

# Digital Mediation of Modernist Literary Texts and their Documents

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This paper will demonstrate an advanced work in progress, the digitised manuscript and transcription of Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* (composed in 1941-45 and first published in 1953). Discussion of the project will centre upon the digital resources buttressing the presentation of manuscript material and a range of related analytic features, and will outline some of the more significant ways in which specifically digital treatment of the material opens up new lines of literary and textual analysis. Indeed, some foundational concepts of textuality come into sharp focus by virtue of digital treatment of textual materials. Some of these concerns will be illustrated by way of examples taken from the *Watt* project, and by a fuller view of the complex relationship between text and manuscript arising from the project.

## 1. SBDMP and the Digitised Edition of the *Watt* Notebooks

The digital and scholarly resources required to produce a digitised literary transcription are not trivial. Two related questions must frame any such project: what scholarly need is being met by the production of such an edition? What specific innovations are made available by virtue of its digital delivery?

The digital transcription of Beckett's *Watt* is an instalment of a larger international project – the Samuel Beckett Digital Manuscript Project – which aims to have all of Beckett's literary manuscripts transcribed and represented in digital form. This initiative responds to a profound deepening of scholarly interest in modernist manuscripts as potential sources of literary hermeneutic attention, and in concert with this focal shift, a renewed interest in theories of textuality and textual criticism. The specific (and heightened) relevance to

this particular text in Beckett's oeuvre is immediately apparent on viewing the complex series of heavily revised and illustrated notebooks that constitute the manuscript of *Watt*. The primary materials do not lend themselves easily to conventional print publication, and indeed several dominant textual features would be lost or deeply submerged within any codex structure. For example, the relationships between dispersed narrative episodes and fragments within the manuscripts cannot be represented adequately in the linear structure of the codex, nor the complex patterns of transmitted, dispersed and submerged material between the manuscript and the published editions of *Watt*.

Of all of Beckett's major texts, *Watt* has received the least critical attention, despite significant scholarly curiosity regarding the deep ambiguity of the published narrative and the baroque nature of its manuscript archive.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this oversight pertains directly to the digitised manuscript project: the materials extend to nearly a thousand pages of autograph manuscript in Beckett's notoriously difficult hand. Few scholars have read any of the primary materials, and only a very few have read them completely. The well-known hermeneutic difficulties presented by the published narrative are thus in no way adequately understood in relation to the primary materials, because they themselves constitute a kind of *terra nullius*. By representing and transcribing the manuscript archive of this pivotal text in digital form, such relations between the archive and publication can begin to proceed in an informed way, and more adequate editorial and hermeneutic strategies can be brought to bear on this most inscrutable of Beckett's texts.

The difficulties of reading Beckett's manuscript and text are, in part, aesthetic. The manuscript was composed during the Second World War, when its author was displaced in the south of France, at a time when reflections upon the efficacy of literary expression were most acute. In addition, the fragments, riddles, and non sequiturs in the published novel (first published in 1953) strongly imply a process of archiving of fuller manuscript material, or more accurately, providing keys by which to unlock abundant manuscript contents. By providing coherent and searchable

access to such a large and complex document, the digitised manuscript project provides the grounds for extensive investigation into hitherto inscrutable textual features in the published text, and provides space for reflection on variant narrative structures and the evolution of literary works more generally.

## 2. Digital Technology and Editorial Practice

The presence of digital technology in scholarship has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Digital aides to scholarship (online library catalogues, concordances, etc.) provide extensions to existing scholarly tools and practices, facilitating certain kinds of scholarship. Primary sources can be identified by means of web-based archive catalogues, and online digital representations of manuscripts allow scholars to conduct particular kinds of work at geographical distance. Whilst access to the physical document may be desirable or even critical in the final event, several stages of a research project can be accomplished prior to such access. Digital extensions of traditional analogue research tools are perfectly commonplace in most disciplines, and (in theory) are not particularly difficult to integrate into a disciplinary mentality.

Recent innovative approaches to scholarly editing tend to imply or assert the relevance of a wider array of documentary sources: genetic editions seek to incorporate all manuscript material and published versions of a text, as well as a rationale of any stemmatic relationship between them, in an attempt to provide a "total" text; social text methods seek to integrate erstwhile secondary documents and materials into the very conceptual fabric of a text, as constituent parts of a text's identity. These more aggregative models of text identity, and more specifically the texts to which they pertain, are clearly conducive to presentation as digital scholarly editions. Conversely, digital modes of representing literary texts can bring questions of a text's identity into sharp focus. For example, the representation of multiple textual witnesses in collation software such as Juxta<sup>2</sup> or Versioning Machine<sup>3</sup> alters rather profoundly the reader's apprehension of the textual matter at hand. The text is digitally mediated and may be

represented by transposed digital reproductions and transcriptions suitably marked up for digital display. But this mediation can go to the very heart of what is considered to be the text.

Digital scholarly editions can do two things that seem fundamentally new: firstly, a potentially large corpus of material can be represented in one space, and manipulated in ways simply not possible in the world of physical manuscripts and codex editions: a basic premise of the digitised manuscript of *Watt*. Secondly, digital collations allow for manipulations of the text material that are visually straightforward and intuitively intelligible, whilst bearing profound implications for the text's identity and the authority of textual evidence. The digital manuscript of *Watt* deploys an interface powered by the Apache Tomcat servlet container, which represents files marked up in XML, in a streamlined version of the TEI5 protocols. A high-resolution digital image of the manuscript page appears alongside the marked-up transcription and attendant tools for analysing the transcribed document. In the case of this particular project, the use of Juxta collation software is not a straightforward choice, given that the manuscripts accord very closely to the published text in many places but diverge almost absolutely in many others. The relationship between text and archive is by no means self-evident, or even chronologically linear, witnessed by the density of cryptic allusions and riddles in the published narrative: many of these may only be understood following a close reading of the more expansive manuscripts episodes from which they are sedimented.

The application of the Juxta software to such an editorial project as the digital variorum edition of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* offers an instructive counterpoint, providing a view of the way in which a well-developed and intuitively graspable digital aid offers new opportunities for new documentary and analytic research. These two examples provide one aspect by which to view the question of digital tools for literary research: does each project in the field of digital humanities require custom digital tools, or are there ways to engineer convergences that continue to provide each project with the specific resources it needs? This remains an open question, inspiring in equal parts an

anxiety of resource-intense customisation, on the one hand, and the very exciting prospect of powerful convergences of digital tools in literary research on the other. One critical implication for literary studies is that wherever this question may lead, the nature and status of text identity will demand radical investigation.

### 3. The Digital-Textual-Literary Future

Recent advances in digital scholarly tools present exciting possibilities for scholarship and for reconsiderations of the paradigms of scholarship. They also present a basic challenge to the work undertaken in literary studies, by calling into question some of the most fundamental conceptual paradigms. The opportunity exists for significant developments in the theory of textual criticism. Whilst it is critical not to overstate the kinds of change made possible by digital scholarship – some apparent paradigm shifts are simply incremental changes to concepts and methods that remain integral to literary scholarship – it seems clear that we are only beginning to understand just what may be possible in the digital domain.

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### References

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### Notes

1. J. M. Coetzee described the *Watt* manuscript material and hypothesised its stages of composition in his PhD dissertation over thirty years ago at the University of Texas at Austin. An epitome of this description and analysis was published in his essay, "The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*," *JML* 2.4 (1972): 472-480. Other discussions include: Sighe Kennedy, "'Astride of the Grave and a Difficult Birth': Samuel Beckett's *Watt* Struggles to Life," *Dalhousie French Studies* 42 (1998): 115-147; David Hayman, "Beckett's *Watt* – the Graphic Accompaniment: Marginalia in the Manuscripts," *Word & Image* 13.2 (1997): 172-182 and "Nor Do My Doodles More Sagaciously: Beckett Illustrating *Watt*," in Lois Oppenheim, ed., *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media* (New York and London: Garland, 1999), pp. 199-215; and John Pilling, "Beckett's English Fiction," in Pilling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 17-42.
2. Juxta was originally developed as a collation tool for Jerome J. McGann's digital Rossetti Archive <[www.rossettiarchive.org](http://www.rossettiarchive.org)> and is now housed under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities and NINES (a digital research environment for nineteenth century studies), Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
3. Susan Schreibman began developing Versioning Machine <[v-machine.org](http://v-machine.org)> in 2000. It is housed at the University of Maryland Libraries and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities.