
Introduction

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds,
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
Wallace Stevens

Till feeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer
M at least. (Samuel Beckett)

It is often said that the opening words of the psychoanalytical session contain the totality of what is to come. Thinking this true of the scholarly text, I find myself writing that this study is primarily about love. This might seem somewhat odd for a reading of Beckett, but I hope that in what follows the reader will gain an appreciation of what I believe to be the fundamental emotional force that organizes his work – a need for contact with a primary, loving other. I will suggest that deeply embedded in his fiction and dramatic work is an enduring psychological struggle to engage the primal mother, in order to maintain a complete, enduring sense of selfhood. Within his work, this struggle and its consequences reflect universal experiences at the edge of the earliest moments of human life, experiences that have at their core the integrative qualities of maternal love.

The central argument of this study suggests that a fundamental contribution of Beckett's work is its presentation of very early experiences in the formation of the human mind and, in particular, the struggles of an emerging-self to maintain contact with a primary sense of internal goodness. This struggle is highly complex, manifesting throughout his oeuvre in variable, sophisticated ways, appearing in character relations, imagery and the associative flow of the plot, and as internal struggles within the narratives and monologues of various first-person pieces, both dramatic and prose. I suggest a reading of the work that assumes it is a production of a 'narrative-self', a virtual person who

produces it as a whole, and that we can approach an understanding of the feeling-states and central psychological organization of this narrative-self through a close study of the texts. Finally, I suggest the texts reveal the convergence of the experience of psychological birth, made possible through the loving mind of the mother, and the birth of fiction, of creativity, that is the heart of life.

Fundamental aspects of early, powerful states of mind manifest throughout the texts: a withdrawn, uninterested passivity that defends against powerful feelings of sadness and rage, feelings of envy directed at sources of goodness that could provide love and attachment, states of confusion between self and other that function to blur loss by forging a sort of primary contact, feelings of severe persecutory or annihilation-anxiety, and a constant, powerful struggle to remain authentic when faced with an overwhelming, consuming otherness. The core feeling-state, however, is one of profound loneliness and disconnection, predicated on the central feeling of being unwitnessed, or *felt*, in a loving way that would contain the earliest anxieties confronting an emerging-self. In this, Beckett's work is about the *possibility* of its own genesis since, as primal reader/auditors, we must maintain contact with the elusiveness that lies at its heart.

Beckett touched upon the centrality of emotional contact in his work when he said (allegedly): 'I'm no intellectual. All I am is feeling' (Graver and Federman, 1979: 217), a statement that fundamentally informs this study. There is no doubt Beckett's oeuvre profits from readings that make sense of its complex standing in the world of ideas – it has been successfully researched within a number of contemporary and historical paradigms. The present study takes Beckett at his word, by assuming there is something worth exploring in his work primarily about *feeling*. In this reading, I attempt to fill what I regard to be somewhat of a lacuna in Beckett Studies: an undervaluation of the powerful, complex emotional states that form the foundation of his work. I will look at the *experience of being* that manifests in his oeuvre as a profoundly personal and compelling exploration of early mental life.

Although this is principally a psychoanalytical study, I have attempted to avoid making it entirely theory-driven. In fact, I believe that Beckett's work can illuminate significant areas of psychoanalytical thought by opening new vistas of research into early experience. This reading developed from my own experience listening to others speaking about their lives and their own early experiences, directly, and not so directly. Though, of course, I have a general theoretical orientation,

elaborated in Chapter 1, I try to be led by the textual material, rather than let theory lead the reading. For me, Beckett has been immensely valuable in elaborating primal experiences that lie at the core of human experience, and his work evaporates the boundaries between psychology and art. I hope the overall reading demonstrates a certain experiential reality in the texts, one that is not theory-dependent, but that encourages new theory-making. I make every effort to allow the text to speak for itself, to illuminate itself, and the very early experiences that lie at its heart.¹

A crucial objection often raised against psychoanalytical readings is that the interpreter assumes the characters are 'real' people. I am taking a somewhat more complex attitude towards the text. I have worked clinically with a number of creative writers and have had an opportunity to witness the creation of a story from before its conscious conception, through its writing and revision, to its impact and place in the internal world of the writer after it is 'complete' (which it *never* is). In this study, I have certain core assumptions about the 'reality' of the text, based on this clinical experience. I read the text as if it were the production of what I call the 'narrative-self'. This is meant to be an underlying, coherent and persistent presence that we can at least discuss, through a patient and embracing reading of the entire oeuvre. I do not suggest that this self is to be in any way *equated* with the person that is Samuel Beckett, though of course, there is, and has to be, an intimate relationship with his internal world. It is the mediation of that internal world, through an active, sometimes conscious, often unconscious process, that leads to the creation of the fiction. The narrative-self cannot be known directly, though in Beckett's work, particularly in his later prose writing, there is a collapsing and condensation between the multiple and complex levels of narration. In this study, it suffices to conceive of the narrative-self as 'knowable' only through its manifestations, which can be in characters, imagery, the flow of the text, certain symbolism, and so forth.² I have always been amazed by the manner in which the writers with whom I work seem to have an actual relationship not only with the characters they imagine, but with the creative organizer of their work, the 'narrative-self', that is predicated on a real sense of both self and other. Although I often speak of characters as if they were 'real' people, I always have in mind that they are operating as aspects of a unified self. This also means that the dramatic pieces will be discussed as productions of the narrative-self, as an underlying coherent organizer.³ I use the term 'narrator' to refer to

the overt 'speaker' of a story or novel, which, in any individual piece, is a manifestation of the narrative-self. I develop the concept of the narrative-self in Chapter 1, since a fundamental suggestion of this study is that Beckett's work is a revelation of the psychological processes that occur during its conception and emergence in the early mind.

An equally important issue about a psychoanalytical reading concerns the possibility that it might 'pathologize' Beckett. If anything, I believe my reading presents a 'Beckett' that, far from pathological, is *more* human, more alive, and less odd, than often realized. Certainly, there is strangeness in Beckett's writing for many readers and on the most basic level it would be foolish to deny there is a representation of pathology in his work. Imagine a cocktail party at which a number of literary characters attended. One could certainly find Emma Bovary to be manipulating, aloof and a social climber, Lord Jim to be distracted and somewhat brooding, and any of a number of Anita Brookner's heroines to be resigned and demonstrating a false sense of cheerfulness. Surely, the average party-goer would see all of them as exhibiting characteristics that fall within the normal spectrum of ordinary human expectations. However, what would one make of Mr Knott should he attend, or of Pozzo and Lucky? On the surface, perhaps, that they are dysfunctional in some profound way? In purely medical terms, many Beckettian characters display schizoid, depressed, even psychotic pathology. Of course, one can read the characters as abstract representatives of universal themes or conditions. Lucky's speech, for example, can be seen as a reflection of a universal existentialist condition, or of the political aspects of his relationship to a materialist master. I read it, in line with the general thesis, as a deeply felt and *personal* account of an internal experience that is *real*, and that reflects an aspect of the narrative-self's relationship to the mother. I am looking at these texts with a psychoanalytical eye, less interested in diagnosis than in psychological *meaning*. Even at its oddest, Beckett's work is *not* pathological, but an expression of deeply internal meanings, from the long ruminative passages in *Watt* to the fragmented narratives of the later stories. Some of the features of the writing, whether dramatic or narrative, that tend to appear pathological, such as the fragmented style, the imagery and the uninterested tone, will hopefully seem far less so once some of these meanings are explored. My suggestion is that Beckett's style reflects the area of human experience he is exploring, where the earliest and most intense of relationships between the self and the world are played out.

Another feature of the study is the inclusion of clinical examples.

These are presented for a specific reason, and it is not to suggest a direct analogy between the feeling-states of the characters, their motivations, and so forth, and those of the patients. Rather, the vignettes are presented to elucidate the experiences I suggest dominate the narrative-self. To borrow from Wittgenstein (and Arsene), these vignettes are merely 'ladders', meant to help with an appreciation of particular experiential states within the work. So, for example, when we discuss the patient who would binge-eat in a manner similar to that of Mary in *Watt*, my intention is to bring to life the woman's experience as it connects to the behaviour, and it is this experience that I suggest comes close to the emotional heart of the novel. This, of course, must be demonstrated by the reading as a whole. The vignettes are meant as a gloss, and if one looks at the way psychoanalysis has grown as a field, I do not think it so unusual to include vignettes. Any applied psychoanalytical study uses vignettes, even if they are not overt, since all analytical theory derives from clinical experience. Using an idea of Winnicott to elucidate a text is a *deferred* way of using Winnicott's clinical experience. I have tried to bring this process closer to the texts, to develop integration between the texts and my own appreciation of them. In a sense, this is how psychoanalytical dialogue often progresses outside of the clinical situation. When discussing a case, using clinical material, analysts are often in a similar situation to the literary critic, since the actual 'self' under discussion is known only through a text, if the original analyst is not physically present (of course, the analysand never is). Yet, given that limitation, an informed and often clinically useful discussion can occur. I believe the same applies to the psychoanalytical study of art, since, as I have said, I think it is possible to at least play with the assumption that the text we read has a cohesive underlying psychological organization that can be knowable. It is my hope that if we allow for this assumption, we will be able to recognize certain aspects in Beckett's work that will make its entertainment worthwhile.

In this study, I use the word 'object', and this should generally be understood to suggest a concept of another 'person'. For the most part, as I have stated, I am concerned with the work as reflecting an internal world of objects. This is a highly complex area of psychoanalytical thought, and I will limit the idea here to the following notion.⁴ I see internal objects (or 'imagos') as more than simple memory complexes or representations of external persons; following a Kleinian model I conceive of them as having a fundamental 'felt' reality within the mind

that, in the deepest unconscious, equates them with actual beings that live within. With Beckett's work this is, perhaps, not so difficult a concept to imagine, since there are many descriptive experiences of the power and the felt reality of the presence of another within the self. I use the term 'self', in general, to refer to the totality of subjective experience, whether conscious or unconscious. The narrative-self is a core part of the human self, and is detailed below.

This study focuses on the earliest relations of the infant and mother. Often, in referring to this relationship, I use the term 'mother' to define the primary object of experience. Since I am concerned with aspects of early relating that require what is generally, sometimes specifically, a female function (intra-uterine experience, nurturing, primary mirroring, early sensations of touch, and so forth) I use the usually accepted analytical term 'mother'. Of course, a male parent or any caregiver can perform many of these functions, and it should be clear that in these cases I would still refer to the person as performing a 'mothering' function. I stress I am only focusing on this primary relationship, and do not intend to suggest that Beckett's work is limited to dyadic experience with the mother (though I do suggest it is dominant). I am looking at early experience as it manifests itself, often in situations that suggest a rupture in the primary bond. So, for example, a man, even a father, can be *felt* as a mother in terms of the elicited internal experience. I will never forget, during my analytical training, discussing a patient with my supervisor, and relating, over many months, how the man never seemed to talk about anything but his anger towards his father. My supervisor kindly pointed out that the reason the mother was apparently *absent* in the patient's monologues was because she was *present* in a much more fundamental sense, having been erased, but reincarnated in many aspects of the related tales of the father's failures. Along these lines, Morrison describes a part of *Avant Fin de Partie* (an early draft of *Endgame*) in which there is a story about a mother and a son. They are deeply connected, and when she disappears, only her son can find her. She is discovered, near death, but eventually recovers under the son's care. Morrison describes:

the sense of terrible disaster and abiding loss [that] permeates the story [...], (as if that moment of fear [i. e. the mother's loss] were perpetually present to him). These emotional elements are much like those in Hamm's chronicle, but the reversed roles and the alternate parent are significant differences. As Beckett finally chose to formulate the play, mothers are negligible and fathers are of central importance; and the

son's pain comes not from loss of the parent (by death) but from loss of the parent's *care* (which results in the child's death). (Morrison, 1983: 39)

In this study, I suggest the mother is *never* negligible in Beckett, or in human mental life; early experience with the mother infiltrates all subsequent relationships to an unparalleled degree. The predominant organization of the mind is predicated on what Morrison calls 'care', and which I call 'love', and it is not physical death that is of greatest concern to infantile-self: it is a *psychic death*, a primal catastrophe, in which the mind is ripped from its containment in the loving otherness that is mother. This fear is 'perpetually present' in Beckett, since when the internal cosmography of the infantile-self and mother, a cosmography of two, is dislocated, the universe comes to an end.⁵

Notes

- 1 Except for certain specific quotes in which Beckett comments directly on his own work, this study does not use any other biographical information (with the exception of Beckett's 'nest' game, described in Chapter 1). It is a textual study, and I hope this allows it to avoid the criticism levelled at other contemporary psychoanalytical interpretations, which Hill fairly sees as giving more weight to Bair's biography 'than Beckett's actual writings themselves' (Hill, 1990: 170). Of course, I hope my general thesis might be useful in ongoing research about the author's own experience with his early objects, reflected in comments to friends, letters, and so forth, and comparing these feelings to shifts in his writing over the years. Anzieu (1993) has written specifically about Beckett's writing as functioning as a self-analysis for the author.
- 2 Klein's paper 'On Identification' (Klein, 1988b: 141-75) was one of the earliest attempts to view characters within a text as aspects of the ego. In that paper, she developed her ideas about projective identification (see Chapter 1), by examining how the character Fabian projects aspects of his personality into others in order to take them over [in Julian Green's (1950) novel]. She discussed the fate of the core personality, which was left behind. J. D. O'Hara suggests that 'From An Abandoned Work' refers to a session of psychotherapy, and that what is abandoned is the therapy, which is never completed (quotation in Gontarski, 1995: xxvii). This is how I read the entire oeuvre, as a lengthy, complex psychoanalytical dialogue, between the emerging-self and an imagined other, whom it hopes can contain primal anxieties, much like the Auditor in *Not I*. I see the (temporarily) 'abandoned work' as directed towards the emergence of an authentic self in relation to a good internal presence. The oeuvre is also a message from an 'abandoned work', that is, from the unrecognized, emerging-self.
- 3 In this, I do not completely agree with Linda Anderson, who states 'the autobiographical self is a fictional construct within the text, which can neither have its origins anterior to the text, nor indeed coalesce with its creator' (Anderson, 1986: 59), since I believe that the narrative/autobiographical self, is *always* operative. Texts are always *transitional* records of its *ongoing* experience.

- 4 For a comprehensive review of internal objects, see Perlow, 1995.
- 5 A comment on the selection of texts: despite his 'minimalist' reputation, Beckett was, of course, a very prolific writer. It would be impossible to completely survey his work in a brief study. I have been selective in choosing texts to elucidate what I feel is a unifying quality observable throughout the oeuvre. I believe that the selection, though selective, is fairly representative, thus, there are detailed discussions of Beckett's dissertation, an early novel in English (*Murphy*), a later English novel (*Watt*), early French writing (the *Nouvelles*, and *Texts for Nothing*, which, for me, serve as abstracts for the Beckett Trilogy), a major play (*Godot*), and briefer, but, I hope, still substantial discussions of various late pieces ('The Lost Ones', *Footfalls*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and so forth). A future study will develop the themes of the present one, with a focus on the late work.