CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Beckett's Finitude

For many writers, Samuel Beckett becomes a kind of life sentence. There are art historians who spend their lives studying Michelangelo and musicologists who devote themselves similarly to Donizetti, but it seems to me that in no other discipline is there quite the same kind of relationship of lifelong indenture to an artistic subject as there is in literary criticism. Perhaps it has something to do with the sharing of the medium between writer and critic, the twinning and braiding of their sentences. If one feels Beckett's sentence forms inveigling themselves into one's own, then one is in good company. J. M. Coetzee and John Banville had the same experience. I once heard Banville explain that he needed to get clean by not reading Beckett for several weeks before starting to write, lest Beckett's cadences insinuate themselves – I have to tell him that it has never worked. It is really like an addiction, a making over of and through the words one uses to speak of these words.

Authors who shape your lifeworld in this way can start to take on the shape of the world as such, becoming a kind of mythos or forming fantasy. Like W. H. Auden's Edward Lear, Beckett 'became a land' to which we 'swarm like settlers' (Auden 1976: 149). There are certain other authors who attain to this status, who, by bequeathing a world, became it – William Shakespeare is one, Jane Austen another and Charles Dickens another still.

My relationship with the mythical world of Beckett has always been a difficult one. It has always been easier for me to try to break away from the fantasy than to bury myself in it, but the rhythm of relapse and resumption in Beckett's work itself seems to predict and proscribe my return to his work. After I published *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* in 1988, I thought I could show myself that I could get away from Beckett by writing a series of books that didn't seem to have much to do with him, with indexes in which he was scarcely mentioned. But the fact that readers wondered where the Beckett chapter was in a book I wrote on ventriloquism (2000), or another on the skin (2003) or another on the intimate life of things

(2011a) seems to be an indication that for me the longest way around has always been the shortest way home. I even found myself having limbered up for writing books on things like air (2010) and sport (2011b) by writing about these topics in Beckett's work. Where I had not done this, I found myself retrospectively rectifying the anomaly, with an essay on flies in Beckett's work as a pendant to a little book on the fly (2006b). I have on many occasions tried to leave the house of Mr Beckett, thinking that, having arrived on the bottom floor and scrubbed and skivvied my way to the top, the time would come to close the door behind me and head out onto the road. But my journey has always seemed to wind back to the back door of Mr Beckett's house; Beckett – that again. So it goes, it seems, in and out of the world of Beckett studies. It is probably apt, then, that the essays I have brought together here should actually have, as one of their unifying concerns, the question of worlds, worlding and worldliness.

What is to be done with Beckett? At one time, the answer to this question might have been, to borrow the title of Simon Critchley's book (mostly) on Beckett, 'very little, almost nothing' (1997). When I began thinking and writing about Beckett in the late 1980s, his work seemed like an anomalous or residual thing. It was plain that he had something to do with modernism. His close association with James Joyce and with some of the leading forms of literary avant-gardism – for example with the magazine *transition* – and his relentless efforts to reinvent the forms of literary expression seemed to make him an exemplary modernist. And yet, in his strange, obsessive introversion and in the difficulty of generalising his innovations, Beckett seemed also to be awkwardly indigestible to modernism.

And then, for a while during the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed to make more sense for critics to use Beckett's works to make the case for some kind of break within modernism, moving beyond the forms of order and authority represented by high and classic modernism into a world of unlimited contingency. Indeed, for a time, Beckett became the exemplary postmodernist, according to the following formula: where modernism turned from the world in the effort to create a second-order world of art, postmodernism pluralised this act of world-making. Under postmodernism, neither the historical world nor the world of art could stand entire; there could only be multiple ways of world-making, in Nelson Goodman's influential phrase (1978). Slowly, but decisively, the answer to the question of what was to be done with Beckett changed: now, it seemed, the answer was 'almost anything'. But there has always been something strained about the attempt to associate the straitened means and subjects of Beckett's work with the opulent pluralising and opening out of sensibility that was held to be

characteristic of postmodernism. Fissure and indeterminacy may be at the heart of Beckett's writing, but then so are impediment and aporia. The lessness of Beckett's work always seemed to sit askew with the openness of what postmodernism was thought to be.

Nowadays, this kind of claim is heard much less often, no doubt an effect of the generalised decompression of the very idea of the postmodern. One expression of the deposing of Beckett from the position of exemplary postmodernist is the place accorded to him in the work of Alain Badiou, as part of his assault upon many of the leading principles of postmodernism, though usually without caring to name them as such. Really, this amounts to an effort to rescue Beckett from association with the sort of liberal pluralism characteristic of the post-Marxist politics of postmodernism. The Beckett of whom we read in Badiou's work is no longer playful but militantly earnest, no longer agitated by contingency but intent and unswerving in his devotion to the most austere of philosophical projects. In one sense, this returns Beckett to a kind of modernism, while at the same time reconstituting the idea of the modern in the form represented by Beckett – now shown to be bent on the aim, close to Badiou's own, of asserting the condition of pure Being. It is in the very strength of Badiou's reading – in its capacity to find in Beckett a sort of philosophical potency – that its weakness, in my view, is to be seen. By contrast, the forms of strong weakness in Beckett's work animate and preoccupy the essays in this volume.

Badiou's philosophy makes two principal and somewhat oddly ill-assorted claims. The first is the argument for a mathematical ontology based around the principle of the infinite. The second is the idea of the event. Badiou believes that mathematics has been shunted away from its position as the determining power of philosophy by what he calls Romanticism, by which he really means the 'temporalization of the concept' introduced by Hegel (Badiou 2010: 40), the idea that philosophical concepts may be embedded in and emerge from historical circumstances, rather than bestriding or standing haughtily aside from them. Unlike many others, Badiou does not identify Romanticism with the principle of expansion beyond every limit; instead, he identifies it with the 'theme of finitude' (Badiou 2010: 39) – perhaps since to identify a particular concept or argument with the contingencies of a historical situation, one must always put a limit on its validity and application. More broadly, Badiou identifies Romanticism with the 'commandeering of being by the one' (Badiou 2010: 42), by which he means the tendency to regard reality as multiple in its appearances but single in its essence. Another, more familiar name for this is Platonism, rather than Romanticism, and it is a little puzzling to find

Badiou bracketing Romanticism and Platonism through their shared commitment to finitude, since the finitude in question seems to be different in each case. Romanticism may be identified with historical finitude, expressed through the historicist reduction of thinking to thinking for the time being and 'the sophistical tyranny of language' (Badiou 2010: 40). Badiou offers a complicated argument that the mourning generated by historical finitude, or 'co-extensiveness with time' (Badiou 2010: 28), produces a pathos which continues to hold open the place of God: 'As long as finitude remains the ultimate determination of existence, God abides. He abides as that which continues to hold sway over us, in the form of the abandonment, the dereliction, or the leaving-behind of Being' (Badiou 2010: 28).

If Romanticism is to be identified with historical finitude, then Platonism may be identified with metaphysical finitude, expressed through the reduction of the thinking of Being to an idea of the One. Romanticism and a certain reading of Platonism converge for Badiou, because of his commitment to the principle that being is intrinsically multiple and never without violence or cowardly acquiescence to be reduced to oneness. Badiou pledges his whole philosophy on the contemporary form of Platonic truth found, he maintains, in mathematics and, in particular, the mathematics of set theory and the centrality in it of the secular reality of the infinite. For Badiou, mathematics is emphatically the warrant of the Platonic claim that 'it is the same to think and to be' (Badiou 2010: 52). As a Platonist, Badiou stands in the mainstream of modern mathematics and against the pragmatic and relativising tendencies of both Continental philosophy and Anglo-American pragmatism.

However, it is not his mathematical Platonism that seems to give Badiou's philosophy traction among readers who seemingly only yesterday were convinced of the unarguable validity of historicism, the constitutive role of language in thought and the violent reductiveness of Platonic metaphysics; rather, it is Badiou's idea of the event. Convinced of the necessity of infinite thought, Badiou is committed to what he calls 'truth', though it is clear that he means by this something like 'force', and not Habermas's 'unforced force of the better argument' (Habermas 1996: 306) but the enforced force of that which refuses to be reduced to the condition of a mere argument. This kind of truth can be guaranteed, Badiou thinks, not by any kind of correspondence with the way things are, but rather by the most radical kind of break with it, because the way things are is always equivalent to *doxa* for Badiou, or its maximisation in the form of what he calls 'the State', by which he means not only every kind of existing political dispensation, but also all stable states of affairs and opinions whatsoever. The name of truth can be

given only to a fidelity to whatever breaks absolutely with such states of affairs. So this is not a Platonism that can be embodied in a Republic built around the eternal Ideas, rather, it is formed from a force of radical fission, which resists being reduced to any such finite embodiment. The distinctive character of Badiou's philosophy is to be found in this extraordinary blending of an absolute and authoritarian Platonic metaphysics with its apparent commitment to radical revolution.

Badiou's reading of Beckett no doubt derives much of its force from his recruitment of Beckett to this glamorous and exciting politics of absolute break, revelatory and revolutionary all at once. I suggest in Chapter 9, 'Beckett's Low Church', that, for all Badiou's insistence on the atheism of his position, it draws powerfully and hungrily on the more voluptuously austere forms of religious cathexis. The Beckett who pledges himself to the event is a Beckett of pure and charismatic radicalism. But those who are attracted to Badiou's radicalism, in some cases, one suspects, on the rebound from the very different radicalism of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, may be inclined to minimise or overlook the authoritarian absolutism and the drastically unworldly, even otherworldly, abstraction to which his anti-liberalism seems to tend.

The most embarrassingly incoherent part of Badiou's argument is the way in which his infinitist metaphysics is supposed to underpin his politics. For all his opposition to the One, Badiou depends upon a wildly implausible reduction of states of affairs to oneness – to that capitalised, rounded-up condition that he is wont to call the State – for his idea of the radical break represented by the event to work. Indeed, Badiou's demanding dream of the absolute exceptionality of events logically depends upon the prior constitution as absolutely homogeneous of the states of affairs from which events diverge, because only this secures the possibility that events could be *absolutely* divergent from them. If Badiou's ontology is opposed to 'the power of a count, a counting-as-one' (Badiou 2010: 41), the cult of the event absolutely requires the egregious counting-as-one constituted in the idea of the State. If the pre-existing situation were in fact the kind of undetermined multiplicity that Badiou's mathematical ontology requires, given that 'situations are nothing more, in their being, than pure indifferent multiplicities' (Badiou 2007: xi), and so could not be counted as one, then there could be no kind of event that could be guaranteed to be discontinuous with every possible element of that unaccounted-for multiplicity or to be, in Badiou's terms, 'an exception to any preconstituted predicate of the situation in which that truth is deployed' (Badiou 2007: xiii). Something cannot come absolutely out of the blue, unless you are sure

that it is the blue that it has come out of. If there are constituents of the blue of which you have not taken account, which must be the case with a situation that is purely multiple and irreducible to any kind of entity, then they might very well turn out to be smoothly continuous with, and even determining of, what seems to have broken out spontaneously in the form of the event.

What is more, given that any emergent historical condition that breaks with a prior condition itself adds something to what it breaks from – in the way, for example, the idea of the Victorian is in some sense defined by the modernism that defines itself in its departure from Victorianism or the way modernism itself is given a certain definition by the hypothesis of the postmodern – we might say that the Badiouan event can never in fact be entirely unrelated to that from which it departs, since it must always form a relation by its very divergence. An absolute break could never be a break *from* anything at all. In the casual-hysterical reduction of the complex, interlocking circumstances of world economics and politics to that ultimate count-as-one of the Romantic Left, 'Capital', Badiou's fanatical infinitism comes close to infantilism (one does not need to deny the existence of any of the myriad components of what is called capitalism to be reasonably dubious that they are all the expression of a unified and self-directing world system). There are many, many things in the world that are in need of remedy, but they are, alas, not reducible to a One, from which a once-and-for-all and absolute break might be made.

Badiou's argument is that Beckett's work 'goes from a programme of the One – obstinate trajectory or interminable soliloquy – to the pregnant theme of the Two, which opens out onto infinity' (Badiou 2003a: 17). The 'event' in Beckett's work takes the form of a breaking open of the linguistically centred solipsism of his work up to *Texts for Nothing* by the force of a kind of love, defined as the 'interval in which a sort of inquiry about the world is pursued to infinity' (Badiou 2003a: 67). What is here sentimentality modulates elsewhere into a kind of forcing on to Beckett's writing of a sort of transfiguration, for example, in these remarks about *Watt*:

> At this juncture, thought awakens to something completely different than the vain grasp of its own predestination – not to mention the torture elicited by the imperative of the word. By means of hypotheses and variations, thought will therefore seek to bring its knowledge of the 'indeterminable purport' of incidents to the height of their 'formal brilliance'. This formal brilliance designates the unique and circumscribed character, the eventual clarity, the pure and delectable 'emergence' of the incidents in question. (Badiou 2003a: 56–7)

All this completeness, uniqueness and purity, the libido of absoluteness that constantly erupts through Badiou's religiose readings of Beckett, seems to me to be utterly at odds with the stubbornly sustained approximating of Beckett's writing. I hope that the tendency of the essays gathered here, even if it was not their conscious aim, is to make less compelling all the forms of infinitism – whether represented by Badiou or found in the lexicon of the illimitable governing forms of postmodernist theory to which Beckett's work has given comfort – and to make a case for Beckett's radical finitude. This involves the recognition that Beckett's work must always come up short of a philosophical assertion and certainly must recoil from anything like the constitution of an ontology, a statement of the nature of being, that can add up to a full and remainderless saying of being, or being of saying, or saying of the being of saying. I call Beckett's finitude radical, not because it takes absolute or ultimate forms, but because it imposes a limit on radicalism itself, even and especially on the kind of bracing, yet comforting absoluteness represented by Badiou and his followers.

'What kind of imagination is this so reason-ridden?' the narrating voice of *Company* asks itself, of itself, and promptly, resignedly, gives itself the reply: 'A kind of its own' (Beckett 1989: 27). The phrase translates the Latin slogan *sui generis*. Put in set-theoretical terms, it identifies the singleton set, the set with only one member. But of course, such a set will always form part of the set of such singular sets, the general category of ungeneralisable categories. The general condition is a condition in which no generality is possible, or at least knowable.

Thinking about the nature of finitude in Beckett's work often centres on the faculty he calls the 'imagination', which alternates between the visionary inheritance of Romanticism and a much more limited, often almost mechanical, faculty conceived as the power of forming images. For Beckett, imagination is not a spontaneously indwelling and upwelling power, but a strenuous and exhausting labour that comes close to the ideas of staging, seeing through or putting into practice. 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine' begins *Company*, inaugurating the stern imperative maintained through the text of making possibility actual, of rendering things finite. Although often credited in the Romantic tradition as the power that promises transcendence of the merely finite world, Beckett's imagination is typically described as defective and itself in need of being imagined. This task is strangely insistent. Even when imagination seems to have expired altogether, it represents just another task of imagining: 'Imagination Dead Imagine', an imagination that is completely dead and done for, just imagine what that could be like. 'Imagination at wit's end spreads its sad wings', we

read in *Ill Seen Ill Said* (Beckett 1989: 65). Knowing that the imagination in question is an unusually, even grotesquely, reason-ridden affair may help to explain how imagination, traditionally the antagonist or enlarger of wit, might be said to be at its own wit's end, but this does not provide much help in understanding the kinds of wings it might seek to rise on. Indeed, we are told only that the wings are spread, not that they assist in any kind of elevation – which could well be the source of their sadness. And, of course, imagination can have or take wing only by an act of imagining, as it has here in fact in the hobbled form of a rather fatigued and lumbering cliché, even if it is the conspicuous leadenness of the phrase which deploys it that gives it its sardonic lift. The imagination in Beckett's work is always a material imagination, always on the alert against its own tendency to levitate or refine itself out of existence, while Beckett is himself strongly attuned to the gaseous correlates of the mental faculties (Connor 2006a).

Repeatedly, I have found in Beckett's work resources for thinking about a specifically material or finite kind of imagination, an imagination that performs the traditional duty of taking us beyond the merely given or present at hand but does so in ways that seem designed to keep us on terms with its materiality, even as that materiality is itself something still to be imagined. If, for example, radio seems to offer to Beckett the attractions of a purely abstract, purely imaginary kind of art, it nevertheless remains specifically and unignorably material. Radio embodies the condition of situation without site. Chapter 5, 'I Switch Off', explores the importance in Beckett's work of radio apparatus and the corresponding intuition that radio itself constitutes a kind of apparatus that is neither fully specifiable nor dispensable, neither quite there nor not there. Chapter 6, 'Looping the Loop', explores the ways in which the semi-phantasmal matter of tape is similarly entangled in time and dream-eaten desire.

I aim through these readings of the different forms the material imagination takes in Beckett's work – the athletic imagination of effort, the imagination of slowness and speed, the imagination of the body grown literally sick of itself and the imagination of and through the technical and material apparatus of hearing and speaking – to intimate an alternative state or strain of the modern, which stresses its commitment to a kind of being in the world that must nevertheless eschew any sense of that world's, or that being's, simple inherence.

Modernism has two very different characters. There is, first of all, the modernism of expansion and experiment, a modernism that abolished the old and started out anew. This is a modernism characterised by an undoing and abandonment of what had seemed given in the past. It is a modernism

that seems at times to operate in thin air, making itself and its world up as it goes along. Alongside the injunction to make it new, we might read the injunction to make it more.

Secondly, there is a modernism characterised by what Peter Sloterdijk has called 'explicitation', which I take to be closely related to my understanding of finitude. For Sloterdijk, explicitation means the process of bringing to conscious awareness and deliberate, overseen operation everything that might previously have been unconscious or part of the given in existence (Sloterdijk 2004: 87). In that this principle involves the rejection of reliance upon what is taken for granted and the desire to make articulate principles of functioning that had previously been taken for granted, it participates in the expansive, self-enlarging project of modernism. Whereas the principle of expansion detaches us from the world, the principle of explicitation returns us to it, for it depends upon the making manifest of forms of situation and limit. With the explicitation of climate, ecological functioning, genetics, neurology and the operations of language and information comes freedom, but also the anxiety of responsibility, as we come to 'depend on what depends on us', in Michel Serres's phrase (Serres 2009b: 36). As Serres has suggested, modernity has gone out into the world and has met itself on the other side (2009a: 5–14). Taking leave of the world, modernism has returned us and itself to it. I find in Beckett's work an exemplary case of this modernism in which excursion curves round into finitude. It is for this reason that the studies of different aspects of Beckett's writing assembled here recur in different ways in regard to the question of worldliness and to the question of the kind of world that Beckett's works constitute.

This kind of worldly modernism looks forward to the new, paradoxical kind of finitude we are encountering and learning to inhabit, in which we are forced as a kind of necessity to exercise what limited mastery we can, not only over the previously exterior world of nature, but also over ourselves, as the engine of a second nature that is both continuous and discontinuous with the first. Our finitude comes not only from our frailty or powerlessness but also from our powerlessness simply to wish away our power. Though Beckett of course offers no blueprint for the kind of extension of knowledge and technical capacity that is likely to continue to be both redemption and predicament, he does go further than most in setting out the extreme immanence required to live in this in-between condition – never at home in the world, but unable to be anywhere else than in the world we will henceforth, but as always, be constrained to make out for ourselves.

Beckett's writing encourages us to see a worldly modernism not just because it is itself worldly in the minor sense, taken up with the unredeemed

bric-à-brac of existence – bodies, objects, habits, obsessions, oddities and impediments, along with what Badiou in his lordly way calls 'everything that makes us scurry about blindly on the desolate surface of the earth' (Badiou 2010: 71) – but also because it is so attuned to a larger vocation of making out a, or even the, world. Beckett is more faithful to what Beci Dobbin calls 'granular modernism' (2014) than to the supreme fictions of the heroic kind of modernism represented by William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound and James Joyce. These essays suggest that Beckett's work will never sanction a letting go of the world. One of the forms of finitising with which Beckett has had no choice but to become entangled, as I try to show in Chapter 10, 'The Loutishness of Learning', is the grounding of modernism's grandeurs in the administering operations of academic life. For this kind of modernism, the world impends upon us as something to be materially imagined, not in the form of alternative worlds, but in terms of 'the world', experienced as a kind of demand for predication as yet without predicative content, as in the climactic moment of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* when Goldberg attempts to explain his philosophy of life to his associate McCann: 'Never write down a thing. And don't go too near the water. And you'll find that what I say is true. Because I believe that the world . . . (*Vacant*) . . . . Because I believe that the world . . . (*Desperate*) . . . . BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD . . . (*Lost*)' (Pinter 1991: 71–2).

A finitive modernism would be a modernism condemned to exert and – in the Sartrean sense I discuss in Chapter 3, 'The Nauseous Character of All Flesh' – transitively *exist* its freedom from God, from any kind of historical destiny or absolute guarantee, as a limit, coercion or compulsion. We are free, with a kind of carceral liberty, not because we are absolutely free to choose, but because the choice that we have no choice to make is free of absolute determination, in the sense that it lacks it. We are 'finitively' rather than definitively free because we are under a necessity of choosing things which we will never absolutely have had to choose.

If the assertion of a given historical essence or identity is one kind of evasion of this finite (because indefinite) freedom from determination, the identification with an absolute freedom, or illimitability, is another. The first hangs back from the finitude of freedom, hugging its dream of a determining past, in the hope that it can be relied upon to yield the inestimable boon of having no choice; the second accelerates past it into the fantasy of an entirely undetermined future. Finitude means the peculiar and painful mixture of freedom and coercion involved in accepting that we have no choice about our freedom, that our freedom is itself a limit on our fantasies of absolute