

Beckett, Samuel Johnson, and the “Vacuity of Life”

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In the “Human Wishes” notebooks, Beckett draws a complex picture of Dr. Johnson, favouring the moralist devoured by love for Mrs. Thrale and the autopsy-defying medical enigma over the moral and political writer at the centre of literary London. The fickle, inconsistent and atomised figure that emerges from these fragments, a voice reduced to a catalogue of anecdotes and aphorisms, is far removed from the Johnson later celebrated by Beckett as his faithful and ubiquitous shadow. How, then, might we reconcile Beckett’s readings of and claims about Johnson? Drawing upon the important body of scholarship dealing with Johnson’s influence, this article argues for the necessity of reading the significance of Johnson for Beckett in terms other than those addressed in Beckett’s oeuvre and acknowledges Johnson as an astute observer of that which lies beyond the boundaries of philosophical concern, rather than simply as a reservoir of idiosyncrasies and witticisms. Indeed, there is a strong case for understanding Beckett’s other Sam as a maverick humanist concerned with the ‘vacuity of life’, receptive to melancholy as a source of profound insight, enamoured with social justice and indignant about English policy in Ireland. Locating Beckett’s interest in Johnson at the level of the latter’s aspirations towards a moral and political philosophy carries important implications for Beckett’s peculiar reimagining of Johnson in an Irish context. Here, such Hibernisation is shown to operate as a vehicle for a pessimistic humanism inferred from Johnsonian morals, in which the possibility of betterment is overshadowed by the vicissitudes of the capricious mind.

“They [the critics] can put me wherever they want, but it’s Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me. And if I follow any tradition, it is his.”¹ As Ruby Cohn and Stephen Dilks have noted, this statement, recorded by Deirdre Bair, sounds quite unlike something that Beckett might have professed; it does, nonetheless, convey Beckett’s lifelong interest in both Dr. Johnson and an English Age of Enlightenment.² Indeed, Beckett regularly revisited writings by and about Johnson until his death, and Johnson’s shadow continues to hang over Beckett’s *oeuvre* and Beckett scholarship.³

Initially, Beckett’s enthusiasm expressed itself in the form of an attempt to adapt Johnson’s life for the stage during the 1930s, leading to the dramatic fragment *Human Wishes*. Little is known with certainty about the difficulties that Beckett faced in relation to the play’s contents; however, the material remnants of the project, three copybooks of extensive preparatory notes, suggest that reading Dr. Johnson provided Beckett with new insights into the relationship between literature, philosophy, and history. The sources featuring in his notes are varied, and include James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*; Johnson’s *Annals* and *Prayers and Meditations*; Hester Thrale’s *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*; John Hawkins’ *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*; Leslie Stephen’s *Samuel Johnson*; Thomas Seccombe’s “Essay Introductory” to A. M. Broadley’s *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale*; *The Dictionary of National Biography*; C.E. Vulliamy’s *Mrs Thrale of Streatham*; A. Hayward’s *Autobiography Letters and Literary Remains of*

¹ Beckett [1972], cited in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), 272.

² Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett’s Theater* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 284 n. 1; Stephen Dilks, “Samuel Beckett’s Samuel Johnson,” *The Modern Language Review* 98, no. 2 (2003): 285.

³ Lionel Kelly, “Beckett’s *Human Wishes*,” in *The Ideal Core of the Onion*, ed. John Pilling and Mary Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992), 21-44; See Frederik N. Smith, *Beckett’s Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 165-7, 110-31; Chris Ackerley, “‘Human Wishes’: Samuel Beckett and Johnson,” *The Johnson Society of Australia Papers* 9 (2005): 11-28; Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 225-39.

Mrs Piozzi.⁴ The “Whoroscope” Notebook, which accompanied Beckett during the same decade, also features quotations from Johnson’s *Life of Ascham*, *Life of Dryden*, *Rasselas*, Boswell’s biography of Johnson and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Smith, 111). Beckett began to think about the project in 1936, while in Nazi Germany, carried out the background research at the National Library of Ireland upon his return to Dublin, and then abandoned his notes, eventually returning to them in occupied France in 1940.⁵ The twice-abandoned project was, then, concurrent with Beckett’s experience of the rise of totalitarianism in Europe.

The Dr. Johnson emerging from these protracted circumstances defies the historical record and the rules of biography: indeed, to open the notebooks is to find oneself confronted with manic date-keeping – births, deaths, failures, successes, and mundane events; as such, the notebooks literalize Johnson’s no less than Beckett’s dislike for attempted systematizations of existence.⁶ Beckett’s focus alters over time: the first notebook gives precedence to Johnson the moralist, devoured by love for Mrs. Thrale; the second pays particular attention to Johnson’s medical symptoms and melancholy; and the third reiterates some of the contents of its predecessors, while revealing the difficulties in transforming Johnson’s everyday life into naturalistic drama. Here, Beckett emphasizes Johnson’s resignation at the approach of death and lack of control over a “seraglio” torn by internal conflicts and a body afflicted by a series of ailments.⁷ The first notebook, which attempts to provide a rational explanation for Johnson’s devotion for Mrs. Thrale and the sudden interruption of their friendship, certainly prefigures this transformation of Johnson into a tragic puppet. But the third notebook adds a

⁴ Smith, 112; Ackerley, 12. Quotations from and comments about Johnson also appear in the later “Sottisier” Notebook and in Beckett’s later correspondence, particularly with Barbara Bray.

⁵ See John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett: A Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 67, 69, 80-1; Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 680.

⁶ I am here referring to Beckett’s praise of historical chaos in the *German Diaries*, Notebook 4 [15 January 1937], as cited in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 244.

⁷ See *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/3, f. 4, 5, 6, 41, 42.

poignant note to its predecessor: Johnson's acknowledged eccentricities (such as providing a diet of oysters for Hodge, his cat) are presented as marks of powerlessness rather than imagination, as necessary consequences of the elderly man's efforts to preserve a semblance of domestic peace in a home ruled by petty hatreds.⁸

In these numerous anecdotes one can trace an attentiveness to Johnson's "impotence" – a recurrent term in Beckett's comments, whose meaning is aligned with the definition given in Johnson's *Dictionary*, itself based on the Latin *impotentia*: want of power, incapacity, feebleness.⁹ As such, Beckett displays scant interest in the consecrated view of Johnson as an authoritarian Tory moralist with a staunch distrust of abstraction; his notebooks likewise allocate little space to the moral and political writer occupying the center of literary London. Instead, he remains alert to Johnson's isolation; he notes that, in 1765 (the year of his meeting the Thrales, of his being awarded an honorary Doctorate from Trinity College Dublin, and of his edition of Shakespeare's plays), Johnson was a relatively unknown, solitary, and much-avoided figure.¹⁰ Beckett's attention to these aspects of Johnson's career suggests that the latter's struggles with complex structures of publishing and patronage struck a chord with him, at a time when he himself was faced with insurmountable difficulties when it came to being published and read. His jottings portray Johnson's aspiration to moral integrity as engendered by psychological instability ("His morality the typical bulwark of neurosis," he emphasizes in notes from Vulliamy's book, for instance), and present his generosity towards the poor and needy as a consequence of self-doubt.¹¹ Johnson's anguish is designated as the trigger for daily confrontations with human misery, and much attention is paid to Johnson's conversations with prostitutes during his evening jaunts through the streets of Lon-

⁸ See *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/3, f. 5.

⁹ Johnson's definition of impotence does not appear in all revised editions of the *Dictionary*. It does feature, for instance, in the 1766 third corrected edition. See Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (London: W. Strahan, 1766), n.p.

¹⁰ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 41. See also Colwyn Edward Vulliamy, *Mrs. Thrale of Streatham* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), 58.

¹¹ Vulliamy, 103. See also *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 48.

don as well as to his affection for the destitute Polly Carmichael, herself a former prostitute, and Frank Barber, a freed slave.¹²

The long-term effects upon Beckett's *oeuvre* of his exposure to the follies, doubts, and anxieties of Johnson and his contemporaries have now been amply documented.¹³ As for the short-term effects, these include an amusing proximity between Beckett's handwriting in the *Human Wishes* notebooks and the adornments and elongated J of eighteenth-century writing and printing conventions, granting assuredness and authority to Beckett's notes and reflecting his close involvement with his subject. Even before Beckett began his research, Johnson's ornate signature began to capture his imagination: his translation of Johnson's infamous letter to Lord Chesterfield into German in another notebook in August 1936 even includes a faithful imitation of Johnson's autograph (Sam: Johnson). That year, in a fashion that recalls Boswell's transcription of Johnson's signature, Beckett began to sign his letters to the publishing house Chatto & Windus "Sam. Beckett."¹⁴

The cacophony of anecdotes and aphorisms emerging from the *Human Wishes* notebooks does not square with the singular Johnsonian tradition evoked in Deirdre Bair's biography; as Frederik Smith has pointed out, casting the net far and wide in his search for insights into Johnson's life led Beckett into an entanglement familiar to Johnson scholars, between an author belonging to the learned tradition, and a personality issued from the popular tradition (Smith, 129-30). Beckett's notes leave such a dialectic unresolved, portraying Johnson's thought as operating across literature, linguistics, theology, and philosophy. In this respect, although Johnson is not often categorized as a philosopher in the strict sense of the term, there is a

¹² *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 29-36, 44-5; Leslie Stephen, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 145-8.

¹³ In particular, Erik Tønning has perceptively argued that *Malone Dies* exists in close proximity to Johnson's perception of the "vacuity of life," since the novel portrays "a hell which consists precisely in an unending, self-reflexive 'apprehension of annihilation.'" Erik Tønning, "Beckett's Unholy Dying: From *Malone Dies* to *The Unnamable*," in *Beckett and Death*, ed. Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman, and Philip Tew (London: Continuum, 2009), 108.

¹⁴ See "German Notes and Translations," UoR MS 5003, f. 49; Beckett to Ian Parsons, *Letters*, 349, 357.

strong case to be made for thinking about Beckett's understanding of European intellectual history as informed by Johnson's ongoing reflection upon the limits of philosophical thought. His regard for Johnson's philosophical stature is revealed in the peculiar triangulation that unfolds between editions of *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot*: in the variants between the French and English versions of Lucky's fragmented monologue, Johnson stands as a counterpart to Voltaire and Bishop Berkeley.¹⁵ In this instance, Beckett's decision to pit Johnson against his two main philosophical antagonists reveals much about his perception of Johnson's orientation, and conveys his respect for Johnson's ability to voice a non-systematic philosophy of experience, able to provide precious insights into human irrationality and social inequality.

Beckett was only too aware of the gulf which separated these diverse thinkers; nevertheless, like Fritz Mauthner, whom Beckett also read during the late 1930s, Johnson provided the salutary example of a maverick intellectual engaged in the thankless task of proving that the boundaries of philosophy are more constricting than can possibly be fathomed. In this respect, Beckett's perception of Johnson is in keeping with that of Boswell: the idea of Johnson as an anti-canonical philosopher is certainly prominent in his *Life of Johnson*, in which the transformation of Johnson into a philosopher blessed with great intellectual prowess, rather than a mere facility for producing witticisms, occurs via his refutation of Berkeley's "ingenious sophistry."¹⁶ Johnson's capacity for philosophical thought is here presented as corollary to his acquaintance with developments in science, more precisely Newtonian physics: to Boswell's observation that "though we are satisfied [Berkeley's] doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it," Johnson answered, "striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it *thus*.'"¹⁷ A decade before Beckett started work on *Human Wishes*, this episode was brought to the attention of *Dublin*

¹⁵ Vivien Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," in *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett, Critical Thought Series*, 4, ed. Lance St John Butler (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), 29.

¹⁶ [Boswell's term] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 333.

¹⁷ Boswell, 333. See also Charles Hinnant's essay "Johnson and Newton: Dismantling the Plenum," in *Samuel Johnson: An Analysis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 1-10.

Magazine readers; Joseph Maunsell Hone converted Boswell's account of Johnson's belief in scientific empiricism into an expression of ignorance, in order to posit Berkeley's idealism as existing beyond the possibility of refutation.¹⁸

Johnson's endeavor to acknowledge the complexities of the intellect finds outlets in many other areas of greater interest to Beckett. In particular, the notebooks betray his curiosity regarding Johnson's search for remedies to metaphysical anguish and his falling prey to the torment caused by that which Beckett, writing to Hone in July 1937, evoked as "the notion of *positive annihilation*" (*Letters*, 509). To the Johnsonian mind, beset by melancholy and fear at the termination of life, confrontations with philosophy bring more indignation at the limitations of human intelligence than consolation – as revealed in Johnson's dismissal of Hume's resignation before the finality of death, to which (as Beckett notes) he responded by affirming his preference for eternal torment over annihilation.¹⁹ These preoccupations filter through Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes," which tells of the blurred boundaries between reason and unreason, and of the mind's restless search for remedies to vacuity, echoing a section in Boswell's biography which Beckett copied (in truncated form): "That man is never happy for the present is so true, that all his relief from unhappiness is only forgetting himself for a little while. Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment."²⁰

Johnson's *Dictionary* further illustrates his antagonistic relationship to idealism; it presents philosophy as branching out of empirical practice, theology, and science, rather than the possibility of transcendence. Philosophy is defined as "[k]nowledge, natural or moral," "[h]ypothesis or system upon which natural effects are explained"; hence, as a knowledge that remains contained within the limitations that arise in its being put to use.²¹ The idea

¹⁸ Joseph Hone, "Bishop Berkeley in Ireland," *Dublin Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1926): 16.

¹⁹ Boswell, 839. See also *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 32. Johnson's letter to Dr. Taylor is quoted in UoR MS 3461/2, f. 101.

²⁰ Boswell, 754. See also *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 32. Beckett omits Johnson's final clause on "enjoyment."

²¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 2, 8th ed. (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1798), 324.

of philosophy as an institutionalized discipline is met with tongue firmly in cheek: the *Dictionary* associates “a professor of philosophy” with “a sophist” (686). Indeed, the philosopher, “a man deep in knowledge, either moral or natural,” is too far removed from the observation of worldly experience to gain an understanding of it (324). By contrast, the realm of morals, which, for Johnson, precedes the establishment of any philosophical system, knows no boundaries in its application since it exists first and foremost as social practice; “moral” is defined as “relating to the practice of men towards each other; as it may be virtuous or criminal; good or bad” (161). Reporting an exchange between Johnson and his friend Oliver Edwards, Boswell suggests that it was not Johnson’s nuanced understanding of morals, but his pessimism which dominated his contemporaries’ perception of his intellectual contribution: “You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson. I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don’t know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in” (Boswell, 957).

In Beckett’s notes for *Human Wishes*, an empiricist Johnson, torn by a metaphysical despair which morals cannot soothe, provides the stuff of drama. Writing to Thomas MacGreevy in 1937, Beckett described Johnson’s dogmatism as “the facade of consternation” in an age “full of ahuris” [bewildered people], concluding: “there can hardly have been many so completely at sea in their solitude as he was or so horrifiedly aware of it” (*Letters*, 529). The *Human Wishes* notebooks evidence Beckett’s marked interest in the stuff of unreason; seen through various biographical lenses, Johnson paves the way toward a particular kind of pessimistic humanism, one that posits the possibility of betterment through learning as a process necessarily overshadowed by the mind’s irrationality. Johnson’s “unsystematic and anti-systematic” approach to the workings of the intellect is subjected to frequent scrutiny; Beckett’s notes include a passage dutifully copied from *Rasselas*, in which the philosopher Imlac highlights the unavoidable preeminence of the irrational over the rational: “All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity.”²² Beckett was equally sensitive to John-

²² Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, edited by Gwin J. Kolb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 150; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 95. I am here borrowing Fred Parker’s phrase; see Fred Parker, “‘We Are Perpetually Moralists’: John-

son's own attempts to handle the mind's instability; his notebooks carefully record Johnson's curious devices for keeping his chronic melancholy in check, from the practice of arithmetic to the reading of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (a book that Beckett also admired).²³ As such, Beckett's notes confirm the value of this state of mind which, for Johnson, is germane to creativity and spiritual insight, once marshaled in the right direction by the imagination; the *Dictionary* illustrates such ambivalence, defining melancholy as a "disease," a "kind of madness," and a "pensive" temper, harboring the promise of intellectual revelation.²⁴ Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes," taking its cue from the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, stands as a poetic counterpart to these definitions, as it envisions the tragic consequences of a civilization of conquest that no longer abides by spiritual and moral values. The scriptures, rather than philosophical reflection, are here given precedence as documentation of humankind's vain search for happiness. Likewise, Boswell reports Johnson's jibe at Platonist attempts to speak of happiness on earth and beyond it: "What philosophy suggests to us on this topic is probable: what scripture tells us is certain. Dr. Henry More has carried it as far as philosophy can. You may buy both his theological and philosophical works in two volumes folio, for about eight shillings" (Boswell, 471).

Although Beckett presented Johnson's life as a treasure trove for playwriting and screenwriting in his correspondence, his notebooks read less as an attempt to gather suitable material for writing about Johnson than as a research journal tracing his own intellectual and philosophical maturation (see *Letters*, 397). Both Boswell's and Hawkins's biographies display discernible limits, and Beckett was quick to note their flaws of methodology and perspective.²⁵ As he began to discern discrepancies between sources, he

son and Moral Philosophy," in *Johnson After 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

²³ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 71; UoR MS 3461/2, f. 61, 26.

²⁴ Johnson, *Dictionary*, vol. 2, 122; see also Thomas Kass, "Morbid Melancholy, the Imagination, and Samuel Johnson's Sermons," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8.4 (2005): 47-63.

²⁵ *Human Wishes*, UoR 2461/2, f. 78, 51.

also commented upon their irrelevance or inaccuracy. Responding to the evocation of Johnson's delight at "seeing his name in a new character flaming away at the bottom of bonds and leases" in Hayward's *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs Piozzi*, he writes in the margin: "as symptomatic of impotence as his love of driving rapidly in a post chaise."²⁶ And to Hawkins' account of Levett's taciturn nature and lack of formal education, Beckett replies: "Balls. He was a symptom of J.'s anxiety."²⁷ In their turn, other readings and preoccupations impacted upon Beckett's perception of Johnson; the simultaneous desire for and desperate fear of isolation, which Beckett diagnoses as expressions of "impotence" and "anxiety," recall Jules Renard, whose *Journal* Beckett was re-reading at the time of the second *Human Wishes* notebook. In dramatic terms, it is clear that Beckett was initially more interested in Johnson's emotional poverty than in his non-systematic philosophy of existence. In a letter to Mary Manning Howe, he wrote of his fascination for Johnson's peculiar living arrangement at the Thrales' residence at Streatham, arguing that Johnson's platonic love for Mrs. Thrale provided both the justification for, and the means of, maintaining a degree of emotional apathy; as such, for Beckett, the death of Mr. Thrale posed serious challenges to Johnson's psyche, since it called for the invention of new pretexts in order to rationalize his own emotional impotence (*Letters*, 396-97). Johnson's love for Mrs. Thrale, he concluded in a later missive to Thomas MacGreevy, was yet another expression of his bottomless fear of death, conveyed in Johnson's declaration to his friend Charles Taylor that he would prefer an eternity of torment over annihilation (*Letters*, 529).

The stage proved to be an unsuitable receptacle for Johnson's unrivalled dramatic potential, perhaps because drawing-room naturalism could not domesticate the monstrous specter which arises from Beckett's notebooks – monstrous by virtue of the Doctor's appetite for coarse foods, opium, alcohol, wit, and company, and by virtue of his terror of death and ability to evade biographical scrutiny. Initially, Beckett included Johnson in the list of characters and imagined an ending that rested upon a vision of

²⁶ Boswell, 845; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 91.

²⁷ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 44; see also Kelly, 34.

Johnson panting in silence and threatening forever to remain.²⁸ This ending failed to materialize: Johnson does not appear in the *Human Wishes* fragment but is *spoken* into life by his “seraglio,” whose conversations find many direct referents in the sources consulted by Beckett.²⁹ If Johnson failed to find embodiment outside of Beckett’s imagination at this particular moment in time, he certainly continued to haunt Beckett’s drama; indeed, many of Beckett’s characters possess Johnson’s mannerisms, gesticulations and ailments – allusions which the reader of Beckett’s notebooks can easily trace back to biographies of Johnson.³⁰ This Johnsonian repertoire finds an afterlife in, for example, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, which echoes Johnson’s love for the tavern and the word “scoundrel,” and in *That Time*, in which Johnson’s “ghastly smile” finds equally powerful resonance.³¹ Still another example might be found in *Breath*, which, as it repudiates the possibility of embodiment, evokes the ending initially planned for *Human Wishes* by reducing the scope of human existence to a brief occurrence of exhausted panting, in a literal illustration of Johnson’s fear of annihilation.

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A consideration of Beckett’s motives for thinking so intensively about Samuel Johnson in relation to the immediate context of his research illuminates the circumstantial nature of *Human Wishes* and its abridged life-span. Indeed, the project entertains an ambivalent relationship to the re-imagining of eighteenth-century Anglo-Ireland emanating from the Protestant intelli-

²⁸ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3458, f. 1; UoR MS 3461/3, f. 26. Helen Deutsch shows that Johnson’s body was “an object of spectacular importance” in eighteenth-century literature and science; see Deutsch, 28-9. Johnson’s characterization of asthma specialist John Floyer as having “panted on to 90” in Boswell’s biography struck Beckett, and he copied Johnson’s phrase on two occasions; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 22; 3461/3, f. 26. See also Boswell, 1271.

²⁹ Stephen, 147. See also *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/3, f. 42.

³⁰ Chris Ackerley, Helen Deutsch, Stephen Dilks, Lionel Kelly, and Frederik Smith have commented upon these allusions.

³¹ Boswell, 718; George Birkbeck Hill, ed., *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, in *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, by James Boswell, vol. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), 48 n. 1; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 16, f. 17; UoR MS 3461/3, f. 42.

gentsia in 1920s and 1930s Dublin; against this background, the difficulties faced by Beckett are placed in stark relief, not least because certain aspects of the Irish Enlightenment created by his contemporaries were concurrent with staunch displays of sympathy for Italian fascism: indeed, as W.J. McCormack has argued, the large-scale reappraisal of Ireland's colonial history under way during the 1930s was enlisted in the service of a far-right politics which appeared at its most salient in revisionist accounts of Bishop Berkeley's idealism.³² Beckett, after abandoning plans to write a poem about Swift's relationship with Stella, kept his thoughts fixed upon Dr. Johnson precisely as his contemporaries reassessed the Irish origins of Bishop Berkeley, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, and Edmund Burke – a gallery against which Johnson was presented as a mere lexicographer and as a second-rate intellect unable to comprehend the sophistication of Berkeley's thought.³³

The *Dublin Magazine* remained an important channel for this reflection during the interwar years, mostly through the agency of Joseph Hone, whose journalistic career was then marked by his sympathy for Mussolini and Charles Maurras's *Action Française*.³⁴ In addition, throughout the 1930s, a flurry of projects and publications re-established the centrality of the eighteenth century to Irish culture: A.A. Luce, Beckett's tutor at Trinity College Dublin, published a study of Berkeley and Malebranche; Hone, with whom Beckett was acquainted, published biographies of Berkeley and Swift with Mario Manlio Rossi; Oliver St John Gogarty and James Starkey (the given name of Seumas O'Sullivan, the editor of the *Dublin Magazine*) collaborated on a biography of Oliver Goldsmith; and W.B. Yeats celebrated the eighteenth-century Ascendancy in both *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* and

³² See W.J. McCormack, *'We Irish' in Europe: Yeats, Berkeley, and Joseph Hone* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010). Michael McAteer suggests that greater caution is necessary in attempting to categorize Yeats' late politics; see Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 156-7, 183, 196.

³³ Beckett pondered on the poem after spending an evening with Hone and hearing about his book on Swift; see Beckett to McGreevy, 5 January [1933], *Letters*, 149-50.

³⁴ See the issues of January-March 1926; April-June 1930; October-December 1935; January-March 1936; April-June 1937; McCormack, 10, 75, 95.

The Words upon the Window-pane.³⁵ Yeats' keenness to emphasize the contribution of Irish Protestants to an enlightened past was already evident in a 1925 Senate address in which he proclaimed the cultural supremacy of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, which, he argued, had created "the best of [Ireland's] political intelligence."³⁶ Going further still, in a 1931 introductory essay to *The Words upon the Window-pane*, Yeats pondered the imaginative benefits of returning to the political philosophy of either Swift or Giambattista Vico as alternatives to base materialism: "What shall occupy our imagination? We must, I think, decide among these three ideas of national life: that of Swift, that of a great Italian of his day; that of modern England. [...] I seek an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself, of its own permanent form, in that one Irish century escaped from darkness and confusion."³⁷

Thus, while a fraction of the Dublin bourgeoisie followed Yeats' lead and rewrote the history of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in an attempt to curb the erosion of its political authority, Beckett focused upon the same period of English literary history in order to think about unreason, vacuity, and melancholy. Aware of Johnson's strong stance against the Crown's economic and cultural policies in Ireland, he particularly resented "foul" readings of Johnson such as that published by Llewelyn Powys in the *Dublin Magazine* who, in Beckett's view, assimilated the writer to "a John Bull, the orthodox balls in fact" (*Letters*, 488; this appears to be a fair criticism of the article). His own recreation of the Johnsonian imaginary provides a response to the dilemma presented by Yeats, posing as a philosopher of political degeneracy and renewal, and to Yeats' and Hone's affiliations with, and admiration for, European fascism: to their transformations of Swift and Berkeley into the founders of the national intellect, Beckett opposes a democratic and humanist Dr. Johnson, whom he depicts in his notebooks as a motor force in the age of Swift, Goldsmith, Berkeley, and Burke.

In this respect, Deirdre Bair's disputed interpretation of the genesis of Beckett's fragment is relevant; indeed, she suggests that the aborted conception

³⁵ Concerning Gogarty and O'Sullivan's unpublished biography of Goldsmith, see Beckett to MacGreevy, 4 August 1938, *Letters*, 637, 639 n. 7.

³⁶ W.B. Yeats, *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 99.

³⁷ W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 343, 345.

of *Human Wishes* was linked to problems of form and coherence raised by Beckett's plan to make Johnson's life amenable to the Dublin stage – problems which Yeats had successfully addressed in his tribute to Swift, *The Words upon the Window-pane*. For Beckett's part, Johnson was to speak the words recorded in Boswell's biography, while his "seraglio" would speak Hiberno-English (Bair, 271). In keeping with this planned mixture of idioms, the first scenes of *Human Wishes* contain modest and stylized resonances which recall the Anglo-Irish peasant speech developed by John Millington Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory, as revealed in lines such as "[g]ive it to me here in my hand" and "[i]s it possible she reads and does not know what she reads."³⁸ Such an integration of Irish echoes into an idiosyncratic brand of eighteenth-century English was also a subversion of the Revivalist belief that Hiberno-English had preserved an Elizabethan quality long excised from the English spoken in England – that which Yeats described as a "distant excellence" (*Explorations*, 294).

Beckett's Dr. Johnson is certainly no beacon of English imperialism, for his notes register Johnson's inadequacy as a proponent of standardized English and his strong Staffordshire accent.³⁹ This Dr. Johnson is also an apt critic of the excesses of English society and displays something of the Wildean in his ability to manufacture witticisms without cease and his insistence upon good conversation being conducted effortlessly.⁴⁰ More importantly, Beckett's notes from Boswell's biography reveal that he paid close attention to Johnson's ruthless opposition to Hanoverian policies in Ireland, as reported by Boswell; indeed, this facet of Johnson's politics features as a preface to the bulk of Beckett's notes.⁴¹ Johnson's ethic of self-questioning and pessimistic empiricism provide an ideal vehicle for political protest, and Beckett's notes highlight Johnson's indignation towards the inequities bred by Protestant landlordism and his sympathy for Catholic emancipation. In his jottings, Beckett substitutes "British Government" for "English Gov-

³⁸ Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 157, 166.

³⁹ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 16; UoR MS 3461/3, f. 42; Boswell, 707.

⁴⁰ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 74; Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, edited by S.C. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 120.

⁴¹ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 2.

ernment”; this telling lapsus tailors Johnson’s political argument to a more recent past and grants new weight to it:

Apropos of barbarous debilitating policy of British Government in Ireland: “Let the authority of the British Government perish rather than be maintained by iniquity. Better wd. it be to restrain the turbulence of the natives by the authority of the sword, & to make them amenable to law & justice in an effectual & vigorous police, than to grind them to powder by all manner of disabilities & incapacities. Better to hang or drown people at once than by an unrelenting persecution, to beggar and starve them.”⁴²

In this instance, Johnson’s integration of the political into the economic may have held a particular appeal for Beckett, whose “Censorship in the Saorstat” pursues a similar line in relation to Irish censorship laws. But Beckett’s interest in Johnson’s “pro-Irish” sensibilities extends beyond the political and shapes his view of Johnson’s literary environment, which he portrays as peopled by Irish writers such as Arthur Murphy and Hugh Kelly in both his notes and the *Human Wishes* fragment.⁴³ Beckett was certainly aware of, and interested in, Johnson’s dynamic influence upon literary life in Ireland; in his notebooks, he reproduces a long excerpt from the letter in which Johnson encourages Charles O’Conor, a scholar of Gaelic and chief activist for Catholic emancipation, to carry out the groundwork necessary for a reappraisal of the history of Irish Gaelic.⁴⁴ Johnson’s support of O’Conor’s endeavor, as Tho-

⁴² *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 93; Boswell, 439.

⁴³ See Kelly, 30-1; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 93.

⁴⁴ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 31; Boswell, 804. The original letter from Johnson to O’Conor reads as follows: “What the Irish language is in itself, and to what languages it has affinity, are very interesting questions. Dr. Leland begins his history too late: the ages which deserve an exact inquiry, are those times (for such there were) when Ireland was the school of the West, the quiet habitation of sanctity and literature. If you could give a history of the Irish nation, from its conversion to Christianity to the invasion from England, you would amplify knowledge with new views and new objects.” On the contexts shaping Johnson’s intervention, see Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson, The Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135-8.

mas Curley points out, identifies him as “the first, and perhaps the only, major English author ever to champion Irish studies” (Curley, 135).

It is unsurprising that Beckett did not complete *Human Wishes*. Attempting to dramatize eighteenth-century literary history was akin to artistic suicide for an inexperienced playwright, and, particularly with regard to the figure of Swift, there were already too many precedents for the project to retain any originality. Charles Edward Lawrence, Lady Gregory’s editor, had written an unsuccessful play on Swift’s love life in 1926; this first foray into the subject prepared the ground for Yeats’ *The Words upon the Window-pane*, a play which Beckett knew, and whose 1930 premiere at the Abbey he also may have attended.⁴⁵ Here, a Yeats by then routinely versed in the occult revives Swift as a spirit during a séance of the Dublin Spiritualists’ Association. Anticipating *Human Wishes*, in which Johnson’s words are spoken through his female entourage, Yeats’ Swift speaks through a medium, Mrs. Henderson, who alternately takes on the persona of Swift and the two women he loved, Stella and Vanessa.⁴⁶ As in *Human Wishes*, the stuff of drama in *The Words upon the Window-pane* grows from the leftovers of the tea party; the séance succeeds in entertaining the Dublin middle-class where tea and cakes fail to provide excitement. The play ends with Mrs. Henderson making a cup of tea after the end of the séance and suddenly reverting to Swift’s voice (“Perish the day on which I was born!”), a terrifying vision which confirms the resilience of Swift’s spirit in the drawing room that Stella once inhabited.⁴⁷

Beckett’s notes on Johnson’s dabblings in demonology and superstitious

⁴⁵ Richard Ellmann, “Samuel Beckett: Nayman of Noland,” in *Four Dubliners: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett* (London: Hamilton, 1987), 100; Pilling, 28. David Richman notes that Yeats and Beckett faced similar problems but does not take the comparison further; see Richman, *Passionate Action: Yeats’s Mastery of Drama* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), 109.

⁴⁶ C.E. Lawrence’s failed play provided the initial inspiration for Yeats’s play; see Mary Fitzgerald, ed., “Introduction,” *The Words Upon the Window Pane: Manuscript Materials*, by W.B. Yeats (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), xvii–xx.

⁴⁷ W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1969), 617. Mrs Henderson’s Swift, as Michael McAteer points out, ventriloquizes Christ’s condemnation of Judas in the Gospel of Matthew, referring to Job 3:3 (McAteer, 164).

attitude toward spirits suggest that he briefly considered following the same avenue as Yeats.⁴⁸ In later plays such as *Krapp's Last Tape* and *That Time*, the resurfacing of Johnson's shadow occurs in the context of the séance as evoked by Yeats – in the context of reviving, visualizing, and listening to a ghostly past and self. However, in the 1930s, Johnson's terror and close escapes from death seemed to open up greater imaginative potential for Beckett's naturalistic project, and he returns on two occasions in his notebooks to Johnson's account of an early life suspended close to death in his *Annals*: "I was born almost dead, and could not cry for some time [...] In ten weeks I was taken home, a poor diseased infant, almost blind."⁴⁹ The passage certainly anticipates the equation between birth and annihilation which pervades much of Beckett's dramatic writing, as exemplified in Pozzo's assertion in *Waiting for Godot*, "[t]hey give birth astride of a grave," or in the opening line of *A Piece of Monologue*: "Birth was the death of him."⁵⁰ If *Human Wishes* does indeed look toward the spectral, it never fails to speak of unfortunate deaths and progressive disappearances with humor: "Let us not speak unkindly of the departed," says Mrs. Desmoulins (*Disjecta*, 161).

Like Beckett, who searched for analogies to Johnson's psychological "impotence" (in the figure of Rousseau, for instance), Yeats was fascinated by the dramatic potential opened up by Swift's difficult love life and absence of public commitment, an issue which he attributed to Swift's "madness."⁵¹ "Swift haunts me; he is always just round the next corner," he wrote in his introduction to *The Words upon the Window-pane*, the first part of which immediately preceded Beckett's "Alba" in the *Dublin Magazine*.⁵² Beckett might have concurred, for he later reminisced about a Yeats unable

⁴⁸ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 74; UoR MS 3461/2, f. 35; see also Piozzi, 125; Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, edited by Bertram H. Davis (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), 131.

⁴⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, edited by E.L. McAdam and Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 3, 5; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 105; UoR MS 3461/3, f. 14.

⁵⁰ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, edited by Mary Bryden (London: Faber, 2010), 86; Beckett, *A Piece of Monologue*, in *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Shorter Plays*, edited by S.E. Gontarski (London: Faber, 2009), 117.

⁵¹ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 70; Yeats, *Explorations*, 361-3.

⁵² Yeats, *Explorations*, 345; *Letters*, 152 n. 8.

to let go of his reimagined Swift during their only meeting in Killiney, in 1932.⁵³ Beckett was, however, far more scrupulous and diligent than Yeats when researching his obsessions, possibly because Yeats' preoccupations remained at the level of Swift's political career, which he utilized in order to justify his own vision of a new Ireland led by the old intellectual aristocracy (*Explorations*, 357-58). Yet, ironically, Yeats' re-imagining of the golden age of the Ascendancy remained mediated by Johnson's "ponderous body."⁵⁴ Indeed, the fragment of Stella's poem to Swift which, in Yeats' play, is carved upon the window and sets the mood for the séance, was given to him by Lady Gregory, who took it from Samuel Johnson's *Works of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland*, and he drew on Johnson's "sniffy" biographical essay on Swift when writing his introductory essay to *The Words upon the Window-pane*.⁵⁵

* * *

The resonances between Yeats' play on Swift and Beckett's projected play on Johnson enable a reconfiguration of Beckett's interest in Johnson's distrust of philosophical systematization. For Beckett, Johnson's ethic of ceaseless self-observation proved to be an appropriate source for a non-systematic ontology predicated upon the incapacity of intellectual thought to comprehend the mind's workings – a failure also acknowledged by Fritz Mauthner, whose critique of language is predicated upon an acknowledgment that the complexity of language remains indomitable.⁵⁶ Beckett's notes

⁵³ Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.

⁵⁴ Yeats, *Explorations*, 359. In this essay, Yeats also refers to a story about Swift's *Drapier's Letters* as reported by Johnson in his biographical essay on Swift in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*.

⁵⁵ [Lady Gregory's adjective] Lady Gregory, 1 October 1930, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, vol. 2, edited by Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), 554. It is likely that the book Lady Gregory owned was Johnson's *The Works of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland*, which contains a selection from Swift's poems and Johnson's short biographical essay on Swift.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1923), 641.

emphasize Johnson's skepticism toward philosophical attempts to domesticate the sheer tedium of life and present as central to the Johnsonian worldview the "vacuity of life," as recorded by Mrs. Thrale: "Vacuity of life his favourite hypothesis. 'Such things as other philosophers attribute to X various and contradictory causes, appeared to him uniform enough: all was done to fill up the time, upon this principle.'"⁵⁷ Much of the fabric of society, Johnson suggests, develops from an inability to acknowledge and negotiate the intolerable emptiness at the heart of living. His theory of vacuity, as Charles Hinnant has argued, performs a radical interrogation of the principle of plenitude which had long sustained approaches to the metaphysical; it replaces the possibility of a generalized theory of metaphysics with an acknowledgement of the significance of a new set of scientific and social phenomena relating to the relation between matter and void (Hinnant, 9-10). Johnson's concerns find echoes in the *Dictionary*, where the threat of void permeates even that which is not void: the term "fully," for instance, is defined as "without vacuity."⁵⁸ The philosophical undercurrent which shapes such a definition also reflects Johnson's perception of his own intellectual endeavor with the *Dictionary*, in which, as he pointed out, he managed to make philosophical terms accessible to the wider public, by reflecting upon their resonances in popular terms and ideas.⁵⁹ More importantly, these considerations of the importance of void and emptiness exemplify Johnson's anti-systematic approach to the problem of being: indeed, vacuity stands as an astute demonstration of the fragility of philosophical analysis when tested against empirical observation.⁶⁰

It is this aspect of Johnson's philosophical orientation that had an enduring influence upon Beckett: in particular, the Johnsonian concept of "impotence" in the face of vacuity finds powerful echoes in Beckett's statements about his own artistic endeavor, not least when he described the recognition of his own "impotence" and "ignorance" and the exploration of the literary ter-

⁵⁷ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 73; Piozzi, 99-100.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, 849.

⁵⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, vol. 5, edited by W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 319.

⁶⁰ I am here referring to Charles Hinnant's illuminating essay on "Vacuity, Time and Happiness in Johnson's Moral Psychology"; in particular, see Hinnant, 4-5.

rain of “impotence” as guiding his artistic concerns.⁶¹ The Johnsonian principle of vacuity also finds many dramatic conversions beyond the *Human Wishes* project: indeed, Johnson’s view of experience as a void needing to be filled finds powerful illustrations in, for instance, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, which rest upon the preeminence of an inactivity that constantly demands a humble form of activity in order to be sustained. The preoccupation with that which defines an active intellect and an active memory, so salient in these plays, certainly finds a powerful precedent in Johnson’s writings, for the qualities of activity imagined by Beckett can only be defined by means of an acknowledgement of the unavoidable presence of inactivity, whose resurgence constantly fails to be curbed.⁶² The vulnerable Beckettian mind, only too aware of the difficult boundaries between activity and inactivity, finds its energies consumed in attempts to avert the promise of emptiness in concrete experience, rather than metaphysics.

Beckett’s presentation of vacuity as the central principle of Johnsonian empiricism in his notes reflects his scholarly awareness of the complexities of Johnson’s *oeuvre*, for the principle of vacuity operates as a bridge between many facets of Johnson’s thought about philosophy, literature, and creativity. Indeed, the exposition of the mind to vacuity, in Johnson’s writings, marks the point at which the creative life of the imagination, philosophical thought, and literary production coincide: all intellectual and creative faculties are kept in check by the preeminence of, and the exposition to, vacuity, as experience becomes subsumed under a desire for metaphysical fulfillment, which is itself necessarily self-defeating.⁶³ An awareness of the dangers inherent in such contingencies underlies Johnson’s plea for the paramount necessity of self-examination and moral reflection: “Whatever philosophy may determine of material nature, it is certainly true of intellec-

⁶¹ Beckett, quoted in Israel Shenker, “An Interview with Beckett [1956],” in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 148. It is necessary to note, however, that the authenticity of the interview has been questioned.

⁶² On this aspect of Johnson’s understanding of vacuity, see Hinnant, 15.

⁶³ I am here indebted to Charles Hinnant’s and Arie Sachs’s analyses of Johnson’s moral philosophy. See Arie Sachs, “Samuel Johnson on ‘The Vacuity of Life,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 3, no. 3 (1963): 345-63.

tual nature, that it *abhors a vacuum*: our minds cannot be empty; and evil will break upon them, if they are not pre-occupied by good” (Boswell, 454). In turn, Johnson’s view of the intolerable position of the soul, confined to contemplating its own metaphysical deficiency and at best barely able to shoulder “the burthen of life,” shapes his reflection upon the necessity of maintaining some form of intellectual and moral diligence in order to avoid the “state of unruffled stupidity” generated by idleness; in *Rasselas*, for instance, ignorance, affiliated to idleness, is granted the status of “privation,” of “a vacuity in which the soul sits motionless and torpid for want of attraction.”⁶⁴ The *Sermons* also resort to the word “vacuity” to evoke the confrontation with the ephemerality of human activity; Johnson speaks of the event of death as bringing about “[a] gloomy vacuity, without any image or form of pleasure, a chaos of confused wishes, directed to no particular end, or to that which, while we wish, we cannot hope to obtain; for the dead will not revive.”⁶⁵ Only intellectual humility and the pursuit of spiritual and moral knowledge, then, can provide hints at an escape from the void at the core of being, for against the continual deceptions and frustrations of living one can always uphold the promise of divine presence, revealed in the confrontation with death. Beckett was sensitive to the complexity of Johnson’s views on death and the writing process: copying from Hawkins’ biography, he remarks, for instance, that Johnson’s grief at the loss of friends was often the trigger which stimulated him to write.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the satisfactions to be derived from writing are, at best, fleeting and not worth the effort that writing demands. Beckett’s notebooks feature several witticisms on this topic: “No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money”; “It has been said that there is pleasure in writing, especially in writing verse. I allow you may have pleasure from writing after it is over, if you have written well.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, vol. 3, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 31; Samuel Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L.F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 96; Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, 49.

⁶⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Sermons*, edited by Jean Hagstrum and James Gray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 267.

⁶⁶ *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/2, f. 51; Hawkins, 250.

⁶⁷ Boswell, 730, 1234; *Human Wishes*, UoR MS 3461/1, f. 17; UoR MS 3461/2, f. 81.

Johnson's *Annals*, whose influence upon Beckett was formative, further suggest that intellectual thought and writing involve a coming to terms with a series of dreary repetitions of the same, which ultimately yield less than what their incremental addition initially promised (see Kelly, 36-41; Tønning, 116-7). The *Annals* offer an ongoing portrayal of a restless mind attempting to resist "the vacuity of life" and hoping to resist "[i]dleness in-temperate sleep dilatoriness immethodical life" and "[t]o reclaim imagination"; "[t]o read good books"; "[t]o rise early"; "[t]o study the Scriptures"; "[t]o keep a journal" (*Annals*, 63, 71, 82, 267). Prayers and resolutions are juxtaposed to lists of sins committed, and, gradually, a complex system of spiritual and intellectual debts and repayments forms, one exceeding the possibility of reimbursement. Similarly, the intellectual process is portrayed as composed of tedium and reiteration, and frustrated wishes replace achievements. Various literary schemes, including projects to write histories of war, melancholy and memory, are no sooner evoked than dropped; Johnson also briefly toys with writing about "the study of philosophy, as an instrument of living" but immediately relents. Admitting defeat becomes an acknowledgement of the uselessness of philosophy to the dynamics of vacuity: "This study was not persued."⁶⁸

The qualities that are now subsumed under the label of "the Beckettian" certainly exist in close proximity to the philosophical terror of idleness and annihilation portrayed in Johnson's *Annals*. Johnson's portrayal of endless tedium and paralyzing awe in the face of the ticking clock impressed itself deeply upon Beckett; in a 1938 letter to MacGreevy, he compared his secluded life in Paris, away from the intellectual excitement offered by the city, to "the kind of life that filled Dr Johnson with horror. Nothing but the days passing over" (*Letters*, 606). Johnson's conception of human life as a succession of tedious confrontations with void and the potentiality of annihilation finds far-reaching philosophical echoes in Beckett's work, and acknowledging such an influence upon Beckett enables, in turn, a reconfiguration of his relationship to twentieth-century philosophy: indeed, the restless Johnsonian mind stands as a precursor of Heideggerian ontology and Sartrean phenomenol-

⁶⁸ Johnson's planned history of melancholy might anticipate Beckett's "Journal of a Melancholic." Johnson, *Annals*, 71, 100, 119, 57.

ogy.⁶⁹ But Beckett certainly had many reasons to resort to Johnson's pessimism beyond the aborted birth of *Human Wishes*, for particular anxieties about the zones of interpenetration between the literary and the philosophical, which Beckett shared, are crystallized in Johnson's preoccupation with void, vacuity, and melancholy. These manifestations of interest in Johnson the author and thinker are important for yet another reason: indeed, the contents of the *Human Wishes* notebooks and the circumstances of the play's aborted genesis across Europe raise important questions about the mediated nature of Beckett's understanding of philosophical questions. For a Beckett clearly attuned to the political stakes facing Europe and eager to demarcate himself from the idealizations of the Enlightenment produced by his Irish contemporaries, reading about Samuel Johnson opened up new avenues for conceiving of the relationship between philosophy, politics, and literature. The raw notes contained in the archives bear testimony to the importance of such a mediation, revealing as much about Beckett's rich and complex relation to the history of Western philosophy and literature as they convey about his response to the immediate present of his fictional writings; as such, reading and borrowing from a Johnsonian philosophy of vacuity enabled Beckett to better understand the complex relation between philosophical and literary history, describing both a past far removed and the immediate concerns of contemporary life.

⁶⁹ Max Byrd, "Johnson's Spiritual Anxiety," *Modern Philology* 78, no. 4 (1981), 377-78.