

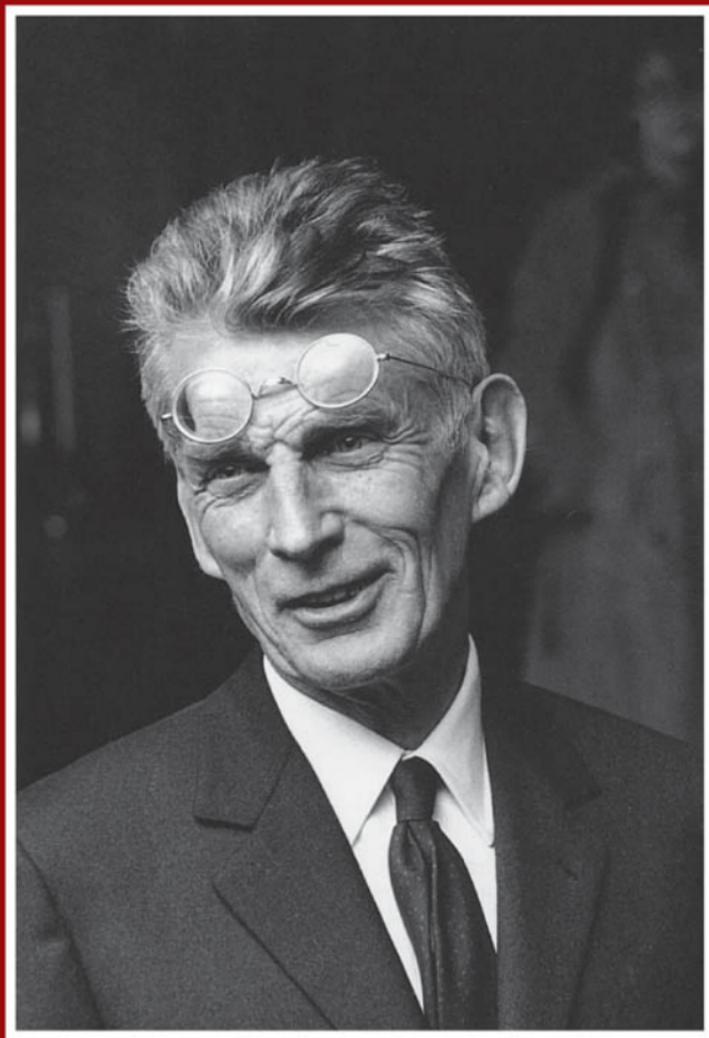
Samuel Beckett

Today / Aujourd'hui

“All Sturm and no Drang”

Beckett and Romanticism

Beckett at Reading 2006



Edited by
Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon

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INTRODUCTION

No matter how tongue-in-cheek Beckett's references to Romanticism sometimes are, they keep recurring with a remarkable persistence throughout his work. The "blue flower," one of the key symbols of Romantic yearning for unreachable horizons, is already present in Beckett's personal *Sturm und Drang* piece, his first published story "Assumption." Later on, the *Blaue Blume* appears as the "blue bloom" in "A Wet Night," alluding to Leopold Bloom's activities in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*. To what extent Romanticism plays a role in Beckett's developing poetics and his positioning vis-à-vis his great examples Joyce and Proust is a fascinating, because difficult, question. In his essay on the latter's work, Beckett discerns a "romantic strain in Proust," a "retrogressive tendency," receding from the Symbolists back towards Victor Hugo.

Although the blue flower seems to have withered after its reappearance in *Watt*, the impossible yearning it stands for never completely disappeared, from his early notes on Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (in the *Dream Notebook*) to the "missing word" (*Stirrings Still*) "afaint afar away" (*what is the word*). The entry on "Romanticism" in the Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett points out, with reference to Molloy:

His condition is essentially that of SB himself, mockery qualified by an undercurrent of German Romanticism, in literature (Hölderlin), music (Schubert), and art (Caspar David Friedrich). Not least of this, as in the art of Jack Yeats, was the sense of isolation, the insignificant human figure in an indifferent world, far from Wordsworth's pantheistic belief but at the heart of the Winterreise. This love is manifest more obviously in the later drama, where SB is less fearful of deciduous beauty. A good study of the Romantic impulse in SB's writings, revealing unexpected insights into a tradition vehemently rejected but never quite denied, is currently lacking.

(487)

In the past few decades there have been scattered efforts to shed some light on isolated traces of, or references to, Romanticism, but it remains difficult to fathom Beckett's ambiguous and somewhat paradoxical

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attitude toward this period in literature, music and art history. Far from being a comprehensive examination, the dossier on “Beckett and Romanticism” in the current issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* tries to give an impetus to the study of this complex theme with contributions on Beckett’s attitudes toward Romantic aesthetics in general, including notions such as the sublime, irony, failure, ruins, fragments, fancy, imagination, epitaphs, translation, unreachable horizons, the infinite, the infinitesimal and the unfinished, but also on Beckett’s reading about the Romantic period (such as Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony* and Théophile Gautier’s *Histoire du romantisme*), his affinity with specific Romantic artists and their influence on works such as *Murphy*, the trilogy, *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *All Strange Away*.

The second part of the current issue presents a selection of papers given at the Beckett at Reading 2006 conference in Reading (30 April – 2 May 2006), which was jointly organised by the Beckett International Foundation and the University’s School of English and American Literature. The conference marked Beckett’s centenary, an event that Beckett himself had viewed in 1981 (the year of his 75th Birthday) as something to be avoided:

I dread the year now upon us and all the fuss in store for me here, as if it were my centenary. I’ll make myself scarce while it lasts, where I don’t know. Perhaps the Great Wall of China, crouch behind it till the coast is clear.

(Letter to Jocelyn Herbert, 11 January 1981; RUL)

Reflecting the importance of the Beckett Foundation’s Archive to scholars, the focus of the conference somewhat naturally tended to be on empirical research and manuscript studies, but this did not exclude other approaches. Indeed, the variety of essays included in this issue shows the importance and benefits of scholarly dialogue and cross-fertilization between different approaches. Scholars attending the conference were also introduced to the ongoing project of establishing digital editions of Beckett’s manuscripts, and an outline of this work is presented at the end of the section.

While the previous *SBT/A* volume (*Présence de Samuel Beckett*) was predominantly French, the current issue is mainly English. Its “Freespace,” however, is truly bilingual. Different forms of otherness characterize several of these contributions, opening with essays on Beckett and Judaism, and the enunciative relation between author and

Introduction

text (focusing on Blanchot, Foucault, and Agamben). Falling down is the central motif in two other English essays, whereas the French contributions zoom in on linguistic matters, the posture of prayer in Beckett's works and the relationship between Charles Juliet and Samuel Beckett. The volume as a whole shows that *Beckett Studies* is in a better state than *Murphy* during its arduous journey toward publication, described by Beckett as "All Sturm and no Drang" (letter to Mary Manning Howe, 14 November 1936; HRHRC).

BECKETT AND ROMANTICISM

“ACCURSED CREATOR”: Beckett, Romanticism, and “the Modern Prometheus”

Dirk Van Hulle

The Romantic period is part of what Reinhart Koselleck has called the *Sattelzeit* ('saddle period'), the era that flanks the French Revolution by fifty years on either side. To investigate Beckett's ambiguous attitude towards this period, this essay starts with the Graveyard Poets and concludes with Mary Shelley's "hideous progeny" – as she called *Frankenstein* in the introduction to the 1831 edition. The essay investigates the relationship between "the modern Prometheus" and his "creature," and the theme of creation as a muddy but central issue in Beckett's works and self-translations.

The subtitle of Mary Shelley's most famous book refers to Frankenstein as "the modern Prometheus." The rebellious Titan who steals fire from Olympus to save mankind was the champion of the great Romantic poets, notably Byron and Percy Shelley. The idea of defying the gods has not only had an influence on Romantic poetics, but was still noticeable in post-war literature as an artistic tendency which John Barth referred to as "the romantic tradition of rebelling against Tradition" (65). This defiant aspect of the Prometheus myth can be retraced in Samuel Beckett's works, as Angela Moorjani has shown with reference to *Catastrophe*, suggesting a correspondence between the Protagonist and a "defiant Prometheus" in opposition to the "Zeuslike" Director (2005, 194). The present essay focuses on another aspect of the Prometheus myth, which has its origins in the Roman version of the Prometheus legend, notably in the *Metamorphoses*: the Ovidian Prometheus creates human beings by mixing earth with rain. The resulting mud is what we are, according to the text of *Eh Joe*: "Mud thou art" (1990, 365) instead of "dust" – as in the King James version of Genesis (III.19). In Rick Cluchey's copy of the bilingual English/German edition, in the right margin next to the line "Mud thou art" / "Dreck bist du," Beckett's marginalia refer to Luther's translation: "Den[n] du bist Erde / u[nd] sollst zu Erde werden / (Luther) / Genesis III 19" (RUL MS 3626, 59).¹ At the same time this

biblical reference is also an allusion to Goethe's line "die Erde hat mich wieder" immediately after Faust's suicide attempt, which Beckett quoted with a twist in the Addenda to *Watt*: "die Merde hat mich wieder" (1981, 251).

1. "night's young thoughts"

In this down-to-earth view of humanity the origin of human creatures coincides with their final resting place, the focal point of the Graveyard Poets. In *Murphy*, Samuel Beckett refers to one of these poets by trivializing Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*: "But now it was winter-time again, night's young thoughts had been put back an hour" (73-74). The same pun recurs in the eighth of the *Texts for Nothing*, but this time in the form of a self-translation:

Tout cela est libre, tout cela est tentant. Vais-je y glisser, essayer d'en faire profiter encore une fois, mes infirmités de rêve, pour qu'elles deviennent chair et tournent, en s'aggravant, autour de cette place grandiose que je confonds peut-être avec celle de la Bastille, jusqu'à être jugées dignes de l'adjacent Père-Lachaise ou, mieux, prématurément soulagées en voulant traverser, à l'heure du berger.

(1991, 173)

The vacancy is tempting, shall I enthrone my infirmities, give them this chance again, my dream infirmities, that they may take flesh and move, deteriorating, round and round this grandiose square which I hope I don't confuse with the Bastille, until they are deemed worthy of the adjacent Père Lachaise or, better still, prematurely relieved trying to cross over, at the hour of night's young thoughts.

(1995, 134)

The reversal of "night" and "young" is symptomatic of Beckett's problematic attitude towards pre-Romantic and Romantic authors. He often pokes fun at them and yet he seems to be strangely attracted to (at least certain aspects of) their works. In the case of the Graveyard Poets, the attraction may be connected less with the "pleasures of melancholy" – as Thomas Warton called them – but with a more general dissatisfaction with an enlightened confidence in knowability. With regard to schoolmen and sages, Thomas Parnell already wrote in his

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“Night-Piece on Death”: “Their books from wisdom widely stray, / Or point at best the longest way. / I’ll seek a readier path, and go / Where wisdom’s surely taught below” (qtd. in Punter and Byron, 11). David Punter and Glennis Byron summarize the Graveyard Poets’ aesthetics as an attempt to learn the secrets of life “from prolonged and absorbed meditation on its extreme limit: death” (11). Against this background Beckett’s reference to the Graveyard Poets may seem to be a reaction to Joyce’s encyclopaedic approach to literature – “in the direction of knowing more” (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 352) – but the matter is more complex than it may appear to be.

After the war, Beckett still admitted to Jake Schwartz that he had an “innate passion for knowledge, which demanded periodic satisfaction” and that secretly he even dreamed of reading through all the volumes of an encyclopaedia – after which he received a complete set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to quench his thirst for knowledge (Bair, 493-94). But this Faustian trait is relativized in a letter to Jacoba van Velde (12 April 1958): “On m’a donné l’édition 1911 de l’Encyclopédie Britannique. 28 volumes. Trop tard.” (NAF 19794, 53).

It might have been “too late” for encyclopaedic projects, but the question is whether Beckett would ever have been able to engage himself with total abandon in any encyclopaedic project, for a quarter of a century earlier he had already discovered that, in spite of this innate passion for knowledge, the accumulation of erudition and “verbal booty” was more of an obstacle than a incentive to his literary projects.² Similarly, his allusions to Edward Young and the Graveyard Poets involve a complex combination of attraction and resistance, as H. Porter Abbott notes: “By appropriating the romantic tradition of the associative, incondite meditation, Beckett accentuates his difference” (91). Porter Abbott draws attention to the stylistic correspondences between the “vaguely iambic dying fall” in Young’s *Night Thoughts* and the twilight passages in Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*, but he immediately points out the differences as well:

In the romantic tradition, the quality of being formally unreined is grounded in the confidence that the individual mind can generate, through the free exercise of its own powers, texts that would be at once beautiful and wise, coherent and deep. The very looseness of the form in this tradition was a promise of higher connectedness; its obscurity, an intimation of higher meaning. But in Beckett’s

hands, the ‘looseness’ of the text augments the anxiety of relatedness and the despair of meaning.

(91)

The same confidence characterizes Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition” (1759): “The mind of a man of Genius is a fertile and pleasant field” (§34). Young emphasizes that unlike imitations, which are “often a sort of Manufacture,” an Original “rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius” (§43). The “man of Genius” Young had in mind was modelled after a particular image, that had already been suggested in the beginning of the eighteenth century by the Earl of Shaftesbury in his *Advice to an Author* (1710): “Such a poet is indeed a second Maker; a just Prometheus under Jove” (qtd. in Abrams 1953, 280). In the history of the so-called *Genie-Zeit*, the figure of Prometheus personified the defiance of authority and established poetic codes.

As Jochen Schmidt illustrates in *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens*, the idea of the artist as a god on earth (*deus in terris*), which was already prominent in the Renaissance, became more distinct when it was linked to the figure of Prometheus during the *Genie-Zeit* (Schmidt, 258-59). But it was Goethe who turned this simile into a programme by means of his poem “Prometheus,” which Beckett typed out (TCD MS 10971/1, 72r-v). As Mark Nixon points out (2006, 265), this excerpt is inextricably linked up with Beckett’s reading of John G. Robertson’s *A History of German Literature* (1902) and Goethe’s *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the reading traces of which can also be found in the same notebook. In *Beckett’s Books* Matthew Feldman draws particular attention to the final stanza in relation to Beckett’s persistent exploration of “the creative act itself” in his post-war works (2006, 27).

Both aspects of the mythical Prometheus – the defiant fire/light-bringer and the creator (referred to as *Prometheus plasticator*) – resonate in Beckett’s works. James Knowlson establishes a link between Beckett’s early reading of Goethe’s poem and his post-war works by pointing out that, towards the end of the 1960s, Beckett “quoted with relish in German some of the rebellious, accusatory lines of the poem” (568), echoes of which recur in *Lessness*. The sole upright figure which “will curse God [...] face to the open sky” (1995, 197 and 201) resembles the attitude of the creature as Prometheus moulded it, according to Ovid: whereas other creatures walked with their heads

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facing downwards, looking at the earth, human beings were given an “upturned aspect” (trans. Kline), because Prometheus commanded them to stand upright and look towards the sky (“os homini sublime dedit caelumque videre / iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus”; Ovid, I.85-86).

Apart from Prometheus’ defiance, his role as *plasticator* also seems to have caught Beckett’s special attention. Goethe’s Prometheus is not just one of the “rebels of the *Genieperiode* [who] exploited the element of Promethean defiance against vested authority, in order to attack the code of poetic rules,” as Abrams calls them; he is as ambitious as Doctor Praetorius in James Whale’s *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) in that he is intent on creating not just a homunculus (like Faust’s assistant Wagner), but an entire species:

Hier sitz ich, form Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei”
(Here I sit, making men / In my own image, / A race that shall be
like me)

(TCD MS 10971/1/72)

A year after the release of Whale’s Faustian sequel of *Frankenstein*, Beckett read (and took extensive excerpts from) Goethe’s *Faust*. After that reading experience, the focus on the creative act was increasingly mixed with the image of the homunculus. The making of such a small creature recurs a few times in the trilogy.³ Beckett’s own “creatures” may be regarded as “homuncules” too, but what characterizes these literary compositions is that they are mainly occupied with decomposition.

2. “turning-point,” or: Wordsworth Ho

In this context it is remarkable how Beckett, presenting his work as a composition in reverse, uses Wordsworth as a contrasting background, notably his famous definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” taking its origin “from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” While Wordsworth explains how “successful composition generally begins,”⁴ Beckett is more interested in “decomposition.” In the years immediately after the so-called revelation, Wordsworth’s famous definition is insistently distorted, for instance in “The Expelled” (“Recollecting these emotions, with the celebrated advantage of