

Introduction

Anthony Uhlmann

When Samuel Beckett first came to international prominence with the success of *En Attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot*, what struck many critics was the sense that his works were virtually divorced from any recognisable context. The two tramps and the master and servant they meet seemed to represent nobody and everybody; the place where they waited might have been anywhere. Celebrated critic Richard Ellmann dedicated a long introductory essay to Beckett called ‘Nayman of Noland’.¹ Yet while Ellmann and others struck by the apparent liberation from context in Beckett’s works were correct in pointing to a strategy of negation in those works, they contributed to a critical tendency to overstate this freedom from context. This critical overstatement in turn led to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the works. For example, Beckett was considered for many years to be an ‘apolitical’ writer. Emile Cioran famously wrote that Beckett remained above such concerns, in believing ‘history is a dimension through which man must pass’, and Alfred Simon cited this contention with approval in his obituary to Beckett published in *Le Monde*.² Clearly the belief that Beckett was apolitical and the first defence offered to this charge (that he was above such matters) share the common assumption that Beckett’s works are divorced from the historical contexts from which they emerge.

Yet the assumption that Beckett definitively broke with contexts has come to be challenged by many critics who have brought to light images, allusions and motifs that cause Beckett’s works to resonate with the real people, places and problems that marked his life and the world in which he moved. Beckett’s notebooks, letters and manuscripts reveal how extensively he entered into dialogue with important intellectual, historical, social and scientific traditions. Theoretical readings have attempted to draw to the surface how far Beckett’s use of language and form also confront the realities of the world in which he lived.

Scholars have come to recognise that, rather than being divorced from context, Beckett developed an aesthetic strategy that worked through deliberate negation. Yet just as negative theology seeks to reveal the reality of an omnipotent creator by tracing the outlines that reveal His absence from the world, Beckett's works evoke the power of the contexts from which they emerge by outlining their absence. This is a complex strategy, which Beckett himself described as 'non-relation', yet its methods can be traced within the works themselves.

In discussing Samuel Beckett's work for cinema, *Film*, Gilles Deleuze, who further develops the notion of exhaustion in Beckett in a later essay, contends that Beckett allows us to recognise key potentials of the filmic medium because he exhausts or negates those elements.³ The same principle of exhaustion or negation might be seen in Beckett's aesthetic writings where he develops the concept of 'non-relation' in art, which he opposes to an artistic tradition that, he states, has always emphasised relation and the power of relation (see Beckett, 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit' in *D* and *P* and the extensive correspondence with Duthuit in *L2*).

In his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (*Dream*), Beckett describes an aesthetic theory that emphasises the connections or relations between things rather than the nature of things themselves. In a later letter to Georges Duthuit (9 March 1949, *L2*, 134–43) Beckett outlines a somewhat different aesthetic understanding; one that emphasises *non*-relation or the refusal to fully draw connections or relationships. Beckett states:

As far as I'm concerned, Bram's painting ... is new because it is the first to repudiate relation in all its forms. It is not the relation with this or that order of encounter that he refuses, but the state of being quite simply in relation full stop, the state of being in front of ... the break with the outside world implies the break with the inside. ... I'm not saying that he doesn't search to re-establish correspondence. What is important is that he does not manage to.⁴

In 'Peintres de l'Empêchement' (first published in 1948), Beckett states that all works of art have involved the readjustment of the relation between subject and object (*D*, 137), a relation that he claims has now broken down. He announced this crisis over a decade before and prior to World War Two in 1934 in another review, 'Recent Irish Poetry' (*D*). The breakdown might be understood to have taken place because, on one hand, the subject can no longer understand itself as a simple point of relation, and, on the other, the object is no longer something that can be simply represented, simply understood. A key problem with any attempt to represent (and therefore interpret) the object is that the interpretation,

the representation (which for Beckett is always made by drawing a thing into relation with an idea), rather than revealing the object, simply adds another layer to it, one that serves to conceal it still more fully, 'Car que rest-t-il de représentable si l'essence de l'object est de se dérober à la représentation?' (*D*, 136).⁵ This problem, which involves the thing itself constantly eluding any attempt to be portrayed, is something Beckett attempts to approach, strategically, from different sides at different times. Yet in 'Peintres de l'Empêchement' Beckett answers his own question as follows: 'Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade' (*D*, 136).⁶ That is, another approach is the attempt to reveal the process of hiding, to create the effect of the power of an object by occluding rather than attempting to represent the essential components of that object.

What this amounts to in practice is a strategy through which Beckett would deliberately obscure or remove links that might serve to clearly situate his works or ideas in relation to a context. What needs to be very strongly emphasised with regard to Beckett's 'non-relation', however, is that it does not simply remove contexts altogether; rather, it still makes use of such associations, but it now obscures them.

This process of occlusion gives the works much of their power and allows them to generate a sense of abstraction that reconnects them with any place, any people, any time, rather than tying them once and for ever to particular times and places. Yet, paradoxically, this is possible for Beckett because of the coherence and depth of analysis that have gone into the use of contexts and sources that he has then hidden. This very strategy, then, lends added weight to critical attempts to find points of connection that have been sundered, disconnected or suspended. These critical projects serve to help us to better understand the power of the works and their capacity for generating understandings of the sense, or senselessness, of our time and place.

This collection considers the question of context in relation to Beckett in two ways. The first three sections of the book, 'Landscapes and Formation', 'Social and Political Contexts' and 'Milieus and Movements', consider how the educational, sociopolitical and artistic milieus through which Beckett passed helped to form both the writer and his manner of writing. The next three sections look at how Beckett's extensive intellectual interests and knowledge (of literature, the arts and the human sciences and hard sciences) made their way into his works. If the first three sections might loosely be thought to involve 'external' influences, the second three might be thought to involve contexts that Beckett made his own. The next section, 'Language and Form', seeks to account for some of the textual strategies

Beckett developed to create his works. The final section, 'Reception and Remains', considers how Beckett and his works themselves have come to be an important context for contemporary artistic practice.

The essays published here offer clearly argued, lucid assessments of the importance of particular contexts to Beckett's works. This book, then, is a highly accessible resource for students first coming to Beckett's work. At the same time it offers a sustained attempt to understand Beckett's particular approach to working with contexts, and as such it will offer new insights that will be an important resource for Beckett scholars as well as general readers.

Finally, I wanted to offer a brief comment on two technical issues. First, I have chosen to use the spelling 'McGreevy' rather than 'MacGreevy' for Beckett's friend and correspondent (who changed his name to MacGreevy in 1941). Both versions of this name are given in the first two editions of Beckett's correspondence. I chose 'McGreevy' as the most important correspondence between Beckett and his friend came before World War Two. Clearly, however, there are arguments on both sides (Knowlson, for example, uses 'MacGreevy'). Second, I chose editions of the works that I felt were as definitive as possible and readily available, yet there are different American and English editions in most cases and choices had to be made. I leaned towards the new Faber editions for the novels as they are the most scholarly editions available. However, I prefer Gontarski's Grove editions of the *Complete Short Prose* and *Nohow On*.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Ellmann, 'Nayman of Noland', *The New York Review of Books*, 24 April 1986.
- 2 Simon, Alfred. 'Le mort de Samuel Beckett: L'auteur d' "En attendant Godot" est décédé vendredi 22 décembre à Paris'. *Le Monde*, 27 December 1989, Paris. Pages 1, 10.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Greatest Irish Film', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 23–6.
- 4 This letter was first published in 2006 and is now included in *L2*. The original translation by Walter Redfern, which is cited here, can be found in Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9–10 March 1949', translated by Walter Redfern, in *Beckett after Beckett*, S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds.), Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. For George Craig's translation of this passage see *L2*, 140.
- 5 'Because what remains representable if the essence of the object is to evade representation?'
- 6 'What remains is to represent the conditions of this evasion'.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01703-0 - Samuel Beckett in Context
Edited by Anthony Uhlmann
Excerpt
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PART I

Landscapes and Formation

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-01703-0 - Samuel Beckett in Context
Edited by Anthony Uhlmann
Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

*Childhood and Portora**Russell Smith*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter can do no more than give a very brief sketch of Beckett's childhood and schooldays, indicating in broad terms some of the strategies by which Beckett reworked autobiographical material in his writing. Readers interested in more detail should consult the biographical studies discussed throughout this chapter. By way of an introduction, however, I would like to outline a four-part schema with which these questions might be considered. It involves issues of presence and absence, of specific references and more generalised themes.

First, then, is the question of specific presences. Scholars have often noted how Beckett's mature writing, from the period of *Watt* onwards, say, constructs an abstracted world radically divorced from specific historical and geographical contexts, but in which, nevertheless, tiny concrete details and allusions remain – names or unique characteristics of people and places – which become all the more resonant for their comparative rarity. Beckett develops this tension most explicitly in *Company*, where 'one on his back in the dark' (*NO*, 3) listens to a voice speaking of a scene from childhood '[s]omewhere on the Ballyogan Road in lieu of nowhere in particular' (*NO*, 16). The Ballyogan Road (near Beckett's childhood home) functions as an indicator of specificity per se; the place name is *in lieu of* (in the place of) no place. Beckett's contextual details often have this ghostly quality, both necessary and arbitrary.

Second is the question of specific absences. This is a complex strategy, whereby Beckett's texts draw attention to specific lacunae, suggesting that what is *not* there is sometimes more important than what *is*. To give one example, Phil Baker has shown that all three postage stamps mentioned in *Molloy* are real stamps, but while two are accurately described, the one that is not described, 'your new Timor, the five reis orange' (*Mo*, 113), which Moran demands to see and which his son has hidden, shows 'an image of

an upright-looking man with a moustache¹; it is an occluded portrait, in other words, of Moran himself, and indeed of Beckett's own father.

Third is the question of thematic presences, that is, more meaningful events or situations (not just 'details') that are reworked, sometimes repeatedly, through Beckett's oeuvre. James Knowlson relates in the preface to his biography how he confronted Beckett, who had insisted on a separation between his life and his work, with numerous examples of repeated childhood scenes. 'Beckett nodded in agreement: "They're obsessional," he said' (*K*, xx–xxi). Scholars often comment on two specific examples.² One is a scene where Beckett's father took him to the Forty Foot, a swimming hole near Dublin, and taught him to swim by ordering him to dive into the water. The scene is repeated in various forms throughout Beckett's writing life, from the uncollected poem 'For Future Reference' (1930), through *Watt* and *Eleutheria* to *Company*, written when Beckett was in his seventies. The thematic 'core' of the scene involves the child's fear and the father's stern command to 'Be a brave boy' (*NO*, 12). A second example involves a small boy out walking with his mother, asking a curious question and receiving a cutting retort, which is treated with significant variations in 'The End', *Malone Dies* and once again in *Company*. The thematic core here, amidst the shifting lacunae and variations of detail, is a feeling of apparent togetherness suddenly ruptured by the mother's angry response. As we shall see, Beckett's memories of his schooldays at Portora are of this type, for while there are few concrete details, scenes of mindless rote learning enforced by punishment are a recurrent theme, especially in *The Unnamable*.

The fourth category is the most difficult: the question of generalised themes notably absent from Beckett's writing. Beckett always insisted that he had a happy childhood; what can it mean, then, that children are almost entirely absent as characters in Beckett's oeuvre? That is, there are no imaginative reconstructions of the experience of childhood and schooldays as we see, for instance, in the opening chapters of Joyce's *Portrait*. The stories of Saposcat in *Malone Dies*, for instance, are self-consciously presented as fictional, with Malone even warning the reader 'Nothing is less like me than this patient, reasonable child' (*MD*, 18). Another way of putting this might be to say that there is no implicit *Bildungsroman* or childhood backstory in Beckett's mature writing; childhood exists in a separate universe radically divorced from the present. Seen from the estranged vantage point of adulthood, it appears complicated and compromised by the gaps, distortions, interpolations and embellishments of memory and its vicissitudes.

Childhood and Portora

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A brief word is in order on Beckett's biographers. Deirdre Bair, Beckett's first biographer, makes it clear in her preface that she found it difficult working with Beckett, and throughout the book one can discern an underlying hostility to her subject, by no means a *prima facie* fault in a biographer. Her 1978 biography was relentlessly criticised in Beckett studies for its factual errors and, more pointedly, for its negative portrayal of Beckett as a deeply disturbed man haunted by a tormented childhood and a life-long guilt-ridden relationship with his domineering and neurotic mother. James Knowlson's authorised biography (1996) can be seen as a corrective to Bair's account, emphasising Beckett's emotional resilience, generosity and compassion, and consistently interpreting the negative aspects of his early years in the redeeming light of futurity. But Bair's biography was begun in 1971, and its depiction of Beckett's early years drew on many sources who had died before Knowlson began his account; Beckett and his contemporaries' views of their early years would have mellowed in the meantime. Knowlson's biography is faithful to the mature Beckett, while Bair's more tendentious account gives a glimpse of the intense sensibility that produced works like *The Unnamable*. The truth probably lies, as truth is wont to lie, somewhere in between (or nowhere in particular).

Lois Gordon's unjustly overlooked *The World of Samuel Beckett* (1996) concentrates on Beckett's first forty years and is particularly good on historical context, while Anthony Cronin's *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (1997) is astute and engagingly written, especially in its evocation of the Dublin of Beckett's childhood. Finally, Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* (1986) meticulously documents in photographs the actual people and places mentioned or alluded to in Beckett's work, but is guilty of occasional solecisms such as writing of the ancient graveyard at Tully near Beckett's childhood home: 'It was this graveyard that Moran chose for his final resting place'.³ To suggest that the places in Beckett's fiction can be visited by a tourist with a map seems a radical misreading of Beckett's project as a whole.

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To begin at the beginning is never simple, and Beckett's case presents two difficulties. The first, thankfully, has been set to rest: Samuel Beckett was born in the front room of his family home on Good Friday, 13 April 1906. However, his birth was not registered until two months later, on 14 June, with the birth certificate giving his birthdate as 13 May, leading Bair to speculate whether this uncanny conjunction of Good Friday and Friday

the thirteenth was myth making on Beckett's part (*B*, 1–2). The birth notice in the *Irish Times* of 16 April 1906 proves that Beckett's version is correct.⁴

The second problem is more difficult, for Beckett repeatedly claimed to have memories of his prenatal existence. 'My memoirs begin under the table, on the eve of my birth, when my father gave a dinner party & my mother presided', he wrote to Arland Ussher in 1937 (*LI*, 474). He told John Gruen in 1970: 'I have a clear memory of my own foetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to'.⁵

It seems that Beckett took these claims seriously. Prenatal memories of this kind are, however, impossible. While the foetus has a memory and undergoes various kinds of learning in utero, 'autobiographical memories' – that is, explicit recollections of events or episodes – do not begin until the age of three or older. Such 'false memories' are well known in psychoanalysis, where analysands produce memories – in which they genuinely believe – in an effort to please the analyst and advance the analysis. Moreover, many early childhood memories are likely to involve 'confabulation', in which individuals confuse actual memories and knowledge of events gained from others. Indeed, *The Unnamable* recognises the creative and collaborative nature of childhood memory: 'Enough of acting the infant who has been told so often how he was found under a cabbage that in the end he remembers the exact spot in the garden and the kind of life he led there before joining the family circle' (*U*, 36). Though it's appealing to imagine Beckett in utero scowling behind his spectacles at the inanity of dinner party chitchat, it is a fantasy on Beckett's part and tells us more about the adult Beckett than the unborn child. In its rejection of the idea of the womb as a lost Eden, it shows Beckett's insistence on understanding suffering as an ontological given, not a psychological contingency.

Beckett's father, William Frank Beckett (1871–1933), was a successful quantity surveyor, a man's man of practical good sense and robust energy, with a 'ready wit', but also a 'fiery temper' (*K*, 10). He was an excellent swimmer and keen golfer, but his greatest love was of long walks through the hills around Dublin, especially on Sunday mornings when, while May attended Tullow Parish Church, Bill would 'go to church with the birds up in the mountains' (*K*, 24). His early death plunged his younger son into profound depression, and Beckett's writing is repeatedly haunted by the wordless companionship of their walks together; 'they were absolutely tuned in', remembered Beckett's cousin Sheila Roe (*K*, 12). Memories of