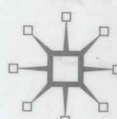


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samuel beckett studies

editor
lois oppenheim



palgrave advances in samuel beckett studies

edited by
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Lois Oppenheim is Professor of French and Chair of the Department of French, German, and Russian at Montclair State University. A past president of the Samuel Beckett Society, she has published widely on philosophical and psychoanalytic aesthetics and in French studies. Her authored and edited books on Beckett include *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue With Art* (2000), *Samuel Beckett and the Arts* (1999), *Directing Beckett* (1994 and 1997), and (co-edited with M. Buning) *Beckett On and On ...* (1996) and *Beckett in the 1990s* (1993). She is currently writing a book on neuro-psychoanalysis and the arts.

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Katharine Worth is Emeritus Professor of Drama and Theater Studies at the University of London, and Honorary Fellow of Royal Holloway University of London. Beckett gave her permission to produce *Eh Joe*, *Words and Music*, and *Cascando* and, in 1987, to adapt *Company* for stage performance. Her many books on theater include *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (1986), studies of single playwrights – Wilde, Sheridan – and of single plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* in Macmillan's Text and Performance series. Her *Samuel Beckett Theatre: Life Journeys* was published in 1999 (paperback edition, 2001).

chronology

What follows are some principal dates in the life and career of Samuel Beckett. The dates and publishers are those of the first publication of a given text. This list is by no means meant to be comprehensive and the reader is referred to the extensive bibliography of Beckett's work (with translation and subsequent editions) contained in James Knowlson's *Damned to Fame: the Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 747–50.

- 1906: Samuel Barclay Beckett born in Dublin, 13 April
- 1923–1930: Undergraduate studies (in French and Italian) at Trinity College Dublin
- 1928–1930: Teaching post at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris
- 1929: Publishes first critical essay, 'Dante ... Bruno. Vico .. Joyce', and first piece of fiction, 'Assumption' in *Transition* magazine
- 1930: *Whoroscope* published in Paris (The Hours Press); returns to Dublin (to teach at TCD)
- 1931: *Proust* published in London (Chatto & Windus)
- 1932: Leaves TCD for Paris; writes *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (published posthumously in 1992 in New York, London, and Paris [Arcade Publishing in association with Riverrun Press and Calder Publications])
- 1933: Death of Bill Beckett (father) and Peggy Sinclair (cousin)
- 1933–1935: Lives in London
- 1934: *More Pricks Than Kicks* published in London (Chatto & Windus)

- 1936: Travels to Germany
- 1937: Moves permanently to Paris
- 1938: *Murphy* published in London (Routledge & Sons)
- 1942–1945: War years in Roussillon; composes *Watt*
- 1945–1946: Visits family in Ireland; works for the Irish Red Cross
- 1946–1953: Writes the *Nouvelles*, ('First Love,' 'The Expelled,' 'The Calmative,' 'The End'); *Mercier and Camier*; The Trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*); *Texts for Nothing*; *Eleutheria* (published posthumously in 1995 in Paris [Les Editions de Minuit] and New York [Foxrock]); *Waiting for Godot*
- 1950: Death of May Beckett (mother)
- 1951: *Molloy* published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *Malone meurt* (Malone Dies) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit)
- 1952: *En Attendant Godot* (Waiting for Godot) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit)
- 1953: First production of *Godot*, Paris (directed by Roger Blin at the Théâtre de Babylone); *L'Innommable* (The Unnamable) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *Watt* published in Paris (Olympia Press)
- 1954: Death of Frank (brother)
- 1955: *Nouvelles et textes pour rien* (Stories and Texts for Nothing) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *Godot* produced in London)
- 1957: *Fin de Partie* (Endgame) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit)
- 1958: *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* produced in London
- 1959: *Krapp's Last Tape* published in London (Faber & Faber)
- 1961: *Comment c'est* (How It Is) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *Happy Days* published in New York (Grove Press); marries Suzanne Descheveaux-Dumesnil
- 1962: *Happy Days* produced in London
- 1964: Shooting of *Film* (directed by Alan Schneider in New York); *Play* produced in London
- 1965: *Imagination morte imaginez* (Imagination Dead Imagine) published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit)
- 1967: *Film* published in London (Faber & Faber); *Têtes-Mortes* published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *No's Knife*:

- Collected Short Prose 1945–1966* published in London (Calder and Boyars)
- 1970: *Mercier et Camier*, *Premier Amour* (First Love), and *Le Dépeupleur* published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit)
- 1972: *Not I* written and first produced, New York (directed by Alan Schneider)
- 1973: *Not I* published in London (Faber & Faber)
- 1976: *For to End Yet Again and Other Fizzles* and *Footfalls* published in London (John Calder and Faber & Faber respectively); *Fizzles* and *All Strange Away* published in New York (Grove Press and Gotham Book Mart respectively)
- 1977: *... but the clouds ...*, *Ghost Trio*, and *Not I* collectively produced as *Shades* by the BBC in London; *Collected Poems in English and French* published in London (John Calder)
- 1979: *Company*, published in London (John Calder)
- 1981: *Mal vu mal dit* (Ill Seen Ill Said) published in Paris (Les editions de Minuit); *Rockaby* and *Ohio Impromptu* published in New York (Grove Press); *Quad* produced for German television
- 1982: *Catastrophe* published in Paris (Editions de Minuit) and *Nacht und Träume* filmed for German television
- 1983: *Worstward Ho* published in London (John Calder); *What Where* published in New York (Grove Press); and *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn, published in London and New York (John Calder and Grove Press)
- 1984: *Collected Shorter Plays* published in London and New York (Faber & Faber and Grove Press); *Collected Poems 1930–1978* published in London (John Calder)
- 1988: *Stirrings Still* published in New York and London (Blue Moon and John Calder); *Collected Shorter Prose 1945–1980*, published in London (John Calder)
- 1989: *Comment dire* published in Paris (Les Editions de Minuit); *Nohow On* (*Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstward Ho*) published in London (John Calder); Suzanne Beckett dies (17 July); death of Samuel Beckett (22 December)

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1

introduction

lois oppenheim

‘This is something I can study all my life, and never understand.’

*Molloy*¹

Martin Esslin, author of an acclaimed classic on absurdist playwrighting, noted in his introduction to that 1961 volume that ‘Godot’ had infiltrated into the ‘private language’ of a local population that had viewed Beckett’s play some four years prior. Entire phrases and even characters from the play bearing the name in its title were said to have become a ‘permanent part’ of the spectators’ environment.² Esslin had no way of knowing just how far from the venue hosting that San Francisco Actors’ Workshop production, the San Quentin Penitentiary(!), the infiltration would extend. Indeed, *Waiting for Godot* (first published in France in 1952) soon permeated the international theater community to revolutionize playwrighting and establish its invisible protagonist as an icon of modernism in the art and philosophy of the Western world.

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) was to become, arguably, the twentieth century’s most important playwright. His work in the theater significantly impacted not only the art of dramatic writing, but of performance as well. So, too, his novels obliterated conventions of that genre and renewed our thinking on the meaning of narrative. Beckett wrote prose and poetry; he wrote for radio, television and film in addition to the stage. He wrote in English and French, publishing over 100 titles in all. Faced with a body of work so pivotal for the evolution of literature and performance, how have critics contextualized the writing? Has the writing itself continually compelled the critical contexts? Or have literary fads sometimes had the upper hand? What characterizes current critical debates and how might we assess the directions in which Beckett studies as a field is moving?

This volume addresses these questions and more; for not only is Beckett's work the subject of a formidable number of critical studies, but it inspires much thinking on the aims of criticism itself.

In the 1960s, when Beckett studies came to the fore, Paris (where the writer was living) was still the center of post-war existential thought. The nature of Beckett's writing was such that critics fixed on the texts of the major existentialist philosophers were easily drawn to the profoundly reflective works of Beckett as well. Albeit in another mode of discourse, Beckett's novels and plays raised a lot of the same questions, harbored a lot of the same doubts, and contained a lot of references (some overt, many not) to the humanistic issues with which the French-speaking existentialist writers had long been concerned.

At the same time, though, Paris was home to the decade-old *nouveau roman*, a literary movement devoted to the reexamination of novel writing that, on several occasions, brought writers and their critics face to face.³ Associated through the publisher, the late Jérôme Lindon of the Editions de Minuit, with a group whose preoccupation with the ways and means of the genre and with experimental investigations that in some ways resembled his own, Beckett's work fast became a focus of 'New Novel criticism' too.

Thanks to Barney Rosset, founder and former publisher of Grove Press, to Tom Bishop, Chair of the French Department at New York University, and to critics like Bruce Morrisette and Vivian Mercier, the *nouveau roman* quickly found a home away from home in the United States. Rosset published the New Novelists in English (in translations by Richard Howard, Barbara Wright, Maria Jolas, and others); Bishop brought them to lecture and teach in American universities, especially his own; and critical studies by American academics proliferated at an astonishing rate. Though, for his part, Beckett was loathe to come to the United States (and did so only once), as a literary persona (somewhat on the periphery of the movement), he was very much 'in the air.' Furthermore, with the rising notoriety of director Alan Schneider – who arrived on the New York scene with *Endgame* (in 1958), *Krapp's Last Tape* (in 1960), and *Happy Days* (in 1961) – and, also, with the proliferation of regional theaters outside New York where Schneider was a growing force, Beckett's theatrical presence in America, and its extension into the drama circle of the academy, were increasingly secured.

Coincidental with Beckett's pervasion of the philosophical, new novel, and academic arenas, criticism, in general, was growing ever more theoretical and interdisciplinary in its focus. Structural linguistics,

anthropology, feminism, and psychoanalysis were permeating the literary domain in both Europe and the United States and, in the 1970s and 1980s, each had their Beckett. So varied were the commentaries, and so voluminous in number, that it seemed almost as if the critics were seeking revenge on the indeterminacy characteristic of the writing under review. It was not until the 1990s, when the debate over Beckett's place on the horizon of modernism (early, late, high, and post) intensified, that theory *qua* theory was relegated to the wings of Beckett criticism and biographical studies, on the one hand, and the exploration of affinities between Beckett's literary aesthetic and other forms of artistic expression, on the other, took center stage.

In a word, then, the field of Beckett studies (still finding new directions today) can be overwhelming. This volume aims to assess its evolution and define the impact of the critical writings on our reading and viewing of Beckett's work. But how might essays devoted to so copious a secondary-source coverage be ordered to maximize the reader's grasp? Some have edited compilations of Beckett criticism arranging the contributions by chronology or genre; others have grouped essays according to critical approach. The objectives of this guide to Beckett criticism differ from previously published collections, however, in two significant ways: First, the over-riding effort is to demonstrate the usage of the various critical orientations while reflecting on them theoretically as well. And, second, not only does it seek to reveal both the evolution of Beckett criticism and the most recent developments in Beckett studies, but the chapters, to that extent possible, are interrelational; they play off the mutual consequences of the various critical approaches at hand.

Thus Porter Abbott's study of narrative theory and Beckett, his exploration of what he calls 'the art of gap management,' is followed by Enoch Brater's on intertextuality, a paper responsive to fundamental questions posed by Abbott about the degree to which preconception enslaves the reader's mind. 'Can you cognize a gap without filling it?,' Abbott asks. 'And what would you feel like if you could?' In uncovering 'shadows' of Yeats in Beckett, Brater seems to respond by having us read Beckett 'in terms of an assimilated literary past,' one set out, however, in a uniquely 'adventurous present.'

Similarly, Elin Diamond's chapter takes as its premise the interaction in the 1970s and 1980s of the texts of French feminist theory and Beckett's plays and prose. While she notes that there is no record of any personal interaction between Beckett and the feminist thinkers she discusses, she uncovers in three of his plays a feminized discourse, a

'parler-femme' (or 'woman-speak'), forging a fascinating intertextual connection to which Leslie Hill's poststructuralist reading of Beckett offers a provocative challenge. If Hill situates Beckett poststructurally, however, he also deflates the contextualization: No more than Blanchot, Foucault, Deleuze, Badiou, or Derrida can Beckett be said to *belong there*.

In fact, Hill shows us Beckett's special sensitivity 'to what Deleuze calls "universal variation," described as a kind of ceaseless becoming, multiplying differences without identity, and showing at the core of all unity the intervention of perpetual foreignness or exteriority.' Anna McMullan, however, seems to reply to Hill by situating Beckett's work precisely within the historical contexts of Ireland of the 1920s and 1930s, of World War II France, and post-war Europe. 'Although Beckett does not represent these contexts mimetically,' she writes, 'his dislocations of personal and cultural memory constitute a critique of regimes which had the power to marginalize, exclude, or, in the case of Nazi Germany, exterminate those who did not conform to its definition of a national or ethnic subject.' So, too, Peter Boxall writes of communality: Juxtaposing homoeroticism as an important vehicle of connection, a 'new homosociality or community,' to a heteronormative reading of Beckett, he also puts deconstruction to the test.

Thus, to the volume's initial question of 'gap management,' as posed by Abbott, Brater, and Diamond seek phantom texts in the hollows of Beckett's own, while Hill delights in extending the recesses, the 'narrative blanks' (as Abbott calls them), and McMullan and Boxall explore vastly different referential contexts wherein they assume meaning.

Linda Ben-Zvi takes up both the intertextual thread and the motif of the body introduced by Boxall. Focussing her discussion of physical decrepitude in Beckett's works on the inscription of Cartesian and Johnsonian models, she reveals the body both as a 'seat of knowledge' and the site of its erased potency, another shaping of absence.

Mary Bryden and Angela Moorjani review two distinct traditions within which Beckett's critics have sought to 'manage' the gaps. With Bryden we have a comprehensive evaluation of Beckett criticism on the horizon of the religious or exegetical, whereas Moorjani gives us an exhaustive review of the psychoanalytic critical perspective. Each contributes an astute assessment of critics' efforts to determine how Beckett's texts communicate – not only in words, but in 'nonverbal and [other] contextual dimensions' (to cite Moorjani) – far more than what they say.

Though Beckett was deeply committed to the process of staging as 'creation,' his critics, Stan Gontarski tells us, have insufficiently tackled the vicissitudes of performance, feeling more comfortable within the confines of the published text. When they have veered toward questions of performance, they have tended to situate their commentaries within the frame of the fidelity of a given production to the work as it appears in print. Gontarski's justification of the need for a longer and stronger look at the nature of Beckett's theatrical art indicates an important direction for future studies.

The sources of attraction to Beckett's work – what in the past prompted the very great interest in the fiction and plays, but also ensures the continuity of this interest – are the subject of the essay by Katharine Worth. Noting that Beckett's entire stage oeuvre has recently been filmed, why, she asks, does the appeal continue to be so strong? The volume closes with a two-part study by David Pattie, a chronological overview of the entire critical corpus and a genre-specific guide for further reading.

A final word on the absence of a chapter devoted solely to Beckett and philosophy: The philosophical orientations to Beckett's work could not but appear in high relief everywhere throughout the volume. So endemic is philosophy to the critical corpus that its inevitable interweaving through the chapters was thought to yield a more substantive view of its significance. As critic Sidney Feshbach has stated, 'The multitude of philosophical approaches Beckett has attracted ranges from language analysis to phenomenology and even ethics. Properly so, for in addition to the ways of academic inquiry, his approach to writing has itself made varied use of philosophy.'

Feshbach has succinctly summarized Beckett's connection to philosophy as follows:

Clearly, Beckett read Schopenhauer on pessimism and Bergson on memory, among many other philosophers. And his interest in René Descartes is incontestable. Carrying to Paris his college book on Descartes, Beckett found in that philosopher an image of the complete human who was divided into an isolated reasoning mind and a body-thing. (Was this division needed for dealing with his own painful medical and emotional problems?) In a France much influenced by Cartesianism, he approached that divided image of mind and body-thing using the literary, especially Irish, tradition of satire directed at the ironic self-tormentor. He repeated two images, a human calming and consoling himself in a rocking chair and a human struggling to

travel on a bicycle, to satirize the desires of a mind locked into the mechanics of the body. Implicitly exploiting the Cartesian philosophy of duality, he ironically remembered, in the early poem 'Whoroscope,' that Descartes preferred to eat over-ripe eggs.

Beckett's wartime experiences and postwar encounters with Parisian existentialism and phenomenology influenced his great three novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. With these, the assumptions of Cartesianism seemed to linger, but the satire was diminished, farcical laughter changed into comic humor, and earlier verbal excesses were stripped to reveal the skeletal armatures of drama and prose and the anguish of a mind.

With his success as a novelist and playwright, Beckett moved from his early physical self-disgust, his desire for philosophical consolation and numbness in life, and his many reminders of illness to a somewhat more tranquil state in which he recalled momentary pleasures within elegiac memory.

If I quote Feshbach at length, it is because new directions for Beckett studies are suggested by the very evolution he describes. Some are evident already in this volume. Others will be so over time. For Beckett's literary philosophy and philosophical literariness are sine qua nonical to his work. Indeed, 'Beckett always read philosophy for its fictions of human existence and, never a philosopher, he always remained philosophical, telling great jokes in the graveyard.'⁴

notes

1. In *Three Novels* (New York: Grove-Black Cat, 1965), 169. Cited by Angela Moorjani and Carola Veit in the introduction to *Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui 11* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 13.
2. Cited by Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday: 1961), xvi-xvii.
3. I refer here to the several colloquiums in which the writers participated together with their critics. There was the famous 1971 conference at Cerisy-la-Salle, for instance, 'Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui' and others at the same venue devoted to single writers associated with the *nouveau roman*. A retrospective held at New York University in 1982 was similarly unique in that a talk by each novelist was paired with one by a preeminent critic of his or her work (see my *Three Decades of the French New Novel*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
4. Sidney Feshbach, personal communication to L. O. dated 19 August 2002.