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Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon  
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## SAMUEL BECKETT'S LIBRARY

*Samuel Beckett's Library* critically examines the reading notes and marginalia contained in the books of Samuel Beckett's surviving library in Paris. This is the first study to assess the importance of the previously inaccessible to scholars marginalia, inscriptions and other manuscript notes in the 700 volumes of the library. Setting the library into context with other manuscript material such as drafts and notebooks, *Samuel Beckett's Library* examines the way in which Beckett absorbed, 'translated' and transmitted his reading in his own work. This book thus illuminates Beckett's cultural and intellectual world, and shows the ways in which his reading often engendered writing.

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Frontmatter  
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*For*  
*James Knowlson, Geert Lernout and John Pilling*

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Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon  
Frontmatter  
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I have been reading wildly all over the place.  
(Samuel Beckett, letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 25 March 1936)

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Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

*Contents*

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Abbreviations / Editions Used</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 Reading Traces: Beckett as a Reader	1
2 Literature in English	20
3 Literature in French	43
4 Literature in German	82
5 Literature in Italian	103
6 Classics and Other Literatures	117
7 Philosophy	128
8 Religion	170
9 Dictionaries and Reference Works	192
10 Science	200
11 Music and Art	214
Concluding Marginalia	221
<i>Notes</i>	225
<i>Appendix: A Catalogue of Books in Beckett's Library</i>	261
<i>Bibliography</i>	289
<i>Index</i>	303

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978-1-107-00126-8 - Samuel Beckett's Library  
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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---



Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-00126-8 - Samuel Beckett's Library  
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(held at British Library London), Kay Boyle, Aidan Higgins, Mary Hutchinson, John Kobler, A. J. Leventhal, Mania Péron, George Reavey and Jake Schwartz (held at Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin) and Barbara Bray, Thomas MacGreevy, H. M. O. White and Nick Rawson (held at Trinity College Dublin; cited with permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin) are reproduced by kind permission of the Estate of Samuel Beckett, c/o Rosica Colin Limited, London. We are grateful to the above institutions for kindly granting permission to cite from relevant unpublished material. For permissions to cite from Beckett's 'German Diaries', we are grateful to Suhrkamp Verlag, and from Beckett's 'Echo's Bones', to Faber & Faber.

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## *Abbreviations / Editions Used*

### Works by Beckett

- ATF*      *All That Fall and Other Plays for Radio and Screen*, preface and notes by Everett Frost (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
- BDMP<sub>1</sub>*   *Stirrings Still / Soubresauts and Comment dire / what is the word:* an electronic genetic edition (Series 'The Beckett Digital Manuscript Project', module 1), ed. by Dirk Van Hulle and Vincent Neyt. Brussels: University Press Antwerp (ASP/UPA), 2011, <<http://www.beckettarchive.org>>.
- CDW*      *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986).
- CIWS*      *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still*, ed. by Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
- Dis*       *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983).
- DN*       *Beckett's 'Dream' Notebook*, ed. by John Pilling (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999). [citations from this book refer to item rather than page number.]
- Dream*   *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1992).
- ECEF*      *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End / First Love*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
- HII*       *How It Is*, ed. by Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
- MC*       *Mercier and Camier*, ed. by Seán Kennedy (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).
- MD*       *Malone Dies*, ed. by Peter Boxall (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).
- Mo*       *Molloy*, ed. by Shane Weller (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
- MPTK*     *More Pricks than Kicks*, ed. by Cassandra Nelson (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).
- Mu*       *Murphy*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-00126-8 - Samuel Beckett's Library  
 Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xii

*Abbreviations / Editions Used*

- PTD* *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965).  
*SP* *Selected Poems 1930–1989*, ed. by David Wheatley (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).  
*TFN* *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose 1950–1976*, ed. by Mark Nixon (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).  
*Un* *The Unnamable*, ed. by Steven Connor (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).  
*W* *Watt*, ed. by Chris Ackerley (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

## Samuel Beckett – Archival and Other Material

- GD* ‘German Diaries’ [six notebooks], Beckett International Foundation, The University of Reading.  
*LSB* *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, vol. I, 1929–1940*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).  
*LSB II* *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, vol. II, 1941–1956*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).  
*WN* ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook, Beckett International Foundation, The University of Reading, UoR MS3000.

## Library Archives

- HRC* Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.  
*JEK* James and Elizabeth Knowlson Collection, Special Collections, The University of Reading.  
*TCD* Trinity College Dublin Library, Department of Manuscripts.  
*UoR* Beckett International Foundation, The University of Reading.

## Notes on the Text

Extracts from Samuel Beckett’s letters, notebooks and manuscripts reproduced by kind permission of the Estate of Samuel Beckett, c/o Rosica Colin Limited, London. All translations from other languages are our own unless stated otherwise. Beckett’s marginalia and notes are transcribed with as little diacritical signs as possible. Underlining is used to indicate passages or words underscored by Beckett.

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## *Introduction*

The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading in order to write.  
A man will turn over half a library to make a book.

(Samuel Johnson, qtd. in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*)

Libraries represent not only the material manifestation of knowledge, but also the labyrinthine world of creation. As Johnson's quotation suggests, the relationship between reading and writing is often seen to be at the core of the creative enterprise. And the library lies at the heart of this complex transmission of knowledge, whether it is the endless Borgesian Library of Babel, Umberto Eco's ideal library (with 3,335 rooms, at least one of which had 33,335 walls, at least one of which had 33,335 bookshelves, and at least one of which could hold 33,335 books) or simply the British Library. If, as Johnson states, a writer reads in order to write, then the books that feed this creative nexus are often viewed as keys that can unlock the mysteries of texts. This is even more the case if these writers' books contain reading traces, marginalia, discrete or clear signs of a dialogue between reader and writer. The library, whether real or virtual, is the postmodern symbol of intertextuality, of the fact that 'books always speak of other books', as Eco says in *The Name of the Rose*. As a result, the libraries of authors have often found their way into national collections and university archives, and many of the books once owned by the most important twentieth-century writers still survive today. Thus the libraries, complete or incomplete, of writers such as Auden, Pound, Woolf, Wilde and Joyce can now be consulted in public collections.

Samuel Beckett's library also survives. It is still where it was at the time of his death in 1989, in his apartment on the Boulevard St. Jacques in Paris. Only a relatively small amount of books had previously been taken out of the library. Shortly before his death, Beckett asked his friend and biographer James Knowlson to integrate volumes of scholarly interest in the Beckett International Foundation's Collection at the University of Reading. Beckett's copies of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, his volume of Hölderlin's

works and some of his editions of Dante, amongst others, were thus made available for consultation. Even earlier, Beckett had given books from his library to friends, such as his collection of books on art and other volumes, which he gave to his friends, the painter Avigdor Arikha and Arikha's wife, Anne Atik. But the bulk of Beckett's books are still in his apartment in Paris. The library contains roughly 700 books, which includes those volumes that Beckett kept at his country retreat in Ussy and that were moved to Paris when he died.

Samuel Beckett's library has hitherto not been available for consultation, although the Estate of Samuel Beckett has in the past assisted scholarly enquiries by providing bibliographical details of the volumes with the help of a hand list, compiled by James Knowlson and Edith Fournier after the author's death. However, in the summer of 2006 Edward Beckett, the literary executor of the estate, allowed us access to the library, in order to study the volumes for reading traces. This book thus represents the first examination of Beckett's library and attempts to sketch a map of Beckett's intellectual world.

The lack of access to the library has so far been a missing link in terms of understanding Beckett's intellectual heritage as well as his cultural milieu. At the same time, it must be noted that the existent 'real' library only represents a very small part of all the books Beckett consulted and read during his life. Indeed, particularly during the 1930s, Beckett, out of financial necessity, frequently worked in libraries or borrowed books from friends. Moreover, Beckett gave many of his books away during his life. A letter to Barbara Bray of 9 June 1959 evidences this; having thanked her for sending the Yale edition of Johnson's *Diaries, Prayers, Annals*, he went on to state that 'it will not be among the vast numbers I intend soon to scrap' (TCD MS10948/1/35). There were further culls, as Beckett sorted out his books on moving from the Rue des Favorites to the Boulevard St. Jacques in 1960 (letter to Bray, 22 October 1960; TCD MS10948/1/117), and then told Jocelyn Herbert on 2 November 1977 that he was in Ussy 'enjoying throwing everything out, books and other rubbish, not absolutely indispensable'. As Beckett informed James Knowlson in 1973, 'Little remains of my paltry library but reference books and a few old chestnuts, unworthy of the meanest catalogue' (24 August 1973; JEK B/1/39). Nonetheless, the significance of the books that survive in Beckett's library in charting Beckett's intellectual landscape, and the way they were transmitted within the creative process, is considerable. Moreover, as these are the books that survived the successive purges, they must have been of significant value or interest to him.

The present book discusses Beckett's library along the lines of categories; as one would find in a library, the chapters are divided into the various fields

*Introduction*

xv

of knowledge encountered in the existing volumes. One of the most important aims of this book is to assess the amount of knowledge Beckett had to acquire before he was able to develop a poetics of unknowing. The books in Beckett's library in Paris range from volumes that he acquired as a student at Trinity College Dublin to books presented to him in the last years of his life. One of the earliest surviving books is a copy of A. Hamilton Thompson's *A History of English Literature, and of the Chief English Writers*, which Beckett bought in 1923 at the age of sixteen. Several other books from Beckett's student days survive, many of them containing marginalia showing an assiduous and precocious reader. Beckett's library offers a unique opportunity to witness the witty young and critical student commenting on the masters of English, French and Italian literature. When he read Robert de la Vaissière's *Anthologie poétique du XXe siècle* (1923), he was particularly struck by Apollinaire's poetry. 'La chanson du mal-aimé' is still rather schoolishly marked in the margin as 'One of the really great modern French poems', but ten pages further on the excitement is much more spontaneous. This is evident from Beckett's marginal note next to Apollinaire's poem 'Réponse des Cosaques Zaporogues au Sultan de Constantinople', which is based on the defiant Cossacks' letter in reply to the Turkish Sultan's demands for their subjugation. The letter's bellowing Cossack guffaw ('goat-fucker of Alexandria, swineherd of Greater and Lesser Egypt, Armenian pig, Podolian villain, catamite of Tartary, hangman of Kamyanets, and fool of all the world and underworld, . . . pig's snout, mare's arse, slaughterhouse cur, unchristened brow, screw your own mother!') is perfectly captured in Apollinaire's poetic brawl:

Bourreau de Podolie Amant  
 Des plaies des ulcères des croûtes  
 Groin de cochon cul de jument  
 Tes richesses garde-les toutes  
 Pour payer tes médicaments

And Beckett exclaims in the margin: 'Better than a Dublin jarvey!'

Similarly, in the middle of Molière's *Tartuffe*, Beckett interjects in the margins '!! Who's a hypocrite?' and calls the author 'Molière the lickspittle' (see Chapter 3). Many of the books which date from the 1930s contain marginalia, whilst the amount of reading traces tends to diminish after the Second World War. However, as the subsequent chapters show, the absence of reading traces can be as revealing as a heavily annotated book.

Beyond books acquired for his university syllabus, the library holds many volumes by authors that were important to Beckett. Thus one encounters

books by authors that have frequently been connected with Beckett's work – Schopenhauer, Berkeley, Joyce and Dante, to name but these. But whilst Beckett's engagement with these authors has been previously discussed by way of evidence in the published work and manuscript material, the actual books in the library provide several answers to questions that have been taxing Beckett scholars for many decades. At the same time, the library also introduces new enigmas and does not offer the ultimate 'solution & salvation' to critical headaches. Thus for example an issue Beckett scholarship has been puzzling over for decades is Beckett's reading of Spinoza, who is mentioned several times in the 'German Diaries' and the letters. After Brian Coffey had 'talked attractively of Spinoza' in July 1936, he lent Beckett a few books that gave him 'a glimpse of Spinoza as a solution & a salvation' (*LSB* 361, 371). The crux of this matter, however, is still not fully clarified, despite the presence of a heavily marked copy of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and 'De Intellectus Emendatione' in Beckett's personal library.

While reading is of course an isolated activity, the books in the library embed Beckett in the cultural milieu of his time. The many presentation copies – from writers such as Pinter or Cioran, or thinkers such as Adorno and Derrida – cut through the image of the reclusive nature of Beckett, and reveal just how aware he was of his intellectual surroundings. Moreover, the library gives first substantial proof of Beckett's engagement with other writers and authors, such as Maurice Blanchot, Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Beyond the 'old chestnuts', as Beckett tended to call his favourite authors, one finds fascinating material in the library in areas one would not suspect, and on the whole the volumes attest to Beckett's wide-ranging interests, with dictionaries and bibles, as well as science books very much in evidence. Even in well-documented areas such as Beckett's interests in philosophy and psychology, there are some unexpected surprises. The library also reflects the fact that Beckett was a multilingual reader, and as a result our book will contain many non-English references and quotations.

Beckett was, throughout his life, an avid reader, although his reading habits and the way he made notes on his reading changed. At times, in particular in the 1930s, Beckett would annotate his books, at others using notebooks in order to record aspects of his reading that he wished to preserve. Describing himself as 'phrase-hunting' (letter to MacGreevy, 25 January 1931; *LSB* 62) or being 'soiled by the demon of notesnatching' (letter to MacGreevy, undated [early August 1931]; qtd. in Pilling 1999, xiii), Beckett filled several notebooks with notes taken from books he was reading. These notebooks, as well as references in manuscripts and his correspondence, have over the years given readers and scholars an insight into the books he had consulted or read.



*Introduction*

xvii

Moreover, Beckett's texts self-consciously refer, in intertextual allusions and direct references, to other texts; from the heavily allusive work of the 1930s, such as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, to the 'lost classics' in *Happy Days*, Beckett's texts are imbued with references to his reading.

However, Beckett himself was often dismissive of his own reading, telling Aidan Higgins, for example, that 'I never read much Yeats. Never read much anything' (29 October 1952). It appears as if Beckett's attitude to his own reading was not so much provoked by an anxiety of influence, although he was fond of the Latin dictum (ascribed to St Jerome) that 'pereant qui ante nos nostra dixerunt' [let them perish, those who have uttered our words before], which he used variously in his texts and letters.<sup>1</sup> The issue is rather connected to Beckett's poetics of unknowing, despite an awareness that any such creative fabric had to be established before it could be abolished. As he told Claude Raimbourg in a remarkable letter of 3 May 1954:

If you must write, you should do it in the face of all opposition. . . . Do not spend too much more time on culture & reading, these are traps. When everything conspires to make the thing impossible, when you are tired, worried, with no time, or money, it is then that things get done. (qtd. in Silverman 2010)<sup>2</sup>

Beckett did not take his own advice, as his library and the record of his reading clearly indicate.

A final note: mindful of Molloy's admission that 'if you set out to mention everything you would never be done' (*Mo* 39), we must point out that this book is not exhaustive in its presentation of the material evidence in Beckett's books. We have tried to address the most salient features of Beckett's library, but inevitably there are omissions. Moreover, it is impossible to give a full catalogue in such a volume, to provide details of all the marginalia, inscriptions and material circumstances of each and all of the books.<sup>3</sup> However, the reader may be interested to know that all the scans from Beckett's library will be made available in the electronic environment of the 'Beckett Digital Manuscript Project' in the near future ([www.beckettarchive.org](http://www.beckettarchive.org)). By taking this step, we hope that other scholars will continue the exploration of Beckett's reading. For it is our belief that the perusal of Beckett's library is a pleasure that compares only to what Borges had in mind when he wrote: 'I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library' (qtd. in Maiorino 2008, 196).