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Dossier: Antwerp

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Teaching Beckett at the University of Antwerp

The Beckett Seminar has been part of the University of Antwerp's Master of English Literature curriculum since 2007. Its introduction into the programme was in line with the focus on modernism and postmodernism that the Department of English Literature has traditionally had. Apart from Beckett, the programme offers seminars on James Joyce and Wallace Stevens, as well as more general courses such as the American historical novel since 1950, New York City in 20th century literature, and Women Writers in Modern British Literature.

Although Beckett has a reputation of being a difficult author, he also features in two introductory Bachelor courses: *Waiting for Godot* is discussed in the BA1 course *Introduction to the Study of the English Literature*, and *Endgame* is part of 20th *Century Literature in English* (BA3). Both these courses are taught predominantly in lecture form, which leaves little room for interaction and provides only a cursory glimpse on Beckett's oeuvre and *modus operandi*. The present essay will therefore focus exclusively on the Beckett Seminar in the Master programme – the course that is taught to small groups of students and grounded in interaction.

The MA Beckett Seminar

The Beckett Seminar is a semester course, which means that it comprises about 12 to 13 weeks, depending on the calendar. The semester format inevitably necessitates making choices for the reading list of Beckett's works, since it is impossible to cover everything. Although the chronological principle has remained a constant, the reading list has undergone a number of changes since it was first taught by Dirk Van Hulle in 2007/2008. While the first edition was devoted exclusively to Beckett's prose works, the share of his drama has grown steadily and now constitutes half of the syllabus. This initial focus on the prose was due to the fact that a separate course on Beckett's dramatic works could be taken up in the second year of the old Germanic Languages programme, but the two courses merged after the Bachelor/Master programme was implemented throughout Europe. In recent years, the seminar has also become much more intermedial, owing to Pim Verhulst's expertise in radio and television plays, and Olga Beloborodova's work on *Film* and *Play / Comédie*. What has also grown over

time is the genetic orientation of the seminar: our involvement in the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP), which consists of digital modules and an accompanying book series, is an opportunity to pass on our accumulated knowledge and skills to our students.

Student Body

Over the course of the years, we have come to the conclusion that there is no particular type of Beckett student. The groups are usually very diverse and the student numbers vary from year to year. Apart from an occasional die-hard Beckett fan, the majority of the students only have a superficial knowledge of Beckett's work at the beginning of the seminar, either acquired in the BA programme, or – exceptionally – at high school. The majority are enrolled in the Master of English Language and Literature programme, but in recent years we have seen an increase in the number of students from the Theatre, Film and Literature programme (TFL). Those students are not only interested in Beckett as a playwright but also in his experiments with film, radio and television. Although they are not necessarily students of English, their background in theatre and film studies is a valuable addition to the course and resonates well with its intermedial angle.

One important aspect that distinguishes students of Beckett in Antwerp from those in other Beckett 'centres' (such as Reading and Dublin) is the fact that English is not their mother tongue. This is an additional challenge in at least two ways. To begin with, Beckett's early prose is filled to the brim with rare and often archaic words that may still be familiar to native speakers (if only as passive knowledge) but are completely unknown to most of the Belgian and Erasmus students. As to the late works, Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, which is on the reading list, is difficult enough as it is for native speakers due to its broken syntax and high number of neologisms, and for those reasons it is even more of a challenge to non-natives.

Secondly, and more generally, the Anglo-Irish cultural context that permeates Beckett's oeuvre is unfamiliar to Belgian students and thus requires extra explanation. This also concerns proper names: for instance, it is not immediately obvious to our students that Murphy is one of the most common Irish names, or what the symbolism is behind the statue of Cuchulain at the GPO (in the famous scene from *Murphy*). To partially remedy this knowledge gap, we always elaborate on Beckett's own

Protestant background and his complex relationship with Ireland in the introductory class, but there is a clear need to return to the context issue throughout the seminar.

That said, Belgian students do have one advantage in studying Beckett, and that is their familiarity with French. Being one of our three national languages, alongside Dutch and German, French is a compulsory part of high school education in Flanders, with formal teaching starting as early as the age of ten in primary school. More or less everyone who is locally schooled has at least a passive notion of French. Another unique feature is that students enrolled in the Linguistics and Literature programme at any Flemish university usually major in two languages during their BA trajectory, whereas students at UK and Irish institutions often major in one language, sometimes taking on additional ones as a minor subject. This linguistic circumstance facilitates the comparison between Beckett's French and English texts for the same work, a feature that often attracts students of English and French to the Beckett Seminar, who are keen to work with the bilingual version comparison tool built into the BDMP. On a broader scale, our location in Belgium, with Brussels being the 'capital' of the European Union, helps frame Beckett as a truly European author for our students, not only due to his bilingual oeuvre (and his involvement in translations into other languages and in editorial projects such as Suhrkamp's trilingual edition), but also – and perhaps primarily – due to his profoundly pan-European cultural background. Evidently this does not imply a narrow Eurocentric view; nor does it exclude an approach to Beckett's works as part of 'world literature'. On the contrary, presenting Beckett as a European writer implies an emphasis on his openness to the cultural exchange of ideas. At the present moment in our history, as nationalism and populism loom large across the continent, teaching Beckett as a pan-European author in the heart of Europe is a moral duty, and we gladly take full advantage of this opportunity.

The BDMP as a Teaching and Learning Tool

As the BDMP grows in size, so does its share in the teaching process. We usually introduce it to the students in the first or the second teaching week by giving them a short demo and asking them to perform a few search actions in the Beckett Digital Library (BDL) and trace the search results to the relevant manuscripts. We also encourage them to use the BDMP in their presentations and research papers, which they almost invariably do. What students particularly like is the collation tool, which

is probably the most used feature in the presentations. Likewise, the BDL is nearly always used to demonstrate intertextual references.

The BDMP currently has seven digital modules, and the eighth one will be added in mid-2019. With the exception of *Waiting for Godot* and *Stirrings Still*, all the works are on the Beckett Seminar reading list, which makes the BDMP an ideal teaching tool for the course. Moreover, the next two modules, scheduled for 2020 (on the radio plays and *Company*), also deal with works that are part of the syllabus, so the use of the BDMP will only grow in importance in the future seminars.

The BDMP is used for a number of purposes by students and by teachers. The students will typically use it in their presentations and their research papers. The student presentations are part of each class and entail a detailed discussion of a work from the reading list scheduled for that particular class. The presentation usually takes up the first half of the three-hour slot and is followed by the so-called ‘elaboration’, i.e. additional information or discussion questions that the teachers may have as a follow-up to the presentation. The presentations always have the same structure, which is explained to the students during a preparatory conversation the week before. Since the work’s genesis is part of the presentation, we encourage the students to use the BDMP and in particular the collation tool for that part. The same applies to intertextuality, which is another staple feature of the presentation: here, the BDL is a helpful resource, and students use it extensively to demonstrate intertextual links to each other. If the student is interested in Beckett’s self-translation, we also point to the BDMP as a useful tool to explore.

From the teachers’ point of view, we find the BDMP a handy way to *visualise* the story behind Beckett’s texts. We use it extensively in the lectures, often in order to explain how a particular passage came about. Also, we use the BDMP to illustrate Beckett’s creative undoing, for instance by showing the students the many cut passages from *Molloy* and *Malone meurt*, or subtle changes in wording that throw a different light on the interpretation of an entire text. This usually leads to an interesting discussion on the acts of undoing and the ‘textual scars’ that the published version still bears, sometimes across language barriers, i.e. in the translations.

Besides the digital modules, the accompanying BDMP volumes also appear to be very popular, especially for the research papers. Students find them useful for the critical part of the genetic analysis and for their explanatory properties. The volumes are among the most cited secondary sources used for the term papers. The division of

labour as we see it in our teaching practice – using the digital modules for the presentations and the printed volumes for the term papers – underscores the complementary rationale behind the digital and the printed parts of the BDMP project, namely the visualisation of Beckett's *modus operandi* as a writer in the digital editions and the analysis of the genesis in the books.

Apart from actively engaging with the BDMP as a learning tool, the students also value and take advantage of the opportunity to actually talk to people directly involved in the production of the digital modules and the accompanying volumes, since all three of the Beckett Seminar teachers are also BDMP editors and members of the editorial board – with more being invited from abroad to give guest lectures. For us, the teachers, it is extremely valuable and important to be able to share our research with such an interested and motivated audience and to use the students' feedback in order to test and improve the project's usability. Many students appreciate the opportunity to apply what they have learned and later go on to work as interns or student assistants on the modules that are under construction, and some even take up a PhD position at the Centre for Manuscript Genetics, (helping) to work on a module of their own.

Future Plans

Having been an inseparable part of the University's English Language and Literature Master programme for more than ten years, the Beckett Seminar course will continue to evolve and innovate in future, just as it has always done in the past. The BDMP has proven its use as a blended teaching and learning tool, and its deployment in the Beckett Seminar is in line with the Faculty's policy to have more Digital Humanities in its portfolio and focus on transferrable skills in addition to acquiring knowledge. On the other hand, the diversification of the reading list towards technological media like film, radio or television and their intermedial crossings with prose and theatre attracts students from outside the English programme, such as those from Theatre and Film studies. The combination of their different methodological and linguistic backgrounds with the genetic orientation of the Beckett Seminar will allow us to involve students even more closely in the BDMP production process, in order to maximize the impact of the course on their learning experience. To this end, we have reorganized the programming of our MA courses when the Linguistics and Literature curriculum underwent a major restructuring at the University two years ago. As a

result, the Beckett Seminar is now taught in the first semester, to familiarize students with the basic concepts of both genetic criticism and digital editing, which they can further explore in elective follow-up components during the second semester (*Writers at Work* and *Digital Humanities*).

In our experience, this combination of courses creates a synergy that not only helps prepare students for the 21st-century job market in the cultural field, but also changes their approach to literature, in that they learn to see it as a process, evolving over time, instead of a mere product intended for reading and consumption. The feedback of the students and our own experience of teaching the Beckett Seminar as an annual course has only strengthened us in the conviction that having a notion of a literary work's genesis potentially enriches the students' understanding and interpretation of that work. In this respect, we were exceptionally pleased when the MLA recently awarded the BDMP with its Prize for a Bibliography, Archive, or Digital Project and called it 'an indispensable aid for research *and* pedagogy for years to come' in its jury report. We intend to further build on this pedagogical potential in close consultation with students, from our own university as well as other national and international institutions, through the University of Antwerp's new *DH Summer School* and the Belgian interuniversity Master of Arts programme, in which Beckett's work and the BDMP have a central role to play.