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The State of Becketts Texts

Reference:

van Hulle Dirk.- The State of Becketts Texts
Journal of Beckett studies - ISSN 0309-5207 - 24:1(2015), p. v-xii
Handle: <http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1243560151162165141>

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Press in the *Journal of Beckett Studies* 24.1 (2015): v-xii.
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DIRK VAN HULLE and MARK NIXON

Editorial: The State of Beckett's Texts

Ever since Samuel Beckett's death, twenty-five years ago, the wish for critically edited texts of his works has been expressed by readers and researchers alike. In 1992, for instance, John Banville wrote in the *New York Review of Books* (13 August 1992) that 'It is time now for all of Beckett's work to be properly edited and published in definite and accurate editions in order that future readers be allowed to see them for the unique testaments that they are'. This was more than two decades ago. But these years have not been wasted, because textual scholarship has witnessed an enormous development in the meantime. This issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* contains contributions that illustrate the urgent need for critical editions as well as suggestions, from the perspective of textual scholarship, to take advantage of the developments in scholarly editing during the last few decades and apply the state of the art in this discipline to Beckett's texts.

In the proceedings of the conference 'Beckett and Beyond' (Monaco, 17–20 May 1991), James Knowlson's contribution opened with the words 'I know my texts are in a terrible mess'. Beckett made this comment toward the end of his career in an interview with Knowlson, who suggests that Beckett was referring to 'one or more of the following "messy" situations':

First, the fact that in the past there have been, and indeed still are, many internal discrepancies between different editions of the same play in the English and American editions; secondly, and much less obviously, since we are dealing with different languages, that there are major inconsistencies in the printed texts of the three European languages with which Beckett had been most closely concerned; thirdly, that the state of the texts no longer reflected the way in

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which, following his work on the plays [...] he wanted them to be played.
(Knowlson, 1999, 176)

American and English Editions

The first “messy” situation’ – the discrepancies between English and American editions – was brought to the fore by Hersh Zeifman in 1977, when he examined the state of ‘The Texts of *Waiting for Godot*’ in the *Educational Theatre Journal*. The first Faber edition (1956), which admitted that ‘a small number of textual deletions were made to satisfy the requirements of the Lord Chamberlain’, was revised in 1965 and this time presented as the ‘complete and unexpurgated text [...] authorized by Mr. Beckett as definitive’. Hersh Zeifman pointed out three instances in which he suggested the Faber edition was ‘clearly superior’ to the Grove edition. One of them concerns a famous and oft-quoted passage, Pozzo’s final speech: ‘Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, **one day like any other day**, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf’ (Beckett, 1965, 89). The passage in bold is not present in the Grove edition, which is ‘incorrect’ according to Zeifman: ‘Presumably all those “one day” repetitions confused the compositor (or perhaps Beckett himself), who accordingly skipped a phrase’ (Zeifman, 1977, 82). Zeifman’s conclusion (in 1977) was:

At the very least, the American text should restore those passages which it omitted [...]. Since Beckett has approved a definitive edition, surely we ought to respect his wishes and have the play as he intended it. (83–4)

But ten years later, when Zeifman’s article was reprinted in the casebook *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, edited by Ruby Cohn (1987), he indignantly added an extra footnote to point out that Faber and Faber had just published the *Complete Dramatic Works* and used the bowdlerized text of *Waiting for Godot*, in which the idea of an

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erection is literally 'whispered down'. Instead of the text of the 'definitive' 1965 edition:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection!

ESTRAGON: (*highly excited*). An erection!

VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow.

the 1986 text of the *Complete Dramatic Works* reads:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR *whispers to* ESTRAGON. ESTRAGON *highly excited*.

VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow.

In his disgruntled reaction, Zeifman spoke of 'barbarism': 'It is appalling that, in 1986, Faber should perpetuate such barbarism by publishing a *Complete Dramatic Works* in which Beckett's most famous play is mistakenly printed in a corrupt and censored text' (1987, 95). Twelve years later, James Knowlson referred to it as 'one of the most unfortunate mishaps in modern publishing history' (1999, 177).

As for the American editions, Zeifman had urged the publisher: 'Perhaps it is *now* time for Grove Press to bring the American edition of the play into line with the 1965 definitive Faber & Faber edition' (1977, 83; emphasis added). '*Now*' was 1977. But thirty years later, the omissions were still not restored in Grove's 2006 centenary edition (Beckett, 2006a, 82) and more recent editions of the play.

Different Languages

Grove also published a bilingual edition.¹ Apart from the unrestored passages, Stan Gontarski suggested in 2006 that the Grove text (1954) remains 'closer to the spirit of Beckett's original translation' than the Faber editions (Gontarski in Beckett, 2006b,

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viii). In the first Faber edition (1956), for instance, Vladimir says: 'But the other Apostle says that one was saved' (Beckett, 1956, 13), a rather literal translation of the French original ('Mais l'autre dit qu'il y en a eu un de sauvé'). The Grove text has a subtle translation variant: 'But one of the four says that one of the two was saved', which is also the way it reads in the 2010 Faber and Faber edition, based on the 'Corrected text published by Faber and Faber in 1965' (Beckett, 2010, 9).² This kind of revision/retranslation has not gone unnoticed and there have been quite a few appeals for a bilingual edition, notably by Bruno Clément and Charles Krance. The concrete results of several initiatives in this direction are discussed in the contributions to this issue. As James Knowlson indicated, however, there is also a third language with which Beckett was most closely concerned (1999, 177). The German Suhrkamp Verlag has made a considerable effort to publish Beckett's plays as multilingual works. Although their trilingual editions do not highlight translation variants as in Charles Krance and Magessa O'Reilly's bilingual editions (Beckett 1993; 1996; 2001) they do make some of the discrepancies between the French and the English versions typographically visible, for instance by means of a huge white gap where the French version simply has a stage direction mentioning an '*échange d'injures*', whereas in the English versions Vladimir and Estragon insult each other with more than a half dozen of abusive terms (Beckett, 1971, 186). And this trilingual edition is available in an affordable paperback edition.

But even between the first edition of the trilingual edition (1963, in which the English version of *Waiting for Godot* follows after the French and German versions, printed in parallel) and the paperback edition (1971, in which the French and English versions are printed in two columns on the left-hand side, with the German translation on the facing recto) there are significant differences. And although Beckett was grateful to Suhrkamp for the care they took to present his work in three languages, he did not hesitate to draw the publisher's attention to the capital mistake they made in the first edition of the *Dramatische Dichtungen in drei Sprachen I* by reprinting the expurgated English version. When Suhrkamp published its trilingual paperback edition in 1971, it did use the 1965 'definitive' Faber edition. But the 1981 hardback trilingual Suhrkamp edition in one volume again reprinted the censored version and

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all the mistakes of the 1963 edition (including the clearly erroneous 'k' in 'Akt Two'
(Beckett, 1981, 412).

Revised Texts

In the 'Zweiter Akt' of the 1963 Suhrkamp edition of Elmar Tophoven's German translation of *En attendant Godot*, Beckett made several annotations for his 1975 Schiller-Theater production of the play (UoR MS 1481/2), which brings us to the third of what Knowlson referred to as "'messy" situations': the discrepancy between the texts of the plays and the way Beckett wanted them to be played. The '*échange d'injures*' was adapted in an annotated prompt copy during the rehearsals (Beckett, 1952, 127). Whereas the 1971 trilingual Suhrkamp paperback edition printed a blank space after '*échange d'injures*' in the French version, the 1963 trilingual edition filled it with the following series of abusive terms, translated into German on the facing page:

Vladimir	Andouille!	Schurke!
Estragon	Tordu!	Würstchen!
Vladimir	Crétin!	Saftsack!
Estragon	Curé!	Giftzwerg!
Vladimir	Dégueulasse!	Rotzlöffel!
Estragon	Micheton!	Rindsknochen!
Vladimir	Ordure!	Mistbiene!
Estragon	Archi...tecte!	Ober...forstinspektor! (158–9)

In the annotated version, Beckett substituted the German list with a new series of handwritten abusive terms: 'Streithammel / Querulant / Stinkstiefel / Giftnickel / Brechmittel / Pestbeule / ~~Scheisskerl~~ Parasit / (Pa..Pa..Paläolitiker)' (Beckett, 2006d, 92). Almost all of these terms, except the last one and the 'Giftnickel' (which was replaced by 'Kotzbrocken'), were incorporated in the revised translation, published in

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the 1971 trilingual edition (187). The annotated copy was published as an affordable facsimile edition by Suhrkamp in 2006 and it also served as one of the texts with which Dougald McMillan and James Knowlson established their 'revised text' in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (1993a). According to James Knowlson, Beckett 'authorised the changes to the German translations without any problem. With the English and French texts he took much more time to acclimatise himself to them before he authorised them' (1999, 184–5). For Colin Duckworth, the revised texts represented the 'textual vandalism' which he thought Beckett had perpetrated on his own texts (1987, 190–1), whereas S. E. Gontarski saw them (in combination with the theatrical notebooks) as 'something like a postmodern performance text, with an emphasis on process and transformation' (1995, 205) and James Knowlson argued that the 'status of these revised texts' (1999, 184) was not that of a 'definitive' text, nor that of 'an aberration' (referring to Duckworth), but certainly 'an improvement' (185).

Still, toward the end of his career, Beckett did not reduce the textual situation of his play to one revised version. When asked about Beckett's instructions with regard to the 'all star' production at the Lincoln Center (Manhattan) with Robin Williams, Steve Martin, F. Murray Abraham and Bill Irwin, Mike Nichols told Mel Gussow: 'He said that as far as the text was concerned, what existed in the various texts was available to us' (Nichols in Beckett, 2008, 97). But does that imply that editors can just eclectically pick and choose whatever they like from the various texts or does each version of the text have its own textual integrity?

That is the starting point of the first contribution to this dossier, which approaches the problem of the various texts 'in a terrible mess' from the vantage point of textual scholarship. The editorial model Dirk Van Hulle suggests combines 'the various texts' in the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (beckettarchive.org) with a critical bilingual edition of the 'twin texts'. The need for such an edition, even (or especially) after the many editions published during and in the wake of what S. E. Gontarski has called 'A Centenary of Missed Opportunities' (2011), is further demonstrated in the articles of this dossier and corroborated by several case studies. The textual 'strategies and strangenesses' in Beckett's early poems are carefully

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examined by John Pilling, who co-edited the 2012 Faber edition of the *Collected Poems* with Seán Lawlor; the texts of the novel *Watt* are scrutinized by Mark Byron, who is working on the *Watt* module in the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP) and Chris Ackerley, who edited the Faber and Faber edition of this novel in 2009; the textual situation of the critical writings is probed by Mark Nixon and David Tucker, who are preparing a critical edition of these texts; the various texts of the radio plays are compared in detail by Pim Verhulst, who is working on a genetic edition of these plays in the BDMP; the multilingual aspect of Beckett's texts is discussed by Pascale Sardin, who has chosen the shorter play *Come and Go / Va-et-vient / Kommen und Gehen* as a case study; the textual variants in the later bilingual prose are perused by Georgina Nugent-Folan, who is preparing a genetic edition of *Company / Compagnie* in the BDMP; and S. E. Gontarski takes stock of the current situation to close this dossier on the state of 'the Beckettian text'.

Finally, this issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* is dedicated to the memory of Billie Whitelaw, who passed away in December 2014, and is remembered in these pages by Anna McMullan.

NOTES

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 31360911.

1. At the same time, Faber and Faber also published a bilingual edition of the play, in which the line 'one day like any other day' does appear (Beckett, 2006c, 177).
2. As Hersh Zeifman noted, the 'apparently positive nature of the statement is thus eroded by its own syntax' (1977, 79).

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