

“The war, no, not that again”:
Samuel Beckett, the French Resistance,
and the Narratives of History

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Introduction

Five.

Try again.

J.M. Coetzee, “Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett”

—————

Samuel Beckett does not quite fit in. Whether as modernist or post-modernist, as novelist or playwright, as friend to James Joyce or Irish counterpart to Jean-Paul Sartre, no matter where, no matter into which tradition he is wedged, Beckett sticks out. More contentious still, his literature constantly disputes the idea of tradition itself.¹ “I love the old questions” Hamm in *Endgame* remarks from behind a pair of dark glasses. “Ah the old questions,” he muses, “the old answers, there’s nothing like them!”² Though the dramatic irony of this moment is lost on the page, Beckett’s position—“tired of adding, tired of subtracting to and from the same old things the same old things,” he writes in *Watt*, or else “never another question” in *All Strange Away*—is clear: he does not like the questions that are asked “millions of times,” nor does he love the stale answers, the “same old things the same old things.”³

His writing also attacks stories and the ways in which we tell them. “What story?” Hamm asks Clov, his miserable servant.⁴ “The one you’ve been telling yourself,” Clov replies, “all your...days.”⁵ While Clov reminds us that we are, all of us, storytelling creatures, Beckett tries his best to suppress this impulse. And when stories—the ones we tell ourselves as individuals, those we tell ourselves as societies—inevitably escape, he attacks them. “What story?” Hamm might also have inquired of Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. “Yes, now I remember,” Estragon

¹ S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett’s Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 15.

² Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 121.

³ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), 175; Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 169; Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 110.

⁴ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*

might have replied, “yesterday evening,” when “we spent blathering about nothing in particular.”⁶ This mindless “blathering,” long-winded talking with no real substance, Estragon adds, in a turn to the past, has “been going on now for half a century.”⁷ Here, Estragon’s (read: Beckett’s) charge implicates the storytellers and meaning-makers before him, all, in his view, mere “blatherers.”

But if not by way of the “same old things”; if not by drawing on previous work, how to tackle Beckett? How do we, for instance, make sense of the playwright who, in *Waiting for Godot*, has Vladimir and Estragon hurl abuse at each other (“Moron!” “Vermin!” “Sewer-rat!” “Cretin!”) back and forth, until Estragon roaring “with finality,” settles on “Critic!”⁸ How do we embark on a biography of the writer who, in *Rockaby*, a later play, concludes with, among other things, “fuck life”?⁹ How do we, moreover, situate the author, who, already weary of materialism in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, an early novel, writes: “Milieu, race, temperament past and present. [...] The background pushed up as guarantee. That tires us.”¹⁰ How do we, finally, insert Beckett, who in a diary entry in 1937 scrawls that he can’t “read history like a novel,” back into a historical narrative?¹¹ Though any one of these questions raises compelling concerns, this thesis will explore the latter two. What problems does Beckett whose literature continuously and

⁶ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 61.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 70.

⁹ Ibid, 442.

In his recent Beckett biography, Andrew Gibson reminds us that *Rockaby* ends with an old woman rocking alone onstage (her mother died in the same chair) to the rhythm of these final lines,

saying to the rocker
rock her off
stop her eyes
fuck life
stop her eyes
rock her off
rock her off

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 13.

¹¹ Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 177.

explicitly challenges both the form and content of history, pose not only for historians, but for the discipline of history itself?

The field of Beckett studies has been aptly described as a “humanist-abstract sandwich.”¹² Over the years, as humanism has merged with biographical and positivist work and abstraction has grown out of philosophy and, later, literary theory, one area of study that has been noticeably absent is history.¹³ Though scholars have started to look at Beckett in various historical settings, examining him, for instance, through the contextual lens of Ireland in the 1920s, or Germany in the 1930s, inquiry into Beckett and his experience in the tumultuous years of 1940s France has been especially neglected. The importance of this paper lies not only in the opportunity to attend to an overlooked period, but to argue that since previous historical work has not engaged Beckett’s own views of history and is therefore lacking, we must “try again,” as the author J.M. Coetzee put it in his essay “Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett.”¹⁴ This period includes Beckett’s participation in the early French Resistance in Paris, his flight to the small village of Roussillon in the south of France, his time working as an ambulance driver for the Irish Red Cross in Saint Lô, Normandy and the prolific years of writing (from the end of the war in January 1946) that Beckett later called the “siege in the room.” By 1950, he had produced some of his most famous work, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, also known as the

¹² Andrew Gibson, “Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49: *L’Innommable* and *En attendant Godot*.” *Limit(e) Beckett* 1 (2010): 2.

¹³ Gibson, “Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49,” 1.

Though Dominick LaCapra didn’t have Beckett in mind when he wrote (in *Rethinking Intellectual History*) that neither the humanist nor the abstract (that of literary critics and philosophers) mode is sufficient, his work seems to diagnose some of the problems that have plagued Beckettian studies over the years. Because, he argues, while the former, on the one hand, encourages narrow readings, reducing the texts to mere documents, little more than signs of the times; the latter, on the other, encourages an equally limited consideration of history, reducing the context to no more than background information, or else a series of names, dates and places.

¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, “Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett,” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 19 (2008): 24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25781817>.

Trilogy, and a play, *Waiting for Godot*. In other words, this long, war-torn decade offers us much to unpack.

That being said, a handful of scholars have already started to address this lacuna. For instance, in “Historicising Beckett,” one volume of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, an annual publication dedicated to Beckett scholarship, Seán Kennedy cautions against exclusively materialist readings of Beckett’s literature that neglect its formal dimensions. He cautions, moreover, against the impulse to profess full knowledge of Beckett with knowing everything about his history. Grounding Beckett historically, he writes, is not the only task of careful Beckett scholars. Rather, the historical approach, as he sees it, is just one part of a complex process of continuous negotiation. And inspiring this negotiation, Kennedy suggests (but does not expound upon), it might be Beckett’s own views about history, ones of circumspection and reticence, that can provide a compelling model for scholars.¹⁵

In his essay about post-war France, Andrew Gibson also investigates Beckett’s historical consciousness by highlighting the clashing tones of the rhetoric of General Charles de Gaulle, the President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, and the post-war literature of Beckett. Gibson argues for a Beckett who, responded to the Fourth Republic’s campaign for unity, reason and purification with the chaos of *L’Innommable* (*The Unnamable*) and the degradation of *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*).¹⁶ His Beckett, a “man of harrowingly exquisite sensitivities,” was not only aware of the discourses of reconstruction and recovery, as France was rewriting the narrative of its Occupation and Collaboration, but specifically refused

¹⁵ Seán Kennedy, “Introduction to ‘Historicising Beckett,’” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 15 (2005): 22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25781500>.

¹⁶ Gibson, “Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49,” 5.

to adopt this language in his work.¹⁷ Gibson concludes that Beckett's view of history (as a "wasteland") was not only at odds with that of the Fourth Republic's, it was a refutation.¹⁸

Finally, and most recently, the historian Emilie Morin has written about Beckett's time in the early Resistance. In contrast to others who have studied Beckett in the same period, though, Morin casts various shades of doubt on this "familiar story."¹⁹ In *Beckett's Political Imagination*, she warns against the presupposition of a unified Resistance narrative (one of the many Gaullist myths forged in the wake of war) as the background to accounts of Beckett's time in the Resistance. She warns, too, against the impulse to fit Beckett into this established background.²⁰ Noting that outside of Beckettian scholarship and modernist studies, Beckett does not enter the general historical record, she cautions against overemphasis on his wartime experiences. Finally, despite her circumspection about previous accounts, she echoes Gibson's prediction from nearly a decade ago that there is still a "great deal of work to be done" on this historical period. Investigations into Beckett's year in the Resistance, Morin ultimately argues, continue to yield new mysteries and insights, ones with intriguing implications for Beckett scholars and historians alike.²¹

Inspired by these calls to action, this essay sheds new light on an old discussion by employing Dominick LaCapra's concept of a "dialogical" relationship, one that engages the "voices" of the past in an attentive, patient and respectful "dialogue."²² This relationship, one

¹⁷ Gibson, "Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49," 16.

¹⁸ As he argues in more theoretical terms in *Beckett and Badiou*, Gibson draws on the philosophy of Walter Benjamin to describe Beckett's view of history as a "wasteland."

¹⁹ Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 147.

²⁰ Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, 150.

²¹ Gibson, "Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic," 2.

²² Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: texts, contexts, language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 64.

that mitigates the opposition between the historical agent and the intellectual historian, LaCapra argues, is especially important when voices of the past resist or qualify the interpretations historians try to put on them.²³ In other words: let Beckett, the Irish writer, resister incarnate, speak for himself. And since historians have, until now, demanded primacy in this continuous conversation, it is Beckett who must speak first. But in order to engage this idiosyncratic and inscrutable “voice” of the past in a “dialogue” and also to meet Beckett and his artistic projects on their own terms, we must first make sure to enter into his abstract ways of looking at the world. This thesis, therefore, begins by constructing a Beckettian framework before situating and applying that framework to French historical narratives of the 1940s. In other words, rather than unfolding chronologically, the argument of this thesis moves from abstract theory to concrete history.

The first three chapters look to Beckett’s private diaries, published work and numerous letters (he was a prolific correspondent) as well as to several interviews (he did not give many) to examine, in particular, his views on narrative, context, and history. Chapter 1 argues that the *Trilogy*’s attack on the narrative form as arbitrary, subjective and artificial has implications for how history is written, and how a history of Beckett might be written. Chapter 2, which suggests that there are striking parallels between recent moves to insert Beckett into a Resistance narrative and perennial moves to stage *Godot* in various historical contexts, claims that Beckett’s dislike of the latter sheds light on the former. Chapter 3 turns to diary entries that Beckett kept during his six-month journey through Germany in 1936 to 1937 in order to present his views on history and the writing of history.

²³ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 64.

With Beckett's skepticism of the attraction of narrative, whether in prose, on the stage or in history, in mind, Chapter 4 contends that the author was conceptually at odds with Charles de Gaulle and the myth of the French Resistance in postwar France. Chapter 5 suggests that, despite Beckett's own views, Gaullist Resistance mythmaking and storytelling continues to color our perception of Beckett's time in the early Resistance in Paris. Ultimately, by engaging with the author's own words, this paper argues that forcing Beckett, the figure who, again and again, does not quite fit, into a Resistance narrative: misunderstands the project of his literature; exposes the flaws of this particular historical narrative; and highlights, more broadly, the potential flaws of any history written in the narrative form. Much like Beckett's own work, what follows is a paper that trails chance, caprice, chaos and disconnection in its wake.²⁴

²⁴ Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing*, 15.

Chapter 1: The Long Sonata of the Dead

What was narrative has become conflict.
Maurice Blanchot, “Where now? Who now?”

In the spring of 1956, Samuel Beckett, sat down for an interview with *The New York Times*. “Gaunt” and “imposing,” Beckett allowed himself a rare moment of candor, reflecting on the frenzy of the post-war “siege in the room.”²⁵ “I wrote all my work very fast,” he said.²⁶ “Since then,” he continued, “I haven’t written anything.”²⁷ This was not strictly true. In 1952, he had published *Texts for Nothing*, thirteen short prose pieces. He had also started to work on *Endgame*, his second major play. “Or at least,” he reconsidered, “nothing that has seemed to me valid.”²⁸ Here, Beckett was not alone in emphasizing the importance of his post-war texts. Over the years, philosophers and literary theorists alike, including, notably, Maurice Blanchot, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Simon Critchley and Martha Nussbaum, have all looked to and grappled with his post-war writing.

Many scholars also feel that the literature produced by the “siege in the room”—a crucible in which Beckett, emerging from the morass of modernism, shed the styles and preoccupations of his literary heroes (Dante Alighieri, Marcel Proust, James Joyce) and developed his own approach—lies at the heart of his oeuvre, one spanning more than half a century. So, we wonder, what is exceptional—or, as Beckett puts it, “valid”—about this play and three novels? To this question and others, Shenker observed that day, Beckett refused to provide

²⁵ Israel Shenker, “Moody Man of Letters,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1956, <https://www.nytimes.com/1956/05/06/archives/moody-man-of-letters-a-portrait-of-samuel-beckett-author-of-the.html>.

²⁶ Shenker, “Moody Man of Letters.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

answers. Critics, audiences and actors all wanted to know what Godot means, Shenker said, but the playwright was “in no mood to offer explanations.” Instead, the “gloomy, despairing man of letters,” instead directed all questions back to the writing.²⁹ He maintained that those looking for his “views” would find them only in his published works. We will discuss *Waiting for Godot* in Chapter 2, but we turn now to the *Trilogy*.

This chapter asks: How do the characters narrate? How do they feel about their role as narrator? What do they understand about it? This chapter suggests that the *Trilogy's* weary storytellers and fractured stories, ones that continuously reject description and signification, alert us not only to narrative's arbitrary subjectivity and artifice, but also, more urgently, to the dangers of its “interests” and attraction. This assault on narrative has implications not only for Beckett's emerging “aesthetic sensibilities” but also (as we will see later) for his historical consciousness.³⁰ Most importantly, however, the *Trilogy's* assault on narrative has major implications for history and the writing of history as Beckett saw it. A traditional narrative structure, “a beginning, a middle and an end,” Beckett writes in *Molloy*, the first novel of the *Trilogy*, is a “handsome little sum,” and “well-built phrase.”³¹ It is also, he adds, “the long sonata of the dead.”³² What are historians, most of whom write in the narrative form, supposed to make of this observation? How do historians propose to insert Beckett back into any narrative, historical or otherwise? Indeed, do we have a responsibility to account for Beckett's artistic project, in form as well as in content, when we historicize it?

²⁹ Much like Moran, who says “no, I have no explanation to give” in *Malone Dies*, Beckett rejected the premise of explanation altogether in this interview. Samuel Beckett, *Three novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 188.

³⁰ William Davies, “Narrating disruption: the politics of form in *Watt*,” in *Beckett Beyond the Normal*, ed. Seán Kennedy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), forthcoming.

³¹ Beckett, *Three novels*, 27.

³² *Ibid.*

Molloy, the first protagonist we meet, doesn't remember much. Though he tells us in the opening line of the novel that he is in his mother's room, he doesn't remember, he immediately admits, how he got there.³³ He's forgotten, too, how to work and how to spell.³⁴ He's even forgotten "half the words."³⁵ From the start, Molloy's disintegrating memory and constant interjections remind us of narrative's inherent subjectivity. Compounded, moreover, by Molloy's weary and erratic articulation of this subjectivity, *Molloy* stumbles along according to his whims. "I will not tell what followed for I am weary of this place," he writes, for instance, in the middle of one early description.³⁶ "I want to go," he adds.³⁷ Here, "I want to go," as if spoken by a sulky child fed up with the playground, feels abrupt. Warily go he does and, as we are bound to his consciousness and its impulses, we are tugged along with him, realizing just how reliant we are on his subjective impulses.

This moment, the first of many in which Molloy tires us he is tired of telling stories, highlights the arbitrary nature of narrative, in many ways an extension of subjectivity "If I failed to mention this detail in its proper place," he notes later on, "it is because you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so."³⁸ This curious and characteristically pessimistic aside (it is never quite clear when Molloy speaks sincerely to the reader, and when he mutters to himself about the burden of narration) lays bare the problem of choice faced by all writers. Since "you cannot mention everything in its proper place," or, in other words, since you cannot describe every moment exactly as it happened in full and vivid detail, "you must choose." From word choice and

³³ Beckett, *Three novels*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 36.

sentence structure, to the organization of paragraphs and chapters, all writers, whether fictional, historical, or otherwise, must make these arbitrary decisions all the time. But for Molloy these are gloomy decisions, as there are things “not worth mentioning and those even less so.” What does it mean to tell a story in which nothing is worth mentioning? Why, for that matter, is nothing worth mentioning?

As we contemplate these questions, Molloy sheds the guise of “telling” stories. What’s really happening, he acknowledges, is artifice. “Saying is inventing,” he says.³⁹ In *Malone Dies* (the second installment of the *Trilogy*) “saying as inventing” devolves into lying. “Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on another subject?” Moran, the protagonist, says.⁴⁰ Whether “inventing” or “lying,” both Molloy and Moran seem to understand that to narrate is to paint words with the sheen of truth. And Molloy, for his part, cannot sustain this deceptive paintjob for long. Of one description, for instance, he admits that “they were pebbles but I call them stones.”⁴¹ While the difference between “pebbles” and “stones” is marginal, since pebbles are just smaller stones, the phrase “I call them” is important. Later, Moran, with more abandon, elaborates on “I call them.” “After all,” he says, “this window is whatever I want it to be.”⁴² While conflated pebbles and stones at least belong to the same category of rock (how can the size of a stone disrupt a story’s truth anyway?), a window as “whatever I want it to be” might remain a window, or it might become something else entirely; with total subjectivity comes immense authorial power.

³⁹ Beckett, *Three novels*, 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 183.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 63.

⁴² *Ibid*, 230.

Molloy's and Moran's authorial concerns, however, are not the only strong forces operating in these novels; the power of narrative and its "interests" are also at work.⁴³ What are these formidable interests of narrative? How do they work on Beckett's protagonists? While Beckett all but rejects narrative in *The Unnamable*, the third and final part of the *Trilogy*, in the first two novels, Molloy and Moran still feel the pull of narrative, like that of a strong current. And when Molloy feels the narrative pressure to describe, he questions it. Of Lousse, a character whom he lives with for a time, he says "must I describe her?"⁴⁴ And then, of her house: "Must I describe it?"⁴⁵ Later, when he finally allows that "she had a somewhat hairy face," he immediately casts suspicion on the phrase. "Or," he catches himself, "am I remembering it in the interests of narrative?"⁴⁶ Here, these "interests of narrative" are descriptive, as a "somewhat hairy face" evokes Lousse's appearance. Elsewhere, the "interests of narrative" are those of embellishment and invention. At another moment, Molloy disrupts an almost peaceful pastoral scene of a "remarkably bare" road and cows "chewing in enormous fields, lying and standing, in the evening silence" with "perhaps I'm remembering things."⁴⁷ "Perhaps I'm inventing a little" he adds, "perhaps embellishing."⁴⁸ Perhaps the fields were smaller. Perhaps the cows were not chewing. But in the interest of rendering a vivid scene, the pressures of narrative are indifferent to what actually happened; they are indifferent, in other words, to the truth.

While Molloy responds to the lure of the "interests of narrative" with questions, Moran responds with anger and refusal. At one point, for instance, he writes, "there is no time for sleep in my long time-table. I do not want—" before cutting himself off.⁴⁹ "No," he insists, "I have no

⁴³ Beckett, *Three novels*, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

explanations to give.”⁵⁰ The abrupt em dash, followed by the equally abrupt “No,” shows how Moran, finding himself in the insidious current of explanation, refuses the tide of narrative altogether. Later, once again finding himself in the narrative undertow, he erupts into obscenities. “Those are men and women, you know,” he writes, “people, without being able to specify further. A stream at long intervals bestrid—.”⁵¹ This time Moran catches himself even faster in the middle of “bestrid—” or, had he finished his thought, “bestride.” “But to hell with all this fucking scenery,” he adds.⁵² Though Moran’s narration is vaguer than that of Molloy before him (a “somewhat hairy face” feels quite colorful in relation to a “stream at long intervals bestrid—”), he still cannot cope with the pressure to describe. He finds the setting, context and backdrop, abhorrent: “to hell,” he curses, “with all this fucking scenery.”⁵³

Moran’s banishment of “all this fucking scenery” to hell begs the question: is it possible to narrate without embellishment and invention? The *Trilogy*’s increasingly vicious attacks against the “how,” the act of writing itself, suggests that Beckett, finding this kind of language empty, thinks that it is not. The first explicit assault on language comes from Molloy, who uses written records, such as newspapers, both “to wipe” away pieces of “stool” and to insulate against the winter’s cold.⁵⁴ With respect to the latter, Molloy, wrapped in swathes of newspaper under his greycoat, extends particular admiration to the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* and its “never failing toughness” and “impermeability.” “Even farts,” he says, make “no impression on it.”⁵⁵ This assault on a publication of lofty reviews and literary criticism, on highbrow journalism is Beckett at his most pointed. But Molloy, for his part, doesn’t care about the *TLS*; he uses

⁵⁰ Beckett, *Three novels*, 188.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 270.

⁵² *Ibid*.

⁵³ *Ibid*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

newspapers for their materiality and words, mere physical aids, for bodily functions. Whether written by Molloy, Beckett or, indeed, Oxbridge graduates on Fleet Street, words are certainly not to be read, let alone pondered. Words wipe stool; words wrap bodies; words, as Molloy puts it, “blacken” pages.⁵⁶

The attack on meaning-making, language and narrative that begins in *Molloy* and continues in *Malone Dies*, culminates in *The Unnamable* and its continuous refusal of stable meaning. On this point, Beckett, writing to a correspondent in 1949 about his shifting relationship to writing, noted that he is “no longer capable of writing *about*.”⁵⁷ By the third novel, there’s nothing but “complete disintegration” — “no ‘I,’ no ‘have,’ no ‘being,’” Beckett told the *Times* journalist (it turns out that Beckett did offer Shenker some explanation during the interview). “No nominative, no accusative, no verb.”⁵⁸ Dealing with “nothing but dust,” he continued, “there’s no way to go on.”⁵⁹ Writing in 1953, Maurice Blanchot, the French literary theorist (one of the first to analyze Beckett’s literature), understood *The Unnamable* in similar terms. In what he understood to be the “profound” culmination of the *Trilogy*’s experiment, there is, Blanchot wrote, “no longer any question of characters under the reassuring protection of a personal name.”⁶⁰ Even in the “formless present of an interior monologue,” he continued, there is “no longer any question of narrative.”⁶¹ Indeed, Blanchot concluded, “what was narrative has become conflict.”⁶²

⁵⁶ Beckett, *Three novels*, 63.

⁵⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 2: 1941-1956*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 141.

⁵⁸ Shenker, “Moody Man of Letters.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Maurice Blanchot, “Where now? Who now?” in *Samuel Beckett*, ed. Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (New York: Longman, 2000), 97.

⁶¹ Blanchot, “Where now? Who now?” 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*

On matters of narrative Blanchot was a fitting judge. His novel *La Folie du jour* (*Madness of the Day*) from 1947, ended with “Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais” (“A story? No, no story, never again”).⁶³ Though many subsequent critics have struggled to tackle *The Unnamable* with Blanchot’s initial level of insight (Does Beckett offer a philosophical theory of mind? Do we overhear the restless sounds of his tormented unconscious? Why does the babbling “I,” with nothing “in particular” to say, continue to speak?), most agree that this final work (*pas de récit*) is not a narrative. “I’m quite different,” the “I” (Beckett gives us no other description) tells us, “a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place where nothing stirs, nothing speaks.”⁶⁴ Following the “I,” who is, the “I” tell us, “in words, made of words, others’ words,” we conclude that that from this “empty place,” where “nothing stirs” and “nothing speaks,” *The Unnamable* rejects narrative altogether.⁶⁵ Indeed, the *Trilogy*’s aesthetic battle against narrative is sustained by the hermetic form of prose. *Godot*’s battle against context, however, was almost never preserved by the more open form of theater, one that, through performance, necessarily becomes embroiled in tangible places and times. “Once on the stage,” Roger Blin, a French director and Beckett’s long-time collaborator, wrote, “things change.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Maurice Blanchot, *La Folie du jour* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973), [].

⁶⁴ Beckett, *Three novels*, 380.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 379.

⁶⁶ Cobi Bordewijk, “The Integrity of the Playtext: Disputed Performances of ‘Waiting for Godot,’” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 1 (1992): 143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41337887>.

Chapter 2: Fighting for *Godot*

Heavens what are they up to!
Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

Under the light of a full moon, in the shadow of a bare tree, Patrick Stewart, an English actor, sits on a rock. “Nothing to be done,” he shrugs. As stipulated by *Waiting for Godot*’s precise stage directions, Stewart searches for something (for what, it is not at all clear) in his right boot. Though he repeats various motions—peering into the shoe, flipping it over, vigorously shaking it—he finds nothing. Nothing is inside; nothing falls out. “Nothing,” he shrugs again, “to be done.” Unlike in the original play, in which “nothing can come of nothing,” as Shakespeare wrote in *King Lear*, this unsettling inertia does not last.⁶⁷ Moments later, Stephen Colbert, the American television host, rushes onstage. The audience, more excited by the appearance of a contemporary celebrity than by the prospect of the arrival of the always-imminent Godot, erupts. “Do you think a replacement will come?” Colbert asks through a thick beard and unconvincing Irish accent. Riffing on the interminable Republican effort to repeal and replace Obamacare in 2017, Stewart and Colbert as Vladimir and Estragon are waiting, it turns out, not for Godot, but rather for “Godot’s Obamacare Replacement.”⁶⁸ Beckett died in December 1989, but spent much of his career trying to halt productions of *Godot* that broke with his original vision. If he were still alive, he might have rushed onstage, too.

“I feel the only line,” the playwright wrote to his American theater director, Alan Schneider, speaking of the endless debates about the meaning of *Godot*, is to “refuse to be

⁶⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Douglas A. Brooks (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2007), 49.

⁶⁸ Colbert’s *Late Show* writers dubbed this performance “Samuel Beckett’s Never-Before-Seen Masterpiece.”

involved in exegesis of any kind.”⁶⁹ He added that he had “no elucidation to offer of mysteries that are all of their [journalists’] making.”⁷⁰ This was in August 1957, when speculation surrounding *Godot* was at its peak. Indeed, during a conversation the year before, Beckett remarked that the play’s “great success” had arisen from a misunderstanding; critics and public alike, he said, sought to impose an allegorical or symbolic explanation on a play that continuously strove to avoid definition.⁷¹ This dynamic should sound familiar. Whether as “exegesis,” “elucidation” or “symbolic explanation,” Beckett’s refusal to participate in debates about a play he had written to elude definition was, by now, a predictable move. Unsurprising, too, was the redirection of questions back to the text itself; echoing his conversation with Shenker, he believed he had nothing to add to what he had already written.⁷² Indeed, when Schneider asked him outright who *Godot* is and what does *Godot* mean, Beckett batted him away. “If I knew,” he replied, “I would have said so in the play.”⁷³

But despite Beckett’s refusal to explain, despite the text’s refusal to elucidate, many critics and directors over the years have tried to fit *Godot* into culturally, politically, and historically specific narratives.⁷⁴ But *Godot*, much like Beckett himself, never quite fits in. This chapter argues that there are striking parallels between recent efforts to insert Beckett into a Resistance narrative and other, earlier efforts to stage *Godot* in context, looking to the play as a kind of proxy. Though we can’t know how Beckett feels about the latter, we can know how he

⁶⁹ Alec Reid, “From Beginning to Date: Some Thoughts on the Plays of Samuel Beckett,” in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 64.

⁷⁰ Reid, “From Beginning to Date,” 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Here, contextualization, namely examining artworks in relation to the historical moment in which they were produced, should be distinguished from recontextualization, examining artworks in relation to other historical moments. And Beckett’s relationship to *Godot* was, for the most part, characterized by a series of fights against the latter. Contextualization and recontextualization, though, are not dissimilar; both often arise from the same the impulse, namely setting *Godot* in various moments in order to pin the play’s uncertainty down, to figure it out.

felt about the former—he loathed it. The text itself makes that quite clear. As we read the *Trilogy* (our point of departure) as a battle against narrative, so we can read *Godot* as a fight against context, against questions of who, what, when and where. We can read it, finally, as a rejection of storytelling as a whole. “Do you remember the story?” Vladimir asks Estragon towards the beginning of the play. “No,” Estragon replies. “Shall I tell it to you?” Vladimir perseveres. “No,” is Estragon’s curt response.⁷⁵

Waiting for Godot, a tragicomedy in two acts, opened on 5 January, 1953 at the Babylon Theater in Paris. Though it is not Beckett’s first major dramatic work, it is certainly his most well-known, and propelled him to fame in the mid-1950s. Written, many believe, as a break from the intensity of the *Trilogy* (it was drafted in between *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*), this play was the third product of Beckett’s “siege in the room” fervor.⁷⁶ Though the playwright would go on to write *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), and, later, *Not I* (1972), *Godot* was in many ways Beckett’s most important contribution to theater. The play forced people, one critic wrote, to “reexamine the rules” of drama and to “pronounce them not elastic enough.”⁷⁷

From the start, Beckett’s relationship to the stage was characteristically abnormal. He dismissed the sort of twentieth-century acting techniques promoted by people like Jerzy Grotowski or Konstantin Stanislavski (“not for me,” he said of “these Grotowskis and Methods”). “The best possible play,” he said, was “one in which there are no actors, only the

⁷⁵ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 14.

⁷⁶ “*L’Innommable* [*The Unnamable*] landed me in a situation that I can’t extricate myself from,” Beckett complained to Shenker. As quoted in Shenker, “Moody Man of Letters.”

“For me theater is first of all a relaxation from work on fiction,” Beckett remarked to Rosette Lamont. “We are dealing with a definite space and with people in this space. That’s relaxing.” As seen in John H. Muse, *Microdramas: Crucibles for Theater and Time* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2017), 105.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Tynan, “New Writing,” *The Observer*, August 7, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

text.”⁷⁸ He was equally dubious of the role of directors, denouncing their “omnipresent massacre” and “abuse” of the directorial function.⁷⁹ In Beckett’s view, the director’s only task was to render the playwright’s vision exactly (or as exactly as possible) as it appeared on the page. Luckily, Blin and Schneider, Beckett’s first-generation directors, saw themselves as invisible orchestrators; Schneider viewed his role of director to be that of “playwright’s surrogate,” while Blin, seeking to impose neither style nor personality on a work, thought that his directorial contribution should go entirely unnoticed.⁸⁰ A director, Blin wrote, is “nothing.”⁸¹ In time, however, such loyal orchestrators proved to be outliers, as others started to stage *Godot* in ways that expressly broke with Beckett’s vision.

To understand how they did that, we must first understand the vision itself. With efforts to create an actor-less, director-less play, Beckett wanted the text, with stage directions that were precise and often so copious that they overflowed into his production notebooks, to reign supreme.⁸² As he said in an interview: “Any production which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me.”⁸³ “Well, shall we go?” Estragon says, turning to Vladimir at the end of Act One.⁸⁴ “Yes, let’s go” Vladimir replies. But bound by the text and Beckett’s disciplined vision, the characters “*do not move.*” Similar questions are posed at the end of the play, with Vladimir proposing departure this time (“Well? shall we go?”) and Estragon agreeing (“Yes, let’s go”). But yet again the text has the final word. “*They do not move.*”⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 513.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

⁸⁰ Lois Oppenheim, *Directing Beckett* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

⁸¹ Oppenheim, *Directing Beckett*, 2.

⁸² Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 88.

⁸³ Anthony Uhlmann, “Staging Plays,” in *Samuel Beckett in Context*, ed. Anthony Uhlmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 173.

⁸⁴ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 52.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 88.

The second striking detail is the play's total rejection of context. Act One, for instance, opens with "A country road. A tree. Evening."⁸⁶ "A road?" The French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet wondered. "Let's say, in a more general way: *outdoors*." A tree? "Sickly" and "without a single leaf." "Let's say," a "skeleton of a bush." "The set," Robbe-Grillet concluded, "represents nothing."⁸⁷ Onstage, the characters echo this description by rejecting all contexts. When, for example, Vladimir asks "Do you not recognize the place?" Estragon replies, "*suddenly furious*," "Recognize! What is there to recognize?" "All my lousy life," Estragon goes on, "I've crawled about in the mud!" (he is cross) "And you talk to me about scenery!"⁸⁸ Moments later, despite Vladimir's best efforts to calm him, he is still cross. "You and your landscapes!" Estragon says, "tell me about the worms!"⁸⁹ But minutes later, Vladimir continues his line of questioning. "You don't remember any fact?" he asks. "Any circumstance?"⁹⁰ Estragon, now "*weary*," replies, "Don't torment me, Didi."⁹¹

In the play in which "nothing happens, *twice*," as one critic put it, Act Two unhelpfully opens on the "next day" at the "same time" in the "same place."⁹² Though the tree now has "four or five leaves," the play all but denounces the concept of time.⁹³ So while Estragon is "tormented" by question of circumstances, Pozzo, a secondary character, is tortured by questions of time. At one highly charged moment, for instance, a simple inquiry by Vladimir—when did Lucky, Pozzo's servant, become —provokes an enraged outburst. "Have you not done

⁸⁶ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 11.

⁸⁷ David Addyman, "En attendant Godot: A New Philosophical Landscape," in *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*, ed. Peter Fifield and David Addyman (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 79.

⁸⁸ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 57.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Vivian Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," *The Irish Times*, February 18, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁹³ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 53.

tormenting me with your accursed time!” Pozzo shouts, “*suddenly furious*.”⁹⁴ “It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day.”⁹⁵ Here, Pozzo bristles at the specificity of time, decrying time itself as “abominable” and “accursed.” Elsewhere, at the start of the play, Vladimir says that “time has stopped.”⁹⁶ Finally, just as it resists time, the play also rejects the specificity of identity, as simple “who” questions are answered only in vague terms. When Pozzo asks, for instance, “Who are you?” in Act Two, Vladimir replies, “we are men.”⁹⁷ At another point in the play, Vladimir insists, “*vehemently*,” that “at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not.”⁹⁸

Despite Beckett’s refusal to address questions of who, what, when and where in the play, countless directors, critics and audiences have over the years insisted on interpreting *Godot* to their own ends. As the Beckett scholar Alec Reid wrote, *Godot* has been likened to everything from God himself to concepts like Hope, Love, Silence and Death.⁹⁹ Outside of the realm of abstraction, he continued, *Godot* has also been seen as a metaphor for a street in Paris’s red-light district; a Balzac character; a bicycle racer; and, curiously, Charles de Gaulle.¹⁰⁰ And this was only in 1975. Over three decades later, as Colbert’s skit reminds us, interpretations continue to be imposed on a play whose creator resisted them. Another more recent appropriation, a reflection of the world’s insistence in seeing *Godot* as something other than it was intended to be, came when the serial entrepreneur Elon Musk nicknamed his innovate drilling machine “Godot.” “No longer waiting for Godot,” Musk tweeted in 2017, refuting the uncertainty about

⁹⁴ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹⁹ Reid, “From Beginning to Date,” 64,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

when the drill would begin digging a tunnel under Los Angeles.¹⁰¹ (We wonder what Beckett would have made of Twitter, or of Musk, for that matter). Here, whether his play is seen as a symbol of political inertia or of a quixotic Silicon Valley-devised gadget, Beckett continues to haunt our cultural unconscious, and *Godot* continues to trigger our storytelling impulse to fit uncomfortable figures into comfortable narratives.

How did Beckett feel about this impulse? Not surprisingly, he did not like it all. Nor did he admire productions that insisted on interpretation, that attempted to cast *Godot* into culturally, politically, and historically specific narratives. He disliked a Dublin production in 1955, for instance, because its background set—swathed in black, green and brown cloth—suggested Irish bogland and gloomy sky.¹⁰² He opposed a London staging, also in 1955, because of its cluttered stage, truncated pauses and soundtrack of heavenly music—all details that strayed from his original featureless vision.¹⁰³ Sometimes, as with a 1965 Berlin performance, he reacted strongly to seemingly insignificant details. In that case, he protested because the stone had been replaced by a heap of twigs—thus disturbing, he felt, the simultaneous presence of the animal, mineral and vegetable.¹⁰⁴ He disapproved, too, of a 1970 Salzburg production’s baroque set, which he felt implied bourgeois decadence.¹⁰⁵

In some ways, Beckett’s own work provides clues to his attitude toward anything that seemed to deviate from his vision of *Godot*. For instance, in Act Two of *Godot*, Vladimir says in response to yet another biblical reference, “I begin to weary of this motif.”¹⁰⁶ We might also look to Winnie, a protagonist, in *Happy Days*, who at one point exclaims “Heavens what are they up

¹⁰¹ Shannon Reed, “Why We Keep Waiting for Godot,” *Lit Hub*, August 30, 2017, <https://lithub.com/why-we-keep-waiting-for-godot/>.

¹⁰² Bordewijk, “The Integrity of the Playtext,” 145.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 78.

to!”¹⁰⁷ But, more seriously, now that Beckett is no longer alive to fight his own fierce copyright battles, we might also look to the standard, notoriously strict rider affecting all Beckett productions.

Though we should be careful not to conflate Beckett’s with the stringencies of his estate, we can see from the rider how Beckett’s attempts to control his productions while he was alive solidified after his death. Today, under the vigilance of the Beckett estate, the rules around getting the rights to and performing *Godot*, or any of Beckett’s pieces of theater, are notoriously strict. “There shall be no additions, omissions, changes in the sex of the characters as specific in the text,” the rider reads; nor shall there be “alterations of any kind of nature in the manuscript or presentation of the Play.”¹⁰⁸ The rider’s specificity (why the quibble about the “sex of the characters”?) and impermeability (“no alterations,” emphatically followed by “of any kind”) at once responds to various previous attempts to “add” “omit” or “change” the text” and anticipates, by sternly prohibiting, future changes.

Though strict about seeming trivialities, whether background colors, music choices or piles of twigs, the rider defends today what Beckett defended throughout his life. In *Godot*, a play that avoids naturalism and realism, breaking down the traditional mimetic notion of art, there is no room for context.¹⁰⁹ The play, inherently, cannot easily slot into preexisting narratives. As the playwright Harold Pinter once wrote about Beckett, whom he called the “most courageous, remorseless writer going”: “I don’t want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways outs, truths, answers” — “*nothing from the bargain basement.*” Beckett is not “fucking me about,” he added, not “leading me up any garden.” Indeed, “the more he grinds my nose in the

¹⁰⁷ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Baldwin, *The Copyright Wars: Three Centuries of Trans-Atlantic Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 413.

¹⁰⁹ Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing*, 15.

shit, the more I am grateful to him,” Pinter said.¹¹⁰ He “*hasn’t got his hand over his heart,*” and he leaves “no stone unturned and no maggot lonely.” We turn now to a third set of texts, Beckett’s diary entries, which present the playwright’s explicit views on history and how to write about it.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Harold Pinter, “Samuel Beckett,” in *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 55.

¹¹¹ Pinter, “Samuel Beckett,” 55.

Chapter 3: Straws and Flotsam

I can't read history like a novel.
Samuel Beckett on 15 January 1937, *German Diaries*

In late September 1936, Beckett travelled to Germany to improve his language skills, look at architecture and, with a particular appreciation for medieval Germany and the Dutch seventeenth century, study painting. Over eight months, he visited Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden, and Munich, as well as other smaller cities. Along the way, he noted his impressions in a series of notebooks. Many observations—about a country in the grip of Nazi rule—were humorous. He noted with an amused disdain the “interminable harangues” of Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels; he complained about the “NS [National Socialist] gospel” and felt irritated by constant “Heil Hitler greetings.”¹¹² Other observations, commenting on the tense, militaristic atmosphere, were more serious. “They *must* fight soon,” he wrote of the threat of imminent war, adding in prescient parentheses, “(or burst).”¹¹³

On 5 November 1936, just two months after arriving in Hamburg, Beckett was peripherally implicated as an audience member in a directive that ordered gallery owners to remove all modern and “decadent” art. In museums across the country, paintings were taken down and stacked in cellars, available only to those with a special permit. Though the German art world was disproportionately affected by the 1936 directive, Beckett, in his own small way, was too; at the Zwinger Gallery in Dresden, for example, Beckett was unable to see the officially “disgraced paintings.”¹¹⁴ Through many conversations with artists, among them Gretchen Wöhlwill, a Jewish painter who told him of her exclusion from all professional activities, and

¹¹² James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 222.

¹¹³ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 242.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 223.

Karl Ballmer and Eduard Bargheer, who spoke to him of the constant streams of inspections and hostile visits from the Nazis, Beckett was increasingly concerned about the restrictions imposed on artistic freedom.¹¹⁵

The directive of 1936, the cornerstone of the even sterner Commission of Confiscation in July of the following year, was just one element of the broader crackdown on culture as well as, more broadly, artistic and intellectual discourse. At risk, too, was German history. But rather than follow the model of purging, Nazi historians changed tack. While it was almost impossible to rework finished paintings, decadent or otherwise, to conform to the aesthetic of Nazism, narratives were easily reworked all the time (this is, in part, why they were, and continue to be, so dangerous). Thus, what was repression in art became revision in history. And on the front line of this revision was historical narrative, increasingly, no more than a “vehicle of propaganda.”¹¹⁶

Here again, Beckett (still in his own small way) encountered the Nazi’s program of historical revision, when in January 1937 he happened upon Friedrich Stieve’s *Abriss der deutschen Geschichte von 1792–1935* (*Demolition of Germany History from 1792-1935*). This was a highly revised narrative which positioned the Nazis as the inevitable outcome of “Germanic destiny.”¹¹⁷ And Beckett, for his part, did not at all like it. In fact, as he wrote in his diary on the evening of 15 January, he despised it. Attending to the particularities of his reaction—one, broadly, of “vomit”-inducing hostility—this chapter offers a third angle through which to examine his relationship to history. No longer under the guise of his characters in the *Trilogy*, or else stirred by the intensity of his control over *Godot*, in this chapter Beckett speaks. In certain terms, he expresses his views on history and how it should be written.

¹¹⁵ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 223.

¹¹⁶ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 84.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

Beckett never particularly liked history. “You will always, as an historian, give more credit to circumstance than I, with my less than suilline interest and belief in the fable convenue, ever shall be able to” he wrote (in early 1938) to Thomas McGreevy, one of his most faithful correspondents, an affable little man with an effervescent sense of humor.¹¹⁸ Though the rest of the letter responded to McGreevy’s book about the Irish painter Jack Yeats, here Beckett lapsed into general musings on history. Beckett understood historians as attendants to and believers in “circumstance,” or background. And what was “circumstance” for historians was for Beckett a “fable convenue,” convenient or agreeable fables, stories we tell ourselves to cover up a far messier reality. Further, in addition to “credit” and “interest,” his use of “belief” and its implications of faith and ideology is also interesting. For the writer who would go on to spend much of his career attacking these fables, the ones unconsciously passed down over the years, the ones in which we all believe, in 1938, he already regarded them with a “less than suilline” (perhaps a riff on sullen) “interest.”

A year earlier, Beckett was in the midst of responding to Stieve’s *Abriss* and its shameless rewriting of history. “I say the expressions ‘historical necessity’ & ‘Germanic destiny,’” he wrote, “start the vomit moving upwards.”¹¹⁹ He was, he continued, not interested in a “unification” of “the historical chaos,” any more than he was in a “clarification” of “the individual chaos.”¹²⁰ And he was still less interested in the “anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos.”¹²¹ For Beckett, “unification,” “clarification” and

¹¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 1: 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 599.

¹¹⁹ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 87.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 177.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 178.

“anthropomorphisation” each presented a different problem. “Unification,” for its part, suggested an attempt to integrate “historical chaos” into a dishonestly cohesive and “unified” story.

“Clarification” implied that historians could somehow shed light on the inherently inexplicable disorder of “individual” people and their chaos. Finally, “anthropomorphisation” attributed human form or personality to things that were inhuman, in this case the “necessities that provoke the chaos.” In other words, history, with its imposition of order, explanation and humanity, was an attempt to smooth over the past’s chaotic edges. But where historians tend to “unification,” Beckett tends toward chaos.

At one moment in this lengthy retort, Beckett even turned to attack the essence of history itself. Expounding the views of Meier (we do not get another name), a friend of Axel Kaun, a bookseller whom Beckett befriended in Hamburg, Beckett noted: “Meier says the background is more important than the foreground, the causes than the effects.”¹²² While Meier liked history with its significant backgrounds and vigorous causes, Beckett, who dismissed “background” and “causes” as “inhuman & incomprehensible machinery,” did not.¹²³ He wondered, moreover, what “appetite” can be “appeased” by the “modern animism” that consists in rationalizing this “inhuman & incomprehensible machinery.”¹²⁴ But what is history if not a mix of “background,” “rationalism” and “causes and effects”? Indeed, in the absence of “background” or “cause and effects” what does history look like?

Though the *Abriss*, with Hitler as the strong protagonist and NSDAP doctrine as its heavy-handed theoretical frame, took to the extreme the novelistic characteristics of historical

¹²² Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 228.

Though Meier will prove to be entirely insignificant to Beckett’s German travels, as in, he only appears once in Knowlson’s biography, Meier nevertheless provided the important theoretical counterpoint to Beckett’s opinions about history.

¹²³ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 178.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

writing, most compelling, teleological accounts of history are still bound to and grapple with the construction and conventions of narrative. In many ways, Beckett's attack on "unification," "clarification" and "anthropomorphisation," highlighted the form that pervaded most historical narratives. "I can't," he added in a damning, if dramatic final flourish, "read history like a novel."¹²⁵

For philosophers of history, among them Frank Ankersmit, Louis Mink, Richard Rorty and Hayden White, who wouldn't openly question what distinguished real, historical stories from imaginary, fictional ones (if both are written in the narrative mode) until the early 1970s, this was a prescient observation.¹²⁶ Many of Beckett's charges—against "unification" and "clarification," against "saying as inventing"—seemed to anticipate those of these philosophers, whose central claim was that since historical narratives cannot ever be reducible to a series of "facts," because even facts are open to interpretation, historical representations are necessarily bound up in construction.¹²⁷ For a long time, White wrote, it was possible to believe that whereas fiction writers invented everything—from characters, events and plots, to motifs, themes and atmosphere—historians invented nothing.¹²⁸ Surely, rhetorical flourishes in historical narratives were just harmless tools to engage the reader's attention?¹²⁹

White, whose work was most closely aligned with Beckett's (which had highlighted the uncomfortable proximity of historical and fictional writing decades before) vehemently disagreed. Stories, he wrote, neither lived or were miraculously found; they were always "told or

¹²⁵ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries*, 177.

¹²⁶ Influenced by post-modernism, French literary theory and hermeneutic philosophy, a method for interpreting literary texts, this "linguistic turn" in the philosophy of history broke with its analytic past. Rather than looking to scientific analogies for historical knowledge, theorists emphasized the rhetoric involved in historical writing.

¹²⁷ Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/history/>.

¹²⁸ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 10.

¹²⁹ White, *The Content of the Form*, 10.

written.”¹³⁰ The “formal coherency” of a “conventional, well-made or fabulistic story,” he added, never truthfully represented real life.¹³¹ What, then, is involved in the transformation of real life into narrative? What happens in this murky liminality?¹³² “All stories are fictions,” White concluded.¹³³ Thirty years earlier and Beckett, with his “less than suilline interest” in received fable (strangely anticipating White’s “fabulistic” with its Latin root of *fabula*, or story), had reached the same conclusion. “To hell with all this fucking scenery,” Beckett, writing in *Malone Dies*, reminds us.

But while he rejected novelistic forms of history, Beckett offered another form of history as acceptable in a rare attempt at explanation. He wanted, he wrote, “a *Nachschlagewerk*” (a reference book), account of history.¹³⁴ Looking back to the early sixteenth-century life of Martin Luther to concretely demonstrate the difference between referential and novelistic accounts of history, he explained that an “oldfashioned history book of references,” one that provides comprehensive and specific information about various subjects rather than continuous reading, would tell him in certain, truthful terms “about Luther, where he went next, what he lived on, what he died of, etc.”¹³⁵ Here, along with, later, “flotsam, etc.,” is the first time that Beckett employs this unhelpful catch-all. We wonder what else he includes in lists that end in “etc.”; we wonder, too, how he expects us to anticipate. On the other hand, using the example of Luther,

¹³⁰ Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9. To support his claim that life does not emerge as stories, White’s close-reading of Jean-Paul Sartre’s first novel *Nausea* (1938) is useful. In the book, Antoine Roquentin, Sartre’s cynical protagonist observes time as a “series of instants” that either “fail to take on the form of a story” or “fall apart into shreds and fragments of existence.” The relationship between narratives unfolding and time, and life, elapsing is clear; as time passes, narratives do not spontaneously emerge. “Nothing happens while you live,” Roquentin continues, “the scenery changes, people come and go out, that’s all.”

¹³¹ White, *The Content of the Form*, 9.

¹³² Sartre’s Roquentin replies that “everything changes when you tell about life,” but, he adds, “it’s a change no one notices.” He continues, “things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense.”

¹³³ White, *Figural Realism*, 9.

¹³⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 228.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

while briefly returning to the rejection of constructed narratives (ones with gripping beginning, middle and end structures, strong characterizations and ideological preoccupations), the “fashionable *monde romancé* that explains copious[ly] why e.g. Luther was inevitable,” would, Beckett believed, tell him nothing.¹³⁶ Here again, the story of a “*monde romancé*,” a romanticized, fictionalized world, dealing only in inevitability, was useless.

Instead, he wanted the “straws” and “flotsam, etc.”¹³⁷ This second etc., following “flotsam,” or the debris of history, depicted here as “straws,” dried stalks of grain, was even more opaque. What will Beckett call for after flotsam? A woven basket of lemons? A nicely thatched roof? It’s not clear. He did explain, however, that he wanted the “names,” “dates,” “births” and “deaths” because, he stressed, demonstrating his pessimistic views about human knowledge and its limits, that “is all I can know.”¹³⁸ “*Schicksal* [Fate] = *Zufall* [Chance], for all human purposes,” he wrote.¹³⁹ In other words, we might extend the opening sentiments of “fuck life” to “fuck fate.” At least, he went on in this playful vein, the “pure incoherence of times & men & places” was “amusing.”¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, briefly setting aside profanities, baskets of lemons and Beckett’s amusement with “pure incoherence,” despite his seemingly light-hearted aversion to fashionable forms of *monde romancé* history, the stakes of this chapter are quite high. How history is written and, more importantly, re-written has real-life implications. In particular, the *Abriss*, a veritable “vehicle of propaganda,” historian of Nazi Germany Claudia Koonz pointed out, was central to the legitimization of the Nazi regime.¹⁴¹ While Beckett’s at times amusingly visceral, “vomit”-

¹³⁶ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 62.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 178.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Davies, “Narrating disruption,” forthcoming.

inducing disgust with novelistic modes of history should not diminish the stakes of this chapter, it's equally important that it does not belie the stakes of the next one. Between 1944 and 1949, Beckett, who did not at all hold with progressive models of history was, yet again, "drastically at odds" with the modes in which Charles de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic wrote history.¹⁴² It is to de Gaulle, the Fourth Republic and its narratives of history that we now turn.

¹⁴² Gibson, "Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic," 23.

Chapter 4: A Flame of Fiction

Once again it was the artists who ‘innocently’ laid down the first explosive charges
Pascal Ory, *L’Entre-deux-mai*

In the late summer of 1944, as the Occupation came to an end, and as the last of the German troops filed out of Paris, France glimpsed national freedom for the first time in four years. On 25 August, from within the historic walls of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, it was General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the French Resistance, who triumphantly ushered in this new era.¹⁴³ “Paris liberated! Liberated by its own efforts, liberated by its people,” he cried.¹⁴⁴ “The one France, the true France, eternal France.”¹⁴⁵ Minutes later, during an appearance at an open window, he jumped onto the windowsill as cheers thronged below him. The next day, carried along by yet more crowds in a parade down the Champs-Élysées, de Gaulle stepped into his role as a national hero.

Amidst the celebration, the French were too swept up to notice that de Gaulle, at once minimizing the degree of French collaboration and evoking national unity, had started to write a story.¹⁴⁶ In fact, he had started to rewrite a story, one that he was already drafting from London in 1940 at the start of the war. This founding narrative, this quasi-sacred symbol, this transcendent catch-all whose significance far exceeded the sum of its parts, was the French Resistance.¹⁴⁷ And while De Gaulle’s carefully constructed myth was so powerful that historians

¹⁴³ Since July 1789, when the Revolutionary mob captured the Hôtel de Ville, situated on the Right Bank of the Seine, just across from the eastern end of the Île de la Cité, the site has been the scene of a number of historical events, including the establishment of the Second and Third Republics in 1848 and 1870 respectively.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows: A New History of the French Resistance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁴⁵ Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁷ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 19.

wouldn't question it until the early 1970s, nearly thirty years later, this chapter argues that decades before the Resistance myth was disputed, Beckett and his skepticism of narrative, context, and history, was at odds with de Gaulle's mythmaking, even as it was already under construction.

In 1940, contrary to de Gaulle's triad of liberated, united, and eternal, France was oppressed, fractured and, volatile: in 1940, the future of this almost unrecognizable nation was bleak. "No one who lived through the French debacle of May-June 1940 ever quite got over the shock," wrote Robert Paxton, the historian largely responsible for first debunking the Resistance myth.¹⁴⁸ In May 1940, after eight months of stasis at the start of World War Two in what we come to be known as the "Phoney War," the *Wehrmacht* invaded France. By 14 June, only six weeks later, the Germans had captured Paris. The collapse of the Third Republic was imminent. Two days later, when Prime Minister Paul Reynaud refused to sign an armistice with Germany and resigned, the 84-year old World War One veteran Philippe Pétain assumed the vacuum left by Reynaud's departure. Known as "The Lion of Verdun" for his role in the First World War, Pétain promptly abolished the French Republic and established an authoritarian regime in Vichy, a spa town in central France.

"In the space of several days," the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry wrote on 18 June 1940, "we have lost all certainty." "We are on a terrifying and irresistible slope," he continued, "nothing that we could fear is impossible; we can fear and imagine absolutely anything."¹⁴⁹ When Pétain agreed to collaborate with Hitler and signed an armistice with Germany on 22 June, Valéry's prediction of a "terrifying and irresistible slope" came to define

¹⁴⁸ Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁴⁹ Paxton, *Vichy France*, 3.

France's wartime experience. Amidst the uncertainty and fear in the spring of 1940, the French population divided between those (following Pétain) who collaborated with the Germans, and those (following de Gaulle) who opposed them. Meanwhile, the rest—those in the middle—resigned themselves to the situation and simply “muddled through.”¹⁵⁰ Over the course of the war, the Vichy Regime, which, among other horrific policies, oversaw the persecution of left-wing activists, Communists, homosexuals, *métèques* (immigrants from the Mediterranean), as well as the deportation of 76,000 Jews (of whom only 2,566 survived) to concentration and extermination camps, became increasingly associated with betrayal, shame, and guilt. By the end of the war, having presided over what came to be known as *les années noires* (the black years), the Vichy Regime was all but synonymous with an extended black mark in the annals of French history.¹⁵¹

To overcome the trauma of defeat, the subsequent Occupation and the virtual civil war that engulfed the country, the French developed a central myth: the French Resistance.¹⁵² This was not a fiction about something that never happened, the historian Robert Gildea argued, but rather a story that served the purposes of France as it emerged from the war.¹⁵³ There were several elements to this story. First, the continuous narrative of Resistance. From 18 June 1940, when de Gaulle issued the first order of resistance via the BBC airwaves from across the Channel (“In the name of France, it is the bounden duty of all Frenchmen who still bear arms to continue the struggle,” he declared on 19 June) to 26 August 1944, when he marched down the Champs-Élysées.¹⁵⁴ Second, the identification of the Resistance with the nation as a whole; that except for

¹⁵⁰ Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 2.

¹⁵¹ David Drake, *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 6.

¹⁵² Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Charles de Gaulle, *The Speeches of General de Gaulle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 2.

a “handful of wretches,” as de Gaulle put it, most of the French acted in “good faith” during the war by supporting the active resisters.¹⁵⁵ Third, though the Allies and some foreign resisters (namely Spanish republicans and Polish Jews) had helped, France was “liberated by its own efforts” and “liberated by its people.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, the Resistance was a French effort that reflected the aspirations and political sympathies of the overwhelming majority of the population.

At the center of this narrative was de Gaulle, who wrote in 1932 that “nothing great is done without great men,” and his concern for renewal, unity, and triumph at the expense of historical truth.¹⁵⁷ “Only General de Gaulle could call upon the movements of the Resistance to form a *union* among themselves and with other forces,” André Malraux, de Gaulle’s first Minister of Cultural Affairs, said on a rainy December day in 1964.¹⁵⁸ “For it was through him alone that France waged one combat,” he added.¹⁵⁹ Though his speech officially commemorated the death of major Resistance figure Jean Moulin, Malraux’s remarks about “The General” offered insights into the Gaullist conception of history. De Gaulle, Malraux went on, “took upon himself the *no* of the first day, the continuation of combat” and the “*destiny* of France.”¹⁶⁰ Here, “destiny” at once recalls Beckett’s “vomit”-inducing reaction to Stieve’s expression of “Germanic destiny,” and highlights the providential overtones of Gaullist history, with de Gaulle taking “destiny” “upon himself” at the center.

“All my life, I’ve had a certain idea about France,” de Gaulle wrote at the beginning of *L’Appel 1940-1942 (The Call 1940-1942)*, in the first volume of his three part war memoir.¹⁶¹ “I

¹⁵⁵ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 10.

¹⁵⁶ Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Charles de Gaulle, *Le Fil de l’épée* (Paris: Plon, 1932), 132.

¹⁵⁸ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 90.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L’Appel Vol. 1: 1940-1942* (Paris: Plon, 1954), 7.

instinctively have the impression,” he continued, “that Providence created it for complete success or exemplary misfortune.”¹⁶² Call it destiny, Providence or fate (as he himself would go on to do), de Gaulle, much like Malraux, “instinctively” viewed French history as predestined. Turning to the pages of his memoirs, this view of history played out again and again. For instance, he recalled the moment his “mission” as leader of the Resistance revealed itself to him. “Faced with the frightening emptiness of general renunciation, my mission appeared to me at once, clear and terrible,” he wrote.¹⁶³ “At this moment,” he continued, “the worst of its [France’s] history, it was for me to take on France.”¹⁶⁴ Here, echoing Malraux, it was for de Gaulle to “take on France.” In *Le Salut 1944-1946 (The Salvation 1944-1946)*, the third volume of his memoirs, he described how, “in blood and ruins” and with a “profound fatalism” the German people suffered “their fate.”¹⁶⁵ While Beckett, we remember, equated “fate” with “chance” “for all human purposes,” for de Gaulle “fate” was the driver of history.

Finally, reflecting on the familiar scene of 26 August when he marched down the grand Parisian avenue, de Gaulle’s memory revealed not only his predilections for fate, but also his overwrought prose and its sublime descriptions. “With huge crowds” (“perhaps two million souls”) massed on either side of the Champs-Élysées, he remembered “it looked more like the sea.”¹⁶⁶ Here we recall Beckett’s Molloy, who at one point, remarks: “Perhaps I’m inventing a little, perhaps embellishing.”¹⁶⁷ “As far as the eye could see,” de Gaulle continued, “there was only this living tide of humanity, in the sunshine, beneath the tricolor.”¹⁶⁸ Albeit within the nationalist purview of the sunlit French flag, the General’s style gives us an insight into his

¹⁶² De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L’Appel*, 7.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 74.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: Le Salut Vol. 3: 1944-1946* (Paris: Plon, 1959), 206.

¹⁶⁶ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L’Unité Vol. 2: 1942-1944* (Paris: Plon, 1956), 364.

¹⁶⁷ Beckett, *Three novels*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L’Unité*, 364.

understanding of history, with metaphors of the “living tide of humanity,” as highly literary. Here we remember another Beckettian character, Estragon: “You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!”¹⁶⁹

Beckett, who fought in the Resistance on French soil, and who bristled at the use of “destiny” or “fate” in any historical narrative, was among the unenthused few in post-war France. “The news of France is very depressing,” he wrote to McGreevy on 4 January 1948, just before starting the *Trilogy*, “[it] depresses me anyhow.”¹⁷⁰ For the man wont to melancholy, depression was not uncommon; however depression provoked by “the news of France” was curious. This, after two years of de Gaulle as chair of the Provisional Government and another two of Vincent Auriol as President of the Fourth Republic, was a time of immense change. “All the wrong things,” he continued, “all the wrong way. It is hard sometimes to feel the France that one clung to, that I still cling to. I don’t mean material conditions.”¹⁷¹ Between 1944 and 1948, something had changed for Beckett. Though he mentioned neither de Gaulle nor Auriol by name, the immaterial “conditions” of the Fourth Republic were “all the wrong things” “all the wrong way.”¹⁷²

One way to understand Beckett’s post-war gloom is to recall that this was the author who couldn’t “read history like a novel” and who rejected progressive, teleological and triumphant models of history. Written in the post-war years, the *Trilogy* repudiated Gaullist “renewal” and insisted on a cultural temper whose memory de Gaulle was “concerned briskly to expunge,”

¹⁶⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 57.

¹⁷⁰ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 2*, 72.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Gibson, “Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic,” 1.

Gibson argued.¹⁷³ (“Memory” and “expunge” are familiar concerns from Beckett’s German diaries). What “cultural temper” did de Gaulle and his allies want to briskly expunge? What “cultural temper” did Beckett insist upon in his literature? While Gibson replied with the “intransigent anti-heroism” of the *Trilogy*, this chapter adds that Beckett also responded with a fierce assault on narrative (whether in prose or on the stage) and an even fiercer attack on narrative’s predilection for causality, explanation and omniscience.¹⁷⁴ We recall this was also the “cultural temper” (that of the “straws” and “flotsam, etc.”) that he insisted upon in his German diaries, in the writing of history. Indeed, in the *Trilogy*, Gibson wrote, history exists as “rubble” and “debris” strewn across the pages.¹⁷⁵

Three decades before Paxton began to question the nationalist story of the mid-to-late-1940s, Beckett’s aesthetic and historical views were already at odds with this narrative.¹⁷⁶ As the historian Henry Rousso argued, years before the so-called “Paxtonian revolution,” artists first anticipated “new trends” by “casting” them “in aesthetic form.”¹⁷⁷ “Once again,” the historian Pascal Ory noted, “it was the artists who ‘innocently’ laid down the first explosive charges.”¹⁷⁸ Whether “new trends” or “explosive charges,” both Rousso and Ory agreed that artistic work in post-war France somehow anticipated historical work in the early 1970s. And while Beckett was certainly in conflict with any kind of historical narratives, he was also, more specifically, in conflict with post-war Resistance narratives.

Though Beckett later referred with characteristic sleight of hand to his Resistance work as “the boy-scouts!” (followed by a crucial, and even more ironic, exclamation point), many

¹⁷³ Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 123.

¹⁷⁴ Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, 123.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 122.

¹⁷⁶ Several French scholars who continued to foment Paxton’s initial work are: Maurice Rajsfus, Dominique Veillon, Henry Rousso, Roderick Kedward, and Pierre Azéma.

¹⁷⁷ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 130.

¹⁷⁸ Pascal Ory, *L’Entre-deux-mai* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), [].

scholars argue that his experiences were more important than this comment suggests. Modernist and Beckettian scholars in particular understand Beckett's remark as an example of his integrity; for them, Beckett was not only was a brave Resister, he was also discreet and humble.¹⁷⁹ For instance, at one moment in his official Beckett biography, James Knowlson wrote that though Beckett "characteristically" "play[ed] down" the significance of his role in the Resistance ("as he always did") it was "nonetheless, quite an important one."¹⁸⁰ Why might Beckett "play down" Resistance narratives? One answer is that the author, who had received two medals—*La Croix de Guerre* and *La Médaille de la Résistance*—for his service in the winter of 1945, was already conscious of the Resistance's cult of heroism.¹⁸¹ Another is that Beckett (as we have seen throughout) rejected any attempt to integrate "historical chaos" into dishonestly cohesive and "unified" stories. So, recalling that LaCapra's "dialogical" relationship is especially important when the voices of the past resist or qualify interpretation, here an acknowledgement of Beckett's "intransigent anti-heroism" might actually help historians transform the questions they pose to the past.¹⁸² More important still, turning to the final chapter, Beckett's comment that his Resistance days were the "boy-scouts!" (taken seriously) might also help Beckett scholars transform the questions they pose to this particular moment in Beckett's own past.

¹⁷⁹ Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, 134.

¹⁸⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 282.

¹⁸¹ Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, 117.

¹⁸² LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 64.

Chapter 5: The Boy-Scouts

Whatever happens, the flame of the French Resistance must not and shall not die.
Charles de Gaulle on 18 June, 1940

“If there is a war, as I fear there must be soon,” Beckett wrote to McGreevy from Paris on 18 April 1939, “I shall place myself at the disposition of this country.”¹⁸³ Beckett’s fears were realized sooner than he expected, when four months later, on 3 September, Britain and France responded to Adolf Hitler’s invasion of Poland by declaring war on Germany. The following year, largely in reaction to the arrest and disappearance of several Jewish literary friends (“I was so outraged by the Nazis, particularly in their treatment of the Jews that I could not remain inactive” he said in a later interview), Beckett joined the Resistance.¹⁸⁴ Specifically, he joined *Gloria SMH*, a covert information network. Known by the code names of the group’s founders, Jeannie Picabia (“Gloria”) and Jacques Legrand (“SMH”), the network formed in the autumn of 1940 to arrange the escape of Allied prisoners into the Unoccupied Zone.¹⁸⁵

By the time Beckett joined, on 1 September 1941, the organization had developed into one of several specialized cells that gathered information about the Occupied Zone under the purview of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) in London.¹⁸⁶ One of roughly eighty members, Beckett was described in the SOE files as: “6 ft. Well built, but stoops. Dark hair. Fresh complexion. Very silent. Paris agent.”¹⁸⁷ Over one intense year, this “very silent” “stooping” agent set to work classifying, organizing and translating confidential documents

¹⁸³ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 1*, 656.

¹⁸⁴ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 325.

¹⁸⁵ Jeannie Picabia, incidentally, was the daughter of Francis Martinez Picabia, a painter and an important figure in French Surrealist movement of the 1920s.

¹⁸⁶ Beckett was recruited by Alfred Péron, a close friend from his time as a lecturer at the *École normale supérieure*.

¹⁸⁷ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 282.

about the Axis troops' movements from French to English. These documents were then condensed, converted into microfilm, and smuggled (in toothpaste tubes, matchboxes, cigarette papers) to London. As the Nazis in occupied Paris were ever watchful for people who looked foreign or had foreign accents, Beckett's role was especially dangerous.¹⁸⁸ The cell continued for a year, until in August 1942, when Robert Alesch, who, extraordinarily, was both a double agent and Catholic priest, betrayed *Gloria SMH* to the Gestapo. More than fifty members (including Legrand) were arrested. But, after receiving a warning from Alfred Péron's wife Mania, Beckett and his partner, Suzanne Déschevaux-Dumesnil, managed to escape only hours before the Germans visited their apartment. Beckett would remain in France during the war, in Roussillon in the south and in Saint Lô in the north, and his experiences there continue to provide new insights into his work and its meaning. But this chapter looks at Beckett's time in Paris to make sense of his disenchantment from the Resistant narrative, and from historical mythmaking itself.

While the "eternal France" speech is de Gaulle's most famous, it is his first speech from the start of the war in 1940 that is most relevant to this chapter. "Must we abandon all hope?" he asked fellow Frenchman on 18 June, in remarks on a broadcast over the BBC airwaves. "Is our defeat final and irremediable?" Responding to his own rhetorical questions, he declared: "I answer—No!"¹⁸⁹ "Whatever happens, the flame of the French Resistance must not and shall die."¹⁹⁰ Following de Gaulle's prediction, this chapter argues that although the Paxtonian Revolution has exposed and forced an almost complete reevaluation of Gaullist mythology in French history, its reach has not fully extended into the realm of Beckettian studies, where scholars continue to see Beckett through the prism of the most persistent Resistance myths.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 283.

¹⁸⁹ De Gaulle, *The Speeches of General de Gaulle*, 2.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, 98.

Beckett, it turns out, rejected not only de Gaulle’s Resistance narrative, but also his own—or at least the one that historians attempt to fit him into. Drawing on the author’s own skepticism about the narratives of history, this chapter argues that much like Beckett himself, the history of *Gloria SMH* does not fit into de Gaulle’s story of a unified, heroic Resistance.

According to the post-war narrative, the Resistance was a French effort and France was “liberated by its own people.” But that is not strictly true. Often overlooked in accounts of Beckett’s work for the Resistance is the uncomfortable fact that *Gloria SMH* was not—either in its inception, nor in its early years—entirely French.¹⁹² Though Knowlson notes that the cell began its life as a Polish group, and though he adds a footnote for further reading, the group’s Polish character has all but disappeared from the historical record.¹⁹³ Why is this? The answer is, in part, that a detailed microhistory of a small cell in the early Resistance would hardly thrilling work. More importantly, emphasizing the Polish contribution to the origins of *Gloria SMH* threatens to undermine the compelling story of Beckett as a decorated French Resistance hero. To acknowledge that *Gloria SMH* was a short-lived subsection of F₂, a much larger and predominantly Polish Resistance group, would be to acknowledge that Beckett’s “illustration” of “integrity” lay not in his charming reticence, but in the explicit message of his actual words. What happens to the stable foundations of Beckettian scholarship if the idea of Beckett as the valiant Resistance hero crumbles? What happens to our understanding of his work? These are the questions few have explored in depth before; these are the questions to which this chapter now turns.

This chapter therefore pushes Gibson’s argument—that Beckett scholars have so far taken little account of the revolution in the historical study of modern France between 1940 and 1949—one step further.

¹⁹² Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, 147.

¹⁹³ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 280.

On 12 August 1945, F₂'s Polish founder, Léon Sliwinski, appealed to the French Fighting Forces of the Interior, asking for equal treatment and recognition for Polish agents after the war. In a short note entitled "Concerning the Polish Agents of Network F₂" Sliwinski wrote that the Polish agents of F₂, were engaged in the "same conditions as their French comrades."¹⁹⁴ "The service of these Poles was entirely voluntary" he continued, and "the entrance into the network's ranks had not been stipulated by any order."¹⁹⁵ Despite unequal post-war treatment from French authorities, Sliwinski emphasized that since the Poles in the group operated under the "same" (the key word of this letter) "conditions" as their French counterparts, they should receive the "same" recognition. Sliwinski went on: the Polish members of F₂ demanded that their "services" be "recognized" by the French Fighting Forces of the Interior under the "same" (here is that word again) "title as the services of other foreigners who fought in the ranks of the Networks of Combat France."¹⁹⁶ To support this claim to equality, he attached three pages of graphs and data to the letter. Figures 1 and 2 (see following pages) both demonstrate, the former visually, and the latter two numerically, that at the year of its inception, 1940, the percentage of Poles in F₂'s "*les effectifs*," or workforce, was 50.7%, just over half. In the first half of 1941, the year that Beckett joined this larger operation, a fact that few Beckett scholars have acknowledged, the Poles made up 42.8% of the workforce; while in the second half of 1941, they made up 42.9%. Though, after reaching 44% in the first half of 1942, their participation—and representation—began to decrease (to 32% in the second half of 1942, and 15.5% in the first half of 1943), what is important is that before and during Beckett's involvement, this was, empirically, a group equally French and Polish group that was as much Polish as it was French.

¹⁹⁴ Léon Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais du Reseau FII*, 12 August 1945, F2 Historique, GR 17 P 129 (1), Archives of the French Army Ministry of Defense, Paris, France.

¹⁹⁵ Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

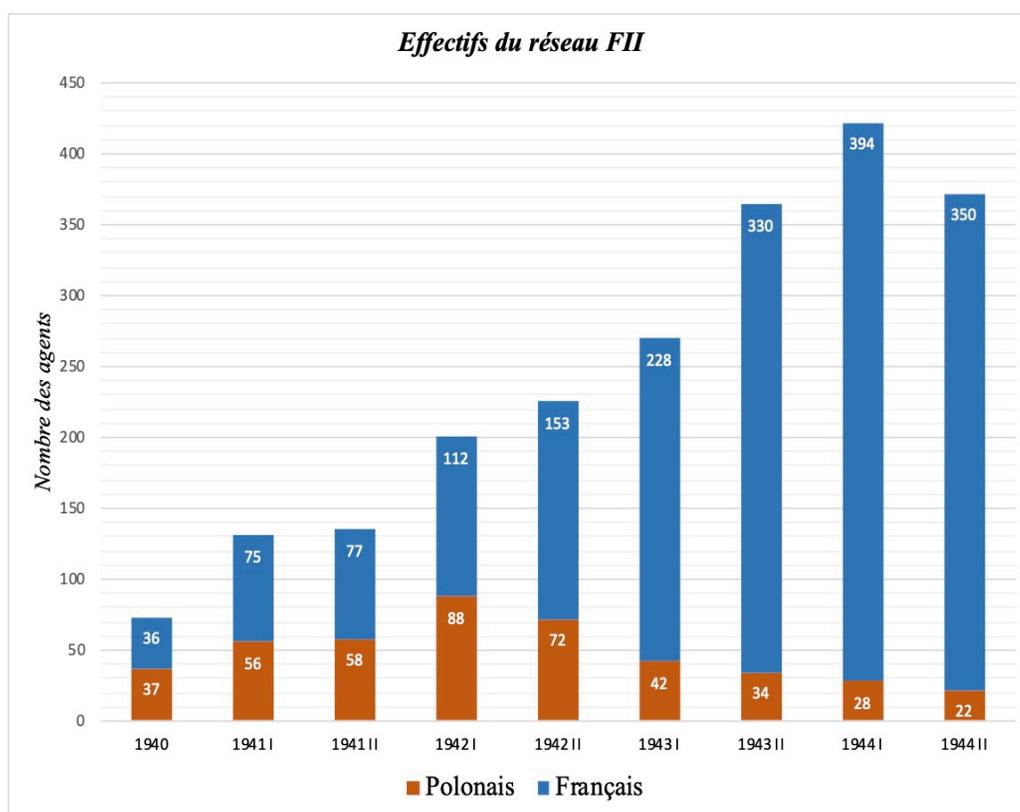


Figure 1: A breakdown (by nationality) of agents in F₂.¹⁹⁷

Effectif du réseau FII (agents P2) et les pertes de l'armistice à la Libération

	Agents P2 recrutés			Pertes						Agents P2 effectifs		
				En période :			Totales :					
	P.	F.	Ens.	P.	P. Ev	F.	P.	F.	Ens.	P.	F.	Ens.
1940	38	36	74	1	0	0	1	0	1	37	36	73
1941 I	61	78	139	4	0	3	5	3	8	56	75	131
1941 II	78	122	200	15	0	42	20	45	65	58	77	135
1942 I	111	160	271	3	0	3	23	48	71	88	112	200
1942 II	121	213	334	26	0	12	49	60	109	72	153	225
1943 I	132	308	440	10	31	20	90	80	170	42	228	270
1943 II	134	433	567	5	5	23	100	103	203	34	330	364
1944 I	134	554	688	4	2	57	106	160	266	28	394	422
1944 II	134	577	711	6	0	67	112	227	339	22	350	372

Figure 2: A breakdown (by nationality) of agents and the number of losses from 1940 to 1944 in the F₂.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*. See annex for the original document.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Agents Français et Polonais, effectifs et pertes en %

		% des polonais dans les agents	Pertes en % du total des agents			
			P.	P. Evacués	F.	T
1940		50.7	0.7	0	0	0.3
1941	I	42.8	3.7	0	0.5	1.1
1941	II	42.9	14.9	0	7.8	9.2
1942	I	44.0	17.1	0	8.2	10.9
1942	II	32.0	36.7	0	10.4	15.3
1943	I	15.5	44.0	59.7	13.9	22.5
1943	II	9.3	46.2	79.5	17.9	28.6
1944	I	6.6	50.8	82.5	27.8	38.2
1944	II	5.9	55.2	83.5	39.4	47.8

Figure 3: A percentage breakdown (by nationality) of losses in relation to total number of agents in the F₂.¹⁹⁹

Turning to Figures 3 and 4 (see following page), we realize that though F₂ was half French and half Polish, Polish losses from the group during the war were disproportionately higher than French losses. After 1942, Polish losses appeared to increase rapidly (the chart notes the percentage in proportion to the total number of agents). Since the total number of Polish agents began to decrease in the second half of 1942, their losses appeared to be more dramatic during these later years. Nevertheless, initially the Poles continuously lost nearly double the number of fighters as the French. By 1941, the percentage of losses of total Polish agents was 3.7%, while for the French it was a mere 0.5%. In the second half of that year Polish losses were 14.9%, while the French lost nearly half that at 7.8%. In the first half of 1942, Polish losses were 36.7%, while the French, again, were far fewer—8.2%.

¹⁹⁹ Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*. See annex for the original document.

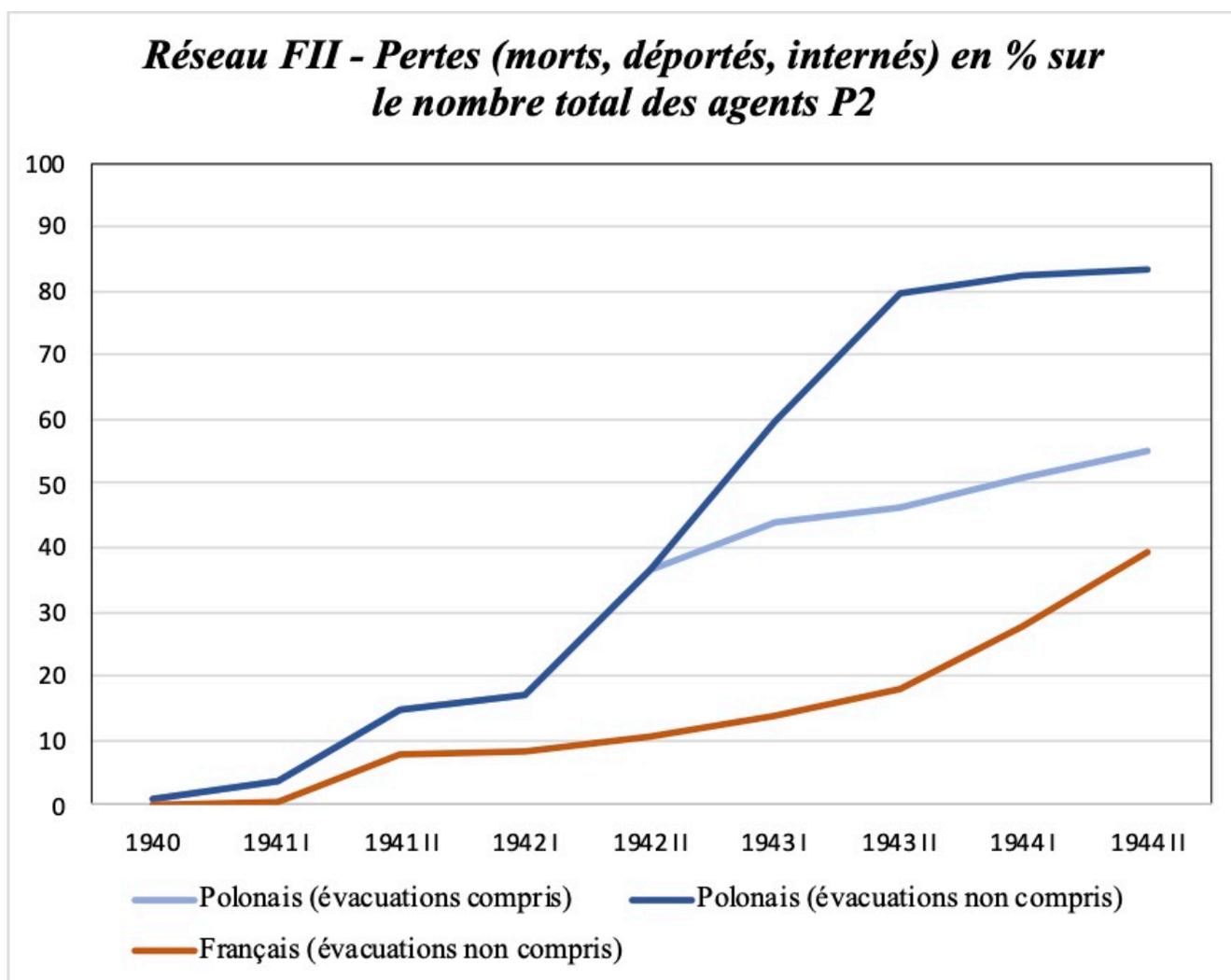


Figure 4: A percentage breakdown (by nationality) of losses in relation to total number of agents.²⁰⁰

Finally, Figure 5 (see following page), with a usefully depicted breakdown of the larger operations of the F₂ network, should—if only visually—undermine the *Gloria SMH*-centric account of Beckett’s time in the Resistance. Take just one diagram of many sketched over the larger network’s long life, pictured here in July of 1941. If we start at the box below “Tudor” and follow the second from the right line to “Marine,” it is only then that we find, at the end of the left most line, “Edwin Gloria SMH.”

²⁰⁰ Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*. See annex for the original document.

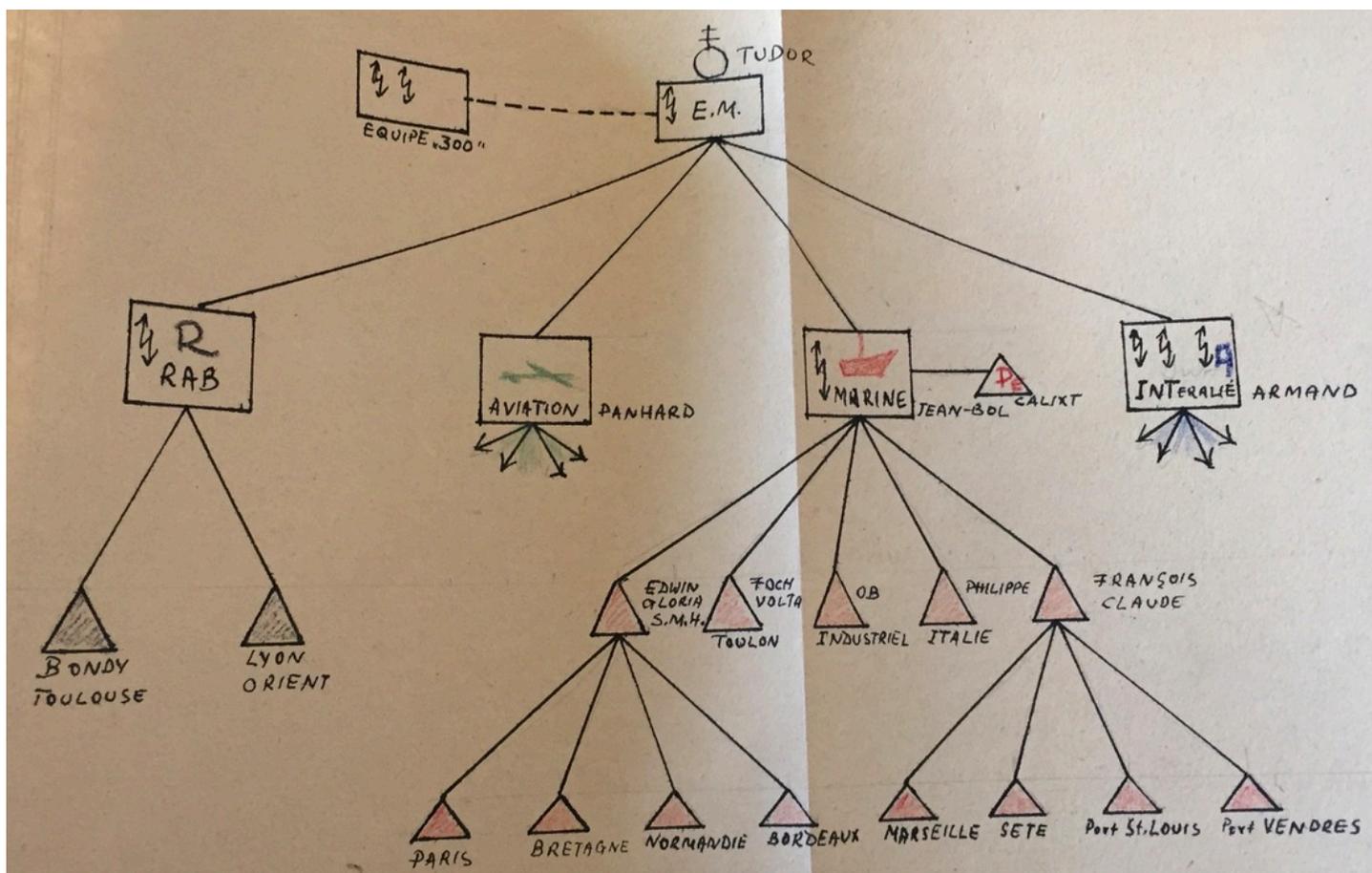


Figure 5: A visual overview of F2's operations in July 1941.²⁰¹

Sliwinski's insistence on fair treatment and recognition reminds us that just as the invaluable help of the Polish fighters in the Resistance did not fit into de Gaulle's nationalist narrative of France in 1944, so it does not fit into Beckettian scholars' narrative of *Gloria SMH* in the French Resistance today. While this letter does not necessarily undermine Beckett's particular role in *Gloria SMH*, it does serve as a counterpoint to a nationalist, *Gloria SMH*-centric story. As Sliwinski reminds us, *Gloria SMH*, in its relatively insignificant size, with less than one hundred members; in its brief lifespan, with less than a year of service; and in terms of

²⁰¹ Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*. See annex for the original document.

nationality, with half of its original membership as Polish, does not fit in. It is in this vast gulf—between how Beckett himself understood his time in the Resistance and how scholars after Beckett elevated and praised him for it—that Gaullist mythmaking emerges.

Conclusion

The reality of the individual...is an incoherent reality and must be expressed incoherently.
Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*

In the summer of 1961, the American academic Tom F. Driver strolled into the lobby of his Parisian hotel to find Beckett already waiting. “Nothing like *Godot*,” Driver wrote, Beckett “arrived before the hour.”²⁰² As they stepped out onto the Rue de L’Arcade, and meandered along the streets of the eighth arrondissement, the conversation drifted. From Augustine’s doctrine of grace, to Heidegger and Sartre, to Jean Racine’s *Phèdre*, they discussed all manner of philosophical, literary and religious topics. “When you pass a church on an Irish bus,” Beckett remarked, “all the hands flurry in the sign of the cross.”²⁰³ One day the “dogs of Ireland will do that too and perhaps also the pigs,” he said.²⁰⁴

They also discussed form and content, or what Beckett called the “mess.” “How could the mess be admitted” when it is the “very opposite of form” and therefore “destructive of the very thing that art holds itself to be?” Beckett asked in a “light” voice cut with a “rough edge,” Driver wrote later.²⁰⁵ Beckett answered his own question. “What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art,” he said. “It only means that there will be a new form, and this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else.”²⁰⁶ For the author who spent much of his career evading interviews, perpetually “in no mood to offer explanations,” this was a rare glimpse into Beckett’s own view of his

²⁰² Tom F. Driver, “Beckett by the Madeline” in *Drama in the Modern World: Plays and Essays*, ed. Samuel Weiss (Taipei: Bookman Books, 1996), 505.

²⁰³ Driver, “Beckett by the Madeline,” 505.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 506.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 505.

work.²⁰⁷ “To find a new form that accommodates the mess,” Beckett said, as the pair sat down at a sidewalk café in the shadow of the Madeline, a looming Roman Catholic church across the way.²⁰⁸ “That is the task of the artist now.”²⁰⁹

This call to “find a new form”—this preoccupation with form and content—was not a new obsession. Writing about it in as early as his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett noted that the “reality of the individual is an incoherent reality and must be expressed incoherently.”²¹⁰ Though he was still interested in the relationship between form and content thirty years later, his understanding of this content had evolved, or, in classic Beckettian terms, devolved. What was an “incoherent reality” in 1932 had become, in 1961, a “buzzing confusion” of “mess.”²¹¹ In time, this “mess” also brought with it an increased sense of urgency. “But now “we can keep” the mess “out no longer,” Beckett said. Why can we no longer keep the mess out? Why an emphasis on now? “Because we have come into a time when it,” that is, the mess, “invades our experience at every moment,” Beckett concluded. Since “it is there, it must be allowed in.”²¹²

From the start of this paper, we wondered what questions Beckett and his literature posed not only for historians, but for the discipline of history itself. How, we wondered, do we write historically about an author who, when he looked to the past, saw only the “same old things the same old things”? Much as Beckett called for a “new form,” LaCapra understands the conflict—between Beckett’s questioning literature on the one hand and established historical paradigms on

²⁰⁷ Shenker, “Moody Man of Letters.”

²⁰⁸ Driver, “Beckett by the Madeline,” 506.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 91.

²¹¹ Driver, “Beckett by the Madeline,” 505.

²¹² Ibid, 506.

the other—as evidence of the “need for newer traditions,” traditions that are more open to “disconcerting modes of questioning,” and are “better able to withstand the recurrent threat of collapse.”²¹³ Thus to Beckett’s call, we might add that the task of today’s historian is to “find a new form that accommodates the mess.” Here we remember that Coetzee’s fifth way of looking at Beckett is both simple and complicated: “try again.”

At last, it is Beckett’s own approach to narrative, history and the writing of history that offers historians a chance for something new. And over the course of his life, over the course of this paper, Beckett has given us suggestions about what new traditions might look like. These Beckettian traditions are skeptical of the “interests of narratives,” including the impulse to “embellish,” to “invent a little.” They are aware of how easy, yet how dissonant it is, to set uncomfortable plays and to fit uncomfortable figures into comfortable contexts. They reject the notions of unity, reason and purification, and they renounce the need to constantly explain and clarify. In other words, these new traditions accommodate the plays, people and groups who don’t easily fit in to conventional narratives. In short, they accommodate the “straws and flotsam” of history, the “pure incoherence of times & men & places” —the mess.

In a 2006 interview, Coetzee was asked about the continuing significance of Beckett’s work. “What relevance, if any, would the writings of Beckett have for the contemporary reader? Why would we read him today? Do we need to read him at all?” the interviewer asked.²¹⁴ Coetzee responded by taking issue with the nature of these questions. “Beckett is a great prose writer, very acute, very restless, very self-aware,” he said. “I don’t see that ‘relevance,’ narrowly

²¹³ LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 28-9.

²¹⁴ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), introduction. 10.5422/fordham/9780823270859.001.0001.

conceived, is of much importance when we come face to face with a writer of the size of Beckett.”²¹⁵ To Coetzee’s response, this paper adds that Beckett—who provokes us to confront the stories we tell ourselves as individuals and as societies—also challenges historians to resist the pull of narrative when it comes at the expense of historical truth. Looking forward, historians still have a great deal to learn from Beckett’s challenges to accepted narratives, to the form of narrative and to the discipline of history itself. As Beckett put it in *Waiting for Godot*: to “hell with all this fucking scenery.”²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*.

²¹⁶ Beckett, *Three novels*, 270.

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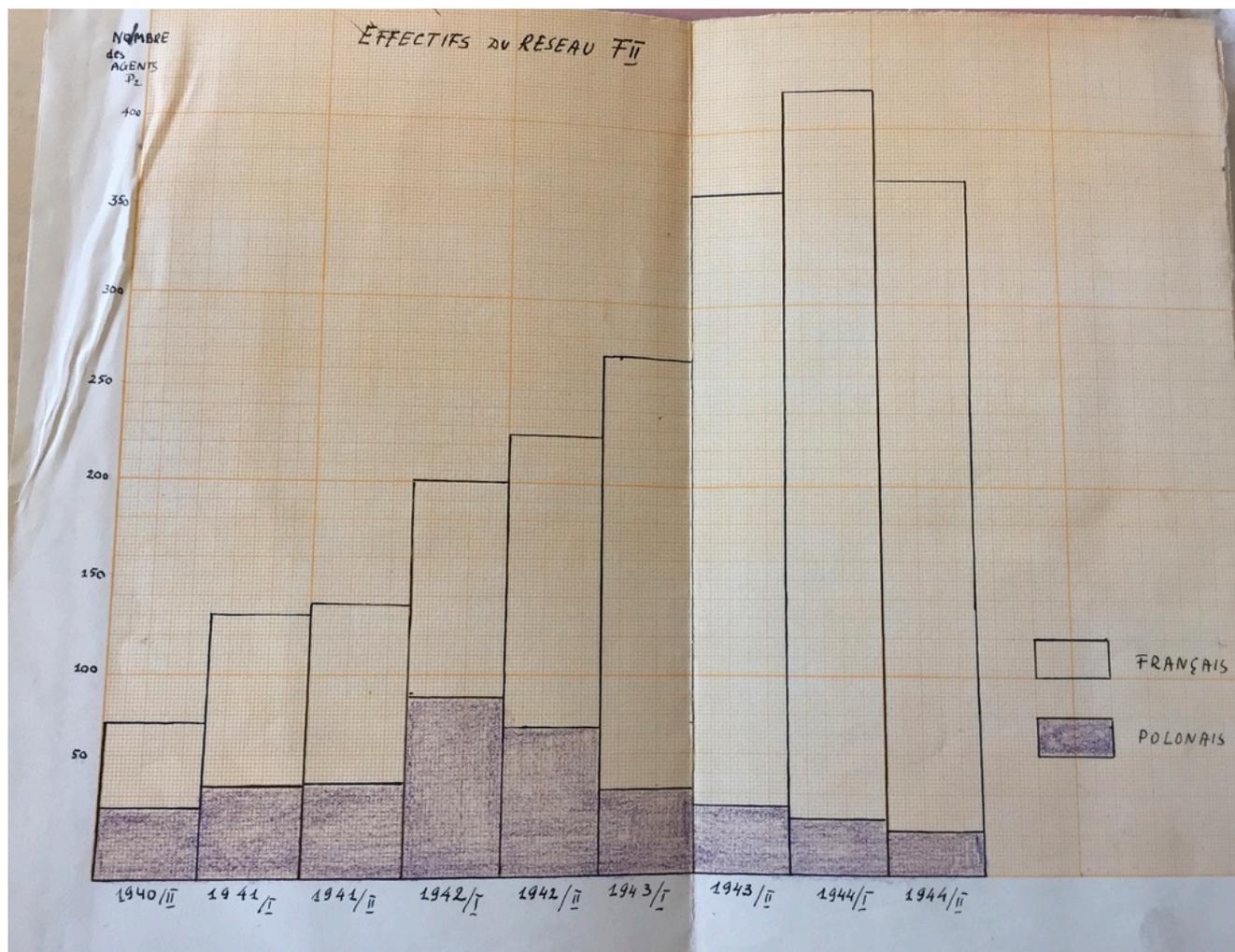
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AnnexFigure 1²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Léon Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais du Réseau FII*, 12 August 1945, F2 Historique, GR 17 P 129 (1), Archives of the French Army Ministry of Defense, Paris, France.

BUREAU III
EFFECTIFS DU RUS. III (AGENTS P2) ET LES PERTES
de l'Armistice à la Libération

	Agents P2 recrutés			Pertes						Agents P2 Effectifs		
	P.	F.	Ens.	En période			Totales			P.	F.	Ens.
				P.	P.Ev.	F.	P.	F.	Ens.			
1940	38	36	74	1			1			37	36	73
1941 I	61	78	139	4		3	5	3	1	56	75	131
1941 II	78	122	200	15		42	20	45	8	58	77	135
1942 I	111	160	271	3		3	23	48	65	88	112	200
1942 II	121	213	334	26		12	49	60	71	72	153	225
1943 I	132	308	440	10	31	20	90	80	109	42	228	270
1943 II	134	433	567	5	5	23	100	103	203	34	330	364
1944 I	134	554	688	4	2	57	106	160	266	28	394	422
1944 II	134	577	711	6		67	112	227	339	22	350	372

AGENTS P2 FRANÇAIS ET POLONAIS
Effectifs et pertes en %

	% des Polonais dans les effectifs	Pertes en % du total des agents			
		Pol.	Pol.Evac.	Fran.	Total
1940	50.7	0.7			0.7
1941 I	42.8	3.7		0.5	4.2
1941 II	42.9	14.9		7.8	25.6
1942 I	44.0	17.1		8.2	29.3
1942 II	32.0	36.7		10.4	49.1
1943 I	15.5	44.0	59.7	13.9	77.6
1943 II	9.3	46.2	79.5	17.9	83.6
1944 I	6.6	50.8	82.5	27.8	89.1
1944 II	5.9	55.2	83.5	39.4	94.8

Figures 2 and 3²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Léon Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais.*

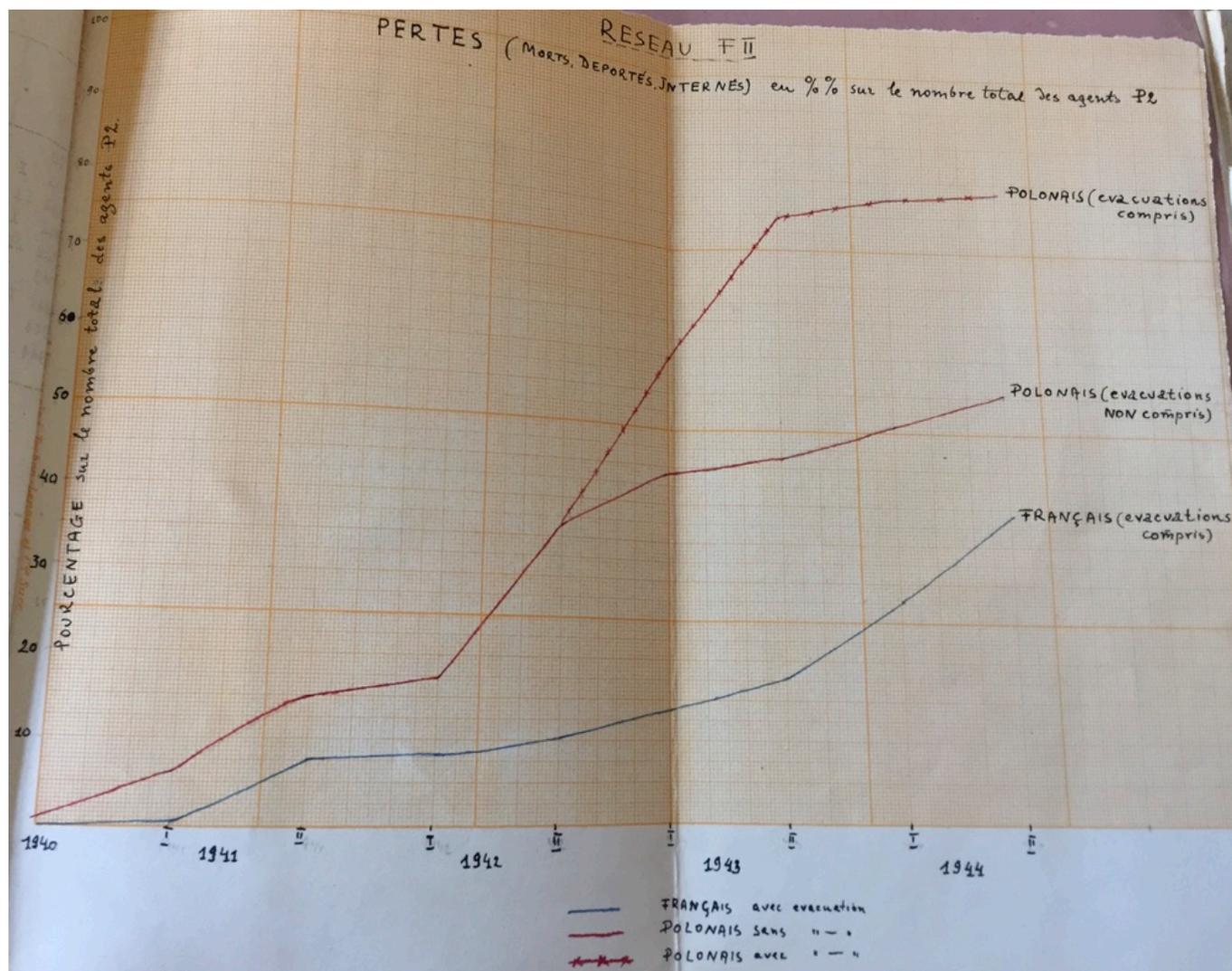


Figure 4²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Léon Sliwinski, *Concernant Les Agents Polonais*.