

# Samuel Beckett and Europe



# Samuel Beckett and Europe:

*History, Culture, Tradition*

Edited by

Michela Bariselli, Niamh M. Bowe  
and William Davies

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction: Samuel Beckett and the Question of ‘Europe’	
William Davies	
Chapter Two .....	15
“The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied”: Material Incorporation in Beckett, Sebald, and Krasznahorkai	
Martin Schauss	
Chapter Three .....	41
In Search of Space and Locale in the Genesis of Samuel Beckett’s	
<i>Fin de partie</i>	
Anita Rákóczy	
Chapter Four.....	55
“Home and visiting temperaments”: Beckett’s Diasporic Encounters	
William Davies	
Chapter Five .....	77
Beckett, <i>Bildung</i> , and the Modernist <i>Bildungsroman</i>	
Bunshiro Sugimoto	
Chapter Six .....	99
‘Proust in Pieces’: Beckett’s Humour Beyond the Critic	
Michela Bariselli	
Chapter Seven.....	119
Variations on a Theme by the First-Person: Samuel Beckett’s Pursuit of the First-Person Narration	
Yusaku Tomaru	

Chapter Eight.....	145
The Place of Samuel Beckett in Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit	
Rosanne Bezerra de Araújo	
Chapter Nine.....	161
“Gorgoglian Ne La Strozza”: Dantesque Variations in Samuel Beckett	
and Primo Levi	
Davide Crosara	
Contributors.....	183

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE QUESTION OF 'EUROPE'

WILLIAM DAVIES

"[S]hall I be bottled in a warring Europe for another 5 or 10 years? Can't say I care much where I'm bottled, du moment que je suis en bouteille."

—Samuel Beckett to George Reavey, 31 October 1945.  
*Letters II*, 24.

"[W]hat if Europe were this: the opening onto a history for which the changing of the heading, the relation to the other heading or to the other of the heading, is experienced as always possible? An opening and a non-exclusion for which Europe would in some way be responsible? For which Europe would be, in a constitutive way, this very responsibility? As if the very concept of responsibility were responsible, right up to its emancipation, for a European birth certificate?"

—Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, 1992, 76.

"Europe is lost"

—Kate Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos*, 2016

When writing the above letter to George Reavey in the autumn of 1945, Samuel Beckett was working in Saint-Lô in Northern France with the Irish Red Cross to help rebuild the town after it suffered a devastating artillery bombardment during the D-Day assault. After Europe had been supposedly rescued from the grip of totalitarian and fascistic regimes, from his vantage point in a ruined town with bodies still being recovered from the wreckage, it seems Beckett could only see further war as the state of life in Europe for the next decade. In doing so, Beckett raises the question of 'where' he shall experience what at the time seemed to him an inevitability of global conflict. "Where would I go, if I could go, who

would I be, if I could be[?]"<sup>1</sup> asks the voice of the fourth of the *Texts for Nothing* (1967), questions that seem to have been pressing themselves upon Beckett in Saint-Lô at a pivotal point of his and, indeed, Europe's post-war existence.

This anxiety of being "bottled" preoccupied not only Beckett but has sat at the heart of questions about history, culture and tradition in criticism devoted to Beckett's writing. The desire not to limit Beckett to any one set of ideas, to any one language or to any national boundary remains a perennial question for dealing with the unsettling effects of his writing's frequent recourse to displacement and disjunction. This is perhaps most clearly articulated in Eoin O'Brien's summation of Beckett's national relations in *The Beckett Country* (1986):

Any discussion as to whether or not the French or the Irish can lay claim to Samuel Beckett is of consequence only insofar as it may assist in the interpretation of his work. A squabble over national identity would be most offensive to Beckett, to whom national boundaries, geographical and cultural, have always been tiresome, and at times threatening, encumbrances [...]. [W]hile allowing that Beckett is Irish in origins, in manners, and at times thought, we must accept that he belongs to no nation, neither to France nor to Ireland; if any claim has validity, it is that he represents in outlook the true European, but even this tidy categorisation is excessively constraining, *Beckett is of the world*.<sup>2</sup>

To state "Beckett is of the world" is to suggest an essential element of uncanny universalism to Beckett's writing. And yet, in stressing Beckett as a writer "of the world", one risks disintegrating the important sense of intersection that 'Europe' might still represent even as contemporary politics threatens to again remake how Europe is conceived on the global stage. Despite O'Brien's quite correct notion that Beckett, like anyone, should not be constrained by limitations due to national affiliations, it is clear, both at the time of O'Brien writing and now, that "European" will never be a "tidy categorisation"; indeed, its complexities reflect the very ways in which Beckett's work is shaped by and interacts with a myriad of cultures and traditions. As such, without disregarding the potential violence and destruction produced over the existence and enforcement of national boundaries, or Beckett's rejection of nationalist and essentialist dogmas, there is still a persistent sense that 'Europe' holds an important

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'IV', *Texts for Nothing* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett Country* (Dublin: Black Cat, 1986), xxii-xxiii [emphasis retained].

critical hinge for Beckett's work when rethought in both literary and political terms.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, the multiplicity of 'European' is pernicious as much as it is integral to thinking through Beckett's work in the contemporary moment: 'European' has substantial and varying connotations depending on whether one has benefited from or been left behind by the rise of a 'European' identity. However, whilst in previous criticism on Beckett's work 'European' has been a functional term to acknowledge O'Brien's notion of Beckett's worldliness, the state of contemporary European and global politics suggests that this "tidy categorisation" may itself be entangled in the aspirations of a borderless state and a history of trying to prevent the same. As this volume and the conference that inspired its production signal, 'Europe' encompasses, complicates and identifies a plurality of contexts, cultures and traditions for thinking about Beckett's work. It also remains a significant space for thinking not only about the content of his texts but how his writing creates new and diverse insights upon the ideas and traditions from which it draws. In turn, by thinking through what we might mean if we in some way still consider Beckett as a 'European' writer, we can start to reckon with this identity amidst the constant remapping of what a 'European' identity may mean both now and in the future.

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In her 2016 spoken-word song 'Europe is Lost', Kate Tempest locates the renewed question of 'being European' that has come about in recent years in terms of a widening gap between the seats of power and the populations of Europe. Identifying this within new trends of multi-national corporations, global digital media and a widening return to nationalism as a legitimate political platform, Tempest reflects on the prospect that this has in part come about through a failure to remain aware of Europe's complicated, often bloody history within the claims made towards unity or

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<sup>3</sup> This has been a particularly important point of departure for rethinking the question of Beckett and Ireland. See, among others, Emilie Morin's *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Seán Kennedy's edited volume *Beckett and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Patrick Bixby's *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) for the diverse ways in which recent scholarship has benefited from a new emphasis on the historical and political potential of Beckett's writing.

collectivism. In turn, this has allowed an increasingly isolated sense of community – of “packs” - to proliferate:

All of the blood that was bled for these cities to grow  
 All of the bodies that fell  
 The roots that were dug from the earth  
 So these games could be played  
 I see it tonight in the stains on my hands  
 The buildings are screaming  
 I can't ask for help though, nobody knows me  
 Hostile, worried, lonely  
 We move in our packs and these are the rights we were born to  
 Working and working so we can be all that we want  
 Then dancing the drudgery off  
 But even the drugs have got boring  
 Well, sex is still good when you get it<sup>4</sup>

For *Tempest*, the ease with which this occurred is the most crucial aspect of this political reality. Beckett too is attuned to such a state of political, historical and cultural slipperiness, as displayed in *Waiting for Godot* (1954). As Vladimir and Estragon consider their position with the ever-arriving Godot, it is the sudden remembrance of the loss of political power that begins to leave them ‘feeble’ and ‘grotesque’:

Estragon:	We've no rights any more? <i>Laugh of Vladimir, stifled as before, less the smile.</i>
Vladimir:	You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited.
Estragon:	We've lost our rights?
Vladimir:	( <i>distinctly</i> ). We got rid of them. <i>Silence. They remain motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees.</i>
Estragon:	( <i>feebly</i> ). We're not tied? ( <i>Pause.</i> ) We're not—
Vladimir:	Listen! <i>They listen, grotesquely rigid.</i> <sup>5</sup>

In the end, a debate over “rights” brings a muted, even defeated response from Beckett’s most famous duo as Estragon falls to the floor. This is of little surprise given that, by comparison, like *Tempest*’s appeal to “sex...when you get it”, the pair gives far more consideration to the prospect of sexual gratification earlier in the play:

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Europe is Lost’, Kate Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos*, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 19.

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?  
 Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.  
 Estragon: (*highly excited*). An erection!<sup>6</sup>

Vladimir anticipates the recognition of a loss of "rights" at the beginning of the play as he laments the once lofty promise of progress that he sensed atop one of Europe's most significant human-made symbols:

Vladimir: Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up.<sup>7</sup>

Beckett's tramp laments the loss of bourgeois status amongst the 'respectable' who could climb the heights of the Eiffel Tower. Just as with Tempest's violent image of fallen bodies, Vladimir and Estragon seem to bear the marks of a changing world that they have been excluded from, instead cast out into a wasteland that progress has left behind.

In this sense, Beckett's excluded, solitary and marginalised figures are alarmingly prescient for the picture of Europe in the twenty-first century. Ironically, the question of 'Europe' has also returned during a period in which modes of communication have shifted large swathes of peoples towards a digital space that is in many ways devoid of strict national divisions. Whilst globalisation and the proliferation of communication through technology have brought a new mode of traversing cultural and national barriers, the reality of borders and separation has returned with renewed vigour in the first two decades of the twenty-first century with refugee crises throughout Europe and the globe. This has, inevitably it would seem, produced reactions of nationalism that claim the loss of national histories, cultures and traditions to be the direct outcome of increased attempts to sustain and champion diverse and cohesive societies. Those who reject the dissolving of national boundaries cite these losses; however, the effects of an unavoidable relationship between new technology, transnational capitalism and globalisation has made clear that there is an increasing gap between those who can afford to think globally and those who cannot. With this in mind, being "of the world" is a very different prospect. In this sense, 'Europe' must not only function as a passive recognition of nations but, as Derrida articulates above, a *responsibility* towards what it might ideally represent and, more importantly, what this may involve in its attainment. It is imperative that

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

when we speak of “being of the world” – whether in terms of Beckett or otherwise - that we also acknowledge what is contained within that world: a complexity of connections, anxieties, tensions and values that are shared and rejected in equal measure across a myriad of cultures, histories and traditions. When considered with due caution, ‘Europe’ can be used productively to evoke this complexity when thinking through Beckett’s work.

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In the second verse of ‘Europe is lost’, Tempest affirms that there is a question of history and culture in Europe in particular that has re-emerged within the current political-economic paradigm:

The wrongs of our past have resurfaced  
 Despite all we did to vanquish the traces  
 My very language is tainted  
 With all that we stole to replace it with this  
 I am quiet, feeling the onset of riot  
 Riots are tiny though, systems are huge  
 Traffic keeps moving, proving there’s nothing to do  
 ‘Cause it’s big business, baby, and its smile is hideous

In lamenting the apparent decline in the effectiveness of political activism, Tempest also makes clear the pernicious presence of a common European historical legacy within these questions of how nationality, nationhood and national sensibilities fit within the contemporary political, economic and cultural moment.

This is not a new set of concerns. However, with the increasing awareness of a separation between national and global interests – and what is often characterised as national populations and global populations – the relationship between Europe and its past (be it conceived as history, culture or tradition) points to a substantial number of questions to be asked of how Europe’s collective, emphatically imperial history remains present within the tensions that exist in the contemporary moment. It is to this that work such as that of Kate Tempest draws our attention, and it is this too that an artist such as Beckett can so readily respond. In considering this, however, it is necessary to shift our sense of how ‘Europe’ is to be conceived regarding art and creative expression if it is not to be reduced to a limited, even parochial set of identifiers. Rather than emphasising a globalised culture that erases national or cultural difference, there is the possibility that an engagement with Europe’s past may offer some way of

preserving a project of tolerance and diversity that also maintains an awareness of how – in positive and negative instances - national histories and cultures intersect in a mode that is unavoidably and uniquely captured under the term 'Europe'. An emphasis on *either* the global *or* the national is a false binary, and it conceals what may well preserve the unique relationship between the collective term 'Europe' and the nations contained (and at times restrained) by it. In offering an approximation of an answer to the questions posed in one of the epithets used in this introduction, Derrida puts this issue of European history in terms of "duty":

The duty to respond to the call of European memory, to re-call what has been promised under the name of Europe, to re-identify Europe - this duty is without common measure with all that is generally understood under the name duty, though it could be said that all other duties presupposes it in silence... This duty also dictates opening Europe up, from the heading that is divided because it is a shoreline; opening it onto that which is not, never was, and never will be Europe.<sup>8</sup>

This question of a duty to all facets of "European memory" is imperative to engage with the reality of European history. To this end, the recent efforts to ask questions of Beckett's writing in terms of the colonial and postcolonial history of Ireland, for example, take on a renewed emphasis if the "flight to Europe" that Beckett made on a number of occasions is to be understood not only as a flight from the network of history, culture and tradition that is constituted in the identifier of 'Ireland' but also a flight *to* a space in which these elements have underpinned a complex struggle between nations and their imperial legacies. As Seán Kennedy reminds us, to consider Ireland as in some way 'outside' of a discussion of Beckett's relationship to Europe is a null point:

If Beckett longed for France when in Ireland, he also remembered Ireland obsessively when in France. He returned to Ireland far more often than Joyce did, and always to a country whose fate was being determined in broader European and global contexts. By virtue of being Irish, then, Beckett was always already European in important ways, and not just because of his Huguenot heritage.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Seán Kennedy, 'Introduction: Ireland/Europe ... Beckett/Beckett', *Beckett and Ireland* ed. Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.

In this sense, Europe constitutes a recognition not of the dissolving of borders and boundaries (as O'Brien's argument suggests of Beckett's writing) but of the ways in which the borders of nations within Europe continue to operate as the containers of tensions, complexities and interactions which are variously reproduced in Beckett's life and writing. On this, then, there is a divergence here from Kennedy's contention that "there will be less need of a category like 'Beckett the European,' which may have resurfaced recently in response to Irish critics deemed over-eager to 'reclaim' him."<sup>10</sup> Whilst certainly the case that a conflation of 'European' with 'universal' is right to be avoided, and that an act of 'reclaiming' is always going to be a reductive endeavour, preserving a sense of value in the term 'European' is necessary to recognise the very convergences that Kennedy goes on to mark out within Beckett's work:

Instead of an either/or debate (and the possessive language that seems to go with it), we need to deconstruct the various binaries in Beckett studies – tradition–modernity, Ireland–Europe, Beckett–Beckett – so that the many fruitful tensions and correspondences between them can be more easily discerned.<sup>11</sup>

This is surely right, but there is a use in the term 'Europe' if we can recover it via such a thesis as that of Derrida's: that 'Europe' can serve as a recognition of the very "tensions and correspondences" that constitute it as a geographical, historical, cultural and political entity. By maintaining 'Europe' as both the multiplicity of influences and traditions that Beckett draws on and as a term that identifies the particular conditions that allowed 'Europe' to flourish (much of which is bound up in questions of the colonial and postcolonial, but also in the ways in which certain ideas, themes and forms constitute 'national' art or culture), 'Europe' can include the rejection of binary thinking and the recognition of a crossing back-and-forth of borders that Beckett's work so effectively produces in its ambivalent treatment of fixity: "Strictly speaking I wasn't there", the narrator of 'The End' tells us, "Strictly speaking I believe I've never been anywhere."<sup>12</sup> It is not in the rejection of borders but in the rejection of fixity that we find Beckett's Europeanness, one that is constituted by both the force and threat of being 'bottled' and the manner in which that constraint is undermined and overturned.

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, 'Introduction: Ireland/Europe ... Beckett/Beckett', 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Beckett, 'The End', *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End / First Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 51.



Alongside a significant emphasis on Beckett's constant movement between nations and cultures, what Kennedy reveals above by association is that the question of Beckett's 'Europeanness' has often involved a claim to Beckett's *Frenchness* in all but name. To speak of his European quality has, at times, been to speak of the cosmopolitan cultural melting pot that Parisian life represented (particularly before the Second World War). Where possible, it is necessary to maintain that 'European' does not denote any one form of history, culture or tradition, and to speak of Beckett's Europeanness should be a recognition of the conversations between literary and artistic traditions that appear within his writing. More importantly, 'European' should not be taken as an erasure of more specific discussions around, for example, Beckett and Ireland or Beckett and France. It is made up of these, yet it also serves to recognise that these come together in Beckett's texts where they are in dialogue, in tension and continually shaping one another.

There is also the practical element in which 'Europe' serves to recognise Beckett's own formative years as a traveller of Europe, a reader of (primarily) European literature and an artist briefly but powerfully consumed by an autodidactic plunge into the lengths and breadths of European philosophy.<sup>13</sup> These do not provide any claim to Beckett's work in themselves, yet they undoubtedly remain an important part of any sense of the connections between cultures and traditions within Beckett's writing. Again, it is these in dialogue within Beckett's work that renders it so powerful. In turn, it is in exploring these relationships that the peculiar sensitivity which Beckett's work appears to retain for any number of contemporary political, social or cultural issues can be fruitfully connected to a range of traditions and intellectual lineages.

Beckett's work not only synthesises his various influences and interlocutors into something new but also looks turns back upon the ideas and cultures from which his work draws. In this sense, the 'duty' that a term such as 'Europe' can also achieve is the recognition that Beckett's work is made up of a series of particulars – be they influences, relations or evocations – that the work cannot be reduced *to* yet are prospective positions which the work can be analysed and read *from*. By retaining a necessary nuance to the term, 'Europe' can thus do a "duty" for Beckett Studies to serve not only to recognise the often demonstrably universal

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Feldman's work on the 'Philosophy Notes' and the recent focus on Beckett's library by Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle have been of particular importance in this regard; see, respectively, Feldman's *Beckett's Books* (London: Continuum, 2006) and van Hulle and Nixon's *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

aspects of the Beckettian aesthetic but also to encompass the complex networks of history, culture and tradition to which Beckett was uniquely attuned. In combining and reproducing elements of traditions across Irish, English, French, German, Italian and beyond in his writing, Beckett exhibits a far more important example of the value of a 'European' moniker than any claim to universalism might attempt to produce.

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Beckett's relation to history is a repeated question in this volume, one that is frequently opened up by bringing Beckett into contact with other writers who in their own ways benefit from the multiplicity of a 'European' viewpoint yet also complicate the claims that it may make. In his essay, Martin Schauss sees in *Watt* (1953) a historically conditioned mode of testimony produced by the obsessive materiality of the texts and the objects within it. In doing so, Schauss finds connections with the writings of W. G. Sebald and László Krasznahorkai that point to a meaningful and productive line of inquiry into the ethical aspects of historically conscious criticism. The question of history is also brought to the fore by Anita Rákóczy in her close analysis of the development of the manuscripts of *Fin de partie* (1957). By more specifically locating Beckett's early situating of the text in the ruined landscapes of France after the First World War, Rákóczy shows that Beckett's historical awareness is at times a precise point of departure from which his works develop.

Beckett's own biography is a record of his constant engagement with a cross-section of national identities and traditions, and it is in this too that we must see any national formation of Beckett – an 'Irish Beckett' or a 'French Beckett', but also a 'German' or 'Italian Beckett' – is to recognise that such a formation was not made in any one nation or through any one cultural interaction alone. As my essay in this volume shows, any notion of Beckett's 'Irishness' was to be formed abroad as much as it was through its relation to 'home', and it is this that can also serve to produce a new way of considering the formation of the political and historical potential of his writing. Such a notion is diversified and complicated by Beckett's adoption of the French language upon his permanent departure from Ireland; this is the subject of Yusaku Tomaru's essay which considers the changes in Beckett's use of narrative voices during the 1940s.

Outside of these still dominant but important modes of nationally-orientated analysis of Beckett's work – French and Irish – the wandering through Europe that Beckett pursued throughout his early life is explored

in Bunshiro Sugimoto's essay which assesses the writer's engagement with German literature and the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* in relation to *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992). This much-needed continuation of a focus on Beckett's German connections prompted by Mark Nixon's work on the 'German Diaries' of the late thirties reveals how important this area of study continues to be for Beckett's writing. By emphasising that Beckett's is as much an engagement with the *Bildungsroman* as it is a parody of its more traditional elements, Sugimoto's work shows how vital an understanding of the traditions within German literature is to Beckett's work. Though *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* is classified a failure in most ways, this method of adaptation and parody is also analysed for its successes and complications by Michela Bariselli whose essay takes on Beckett's little studied short critical works of the 1930s. By offering a philosophically underpinned analysis of Beckett's humour, Bariselli shows that Beckett's techniques are applied as much to his fiction as his critical work during the early period, often with greater success than his first novel, and reveals that Beckett's developments as a writer stem as much from his engagement with a broad European literary field as it does to his close attention to form and structure.

The question of influence is also central to this volume; however, it is not just those artists and cultures that influenced Beckett. Europe represents less a geographical space or limitation than a rich convergence of traditions, genres and artistic movements that are unavoidably linked in ways that allowed Beckett to draw on any number of them within his writing. Likewise, selecting points of departure within the broad space denoted in the otherwise unwieldy term 'European Literature' invariably allows us as critics to develop conversations that attend to Beckett's habits and interests, as well as producing insights into his work that draw him into new traditions or discourses with which to productively read his work. To this end, this volume includes essays that recognise the influences *upon* Beckett's writing and, in turn, consider how such influences draw Beckett into dialogue with other writers.

Emphasising that 'Europe' is not limited to the content of Beckett's work but its influence upon a wider field of European culture, Rosanne Bezerra de Araújo's essay examines the influence and importance of Beckett (and, in particular, *Waiting for Godot*) for the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica and what he terms 'Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit'. Seeing not a prospect of influence but a rich source for rethinking the philosophical aspect of Beckett's work, de Araújo demonstrates the still untapped potential for a multitude of perspectives on

Beckett's writing derived from an interrogation of what a connection such as 'Europe' may bring to bear. This innovative reading demonstrates that, when properly attended to, the question of 'Europe' is vital for creating new modes of interpretations and analyses of Beckett's writing.

Finally, Davide Crosara's work here represents both an acknowledgement of the importance of Italian literature to Beckett and how, through a convergence over the effects and modes of engagement with the work of Dante, such an acknowledgement produces the possibility of analysis of Beckett in terms of figures such as Primo Levi. Rather than suggesting particular influences of one author on another, Crosara inspects the (re)turn to Dante in Beckett and Levi's life and writing in the aftermath of the Second World War to reveal new ways of reading these unique literary figures.

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With ongoing tensions across Europe from both left and right-wing corners of the political spectrum, the sincere proposition of a 'European' identity as one that overcomes the necessity of boundaries or borders seems highly unlikely, and if its failure is not entirely inevitable there are certainly questions to be asked as to how a globalising world can continue to swing so dramatically back towards nationalism and the threat of isolationism in times of social, political and economic crisis. 'Europe' emerges at times as an identity that at once encompasses a future-orientated look towards transcending national boundaries whilst also simultaneously recalling the specifically European empires that colonised the far reaches of the globe. All of these concerns and more are inherent to any claim that puts forward an author or artist as discernibly 'European'. Indeed, if we are to take Derrida's claim of "duty" seriously, 'European' and Europe must come to denote an obligation to both preserving the important network of history, culture and tradition that Europe represents and recognising that this preservation must be accompanied by an attention to avoiding a 'European/universal' conflation or a reaffirmation of a Eurocentric mode of inquiry upon literature and art that has benefited from, and in some way is the most clear articulation of, a Europe that must be continuously interrogated. The question of Europe and what it represents within a global context has been renewed by responses to increasing divisions between those with power and those without, to crises that force displacement and the loss of homes, and to a growing faction of a society that feel disenfranchised by the prospect of a global promise when local structures are abandoned or left in ruins. It is to these as much

as any question of literary or artistic traditions that speakers and attendees were invited to consider during the 'Beckett and Europe' conference in 2015. It is from the discussions and papers given at that event that this volume has been brought about as a contribution to the attempt to find new ways to consider how we can speak critically of Beckett's influences, traces and relations without resorting to the treatment of either 'Beckett' or 'Europe' as cultural monoliths. This is important not only for continuing to allow Beckett's work to flourish in new readings, contexts and interpretations but also for the ongoing production of a critical language that can adequately articulate the multiplicity, complexity and even contradictory nature of the work with which it attempts to engage.

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CHAPTER TWO

“THE FOLLOWING PRECIOUS  
AND ILLUMINATING MATERIAL SHOULD  
BE CAREFULLY STUDIED”:  
MATERIAL INCORPORATION IN BECKETT,  
SEBALD, AND KRASZNAHORKAI

MARTIN SCHAUSS

Things in Beckett have a penchant for remaining, fizzling residually, stirring still. They articulate a lessness, rather than a nothingness: “Scattered ruins same grey as the sand ash grey true refuge. . . Grey sky no cloud no sound no stir earth ash grey sand.”<sup>1</sup> Beckett’s “signature,” according to Jacques Derrida, may be “this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted.”<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I am concerned with Beckett’s remainders as literal *leftovers*, the residua as they emerge from an excess, surplus economy. In short, I am concerned with Beckett’s waste products. On socio-economic, psychoanalytic, and structural levels, waste matter announces a kind of failure, as its presence unfolds into acts of effacement and absence of signification. Its material articulation is captured by Julia Kristeva’s understanding of *abjection*: “[it] is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>3</sup> As production and consumption produce their negative—

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Lessness’, in *The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature:’ An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

excess and squandering<sup>4</sup>—and value systems are put on hold, the material properties and conditions of this negative ask to be confronted. The focus of this essay lies on the swathes of matter in *Watt* (1953), a novel marked as much by textual, thematic, and material incorporation as by the dynamics of expulsion, disposal, and recycling. The double gesture of exclusion and remainder is made literal in *Watt*'s "Addenda," whose tongue-in-cheek footnote informs: "The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation."<sup>5</sup> Here, Beckett's textual practice announces the consolidation of language and materiality, the incorporation of language, and the expulsion thereof; the addenda—fragmented sentences, poetic morsels, which have "never been properly born"—form the text's refuse.<sup>6</sup> That Beckett at different points described the novel as "an unsatisfactory book, written in dribs and drabs,"<sup>7</sup> "without pre-established plan,"<sup>8</sup> "in order to stay sane"<sup>9</sup> during the war, need then not be a mere dismissal, but can be seen as a faithful portrayal of the finished (in its nature incomplete) published text.

From this, the essay seeks to raise the stakes of Beckett's material incorporation by placing it within the wider notion of the historical archive, thus problematizing the discussion of the dramatization of textual production (as Leslie Hill, for example, presents in *In Different Words* (1990)) through historiographical, political, and ethical concerns. The double nature of refuse as absence and remainder, it is thus argued, informs our understanding of a sense of history in Beckett. This sense of history emerges out of an apparent contradiction: history (like philosophy) appears as refuse in Beckett—an "almost nothing" to borrow Simon Critchley's formula<sup>10</sup>—and the same goes for the micro-histories of individual testimony and memory, but at the same time this "almost nothing"—the refuse—is encountered in abundance.<sup>11</sup> This means that the

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<sup>4</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Zone, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove, 1953), 247.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to George Reavey, 14 May 1947. George Craig et al., eds, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume II: 1941-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Gottfried Büttner, 12 April 1978. Quoted in Craig et al., *Letters II*, xix.

<sup>9</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 333.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*. Abington: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Boxall, "'There's no Lack of Void': Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo." *SubStance* 116 (2008): 56-70. doi: 10.1353/sub.0.0005.



question of the *how*, of the coming-into-being of the text as text, draws on the material incorporation of this negative archive. One may be tempted to take Adorno's phrase "Kulturmüll"<sup>12</sup> [culture trash] literally, and in this way, the critical investment of the material conditions under which "[history] intrudes, and then takes us nowhere," becomes imperative.<sup>13</sup> On that account, the essay finds that these material conditions within *Watt* are intimately bound up with the question of the production and legibility of history, an argument which requires an analysis of the text's archive, and of the text as archive. Rather than limiting the reading to the structural properties of a material negative, the argument thus expands onto matters of memory and testimony, the site of materiality as it shapes the construction of a historical subject, or, more aptly, as it has a hand in the incompleteness thereof.

It is in this vein that the analysis brings in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* (1985), complicating the reading of Beckett's incorporating gesture by exploring their more overt social and historical dimensions. It is argued that the incorporation of disruptive, fragmented matter assumes a comparable role in these works, found at the heart of questions concerning the material document as testimonial agent, the reliability of the historical record and the ensuing narrative. In these texts, a reifying cultural appropriation runs into trouble when confronted with the site of narrativity as stubborn matter.

## ***Watt* and Excess of Matter**

Watt is having a difficult birth but is expected out into the dark of day next week...<sup>14</sup>

Throughout *Watt*, the reader encounters discarded and unwanted things: the slops in Mr Knott's household, his leftovers, words (of course), the "expelled" offspring of the Lynch family.<sup>15</sup> Arsène calls his own life "[an] ordure," the whole affair of ancestry "[an] excrement," seasonal

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<sup>12</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Versuch, das 'Endspiel' zu verstehen," in *Gesammelte Schriften: Noten zur Literatur* Band 11, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 281.

<sup>13</sup> Seán Kennedy, "'Humanity in Ruins': Beckett and History" in *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. Dirk van Hulle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 188.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Con Leventhal, 6 August 1953. George Craig et al., *Letters II*, 395.

<sup>15</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 104.

regeneration “[a] turd.”<sup>16</sup> What remains a suspicion for most of the novel is reinforced by the addenda: that this text might somehow be one big archive of refuse. The breaks in the text indicated by question marks,<sup>17</sup> metafictional interventions such as “(Hiatus in MS),”<sup>18</sup> the fact that Watt cannot remember which events truly took place and in what form, or that Sam cannot remember which events Watt recounted and which he himself might have made up; these elements are exacerbated by the 37 addenda and their footnote, the latter suggesting the aporetic manner in which Beckett handles his textual matter. At once “prevented” from being incorporated due to “fatigue and disgust,” the appendix’s presence spells its very incorporation. To be sure, on one level, the addenda allude to the episode in which Mr Louit presents the wondrous Mr Thomas Nackybal, “native of Burren,” to a committee of academics, following up on the dig at insipid academic practices.<sup>19</sup> Like his scant notes to the “erudite” and “obscure” poem *Whoroscope*, Watt’s addenda might be read as a “send-up” of T. S. Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land*.<sup>20</sup> After all, as Beckett writes in a letter, “T. Eliot is toilet spelt backwards.”<sup>21</sup>

Beyond its satirical function—indeed, beyond what Claire Lozier calls Watt’s creative “*jeu d’archive*” (his “farcical affliction”)<sup>22</sup>—the appendix demands close attention because of its material presence as residue or remainder, provoking “disgust” (perhaps all too anatomically), tracing and recycling the text’s expelled, excess material. It is this double gesture of incorporation and expulsion which charges the text’s metabolism. Beckett’s characters are notoriously obsessed with their bodily functions, and the ensuing scatological humour and aesthetics are well-commented on.<sup>23</sup> Arsène’s above-quoted remarks and Watt’s duty to fertilise the plants in the garden with Mr Knott’s faeces show that *Watt* makes no exception. One of the fragments in the appendix reformulates Arsène’s complaint into

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 9 January 1937. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume 1: 1929-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 421.

<sup>22</sup> Claire Lozier, “Watt’s Archive Fever,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 22.1 (2013): 49, doi: 10.3366/jobs.2013.0057.

<sup>23</sup> See for example David Lloyd, “Writing in the Shit: Nationalism and the Colonial Subject,” *The Irish Review* 4 (1988): 59-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29735343>; Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

a bastardisation of Faust's famous ejaculation: "die Merde hat mich wieder."<sup>24</sup> The eating habits of Mary, a parlour maid, are described extensively and end in "the servants' W.C., where a greater part of Mary's time was spent . . ."<sup>25</sup> (In)digestion and excretion exhaust and exceed thematics throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*, coinciding, as it were, with the necessity and impossibility of expression. In the case of *Watt*, digestion and evacuation take on compositional energy. A rough thirty pages are devoted to the disposal of Mr Knott's leftovers, which are themselves already the product of a recycling process in which a motley variety of ingredients are "inextricably mingled and transformed into a single good thing that was neither food, nor drink, nor physic, but quite a new good thing."<sup>26</sup> Watt's taxonomic list of ingredients, at first specific and comprehensive, quickly spills over with many other things "too numerous to mention."<sup>27</sup> The accumulation of things becomes excessive, unfolding into non-specific matter. The power dynamics in Mr Knott's household are nowhere clearer than in the disposal and recycling of faeces and leftover food: the power rests with the person who is free to waste as much or little as s/he chooses. As Georges Bataille remarks in his theory of the "potlatch:" "*what is appropriated in the squander is the prestige it gives to the squanderer (whether an individual or a group), which is acquired by him as a possession and which determines his rank.*"<sup>28</sup> Indeed, throughout, the power dynamics within the Knottian micro-economy are mediated through things—doors, a key, food. While this is by no means unique for one of Beckett's novels, a confrontation with the abject and the resulting phobia and failure to introject what is incorporated run through *Watt*. Binaries of inside/outside, subject/object, which are threatened by abjection, are constantly put under pressure, as Hill already noted.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, this always draws back to an expelled materiality: excrement, food remainders, etc., a materiality performed on a textual and narrative level.

The disposal of the leftovers develops, notably, into one of Watt's obsessive, mock-analytic problem-solving projects, recurring throughout the

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<sup>24</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 250.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 72. Original emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Hill, *In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24.

novel<sup>30</sup>: countless series, lists, inventories, mathematical games, repetitions with a difference, conducted often by Watt, sometimes by another character, and ultimately recounted, in some embedded or framed form, by the narrator, Sam. The events (or non-events) taking place during Watt's service in the Knott household operate according to this same system, more often than not culminating in the famous series of syntactical and logical permutations. Indeed, their nature, outcome, and representation can be said to reside in the system itself; the logic forms its own end, its object is the logic. The first "principal incident" taking place—the call from the Galls, father-son piano-tuners—is said to "[resemble] all the incidents of note proposed to Watt during his stay in Mr Knott's house, and of which a certain number will be recorded in this place, without addition, or subtraction, and in a sense not."<sup>31</sup> Watt turns these incidents over in his head, again and again, in a fabulous game of language exorcism serving to recover from the "fragility of the outer meaning" some (or any) other meaning, "to elicit something from nothing."<sup>32</sup> Such a meaning certainly cannot be a symbolic one, and, even if occasionally discerned, must remain largely unspeakable and transient.<sup>33</sup> For Watt, the pseudo-logical treatises are an attempt to banish epistemological indeterminacy, turning "a disturbance into words," making "a pillow of old words, for a head," but the effect ultimately exacerbates this indeterminacy.<sup>34</sup> As Georgina Nugent-Folan comments, Watt's "need for semantic succour" does not result in a knowledge as to "the 'whatness' of a word," but rather "[every] object is 'ill seen,' every word is 'ill said'."<sup>35</sup> What the reader encounters are events metabolised by Watt into "purely plastic content," devoid of "all meaning, even the most literal," and according to the novel's famous rule: "no symbols where none intended."<sup>36</sup> These passages are "in a sense not;" in a sense, they are "nothing." Hence the irony that such passages

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<sup>30</sup> The philosophical *enjeu* of Watt's language games cannot be further commented on here; suffice it to say that a large number of at times conflicting articles exists on the novel's parodic engagement with Rationalism, Logical Positivism, and/or Fritz Mauthner's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's language philosophy.

<sup>31</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding Watt and Erskine's interactions, we are informed that "in the first week, Watt's words had not yet begun to fail him, or Watt's world to become unspeakable." *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Georgina Nugent-Folan, "'Ill buttoned': Comparing the representation of objects in Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* and Stein's *Tender Buttons*," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 22.1 (2013): 64, 77, doi: 10.3366/jobs.2013.0058.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 254.

from the manuscript should be inspected for code by the British War Office on Beckett's return to the United Kingdom in 1945.

As part of a novel, these prolonged syntactical permutations cannot be said to retain narrative impulses. The joke is evident after a few lines, and becomes self-consciously old early in the novel, to the extent that Watt himself contemplates the relation between his series and empirical evidence: "Was the picture a fixed and stable member of the edifice, like Mr Knott's bed, for example, or was it simply a manner of paradigm, here to-day and gone to-morrow, a term in a series, like the series of Mr Knott's dogs, or the series of Mr Knott's men, or like the centuries that fall, from the pod of eternity?"<sup>37</sup> And if the series are "exhaustive [*exhaustives*]," in the words of Gilles Deleuze, exhausting possibilities, they are also "exhausting [*épuisantes*]."<sup>38</sup> A lot of the time, the reader might *look* at the pages of text, as opposed to reading them, as perhaps with the "multitude of looks that go astray" or do not go astray between the academics on Mr Louit's panel: "Mr Fitzwein looked at Mr Magershon, on his right. But Mr Magershon is not looking at Mr Fitzwein, on his left, but at Mr O'Meldon, on his right. But Mr O'Meldon is not looking at Mr Magershon, on his left, but..."<sup>39</sup> Or the Sternean passage of frogs' croaking,<sup>40</sup> or indeed Mr. Knott's habits regarding dressing, walking and arranging of furniture:

Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire; from the fire to the bed; from the door to the fire; from the fire to the door; from the fire to the door; from the door to the fire; from the window to the bed; from the bed to the window; from the bed to the window...<sup>41</sup>

Do we read the above passage in its entirety? Have these pages, as part of the literary, lost their value? Are they merely conceptual?

A number of Beckett's later, fragmented prose pieces, such as 'Lessness' (1969) and 'Ping' (1966), prompted commentators to defend their *literary* merit beyond a conceptual recuperation in which "a quick, superficial glance" suffices to call a text "anti-literature" and establish its

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<sup>37</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 130-131.

<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann, *SubStance* 42.3 (1995): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3685005>.

<sup>39</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

artistic value that way.<sup>42</sup> However, *Watt* provides the critic with no such headache. What David Lodge feels he needs to argue in relation to ‘Ping’ is a given in *Watt*: “Its language is not void; its words do not merely demonstrate their emptiness.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, this credo would partly provide the very subject matter of the novel, and constitute its protagonist’s desperate pursuit. The apparent emptiness of the series relies precisely on its contiguous, material presence, its incorporation within a novel, which despite narrative discontinuity and formal excess remains a novel. Perhaps for this reason, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s inclusion of list passages from *Watt* (as well as an excerpt from Molloy’s famous sucking stones episode) in their conceptual writing anthology *Against Expression* (2011) feels somewhat misplaced, regardless of Beckett’s influence on “uncreative” avant-garde practices today. The meaning that emerges through the relation to the rest of the text is here passed by. Indeed, the reader may “read” these passages to secure an effect rather than content; what one is confronted with is textual matter, arranged into an obsessive pattern by Watt, a syntactical plasticity in which one can become lost and disoriented (if then one does not simply skip), before the narrative once more interrupts this state of stupefaction. A number of critics have insisted on the importance of the material conditions of Beckett’s use of different media (novel, short prose, poetry, drama, radio, TV). Daniel Albright, for example, writes that Beckett aimed “to foreground the medium, to thrust it in the spectator’s face, by showing its inadequacy, its refusal to be wrenched to any good artistic purpose.”<sup>44</sup> The text waste becomes in *Watt* a marker not just for a genre’s, but for a medium’s insecurity, announcing the more overt engagement with this ontological and artistic conundrum in the later prose works. The problem of the novel’s inadequacy—as an autotelic container for meaning and *histoire* [(hi)story]—is foregrounded here at the moment that textual matter overflows, when narrative emptiness becomes materially abundant, when, in Estragon’s words, “there’s no lack of void.”<sup>45</sup> *Watt* shows that the breakdown and emission of the medium’s materiality have been at stake before the conception of the so-called “Residua,” in which Beckett’s impossible task of writing remainders, writing incompleteness, appears more overtly, where, in Peter

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<sup>42</sup> David Lodge, “Some Ping Understood,” *Encounter* (February 1968): 89, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1968feb-00085>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 57.