

INTRODUCTION

Negative Modernism: Beckett's Poetics of Pejorism and Literary Enactment

Dirk Van Hulle

(University of Antwerp)

Samuel Beckett has been referred to as 'The Last Modernist' (Cronin 1996), but he has also been situated within the postmodern canon and was recently even called a 'postmodern icon' (Murphy and Pawliuk 2016). The opening paragraph of the *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* opens with Beckett's work as prototypical of postmodernist imaginative writing, which 'doesn't go down easily' and 'presents a challenge to the reader' (Nicol 2009: xiii-xiv). But equal prominence is given to Beckett in the 'Introduction' to Peter Childs's *Modernism* in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series, where the opening paragraphs of *Murphy* are quoted to 'plunge into a fictional narrative and discuss what is going on at the start of a modernist text which is in some ways exemplary but which would actually be sidelined by some definitions of modernism and by some overviews of modernist writers' (2008: 6). That Samuel Beckett is sometimes called a modernist and sometimes a postmodernist is not new, but that of all twentieth-century writers it is Beckett who is referred to as paradigmatic of both modernism and postmodernism suggests that his connection with modernism requires further scrutiny.

As Susan Stanford Friedman noted in 2001, an interesting shift occurred in the semantics of the term 'modernism' in the final decades of the twentieth century: whereas it stood for rebellion and rupture in the 1960s it came to signify elitism, the Establishment, 'High Culture', or 'the authoritarian target of emancipatory postmodernism' in the 1990s (5-6). In the latter period, Samuel Beckett was often regarded as a typical exponent of postmodernism. In a landmark publication on this period (*Constructing Postmodernism*, 1992), Brian McHale suggested a transition from modernism to postmodernism that was marked by 'the distinction between the cognitivist and the postcognitivist Beckett' (34), that is 'the Beckett who is still

preoccupied with modernist issues of reliability and unreliability of narrators, radical subjectivity, and multiplicity of perspectives, as in *Watt* and *Molloy*' (34) and 'the Beckett who focuses instead on the status of fictional worlds, the power (and impotence) of language to make and unmake worlds, and the relationship between fictional being and elusive "real" being, as in *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, and many of the later short texts' (34).

Still, Beckett was not unequivocally presented as an exponent of postmodernism. McHale also suggested that 'Beckett qualifies for membership in the late-modernist category' (1992: 28). In *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Post-Modern Drama* (1990) H. Porter Abbott, too, presented Beckett as a representative of 'late modernism'. And indeed, the term 'late modernism' seems to be gaining currency in Beckett studies today (see for instance the contribution by Shane Weller in this volume), now that postmodernism 'has receded into the historical past', as Wang Ning observes in 'Historicizing Postmodernist Fiction' (2013: 265).¹ Against the background of the 'waning, if not yet obsolescent critical paradigm' of postmodernism, Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet speak of an 'extraordinary reinvention of modernism taking place today' (Murphet et al 2014: 4), sometimes referred to as 'new modernist studies' (3), which 'resist singular ideas of modernism' (3).

At the same time, several critics have called into question not only the criteria underlying these labels but also the act of categorization itself, the danger being in 'the neatness of identifications', as Beckett warned his readers from the start (*Dis* 19). Before we investigate Beckett's relationship with modernism in this volume, it is useful to take a step back and explore the philosophical prehistory of what could be termed Beckett's negative modernism. This introduction first retraces the prehistory of this negative modernism by starting from (1) 'epiphanic' modernism. It then traces the contours of Beckett's (2) poetics of 'pejorism', to examine (3) how his negative modernism is enacted in his works and how this study of Beckett's relation to modernism can be paradigmatic of the current study of (4) 'modernism after postmodernism'.

Before and after epiphanic modernism: *Tombeau de Leibniz*

When Beckett opened his first published essay with the sentence 'The danger is in the neatness of identifications' (Beckett 1984: 19), he was analysing the late work of a

central figure in literary modernism, James Joyce's work as it was 'progressing' from the last word of *Ulysses* (1922): 'yes'. This final 'yes' is more ambivalent than it may seem at first sight (see Sam Slote's contribution to this volume). Taken at face value, the modernist 'yes' could stand for an affirmative 'Yes to life' after Nietzsche's proclamation of God's death – which was followed by the question how we were going to comfort ourselves after this murder: 'Gott ist todt! Gott bleibt todt! Und wir haben ihn getödtet! Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder?' [God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?] (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 480).²

The resulting sense of loss also implied a loss of faith in words. Beckett was certainly not the only writer who felt the modernist state of crisis most acutely through language. Several poets and writers had the feeling that once evocative words had become either 'abstracted to death' (*Dis* 28) or overdetermined and worn out. As Gertrude Stein noted, the poets of the past were 'drunk with nouns' (1998: 328) and believed that the noun was still present as 'the name in origin' (1975: 145); 'when language was new [...] the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there' (2004: 7).³ Now that the connection between word and object was disputed, however, Stein tried to find 'a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them' (1998: 330; see Nugent-Folan 2013). Beckett similarly struggled with naming and unnamability. Whereas, in the Book of Genesis, Adam could still feel entitled to simply give names to things, Beckett's character Watt is no longer able to comfort himself with the belief that the word 'pot' was the right word for Mr Knott's pot: 'It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted' (*W* 95).

In the absence of any answer to Nietzsche's question 'How shall we comfort ourselves', some writers started discrediting received language through language and disrupting semantic certainty; others took recourse to intertextuality. One form of modernist comfort is contained in the intertextual leitmotif 'Fear no more the heat of the sun' in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). On the one hand, the line from the dirge in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (IV.2) is comforting in the most direct way to the suicidal character Septimus Smith; on the other hand, it is also his surviving counterpart, Clarissa Dalloway, who needs comforting. She finds comfort in 'moments of being', for instance when Clarissa remembers how, 'for a moment', she

felt ‘what men felt’ when ‘she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman’:

It was a sudden *revelation*, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; *an inner meaning almost expressed*. (2015: 29; emphasis added)

This moment, which Peter Childs describes as a ‘spreading emotional orgasm’ (2008: 170), is called a ‘revelation’ and a ‘religious feeling’ by Woolf herself (2015: 32). Although these ‘moments of being’ are usually more physical than for instance the spiritual insights James Joyce referred to as ‘epiphanies’, it is interesting that both Woolf and Joyce directly or indirectly relate the experience of sudden and striking realization to religion (the term epiphany originally referred to enlightening insight through the divine). After Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death and the disintegration of nineteenth-century structures, many modernists seem to have felt not only a loss but also a need to find a surrogate to fill the gap, not necessarily by creating a complete esoteric system of their own, such as Yeats’s, but still by suggesting both the existence of some ‘inner meaning almost expressed’, and the possibility to reach or approximate it through art.

Proust’s equivalent of Woolf’s ‘moments’ were instances of ‘involuntary memory’, which Beckett marked in his copy of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27) as ‘Rev’ or moments of revelation.⁴ As he rightly pointed out in his essay *Proust*, this modernist aesthetic was to a large extent inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy and the notion of the Will, which ‘objectifies’ itself in the empirical world, marked by time, space and causality: ‘to every grade of the Will’s objectification, there corresponds a timeless archetype, a Platonic eternal form, in short: a *Platonic Idea*’ (Pothast 2008: 33). The key element that made Schopenhauer’s philosophy so attractive to many modernist writers was the suggestion that the artist can gain access to, and knowledge of, these so-called Ideas: ‘The visionary, artistic knowledge of Ideas according to Schopenhauer is entirely a matter of intuition

(“Anschauung”)' (39). And of all the arts, music provided the richest metaphysical knowledge of what the world ‘truly’ is.⁵ By providing access to this ‘deeper’ or ‘higher’ reality beyond the phenomenal world, art would – according to Schopenhauer – be able to momentarily tear apart the ‘veil of Maya’, ‘the epitome of all illusions’ (70).

Schopenhauer’s idealist aesthetic is remarkably optimistic in comparison with his otherwise pessimistic view. Against Leibniz’s overoptimistic worldview that this would be the best of all possible worlds, Schopenhauer argued that it was actually the worst of all possible worlds.⁶ Leibniz’s theodicy,⁷ satirized by Voltaire in *Candide, ou l’optimisme* (1759), was seriously challenged by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which is evoked in Beckett’s poem ‘ainsi a-t-on beau’ (1938):

ainsi a-t-on beau
par le beau temps et par le mauvais
enfermé chez soi enfermé chez eux
comme si c’était d’hier se rappeler le mammouth
le dinothérium les premiers baisers
les périodes glaciaires n’apportant rien de neuf
la grande chaleur du treizième de leur ère
sur Lisbonne fumante Kant froidement penché
rêver en générations de chênes et oublier son père
ses yeux s’il portait la moustache
s’il était bon de quoi il est mort (CP 98)

As Lawrence E. Harvey paraphrases, ‘It is vain to recall bygone ages, summoning them into an eternal present, and likewise unimportant, for the immediate past slips irretrievably away’ (1970: 210). While the phrasing of the poem is based on words clogged from Fritz Mauthner,⁸ the panoramic historical perspective is Hegelian in scope. One could read the last part of the opening line (‘...-t-on beau’) as a ‘tombeau’ in the sense of the musical genre of that name, a composition commemorating the death of a notable predecessor. As a ‘Tombeau de Kant, Hegel et Leibniz’ it puts to rest Kant’s ‘icy reason’, the dialectical idealism of Hegel’s philosophy of history and Leibniz’s theodicy. As opposed to Kant’s ‘icy reason’, Harvey notes, ‘[t]he poet is obviously no cold philosophical analyst’ (1970: 209). As for Leibniz: ‘The earthquake

of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz', as Adorno noted in the chapter 'After Auschwitz' in his *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 361). And unlike Hegel's optimistic identification of the divine 'telos' of history and the 'totalizing logic inherent to universal histories' (Wolfe 2008), Beckett's view was much closer to Adorno's 'negative dialectics' and his 'logic of disintegration' (Adorno 1973: 144),⁹ supplying what J. M. Bernstein calls 'a negative theodicy' (2001: 383)¹⁰ instead of the old Western tradition of affirmative metaphysics and the rationalization of suffering.

Beckett criticized any rationalization and justification of suffering from an early stage onward, as the ending of the story of 'Dante and the Lobster' already indicates when the rationalization of the lobster's pain of being boiled alive ('it's a quick death, God help us all') is utterly denied: 'It is not' (*MPTK* 14). After the war, this criticism of the theodicean belief in the steady progress of humanity is further developed, even in fragments that never made it into print. For instance, in the 'Louis & Blanc' fragment,¹¹ two men are being given a breath of fresh air by a guardian, but their teeth have not been brushed, which Blanc thinks is an injustice. Blanc concentrates on the body being aired, arguing that they should complain ('Il faut réclamer'); his alter ego, 'Louis même', rationalizes the suffering and the feeling of injustice (qtd. in Van Hulle 2015: 135). In his 'German Diaries', Beckett had already touched upon this kind of rationalization with reference to history, when he wrote 'I can't read history like a novel': 'I am not interested in a "unification" of the historical chaos any more than I am in the "clarification" of the individual chaos, & still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos' (qtd. in Nixon 2011: 177-8). He was more interested in particulars like names, dates and other details than in 'the modern animism that consists in rationalising them' (178), 'the fashionable *monde romancé* that explains copious[ly] why e.g. Luther was inevitable without telling me anything about Luther' (Beckett qtd. in McNaughton 2005: 107).

Not unlike the 'Louis & Blanc' fragment, 'ainsi a-t-on beau' reads as a dramatic expression of Beckett's view on this 'anthropomorphisation' – an ironic demonstration of the human mind's tendency to rationalize injustice and the theodicean faith in the universal progression of history. The second half of the poem stresses the negative counterpoise to this optimistic faith:

on n'en est pas moins mangé sans appétit

par le mauvais temps et par le pire
enfermé chez soi enfermé chez eux (CP 98)

It's all well and good to remember ('se rappeler') the mammoth of times immemorial, to dream ('rêver') in generations of oaks, and to forget ('oublier') one's father, one isn't any less consumed by his death and one is left behind with the feeling of being locked up – possibly the feeling of being entombed in the 'tombeau' of this theodicean way of thinking ('ainsi a-t-on beau [...] se rappeler [...] rêver [...] oublier'), this way of rationalizing suffering in the name of progress and imbuing everything with purpose and meaning. In the end, one remains just as locked up as in the beginning ('enfermé chez soi enfermé chez eux', repeated verbatim), but the poem is not static: it moves from the good-weather forecasts of Leibnizian and Hegelian worldviews and philosophies of history ('le beau temps') to bad weather ('le mauvais temps') and worse, even the worst ('le pire'). This poem already contains much of Beckett's search for the worst and worse as developed later, notably in *Worstward Ho*, on the basis of such intertextual references as the lines 'The worst is not / so long as one can say, This is the worst' from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (IV.1) and Petrarch's 'chi può dir com'egli arde, è 'n picciol foco' [He who knows he is burning is burning in a small fire].¹² This search for the worst and worse is part of Beckett's poetics of pejorism.

Poetics of pejorism: from Plümacher to Proust

Beckett's poetics of pejorism is characterized by acts of linguistic pejoration,¹³ by a 'fidelity to failure' (*Dis* 145), a sustained effort to question the efficacy of language and challenge the certainty of meaning, the asymptotic attempt at writing 'worser' (*CIWS* 97) and never reaching the 'worst worst' (95). There are at least two aspects to this poetics of pejorism: (1) the quest for the worst and (2) the awareness of the impossibility to say 'this is the worst'.

(1) The quest for the worst is a journey toward 'pessimum'. The term 'pessimism' was coined by Jesuit reviewers of *Candide, ou l'optimisme*, Voltaire's satirical response to Leibniz's theodicy.¹⁴ But whereas 'pessimism' is a static concept, stuck in the superlative 'pessimum', Beckett was inspired to conceive of a more dynamic negative modernism by reading Olga Plümacher's book *Der Pessimismus* (1883). The

opening paragraph of the introduction defines pessimism as a philosophical system, founded by Arthur Schopenhauer and developed by Eduard von Hartmann, on the following principle: ‘die Summe der Unlust überwiegt die Summe der Lust; folglich wäre das Nichtsein der Welt besser als deren Sein’ [the sum total of pain exceeds the sum total of pleasure; as a consequence, the non-existence of the world would be better than its existence] (Plümacher 1888: 1). Beckett marked this definition with a pencil line in the margin of his copy.¹⁵ To further explain the notion of pessimism, Plümacher refers to Leibniz’s claim that this is the best of all possible worlds and notes, with a remarkable metaphor, that this theodicy is hanging from the very thin string of the religious dogma of an omniscient and omnipotent God/creator.¹⁶ Even the most resolute optimists no longer deny the reality of pain (*Unlust*) and their praise of the world is marked by a sense of ‘in spite of everything’ (*trotz alledem und alledem*), which is why she suggests the static superlative ‘*Optimismus*’ be replaced by the more dynamic comparative ‘*Meliorismus*’ (1888: 2), the philosophy holding that, by interfering in natural processes, human beings can bring about progress, that is improvements over the natural state of things. Beckett wrote the neologism ‘*Pejorismus*’ next to this line on the facing page, which would be the opposite, holding that humanity is nothing to be boasting about since human interference can bring about serious regress vis-à-vis the natural processes.¹⁷ The hypothesis that our world might be the worst rather than the best of all possible worlds may lead to a static pessimism. Beckett’s ‘pejorism’ is more dynamic, but it does not imply progress, nor necessarily regress. He preferred the word ‘gress’ or ‘mere gress’, because of its ‘purity from destination and hence from schedule’ (*LSB I* 186). In his ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook (UoR MS 3000, 45v), Beckett also jotted down the terms ‘meliorism / pejorism’ on the page that faces the beginning of a cluster of excerpts from Fritz Mauthner’s *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (qtd. in Van Hulle and Nixon 2013: 155). This *Kritik* was one of the first tools in Beckett’s logoclastic aesthetic, after he had formulated it in his letter to Axel Kaun of July 1937 as an attempt to bore holes in language, metaphorically presented as a veil (*LSB I* 518) – a key metaphor, possibly inspired by Schopenhauer’s reference to the Indian image of the ‘veil of Maya’. Mauthner’s critique of language adds a linguistic element to the quest for the worst, namely:

(2) the awareness of the impossibility to *say* ‘this is the worst’.¹⁸ Mauthner’s linguistic scepticism was based on the assumption of the identity of human knowledge and language. Building on Darwin’s theory of evolution, Mauthner suggests we should acknowledge that our senses just happened to evolve in a particular way (*Zufallssinne*) and that, consequently, our brainpower is simply an accidental intellect (*Zufallsvernunft*).¹⁹ Similarly, our language can never contribute to knowledge of the world, according to Mauthner, for we can only experience what we know, what is already contained in our vocabulary.²⁰

But the question is whether all the facets of Beckett’s early, pre-war poetics remained intact and applicable to his postwar writings. At least some aspects, such as the Schopenhauerian idealistic aesthetics, seem to disappear or be criticized in the postwar works. Ulrich Pothast discerns a break with Schopenhauer’s aesthetics (though not with his world view) after the war. Whereas in the early 1930s, Beckett still believed there was both an object of art (the totality of a past experience) and an artistic subject (the artist who, in a state of ‘will-lessness’ is granted contact with ‘true reality’), according to Pothast he dropped this ‘dualist’ outlook in his postwar aesthetics and no longer assumed two entities that had to be brought together. Instead, ‘there is just one process which in the end is called “failing”’ (2008: 188).

Nonetheless, this did not constitute a complete departure from Schopenhauer. For even without artistic object there was still the obligation to express. This obligation was in line with Schopenhauer’s notion of the ‘*pensum*’ (which Beckett introduced in his essay *Proust* and which frequently recurs in the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* and *L’Innommable*). So, as Pothast notes, Beckett did not turn away from Schopenhauer in general; he only took his distance from Schopenhauer’s idealist aesthetics. This also implied a distance from the belief in the possibility of a sudden and striking realization (revelation, epiphany, moment of being) that marked several of the high modernists’ aesthetics.

Proust’s revelations are a case in point: in his copy of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Beckett marked a few passages about the white and red hawthorns as ‘Rev. 5 prepared’ (Proust 1928: 200-1), announcing the fifth ‘revelation’, the narrator’s important aesthetic experience relating to the composer Vinteuil’s works, the white hawthorn standing for his sonata, the pink hawthorn for the septet.²¹ The discovery of the pink hawthorn after having enjoyed the white variety is compared to knowing the sonata and discovering the septet with similarly renewed enjoyment. This is one of

the most directly Schopenhauerian aesthetic moments in Proust as it suggests the possibility of attaining the so-called ‘Ideas’ through music and momentarily tearing the ‘veil of Maya’ apart. Even though, like Schopenhauer, Proust is known as a pessimistic writer, his aesthetic has an optimistic streak. The comparison with the hawthorns becomes such an important leitmotif in Proust’s work that it can hardly be a coincidence that Beckett introduces them when Molloy is lying down beside his bicycle in the ditch, where the white hawthorn stoops towards him. But instead of triggering a powerful ‘*mémoire involontaire*’ or a ‘moment of being’, any epiphanic potential is smothered by Molloy’s deadpan remark: ‘unfortunately I don’t like the smell of hawthorn’ (*Mo* 24).²² Beckett thus effectively undermines the optimistic streak that is still pervasive in several key modernist aesthetics.

Similarly, Beckett employs another intertextual reference to erode these aesthetics: the Shakespearian leitmotif ‘Fear no more the heat of the sun’ from *Mrs. Dalloway*, mentioned above. The leitmotif’s suggestion of a ‘deeper’ connection between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, in terms of both androgyny and death,²³ is again smothered in *Happy Days*, where Winnie and Willie’s decomposed version of the leitmotif is in effect reduced to a hearing test:

WINNIE: [...] Can you hear me? [*Pause.*] I beseech you, Willie, just say yes or no, can you hear me, just yes or nothing.

Pause.

WILLIE: Yes.

WINNIE: [*Turning front, same voice.*] And now?

WILLIE: [*Irritated.*] Yes.

WINNIE: [*Less loud.*] And now?

WILLIE: [*More irritated.*] Yes.

WINNIE: [*Still less loud.*] And now? [*A little louder.*] And now?

WILLIE: [*Violently.*] Yes!

WINNIE: [*Same voice.*] Fear no more the heat o’ the sun. [*Pause.*] Did you hear that?

WILLIE: [*Irritated.*] Yes.

WINNIE: [*Same voice.*] What? [*Pause.*] What?

WILLIE: [*More irritated.*] Fear no more.

[*Pause.*]

WINNIE: [*Same voice.*] No more what? [*Pause.*] Fear no more what?

WILLIE: [*Violently.*] Fear no more!

WINNIE: [*Normal voice, gabbled.*] Bless you Willie I do appreciate your goodness. (*HD* 15)

In an earlier version, Willie still replied by quoting the entire line.²⁴ The published versions insist on the crumbling of ‘the old style’, breaking the intertextual straws at which Winnie tries to grasp. If the modernist aesthetic of epiphanies, moments of being and involuntary memories can be regarded as a remnant of the Leibnizian theodicy, its optimism and ‘language of uplift’²⁵ shrinks like Winnie on the mound (‘*mamelon*’) of *Happy Days*.

Pejorism enacted

But does this imply that Beckett is not a modernist? Not necessarily. Beckett’s negative modernism is to modernism what Adorno’s negative dialectics means with regard to Hegel’s dialectics and philosophy of history. In order to implement his poetics of pejorism, Beckett applied a technique he admired in Joyce’s late style: *enactment*. In his first published essay, ‘Dante...Bruno.Vico...Joyce’, Beckett used the example of Joyce’s neologism ‘in twosome twiminds’ to express the notion of ‘doubt’ (*Dis* 28). Instead of using the English language, which according to Beckett was ‘abstracted to death’, Joyce expressed doubt by enacting it, by making his language *be* in two minds, and not just once but twice. The famous conclusion – ‘His writing is not *about* something, *it is that something itself*’ (27) – has led H. Porter Abbott to speak of an art of *isness* and an art of *aboutness* (2013: 92). For Beckett, the ‘bad’ example of *aboutness* was none of the modernists, but Honoré de Balzac. In his TCD lectures he told his students that the problem with Balzac was that he always explained everything: ‘If Balzac treated this he’d establish train of motives & explain it all’ (TCD MIC 60, 27).²⁶ In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Balzac is similarly criticized,²⁷ but the problem with *Dream* is that it did so by *explaining* Balzac’s urge to explain. Similarly, it also explained Belacqua’s aesthetic instead of enacting it. Gradually, however, Beckett did find a way to implement the aesthetic of inaudibilities, of the experience ‘between the phrases’, of the ‘compositions eaten away with terrible silences’ à la Beethoven (*D* 139), by *enacting* rather than *explaining* his poetics of the ‘Unwort’ (*Dis* 54). What exactly this ‘unword’ stood for in Beckett’s developing poetics is hard to pinpoint, but apart from the logoclastic impulse the negative affix also suggests a connotation with Keats’s ‘negative capability’. This capability ‘of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats 1966: 40-1) involves the ability to live with the notion of ‘unknowability’ or what H. Porter Abbott calls the ‘cognitive

sublime' (2013: 35), which 'involves the most extreme type of unknowability – the inability of the inquiring intelligence to account for its particularity as an inquiring intelligence' (23). Abbott investigates the '*experience of unknowing*' in literature (22) and draws attention to Beckett's remarkable capability of devising textual mechanisms through which the reader *experiences* not just the character's consciousness (40), but above all the unknowability of that consciousness. According to Abbott, Beckett achieves this effect 'by keeping his reader from premature closure, from settling on meaning when meaning can only be approached, not arrived at' (88). With his enactive 'techniques of total immersion' (154) Beckett manages to make his readers feel this unknowability, instead of explaining it à la Balzac and slipping into *aboutness*.

Obviously, enactment in literature is not an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon, but in combination with linguistic scepticism and a preoccupation with the materiality of language, this enactment of a profound dissatisfaction with received language may be a crucial element in our investigation into Beckett's relation to modernism.²⁸ With this volume on Beckett and modernism, we would like to move beyond the point of labelling (is Beckett a 'modernist', a 'late modernist', a 'postmodernist', a 'metamodernist'?) and instead examine the different ways in which Beckett interacted with the broad intellectual and artistic climate commonly referred to as 'modernism', taking Susan Stanford Friedman's 'definitional excursions' into account: 'Modernism requires tradition to "make it new". Tradition comes into being only as it is rebelled against. Definitional excursions into the meanings of *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism* begin and end in reading the specificities of these contradictions.' (2001: 510)

That is indeed what the contributors to this volume have in common: they read and discuss 'the specificities of these contradictions' to define not just the meanings of the terms modern, modernism, late modernism, but above all the specificities of Samuel Beckett's works against the background of modernism.

Modernism after postmodernism

While the notion of 'postmodernist fiction' is being archived, put to rest and 'historicized' (see above; Ning 2013: 265), the term 'modernism' is experiencing a remarkable revival. In *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, Steven Connor notes that, 'for a time, Beckett became the exemplary postmodernist' when

‘during the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed to make more sense for critics to use Beckett’s works to make the case for some kind of break within modernism, moving beyond the forms of order and authority represented by high and classic modernism into a world of unlimited contingency’ (2014: 2). But with hindsight, after the ‘generalised decompression’ of the idea of the postmodern, Connor also recognizes that

there has always been something strained about the attempt to associate the straitened means and subjects of Beckett’s work with the opulent pluralising and opening out of sensibility that was held to be characteristic of postmodernism. (2-3)

Still, postmodernism has had an impact on our views of modernism. As Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers note in *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*: ‘The postmodernist critiques of modernism helped energize the formation of the New Modernist Studies, and at the same time, postmodernist projects such as ethnic studies and postcolonial studies have been widely incorporated into it’ (2015: 227). In that sense, the so-called ‘New Modernist Studies’ almost appear to be a form of *récupération*, an appropriation of originally subversive ideas by the mainstream. Latham and Rogers define New Modernist Studies as referring ‘very broadly to scholarship produced after the postmodernist attacks on modernism; much of this work challenges the previous, longstanding critical axioms about modernism’s commitment to apolitical, ahistorical formal experimentation and its reliance on myth, allusion, and difficulty’ (225). Challenging these axioms was ‘an immense project, a paradigm-shifting transitional phase in the history of the idea of modernism’ (106), resulting in a canon that became less and less knowable, ‘in part because it had not concluded in 1939 or 1945 or 1950, but remained instead a central part of contemporary debates’ (105).

By including other participating agents, the modernist canon expanded and what started as a passionate criticism of New Critical modernism ended up rehabilitating modernism as a subversive paradigm with renewed vitality. But again, the danger is in the neatness of identifications: if Beckett’s works are turned into culturally and politically correct endorsements of whatever happens to be the most current creed or trend in academia, the danger is that ‘modernism after postmodernism’ becomes a new conformist doctrine. Instead of trying to find ways in

which Beckett's works conform to the most fashionable academic theoretical frameworks, it is also necessary to examine their power to withstand them.

It is undeniable that postmodernism's abandonment of grand narratives and the development of a great variety of theories after New Criticism – from deconstruction to feminist theory, postcolonialism and various forms of capital-T Theory – have left their mark on the way we understand modernist fiction. All the more reason, therefore, to reassess Beckett's relation to modernism and to examine the traces that postmodernism has left on our understanding of modernism. To undertake this reassessment, the present volume focuses on a wide range of topics: Beckett's relation to other modernists (see the contributions by Sam Slote, José Francisco Fernández, Andy Wimbush, William Davies, S.E. Gontarski) and the literary canon (Paul Fagan, Onno Kusters), his Irish legacy (Feargal Whelan), his interest in other art forms (Evelyne Clavier, Galina Kiryushina), and his fascination for the human mind (Ulrika Maude, Olga Beloborodova and Pim Verhulst). A number of contributors attempt to redefine Beckett's modernism in different terms – from 'late' (Shane Weller) or 'belated' (Conor Carville) to 'modified' modernism (Jean-Michel Rabaté) – in order to indicate, with the benefit of hindsight, how Beckett's oeuvre is to be situated within the modernist continuum. This 'modernism after postmodernism' in relation to Beckett's works is the overarching theme of the present volume.

Notes

1. For the same special issue of *Narrative*, Brian McHale wrote an Afterword, called 'Reconstructing Postmodernism', in which he notes that 'even as postmodernist fiction has waned in its North American and European homelands [...], it seems to have flourished elsewhere' (2013: 362).
2. In a chapter called 'The Birth of Irish Modernism from the Spirit of Nietzscheanism (Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett)', Jean-Michel Rabaté suggests that, after Yeats and Joyce, Beckett 'was ushering in a different Irish modernism', 'a later modernism', presented against the contrastive background of Nietzsche's 'will to power': 'Beckett praised the "un-will to power" leading to radical impotence as the solution to the world's quandaries' (2016a: 67).

3. According to Stein, she wrote her work (referring specifically to the famous line ‘rose is a rose is a rose’ from the poem ‘Sacred Emily’) because she was dissatisfied with extant language, a language made of ‘wornout’ and ‘stale literary words’ which seemed to have lost ‘the excitingness of pure being’ (qtd. in ‘Editor’s Foreword’, Stein 2004: 7).
4. Beckett noted these moments especially in vol. 1 of *Du Côté de chez Swann* (1928) and vol. 2 of *Le Temps retrouvé* (1929). See the *Beckett Digital Library*, <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/PRO-ALA-1.html> and <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/PRO-ALA-16.html>.
5. ‘But music, if we may use a spatial metaphor, is as close to the Will qua essence of this world as the Ideas are’ (Pothast 2008: 65). The spatial metaphor is also employed when it comes to defining what lies beyond the so-called ‘veil of Maya’: seeing through the veil of Maya is to ‘reach a higher level of knowledge’ (71).
6. ‘But against the palpably sophistical proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the *worst* of all possible worlds. For possible means not what we may picture in our imagination, but what can actually exist and last. Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of continuing to exist. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.’ (Schopenhauer 1966b: 583)
7. In his ‘Philosophy Notes’ (see Feldman 2006), Beckett wrote several paragraphs on Leibniz’s theodicy and ‘optimism’: ‘Problem of theodicy reduced to *why did God permit metaphysical evil?*’ (TCD 10967/212; qtd. in Tønning 2007: 213). For a thorough discussion of ‘Beckett’s Leibniz’, see Tønning 2007: 205.
8. John Pilling briefly notes that at least three phrases in the poem derive directly from Mauthner (Pilling 2006: 163). The phrases (in bold below) are based on the following passages from three successive subsections under chapter XIII (‘Sprachwissenschaft und Ethnologie’) in volume II of the *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (‘Zur Sprachwissenschaft’):
Periodische Eiszeiten

‘Haben die Geologen recht mit ihrer Aufstellung von zwei getrennten Eiszeiten, so hätten wir in ihnen einen Zeitraum von rund 30 000 bis 40 000 Jahren bemessen. Nun ist aber nachgewiesen, dass die erhaltenen organischen Reste der Eiszeit mit den jetzt lebenden Tieren und Pflanzen zusammenstimmen, dass also der Mensch, der schon des **Mammuts** Zeitgenosse war, vor der Eiszeit auf der Erde gelebt haben konnte.’ (Mauthner 1923, vol. II: 41)

Adhémar "Révolutions de la mer"

‘Adhémar erklärt die **Eiszeiten** nämlich nicht etwa aus der bloßen Tatsache der größeren und geringeren Erwärmung. Er nimmt die Erscheinung zu Hilfe, dass während einer Periode von 10½ Jahrtausenden der kältere Erdpol eine so ungeheuerliche Masse Eis um sich versammelt, dass dadurch die Verschiebung des Schwerpunktes der Erde erfolgt. Die Verschiebung will Adhémar auf mehr als 1½ Kilometer berechnen. Diese Verschiebung des Schwerpunktes wieder hat ganz mechanisch die unverhältnismäßige Ansammlung von Wasser auf der kälteren Erdhälfte zur Folge, wie wir sie jetzt, das heißt nach etwa 11 000 Jahren, auf der südlichen Hälfte jedes Globus im Bilde sehen können’ (Mauthner 1923, vol. II: 644). Beckett also took notes from this section in the ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook (UoR MS 3000, 54r).

Zeitdauer der Sprachgeschichte – Zeit der Zahlengeschichte

‘Ich habe vorhin darauf hingewiesen, dass ein Eichbaum unter Umständen, das heißt naturgemäß, älter wird als im Durchschnitt die Sprache eines Menschengolkes. Niemand zweifelt beim Anblick einer tausendjährigen Eiche, die mit ihrem Rauschen die uns unverständliche Sprache Karls des Großen begleitet hat, dass sie von der Frucht eines Baumes stamme, der vor ihr da war, und der wieder von einem anderen, und so ruhig um 1000 **Eichbaumgenerationen** zurück. Warum zögert man, einer Sprache so zahlreiche Ahnen zuzutrauen? Weil sie nicht so unverändert geblieben ist wie ein Eichbaum? Gerade die Veränderung ist ja sonst ein Zeichen der Zeitdauer’ (Mauthner 1923, vol. II: 648). Beckett translated this phrase as ‘a generation of oaks’ in the ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook (UoR MS 3000, 55r).

9. Instead of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis logic of Hegel’s dialectics and the universal history based on a totalizing organizational principle, whereby ‘*humanité*’ stands for the belief in the steady progress of mankind, Adorno’s

alternative ‘logic of disintegration’ reflects his suspicion of any totalizing narrative that easily lends itself to totalitarian thinking, raising ‘one particular to the status of the universal, which then becomes privileged at the expense of all other particularities’ (Wolfe 2008). Instead of the hope for positive transcendence or ‘Aufhebung’, the only hope Adorno’s ‘negative dialectics’ offer is that ‘it will not come to rest in itself’: ‘It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope’ (Adorno 1973: 406).

10. See especially the chapter ‘Auschwitz as Negative Theodicy’ in Bernstein 2001: 372-84.
11. Preserved at Harvard University’s Houghton Library (HU MS THR 70.3).
12. Noted by Beckett in respectively the ‘Sottisier’ Notebook (UoR MS 2901, 14v) and the ‘Sam Francis’ Notebook (UoR MS 2926, 17v). See also Atik 2001: 80.
13. These acts of pejoration are especially noticeable in the genesis of *L’Innommable* and its translation into English (Van Hulle and Weller 2014: 209).
14. In the *Revue de Trévoux*, Voltaire was accused of ‘*pessimisme*’, as Joshua Foa Dienstag notes (2009: 9).
15. See the *Beckett Digital Library*, <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/PLU-PES.html>.
16. ‘Die Behauptung der Welt als der besten der möglichen Welten hängt an dem brüchigen Faden des religiösen Dogmas von der Allweisheit und Allmacht eines persönlichen Gott-Schöpfers’ (Plümacher 1888: 2).
17. See the *Beckett Digital Library*, <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/PLU-PES.html>.
18. Both the quest for the worst and the awareness of the impossibility to *say* ‘this is the worst’ are enacted in Beckett’s oeuvre and arguably reach a climax in *Worstward Ho*.
19. ‘dass die Vernunft in der Menschheit *geworden* ist, so geworden, wie sie ist, dass sie aber auch anders hätte werden können als sie geworden ist’ (‘Whoroscope’ Notebook, UoR MS 3000, 55r), ‘dass unsere Vernunft (sie ist ja Sprache) nur eine Zufallsvernunft sein kann, weil sie auf Zufallssinnen beruht’ (55v; cf. Mauthner 1923, vol. II: 689–90).

20. ‘Was die Menschen sprechen, das kann niemals zur Welterkenntnis beitragen. Wer spricht, der lernt nur seine Wahrnehmung auswendig; wer hört, kann nie mehr erfahren, als was er weiss, als was schon in seinem Wortschatz enthalten ist. Neues kann nur wahrgenommen u. gezeigt werden. Gesagt kann es nicht werden.’ (Mauthner 1923, vol. II: 309ff.; ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook, UoR MS 3000, 50v)
21. See the *Beckett Digital Library*, <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/PRO-ALA-1.html>.
22. For a more detailed analysis of this passage in *Molloy* in relation to Proust, see O’Reilly, Van Hulle and Verhulst 2017: 173-5.
23. In Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (IV.2), the dirge is sung for the King’s daughter, Imogen, dressed as a boy called ‘Fidele’, who is believed to be dead, but turns out to be only temporarily drugged.
24. Beckett quoted this exchange in a letter to Barbara Bray on 10 October 1960, while he was still working on the first draft of the play in the ‘Eté 56’ Notebook (UoR MS 1227-7-7-1): ‘She (very soft) Fear no more the heat of the sun. (Pause. Do.) Did you hear that? / He (very soft) Yes / She (“ ”) What? / He (“ ”) Fear no more the heat of the sun’ (*LSB III* 365).
25. Phrase coined by Andrew Gibson in his lecture “‘An intellectual justification of unhappiness’: Beckett’s Aesthetic War on the Theodicies’ during the London Beckett Seminar Conference ‘Samuel Beckett: Performance/Art/Writing’ (University of London, 26-28 May 2016).
26. Quoted in O’Reilly, Van Hulle and Verhulst 2017: 226. One of Beckett’s counterexamples was Dostoevsky, through his reading of André Gide’s book *Dostoïevsky* (1923).
27. As the narrator of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* explains, ‘The procédé that seems all falsity, that of Balzac, for example, and the divine Jane and many others, consists in dealing with the vicissitudes, or absence of vicissitudes, of character in this backwash, as though that were the whole story. [...] To the item thus artificially immobilized in a backwash of composure precise value can be assigned’ (*D119*). Balzac is said to be ‘absolute master of his material’ (119).

28. Gertrude Stein is also a good example of a modernist writer who expresses her theories of writing through the process of composition, instead of explaining them, as she demonstrated for instance in 'Composition as Explanation' (published by the Hogarth Press in 1926).