

# *Introduction*

## *The Odd Poem – Samuel Beckett’s Poetry*

*William Davies and James Brophy*

### I.

At a particularly low moment at the end of August 1937, Samuel Beckett wrote to Mary Manning Howe describing his recent fallow period at home in the Dublin suburb of Foxrock after returning from an extended trip to Germany:

I do nothing, with as little shame as satisfaction. It is the state that suits me best. I write the odd poem when it is there, that is the only thing worth doing. There is an ecstasy of accidia – willless in a grey tumult of idées obscures. There is an end to the temptation of light, its polite scorplings & consolations.<sup>1</sup>

Beckett’s emphasis here is the nothing he is doing, but it might as well have been the ‘odd poem’ that is the occasional product of his acedia. Throughout his life, Beckett only ever wrote *odd* poems. Odd in a triple sense: of occurring at irregular intervals; of their being formally unusual, *sui generis*, even while often inspired by historical forms; and in the sense of their being somehow *in addition to*, awkward for their lack of a clear relation to otherwise so praised a body of work – not ‘the bride herself’, but the ‘odd maid out’, as he put it in an early short story.<sup>2</sup> Beckett was also oddly protective of his poetry: when questions of the collation and republication of early works came as he found fame, it was only his poetry collection, *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935), that he was really willing to see set in type again, this despite the little recognition it received the first time around, or since.<sup>3</sup> From start to end, Beckett’s poetry remained an odd endeavour.

<sup>1</sup> *LSB* I, 546. Mark Nixon transcribes ‘idées oiseuses’, or ‘idle notions’, in place of ‘idées obscures’, in *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries 1936–1937* (London: Continuum Books, 2011), 185. The ‘odd poem’ in question is possibly ‘Ooftish’ (*CP*, 354).

<sup>2</sup> ‘What a Misfortune’, *MPTK*, 139.

<sup>3</sup> C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 160.

The first poetry Beckett wrote contributed to the conscious effort of building a name for himself through contests and literary publications. Early biographical entries mark out poetry as his primary focus. In the June 1930 issue of *transition*, he is ‘Samuel Beckett, an Irish poet and essayist’, and in *The European Caravan* (1931) he is ‘the most interesting of the younger Irish writers’ who ‘has adapted the Joyce method to his poetry with original results. His impulse is lyric, but has been deepened through this influence and the influence of Proust and of the historic method.’<sup>4</sup> Beckett’s early poems are well-suited to the brand of European modernism these publications represented, but as these descriptions make clear, he was very much steeped in an Irish modernist milieu as well, perhaps best indicated by the long poems, ‘Enueg I’ and ‘Sanies I’, set in and around Dublin.<sup>5</sup> However, poetry had become even by August 1937 a genre of enervation to be undertaken, if only barely, in periods where more substantial work was not possible – moments of acedia, of depression, and of mourning. In those mid-career years in which Beckett produced critically regarded work in the genres of the novel and drama, the late 1940s to the early 1970s, he seems to have written almost no poetry whatsoever. It appears that the poetic impulse was either calmed by the steady fulfilment of other artistic projects, or else it was sublimated into the novels and plays of those productive years.

Sublimated, or simply amalgamated. There are the scraps of verse in the addenda to the novel *Watt* (1953) for example, written in the mid-1940s. The fourth ‘Addenda’ entry, ‘who may tell the tale’, and the twenty-third, ‘Watt will not’, are both included in Seán Lawlor and John Pilling’s *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*.<sup>6</sup> The eighth addendum, a quatrain beginning ‘Bid us sigh on from day to day,’ similarly suggests that verse remained in and on Beckett’s mind while writing his novel.<sup>7</sup> ‘Bid us sigh’,

<sup>4</sup> On quoting these biographies, Christopher Ricks points out that it is unclear what ‘the historic method’ actually refers to (‘Imagination dead imagine’, review of *Samuel Beckett: Poems 1930–1989*, ed. John Calder, *Guardian*, 1 June 2002).

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion, see David Wheatley’s ‘The Mercyseat and “The Mansion of Forgetfulness”’: Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*, Austin Clarke’s “Mnemosyne Lay in Dust” and Irish Poetic Modernism’, *English Studies* 83, no. 6 (2002): 527–540; and ‘Slippery Sam and Tomtinker Tim: Beckett and MacGreevy’s Urban Poetics’, *Irish Studies Review* 13, no. 2 (2005): 189–202.

<sup>6</sup> *CP*, 109; 110.

<sup>7</sup> Whether or not the poems started out as discreet exercises is unclear as they appear simultaneously on the verso and recto pages of the *Watt* manuscript notebooks. Beckett wrote predominantly on the recto while using the verso for free thinking and revision. It is therefore not possible to discern whether he wrote the poems first as part of drafting the prose or first on the verso and then incorporated them. See *CP*, 393–394.

though, is not included in any volume of Beckett's poetry.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in the realm of Beckett's drama, a poetic impulse is on display in the chant Clov sings near the conclusion of *Fin de partie*:

Joli oiseau, quitte ta cage,  
Vole vers ma bien-aimée,  
Niche-toi dans son corsage,  
Dis-lui combine je suis emmerdé.<sup>9</sup>

These examples are clearly, which is to say formally, *verse*. Clov's 'Joli oiseau' serves the dramatic art of fleshing out this character and this world, but it is also a captivating combination of child's song and love lyric, held in balance with a sense of existential dead-end. Yet this blend of allusion, erotics, and spiritual desperation is very much what makes up the substance of this play; should we extract a moment of lineated verse and call it a poem in and of itself? Everything about its nestled fittingness here within the play makes it lack the oddness of Beckett's independent poems, yet this compulsion to include verse and song is, in its own way, odd. 'Joli oiseau' is, then, among those poetic works, like the *Watt* addenda poems, that do not neatly fit into a study of the author's *poetry* as such, even while they demonstrate something about Beckett as a poet.

Then there are those moments in Beckett's prose when lyricism bursts through: instances not representationally of verse, but poetic nonetheless. Any reader of Beckett's prose will likely have stumbled on an example, but one demonstration might be the ending sentences of 'The Calmative' (1946): '[. . .] in vain I raised without hope my eyes to the sky to look for the Bears. For the light I stepped in put out the stars, assuming they were there, which I doubted, remembering the clouds.'<sup>10</sup> In the experimental prose Beckett began writing in the early 1960s with works like *All Strange Away* (1964), *Ping* (1966) and *Lessness* (1970), the poetic impulse toward lyricism morphs into an attention to language, to its sound and rhythm, that is fundamentally poetic in nature – the rhythms and repetitions of *Lessness*, for example, are central to the textual experience. But such emphasis on the sounds of words had long been an element of his style, from the

<sup>8</sup> The likely reason the other two *Watt* poems are included in volumes of the poems is both were recorded by Beckett for Lawrence Harvey in the 1970s – that is, their inclusion preserves both the slim history of Beckett performing his work and the fact that Beckett chose these poems when asked to recite his own verse.

<sup>9</sup> *Fin de partie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 105. This has no counterpart in the English *Endgame*.

<sup>10</sup> *CSP*, 76–77.

comedic wordplay of lists and permutations in *Watt* to the collapse of the speaking self in his novel *The Unnamable*.

Lyricism is to be found in his dramatic masterpieces, too, as exemplified by the rhythmic exchange of dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* which begins after Estragon evokes 'All the dead voices', a passage excerpted for Derek Mahon's 1972 anthology *Modern Irish Poetry*.<sup>11</sup> That poetry, or lyricism, was innate to Beckett's work in all genres helps resolve the mystery of why he seemed to feel no need to write poems when he was not in those states of willless tumult described to Mary Manning Howe. It helps us to understand why in the chronology of composition there is a period that stretches nearly two decades beginning at the end of the 1940s without an original poem to show (at least none which has survived).

To tease out what is and what is not a Beckett poem is worth some consideration. Poetry is not only a genre formally distinguishable from other kinds of writing, however poetically one might compose novels or plays: it is also an atmosphere of critical concern with particular connotations of tradition and legacy. In 1933, as he struggled to come up with another story for his *More Pricks than Kicks* collection, Beckett remarked to Thomas MacGreevy that it was through poetry that he really hoped for success at the time: 'If only I could get the poems off now I'd be crowned.'<sup>12</sup> As John Pilling has put it, Beckett 'thought of poetry as the ne plus ultra of genres, the medium in which greatness was most difficult to acquire, but imperishable once acquired'.<sup>13</sup>

What Beckett did and did not recognise as poetry when discussing or publishing his work matters, then, and moments when he chose to write poetry, particularly after he made his name in other genres, matters also. To call something a poem introduces a specific tradition of critical reading; a specific understanding of inheritance, reference and tradition; and, indeed, possibly even a specific form of prestige, one Beckett never really achieved with his poetry despite his deep engagement with the traditions to which it connects. Indeed, another way of looking at Beckett's return to verse writing in the 1970s is that prestige was no longer an issue: poetry once again had become for him a necessity. For all these reasons and more, the authors in this volume have undertaken, in various ways, the work of

<sup>11</sup> *Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Derek Mahon, (London: Sphere Books, 1972), 114. Mahon also included under the title 'Song from *Watt*' the 'To Nelly' verse from the novel. 'what would I do' was the 'only bona fide poem' included by Mahon (*CP*, 393).

<sup>12</sup> *LSB I*, 167.

<sup>13</sup> John Pilling, 'Beckett and "The Itch to Make": The Early Poems in English', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 8, (1999): 16.

coming to terms with Beckett's poetry distinctly, and with Beckett distinctly as a poet.

## II.

The critical prospect of 'Beckett as poet' has been so overshadowed by Beckett as novelist and dramatist that a glance over the critical history might throw into doubt that he wrote poetry at all. Reviewing the *Collected Poems in English and French* in 1977, Richard Coe observed that, at the time of writing, an estimated 5,000 scholarly and critical items had been published on Beckett, including sixty books.<sup>14</sup> Of those, Coe noted, only Lawrence Harvey's *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (1970) treated Beckett's poetry with any serious attention. Five decades later the picture is little different, save that the first figure pales in comparison to the number of publications dedicated to Beckett's work today. A healthy number of essays have been published on Beckett's poetry, but Harvey's remains the only full-length study.<sup>15</sup> This is no doubt in part a result of the lack, until 2012, of a proper 'collected' poems, but one continues to find whole monographs dedicated to Beckett's work which make no mention of his poetry writing.

Harvey's *Poet and Critic* recognises that the poetry formed a significant part of Beckett's writing life. Harvey acknowledges the poems are 'difficult if not hermetic' from the start, but he sees their difficulty as a result of their unique relationship to Beckett's intellectual and emotional life, his 'human realities': 'they are filled with allusions to worlds beyond the world of poetry – to literature and philosophy, to Ireland and France and especially the Dublin and Paris that Beckett knew as a young man, to events in the life of the poet'.<sup>16</sup> This is one way to understand Beckett's 'lyric impulse' described in those early modernist publication biographies – the poems are 'difficult' in a recognisably modernist sense of allusion and intellectualism, mediated through an often intense lyric subjectivity. Harvey's emphasis on Beckett's private, inner life for reading the poetry anticipates the substantial biographical information Lawlor and Pilling deemed necessary to provide in the commentary of their *Collected Poems*.

<sup>14</sup> *Times Literary Supplement* (15 July 1977). Reprinted in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 401–405.

<sup>15</sup> For a bibliography of criticism on Beckett's poetry, see *CP*, 479–485.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), ix–x.

Beyond its interpretative treatment of the poems, Harvey's monograph was for some time also the only place that interested readers could find certain poems reprinted, notably the four poems published in 1931 in *The European Caravan* – 'Hell Crane to Starling', 'Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin', 'Yoke of Liberty' and 'Text [3]' – not available again until the Calder 2002 *Collected Poems 1930–1989*. Harvey's study is, though, limited by the obvious fact that it was produced while Beckett was still alive and writing. Harvey did not in the late 1960s know, of course, that Beckett would return to poetry (shortly after *Poet and Critic* was published, in fact), and indeed that he would later produce some of his most affecting poems. It therefore remains the case that there is no book-length study of Beckett's complete poetry apart from compendium works and encyclopaedic overviews such as Ruby Cohn's *A Beckett Canon* (2001).<sup>17</sup>

The only other extended study of Beckett's poems came in 2007 with the sixth issue of the *Fulcrum* literary journal. Edited by Philip Nikolayev, 'Samuel Beckett as Poet' brought together scholars, critics and people who knew Beckett to reflect on his poetry and poetics. In his introduction, Nikolayev laid bare the dearth of available criticism on the poetry and signalled the impact that a collected poems and projects such as the published letters would have (particularly given how frequently Beckett includes whole or parts of poems in his correspondence). Nikolayev has been proved right, especially in the work of some of the *Fulcrum* contributors who have continued to enlarge our understanding of the poems and the traditions they speak to, particularly Marjorie Perloff, Mark Nixon and David Wheatley, all of whom have written regularly on the poetry before and after the *Collected* appeared; Nixon and Wheatley carry on their thinking here. Nikolayev's call for scholarly treatments of the poems came to fruition first in Wheatley's *Selected Poems: 1930–1989* (2009), published as part of the Faber & Faber 'Reader's editions' Beckett series; and then in Lawlor and Pilling's *Collected Poems* (2012). Wheatley's *Selected* and Lawlor and Pilling's *Collected* are each valuable and complementary. Wheatley's edition, friendly to a general readership interested in the poetry, provides a short prefatory essay that demonstrates the immense worth of having a practising poet attend to Beckett's poems. It also offers reliable texts and an editorially principled treatment of the *mirlitonnades*, as

<sup>17</sup> Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 7. Cohn's is an indispensable text but one that confesses to its own limitations on the poetry, depending as it does on Harvey for its analysis (though Cohn offers useful and insightful points of disagreement).

well as an appendix of some of the only reliably rendered English translations for these and other poems in French. Wheatley's contribution to this present volume, which explores the centrality of the human body throughout the corpus of Beckett's poetry, continues to demonstrate the insightful sensitivity that Wheatley brings as a reader. For their part, Lawlor and Pilling's labour of gathering nearly all of Beckett's poems and poetic translations in sound textual versions with extended scholarly apparatus, variants and intertextual detail, provides the groundwork such that the critical deficit might begin to be rectified.<sup>18</sup>

Two recent areas, one of scholarship and one of appreciation and influence, offer noteworthy exceptions to the lack of attention to Beckett's poems. With the opening up of Beckett's archives, alongside the letters and *Selected/Collected Poems* projects, manuscript studies of Beckett's poems have become a more frequent occurrence, notably by Nixon, Wheatley and Dirk Van Hulle (who returns to the materiality of the late poetry in his chapter here).<sup>19</sup> Van Hulle included 'what is the word', Beckett's final poem (and final work of any kind), in the inaugural volume of the *Beckett Digital Manuscript Project* genetic dossier series.<sup>20</sup> 'What is the word' is also unique for its part in performances of Beckett's non-dramatic works. In 2019, the performance group Rosetta Life produced 'This Here: An exploration of fragility and embodiment amongst stroke survivors', for which 'what is the word' is the core text. The poem also formed the backbone of Pan Pan Theatre's 2020 performance piece, itself titled 'What is the word', which combined audio-visual effects with readings of Beckett's poems. These mark only the latest in the curious life of Beckett's poems in the world of performance art. The theatre group Mouth on Fire have included readings of Beckett's French and

<sup>18</sup> 'Nearly all' because there are some absences. As John Pilling has discussed, the 'Petit Sot' poems remain uncollected due to copyright issues. See Pilling's "'Dead before Morning": How Beckett's "Petit Sot" Never Got Properly Born', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 198–209. In the case of the *Mexican Anthology* translations, Lawlor and Pilling offered only a representative sampling to prevent overwhelming the contents of an already large volume. And, as discussed by Mark Nixon in the present volume, there is the 'missing *Poème*', 'Match Nul', discovered only after the *Collected's* publication.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Nixon, 'The Remains of Trace: Intra- and Intertextual Transferences in Beckett's "Mirlitonnades" Manuscripts', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2007): 121–134; David Wheatley, 'Beckett's *Mirlitonnades*: A Manuscript Study', in *The Beckett Critical Reader: Archives, Theories and Translations*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 38–66; Dirk Van Hulle, 'Beckett's Art of the Commonplace: The "Sottisier" Notebook and *mirlitonnades* Drafts', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 67–89.

<sup>20</sup> Dirk Van Hulle, *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Stirrings Still/Soubresauts and Comment dire/What Is the Word* (Brussels: University Press Antwerp), 2011.

English poems in various performances, often with their own Irish translations,<sup>21</sup> and composers including Gavin Bryars, Bill Hopkins, Henning Christiansen, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen and Rhian Samuel have all either set Beckett's poems to music or used them to generate new compositions.<sup>22</sup> Bryars has no compunction about referring to Beckett as a poet, and in attending with a musician's eye and ear to the poetry, is particularly sensitive to the intricacies and rhythms of Beckett's translations and bilingual writings.<sup>23</sup>

### III.

Beckett's poetry career makes specific critical and scholarly demands. Fundamentally, treating Beckett's poems as distinct from his other work requires asking questions about the idiosyncratic nature of poetry. What renders it distinct? Is it a matter of form? Of compositional approach? Of text and intertext? Of reception and reading? Various chapters in this volume deal with these issues directly and indirectly. They also confront the issue of understanding what poetry was to Beckett and how it contributed to his writing life broadly. At times, Beckett applied specific sensibilities when it came to discerning what he valued in his own poetry, namely that poems should in some way 'represent a necessity'.<sup>24</sup> The necessity of writing poems, the necessity of their existence in the world and the necessity of their content and form – these are all entangled here. The aim of the present volume, therefore, is to provide as wide a coverage as possible of Beckett's poetry from a range of perspectives, from biographical and archival analysis to situating Beckett in various poetic traditions. Across the volume, readers will find essays which deal with each of the periods, those odd moments, in which Beckett was producing poetry or undertaking poetry translations. Together, these chapters provide a systematic exploration of the major phases of Beckett's poetry writing.

While the gathering of scholarly chapters is not the same as compiling a collection of Beckett's poems, it still requires certain decisions about the

<sup>21</sup> Of note is the 2019 production at the Teatro Apolo in Almeria, Spain, in which tri-lingual readings of Beckett's poems linked English and Irish language performances of *Rockaby* and *Come and Go*.

<sup>22</sup> Gavin Bryars, *Beckett Songbook*, 2014; Bill Hopkins, *Musique de l'indifference*, 1965; Henning Christiansen, *3 Beckett-Sange*, 1976; Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, *Trois Poemes*, 1989; and Rhian Samuel, *The Flowing Sand*, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> 'Gavin Bryars on Samuel Beckett: "There is something particularly satisfying about devoting a collection of songs to a single poet"', *Independent*, 18 July 2014, Online.

<sup>24</sup> *LSB I*, 133.



nature of Beckett's poetry. We have, for example, included a chapter about Beckett's *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* translations in which José Francisco Fernández provides a full scholarly account of the conditions of its creation and considers the place of Beckett's translations in the context of his own work and the context of Mexican poetry. One chapter in the volume, then, is focused on a set of translations that could arguably account for perhaps a third (or more) of Beckett's summative poetic output if measured by page count (as Fernández describes, Beckett completed 103 translations by thirty-five poets for the volume). But is Beckett's translation of Manuel Acuña's 'Before a Corpse', for example, written largely as a paying gig treated not without ambivalence in a period just before his career took off in a serious way, a *Beckett* poem? What of the arguably more intentional undertaking that is Beckett's 'Bateau ivre', or his translation of Apollinaire's 'Zone' – are these simply English *versions* of landmarks of modern French poetry, or something more literarily substantial? We may also think of Beckett's translation from French of Ernst Moerman's remarkable 'Louis Armstrong', a poem that evokes, as Onno Kusters explores in this volume, a moment and an atmosphere in the 1930s of which Beckett was very much a part. Beckett as a young *jazzster* is, to certain images we have of the author, a bizarre if not perverse idea. And yet Kusters teaches us much about what is to be found in the serious treatment of Beckett's very earliest translations. There is yet another question to ask: do Beckett's 'que ferai-je' and 'what would I do', for example, constitute *two* mid-career Beckett poems, or a single poem made available by its author in two versions? The poetry of each, whatever is the material of 'poetry', seems only increased by the relation between the two; this is the topic of Pascale Sardin's expert and exacting treatment of Beckett's self-translated poems.

The young Beckett began his career with 'Whoroscope', published by Nancy Cunard and the Hours Press in 1930. By the time Beckett's first and only integral collection of poems, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*, was published in 1935, he had already moved through at least two stages in his development as a poet (while also writing and abandoning a novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and putting together a short story collection, *More Pricks Than Kicks*). Collecting select poems written between 1931 and 1935, *Echo's Bones* captures Beckett's transition (though obfuscated somewhat by the order of the volume's poems) away from an earlier poetic form oriented around surreal poems of a disjointed and flâneurishly urban perspective, poems of 'weirdness and dislocation', as explored by Andrew Goodspeed in our opening chapter. These poems are, as Mark Byron demonstrates, both skilfully attuned to and anxiously

reaching beyond the modernist poetics to which they are indebted. Both the cityscapes and the modernism out of which these earlier poems emerged are Irish inflected. Inter-war Ireland was Beckett's most immediate milieu and, as Gerald Dawe argues, he was far more engaged with it than his aloof attitude often suggests. His most frequent correspondence in the 1930s was with the Irish poet and art critic Thomas MacGreevy, and Beckett counted as close friends (for a time at least) the Irish modernists Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin. All three received due praise in Beckett's slim body of criticism from the 1930s, as Dawe discusses, and Beckett did not fully extricate himself from the Irish cultural scene until after the Second World War.

Aloofness and apparent indifference are often the cause of scholarly disquiet when judging Beckett's cultural inheritances. His dismissal of Romanticism broadly, for example, has frustrated close examination of the poetry in this context. Conceiving Romanticism as a negotiation of capitalist ideology, Edward Lee-Six reveals that Beckett's poetry not only benefits from a Romanticist critical framework, but also enables fresh readings of that very framework in turn. Hannah Simpson complicates the notion of 'poetic inheritance' further by considering the spectre of Beckett among Northern Irish poets including Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon and Leontia Flynn. At times, Simpson argues, Beckett is a mediating figure for wider cultural concerns; at others, he is a burden that must be shed, only to return as a haunting presence that troubles monolithic conceptions of 'Ireland' and 'Irishness'. Simpson's chapter offers a scholarly model for further explorations of Beckettian inheritances among poets in other cultural and national contexts.

The transition *Echo's Bones* marks is a shift towards concision and reduction in Beckett's writing (something that would come to his prose and drama much later). In 1934, he moved to primarily brief, epigrammatic poems that would prove the more durable genre to turn to at his odd intervals. These kinds of poems ('Da Tagte Es', written after the death of his father, is an early example) tended to be more formally regular than the equally brief, late *mirlitonades*, but taken together it is epigrammatic poetry that makes up the majority of poetic creations that Beckett seemed to think of as complete. Though very few extend to more than four or five lines, the poems of Beckett's epigrammatic turn are, as James Brophy demonstrates, crucial to mapping out the genesis of Beckett's affection for the 'gnomic' quality of language and of poetry in particular.

As Beckett began establishing himself in the French literary world after the war, poems (now in his adopted new language) were once again useful in pursuing literary credibility. In November 1946, for example, during a

period of intense creativity in prose and, soon, drama, he gave poems written in the late-30s to Jean-Paul Sartre for publication in *Les Temps modernes*. 'Poèmes 38–39' are also of an epigrammatic and lyric flavour; these beguiling poems and their shifting subjectivities are the topic of Daniel Katz's exploration. These poems also arose out of Beckett's intense personal and sexual relationships, including one of the newest additions to the Beckett *oeuvre*, 'Match Nul', discovered in 2013, which is documented and explicated here as a potential missing 'Poème' by Mark Nixon.

Amid the shattering oddness of the Second World War, Beckett's creative preoccupation became the novel *Watt*. If his main impulse during the war years was novelistic, with the odd addenda poems scattered here and there, the Irish Red Cross project in Saint-Lô which Beckett joined in 1945 did clearly demand, or at least prompt, poetic attention. It inspired one of his most famed elegies, 'Saint-Lô', a quatrain mourning a French town destroyed in the D-Day offensive. Written in English and first published in an Irish newspaper, 'Saint-Lô' stands as not only one of the best Beckett poems but also as one of the best modern war poems, its stark imagery of 'shadows' and 'havoc', expressed through elusive, enigmatic syntax, renders war an ineffable spectacle. The dead above all are depicted at most as mere shades in the poem; this is the starting point of Adam Piette's excursion on Beckettian poetics and what happens when we conceive of Beckett as a kind of war poet.

During the period of transition from English to French and from London and Ireland to Paris in the 1940s, it was three poems (published as *Trois Poèmes*) that represented Beckett's first exercise in self-translation, contextualised and analysed here by Pascale Sardin. 'Je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse' / 'my way is in the sand'; 'que ferais-je' / 'what would I do'; and 'je voudrais que mon amour meure' / 'I would like my love to die', are among his most moving poems, continuing the use of four or five-line forms yet far more inclined to insert a lyric subjectivity than in poems such as 'Da Tagte Es' or 'Saint-Lô'. The result are poems devoted to liminality and the thresholds of life and expression so central to the preoccupations of texts like *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* and the *Texts for Nothing* of the 1950s.

While he turned to poetry to respond mournfully and with sharp acidity to his war experiences in 'Saint-Lô' and the poem 'Antipepsis' respectively (the latter perhaps the closest Beckett comes to writing an overtly 'political' poem), these occasional verses did not precipitate further poetry in English, and Beckett's attention became almost entirely focused on prose and drama. There are the *Trois Poèmes* of 1948, possibly inspired by his

returning to the French poems of 1938–1939, which do represent aforementioned changes in preoccupation and formal attention in Beckett's poetry writing. Beckett also found himself returning to verse when he was moved to write 'Mort de A. D.' in response to the death of his Saint-Lô colleague Arthur Darley in 1948.<sup>25</sup> As with the death of his father and the destruction of Saint-Lô, poetry proves the medium most necessary to the occasion of loss, though Beckett clearly saw the poem as more than occasional since he included it for publication with some other French poems in *Cahiers des Saisons* in October 1955.<sup>26</sup> While the title recalls a long tradition of verse dedicated to King Arthur's death, from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) to Tennyson's 'Morte d'Arthur' (1842), Beckett's poem is deeply personal in its attempt to capture the tumultuousness of Darley's private life, chiefly the dual personality he developed in his struggle to reconcile his faith and the wild personality he developed after drinking.<sup>27</sup> The *Cahiers* publication was one that kept 'Beckett as poet' a live prospect in the 1950s; however, it would be two decades before we find evidence of any significant new poetic activity.

Between 1950 and 1973 the only known poem is a single translation, from the aphorist Nicolas Chamfort ('Hope'), dated to 1967, and likely one that would have been soon forgotten had Beckett not been moved, six years later, to undertake a series of loose translations between the summer and winter of 1973 that would come to be known as *Long After Chamfort*. This series, a total of eight brief apophthegmatic pieces (one of which is Pascal's, not Chamfort's), likely helped inspire original work: the 'hors crâne', 'something there' and 'dread nay' set of poems begun on New Year's Day, 1974, as the image of icy Dantean hell came to Beckett again on the cold winter morning. The maxims also ushered in a late-career return to small, contemplative verse, and perhaps also the incorporation of poetic elements into his genre-bending late prose works.

Beckett's late verse is mostly given over to what he called the *mirliton-nades*. Beginning in 1976, this grouping constitutes, in some sense, a rough naming system or genre that conceivably includes almost all the remaining poetic output, excepting his very final poem, 'Comment dire' / 'what is the word'. Like the Chamfort maxims, the *mirliton-nades* represent the return of poetry as an active, even habitual, process for Beckett. These small verses, whose name recalls the *mirliton* or 'eunuch's flute', a small

<sup>25</sup> *CP*, 399–400. <sup>26</sup> 'vive morte' and 'bon bon il est un pays' are the other two. *CP*, 400.

<sup>27</sup> *CP*, 399–400. Beckett cannot help being playful in the title, though: the word 'dead' hides in plain sight in it.

kazoo-like woodwind instrument often sold to children, began for Beckett the stuff of 'gloomy French doggerel'; they demonstrate, however, a relatively thin membrane (to recall the buzzing wax paper that gives the *mirliton* its distinctive, cheap sound) between Beckett's French and English, being a form that lent itself to epigrammatic creation in both.<sup>28</sup> His unique methods of revision on a variety of materials for these short poems (famously including a Johnnie Walker Black bottle label) – often at once fragile and humorously glib – have generated compelling responses in this volume, marking out Beckett's poetry not only for scholarly attention but as a source for creative and critical evolution, capturing the sense that Beckett's poetry requires, and so can create, their own 'ways of reading'.<sup>29</sup> In this vein, Dirk Van Hulle further develops Bill Brown's 'thing theory' through Beckett's late poems in his chapter contribution. The *mirlitonnades* prove in many ways to be the definitive assortment of Beckettian *odd poems*. They foreground the frailty that we have suggested was inherent in Beckett's poetics, while paradoxically removing the body and the bodily from their quiet, and very locally attended, renderings of the world. Adam Piette deals extensively with the *mirlitonnades* in terms of their 'spectral voices', while David Wheatley concludes his study of Beckett's poetics of embodiment by accounting for these late, strange poems with their 'evanescent and spectral' removal of the poet's, or anyone else's, body.

In the 1980s, alongside the *mirlitonnades*, Beckett was also writing works that emerged from challenging any strict distinction between poetry and prose.<sup>30</sup> The excellent late lyric 'Brief Dream', for example, is a distillation of the spirit of his final prose work *Stirrings Still* and survives in its notebook drafts. 'Brief Dream' was plucked out and published as a discrete poem, twice in fact, under Beckett's watch in the late 1980s, validating its inclusion in a *Collected Poems* but also further complicating the question of what else belongs among the *poems*, by adding to it lined scraps in notebooks. We can similarly ask: when do lyric excursions in letter writing constitute a poem? The very means by which Beckett's texts stimulate these questions makes any easy answers both unlikely and unwelcome. Beckett's own treatment of his texts is one way of assessing

<sup>28</sup> 'mirliton, n.', *OED*; Beckett qtd. in Maurice Harmon, ed. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 355.

<sup>29</sup> Onno Kusters, "'Whew of Words': Beckett's Poetry from 'Whoroscope' to 'what Is the Word'", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 1 (1992): 94.

<sup>30</sup> Though we can sense some aspect of this breakdown as early as the shift away from the use of terms like 'novella' in favour of 'text' for short prose work in the 1950s.

this, those he described as poems, or did not, as in the case of ‘neither’, a late piece that has all the look of a poem but was deemed prose when Beckett was consulted for the 1984 Calder *Collected Poems*.<sup>31</sup> Beckett’s late, experimental texts like *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* also require, even demand, attention to their acoustics, as might conventionally be found in the close reading of poetry – these issues of sound sense are the focus of William Davies’ chapter.

After the *mirlitonrades*, ‘Comment dire’ / ‘what is the word’, Beckett’s last poem, is an ‘odd poem’ *par excellence*, a poem demanded by occasion, demanded in the sense that it ‘was there’, and needed to be written. In 1988, having lost his speech during a serious medical event that may have included a stroke, Beckett produced this most remarkable poem of aphasic grasping; its desperation to return to the land of language, a land Beckett was never entirely happy in anyway, is powerful, saddening and moving.<sup>32</sup> There are few better examples of a poem confronting frailty and the limitations of a disordered neurology. The problematics of self and body Beckett struggled with since the beginning had somewhat cruelly been forced upon him by illness in his old age.

#### IV.

Gwendolyn Brooks called poetry ‘life distilled’; it is, to adapt the opening to John Donne’s fifth *Holy Sonnet*, ‘a little world made cunningly’. Aside perhaps from his youthful tendencies for rather strained high modernist imitation, Beckett’s body of poetry bears these assessments out, most powerfully in the short, highly controlled forms he turned to when life demanded creative response. Ideas of distillation, of one work, often a poem, refining a much longer work into a few lines – ‘Brief Dream’, the *mirlitonrades*, the *Watt* poems, the turn to quatrains in the 1930s – were also important to Beckett when it came to the act of writing itself. He referred to the short prose text *All Strange Away* (1976) as the ‘residual precipitate’ of another, ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’ (1965).<sup>33</sup> Beckett used ‘precipitate’ in the title of his earliest poetry collection, *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*, suggesting the poems contained within are at once

<sup>31</sup> *CSP*, 284.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Salisbury calls the poem ‘the expression of a disabled author’ newly situated in the legacy of their own ‘aphasic modernism’. See Salisbury, ‘“What Is the Word”: Beckett’s Aphasic Modernism’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 17, no. 1–2 (2008): 78–126.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Nixon, ‘All the Variants’, in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.), *The New Samuel Beckett Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 37.

the pitiable, skeletal remains of the said before (Echo's bones), and the distillate, the solid from solution. There is both the notion of discard and of the artist hard at work in the refining process – suitable certainly for an author often so dismissive of his creative labours. The title also evokes T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*, as though one of the 'echoes' of the collection is that first phase of high modernism. 'Precipitate', Lawlor and Pilling note, is also found in J. G. Robertson's *A History of German Literature* (1902), used to describe Goethe's visit to the Harz Mountains which 'left its poetic precipitate in the poem "Harzreise im Winter"', an apparent source for 'The Vulture', the last of the *Echo's Bones* poems to be written. Beckett read Robertson in early 1934, in time to add the 'precipitate' to the 'bones' before the compilation and publication of his collection.<sup>34</sup> But Beckett may well have encountered the notion of poetry as precipitate four years earlier in his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*). Beckett read Schopenhauer in 1930 during bouts of terrible illness, a year in which he also wrote and published a number of poems. An advocate of art as a means by which the Will might be alleviated, Schopenhauer conceives poetry as the distillation of a poet's experiences:

Just as the chemist obtains solid precipitates by combining perfectly clear and transparent fluids, so does the poet know how to precipitate, as it were, the concrete, the individual, the representation of perception, out of the abstract, transparent universality of the concepts by the way in which he combines them.<sup>35</sup>

Beckett was reading Schopenhauer again when he returned from Germany in 1937 and told Mary Manning Howe of his profound depression. Less than a month after he wrote of the 'odd poem' that came to him during that phase of intense malaise, he wrote to Thomas MacGreevy that he had been reading Schopenhauer and that 'everything else' 'only confirmed the feeling of sickness'. It was, he wrote, 'a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet'.<sup>36</sup> It seems Beckett, a poet so often read like a philosopher, found during intense and debilitating illness a 'window opened' on the 'fug' by keeping the idea of poetry close at hand.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *CP*, 261–2. *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* is itself a precipitate, distilled from the twenty-seven poems collected in Beckett's *POEMS* volume which he first proposed to George Reavey (*CP*, 259).

<sup>35</sup> *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 243. Eliot turned, probably with Schopenhauer in mind, to his own image of the chemist hard at work with gases and catalysts in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919).

<sup>36</sup> *LSB I*, 550. <sup>37</sup> *LSB I*, 550.

Beckett returned to the idea of the 'precipitate' during his correspondence with the art critic Georges Duthuit in the letters which were 'distilled' into the *Three Dialogues* (1948), a series of scripted conversations about contemporary painting. Beckett tried to define for Duthuit a notion of 'the artist' as 'he-who-is-always-*in-front-of*', one who 'instead of being in front of the precipitants he is in front of the precipitates'.<sup>38</sup> The underlying notion is still Schopenhauerian (and behind that, Kantian): the artist 'in front of' not the causes of things but the things themselves. While painting is the matter under scrutiny here, Beckett's theory certainly appears distilled from, or at least echoes loudly, Beckett's favourite philosopher's musings on poetry.

It would be wrong to say that Beckett's poetry is the precipitate, the refined form, of his other work, just as it would be wrong to say that he saw it as subordinate when he found success in other genres. Beckett chose to write poetry at certain times of his life, and not to at others; at certain points, it seems poetry simply did not come to him, or he did not need it. At the start of his career, poetry was another form through which to attain literary recognition and in which to demonstrate (not always successfully) one's knowledge and mastery of language. It was also a space in which to work out images or turns of phrase, sometimes originating ideas to transfer them to prose, sometimes vice versa. Much of the early poems share phrases and motifs with Beckett's early prose texts, particularly his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Poetry was, as seen in his elegies and first-person lyric pieces, also an intimate genre for Beckett, at times far more so than other forms of writing. It is in poetry that he first creatively thinks through his father's death, the trauma of the Second World War, and eventually his own old age. Most strikingly, in his last two decades of writing, poetry was the genre to which Beckett turned when other writing, other thinking, was not possible. At odd moments of immobility, both physical and creative, we find a poem, or poems. The acts of writing, reading and learning poetry all meant something to Beckett. His poems, and his status as a poet, have been relegated too long to the shadow of his other achievements. We have, in this volume, tried to bring Beckett's poetry 'in-front-of' his other works, to see the poetry, and to see the prospect of 'Beckett as poet', as worthy of both study and appreciation.

<sup>38</sup> *LSB* II, 139.