

Introduction

THE FRIENDS OF BECKETT

In setting out on any theoretical or critical undertaking, it is helpful to have some general notion of the nature of the object of study. Deleuze and Guattari begin *What is Philosophy?* with a meditation on the nature of the 'friend'. The philosopher is the lover or the friend of wisdom and so in considering the nature of philosophy it is necessary to think the nature of the friend who is presupposed within it. A similar approach might be worthwhile in considering the tasks required of literary criticism in general, and of those critics concerned with the work of Beckett in particular.

There is clearly a field of study which calls itself 'Beckett studies', and in attempting to understand the works of Beckett one will inevitably add to, or be implicated within, this field of study. Implicated in this field are any number of thinkers who share aspects of the set of the works of Beckett in common. It might be claimed that just as philosophers are linked as friends of wisdom these thinkers might usefully be grouped together as 'friends of Beckett'. Indeed, given that Samuel Beckett died only a few years ago the field includes many critics who literally counted themselves as friends of the man, and these critics, in part because of their real friendships with Beckett, might still be said to be the most prominent in the field. I would also claim that, even amongst those who did not know Beckett personally, even those who claim only to be interested in the works, there is a sense of obligation. This might be considered to involve fidelity: a friend must, or should, be faithful. With the critics reading one another's works, it would be easy enough to offer examples as to how this notion of fidelity has real effects within the field. The friends of Beckett are not only faithful to Beckett but see it as part of their duty to check that this faithfulness (be it to the work or the man) is maintained by all the other suitors. Following the line of thought

developed by Deleuze and Guattari a little further, the friends become rivals, and the struggles of the rivals turn about notions of fidelity (1994: 107). The question becomes: who is the true friend?

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Deleuze praises Nietzsche for indicating that the form of the question one asks is of the utmost importance. Philosophers often fall into the trap of asking ‘what is? . . .’ at times when they really should be asking ‘who is? . . .’ or ‘which one is? . . .’ (1983: 77). Rather than attempting to explicate this distinction, it might be worth attempting to test it.

When I ask ‘what is literary criticism?’, or even, ‘what is Beckett studies?’, I find myself developing a series of apparently heterogeneous generalizations; whereas in this particular case it seems much more useful to ask ‘which one? . . .’, which aspect of Beckett? Which aspect of Beckett’s works? Which, or what kind of literary criticism? Which Beckett critic?

According to Nietzsche the question ‘which one?’ (qui) means this: what are the forces which take hold of a given thing, what is the will that possesses it? (Deleuze, 1983: 77)

Put in this way the question sounds very much like a personal accusation. Put in this way many a Beckett critic might struggle to affirm disinterestedness, to defeat his or her own jealousy and deflect the jealousy of the rivals by appealing to the notion of fidelity (‘I might wish to possess this thing, “Samuel Beckett”, but only because I am a true friend’).

Further, however, when we force ourselves to ask ‘which one?’ we already presuppose that there are multiple aspects to the field. Following Proust as he is interpreted by Beckett, the lover wants to possess the whole of the loved one, but this proves impossible; absolute love itself proves impossible because the loved one is so dispersed in time and space that there is no way one could ever touch all of its points. To quote Beckett quoting Proust:

‘We imagine that the object of our desire is a being that can be laid down before us, enclosed within a body. Alas! it is the extension of that being to all the points of space and time that it has occupied and will occupy. If we do not possess contact with such a place and with such an hour we do not possess that being. But we cannot touch all these points.’ (Beckett, 1987: 58)

In asking ‘which one?’, then, as a friend you are forced to recognize the impossibility of absolute possession. If this is not recognized, the only

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option is to find sanctuary in an immobilized totalizing ideal of the loved one which, in the end, can only do injustice to the real loved one who, sooner or later, will break free of these imposed limits and betray you (behind your back, if you are lucky). It is clear, then, that the field of Beckett studies must divide; it also becomes apparent how the field must also always be constantly expanding as the works continue to touch more points in time and space and that this expansion will inevitably cause it to cross, as it has crossed already, numerous disciplinary boundaries.

ANSWERING THE QUESTION 'WHICH ONE?'

In general terms this book will seek to situate *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* within a French intellectual and historical milieu: specifically by relating these works to concepts and ways of seeing developed by French poststructuralists (focusing on the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and Foucault in particular) so as to shed light on Beckett's novels. This approach requires both that some explanations be given, as a number of problems become immediately apparent, and that some qualifications be made.

The qualifications concern what I will not be attempting and could not hope to do, and so I will treat them first. There is an enormous amount which might be written about Beckett's relationship to French thought and the French milieu in which he lived most of his life, and I can only hope to treat a fraction of this question. For example, I will not attempt a biographical survey, nor will I attempt to compare Beckett's works with those of contemporary French writers of fiction.¹ I will also in no way attempt to exhaustively survey the range of philosophical and aesthetic thought with which Beckett might have come into contact.²

With regard to the explanations, then, I will focus on key concepts and ways of thinking developed by one or two thinkers. My reasons for doing this largely relate to my answer to the question 'which one?' I am interested in that Beckett who is loosely described as a 'philosophical' writer. A number of critics have suggested that the question which most

¹ A comparative study of Beckett and his French literary contemporaries is no doubt overdue: one of the few English-language critics to write about Beckett with, to an extent, reference to post-war French literature, is Scott, whose book last appeared in 1969.

² This book adds to a body of works within Beckett studies which consider different aspects of Beckett's relationship with philosophy: see, for example, Adorno, 1988; Blanchot, 1986; Bryden, 1993; Butler, 1984; Connor, 1988, 1992; Dearlove, 1982; Deleuze, 1995; Dobrez, 1986; Hill, 1990; Locatelli, 1990; Murphy, 1994; Rosen, 1976; Trezise, 1990; Watson, 1991; Wood, 1993.

concerned Beckett in his writings was the question of Being. This is a very large question, but it was one which Beckett approached in particular and fairly consistent ways. Further, his particular approach creates a striking resonance with certain recent trends in French poststructuralism, particularly as they are developed in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Derrida. While I in no way claim that these resonances are the only ones, they are important nevertheless and will, in being followed through and in some fashion explicated, add to that body of work which seeks to better understand the achievement of Beckett's works.

In brief, I will be attempting to show two things. Firstly, that such resonance exists and that it thereby produces certain effects. Secondly, I will bring to light the question of whether this resonance, this proximity or neighbourhood (through which the writer and the philosophers seem to encounter similar questions and develop responses that are also in proximity), might be considered necessary rather than contingent. I will hope to show, in effect, that a certain climate or milieu (determined by historical necessity and certain convergences of traditions of thought) might be implicated in the production of this proximity, as certain urgent questions appear and require confrontation.

Two important problems emerge, which I will in part attempt to outline in this introduction: the first concerns the problem of how one might relate the separate disciplines (in Foucault's sense) of philosophy and literature. The second concerns the problem of how one might relate both of these disciplines to history.

LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY: ANTI-PLATONISM

It is likely that a reader, questioning my critical fidelity to Beckett's works, will question how it is possible to relate to Beckett's works notions developed by thinkers with whom Beckett was unlikely to have been familiar; thinkers who, while more or less contemporary, came after (at least in relation to the novels under consideration) Beckett, and to Beckett's own methods and works. The answer to this, which I will hope to develop throughout this introduction, will have two parts. Firstly, I will hope to indicate that these thinkers might be shown to draw upon similar intellectual traditions to those developed by Beckett. Secondly, I will hope to show throughout the book as a whole that the new situations confronted by Beckett on an aesthetic plane constituted urgent questions which confronted a whole generation of thinkers across different

disciplines; further, that they thereby required a new philosophical approach (one which, and I will define this term more precisely below, might be termed ‘anti-Platonic’) in order to be understood conceptually, and that this approach emerges clearly in the works of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and Derrida. That is, I am suggesting that in a real sense Beckett ‘thought differently’, to use Foucault’s term, and that his manner of thinking differently might best be described through recourse to those thinkers whose manner of thinking differently was analogous to his own.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY: ‘ANTI-PLATONISM’

Literature and philosophy have long been considered to comprise separate and distinct spheres within the dominant tradition of Western thought. Plato’s Socrates opposed the dialectic method of thought (which seeks to systematically trace the causes of things through logic, thereby appealing to reason alone and so ‘teaching’ rather than merely ‘convincing’ those to whom it is addressed) to the rhetorical method (which seeks to convince through describing the appearance of things and appealing to the emotions). The first method, the dialectic, was that adopted by the true philosopher (the lover of wisdom), while the second method, rhetoric, was that adopted by the sophist (the *soi-disant* ‘wise-one’).³ Further, the methods of the sophist have often been equated with literary technique: through, for example, the use of devices which allow one to imitate something without understanding it (in a rational sense) and to convince others through an appeal to the emotions rather than to reason. Plato, then, found it necessary to cast the poet (once considered the seer, the prophet) from his Republic,⁴ which was to be founded upon reason alone. From then on, to speak no doubt far too generally, literature and philosophy became fairly clearly separated domains. A central concern of philosophers labelled ‘poststructuralist’, however, has been the on-going effort to breach or pass beyond many of these well-policed borders.

To outline what is involved in ‘anti-Platonism’ is extremely difficult and therefore I will only attempt to provide a general idea of Deleuze’s anti-Platonism here (which differs somewhat from that of Derrida, which is given its most explicit form in his reading of Plato found in *Dissemination*).

³ Cf. Plato, ‘Protagoras’.

⁴ Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, Book 2.

In ‘Theatrum Philosophicum’, an article discussing Deleuze’s ontology in *Difference and Repetition* and his aesthetics in *The Logic of Sense*, Foucault begins by asking what it means to ‘reverse’ or ‘overturn’ Plato in philosophy and suggests that in fact all philosophy might be called anti-Platonism. Indeed this seems to be how philosophy is defined: Plato provides a kind of model for philosophers so that ‘the philosophical nature of a discourse is its Platonic differential’ (Foucault, 1977: 166). All philosophical works, then, are both related to those of Plato and necessarily diverge from them. We should be aware that ‘Platonism’ is a philosophical term which refers specifically to the notion of Forms or Ideas developed by Plato.

So, Foucault suggests that all philosophy, including that of Plato, is anti-Platonic. Plato is anti-Platonic when we are unable to tell Socrates from the Sophists in the dialogues: philosophy is anti-Platonic when it attempts to derive any ‘truth’ from something other than an ideal Form; whenever it suggests that the truth might be variable rather than fixed; whenever it suggests that the truth might be paradoxical or ambiguous. Plato, says Foucault, was searching for the authentic, the pure gold; a savage purity, more pure than anything we might actually experience (Foucault, 1977: 167).

So how do you overturn Plato? Not, Foucault states, by just reversing the equation and putting appearance above essence, for all we do then is give a paltry kind of ideal Form to appearance. Rather than opposing the single model with a single appearance, he suggests, we should oppose the single model with the multitude of supposed appearances, a multitude so great and so divergent from the model as to render the model meaningless (Foucault, 1977: 168).

It would be far too large a task to attempt to completely define ‘anti-Platonism’ here: this would lead us into mazes of thought which would carry us too far from the questions at hand. For those that are interested, good summaries of ‘anti-Platonism’ can be found in Foucault’s article, and, with relation to the differences between Deleuze’s and Derrida’s methods of ‘reversing’ Plato, in Paul Patton’s ‘Anti-Platonism and Art’ (1994). What is of most importance to my argument here is simply the recognition of the importance of ‘literary’ kinds of thinking to both Deleuze’s ontology of pure difference or chaos and Derrida’s deconstruction.

In his essay on reversing Plato in *The Logic of Sense*, for example, Deleuze looks to Aesthetics to show how there is a disparity between our general view of experience (a view based on the invariable Forms, the

Ideas of Plato) and the conditions of our real experience (which involves constant change, constant flux, chaos). He suggests that what we need is a general view of experience which conforms to our actual experience. This he suggests, exists in modern literature, where divergent series, unrelated stories, are not unified but nevertheless resonate with one another. The structure of this kind of art, then, is reunited with our real experience, which does not proceed through well-ordered single story-lines but through the simultaneous sounding of various different and perhaps otherwise unrelated series of events (Deleuze, 1990: 260–2). Clearly, then, for Deleuze, philosophy must learn from literature of this type, the type created by Beckett, amongst others.

Derrida's deconstruction, on the other hand, affirms the importance of ambivalence, of the relation *between* terms rather than the choice of one term over another. Following Patton, Derrida 'seek[s] to undermine the Platonic order of representation from within, by arguing that the very concept of imitation/representation is infected with the same kind of ambivalence or indeterminacy found in other terms such as *pharmakon*' (Patton, 1994: 148), a term which, as Derrida shows in 'Plato's Pharmakon' means both 'poison' and 'remedy' at once (Derrida, 1981). Ambivalence, indeterminacy, one might contend, are the tools poets have been working with ever since when, and it is because of his insistence on the importance of such indeterminacy that Habermas accuses Derrida of 'leveling the genre distinctions' between literature and philosophy. Philosophy is that discipline which is supposed to be serious and to search for truth, the single meaning, through logic alone while literature requires ambiguity (an ambiguity which might allow the coexistence of logic and rhetoric, for example), uncertainty, several meanings at once.⁵

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a work of art reaches the infinite through the finite (1994: 197), whereas Philosophy is commonly thought to approach the particular through the general. Beckett says much the same in 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce': 'Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and

⁵ Habermas's essay attempts to demolish Derrida's entire project by insisting that the border between Literature and Philosophy must be forcefully patrolled. Habermas suggests that while it is impossible for any discipline to be completely pure, nevertheless one should respect the dominant mode of any form of writing. Tellingly, however, he himself is forced to turn to rhetorical techniques in order to maintain his logical position by having us believe he, who clearly has a subtle mind, is ill-equipped to understand Derrida. This move is made so that he might turn to critiquing the more clearly inconsistent positions of Derrida's 'disciples' which are then quite unfairly taken as perfectly representing Derrida's own positions. This is a means of argument through sleight of hand which at best might be called disingenuous. See Habermas 1992: 185–210.

cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling and animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars. Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity' (Beckett, 1983: 24). With Platonism, the infinite, the essence, the general or universal, is conflated with the 'Form' or 'Idea' which alone is considered eternal. So-called 'anti-Platonism', on the other hand, is a philosophy of existence rather than of Forms. It does not do away with essence; rather, it contends that essences cannot be disconnected from particulars as existence involves the play of differences (that which we understand as particular). This play of the general and the particular within an essence is sometimes called the 'indefinite' in Deleuze (Deleuze, 1995; Foucault, 1977: 167–70).⁶

So, if one wishes to speak of existence in this way, the rigid disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy (the one concerned with the particular the other with the general) must be breached, otherwise it is not possible to encounter existence or difference which requires the particular and the general at once. One might rightly contend that literature, at its best, has long been testing or ignoring this boundary. Indeed, this is precisely my point: that literature can be 'philosophical'. This, of course, does not mean reducing one to the other. Clearly, while they are concerned with the same questions they move in different directions and approach from opposite sides; literature moving from the particular towards the general, philosophy from the general towards the particular.

GILLES DELEUZE, 'POSTSTRUCTURALISM' AND
 SAMUEL BECKETT

While the reader might now be ready to concede the validity of comparing works of literature with works of philosophy in general the question still remains as to why one should specifically compare Samuel Beckett's works to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida. Firstly, this point might be in part defended anecdotally: in fact all of these philosophers indicate Beckett as a thinker whose project was in accord with their own. Foucault has stated, 'I belong to that generation of people, who, when they were students, were

⁶ Where we stop talking, for example, of a particular woman or woman in general and begin to speak of 'a woman' as an indefinite term which is at once general and particular; any woman whatever, a being who is both determined and indeterminate.

enclosed within an horizon marked by Marxism, Phenomenology, Existentialism, etc. . . . I was like all the other students of philosophy at that time, and for me, the rupture came with Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*, a breath-taking spectacle' (Foucault, 1985: 105). Deleuze and Guattari frequently refer to Beckett's work to illustrate and even isolate concepts with which they work,⁷ and, asked why he has never written on Beckett, Derrida replied: 'This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close' (Derrida, 1992: 60).

However, a more detailed response to the above question can also be given. My answer in the following discussion will primarily concern the relation between Beckett and Deleuze as the greater part of this book draws upon this relation. Although I will also briefly discuss Derrida in this introduction I will endeavour to sketch the relations to Foucault, Levinas and Derrida more fully later in the specific chapters which deal with those thinkers.

The proximity between the thinking which occurs in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Samuel Beckett is at once striking and paradoxical. Clearly Deleuze feels an affinity of some sort with Beckett: in *A Thousand Plateaus* he and Guattari include Beckett, along with Kafka and Godard, among writers of whom they are fond (97–8); and, as I have stated above, there are numerous examples of their use of Beckett's works to illustrate concepts that are being developed. On the other hand, as far as we know Beckett read little of Deleuze, although his young friend André Bernold discussed the work of both Deleuze and Derrida at length with him in the early to mid 1980s (Bernold, 1992a: 85–6).

Yet, if we are to believe the publicity which follows Beckett and Deleuze, then, strictly speaking, their projects should be considered irreconcilable. After all, Beckett is, in caricature, associated with negation, the expression of nothing, failure, the misery of being; all of these are (no doubt justifiably) critical commonplaces in the field of Beckett studies. On the other hand Deleuze is, like Spinoza, seen as a philosopher of affirmation, of joy, of positive Being which requires no negation.

To get us started, to bring together these irreconcilables, it might be worth considering Beckett's aesthetic writings beginning with the con-

⁷ Concerning, for example, the problem of whether the body belongs to me and what belongs to it in *The Fold*, 109; the stroll of the schizo (2, 84), the inclusive disjunction (12, 76), the decentred subject (20) and the absence of links between disparate elements (324, 338) in *The Anti-Oedipus*; style as continuous variation (97–8), the rupture as opposed the voyage (199) and territorial assemblages (503) in *A Thousand Plateaus*; the perception-image; the action-image and the affection-image in *Cinema 1*. In addition Deleuze has dedicated two essays to Beckett: 'The Greatest Irish Film' (Deleuze, 1993a: 36–9) and 'The Exhausted'.

cept of 'identified contraries' in 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce' which Beckett borrowed from Giordano Bruno:

The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent. Minimal heat equals minimal cold. Consequently transmutations are circular. The principle (minimum) of one contrary takes its movement from the principle (maximum) of another. Therefore not only do the minima coincide with the minima, the maxima with the maxima, but the minima with the maxima in the succession of transmutations. Maximal speed is a state of rest. The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical: in principle, corruption is generation. And all things are ultimately identified with God, the universal monad, Monad of monads. (Beckett, 1983: 21)

While clearly Beckett is paraphrasing Bruno in relation to Joyce there are, already in this passage, one or two things which indicate how we might begin to think the proximity between Beckett and Deleuze: in particular, there is an emphasis on movement, and a reference, via Bruno's pantheism and with a nod to Leibniz, to the plane of immanence, the one substance. Indeed, the notion of the monad develops this further, indicating an identification of the microcosm with the macrocosm (cf. Leibniz, 1973: 179–94).

In the same essay Beckett affirms that while Joyce makes use of the concepts of philosophers, his position is that of the artist, not the philosopher. In consequence, rather than having to develop a conceptual consistency in the earnest manner demanded of philosophers he is able to play with these concepts in a detached and disinterested way; developing variations on the themes these concepts expound without necessarily taking the process seriously (at least not with the seriousness of a philosopher: 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce': 22). The same can be said of Beckett, with the qualification (good for Joyce as for Beckett) that that which results from this disinterested play is not necessarily without interest for the philosopher, especially one like Deleuze, who, like Derrida, and following Nietzsche, at times sets about laughing down the seriousness of philosophers.

Having said this, then, it is worth briefly recounting how Beckett read, admired and played disinterestedly with the concepts of many of the philosophers whom Deleuze counts as his antecedents, working in what Michael Hardt has called a counter-tradition of philosophy; one primarily defined, for Hardt, by the affirmation of the univocity of Being (the plane of immanence). Among others Beckett read ('studied' has overtones which are too serious), and clearly read closely, many of the Pre-Socratics, Bruno, Vico, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Maleb-