

The Chronology of the Writing Process

Developing a New Way to Navigate the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project

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In 2018 the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP) won the MLA Prize for a Bibliography, Archive, or Digital Project. The BDMP is a digital genetic edition that enables ‘readers to discover new documents and see how the dispersed manuscripts of different holding libraries interrelate within the context of a work’s genesis in its entirety.’¹ It contains a variety of genetic material, such as, manuscripts, typescripts, notebooks and Samuel Beckett’s personal library.

The BDMP is organized in modules which represent individual works. For each module the project provides digital facsimiles and a deep encoding of the information found on the pages, such as, text, dates and places. However, this plethora of data is currently confined within each module while in reality the captured data points are highly interconnected. Beckett, for instance, often worked on several works simultaneously: he was translating *L’Innommable* at the same time he was writing *Endgame* (Cohn 2001, 237). As a result, the image of an author neatly finishing a work before starting a new project does not apply to Beckett, but by separating his creative process into different modules, the connections and overlaps between the modules are buried. In other words, across the BDMP modules the data overlaps on both the dimension of time and space, but these connections are not yet visible to the user.

However, these connections are revealed by means of the Chronology Feature, currently being developed at the Centre for Manuscript Genetics as part of a PhD project. In doing so, the Chronology Feature builds on the work already done for the BDMP and expands it even further. The data is collected and stored in an XML database which contains not only the XML transcriptions of the different BDMP modules, but also data extracted from the published volumes of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (published between 2009 and 2016). Since these letters contain a wealth of data relating to Beckett’s reading, writing, translating and directing activities, the integration of this information into the Chronology Feature allows us to enrich the modules of the BDMP. For instance, the letters often contain references to source material that inspired Beckett during the writing process and this information from the letters allows us to create a link between the module in question and the Beckett Digital Library (BDL module). In other words, the Chronology Feature brings together the data and visualizes it in order to illustrate the different connections and overlaps within Beckett’s oeuvre.

¹ See www.beckettarchive.org (accessed 24/04/2019).

Newer generations of digital genetic editions often provide a chronological order of the genetic material. Examples such as the Faustedition and Nietzsche Source give users access to textual witnesses in the order of their creation.² What we provide is a new way of navigating the genetic material and, as a result, a new way of studying it in a non-teleological manner. Additionally, by pinpointing time and space on the Chronology Feature we provide access to the societal influences that shaped Beckett's writing. Questions such as "what influenced Beckett?", "which books did he read?" and "who did he write to?" can be answered for any recorded time and place by using our dynamic visualization. As such, through the usage of the Chronology Feature, scholars can connect exogenetic influences to the endogenetic material and make new claims about how the writing mind is a product of its environment and the society that surrounds it (Van Hulle 2014). With such a tool we, as genetic editors, visualize the making of Beckett's oeuvre in a new way which highlights the diversity and interconnectedness of Beckett's works.

List of Works Cited

- Cohn, Ruby. 2001. *A Beckett Canon*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Van Hulle, Dirk. 2014. *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond*. London: Bloomsbury.

² See <http://faustedition.net> and <http://www.nietzschesource.org/> (accessed 24/04/2019).