

Introduction

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When Samuel Beckett first came to international prominence with the success of *En Attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot*, what struck many critics was the sense that his works were virtually divorced from any recognisable context. The two tramps and the master and servant they meet seemed to represent nobody and everybody; the place where they waited might have been anywhere. Celebrated critic Richard Ellmann dedicated a long introductory essay to Beckett called 'Nayman of Noland'.¹ Yet while Ellmann and others struck by the apparent liberation from context in Beckett's works were correct in pointing to a strategy of negation in those works, they contributed to a critical tendency to overstate this freedom from context. This critical overstatement in turn led to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the works. For example, Beckett was considered for many years to be an 'apolitical' writer. Emile Cioran famously wrote that Beckett remained above such concerns, in believing 'history is a dimension through which man must pass', and Alfred Simon cited this contention with approval in his obituary to Beckett published in *Le Monde*.² Clearly the belief that Beckett was apolitical and the first defence offered to this charge (that he was above such matters) share the common assumption that Beckett's works are divorced from the historical contexts from which they emerge.

Yet the assumption that Beckett definitively broke with contexts has come to be challenged by many critics who have brought to light images, allusions and motifs that cause Beckett's works to resonate with the real people, places and problems that marked his life and the world in which he moved. Beckett's notebooks, letters and manuscripts reveal how extensively he entered into dialogue with important intellectual, historical, social and scientific traditions. Theoretical readings have attempted to draw to the surface how far Beckett's use of language and form also confront the realities of the world in which he lived.

Scholars have come to recognise that, rather than being divorced from context, Beckett developed an aesthetic strategy that worked through deliberate negation. Yet just as negative theology seeks to reveal the reality of an omnipotent creator by tracing the outlines that reveal His absence from the world, Beckett's works evoke the power of the contexts from which they emerge by outlining their absence. This is a complex strategy, which Beckett himself described as 'non-relation', yet its methods can be traced within the works themselves.

In discussing Samuel Beckett's work for cinema, *Film*, Gilles Deleuze, who further develops the notion of exhaustion in Beckett in a later essay, contends that Beckett allows us to recognise key potentials of the filmic medium because he exhausts or negates those elements.³ The same principle of exhaustion or negation might be seen in Beckett's aesthetic writings where he develops the concept of 'non-relation' in art, which he opposes to an artistic tradition that, he states, has always emphasised relation and the power of relation (see Beckett, 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit' in *D* and *P* and the extensive correspondence with Duthuit in *L2*).

In his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (*Dream*), Beckett describes an aesthetic theory that emphasises the connections or relations between things rather than the nature of things themselves. In a later letter to Georges Duthuit (9 March 1949, *L2*, 134–43) Beckett outlines a somewhat different aesthetic understanding; one that emphasises *non*-relation or the refusal to fully draw connections or relationships. Beckett states:

As far as I'm concerned, Bram's painting ... is new because it is the first to repudiate relation in all its forms. It is not the relation with this or that order of encounter that he refuses, but the state of being quite simply in relation full stop, the state of being in front of ... the break with the outside world implies the break with the inside. ... I'm not saying that he doesn't search to re-establish correspondence. What is important is that he does not manage to.⁴

In 'Peintres de l'Empêchement' (first published in 1948), Beckett states that all works of art have involved the readjustment of the relation between subject and object (*D*, 137), a relation that he claims has now broken down. He announced this crisis over a decade before and prior to World War Two in 1934 in another review, 'Recent Irish Poetry' (*D*). The breakdown might be understood to have taken place because, on one hand, the subject can no longer understand itself as a simple point of relation, and, on the other, the object is no longer something that can be simply represented, simply understood. A key problem with any attempt to represent (and therefore interpret) the object is that the interpretation,

the representation (which for Beckett is always made by drawing a thing into relation with an idea), rather than revealing the object, simply adds another layer to it, one that serves to conceal it still more fully, 'Car que rest-t-il de représentable si l'essence de l'objet est de se dérober à la représentation?' (*D*, 136).⁵ This problem, which involves the thing itself constantly eluding any attempt to be portrayed, is something Beckett attempts to approach, strategically, from different sides at different times. Yet in 'Peintres de l'Empêchement' Beckett answers his own question as follows: 'Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade' (*D*, 136).⁶ That is, another approach is the attempt to reveal the process of hiding, to create the effect of the power of an object by occluding rather than attempting to represent the essential components of that object.

What this amounts to in practice is a strategy through which Beckett would deliberately obscure or remove links that might serve to clearly situate his works or ideas in relation to a context. What needs to be very strongly emphasised with regard to Beckett's 'non-relation', however, is that it does not simply remove contexts altogether; rather, it still makes use of such associations, but it now obscures them.

This process of occlusion gives the works much of their power and allows them to generate a sense of abstraction that reconnects them with any place, any people, any time, rather than tying them once and for ever to particular times and places. Yet, paradoxically, this is possible for Beckett because of the coherence and depth of analysis that have gone into the use of contexts and sources that he has then hidden. This very strategy, then, lends added weight to critical attempts to find points of connection that have been sundered, disconnected or suspended. These critical projects serve to help us to better understand the power of the works and their capacity for generating understandings of the sense, or senselessness, of our time and place.

This collection considers the question of context in relation to Beckett in two ways. The first three sections of the book, 'Landscapes and Formation', 'Social and Political Contexts' and 'Milieus and Movements', consider how the educational, sociopolitical and artistic milieus through which Beckett passed helped to form both the writer and his manner of writing. The next three sections look at how Beckett's extensive intellectual interests and knowledge (of literature, the arts and the human sciences and hard sciences) made their way into his works. If the first three sections might loosely be thought to involve 'external' influences, the second three might be thought to involve contexts that Beckett made his own. The next section, 'Language and Form', seeks to account for some of the textual strategies

Beckett developed to create his works. The final section, 'Reception and Remains', considers how Beckett and his works themselves have come to be an important context for contemporary artistic practice.

The essays published here offer clearly argued, lucid assessments of the importance of particular contexts to Beckett's works. This book, then, is a highly accessible resource for students first coming to Beckett's work. At the same time it offers a sustained attempt to understand Beckett's particular approach to working with contexts, and as such it will offer new insights that will be an important resource for Beckett scholars as well as general readers.

Finally, I wanted to offer a brief comment on two technical issues. First, I have chosen to use the spelling 'McGreevy' rather than 'MacGreevy' for Beckett's friend and correspondent (who changed his name to MacGreevy in 1941). Both versions of this name are given in the first two editions of Beckett's correspondence. I chose 'McGreevy' as the most important correspondence between Beckett and his friend came before World War Two. Clearly, however, there are arguments on both sides (Knowlson, for example, uses 'MacGreevy'). Second, I chose editions of the works that I felt were as definitive as possible and readily available, yet there are different American and English editions in most cases and choices had to be made. I leaned towards the new Faber editions for the novels as they are the most scholarly editions available. However, I prefer Gontarski's Grove editions of the *Complete Short Prose* and *Nohow On*.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Ellmann, 'Nayman of Noland', *The New York Review of Books*, 24 April 1986.
- 2 Simon, Alfred. 'Le mort de Samuel Beckett: L'auteur d' "En attendant Godot" est décédé vendredi 22 décembre à Paris'. *Le Monde*, 27 December 1989, Paris. Pages 1, 10.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Greatest Irish Film', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 23–6.
- 4 This letter was first published in 2006 and is now included in *L2*. The original translation by Walter Redfern, which is cited here, can be found in Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9–10 March 1949', translated by Walter Redfern, in *Beckett after Beckett*, S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds.), Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. For George Craig's translation of this passage see *L2*, 140.
- 5 'Because what remains representable if the essence of the object is to evade representation?'
- 6 'What remains is to represent the conditions of this evasion'.