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978-0-521-54738-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett

Ronan McDonald

Excerpt

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Introduction

'I'd be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my own works.'¹

A generation after his death, Samuel Beckett remains one of the giants of twentieth-century literature and drama. More troubling for his critics, he is also one of the last century's most potent literary myths. Like other 'modernists', he has a reputation for obscurity and difficulty, yet despite this his work permeates our culture in unique ways. The word 'Beckettian' resonates even amongst those who know little Beckett. It evokes a bleak vision of life leavened by mordant humour: derelict tramps on a bare stage waiting desperately for nothing, a legless old couple peering out of dustbins, geriatric narrators babbling out their final incoherent mumblings. It evokes sparseness and minimalism and, with them, a forensic, pitiless urge to strip away, to expose, to deal in piths and essences.

Part of the reason that Beckettian images have seeped into popular culture is of course because of his peerless influence on post-war drama. His stage images have a visual and concrete dimension that the modernist poets and novelists arguably lack. One can visualise the spare Beckettian stage more easily than the poetic urban wasteland. Moreover his plays are not perceived as so forbiddingly highbrow that several have not become staples of repertory theatre. The Beckett 'myth' or 'brand' has been fuelled by two related phenomena: Beckett's refusal to offer any explication of his own work, his insistence that they simply 'mean what they say', coupled with his determined reclusivity (a horror of publicity that led his wife to greet news of his 1969 Nobel Prize for literature with the words 'Quelle catastrophe!'). If Beckett expected his silence to close down speculations about the 'man' behind the work, it was a forlorn hope. Rather it fed the mystery and aura that surrounded him, bolstering his image as the saintly artist, untainted by grubby self-promotion or by the coarse business of self-explication.

Moreover, the lack of specificity of his drama, the deracinated sets and absence of geographical or temporal certainty supported the idea, especially

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amongst Beckett's early critics, that his work had a universal import, that it articulated something fundamental and trans-historical about what life and human existence were all about. Where are these plays set? Who are these nameless narrators? The uncertainty of identification was interpreted as a badge of the archetypal or the elemental. His stripped stages or nameless narrators seemed shorthand for everywhere and everyone. 'Existentialist' concerns, so prominent in the fifties, were read into Beckett's work, at least so far as it was seen as a generally bleak and bleakly general view of human existence.

Paradoxically, at the same time as he is vaunted for expressing a 'timeless' human condition, Beckett is celebrated as the truest voice of a ravaged post-war world. The skeletal creatures and pared-down sets of his plays, or the aged, bewildered, agonised narrators of his novels, are regarded as the proper artistic expression of a world bereft of transcendent hope, without God, morality, value or even the solace of a stable selfhood. Notwithstanding Theodor Adorno's declaration on the impossibility of art after Auschwitz, Beckett comes closest to being the laureate of twentieth-century desolation.

Whether of all time or of his own time, Beckett, then, is sometimes given the role of a secular saint. His writings, though often confusing, are always regarded as profound, even visionary. Appropriately, Beckett's own, very striking face has entered modern iconography. Indeed there is no other writer of the post-war period whose face is so well known in comparison with his voice. It is always that of the older Beckett with his instantly recognisable, thin, angular countenance, furrowed with lines, the cropped grey hair, the long beak-like nose and, above all, those penetrating blue ('gull-like') eyes. The willingness to be photographed, coupled with the unwillingness to be interviewed, made him, ironically, one of the world's most recognisable recluses.

There is, then, a unique cult of veneration amongst Beckett's followers, imitators and devotees. Not only has he escaped the slump in popularity that afflicts a lot of writers in the years immediately after their death, but he also seems invulnerable to much of the critical backlash against some of the modernist writers over the past decade. A participant in the French Resistance and an opponent of totalitarianism in all its forms, Beckett was never going to merit the censure directed at some other modernist writers for anti-Semitism or reactionary political views. The Beckett myth, the aura of artistic integrity, elemental truth and existential bravery that surrounds him, is now something of which the vigilant Beckett reader needs to be wary. Reading Beckett, like (for all the differences) reading Shakespeare, means engaging with a complex web of cultural associations and literary prestige.

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This book sets out to help the student, the theatre-goer, and the non-specialist general reader to think critically about Beckett and his major works. However, rather than simply providing answers or solving puzzles, this book strives to ask relevant questions. To engage fruitfully with Beckett's plays and novels does not necessarily mean to 'decode' them or to figure out what they really mean underneath the obscurity. One must heed the challenges they pose to the very acts of reading, viewing and interpretation. These are beautiful, crafted but thematically elusive plays and prose works. Readers or spectators are often drawn to Beckett, not because of some perceived idea or vision of life, but because of the compelling and utterly unique voice he has on stage and page. Beckett always put much more emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of his work than the meaning that could be extracted from them, on the shape rather than the sense. He once said, tellingly, 'The key word in my plays is "perhaps"'.² In a very early critical essay on James Joyce he warned that the 'danger is in the neatness of identifications' (D 19). It is a warning which we should still heed.

Throughout the study of individual texts, I will try not just to dispel obscurity or difficulty, but also to ask what it is doing, how it functions aesthetically. While the source of an allusion or the occasional contextual gloss will from time to time be invoked, the primary intention of this book is not to provide annotation or explanation. As this book is intended as an introduction, references to other critics and secondary sources are kept to a minimum, outside the summary of criticism on Beckett provided in Chapter 5.

The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett is intended for people who have seen or read the works that are discussed herein and who want to think more about them. It will be of little use to someone who has not previously read the text under discussion. I have generally avoided providing plot summary or paraphrase of individual texts, not least to discourage students from adopting this approach in their own essays. Though this book can be read straight through, it may also be of use to a student who is doing a course that treats a single Beckett text – *Waiting for Godot* as part of a drama course, for instance – who will be able to consult the relevant section in this book.

Though I provide an overview of all Beckett's life and work in Chapter 1, this Introduction is *not* a comprehensive survey of all Beckett's plays and prose. The extended discussion of the works themselves in Chapters 3 and 4 focuses on the plays most often produced and the prose works most often read and studied, especially at undergraduate level. Unfortunately, this has necessitated omitting extended consideration of the minimalist skullscapes and dramaticules of Beckett's later period. These are rich, formally complex and intriguing texts, wholly resistant to summary. Rather than give the later

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works cursory or tokenistic treatment, I thought it preferable to omit them altogether from the extended critical readings. For the same reason, I have had to leave out critical consideration of Beckett's poetry, a lamentably neglected part of his oeuvre. This decision was made on the basis that more sustained treatment of individual difficult works would prove more useful to those encountering Beckett for the first time than stretching the space available to cover a sixty-year career more superficially.

Beckett expanded the possibilities of every form or literary mode he wrote in: short story, novel, stage play, radio play, film and television. When he started working in a new form or medium he learned the rules and grammar before fundamentally testing their limits. It is because his works are so inextricably attached to their mode, because the 'what' is so attuned to the 'how', that he was usually reluctant to allow adaptations. To illustrate this mastery, the intense sense that Beckett's work gives of probing the limits and possibilities of a medium, Chapter 3 includes a section on Beckett's radio plays, including an examination of *All That Fall* and *Embers*. *All That Fall* is one of the greatest radio plays ever written, and also, arguably, one of Beckett's most realist and accessible texts.

Finally, why are the plays before the prose, given that most of the novels treated were written before *Waiting for Godot*? There are a number of reasons for this sequence. First, Beckett is probably still better known as a playwright. While as a prose writer he is a key influence on such modern novelists as J. M. Coetzee and John Banville, his impact on post-war drama is unparalleled. The careers of Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and countless others would be impossible to conceive without Beckett's influence. Many people encounter Beckett in the theatre and move on from his stage plays to read his novels. It is partly with this sequence in mind that the structure of this book is organised.

It is customary to think of 'difficulty' or 'obscurity' as being all about what we do not know. But Beckett proves that the experience of difficulty can come from simplicity as well as from complexity. He thwarts expectations not by bombarding us with new information, but by dispensing with familiarity, shattering assumptions and abandoning theatrical conventions. If the plays are, in general, more accessible than much of the prose, it is not just because of their concrete presence, their stark images that communicate viscerally, before the intellect has time to gauge their significance or meaning. It is also because of this radical and alienating *simplicity*. The difficulty of Beckett's early prose works – sardonic in tone and encrusted with erudition – is very different from that of his later drama, which makes theatre of minimal situations, or his later prose, so often based on repetition and variation of

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simple phrases and cadences. This is in one sense why Beckett always refused to offer explanations of what his plays might mean, insisting on the literal validity of what was on the page or stage. He wrote to Alan Schneider, his American director:

I feel the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind. And to insist on the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue. If that's not enough for them, and it obviously isn't, it's plenty for us, and we have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their making. My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. (D 109)

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Chapter 1

Beckett's life

Samuel Beckett was a reluctant biographical subject. Though friends and acquaintances recollect a kind and generous man, he guarded his privacy with intense vigilance, seldom granting interviews and always claiming that his work should speak for itself. However, when his authorised biographer, James Knowlson, pointed out the recurrences of images from the Ireland of his childhood in his writing, he agreed. ““They’re obsessional,” he said, and went on to add several others.”¹ In early prose works, like *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) or *Murphy* (1938), the correspondences of character and event with Beckett’s own life are very explicit.² In his post-Second World War work, the biographical allusions become more submerged and less readily identifiable, just as the settings become more detached from a recognisable reality. Yet Beckett’s imagination is saturated in his life experiences, even if the direct references to these experiences become rarer. Indeed, examination of the various drafts of Beckett’s drama demonstrates what one critic has called the ‘intent of undoing’: the connections to a recognisable, and biographical, world become more attenuated as the drafts proceed.³ The events in Beckett’s life leave their traces in the shape of his work, without necessarily leaving an inventory in its content.

However, biographical criticism holds dangers too. Beckett is one of the most innovative and difficult writers of the twentieth century. It is tempting, faced with the often elusive meanings of his work, to seek refuge in ascertainable facts by pointing out correspondences with his life. The student of his work can then replace the task of interpretation with that of simple annotation – explaining the origins of a reference, an allusion, a character or an event, rather than asking what they might mean within the logic of the text. Finding the source of the stream will not by itself chart the river. Even if there is no absolute separation between Beckett’s life and his work, neither should there be an absolute identification. The work will always produce meanings far in excess of its biographical or contextual annotations and, if we can find any coherence in Beckett’s life, it should not be permitted to stand in for the incoherence and recalcitrance of his drama and prose.

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It seems almost too good to be true that the twentieth century's most famous dramatist of suffering and desolation would be born on the day of the crucifixion but, sure enough, Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on Good Friday, 13 April 1906. He was the second son of William Frank Beckett, a successful quantity surveyor, and his wife Maria, known as May (née Roe) and was raised a Protestant in the affluent village of Foxrock, eight miles south of Dublin. Bill Beckett was a robust and kindly man whom Beckett loved very much. They would often go for long walks together in the Dublin and Wicklow hills, a topography and landscape found throughout Beckett's work, from *More Pricks than Kicks* through the trilogy to late works like *That Time* (1976) and *Company* (1980). The key to understanding Beckett, according to his friend and doctor Dr Geoffrey Thomson, was to be found in his relationship with his mother.⁴ She was both loving and domineering, attentive and stern, and Beckett's love-hate relationship with her is at the crux of his intense feelings of anxiety and guilt. In later life he wrote of her 'savage loving',⁵ and it seems his later decision to settle permanently in France was as much a flight from mother as from motherland. Even though Beckett claims to have 'no religious feeling', he acknowledges that his mother was 'deeply religious'.⁶ The many biblical allusions in his work may partly derive from this influence. On being asked to describe his childhood, Beckett has called it 'Uneventful. You might say I had a happy childhood . . . although I had little talent for happiness. My parents did everything that they could to make a child happy. But I was often lonely.'⁷ Loneliness, solitude, alienation would become recurrent themes in his later work.

As a member of the Irish Protestant minority in a largely Catholic country the young Beckett was something of an 'outsider', an experience which may have fed his later explorations of dislocated or marginal conditions. As the Anglo-Irish critic Vivian Mercier, musing on the similarity between his own background and that of Beckett, discerned:

The typical Anglo-Irish boy . . . learns that he is not quite Irish almost before he can talk; later he learns that he is far from being English either. The pressure on him to become either wholly English or wholly Irish can erase segments of his individuality for good and all. 'Who am I?' is the question that every Anglo-Irishman must answer, even if it takes him a lifetime as it did Yeats.⁸

Perhaps this heritage of fractured identity, this search for the self, might have left its mark on Beckett's later preoccupation with a painful indeterminacy of subjectivity. 'Who am I?' is a question that Beckett's creatures repeatedly ponder. At the same time, however, we need to be wary of foreclosing or

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containing Beckett's complex and manifold probing of the nature of selfhood into a straight biographical correspondence. If his Irish Protestantism influences his later work, the implications and meanings of that work are certainly not limited to this source.

Moreover, we should be careful about unifying the identity of Irish Protestants into an undistinguished morass. We should not lump Beckett's cultural experience in with the 'Ascendancy', land-owning Protestant class to which J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory belonged and to which Yeats aspired. Beckett's was not a family that would have been comfortable in the literary salon. Though comfortably off and respectable, the family were not cultured or bookish, belonging rather to a high-bourgeois professional class. Hence, they were perplexed and worried when Beckett threw over a promising and respectable academic career for the insecurity of the Bohemian lifestyle and his mother kept the scandalously titled *More Pricks than Kicks* well out of sight of household visitors.

Importantly, this Protestant middle class, resident in the well-to-do Dublin suburbs, were more historically and politically insulated than their wealthier Ascendancy co-religionists. For Yeats and his collaborators art and literature were intimately associated with the 'nation'; indeed it was on these foundations that nationhood was formed. The resolutely middle-class and suburban milieu of Foxrock tended not to be so cultured or so politicised. This was not the land-owning class of the great Irish estates, whose social and political dominance had been undermined by the land reform of the last decades of the nineteenth century. It was class of professionals and bourgeois suburban self-containment, most of whose members commuted into the centre of Dublin every day to work. Therefore, though its instincts and allegiances would have been unionist and pro-British, the new dispensation after the Irish revolutionary period and the newly independent state after the treaty of 1921 had little effect on its day-to-day life. These large homes with long drives were at one remove from much of the violence and turmoil of Ireland's revolutionary period. There was little incentive or reason for this community to conceive of itself, or its privileges, in political terms.

Beckett, without obvious family precedent, became a great writer and intellectual. But it could be argued that the political insulation of his family background had a more enduring impact on his imagination. Beckett lived through extraordinary times from the start. His childhood and teenage years saw the rise of militant Irish nationalism and the subsequent War of Independence and Civil War. He was in Germany during the thirties and the consolidation of Nazi power, and in Paris during the occupation, where he joined the Resistance. However, there is another sense in which, until

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the Second World War, Beckett was cosseted and displaced from these 'interesting times'. The image of Beckett and his father, on a hill, miles outside Dublin, watching the flames rise during the Easter Rising of 1916, is a metaphor for his involvement in Irish politics at this time. Andrew Kennedy has said the boy and the young man were not 'subjected to the turmoil of war and revolution' and that 'it is the orderliness and the sheltered "old style" gentility of a pre-First World War childhood, at the relatively quiet edge of the Western world, that strikes one'.⁹ There was, then, no need for someone of his background to think politically. It was not difficult for him, when he became a writer, to subscribe to that strand of cosmopolitan modernism which tended to disdain politically motivated art or cultural nationalism. His scornful attitude to the aims and ambitions of the Irish cultural revivalists, though presented as anti-provincialism, might also partly derive from the political immunity of his middle-class family background.

A young man 'with little talent for happiness', who nonetheless enjoyed a loving and cushioned upbringing, cannot find the causes of his misery in evidently temporal terms. So he finds the causes of unhappiness more readily in a pessimistic view of the world or in existence itself. Since the sources of unhappiness are not social or political, then, neither are the solutions to it. Hence his later dislike of political argument or discussion (even when he was touring Nazi Germany), such arguments striking him as pointless. 'There's a man all over for you,' exclaims Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, 'blaming on his boots the faults of his feet'(11).

Beckett went to private schools, first, Earlsfort House School in Dublin, then a boarding school, Portora Royal, in Enniskillen, the alma mater of Oscar Wilde. As well as his academic gifts, he gained a reputation for his athleticism and sporting prowess, particularly in rugby and cricket. In October 1923 he continued on the Wildean route to Trinity College Dublin, where he read French and Italian. After graduating in 1927, he spent an unhappy nine months teaching at the exclusive Campbell College in Belfast. When his dissatisfaction showed, he was asked by the headmaster if he realised that he was teaching the cream of Ulster society. 'Yes,' he replied, 'rich and thick.'¹⁰ In November 1928, Beckett left Ireland for Paris, serving as teacher of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. There he became friends with the Irish poet and art critic Thomas MacGreevy, who became an intimate and confidant for many years. Their letters illustrate that Beckett, for all his great shyness and love of solitude, also needed friendship and intellectual companionship. MacGreevy introduced the young Beckett to literary society in the French capital, most importantly to James Joyce and his circle, including Eugene Jolas, the editor of the avant-garde, modernist magazine *transition*, which

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would publish some of Beckett's early work. Beckett was already familiar with the work of his fellow Dubliner, the revered author of *Ulysses* (1922) and an established titan of modernist literature. Though Joyce was a Jesuit-educated Catholic, Beckett shared much in common with the older man in terms of aesthetic and social outlook. Both came from middle-class families, both spurned the narrow cultural nationalism of the Irish Revival and both were passionately committed to the modernist and experimental literature of continental Europe. The influence was immense, and traceable not simply in terms of subject matter or literary style. Joyce became the vision of the artist as a figure of integrity, fulfilling his vocation with uncompromising dedication. Joyce's example taught the often indolent Beckett the importance of industry and application. It is from Joyce, too, that we can trace Beckett's determined resistance to all forms of censorship, of his own work or that of others, a conviction of the inviolate autonomy of the artist's intention that would later manifest itself in a refusal to countenance any altering or interference with his published work. Joyce's art always came first, and he never allowed the scruple of friends and family to prevent him from plundering autobiographical material for literary inspiration. Beckett's early prose works are full of a similar deployment of his own experiences in which, for example, his cousin Peggy Sinclair, with whom he had had his first love affair, is unflatteringly portrayed as the 'Smeraldina' in *More Pricks than Kicks* (a depiction he later came to regret).

But at the same time as Joyce showed the way, Beckett also realised that he had to find his own route. As Beckett told James Knowlson, 'I do remember speaking about Joyce's heroic achievement. I had a great admiration for him. That's what it was epic, heroic, what he achieved. But I realised that I couldn't go down that same road'.¹¹ For many writers, especially Irish writers, the influence of Joyce could be overwhelming. How could one ever emerge from so great a shadow? How could one find one's own voice when Joyce had, seemingly, so decisively sounded the limits of literary possibility? Later on, Beckett was certainly aware of the dangers and inhibitions of having the master in such close proximity. 'I vow I will get over J. J. ere I die. Yessir', he wrote to a friend in 1932.¹²

Beckett became a visitor at the Joyce household and occasionally helped the older man, whose sight was ailing, in his writing of 'Work in Progress' (known on its full publication as *Finnegans Wake* (1939)). He was subsequently invited to contribute to a collection of essays written by Joyce's friends to prepare the public for, and to generally promote, this most difficult and experimental of texts. Beckett's essay 'Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce' originally appeared in *transition* (1929), but would later be placed first in the