Beckett's Critique of Kant

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This chapter builds upon my earlier work in "Beckett and the Philosophers" (1994) and more recently in Beckett's Dedalus *(2009) where I combined my discussion of Kant in Watt with an examination of Beckett's critical reservations about Joyce's modernist theories of the moment of revelation. This line of thought can be expanded and I would also like to incorporate a discussion of Hume's influence in Watt, particularly with reference to causation (Hume woke Kant from his "dogmatic slumber"). Furthermore, I would like to expand upon Vaihinger's development of the Kantian "as if" and its aesthetic and fictional applications in Beckett's oeuvre by drawing upon Beckett's extensive notes on Kant from Windelband. The final section of my proposed chapter would deal with how to write about Beckett's rewritings of the philosophers. So many of these discussions consist primarily of "poststructuralist" – type thematizing and do not offer an engaged close reading of Beckett's philosophical poetics.*

To begin *in medias res*, in the thick of things: in his January 5, 1938 letter to Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett details a host of social activities, particularly with Joyce and his family, which were part and parcel of his busy life in Paris as he was waiting for the publication of *Murphy*. In one of his concluding remarks – most definitely not a throwaway –Beckett reports that "the entire works of Kant arrived from Munich," consisting of "two immense parcels" that, in an almost vaudevillian depiction, he "could hardly carry from customs to taxi."[1] These were the eleven volumes of the Berlin Academy (1912-23), edited by Ernst Cassirer et al. Taking possession of the

[1] Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 1: 1929-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 581.

complete works is the culmination of a series of engagements with Kant throughout the key decade of the 1930s, beginning with the last sentence of Jean du Chas's mock lecture "Le Concentrisme" (1930), which counsels against "concretizing Kant's Thing-in-itself," and the Kantian marginalia in his own set of Proust's *Recherche*; to the entries from Jules de Gaultier's *De Kant à Nietzsche* in the "*Dream*" *Notebook*; to the "Philosophy Notes," 1932-33, derived from Wilhelm Windelband's *History of Philosophy*, in which fully a quarter of just under a hundred sides is dedicated to Kant; to the important entries in the "*Whoroscope" Notebook*.[2] As I have argued elsewhere, Kant is the seminal modern philosopher who has exercised a decisive vision-shaping influence on Beckett.[3] In working out his own highly original responses to a number of critical philosophical questions, Beckett found Kant to be an indispensable figure who supplied him with a philosophical grammar for realigning the proliferation of negatives encountered at the boundary lines of word and world.

Beckett read Kant in two distinct ways: the first might be termed "post-Kantian" insofar as it pursues a historico-contextualist approach that goes against Kant's own fundamental principle of philosophy as a supratemporal activity, essentially self-contained or "transcendental." Indeed, the major steps forward in German Idealism after Kant, beginning with Fichte, entailed a focus upon a finite human subject in a specific social con-

[2] Samuel Beckett, "Le Concentrisme," in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 35; John Pilling, "Beckett's Proust," *Journal of Beckett Studies*, I, 1976, 14; John Pilling, *Beckett's "Dream" Notebook* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999), 164-66; Matthew Feldman and Ulrika Maude, eds., *Beckett and Phenomenology* (London: Continuum, 2009), 24.

[3] The Beckett-Kant relationship is indeed at the heart of my reading of Beckett: see especially "Beckett and the Philosophers," *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 229-37; the chapter on *Watt* in *Beckett's Dedalus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 127-40 (note also the Kantian structure of the argument: the introduction, "Prolegomenon to Any Future Beckett Criticism," and the conclusion, "Critical Beckett"). Furthermore, my study of Beckett criticism with Werner Huber, Rolf Breuer, and Konrad Schoell was entitled *Critique of Beckett Criticism: A Guide to Research in English, French, and German* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994).

text. This point was made in melodramatic fashion the very day after Beckett received Kant's works: on the night of the sixth of January, Beckett was stabbed by a pimp in a street altercation and rushed to hospital with a life-threatening injury. As Beckett wryly remarked, "It was a new kind of 12th Night certainly."[4]

In a letter to Arland Ussher several months later, Beckett ends with "I read nothing and write nothing, unless it is Kant (de nobis ipsis silemus) and French anacreontics"[5] (the latter supposedly supplying relief from the former). John Pilling has pointed out that Beckett went to the trouble of typing up his own index of Kant's works (thereby enhancing the value of his not insignificant investment) and that Beckett started his reading with the final volume, Ernst Cassirer's study of Kant's "Life and Teaching," "using this as the base from which to explore the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*."[6] Furthermore, Pilling draws attention to the first direct literary application of this reading: in the poem "ainsi a-t-on beau," the line "sur Lisbonne fumante Kant froidement penché" is taken directly from Cassirer's biographical volume. The flux of vast historical periods depicted in the poem destroys in Lawrence Harvey's judgment the "unfeeling and futile manipulations of icy reason,"[7] with its pretensions to the immobility of fixed categories of cognition.

When Beckett wrote to Germany to order Kant's works, he asked the bookseller for an "antediluvian"[8] edition, a suggestive descriptor for a number of reasons. First of all, it conjures up a sense of Beckett's own ironic self-reflection about why an avant-garde artist in 1930s Paris should be so interested in immersing himself in a 150-year-old philosophical and aes-

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4 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 585.

5 Ibid., 622

6 John Pilling, "Beckett and Mauthner Revisited," in *Beckett after Beckett*, edited by S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 163.

7 Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 209.

8 Brian Coffey, "Memory Murphy's Maker: Some Notes on Samuel Beckett," *Threshold*, 17 (1963), 33-4.

thetic credo. The "Black Letter" typography aside[9] (which would certainly render its appearance antiquarian), more telling is the enveloping historical topography. Beckett's six-month German *Wanderjahre* from which he returned in April of 1937 gave him first-hand contact with the realities of National Socialism and in this historical context the particular edition of Kant Beckett ordered would have indeed preceded the flood of fascism, most pointedly in that it was edited by Ernst Cassirer, a Jewish Kantian scholar, who had resigned his post as Rector of Hamburg University when the Nazis came to power in 1933.

The second way in which Beckett read Kant might be termed "neo-Kantian" in that it is predicated upon a careful study of Kantian principles and proceeds toward a series of innovative and imaginative speculations of Beckett's own devising. Particularly revealing are two seminal entries in the "*Whoroscope" Notebook*. The first dramatizes Beckett's appreciation of Kant's master stratagem in his "Copernican Revolution," namely the overturning of the very means by which our understanding of the world develops: "Kant's proof that the conditions of the possibility of experience are also the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience!!!"[10] The other major Kantian citation, transcribed from Jules de Gaultier's *De Kant à Nietzsche,* supplies a veritable gloss on the first, underlining the three major points inherent in Kant's "Copernican Revolution" and supplying further justification for Beckett's use of the notation for a masterful move in a chess game:

> It is the great achievement of Kant, accomplished in the fifty pages of the *Transcendental Esthetic*, to have shown space and time are in no way on the one hand, a substantial reality nor, on the other, properties of the object; but on the contrary, belong to the subject of knowledge and are the categories of sensibility of such a subject.[11]

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[9] Pilling, "Beckett and Mauthner Revisited," 166.

[10] John Pilling, "From a (W)horoscope to *Murphy*," in *The Ideal Core of the Onion: Reading Beckett Archives*, edited by John Pilling and Mary Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992), 16.

[11] Ibid., 18. .

Or in the more succinct form which Beckett encountered in Windelband: "Kant discovered that the objects of thought are none other than the products of thought itself."[12]

So much for Beckett's "notesnatching" of Kantian materials: things get immeasurably more complex – not to say much more interesting – in the application of these ideas in his own writing. That Kant plays a seminal as well as a problematic role in Beckett's thinking is implicit throughout his passionately engaged assessment in 1967 of the philosophical tradition and how he sought instead to create worlds of his own by "pure force of the imagination":

> The crisis started with the end of the seventeenth century, after Galileo. The eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de le raison*. I've never understood that: they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous*, *ils déraissonent*! They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak. The Encyclopedists wanted to know everything … But that direct relation between the self and – as the Italians say – *lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken.[13]

For Beckett, Kant was first and foremost the modern philosopher who recognized that this "direct relation" was ruptured, that "objects" were not given independently of thought. That the subject is incapable of knowing the essence of the object (its noumenon) is a guiding axiom of Beckett's early aesthetic speculations in *Watt* and is also evident throughout his art criticism on the van Veldes in the 1940s.[14] Beckett's vehement denunciation of the pretensions of the age of reason is prefaced by an implied acknowledgment of the limitations of the Kantian approach: to create new worlds through "pure force of the imagination" dialogically engages Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the failure therein to recognize fully the trans-

[12] Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. J.H. Tufts (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), 543. .

[13] Interview with Michael Haerdter, cited in Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre* (New York: Riverrun Press, 1988), 231.

[14] Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, 209-10.

formative powers of the imagination. Beckett's critique of Kant incorporates an in-depth awareness of both the strengths and weaknesses in his thought and this critical evaluation leads towards Beckett's own original aesthetic speculations, and this is nowhere more decisively the case than in Beckett's "war novel" *Watt*, which was begun in 1941 and not completed until 1945.

Critics have found it very difficult to determine the same philosophic consistency in *Watt* as there was in *Murphy*'s combination of Democritean, Geulincxian, and Spinozan elements.[15] John Fletcher, for example, concludes that it would be safer to attribute the various philosophical conundrums foregrounded in *Watt* "to a general influence emanating from the sceptical tradition of empiricism."[16] Indeed, such perplexities are strikingly similar to those confronted by Kant when he was roused from his "dogmatic slumber"[17] by David Hume's skeptical arguments that knowledge of necessity is not given in perception, and that this is crucial when considering the question of causality. A case in point is Watt's troubled deliberations in the house of Mr. Knott about the bell that sounded in the night in Erskine's room: when Watt the amateur detective tries to solve this "locked room" mystery, he discovers to his utter dismay that "[t]here was a bell in Erskine's room, but it was broken."[18] Kant mounts his defense of "pure reason" against Hume's arguments by positing a fundamental distinction between mere appearances and "things-in-themselves." That is, we have no direct knowledge of the world, only representations. But the central problem is that the so-called eponymous subject Watt is a gormless milquetoast who wants above all to continue endorsing the everyday reality he has been schooled to accept. As Vivian Mercier astutely remarked, "the point to remember about poor Watt is that, far from being an aggressive Pyrrhonist, he is not even a conscious sceptic."[19] Nevertheless, Beckett has transported his hapless fictional probe to the domain of Mr. Knott where a series of

[15] See my discussion of *Murphy* in "Beckett and the Philosophers," 224-29.

[16] John Fletcher, "Samuel Beckett and the Philosophers," *Comparative Literature*, 17 (1965), 55.

[17] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1950), x1.

[18] Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, edited by C. J. Ackerley (London: Faber, 2009), 109.

[19] Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 167.

Humean impasses pertaining to causality and predictability are countered with a number of strategic maneuvers of a distinctly Kantian variety.[20] In short, *Watt* is a Kantian novel: its conception, characterization, a number of crucial scenes, and its tantalizing last words, "no symbols where none intended," cannot be fully appreciated without recognizing how Beckett adapted Kant in this work.

The Kantian negatives concerning what man could and could not know are dramatized in the journey of Watt to take up a position as a servant at Mr. Knott's establishment. Kant/Knott is itself a double negative whereby Beckett punningly sorts "can't" from "cant," the knowable from the unknowable. For example, after discovering, at the veritable center of the novel the broken bell in Erskine's room, Watt is fixated by "[t]he only other object of note" present there, a picture which greatly upsets him since it suggests disorientating thoughts about "a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time" (*Watt*, 109, 110). Watt's private viewing is structured around the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* where Kant maintains that the beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in its being bound, whereas the sublime can be located in a formless object: "Insofar as *unboundedness* is presented, either in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while we add to this unboundedness the thought of the totality." The sublime is a pleasure that arises only "indirectly": "it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger."[21] Before such a spectacle Watt can only stand and weep.

From the sublime to the ridiculous: even the most humdrum of daily objects, such as Mr. Knott's pots, were not for Watt any longer amenable to

[20] References to Hume in discussions of Beckett are surprisingly rare. An exception is Sidney Feshbach's "On Names in James Aloysius Augustine Joyce and Samuel Barclay Beckett," *Massachusetts Review*, Winter 93/94, Vol. 34 (1953), 593-616, which refers to *Watt* as "Beckett's Humean novel" (601). There is, however, no linkage with Kant in Feshbach's argument.

[21] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans., with an introduction, Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 74.

being neatly identified. They were no longer quite themselves and there is, of course, no access to the noumenal "pot-in-itself" which might in Kantian terms be "thinkable," but perforce remains "unknowable." The liminal nature of so-called commonplace realities is such that Watt is compelled to adopt in self-defense a Kantian manipulation of a priori categories in order to "extract" semblances of meaningful patterns, as exemplified in the episode with the Galls. There are other instances of "great formal brilliance" but alas of "indeterminable purport" (*Watt*, 61) as Watt tries to carry out what might ironically be dubbed his "Transcendental Deduction."

Sam, the narrator of Watt's tale, characterizes his subject's behavior as raising a number of "delicate questions," namely, what was the point of "this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning" (62)? The point is moot, but the long-term consequence is certainly of determinable purport: after Watt leaves Mr. Knott's employ, he can no longer fit into conventional society and ends up in an asylum where he meets the narrator-to-be of his story. Watt suffers from a series of progressively more severe aphasic disturbances and this is further confounded by the painfully obvious inadequacies of Sam as a recorder of Watt's quixotic "pursuit of meaning." For, while Sam admits his physical senses are failing, he steadfastly maintains that his "purely mental faculties" were "if possible more vigorous than ever" (*Watt*, 169); but the five blanks allotted to these faculties contain only question marks! As Beckett declared with reference to the *philosophes*, who – like Sam – wanted to know everything, "*ils sont tous fous*, *ils déraissonent*!"

Comparing the two endings of *Watt* brings to the forefront the question of meaning in terms of symbolic presentation and indeed the very status of the "symbol" itself as highlighted in the last entry of the "Addenda," the second ending: "no symbols where none intended" (223). Here Beckett has extended his reading of Kant to include a critique of modernist aesthetics as represented primarily by Joyce whose views are reincarnated in the figure of Arsene, whose vision of transcendence gained and lost is at the heart of the first section of the novel.[22] An "antediluvian" Kant is thus brought into play at the cutting edge of Beckett's avant-garde aesthetic speculations. In the

[22] For a more detailed argument in support of the Joyce-Arsene analogy see my *Beckett's Dedalus*, 130-41.

novel's first ending, the locals offer their dogmatic views on man, nature, and God as they watch Watt depart Mr. Knott's. Speaking "practically," Kant emphasized that the elevated thoughts which nature affords us do have application in the everyday world and the locals certainly have no doubts about the Kantian equation of beauty, nature's symbols, and God's sanction:

> The trembling sea could not but be admired. The leaves quivered, or gave the impression of doing so, and the grasses also, beneath the drops, or beads, of gaily expiring dew… [Mr. Gorman] raised high his hands and spread them out, in a gesture of worship. (213)

But they cannot make any sense of Watt, who does not fit into their scheme of things. The conventional symbolism of Mr. Gorman and his ilk is obviously not "intended" as any resolution to Watt's dilemmas. Watt saw his picture, and it was not pretty or charming, nor could its "unboundedness" be so neatly domesticated. In the midst of such ineffable mysteries, Watt has lost his own sense of "whatness" amongst the proliferation of unnamable entities.

Kant and Beckett might seem strange bedfellows, but the ménage à trois with Joyce (Arsene) is when things get really interesting and the stratagems whereby this conjunction is effected in *Watt* are worthy of their own "!!!" notation. Throughout *Beckett's Dedalus*, I argued in detail that Beckett could not for critical reasons accept either the Proustian "miracle" of involuntary memory or Joyce's epiphany in which, in his estimation, the boundary lines between the phenomenal and the noumenal have unjustifiably been breached. In Arsene's vision of transcendence, Beckett employs a Kantian allusion to set things in a critical perspective. Arsene recalls how he was one with nature and yet somehow also beyond it: "I was the sun …" (34) and "my personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw" (35), summing up with, "I perceived it with a perception so sensuous that in comparison the impressions of a man buried alive in Lisbon on Lisbon's great day seem a frigid and artificial construction of the understanding" (35). This echoing of the line of Beckett's poem "ainsi a-t-on

beau" cited earlier is not, however, simply an ironic reference to Kant's philosophical sangfroid; in this context, the allusion also helps to put into critical perspective Arsene's vision, which cannot sustain itself and falls back into the world in which Kantian distinctions and boundaries between the noumenal and the phenomenal do indeed unfortunately apply.

Arsene's "short statement" (31) of some twenty-five pages is divided into two very long paragraphs: the first deals with his visionary experience and the loss thereof; the second consists of his efforts to make some sense of his stay at Mr. Knott's and to pass it on to his successor: "I have information of a practical nature to impart" (36-7). This consists of his view that his visionary experience "was not an illusion, as long as it lasted, that presence of what did not exist" (37), as well as the vital question of whether what has happened to Arsene will necessarily also happen to Watt. Here Beckett invokes the concept of the "categorical imperative" in order to question the equating of individual acts with universal laws. The point is reinforced by the anecdote of Mr. Ash's meeting with Arsene on Westminster Bridge, which begins his second paragraph and which in Beckett's mind is specifically associated with Kant. In the *"Whoroscope" Notebook* one of Beckett's notes on Kant conjures up the mise-en-scène of the Mr. Ash story: "Kant's exact description of Westminster Bridge (having never set foot outside Prussia)."[23] Kant was famous for his precise and exacting schedule: the inhabitants of Königsberg could set their watches by his daily constitutional on the "Philosopher's Walk." There is hence a telling contrast between Kant's neatly ordered world and the maddening disparity between Mr. Ash's own calculation of what time it is and the authorized version supplied by Big Ben. Enlightenment master narratives are conspicuous only by their absence.

Beckett also draws on Kant's well-known dictum in the *Critique of Judgment* that "Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness in so far as it is perceived in the object *without the precondition of a purpose*"[24] in order to put into critical perspective Arsene's vision of man's existential realities and how these could not be accommodated by the would-be epiphanies of modernist aesthetics: "And what is this coming that was not our coming and this

[23] Cited in John Pilling, "From a (W)horoscope to *Murphy*," *15*.
[24] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 74.

being that is not our being and this going that will not be our going but the coming and being and going in purposelessness?" (48-9). Nevertheless, the issues of "aesthetic judgement" (141) and the role of the imagination are pointed to in *Watt* as a way and means of escaping from madness and demented logic. An artist figure needs to emerge whose vision can incorporate "somethings" and "nothings" without becoming entangled with symbols (intended or not), a figure who can create viable "as if"[25] propositions or fictions that will allow for the formulation of his own predicaments.

Beckett's great post-war *Trilogy* harbors some suggestive analogies with Kant's *Critiques* in terms of differentiating the claims of reason and the imagination. The opening sequence of *Molloy* depicts the narrator watching two characters (A and B in the original French, A and C in the English translation), who briefly meet and then separate, one going back to the town, the other "on by ways he seemed hardly to know."[26] This parable foreshadows the parting of the ways of the troubadour-vagabond Molloy and the petty bourgeois tyrant Moran, even though over the course of the two parts of the novel they are drawn closer together, without, however, ever becoming one. A and B might – amongst a number of other possibilities – bring to mind Kant's A and B versions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (in which the 1787 revision of the original 1781 edition downgrades the faculty of the imagination vis-à-vis the more ordered categories of the understanding). To blur such parallels might be one of the reasons Beckett changed the designations in the English translation. Among other possibilities, A and C could be taken as a shorthand version of the Author-Character functions which are a driving force throughout the *Trilogy*. Malone in the next novel is totally uninterested in any type of "categorical imperative" of general significance; his application of "practical reason" is completely for his own ends as he tries to transcend his mortal situation by making his own death coincide

[25] The "as if" of nature's purposiveness is a key concept in Part II of the *Critique of Judgment*, "Critique of Teleological Judgment." The Kant scholar Hans Vaihinger developed systematically the "fictional" dimensions of "as if" and such "fictionism" is also very evident in Jules de Gaultier's *From Kant to Nietzsche*, trans. G.M. Spring (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1961), with which Beckett was familiar.

[26] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber, 2009), 5.

with that of his fictional creations.

The most telling comparisons are between the final works of each trilogy: *The Unnamable* might be termed Beckett's "Critique of Pure Imagination," in contrast to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* which sets the schematic ways of making a concept "sensible" or known above those of the symbolic: "Schemata contain direct, symbols indirect, exhibitions of the concept."[27] "No symbols where none intended," to be sure. The "preamble"[28] of *The Unnamable* (perhaps more accurately its "prolegomenon" given its critical-discursive elements) is concerned primarily with setting up its own version of Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in regard to Author-Character roles and functions. The Unnamable asserts that he is at the center and does not move, whereas Malone – now fully revealed as a fictional construct – orbits him, "he wheels, I feel it, and about me, like a planet around its sun" (5). But as this novel spirals away from any would-be authorial control, it is excruciatingly obvious that there is no way to speak in a "transcendental" manner about an originating self since the very nature of language itself in its imaginative capacities ineluctably generates a host of fictional projections which need somehow to be accommodated. As commentators as diverse as Schopenhauer, Mauthner and Cassirer have emphasized,[29] Kant's system lacks, above all, a critique of language and its operations. Hence the ironic implications of the Unnamable's declaration that Kant's Baconian motto for the second (B) edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *De nobis ipsis silemus* ("As concerns ourselves we remain silent"), "should have been my motto" (42): all the Unnamable does is to try to talk about himself, while miserably failing to do so since the stories of his fictional creations endlessly intertwine with those he would keep "pure" for himself. This would-be "Copernican Revolution" has failed categorically in that a "pure imagination" cannot exist solely in its own right in a priori fashion but must create a world of its own in which the question of language is bound to be absolutely

[27] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 227.

[28] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, edited by Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 13.

[29] For a more thorough discussion of Kant's relationship with other philosophers who have played an important role in the discussion of Beckett's works see Matthew Feldman's stimulating discussion in the first chapter of *Beckett and Phenomenology*.

critical. The Unnamable's last words – truly his "motto" – "I can't go on, I will go on," carry an acknowledgment of the limitations of the Kantian enterprise. As this suggests, and as he pointed out late in life, Beckett remained a self-declared "non-can-er"[30] when it comes to the systematic application of philosophical reason.

How It Is (1964) represents the decisive breakthrough in the post-*Trilogy* period whereby Beckett moves towards a re-engagement with the world, with the depiction of a subject in time. The status of Kantian ideas in this novel is profoundly ambiguous in that even as certain ideas are subjected to a scathing critique, other aspects of a thoroughgoing critical stance toward certain dogmatic cultural fictions are still of vital importance. It would be easy – all too easy – to apply the Horkheimer-Adorno thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *How It Is*, namely, how an unthinking endorsement of instrumental reason leads from the Jacobin Terror to Auschwitz-Birkenau, thereby rendering Kant and Sade "bedfellows" of sorts.[31] In *How It Is* Beckett has flattened out the great chain of being of Western philosophy, with its hierarchical divisions, and presents instead a great chain of torturers and victims crawling their way through an excremental underground (a sort of metaphysical *nostalgie de la boue*), replete with the grotesque paraphernalia of sacks of tinned fish and armed with tin-openers which can also be used to jab one's partner up the rectum in the highly regulated system of designated "couplings." So much for love and joy in the great chain of being. As the narrating voice maintains, "we have our being in justice,"[32] and this is characterized by a whole series of mathematical calculations whereby each member of the great chain is guaranteed his due and, turn and turn about, gets to be torturer and victim. In his preliminary comment on the *philosophes* cited earlier, Beckett argues that "the crisis

[30] The phrase Beckett used in his "interview" with Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters", *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, sec. 2, x, 1.

[31] For example: Jean-Michel Rabaté, "'Formal Brilliance and Indeterminate Purport': The Poetry of Beckett's Philosophemes," *Fulcrum*, Number 6, 2007, 530-550; David Cunningham, "'We have our being in justice': Formalism, Abstraction and Beckett's 'Ethics,'" in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), 21-37.

[32] Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, ed. Édouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 108.

started with the end of the seventeenth century, after Galileo," and *How It Is* shows how a scientific world-view with its mathematization of reality can construct such a demented parody of a rational world.

And, naturally enough, this type of reason needs a God to justify and make sense of the whole proceedings. At the end of part I, the narrating voice refers to "a celestial tin miraculous sardines sent down by God" (40). Here Beckett would seem to be alluding to the most famous sardine can in world literature, the one which contains a ticking time-bomb and winds its way throughout Andrey Biely's *St. Petersburg*.[33] At the novel's climax, the bomb goes off in the study of a high Tsarist official in which a bust of Kant has been prominently on display as a means of symbolically representing a host of contestatory views on reason and revolution. Beckett's "characters" Bem and Bom, whose names are borrowed from a duo of Stalinist clowns, provide an implicit historical critique of the totalitarian theocracy across *How It Is*. The reactionary conservatism of Biely's ending is diametrically opposed to Beckett's in which an act of justifiable literary terrorism blows up the whole absurdly contrived chain of being and all the rituals which accompany it, culminating with a God-figure. The radical solution the narrating voice opts for is to "eliminate" all such fabrications, "rendering me in the same breath sole responsible for this unqualifiable murmur" (126). Beckett, in my judgment, is one of Horkheimer's "dark writers"[34] whose explorations outside of more conventional definitions of "reason" salvage the very possibility of the Enlightenment's more positive achievements. Odd as it might at first sound, the ending of *How It Is* can be legitimately identified with the guiding principle of Kant's justly famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?" (1794): "Nonage is inability to use one's own understand-

[33] The sequence begins with "There was a handsome bust-of Kant, needless to say" (28), and ends with "As for Kant? Kant was forgotten" (309), after the bomb has gone off (Andrey Biely, *St. Petersburg*, trans. John Cournos, "Foreword" by George Reavey [New York: Grove Press, 1959]). In a letter to George Reavey (February 22, 1937), Beckett mentions that he heard "an interesting" lecture (on February 18) on Biely by Prof. Fedur Stepun (*Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 455).

[34] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 116.

ing without another's guidance."[35] The courage to subject everything to a thorough critical enquiry is – all Beckett's disclaimers aside – heroic.

Beckett is the most philosophical of writers precisely because he is the most literary; the opening sentences of "Assumption" (1929) raise the vital questions of who is speaking, with what authority, and how the words of literature have (or do not have) reference to the world outside the text-in-itself: "He could have shouted and could not. The buffoon in the loft swung steadily on his stick and the organist sat dreaming with his hands in his pockets."[36] The Kant-Beckett relationship is not all that surprising since, as Tom Rockmore has recently underlined, Kant "provides the problems, vocabulary, and the main insights that continue to shape the debates over the problem of knowledge."[37] Beckett may have stopped reading the philosophers when he realized, around the time of writing *Molloy*, that he had to confront his own "darkness" and acknowledge his own lack of knowledge about it. Nevertheless, he continued to think his way through the aesthetic issues that Kant's works led him to in *Watt*, toward what might be termed his own "endarkenment." As Rockwell further contends, many of the principal thinkers of the twentieth century are "in dialogue with each other on the basis of a shared Kantian tradition,"[38] albeit one which they approach in quite distinct ways. This is certainly the case, for example, with Husserl and Mauthner whose works have been brought to bear in Beckett studies, and also especially relevant with reference to Heidegger, whose assessment of Kant's failure to validate the powers of the imagination in ontological investigations is remarkably similar to Beckett's comments on the world-making "pure force of the imagination."[39] Moreover, Kant's failure to embrace the so-called "lower" faculty of the imagination "might on the empirical level have to do with a failure of

[35] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in Peter Gay, ed., *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1973), 383.

[36] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, edited by S.E. Gontarski (New York Grove Press, 1995), 3.

[37] Tom Rockmore, *In Kant's Wake: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 7.

[38] Ibid., 19.

[39] See my comments on Beckett and Heidegger in "Beckett and the Philosophers," 236.

nerve when it came to a reckoning with the body, its feelings, and desires."[40] Kant's last word, "*Sufficit*" ("It is enough"),[41] makes for a revealing comparison with Beckett's last words in one of his most moving later ontological fables about a love lost and recalled through the powers of the imagination: "Enough my old breasts feel his old hand."[42]

In 1956, on December 23 to be exact, Beckett presented his artist friend Avigdor Arikha with his complete set of Kant's works.[43] Suffice it to say, this is fitting in that Beckett's "For Avigdor Arikha," written for a 1966 exhibition, has a strongly "Kantian" ethos:

> Siege laid again to the impregnable without. Eye and hand fevering after the unself. By the hand it unceasingly changes the eye unceasingly changed. Back and forth the gaze beating against the unseeable and unmakable. Truce for a space and the marks of what it is to be and be in face of. These deep marks to show (*Disjecta*, 152).

This "lyric of criticism," in Ruby Cohn's words (178), is typical of many of the later texts in that it turns away from the within to the greater problem of devising means of accommodation with the outside world. The subject is located in a "thereness" that brings him face to face with the world. For, though man cannot overstep the boundaries of his situation in time, he can create marks which are characterized as possessing depth. Beckett's works are not, "perhaps uniquely, resistant to philosophical interpretation"[44] as Simon Critchley has suggested. Beckett's relationship with

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[40] Jane Kneller, "The Failure of Kant's Imagination," in *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 466.

[41] Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (London: Granta, 2009), 187.

[42] Samuel Beckett, "Enough," in *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 98.

[43] John Pilling, "Beckett and Mauthner Revisited," 163.

[44] Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 165. . This view is, for example, endorsed by Bjorn K. Myska in *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002, 13). Myska's argument focuses on *Molloy* and how it generates complex reactions which could be likened to the encounter with the sublime.

Kant is complex and multidimensional: critical commentary cannot turn away from the dialogical aspects of this exchange and how Beckett's thought and the shape of his ideas were thereby transformed. Moreover, a critical evaluation of the Kant-Beckett relationship leads toward a reappraisal of the more affirmative dimensions of Beckett's art, especially in the post-*Trilogy* period. It is perhaps time for a "Copernican Revolution" in Beckett studies, one whereby we can move beyond the ideology of negativity that has restricted our ability to appreciate some of the more reconstructive aspects of Beckett's remarkable oeuvre.

Dedication

This essay is dedicated to Patricia Merivale who first introduced me to Beckett's work and to Ian Ross with whom I started to work out the Kantian dimensions of *Watt* – all those years ago at the University of British Columbia.