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Beckett's Spectral Presences

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Abstract

Spectrality remains a key motif and metaphor in Beckett's writing; many of his wandering and destitute creations seem on their way towards another kind of life, uncomfortably close to death, and remarkably close to the spirit world. This article outlines some of the paradoxes that surround Beckett's relation to the ghost as a dramatic device; it emphasises how uneasily Beckett's work sits within the tradition of the ghost play, and unravels some of the preoccupations and interests shaping Beckett's treatment of dialogues with the dead.

Résumé

La spectralité est un motif et une métaphore clé chez Beckett ; ses créatures errantes, dépossédées de tout, semblent souvent en chemin vers une autre vie, inconfortablement proche de la mort, remarquablement proche du monde des esprits. Cet article considère les paradoxes qui entourent l'utilisation que fait Beckett du fantôme comme artifice dramatique, et met l'accent sur les tensions entre le théâtre de Beckett et les formes représentationnelles du fantôme dans l'écriture dramatique, tout en déroulant certaines préoccupations et certains sujets d'intérêt autour desquels s'est formé son traitement du dialogue avec les morts.

Keywords

spectrality – ghost – occultism – mediumship – superstition – Hester Travers Smith

As Beckett scholars have regularly noted, spectrality is an important thematic and aesthetic dimension in Beckett's work, one that is tied to its sense of life as a series of slow, irremediable endings, and its capacity to represent being as non-presence. Recent landmark productions suggest that the plays that toy openly with spectrality and invite speculation about what sustains their characters continue to attract a great deal of public interest and attention: among these, in the Anglophone world, we might include the radio plays, recently revived by the BBC as part of an experiment on binaural sound, and *Not I* and *Footfalls*, to which Jess Thom and Lisa Dwan have given a new and deeply embodied lease of life. In many ways, the plays that are the furthest removed from this spectral model are also those that seem the least representative of Beckett's writing, those that seem the least secure in their form: *Eleuthéria* is a case in point. Over time, Beckett's drama has also become a formidable "memory machine", to borrow Marvin Carlson's term, with performances of his plays and prose texts carrying all kinds of spectral knowledges. The connections between Beckett's conception of spectrality, his directorial practice and directorial legacies, and the performance histories of his texts can be just as intriguing as they are moving. Both Dwan and Billie Whitelaw have spoken in powerful ways about how their landmark performances carry the memory of the departed (Dwan 2014; Schneider 1981). The art of appearing as a ghost in a Beckett performance has long involved a constellation of different types of experience and skills—to do, notably, with voice placement and eye movement—which, in turn, have sometimes bled into areas of popular culture seemingly at odds with Beckett's writing. Patrick Magee's iconic performance in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) cannot fail to recall the "cracked voice", haunted eyes and frozen posture that *Krapp's Last Tape* had required of him many years previously (Beckett 2006, 215). As for Whitelaw, it remains unclear whether she already possessed that special gift to terrify before she began performing as a Beckett ghost, or whether her performances in horror and dystopian classics including *The Omen* (1975) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) facilitated her work on Beckett's stage and television productions; in any case, there are clear resemblances between the voice she used when playing a nanny possessed by the devil in *The Omen*, filmed the autumn before she began rehearsing *Footfalls* with Beckett at the Royal Court Theatre, and the 'colourless' voice Beckett wanted her to hone.

Spectrality has become a vast subject in Beckett studies, with the radio and television plays, the work's broader Gothic dimensions and the spectrality of historical memory attracting particular attention. Patrick Bixby, notably, has shown how Irish topography and history become spectral in Beckett's writing, and William Davies has demonstrated how Beckett's work registers everyday wartime events and experiences that were ill remembered and manipu-

lated after the French defeat in 1940, and remained difficult to comprehend thereafter. A smaller body of scholarship deals with the ghost as figure and metaphor; Carla Locatelli has defined Beckett's "elemental ghosts" "as the principal figurations of an epistemological effort, and therefore also as an ethical engagement with(in) writing" (2); Robert Kiely and Pascale Sardin have investigated the role of mediumship in the novel trilogy and *Eh Joe* respectively; and Martin Harries has identified Beckett's ghosts as "the spirits of slow popular culture"—"not ghosts of this or that event, but ghosts of the *longue durée*" who retain ties to everyday, all-too-physical experiences of war (32, 19). As these different approaches reveal, spectrality can be contextualised and approached in a myriad ways in relation to Beckett, and it would be fruitless to settle on a fixed mode of interpretation: the writing yields a mass of possibilities and practices that often grate against one another, which is precisely its greatest merit.

One thing is certain: Beckett enjoyed reading a particular type of modernist ghost play. He owned, and read, books by August Strindberg, Maurice Maeterlinck and W.B. Yeats, as well as a copy of Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* (Van Hulle, Nixon and Neyt 2017). Yeats, Strindberg and Maeterlinck shared an interest in staging ghost-like characters who retain close ties to the living, yet carry with them a different kind of history; their plays state otherworldliness as a given fact, to be represented through costume, makeup, masks and spatial divisions, through stylized decors, backdrops and movements, through slower gestures and utterances, through characters remaining silent, losing the ability to speak, falling into a trance, or dying too suddenly to have ever been alive in the first place. Faithful to his usual custom, Beckett never reclaimed such influences and did so in a consistent manner. He owned a large number of books by Yeats, about his work, about his family; while letters and memoirs reveal his obsessive returns to Yeats's later poetry and plays, and his interest in Yeats's idiosyncratic borrowings from Japanese Noh theatre—itself a theatre of ghosts—he never mentioned Yeats when discussing his precursors, and made clear that he had a poor opinion of Yeats as a person at various points. Likewise, he asserted that he did not know Maeterlinck's plays except for *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Worth 1978, 6), but owned a copy of Maeterlinck's *Théâtre I* featuring *La princesse Maleine*, *L'Intruse* and *Les aveugles*, and annotated the preface (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 64). Maeterlinck's preface emphasises that his plays deal with "gigantic powers, invisible and fatal, whose purpose is entirely unknown", and present characters who appear as "slightly deaf somnambulists constantly torn away from a painful dream" (iii, ii; my translation). When, in 1967, Anthony Swerling investigated Strindberg's influence on French theatre (from Lenormand to Adamov through to Beckett himself) Beckett responded in exactly the way he responded to enquiries about Fritz Mauthner or Ludwig

Wittgenstein—that there was nothing there: "Thank you for your letter. I do not know Strindberg's theatre well and do not believe to have been influenced by it" (24; my translation). But he was interested in Strindberg enough to go and see Roger Blin's production of *La sonate des spectres* twice in late 1949, and to want to read about Strindberg's psychological ailments: along with copies of Strindberg's *Théâtre I* and *Inferno*, he owned the French version of Karl Jaspers's 1922 "pathographic analysis" of Strindberg, Van Gogh, Swedenborg and Hölderlin (see Van Hulle, Nixon and Neyt 2017), a study detailing Strindberg's psychology and psychiatric history in particular depth, written when Jaspers was still a psychiatrist.

The more Beckett worked with technologies of sound and image, the more intensely the idea of staging an ethereal presence appealed to him. For Xerxes Mehta, Beckett became interested in staging spectrality in his mid-career, and his "stage works since *Play* are ghost-plays, haunting, their spectral quality lying at the heart of their power [...], obsessively present in the manner of visions and nightmares" (135). It is possible to argue for a more extended conception of spectrality than Mehta's, however, and venture a guess that Beckett's interest in representing the spectral informed his whole dramatic career. If *What Where*, his last play, is a ghost play of sorts, so is *Human Wishes*, his first dramatic fragment, which he began to ponder in 1936. Earlier ventures into the theatre such as *Le Kid* and Mary Manning's *Youth's the Season*, to which he reportedly contributed, had not featured ghosts, but characters who lose speech or consciousness, and enter in a trance in ways recalling Yeats, Strindberg and Maeterlinck. Like *Waiting for Godot*, *Human Wishes* revolves around an active physical absence—that of Samuel Johnson. The notes Beckett compiled suggest that he briefly considered following the avenue Yeats had taken with his play on Jonathan Swift, *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, which is a dramatization of a séance: Beckett's notebooks refer to Johnson's dabblings in demonology, his superstitious attitude towards spirits and terror of death, and his account of an early life suspended close to death ("I was born almost dead" (3); see Morin 2011). Long after *Human Wishes*, Beckett's work remained dotted with references to Johnson's life and work; in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *That Time* in particular, the resurfacing of Johnson's shadow occurs in the context of something resembling the séance—in the context of reviving, visualizing, and listening to a ghostly past and self. Yeats remains an obsessive presence of the same order, his work returning in the margins of dialogue in Beckett's absurdist plays and taking over *... but the clouds ...*, shaping its visions of spectral returns. Here as elsewhere, the process of contacting the disappeared and disappearing provides the subject-matter; how might they be genuinely reached?

On the surface, an abyss separates spiritualism from Beckett's interest in staging conversations with the dead. But there are some oddities, some irregularities that also suggest an occasional embrace of anti-rational practices and ideas: his early interest in the Surrealist movement, during the period when the Surrealists experimented intensively with automatic writing; his name appearing in "Poetry Is Vertical", a manifesto that Eugene Jolas associated with "mediumistic experiments in life and language" and the defense of "hallucinative forces now trodden underfoot" (6); his reading of a volume traversed with evocations of phantoms, banshees, mediums and fairies: the correspondence between Yeats and Æ, which he scrutinized upon its publication in 1936 (Pilling 2006, 23); his later decision, when his mother's condition deteriorated, to send a lock of her hair to Suzanne's homeopath, so that he could practise long-distance diagnosis and healing (Knowlson 1996, 367). Most importantly, there is the matter of his friendship with Hester Travers Smith, a prominent medium, which suggests that he took seriously spiritualism's capacity to console and heal mourners—at least seriously enough to spend time with her and thoroughly enjoy her company during the 1930s.

Travers Smith, née Dowden, was much liked by Yeats and held in great admiration in spiritualist circles. She was witty and had many friends. As a medium, she focused particularly strongly on method, and wrote books discussing her protocols with the Ouija board and automatic writing that attracted attention far and wide, including from Arthur Conan Doyle. Beckett got to know her through Thomas MacGreevy—who was then close to George Yeats, another medium who practised automatic writing; MacGreevy lived for a while in Travers Smith's house in Cheyne Gardens in London. Beckett played piano duets with her in early 1935, went for lunch with her, enjoyed musical evenings at her London home, and rented a room from her during a brief London trip (Fehsenfeld and Overbeck 2009; Cronin 1996, 197–198, 267). He called her 'Hester' in his correspondence; she sent him postcards from holidays. He thought highly of her daughter Dorothy, a renowned theatre designer and artist. His friendship with Travers Smith developed just when her psychical research was taking a new turn: in the mid-1930s, she founded her new Metapsychic Group, which was distinct from the occult societies that she frequented; the group, depicted as a mediumistic failure, provided good occasions for talks and gatherings in her London house, often held alongside her musical evenings (Bentley 1951, 139). Given what Hester's father Edward Dowden had represented in Irish intellectual life, frequenting her probably tickled Beckett. He may also have looked to her for comfort; her book *One Step Higher* (1937), which she was probably thinking about at the time of Beckett's visits, offers a reassuring conception of death as entirely continuous with middle-class life; the voices she hears, she

reports, constantly tell her that the dead live in the same way as the living: they have cities, libraries and bookshops; they have everything they need in their other life. We can only speculate about the extent to which Travers Smith's views about the otherworld influenced Beckett at such a vulnerable and distressing time; it may well be that he was tentatively searching for some form of healing after the death of his father, and was then open to non-rational ways of thinking about death. He may also have enjoyed her vast knowledge of literature: indeed Hester Travers Smith was a distinctly literary medium, best known for channelling the voices of deceased male authors, including Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde, through automatic writing, and she also had firm views on modernism. Her version of Wilde in *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* (1924) thinks little of Joyce and Yeats: Joyce is as a "monster" feeding on lies, and Yeats is "a fantastical mind, but so full of inflated joy in himself that his little cruse of poetry was emptied early in his career" (1924 40, 14).

Scholars who have worked on George Yeats's automatic scripts have shown just how interesting and illuminating they are as social and historical documents (see Mills Harper 2006). Travers Smith's books belong to that category too, and reveal how she used mediumship in order to realise thwarted critical ambitions. Many passages in *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* resemble literary criticism more than mediumship, and position Wilde at the cutting edge of thinking about theatre: "My plays were scarcely drama. They were more the weaving of character into pattern; and this, with the use of language which I chose in each instance to illustrate the surface of the human being. I did not propose to go deep into the heart [...]. It seemed to me we used to get more from each other by accepting the outside than by probing into the intestines" (33). As Elisha Cohn argues, *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* is a sophisticated examination of mediumship as authorship, which does "not seek to establish Wilde's identity but rather the ghost's"; Travers Smith "foreground[s] the notion that original authorship is deeply mediated, while at the same time insisting that this truly was Wilde's spirit, as if authorship were an unconscious and inter-subjective process of imitation" (98). Her attempt to establish the book's authenticity shaped her presentation of automatic writing methods: as proof that the book channels Wilde's authentic voice, the appendix reproduces writing samples produced by her and her assistant during séances alongside samples of Wilde's writing (to the contemporary reader, the proof is inconclusive). Small details suggest that, when Beckett embarked on his journey through Samuel Johnson's life in 1936 and 1937, he sought to get closer to his subject through the same handwriting methods: in his notebooks, he mimicked the adornments and conventions of eighteenth-century handwriting and printing and produced a faithful imitation of Johnson's ornate signature, even

signing his letters to Chatto & Windus as 'Sam. Beckett', in the fashion used by Boswell in his biography of Johnson (see Morin 2011). Yet, as with anything and anyone of importance to Beckett during the 1930s—the most unhappy time of all—Travers Smith receives a dismissive treatment in *Murphy*, where she is transformed into a medium called Rosie Dew; Dew, we are told, may work with a Ouija board, but she experiments with new techniques constantly and is "no ordinary hack medium": "She might not be able to bring down torrents of ectoplasm or multiply anemones from her armpits, but left undisturbed with one hand on a disaffected boot, the other on the board, Nelly in her lap and Lena coming through, she could make the dead softsoap the quick in seven languages" (61).

Passages such as these point to deep tensions around Beckett's apprehension of the ghost, which is also pertinent to his drama. Why should a playwright like Beckett, so concerned about minute nuances and details, be so interested in what is also, fundamentally, a crass dramatic device, laden with specific, heavy conventions? The ghost play is diametrically opposed to everything he tried to achieve as a playwright. Thinking about spectrality in relation to Beckett, then, involves thinking about a major paradox, one that is not easily reconcilable with the work's dominant scepticism; indeed while Beckett was always attracted to, if not obsessed by, the ghost play, he was no occultist. Much suggests that he would have sided with Theodor Adorno, who saw occultism as a "metaphysic of dunces", the expression of a "consciousness famished for truth imagin[ing] it is grasping a dimly present knowledge diligently denied to it by official progress in all its forms" (177).

Beckett's ghosts are also a challenge to a long-standing dramatic tradition: indeed there are remarkable disjunctions between Beckett's treatment of the ghost—as a presence that remains there, elegantly, evocatively, obsessively—and the tradition of the ghost play, where the ghost is often a clumsy and anachronistic servant of the plot, offering resolution where other dramatic devices might fail. The playwright David Edgar once observed that "the ghost as a theatrical character is the most consistently applied dramatic device" in playwriting history (Luckhurst and Morin 2014, 4). The ghost also signifies obedience to the constraints of a genre that is character-driven, and deals with psychology and punishment; the ghost erupts into plots, casts verisimilitude into profound doubt, and wreaks havoc on knowledge about bloodlines, love affairs, deaths and inheritances, its staging frequently posing serious material and technical challenges. The ghost is always purposeful, as Roger Clarke reminds us, contrasting the ghosts of ancient Greek drama ("strange wraith-like creatures, pathetic and winged, which had no power over the living"), medieval ghosts ("reanimated corpses or holy apparitions"), Post-Restoration

ghosts (who "returned to correct injustices, right wrongs and supply information about lost documents and valuables"), Regency ghosts ("gothic") and modern ghosts: the Victorian ghost, he argues, mostly belonged to the realm of the séance, often led by women, and was soon perceived as a manifestation of mysterious natural laws, while the ghosts of the 1930s were commonly poltergeists (2012, 24–25). These conventions have, in turn, been replicated across vast areas of playwriting, and many modern and contemporary plays suggest analogies between characters and ghosts in direct, immediate ways, by merely adding "like a ghost" to the stage directions. Beckett's writing is far removed from such literal thinking, and his ghosts are in another league; they never exist in a simple way.

It is not so easy to attribute a clear origin, direction and context to Beckett's ghosts, to his scarred and spectral landscapes. It is also difficult to pin down exactly what is being repressed, ignored or rejected through the ghost in Beckett's texts; a mass of conflicting possibilities can be entertained, always. The manner in which spectrality is manifested fluctuates too: some plays externalise the ghost, who can be seen but remains silent; elsewhere the ghost appears and speaks; elsewhere still the ghost is just a voice, seemingly internalized. Some of Beckett's texts nonetheless pay lip service to the heaviness of plot that has always characterized the ghost play, letting the remnants of a recognisable plot emerges around the dead, the dying, or those who are struggling to exist. *All That Fall*, for example, returns to an identifiable plot of quest and journey in a manner that is unusual for Beckett, while using uncertainties around physical presence to address the specificities of radio. *Play*, situated in some sort of afterlife, playfully gives insights into how M died. "She had a razor in her vanity bag. Adulterers, take warning, never admit", says M (310). It remains unclear clear whether the murder is W1's or W2's doing, but complicity between them is part of the half-concealed story. Likewise, in *Eh Joe*, V's mention of "that lump in [Joe's] bubo" (364) evokes a specific type of lymph node inflammation seen among syphilitic patients, and suggests that the voice crafted to come from another world may be an auditory hallucination induced by advanced syphilis. The probabilities are high: V accuses Joe of seducing women, being sexually promiscuous and paying for sex. In *Footfalls* too, something concealed seems to lie at the source of May's woes: a manuscript evokes a suitor (MS-UoR-1552–2, in Little and Neyt 2022), suggesting a fleeting dalliance with someone of a lower class or another religion—recalling the plotline of Yeats's *Purgatory*, quoted elsewhere in Beckett's drama, when Henry attempts to summon the soul of his disappeared father in *Embers*.

Despite the prevalence of spectral presences in Beckett's drama, literal mentions of ghosts are few and far between, and are mostly confined to *Ghost Trio*

and *A Piece of Monologue*. Beckett's stage directions are never about making direct analogies with ghost apparitions; they focus on spelling out all the practical details, on making sure that the vision will be realized and operate with due regard paid to the author's understanding of aesthetic necessities. Everything hinges on maintaining ambiguity, on eluding possible directionality. In *Eh Joe*, as in *Footfalls*, *Embers* or *Ohio Impromptu*, we don't quite know who is haunting whom—whether the voice is a figment of Joe's imagination or whether it is a ghost in the old style, an omniscient ghost, able to see into his conscience and into the crimes he has committed. For Beckett, the key was to maintain ambiguity around what Joe seems to see, not what he can hear; that much is clear from his depiction to Alan Schneider of Joe's eyes as "turned inward", absorbed in "a listening look" (Harmon 1998, 203). The play's investigation into seeing is embedded into old questions of form: the history of television and filming turns back on itself, the subject-matter becoming the square screen and the eye, and the fact that the camera can indeed move forward. *Embers* functions in a similar way; in 1964, Beckett explained that *Cendres* "rests upon an ambiguity: is the character experiencing a hallucination or is he confronted to reality?" (Mignon 1964, 8; my translation). He wasn't sure, he said, whether the play was entirely successful in that regard, but presented this question as his way of accommodating the specificities of radio. *Embers*/ *Cendres* is also a return to very early ideas about the radio play; about its need to overemphasize and overexplain its own lack of a visual form, to compensate to for the fact that the listener can hear voices and sounds without being able to see. The modernist *Hörspiel*—a genre tied to the ghost play, which counts among its first instalments Rolf Gunold's *Spuk* (ghost apparition), written after E.T.A. Hoffmann—remained a source of inspiration for Beckett; one of his last texts—titled "Unhörspiel", then "Endhörspiel", and eventually "Hörendspiel", written in 1988—testifies to his enduring interest in how loss of corporeality might be represented: the fragment pits silence (S) and a ghostly voice (V) against one another, then brings them together (see Craig, Fehsenfeld, Gunn and Overbeck 2016, 704).

Paradoxically, Beckett has remained a marginal, background figure in the theorising of spectrality. In Mark Fisher's essays, notably, Beckett is a background presence who doesn't really materialize as an influence or a solid comparison. Beckett is also a spectral presence in Jacques Derrida's work, in spite of the convergence between many of their respective interests, and Derrida was notoriously reluctant to speak about him (see Derrida 1992, 61). The history of their subdued contacts, which took place in writing and by proxy, encompasses neighbouring statements in Swerling's 1971 book on Strindberg; Beckett's contribution of "Brief Dream" to *For Nelson Mandela*, the English version of Derrida and Mustapha Tlili's tribute published by Richard Seaver in 1987; and,

in 1987 also, Derrida's gift to Beckett of a copy of *Ulysse gramophone: Deux mots pour Joyce* through André Bernold, bearing a dedication professing his long-enduring admiration and gratitude (Van Hulle, Nixon and Neyt 2017). Yet many key ideas in spectrality studies resonate powerfully with Beckett's writing and with Beckettian traditions of performance. Take, for example, Avery Gordon's definition of haunting in *Ghostly Matters*:

> If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.
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Gordon's observations address a wider issue: occultism has all too often been dismissed, diminished or underestimated as a social question. Literary historians including Roger Luckhurst, Shane McCorristine, Helen Sword, Pamela Thurschwell and Marina Warner have demonstrated how unwise it is to dismiss ghost-seeing and ghost-hearing as simple manifestations of superstition. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren have lamented how spectrality has remained a "somewhat toxic [topic] for scholars seeking to be taken seriously" (3); they have called for a better recognition of the ghost as key literary trope, endowed with its own historical and political valencies:

> Ghosts, spirits, and specters have played vital roles in oral and written narratives throughout history and across cultures, appearing as anything from figments of the imagination, divine messengers, benign or exacting ancestors, and pesky otherworldly creatures populating particular loci to disturbing figures returned from the dead bent on exacting revenge, revealing hidden crimes, continuing a love affair or simply searching for a way to pass on. Their representational and socio-cultural functions,

> meanings, and effects have been at least as manifold as their shapes—or non-shapes, as the case may be—and extend far beyond the rituals, traditions, ghost stories, folktales, and urban legends they populate. [...] [C]ertain features of ghosts and haunting—such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession—quickly came to be employed across the humanities and social sciences to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions. These questions include, among others, the temporal and spatial sedimentation of history and tradition, and its impact on possibilities for social change; the intricacies of memory and trauma, personal and collective; the workings and effects of scientific processes, technologies, and media; and the exclusionary, effacing dimensions of social norms pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class.
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Such a blueprint is pertinent to Beckett studies: a thorough engagement with spectrality as a social, historical and political phenomenon and metaphor can encourage new enquiries, into Beckett's influences and ties to literary traditions preoccupied with ghosts and revenants, into the work's historical and political fabric, and into immensely important questions thrown into relief by spectrality and pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class. Without an engagement with these issues, it is not easy to identify what kind of social figures Beckett's spectres might be, or the kinds of traumas they relate to; in addition, much work remains to be done on Beckett when it comes to mapping the social and political worlds that the work has continuously inhabited, in its different linguistic forms, across different media. While a large body of scholarship draws attention to the prevalence of spectrality, ghosts and apparitions in Beckett's writing, the problems to be grappled with remain major, particularly around the notion of the ghost as a cipher for war trauma and other forms of historical trauma—around how we might contextualize Beckett's direct and indirect relation to key historical experiences and political events; how the writing configures itself around the author's comprehension of history. So little is known, ultimately, about all the mediating factors and influences between Beckett's life, his writing, the many crises and conflicts raging around him, and the catastrophes that haunted him. Much suggests that, like Adorno—who saw the astrology columns of the *Los Angeles Times* as deeply valuable sociological material, and scrutinized a year's worth of them—Beckett was sensitive to the social dimension of superstition and divination, to the secret longings, memories and regrets they partially conceal.

In the manner in which he has been represented, Beckett himself has often failed to materialise, to become a truly consistent being; there is a raft of photographs portraying him as someone who is not really present, who inhabits another world, and there are many interviews in which he is not presented as a creature of flesh and blood but drifts in and out. The most striking are by John Gruen, who described Beckett as "a gaunt and somewhat terrifying bird", with eyes resembling "fierce jewels in a granite setting" in 1964 (31), reinforcing the sense of him as a ghost in a 1969 version of the interview that evokes "a skeletal face, lined and craggy", "cold, dispassionate eyes", and speaking "in whispers" (1969, 210). The dramatic lines Gruen added once the Nobel Prize was won (such as "I have a clear memory of my own fetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to" (1969, 210)) reinforce the sense of Beckett as a suspended being. Inevitably, the logic goes, such an ethereal creature cannot possibly be concerned about the affairs of the world, about the dirty, lowly stuff of politics, about the labour involved in the act of writing. But it is a tragic error, always, to assimilate authors with their creations. We know what problems this has created in Beckett studies in terms of situating and understanding the work's historicity, its political dimensions and, ultimately, its significance. A letter John Fletcher sent to Raymond Federman in 1964 summarises the stakes particularly well: Fletcher points out that common constructions of Beckett as a secluded author, as a withdrawn clown-scholar, as an anguished absurdist don't square with the reality; all the labels, he observes, vanish once one finds oneself observing the author incarnate, getting tipsy on champagne (Fletcher 1964). He concludes that everyone, himself included, needs to do some hard rethinking. Even after all these years, working on Beckett continues to involve such hard rethinking, in order to accommodate Beckett's concrete presence in the world and the concreteness of the writing, in all its awkward, unwieldy, esoteric dimensions.

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