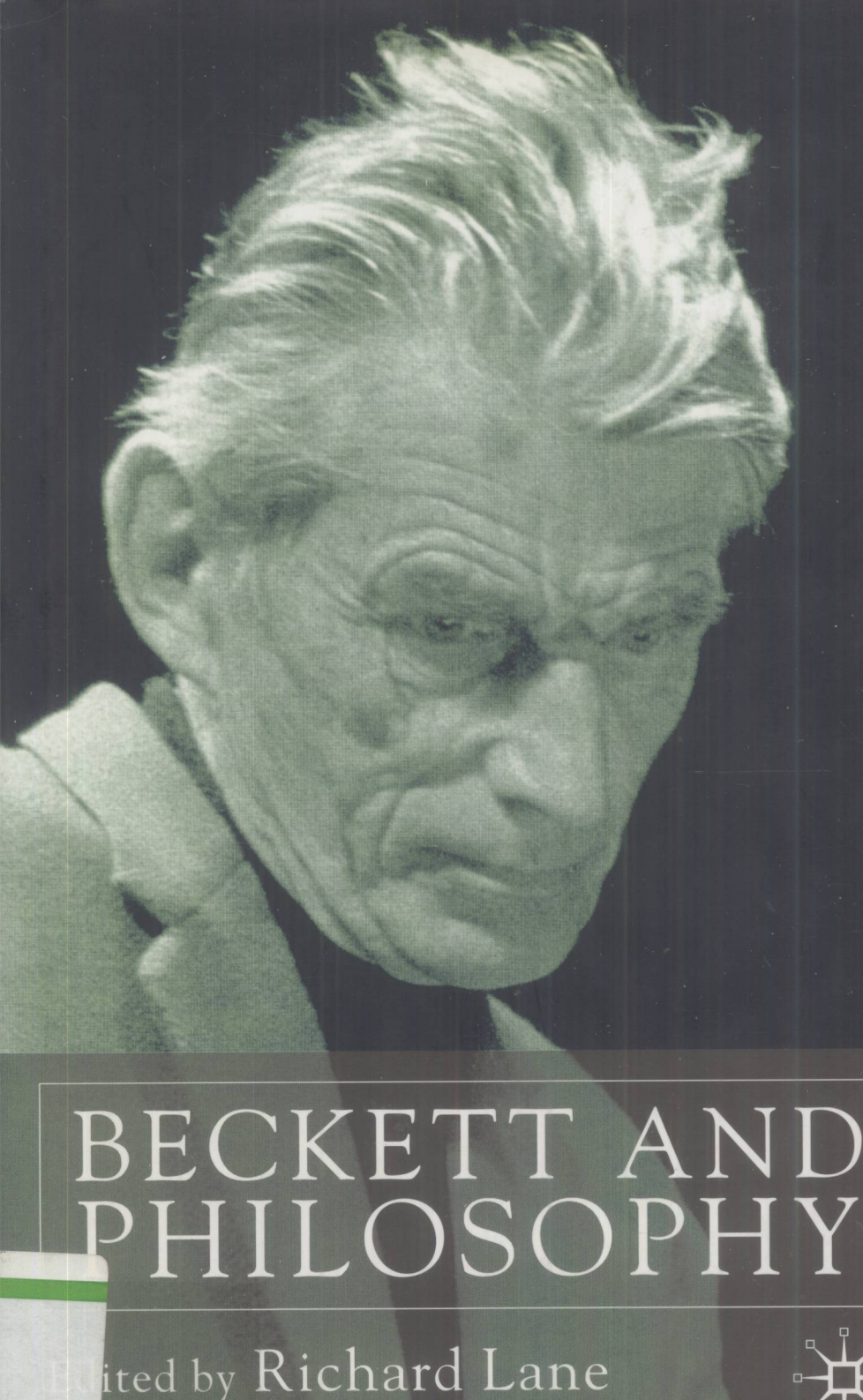

BECKETT AND PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Richard Lane

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Senior Lecturer in English
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Director
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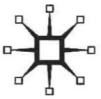

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Richard Lane is Senior Lecturer in English at South Bank University, and an honorary Reader in British and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. He has published numerous articles on modern and postcolonial fiction and theory, in journals such as *Canadian Literature, Commonwealth, JCL, BC Studies*, and *The Malcolm Lowry Review*. He lectures regularly in Canada and the US, and is involved in an ongoing archival study project at the University of British Columbia, Special Collections Division. Recent publications include a chapter in *Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon* (1999), *Jean Baudrillard* (2000), a book-length study of *Mrs Dalloway* (2001). Forthcoming work includes a book on *The Literature of the U.S. Immigrant Experience* (2002) and a co-edited collection on contemporary British fiction (2002); he also writes the Canadian Literature section of *The Year's Work in English Studies*. He is joint founder and Director of the London Network for Modern Fiction Studies.

Ulrika Maude has recently completed her doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett's prose and drama at the University of York. She has published articles on Beckett, and is currently co-editing a collection of essays on Beckett and the body with Steven Connor. She teaches at the University of York.

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Contents

Introduction

Richard Lane

One of the key texts for contemporary readings of Beckett and philosophy – or the impossibility of Beckett and philosophy and what this actually signifies theoretically – is Simon Critchley's 'know happiness – on Beckett' in his *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. Critchley suggests that: 'By debating the meaning of meaning, Beckett's work permits us to trace the history of the dissolution of meaning and to delineate some sort of genealogy of nihilism. Such a genealogy would permit neither the restoration of meaning in an ever-falsifiable and faded positivity, some version of the overcoming of nihilism, nor the irrelevant metaphysical comfort of meaninglessness' (1997: 152). A genealogy of nihilism, in the Nietzschean and Foucaultian sense of 'genealogy', would account for the fact that other avenues, for contemporary theorists, remain remarkably problematic when the critical impetus is one of an encounter with, or collision between, philosophy and Beckett's texts. It is a question here of a remainder, with something always escaping the encounter or collision, theorized most famously in his *Acts of Literature* interview by Derrida:

> What Derrida seems to be suggesting is that because one cannot avoid the platitude of metalanguage and the inevitable lagging behind and overshooting of philosophical interpretation, Beckett has to be avoided. One cannot hope to be faithful to the *idiom* of Beckett's language because any interpretation assumes a generality that betrays the idiom, what Derrida will also call a text's *signature* . . . Derrida is suggesting that the work of Beckett's work, its work-character, is that which refuses meaning and remains after one has exhausted thematization. Such a remains (*reste*) would

> be the irreducible idiom of Beckett's work, its ineffaceable signature. It is this remainder that is both revealed through reading and resists reading. (1997: 145)

Critchley gets to this Derridean moment via the work of Theodor Adorno and the paradox which Zuidevaart sums up: 'Art needs a philosophy that needs art'. This paradox would simply disappear if the critic believed that the work of philosophy could completely account for the artwork, or, if the critic decided that the artwork was not in need of interpretation: perhaps it is non-conceptual, or, perhaps it always already communicates what it wants to say, but in a language entirely other to philosophy.

If Beckett and philosophy come together now in the project of a genealogy of nihilism (*not* the reductive reading that Beckett's works are simply nihilistic), then, for Critchley, this raises the question of form, or, more precisely, the crisis of form (for example parody): 'where the autonomy of modernist art is a problem because this autonomy, by definition, can no longer be governed by the constraints and conventions of tradition.' (p. 154). Modernist art does not emancipate itself from form, but as authentic negation does need 'formal emancipation' (p. 155). Quoting Zuidervaart quoting Adorno: 'Beckett's absurdist plays are still plays. They do not lack all meaning. They put meaning on trial.' (p. 155). Critchley goes on to examine Beckett's work in some detail, in relation to humour, narrative, the voice which speaks in the work and, once more, the problem of meaning. But for this collection, it is Critchley's Adornian reading which is of most interest; the notion that meaning is on trial is one examined by a number of contributors. The 'resistance to philosophy' of Beckett's work is explored by Robert Eaglestone and touched upon by Steve Barfield as one route to the Heideggerian moment in Beckett, while Andrew Gibson writes that 'At this moment, the most significant issues in Beckett studies are just beginning to congeal around the questions raised by Badiou on the one hand, and Adorno and Critchley on the other.' However, in a sense all of the contributors are interrogating in different ways this notion of meaning being 'on trial' if the full Adorno quotation from his *Aesthetic Theory* is taken into account: 'Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of any meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial; *they unfold its history*' (p. 153; my emphasis). A genealogy of nihilism would account for the history of 'meaning on trial' as such, but this is not the *only*

critical approach available. In this collection meaning may be on trial, but it is so from a number of competing perspectives and narratives.

Richard Begam, author of the important recent work *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (1996), argues in the first chapter of this collection that it is essential to examine Beckett's relation to the critical debates concerning foundationalism. Rather than examining philosophical influence (the 'genetic' approach which has largely needed some kind of authorial 'authorization' for critics to proceed, a kind of permission from beyond the grave) or literary-philosophical intertextuality, Begam examines a 'philosophical problem'. This enables Begam to situate Beckett in relation to contemporary debates concerning modernism/postmodernism, existentialism/poststructuralism and humanism/antihumanism. Choosing primary texts that, paradoxically, may seem the most resistant to postfoundationalism – *Company*, radio and stage plays – Begam offers a wide-ranging exploration of the speech/writing opposition, the question of memory, autobiography, and authorial reconstruction, via a Derridean approach. Begam concludes that his close-readings tell 'a remarkably consistent story: again and again, speech yields to writing, foundations give way to contingency.' Robert Eaglestone looks at the notion of 'meaning on trial' from a more literary-theoretical perspective, arguing that Beckett's 'works do clearly test the limits of our ideas about what literature is and the what foundations of "thinking about literature" should be.' However, this is also an interrogation on Eaglestone's part into the entire philosophy/literature division and/or conflation; thus he examines: Literature as entertainment, Philosophy as the work; Literature as Philosophy; Literature as a parody of Philosophy; Literature as an influence on Philosophy and [literature & philosophy as:] Just texts? His conclusion is that 'the work of Beckett – again, as a test case – reveals a transformative moment, a "real movement" in Heidegger's phrase, in "thinking and writing about literature". This movement has been discussed by Geoffrey Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, where he writes that literary "commentary may cross the line and become as demanding as literature: it is an unpredictable or unstable genre that cannot be subordinated, a priori to its referential or commentating function."'

The desire to go beyond authorized philosophical/literary connections in the genealogy of meaning on trial has led to some of the most interesting contemporary Beckett criticism, especially in the poststructuralist accounts of critics such as Connor, Critchley,

Derrida and Royle. This collection offers accessible readings of the poststructuralist 'intersections' of Beckett and Derrida (Chapter 3), Foucault (Chapter 4), and Deleuze (Chapter 5) as well as French theorists Badiou (Chapter 6) and Merleau-Ponty (Chapter 7). The Adornian reading is re-addressed within the Part on 'Beckett and German Thought' (Chapter 8), as well as a critical account of Beckett via Habermas (Chapter 9), a survey of Heideggerian moments in Beckett's work (Chapter 10) and the paradoxical 'influence' of Nietzsche (Chapter 11).

In his 'Cinders: Derrida with Beckett', Gary Banham re-examines the Attridge/Derrida interview that is so widely quoted by critics studying a Derridean approach. The 'proximity' to Beckett which is so problematic for Derrida is explored in a highly original way via the 'cinder effect': 'Through associating the works of Beckett and Derrida as bodies of writing which share in the engagement with the "nothing" that brings both to the edge of nihilism this piece will draw out the nature of the difficulty with experiencing the effect of both these bodies of writing.' Banham draws together Beckett's *The Unnamable* and Derrida's *Cinders* (among other texts), to explore how the work of nihilism is also not nihilistic, the aporetics at the heart of Beckett's and Derrida's texts. Thomas Hunkeler examines the proximity of madness in his chapter 'The Role of the Dead Man in the Game of Writing: Samuel Beckett and Michel Foucault', arguing that 'it is the experience of madness that *founds* the works of Beckett and Foucault, but it is precisely this foundation, which in a paradoxical way also *ruins* every construction.' Hunkeler performs a useful critique of the 'misappropriation' of Beckett by Blanchot and Foucault, whereby the experience of madness becomes an avenue to some kind of authentic voice or expression of truth. Hunkeler's reading recovers through a conceptual and historical account the subtle differences between Beckett's and Foucault's positions. Mary Brydon, in 'Deleuze Reading Beckett', writes about the process of recognition in Deleuze's experience of Beckett; she examines Deleuze's *L'Epuisé*, paying particular attention to the analysis of *Quad*. What is fascinating about Deleuze is that in his lack of desire for 'live theatre' his critical abilities were directed towards the earlier prose pieces and the later television plays. Bryden argues, for example that the 'determinacy' which Deleuze 'discerns in Beckett's television plays relates not to a specific cultural or geographical space, but to the disposition of that space. In these plays, the dimensions of the space, and the relation and distance between its inhabiting features,

are not incidentals. They *are* the text.' In her chapter, Bryden offers an exceptionally clear and accessible reading of Deleuze's positing of 'three different modes of Beckettian expression, which he calls Langue I, Langue II, and Langue III.' The chapter offers a contextualization and clarification of Deleuze's theoretical reading.

The collection offers an approach to Beckett and French thought beyond the trilogy of Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault; Andrew Gibson, in 'Beckett and Badiou', situates Badiou's reading of Beckett not as some project to 'import' his entire approach into Beckett studies, but more as a way of flagging up a 'different direction' to contemporary critical work which is 'quite different . . . to the postmodern, poststructuralist and deconstructive methodologies that have been most significant for the Beckett criticism of the past decade.' Importantly, 'it does this without any lapse back into the foundationalism, representationalism or existential humanism that so dominated work on Beckett before the arrival of Connor and Trezise.' Gibson elucidates the ethico-political dimension of Badiou's reading in a timely and effective way. Finally, the last chapter in this section is Ulrika Maude's 'The Body of Memory: Beckett and Merleau-Ponty'. Examining the recent 'mutation of the significance of the body into the problem of the body as signification', Maude ties this in critically, and via a wide range of Beckettian texts, with Merleau-Ponty, 'who, with his theory of the incarnate subject, brought the body to the centre of philosophical interrogation.'

In the final Part of the collection, 'Beckett and German Thought', David Cunningham returns to Adorno and the *Aesthetic Theory*. Cunningham argues that 'for Adorno, the challenge Beckett's works make *to philosophy* (and, as such, its dramatic importance), lies, not in the demand for the elucidation of some hidden metaphysical or political thematic present within them, but in the conjunction of these enigmatic modern works' "difficulty" with the critical task of aiding "the non-identical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity".' Through a comparison of Lyotard's not-trying-to-understand Duchamp and Adorno trying-to-understand Beckett, Cunningham examines the genealogy that is often referred to, yet not so often explored via its multiple theoretical ramifications. Philip Tew compares Adorno's approach to Beckett with Habermas's in his chapter 'Philosophical Adjacency: Beckett's Prose Fragments via Jürgen Habermas'. He argues that 'Beckett's world-view would seem opposed to the ultimately positive account of the ontological priority of normative values outlined by Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse*

of Modernity where those values define human involvement in being and are such that they are seen as providing potentially further enlightenment.' However, this would not account for 'two oblique and perhaps surprisingly approving references to Beckett made by Habermas in *Autonomy and Solidarity*', therefore a critical strategy of philosophical adjacency is called for to account for such a surprise move. Tew's chapter provides a powerful critique of the Beckett/Habermas adjacency via a reading of Beckett's prose fragments. His concluding questions neatly summarize this approach: 'In a positive light, is Beckett's curious tension constructive in a performative manner, or is it the defeat of the communitarian that seeks to refuse the intersubjective at the heart of the human presence? A web of dialectical denial sustains the contracted consciousness, which refutes a series of alternative possibilities: transcendence, acceptance, self-renewal, altered perception or dialectical reconfiguration of the lifeworld. If Beckett's central notion remains that of defeat, then its very thematics haunt Habermas's attempts at renewal of the project of understanding and socio-philsophical placement that are undercut by his casual literary admiration.' Steve Barfield offers a useful literature survey of the critical field in his chapter on Beckett and Heidegger. Barfield examines the restrictions imposed upon scholarship by 'the governing principle of research . . . [that argues for providing in the first instance] evidence of Beckett's interest in a particular philosopher (or vice versa).' He then examines the issues which surround the question of Beckett and Heidegger, with emphasis upon existentialism, before performing a brief critical reading. Finally, the collection ends with a chapter by me on Beckett and Nietzsche which examines the critical and creative possibilities available once the 'governing principle of research' identified by Barfield is jettisoned. I argue that an examination of the intertextual relationship between Beckett and Nietzsche necessitates an aporetic logic whereby not only does Nietzsche influence Beckett, but paradoxically, Beckett 'influences' Nietzsche.

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Part I

Theorizing Beckett and Philosophy