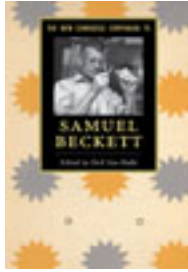


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### Chapter

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## II

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# Samuel Beckett with, in, and around Philosophy

Were it not a critical commonplace, philosophy would seem the most unlikely company for Samuel Beckett's work. The 'love of wisdom' would seem incompatible with Beckett's celebrated advocacy of an art of 'impotence [and] ignorance' (Graver and Federman 1979, 148). Less clear, Beckett's own statements send us in opposing directions. He told Gabriel d'Aubarède in 1961 that 'I never read philosophers [...] I never understand anything they write', and would also tell Lawrence Harvey that 'if he were a critic setting out to write on the works of Beckett (and he thanked heaven he was not), he would start with two quotations, one by Geulincx: "Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil valis", and one by Democritus: "Nothing is more real than nothing"' (Harvey 1970, 267–8; Graver and Federman 1979, 217). This apparent oscillation resembles the self-cancelling rhetoric of the trilogy, and sows ambiguity across the range of philosophical readings. These views both discourage and encourage a certain philosophical approach to reading the works, withholding and granting authorial legitimation.

Yet the connection is as firm as it is diverse. Four identifiable – although frequently interwoven – strands are discernable: Beckett's writing is indebted to philosophy consulted prior to and during composition; it is responsive to subsequent interpretation by philosophers and philosophically – inclined critics; it seems to exemplify tenets of certain philosophical systems; and it frequently sports a philosophical feel in its own right. Beckett's œuvre thus stands to embody the product, subject, illustration and practice of philosophy. While this indicates a degree of complexity impossible to trace exhaustively – as testified by the volume of literature addressing these issues – it also speaks powerfully to a striking propinquity. As evident to first-time readers as to long-term devotees, Beckett's work simply seems a good fit with philosophy.

An example from the French philosopher Jean Wahl captures much that is at stake in the relationship between Beckett and philosophy. In the closing speech to the third 'Colloque philosophique de Royaumont', a week-long

conference on the work of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl held in 1957, Wahl recorded the delegates' visit to Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie*, which had had its Paris debut on 26 April, during the conference:

Et puis ces journées ont été interrompues par l'audition d'une pièce de théâtre. J'ai retenu de cette pièce deux ou trois formules, deux ou trois répliques, que je me permets de vous relire. Je ne sais pas quelle est leur lien exact avec notre sujet: 'Mais qu'est-ce qui se passe qu'est-ce qui se passe – quelque chose qui a son cours'. Et puis un autre personnage de la *Fin de Partie* de Beckett: 'Tu m'as posé cette question des milliers de fois, mais j'aime les vieilles questions. Ah! les vieilles questions, les vieilles réponses, il n'y a que cela'. Ainsi ces interruptions n'ont pas été de réelles interruptions. [And then these days were interrupted by the rendition of a piece of theatre. I retained from this piece two or three formulae, two or three retorts, that I will allow myself to reread to you. I do not know what their exact connection is with our subject: 'But what is happening, what is happening – something is taking its course'. And then another character of Beckett's *Endgame*: 'You've asked me this question thousands of times, but I like the old questions. Ah! The old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them'. As such, these interruptions were not real interruptions.] (Husserl 1957, 131; my translation)

At the earliest historical moment – the very week of the play's opening in the city – Beckett is being watched, discussed, even co-opted by philosophers. While poking fun at the eternal preoccupations of philosophy and its apparent lack of progress Wahl also sees Beckett as a participant in philosophical enquiry. The persistent quality of his work – its repeated return to essential matters and to difficult questions – is something that he has in common with his audience: Beckett both is and is not an interruption from the work of the conference. *Fin de partie* would thus seem not an illustration of a philosophical principle or a scenario demanding a philosophical response, but rather a new philosophical method for a long-running problem: a change of approach if not of subject. If Beckett's work represents, as Enoch Brater suggests, 'a way of thinking' this cannot be wholly separated from the discipline of philosophy (2011, 2).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as revealing as this intimacy is, the complimentary copy of the conference proceedings – entitled *Husserl* – that Jérôme Lindon sent him seems to have gone unread.<sup>2</sup> Where the philosophers were keen viewers of Beckett's drama, Beckett seems to have been a rather less attentive audience.

The secondary literature that this rapport has engendered has long since outstripped adequate summary and perhaps even comprehensive reading. It provides a great deal of detail about the author and his activities, as well as an expanding range of interpretations of the works, which place Beckett everywhere between an exemplary existentialist (see Connor 2009, 56–76)

to an evangelist for love (see Badiou 2003). It also reflects changing intellectual trends; long-running critical preoccupations; developments in theatre, publishing and philosophy itself; anniversaries and their attendant public commemorations; and the availability of relevant historical and archival documentation. This richness has driven and been driven by significant methodological issues: How should we read and write on Beckett? What questions ought we ask, and what sort of answers do we consider of value? What sort of critique must criticism itself be subject to? And even what is the object of our study? So essential are these queries that they are not only asked of philosophy in this context, but by it. ‘What should we do with Beckett?’ is, for readers and audiences, a question so disarmingly direct that it might originate within philosophy itself. As such, the current chapter reflects on writing by and about Beckett, in both of which the role of philosophy is a lively one.

Philosophy and Beckett is not, then, a stable topic, but one with a range of meanings that are subject to ongoing change. Indeed, the academic treatment of the area has moved on even since P. J. Murphy wrote the predecessor of this chapter in 1994, ‘Beckett and the Philosophers’ (in the first edition of *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*). Murphy judged the significant development to be the transition from the philosophical consideration of human situations depicted by Beckett to a poststructuralist account concerned with the linguistic play that creates and breaks down those characters (1994, 222–40). Beckett studies, perhaps more than any other literary subfield, has been at the forefront of broader shifts in literary-philosophical style. Georges Bataille (1979, 55–64), Maurice Blanchot (1979, 116–21), Theodor Adorno (1982, 119–50) and others met his texts promptly with important philosophical readings; indeed, Shane Weller (2009, 24–39) has identified Beckett’s reception in France as the treatment of Beckett by the ‘philosophes’. As this has continued, developments in literary criticism have not only found Beckett worth discussion, but a precursor to the most recent theories. Accordingly, the third ‘Text for Nothing’ is quoted at the opening of Michel Foucault’s ‘What is an Author?’ – ‘What matter who’s speaking?’ – as if Beckett himself had dismissed the notion of the author in favour of a more complex author function, which emerges from the text (*TFN* 111). Similarly, the sliding of signifier from signified – for example, ‘Looking at a pot [...] it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot [...] For it was not a pot, the more he looked’ – would anticipate the interests and strategies of deconstruction (*W* 78). Beckett’s work is profoundly responsive to philosophical appropriation, but is also the material out of which philosophy seems to emerge.

The publication of James Knowlson’s authorised biography *Damned to Fame* in 1996 has been widely seen as having initiated an ‘archival turn’ in

the study of Beckett's work, challenging the authority and prestige of predominantly text-based theoretical readings. The increased availability of archival material has encouraged an approach that returns the author figure to the centre of academic enquiry, allowing study of biographical circumstance, reading habits and writing methods.<sup>3</sup> It has also enriched our understanding of the published works as a phase in a longer process of reading, note-taking, drafting, reshaping, publication, adaptation and revision. Rather than seeing a fixed and stable oeuvre as the source for philosophical reflection, much of this work looks at the philosophical sources for Beckett's work, which is returned to a historical framework incorporating ongoing change. Thus it has challenged the polar beliefs that Beckett was either familiar with any philosophical text the critic happens upon, or that, as John Fletcher argued of the pre-Socratic philosophers, 'there is nothing to suggest that his interest has ever gone beyond the anecdotal and superficial' (1965, 43). This can mean a change of subject as well as method: alongside the usual company of Arthur Schopenhauer and Fritz Mauthner, less easily recognised figures such as Wilhelm Windelband and Olga Plümacher emerge.<sup>4</sup>

It is not the case, however, that the philosophical grounding of scholarly work has receded, but rather that its function has altered. For the very methodological debate has emerged within a philosophical frame. Matthew Feldman's agenda-setting article 'Beckett and Popper, or "What Stink of Artifice"' (2006a) discerns two divergent interpretative approaches in the field initiated by this 'turn'. One is epitomised by the retrospective application of extrinsic explanatory frameworks, such as those in Richard Lane's collection *Beckett and Philosophy*, and the other by the use of archival material to uncover an existing system of thought within the work. Seeking to avoid the Rorschach element of reading that Beckett's work allows, Feldman presents letters, notebooks and drafts as a substantial ground on which to build a scholarly argument: a cogito moment. His prime criterion, drawn from Karl Popper's falsifiability axiom, is that in order to be considered worthwhile, arguments must be vulnerable to disproof. Such a practice, he asserts, would allow one to approach the most significant problems and make the most interesting assertions, beginning to interpret Beckett from an empirical grounding.<sup>5</sup> Arguments such as many of those advanced in philosophical readings lack explanatory power, he asserts, because they cannot be disputed in this manner. This is not then, a debate between a philosophically literate and an anti-philosophical approach but a conversation conducted squarely within the domain and in the language of philosophy.

The same objection that haunts Popper's thesis necessarily pertains to Feldman's: that the doctrine of falsifiability is not itself falsifiable. That is, to assert that the strongest arguments emerge from adherence to the principle

is not something that can be tested, but only asserted as an article of faith. It is not, by its own measure, a strong argument. While Feldman's call to rigour is a salutary one that demands scholars attain a proper standard of research, this objection points up the reason why there has, in reality, been no great methodological schism. As literature does things *other* than make falsifiable statements, so literary critics in turn may choose to respond to a call other than that of Popper. As such, it is worth reframing this debate as a question of purpose. The extent to which criticism addresses issues of a text's current meaning – as opposed to its development, its sources and its basis in biographical events – fosters a continuum in critical work. At one pole is a series of assertions about verifiable events and documents: what the author did, what and how he read, what he saw and wrote. At the other is a set of propositions about the meaning of texts *as they continue to unfold in the present*. Such meaning is contingent and untestable; it flickers into and out of existence with changing fashions in reading and staging, personal knowledge, context and experience. But it is also, critically, the source for the implicit value claims that underpin most readings: *Waiting for Godot* speaks to me; I find *Molloy* touching, and *Endgame* funny. The range of effects a text can have on its audience is the reason it matters to that audience. Indeed, literary *œuvres* including Beckett's are regularly celebrated because they speak to a broad range of people, whose diverse circumstances often put them at a considerable remove from the author's own.<sup>6</sup> All critical commentary thus negotiates a balance between the demands of a method that is often historical and author-driven, and the values of another that is unstable and reader-oriented. This is a question driven by a combination of factors including individual preference, institutional recognition and cultural value.

At its most basic, Beckett's fitness for philosophical reading is surely a consequence of his works' concern with the same sort of fundamental ideas and experiences addressed by philosophy. *Waiting for Godot* can be read as an examination of existence in a world apparently without meaning: a situation thought universal by existentialism. *How It Is* might be understood to examine the nature of cruelty and suffering, experiences explored at length by Schopenhauer. *Happy Days* poses the question of the tone and value of humour, which Descartes thought not redemptive but characteristic of contempt. This type of reading has taken root in ground indicated by the plays' titles: *Waiting for Godot* is a play about waiting, *Endgame* about ending. This directness suggests that the works are focussed on basic elements of human existence; if they do not provide metaphysical answers they instead offer explorations of certain experiences. In this, then, they resemble a certain kind of philosophical material. These are, of course, among the

universal themes of literature: one might consult Dante's *Divine Comedy* for a consideration of cruelty, or Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* for clues to the value of humour. But Beckett seems to ask these questions particularly insistently, and with a certain philosophical feel. How can we account for this closeness?

We might address the problem via the longest running of philosophical couplings: with René Descartes. Historically as well as critically, this appears a good starting point: a foundation for Beckett's early poem 'Whoroscope', which won Nancy Cunard's competition for the best poem written on the subject of time in 1928, and for influential readings such as Hugh Kenner's 'The Cartesian Centaur' (1961). Beckett's first published novel *Murphy* (1938) also bears the apparent marks of a deep familiarity with Descartes's work. It is the most explicitly philosophical of Beckett's novels, dealing in the concepts and language of philosophical history for plot and person alike. The opening of the work, for example, depicts the eponymous protagonist tied to a rocking chair immersed in meditation, in an appropriately static flight from the world of embodiment: 'it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind' (*Mu* 4). Beckett's first great character, then, at first appears to be a card-carrying Cartesian, as he 'felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common. But he felt his mind to be bodytight and did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap' (*Mu* 70).

Study of Beckett's 'Philosophy notes', written in 1932–3, has allowed us to understand that if *Murphy* owes a debt to Descartes, it is via commentaries and syntheses read by the author, rather than primary texts. Feldman's *Beckett's Books* (2006b) has shown convincingly that Beckett's reading habits were more reliant on digests than the casual reader may suppose. His use of Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1893) in particular dominates those notes that fed directly into *Murphy* and other works, so that the terminology of Beckett's Cartesianism is in fact that of his German commentator. For example, Feldman shows that the pineal gland, the mechanism of Murphy's mysterious exchange between body and mind, which is known as the 'conarium' in Beckett's novel, is borrowed not from *Discourse on the Method* or *Meditations on First Philosophy* but from Windelband's rather stolid summary (*Mu* 6). Indeed, after this discovery the novel's broader philosophical debt is revealed as that owed to the early Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Democritus, and post-Cartesians such as Nicolas Malebranche and Arnold Geulincx, rather than to Descartes himself. Adequate knowledge of these more obscure sources allows us to see

that Murphy's dualism is not a straightforward Cartesianism but something altogether more subtle and more strange. It is cut from the earliest Greek philosophical considerations of the different qualities of the mind and body, the mechanism of their interaction, the return and development of these ideas in seventeenth-century France and Belgium, and, in turn, the subsequent digestion and summary of these ideas in the nineteenth by the German neo-Kantian Windelband.

This research has undoubtedly reshaped academic understandings of Beckett's novel and of his practice as a writer in this period and beyond. Yet its corrective capacity also demands that we reassess what role remains for Descartes. If *Murphy* is not the author's supreme Cartesian novel, is this to be thought an erroneous pairing: a 'pseudocouple' in the strongest sense? Instead, I suggest, we might profitably compare Descartes's writing to the celebrated style of Beckett's postwar writing, where the verbiage of the earlier texts has been peeled away in the belief that 'All true grace is economical' (Brater 2011, 13). This reveals a form of stylistic scepticism in common. Where Descartes subjects experience and knowledge to rigorous doubt in search of a firm grounding, Beckett works to strip away extraneous verbal and formal detail. Rather than a rich depth of character, setting and plot, adopting the conventions of the discipline, Beckett's starting point is a Cartesian 'meremost minimum' (CIWS 82). Purged of superfluities and overly complex 'noise', *Endgame*, for example, brings a clarity of purpose and expression to its depiction of obligated care and reliance. This aesthetic intimacy would stand to displace a conceptual debt long established, but now being recalculated – which is to say reduced – with the corrective of the 'Philosophy notes' (see Feldman 2006b). In place of a specifically Cartesian debt – a quotation here or an idea there – stands a broader sense of common atmosphere, with Descartes as an occasional synecdochical figure.

Thus we ought to observe how often Beckett's works read like extended philosophical examples or thought experiments. They make use of significantly reduced means in setting and character, minimizing the range of these steadily throughout the course of the oeuvre. Where *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) relates Belacqua's wanderings through an assortment of Dublin settings, *Murphy* works its way to the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, where the core of its action takes place. More quickly still *Watt* (1953) settles into Mr Knott's house; in the trilogy we read stories of traumatic journeys but with an increasing concern for the static situation of the narrator, who is reduced to a room, a bed or a jar; and the later prose seems to take a perverse pleasure in containing its denizens in assorted geometric forms.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, it is notable that the only scene changes in the whole of Beckett's drama are those in the little-loved *Eleutheria*, where we see the same room



from different angles and lose a second space between Acts II and III. This concern with reducing and restraining the contents of his fictional worlds implies a certain logic essential to philosophy. The control of variables is central to experimental thought, removing factors that may mask or distort the forces and events under scrutiny. But this practice is also antithetical to broader literary practice, which routinely takes advantage of its ability to summon a broad range of events, people and places. Thus, instead of placing a central character in a range of relationships and places, developing their behaviour and nature via their responses, we are shown one or two protagonists engaged in a particular action and in a specific place. Beckett appears less concerned with creating a convincing narrative of change and development than with posing a certain scenario and holding it near static.

The strange nature of these situations also departs from the realist tradition of aesthetic writing. It does so not by entering a fantastical world of radical difference, but by being slightly off-kilter or even uncanny. All of Beckett's texts depict a scene that resembles an odd limit case: they work in the area between feasibility and actuality. As such, they are not unrealistic but unusual: they appear to be testing a problem, or working through a hypothesis, and to be concerned with the development of significance or the structure of human experience. What would happen if we made a space, and then put a body in it as in 'All Strange Away' (1964)? Would that, as Clov asks in *Endgame*, result in its 'beginning to ... to ... mean something?' (CDW 108). How would a human being react? And would the answers to those questions be different if we were to multiply the number of inhabitants, as in *The Lost Ones* (1971)? Other texts would seem to pose perennial questions. What is the value of human life, and is it a function of one's actions? Thus, how would it be to have suicide weighed up by two external agents, as in *Rough for Theatre II*? What would they need to consider, and how?

However, this impression that the works conduct themselves in a philosophical manner would appear to contradict Beckett's own distinction between literary and philosophical styles. His demurral before Heidegger and Sartre, for example, is because 'their language is too philosophical for me', while his remark that his novels would not be necessary if they could have been written philosophically implies a similar distinction (qtd. in Graver and Federman 1979, 219, 217). A further comment when reading Schopenhauer in 1937 that 'it is a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet' suggests a distinction in reading method as well as between the disciplines themselves (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 268). Confessing an enjoyment of Schopenhauer's writing in this moment, Beckett's statements cut in the other direction as well. They posit the possibility that the boundary between the two subjects can be crossed, and that, more importantly, to do so is a

productive and even a pleasurable thing to do. On these grounds we may justifiably enjoy reading Beckett as though he were a philosopher, taking seriously the questions posed and the suggestions given in response.

If the issue of pleasure and satisfaction is a relevant one, the movement between commentary attentive to the author's own interests and a retrospective philosophy-style reflection is not exclusively the result of critical tastes. Shifting between addressing philosophy *in* the texts and conducting philosophy *with* them, we might notice how different works seem to become more and less prominent in critical literature. The directness with which philosophical sources are employed in the early poems, novels and stories has met with abundant accounts of early Greek thought centred on *Murphy*, while it is texts such as *How It Is* and the television plays written in the later part of Beckett's career that have attracted the attentions of Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Across the range of Beckett's corpus, philosophical reference appears to become increasingly subtle. A quieter use of philosophy, exercising an apparent allusive restraint, paradoxically makes retrospective philosophical reflection more inviting. What Beckett calls in his 1982 play *Catastrophe* the 'craze for explicitation' is something we might recognise in the author's own early works, while later texts apparently place their philosophical debts under cover (CDW 459).

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether Beckett's later texts are actually less engaged with his reading in philosophy, or simply that their philosophical debts are yet to be the subject of detailed exposition. As I have observed elsewhere, we can see a direct engagement with philosophical texts in those corners of Beckett's writing assumed to refrain from such allusion (see Fifield 2011). In *The Unnamable*, the narrator's lament that 'I alone am man and all the rest divine' is a direct challenge to Hippocrates' statement transcribed by Beckett in his 'Philosophy notes': 'Nothing is more divine or human than anything else, but all things are alike and all divine.' (Un 10; Burnet 1914, 33; qtd. by Beckett in TCD MS10967/8.1). Without addressing this example in detail, it is important to notice that Beckett draws the situation of his novel's protagonist from reading done twenty years – and a World War – previously, while living in London. The fact of this statement having a Hippocratic origin, drawn by Beckett from John Burnet's 1914 overview, *Early Greek Philosophy Part I: Thales to Plato*, is not significant in itself. However, it does allow an understanding of the narrator's torments as a realisation of an ancient debate around the transmigration of souls, Orphicisms, and the eschatological function of embodiment. As more of these references are shown to us by scholarship it becomes possible that the major works of Beckett, those that have previously appeared to be characterised by a flight from specificity and allusion, are a tissue of the author's

direct engagement with philosophy. If this is the case, the interaction of knowledge claims of different types will continue to be a lively one in the study of Beckett's writing.

If the sense of philosophical debt and interpretative good fit is ever more visible, we must also consider the contrary position. As indicated at the opening of this chapter, Beckett himself made strident rejections of philosophical readings of his work, and, as H. Porter Abbott has explored in 'I am Not a Philosopher', warned strongly against mistaking him for a philosopher (2008, 81–92). This worry is, in Abbott's estimation, born of philosophy's comprehensive remit and its systematising outlook: 'The philosopher's trade, after all, is to make a system with non-contradictory parts' (85). Addressing Francophone criticism Bruno Clément similarly suggests that it is 'a characteristic of the philosophical reading: it must be "without remainder"' (2006, 121). This totalising gesture is undoubtedly a problem for Beckett, whose work is more unruly, and more resistant to a comprehensive and competent metaphysical gesture. But the same would also be true of any worthy literary œuvre. The very richness of a work lies in its exceeding a simple exposition: a work that can be fully accounted for is, one might reasonably assert, one that lacks appropriate depth. This disciplinary or epistemological argument against too vigorous a pairing of Beckett and philosophy is as potent as it is important. But it overlooks a more simple factor: Beckett's personal anxiety about philosophy emerged not when discussing Spinoza, Leibniz or Hippocrates but Sartre, Heidegger and Adorno. The perceived danger of philosophy was at its greatest when it was contemporary and threatened to attach itself to the work at the very moment of its emergence.

This is, history shows us, a legitimate fear for prompt and persuasive interpretations. The influence of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), for example, has been so great as to label Beckett's œuvre for the greater part of his audience for half a century. Feldman and Nixon's *International Reception of Samuel Beckett* testifies that the reception of Beckett was in many cases that of *Waiting for Godot* and *The Theatre of the Absurd*, while Michael Y. Bennett (2011) has judged the category sufficiently important to warrant a revitalization. More theoretically challenging readings too, such as that by Maurice Blanchot, have been seen as unduly influential, stifling heterodox interpretations with an unwarranted prestige (see Casanova 2007). As such, Beckett's reluctance to grant Gabriel d'Aubarède's enquiry about contemporary philosophical influence must be seen in the light of another question as to whether existentialism 'may afford a key to your works'. Beckett answered, 'There's no key of problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms' (qtd. in Graver and Federman 1979, 217). As complex

as the authorial and disciplinary relationship to philosophy may be, there is a more simple explanation. I suggest that no writer would happily concede that their work was simply an illustration of the latest philosophical or literary fashion.<sup>9</sup> Beckett's proximity to existentialism, published and reviewed in *Les Temps modernes*, compared to Sartre and Camus, and engaged with questions of meaning and its absence, made the danger of mischaracterisation a real one.<sup>10</sup> His enjoyment of Sartre's novel *La Nausée* (1937) in 1938 does not preclude his later dissociation from the ambition, politics, popularity or occasional obscurantism of existentialism.<sup>11</sup> Beckett's general reluctance to join literary groups or schools, as well as his evident desire to forge a singular literary identity during this period, is as good a reason as any epistemological objection to philosophy in general.

This would not, then, suggest that philosophy is seen as an intrinsically overbearing discipline, but rather that it can be deployed as such. The right-minded philosopher, Beckett's practice suggests, is one who knows the limits of the craft, not least the impossibility of a comprehensive account of a literary oeuvre. Indeed, Jacques Derrida's well-known half-response to Beckett indicates that the very same proximity that invites engagement is also its deterrent. He says, 'This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard' (Derrida 1992, 60). He also accedes to the suggestion that Beckett's work is already so thoroughly deconstructive that there is no opening for deconstruction to produce a response. While this might be thought a problem peculiar to deconstruction, which itself walks that tricky line between philosophy and literature, I suggest that this is more generally applicable to philosophy. The problem of doing philosophy with Beckett is always one of being at once 'too easy and too hard'. The texts are never a neutral ground to which we may bring an objective method; rather, philosophy is already present and at work in them. What we find in Beckett's writing, and in the abundant scholarship that addresses it, is a tumult of references to thinkers across and, notably, beyond the canon. It is also deeply responsive to interpretation based on theories and texts unknown to the author and his works, whether contemporary or historical. While this richness provides innumerable openings for conceptually literate interpretation, it is precisely the fragmentary use and fluctuating sense of these approaches that is central to Beckett's relationship to philosophy. Indeed, it is questionable whether one can make a statement about Beckett and philosophy that is both coherent and accurate. His dealings were almost entirely with philosophers, philosophical texts and philosophical ideas, rather than with a discipline: not generalities but particulars, both demented and otherwise. Thus Beckett would tell MacGreevy 'I am reading

Schopenhauer [...] But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or a worthless metaphysician' (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 118). It is the same versatile and powerful tools that philosophy offers to Beckett's readers, including its particular tone, focus and method, which attracted the author himself, both as a young man diligently filling the gaps in his education and as an older figure, whose works became the subject of discussion by some of the most important philosophers of the age. And just as Beckett's patience with and belief in philosophy varied according to context, its value for readers will continue to fluctuate. The central and unanswerable question of philosophy and Beckett will remain, I suggest, one of measure.

## NOTES

- 1 This is a recurring idea, expressed elegantly by Bruno Clément as 'rather than literature and thought constituting two different orders, literature, by itself, thinks' (2006, 122). See also the edited collection *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All* (2008) whose first section gathers essays whose work is 'Thinking through Beckett' as if it were a medium as well as a method (Ben-Zvi and Moorjani 2008).
- 2 See the series of letters to Barbara Bray in March 1960 for a repeated admission that Beckett had not himself read the book he was recommending.
- 3 Outstanding examples of this work include Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes* (2006); Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936–37* (2006); Anthony Uhlmann, ed. *Samuel Beckett in Context* (2013). The ambitious Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP), run by Dirk Van Hulle at the Centre for Manuscript Genetics at the University of Antwerp is at the forefront of this kind of study ([www.beckettarchive.org](http://www.beckettarchive.org)).
- 4 For a survey of Beckett's library and the notes contained in the volume see Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (2013).
- 5 I have avoided further use of the term 'empirical', which buttresses a shaky distinction. To study a published text with no reference to manuscripts, notes or biographical events, and even to use it to reflect on personal matters is still a project of observation and experiment.
- 6 See, for example Brater (2011) whose opening chapter covers the range of contexts in which *Godot* has found an audience. *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*, edited by Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman (2009), gives a more detailed picture of the global reach of Beckett's work.
- 7 Curiosities in this respect are *Mercier and Camier* and *The Lost Ones*, which are strangely mobile and populous, respectively. *Film* also draws its narrative from motion, although it depicts the subject in a desperate search for withdrawal and confinement.
- 8 Some recent examples from a long list of works on Beckett and Greek philosophy include Feldman (2006c); Van Hulle (2008b, 203–16); Weller (2008, 321–33); Fifield (2011, 67–88); for a contrast in method, see Badiou (2003); Deleuze (1995, 3–28).

- 9 I have argued this point more fully in *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* (2013).
- 10 For an account of this proximity see Weller (2013, 160–72).
- 11 Beckett wrote to MacGreevy in May 1938 and passed on his judgment that Sartre's novel was 'extraordinarily good' (*LSB I* 626).