University of Reading

'Crawling in the Flanders mud': Samuel Beckett, war writing and scatological pacifism

Article

Accepted Version

Davies, W. (2020) 'Crawling in the Flanders mud': Samuel Beckett, war writing and scatological pacifism. Journal of War and Culture Studies, 13 (2). pp. 145-162. ISSN 1752-6280 doi: 10.1080/17526272.2019.1644273 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85944/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2019.1644273

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

University of Reading

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

‘Crawling in the Flanders Mud’: Samuel Beckett, War Writing, and Scatological Pacifism

Author:
William Davies

Author details:
Dr William Davies
Department of English Literature
University of Reading
w.j.davies@reading.ac.uk

Acknowledgements:
Thanks to Gareth Mills, Lucy Jeffrey and Antonio Gambacorta for their discussion of initial ideas for this article.

Abstract
This article explores the depiction of wounded soldiers in Samuel Beckett’s novel *Mercier and Camier* (written in French in 1946, published in 1970, and translated and published in English in 1974) and the extent to which the novel’s repeated focus on scatological elements of the combatant experience represents a demonstrable pacifist position. This aspect of the novel is discussed from two perspectives: the Irish military history which Beckett repeatedly invokes in the novel; and the relation between the novel and the war writing which followed World War I, much of which expressed pacifist ideals by laying bare the suffering to which combatant bodies are subjected. By analyzing Beckett’s choice to defer from the immediate referent of the conflict of the 1940s back to the Boer War and World War I, it is argued that the novel’s scatological reframing of a soldier’s experience as measured by battlefield ‘diarrhoea’ produces a pacifist rejection of the cycles of violence evidenced by the military conflicts of the twentieth century.

Keywords
Samuel Beckett; pacifism; scatological; Ireland; World War I

During their meandering journey through a partially-realized Dublin setting, the titular characters of Samuel Beckett's novel *Mercier and Camier* (1974) encounter a 'ranger' who, the narrator informs us, 'risked his life without success in defence of a territory which in itself must have left him cold':

> He suffered torment with his hip, the pain shot down his buttock and up his rectum deep into the bowels and even as far north as the pyloric valve, culminating as a matter of course in uretroscrotal spasms with quasi-incessant longing to micturate. Invalided out with a grudging pension, whence the sour looks of nearly all those, male and female, with whom his duties and remnants of bonhomie brought him daily in contact, he sometimes felt it would have been wiser on his part, during the great upheaval, to devote his energies to the domestic skirmish, the Gaelic dialect, the fortification of his faith and the treasures of a folklore beyond compare. The bodily danger would have been less and the benefits more certain. (2010a: 10).[1]

Following the narrator's sarcasm-inflected evaluation of Irish cultural nationalism and struggle for independence, Mercier and Camier register the ranger's experience by way of his bodily experience and his medals:

> Let us show him a little kindness, said Mercier, he's a hero of the great war. Here we were, high and dry, masturbating full pelt without fear of interruption, while he was crawling in the Flanders mud, shitting in his puttees.
>
> Conclude nothing from those idle words, Mercier and Camier were old young.
>
> It's an idea, said Camier.
>
> Will you look at that clatter of decorations, said Mercier. Do you realize the gallons of diarrhoea that represents?
>
> Darkly, said Camier, as only one so costive can. (2010a: 10)

The scene sets the 'domestic skirmish' of the Easter Rising and Irish Civil War within the context of the 'the great war', the scathing description of that 'domestic' situation dissolving into puerile commentary and an apparent disregard for the pained body before them. The

[1] Written in French in 1946 on Beckett's return to Paris after his time as a Resistance member and refugee in war-time France (for a detailed account, see Knowlson 1996: 297-316), *Mercier et Camier* was not published until 1970, after Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Beckett's English translation was published in 1974.

ranger's experiences in Flanders and his 'sour' treatment afterwards are reduced to 'shitting in his puttees', the horror of war measured not by battlefield heroics but injuries and their long-term effects. Yet, despite the scene's bitter humour and scatological obsession, there is a powerful indictment of war that admonishes the very principle of measuring experience by 'decorations' and reframes the body as the record of warfare, exemplifying that, as Elaine Scarry puts it, 'the main purpose and outcome of war is injuring' (1985: 68).

Mercier and Camier's relation to the Irish independence conflicts, and to military experience more broadly, is murky—it is deliberately ambiguous as to whether 'masturbating' is literal or evaluative—yet we learn later in a conversation about their umbrella that Mercier and Camier are also aware of an earlier conflict's conditions, specifically, the Siege of Ladysmith in Natal during the Boer War:

> [The pair's parasol] must have come out about 1900, said Camier. The year I believe of Ladysmith, on the Klip. Remember? Cloudless skies, garden parties daily. Life lay smiling before us. No hope was too high. We played at holding fort. We died like flies. Of hunger. Of cold. Of thirst. Of heat. Pom! Pom! The last rounds. Surrender! Never! We eat our dead. Drink our pee. Pom! Pom! Two more we didn't know we had. But what is that we hear? A clamour from the watch-tower! Dust on the horizon! The column at last! Our tongues are black. Hurrah none the less. Rah! Rah! A craking as of crows. A quartermaster dies of joy. We are saved. The Century was two months old.
>
> Look at it now, said Mercier. (2010a: 60)

Again, it is unclear whether they saw combat or are 'remember[ing]' or reimagining accounts of the conflict. Regardless, the scene includes specific evocations of the British military establishment directing Irish military losses and once more mediates military experience through the body. The living risk thirst, famine, bodily effluence, death; the dead become objects, available to the transgressions of the cannibal: 'we eat our dead'.

Despite the caustic tone of these scenes, I suggest that *Mercier and Camier* ultimately invokes a pacifist sentiment through its descriptions of soldiers' bodies. Pacifism is a necessarily broad conception ranging from the rejection of military institutions to opposition to all forms of violence. As Jenny Teichman argues (1986), however, all pacifisms share some degree of 'anti-warism', and many find their articulation in the overt presentation of 'the physical immediacy of damaged human bodies' (Scarry 1985: 64), as occurs in *Mercier and Camier*. By identifying the injured body as a part of warfare, this corporeal pacifism is an expression of the realities of war which stands against the reduction of conflict to

historical, political and geographical abstraction and detachment. It is pacifism by dint of presenting the reality that bodies suffer in war; more specifically, in Beckett's novel, that pacifism is most frequently of a scatological kind.

Beckett's recourse to military suffering also draws attention to the novel's position 'after' World War II, yet direct reference is deferred for the earlier horrors of World War I and the Boer War.[2] This turn to conflicts of the past—whether international or 'domestic'—raises the question as to whether the memory of warfare and its record in soldier's bodies should have been enough to prevent further conflict, witnessed as it could be in the memorials and graves across Europe, and the visible and invisible wounds of veterans. In doing so, the text raises ethical questions concerning military violence and the demands of commitment and duty made of soldiers in combat, as well as suggesting, particularly in the rapid turn to mock-empathy when Mercier and Camier encounter the ranger, that a certain ambivalence to bodily violence risked emerging with the repeated horrors of modern warfare. By examining *Mercier and Camier*'s engagement with military duty and patterns of historical violence, this article explores how Beckett's deferral from the all-too-immediate conflict of the 1940s articulates an important reflection on the ways in which a bodily focus—and the attendant themes of historical memory, violence and the ethics of duty—enables a transhistorical reflection on the nature of modern warfare. Further, I suggest that by attending to the images of combat suffering in the text, we can draw Beckett's novel into the war-writing tradition of the first half of the twentieth century—particularly the popular 'war books' of the late 1920s and early 1930s, but also the poetry of Beckett's friend Thomas MacGreevy—a hitherto underexamined connection which demonstrates the extent to which the injured body of a soldier operates as a crucial nexus for exploring the ethics of warfare, yet also accounts for the chilling ambivalence that seems to pervade the pair's responses to physical suffering. Both the encounter with the ranger and the evocation of the conditions of the Ladysmith siege at the turn of the century dwell on the body—the violated, wounded, terrified body—as a symbolic space in which the effects of military commitment and a 'high and dry' position are in constant conflict: would the ranger have been 'wiser' to have fought in the 'domestic skirmish'? Do Mercier and Camier's responses suggest an ambivalence caused by over-saturation in images of conflict, in 'too much' war, be it Irish or international? Is one form of violence over another preferred? What does it mean to fight on

[2] Notably, Beckett also turns to World War I in the drafts of *Fin de partie*/*Endgame* (1958) with both on-stage figures wounded in the Picardy campaign of the war. See Rákóczy (2017).

'foreign soil' for a nation that leaves one 'cold'? And will more harm be done to human bodies by not acting? This last point is vital given the chaos of the 1940s after which Beckett wrote the text, a conflict in which he could not 'stand by with arms folded' (qtd. in Reid 1968: 14). Certainly, by the advent of the second global conflict in half a century, with the blanket bombings of civilians, the strafing of refugees fleeing cities, and what Seán Kennedy terms 'the appalling vistas of Auschwitz' (2015: 196), the prospect that non-action could cause more harm seems much more likely.[3]

The novel also deals specifically with moments of conflict in Irish military history in which the colonial relationship with Britain resulted in Irish suffering. As we will see, the implicit connection between the Irish fighting for the British and the British army's role in the Irish fight for independence lies behind the two scenes. Given the discussion of these aspects of the text, this article intersects with analyses of *Mercier et Camier*/*Mercier and Camier* that have interrogated the text's historical allusions, particularly Elizabeth Barry's focus on how the military details of the text reveal the politics of Beckett's translation practices. Though Barry briefly notes 'Beckett's characteristic penchant for the scatological' (2005: 513) in these military allusions, her work does not touch on the wounded bodies themselves.[4]

More broadly, this article joins the ongoing attempts to renegotiate Beckett's relationship to history, and in turn the politics of that history. While Beckett's most famous post-war works—*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*—have resulted in a reputation for an aesthetic that eschews both historical and geographical determination (managed by critics invested in a 'philosophical' rather than 'historical' Beckett committed to a poetics of 'undoing' (Gontarski 1985)),[5] there is now a substantial scholarly consensus that Beckett's relationship to, and use of, history and politics is more

[3] This is complicated further by Ireland's commitment to neutrality during World War II. Neutrality was an important assertion of national sovereignty, never mind that war would have crippled the nation's economy. Nevertheless, Ireland's neutrality was unsurprisingly condemned by many as cowering before the threat of fascism; that said, many citizens did volunteer for combat and war-work during the period. Space prohibits a full discussion of Irish neutrality and Beckett's responses; suffice to say he did not necessarily reject neutrality but the methods of its enforcement via protectionist nationalist propaganda. See Davies (2017).

[4] Though a still neglected work, Connor (1989), Kennedy (2005) and Gibson (2013) have also attended to the historical intersections of *Mercier and Camier*. For Beckett's 'penchant' for the scatological in a political framework, see David Lloyd's (1989) work on the author's writing in relation to postcolonial Ireland. Paul Stewart explores the recurrence of defecating horses in Beckett's work as part of the author's sexual motifs (2011: 17-28), and Andrew G. Christensen (2017) examines scatology in *Molloy* as part of Beckett's notion of language as excess.

[5] For analysis of this phase in Beckett criticism, see McNaughton (2018: 1-24).

complex than otherwise assumed. Andrew Gibson has made considerable headway on showing that Beckett's post-war writing bears far more traces of the war in France than previously recognized, for example (2010; 2015), and Emilie Morin (2017) and James McNaughton (2018) have demonstrated Beckett as politically aware and active in both his life and work.

That said, there remains an ongoing negotiation of how the philosophical tradition in Beckett Studies might better reckon with historical studies. In terms of the war, Marjorie Perloff offers a useful sense of how philosophy and history work together in engaging with Beckett's post-war works:

> Not what wartime France *was* but how it *felt*: this is the motive of *Godot* and the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. These fictions provide no answers; they merely give us what Wittgenstein would have called a more perspicacious *view* of our situation. In this sense, to borrow a famous axiom from the *Tractatus*, the only 'position' Beckett's war writings take is that ethics and aesthetics are one. (2005: 102, original emphasis)

Though 'merely' risks downplaying the importance of this 'view', this sense of 'our situation' suggests that Beckett's rejection of direct representation does not exclude the political and historical resonances of these ethical-aesthetic manoeuvres. Indeed, if the 'only' position of Beckett's writing in the aftermath of the war is that 'ethics and aesthetics are one', we must attend to the historical and political burdens of what both 'ethics' and 'aesthetics' might mean in relation to warfare. In the case of *Mercier and Camier*, the text's deferral to the earlier wars of the century is suggestive of Beckett's non-representational tendencies, foregoing the direct evocation of the conflict most immediate to the text's composition to offer a 'more perspicacious view' in its transhistorical perspective. However, in its direct reference to war and military activity, the novel achieves some of the most explicit responses to the realities of modern warfare in Beckett's post-war canon, responses which are realized through the wounded and visibly suffering body.

Beckett's Wars

World War I and its aftermath was a significant backdrop to Beckett's early years. Thousands of young men from across Ireland joined the British forces as volunteers (no conscription bill was ever successfully passed for Ireland), be it for the economic prospect of the 'king's shilling' or the sense of duty and adventure encouraged by British and native propaganda

(Jeffrey 2000: 5-36). The war years also included the Easter Rising in 1916, an event which presented pressing questions of national duty to those Irish soldiers fighting in Flanders and elsewhere. For Beckett's family and many civilians in Ireland, though, the most immediate concerns of the period were the limitations placed on daily necessities by the events of the war. Food and fuel were rationed during the period (Knowlson 1996: 22) and, like in so many institutions at this time, the war affected both staff availability and quality during Beckett's schooling (Knowlson 1996: 44).

Beckett also knew many people, Irish or otherwise, physically or mentally injured by the war. His uncle, Howard, was deeply affected by his experiences, as Beckett still recalled later in life:

> [Howard] had been in the Ambulance Corps during the First World War and witnessed horrors that were thought to have affected him deeply. Beckett could 'remember him coming home on leave. Coming to Cooldrinagh in uniform. He had a dreadful time. He was more or less pushed into it, blackmailed into it by the family. To join up.' (Knowlson 1996: 9)

The war's effects were made concrete in such figures, and in the veterans he would encounter during his student years in Dublin where he observed 'how wretched the lives of so many of his fellow men could be: beggars, tramps, ex-soldiers wounded or gassed in the First World War' (Knowlson 1996: 67). The 'decimation' of the Irish male population was all the starker in Dublin compared to the suburbs of his family home, a fact which Beckett used to inform the character of the blind veteran who is wheeled daily to Fleet Street in his early story 'Ding-Dong' (Knowlson 1996: 44). Perhaps most significantly, Beckett's friend Thomas MacGreevy was wounded twice, first on the front line of the Somme, then in Ypres (MacGreevy 1991: 97).[6]

Beckett's experiences of World War II also presented him with the realities of warfare. Though his roles in the French Resistance were non-combatant, the activity brought its own dangers and demanded a strong sense of duty to the clandestine cell with which he operated. The fall of France in 1940 meant Paris was soon filled with wounded soldiers, including Beckett's friend and fellow Resistance member, Alfred Péron. Péron was also one of several friends and Resistance colleagues that Beckett lost to the Nazi concentration camps. In pointing to these and the above details, I do not suggest that *Mercier and Camier* is

[6] Notably, Beckett's psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion also served in World War I. There is no suggestion that Bion and Beckett spoke of the subject, though Bion's daughter remained adamant that the war shaped his path as an analyst, including his practices during the 1930s when Beckett was in his care. See Jacobus (2005: 193).

merely a rehearsal of biographical factors. Rather, the text transmutes these details along with certain anxieties of the war in the 1940s. In particular, Beckett's deferral evokes the sense felt by many that World War II was a horrifying repeat or extension of the First. The poet Keith Douglas, for example, saw little difference between the two wars, noting in 1943 that:[7]

> there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character. There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain, and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that every day on the battlefields of the western desert—and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well—their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service would be inspired to write, would be tautological. (352)

Beckett's recourse to the earlier conflicts of the Boer War and World War I when writing in 1946 also suggests this sense of the 'same old hell' extending itself across history. In activating the context and genre of war writing for the novel (that is, writing that directly references war), we can see that *Mercier and Camier*'s exploration of military violence through both historical deferral and images of wounded soldiers results in a text that can be more fully recognized as one engaged with the horrors of modern warfare. Indeed, it is worth observing that in Beckett's translation of the text in the 1970s, despite the differences between the French and English texts (convincingly set in historical terms by Andrew Gibson (2013)), Beckett retains the specific historical details of both the Irish soldier in Flanders and the Boer War in the English version published in 1974. Translated and published in the middle of the Cold War, when Beckett's prose had otherwise entirely done away with the character and narrative content of the stories of the late 1940s (the novellas, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*), his retention of such details intensifies the deferral tactic all the more, drawing further attention to the deadly repetitions of violence that punctuate the twentieth century.

***Mercier and Camier*'s Catalogue of Conflicts**

Throughout the novel, Mercier and Camier remain in constant proximity to violence, much of it framed in military language and Irish history. Before their encounter with the ranger,

[7] Like his trench-poet predecessors, Douglas frequently detailed the war through damaged bodies. Take, for example, the fly ridden skin and 'burst stomach' of the soldier's body in 'Vergissmeinnicht' (2000: 118).

Mercier and Camier find themselves in a ‘public garden’ containing a beech tree dedicated to ‘a Field Marshal of France peacefully named Saint-Ruth’ who was ‘struck dead by a cannon-ball, faithful to the last to the same hopeless cause’ (2010a: 5). As Barry has shown, the scene refers to French officer Charles Chalmont who died in Ireland fighting for the Jacobites against William III’s Protestant forces (2005: 508-509). In doing so, the scene foregrounds that of the ranger, of the soldier left ‘cold’ in a war in which they appear to have only an oblique stake in the conflict.

Other moments in the text draw on snippets of military discourse. Early on, Camier puts their journey in tactical terms: ‘It is no longer possible to advance. Retreat is equally out of the question’. The remarks fail to rouse Mercier from ‘musing’ on ‘the horror of existence’ (2010a: 16). As the debate continues, Mercier retorts that they cannot ‘turn back’ because they will ‘lose ground’, an occurrence they can ‘ill afford’ (2010a: 17). In another moment of indecision, Camier retorts to a menacing barman that the pair ‘put a bold front on it […] though [were] actually shitting with terror’; peace is only assured with ‘sickly smiles and scurrilous civilities’ (2010a: 68). Terror recurs when Mercier and Camier beat the constable who arrests them, sending ‘the helmet flying’ with a kick and clubbing his ‘defenceless skull’ (2010a: 76). The violence they inflict is recalled later in a form that evokes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: ‘they were weary, in need of sleep, buffeted by the wind, while in their skulls, to crown their discomfiture, a pelting of insatiable blows’ (2010a: 77). Later still, they encounter the grave of a nationalist who was ‘brought here in the night by the enemy and executed, or perhaps only the corpse brought here, to be dumped’ (2010a: 82). As Seán Kennedy demonstrates (2005), this scene works through the legacy of violence in the Irish Free State through the figure of Noel Lemass, a survivor of the Easter Rising who was later abducted, likely tortured, and murdered by pro-Treaty forces. The grave is a monument to Lemass. Central to the scene is the unanswered question surrounding what happened to Lemass’s body before and after he was shot. Though Mercier and Camier claim to have forgotten the details of Lemass’s murder, Kennedy observes that the cultural amnesia of the pair does not remove the context in which the novel is set. Indeed, they display a ‘gratuitous attitude to violence’ which, for many, was the ‘peculiar prerogative of Irishmen of all stripes in the nineteen twenties and thirties’ (2005: 127). The pair’s caustic remarks towards the ranger can be read in the same vein, so imbricated are they in political violence from all sides that they are simply unable, or unwilling, to offer anything other than faux-‘kindness’.

It is in the invocation of the Boer War, though, that we get the clearest exploration of the cycles of violence through the combination of a broader sense of modernity’s warring

tendencies—one which incorporates, inevitably, the events of the 1940s after which Beckett wrote the French text ('look at [the century] now')[8] —and a turn to specific moments in Irish military history, though the reference is less direct than that of the ranger. Camier recounts seeing the 'the column at last' which came to liberate Ladysmith. That liberating column was comprised of a number of Irish units, including the 1st Battalion of the Inniskilling Fusiliers, a regiment that had suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Colenso (15 December 1899) in an early attempt to liberate Ladysmith, theirs being the flank that met the Boer forces head-on. In the successful liberation of the town, the Irish troops again suffered terrible casualties and, overall, it was the Irish regiments that experienced the greatest losses from the beginning to the end of the Ladysmith ordeal.[9] With the ranger scene's evocation of the Easter Rising/World War I dilemma in mind, this evocation of the Boer War also draws on the tensions surrounding Irish soldiers fighting on foreign colonial soil for an imperial power, one which at the time was opposing independence for their home nation.

The Inniskilling Fusiliers are an intriguing allusion for the text. The regiment's origins are worth quoting from their own 'official' history:

> In 1688 the inhabitants of Enniskillen took up arms in defence of their town against the threat of occupation by the forces of James II. The troops so raised, The Inniskillingers, Foot and Dragoons, were not content to sit passively behind the walls of their town but made repeated expeditions into the surrounding district to seek out and destroy the enemy. So successful was this force it was incorporated into the army of William III [.] (web)

The absorption into William III's army puts the regiment in opposition to the previously mentioned Charles Chalmont who died 'faithful to the last' fighting for James II. Through the eighteenth century, the regiment formalized its tradition of 'expeditions', fighting the French in North America and the West Indies and again during the War of Independence against French forces and American colonists seeking independence from Britain. Over the next century or so, prior to their participation in the Boer war, the regiment would be dispatched to Egypt, Italy, Spain, Portugal and India. Beckett's time at Portora Royal in Enniskillen make it likely he witnessed sections of the regiment training and on duty, particularly the reserve

[8] For Kennedy in this regard, the scene also draws on a political negotiation of turn-of-the-century anxieties over European racial degeneration (2015: 196).

[9] All details sourced from the official regiment website: 'A Brief History'; 'Anglo-Boer War – 1899-1902'; 'Inniskillings in Dublin, 1916', http://www.inniskillingsmuseum.com/ [accessed 17/12/18]

battalions, and his school years would have involved a potted history of the regiment's formation.

More intriguing still, the Inniskilling Fusiliers are directly referenced in the manuscript drafts of Beckett's novel *Watt*, written between 1941 and 1945 in wartime France (Watt also appears in *Mercier and Camier* to bring the pair back together and resolutely declare 'Fuck life!' (2010a: 96)). In the draft, a piano tuner, Mr Gall in the published text, describes himself as a former soldier who fought on foreign soil for a crack regiment, noted to be the Inniskilling Fusiliers, during the reign of Victoria and Edward VII (that is, the Boer War), a period he describes as an awful time of poor food and hard experiences (1941, Notebook 1, 15; Typescript, 3). This timescale would also suggest that the piano tuner left the Inniskilling Fusiliers just prior to its involvement in both World War I combat and the Irish War of Independence: the 3rd, 4th and 12th Reserve Battalions were in Ireland during the Rising, while the 1st and 2nd Battalions were sent to India and Flanders respectively. The regiment also sent troops to Gallipoli, Macedonia and Palestine, the latter of which endured its own experiences of British colonial control. The drafts also expand on the lives of two manservants, Arsene and Erskine, both of whom are described as participated in neither World War I nor the Irish War of Independence. However, where the piano tuner did not participate because he finished or resigned his commission with his regiment, Arsene and Erskine forwent military service because they put their sense of duty and faith, and economic prospects, in their 'big house' master.

While the military details in the *Watt* manuscripts are part of the novel's exploration of the fortunes of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency in Ireland (its own deferral from the war, as suggested by Kennedy (2014)), *Mercier and Camier* develops more fully the notion of military commitment – nationalist action versus fighting for the imperial power – and draws on the history of Irish historical violence by setting evocations of the Jacobite-Williamite war, the Boer War, the Easter Rising and World War I side-by-side to suggests patterns of conflict in which the Irish were often both complicit and unwilling subjects. Indeed, the text looks to events in which Irish soldiers were particularly affected by the decisions of British military powers, be it in the violent repression of the Rising or the administration of Irish soldiers fighting in British regiments in South Africa and the trenches. Beckett's turn after World War II to these wars of the past points to a continuum of military violence that is steeped in the political and ethical issues surrounding notions of duty and commitment: what role do these notions play in the soldier's decision to fight? How do they affect the suffering that can occur? How does the body record such suffering? In the context of Irish military

involvements abroad, this is fraught territory: ‘Those that I fight I do not hate / Those that I guard I do not love’, as W. B. Yeats puts it in ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’ (2008: 64).

The novel sets out Irish historical violence in a pattern that is intimately connected to the ways in which the colonial relationship governs commitment and duty, and by overlaying moments of Irish military history, the novel negotiates the ethics of duty and its relationship to violence. These moments so often return, frequently with child-like puerility and humour, to the mutilated, bleeding, shitting bodies of war, that the text is also drawn into the wider sphere of war writing from the first half of the twentieth century. In the remainder of this article, I consider the ways in which this focus on the body in *Mercier and Camier* locates the text within a tradition of war writing—primarily poems and novels—which evinces a demonstrable ‘anti-warism’ through the body, most often in terms of injury and the scatological, and often in a manner that makes apparent the alienation of soldiers from the politics of conflict. I examine this from two perspectives: the poetry of Thomas MacGreevy, an Irishman injured fighting for the British, and the ‘war books’ of the late 1920s and 1930s which often produced their own forms of bodily, scatological pacifism.

Mercier and Camier and War Writing

In 1934, MacGreevy published his first and only collection of poetry. *Poems* combines the poet’s modernist tastes with his interest in the spiritual and national possibilities of poetry as communion. Though admired by many, the collection did not receive much fanfare on publication, largely because, as Brian Coffey suggests in a review of MacGreevy’s collected poems in 1972, the poet’s theological poetics was simply not the taste of the ‘literary London’ of the time (1972: 10).[10] MacGreevy’s much-neglected poetry also constitutes an important literary negotiation of World War I by an Irish combatant poet who waited a considerable amount of time before publicly releasing his work.[11]

MacGreevy’s war years rendered him somewhat estranged from the literary circles of post-Rising Ireland; ‘the returned exile’, as Anthony Cronin puts it (qtd. in Dawe 2013: 6), who had fought for the British yet remained a staunch Irish republican. Haunted with ‘war-

[10] Beckett mounted his own defense of the collection in *Dublin Magazine* in 1934 (‘Humanistic Quietism’, 1984: 68-69).

[11] As explored below, many major responses in prose took over a decade to arrive after the war. Poetry was more immediate, and it is in this context that MacGreevy is somewhat unusual.

inflected traces' (Dawe 2013: 4), the poems deal with 'the fact of his military past as a British soldier during the Great War' and how 'the trauma of that time would not have endeared him to post-revolutionary nationalist Ireland' (Dawe 2013: 6). The domestic space became like that of the foreign, 'cold', as Beckett puts it. For MacGreevy, the feeling of having missed out on the nation's own 'great upheaval' (Beckett 2010a: 10) was as significant as his experiences abroad.

The time between the war and the writing of his poems indicates MacGreevy's struggle with coming to terms with his war years. Many of the poems capture the notion of 'the spectator [of war] who *survived*' yet remain oddly distanced (Dawes 2013: 11; original emphasis). This combination of survivor and detached spectator are central to MacGreevy's war poem 'De Civitate Hominum', an account of seeing a scout plane shot down over the trenches, a different perspective on the (imagined) experience of Yeats's airman. The poem opens:

> The morning sky glitters
> Winter blue.
> The earth is snow-white,
> With the gleam snow-white answers to sunlight,
> Save where shell-holes are new,
> Black spots in the whiteness—
> A Matisse ensemble. (1991: 2)

Against this cold, peaceful morning are the soldiers, 'those […] / who die between peaces' wearing 'spick and span subaltern's uniform' (1991: 2-3). The peace gives way to the looming threat of suffering posed by the arrival in the poem of 'new' 'shell-holes', a suffering felt and knowable only to those soldiers witnessing the scene. Clouds—now 'fleece-white flowers of death'—enfold 'an airman' on the horizon who '[i]s taking a morning look around'. The clouds part to allow the airman through, the scene still for a moment until actual violence occurs:

> suddenly there is a tremor,
> A zigzag of lines against the blue
> And he streams down
> Into the white,
> A delicate flame,
> A stroke of orange in the morning's dress.

No body is seen, no scream heard. The poem instead ends with the anticipation of divine acknowledgement: 'My sergeant says, very low, "Holy God! / 'Tis a fearful death." / Holy God makes no reply / Yet' (1991: 3).[12]

The aestheticizing mode of the poem creates a palpable distance quite distinct from Beckett's treatment of conflict. Both writers eschew direct representation of the wars they experienced, MacGreevy's by way of an imagistic vision of colour, Beckett's by a historical deferral that is subsumed in scatological imagery. MacGreevy's poem aestheticizes its subject, MacGreevy's own experiences of war, by overwhelming any sense of loss or horror with the vivid sublimation of the airman's death into the painterly image, leaving only the sergeant's 'very low' comment as the emotional register of the poem. The body of the airman, presumably lost in a far field beyond the trenches, remains outside the poem's formal and referential scope. Beckett's scatological humour draws all attention to the body, to the suffering it records, a vivid description of the horror that MacGreevy's poem transmutes into the slow beauty of the 'stroke of orange' that is the mark of the airman's death, one that seems as inevitable as the sunrise. If Beckett's ranger poses the prospect of engaging with the aftermath of war, of those who survived but were changed utterly, MacGreevy's poem returns to the moment of experience only to find it distant, abstracted. Though distinct, they each produce literary responses that insist on both the difficulty and necessity of bearing witness to war's suffering. However, the imagism of MacGreevy's poem echoes his estrangement from his military experiences and his desire to distance those experiences from political contexts which might call into question his patriotism. By contrast, the immediacy of the body in Beckett's text confronts the lived experience of the suffering that inevitably accompanies war.

Beckett's use of the image of the wounded soldier also brings *Mercier and Camier* into dialogue with the 'war books' of the 1920s and 1930s, writing inflected often with modernist tendencies towards fragmentary narratives, as seen in Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) (the first major study of which was written by Thomas MacGreevy (1931)), the rejection of 'old world' ideologies and a move towards pacifism, seen in Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (1929), and visceral, experiential descriptions, most famously found in Erica Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). The use of the body in the poetry of the trench poets—Owen, Rosenberg, Sassoon—are also important touchstones for

[12] We might compare the ending of Beckett's short story 'Dante and the Lobster' as a lobster is dropped into a boiling pot: 'Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all. It is not.' (2010b: 14).

these texts. Patricia Rae argues that George Orwell's writing on the Spanish Civil War carried forward the 'war books' tradition beyond the late 1920s during a period in which they suffered a significant backlash (2009: 246). The physical realities of combatant bodies were central to the war books' cultural and social impact as a literary response to warfare, raising uncomfortable questions about duty, commitment and the politics of criticism when faced with the suffering of combat.

The popularity of the war books and the subsequent hostility they prompted are worth reflecting on when considering *Mercier and Camier* in this context. Of those listed above, Remarque was identified by the British press in 1929 as the most prevalent representative of the 'Lavatory School', a title first used in an anonymous editorial for *London Mercury* that deplored the author's presentation of physical suffering and trench conditions that soldiers encountered, most often through scatological and bloody images of bodies (Eksteins 2009: 68). This criticism was coupled with accusations of Remarque's text as propaganda by British, French and German press alike; it was deemed 'pacifist, or allied, or German, depending on the critic' (Eksteins 2009: 68). The critics of Remarque, Graves and others also shunned their recourse to interiority and 'vulgarity' as a misrepresentation of military experiences and accused them of generating an anti-patriotic 'Myth of War' which expounded, rightly, 'the indifference and incompetence of military leaders and the complacency of jingoists on the home front' (Rae 2009: 246). Indeed, that sense of 'indifference'—captured so frequently in the image of the young man sent to die in foreign lands—is at the heart of Beckett's own description of the 'cold' foreign space in which his ranger was wounded. Likewise, Camier's memory of 'garden parties' enjoyed while 'play[ing] fort' recalls the apparent 'complacency' of the home front.

An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1930 paints a clear picture of the anxieties around the war book 'boom' that occurred:

> The recent flood of the 'literature of disillusionment' or of 'war books'—a phrase which has just acquired this special significance—differs from what has gone before only in that it is a flood in place of a trickle and that the water has grown decidedly muddier. (qtd. in Halkin 2009: 107)

Unsurprisingly, debates over the validity of the war books, and the ways in which they could be discussed critically, were immediate and intense:

> The Daily Herald [informed] its readers that the undiscerning fashion for war books would end in June 1930, 'when a novel will no longer be sure to sell on the mere virtue of its relation to the war.' When voices complaining of the

> surfeit of war books began to be heard, [the journalist] Arnold Bennett […] insisted that nobody, except those who had fought in the war, had the right to be bored by good books about it. The subject seemed inexhaustible. (Halkin 2009: 107)

Accusations of vulgarity, of 'cashing in', and of a dubious formalising abounded during the period, as did questions of just who had the right to discuss the war, who could discern what was 'true' of these experiences, and in what terms?

Yet these questions, in turn, raise important ethical considerations for what it might mean to say one has grown 'bored' of encountering wounded bodies. If the market was saturated with 'decidedly muddier' waters, it meant readers and critics were also becoming increasingly immune to the accounts of the wounded and suffering bodies these texts so often depicted. If Beckett's pair are, as Kennedy suggests, typically 'Irish' in their ambivalence towards the implied violence of the grave of Noel Lemass, they are gleefully biting towards the specifically bodily suffering they recall or encounter, suggesting they have become over-accustomed to, even over-whelmed by, the very image of the wounded soldier, yet are able to identify the very thing which records such violence. The text thus by implication raises the question as to whether the sight of a wounded soldier has become banal—be they veterans of World War I or II, or one of any number of conflicts during the twentieth century, and be they encountered in the street, depicted in literature, or circulated in the media— because of the scale and relative reoccurrence of mass mechanized warfare. The very thing that should suggest that further war is an abhorrent notion—the wounded soldier's body—seems only to elicit humour or irony, so used to the notion of wounding and bodily suffering are Mercier and Camier when it comes to the violence of modernity. Yet, if the novel seems to indict the pairs' caustic responses, we might also see them as ironic and comedic reformulations of that 'disillusionment' that underpins the often-extreme presentation of injured bodies in the 'war books' of the post-World War I decades.

Important too for the relation between *Mercier and Camier* and the 'war books' is how the notions of truth and experience converged in soldier's bodies. It was the authors themselves who most vocally defended their attempts to capture how war 'felt', to use Perloff's term; as Remarque wrote in the preface to *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

> This book is intended neither as an accusation nor as a confession, but simply as an attempt to give an account of a generation that was destroyed by the war—even those of it who survived the shelling. (1996)

The relatability of mutual experience— 'to give an account of a generation'—was at the heart of this venture, to offer not an evaluation or summation of the war in its entirety but a glimpse of what the experience of the trenches meant for the individuals who witnessed them. As Sassoon writes, 'Armageddon was too immense for my solitary understanding' (1930: 81). Beckett's ranger, in these terms, provides another glimpse, though it is one rendered with a line of attack that draws in the deferred context of World War II's own suffering bodies.

With a decade's distance from the most heated debates over the validity or sustainability of the 'war book' style, Orwell noted the insignificance of 'truth' in the moment of experiencing warfare, a conclusion he reached on his return from Spain:

> The soldier advancing into a machine gun barrage or standing waist-deep in a flooded trench knew only that here was an appalling experience in which he was all but helpless. He was likelier to make a good book out of his helplessness and his ignorance than of a pretended power to see the whole thing in perspective.

'The truth' of the political situation was secondary to 'the truth about the *individual reaction*' (Orwell 1940 109; original emphasis).

In his own war writing of the late 1930s and 1940s, Orwell recouped from the (by then beleaguered) 'war book' genre not only an emphasis on experience but also the pervasive nature of warfare as defined by every aspect of the human body under duress, particularly the bowels. He recalls, for example, the 'frightful shambles of smashed furniture and excrement' of a small Spanish village in which he fought, and that local church shared a wall with a home turned into a lavatory; its floor, he writes, was 'inches deep in dung' (1938: 54) in which the soldiers in Spain, like Beckett's ranger, were forced to fight. Orwell makes the case that the politics of the combat—here the fight against fascism—is subsumed in the ordeals, the actual experience, of bodily functions during war:

> I believe it was [the] latrines that first brought home to me the thought, so often to recur: 'Here we are, soldiers of a revolutionary army, defending Democracy against Fascism, fighting a war which is *about* something, and the detail of our lives is just as sordid and degrading as it could be in prison, let alone in a bourgeois army.' […] Bullets hurt, corpses stink, men under fire are often so frightened that they wet their trousers. (1943, web.)

Beckett calls on the same kind of detail in *Mercier and Camier*, from the image of the shitting ranger to the defiled bodies of the Ladysmith siege. In doing so, the dark humour can be seen to conceal, not always with much effort, a serious appraisal of modernity's patterns

of mass violence and the degree of distance which emerges between the ideology of conflicts and the realities of those fighting them. The novel's more immediate conflict of World War II is placed within that pattern, making apparent in its deferral that though the horrors of World War II were unique, they are also involved in the long cycle of violence which requires bodies to suffer during war.

Conclusion

Like the war books of Remarque and Orwell, among others, Mercier and Camier's encounter with the ranger offers a stark inversion of war, reframing the veteran not as representing a national narrative of victory or valour, as his medals may suggest, but as a being disfigured by the conflict whose body is the record of both experienced and witnessed physical suffering. Even Mercier and Camier's explications of their own views of military and political commitment are rendered through the body: so 'costive' are they that they can only 'darkly' understand the soldier's experience in Flanders. This last detail encodes one further step in the equation of bodily suffering and historical record, of the relationship between the body and how war 'felt': Camier's constipation is presented as an inhibitor to a full recognition of what military action entails. His body does not work as it 'should', and so will not suffer as it 'should' in the face of military activity because he cannot engage in any form of 'big push'. In this sense, with the injured body of the ranger before them, the scene demonstrates the demand that military commitment makes for bodily perfection in its combatants. The suffering of war, in this calculation, is the trauma, the 'injuring' that Scarry details, that is done to 'perfect' bodies to render them non-combative. It is the goal of bullets, gunpowder and gas to render bodies imperfect, hence the medicalized detail of the ranger's rectal injuries. Such bodies suffer and continue to after peace—so-called—arrives. In Beckett's depiction, there is no existentialist redemption, only the marks of injury and the 'dark' sense that potentially dubious notions of national duty and commitment drove the ranger to participate in the conflict in the first place, or potentially even an ill-fated notion of adventure instilled by war-time propaganda which exploited what Yeats called 'A lonely impulse of delight' ('An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', 2008: 64). Indeed, the martyr-like notion of 'fate' by which Yeats's airman 'foresees his death' is revised through the body in Beckett's war writing: the absent body of Yeatsian 'fate' against the lived, and still living, experience of the wounded bodies found in *Mercier and Camier* and the 'war books'.

In *Mercier and Camier*, the prospects of duty and commitment are interrogated by the image of the defiled body, of the bullet-wounded ranger, of the corpses in the retelling of Ladysmith. These bodies enable a transhistorical evaluation of commitment and duty in the text, using the patterns of Irish historical violence to suggest the notion that history has failed to teach 'us' anything about 'playing fort' or the realities of 'flies… hunger… cold… thirst… heat', of 'eat[ing] our dead' (2010a: 60). The concern looms that the prospect of history teaching at all is fantastical, an idealism suitable for 'garden parties' rather than battlefields, one made all the more fantastical when we acknowledge the post-World War II position from which Beckett was writing. In doing so, the novel offers a pacifist position in the image of the wounded soldier and Mercier and Camier's responses to it, responses that are imbued with a disenchantment with modernity's failure to prevent another mass conflict, a response that regrets that so many had remained 'costive', 'masturbating full pelt' while allowing for cycle of global conflict to continue.

References

Barry, E. 2005. Translating Nationalism: Ireland, France and Military History in Beckett's *Mercier et Camier*. *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (4): 505-515.

Beckett, S. 1941. *Watt* Notebook I and Typescript, Box 6.5–7 and Box 7.1–6. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

Beckett, S. 2009. *Watt*. London: Faber & Faber.

Beckett, S. 2010a. *Mercier and Camier*. London: Faber & Faber.

Beckett, S. 2010b. *More Pricks Than Kicks*. London: Faber & Faber.

Christensen, A. G. 2017. 'Tis my muse will have it so': Four Dimensions of Scatology in Molloy. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 40 (4): 90-104.

Coffey, B. 1972. Thomas MacGreevy: A Singularly Perfect Poet. *Hibernia Review of Books*, 4: 10.

Connor, S. 1989. 'Traduttore, Traditore': Samuel Beckett's Translation of *Mercier et Camier*. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 11-12: 27-46.

Davies, W. 2017. A Text Become Provisional: Revisiting *The Capital of the Ruins*. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 26 (2): 169-187.

Dawe, G. 2013. Nocturnes: Thomas MacGreevy and World War One. In: S. Schreibman, ed. *The Life and Works of Thomas MacGreevy*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 3-16.

Douglas, K. 1943. Poets in This War. In: D. Graham, ed, 2000. *The Letters of Keith Douglas*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, pp. 350-353.

Complete Poems. D. Graham, ed. London: Faber & Faber.

Eksteins, E. 2009. Memory. In*:* H. Bloom, ed. *All Quiet on the Western Front: New Edition.* New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, InfoBase Publishing, pp. 57-80.

Gibson, A. 2010. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Reaktion.

Gibson, A. 2013. Franco-Irish Beckett: *Mercier et Camier* in 1945-6. In*:* P. Fifield and D. Addyman, eds. *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies: New Critical Essays*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 19-38.

Gibson, A. 2015. Beckett, Vichy, Maurras, and the Body: Premier amour and Nouvelles. *Irish University Review*, 45 (2): 281–301.

Gontarski, S. E. 1985. *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Halkin, A. 2009. The Flood. In*:* H. Bloom, ed. *All Quiet on the Western Front: New Edition.* New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, InfoBase Publishing, pp. 107-126.

Jacobus, M. 2005. *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kennedy, S. 2005. Cultural Memory in *Mercier and Camier*: The Fate of Noel Lemass. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 15: 117-131.

Kennedy, S. 2014. 'Bid Us Sigh on from Day to Day': Beckett and the Irish Big House. In: S. E. Gontarski, ed. *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 222-234.

Kennedy, S. 2015, 'Humanity in Ruins': Beckett and History. In*:* D. Van Hulle, ed. *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 185-199.

MacGreevy, T. 1991. *Collected Poems: An Annotated Edition*. S. Schreibman, ed. Dun Laoghaire: Anna Livia Press.

McNaughton, J. 2018. *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Orwell, G. 1938. *Homage to Catalonia*. P. Davison, ed. 1987. *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol. 6. London: Secker & Warburg.

Orwell, G. 1940. Inside the Whale. In*:* P. Davison, ed. 1998. The *Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol. 12. London: Secker & Warburg, pp. 86-115.

Orwell, G. 1943. Looking back on the Spanish War. London: New Road. http://orwell.ru/library/essays/Spanish_War/english/esw_1 [accessed 3/1/2019]

Perloff, M. 2005. ‘In Love with Hiding’: Samuel Beckett’s War. *The Iowa Review*, 35 (1): 76-103.

Rae, P. 2009. Orwell, World War I Modernism and the Spanish Civil War. *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 2 (3): 245-258.

Rákóczy, A. 2017. In Search of Space and Locale in the Genesis of Samuel Beckett’s *Fin de partie*. In*:* M. Bariselli, N. M. Bowe and W. Davies, eds. *Samuel Beckett and Europe: History, Culture, Tradition*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, pp. 41-54.

Reid, A. 1968. *All I Can Manage, More Than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett.* New York: Grove.

Remarque, E. M. 1996. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. London: Vintage.

Sassoon, S. 1930. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. London: Faber & Faber.

Scarry, E. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stewart, P. 2011. *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Teichman, J. 1986. *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy*. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Yeats, W. B. 2008. *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*. E. Larrissy, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.