CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Here is one who seems on the one hand reluctant to change his state, and on the other impatient to do so.

Beckett, Watt

‘You used never to halt except to make your reckoning’, writes Beckett in *Heard in the Dark* 1: ‘[s]o as to plod on from nought anew’.² My book halts, as its title indicates, before Beckett had written the play which brought him world fame, and indeed before the first two elements of the so-called ‘trilogy’: *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*. *Beckett before Godot* is a study of ‘the formative years 1929–46’; I am endeavouring to ‘make [a] reckoning’ of Beckett’s creative activities between these dates, each individual instance of which – whether successful or unsuccessful – was undertaken in the spirit of ‘from nought anew’. What matters for my purpose is not a ‘reckoning’ of the kind which *Molloy*’s Moran (keen that his son should learn the principles of double-entry book-keeping³) would find useful; debit and credit, profit and loss, are for me only of interest once I have established, as best I can, how and why Beckett wrote this or that, why he felt he had accomplished ‘nought’, and how and why he was moved to begin ‘anew’.

In what is inevitably a story of stops and starts, it was plain to me from early on that – even if ‘[t]he danger is in the neatness of identifications’ (*Dis*, 19) – this book should end at the point where a time of apprenticeship had come to its end, and where a period of mature achievement was about to begin. With the hindsight of old age Beckett was himself of the view that 1945 and 1946 were the years which conditioned his subsequent development as a writer. It was in the summer of 1945, as a letter to Richard Ellmann emphasizes,⁴ that Beckett experienced what he would ever afterwards regard as the pivotal event in his career, an experience he
would hand on (suitably fictionalized, and suitably modified) to his creature Krapp in the play Krapp’s Last Tape. What for Krapp on tape had been ‘[t]he vision at last’ was for Beckett less a matter of vision, and more a matter of recognition. He had come to the end of a road in becoming ‘aware of my own folly’; a line was to be drawn between before and after, and between two kinds of knowledge divided by a sudden shaft of self-knowledge. ‘I tried until 1946’, Beckett told Charles Juliet,

to discover a kind of knowledge that would permit me to act. Then I realized that I was on the wrong track. But perhaps there are only wrong tracks. You must nevertheless find the wrong way which suits you.7

It was on the basis of having found the wrong way that suited him that Beckett could see all previous ways as unsuitable, even with ‘the neatness of identifications’ left, very characteristically, somewhat blurred by the suspicion that there might only be wrong tracks.

It was in beginning Molloy in May 1947 that Beckett, in his own eyes, became Beckett: ‘Only then did I begin to write the things I feel.’8 This is no doubt why the opening paragraph of Molloy, probably the last words to be written,9 makes so much of ‘beginning’ when ‘now it’s nearly the end’.10 The emphasis is indicative of a desire to begin ‘from nought anew’, proof positive, as it were, that the exhortation ‘All that goes before forget’11 has been complied with. Yet Beckett could never have experienced such a desire without having so much to forget, almost twenty years of work that – with Molloy completed – could be adjudged as of no account. Nor could he ever rid himself of the knowledge that with every achievement (insofar as he could permit himself to think of it as such) went a sense of failure. Even with Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable and Waiting for Godot written, Beckett can be found, in the third of the Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit, saying: ‘There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said’ (Dis, 144).

In what follows I respect Beckett’s division of his career as a writer into before and after 1946, whilst nevertheless applying to the ‘before’ a principle of ‘vain saying’ only made public late in 1949. In such a perspective it hardly seems to matter whether, between my limit dates, Beckett’s ‘wrong track’ or tracks did not suit him, or are not where we might expect to encounter him at
his best as a writer. As Beckett told Juliet – and as he had already told Duthuit – the formative years had been years of trial and experiment, years of discovery; and in maturity Beckett had ample opportunity to discover that trial and experiment, once begun, possessed a kind of unstoppable momentum which would never end, or which would only be ended by the ‘last end’ over which he had no control.

The ‘identifications’ I make here are designed to figure against a large and disparate mass of critical writing on Beckett, from much of which (as hopefully my references to it will indicate) I have learned how best to read him. Yet by far the greater bulk of commentary on Beckett concerns itself with his mature work of 1947 and after. Even though Beckett studies have been growing for more than four decades, there is still no one book that treats of every significant aspect of the formative years. This Beckett before Godot attempts to do, by following – for the most part chronologically, as if the biography of an œuvre could be written – the ‘many ways’ in which Beckett sought relief from creative imperatives which more often than not led him into impasses and/or obstacles only with difficulty circumvented. The ‘many ways’ of Beckett’s conversation with Duthuit (‘two or three hundred’ (Dis, 14)) point up the fact that Beckett before Godot was a much more various figure than the one who eventually found the ‘wrong way’ that suited him. The very variety of modes, registers and genres observable between 1929 and 1946 is a mark of how difficult Beckett found it to make progress. In speaking in old age of ‘the problems that beset continuance’, Beckett had every reason to reflect ruefully upon how many problems had bedevilled continuance before he became ‘aware of my own folly’, and yet still be able to act in spite of and because of them. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to privilege the ‘problems’ over the fact that ‘continuance’ occurred. In analysing any given work, I have tried to show how and why a problem presented itself, and whether or not it was, or could be, satisfactorily (if only temporarily) solved.

In his conversations with Lawrence Harvey in the early and mid 1960s Beckett spoke of ‘form’ as something separable, an entity apart, from the ‘content’ which it ought ideally to accommodate (Harvey, 249). In his first published work, the essay Dante … Bruno … Vico … Joyce of 1929, Beckett insisted on the inseparability
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of form and content. In practice, during the formative years, this age-old chicken-and-egg issue was continually presenting itself as more or less insoluble, with Beckett shifting towards one pole or the other, or simply occupying an awkward middle-ground. The Joyce essay allowed Beckett to play fast and loose with form, even if he could not wholly abandon the conventions and ground rules typically operative in an enterprise of this kind. The effect – in spite of Beckett’s insistence that ‘Form is content, content is form’ (Dis, 27) – is to catapult the essay’s curious and compelling content into a kind of prominence from which it can never be dislodged. Yet, as I seek to show in chapter 2, the manifest content masks a latent content, much as the visible structures of argument conceal the invisible mainsprings out of which they have come. The Joyce essay bristles with surface substance, as does its ‘natural’ companion (the short story Assumption), without either of them divulging their author’s real needs, expressive, creative or psychological. A brilliance of surface, combined with unexpected tactical manoeuvres, makes the recovery of significance a problem for even the most gifted and committed reader.

In my third chapter I situate alongside the Joyce essay and Assumption a comparable pair of works, Proust and the spoof-lecture Le Concentrisme. In each of the pairs the first item reveals Beckett the more he strives to conceal himself behind the words and formulae of others; and in each case the second item conceals Beckett behind what might ordinarily be considered a more confessional mode of utterance. In all these early instances it is apparent that conventional constraints are in some danger of disappearing, and are being weakened by fair means and by foul. Yet nothing quite prepares one for the massive counterblast to convention, itself weakening as it continues, which Beckett saw himself delivering in writing his first novel Dream of Fair to Middling Women, the focus of my fourth chapter. It was not until Beckett had turned the ‘prospect of self-extension’ (Dis, 19) into an actual enterprise of self-extension that any of his deeper insights could be voiced or, more often than not, shouted. Nor could he make much sense of his own idiosyncrasies without opening up a more interactive dimension – in which the protagonist has no option but to confront others – than he had previously found it either expedient to do, or incumbent upon him to provide. In the event, Dream cleared a space that no publisher would permit the novel to fill,
which left Beckett with his creative difficulties still very much on his hands, as he seems almost to have predicted in the final paragraph of the novel. The injunction to ‘move on’ is, as Dream ends (Dream, 241), into an unknown future, but one to which Beckett hopes to become better attuned.

I see Dream as ending the first of what can usefully (in spite of Beckett’s expressed hostility to ‘the rule of three’ (Dis, 90)) be regarded as three phases of literary activity between 1929 and 1946. This first phase (from 1929 to 1932) is one of maximum volatility, and of enterprises caving in under their own weight, or wrecked by incommensurable impulses. The second phase (from 1932 to 1936) seems, by contrast, one of compromise, a making the best of a bad job. The actual ‘bad job’ of this period was Beckett’s stint as a reviewer; yet even here the signs of his need to reconstruct a working method can be discerned. Indeed, the reviews make Beckett much more visible than the medium of literary journalism requires or will actually tolerate, whereas the short stories collected as More Pricks Than Kicks show that Beckett’s real interests could be effectively secreted within the folds of forms either timeless or shop-worn. In my detaching the stories from Dream, and in so describing them, an alignment of sorts between More Pricks and the poems of Echo’s Bones may make the Beckett of the early 1930s look a more integrated figure than, psychologically, he actually was; but the exploration of an inner agenda in the stories acts as a reinforcement of the inwardness everywhere present in the poems, such that they seem at first encounter almost impossible to read. I read Beckett’s poems in English, collected and uncollected (and in some cases unpublished), in the light of what is said in, and what occurs in, Dream of Fair to Middling Women, and use wherever it seems relevant (more here perhaps even than elsewhere) Beckett’s letters to his close friends and to the few useful literary contacts he had thus far made.

As Dream brings phase one to an end, Murphy marks the conclusion to phase two. Murphy is arguably the most impressive of Beckett’s achievements previous to Molloy; but its failure to find a publisher obliged Beckett to ‘move on’ in every sense of the phrase. In Murphy he had striven to intersect with the taste of the time, whilst nevertheless reserving to himself the right to see conventions as manoeuvrable counters in a game only the author could win, which he characteristically saw as a game that must be
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lost in the long run.\textsuperscript{14} It is against this background of volatility and compromise that my third phase (from 1937 to 1946) – the longest and most complex of the three – figures. The temptation to equate this third phase with the third zone of Murphy’s mind – ‘a perpetual coming together and falling asunder of forms’ – is only with difficulty resisted; for reasons literary and personal ‘[h]ere there was nothing but commotion’.\textsuperscript{15} The analogy fails, however, at the point where Murphy’s narrator, in an abstract and idealist spirit, speaks of ‘the pure forms of commotion’. For Beckett before, during and after the war all forms had been exploded, pure or impure.

The title of my ninth chapter (‘Dissonance’) is taken from the sentence in Beckett’s letter to Axel Kaun which wonders whether ‘it will perhaps become possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All’.\textsuperscript{16} Unable or unwilling to hear either ‘music’ or ‘silence’, Beckett spent the decade from 1937 to 1946 in a more or less continuous state of ‘dissonance’. Viewed as a whole, this third phase is even more resistant to summary than phases one and two; it is full of what Beckett would later call ‘jumps’ and ‘shifts’,\textsuperscript{17} between languages, between genres and between places. It was in these years, with the world at war, that Beckett was least certain as to how best to proceed as a writer. During these years, and for the best part of a decade thereafter, the ‘smart boy’\textsuperscript{18} who could have been a professor, who could have made a long-lasting impact on literary London, and who could have continued to compromise at the creative level, was lost in the turmoil of the times and (in a favourite later formulation) ‘far’\textsuperscript{19} – from friends, from patrons, and from every prospect of ultimate success.

It was in the decade begun by Beckett’s six months in Germany that ‘perhaps there are only wrong tracks’ became a matter of lived experience rather than a hypothesis of more or less utility in the business of writing. As my tenth chapter (on Watt) attempts to show, Beckett was struggling to find the right way of going wrong, the ‘knowledge that would permit me to act’. Every literary act during this decade – which perhaps contains more extra-literary acts than any other – seems an act of desperation, without much likelihood of the consolation already in short supply earlier. Yet if Beckett had not gone to ground – or been obliged to go to ground – it seems probable that there never could have been a remedy.
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From a developmental point of view, there may be no need to make one phase or one creative enterprise more important than any other. Beckett’s own abiding awareness that for every progression there is also retrogression similarly militates against the idea that one move may be more beneficial than another. In conversation with Charles Juliet in 1968 Beckett insisted that even Molloy was begun without much sense of whether ‘continuance’ would prove possible;20 if writing Molloy was ‘like taking a walk’,21 it remained a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. What does, however, need stressing relative to the ‘dissonance’ of 1937–46 is the way Beckett kept on the qui vive for ‘an inking of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again’ (ULP, 28). If I make too much of such few inklings of this kind as can be found in this third phase, and if I read the nouvelles (or at least The Calmative) as the end of a long journey that was only just beginning, this is because it seems preferable to make a ‘halt’ with a ‘reckoning’ in which the positive elements outweigh the negative. If Beckett was still only ‘partially purged’ (Dis, 33) as he turned forty, he was at least close to coming into his own, after an unusually long apprenticeship for someone in due course considered one of the major writers in whose work ‘our condition’ is to be thought again.
PART ONE

1929–1932
CHAPTER TWO

Dante ... Bruno. Vico. ... Joyce and Assumption: ‘the prospect of self-extension’

There is not a trace, not as much as a suspicion of the old stench of the premises in the conclusion.
Beckett, Dream of Fair to Middling Women

In his years of fame, culminating in the award to him of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, Beckett made no secret of the fact that his earliest impulses were not so much literary as academic. ‘When I first met Joyce’, Beckett told James Knowlson in October 1989, ‘I didn’t intend to be a writer. That only came later when I found out that I was no good at all at teaching’ (Knowlson, 105). The curious circumstances in which Whoroscope (1930) was composed (Harvey, 31f.), combined with the critical essay Proust of 1931 (and plans to follow it with a study of Gide2), seem at first sight confirmation of Beckett’s sense of what he once was, or had been. There is, however, surviving evidence of a different kind from the years leading up to Proust, Beckett’s first appearance before the general public. The years in question – 1928–30 – are something of a biographer’s nightmare, even with a few figures still alive to assist in the reconstruction of them. But they also pose problems for the interpretative critic, anxious not to scant the links in a chain of development, but also alert to the danger of making Beckett’s career as a writer begin earlier than the author himself was prepared to countenance. Even in such unpromising circumstances, however, the conclusion is inescapable that Beckett must indeed have had some ambition to become a writer, and was in fact alive to such opportunities as were offered him in this connection. In spite of Beckett’s own estimation of his apprenticeship, it is perhaps preferable to suppose that what was uppermost in his mind was the difficulty of ‘becoming a writer’, a difficulty (or cluster of difficulties) which
in part frustrated, but at the same time facilitated, his ultimately becoming one.

Beckett’s published work previous to Proust – always supposing there is nothing in Portora magazine that is his\(^8\) – comprises a scatter of poems (here dealt with in the discussion of Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates), at least two squibs for his ‘college miscellany’ (TCD), and two contributions to the first double number of the émigré journal transition, edited by Eugene Jolas: the essay Dante ... Bruno. Vico. Joyce and the short (very short) story Assumption. The TCD items (‘Che Sciagura’ and ‘The Possessed’\(^4\)) were considered obscure even by the very people – the students at Trinity College – to whom they were principally addressed. Both were topical, or (in a very restricted sense of the word) ‘occasional’, as Beckett’s very early poems also tended to be. Yet neither ‘Che Sciagura’ nor ‘The Possessed’ – nor, one supposes, anything else in TCD yet to be identified as Beckett’s – benefits greatly from the reconstruction of the occasion which acted as a stimulus towards them, in the first case an embargo on the importation of contraceptives into Northern Ireland, in the second ‘a reply to our reporter’s criticism of the Modern Language Society’s plays’.\(^5\) ‘Che Sciagura’ and ‘The Possessed’ are, in any event, now only of interest not for what triggered them, but for what they set in train: a voice, or medley of voices, standing at an oblique angle to such few words as issue forth, and a temperament given to parody, but not otherwise of a very giving disposition at all, as if enigma were a good in itself.

This ‘miscellaneous’ material, whatever inhibitions it may have loosened, pales into insignificance beside the evidence offered by the June 1929 number of transition, the point at which, for all practical purposes, Beckett’s writing career may be said to have begun. Even though Eugene Jolas and transition did not subscribe to the ‘one issue, one contribution’ rule usually applied by editors of literary magazines – in the double number 16/17 there were also multiple entries for Harry Crosby, ‘Theo Rutra’ and Jolas himself\(^6\) – to have appeared twice in the journal known for its support of Joyce in the years after Ulysses must have been of major moment to the young Beckett, only a few months on from his twenty-third birthday. He was also for the first time breaking out of the confines of Trinity College and its parochial concerns, for although transition was too avant-garde for a mass market audience it commanded loyal support in the major cities of Europe, and had from the