

DIRK VAN HULLE

INTRODUCTION: A BECKETT CONTINUUM

Beckett seems to hit a nerve at this moment in time. The increasing interest in his works in the past two decades is marked by at least two important trends. On the one hand, Beckett's status as a challenging writer has stimulated critics and philosophers such as Deleuze and Badiou to write key interpretations that have in their turn become objects of further critical investigation within Beckett studies and literary theory, leading to an intellectually vibrant field of study. On the other hand, the interest in Beckett has been reinforced by a historicist trend, focussing for instance on Beckett's Irish background, and by the invigorating effect of newly discovered archival material. In the past fifteen years and especially since the publication of James Knowlson's biography (1996) and John Pilling's *Beckett before Godot* (1997), several scholars have drawn attention to an impressive amount of archive material that had not been taken into account before. Notable examples are the Dante notes (Ferrini 2003; Caselli 2005a); the TCD manuscripts (Frost and Maxwell 2006); the notes on Arnold Geulincx (Uhlmann et al. 2006; Tucker 2012; Frost 2012); Beckett's interwar notes on philosophy and psychology (Feldman 2006b); his students' notes on the lectures at Trinity College, Dublin (Le Juez 2007); and the 'German Diaries' (Nixon 2011). The publication of Beckett's letters (2009–) made a wealth of new information widely available, and so did the BDMP (2011–).

All this new material has had a considerable impact on the perception of the Beckett canon, to such a degree that S. E. Gontarski coined the phrase 'the grey canon' (Gontarski 2006) to denote all the writings by Beckett (notes, letters, diaries, criticism, self-translations, abandoned works) that provide us with a new context to interpret his published works. There are evidently numerous ways to approach both the Beckett canon and the 'grey' canon, depending on whether or to what extent one wishes to take this newly available contextual information into account. These are methodological questions any student of literature will be confronted with at some point, and for which the intellectual energy in Beckett studies currently provides an

excellent paradigm. This new edition of *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* aims to guide students and interested readers through Beckett criticism the way John Pilling's excellent first edition (1994) did for a different period in Beckett studies. The primary goal is to offer an accessible and stimulating introduction to a key set of issues animating the field of Beckett studies today, and to address the central question of why Beckett matters now.

In recent years, Beckett criticism has sometimes tended to present itself in terms of two camps, with respectively historicist and theoretical interests. I think we have moved beyond that black-and-white antithesis. For instance, an expert in literary theory such as Anthony Uhlmann (author of *Beckett and Poststructuralism*) can at the same time be the scholar who made Beckett's notes on Arnold Geulincx available in the 2006 translation of Geulincx's *Ethics*. As the contributors to this volume show, what makes Beckett studies so vibrant today is the interaction among different approaches, ranging from theory to contextual, historical and archival research. This mutually beneficial interaction, resulting in a critical continuum, is the overarching rationale of this book.

A Critical Continuum

The practice of Beckett criticism in the last few years shows that an exchange of ideas between various approaches is mutually enriching. Historicist and more theoretical interests are in many ways complementary and their interaction is marked not just by polite respect, but by an appreciation of the benefits of working together. Instead of dividing Beckett studies into dichotomies, the notion of a continuum is perhaps more accurate and more productive. In the 1980s and 1990s, Beckett studies may indeed have been somewhat dominated by what Jean-Michel Rabaté refers to as 'capital-T Theory' (Rabaté 2011b, 700). Gradually, this preoccupation with such thinkers as Kristeva, Derrida, Cixous, Foucault and Lacan shifted to other concerns. After the critical construction of a 'universal' Beckett in the second half of the previous century (emphasizing an ahistorical view of the human condition), students of his work have become increasingly aware of the importance of the 'demented particulars' (*Mu* 11). The current appreciation of the dialectics between what Pascale Casanova called 'Beckett, l'abstracteur' and the Beckett of the particulars contributes in a considerable way to the unprecedented upsurge of interest in Beckett's works, especially during and following the Beckett Centenary in 2006.

The interplay between these concrete and abstract aspects of Beckett's work is certainly not only an academic matter; it relates to the content and

intrinsic qualities of Beckett's works and poetics of 'stripping away'. In times of social or economic crisis, Beckett's works apparently find increased resonance, possibly because of his concern with ethics and asceticism. As Fintan O'Toole noted during the 2013 Beckett Summer School,¹ one of the reasons why Beckett matters today has to do with the unsentimentalized, humorous persistence of his characters – in spite of themselves, in spite of the world, in spite of death. Beckett addresses the big questions, not unlike the protagonist in his favourite poem by Walther von der Vogelweide, sitting on a stone and pondering the basic ethical question of 'wie man zer welte solte leben' ['how one should live in the world'] (Vogelweide 1994, 72). To an era marked by overabundant irrelevance, Beckett's antithetical stringency offers a counterbalance, which makes him a figure of our time.

To understand his method of 'stripping away', it is important to be aware of the particulars, without which there would be nothing to strip away in the first place. On the one hand, this implies an enhanced attention to the historical circumstances, including the impact of Beckett's Irish background and of the Second World War, which 'deeply scoured his imagination' (McDonald 2009, xiv). On the other hand, this renewed attention to the particulars chimes with contemporary concerns. For instance, Beckett's sustained examination of the embodied mind and the mental mechanisms to deal with the particulars dovetails with the recent 'cognitive turn' in several disciplines within the humanities, notably in narrative theory. Thus, for instance in 'Re-Minding Modernism', David Herman reads 'Beckett's late-modernist or proto-postmodernist novel *Murphy*' as an enactment of an 'anti-Cartesian model of the mind', because the strict division between body and mind, 'the pure Cartesianism to which he had aspired is tantamount to a debilitating solipsism' (Herman 2011, 267–8). When after Murphy's death his ashes end up on the floor of a pub, it is therefore significant that his mind and body are freely mixed and distributed among the particulars, swept away by daybreak 'with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit' (*Mu* 171).

The way Beckett deals with the particulars is a matter of both form and content, which are inextricably bound up in his work. So in order to examine why Beckett matters today, this companion not only gives an introduction to the Beckett canon (Part I, with three essays on Samuel Beckett's prose, two essays on his drama and one essay on the poetry and criticism), but also opens up more space to accommodate different shades of critical perspective on artistic practice/form (Part II) and content (Part III).

Part I (*Canon*) starts with Beckett's fiction. John Pilling (Chapter 1) makes use of notes such as the *Murphy* notebooks, which have only recently become publicly available (2013), to discuss Beckett's early works, from his first

stories to *Murphy* and *Watt*. Angela Moorjani (Chapter 2) analyses Beckett's reshaping of the novel in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, taking into account the changes in critical approaches to the trilogy from the earliest reception to the most recent scholarship. Peter Boxall (Chapter 3) investigates the development of Beckett's prose after *The Unnamable*, carefully reflecting on the dangers of implicit periodization, which – for pragmatic reasons – is not always avoidable.

With regard to Beckett's dramatic works, Rónán McDonald (Chapter 4) takes Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, as an adequate starting point for an analysis of the cultural impact of his work, in terms of both theatrical performance and the continued impact in a broader cultural sense. For, ever since the initial bafflement that characterized its early reception, the piece has inspired philosophers and artists alike, and has become so iconic that it has even been parodied in children's programmes such as *Sesame Street*. Emilie Morin (Chapter 5) discusses religious, political and other readings of Beckett's *Endgame* and shorter plays, taking into account the tension between authorial control and the fluidity of the texts due to Beckett's revisions, as well as issues of censorship and bowdlerization (such as the Lord Chamberlain's objection to the line about God in *Endgame* – 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!', CDW 119). The plays and their reception are an adequate corpus and starting point for an evaluation of developments in Beckett criticism, from 'humanist' to 'existentialist' interpretations, from Adorno's 'Versuch, das *Endspiel* zu verstehen' to Deleuze's 'L'Épuisé' and beyond.

Focusing on Beckett's criticism and poetry, Mark Nixon (Chapter 6) studies a lesser known but no less important aspect of Beckett's canon, building on Lawrence E. Harvey's pioneering book on this topic. Harvey's study, however, dates from 1970. It took more than four decades before the first critical edition of Beckett's poetry was published (Beckett 2012). As to the critical writings, Beckett's literary analyses and his capacity as an art critic are increasingly being revalued. Chapter 6 therefore focuses on Beckett's interest in the visual arts as evidenced for instance in the 'German Diaries' and in his correspondence with Georges Duthuit.

Part II (*Poetics*) zooms in on Beckett and late modernism, Beckett's intertexts, his bilingual writings and the performative aspects of his work. A few decades ago, the question of whether Beckett was a modernist or a postmodernist was the subject of long debates, notably since Brian McHale's discussion of Beckett as a 'late modernist' in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992, 28) and the publication of Anthony Cronin's biography, *The Last Modernist*. Instead of resurrecting these old debates, Shane Weller (Chapter 7) explores a new view on Beckett as an exponent of late modernism. Taking into account

the broader field of modernism studies, this chapter describes what this late modernism entails, examines how it manifests itself and attempts to define Beckett's place in literary history.

Anthony Uhlmann (Chapter 8) discusses the vastness of the intertextual complex surrounding Beckett's texts, each of which is – in Roland Barthes's terms – a tissue of past citations. This aspect of Beckett's work is especially interesting when the incorporation of passages from a variety of historical sources is deliberately fragmentary as in *Happy Days*. Winnie's 'something something', filling the gaps in the partially remembered quotes (as in the reference to Thomas Gray, 'something something laughing wild amid severest woe'), emphasizes the ambiguity of both the presence of this body of knowledge and its phantom limbs (CDW 150; Gray 2013). As Chapter 8 shows, intertextual research is not a matter of 'source hunting' or of looking for 'influences', but of examining the condition of the Beckettian text and of enhancing readers' appreciation of the complex interplay and tensions between the authority of writers and thinkers of the past (such as Dante, Shakespeare, Racine) and Beckett's experimental, innovative texts.

The multilingual nature of Beckett's reading is directly relevant to an appreciation of his works' bilingualism (Sardin 2002; Montini 2007; Mooney 2011; Slote 2011) and the linguistic scepticism that informs them. The recently published second volume of the letters contains a very open statement by Beckett about his reading of Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, which had greatly impressed him ('qui m'a très fortement impressionné'; *LSB II* 462). The role of language was central in Beckett criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance in studies such as Steven Connor's chapter on self-translation in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. This role has been reassessed in the past decade, notably by Steven Connor himself in the preface to his edition of *The Unnamable* (Connor 2010, xx), referring to Alain Badiou's urge to move beyond 'language-centred post-structuralist criticism'. Sam Slote (Chapter 9) examines the changing role of language in both Beckett's writings and Beckett criticism.

One of the issues that keeps recurring in Beckett studies relates to the tension between Beckett's instructions as a director of his own plays and the performative future of his dramatic work. In more general terms, the question is whether 'avant-garde' is a historical label or a dynamic concept that requires constant updating. Whereas Chapters 4 and 5 deal mainly with the plays as texts and with their critical reception, S. E. Gontarski (Chapter 10) investigates the performative aspects – through Artaud and Deleuze – with an equal openness toward, on the one hand, Beckett's *Theatrical Notebooks* (1993c, d) and, on the other hand, current innovative performances.

Part III (*Topics*) focuses on the themes of philosophy, ethics, the embodied mind and history. The relationship between Beckett's work and philosophy is bidirectional: his long-standing interest in philosophy has left its traces for instance in his philosophy notes and in his personal library; conversely, the philosophical interest in Beckett is evidenced for instance in the works of Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, Gilles Deleuze or Martha Nussbaum. If the recent developments in Beckett studies can duly be called 'important and invigorating' (Gibson 2011, 926), this is to a large extent due to an open view on philosophical and historical approaches as being mutually complementary – a view that may even be paradigmatic of a more general trend in literary studies (combining archival and theoretical approaches). Peter Fifield (Chapter 11) therefore regards both Beckett's interest in philosophy and philosophers' interest in Beckett from complementary perspectives.

Beckett's fascination with philosophy is related to his obvious interest in ethics, which manifests itself for instance in the copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* in his library (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 132–3) or his extensive notes on Geulincx's *Ethica*. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chapter 12) investigates the relevance of Beckett's ethics or 'meta-ethics', founded on ignorance and impotence, characterized by a reluctance to act as the committed intellectual, but also by 'a spirit of obstinate ethical perseverance facing barbarism' (Rabaté 2010, 104).

In several ways, Beckett's work can be regarded as an 'inquiry into the human mind' (to borrow the title of a work by Thomas Reid, used by Beckett during the composition of *L'Innommable*). Many of his writings are concerned with consciousness and perception. In the past, this aspect of his works was usually discussed from the perspective of philosophy and/or psychology (see for instance Anzieu 1983). Psychology was only one of the many approaches to cognition, and I believe Beckett's work prefigures many of the concerns that have only recently been grouped under the label '4e cognition' (encompassing the *embedded*, *embodied*, *enactive* and *extended* mind). An interesting new avenue of research relates these issues to brain science, including contemporary concepts of mental disorder.² What is innovative about these approaches is the renewed attention to embodiment. From this perspective, Ulrika Maude (Chapter 13) studies the interaction between body and mind as reflected in Beckett's notes on Samuel Johnson – including both his interest in Johnson's intellectual accomplishments and his remarkably detailed attention to the lexicographer's physical afflictions.

In Chapter 14, Seán Kennedy nuances Beckett's own statement that he had 'no sense of history' (qtd. in McNaughton 2005, 106) and approaches the question of why Beckett matters today from a historical perspective. While

Adorno suggested that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, this was ‘precisely the point at which Beckett’s creative powers were finally and fully engaged’, according to Kennedy. One of the case studies is a discussion of the bowler hat in Beckett’s writings. This historicizing approach illustrates what Andrew Gibson has called ‘a new phase’ in Beckett studies: ‘A young generation of scholars have abandoned the theoretical turn that dominated work on Beckett from the late 1980s onwards’ (Gibson 2011, 926). What Kennedy’s essay also shows, however, is that a historicizing approach does not imply a foreclosure of other approaches.

In one form or another, all the chapters thus illustrate how the Beckettian particulars function within a theoretical discourse; how they relate to a critical framework; and how they can be conducive to various critical approaches and their mutually beneficial interaction, which marks the intellectual dynamism of Beckett studies today.

A Continuum of Multiple Canons

As a tribute and respectful reference to Ruby Cohn’s *A Beckett Canon*, the introduction to this companion is called ‘A Beckett Continuum’, not only because of the critical continuum described in the previous section, but also because Beckett’s work can be seen as a continuum. As Peter Boxall notes in Chapter 3, it is difficult not to succumb to the neatness of parcelling Beckett’s work into a beginning, a middle and an end, which would reduce his individual writings to symptoms or emanations of a particular historical condition or a ‘phase’ in Beckett’s developing poetics. The challenge is to recognize the ways in which his works were partially shaped by the logic of historical conditions, and at the same time to acknowledge their resistance to that logic. So, even though it has pragmatic advantages to faintly distinguish an early, middle and late period (as in the first three chapters on Beckett’s prose), the notion of a continuum problematizes the idea of a solid ‘œuvre’ with neatly identifiable phases and clear turning points. In his letters – for instance to Jacoba van Velde – Beckett seldom spoke of his work in terms of his œuvre but rather in terms of his *travail*. Each of his writings can function as an autonomous work, but also as part of an ongoing ‘work’ or *travail*. His writings have the same ‘negative capability’ as the word ‘still’ in the middle of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’, depicting both the action of dancing figures on the Grecian urn and the stillness of their fixation in a work of art: ‘For ever warm and *still* to be enjoy’d, / For ever panting, and for ever young’ (Keats 1988, 345). This form of ‘being in uncertainties’ applies to Beckett’s works both on a micro level (as in Belacqua’s appreciation of Dante’s ‘superb pun’ on the word ‘pietà’ in

the story 'Dante and the Lobster', *MPTK* 11) and on a macro level (as in Beckett's conscious decision to let his *œuvre/travail* end in the middle of a sentence, *CIWS* 135).

Instead of presenting a list of works and a separate chronology, it therefore seemed more appropriate to combine the two in a Chronology of Beckett's Writings. The column on the left lists the works in the order in which they were written (which sometimes differs from the order of their publication). If the year of publication differs from the year of writing, the year of publication is indicated in parentheses. The start of the writing process determines the order of the works, no matter in which language they were written. The English titles are in roman, the French titles in bold typeface (with one exception: the poem 'Cascando' was not translated into French, but into German as 'Mancando'). This way, a few patterns emerge at a glance. For instance, until fairly recently it was generally assumed that Beckett's so-called revelation at the end of the Second World War coincided more or less with his decision to write in French, which was not the case, as James Knowlson, John Pilling and others have pointed out. The survey shows how many poems Beckett had already written in French in 1937–8. Another pattern that emerges is that self-translation only became more or less systematic from the 1950s onwards; and that from the late 1950s onwards, his plays tended to be originally composed in English whereas there is a slight tendency towards writing prose texts in French first and subsequently translating them into English (although this is by no means a general rule).

The self-translations are indicated in the column on the right (again with the year of publication in brackets). The titles of poems are in quotation marks; reviews are in grey typeface and other prose texts in italics. In order not to overshoot the mark, the survey does not enumerate all the separate 'textes pour rien' and 'fizzles', only their collective publications as *Textes pour rien* (1955) and *Texts for Nothing* (1967), *Foirades* (1973) and *Fizzles* (1976), which Beckett started writing in the 1950s and 1960s. The published reviews and essays are mentioned as separate publications. Some reviews and essays (such as 'Les deux besoins' and 'Le Concentrisme or Jean du Chas' remained unpublished until they were included in the collection *Disjecta* in 1983.

Inevitably, the survey cannot take all the subtleties into account. For instance: the survey indicates the four texts known as 'Faux départs' as a French title, although one of the texts is actually written in English; the poem 'something there' should perhaps be regarded as an adaptation rather than a translation of 'hors crâne'; even though the story 'Dante and the Lobster' was published separately in *This Quarter* (December 1932), it is

not listed separately, but as part of the collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), also including the stories ‘Fingal’, ‘Ding-Dong’, ‘A Wet Night’, ‘Love and Lethe’, ‘Walking Out’, ‘What a Misfortune’, ‘The Smeraldina’s Billet Doux’, ‘Yellow’ and ‘Draff’; the story ‘Echo’s Bones’ (originally meant to be included in the same collection) was published posthumously, edited and annotated by Mark Nixon (2014); the dramatic text *Fragment de théâtre* (1974), translated by Beckett as *Rough for Theatre I* (1976), was preceded by an early English version, called ‘The Gloaming’; translations of other writers’ work have not been included, even though in some cases (for instance ‘Long after Chamfort’) one could argue that the translation deserves to be treated as a Beckett creation in its own right.

The aim of presenting the original works and the self-translations in separate columns is to show that there is a sort of mirror canon or self-translation canon next to what Ruby Cohn called *A Beckett Canon*. And the combination of this canon with its mirror canon results in ‘a Beckett continuum’ if it is completed with Beckett’s unpublished canon (see Nixon 2014), including ‘Lightning Calculation’ (1935); ‘Match nul ou L’Amour paisible’ (1938), the ‘Petit Sot’ poems (1938–9), ‘Au bout de ces années perdues’ (1951–2), ‘Hourrah je me suis repris’ (1952), ‘On le tortura bien’ (1952), ‘Ici personne ne vient jamais’ (1952), ‘Coups de gong’/‘Espace souterrain’ (1952), ‘Mime du rêveur A’ (1956), ‘J. M. Mime’ (1963), ‘Petit Odéon’ fragments (1967–8), ‘Chien anagramme de niche’ (before 1969), ‘Film-Vidéo Cassette project’ (1972), ‘Long Observation of the Ray’ (1975–6), ‘Epilogue’ (1981), ‘Last Soliloquy’ (1981), ‘Mongrel Mime’ (1983?), ‘On my way’ (1983?) and ‘Bare Room’ (1984). This unpublished canon, together with the published canon, the self-translation canon and the manuscripts that are becoming digitally available in the ongoing Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, constitute a Beckett continuum that accords with the most Beckettian of all possible words: ‘on’, the word that fully encompasses the creative power of its negativity, ‘no’, going on by means of epanorthosis and ‘aporia pure and simple’, proceeding ‘by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered’ (*Un* 1), as in the last line of *The Unnamable* – ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’ – or the first lines of *Worstward Ho* and the last part of *Stirrings Still* – ‘On’ and ‘So on’.

NOTES

- 1 Round table ‘Beckett’s Impact and Relevance Today’, with Daniela Caselli, Peter Fifield, J. C. C. Mays, Mark Nixon, Fintan O’Toole and H. Porter Abbott; chair: Dirk Van Hulle.
- 2 Adam Piette gave an impetus in this direction by focusing on the neurological aspect of early neuropsychology and the recognizable syndromes that feature

for instance in *Murphy*. In 2008, Elizabeth Barry guest edited a volume of the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, introducing new relations between the disciplines of neuroscience, psychoanalysis and literary studies, which ‘have opened up some of the most suggestive avenues in Beckett criticism to be seen for some time’, marking ‘a new threshold in Beckett studies’ (Barry 2008, 3). Beckett’s works were analysed against the background of neurological disorders such as Cotard’s syndrome (Fifield 2008), aphasic symptoms (Salisbury 2008) and Tourette’s (Maude 2008).