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**Beckett's Books:  
A Cultural History of Samuel  
Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'**

*MATTHEW FELDMAN*

**Continuum**

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## Beckett's Books

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# Beckett's Books

A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's  
'Interwar Notes'

MATTHEW FELDMAN

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NEW YORK • LONDON

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Continuum

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*For my father*

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## *Foreword*

One of the abiding concerns of Beckett Studies since the late 1950s, when his works began to attract sustained critical attention, has been the identification of the philosophical affiliations of this seemingly most philosophically inclined of literary figures, a writer whose works explore in an unremittingly interrogative spirit the nature of cognition, perception, consciousness, memory, temporality, being and non-being, and whose entire oeuvre might even be seen as an attempt to respond adequately to the three questions with which *The Unnamable* (1953) opens: 'Where now? Who now? When now?' From very early on, however, two general assumptions came to dominate analyses of the philosophical heritage in Samuel Beckett's work. These assumptions were, first, that Beckett possessed an almost unparalleled first-hand knowledge of many of the major figures in Western philosophy, from the Presocratics to G. W. H. Hegel, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Ludwig Wittgenstein, from Martin Heidegger to the French existentialists; and, second, that, for all his familiarity with these various philosophical traditions, Beckett's was essentially a Cartesian vision. Now, among the scholars who have sought to challenge or at the very least to nuance these and many other assumptions about Beckett, one of the greatest debts is undoubtedly owed to James Knowlson, whose 1996 biography has had a scarcely calculable impact on Beckett Studies, not least through his identification of many of the works on which Beckett took notes during the 1930s, arguably the most formative, if also the most difficult, period in Beckett's life and one during which he was far from clear about the direction – if any – of his own work.

Matthew Feldman is one of a new generation of Beckett scholars to have set themselves the task of pursuing those lines of enquiry indicated by Knowlson in particular. Making use of the existing Beckett archive and, above all, of important archival material that has only very recently been made available to scholars, Feldman proceeds to challenge with considerable force both of the above-mentioned assumptions regarding Beckett's relation to philosophy. That Beckett's substantial transcriptions from works of philosophy and psychology in the 1930s were not always those of an academic scholar, that he often relied upon synoptic texts, and only in very specific, and indeed crucial, instances – above all, with regard to the Belgian Occasionalist Arnold Geulincx and the Austrian language philosopher Fritz Mauthner – then proceeded to acquaint himself with the originals, are facts



of considerable importance to our understanding of how Beckett worked in the early years, when not only inspiration but also the means of publication were far from assured. In addition to identifying many of the sources from which Beckett's notes were taken, Feldman analyses the manner in which both the nature and the purpose of Beckett's note-taking changed during the 1930s, and connects this with the development of his art during that decisive, if painful, decade, as he sought to take his distance from Joyce and endow his works with what, in a letter to his publisher Charles Prentice, he terms his own 'odours'. The Beckett who emerges from Feldman's analysis is a figure who bears very little resemblance to either Beckett the Cartesian or Beckett the philosopher *manqué*.

Beyond challenging some of the assumptions that have shaped so many attempts to analyse the place of the philosophical heritage in Beckett's oeuvre, Feldman also challenges many of the theoretical assumptions that have dominated Beckett Studies, not just in the early postwar years, when Beckett was forced into an uncomfortable alliance with French existentialism, but also in the wake of the poststructuralist revolution, when he quickly came to be seen as the great anticipator of deconstruction, a writer whose works enact the very procedures subsequently adumbrated in a more strictly philosophical form by Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, among others. The poststructuralist approach to Beckett has undoubtedly produced some of the most innovative recent readings of his work, not least Deleuze's remarkable late essay on Beckett's television plays. And there is certainly much in Beckett that does anticipate deconstruction, above all his sense of the aporetic, which in his works comes to take the form of both the obligation and the impossibility of expression. And yet, as Feldman reminds us, the risks entailed by attempts to think of Beckett in relation to poststructuralism are considerable, for what tends to get lost, and even on occasion simply dismissed without the slightest reservation, is not only the precise, if complicated, historical sequence within which Beckett is situated, but above all, the empirical history of his own readings in philosophy, a history the uncovering and comprehension of which make considerable scholarly and interpretative demands.

If Beckett's is indeed an aporetic art, which is to say an art that constitutes at once the experience and the enactment of a series of aporias, then, Feldman argues, that art is to be understood first and foremost in relation to those texts with which Beckett himself was familiar and which found their often distorted way into his own works. If one wishes to contribute to the understanding of Beckett's oeuvre, then it is not enough to detect more or less striking resemblances between his works and those of a range of philosophers, theologians and literary figures picked to suit a particular commentator's intuitions or predilections. It is certainly not enough to point out resemblances between the rhetoric of Beckett's texts and the rhetoric of Derrida and others, since this will tell us less than we might imagine about Beckett, if rather more about Derrida and those writing in Beckett's wake. Only once

the empirical groundwork has been laid, only once one has identified Beckett's own concrete sources and analysed the precise manner in which those sources are incorporated into his works, can the theoretical questions regarding Beckett's relation to the postmodern begin to acquire any real force.

First and foremost, it is to the labour of this empirical groundwork that Feldman commits himself in this book, as that which must precede and indeed make possible the theoretical moment. This is not to say, however, that Feldman is simply content to engage in source-hunting, or that he rejects out of hand any theoretically informed approach to the literary. Far from it. Unlike some of those commentators with whom he takes issue in this book, Feldman does not underestimate the problematical nature of influence, and, as he makes clear, his aim is not to supplant the Cartesian Beckett with a Democritean, Schopenhauerian or Mauthnerian Beckett, but rather to propose a new way of thinking of Beckett's relation to the philosophical. By arguing for a much more general indebtedness to the philosophical heritage than has hitherto been envisaged or demonstrated, Feldman makes the intertextual relation in Beckett something other than either a tidy one-to-one relation between two texts or two writers, or a purely anonymous textuality of the kind proposed by Roland Barthes in his influential 1971 essay, 'From Work to Text'.

While acknowledging Beckett's early claim that 'The danger is in the neatness of identifications', and committing himself to saving that 'perhaps' which, he argues, is negated by both the existentialist and the post-structuralist versions of Beckett, Feldman never takes this sense of the danger of identifications as a licence for an interpretative free-for-all, or as proof that any identification of Beckett's sources is either pointless or impossible. Indeed, one of the convictions underlying Feldman's work is that literary interpretation has a scholarly responsibility. If a specific claim about Beckett's works, his sources, his affiliations and his place within the intertextual space simply cannot be subject to falsification, then, for Feldman, it is illegitimate. One might imagine that literary criticism pursued in accordance with such a principle of responsibility would be pedestrian at best, a matter of what Beckett, in his 1929 essay 'Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce', disparagingly terms 'book-keeping'. Feldman's work demonstrates that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, some of the interpretative risks he takes in this book are considerable, and this in itself is proof that a commitment to the empirical and to responsible literary scholarship does not preclude an adventurousness that is itself perhaps the most effective provocation to other scholars to enter into the task of trying to 'make sense' of Beckett.

For all its commitment to the empirical and the falsifiable, then, Feldman's work does not pretend to have the last word on Beckett's relation to philosophy, even though it exhibits a wealth of essential new material, an impressive grasp of the hermeneutic stakes, and a series of very persuasive readings.

Rather than seeking to put an end to the debates surrounding Beckett's literary, philosophical and psychological debts, Feldman's work constitutes nothing less than a call to others in the ever-expanding field of Beckett Studies to take up the challenge of reading Beckett responsibly, which is to say with a sense of the difference between ungrounded speculation and well-evidenced argumentation, and, at the same time, with an acute sense of that problematization of the very act of reading which Beckett's own works might be said not simply to thematize but to enact.

Shane Weller  
Canterbury, September 2005

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## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

The following volume contains much within it owed to many. In the first instance, *Damned to Fame*, Jim Knowlson's 1996 biography of Samuel Beckett, not only portended a massive sea change in Beckett Studies generally, but made studies like this one possible in the first place. Knowlson deposited most of the archival sources surveyed here in the Beckett International Foundation archives, materials that will be central to the explorations that ensue. For all this I am deeply grateful to Knowlson; moreover, his unparalleled text contains such a treasure of information that *Beckett's Books* essentially adds analytical breadth and depth to Beckett's artistic evolution prior to 1945, one so aptly captured in *Damned to Fame*:

The image of Beckett undergoing a conversion like St Paul on the road to Damascus can too easily distort our view of his development as a writer. As critics have shown, some of his late themes were already deeply embedded in his earlier work, particularly his interest in Democritus' idea that 'nothing is more real than nothing' and the quietistic impulse within his work. But the notion of 'THE Revelation' also obscures several earlier and less sudden or dramatic revelations: the certainty that he had to dissociate himself at an early stage from Joyce's influence; the reassessment necessitated by almost two years of psychotherapy; the effect on him of being stabbed and in danger of dying; the freedom to discover himself as a writer that living away from Ireland, freed from his mother's sternly critical influence, offered him; the impact of the war years, when his friends were arrested and he was forced to escape and live in hiding; and the greater objectivity that working with others at St-Lô allowed him to assume with respect to his own inner self. The ground had been well prepared.<sup>1</sup>

Colleagues of Knowlson's have also been as kind as he has with their time and insights: John Pilling, Julian Garforth, Verity Andrews and a number of others at the Reading University Library have my gracious appreciation. Especially worthy of note here is Mark Nixon, who has offered support, shared materials and has been a constant stimulus both as outstanding scholar and colleague. A number of others have also helped to shape this monograph, and their mere names do little justice to the amount of thanks due to each: Shane Weller, Dirk van Hulle, Steven Connor, Julie Campbell, Paul Jackson, Catherine Morley, Erik and Judith Tønning, Marius Turda,

Robert Mallett, as well as the Oxford Brookes University and Bodleian Upper Reserve library staffs.

*Beckett's Books* emerged from my 2004 doctorate 'Sourcing "Aporetics": An Empirical Study on Philosophical Influences in the Development of Samuel Beckett's writing' – that mouthful would have been impossible without Brookes' University Studentship Award, or without the support of the English and History Departments therein. More narrowly, a range of European sources used by Beckett and quoted in English here were forged by the professionalism and excellent translations of Detlef Mühlberger (German), Roger Griffin (German), Anna Castriota (Latin) and Steven Matthews (French). The latter, my supervisor throughout, has contributed far more than French to this text, and far more than mere supervision to the entire project: I am deeply thankful to my mentor and friend.

The aforementioned doctorate itself contains five appendices with large portions of those 'Interwar Notes' cited throughout this volume: included are roughly 150 pages of Beckett's notes on – in particular – philosophy and psychology, as well as original material translated into English. For considerations of brevity these appendices have been excluded here, and Anna Sandeman, Kate Reeves, Anya Wilson, Rebecca Simmonds, Joanna Taylor and the excellent team at Continuum Books are doubtless right to find that its unwieldy nature is better served in the dusty recesses of the Brookes and Reading libraries. By way of denoting Beckett's materials termed here 'Interwar Notes', archive numbers are included in the main body of the text; all other references are found in short notes, each corresponding to full details given in the bibliography.

Parts of Chapters 1 and 2 appeared in recent issues of *The Journal of Beckett Studies* (hereafter *JOBS*) and *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* (*SBT/A*), and I am grateful for their editorial counsel and willingness to publish my earlier work. The Christoffel Press kindly allowed me to quote passages from Martin Wilson's translation of Arnold Geulincx's *Metaphysics*, for which they have my thanks. Finally, this text would *really* have been impossible without assistance from Edward Beckett and the Beckett Estate: in the granting of permissions, answering of questions and acting as constant support to scholars enquiring into Samuel Beckett's literature. That said, none of those acknowledged share in any mistakes or omissions arising from *Beckett's Books*; these are solely my responsibility.

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## Introduction

*The time is not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear, any more than the light of day (or night) makes the subsolar, -lunar and -stellar excrement. Art is the sun, moon and stars of the mind, the whole mind.*<sup>1</sup>

‘Negation is no more possible than affirmation,’ Samuel Beckett (1906–89) once shrugged in conversation with Charles Juliet. ‘It is absurd to say that something is absurd. That is still a value judgement. It is impossible to protest, and equally impossible to assent. You have to work in an area where there are no possible pronouns, or solutions, or reactions, or standpoints . . . That’s what makes it so diabolically difficult.’<sup>2</sup> Similar difficulties have long extended to criticism on Beckett. The conflicting demands of interpretative clarity and Beckett’s unique writing – much of it without traditional literary foundations like plot, character, setting and so on – have to a great extent inspired a library of scholarship crammed together under the heading ‘Beckett Studies’. By way of contribution, *Beckett’s Books* yokes important insights from these shelves to archival documents first composed by Beckett during the interwar period. My aim, in (hopefully) remaining faithful to Beckett, has been twofold: to emphatically affirm the importance of these extant materials in the evolution of Beckett’s artistic approach, and to quietly negate overarching readings of Beckett that attempt to say what he (or ‘it’) actually ‘means’.

A working method also insistently affirmed throughout assumes the importance of biographical facts and empirical information gathered around Beckett’s artistic development during the 1930s. Academic training, extreme personal experiences (such as Beckett’s near-fatal stabbing in Paris in January 1938) and an increasingly radical view of art all anticipated – and to varying degrees clearly underwrote – Beckett’s mature writings and less frequent public discussions (as with Juliet above). As Beckett said of himself, ‘I became a writer, because all else failed’.<sup>3</sup> Irrespective of the accuracy of this remark, much of what Beckett was attempting at this time of ‘failure’ was, in turn, garnered from voracious reading and exhaustive note-taking during the interwar years. A theoretical approach to these ‘Interwar Notes’ is advanced in Chapter 1. As will become clear, the broad term ‘Interwar Notes’ embraces

everything from the hugely illuminating 'Whoroscope Notebook' to the seemingly prosaic 'German Workbook'. Their shared features are underpinned biographically, empirically and artistically by an exploration of Beckett's own working methods, shorthanded as 'non-Euclidean logic'; that is, a particular approach to art (and indeed much else) championing an alternative logic and *modus operandi* to the more rational, 'Euclidean', approaches to Western conceptions of the world. The term 'non-Euclidean logic', it should be stressed, attempts to capture Beckett's artistic approach and development during the interwar period through his contemporaneous notes. This approach to Beckett's own methodology does not seek to summarily 'explain' the literature of this most opaque of modern authors; but instead, to enquire into some of the ways that art turned out as it did, and why.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of some characteristics shared by the 'Interwar Notes', in addition to pointing up their relevance to Beckett's life and work. In surveying the massive collection of archival material, new evidence on this decisive period for Beckett features prominently, as well as a substantial amount of historical contextualization of these sources as a whole. The following three chapters further expound upon these themes, and delineate those materials invariably consuming the greatest amount of Beckett's time in the construction of his notes. First, the more than 500 typed and handwritten sheets comprising the 'Philosophy Notes' are evaluated in Chapter 3 against the backdrop of longstanding Cartesian readings in Beckett Studies. Here, the focus is firmly upon the importance of empirical scholarship in best addressing those philosophical influences understood to be decisive in Beckett's early development. In short, René Descartes' shadow has been cast across Beckett Studies far too emphatically and for far too long: a corrective is applied here through the location of more general, and more widespread, philosophical debts comprising Beckett's early development. Chapter 4 makes much the same case through the 'Psychology Notes', a corpus of some 20,000 words of typewritten notes taken by Beckett from nine psychological texts. Like the new perspective offered on Beckett's relationship with philosophy in Chapter 3, this chapter reconsiders Beckett's larger relationship with psychology; in this case, through an extensive biographical discussion of Beckett's two years of psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion (1897–1979). Chapter 5 further underpins Beckett's literary explorations of ignorance and ineffability through, paradoxically, learned books. By locating major sources of inspiration in the transcriptions of Arnold Geulincx (1624–69) and Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923), this chapter locates the importance of these figures in Beckett's artistic and intellectual development to a far greater degree than previously acknowledged. Altogether, these three chapters reveal a different side of Beckett than has been generally explored: studious and meticulous; self-directed and curious about various currents of thought; and, at the same time, willing and able to turn these intellectual systems upon themselves for artistic reasons.

But first a caution: the very novelty of Beckett's literature has simultaneously raised the problem of reading Beckett: how is it possible to make a sensible assertion about something attempting to be 'inexpressive'? One cannot rightly say that ineffability expresses meaning, but neither can one say that it does not express *some* meaning. However radical Beckett's project is, the very act of committing words to paper, of not leaving a blank page, is still a form of communication. When speaking of a new medium not submitting to the 'ultimate penury' of an art detached from its occasion, Beckett asserted revealingly to his friend, the art critic Georges Duthuit, in their 1949 'Three Dialogues':

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, *is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, new term of relation, and of the act which unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act*, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.<sup>4</sup>

Acceptance of failure, submission to obligation, expressing the inexpressible; these are the working methods Samuel Beckett presents to his readers, not in the interests of offering a doctrine, or in order to make the inexplicable comprehensible, but precisely to use his art to show that consciousness can only take blurred snapshots of memory and experience. Faced with Beckett's academic pedigree and revolutionary artistic ideas, scholars are thus on notice in attempting systematic readings of his literature; for the problems encountered offer fundamental challenges to sense-making, as announced in the pivotal novel *Watt*: 'But what was this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning? And to what did it tend? These are delicate questions.'<sup>5</sup>

In response, the perspective here is presented in the following terms: *it is inherently preferable to theorize from a position of empirical accuracy*. Theorizing is intrinsic to scholarship; theorizing without empirical substance is not. In seeking to best circumvent the latter, *Beckett's Books* focuses on the circumstances impacting upon Beckett during the late 1920s and 1930s – in the widest sense – in the construction of his notes, correspondence and literature. Analysis of Beckett's writings will therefore take the form of a wide-ranging scrutiny of the interwar period in light of three vital considerations: first, the period from Beckett's 1920s essays through to his transcriptions of Mauthner a decade later (covering, especially, 1928–38) provides far and away the largest body of extant, unpublished and heretofore undervalued writings. If empirical accuracy obtains as a worthy aim, a veritable treasure trove of journals, notebooks, transcriptions and letters is now available in the various Beckett archives. A second approach here explores the relationship between these archival deposits and Beckett's life and writings at this time. In doing so, the intimacy between Beckett's public and private writings becomes immediately evident. Beckett's literature, and to a lesser extent, journalism



and correspondence, reflects the intense reading undertaken during this period: again and again, a process of filtering knowledge into writing is detectable; here obscurely, there overtly. And third, it is biographically apparent that this period immediately preceded, and in many ways prepared, Beckett's breakthrough in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As such, evidence surveyed here will locate some notable changes in Beckett's literature, while also factually underpinning existing scholarship that finds erudition to be a crucial – if characteristically obscured – force in his art, one acting as a catalyst for artistic change as well.

As an exemplar of perspectives guiding the ensuing chapters, a brief look at Beckett's 1958 play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, is instructive. As with his oeuvre as a whole, interpretative residua – from memories refracted through Krapp's old tape recordings to the inclusion of Beckett's own past – are firmly located outside the confines of the text. However, with James Knowlson's indispensable biography, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, and Beckett's *Theatrical Notebook* for the play to hand, veiled allusions within *Krapp's Last Tape* become visible. An investigation of Beckett's notebook reveals that lighting is essential: the 1969 direction instructs that 'Explicit integration light dark' is intended to occur in over half the 27 items listed as contents in the authorized edition.

Note that Krapp decrees physical (ethical) incompatibility of light (spiritual) and dark (sensual) only when he intuits possibility of their reconciliation intellectually as rational-irrational. He turns from fact of anti-mind alien to mind to thought of anti-mind constituent of mind. He is thus ethically correct (*signaculum sinus*) through intellectual transgression, the duty of reason being not to join but to separate (deliverance of imprisoned light). For this sin he is punished as shown by the aeons.<sup>6</sup>

In this handwritten page, Beckett frames this fusion in terms of the title 'Mani' (Manichaeus), initiator of a sect of heretical Christians who believed the malevolence of this world could be understood by personal authenticity, astride esoteric insight into the meta/physical battle of Good and Evil waged amongst deities. Undoubtedly, the oppositions between light-dark, mind-body, rational-irrational were clearly important both to the Manicheans and to Beckett. But the explicit integration of such opposites in Krapp is nowhere mentioned in the play itself. Unlike the unconcealed erudition in writings preceding the eponymous hero's first appearance in the 1946 *Eleutheria*, a dozen years later *Krapp's Last Tape* employs a hidden philosophical-theological framing device to structure most of the play. Krapp's view of 'everything on this old muckball' is thus steeped in Gnosticism, notwithstanding the playwright's meticulous construction of the play as self-contained and non-referential, one decontextualized and virtually bereft of allusion outside the stage and props. In revealing the context and personal

elements (such as Beckett's visits to Kassel, Germany, and the more specific instances there reading *Effie Briest*)<sup>7</sup> of this universalized play, scholarship demonstrably increases our understanding of *Krapp's Last Tape*. And it certainly appears proximate to Beckett's own, if only rarely explicated, views: 'If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable.'<sup>8</sup>

This brings up the final consideration pursued by *Beckett's Books*. The readings, transcriptions and, in an important sense, internalization of many of the literary and especially philosophical texts Beckett noted in the years prior to the Second World War may therefore be viewed as an intellectual axis around which he redefined his own aims and honed the artistic methodology employed in the postwar works to such acclaim. A guiding paradox in this book takes into account the garnering of knowledge, prior to its divestment in an 'anti-encyclopedic' process, culminating in fully 140 instances of 'I don't know' in *The Trilogy of postwar novels: in exploring impotence and ignorance, Beckett's literature was underpinned by wide-ranging erudition*.<sup>9</sup> As usual, Beckett has phrased this assessment most effectively in exclaiming, 'You've got to get *back* to ignorance'. Taking him seriously and literally, I follow Anne Atik's judgement of Beckett's views on knowledge: 'He feared erudition swamping the authenticity of a work, and constantly warned against that danger for other artists, having had to escape from it himself.'<sup>10</sup> Decades earlier, such non-Euclidean logic was perfectly expressed in terms of language and silence in a personal counterpart to the academic 'Interwar Notes', the 'German Diaries', which frequently anticipate themes in Beckett's postwar texts: 'Even to listen is an effort, and to speak ausgeschlossen [ruled out]. Anyway the chatter is a solid block, not a chink, interruption proof. Curse this everlasting limpness and melancholy. How absurd, the struggle to learn to be silent in another language!'<sup>11</sup>

In attempting a *return* to ignorance by virtue of divesting learnedness, Beckett betrays an awareness of the paradox at hand; indeed, he perhaps indicates a way out. For ignorance assumes 'ignorance of something'; that is, *some* knowledge of the very thing having 'unknown' as a property. Both the word and idea 'ignorance' simply cannot be self-contained: how such ignorance? ignorance *of what*? Seeking knowledge implies ignorance, just as seeking ignorance implies knowledge. Exploration of the latter marks Beckett's later art. But the former necessarily precedes it. And by speaking of ignorance as a quest rather than a state of being, Beckett offers a first hint of his method; ours will centre upon his accumulation of knowledge – oftentimes itself pointing toward ineffability (as both linguistic proposition and individual experience) – as indispensable in precipitating that famous artistic quest for ignorance.

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# 1 Theorizing 'Misology': Approaching Beckettian Paradoxes

*. . . a sufficient quantity of food was prepared and cooked to carry Mr. Knott through the week . . . these things, and many others too numerous to mention, were well mixed together in the famous pot and boiled for four hours, until the consistence of a mess, or poss, was obtained, and all the good things to eat, and all the good things to drink, and all the good things to take for the good of the health were inextricably mingled and transformed into a single good thing that was neither food, nor drink, nor physic, but quite a new good thing . . .*<sup>1</sup>

In a spirit similar to that leading Samuel Beckett to characterize his own work with an ever-indeterminate 'perhaps' and to suggest that the (inadvisable) study of his work should begin with an awareness of the cul-de-sac of reason, we will here endeavour to alter, amplify, apply and amalgamate the epigraph into what will hopefully be, critically, 'quite a new good thing'. This 'thing' depends, in the first instance, upon continuing provisions for (and in) Beckett's writing, including exhaustive materials on Democritus and Arnold Geulincx, the two philosophers explicitly cited as departures for studying his art.<sup>2</sup> In fine, Beckett's own 'poss' is a mix of substantial intellectual debts owed to particular books, figures and systems from within European culture. In turn, these assisted him in a mode of expression that is at once inspirational and futile, philosophical and artistic: systematic at times within certain limits; and then again, non-systematic in response to those limits.

Surveying these archival deposits means sifting through a jumble of notebooks and typewritten sheets from artistic, literary, historical, psychological and (of greatest volume, and arguably greatest importance) philosophical readings. These will be used throughout as an empirical platform to underpin a number of theoretical considerations. For the 'Interwar Notes' brilliantly demonstrate attention to the narcotic of systematic thought – linear perception as regards phenomena, linear progression as regards literary and philosophical developments, and the consequent ramifications for truth and the utility of knowledge – revealing a ten-year immersion in just such modes of thinking that, for Beckett, both made clear the hallucinogenic nature of rationalism and set the preconditions for what Knowlson has called a 'frenzy

of writing' after the Second World War. The primary interest here is with the former travails – especially during the 1930s – and their reflection in the 'Interwar Notes', argued throughout as essential props 'setting the stage' for the creative breakthroughs of the latter period. Such sentiments are in step with James Knowlson's exhaustive biography on the subject:

Beckett always saw himself as belonging to and drawing from a wide European literary tradition . . . Although he was to turn away from the quest for more knowledge to the exploration of impotence and ignorance after the war years, he remained one of the most erudite writers of the twentieth century, with a range of easy reference that extended widely over many literatures.<sup>3</sup>

In short, our analysis throughout finds that Beckett's notes were immediately integral to the construction of his writings during the 1920s and 1930s; were reflective of his temperament and tribulations at that time; and remained highly significant thereafter (as direct references specifically, and inspirations generally) in the development of his art.

That a period of germination occurred in the years before Beckett's fame will be suggested in ensuing chapters, astride numerous examples of the transformative contribution made by Beckett's notes to his literary output. One crucial reservoir encountered again and again is the '*Whoroscope* Notebook': an incredible mosaic of notes toward *Murphy* ('Murphy "I am not of the big world, I am of the little world: Ubi nihil valeo, ibi nihil velo" (I quote from memory) and inversely'); quotations; facts, figures and phrases – like that from our title, 'misology = hatred of theories'; and Beckett's occasional aphorisms, such as 'unselfish because he had no self – he had no self to be selfish about', or 'A lifetime hard' (Reading University Library, hereafter RUL, MS 3000, pp. 9, 72, 36, 35). Beckett's 'commonplace book' was his companion for much of the 1930s, testifies to his erudite interests, and undoubtedly acted as sometime creative spark for his literature. Indeed, much of Beckett's reading and some of his creative jottings in the 1930s are recorded in this notebook. For indicating many of Beckett's interests at this time alone, the '*Whoroscope* Notebook' is priceless. Moreover, the way in which some of his personal readings and writings are transformed, recycled and sometimes concealed, is evident here as well.<sup>4</sup>

In characterizing this process, Porter Abbott's understanding of 'auto-graphing' – a decanting from Beckett's experiences into his literature – is an indispensable aid in viewing Beckett's incorporation of his 'Interwar Notes' in terms of the practice of 'autography'.<sup>5</sup> Although Abbott is largely concerned with details from Beckett's life, examples of 'self writing' abound during the interwar years. A bare example must suffice for now: whereas the '*Whoroscope* Notebook' records in the mid-1930s 'Leibniz to Locke "Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, nisi ipsi intellectus" [There is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses except the mind itself]' (RUL MS

3000, p. 62); by *Malone Dies* in 1948, Jackson's parrot can only utter 'nihil in intellectu, etc': 'These first three words the bird managed well enough, but the celebrated restriction was too much for it'.<sup>6</sup>

#### BECKETT'S 'POSS' AND THE DOG'S DINNER

Before moving on, let us more closely consider Beckett's own evolving method at this time. An early example is furnished by the 1931 academic essay on Marcel Proust, which 'accepts regretfully the sacred ruler and compass of literary geometry' in seeking 'the heart of the cauliflower or the ideal core of the onion [that] would represent a more appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excavation than the crown of bay'.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the ensuing eight years forming the bulk of our forthcoming analysis witnessed an expansion of intellectual endeavours after *Proust*, alongside a growing dissatisfaction with the rational, optimistic, positivistic ethos Beckett perceived in academia. By seeking the 'heart of the cauliflower' in his own art, Beckett's enormous corpus of 'Interwar Notes' simultaneously harnessed erudition and cultivated an increasingly divergent artistic view of that erudition. That this widening fissure was becoming increasingly apparent to Beckett is documented in his 'German Diaries' between September 1936 and April 1937, where 'the position of the intellectual is for me of secondary interest . . . what I want to know about is the artist, who is never comfortable by definition'.<sup>8</sup>

Insofar as *Murphy*, completed months earlier (but not published until 1938), constituted an amalgam of different intellectual schools of thought, Beckett's trip to Germany announced a break with the somewhat gaudy erudition of a previously aspiring academic and more or less concluded his note-taking projects.<sup>9</sup> Changes thereafter detectable in *Watt*, written during the Second World War, surely owe something to the fact that Beckett was fleeing from Nazi agents, arriving in his hideaway at Roussillon with none of the books and notes used in the composition of *Murphy*.<sup>10</sup> Still, the materials left behind in Paris, exemplified by Beckett's 'Interwar Notes', continued to anchor his evolving artistic approach in the generation between *Proust* and the 'Three Dialogues'. An analysis of the latter text will best initiate our investigation of the erudition Beckett was directing himself toward in the interwar period, one fundamentally marking his later art.

Nowhere is the conflation of a previous tradition and development of new ideas more apparent than in Beckett's 'Three Dialogues' with Georges Duthuit, composed in the months following the mid-1949 completion of *En Attendant Godot*. Generated from discussions in Paris between the two, the text, written by the former and published by the latter in the December 1949 issue of *transition*, has frequently been viewed, in terms formulated by

Anthony Cronin, as 'the nearest Beckett ever came to writing a manifesto or a statement of what he felt to be his own position'; namely, the 'categorical imperative to create when combined with the impossibility of creation'.<sup>11</sup> In stark contrast, Eyal Amiran asserts that the 'Three Dialogues' 'are so explicitly dramatized' that Duthuit 'was not well pleased with the role assigned to him', ostensibly because of the 'fictional footing' given to 'factual' conversations about the painters Bram van Velde, André Masson and Pierre Tal Coat.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, the boundaries between artistic statement and artistic creation are visibly blurred.

Unusually for Beckett, the creative process was to some degree shared, and as Lois Oppenheim's research finds, 'references to the collaborative effort are too numerable to cite'.<sup>13</sup> Duthuit's sizeable contribution notwithstanding, Beckett certainly wrote the text independently as a kind of personal statement on art, somewhere between Amiran's deliberate fictionalization and Cronin's declarative manifesto. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the correspondence between the two friends cited by Oppenheim points to a less opaque and more discursive exchange regarding their respective differences on art: 'I think I see what separates us, what we always end up stumbling against, after many useless locutions. It is the possible-impossible, richness-poverty, possession-deprivations, etc. etc. opposition.' 'You oppose a quotidian, utilitarian time to a vital one of tripes, privileged effort, the true', Beckett later wrote to Duthuit. 'All this comes down to wanting to save a form of expression that is not viable.'<sup>14</sup>

Lasting until the mid-1950s, these written exchanges shed light on the setting of the 'Three Dialogues' in much the same way as a London A-Z and 1935 calendar shed light on the setting of *Murphy*. Oppenheim's reading of this correspondence never strays far from Beckett's own understanding of his art; indeed, the *transition* venture was in retrospect touted by Beckett as an exercise in artistic self-reflection: 'So you can't talk art with me; all I risk expressing when I speak about it are my own obsessions'.<sup>15</sup> Yet Oppenheim and other scholars approaching the 'Three dialogues' leave three important questions unanswered: Why was it written in such a way? Why dialogues? And why three of them?

In approaching such questions, it ought to be noted that all three critics above have touched on important factors of intent and background. Next to nothing, however, has to date been written on the intellectual influences behind the 'Three Dialogues'. For Beckett's readings in the preceding twenty years reveal a structural debt raising a larger point about the general backdrop provided by various systems of thought in Beckett's texts. Indeed, the very allusiveness of the title makes this apparent.

Dialogues, as a marriage of (literary) form and (philosophical) content, have been a frequent trope for opposing rival philosophical traditions. Earliest employed to expound Socrates' famous methods of questioning, Plato's *Dialogues* cover subjects as various as the immortality of the soul, intellectual

love, the relation of virtue to knowledge (or otherwise) and the Socratic idea that 'the study of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom'. Also fundamental is the method of composition: comedy, tragedy, irony, opposition; the marriage of reality and imagination; and for Scott Buchanan, 'the theatrical machinery and instrument of deeper vision in which both literary and philosophical ideas will find a focus; while the characters in the dialogues are historic personages . . . the characters are stylised to the point of becoming the abstract types, or stock characters, of comedy'.<sup>16</sup> In sum, one is as likely to find Plato's dialogues in the Classics section of bookshops as in the Philosophy section. The Platonic dialogue form, then, initiates a tradition dramatizing philosophical disputes in order to best distinguish and express their contours. This is also true of Cicero, upon whose dialogues David Hume later 'modelled' his own *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Like Plato, Hume was certainly read by Beckett – July 1932 for the former, and by 1938 for the latter – and although it is not certain he was familiar with either philosopher's dialogues as such, of greater importance to note presently is the marriage of literary form and philosophical content long represented in this tradition:

The *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, as an example of the philosophical dialogue, is beyond dispute the most brilliant in the English language, surpassing Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), the only serious contender. . . . The *Dialogues* is the final marriage of philosophy with art that had been Hume's ambition throughout a long career as a man of letters.<sup>17</sup>

Also significantly, the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* takes as its theme George Berkeley's theory of 'immaterialism', which sets the act of perception in opposition to the perceived: 'Berkeley's own philosophy is ideally suited to the dialogue form', Jonathan Dancy affirms, 'because he denies what we would have thought the most obvious thing in the world, that the physical world consists of real material things, existing out there in a way that has really nothing to do with us'.<sup>18</sup> The distinction is even extended to Berkeley's participants, Philonous ('lover of mind') and Hylas ('materialist').

Given that Beckett had read Berkeley's *Dialogues* (specifically referring to it in 1936) and owned this text at his death, it is surprising that Frederik Smith's perceptive essay 'Beckett and Berkeley: A Reconsideration' makes only passing mention of this connection, despite arguing throughout that

in Berkeley we have a philosopher who is a fine writer and whose arguments depend in large measure on the form of his works, whereas in Beckett we have a literary writer interested in dealing, through the manipulation of form, with many of Berkeley's most pressing philosophical concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Smith observes that Beckett found both style and theme alluring in the Bishop's treatises, and also notes references to Berkeley in *Murphy*, the 1965 *Film* and (more opaquely) elsewhere, contending that 'while critics have pursued the influence of Berkeley's ideas on Beckett, we have paid little or no attention to the profound influence of the structure and style of his texts'.<sup>20</sup> Smith's contribution is particularly valuable insofar as it alerts us to Beckett's general interest in Berkeley's idealist structure and style. And in the context of the 'Three Dialogues', we find the most explicit appropriation of Berkeley's form by Beckett: the 1949 Dialogues are modelled upon the 1713 *Dialogues*.

Consider an exchange between 'B.' and 'D.' from Beckett's first dialogue, where it is made clear that merely replicating nature can no longer be the goal of the modern artist. The unfolding contention, as in Berkeley's dialogues, is over who exhibits the greater scepticism: the one believing art can still capture modern experience with the tools used by representational painting throughout the ages, or the one believing the subject matter of the modern artist demands a new form of expression, a new understanding. The history of painting stands condemned as a history of mimesis – for 'B.', perpetually forced 'to enlarge the statement of a compromise' – and the point of opposition in the dialogues, crafted right from the start, centres upon whether an explicit turning away from this tradition is absurd (or simply impossible), or whether another artistic plane can be perceived and ought to be pursued.

- B. In any case a thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience, as revealed to the vigilant coenaesthesia. Whether achieved through submission or through mastery, the result is a gain in nature.
- D. But that which this painter discovers, orders, transmits, is not in nature . . .
- B. By nature I mean here, like the naivest realist, a composite of perceiver and perceived, not a datum, an experience.<sup>21</sup>

We are thus returned to whether recreating the natural, material (or matter à la Hylas), or whether accepting pure perception, the void (or the mind à la Philonous), is the most appropriate way to interpret modern experience.

When framed in this way, it becomes clear that a great deal of Beckett's 'Three Dialogues' is directly suggestive of Berkeley's *Dialogues*. Although the flavour of this affinity is best served by reading the Beckett and Berkeley texts in tandem, an excerpt from the latter's own first dialogue is illustrative:

- HYLAS. But what say you to *pure intellect*? May not abstracted ideas be framed by that faculty?
- PHILONOUS. Since I cannot frame abstract ideas at all, it is plain, I cannot frame them by the help of *pure intellect*, whatsoever



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