

## CHAPTER I

*Reading Traces: Beckett as a Reader*

## USE VERSUS READING

Writing in books is a taboo to many modern readers. In *Used Books*, William H. Sherman refers to a warning on readers' tables at Cambridge University Library: 'MARKING OF BOOKS IS FORBIDDEN' (156). But as the graffiti on the warning sign itself indicate, the bibliophilic *Reinheitsgebot* has the same effect on readers as any zoological garden's prohibition sign 'Do not feed the animals'. In the nineteenth century, the idea that one is not supposed to write in the margins of books was so strong that archivists purged the margins of printed books from handwritten annotations by washing and bleaching the pages. But this ideal of purity is relatively recent. In the Renaissance, annotating was common practice precisely because of the effect it had on the perception of the text. The idea that a book should be 'a good read' was unfamiliar to the reading culture of the Renaissance. Students were explicitly instructed to 'use' rather than just 'read' books. Sherman quotes John Brinsley's influential handbook *Ludus Literarius; or, The Grammar Schoole* (1612), which explains why annotations were considered such an important aspect of education: 'To read and not to understand what we read, or not to know how to make use of it, is nothing else but a neglect of all good learning' (Brinsley in Sherman 2008, 4).

As a result, some of the most fascinating thoughts have been formulated for the first time in the margins of books. Fermat's last theorem is a case in point. In his 1621 edition of Diophantus' *Arithmetica*, Pierre de Fermat wrote a few Latin lines next to Problem II.8, about the way to split a given square number into two other squares. In 1637, Fermat noted in the margin opposite this problem: 'Cubum autem in duos cubos, aut quadratoquadratum in duos quadratoquadratos, et generaliter nullam in infinitum ultra quadratum potestatem in duos eiusdem nominis fas est dividere cuius rei demonstrationem mirabilem sane detexi. Hanc marginis exiguitas non caperet' [It is impossible to separate a cube into two cubes, or a fourth power into

two fourth powers, or in general, any power higher than the second into two like powers. I have discovered a truly marvellous proof of this, which this margin is too narrow to contain]. Fermat's copy of the *Arithmetica* was lost, but under the subheading 'Observatio Domini Petri de Fermat', his son incorporated the lines into the text of a new edition of Diophantus' work that was published in 1670. What was originally presented in the margin as the promise of a solution made it into print as an augmented problem that was to puzzle mathematicians for more than three centuries, until it was finally solved, only recently. Thus the mother of all mathematical brainteasers was engendered by the material matrix of a marginal space.

With regard to more recent marginalia, Mats Dahlström has drawn attention to a project by the Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg, who made a compilation of marginal annotations in public library copies of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The work of art consists of one copy of the 'central' text, surrounded by numerous layers of comments, exclamation marks and other responses by dozens of readers. The result shows how impressive the impact of a text can be and how much energy readers are willing to invest.

The irony of this art project, however, is that Virginia Woolf was an adamant opponent of marginalia. In her essay 'How Should One Read a Book?' she characterized the paradox of reading as a combination of immersion and the simultaneous realization that complete immersion is impossible:

We may stress the value of sympathy; we may try to sink our own identity as we read. But we know that we cannot sympathize wholly or immerse ourselves wholly; there is always a demon who whispers, 'I hate, I love', and we cannot silence him. Indeed, it is precisely because we hate and we love that our relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate that we find the presence of another person intolerable. (Woolf 1972, 9)

This 'presence of another person' could be a presence in the same room as the reader, but Heather Jackson suggests that it could also be a previous reader, who makes his or her past presence felt by means of reading traces.

In an unpublished essay, catalogued under the title 'Writing in the Margin', Virginia Woolf employs stark images of assault to condemn marginal annotating – 'this anonymous commentator must scrawl his O, or his Pooh, or his Beautiful upon the unresisting sheet, as though the author received this mark upon his flesh' (Woolf in Jackson 2001, 239). Woolf presents these annotations as readings that are forced upon her. This is more than just an individual feeling. William W. E. Slights, studying 'The Cosmopolitics of Reading', suggests that 'marginal annotation, whether printed or handwritten, can radically alter a reader's perception of the centred text' (1997, 201).

But perhaps this altered perception might be an enrichment as well. In the case of Samuel Beckett's personal library, many Beckettians would wish he had left even more of 'his O, or his Pooh, or his Beautiful' in his books. Unlike Virginia Woolf, Beckett had no scruples about writing in the margins. Beckett and Woolf are exponents of the two different types of readers in Heather Jackson's playful dichotomy between 'As' and 'Bs': 'For most of the twentieth century, . . . two groups – call them A for Annotator and B for Bibliophile – have existed in a state of mutual incomprehension. (A thinks that B might as well stand for Bore, and B that A is for Anarchist.)' (Jackson 2001, 237). Jackson respects Woolf's viewpoint, because it raises an interesting issue. Even a confirmed 'A' must admit that a majority of marginal reading traces are either quite trite and pedestrian, or so short and enigmatic that they fail to be of interest to subsequent readers.

In her unpublished essay on 'Writing in the Margin', Woolf wondered what might be the audience an Annotator tries to address, suggesting it might be the author, or else the next borrower of the book. But there is at least a third option: the Annotator may be addressing a later self. Edgar Allan Poe suggested a theory of reading notes in 'Marginalia', an introduction to a series of articles, and gave a fascinating account of such an encounter with one of his younger selves:

During a rainy afternoon, not long ago, being in a mood too listless for continuous study, I sought relief from *ennui* in dipping here and there, at random, among the volumes of my library – no very large one, certainly, but sufficiently miscellaneous; and, I flatter myself, not a little *recherché*. Perhaps it was what the Germans call the 'brain-scattering' humor of the moment; but, while the picturesqueness of the numerous pencil-scratches arrested my attention, their helter-skelter-iness of commentary amused me. I found myself at length forming a wish that it had been some other hand than my own which had so bedevilled the books (Poe 1965, 3).

Poe openly admits his secret thoughts at that moment: 'there might be something even in *my* scribbling which, for the mere sake of scribbling would have interest for others' (Poe 1965, 3). But if so, he wonders, how could one transfer those comments and separate the text from the context 'without detriment to that exceedingly frail fabric of intelligibility in which the context was imbedded' (3)? Preserving (or reconstituting) this 'frail fabric of intelligibility' is perhaps even harder if the 'marginalist' is no longer alive. That is the challenge in the present attempt to interpret Samuel Beckett's reading traces.

#### TYPES OF TRACES

The term 'marginalist' was coined by Daniel Ferrer to distinguish this type of 'A' (Annotator) from the so-called extractor, who prefers to write notes

in a separate notebook. The 'extractor', however, is not necessarily a 'B' (Bibliophile). Moreover, some annotating readers are both 'marginalists' and 'extractors'. Samuel Beckett, for one, combines both these capacities, and apart from that, he also belongs to a third category of 'rereaders'. These three categories correspond to three types of reading traces.

### 1. *Traces of the 'Marginalist'*

(a) *Marginal comments*: Marking books is such a private activity that no typology of marginal comments is generalizable. Elaine Whitaker suggested the three categories of

- editing (including 'censorship' and 'affirmation');
- interaction (such as 'devotional use' and 'social critique'); and
- avoidance (expressed by means of 'doodling' and 'daydreaming').

This compact categorization contrasts sharply with Carl James Grindley's extremely elaborate typology in 'Reading *Piers Plowman* C-Text Annotations'. Apart from marks that are only loosely connected to the content of the text (such as ownership marks, doodles or pen trials), the marginal traces that clearly constitute a response to the body of the text are divided into five categories:

- narrative reading aids (including translation);
- ethical pointers (from perceptive points and exemplifications to disputative annotations);
- polemical responses (such as social, ecclesiastical or political comments);
- literary responses (from irony to language issues); and
- graphical responses.

But no matter how useful this typology may be to analyse the annotations to *Piers Plowman*, any typology entails the danger of overcategorization. With a view to studying Beckett's annotations, perhaps the most useful starting point is the basic distinction between 'intensive reading' and 'extensive reading'.

According to book historians such as Roger Chartier, 'intensive' reading was inspired by the Protestant practice of studying the Bible, whereas 'extensive' reading could only develop thanks to the expanding market of printed materials, especially from 1750 onwards (Chartier 2003, 92). But as Chapter 8 will show, Beckett turned this pattern upside down in that he applied an *extensive* reading method to *La Sacra Bibbia*.

The most striking example of intensive reading in Beckett's personal library is his copy of Olga Plümacher's *Der Pessimismus*. It clearly bears the marks of 'hard use', to employ the essayist Anne Fadiman's words (Fadiman 1999, 32). This kind of 'hard use' is not necessarily a sign of bibliographical disrespect. It can also be an expression of intimacy and interest. One cannot

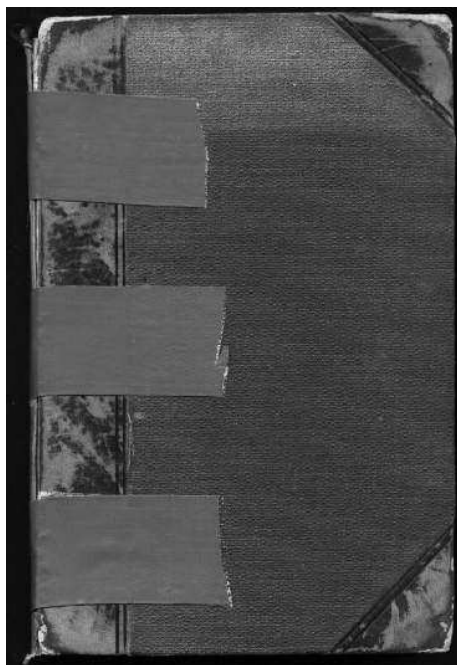


Figure 1 Cover of Olga Plümacher's *Der Pessimismus*

exclude the possibility that the 'book's *words* were holy, but the paper, cloth, cardboard, glue, thread, and ink that contained it were a mere vessel, and it was no sacrilege to treat them as wantonly as desire and pragmatism dictated' (32). Fadiman's description is applicable to the way this volume has been read to pieces, to the extent that it had to be glued together again with adhesive tape (see *Figure 1*).

This is the only book in Beckett's extant library that is interleaved with white pages. The interleaves were used for summaries and translations, whereas the body of the text seems to have been read several times, because numerous passages are underlined in different colours. To what extent these traces of intensive reading are Beckett's is another matter, which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

As opposed to this kind of intensive reading, instances of extensive reading – marked by references to other books read by the same reader – are also present in Beckett's library. For instance, in his copy of George Berkeley's *A New Theory of Vision and Other Writings*, Beckett responded to Berkeley's treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge by writing with a blue-green

pencil in the margin: 'against Geulincx (?)'. Notably the question mark indicates the frailty of the 'fabric of intelligibility', not just in Poe's terms (the relationship between the marginalia and the body of the text) but also in terms of the relationship between Beckett's marginalia and reading notes on separate sheets or in notebooks. In the 1930s Beckett committed himself to the study of philosophy, both by means of surveys or histories of philosophy, such as John Burnet's *Greek Philosophy* or Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, and by means of intensive readings of particular philosophers. His notes on Geulincx's *Ethics* are a case in point. In search of the *Ethica* from *Arnoldi Geulincx Antverpiensis Opera Philosophica*, Beckett had to 'put [his] foot within the abhorred gates' of Trinity College Dublin in January 1936 and 'penetrate more deeply' in the next few months (*LSB* 299). But it is interesting that the intensity of his philosophical investigations is often marked precisely by traces of extensive reading. He tried to understand these philosophies by contrasting or comparing them with other philosophies, as the annotation 'against Geulincx (?)' indicates.

(b) *Non-verbal codes*: The most enigmatic marks in Beckett's books belong to what Heather Jackson categorizes as 'non-verbal codes' (Jackson 2001, 14). A good example is *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* by Fritz Mauthner. 'In Beckett's library at his death', John Pilling writes, 'was a copy of the three-volume Felix Meiner 1923 *Beiträge*, printed in Leipzig and Munich. It was from this edition, and presumably from his own copy . . . that Beckett took the handwritten notes for the entries in the 'Whoroscope' Notebook, and also for the four pages of typewritten notes now in the archives of Trinity College Dublin (TCD MS10971/5)' (Pilling 2006b, 164). After several studies on the relationship between Beckett and Mauthner (Ben-Zvi 1980, 1984, 2004; Feldman 2006a; Garforth 2005; Hesla 1971; Lernout 1994; Pilling 1976a, 1992, 2006b; Skerl 1974; Van Hulle 1999, 2002), Pilling's article is duly entitled 'Beckett and Mauthner Revisited', and it is not likely to be the last visit, for the edition in Beckett's library turns out to contain no less than 700 marked pages. With regard to the question of the volumes' provenance, John Pilling referred to the executor of the Beckett Estate, Edward Beckett, who was of the view 'that the three volumes were purchased in Germany, although there is no mention of them in the six German Diaries of 1936–37, which may or may not point to a purchase in Kassel on any one of half a dozen visits between 1929 and 1932' (Pilling 2006b, 164). Perhaps we should not even exclude the possibility that, although Beckett read Mauthner before the Second World War, he may have purchased or received the book later on. This matter will therefore be revisited (see Chapter 7) with the help of the reading traces.

Even though the number of marks in the three volumes is impressive, they seldom correspond to Beckett's extensive excerpts in the 'Whoroscope' Notebook and his typed notes on Mauthner. The marks in the *Beiträge* are consistently straight, vertical lines in the margins, all in grey pencil, suggesting a disciplined, diligent and remarkably even-tempered reading. None of the book's more than 2,000 pages shows any sign of either enthusiasm or depreciation; none of the marked pages contains any comment or annotation. The marginal codes are purely non-verbal, which makes it extremely hard to make any assumption as to the 'authorship' of these pencilled lines.

The question of agency is possibly even more of an enigma in the case of another kind of 'non-verbal code': 'dog-ears', or signs that corners of pages have been folded down at some point. Beckett's copy of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, for instance, contains only two passages marked in pencil, but also numerous traces of remarkably large dog-ears, which occur throughout the book and sometimes in close succession. It cannot be excluded that these dog-ears were not made by Beckett, but even this most enigmatic of reading traces is sometimes identifiable by means of a sort of signature. In this case the signature is the size of the dog-ears. The dog-ears in Beckett's copy of *The Origin of Species* are just as large as, for instance, the dog-ear marking the article on Manichaeism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which served as a source of inspiration for Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (see Figure 2).

In 1969, Beckett was asked by the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt in Berlin to direct his own play. During the rehearsals he took notes in his so-called production notebook, which contains – among other things – three pages about the religion of Mani or 'Manichaeism' and the Gnostic dualism between good and evil, light and darkness. Beckett summed up the moments in the play that emphasize the dualism between light and darkness. On the second page, he made two lists of 'Light emblems' (the mild zephyr / cooling wind / bright light / quickening fire / clear water) and 'Darkness emblems' (Mist / heat / sirocco / darkness / vapour) (Beckett 1992, 135), corresponding to a passage in the article on 'Manichaeism' by Adolf Harnack and Frederic Cornwallis Conybeare in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 'As the earth of light has five tokens (the mild zephyr, cooling wind, bright light, quickening fire, and clear water), so has the earth of darkness also five (mist, heat, the sirocco, darkness and vapour)' (573). The large dog-ear in Beckett's copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in his personal library not only serves as a material trace of Beckett's use of this source text for *Krapp's Last Tape*, but also (indirectly) as an indication that he did read the complete text of Darwin's book. In that sense at least, 'size matters', and dog-ears certainly deserve to be recognized as fully fledged marginalia.



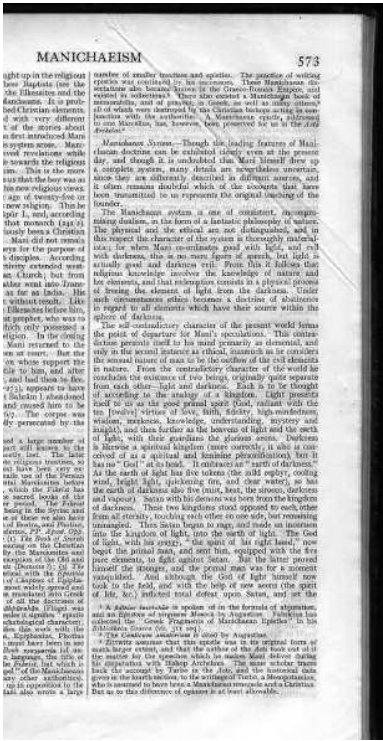


Figure 2 ‘Manichaeism’ page from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with large dog-ear.

(c) *Non-marginalia*: Sometimes a book in the personal library is heavily marked, and yet the author eventually used an *unmarked* passage for his own writing. To denote such passages that are *not* marked, Axel Gellhaus coined the term ‘non-marginalia’ (Gellhaus 2004, 218–19). This category applies to the caterpillar ‘working away at his hammock’, which is mentioned in Beckett’s story ‘Echo’s Bones’ and referred to in *Murphy* and *Watt* (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 125–6). The story that resonates in these references is one of the few direct allusions in Beckett’s works to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1902, 187; see Chapter 10). Although Beckett’s copy of *The Origin of Species* shows reading traces in the form of both pencil marks and dog-ears, it was this *unmarked* passage about the caterpillar that made it into Beckett’s works, not just once, but repeatedly.

The insistence with which some *unmarked* passages in Beckett’s books are alluded to in his works, calls for special attention to ‘non-marginalia’.



Beckett's copy of *The Works of William Shakespeare* is marked on merely half a dozen of its pages, and it even contains material that adds some *couleur locale* to Beckett's reading, such as a shopping list, mentioning 'Briquets / Foie / Whiskey' (see Chapter 2). But what Beckett has marked is not necessarily anything he has ever used for his writing, whereas what he *did* use is not marked. A good example is the 'vile jelly' in *Ill Seen Ill Said*: 'Suddenly enough and way for remembrance. Closed again to that end the vile jelly . . .' (paragraph 51) – an allusion to the last scene in Act III of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Cornwall pulls out Gloucester's eyes: 'Out, vile jelly!' One of the subsequent passages in *King Lear* (the blind Gloucester, led by his disguised son Edgar on the cliffs of Dover) recurs frequently in Beckett's works as an Ur-scene of someone who is on the verge of committing suicide and yet does not kill himself. For instance, the blind Gloucester and his son reappear as the 'Galls father and son' in *Watt*: 'They were two, and they stood, arm in arm, in this way, because the father was blind. . . . How very fortunate for Mr. Gall, said Watt, that he has his son at his command, whose manner is all devotion . . . when he might obviously be earning an honest penny elsewhere' (*W* 57–8). What is remarkable about the scene of the Galls is that it continues to unfold in Watt's head:

This was perhaps the principal incident of Watt's early days in Mr. Knott's house. In a sense it resembled all the incidents of note proposed to Watt during his stay in Mr. Knott's house. . . . It resembled them in the sense that it was not ended, when it was past, but continued to unfold, in Watt's head, from beginning to end, over and over again, the complex connexions of its lights and shadows . . . it continued to happen, in his mind . . . inexorably to unroll its phases . . . it revisited him in such a way that he was forced to submit to it all over again, to hear the same sounds, see the same lights, touch the same surfaces, and so on, as when they had first involved him in their unintelligible intricacies (*W* 59–63.)

Given the link with the scene in *King Lear*, this description of the incident's 'unfolding' in Watt's mind can be read as a precise description of the effect of reading in Beckett's own mind, especially with regard to what Anthony Uhlmann refers to as the 'occluded image' (Uhlmann 2007, 68–9) and the persistence of philosophical images and particular literary scenes throughout Beckett's oeuvre.

Sometimes this persistence of images is based on graphic images in Beckett's personal library. For instance, Beckett's bibles show numerous reading traces, several of which have not been used in his writings, whereas it is the *unmarked* map of the Holy Land that made it into *Waiting for Godot*. When Gogo is asked whether he remembers the Gospels, he replies: 'I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue.

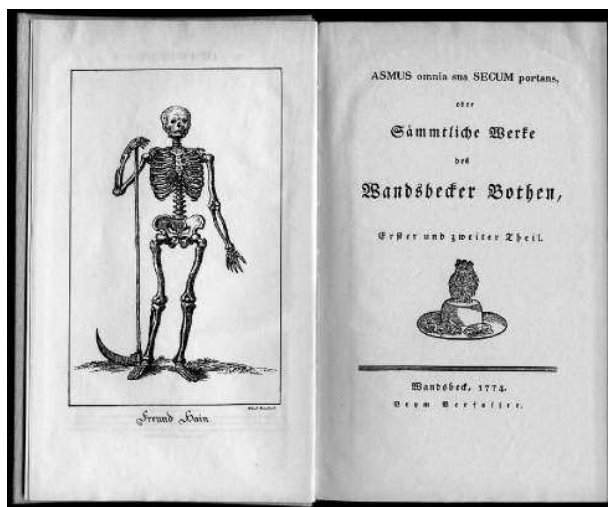


Figure 3 Unmarked illustration of 'Freund Hain' in Matthias Claudius' *Sämmtliche Werke*

The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy' (CDW 13).

This kind of unmarked illustrations and 'non-marginalia' can be relevant with reference to Beckett's role as director of his own plays. When the protagonist in *Krapp's Last Tape* is said to 'look over his shoulder into the darkness backstage left' (Beckett 1992, 4), he senses the presence of death, which in Beckett's production notes is called 'Hain' (220). Beckett explained to James Knowlson that he alluded to Matthias Claudius' poem 'Death and the Maiden' (set to music by Franz Schubert) and to the eighteenth-century German poet's use of the word 'Hain' to refer to the death figure. In Beckett's personal library, his copy of Matthias Claudius' *Sämmtliche Werke* contains a card, inserted between pages 884 and 885, quoting a letter from Claudius to Voss (21 August 1774) that includes 'Der Tod und das Mädchen' (see Chapter 4). But the image of Hain he had in mind is most probably the unmarked illustration next to the title page (see Figure 3).

## 2. *Traces of the 'Extractor'*

Monroe Beardsley once claimed that the first question of the 'objective critic' should not be 'What is this supposed to be?' but 'What have we got here?' (Beardsley, qtd. in Wimsatt 1968, 195). This soundbite was evidently directed