

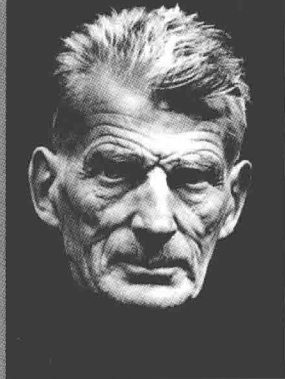


贝克特

小说中的
时间难题

胡怡君 著

上海三联书店



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Introduction

Before Beckett moved to Paris for permanent residency in 1939, he studied French in Ireland and then taught French in local schools. The intimacy with the French language, as a natural result of his academic experience and his occasional visits to Paris, had prompted and enabled him to read French literature and philosophy of a variety of origins and schools. And unsurprisingly his major works, either prose work or drama, are firstly written in French, a language that he believes is of greater purity and clarity, before his own translation of them back into his mother tongue. His debts to such French predecessors as Descartes, Bergson and Proust are evident if one looks into his writings replete with meditations on body-mind duality, perception, time and identity and so on. Contemporary French philosophers such as Deleuze and Blanchot who could easily insinuate themselves into the thematic discussion of Beckett's works shed further light on the French footing embedded therein.

However, this book is not to focus on the relationship between Beckett and his French foregoers but on one of the most heated philosophical concepts that could be traced back to Beckett's reading of *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust, a French novel about the old time lost once and regained. It is the 'time'. Time as a philosophical issue draws the attention of nearly every influential western philosopher: Plato, Aristotle, Augus-

time, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, to name but a few. As a concept closely related to the condition of being which is in time, time is well versed in their metaphysical elaboration on existence. Though Beckett is not a philosopher, who has not even a philosophical mindset to develop a philosophical supposition into a complicated and giant system centering around some key concepts, the metaphysical topic of time, especially when the topic of language is involved, is well set inside the narratives that he engages himself in. As philosophers dispute for centuries over the definition of time, the novelist is haunted by the topic of time for nearly a lifelong time.

The present book is to deal with the time problems Beckett reveals and tries to solve in his novels. I am going to call his time problems “time aporias” in this book. Aporia means a philosophical puzzle or a state of puzzlement. The term “time aporia” is quoted from Paul Ricoeur who regards the fictive experience of time, or narrative, as a solution to the time aporia which philosophy so far hasn’t been able to deal with. For Ricoeur, there could be concluded two time aporias. The first rises from the subjectivity of time phenomenology imposed upon the physical understanding of time. The phenomenological exploration of time, mainly conducted by Husserl and Heidegger, is an attempt to save time from the ordinary understanding of it to be objectified sequences and to redefine it as intrinsic time consciousness. Following the old dispute between Augustine and Aristotle, Ricoeur in the third volume of *Time and Narrative* lists phenomenologists as followers of Augustine who treats time as subjective experience. The other camp which holds a cosmological view on the issue of time, of which Aristotle and Kant are representatives, considers time in the context of motion and mathematics. Therefore according to

Ricoeur both of them, either phenomenological or cosmological, are partial in their understanding of time.

Ricoeur argues that this aporia of time brought to light yet unsolved by phenomenology can be solved by narrative which puts history and fiction together. The integration of the heterogeneous time experience with the harmonious narrative framework dismisses individualism and intangibility in phenomenology and at the same time overcomes the lack of intuitive experience in Aristotle or Kant. Narrative becomes a temporal synthesis to help establish identities on both the individual and historical levels.

The second time aporia of Ricoeur, the irreconcilable conflict between the protean experiences (heterogeneous experiences) of time and the coherent and unitary nature of time (the function to build up identities), swings behind once narrative is proposed to solve the first aporia. Narrative has to face its own limits. For Ricoeur, "the term 'limit' can be taken in two senses. By an internal limit, we mean the art of narrative exceeds itself to the point of exhaustion, in attempting to draw near the inscrutable. By an external limit, we mean that the narrative genre itself overflows into other genres of discourse that, in their own ways, undertake to speak of time." (3: 270 – 271) His intention is to make narrative transcend its limits to reach a Hegelian synthesis in which a historical understanding of time to be the extension of narrative, its inscrutability included, is possible.

The aporias of time about which Beckett puzzles his brain correspond to some extent to the above two time aporias concluded from Ricoeur's works. The two time problems of Beckett this book discusses are derived from his academic essay *Proust* in which time is described as "the Time cancer", with habit and

memory as its two attributes. Habit and memory are thought to maintain the continuity of the ego. Their major responsibility is to adjust first the new ego to the old one and then the coming reality to the older knowledge, so that the relationship between the ego and its surrounding reality is maintained in turn. Beckett in the essay praised highly Proust who discovers and represents in *A la recherche du temps perdu* another kind of true time to replace the Time cancer, namely the regained involuntary memory. But Beckett himself, as we will see in his own novels, fails to take the involuntary time experience for granted. Thus two time problems loom large for the young novelist: the impossibility to grasp the involuntary time experience and the impossibility to express the involuntary time experience.

If these two time problems recurring in Beckett's narratives are called time aporias in a Ricoeurian sense, then one of them, the impossibility to secure a stable and true identity in involuntary time, corresponds to the different narrative versions of one event, or in Ricoeur's words "the multiplication of limit-experiences", and the other, the inexplicability of the involuntary time experience, is compatible with the intellectual nature of the narrative. For Ricoeur, "it is in the way that narrativity is carried towards its limits that the secret of its reply to the inscrutability of time lies." (3: 270) The paradoxical relationship between narrative and its other, the transgression of narrative in narrative, is a dialectical exegesis similar to what Hegel displays in his philosophy. The aporias thus are made positive and productive by narrative, and the internal limit, the variations on narrative to exhaust the narrative, works to open up narrative to the productive aporias. Externally, narrative transgresses its limit by

surrendering itself to the inscrutable time.

Ricoeur mentions about Proust in his elaboration on the relationship between philosophy and narrative too. In the second volume of *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur cites the novels he has examined as examples which takes different genres of literature to speak of time, among which there is the *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust, according to Ricoeur, defines the borderline between story and myth by narrativizing “a metaphysical experience of lost identity, stemming from German Idealism, to the point where we may just as well speak of the supertemporal experience of Beauty as an initiation, whence comes the impulse of creation as it moves toward the work wherein it must be incarnated” (3:272). Thus time is re-mythicized in Proust’s novel. And Proust’s narrative functions on a larger scale, working together with the non-narrative to portray time which remains inscrutable for narrative.

But Beckett blurs the distinction between narrative and language on the one side, and between the fictional time experience in a novel and real time on the other. Therefore Ricoeur’s prerequisite for reaching the final synthesis, the separation of narrative from its other, is denied in advance. The two time aporias of Beckett, especially the second one which is related to language, are beyond the scope of narrative discussion. If the threefold mimesis in literature^① Ricoeur concludes has to be

① The first fold is figuration which means the narrative function to fictitiously represent the reality; the second is configuration which denotes the plotting of the figuration; the third, also the most important, is the refiguration which implies the narrative function to remake the reality.

held as a criteria (The final constructive synthesis above mentioned is the third fold; the refiguration of time in fictional narrative.), Beckett then is trapped in the swamp of configuration, the second fold of the mimesis which ensures narrative emplotment to concord the multilayered image of time experience. The question raised in the first chapter of the second volume of Ricoeur's work curbs Beckett from going further in his narrative:

Is it not true that plot is disappearing from the horizon of literature insomuch as the very contours of the most basic distinction among the modes of composition, the one having to do with mimetic composition, are being wiped out? (2:7)

Beckett appreciates Proustian romanticism which goes beyond the classical aesthetics of unity of the complex reality. His problem then, as narrative is concerned, is how to grasp and imitate the time experience which is both spatially and temporally inconsistent. Ricoeur makes a comparison between realistic writing and modernist writing. The former is said to abandon the classical paradigm as a result of the call of social complexity while the latter abandons every paradigm in view of the presumption of an incoherent reality. Without paradigms either of the cognition or of the narrative representation of the true time, however, Beckett is admitted to the essence of the objects and at the same time expatriated from the realm of narrative.

On Ricoeur's map of modernist writing, Beckett is shown as, to quote Kermode, the "shift towards schism", the shift from the

older form of modernism — that of Proust, Thomas Mann and Virginia Woolf — to the new. The older generation, the group Ricoeur finds comfortable to go along with, becomes the subject of the last chapter of his second volume, in whose novels the past remains a source of order and a dependable basis for the fictive experience of time. Beckett, for Kermode as well as for Ricoeur, on the other hand, oscillates between the narrative emphases on truthfulness and consolation, thus the schism between “the inescapable suspicion that fictions lie and deceive, to the extent that they console us, and the equally invincible conviction that fictions are not simply arbitrary, inasmuch as they respond to a need over which we are no the masters, the need to impress the stamp of order upon the chaos of existence, of sense upon nonsense, of concordance upon discordance.” (2;27)

As he insists in *Proust*, Beckett never concedes that narrative could work as a consolation. Beckett’s time aporias lie mostly in the impossibility to regard truthfulness as consolation, since truthfulness is incompatible with narrative which is literally fictive. In other words he is unable to configure the essential reality through emplotment, that is, he couldn’t find a sane body for the fragmented time experience. Thus the coexistence of narrative and its other—the refiguration of time experience which Ricoeur finds in Proust—is also denied of Beckett. On the one hand he is not to transcend the limits of narrative. On the other he is rather transcending “a boundary beyond which we can no longer recognize the formal principle of temporal configuration that makes a story a whole and complete story” (Ricoeur, 2;28). Thus Ricoeur tends to circumvent Beckett and thus circumvent the possible death of narrative. But Beckett’s fictional narrative

continues after *Proust* anyway. This book is to record, as the topic of time is concerned, Beckett's solutions to the two time aporias in his own way.

There has already been a long history of Beckettian criticism in the western world. As the time theme related to the two time aporias is dug up from Beckett's novels, I would like to give a general review of the critical literature of his prose works firstly and then to focus on the review of the literature on the specific subject of time. Literary criticism on Beckett's novels started early in the 1960s and continues to shine, with new stars added to the bulk, in the sky of the new century. Books on the history of Beckettian criticism which were published before the turn of the millennium tended to mark the thirty-five years from 1960 to 1995 by three phases. The first decade witnessed the surge of Cartesian dualism in Beckettian existential quest. Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, published in 1961, focused on the Cartesian clowns in Beckett's novels who are tortured by a dualistic body-mind system. In John Fletcher's classification of Beckett's three periods of fictional writing in the 1964 *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, namely the periods of the heroes as citizens, as the outcast and as voices, Cartesian philosophy was nimbly adopted. Raymond Federman's 1965 criticism set a standard for latecomers: "Human loneliness, physical disintegrations, mental alienation, intellectual fiasco, creative failure and the unavoidable dualism of mind and body, reality and fiction" (57) permeate the works of Beckett. The critics who had once found the various ways into Beckett were included into one single group who focused on the Cartesian split between an external world and a world of the self, the latter shaped as a hero seeking after meanings in the

former, an illusion doomed to collapse always.

The next ten years, after the 1969 Nobel Prize effect, marked a booming industry of Beckett criticism, a period in which the main channel of Beckett studies with Cartesian philosophy began to branch out into a variety of tributaries^①. Except for some new voices developed on the basis of the preceding period's meditation, reviews compiled regarding the so-far critical history, the advocacy of the return to textual analysis, as well as discussions on formal innovations are among the main attractions of Beckett criticism. Federman and Fletcher edited in 1970 the first critical collection, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics*, followed by Katherine Worth's *Beckett the Shape Changer* (1975), Ruby Cohn's *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism* (1975) and so on. Ruby Cohn, fed up with the once suffocating metaphysical studies, returned to textual perusal of a world "that was both intellectual and emotional" (*Back to Beckett* 129) in her 1974 *Back to Beckett*. Likewise, in the same year, Hugh Kenner discarded philosophy in *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*. More eye-catching was Katherine Worth's 1975 collection *Beckett the Shape Changer*, which, setting Beckett as an innovator of forms, covered a wide range of stylistic topics. Dramatic forms, performing styles as well, which were thought to be helpful to Beckettian expression, were explored at that time. It's not unreasonable to say that the rise in stylistic concern to some extent resulted in the later deconstructive dissection of the texts. The

① Descartes was by no means given up, but the focus was transferred to his followers; the Occidentalists and the Existentialists, etc. The Cartesian image in Beckett was transformed into one as the first in the line of Beckett's literary anti-heroes.

year 1976 gave birth to John Pilling's *Samuel Beckett*, perhaps so far the most comprehensive discussion of actual and potential influences both literary and philosophical, intellectual and emotional. In addition, stylistic and narrative techniques were explored in Brian Finney's *Since How It Is: A Study of Samuel Beckett's Later Fiction* (1972) and H. Porter Abbot's *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* (1973).

The ensuing fifteen years met a bombastic trend in theoretical treatment of any literary texts. Structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and Other-isms puzzled the mind of naïve readers, yet triggered off a chain reaction from sensitive and scholastic critics. Eric Levy took a deconstructive perspective in *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction* (1980). In 1986, Peter Gidal, when comparing Beckett with Brecht and Karl Valentin, carried out a post-structural reading in his *Understanding Beckett*. The 1987 *The Broken Window: Beckett's Dramatic Perspective* and the 1990 Stirling University conference thesis collection *Rethinking Beckett* were important works of post-structural criticism. Later on feminism, quoting the theories of Kristeva and Cixous, found its voice in *Women in Beckett* (1992) edited by Linda Ben-Zvi and in *Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama* (1994) by Mary Bryden. Psychoanalysis also attached itself to the mythic patterns in Beckett's plays and fictions. Jung and Lacan won the most popularity. Therefore Beckett became an avant-garde who fought against traditional metaphysics and logocentrism.

From the year 1998 onward, theoretical discussions, with new contributions from contemporary popular philosopher such as Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and Badiou, still occupied a