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978-0-521-42413-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Beckett

Edited by John Pilling

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The world fame of Samuel Beckett is due to a combination of high academic esteem and immense popularity. An innovator in prose fiction to rival Joyce, his plays have been the most influential in modern theatre history. Beckett's celebrated refusal to 'explain' his work, allied to his indifference to the rewards of celebrity, made him seem a 'difficult' author. Yet, when pressed, Beckett's own emphasis fell on the 'fundamental sounds' he was seeking to express.

As an author in both English and French and a writer for the page and the stage, Beckett has been the focus for specialist treatment in each of his many guises, but there have been few attempts to provide a conspectus view. This book provides thirteen introductory essays on every aspect of Beckett's work, paying particular attention to his most famous plays (e.g. *Waiting for Godot*, and *Endgame*) and his prose fictions (e.g. the 'trilogy' and *Murphy*). Further essays tackle his radio and television drama, his theatre directing and his poetry, followed by more general issues such as Beckett's bilingualism and his relationship to the philosophers. Reference material is provided at the front and back of the book, in the form of a chronology of Beckett's career, a list of French and English titles and a list of books for further reading.

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CONTRIBUTORS

H. Porter Abbott is Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has published many essays on Beckett in journals and is the author of *The fiction of Samuel Beckett: form and effect* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1973) and of *Diary fiction: writing as action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Ann Beer teaches at the Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing, Faculty of Education, McGill University, Montreal, and has published essays on Beckett in the *Journal of Beckett Studies* and *The Southern Review*.

Paul Davies is Lecturer in English at the University of Ulster, Coleraine and the author of *The ideal real: Beckett's fiction and imagination* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994). His essays have appeared in *Temenos* and the *Yearbook of English Studies*.

Keir Elam is Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Pisa and the author of *The semiotics of theatre and drama* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) and *Shakespeare's universe of discourse: language games in the comedies* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). With Alessandro Serpieri and others he co-edited a four-volume study of Shakespeare's dramatization of his historical sources, *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare* (Pratiche, Parma, 1988).

Jonathan Kalb is Assistant Professor of Theater at Hunter College, City University of New York and a regular theatre critic for *The village voice*. His book *Beckett in performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) was the 1991 winner of the George Jean Nathan award for Dramatic Criticism, and Limelight Editions have published *Free admissions: collected theater writings*.

Paul Lawley is Senior Lecturer in English, University of Plymouth. His essays on Beckett have appeared in *Modern Drama*, *Modern Fiction Studies*

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and the *Journal of Beckett Studies* and have often been reprinted in collections.

Roger Little occupies the oldest chair of French in the world in the department at Trinity College, Dublin where Beckett was successively a student and an assistant lecturer. He has written books on Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Saint-John Perse and André Frénaud and edited several selections from the modern French poets.

Anna McMullan is Lecturer in Drama at the Samuel Beckett Centre for Drama and Theatre Studies, Trinity College, Dublin and the author of *Theatre on trial: the later plays of Samuel Beckett* (Routledge, 1993). Her essays on Beckett have appeared in *Modern Drama*, the *Revue d'esthétique* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies*.

P. J. Murphy teaches English at the University College of the Cariboo, British Columbia. He is the author of *Reconstructing Beckett: language for being in Samuel Beckett's fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 1990) and of *Beckett as critic* (forthcoming from Routledge and Kegan Paul). He has co-authored (with Konrad Schoell, Rolf Breuer and Werner Huber) a *Critique of Beckett criticism* (Camden House, 1994).

John Pilling is Professor of English and European Literature and Director of the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading. He edited the *Journal of Beckett Studies* from 1979 to 1985. His books include: *Samuel Beckett* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), *Frescoes of the skull: the later prose and drama of Samuel Beckett* (with James Knowlson; John Calder, 1979) and *Fifty modern European poets* (Heinemann, 1982). He co-edited (with Mary Bryden) *The ideal core of the onion: reading Beckett archives* (Beckett International Foundation, 1992).

Andrew Renton teaches Fine Art and History of Art at Camberwell College of Art, The London Institute and Goldsmith's College, London University. He has curated numerous exhibitions of contemporary art throughout Europe. He co-edited (with Liam Gillick) *Technique anglaise: current trends in British art* (Thames and Hudson, 1991) and has published essays on Beckett in *Performance* and *The ideal core of the onion: reading Beckett archives*, ed. John Pilling and Mary Bryden (Beckett International Foundation, 1992).

Rupert Wood is Lecturer in French at St John's College, Cambridge. He is currently writing a book on the decay and implosion of philosophical and critical language in Beckett's writing and the development of the ways in

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which his prose and drama present world-pictures, which grows out of a 1990 Ph.D. thesis, 'Aesthetics and ascesis: Schopenhauerian structures in the later prose of Samuel Beckett'.

Michael Worton is Professor of French at University College, London and is co-editor of the Bloodaxe French Poets series. He has co-edited (with Judith Still) *Intertextuality: theories and practice* (Manchester University Press, 1990) and *Textuality and sexuality: reading theories and practices* (Manchester University Press, 1993) and is currently writing a study of the novels of Michel Tournier.

PREFACE

By the time of his death in 1989 Samuel Beckett had emulated the fame of his sometime mentor and lifelong model of excellence as a writer, James Joyce. Beckett had, indeed, gone one better in terms of public recognition and the visible signs of its rewards, and been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Yet, much like Joyce, Beckett had remained a writer working at the limits of the possible, always experimenting beyond his audience's expectations, indifferent to the imperatives of the market-place. Beckett's adamant refusal to become a commodity – he never willingly gave interviews, and shunned publicity to the point where it became inevitable he would attract it – created misconceptions about the man, and an aura of 'difficulty' and 'unapproachability' attached itself to his writings. Thirty years of expert commentary have seen the creation of an enormous secondary literature with almost a life of its own – so much so that interested parties may find themselves sufficiently hard-pressed on the way to Beckett never to encounter him directly, in the way Beckett himself (above and beyond his self-punishing disaffection at being a focus for debate at all) would have wished. A reader could be forgiven for feeling that there is just not enough shelf space for much more interpretation of a figure intent upon eluding definition, whose profound pull towards, if not into, silence has nevertheless been the occasion for millions of words in addition to his own.

But it is not so. For as the critical literature has grown, it has naturally become more specialized and stratified, an outcome in part provoked by Beckett having written in both English and French, and for both the page and the stage. The very possibility of an overview seems to have been imperilled by the expansion of critical perspectives, which paradoxically has also led to narrower views and a tendency to tunnel vision. Hence this *Companion*, an 'addition to company'¹ of a distinctive kind, designed to supply what is perhaps no longer within the compass of a single commentator, if it ever was. It is in the very nature of such an enterprise that we should hear voices of different timbres, occasionally discordant one with another, gener-

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ating material not meant to facilitate what Beckett dismissed as mere ‘book-keeping’,² but rather to supply a general reader’s needs. The multiplicity of aspects reflects and respects a multiplicity originating in Beckett himself, and in texts that are cunningly designed to mobilize as much expressive power as possible, even as the means to do so seems (either because of intrinsic shortcomings in a given medium or because past precedents operated actively against Beckett repeating himself) to dwindle almost to nothing.

The topics within these essays suggest themselves as areas worthy of focus, which is not to say that thirteen other frames of reference could not have been brought to bear upon an exceptionally rich body of work, for all its author’s insistence on poverty and ‘indigence’.³ The corporate aim is in no way to limit discussion by presupposing that these readings might be definitive and ‘proof against enduring tumult’,⁴ but rather to provoke it, as posterity proceeds to decide for itself where the best of Beckett is to be found. As seems proper in the circumstances, these essays are offered in a companionable spirit, but not a complacent one. In rising to a challenge they seek also to perpetuate it, without foreclosing upon readers discovering the work of Beckett for themselves.

NOTES

- 1 *Nohow on (Company, Ill seen ill said, Worstward Ho)* (London: John Calder, 1965), 22.
- 2 Ruby Cohn (ed.), *Disjecta: miscellaneous writings and a dramatic fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983), 19.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 4 *Collected shorter prose 1930–1980* (London: John Calder, 1984), 146.

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CHRONOLOGY OF BECKETT'S LIFE

This chronology has benefited greatly from the expert attentions of Beckett's official biographer, James Knowlson, whose willingness to help is very much appreciated.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1906 (13 April) | Samuel Barclay Beckett born at Cooldrinagh, his parents' house in Foxrock, south of Dublin, on Good Friday. |
| 1911 | Attends Ida Elsner's private academy (cf. Moran on the Elsner sisters in <i>Molloy</i>) and Earlsfort House School in Dublin, with his elder brother Frank. |
| 1920 | Follows Frank to the distinguished Portora Royal boarding school at Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, where he throws himself vigorously into the life of the school, excelling at cricket and showing signs of considerable scholastic potential. |
| 1923 (October) | Enters Trinity College, Dublin, where he studies Modern Languages (French and Italian) and in his leisure hours goes to plays at the Abbey Theatre. |
| 1926 (June) | Awarded a Foundation Scholarship on the basis of exceptional academic performance. First visit to France, a month cycling in and around Tours. |
| 1927 | Vacation trip to Florence, visiting churches and museums. |
| (December) | Graduates B.A., first in the First Class. Awarded the Gold Medal. |
| 1928 (January–September) | Takes up post as teacher of French and English at Campbell College, Belfast.
First visit to Germany, to stay with his cousin Peggy Sinclair and her family in Kassel. |

CHRONOLOGY

- 1928 (October) Installed as *lecteur* at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, as successor to Thomas MacGreevy. MacGreevy becomes a close personal friend and introduces Beckett to James Joyce and the Joyce circle.
- 1929 (June) Publishes his first essay ('Dante...Bruno.Vico...Joyce') and his first short story ('Assumption') in the *émigré* magazine *transition*.
- 1930 (Summer) Composes *Whoroscope*, his first separately published creative work (Hours Press). Reads Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Translates Rimbaud's *Le bateau ivre*.
- (September) Returns to Trinity to a post as lecturer in French.
- 1931 (February) *Le Kid* (a parody of Corneille's *Le Cid* co-written with his friend Georges Pelorson) performed by the Modern Language Society.
- (March) *Proust* published (London: Chatto and Windus) to largely favourable reviews.
- (September) First Dublin publication, the poem 'Alba'.
- (December) Christmas in Kassel (as also in 1928, 1929, 1930). Resigns his lectureship.
- 1932 (February) First serious attempt at a novel, *Dream of fair to middling women*, written in Paris on returning from Germany.
- (December) Publication of the story 'Dante and the lobster' in *This Quarter* (Paris).
- 1933 (May) Death of Peggy Sinclair from tuberculosis.
 (26 June) Death of Beckett's father after a heart attack.
- 1934 (January) Takes up residence in London, seeking medical advice to temper mourning and melancholia.
 (24 May) *More pricks than kicks* published (London: Chatto and Windus).
 (Summer) Working on poems later published as *Echo's bones and other precipitates* (Paris: Europa Press, 1935). Reviews in London literary magazines.
- 1935 (Summer) *Murphy* begun.
 (Autumn) Attends one of C. G. Jung's Tavistock lectures (cf. *All that fall*).
- 1936 (26 June) *Murphy* completed in typescript.
 (29 September) Leaves Ireland for Germany.
- 1937 First serious attempt at a play based on Dr Johnson and his circle (*Human wishes*). *Murphy* turned down

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- by a succession of London publishers. Beckett becomes 'the bawd and blasphemer from Paris' in the *Irish Times* after being cross-examined during a Dublin libel action. Brief love affair with the American heiress and 'art addict' Peggy Guggenheim.
- 1938 (7 January) Stabbed by a pimp in Montparnasse. Visited in hospital by Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, later his companion for life.
- (March) *Murphy* published (London: Routledge). Working with Alfred Péron on a French translation of *Murphy*. Writing poems directly in French.
- 1939 Joyce's *Finnegans wake* published.
- (3 September) England declares war on Germany.
- 1940 Fall of France. Beckett travels south as part of the exodus from Paris (June). Returns to his apartment (October) and a year later, joins the Resistance.
- 1941 (January) Death of James Joyce in Zurich.
- (February) *Watt* begun.
- 1942 (16 August) Alfred Péron arrested. Beckett and Suzanne go into hiding.
- (6 October) Arrival at Roussillon, after crossing clandestinely into Vichy France.
- 1944 (24 August) Liberation of Roussillon.
- 1945 (March) Awarded the Croix de Guerre for his Resistance work.
- Watt* finished in manuscript after three years of intense but spasmodic writing 'to get away from war and occupation'.
- (August) Arrives at devastated St-Lô in Normandy to take up his duties as storekeeper–interpreter at the Irish Red Cross Hospital, a job for which he had volunteered.
- 1946 (July) First publication of short fiction in French. First novel in French (*Mercier et Camier*) begun.
- (Autumn– Winter) Writing the four *nouvelles*.
- 1947 (January) First play in French, *Eleuthéria*, begun.
- (2 May) *Molloy* begun.
- (27 November) *Malone meurt* begun.
- 1948 (9 October) *En attendant Godot* begun.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1949 (29 March) *L'Innommable* begun.
 1950 (Spring) Completes translations from the Spanish for *Anthology of Mexican poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958). Translates Apollinaire's *Zone*.
 (25 August) Death of Beckett's mother.
 (24 December) *Textes pour rien* begun.
 1951 (March) *Molloy* published (Paris: Editions de Minuit).
 (October) *Malone meurt* published (Paris: Editions de Minuit).
 (December) *Textes pour rien* completed in manuscript.
 1952 Buys land at Ussy-sur-Marne with the legacy from his mother's estate. Ussy subsequently becomes Beckett's preferred location for writing.
 (October) *En attendant Godot* published (Paris: Editions de Minuit).
 1953 (19 January) First performance of *Godot* under Roger Blin's direction at the Théâtre de Babylone in Montparnasse.
Watt published in Paris (Olympia Press).
 Translation of *Godot* into English begun.
 1954 (September) Death of Beckett's brother Frank.
 1955 (March) *Molloy* (in English) published in Paris (Olympia Press).
 (April) Best man at Joyce's son Stephen's wedding.
 (Summer) First version of *Fin de partie* finished.
 (3 August) First English production of *Godot* opens.
 (November) *Nouvelles et textes pour rien* published (Paris: Editions de Minuit).
 1956 (3 January) First American production of *Godot* in Miami.
 (February) First British publication of *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber).
 (June) One-act version of *Fin de partie* finished.
 (July–September) *All that fall* written.
 1957 (3 January) First radio play (*All that fall*) broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.
 (March) Death of Jack B. Yeats.
 (May–August) Translates *Fin de partie* into English.

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- 1958 (February) *Krapp's last tape* begun.
 (October) First performance of *Endgame* at the Royal Court Theatre.
 (December) *Comment c'est* begun.
- 1959 (June) Honorary D. Litt. degree ceremony at Trinity.
- 1960 (Summer) *Comment c'est* finished.
 (Winter) Moves to new apartment on the Boulevard St Jacques, Montparnasse, his Paris address for the rest of his life.
- 1961 (March) Solemnization of marriage to Suzanne at Folkestone, Kent.
 (May) Shares Prix International des Editeurs with Jorge Luis Borges. *Happy days* finished.
 (December) First radio play in French (*Cascando*) written.
- 1962 (July) *Play* begun.
 Translating *How it is*.
- 1963 (May) *Film* and *Play* finished. Beckett assists with the German production of the latter, and from this point onward is invariably closely involved with the major productions of his plays.
- 1964 (Summer) First and only visit to the United States, to assist with the realization of *Film*.
- 1965 (Spring) *Imagination morte imaginez* and *Eh Joe* written, the latter his first television play (first broadcast BBC2, July 1966).
 (Autumn) *Assez* written; *Le dépeupleur* begun.
- 1966 Translation of *Textes pour rien* into English. Helps with the translation of *Watt* into French.
- 1967 (Spring) Glaucoma diagnosed. Death of Thomas MacGreevy.
 1969 Writes *Sans* and translates it as *Lessness*.
 (23 October) Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Beckett in Tunisia in flight from the world's press.
- 1970 (October) First of two successful eye operations (second operation, February 1971).
 Consents to the long-delayed publication of *Mercier et Camier* and *Premier amour*, both written in 1946.
- 1972 (Spring) *Not I* written, after a trip to Morocco in February.
 (April–May) Translating *Premier amour*.
 (June–July) *Still* trilogy begun.
- 1973 (January) Successful London production of *Not I*, with Billie Whitelaw as Mouth. Translating *Not I* into French.

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- (August) *As the story was told* written. Translation and recasting of *Mercier et Camier* finished.
- 1974 (Summer) *That time* begun. Translating *Still* into French.
- 1975 (March) Directs *Godot* in German at Berlin. *Footfalls* begun.
- (April) Directs *Pas moi* in Paris.
- (December) *Pour finir encore* written.
- 1976 (Autumn) Television play *...but the clouds...* begun.
- 1977 *Company/Compagnie* begun.
- 1980 *Mal vu mal dit* begun.
- 1981 Writes and translates *Rockaby* and *Ohio impromptu*. *Worward Ho* begun.
- 1982 Writes and translates *Catastrophe*. *Nacht und Träume* written.
- 1989 (July) Death of Suzanne Beckett.
- (22 December) Death of Samuel Beckett. Burial in Montparnasse Cemetery.

ABBREVIATIONS

Except in the case of the following abbreviations, full details of works referred to are given after each essay, either in the endnotes or in the checklist of recommended reading.

- AST *As the story was told: uncollected and later prose*, London: John Calder, 1990.
- CP *Collected poems 1930–1978*, London: John Calder, 1984.
- CSP *Collected shorter prose 1930–1980*, London: John Calder, 1984.
- CSPL *Collected shorter plays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- D *Disjecta: miscellaneous writings and a dramatic fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn, London: John Calder, 1983.
- Dream *Dream of fair to middling women*, Dublin: The Black Cat Press, 1992.
- E *Endgame*, a play in one act, followed by *Act without words*, a mime for one player, London: Faber and Faber, 1958.
- HD *Happy days/Oh les beaux jours*, a bilingual edition ed. James Knowlson, London: Faber and Faber, 1978.
- HII *How it is*, London: John Calder, 1964.
- LO *The lost ones*, London: John Calder, 1972.
- MPTK *More pricks than kicks*, London: John Calder, 1970.
- Mu *Murphy*, London: John Calder, 1963.
- NO *Nohow on (Company, Ill seen ill said, Worstward Ho)*, London: John Calder, 1990.
- PTD *Proust and Three dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, London: John Calder, 1965.
- T *The Beckett trilogy: Molloy, Malone dies, The Unnamable* London: Pan, 1979.
- W *Watt*, London: John Calder, 1963.
- WFG *Waiting for Godot*, second edition, London: Faber and Faber, 1965

A NOTE ON TITLES

The two columns below list all substantial Beckett works, providing a conversion table between them. In relatively few cases no equivalence exists. English titles are given in alphabetical order.

ENGLISH	FRENCH
	<i>Abandonné</i>
<i>Act without words I and II</i>	<i>Actes sans paroles I and II</i>
<i>All strange away</i>	
<i>All that fall</i>	<i>Tous ceux qui tombent</i>
<i>As the story was told</i>	
<i>Breath</i>	<i>Souffle</i>
<i>...but the clouds...</i>	<i>...que nuages...</i>
<i>Cascando</i>	<i>Cascando</i>
<i>Catastrophe</i>	<i>Catastrophe</i>
<i>Come and go</i>	<i>Va et vient</i>
<i>Company</i>	<i>Compagnie</i>
<i>Dream of fair to middling women</i>	
<i>Eh Joe</i>	<i>Hé Joe</i>
	<i>Eleuthéria</i>
<i>Embers</i>	<i>Cendres</i>
<i>Endgame</i>	<i>Fin de partie</i>
<i>Enough</i>	<i>Assez</i>
	<i>La falaise</i>
<i>Film</i>	<i>Film</i>
<i>Footfalls</i>	<i>Pas</i>
<i>For to end yet again</i>	<i>Pour finir encore</i>
<i>From an abandoned work</i>	<i>D'un ouvrage abandonné</i>
<i>Ghost trio</i>	<i>Trio du fantôme</i>
<i>Happy days</i>	<i>Oh les beaux jours</i>
<i>How it is</i>	<i>Comment c'est</i>

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NOTE ON TITLES

ENGLISH	FRENCH
<i>Imagination dead imagine</i>	<i>Imagination morte imaginez</i>
<i>Ill seen ill said</i>	<i>Mal vu mal dit</i>
<i>Krapp's last tape</i>	<i>La dernière bande</i>
<i>Lessness</i>	<i>Sans</i>
<i>The lost ones</i>	<i>Le dépeupleur</i>
<i>Malone dies</i>	<i>Malone meurt</i>
<i>Molloy</i>	<i>Molloy</i>
<i>More pricks than kicks</i>	
<i>Murphy</i>	<i>Murphy</i>
<i>Nacht und Träume</i>	<i>Nacht und Träume</i>
<i>Not I</i>	<i>Pas moi</i>
<i>Ohio impromptu</i>	<i>L'impromptu d'Ohio</i>
<i>A piece of monologue</i>	<i>Solo</i>
<i>Ping</i>	<i>Bing</i>
<i>Play</i>	<i>Comédie</i>
<i>Proust</i>	<i>Proust</i>
<i>Quad</i>	<i>Quad</i>
<i>Rockaby</i>	<i>Berceuse</i>
<i>Rough for radio I and II</i>	<i>Esquisse radiophonique; Pochade radiophonique</i>
<i>Rough for theatre I and II</i>	<i>Fragments de théâtre I and II</i>
<i>Still</i>	<i>Immobile</i>
<i>Texts for nothing</i>	<i>Textes pour rien</i>
<i>That time</i>	<i>Cette fois</i>
<i>Three dialogues with Georges Duthuit</i>	
<i>The Unnamable</i>	<i>L'Innommable</i>
<i>Waiting for Godot</i>	<i>En attendant Godot</i>
<i>Watt</i>	<i>Watt</i>
<i>What where</i>	<i>Quoi où</i>
<i>Words and Music</i>	<i>Paroles et Musique</i>
<i>Worstward Ho</i>	<i>Cap au pire</i>