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Excerpt

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I

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An endgame of aesthetics: Beckett
as essayist

Whilst it is easy to see where Beckett's discursive writing begins, it is difficult to see where, or how, it ends. It is possible to outline the loose assemblage of aesthetic theories and philosophical ideas that form their point of departure, but it is extremely difficult to see what happens to these ideas and where they end up. Beckett's two major early essays, 'Dante. . . Bruno. Vico. . . Joyce' (1929) and *Proust* (1931) are founded upon fairly coherent systems of philosophy and aesthetics. The rest of his pre-war discursive writing, which consists mainly of short literary reviews, can with care be unpicked to reveal developments of the same ideas. After the war, Beckett's critical attention switched to painting. Despite their highly stylized manner and ironic tone, his first two essays are in many respects logical extensions of his pre-war ideas, and they can readily be labelled 'discursive'. Yet these pieces represent the start of a deconstructive process whose logical conclusion is not to be found in recognizably discursive writing at all, but in dramatized dialogue and in the condensed lyricism of the *témoignages* and later prose.

There are several totally different ways in which the reader can tackle Beckett's discursive writings. Perhaps the most obvious strategy is to attempt to tease out an aesthetic which may then serve to elucidate Beckett's other works. In this way, his discursive writings are read as if they contained an aesthetic theory or even a philosophical doctrine which underpins his drama, fiction and verse. Much critical attention has been devoted to uncovering these supposed theories or doctrines. Given Beckett's reluctance to discuss his work in these terms, and given the elusiveness of any kind of systematic thought in his literary output, it is easy to see why one might wish to claim the discursive writings as some kind of critical key. It is particularly tempting to see Beckett's discursive writing occupying a clearly demarcated position; like the key to a map, it sits aloof in the margins, yet remains indispensable for deciphering the map itself.

A completely different strategy – one which is often ignored in the rush to

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locate a system – is to judge these texts according to the criteria by which we conventionally judge introductions to texts or pieces of literary journalism.¹ After all, however self-revealing we imagine them to be, Beckett's critical works are not about his own work, and they are often not even about writing at all. *Proust* was intended, ostensibly at least, to serve as an introduction to *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and its informativeness in this respect is often overlooked. Indeed, one should overlook neither the fact that Beckett dismissed most of his discursive writing as the result of friendly obligation or economic need, nor the fact that the work of some of his friends seems to provide unlikely objects for Beckett's high-flown praise. Beckett's long resistance to the republication of these articles, and his eventual choice of the title *Disjecta* for the collection that contains these various discursive writings, might suggest that these pieces are of rather marginal importance. Yet this 'throwaway' status would hardly put *Disjecta* (1983) in a unique position within Beckett's work, littered as it is with abandoned texts, fragments, 'têtes-mortes' and fizzles. Like his heroes' bodies, the Beckettian corpus is dismembered; in its wake this particular body leaves behind the *disjecti membra poetae*.

Whilst it is possible to find within Beckett's discursive writings a logical development of aesthetic theory (and much else to interest students of the various branches of philosophy), that is not a sufficient reason to marginalize them as keys to Beckett's work. Too often these pieces are regarded as philosophical or aesthetic credos which give meaning to the rest of his work. Beckett's discursive works, like his prose works, chart a course of contraction and the abandonment of various possible ways of expressing. Beckett's work is negatively defined; he described it as the work of a 'non-knower, a non-can-er'.² In the discursive pieces, Beckett toys with, and eventually tries to abandon, those very things which, as critic or as writer, he cannot do, say, or know. The most obvious of the things that it turns out he cannot do are philosophy and aesthetics, at least in any systematic or serious sense. However, in later pieces Beckett undermines the foundations upon which anything serious can be written by the critic. The increasing difficulty Beckett has in being 'serious' means that the artists he chooses to write about begin to resemble, in terms of their function within the texts, characters in his fiction. Thus, as I hope to demonstrate, Beckett's discursive writings lie on a continuum with at one end relatively stable and systematic philosophy, and at the other a continuously self-deconstructing and self-consciously fictive residue of philosophizing.

'Dante. . .Bruno.Vico. .Joyce', which traces James Joyce's indebtedness in his 'Work in progress' (the future *Finnegans wake*) to Dante, Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico, is perhaps rather unrepresentative of

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Beckett's ideas and interests for two reasons: the philosophical angles were in fact Joyce's idea, and the essay was written at Joyce's behest in order to publicize his forthcoming work. The essay nevertheless prefigures some tendencies in Beckett's own critical writing, perhaps most interestingly in the way that Beckett uses Vico to elaborate his own concerns with the relation between content and form. Vico's empirical investigation of the development of religious language into poetic and philosophical language temporalizes philosophy by relegating it to a stage in the historical development of natural languages. Thus philosophy is robbed of its transcendent status, and form and content become inseparable. Beckett then goes on to apply Vico's insight to Joyce's work: 'Here form *is* content, content *is* form [...] His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*' (D, 27). These statements can, no doubt, be applied to tendencies in Beckett's literary output, yet they also prefigure tendencies in his critical writing. The privileged position that philosophy assumes for itself will gradually disappear in Beckett's later discursive texts. Moreover, it will become clear that the philosopher's untenable position is also that of the critic who sees himself as writing *about* something. Philosophy and criticism share the same assumed perspective, and both imply the same distance between the writer and what he writes *about*. The direction that Beckett's critical writings take gradually serves to demonstrate the untenability of the metatextual status they have apparently assumed for themselves, and which the Beckett scholar may be tempted to claim for them.

Beckett sets about his introduction to Proust by attempting to outline the quite formal philosophical considerations (aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical) that he regards as the foundation of Proust's novel. Proust himself considered *A la recherche* to be 'un ouvrage dogmatique',³ and Beckett clearly considers it to be founded upon quite clear conceptions about the status of art, habit, memory and time, as well as about the value of existence itself. Yet the origins of the ideas that Beckett plays with are never made clear in *Proust*. Much of the material that Beckett uses in order to create an account of Proust's aesthetic comes from the wealth of comments made by Proust in his novel. However, in addition to this, Beckett draws heavily, throughout *Proust*, on the writings of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer; Schopenhauer's name, though, is mentioned only four times. The result is that *Proust* often reads like an encounter between Beckett and Schopenhauer, with Proust's novel supplying pertinent material for a philosophical essay. *A la recherche* is filtered first through Proust's own comments, but, more significantly, through Schopenhauer's most important work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The world as will and representation*). Beckett's use of quotation marks and page

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references is decidedly unscholarly, and by blurring the distinction between quotation, paraphrase and his own material, Beckett gives the impression that he sees the aesthetic and ethical systems of Proust and Schopenhauer as virtually identical.

The broadly Schopenhauerian filter that Beckett uses to sift *A la recherche*, while far from arbitrary (Proust does undoubtedly make use of Schopenhauer), is only one of several plausible philosophical filters he might have used. For the Beckett critic, the choice of filter is of greater interest than the matter to be filtered, and it is perhaps methodologically dangerous to dwell too long on the 'treasury of nutshell phrases' (*PTD*, 29) he has gleaned from the novel itself. There is an obvious pitfall in seeking affinities between a critic and his subject; Beckett's admiration for many of the artists he writes on does not necessarily mean that their concerns are the same. The Schopenhauerian filter that Beckett uses is a well-structured combination of pessimism and a tragic view of existence. The Schopenhauerian system, moreover, offers a convenient epistemological 'geometry'. It offers, through artistic contemplation, the possibility of an aloof and stable perspective from which things can be seen in their true essence (in their Ideal form, as Schopenhauer puts it), and ultimately from which the sheer awfulness of the life of the body on earth can be seen. Artistic contemplation is, then, the sole redeeming feature of our existence, because in the disinterested aesthetic experience, we step outside our existence, and outside the futile and endless cycles of willing that characterize it. This heady mixture of idealism and pessimism provides the starting-point to much of Beckett's subsequent discursive writing.

Beckett's analysis of the Proustian aesthetic is centred around an account of the workings of habit upon memory, and the consequences these have for the subjective experience of time. The (Proustian) individual is afflicted by time, for in effect the 'individual' is nothing but a series of individuals. Thus, Beckett states, the desire of an individual at time A cannot be satisfied at time B, for the individual at time B will no longer be the same individual. These individuals are, moreover, afflicted by habit, which, among other things, packages the sensory impressions that the individual receives as motives. The habit-determined mental 'attention'⁴ which the subject pays to the object means that his perceptions are ordered in time and space, and assigned a place in a causal chain. The purity of the thoughtless, motiveless impression is thus reduced to the baseness of a utilitarian concept. Indeed, according to Beckett's analysis, voluntary memory, direct perception, conception and even imagination provide nothing but façades which disguise the object. Beckett correctly points out that the only exit that the Proustian subject has from this habit-bound existence is one over which the subject

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has no control: involuntary memory. For the Proustian subject, the moment of involuntary memory is a moment when, through some external stimulus, circumferential phenomena, stored away in the back of the memory in unconceptualized form, rush back to engulf the subject in their pure and timeless essence. During these miraculous moments, when habit's spell is broken, the subject, too, is liberated from the order of time.

Beckett, more of a Schopenhauerian than a Proustian, filters the whole of Proust's theorizings on time, memory and habit through the aesthetic system of his favourite philosopher. Schopenhauer calls the basic unit of the subject's consciousness *eine Vorstellung* (a representation). Representations, the sum of which constitute the subject's experience of the world, are objects *as they are* for the subject. In virtually all cases, claims Schopenhauer, representations are given shape by the 'principle of sufficient reason'; it is through this principle that the subject's representations are assigned a particular place in time and space, and in chains of cause and effect. To this extent, Schopenhauer is a Kantian. Through this individuating principle, representations are served up as motives. It is in the subject's interest to order things in this way; hence the ordinary way that we see things is in the thrall of the will-to-live. The analogy to Proust is clear, and Beckett recognizes this. He identifies Proustian habit with Schopenhauerian will-to-live. For Schopenhauer, the only way of escaping from this futile force which controls our lives lies in the aesthetic experience, the moment of will-less contemplation when the veil which disguises the object is thrown aside. In these all too rare moments, the subject can contemplate the pure timeless essences of the world, the Platonic Ideas, independently of the principle of sufficient reason. (Although, according to Schopenhauer, works of art are not necessary for an aesthetic experience, works of genius do provide the clearest window onto the Ideas.) Once again, the analogy to Proust is not lost on Beckett; Proustian involuntary memory becomes Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience. Yet here the analogy is not particularly accurate. For Proust, time in its pure state is regained through involuntary memory, whereas for Schopenhauer time is merely obliterated in the rapture of the aesthetic experience. Beckett, therefore, admits that he cannot understand the title of Proust's final book, *Le temps retrouvé* (PTD, 75). Here, as in a few other places, a little conceptual residue betrays the presence of Beckett's discreet Schopenhauerian filter.

From the lofty disinterested heights of aesthetic experience Schopenhauer sees the world as a veritable vale of tears. The world of the ordinary subject, slave as he is of the will-to-live, is one of infinitely frustrated longing. Beckett, seemingly seduced by the power of this world-picture, understands Proust to be a pessimist, an interpretation he was later to regard as

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'overstated'.⁵ Beckett maintains that music, for the Proustian narrator, reveals life to be a punishment, a pensum, a duty that has to be discharged (*PTD*, 93). He even goes so far as to relate Proust's novel to 'the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, the wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire' (*PTD*, 18). The observation that Proust is detached from all moral principles turns into a reworking of Schopenhauer's point that the tragic figure represents the expiation of the sin of having been born. In this connection, he even borrows the Calderón quotation that Schopenhauer uses: '*Pues el delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido*'. Half-remembered snippets of these expressions of pessimism, all taken from Schopenhauer, reappear with some regularity in Beckett's later drama and prose.

Beckett's 'filter' has a strong philosophical structure. But what does he find praiseworthy in the way that Proust writes? Perhaps realizing how dogmatic his own analysis has become, Beckett insists, near the end of the essay, that 'for Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics' (*PTD*, 88). For Beckett, Proust does not evade the implications of the way that those ecstatic moments of involuntary memory have been revealed to him. Proust pursues the Idea rather than the concept. He is not content merely to describe, in the form of notations, surface phenomena. Although apparently analytic, Proust's explanations are experimental; they go in search of the elusive Ideal beneath the surface of concept. His writing is therefore excavatory. In a later short review, 'Proust in pieces' (1934), Beckett writes that *A la recherche* is not the analytic statement of the search, with all its 'plausible frills', but *is* the search itself. Proust, he writes, 'communicates as he can, in dribs and drabs' (*D*, 65). The result is described in *Proust* as a sort of literary impressionism (*PTD*, 86).

Beckett takes sideswipes at contemporary realism and naturalism (which 'worship the offal of experience' (*PTD*, 78)), and at what he sees as the over-conceptualized writing of certain Symbolists. Paraphrasing another critic, Arnaud Dandieu,⁶ he contrasts Proust to the classical writer who raises himself artificially out of time to give order to his work. Proust, he claims, has a strong Romantic strain, and thus writes *in* time. It is during those moments of involuntary memory that Proust discovers himself as an artist. As a writer he merely attempts to translate those experiences. Proust himself maintains that as a writer, he is not an artist, but an artisan (*PTD*, 84). Hence, whilst a way out of habit-bound perception is possible in involuntary memory, the images of involuntary memory cannot be recalled and put into words without a loss. Therefore Proust's writing has to remain 'the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative per-

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ception' (*PTD*, 88). This is, perhaps, for Beckett, the central problematic of the writer, and it remains, of course, a major theme in his work right through to the 'ill seen ill said' of his late prose. It is the eventual abandonment of even the possibility of the kind of exit provided by involuntary memory, the possibility of access to another space, which determines the direction that his later discursive writing takes.

'Humanistic quietism' (1934), a review of a collection of poems by Thomas MacGreevy, represents, if anything, a more idealist account of literature than *Proust*. There is, it must be said, something rather artificial or even pretentious about the extravagant claims Beckett makes for his friend's poetry. Yet this element of pretence is significant, for the structures which Beckett uses are of the kind that are dismantled in his later writings on aesthetics. According to Beckett, what distinguishes poetry from other literary forms is that it represents the only way out of the prison formed by ordinary or non-poetic language. MacGreevy's poetry, a kind of 'prayer', simultaneously opens up a space beyond language and condemns ordinary language, 'the tongue-tied profanity' (*D*, 68), to a secondary and impotent status. The article is constructed on the same philosophical 'geometry' as *Proust*. It consists of a first space which is the conceptual prison of language, and a second space, arrived at almost miraculously through the power of poetry, which is like that of the Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience. This second space is not only one which affords a sort of clarity of vision, but one which condemns ordinary language to an enfeebled status.

This geometry is developed much further in the highly revealing letter Beckett wrote (in German) in 1937 to Axel Kaun. In this letter, Beckett sets out what he thinks ought now to be the aims of writing: he wishes to see a kind of writing – a 'Literatur des Unworts' (a 'literature of the unword') (*D*, 54) – that can penetrate the veil of words. Beckett's ideas, which here have an apparently Modernist edge, still derive their shape from the Schopenhauerian aesthetic of *Proust*. Ordinary language, like any form of representation, is but a veil, but poetic language should be able to tear aside the veil and point to a space beyond representation, thus revealing words for what they are: merely a veil. What lies beyond this veil, though, remains unknown. It may be nothingness, and art in general may only be able to point to the opaque nature of representation rather than to any real object beyond it. Beckett is now noticeably more reserved about the kinds of art that can escape the impositions of representation. Music, he claims, is able to penetrate its own surface: he cites Beethoven's Seventh Symphony as an example. Literature, however, has been unsuccessful, although he does believe that Gertrude Stein's 'logographs' have revealed a certain 'porous' nature in language. Beckett suggests that ironically drawing attention to this

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closed nature of language might be a necessary stage in undermining old forms of writing. This may not be enough, though, and he wonders whether the irredeemably corrupted game should be given up altogether. The tension between making the game work and giving up, with its ethical overtones, reappears both in later discursive writings and in his later literary output, most noticeably in *L'Innommable/The Unnamable*.

The Axel Kaun letter is ostensibly a programme for a future mode of writing, and it marks a break with earlier, more optimistic, views about the power of poetry. Yet despite that break, Beckett's views are still dogmatically sceptical with regard to language; his philosophical vision still encompasses spaces both inside and outside the prison of words. What bars us from the second space seems almost impenetrable, yet the more impenetrable it becomes, the more Beckett blocks off his own justification for using the picture in the first place. If the subject can have no conception of anywhere else, how can it know it is trapped? Hence his position seems somewhat ironic, for the aesthete is assuming for himself the very powers he has denied the artist. This position, which had seemed unproblematic when there was a means of access from the first space to the second, now begins to look a little shaky. Up until the Axel Kaun letter, Beckett's discursive writing focuses almost exclusively on the expressive possibilities of art, and in particular literary language. His increasing pessimism in this respect means that a second dimension to his discursive writing has to develop. This will, in post-war articles, take the form of a steady ironization of the critical perspective itself, and an undermining of the possibility of saying anything serious about art.

Meanwhile, the definition of an art more restricted in its scope continues in journalistic reviews. In 'Intercessions by Denis Devlin' (1938), Beckett identifies qualities in Devlin's poetry that he sees in *A la recherche*: he praises Devlin's highly imaged writing, and the minimal interference of the rational. The suggestion that any form of art has a privileged position is now firmly rebuffed. 'The time,' he writes, 'is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear' (*D*, 94). Art is now trapped in the world, and is no longer an alternative space. Exits to a space where the subject can have complete access to the object have disappeared. There is no way out for the artist, and, since art represented the only way out of the conceptual prison short of total silence, the human condition possesses no way out either. This sense of being trapped is articulated in 'MacGreevy on Yeats' (1945), a review of MacGreevy's study of the painter Jack B. Yeats (W. B. Yeats' brother), where Beckett describes Yeats as bringing light to the 'issueless predicament of existence' (*D*, 97). The predicaments of the

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artist and the human being are thus the same: both issueless, they are without exit, solution or outcome.

On a less abstract level, 'MacGreevy on Yeats' demonstrates Beckett's rejection of the nationalistic side of much contemporary Irish writing. He denies that Yeats' true importance lies in his supposed position as 'the national painter' of Ireland. An earlier article, 'Recent Irish poetry', pseudonymously published in 1934, contains a diatribe against the 'antiquarian' Celtic twilighter tendency of many of his contemporaries in the Irish Free State; Beckett rounds on these poets for ignoring the twentieth-century 'breakdown of the object' and for 'delivering with the altitudinous complacency of the Victorian Gael the Ossianic goods' (*D*, 70). That Beckett believed politicians should not interfere in art is undeniable; he praises Proust's detachment from moral considerations, but rounds on him for occasionally raising his voice with 'the plebs, mob, rabble, canaille' (*PTD*, 66f.). That is not to say, however, that Beckett's discursive writing never has a direct political edge, for he launches a scathing attack on the parochialism and philistinism of Ireland's censorship laws in a commissioned yet unpublished article 'Censorship in the Saorstat' (1935) – now available in *Disjecta*.

'MacGreevy on Yeats' marks several points of change and departure in Beckett's discursive writing. First, most of the subsequent texts are written, initially at least, in French, *Three dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1949) being a notable exception. Second, it is perhaps the last piece where the critical voice stands aloof from the aesthetic problematic, before being caught up in its own inexorable deconstructive logic. Third, Beckett switches his attention, in this and subsequent essays, away from literature and towards painting. The initial aim of these pieces is to give an account of particular explorations of the expressive limitations of painting. However, they also explore language's impotence in the face of visual images, and the instability of the philosophical foundations upon which art-criticism of this kind is built. The result is that whilst the logical centre of the essays may be the painters and their paintings, these can seem curiously absent. Just as Mr Knott's world – the logical centre of *Watt* – becomes a sort of hidden vehicle for an exploration of the communicative failings of language, so painting gives way to the word in essays that are ostensibly about painting. Once again, we can see that Beckett's works are not really *about* something; they are that something themselves.

Beckett's next two essays, 'La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon' (1945) and 'Peintres de l'empêchement' (1948), are written on his friends the brothers Geer and Bram van Velde, two Dutch painters working in Paris during the post-war period. The first of these essays is a long and

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uncomfortable mixture of disparate elements: an anti-intellectual defence of the art-world's *petit peuple*, obscurantist sideswipes at critics and criticism, and a highly ironic piece of speculative aesthetics. At least Beckett recognizes this, calling it 'un bavardage désagréable et confus' (*D*, 119). It is nevertheless possible to discern that the essay revolves around the discussion of two subject–object relations: that between the viewer (or critic) and the painting, and that between the painter and his object.

Beckett starts from the premise that the painting is a pure object, which, as it were, waits to be disfigured by human attention. It is, in its pristine state, 'un non-sens'. The disfigurement is 'un double massacre' perpetrated by perception and conception; the 'risible empreinte cérébrale' is disfigured even further by the 'assassinat verbal' (*D*, 124). The object is ill seen, the image ill said. Beckett holds out the faint hope of a pure subject, for he praises the simple *amateur* who might wander into the gallery off the street, and who is ignorant of the advice given by legions of aestheticians, art-historians and critics. This, however, is hardly a convincing model for the disinterested subject of aesthetic perception, and further scattered comments throughout the essay suggest that Beckett is not convinced either. What he seems to be after is less a simple art-lover than a will-less deaf-mute with an incapacity to differentiate time: a sort of ascetic simpleton.

The van Veldes, Beckett claims, realize the impossibility of representation. In the irreparable breakdown of subject and object, he goes on to claim, Geer's paintings somehow escape from the condition of space, and Bram's from the condition of time. By exploring the boundaries of art, they are exploring the boundaries of the human condition, which interests them more than painting. How, though, can Beckett as critic, know this, say this, write this? He, like the loquacious *amateurs* he describes, cannot leave the art-object alone. He too must drag it into 'une sorte de ronde syntaxique' (*D*, 125). So the essay struggles frantically with the illegitimacy of its own philosophical conceptualization, which allows the critic the transcendent perspective that it has disallowed everyone; everyone, that is, except perhaps for Bram, who, far from being 'un cochon d'intellectual', has no idea about what he has done in painting until about ten years after the event.

The problem Beckett faces now is how to find any stable background against which to write about art. In 'Peintres de l'empêchement', Beckett tries a different approach. Instead of continuing the impossible search for a philosophical justification, he suggests that the critic might attempt to *create* one. By affirming something, and remaining faithful to it through constant repetition, one can hold a solid opinion on just about anything, he claims, tongue half in cheek. Beckett seems to be asking whether a conscious forgetting of the necessarily self-undermining element in any adopted system of