

Crossing the Border between Archive and Edition: The Samuel Beckett Digital Manuscript Chronology

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Within the digital humanities, it is common to distinguish between digital archives and digital editions. This paper argues that research into an author’s writing processes benefits from digital projects that cross the border between the two. It introduces a work-in-progress digital manuscript chronology that lists information found in manuscripts, notebooks, and letters on a malleable timeline. As such, it presents the data preserved in the archive in a way that elucidates the compositional histories of literary works. The main advantage of this tool is that it visualizes the geneses of different works within the same environment, facilitating the study of “creative concurrence.” The oeuvre of Samuel Beckett serves as a case study.

Keywords: genetic criticism, digital scholarly editing, Samuel Beckett

1 Introduction

Digital textual scholarship often distinguishes between digital archives and digital scholarly editions. While the consensus now seems to be that they are not mutually exclusive, both orientations have different rationales, both equally valuable to study our textual heritage. To study authors’ oeuvres as the creative ecologies they represent, including both published and unpublished materials, it is necessary to cross the border between archives and editions. In this paper, we will introduce a work-in-progress digital manuscript chronology of Samuel Beckett’s works as one of the means toward achieving that goal.

The tool is set to be incorporated into the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP; www.beckettarchive.org), which operates both as a digital archive of Beckett’s works and as a genetic “complete works” edition organized into 26 modules, 10 of which are currently available online. The BDMP digitally reunites Beckett’s manuscripts, notebooks, and personal library, while also offering a set of tools that facilitate the study of the geneses of his works. The Beckett chronology lists all the dates found in the archive on a dynamic and interactive timeline. In so doing, it aims to offer a digital expansion of John Pilling’s *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* and Ruby Cohn’s *A*

Beckett Canon (Cohn, 2001; Pilling, 2006). While these initiatives are bound to the print medium in which they appeared, a digital manuscript chronology tries to fully exploit the potential of computational methods and user interfaces. A chronological presentation of the manuscript material not only allows us to track Beckett's day-by-day progress in depth, but it also promises to introduce a new way of showcasing the fluid nature of some writing processes. A writer like Beckett, for instance, often worked on multiple projects at once. As a result, several unfinished manuscripts occupied his desk for months or even years, occasionally resulting in cross-fertilizations between writing projects across genres and media. Thanks to a digital Beckett chronology, such instances of "creative concurrence" (Van Hulle, 2021, 2022) can be more finely traced and studied, since it presents the archival material of the entire oeuvre rather than collecting documents relating to separate works.

2 Digital Archives and/or Editions

There currently exists no universally accepted definition of digital scholarly editions and it still remains difficult to define what precisely separates them from digital archives. Many digital projects that aim to present the textual history of literary works blend properties traditionally assigned to both archives and editions. In general, these initiatives aspire to be as extensive as a literary archive, collecting and presenting digital facsimiles of manuscripts, notes, proofs, or books in an author's personal library. At the same time, it is not uncommon that they also provide additional aids that help users navigate this labyrinth of archival material, such as transcriptions of handwritten passages, reading texts, or a set of tools that facilitate the comparison of documents. In an ongoing debate, attempts to establish definitions of digital scholarly editions have appeared piecemeal in the past few years (Gabler, 2010; Pierazzo, 2016; Robinson, 2013; Sahle, 2016). Much of the difficulty seems to stem from the absence of a standardized form that is adopted by all digital editions online today. Their appearances and functionalities frequently differ according to their publication dates, the specificity of the edited work, and the aims of the editors, all factors that may have contributed to the lack of consensus among scholars. A dense fog still obscures these discussions and until that fog has lifted it is good to engage in a healthy debate on the ontology of digital scholarly editions.

One widely accepted characteristic of digital scholarly editions appears to be the publication of an extensive collection of documents. In theory, the digital medium has the potential to include a large number of facsimile scans of original documents, such as an author's notes, sketches, or drafts taken from various archives, repositories, and collections scattered around the globe. In "The Primacy of the Document in Editing," Hans Walter Gabler stresses the importance of these reproductions in digital editions and argues that "it is documents that we have, and documents only" (Gabler, 2007, p.199). The work of textual scholars and editors ultimately begins with the investigation of documents. Before editors can make any statement about a text, they first need to extract these texts from the documents in which their surviving versions are contained. Only then can texts be read, interpreted, and edited. According to the Swiss editor-scholar Hans Zeller the "manuscript requires interpretation [...] and the result of the interpretation is the text. This act of interpreting the manuscript is the constitution of the text" (Zeller, 1995, p.43).¹ Consequently, digital editors generally ensure that the documents on which their arguments are based are rendered visible.

¹ However, Daniel Ferrer counters that "the draft is not a text, or a discourse; it is a protocol for

The effort of digitally representing original documents has become a core feature of digital editions. In a later article, Gabler duly notes that this may even “be considered the primary concern and duty of scholarly manuscript editing today” (Gabler, 2016, p.68). As this aspect of digital editions enables users to check the editors’ transcription at any point, it contributes significantly to the edition’s accountability, which goes a long way in giving shape to what Patrick Sahle called a “digital paradigm” (Sahle, 2016, p.28) in textual editing.

But a digital scholarly edition is, or often aspires to be, more than a mere collection of related documents and transcriptions. While they select, order, and publish archival documents online, scholarly editions also aim to elucidate a textual history. The archival material presented in digital scholarly editions offers a wide array of information in order to do this, but pieces of information become particularly useful when they are related to one another by editors. Anne Baillot and Anna Busch remark that “editors are still in dire need of a set of standards that would give the kind of direction the scholarly book tradition would provide them with” (Baillot and Busch, 2021, p.181). We could potentially arrive at such an editorial model for the digital age by considering the effort of finding and presenting meaningful connections between documents as one vital task of editors. Peter Shillingsburg points to the necessity of joining texts and documents: “[t]he first job of all editors is to gather relevant variant forms of the work to be edited and [...] establish the relationship they bear to one another” (Shillingsburg, 1996, p.134). Barbara Bordalejo also notes that “[a]n editor who has collected materials, gathered evidence, and compared variants eventually has to decide what does it all mean, who will care about it and how to present it; but most importantly how those materials relate to each other” (Bordalejo, 2013, p.64). Scholarly editions present critically established links across or within archival documents, which could help illuminate part of the genesis or serve as starting points for further investigations into the history of a text.

These links can take different forms. One example is providing users with a synoptic overview of the different versions of a sentence, paragraph, or line of verse by means of digital collation. But when we study literary writing processes, we tend to focus on the geneses of individual works, such as novels, short stories, or poems. In doing so, we often overlook the reality that works of literature typically come into being within wider creative landscapes. They are conceptualized, written, and rewritten within certain creative clusters. The creative process involved in writing a work of literature is typically influenced by many events happening simultaneously. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the creative continuum is often not limited to single writing projects, since it is common for writers to work on several assignments simultaneously. In *Ways of Escape*, the second volume of his autobiography, Graham Greene writes that he used to work on two novels at once in 1938, devoting his mornings to the thriller *The Confidential Agent* and his afternoons to *The Power and the Glory* (Greene, 1980, p.91). In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Jennifer Egan recently revealed that she adopted a similar method, writing *Manhattan Beach* and *The Candy House* at the same time (Treisman, 2023). Earlier examples can be found as well. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, suggests that Shakespeare may have written parts of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* concurrently (Greenblatt, 2004, p.52). The hypothesis we wish to develop here is that highlighting the connections between overlapping writing projects could also help to turn an archive into an edition. We will illustrate this by analyzing a short poem Beckett composed in 1974.

making a text” (Ferrer, 1998, p.261).

3 Case study: “hors crâne” and “creative concurrence”

On 1 January 1974, Beckett started the new year by writing a new piece of prose in French, which was eventually to become a poem called “hors crâne.” In the early manuscripts, when it was still a piece in process, it was not much longer than a paragraph, written on a loose sheet of white paper. Beckett kept revising it over the following days. The first draft is followed by three further drafts of the same piece of prose, all on the same page. After these four versions, still on the same piece of paper, he decided to turn it into a poem, numbering the four three-line stanzas, signed and dated 4 January 1974.

While he was writing this poem, a few other projects were on his desk. One of them was a collaboration with the visual artist Jasper Johns. In November 1973, they had met to discuss their book project *FOIRADES/FIZZLES: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns*. Beckett translated three short *foirades* (short prose pieces) from French into English: *Il est tête nue* into *He is barehead* on 31 November 1973, *Horn venait la nuit* into *Horn came always at night* on 12 December 1973, and *J'ai renoncé avant de naître* into *I gave up before birth* on 15 December 1973 (Pilling, 2006, pp.193-194). At the same time, he was working on the translation of his play *Not I*, from English into French (*Pas moi*) – or at least this translation was a project that had been on his desk since March 1973. It would take him until May 1974 to finish a first draft of the translation. There are indications that in the meantime this translation project was on his mind. For instance, on 8 December 1973, he wrote to American director Alan Schneider: “Still haven’t translated *Not I*” (Beckett, 1998, p.311).

One of the play’s most striking features is that the text is spoken by nothing but a mouth, reducing the stage basically to just a set of moving lips, speaking from the dark. Beckett appears to have come up with this idea in the summer of 1971, when he asked Ruby Cohn: “Can you stage a mouth? Just a moving mouth with the rest of the stage in darkness?” (Cohn, 2001, p.315). But the talking mouth is a radicalization of his earlier idea to stage just a head. That idea goes back at least ten years further in time, to the abandoned “Kilcool” fragments, which Beckett referred to as his “lit face” play, as in his letter of 26 August 1963 to Barbara Bray (Beckett, 2014, p.567) – and perhaps even earlier, to the second act of the play *Happy Days*, in which the main character, Winnie, is buried up to her neck in a mound, so that only her face is still visible. The stage directions of “Kilcool” (TCD MS 4664, 10r; BDMP10, AS1) describe an even further minimized set with just a “Woman’s face alone in constant light. [...] Nothing but fixed lit face & speech” (Little and Neyt, 2022). This isolated head appears to have been an image that preoccupied Beckett for many years. On several occasions, he mentioned Caravaggio’s painting *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, which he saw in Valletta Cathedral when he was on holiday in Malta in 1971, as a source of inspiration – especially mentioning the onlookers (Little, 2021, pp.148-149). But the isolated head was in the first place a literary image for Beckett, who had probably encountered it for the first time in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. In *Inferno*, Canto 32, Dante and Virgil stumble upon Bocca degli Abati in Antenora, the second division of the ninth circle of Hell, which is depicted as a frozen lake that houses traitors. Bocca, who had betrayed the Guelf party, is buried in the ice up to the neck.

The development of this Dantean image was not limited to the genre of drama, however. In 1969, Beckett had started writing a piece of prose fiction in French which was to become *Pour finir encore* (*For to End Yet Again*).² By 3 September 1970, he wrote

² The earliest manuscript toward *Pour finir encore* is dated 8 and 10 November 1969 (Pilling, 2006,

to Ruby Cohn that he had “written 200 sentences” (Beckett, 2016, p.239). As is often the case, the text’s incipit - “Pour finir encore crâne seul dans le noir lieu clos” (Beckett, 1976, p.7) - did not coincide with the start of the text’s genesis. It took Beckett five years to arrive at the final version of the text in 1975, published by Les Éditions de Minuit in 1976 together with the other “fizzles” as *Pour finir encore et autres foirades*.

At first sight, Beckett seems to have been in the short prose mood when, on 1 January 1974, he started writing a new text, as if he was just continuing the series of *Foirades* – which would make sense, given the ongoing book project with Jasper Johns. But, as indicated above, after four versions he turned the text into a poem, thus definitely moving away from the *Foirades* format. And while it may seem as if *Pour finir encore* signals the end of the “closed space” texts, the earliest versions of this text do not mention this theme, nor even an isolated head or skull. It is more likely that the concurrent work, “hors crâne,” prompted Beckett to introduce the theme of the skull being the last closed space. First, it was not yet a skull but a head: “Où la tête cette fois. Difficile à dire. Finis les lieux clos” (BC MS 1991001/11/4/1, 01r, translation: “Or the head this time. Difficult to say. No more closed spaces”). In the third version, he then introduced an explicit reference to Dante, “tel Bocca dans la [xxx] glace” (BC MS 1991001/11/4/1, 01r, translation: “like Bocca in the ice”). And in the fifth version, when he turned the text into a poem, he also changed “tête” [head] into “crâne” [skull].

While *Pour finir encore* may have served as a starting point for Beckett in the early stages of writing “hors crâne,” the creative concurrence also works the other way round: the poem changed the course of the writing process of *Pour finir encore*, because it introduced the theme of “hors crâne seul dedans” – which recurs almost literally in the late drafts written in 1975 as well as the published version of *Pour finir encore*: “crâne seul dans le noir lieu clos” (Beckett, 1976, p.7).³ Moreover, the early versions of “hors crâne,” still in short prose format, started with “Là quelque chose,” which became the opening line for another poem in English, “something there” – yet another writing project lying on his desk almost simultaneously. And Bocca, meanwhile, kept prompting new poems, as he is mentioned in the first draft of “dread nay” (started in the same month as “hors crâne,” on 31 January 1974). It is obvious that this kind of creative concurrence effectuates cross-pollination and self-pollination, but how do we visualize this and enable users to study this concurrent pollination in a digital environment?

4 Toward a Digital Manuscript Chronology

What distinguishes genetic criticism from related disciplines, such as bibliography, book history, and archive studies is its focus on the temporal unfolding of the creative process. Literary composition inevitably occurs in time, and one of the tasks of geneticists is therefore to reconstruct the chronological order of writing events. Pierre-Marc De Biasi even argues that the novelty of genetic criticism lies in its investigations into “the unexplored expanse of a new object structured by time” (De Biasi, 2004, p.42). At some point during their analysis, genetic critics will need to decide what was

p.182). In a letter of 8 November 1969 to Barbara Bray, Beckett writes: “Wrote first sentence this morning désespoir de cause again of God knows what and who cares. Feels like beginning *Molloy* only 1/4 century worse” (Beckett, 2016, p.192).

³ Several manuscripts of *Pour finir encore* have only recently been donated to the Bibliothèque nationale de France; among these as yet uncatalogued documents is a manuscript dated 15 May 1975 (archival research at BnF, Dirk Van Hulle, 22 November 2022).

written first and what was added, deleted, or corrected later. They will also need to pinpoint the length of the interval between the different writing stages and define the chronological order of the documents.

There are several ways to present the chronology of a writing process in a genetic edition. The publication of a genetic dossier is one common method to reach this goal. Such a dossier not only compiles the extant documents that have contributed to a writing project, but it also visualizes their order of composition because, as Almuth Grésillon suggests, these documents are best organized according to the chronology of the successive writing stages (Grésillon, 1994, p.242). This system of organization is mostly situated on the level of the document, showing the chronological sequence of notebooks, manuscripts, typescripts, and proofs. More pertinently, genetic dossiers are created for individual works rather than creative clusters consisting of drafts belonging to separate projects.

Additionally, editors could resort to another common method, namely the creation of a so-called “genetic map” (Van Hulle, 2020). This type of representation visualizes the timeline of both documents and versions leading up to a work. As a result, a genetic map provides an insight into the trajectory of a writing process. Moreover, these maps could also point to parallel geneses, albeit in a rather rudimentary fashion. The BDMP’s genetic map for *Fin de partie / Endgame*, for instance, shows that Beckett worked on several other texts during the composition of this play, such as *Acte sans paroles I* and two versions of the unpublished “Mime du rêveur.” While these “maps” are currently some of the most detailed items that genetic editors can incorporate into their editions to present the chronology of writing, they remain simplified and static illustrations of something more complex, designed to be easily publishable both online and in print form. The benefit of digital scholarly editions is that different ways of organizing the documents can co-exist. Next to genetic dossiers and maps that organize documents and versions chronologically, digital scholarly editions could also benefit from a more fine-grained tool that fully exploits the potential of the digital medium and that is designed specifically to study the interactions between concurrent writing events.⁴

The digital manuscript chronology lists all the dated material in the BDMP on a vertical timeline (see Figure 1). It allows users to scroll through the dates found in manuscripts, notebooks, and books in Beckett’s personal library as if they were using a chronology that we find in many print scholarly editions, which certainly helps to map the progression of the geneses of Beckett’s works. It also enables users to refine the results by decade, year, or work, and clicking the facsimiles they wish to analyze more closely will take them to the corresponding page in the genetic module for that work. Since many of Beckett’s manuscripts are undated, it is also possible to include documents with “uncertain” or “inferred” dates, derived from ancillary archival materials.

To reconstruct the chronology of Beckett’s writing processes more accurately, it is necessary to incorporate information drawn from documents not currently preserved in the BDMP, such as Beckett’s correspondence. In many cases, letters shed light on the genesis of a text, and they can often help us date it. The chronology therefore offers brief summaries of statements in Beckett’s correspondence that could be related to his creative process, such as those referring to a text he is writing, a work he is

⁴ Our proposal for a new tool echoes recent calls for a more experimental approach to digital scholarly editing. Christopher Ohge, for example, invites editors to move “from abstract-rationalist models to a programme of action and experimentation” (Ohge, 2021, p.121).

translating, or a book he is reading. In addition to data based on Beckett's published letters (Harvard University Press, 1998; Cambridge University Press, 2009-2016), the tool also aims to include information drawn from unpublished correspondence. The incorporation of these references results in a much more detailed picture of Beckett's work schedule. Lois More Overbeck, one of the editors of the four-volume edition of Beckett's correspondence published by Cambridge University Press, notes that "Beckett's letters reveal the gradual shifts that take place between his original conception and the realisation of his work" (Overbeck, 2013, p.431). These day-to-day progressions become particularly evident once the statements in Beckett's letters are linked with his manuscript drafts, allowing users to compare the remarks in the correspondence with the facsimiles in the archive.

The Chronology feature uses an eXist-db database that retrieves data from the XML files that are the basis of the BDMP. All the encoding is done in XML, in accordance with the guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). The information drawn from the notebooks, manuscripts, and the Beckett Digital Library is complemented by an additional XML file for the correspondence (see Figure 2). The latter file contains a list of <date> tags, each with a unique identifier and a set of attributes that further specify when the letter was written and the type of document it concerns. The statements Beckett makes in his letters that could be related to his creative process are briefly summarized within these <date> tags. The data also note the place from where Beckett sent the letter as well as the source where the full letter can be found, in many cases the edition published by Cambridge University Press, but sometimes also unpublished letters, kept in libraries or public archives.

To illustrate how the tool may help dissect creative clusters, let us zoom in on the period that coincides with the writing of Beckett's first published novel, *Murphy*. The six notebooks containing the manuscript already provide us with an exceptionally high number (145) of dates, and the chronology also incorporates information found in 137 letters sent during the novel's composition, the bulk of which derives from Beckett's elaborate correspondence with his friend Thomas McGreevy. Scrolling through the chronology immediately points to the interplay between different events. For example, the first entry reveals that in a letter of 1 January 1935, Beckett wrote to McGreevy that he had consulted a book on the German expressionist painter Heinrich Campendonk, which he found "very interesting" (Beckett, 2009, p.240). The Chronology shows that shortly after Beckett also composed an undated short story titled "Lightning Calculation," whose protagonist is planning to write a book, titled *The Pathetic Fallacy from Avercamp to Campendonk*, which has the painter as a subject. At the end of the month, Beckett sent the story to the publisher Lovat Dickson, who would eventually reject it about a week later (Beckett, 2009, pp.243,247). The idea that his story would remain unpublished may have been a reason for Beckett to recycle some of its elements in his novel, which he started writing on 20 August. In the fifth notebook, in a passage dated 25 January 1936, the title of the book reappears once again, although the painter's name has now been changed into "Kampendonck" (UoR MS 5517/5, 25r). Even this brief example shows how the chronological presentation of Beckett's activities, derived from multiple sources, helps us not only to analyze the genesis of *Murphy* but also to trace the novel's relationships with other archival material.

CHRONOLOGY

This feature presents all dates in manuscripts in chronological order.
It can be enriched with two other datasets by selecting any of these options:

include dates from other sources include uncertain/inferred dating

Previous 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Next

LET
TER

08 / 09 / 1935

SB writes to Thomas McGreevy that he told Chatto and Windus to send *Proust* and *More Pricks Than Kicks* to Simon and Schuster. He is expecting proofs of *Echo's Bones*, to be published in November 1935 by The Europa Press, and is working over his poems, especially 'The Undertaker's Man' ('Malacoda') proves to be difficult. He mentions that he has been working on something new and that he witnessed old men flying kites at the Round Pond in a passage that echoes the end of *Murphy*.

Place: 34 Gertrude St [London]
Source: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. I, 1929-1940, pp. 272-276

Murphy, MS-UoR-5517-1, f. 31r



09 / 09 / 1935

9/9

REFINE

Found 453 entries.

Refine by decade: 1930's, 1940's, 1950's, 1960's, 1970's, 1980's

Refine by year: -select year- refine

Refine by work:

Murphy (145)
(137)
Molloy (56)
Malone meurt / Malone Dies (23)
L'Innommable / The Unnamable (20)
Stirrings Still / Soubresauts (17)
Not ! / Pas moi (17)
Fin de partie / Endgame (10)
Krapp's Last Tape / La Dernière Bande (9)
That Time / Cette fois (6)
Comment dire / what is the word (4)
En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot (4)
Footfalls / Pas (3)
(2)

Figure 1: The interface of the digital chronology in the BDMP.

```
<date xml:id="SB-MCG-08-09-1935" when="1935-09-08" type="letter">
  SB writes to Thomas McGreevy that he told Chatto and Windus to send <hi rend="i">Proust</hi> and
  <hi rend="i">More Pricks Than Kicks</hi> to Simon and Schuster. He is expecting proofs of <hi rend="i">Echo's Bones</hi>,
  to be published in November 1935 by The Europa Press, and is working over his poems, especially 'The Undertaker's Man' ('Malacoda')
  proves to be difficult. He mentions that he has been working on something new and that he witnessed old men flying kites at the
  Round Pond in a passage that echoes the end of <hi rend="i">Murphy</hi>. <lb/><lb/>
  Place: 34 Gertrude St [London] <lb/>
  Source: <hi rend="i">The Letters of Samuel Beckett</hi>, vol. I, 1929-1940, pp. 272-276
</date>
```

Figure 2: An excerpt of the XML encoding for the Digital Beckett Chronology.

5 Conclusion

In his book *The Fluid Text*, John Bryant writes that genetic criticism “assumes that the creative process is a continuum of overlapping and interpenetrating actions flowing seamlessly from one to the next” (Bryant, 2002, p.73). The tool we have introduced in these pages may help communicate such a creative continuum in a digital scholarly edition. While still incomplete, the digital timeline’s aim is to provide a more detailed overview of the gradual development of Beckett’s oeuvre. The main advantage of this type of interface is that it gives us an insight into both diachronic and synchronic processes of composition. A digital chronology presents the drafts belonging to different writing projects side by side rather than organizing and separating them according to the work to which they belong. As such, it points to relationships not only within but also across genetic dossiers. The tool is a welcome addition to a digital complete works edition of Beckett’s texts, since he not only divided his time between multiple projects, but also because this practice was an important aspect of his creative process, one that drove him more than once to compose new works across genres and media. A digital manuscript chronology could therefore offer an illuminating way of showcasing creative concurrence within the archive and turn the two-dimensional text into a 3D object, as it were, by giving shape to what Louis Hay has called “the third dimension of literature” (Hay, 2002, p.245): time.

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