Introduction: Beckett and Surrealism

I

Samuel Beckett (1906–89) sometimes seemed like a man not entirely at home in the twentieth century. The furniture of his work usually consists of old or timeless things: lobsters, Gorgonzola cheese, passages from Dante, to take examples from his first successful short story. Beckett's characters own bicycles and take the train and use the telephone, but for the most part could dwell in the fourteenth century or the twenty-fourth without seriously compromising themselves. Futurist exhilaration in technology was foreign to Beckett's temperament.

Aloof, eremitical, Beckett wrote about technology as if it were somebody else's environment. In the script for *Film* (1964), he throws up his hands: "This poses a problem of images which I cannot solve without technical help . . . perhaps I exaggerate its difficulty through technical ignorance."[1] On the other hand, Beckett's collaborators often noted that he had a canny and detailed understanding of technological possibilities. This book argues that Beckett's whole canon is intimately engaged with technological problems: vacuum tubes, amplitude modulation, magnetizing heads, even computer programs are present either explicitly or in quasi-allegorical form. I concentrate here on Beckett's stage work, but I believe that the same is true of Beckett's prose fiction, especially the later material.

Beckett in some sense wanted to be uneasy about technology. Just as Krapp struggles to find the right passage of tape, and eventually throws away a tape in disgust, so Beckett wrote for radio, film, television, in deliberately awkward ways; he refused to take advantage of what the medium can do well, preferring the effortful, the recalcitrant, even the incorrect. But this was Beckett's way with every artistic medium that he worked in: to foreground the medium, to thrust it in the spectator's face, by showing its inadequacy, its refusal to be wrenched to any good artistic purpose.

I

When young, Beckett was fascinated by the notion that writing might provide psychic authenticity and vivid presentation of the physical world, as Proust's and Joyce's novels seemed to do; instead he found himself immersed in artificialities, self-enclosed wordgames. Indeed he discovered that, whatever he sought from art, he tended to find exactly the opposite. He tried to escape from this bind by means of two tricks. First, in order to gain mastery over his art by describing the sheer cussedness of the artistic phenomenon he devised allegories of artistic frustration, such as the narrow outdoor corridors in *Watt*, fenced by barbed wire and preventing any access to the gardens, through which Watt and Sam make their cautious way.[2] Second, he proclaimed an art of non-representation, estrangement, and general failure, in order to arrive at some grasp of fact through an extremely indirect route. If it is true that art can do little or nothing, then to provide little or nothing is a form of facing the truth.

One of the lessons of twentieth-century art is that modesty is better rewarded than self-aggrandizement, both in the case of the artist and the case of the critic. Large claims have often been unsuccessful. Those formalists who insist that art is nothing but abstract shapes tend to find that the artwork dissolves into a welter of psychic intentions, that it becomes an appendage to the artist's biography or to the politics of its age; by contrast, those deconstructionists who argue that art is essentially an embodiment or a subversion of power tend to find that the artwork clenches itself into aesthetic form, asserts an atemporal presence. Beckett saw much more clearly than most of his contemporaries that art resists the models imposed on it; and so, instead of imposing purposes and templates upon art, he experimented with the notion that an artistic medium itself might be made to speak, if approached with a sort of intelligent humility. Of course, Beckett, being Beckett, was less interested in what a medium could do than in what it couldn't do – its areas of muteness, incompetence, non-feasance of transmission. Jean Cocteau, in *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), put the medium on stage by having the narrator sit inside a giant gramophone; in Beckett's theatre of media each medium tends to dwindle before the stress that Beckett places on it.

Beckett never claimed to be a philosopher, but he seemed to organize his explorations of, or assaults on, the various artistic media by questioning the tenability of the various antitheses that seem to govern the medium. Beckett's voyages across the media have begun to be explored by some important critics: Gilles Deleuze on television and film,[3] Mary Bryden on music,[4] Lois Oppenheim on all the arts[5], to name a few. I hope to continue this examination by attending, as well as I can, to the flinty details of

Beckett's craft. A good deal of excellent work has been done on the Beckett canon as a reflex of history, or as a reflex of Beckett's psychology; I will concentrate instead on Beckett's aesthetics, his extraordinary doting on technique.

Here are some of the antitheses that fail to sublate properly into a dialectic, and stubbornly remain paradoxes, arranged according to the medium that Beckett was investigating.

Fiction

(a) *Representation v. Non-representation*. At the beginning of his career, in 1928, Beckett praised Joyce:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself* . . . When the sense is dancing, the words dance. Take this passage at the end of Shaun's pastoral: "To stir up love's young fizz I tilt with this bridle's cup champagne, dimming douce from her peepair of hide-seeks . . ." The language is drunk. The very words are tilted and effervescent.[6]

Writing should contrive to incarnate its subject stereomorphically; it should dance, it should get drunk, instead of merely describing these things. The hope for this sort of thick, embodied style can be found in many places in Beckett's early fiction, such as the description of the rocking-chair trances in *Murphy* (written 1934–36; published 1938): "The rock got faster and faster, shorter and shorter . . . Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped."[7] The prose embodies the rhythm that it describes. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written 1932; published 1992), when Beckett wrote about sickness, the words themselves become sick:

confluent noli me tangere rodent ulcers lancinating his venter, incubating the nits what nits bloody well you in the scarf of his cuticle, his mouth a clot of sordes . . . his inspirating (there's no call to labour this particular aspect of his malaise) crepitous mucous sonorous sibilant crackling whistling wheezing crowing and would you believe it stridulous[8]

It will be noted that Joyce and Beckett took different approaches to the task of writing carnal, hyper-representational texts. Joyce unpeeled the written page into distinct transparent layers; in the passage cited above, one layer concerns the nuzzling of lovers ("her peepair of hide-seeks") and the other layer concerns drunkenness (the bottle of Piper Heidsieck champagne

buried in the very phrase). But Beckett gnarls and pile-drives his sentences, gashing the verbal texture, instead of making delicate figurations on the superimposed onion-skins. Such passages in Beckett are often notable for an absence of grace – a certain laborious quality tends to infect them, and the words start calling attention to themselves in ways that defeat their denotative quality. By the time of *Watt* (written 1941–44; published 1953), all hope of representation is collapsing into a sort of text governed by arithmetical, pre-compositional strategies, as if a computer had been given a list of intransitive verbs and body-describing adjectives and told to generate characters by means of word lists:

Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window

For one day Mr Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middlesized, yellow and ginger, and the next small, fat, pale and fair, and the next middlesized, flushed, thin and ginger, and the next tall, yellow, dark and sturdy[9]

But just as all normal pathos tends to vanish into abstract textual manipulations, so the abstract textual manipulations generate a strange sort of pathos, a sense of a mind reeling over an abyss of artistic impotence. In "Three Dialogues" (1949, with Georges Duthuit), Beckett tried to give voice to his sense of paradox, in that he was contriving a psychically intense, almost sentimental sort of non-representationality: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world"[10], thereby promoting the figure of the Suffering Artist from a local or temporary sort of suffering to a permanent state of anguished monumental grandeur, Myself am failure.

(b) *Voice v.* Ecriture. One of the puzzling themes of the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* (written between 1947 and 1950) is the multiplication of interior voices. Are these voices symptoms of paranoid hallucination in the mind of the character? Of Beckett himself? Could Dr. Freud cure the text, rid it of these vocal furies, leave it in a state of happy silence? It might be better to argue that these voices are generated by an aesthetic problem: the equivocation between the vocal and the written nature of language. The premise of the trilogy is to place extreme stress on the writtenness of the text, from Molloy's asylum notes to Malone's Venus pencil to Moran's report; but this emphasis sets up a counter-pressure: the text wishes to assert its status as oral speech, and so dislocated and unplaceable voices start to leak into the text from all directions. As Richard

Begam has shown beautifully,[11] by the time of *Company* (1980) the dialectic of the vocal and the written has reached such a pitch that the text is a sort of fugue between voice and *écriture*, which disconcertingly keep trading places.

Drama

(a) *Improvisation v. Script*. This dialectic is simply the theatrical equivalent of voice v. *écriture*; an actor who improvises seems to be following the whims of an interior voice, whereas an actor who slavishly follows a script is obeying an already-composed piece of writing. The transition between the mature fiction of the trilogy (and *Mercier and Camier*, written in 1946) and the early drama of *Waiting for Godot* (written in 1948) is simply a transposition to a new medium of the same problem. In *Waiting for Godot*, the actors seem confined in the vaudeville routines of their stichomythia, hoping, or fearing, that some novelty will jolt them into a more spontaneous response to the world; but the boundaries between script and improvisation are unclear – is Lucky's tirade a symptom of mental breakdown, or a reading of a set piece? – and it is hard for the spectator to be certain whether Didi's and Gogo's comments on their performances ("That wasn't such a bad little canter"[12]) represent a departure from or an adherence to the prepared text. In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) the role of script is played by the tapes, which will always deliver exactly the same message no matter how often they are played; but on the other hand, the role of improvisation is also played by the tapes, in that the tapes play back a fossil of an extinct improvisation, full of false starts and uncertainties. Here, as elsewhere in Beckett, the distinction between improvisation and script, between the casually-spoken and the read-aloud, seems to vanish. As Beckett meditates on the theatrical experience – in which actors pretend that they have just made up the words they speak, words that in fact usually pre-exist as a written text – he finds ways of calling attention to the bizarreness of this universally-accepted premise. Again, Beckett's work is a calling-into-question of the medium in which the work appears.

(b) *Catharsis v. Fun*. Throughout its history, the drama has been a hybrid of ritual (worship of Dionysus, enactment of the *quem quaeritis* Easter trope, ceremony of resistance to capitalist exploitation) and goof (dwarf jugglers, belching drunkards). Most plays labor to separate these functions, but there are a number of plays, including the *Second Shepherds' Play* and *Macbeth* and Hofmannsthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, that combine them by intercutting the gospel sobriety, the ethical challenges, with spoofs and

niaiseries. Beckett goes further: he abolishes the distinction between game and earnest by squashing them onto the same theatrical plane. If, as Nell says in *Endgame* (1957), "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness,"[13] then death, suffering, amputation, blindness, loss of function, loss of world, are the richest amusements life offers. W. H. Auden wrote that Helen Keller jokes are blasphemies against humor[14] and Beckett consciously blasphemes against the distinction between comedy and tragedy on which so much earlier drama is predicated. The more obviously wrenching and painful the theme, the airier and more acrobatic the treatment – as in *Play*, in which adultery is abstracted into a dazzling light-show, or *Not I*, in which memories of rape are abstracted into a word-chase delivered by a clownishly isolated pair of lips.

Radio, Film, and Television

Intimacy v. Remoteness. One of the important themes of Beckett's later career is the hunt for new media to stimulate his extremely medium-driven artistic imagination. He was especially intrigued by media that contain striking defects: radio promotes the concept of blindness from an individual deficiency to a universal rule; the silent film behaves similarly with such concepts as deafness, ignorance, self-immuring – the characters, being mute, must shout with their gestures and pretend to understand one another; television seems to project precarious images which are always in danger of vanishing into a field of dancing gray dots; and radio, film, and television alike were defective in that they lacked any sense of the corporeal presence of actors. All media, to Beckett's way of thinking, are mutilated and inept; but the technological media of the twentieth century confess their incompetences in especially striking ways. Beckett's first radio play, *All That Fall* (1957), is especially clever in its recoil from the intimacy of radio – the voices are right there in your own living room, as if some friends had dropped by – to a *Verfremdung* of the medium, a chill of voices that confess their inability to speak.

Painting and music

Nacheinander v. Nebeneinander. In the eighteenth century Lessing distinguished between the arts of *Nacheinander* (the sequential arts that exist in the domain of time, such as music and poetry) and the arts of *Nebeneinander* (the juxtapositive arts that exist in the domain of space, such as painting and sculpture). Furthermore, he argued that this border should not be

crossed: poetry should never attempt the static description that painting can perform easily, and painting should never attempt to portray violent movement. In the twentieth century, the musicologist Theodor Adorno extended Lessing's argument: he hated what he called pseudomorphoses – attempts by one medium to imitate the technical procedures of an alien medium. For example, he thought that Stravinsky was a poor composer because he tried to create a pseudomorphosis of painting into music, by using a pictorial method (pattern-unit construction, as in a mosaic or a Cubist drawing) to create a musical composition: "The spatialization of music is witness to a pseudomorphosis of music to painting, on the innermost level an abdication."[15]

But for a writer as distrustful of media as Beckett, any morph is a pseudomorph – in other words, any technical procedure in art, no matter how natural or proper it seems to be, is a sort of deformity. As a connoisseur of misshapen art and technical vanities, Beckett was drawn to all sorts of pseudomorphoses from various artistic media into writing. The imaginary pictures that appear in Beckett's work beautifully illustrate his love of pseudomorphosis: in *Watt* there can be found, hanging from a nail on Erskine's wall, a diagram of a circle and a dot that, far from constraining itself into a static figure, is the most vigorous and restless thing in the entire novel, spinning out elaborate whirling fictions of unbelonging, homelessness, as if it were a child's doodle version of a painting by Bram van Velde:

Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and the circle entered together upon the same plane . . . Watt wondered if they had sighted each other, or were blindly flying thus, harried by some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. He wondered if they would eventually pause and converse, and perhaps even mingle, or keep steadfast on their ways, like ships in the night, prior to the invention of wireless telegraphy. Who knows, they might even collide.[16]

In *All Strange Away* (1963–64), the pin-up of naked Emma posted on the wall has a disconcerting way of mutating into a male figure named Emmo.[17] In the anti-Lessing world of Beckett's later prose, pictures turn into animated cartoons, while fictions develop the dead immobility of pictures.

This transvestism among artist media can also be seen in Beckett's treatment of music. Actual pieces of music turn into visionary hallucination (as in *Ghost Trio*, 1975, or *Nacht und Träume*, 1982), as if a Beethoven trio or a Schubert song were better realized in a stage spectacle than in a concert; while stage spectacles turn into a sort of virtual music, a music of actors' movements – as in *What Where* (1983), a mimed fugue in which the

torturer–victim (subject–countersubject) relation in one module keeps al-
tering into a new module, so that the countersubject of one version becomes
the principal subject of the next.

Perhaps behind all these antitheses is the antithesis of Failure v. Success.
Beckett's repeated assertions that his art is the art of impotence and nesci-
ence, that his motto is "Fail better,"[18] are, I believe, veiled ways of saying
that the true failure lies not with Beckett the particular artist but with art
itself, always at the mercy of decomposing and perverse media. Beckett saw
himself as an artist who was unusually honest about art's inability to carry
out the artist's goals. But if, as we shall see throughout this book, the road
of art always leads in the direction opposite to the one the artist thinks he or
she is following, then perhaps the artist who intends to fail may (uniquely?)
succeed.

ii

Beckett's habit of disengaging himself, of handling the stuff of his art with
tweezers and rubber gloves, also extends to his relations with other artists.
He did not affiliate himself with artistic movements; nonetheless his work
has strong and detailed relations with a number of the great isms of the
twentieth century. There is, for example, a Neoplasticist Beckett whose
canon evolves like Mondrian's; just as Mondrian's early abstractions of
trees and his early abstractions of waves converge in grid designs which are
no longer recognizable as either tree or wave, so Beckett's characters erode
into smooth indifferent pebbles or cylindrical buttons. In *Murphy*, the title
character has a distinct sense of humor, a set of quirky preferences (Celia,
ginger), an uncle in the Netherlands, even a last will and testament – he
asks that his ashes be flushed down the toilet of the Abbey Theatre, "if
possible during the performance of a piece"[19]; but by the time of *Fizzle 1*
(1977), Murphy, his wish to pass into plumbing evidently gratified,[20] has
simplified into a postmortem crawler through pipes, as if he were threading
his way through the inner tubing of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*
(1943).

But there is one artistic movement that is central to Beckett's aesthetic –
a movement that was born out of the very discords among artistic media
that were so to excite Beckett's imagination. The first appearance of the
name of this movement appeared in 1917, in Apollinaire's program note to
the ballet *Parade*, in which the sets (by Picasso), the scenario (by Cocteau),
the choreography (by Massine), and the music (by Satie) seemed to have
little to do with one another:

The Cubist painter Picasso and the boldest of choreographers, Léonide Massine, have effected it, consummating for the first time the alliance of painting and dance, of plastic and mime, which is the sign of the advent of a more complete art.

Let no one cry paradox! The Ancients, in whose life music held such a great place, knew absolutely nothing of harmony, which is almost everything in modern music.

From this new alliance, for until now stage sets and costumes on one side and choreography on the other had only a sham bond between them, there has come about, in *Parade*, a kind of super-realism [*sur-réalisme*]

. . . Above all it's a question of translating reality. However, the motif is no longer reproduced but only represented and rather than being represented it would like to be suggested by a kind of analysis–synthesis embracing all its visible elements and something more, if possible, an integral schematization that would seek to reconcile contradictions while sometimes deliberately renouncing any rendering of the immediate outward aspect of the object.[21]

A realism to be attained through splintering, through calculated dishar-mony of means, through deliberate renunciation of "any rendering of the immediate outward aspect of the object" – this is the sort of realism that Beckett wanted: what Apollinaire here calls a sur-realism. In Beckett's first complete play, *Eleuthéria*, he mocks Surrealism by having a character say of his wife, who has laid barbed wire around her absent son's chair, "Soon the apartment will be full of barbed wire. (*Pause*) It must be said, in Violette's defense, that for one whole afternoon, she was under the spell of the Surre-alist exhibition."[22] But Beckett himself spent his whole life under the spell of the Surrealist exhibition.

If Beckett associated Surrealism with barbed wire, it may have been because Surrealism felt prickly to him. Beckett's early relations with the Surrealists were troubled by the fact that most of them were unfriendly to Joyce's work[23]; and the Surrealist movement, its membership zealously guarded by André Breton, had its exclusionary, cliquish aspects. In his fiction, in his aesthetic theory, in his circle of associates, Beckett tried to remain both inside and outside of Surrealism. And yet, as we will see in later chapters, his instincts were Surrealist: his instinct, when writing stage plays, to fracture the theatre into distinct planes, in which action and speech never coincide; his instinct, when writing for technological media, to isolate *melos* from *lexis, lexis* from *opsis*, as in *Words and Music* (1962) and *Cascando* (1963); his instinct to go against the grain of the medium, to force one medium to assume properties more readily available to some other medium, as in the television play *Eh Joe* (1966) in which the camera scarcely moves from the character's face, and the voice-over does all the work of imaging; indeed his very instinct to articulate his work by means of antitheses that never

resolve, like the ones listed above – an approach strictly in agreement with Breton's rigorous alogic, as expressed in the Surrealist maxim that opposites must not be perceived as contradictions.[24] Beckett's work took shape both according to the psychic–automatic Surrealism of Breton and his followers, and according to the original Surrealism of Apollinaire, in which reality was violently seized in the contrapuntal friction among the competing media of music, painting, and discourse.

Beckett's early translations of the Surrealists were, I believe, as important to his artistic development as his critical studies of Proust and Joyce were. For example, in 1928 Beckett translated "The Fiftieth Anniversary of Hysteria" by Louis Aragon and Breton:

we propose a fresh definition of hysteria, as follows:
"Hysteria is a more or less irreducible mental condition, marked by the subversion between the subject and the moral world under whose authority he happens to be . . . Hysteria is not a pathological condition and may in all respects be considered a supreme means of expression."[25]

In 1930 Beckett translated parts of *The Immaculate Conception*, by Breton and Paul Éluard, a book that attempted to simulate various mental illnesses, debilities, and paralyses (Jacques Lacan was among those who reported this experiment in *Annales médico-psychologiques*):

If my voice can lend itself successively to the speech of the most disparate beings, to the speech of the richest and the poorest, the blind and the hallucinator, the coward and the aggressor, how then can I possibly admit that this voice, finally mine and mine alone, originates in regions that have, if only for a time, been outlawed? – regions to which I, in common with the majority of mankind, cannot hope ever to accede? . . . We would even . . . declare that, in our opinion, the "essays of simulation" of maladies virtual in each one of us could replace most advantageously the ballad, the sonnet, the epic[26]

Beckett's first published novel, *Murphy*, most advantageously replaces the novel as we know it with an exercise in the simulation of psychosis, and a number of passages catch exact echoes of the rhetoric of Beckett's Breton translations. Here are Murphy's first reactions to his new job as an attendant in an insane asylum:

the impression he received was of that self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world which he had chosen for himself as the only felicity and achieved so seldom.
The function of treatment was to bridge the gulf, translate the sufferer from his own pernicious little private dungheap to the glorious world of discrete particles, where it would be his inestimable prerogative once again to wonder, love, hate,