

## SEM14. “P raises his head”: Acts of resistance in Samuel Beckett

14A 11 September h. 11:00-13.00, S4 Moro

14B 11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S4 Moro

### Convenors

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### Abstract

Despite the fact that it is often characterized by nihilistic interpretations, Beckett's oeuvre depicts several acts of resistance, from Word's final sigh in *Words and Music* (1962) to the upward gaze of the Protagonist in *Catastrophe* (1982). The weight and inescapability of mortality marks Beckett's work since its very beginning, as testified by his first poetry collection, *Echo's Bones* (1935). Beckett's meditation on finitude is nonetheless accompanied by an enquiry into the residual possibilities of language, even when his goal is to dissolve “that terrible materiality of the word surface” (Beckett, 1937), testing the limits of the linguistic medium. Beckett's postwar considerations on painting are imbued with explicit ethical undertones, as clearly indicated in the “obligation to express” which concludes *The Three Dialogues* (Beckett, 1949). The intermedial experiments that follow often stage acts of domination and torture, frequently alluding to contemporary historical events, from the Algerian War to the Cold War. Strongly opposed to the idea of writing as a repository of a political message, he conveys his ethics by means of a rigorous reshaping of form. The aim of this seminar is to examine the presence and meaning of resistance in Beckett's corpus.

Proposal may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Beckett and resistance
- Beckett and testimony
- Beckett and anti-totalitarian dissent
- Beckett, nationalism and internationalism
- Beckett and censorship
- Beckett and ethics
- Political interpretations of Beckett
- Philosophical interpretation of Beckett
- Modalities of resistance: the dissolution of identity
- Modalities of resistance: the dissolution of form
- Modalities of resistance: the dissolution of language
- Beckett as a director: freedom and the marketplace
- Beckett and his publishers: freedom and the marketplace
- Alienation, commodification and the marketplace in his prose, plays, essays, poetry
- alienation, commodification and the marketplace in Beckett's correspondence
- Hybrid bodies in Beckett
- Ecocritical interpretations of his work
- Beckett and popular culture
- Acts of resistance in Beckett and his contemporaries
- Political reappropriations of Beckett
- Postcolonial rewritings of Beckett

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## SEM14. Papers

### 14A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, S4 Moro

- *The twilight of resistance: Representations of old age in the work of Samuel Beckett* (Irene De Angelis, Università di Torino)
- *"You love me so": From musical-box tune to revealing song in Happy Days* (Yuri Chung, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *The space of silence in Beckett's radio plays: Words and Music (1962) and Cascando (1963)* (Sara Pallante, Università degli Studi di Salerno / Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)
- *Wor(l)ds fall apart: The obligation to express and the resistance to interpretation in Beckett's theatre* (Antonio Sanges, University College London)
- *"I say it as I hear it": Fundamental sounds in Samuel Beckett's later texts* (Rossana Sebellin, Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma)

### 14B 11 September h. 14:30-17:00, S4 Moro

- *"P raises his head". Acts of resistance in Beckett's corpus* (Penelope Ioannou, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens)
- *"Accursed progenitor!". Beckett and the container* (Paolo Caponi, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *The life of the mound* (Livia Sacchetti, John Cabot University)
- *Samuel Beckett's regimes of ignorance: Ethico-political acts of resistance* (S. E. Gontarski, Florida State University, US)

## SEM14. Abstracts

### "Accursed progenitor!". Beckett and the container

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The image of the "container", in Wilfred Bion's terms, acquires a particular relevance in Beckett's oeuvre during the Fifties, i.e. the period that includes the narrative burst of the trilogy (1951-53) and his successful beginnings in the theatre. It is an overdetermined image, coalescing in the receptacle of the jar (*Molloy*) or the ashbin (*Endgame*), imbued with literary and figurative influences and triggered by Carl Gustav Jung's 1935 conference at the London Tavistock clinic attended by Beckett with is then psychotherapist Bion. In spite of its obvious, regressive function, the jar also stands as a reactive expedient, one that both propels the story forward and operates as a container of a hybridized body that stubbornly opposes his hiding, removal, or disappearance. My contribution will focus on this symbol and on its plastic relevance in Beckett's work.

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## **“You love me so”: From musical-box tune to revealing song in *Happy Days***

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“One cannot sing just to please someone,  
however much one loves them, no,  
song must come from the heart” (S. Beckett, *Happy Days*, Act I).

As Knowlson recalls, Samuel Beckett was faced with a dilemma when he was trying to complete *Happy Days*. He had to choose Winnie’s song for the finale of the play. At first, there seemed to be a preference for “When Irish eyes are smiling”, a famous tribute song to Ireland, but, in the end, he opted for “I love you so”, the waltz duet from Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. His friend, Alan Schneider, had advised him to choose the latter for pathos purposes and its universality, with the author concurring with these points.

According to Maier (2008), this finale represents a moment in which Winnie can finally express her feelings, deriving from the “heart”, in a pseudo duet which, from his point of view, turns into an unanswered song, a sort of prayer. Similarly, O’Brien Johnson (1989) sees it simply as a variation, an interchangeable substitute of her ending prayer habit. But since Winnie is a person of fixed habits, shouldn’t she pray instead? And is she really expecting an answer to her song?

Furthermore, when analysing *Happy Days*, Loftis (2013) focuses on Winnie’s “loss of memory and deliberate forgetting” in the play, concluding that the past could never be completely erased or forgotten. If citations, like the Shakespearian ones and many others, are partially misquoted due to falling memory, Winnie’s final song instead follows a different direction. If, in the first act, only the tune can be heard coming from a musical-box with a failed attempt by Willie to reproduce its lyrics, Winnie in the end offers a faithful rendition of it. Memory, by means of this song, seems intact and resistant to the aforementioned failures.

The aim of this paper is to show how these final sung words give further meaning to a work, which Beckett himself had to modify due to the choice of this waltz duet.

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### **The twilight of resistance: Representations of old age in the work of Samuel Beckett**

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This paper proposes to explore the complex and often poignant representations of old age in the work of Samuel Beckett in light of the themes suggested in the call for papers. Far from being a mere phase of biological decline, old age in Beckett proves to be fertile ground for exploring the dynamics of resistance, testimony and dissolution. Through the analysis of iconic figures such as Hamm and Nagg in *Endgame*, Winnie in *Happy Days*, and the protagonists of *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Rockaby*, this study will examine how older characters confront loss, memory, and the approaching end through acts of tenacious survival, recollection of the past, and a peculiar form of inner resistance.

In particular, the paper will focus on how progressive physical and mental disintegration is reflected in the deconstruction of dramatic and narrative form, and how language itself is worn down and fragmented in an attempt to express the ineffable experience of ageing. It will also discuss whether and how the vulnerability and dependence associated with old age can be interpreted in relation to the dynamics of alienation within an often ruthless existential context. Finally, it will suggest how Beckett’s representations of old age can offer a critical perspective on contemporary notions of productivity, autonomy and individual worth, raising questions about the dignity and meaning of existence in its final stage.

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## Samuel Beckett's regimes of ignorance: Ethico-political acts of resistance

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Beckett's is, foremost, an anti-authoritarian and so an ethico-political discourse. That is, Beckett was part of the resistance to particular political regimes at a particular moment in history, but much of his resistance, and Beckett remained a resistance writer for the entirety of his career, was more broadly to what Foucault would call "regimes of power," diffuse and discursive as well as concentrated and coercive. For Foucault, "power is everywhere," diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and "regimes of truth" (Foucault 1991, 27-28).

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Interview, "Truth and Power," 131)

Or again,

"It seems to me that power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it... [But] to say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what...

[Resistances] are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (Interview, "Power and Strategies" 141-142).

If Beckett accepted, practiced and professed a "regime of ignorance," it was because knowledge is allied to and so complicit with power and control, part of a "regime of truth"; that is, power is constituted through knowledge, Foucault reminds us. Beckett's professed ignorance, about his work, about the history of Philosophy, about the aesthetics of art, is an overt and conscious act of ethical resistance, the model for which may be the language-less protagonist in the first "Act without Words," who is involuntarily "thrown into the world" but whose apparent final passivity is an act of resistance, of willed political defiance, even as he has exhausted the possibilities of a future.



## "P raises his head". Acts of resistance in Beckett's corpus

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This paper proposes a close reading of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* through the Greek triad of ἀπορία (aporia), ἀταραξία (ataraxia), and ἀθανασία (athanassia), asking how the novel mobilizes linguistic instability in its radical resistance to philosophical containment, and understanding its verbal world as one of perpetual suspension, disintegration, and regeneration. Beginning with the jagged first utterances—"Where now? Who now? When now?"—the paper explores how Beckett's syntactical violence and semantic slipperiness render the Cartesian cogito inoperative, recasting skepticism as a restless, recursive mode of becoming rather than an endpoint of detachment.

Drawing on the semantic elasticity of ἀπορία, which carries both the burden of a roadblock and the promise of its surpassing, I argue that Beckett's text refuses stillness even as it hungers for it. As the text enacts a form of procedure-by-aporia, ataraxia—the equanimity toward which philosophical aporia traditionally tends—is repeatedly suspended and

undone by the text's formal and rhetorical unruliness: with its rhythmic stuttering and irreconcilable speed, Beckett's prose makes a poetry out of resisting stillness at every turn.

The paper also considers the novel's engagement with ἀπορία not only as philosophical impasse but as a term embedded in everyday Greek—used colloquially to indicate both a question and the means through which that question might move past its own obstacle. In this light, Beckett's language—autolytic, kinetic, and constantly doubling back on itself—becomes both the site of confusion and its own strange engine of clarity. Finally, the paper draws a brief parallel to Abdellkebir Khatibi's *Love in Two Languages* to illuminate the shared terror and ecstasy of language under erasure—of words poised always between *mot* and *la mort*. In both texts, linguistic aporia becomes a condition not of stasis but of infinite, if uneasy, survival.

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## The space of silence in Beckett's radio plays: *Words and Music* (1962) and *Cascando* (1963)

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The modernist interest in incommunicability and the unspoken is well known. Counteracting the essentiality and silences of the modernist text are the urban and technological clamours. Radio, with its incessant flow of words, sounds and noises, develops in this context. In contrast to writing, silence on the radio often means complete absence: if disembodied sounds and voices were also silenced, they would become dead air. Yet silence, in its studied alternation with voices, sounds, and noises, can be one of the most powerful imaginative stimuli even in the radio context (McWhinnie: 1959). This article intends to focus on the role of silence in two radio plays by Samuel Beckett, *Words and Music* (1962) and *Cascando* (1963). Although the centrality of silence has often been examined in Beckett's works, these two radio plays have been interpreted as the author's intention to express the triumph of the essentiality and abstractness of music over the rhetoric of words (Prieto: 2020: 565-569). Each radio play is a meta-narrative of the creative process, in which a character strives to foster collaboration between words and music in order to craft a composition. This analysis has the primary objective of demonstrating that the interruption of sound and voice should not be interpreted merely as a postmodern indication of the complete breakdown of artistic expression – whether verbal or musical – within the landscape of mass communication. Even on the radio, silence can serve as a space of resistance – empty, and yet not devoid of life – a space to which one must cyclically return to revitalize artistic expression and renew the pursuit of elusive meaning.

## References

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## The life of the mound

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In her essay *There Must be a Lot of Fish in the Lake*, Una Chaudhuri reflects deeply on the relationship between stage space and natural spaces. She argues that the stage has often been limited to the portrayal of "human existence as a seamless social web", ignoring the necessary relationship between human and nature or, in rare cases, using the latter as a metaphor. She continues by arguing that "the ideological discourse of realism thrust the nonhuman world into the shadows, from which it emerged in the ghostlike form of strangely menacing-yet inanimate-objects" and, in this light, she considers "the junk-strewn, garbage-choked stages of Pinter, Mamet, Shepard, and others". While Beckett's work would seem to father the work of those mentioned in the latter statement, *Happy Days* stands as a stark contrast to plays that only portray human-made wastelands.

This paper proposes to read *Happy Days* in ecocritical terms. It will evaluate the relationship created between the mound, Winnie, and Willie as a haunting presage of the climate crisis. As is often the case with Beckett's use of stage space, the mound that entraps Winnie is neither fully a metaphor nor fully literal. It is designed to inhabit a liminal space,

one that provokes the audience by remaining boldly undefined. The play offers no explanation for the mound; hence, no accurate assessment of its nature can be made. However, the mound's movement--or growth--is the only traceable progress made on stage. Winnie's and Willie's actions, instead, are bound to it, but are also inconsequential. Confined by a natural phenomenon that devours their prospects and limits their present, Winnie and Willie seem unconcerned with it, taken as they are with their consumption of the objects they carry. As they busy themselves with nostalgic memories about "the old days", lipsticks, newspapers, and idle talk, the mound grows threateningly, moving out of the space of a mere metaphor. It is not the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot* or "ashcans" of *Endgame*, it is an active, vital force; one that moves and grows pervasively, ultimately intimating doom. Winnie's and Willie's lack of concern with their natural habit seems to anticipate with glaring accuracy the current crisis. As they are increasingly reduced to earthworms, crawling, entombed, and unaware, the mound stands strong in both triumphant and destructive terms.



### **Wor(l)ds fall apart: The obligation to express and the resistance to interpretation in Beckett's theatre**

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Beckett depicts characters whose lives are not worth living at the limits of the grotesque (Nell and Nagg in *Endgame* are two old people living in a dustbin): this led the critics to think about Beckett as depicting absurd or nonsensical situations. Furthermore, similar to Cioran, Beckett had no faith in the possibility of language to express: 'There is nothing to express' (Cohn 1983). This suggests that not only did Beckett have a pessimistic and nihilistic view of life, but he also had no faith in the possibility that art could play a role in such a worldview, and that any tentative to resist the meaninglessness of life would be fruitless. Many critics read Beckett's oeuvre with the lens of Existentialist philosophy or Nihilistic philosophy, and original interpretations such as those by Adorno or Cavell are allegorical interpretations that significantly differ from each other. It is possible to read Beckett's remarks on philosophy in his Philosophy notes, which are rather unoriginal: for example, Beckett says that in ancient Greek philosophy, pessimism is an 'imminent' consequence of hedonism (Beckett 2020). Furthermore, Beckett's engagement with philosophy seems to be very peculiar, and he was interested in Schopenhauer (as it is possible to understand by reading his letters) just because the philosopher provided an 'intellectual justification of unhappiness' (Beckett 2009). In Beckett's novels and plays, the characters deal with major problems of the Western philosophical tradition: destiny, love, death, and suffering. However, Beckett never deepens these themes, and he banalizes them at the level of a conversation about the weather, as if suffering is an important matter.

I argue that Beckett acknowledges that it is impossible to solve the problems of the Western tradition that led to the acknowledgment of the meaninglessness of life: for example, on several occasions in which the author hints at the fact that it is better not to be born. Once this is acknowledged, the artist can take their pessimism and nihilistic view as an obvious thing and banalize it. The meaninglessness of life is obvious. The artist cannot philosophically engage with this problem, which, in Wittgensteinean words, would be outside of their 'world' (Wittgenstein 1998); instead, the artist could just deal with 'superficial' themes (Sanges 2023). In this way, the artist can create artworks in which he expresses his pessimistic worldview without dealing with it. Nevertheless, the artworks remain valuable in themselves, as they function as self-contained esthetic games that resist interpretation.

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## **“I say it as I hear it”: Fundamental sounds in Samuel Beckett’s later texts**

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The question – and quest – of “fundamental sounds” in Samuel Beckett’s later production enacts an increasingly radical and idiosyncratic blurring of literary and performative genres. Beckett’s meticulous pursuit of the right word, a pursuit mirrored and intensified in his practice of self-translation, propels a movement toward the dissolution of genre boundaries that had already been set in motion in his early work (as exemplified in *Echo’s Bones*). This tendency becomes more pronounced in his later prose, drama, and radio work, where the formal limits traditionally imposed by genre collapse, often extending beyond the author’s own intentions (and occasionally to his discomfiture).

In this evolving terrain, Beckett’s prose increasingly adopts dramatic qualities; his stage plays are adapted or incorporated into poetry collections; his radio texts are staged; and the dramatic and prose works alike are often interpreted through hybridized forms of performance and critical reading. These migrations of form call into question the essential components of genre identity, prompting reflection on what remains of drama when dialogue is erased, what persists of prose when its structure becomes inherently performative, and how radio plays, ostensibly aural in nature, are able to generate such a rich tapestry of visual imagery.

This paper aims to explore the liminal spaces Beckett opens between genres, focusing on the residue and transformation of drama and prose when their conventional markers are stripped away. Through detailed textual analysis, I examine the implications of Beckett’s persistent interrogation of linguistic precision and its consequences for the ontology of the work itself. Central to this inquiry is the phenomenon of aurality and rhythm, which, far from being the preserve of the auditory arts alone, undermines stable notions of medium and mode.

As I hope to demonstrate, Beckett’s radical fidelity to the elusive “mot juste” is not merely a stylistic choice but becomes, in effect, an act of resistance to aesthetic categorization. His late works manifest a poetics of indeterminacy, where the collapsing of form is both a philosophical stance and a structural necessity. In Beckett, the sound of the word is never just sound, it is an echo of genre’s undoing.

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