



‘The gantelope of sense and nonsense run’:  
*Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*  
in the 1930s

*Onno Kusters*

*The firm step is past & gone and Echo’s bones turned to stone [...].*  
(LSB IV 705).

In this article I discuss Samuel Beckett’s collection *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates* (published December 1935; henceforth *EBOP*). I tackle a prominent aspect of the imagery in the collection: that of the body, specifically that of bodily liquids and solids. Furthermore, I argue that two modernist manifestos, ‘The Revolution of the Word’ (1929) and ‘Poetry is Vertical’ (1932), as well as Beckett’s own review ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, are integral to how the collection communicates (or deliberately fails to do so) before it is understood (if at all). I also show how Beckett applied the chiasmus in structuring the collection. Finally, I investigate how in his two ‘Serena’ poems Beckett processed his reading of Edmund Spenser (1552–99).

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## ‘EXEO IN A SPASM’

Compared to his other work, Beckett’s poetry has been poorly received. Indeed, as P. J. Murphy in *A Critique of Beckett Criticism* has put it, Beckett is seen as ‘a minor poet. None of his critics have seriously challenged this essentially just and often echoed assessment’ (1994: 54). Murphy’s assessment is severely limited: in the thematically, syntactically, and structurally complex poems<sup>1</sup> collected in *EBOP* the young Beckett chose an entirely original approach by interweaving a representation of a mind beset by ‘fatigue and disgust’ (*W* 215) with allusions to both the usual (high) modernist suspects (Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Pound) and less obvious intertexts such as Goethe, Walther von der Vogelweide, the French symbolists, and the Provençal troubadours. Echoing in its full title both Ovid’s tale of unrequited love and T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917)<sup>2</sup> yet offering only occasional glimmerings of lyricism, the thirteen poems in *EBOP* have often been found to be overly hermetic.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Beckett’s poetical work as a whole is often considered the least felicitous part of his oeuvre. In 1984, Derek Mahon wrote, ‘Let us not pretend [...] that [Beckett] is a great poet; *obviously* he is not’ (88; emphasis added). ‘Whoroscope’, according to Mahon, is ‘[s]uch a bad poem there is nothing of consequence to be said of it’, and ‘the Enueg, Sanies and Serena poems are little better’ (88). He went on to suggest a ‘rigorously selected Poems of Samuel Beckett’ (88), thirteen poems in all, choosing only four from *EBOP* (‘The Vulture’, ‘Alba’, ‘Da Tagte Es’, and ‘Echo’s Bones’). In a later piece, Mahon claimed that Beckett himself saw ‘Whoroscope’ as ‘little more than a bit of fun’, though he does recognize its ‘Joycean rodomontade [...] and the curious pre-echoes of many a later and more laconic soliloquy’ (2006: 12). The tone and intention, ‘if any’, of the ‘rambling “Enueg”, “Sanies” and “Serena” series [...], interspersed with shorter poems [which] cycle [...], trudge and drift around Dublin, London and Paris’, Mahon calls unreliable, unclear, and, misquoting Beckett, ‘the work of a very young man with nothing *to do all day* and the itch to make’ (12; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Mahon’s use of the term ‘pre-echoes’ constitutes a familiar move in the criticism of Beckett’s poetry: to refer to passages from the later prose and drama as representing the author’s ‘true’ or ‘greater’ poetical voice—an idea evidencing a rather limited, Romantic view of the term ‘poetical’.<sup>5</sup> Mary Lydon has convincingly argued, for instance, that ‘[o]ne of the most striking effects of Beckett’s oeuvre [...] is the challenge it addresses to the

apparently self-evident distinction between poetry and prose' (1999: 61). I hope to show that, quite apart from that 'challenge' or the 'pre-echoes' of later work, *EBOP* invites, however forbiddingly, its readers to an exciting and rewarding field of poetical experience significant in its own right.

### 'THE BOLUS HAS GONE HOME'

Interestingly, the harsh words about Beckett's poetry seem to be partially supported by his own valuation. In a letter to George Reavey of January 1936, just over a month after *EBOP* had been published, Beckett noted that '[m]y friends here esquivent [eschew] the Bones for the more part, which means the bolus has gone home. What shall they say, my not even enemies. May it stick in their anus' (*LSB I* 295). The scatological imagery Beckett uses is typical, and perhaps typically Irish: Jonathan Swift and James Joyce, too, would often resort to this particular trope. The poems themselves, of course, are also full of 'the grey spew of the sewer' (*CP* 8), and the letter to Reavey is certainly not the only one from the 1930s to equate writing and defecation. 'If art hits, and must hit, the body', the editors of the letters suggest, 'this is because it must emerge from the body to begin with' (*LSB I* xciv). 'At its best', they continue, 'writing is evacuation of pus, or is ejaculation of sperm. Being very rarely at its best, it is more commonly—even obsessively—that less exalted convulsion, defecation. [...] Even when the work is not itself fecal, it can still do cloacal duty' (xciv–xcv).<sup>6</sup>

John Pilling has argued that '[i]t was into a world not yet comfortable with Eliot's achievement in *The Waste Land* that Beckett wished to introduce his own poems, rather than into one which had seen fit, in 1923, to award the Nobel Prize for Literature to W.B. Yeats' (Pilling 1999: 17). If that world was not yet comfortable with *The Waste Land* (1922), it certainly was not ready for Beckett. In *EBOP* the Cartesian *cogito*, Beckett's formidable intellect and wide reading, stands out, but it is the *sum*, the physical body, whether in terms of the non-sterile liquids and solids it produces or of the constraints it has to suffer, that gives it much of its specific quality.<sup>7</sup> Eliot's 'waste', in *The Waste Land*, connotes isolation and desolation, which also feature in *EBOP*; the waste in Beckett's collection, however, is also *literally* human waste—capable, sometimes, of fertilizing (excrement) or procreating (semen), but usually just pointless or at best purgatory: piss, pus. In many of the poems in *EBOP*, where the full title, in this respect, is in itself a bit of a give-away,<sup>8</sup> it is the body that triggers

the intellectual concepts, not the other way round. In *EBOP*, to put it in Joycean terms, Sam the Penman takes centre stage, expressing himself like Shem the Penman in *Finnegans Wake*, ‘through the bowels of his misery [...] over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body’ (Joyce 1939: 185). As Beckett himself quipped about his recent work in 1931, ‘of course it stinks of Joyce in spite of most earnest endeavours to endow it with my own odours. Unfortunately for myself that’s the only way I’m interested in writing’ (*LSB I 81*).<sup>9</sup>

### ‘I HAVE A DIRTY’

Richard Coe has noted how Beckett ‘seems painfully fascinated by certain words: *haemorrhage*, *haemorrhoidal* (“Home Olga”), *hemorrhoids* (*sic*; “Sanies II”)’ (1977: 873). Indeed, not only the two ‘Sanies’ poems, in which such words are to be expected,<sup>10</sup> but a great number of poems in *EBOP* seem to be driven by all kinds of body parts as well as bodily functions, obstructions, secretions, and remains. ‘Exeo in a spasm<sup>11</sup> / tired of my darling’s red sputum’,<sup>12</sup> opens ‘Enueg I’ (*CP 6*); in ‘Enueg II’ we find Christ on the cross ‘sweating like Judas’ (9); ‘the green tulips / shining [...] like an anthrax’ (9), and so on.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, as Alan Gilles has suggested, there is a relevant connection between the bodily secretions in the poems and their lack of punctuation: Beckett’s poems ‘almost entirely *void* themselves of punctuation, which focuses the reader’s attention on the line’ (2005: 125; emphasis added). Gilles offers a reading of how Beckett’s ‘avant-garde proclamations distract attention from his entirely conventional attraction towards aesthetic consonance’ (127). He underscores the ‘malignant nihilism, gratuitous morbidity, and militant aggression of Beckett’s verse’, most of which he calls ‘mechanically warped anti-poems of furious inarticulation [...] [d]ominated by its rage against death, [...] fused with an envenomed sense of the impotence of language’ (119–120). Quoting the opening line from ‘Serena II’ (‘this clonic earth’, *CP 18*), Gilles argues that ‘[c]lonic’ denotes ‘spasms in which violent muscular contractions and relaxations take place in rapid succession, and a better description of Beckett’s verse would be difficult to find’ (120).

The form in particular of Beckett’s friend Thomas MacGreevy’s poems can also be seen as something that Beckett absorbed in his own work. The form and structure of ‘Crón Tráth na nDéithe’, MacGreevy’s long and dark ‘Cab poem’, as Beckett called it (MacGreevy 1971: 12) and which he liked a lot, is not dissimilar from what Beckett himself does in, for instance,

'Enueg I'. That poem, moreover, also describes an odyssey (of sorts) in and around Dublin.<sup>14</sup> MacGreevy paid careful attention to the layout of his poems, thereby, according to Karen Brown, 'engender[ing] visual as much as aural experiences' (2011: 107).<sup>15</sup> Brown argues that '[t]he *space between* the poet or painter and the phenomenal world of which he wrote or painted may be linked to the modernist conception of the void, a concept stemming from French literature of the late nineteenth century and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé in particular' (107). She observes that MacGreevy, like Beckett, was concerned with the 'void' and not so much with communication; in MacGreevy, the void 'is linked to the poet's disillusionment in the face of war, to the Romantic poets' imaginative response to the limitations of language, and to the spatial awareness of poets such as Mallarmé' (108).<sup>16</sup>

#### 'ITS SECRET THINGS'

The particular quality of *EBOP* may furthermore be connected with the notion of rupturing the lines of communication as suggested in the modernist 'Poetry is Vertical' and 'Revolution of the Word' manifestos, and with Beckett's polemical 1934 review 'Recent Irish Poetry' (*Dis* 70). To see how, we can take a letter he wrote to MacGreevy in 1931 as a starting point: '[T]he greater part of my poetry', Beckett writes, 'though it may be reasonably felicitous in its choice of terms, *fails* precisely because it is *facultatif*' (*LSB I* 133; emphasis added). 'Whereas the 3 or 4 I like', Beckett goes on,

Alba & the long *Enueg* & *Dortmunder* & even *Moly*, do not and never did give me that impression of being *construits*. I cannot explain very well to myself what they have that distinguishes them from the others, but it is something arborescent or of the sky, not Wagner, not clouds on wheels; written above an abscess and not out of a cavity, a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit. (*LSB I* 134)

Knowlson, who quotes most of this letter in full (1996b: 222), does not attempt to illuminate what Beckett himself fails to 'explain very well', but it is worth examining what Beckett is trying (or failing) to say here.

It is tempting to think that the idea of his poetry as failed because it is 'facultatif' is a 'pre-echo' of the philosophy of failure that we now recognize

as informing Beckett's oeuvre as a whole. But more to the point here would be to understand the distinction he claims for the poems he likes as 'written above an abscess and not out of a cavity, a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit'. I would argue that the emphasis is on the notion of *statement* versus (and preferred to) *description*. The idea of a poem as a statement suggests that it is not meant to communicate, or at the very least, that the poet does not expect the reader to communicate anything back. The idea (also mentioned by Gilles as informing Beckett's essays on Proust and 'Work in Progress') might be an echo of item 11 in 'The Revolution of the Word' proclamation, published in *transition* in 1929: 'The writer expresses. He does not communicate' (the springboard to item 12, the most famous item on the list: 'The plain reader be damned', Jolas 2009a: 112). Beckett did not sign the proclamation, but he was certainly aware of it and, as John Fletcher has suggested, in all likelihood he shared at least some of its spirit, at the time working closely with Joyce on *his* particular role in that revolution (1964: 320).

A proclamation that Beckett (as well as MacGreevy) did sign was the so-called 'Poetry is Vertical' manifesto, published in *transition* in 1932. It stresses 'the hegemony of the inner over the outer life', and claims that '[t]he final disintegration of the "I" in the creative act is made possible by the use of a language which is a mantic instrument, and which does not hesitate to adopt a revolutionary attitude toward word and syntax, going even so far as to invent a hermetic language, if necessary' (Jolas 2009b: 266–267). Perceiving the language of *EBOP* as a 'mantic instrument' is perhaps overstating things (not all obscurity leads to prophesy), but like *Finnegans Wake's*, its hermetic, mysterious quality is obvious.

In 1934 Beckett picked up the idea of poetry as statement again, insisting in 'Recent Irish Poetry' on a poetical mode in which the 'rupture of the lines of communication' (*Dis* 70) is key. The line that Beckett draws in his essay between the 'antiquarians' and 'others', 'with MacGreevy situated somewhere in the middle', has led, according to Karen Brown, 'to too simplistic a history of two camps of Irish art: "conservative writers working within hackneyed Irish modes, on the one hand, and overtly experimental and European-influenced modernists, on the other"' (2011: 109). Yet even if we take this into account, it is safe to say that, at first glance, Beckett belonged to the group of overtly experimental modernists, particularly in the 1930s, when his own modernism had as yet to shift towards a more personal kind of '-ism'. At the same time, Beckett's 1930s

poetry is difficult to classify. It certainly does not belong to that of the conservative Irish writers, but it is more than merely 'overtly experimental' and 'European-influenced' modernist. It both echoes tradition and foreshadows post-Joycean revolution. By 'embracing' Joyce, Beckett liberates himself from him. In 1932 he wrote: 'I vow I will get over J. J. ere I die' (*LSB I* 108). In many ways he did, of course, but my main point is that the 'Joycean practices', as Robert Garratt has called them (1989: 94), that is to say Beckett's (and Dennis Devlin's and Brian Coffey's) 'commitment to a Joycean direction in poetry' (95), their 'willingness to adopt modernist techniques, which they derived from *Ulysses*' (96), provide not so much a straightjacket as a way toward the liberation of the Joycean voice in poetry. Joyce himself could be left to look after his own voice in his own prose, but his 'direction' could be more profitably taken up in his younger fellow writers' poetry. Close-reading a number of poems from *EBOP* in terms of their specific Joycean elements,<sup>17</sup> Garratt has suggested that '[b]y accepting its disjointedness and, more important, by insisting on a personal vision of reality which made cultural and spiritual isolation its subject, Joyce offered the next generation of poets a sense of continuity, and with it the means to widen the poetic tradition that Yeats had narrowed' (102).<sup>18</sup>

### 'AH THE BANNER'

In *EBOP* several notions from the manifestos and the review can be recognized. Take, for instance, the first-person narrators who set out on their journeys or observations and leave us, at the end of the poem, without any recognizable persona to relate to. In 'Enueg I' the 'I' (depersonalized, without agency, by virtue of the Latin *exeo* not needing a personal pronoun) experiences a kind of spasmic, orgasmic birth:

Exeo in a spasm  
 tired of my darling's red sputum  
 from the Portobello Private Nursing Home  
 its secret things  
 and toil to the crest of the surge of the steep perilous bridge  
 and lapse down blankly under the scream of the hoarding  
 round the bright stiff banner of the hoarding  
 into a black west  
 throttled with clouds. (*CP* 6)

From this point onwards we witness the gradually ‘re-personalized’ persona (‘I trundle’, 6) on his circular descent into Dublin, which ends in Kilmainham, ever since the 1916 Easter Rising a name in Ireland with distinctly ominous reverberations—most of the leaders of the Rising were executed in Kilmainham prison within nine days of the event. Having arrived there, the final words are Beckett’s translation of Rimbaud’s poem ‘Barbare’ (see *CP* 266), which can, however, simultaneously be read as an allusion to the bloody events in the prison in 1916, its flying flag a ‘banner of meat bleeding’:

Ah the banner.  
the banner of meat bleeding.  
on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers.  
that do not exist. (8)

In a poem like ‘Dortmunder’, the process of disintegration, depersonalization, or even extermination, starts as early as the third line: ‘In the magic the Homer dusk / past the red spire of sanctuary / *I null* she royal hulk / hasten to the violet lamp to the thin K’in music of the bawd’ (11; emphasis added). Most directly though it is the title of both the collection and the eponymous final poem that points to the final disintegration of the ‘I’, of nymph Echo’s ‘I’ under Narcissus’ non- or rather only-himself-seeing gaze. Her bones, taken by the maggots for what they are, are turned to stones.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of favouring statement over communication can be seen in ‘Alba’, where a beloved is addressed

whose beauty shall be a sheet before me  
*a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of emblems*  
so that there is no sun and no unveiling  
and no host  
only I and then the sheet  
and bulk dead (10; emphasis added)

‘The artist who is aware of this [rupture] may *state* the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects; he may *state* it as no man’s land’, Beckett wrote in ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ (*Dis* 70; emphasis added). Pivoting on the notion of poetry as statement of things and mood rather than as ‘ode’ to and exegesis of feeling, this kind of anti-Romanticism is typical of *EBOP*.



Beckett's 'stinking of Joyce' can also be traced in how he applied in *EBOP* what Marius Buning has called Joyce and Beckett's 'master trope', the chiasmus. Using a number of examples indicating how '[t]he chiasmus [...] is both a micro- and a macro-structural device', Buning showed that the device served Beckett in several short stories, novels, novellas, and the prose poem *what is the word*: 'in his final utterance, [...] "What is the Word", written shortly before his death, Beckett resorts to sustained chiasmic patterning, thus foregrounding the impossibility of escaping the prison-house of language, self, and reality' (1994: 56). John Pilling, without mentioning the term, has postulated a chiasmic patterning for the collection by pointing out that 'Beckett's placement of "Malacoda" third from last suggests that he recognized the resemblance between the poem on the death of his father and the poem on the death of "the old heart" ("Enueg II"), which he placed third in the book he published' (1997: 89). Ruby Cohn, too, without invoking the chiasmic balancing act, talks at length about the deliberate formal setup of *EBOP*: 'It was Beckett who arranged the poems in the sequence that we read. His first and last poems describe a mordant circle, for the volume opens on an offal-eating vulture, and it closes on the bones left by maggots. [...] The final lyrical "Echo's Bones" is at once a voyage and an elegy' (2001: 63). Pilling's and Cohn's observations are significant; if we follow Buning's preamble and render the structure of *EBOP* along chiasmic lines, Fig. 1 shows what it might look like.

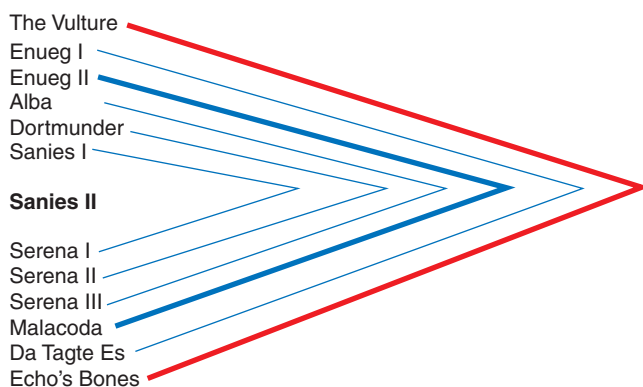


Fig. 1 The chiasmic structure of *EBOP*

Figure 1 shows how the poems in *EBOP* chiasmatically connect: ‘The Vulture’ (the first poem) and ‘Echo’s Bones’ (the last) link up thematically and in terms of imagery (see Cohn above); and so do, for instance, ‘Enueg II’ and ‘Malacoda’ (see Pilling above). Read in this way, ‘Sanies II’ would be the pivotal poem in *EBOP*; it is the one on which the collection turns, and at the same time it stands apart from it; it does not have a ‘companion’ poem. Interestingly, corresponding to the chiasmatic setup of *EBOP* might be the fact that the first poem of the collection, ‘The Vulture’, was written last, and the last, ‘Echo’s Bones’, first (see *CP* 298).

Further research will have to be conducted so as to decide whether the chiasmatic pattern informs the entire collection or merely a small number of paired poems, but clearly both the linear and chiasmatic routes through *EBOP* lead up to dead ends. In his selection of the poems and in the composition of the whole, Beckett seems already to be experimenting with a Joycean trope that brings him close to imitating the high modernists’ fondness for works built on systems, mythical, rhetorical, or both.

#### ‘ALL THINGS FULL OF GODS’

Coffey, Devlin, Beckett, and also MacGreevy, partly on the basis of Beckett’s 1934 review in which he takes to task most members of the ‘cultic twalette’ (Joyce 1939: 344), are often seen to form some kind of collective: a group of Irish modernists distinguishing themselves from a more traditional current that was also never fully abandoned. As David Wheatley has emphasized, however, it would be wrong not to recognize that ‘real and profound differences existed between [Beckett and MacGreevy], certainly on the connection (or lack thereof) between their modernist poetics and the concept of Irish tradition they respectively embraced (MacGreevy) and contemptuously rejected (Beckett)’ (2005: 189). Wheatley’s reading of *EBOP*’s Irish settings in terms of a post-Free State Gramscian interregnum discusses Beckett’s hostility to Eliot and his mythical method. Wheatley finds, for instance, that the river Liffey in ‘Enueg I’ is not so much ‘a Joycean source of life and renewal [as a] cloacal filth’ (94). He criticizes Harvey’s *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (1970), which is said to offer ‘a comprehensive reading but fails to engage with [*EBOP*’s] Irish Modernist genealogy’ (198), and goes on to call Patricia Coughlan’s chapter on Beckett in her *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (1955) ‘the best reading of Beckett within that framework’ (198).

Both Coughlan’s and Wheatley’s approaches to *EBOP* are wider-ranging than Harvey’s. However, albeit speculative at times, Harvey’s work is still

crucially significant as both an introduction to potential readings and a resource for Beckett's sources. Harvey was the first to pinpoint the various reverberations in *EBOP* of some of the traditional Provençal songs invoked by their titles: enueg (a complaint), serena (an evening song), alba (a dawn song). 'Da Tagte Es' and 'Dortmunder' are also set at dawn. There are two important aspects of the 'Serena' poems, however, that as far as I have been able to establish have until now been overlooked.

It would strike any reader that the 'Serena' poems are anything but 'serene' in the *OED*'s straightforward sense of 'clear, fine, calm, tranquil, restful to the eye, untroubled', and so forth. This is from 'Serena I':

I stump off in a fearful rage under Married Men's Quarters  
Bloody Tower  
and afar off at all speed screw me up Wren's giant bully  
and curse the day caged panting on the platform  
under the flaring urn (*CP* 17)

Obviously the mood is not 'clear' or 'tranquil'. Interestingly, the editors of the *Collected Poems* argue that despite Harvey's claim that Beckett is working with the Provençal model of the 'evening song in which the lover expresses "his unhappiness during the daytime and his longing for the night that will reunite him with his lover", [...] the three "Serena" poems hardly seem to accord closely with this definition, and the genre is not recorded by Beck' (282–283).<sup>20</sup> Instead, they suggest, Beckett may have thought of Dante, who uses the word 'serena' ('siren') in a dream sequence in *Purgatorio* (XIX.19), 'with Dante the protagonist tempted by a siren-like figure' (283). I would argue, however, that a now obsolete meaning of the word 'serena' also helps give the two 'Serena' poems an additional dimension: 'A light fall of moisture or fine rain after sunset in hot countries (see serein n.), formerly regarded as a noxious dew or mist' (*OED*). Serena, here, is a precipitation (if not a precipitate), one of the many none too healthy forms of falling or fallen moisture, bodily or otherwise, the collection includes.

### 'THE FAIRY-TALES OF MEATH ENDED'

Next to recalling the troubadour genre and suggesting the notion of 'precipitation', the 'Serena' poems evoke a character from a poem conceived in Ireland by a British settler in the late sixteenth century whom Beckett, alongside the Provençal troubadours, first studied at Trinity College under

the guidance of professor Rudmose-Brown (Knowlson 1996b: 54–55), and echoes of whose work have been recognized in, among others, *Watt*, *Molloy*, and, as we shall see, *Endgame*: Edmund Spenser. His ‘wandering’ (Van Es 2006: 52) Serena features in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596).<sup>21</sup> One of the figures that appear to be ‘types of [Queen] Elizabeth, both positive and negative’ (52), she is introduced when she is caught having sex with her knight, Calepine. She then wanders off in the forest where she encounters the Blatant Beast, ‘the monster with a thousand tongues who attacks its targets without discrimination or purpose’ (52). In Canto VIII, Serena is ogled by the wild men of the ‘salvage Nation’:

Her yvorie necke, her alablaster brest,  
 Her paps, which like white silken pillowes were,  
 For love in soft delight thereon to rest;  
 Her tender sides her bellie white and clere,  
 Which like an Altar did it selfe upre,  
 To offer sacrifice divine thereon;  
 Her goodly thighes, whose glorie did appeare.  
 Like a triumphall Arch, and thereupon.  
 The spoiles of Princes hang’d, which were in battel won.  
 (Spenser 2007a: 121)

Next, having caught Serena sleeping, the savages strip her naked and prepare to rape her, but they are stopped in their tracks by the priest, who wishes to sacrifice her to the gods:

Those daintie parts, the dearlings of delight,  
 Which mote not be prophan’d of common eyes,  
 Those villeins vew’d with loose lascivious sight,  
 And closely tempted with their craftie spies;  
 And some of them gan mongst themselves devize.  
 Thereof by force to take their beastly pleasure.  
 But them the Priest rebuking, did advize.  
 To dare not to pollute so sacred threasure,  
 Vow’d to the gods: religion held even theeves in measure. (121–122)

Leaving Spenser’s sexual obsessions aside, it is the forest setting, the strangely shaded combination of light and dark that, I would argue, prefigures especially Beckett’s ‘Serena II’, not least because of its allusion to ‘the fairy-tales of Meath’ having ended:

all these phantoms shuddering out of focus  
 it is useless to close the eyes  
 all the chords of the earth broken like a woman pianist's  
 the toads abroad again on their rounds  
 sidling up to their snares  
 the fairy-tales of Meath ended  
 so say your prayers now and go to bed  
 your prayers before the lamps start to sing behind the larches  
 here at these knees of stone  
 then to bye-bye on the bones (*CP* 19)

'[T]he poem unreels backwards in time', as Coughlan has put it, featuring 'a symbolic deployment of the geography of Ireland' and '[Meath's] ancient role as the seat of Irish kingship' (1955: 194).<sup>22</sup> Spenser's 'Salvage Nation', inhabited by savages, inspired 'the tradition of the wild man in European culture' (Hamilton 1990: 1635), and represents the colonized Ireland. We might ask, with Samuel Beckett, ten years after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, how much of that Renaissance savagery had ever gone away.

Séan Kennedy (2012) has drawn attention to the echoes in *Endgame* of a prose work by Spenser, the *Vewe of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) which 'contains his considered opinions about the Ireland he knew so well after sixteen years of living (or exile) there' (Hamilton 1990: 1872). Crucial for *Endgame*, according to Kennedy, is a passage in which Spenser describes the phantom-like natives, 'shuddering out of focus' (to quote 'Serena II'), dying of famine, crawling on all fours, eating watercress and carrion (see Kennedy 2012: 108).<sup>23</sup> Next to incorporating echoes of Spenser's *Vewe* in *Endgame*, I would argue, Beckett was already absorbing Spenserian elements in his poetical work of the 1930s. The story of Mammon (not capitalized by Beckett in 'Serena I'), for instance, is one of the key episodes in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*; similarly, 'the toads abroad again on their rounds / sidling up to their snares' in 'Serena II' seems to be an allusion to Book I, in which we find a description of Envy '[u]pon a ravenous wolfe, and still did chaw / between his cankred teeth a venomous tode' (Canto IV, stanza 30; Spenser 2007b: 62). Beckett's toads perhaps also recall the singing frogs in Spenser's 'Epithalamion' (1594), the wedding poem he wrote for his second wife: 'Ne let th' vnpleasant Quayre of Frogs still croking / Make vs to wish theyr choking' (Spenser 1997: 117).<sup>24</sup> That poem has also been identified as a 'part-model'

(Ackerley 2005: 29) for the wedding poem parody ‘To Nelly’ in *Watt* (in which, of course, the protagonist also remembers his younger self listening to three frogs croaking ‘KraK’, ‘Krek’, and ‘Krik’; *W* 135–137).

### ‘BYE-BYE ON THE BONES’

Beckett’s ‘Serena’ poems are about ruination, despoliation; they incorporate echoes of the early modern in an evocation of the present as embodied by an English city (London, in ‘Serena I’) and the Irish countryside (around Dublin, in ‘Serena II’), respectively. Next to aspects of *EBOP* discussed in this chapter which more openly engage with voices Beckett echoes or alludes to, the restless dialogue with the early modern is a crucial element in what sets Beckett’s modernism apart from that of his contemporaries. Having studied Spenser, and having ‘experimented with writing some “obscene Spenserian stanzas”’ (Knowlson 1996b: 131) in December 1932, Beckett fashioned his entirely modern and idiosyncratically modernist ‘Serena’ poems partly on a model provided by a sixteenth-century English exile in Ireland. It is a model deserving of further attention in Beckett studies. As Mark Nixon has observed, ‘Beckett’s notebooks from the thirties reveal that he drew on all European cultures, including both the Irish and the English’ (2005: 46), and Spenser’s presence in *EBOP* serves as such an acute ‘both Irish and English’ backdrop. It is reasonable to expect that many more bones and other precipitates of the Spenserian and other echoes touched on in this chapter await further exhumation and subsequent dissection.

### NOTES

1. Or ‘pomes’; Beckett used the pun (poems/apples) in letters to Thomas MacGreevy (*LSB I* 19, 100). Joyce’s *Pomes Penyeach*, also comprising thirteen poems, was published in 1927.
2. See also Ackerley and Gontarski (2004: 168) on the ‘sustained parallelism’ Beckett created in echoing Eliot’s title. See also Pilling (1997: 244n40).
3. Beckett’s poetry ‘is hard to fathom, harder even to speak of – it is *hard* poetry’ (Kosters 1992: 93).
4. Correct version: ‘a young man with nothing to say and the itch to make’ (Harvey 1970: 305).
5. See also Marjorie Perloff on regarding *Ill Seen Ill Said* as a poem. Perloff calls for a questioning of ‘our continuing faith in Romantic and modernist paradigms of poetry’ (1982: 432).

6. 'The scatology may contain an undergraduate's jocularly, but that it is no mere joke, still less any mere trope, is clear even without recourse to Beckett's *oeuvre*. Writing and shitting: without recourse to Freud, either, these may be seen to share for Beckett an all-important intimacy, an urgency, a necessity even, just as they share a difficulty and delight in emission and transmission. They share, that is to say, both the requirements and the limits of *expression*' (*LSB I* xcv).
7. On Beckett and the body, see Maude (2011), but she does not discuss Beckett's poetry.
8. *OED*, 'precipitate' (noun and verb): '*fig.* Something that materializes or is produced as by a chemical or atmospheric process; a by-product', and '*Meteorol.* More fully *atmospheric precipitate*. Moisture that falls to the earth after condensing from water vapour in the atmosphere; a particular form of this, as rain or snow'. See also Pilling (1997: 244n40).
9. See also Joyce's letter to his publisher Grant Richards praising 'the odour of corruption which I hope floats over my stories' (Joyce 1966: 123).
10. Sanies: '[a] thin fetid pus mixed with serum or blood, secreted by a wound or ulcer' (*OED*). For an illuminating criticism of 'Sanies II', see Ackerley (2007). Consider also an autobiographical backdrop to Beckett's obsession in *EBOP* with the (malfunctioning) body: he suffered from severe physical and mental/psychosomatic health issues throughout the 1930s, including heart palpitations, panic attacks, and abscesses. See Knowlson (1996b: 172–250).
11. See also the penultimate stanza of MacGreevy's 'Crón Tráth na nDéithe': 'When the Custom House took fire / Hope slipped off her green petticoat / The Four Courts went up in a spasm / Moses felt for Hope' (MacGreevy 1971: 27).
12. As the editors of the *Collected Poems* note, 'SB is almost certainly thinking of his cousin Peggy Sinclair with whom he was romantically involved at the time and who later died of tuberculosis' (*CP* 264). There might also be an echo here of John Keats on recognizing the blood in his sputum as 'arterial blood: I cannot be deceived by its colour. It is my death warrant' (qtd. in Byrne 2010: 32).
13. For example, 'ink of pestilence in my skull', 'sweaty heroes' ('Enueg I', *CP* 7); 'the mard [cf. French *merde*] of all sinners' ('Dortmunder', 11); 'clonic earth' (twice), 'bye-bye on the bones' ('Serena II', 18–19); 'mmae', 'cock' ('Serena III', 20); 'the flesh falls', 'breaking without fear of favour wind' ('Echo's Bones', 23).
14. See also Ruby Cohn on 'Enueg I': '[A]n embryonic picaresque novel, or rather an aborted one, because it embarks at every new departure, on a voyage through the circles of "hell"' (2001: 27).
15. The online Thomas MacGreevy Archive provides spectacular examples which show the process of composition ([www.macgreevy.org/index.jsp](http://www.macgreevy.org/index.jsp)).

16. John Pilling, among others, has investigated how late nineteenth-century French poets and Beckett's work interact. See also John Fletcher: 'Aragon's toughness of diction and a freedom of meter [...] also reminds us of certain poems in the *Echo's Bones* cycle' (1964: 323).
17. "Enueg I" is Joycean in design as well as technique; the protagonist wanders through a section of Dublin, sensing in the physical environment an exemplum of his own mental state, reminiscent of Stephen's mental gymnastics in the "Proteus" chapter of *Ulysses* [...]. The references to Chapelizod, the Fox and Geese, and Isolde and the particular environs and the river Liffey are conscious echoes of *Finnegans Wake* [...]. Moreover, the journey of the poet-persona in "Enueg I" is both internal and external in the manner of both Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses*' (Garratt 1989: 97–98).
18. This was recognized as early as 1932, when Samuel Putnam, in the introduction to George Reavey's *Faust's Metamorphoses: Poems*, wrote: 'Beckett is the closest, perhaps as yet too close, to Joyce, but then, he sees a task for himself in poetry which Joyce has left untouched,—the task perhaps of expressing, as Rimbaud expressed, passionate nihilism, and transcendental vision at one and the same time (7–8)' (qtd. in *LSB I* 108–109n2).
19. 'The HRHRC "autograph" copy of *EBOP* is marked by SB: "Echo's Bones were turned / to stone' / Ovid Metamorphoses?" [...], although in this case it is a process of putrefaction that is so vividly imagined' (*CP* 298).
20. See Beck (1910).
21. I thank David Pascoe for suggesting I look into the presence of Spenser's Serena in Beckett's 'Serena' poems. In the *Beckett Digital Library* a number of reading traces in the Spenser edition owned by Beckett may be found. Beckett's remark in the margin of Book II, Canto XI—'An example of Spenser [*sic*] psychology' (*BDL*, [www.beckettarchive.org/library/SPE-FAE-2.html](http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/SPE-FAE-2.html))—could provide a starting point for future research on Beckett and Spenser, which falls, however, outside the scope of this article.
22. 'Jenkins remarks that, while accompanying Grey on a number of further military forays and retaliatory strikes aimed at breaking the back of Irish resistance, Spenser "may have beheld, in addition to frequent surprise attacks and executions, some of the beautiful lakes of West Meath as on the previous [expedition] he had seen the lakes of Killarney" (1937, 344)' (qtd. in Anderson et al. 1996: 6). Beckett may have been familiar with this detail from Spenser's biography: 'behold Meath shining through a chink in the hills' ('Serena II', *CP* 18).
23. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, deliberate starvation and, by such means, genocide, were high on the British agenda in Ireland. Spenser was one of England's willing executioners there. Ackerley and Gontarski



describe Spenser as an 'English poet whose term in Ireland as the Lord Deputy's secretary smeared his reputation with lasting odium. SB [...] retain[ed] for the poet a respect the more surprising given what Spenser stood for' (2004: 536).

24. 'A conflation of classical sources with local detail, see Vergil, *Georgics*, 1.378, "et veterem in limo ranae cecinere querellam" (in the mire the frogs croak their ancient lament; frogs are associated with jealousy or *Invidia* [=to look askance] through an extended etymological pun on *limus* [=both looking askance and mire]). But the irritation Spenser felt at the frogs' nocturnal croaking in the Irish bog is also evident both here and also in *FQ* V.x.23.8' (Spenser 1997: 248).