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Introduction

> I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophical terms.
>
> (Beckett in an interview with Gabriel d'Aubarède, 1961)[1]

> The suggestion that Fielding was deficient in comprehension of the novel as a form, because we have no notes (no?) from his hand on the subject, is very nice.
>
> (Beckett, 'Ex Cathezra', 1934) [2]

As Frederik Smith has recently pointed out, Beckett's readers have paid significantly less attention to his literary influences than to his philosophical ones.[3] New book-length studies on Beckett and Dante (Daniela Caselli), Beckett and Proust (James Reid), and a long-established recognition of Joyce's influence (Barbara Reich Gluck) are still notable exceptions to the dominant tendency to position Beckett in relation to thinkers like Berkeley, Descartes, Leibniz, Geulincx, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida to glean a philosophical meaning from his work.[4] One result of this approach is that Beckett's readers have often considered him from a thematic perspective; for example, by asking what the value or non-value of 'nothing' is in the text – an argument which has been consistently deployed by critics and philosophers from the postwar period to the present day to co-opt Beckett and argue that 'a certain kind of literary practice constitutes a genuine resistance to nihilism.'[5] For all the differing conclusions among Beckett's prosecutors and defenders in this debate – from Lukács to Badiou – this fundamentally philosophical approach unites a significant portion of Beckett's readers in a common *agon*, even as they argue across the so-called modern/postmodern theoretical divide that began troubling literary studies in the seventies and eighties. As David Pattie contends, despite their differences both 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' camps use Beckett in a similar manner: 'as a lens through which to focus the critic's attention on perhaps the most basic theoretical inquiry: "How do we make meaning in the world?"'[6]

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Moreover, such questions have often led Beckett's readers to similar conclusions as they claim 'a positive estimation of the impact of Beckett's writing, either as a document of eternal struggle or as a heroic attempt to escape the authority of fixed meanings' (Pattie, 244).[7]

This common theoretical project has neglected Beckett's literary influences but it has also marginalised his importance in a generic continuum which he himself emphasised (even as he denied that he had a message expressible in philosophical terms)[8] – that is, it ignores Beckett's place as an innovator in the *novel*. Starting with Kenner's account in the early sixties, studies engaging with Beckett's fiction have neglected the attempt to discuss Beckett's engagement with a theory of the novel and with the lineaments of the genre itself.[9] This trend has continued into the twenty-first century, even as the philosophical frameworks deployed for this purpose have shifted from, say, Cartesian to poststructuralist. It is telling that *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, which neatly addresses the state of Beckett criticism circa 2004, has no section on Beckett as a novelist, though there are essays on 'Beckett and Performance' (S. E. Gontarski) and 'Sources of Attraction to Beckett's Theatre' (Katharine Worth), as well as 'Feminist Readings of Beckett' (Elin Diamond) and 'Beckett and Homoeroticism' (Peter Boxall). The closest thing to an account of Beckett's engagement with the novel is H. Porter Abbott's essay on 'Narrative'. Several recent studies on Beckett's fiction have taken a similar tack. Jonathan Boulter's *Interpreting Narrative in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (2001), for example, reads Beckett's novels 'in the light of phenomenological-hermeneutical theory, primarily that of Hans-Georg Gadamer'.[10] James H. Reid's *Proust, Beckett and Narration* (2003) ends up relying less on Beckett's relation to what Christie McDonald has rightly called the 'Proustian revolution' in the novel than on reading Beckett's *Three Novels* and *À la recherche du temps perdu* as works in which 'first-person narration takes the form of an interplay between the tropes of allegory and irony as defined by Paul de Man'.[11]

By pointing out the nature of recent approaches to Beckett I do not wish to deny the insights that reading him through philosophy, or reading his fiction through narrative theory have provided. It is inevitable, and desirable, with a writer like Beckett to read him alongside such theories. Nor do I seek to overemphasise another kind of theoretical approach which the reader may already suspect lies waiting in the wings after my repeated use of the term 'novel': that of genre theory. But what if the kinds of questions Beckett *himself* was asking, especially at the beginning of his career, were more involved with literature than

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philosophical meaning – or to put it more specifically, What if Beckett's novels began as a question of how a particular literary *form* can address reality? What of Beckett himself as a theorist – of a rather different kind than the philosopher or reader of philosophy his critics have often described?

These are the questions with which I began this study, but before I proceed, a few words are necessary on the limits and aims of this book as it now stands. In what follows I consider Beckett's development chronologically, focusing on his experimentation with the novel in the formative period from the early thirties to 1950 – the period leading up to and including the *Three Novels*. Beckett did of course go on to write another novel, *Comment c'est* (begun 1958). But this work belongs to a later phase of his thought and career, when he had already worked through the process of 'getting [him]self in perfection ... after so many years of expression in blindness', and was addressing different concerns from the ones that led him to *The Unnamable* – a book that positions the novels from *Murphy* up to *Malone Dies* within a kind of self-enclosed, collective form.[12] Much that is in this study has a bearing on *Comment c'est*. But in order to provide space for the detailed formal and stylistic analysis and the use of manuscript evidence this book relies on for its argument, I was forced to confine myself to the novels I have included.

Since the late sixties, Beckett's readers have viewed these fictions mainly with relation to an Anglo-Irish literary tradition, an approach that has been given new life by two recent studies, Patrick Bixby's *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009) and Frederik Smith's *Beckett's Eighteenth Century* (2002). But despite the importance of this tradition for Beckett, his consideration of the novel was focalized through a distinctly European lens from the beginning. Starting with *Dream*, Beckett drew key novelistic targets as well as several of his chief exemplars from the Continent in order to challenge what he termed the 'tradition' of the 'European novel'.[13] This study brings attention to new influences in this regard, and attempts to reposition Beckett's early novelistic theory and practice within an important, even a defining context: a counter-tradition running from Sade to Stendhal up to Dostoevsky, Gide, and Sartre – writers who are pitted against antagonists like Goethe, Zola, and Balzac.

Beckett's challenge to and emulation of such Continental novelists fed into one of his key concerns: cultivating tensions between the novel's components (for example, between its narrator and characters) and exploiting its competing claims (such as its pretense to a fidelity to reality, and its

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status as a formal construct). Beckett's attempt to exploit and intensify such tensions led him toward a preoccupation with what *Dream*'s narrator calls the 'architectonics' of the form, especially the novel's structure and the dynamics of its narration.[14] Narration and narrators are therefore a key focus of this book. As Leslie Hill has pointed out, Beckett's readers have neglected these aspects of Beckett's fiction, but they have done so at their peril.[15] As Beckett continued to write, he became increasingly preoccupied with staging the relation that underpins all novels: the fluctuating current of feeling between the voice and the story it tells.

The tensions the novel has often belied reappear writ large in Beckett's own books, but this is not only a result of his attempts at formal critique and innovation. The shape of Beckett's novels, especially during the formative years of the thirties, is also the outworking of pressures within his own psyche: chiefly, the conflict between an abiding urge to write out of what he termed 'feeling' and, against this desire, his tendency to follow the academic, highly cognitive procedures with which he began his apprenticeship in the novel. In this sense, this study assumes that the work cannot be completely separated from the life. Yet I am less interested in a 'biographical' Beckett than, to borrow from Sarah Lawall, the figure who 'assumes form as the work is created' – that is, the writer who exists in and through the work as a body of perspectives and intensities.[16] The story I will tell involves Beckett's changing approach to the practical difficulties of how one goes about writing a novel as well as the internal pressures that directed this development. But it also concerns the way that feeling itself came to play a larger role (though an often ignored or misunderstood one) in Beckett's work with the tradition of the novel.

I mentioned that I will be following a series of tensions within Beckett's thought and fiction. But in a very real sense Beckett's work in the novel, and after, proceeds from one key paradox. It is to the roots of this paradox to which we now turn.

The most obvious source for Beckett's early thought about the novel are his two essays on novelists: his 1929 piece on Joyce and his 1930 monograph on Proust. But before I rehearse Beckett's account of these writers yet again, it may be helpful to ask a secondary question regarding their importance to his own practice. Compare the theory in these essays to the way *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* works: despite *Dream*'s style (which 'stinks of Joyce' as Beckett himself admitted),[17] Beckett's first novel presents serious problems for anyone attempting to connect Beckett's treatment of the form and that outlined by 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce' or *Proust* – a

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fact that Beckett's readers have struggled to come to terms with for the understandable reason that they would like to appreciate Beckett in the light of his own theory and in the face of his reticence to talk about it. As Shane Weller has recently demonstrated, there is no disguising the fact that, despite the efforts of such eminent critics as Christopher Ricks to argue to the contrary, Beckett's novel presents a very different approach to the form from that of the Joyce it borrows. Rather than a principle of identification, *Dream* operates on, and posits through Belacqua and 'Mr Beckett', a principle of 'incoherence' – a movement toward formal and thematic 'disintegration' and 'dissonance' rather than the coherence and unitary power Beckett praised in Joyce's great symphonies.[18]

> There is one point to make clear: the Beauty of *Work in Progress* is not presented in space alone, since its adequate apprehension depends as much on its visibility as on its audibility. There is a temporal as well as a spatial unity to be apprehended (*Dis*, 28).

> The only unity in this story is, please God, an involuntary unity (*DFMW*, 133).

And Beckett's theory in *Proust*? In that work, Beckett defends his early French master's attempt to engage with the 'manifold component aspects' of the self in space and, most importantly, time.[19] Proust's novel is 'modern' because he engages with a reality that is inherently complex and multiple: a 'mobile' subject before a 'mobile' object – Marcel as 'the individual [composed of] a succession of individuals' confronting a 'multiple' Albertine (*PTD*, 49). But Beckett also recognises that, like *Work in Progress*, Proust's novel reveals a revelation of unitary meaning through a principle of 'apprehension', a term that Beckett originally cribbed from Stephen's aesthetic as communicated to Cranly in *Portrait* (*Dis*, 28). And it is of course this ultimate resolution by means of art – the recovery of the lost past and the fragmented self via the aesthetic – that Beckett posited as the other element in Proust's 'equation'. Christie McDonald puts it this way:

> In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust charts the way writing transforms the particulars of feeling and thought into form, retroactively conferring the recognition of aesthetic truth through an epiphanic vision.[20]

How did Beckett get from these theoretical origins to the wildly parodic and ironic anti-novel of disintegration that is *Dream*?

Another paradigm asserts itself when we remember that, for all the differences between Joyce and Proust (and between Beckett's essays), Beckett had a common novelistic target in both pieces: the realist novel. In taking

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aim at this tradition he rehearsed a critical gesture performed by theorists like Jacques Rivière in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (which Beckett read and later published in, twice),[21] and his friend and the editor of that review, André Gide – from whom we shall see Beckett in fact derived this gesture. To mention only the obvious, Beckett's Joyce of 1929 and his Proust of 1930 are valued as 'innovators' because of their experimentation in the face of nineteenth-century novelistic realism and its inheritors: Beckett's 'parenthetical sneer' at the 'Ladies and Gentlemen' who have shunned Joyce for the 'rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense' is dutifully reiterated with greater ire in *Proust*'s rejection of the novel of 'surface' that records only 'the offal of experience' (*Dis*, 26; *PTD*, 78). And this attack on 'the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art' and 'the penny-a-line vulgarity of a literature of notations' was important enough for Beckett to redeploy it in 'Mr Beckett's' savaging of both English and French exemplars in *Dream*: *i.e.*, the 'divine Jane [Austen]' and Balzac (*PTD*, 76; *DFMW*, 119).

Beckett's concerted antipathy to the 'realist novel' as a trivial work of 'surface' and his endorsement of 'complexity' was not, of course, native to the English tradition; it was French, and specifically, it was the scepticism born of the tumultuous period of theory and experimentation that engulfed the French novel in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, and whose fruit – the novels of writers like Céline, Camus, Sartre, or Robbe-Grillet – was later recognised to hold affinities with Beckett's own fiction. But if Beckett's 'mature' works in some ways resemble the novels of these writers, it is not only because (with the exception of Robbe-Grillet) he read them; it is because they share common roots, and specifically, a common father in the theory and practice of the novel.

I

Beckett himself acknowledged the influence of Proust, Joyce, and Dante. But he was less forthcoming about his enduring and significant debts to one of his greatest masters, whose importance to Beckett's novels and novelistic theory has, as a result, gone largely unnoticed: André Gide.[22] According to Stanley Gontarski and Chris Ackerley in their *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (2004), Gide 'provided a model', but Beckett's only direct mention of the older writer is a scornful aside in his discussion of memory and habit in *Proust*.[23] To my knowledge only one critic – John Pilling – has argued for the importance of Gide to Beckett's novels, and as he has pointed out on more than one occasion (when

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highlighting some of the other references to Gide he has discovered in Beckett's work), such allusions as the above in fact indicate 'a *staged unconcern* ... designed to mask the real interest [Beckett] had in Gide'.[24] If Pilling is right, what was Beckett's aim in feigning an 'unconcern' with the older writer? What did he have to hide?

James Knowlson's biography indicates that Beckett was probably introduced to Gide's work by Beckett's tutor and the professor of Romance languages at Trinity College, Dublin, Thomas Rudmose-Brown. Gide was part of 'Ruddy's' (at the time unusual) interest in modern authors, and Beckett's teacher at least was not immune to the magnetic force of Gide's personality; several of Rudmose-Brown's trademark utterances have a particularly Gidean ring (*DF*, 50).[25] Beckett also studied Gide for the final Moderatorship exams in which he was so successful, finishing, in his tutor's own words, 'in a blaze of glory and [with] a large gold medal in Modern Literature in Michaelmas 1927' (*DF*, 75). Two clues stand out from this period: first, after returning from his position in Paris at the École Normale Supérieure, Beckett chose to lecture on Gide and the modern novel in the autumn of 1930, which also means that he had been again bearing down on Gide's fiction as he prepared for the lectures the preceding summer (*DF*, 126). As we shall see, Beckett's choice in this regard was not an arbitrary one – a fact Beckett's former student, Rachel Burrows, suggested in her 1982 interview with Gontarski and others:

EDS.: Would Beckett have been the one who chose to have the interest in the modern novel [in his lectures]?
RB: Yes.
EDS.: In Gide?
RB: Yes. Yes he would.[26]

Second, this interest in Gide's importance as a modern novelist was not a fleeting one. One of the primary indicators of Beckett's ongoing engagement with Gide and his theory is that throughout the early to mid-thirties Beckett made numerous attempts to compose a monograph on Gide to complement his book on Proust. (The first of these attempts took place in early February of 1932, when Beckett proposed the idea to Prentice.) More telling still – and despite Ackerley and Gontarski's claim for a lack of allusion – Beckett's interest in Gide started to appear in his fiction as he parodically deployed what he termed Gide's 'modern' treatment of character and narration. He implanted allusions to Gide's writings in *Dream* and *Murphy* even as he imitated what he called Gide's '*New structure*' of the novel (MIC60, 37; Burrows's emphasis).

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If Beckett's theoretical interest in Gide was as profound as I have indicated, this would reveal not only a new source for and an illumination of his artistic theory, but a rather different context for his early novels from those by which they have been so far understood. What if one were to perceive Beckett's early fictions, and by extension his later novels, as an attempt to develop beyond the proto-modern paradoxes of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century context of French aesthetic theory, with its post-Symbolist disdain for the novel, and its post-Naturalist disgust of linearity, closure, and 'coherence'? What might Beckett have learned from Gide's endeavour to generate narratives of 'complexity', his fascination with Dostoevsky and the convoluted structure of the *roman d'aventure*, his penchant for self-undermining narratives, or his approach to fiction as a form of *ironic critique*?

II

Beckett's book on Gide was never written, but the key components of his thinking about the older writer can be reconstructed through notes taken by his pupils on his 1930 lectures. The portrait that emerges provides a compelling model for reading Beckett's own fictional development: Gide's major works are understood as a series of ironically self-conscious responses to the problem of representation – fictions that ultimately end in contradiction and stage their own *failure*. I say *problem* of representation because for Gide the novel's power lies in its capacity to engage a reality that is seen as complex and finally unknowable, a notion that put him in conflict not only with major forerunners in France but, in Gide's view, the European novelistic tradition in general.

Born in 1869, Gide came of age in a generation of French writers and intellectuals that profoundly distrusted the novel, preferring poetry to what they saw as a degenerate tradition committed to the transcription of surface reality and enslaved to reductionist philosophies. Gide's eagerness to take up the novel was therefore shadowed at the beginning by a keen sense that his predecessors (chiefly Balzac and Zola) set an example of mastery that betrayed the novel through positioning it as a servant of or a rival to the discourses of science and history. In doing so, these writers simplified the novel in the interests of achieving 'a final and conclusive' – and therefore, in Gide's view, false – 'solution' to the problem of the form's means and ends.[27] As Beckett pointed out to his students, the sceptical energies of Gide's mature fiction – his vicious parody of teleologies and 'systems' in works like *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and *Les Caves du*

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Vatican, for example – should be understood in the light of this generational doubt; Gide's work, Beckett argued, originates in the assertion that there are forms of 'thought [which go] further than science', and that human actions 'cannot be reduced to motive[s]' (MIC60, 14). As we shall see, one measure of Beckett's abiding concern with this historical context for Gide's project is his commitment to attacking in his own novels those writers whom he described as Gide's adversaries – a critique that extends from *Dream*'s opening salvos to the final pages of *The Unnamable*.

For Beckett, a key driver of Gide's innovations in the novel thus consists in a double response to the past. First, Gide rejects a realist or Naturalist model (the two terms are not distinguished in Beckett's lectures) obsessed with reality's comprehensibility, its 'surfaces' (MIC60, 47). Second, and in tension with this rejection, Gide makes an attempt to work with his fictional inheritance, 'to renew [the] tradit[ional] structure of novel' by unleashing its potential as 'the most *lawless*' of genres (MIC60, 31; *C*, 166). But before considering how Gide approached this double task of critique and renewal the question should be asked: What lies behind Gide's view of reality, and specifically individual experience, as complex and fundamentally unknowable? In Beckett's reading a major root for this tendency was Gide's struggle with his Puritan upbringing, whose strictures sharpened contradictions in his personality even as its doctrines nurtured his congenital affinity for paradox. Beckett's lecture-hall flourish that Gide's tormented 'Protestantism explains most of his characters' or his argument that Gide should be read as a 'Protestant' first and an 'Iconoclast' second will likely find more critics than adherents (MIC60, 37; 31). Yet – in a manner that is illuminating for Beckett's own work and theory – there is much in his claim that Gide's commitment to accepting the unexplained, his refusal of logic to adequately account for human nature, and his cultivation of a poetics that admits 'failure' and contradiction are indebted to paradoxes at the heart of Protestant doctrine. For Beckett, Gide's most important trait as a novelist is a 'humility' that allows him to accept the unknowable in a manner not dissimilar to the Christian acceptance of the mystery of grace, or that enigma (which recurs continually in Gide's writing) that Beckett terms the 'Evangelistic paradox of renunciation': '[that to] save [one's] life [one must] lose it' (MIC60, 27).[28] In this view, both Gide's personal struggle with Christianity – which generated a powerful conflict in his character between the ideal and the sensual, and the sacred and the transgressive – and the antilogies within Protestant doctrine itself are relevant to his rejection of any attempt to seek a unified sense of self and world and in the novel. Just as important, in Beckett's account Gide's

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vexed Christianity is inseparable from his cultivation of a poetics that reinscribes paradox, a comportment of 'humility' and ultimately the author's 'renouncement' [*sic*] of mastery in the form of the novel (MIC60, 23).

Gide's fascination with the ideal, with paradox, and with sacrifice is indeed a key to his early fictions. But his Protestantism is also here enmeshed with his first alliance with a received aesthetic paradigm: that of Symbolism.[29] Under the spell of Schopenhauer's teachings on the rejection of the phenomenal world, Gide positioned himself as a devotee of the new art of intuition, pure form, and essence as opposed to the 'contingent' world traditionally explored by the novel. 'In those days', Gide wrote later,

> the movement in progress was a reaction against realism.... Supported by Schopenhauer ... I considered everything that was not *absolute* – that is to say, the whole prismatic diversity of life – *contingent* (this was the fashionable word). It was very much the same with every one of my companions.[30]

Beckett argued that as early as *Le Voyage d'Urien* (1893) Gide bade 'farewell to symbolism' and developed an original style (MIC60, 10). But he also hints that Symbolism offered Gide a way of reconceiving the novel that lingered in his later work. Instead of considering the form as a linear or teleological narrative, Gide co-opted a Symbolist poetics to envision the novel as an arrangement of elements in a complex of interacting relationships. Beckett noted that this approach might be understood in terms of a rejection of Stendhal's mirror, a claim Gide himself made with reference to what he called the 'composition' of the work of art (MIC60, 27):

> Today the novel must prove that it can be something other than a mirror carried down the road – that it can be superior and a priori – that is, deduced; that is, *composed*, that is, a work of art.[31]

This is Gide's first serious reformulation of the idea of the novel: as a structure whose 'realism' is of a 'higher sort' than that of a mimetic representation of time or space. Gide's fascination with this view also derived from what Beckett called his 'classical' tendencies, which Symbolism would only have strengthened (MIC60, 39).[32] The work of art in this view requires 'the submission ... of the word in the sentence, and the sentence on the page, and the page in the whole work' to a greater pattern.[33]

Yet even as Gide's fascination with the novel as a work of composition led him toward an interest in an alternative type of unity in the form, he was compelled to reflect upon and stage this unity as another type of artifice. In *Les Cahiers d'André Walter* (1891), Gide first experimented

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