



Samuel Beckett and Catastrophe

Edited by Michiko Tsushima
Yoshiki Tajiri · Mariko Hori Tanaka



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After publishing *Samuel Beckett and Pain* (Rodopi, 2012) and *Samuel Beckett and Trauma* (Manchester University Press, 2018), we embarked on the third project, on Samuel Beckett and catastrophe, and this present volume is its fruit. In October 2018, we formed a panel with Naoya Mori, a contributor to this volume, on the theme of catastrophe in *Endgame* in the annual meeting of IASIL Japan (the Japan branch of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literature) at Toyo University, Tokyo. In April 2019, we received a three-year grant from Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research) on the subject of Samuel Beckett and catastrophe (No.19K00442). In December 2019, the grant enabled us to invite to Tokyo, another contributor to this volume, Trish McTighe, who, at Aoyama Gakuin University, gave a lecture that developed into her chapter. Many more academic interactions were to have followed, but the Covid-19 pandemic severely limited the opportunities. Despite this ‘catastrophe’, we went on with the help of many people. We are grateful to all of them, especially the members of the Beckett Circle in Japan and the overseas colleagues in Samuel Beckett Society.

Michiko Tsushima
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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Michiko Tsushima, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Mariko Hori Tanaka	
Catastrophe and Aesthetic Creation	
Tickling Your Catastrophe, or Beckett's Laughing Antistrophe	13
Jean-Michel Rabaté	
The Not-All Catastrophe in <i>Ill Seen Ill Said/Mal vu mal dit</i> and 'Comment Dire'/'What Is the Word'	33
Llewellyn Brown	
Beckett's Grey and the Temporality of Afterness	53
Michiko Tsushima	
Beckett's Monadology and the Anti-Catastrophic Aesthetics	73
Naoya Mori	
Catastrophes in History	
Beckett's Sense of History in the Age of Catastrophe	97
William Davies	
Imagination's Dead: Beckett's Catastrophic Realism	117
Jeff Fort	

Catastrophe and Everyday Life in Samuel Beckett Yoshiki Tajiri	135
Ecological Catastrophe and the Role of Art	
Slow Violence and Slow Going: Encountering Beckett in the Time of Climate Catastrophe Laura Salisbury	155
A Feminist Counter-Apocalyptic Interpretation of Precarity: Reading Samuel Beckett's <i>Catastrophe</i> in the Post-catastrophe Age Mariko Hori Tanaka	175
Gestures of Helpless Compassion: Beckett's Eco-Poetics of Extinction Trish McTighe	193
Correction to: Slow Violence and Slow Going: Encountering Beckett in the Time of Climate Catastrophe Laura Salisbury	C1
Index	215

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Introduction

Michiko Tsushima, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Mariko Hori Tanaka

Catastrophe has been a theme of literature since the word came into the world. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘catastrophe’ is the word that originated from the Greek ‘kata’ meaning ‘down’ and ‘strophē’ meaning ‘turning’, so that it signifies ‘overturning’ or ‘sudden turn’. Therefore, the word has large connotations from a great change in politics to a natural disaster, or from some huge uncontrollable accident to ecological and cosmic calamity caused by human activity. Catastrophe also refers to the denouement of a drama, especially a classical tragedy. The word was mainly used in this sense, i.e. as a turning point or a reversal of the narrative in dramatic texts. It was in the mid-eighteenth century that it began to refer to a disastrous event.

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Samuel Beckett's works, especially those after World War II, are often set in a post-catastrophic world, even though what the catastrophic events were is unknown. Characters who survived some calamity stay either in an empty space or in a closed space with no other people around. However, they sometimes mention or hint that the victimised are all dead or dying, and that they themselves are in a living dead state. How do readers and spectators respond to their situations? Readers and spectators may enjoy them as fiction as long as they are situations on stage or somewhere else. But at the same time, spectacles of catastrophe in art and literature possibly affect their readers and audience who would imagine them as serious events that may happen to them in reality. While the reality of catastrophe may be beyond words and indescribable, fictional works can convey it by analogy. Through art and literature, film and drama, the unspeakableness of the event can be approached with language and/or images. The creation of those artworks resonates with philosophy, psychology, history and more recently, ecology. This book explores how the (post-)catastrophic situations in Beckett can be read through the perspectives of those various disciplines on catastrophe.

As shown in *Catastrophe and Philosophy* edited by David Rosner, in our civilisation many influential philosophies and worldviews originated from the experience of catastrophes such as natural disasters, wars, plagues and economic crises. Rosner's book illustrates, for example, how Plato's *Republic*, St. Augustine's *City of God*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Borowski's Holocaust stories and Agamben's *State of Exception* are reactions to different catastrophic situations. According to Rosner, catastrophes 'fundamentally challenge [...] basic human "sense-making" capabilities' (334). Therefore, a great number of thoughts in the history of ideas can be regarded as attempts to 'make sense out of catastrophe and reorient themselves in its aftermath' (xii). In *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone observes that the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, representatives of postmodernism, are responses to the Holocaust, and in *The Broken Voice*, he attends to the thought contained in the 'broken voice' of the Holocaust in literature.

We can situate Beckett's work in this history of thoughts that arose out of catastrophes. As is well known, Theodor Adorno regarded Beckett as a post-Auschwitz writer. For Adorno who famously wrote, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1983, 34), Beckett was primarily a writer who responded to the catastrophes of the Nazi years. In *Negative*

Dialectics, Adorno writes, ‘Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps—a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp [...] To Beckett, as to the Gnostics, the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet’ (380–1). Adorno senses in Beckett’s ‘image world of nothingness’ ‘a carrying-on which seems stoical but is full of inaudible cries that things should be different’ (1973, 381).

Adorno found in Beckett’s works (esp. in *Endgame*) models for how art can respond to historical catastrophes. According to Espen Hammer, Adorno claims that Beckett explores the catastrophe of the twentieth century, ‘revealing the state of humanity in a world that no longer seems to offer unquestionable sources of meaning or existential assurance’ (133). Unlike Strindberg or Brecht, Beckett’s works ‘do not make moral pronouncements’ or ‘do not tell us how things *ought* to be’, but ‘assert “This is how it is”’ (134). In other words, Adorno sees in Beckett ‘historical “prototypes” (*Urbilder*)’ (135): in ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, he explains that ‘Beckett’s prototypes are [...] historical in that they hold up as typical of human beings only the deformations inflicted upon them by the form of their society’ (257). Hence, the characters in *Endgame* are not ‘figures of historical reality’ but ‘emblems or perhaps allegories of what human existence now amounts to’ (Hammer, 135). As Hammer suggests in his interpretation of Adorno, Beckett expresses the truth of human suffering in the post-catastrophic context, the truth attained by a kind of knowing which transcends the limits of everyday knowing (16). To Adorno who ‘stated ambition of viewing advanced work of art as philosophical and indeed metaphysical truth-tellers’, regarding the notion of ‘art as a privileged form of expression’ (Hammer, 213), Beckett’s art is obviously a ‘metaphysical truth-teller’. Adorno believes that advanced, modern works of art (including Beckett’s works) express human suffering. But what they express is not sufferings of anyone in particular but ‘the objective suffering behind’, and by expressing it, the works ‘anticipat[e] a reconfigured social order’ (Hammer, 205–6). In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes, ‘Artworks bear expression not where they communicate the subject, but rather where they reverberate with the protohistory of subjectivity, of ensoulment, for which tremolo of any sort is a miserable surrogate’ (112–3). This is how Adorno finds in Beckett the *raison d’être* of art in its response to catastrophe.

Philosophically linking the concept of catastrophe with aesthetics, Part I of this volume addresses the way the presence of catastrophe is fundamental to Beckett's aesthetic creation. As discussed above, Beckett wrote his works in the context of political catastrophes of the twentieth century, especially the catastrophe of the Nazi years. Although Beckett wrote his work as a response to his own experience of catastrophes, it does not merely represent catastrophes as factual events. It presents itself as an art that radically questions the representation itself and undermines its own stability. The first four chapters discuss how the relation to catastrophe forms a structural basis for Beckett's art from the perspectives of European intellectual history, psychoanalysis and philosophy.

Jean-Michel Rabaté, drawing on a number of Beckett's texts such as his later play *Catastrophe*, passages from the Trilogy, the opaque French poem 'ainsi a-t-on beau...' and conversations on art with Georges Duthuit in the 1940s and 1950s, sketches the several levels at which the concept of 'catastrophe' makes sense for Beckett by alluding to various important works in psychoanalysis, European thought, art and literature. In conclusion, he contends that Beckett refused to 'make a strophe of the catastrophe' in rejecting 'the "strophic" great works of art in which death and loss find a dialectical resolution' and presented 'his new aesthetics of impotence against the sublime power of art still deployed by Joyce and Proust'.

Llewellyn Brown discusses how Beckett's work evidences the effects of a catastrophe by analysing *Ill Seen Ill Said/Mal vu mal dit* and 'Comment dire'/'what is the word' from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Brown, a Beckettian catastrophe is located beyond historical and biographical dimensions: it is at the heart of writing as is described as 'the hole within language'. Brown argues that it is shown through 'an incessant instability haunting language', or the internally excluded part in language that disrupts any representation. He examines how Beckettian language of catastrophe has a radically structural aspect and how it can be seen as a productive force in aesthetic creation.

Michiko Tsushima, paying attention to Beckett's grey which marks sites of a catastrophe that has already happened, explores the relation between the colour grey and the post-catastrophic temporality of 'after' in Beckett. Referring to Paul Klee's view of grey and Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of 'after' in *After Fukushima* and 'Finite History', she examines the dimension of grey in afterness in *Malone Dies*, *Ghost Trio*, and *Endgame*. She argues that Beckett's work points to the importance of remaining exposed

to this dimension, in other words, to the fundamental indecision that lies at the core of his work. It is the condition of possibility for the openness to other futures.

Naoya Mori recognises in Beckett's works his principle of the '*impossibility of catastrophe*' and argues that it was originated from Leibniz's philosophy. The '*impossibility of catastrophe*', the phrase found in his letter to Alan Schneider, means the impossibility of denouement in drama, but Mori reads in this phrase Beckett's anti-catastrophic aesthetics modelled on Leibniz's monadology. Its adaptation can be found in Beckett's various works with no beginning and no end in which the unborn or deceased speak. Mori also maintains that Beckett's monadology is not only the aesthetic principle but the ethic of his life.

Part II turns to catastrophe in Beckett's work in terms of history. Beckett studies has recently seen a surge of historical research. Following Sean Kennedy and Andrew Gibson's work (mainly on Irish history and post-war French history, respectively), such books as Emilie Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* (2017), James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (2018) and William Davies's *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War* (2020) provide us with a wealth of information about the way Beckett was profoundly engaged with important historical events in the twentieth century, from the Easter Rising in 1916 to the Holocaust and the Algerian War. When we think of Beckett and catastrophe, however, we are faced with a fundamental question about the relationship between history and catastrophe. In a sense, these two are antithetical because if the former may be considered as an ongoing process in which we are involved, the latter is something special and overwhelming that disrupts that process or at least our sense of it. Morin's book may give some readers the impression that Beckett was constantly exposed to significant political events and contexts. One might be tempted to think that his life was inseparable from a series of catastrophes. But Morin does not particularly emphasise the catastrophic feature of the political history in which Beckett was living. When catastrophe becomes constant, it loses its meaning as something extraordinary. Then should we narrow the meaning of catastrophe to indicate only extravagantly disastrous events like the Holocaust and the A-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Or is it better to think that the twentieth century was truly an unprecedented age of catastrophe and that all those political events Beckett witnessed or lived through can be regarded as catastrophes?

In his chapter on Beckett's sense of history, William Davies clearly sides with the latter view that Beckett was constantly involved with the twentieth century's catastrophic events, quoting and endorsing some historians who emphasise the catastrophic character of the period between 1914 and 1945. Davies points out that catastrophe is both within and outside of history and discusses how 'Beckett's works frequently slip between belonging within history and outside of it' in dealing with catastrophe. In the latter half of the chapter, Davies goes on to trace Beckett's references to the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, which profoundly impacted the contemporary European intellectuals and discusses how with this catastrophe in mind Beckett came to terms with his father's death and the chaos in Europe during and immediately after World War II. At the end, Davies briefly mentions the importance of Beckett's work in our age of climate change crisis.

Jeff Fort starts his chapter precisely with this catastrophic problem of climate change, enumerating the disasters it caused recently. Yet he goes on to list many other political and social problems that plague the world at present. The world now is really full of catastrophes! Fort notes that Beckett's work is 'proleptic' since 'his vision has manifestly been *realised*' in the world today. He thus alerts us to the alarming actuality of Beckett's 'realist' vision. Fort then argues that Beckett's work registers historical catastrophes without representing them. Underlying this is the coincidence between the catastrophic subjectivities and the catastrophic landscapes that they inhabit. Beckett saw the world as the mad artist in *Endgame* saw it—as only ashes. A ruined landscape is envisioned by ruined or dead imagination. A limit case of this trait can be found in *The Unnamable* where there is no distinction between imagination (that is dead) and the world or between inside and outside.

Yoshiki Tajiri limits catastrophe to A-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the ensuing anxiety of nuclear war in the Cold War period. He argues that while *Endgame* shares the popular 'post-apocalyptic' sensibility of the nuclear age, it presents everyday life as traumatised and not resistant to catastrophe. Septical of the simple opposition between the everyday and catastrophe, Tajiri shows how these two are intertwined in Beckett's work. He goes on to discuss relevant motifs in Beckett's work such as the obsession with the trauma of birth, the significance of the day, the particular 'anti-evental' temporality and the highlighted absurdity of the quotidian matters. Finally, he argues that the imagination of

outer space as shown in Hamm's remark in *Endgame* indicates the relativisation of the earth (and everyday life on it) in the nuclear age. Tajiri thus explores the relationship between catastrophe and everyday life in the nuclear age, and historically situates Beckett's work in that light.

With the recent rise of the concept of the 'Anthropocene' and climate changes, ecological readings have been attempted in the theatre studies; Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh's *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage* finds the buds of ecological thinking in Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Greg Garrard, who discusses the relationship between nature and human in literary and cultural production history in his *Ecocriticism*, adds Beckett's *Endgame* in his essay 'Endgame: Beckett's "Ecological Thought"', saying that the play 'foreshadows the ecological catastrophe to come' (394), which, unlike the Biblical apocalypse, offers neither 'the revelation of truth nor the final triumph of good over evil' (395). Instead, the play reveals 'interconnectedness' between human and nonhuman both in 'the planetary and cosmic scales' and in 'the genetic and cellular level', which implies 'kinship in mutual vulnerability' (394). Responding to such ecological thought, in *Beckett's Intermedial Ecosystems*, the first book on Beckett and ecology, Anna McMullan explores Beckett's later works in terms of the concept of ecosystems.

As Garrard sees in the context of *Endgame* the 'ecological: the intractable war of attrition Malthus perceived between population growth and limited resources' (390), Beckett's observation of the world in the play came from some chaotic circumstances that the author had seen during the Irish Independence when he was young and experienced in the post-catastrophe of World War II in France as has been discussed. However, whatever catastrophe Beckett imagined when he wrote his works, it is obvious that his characters are all thrown into some unknown ruinous environment of post-catastrophe. And they are all vulnerable and precarious. McMullan, calling Beckett's later prose and radio drama 'the closed space texts', argues that they 'attempt to define or capture their objects of observation in a narrative framework which "de-centres" the human', but at the same time they 'evoke with at times uncanny tenderness the ephemerality and vulnerability of human existence' (33).

If the very existence of Beckett's characters is vulnerable and therefore unstable after experiencing some unknown catastrophe, their use of language also lacks stability, always going back and forth, shifting from one place to another. Undecidability, indeterminacy and in-betweenness

pervade Beckett's writing with his acute sense of afterness in fractured ruins. His tone, however, is not pessimistic but satirical and comical. His distrust towards the post-World War II society is clear in his descriptions of degeneration and degradation of the human and its environment. His critical views on the post-war environment of the earth damaged by anthropocentrism are often expressed with irony and parodies. As Lavery and Finburgh contend, 'the very presence of life itself is now imagined as "provisional"' (28), the term Beckett uses in 'The Capital of the Ruins'. Beckett holds the view that everything, from animals to vegetables, to minerals, is fluid. Part III deals with Beckett in terms of ecological thought, responding to the recent rise of theories of deep ecology.

The awareness of the human existing provisionally and unstably as a life form is the core of today's ecocriticism, in which ecological catastrophes such as climate change that we often see globally are due to human activity, broadly resulting from evolutionistic thinking in the course of industrial and technological development in the age of Anthropocene. Timothy Morton, the prominent ecologist, warns us that ecological catastrophe has already happened, saying 'The end of the world has already occurred' (7). Jürgen Zimmerer also contends, 'The potentially truly apocalyptic character of climate change in the future obscures the view of the ground-level suffering occurring today' (4).

However, since the climate and environmental catastrophe 'occurs gradually and out of sight' (Nixon, 2), when we face its effect, it might be too late to return to the pre-catastrophic circumstances. In the situation where we are slowly heading towards 'the end of the world', all we can do is to think about how we survive still in the suspended unending world. Laura Salisbury's chapter discusses how Beckett's texts show commitment to staying with catastrophe in the paradoxical temporality that is at once stuck and ongoing. Bearing in mind Rob Nixon's idea of 'slow violence' and Steven Connor's idea of 'slow going', Salisbury argues that Beckett's work can be interpreted as addressing the scene of climate emergency with that particular temporality opposed to the punctuality of crisis in which decision and action are possible. She goes on to read *The Lost Ones* closely and introduces Lisa Baraitser's concept of 'maternal death drive' that supplements Freud's death drive. This concept opens up a new perspective on the repetition in Beckett that links to attachments and interdependencies of all life in catastrophe.

It can be said that in Beckett's acute sense of slowness and afterness in fractured ruins exists his hope for future different from the narrow-minded patriarchal views in which linear progressive thinking is dominant. Mariko Hori Tanaka provides a feminist 'counter-apocalyptic' reading of Beckett's *Catastrophe*, following proposals by recent ecological feminists such as Catherine Keller, Joanna Zylińska, Elizabeth Grosz and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Hori Tanaka illuminates the way Beckett challenges the theatrical convention by ridiculing an incompetent director and hinting that other inconspicuous and precarious characters collaborate with one another in creating an art production the director desires yet secretly defying him, and thus, Beckett leads his readers/audience to be aware of the wrong of the apocalyptic discourse posited by the patriarchal society.

Trish McTighe finds in Beckett's texts his critical views on how art has been complicit with the Anthropocentric extinction and extraction—the colonial violence that has brought today's global eco-crisis. As she proves in her reference to the scenography of the 1955 Irish premiere of *Waiting for Godot* whose stage image reveals the politics of extraction and the looming shadow of extinction colonial Ireland experienced, live performance becomes a space for the audience to witness and understand how the human is complicit with colonial and environmental violence. Then, McTighe focuses on Beckett's strategies to show it with two examples: the Auditor of *Not I* and the Assistant of *Catastrophe*, figures whose humanity is more in doubt than other denuded figures onstage. The former shows only the gesture of helpless compassion and the latter cannot help being uneasily complicit with the dominant autocratic institution. All three essays in Part III thus make clear the way Beckett leads us to reflect on the ethics and aesthetics of art in this era of precarious planetary life.

As a whole, these essays in the present volume offer new ways of reading and understanding Beckett in relation to catastrophe, especially catastrophes in our world today. Beckett's post-war works reflect not only the author's own experiences of the war and its aftermath but also his critical imagination of the post-war environment that we now share globally. He does not simply lament the vulnerability of human beings in a purely negative manner but contemplates how we, beings operating in a state of precarity, struggle with pain and go on living (or bearing) in the worsening post-catastrophic condition of the world.

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Catastrophe and Aesthetic Creation



Tickling Your Catastrophe, or Beckett's Laughing Antistrophe

Jean-Michel Rabaté

CATASTROPHE, THAT OLD GAG

It all begins annoyingly: we follow an irate, obnoxious and arrogant director who terrorises his secretary; huffing and puffing, he claims to be in a hurry, yet wants his cigar lit and relit; he lingers on silly details of colour and gesture, but checks his watch, eager to go to a political meeting after he is done with his theatrical business. He orders his assistant around while she give instructions to an old man standing on a podium. They make him try out hieratic poses; his hands join as in prayer; he bares some flesh despite the cold; his skin needs to be whitened for

This essay uses a few passages, in a modified form, taken from my *Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. The title derives from Page's words 'I'll tickle your catastrophe' in William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part Two, Act II, scene 1 (894). The same expression is used by Simon Dedalus in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (73).

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