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Absurd Consequences: Beckett and Berkeley

Absurdní konsekvence: Beckett a Berkeley

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Absurd Consequences: Beckett and Berkeley

Samuel Beckett has long been known as a philosophical author, who drew on philosophical work to create haunting images and intricate texts that are felt by later thinkers to express so well their own questioning of the foundations of Western thought. On the other hand, Beckett's own interests lay with philosophical writers of the 17th and 18th centuries. This thesis looks at the way Beckett infuses the tenets and metaphors of the 18th-century philosopher George Berkeley with new meanings that transform early modern theories into artistic works that continue to appeal to audiences and thinkers to this day.

Research into Beckett's philosophical sources was an important subject from early Beckett criticism onwards. Significant early works include Ruby Cohn's "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett" (1964);¹ John Fletcher's "Beckett and the Philosophers" (1965);² and Edouard Morot-Sir, "Samuel Beckett and Cartesian Emblems" (1976).³ What is common to these essays and other research published at the time is the identification of Beckett's thinking with a Cartesian stance. The increasing amount of archive materials available to researchers, including letters, his personal notes, and the books left in his library after his death, has had a tremendous impact by showing that Descartes was only one of many philosophers Beckett studies and drew upon.

Samuel Beckett's interest in Berkeley has become common knowledge in Beckett studies, backed by archive materials, direct allusions and the occasional mentions in the criticism. There have been several attempts to provide an account of Beckett's engagement with Berkeley. These include Anthony Uhlmann's chapter "Beckett,

¹ Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," *Criticism* 6:1 (1964): 33-43.

² John Fletcher, "Beckett and the Philosophers," *Comparative Literature* 17:1 (1965): 43-56.

³ Edouard Morot-Sir, "Samuel Beckett and Cartesian Emblems," *Samuel Beckett: The Art of Rhetoric*, eds. Edouard Morot-Sir, et al. (Chapel Hill: U.N.C. Dept. of Romance Languages, 1976) 25-104.

Berkeley, Bergson, *Film: The Intuition Image*” in his book *The Philosophical Image*⁴, Branka Arsić’s *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)*,⁵ an early article by Jean-Michel Rabaté “Berkeley entre Joyce et Beckett”,⁶ “Beckett and Berkeley: A Reconsideration”⁷ by Frederik Smith, and the latest contribution is Steven Matthews’ “‘The Books are in the Study as Before’: Samuel Beckett’s Berkeley”.⁸ These studies unfortunately opted for a short form of a single chapter or magazine article, thus failing to give an extensive account. Moreover, archival materials released recently provide many more details on what philosophical sources Beckett was familiar with, his engagement with different thinkers, and his evaluation of them. This thesis proves that Beckett spent time and effort on reading Berkeley and secondary materials about him, even though he mostly kept silence on his interest in the philosopher. It studies themes and images taken directly from Berkeley’s writings, which regularly appear in Beckett’s texts across different media, from the 1930s to at least the late 1960s. By following the different appearances of Berkeleian themes in Beckett it is possible to see that Beckett read Berkeley’s text against the grain, consistently ignoring the spiritual realm and taking a pessimistic and paranoid view. What Berkeley advances as a praise of God, Beckett renders as a threat from hostile forces. In Frederik Smith’s poignant formulation, Beckett “reads Berkeley cruelly”.⁹

Using archive materials it was possible to reconstruct a more accurate timeline of Beckett’s introduction to and reading of Berkeley than was hitherto available. The common assumption that A. A. Luce must have discussed Berkeley with his young student was shown to be unfounded. Beckett’s interest in Berkeley was awakened in Dublin social and intellectual circles, where the Irish philosopher was widely

⁴ Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ Branka Arsić, *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁶ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Berkeley entre Joyce et Beckett,” *Études Irlandaises* 10 (1986): 57-76.

⁷ Frederik N. Smith, “Beckett and Berkeley: A Reconsideration,” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui* 7 *Beckett vs. Beckett*, eds. Marius Buning, et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998) 331-348.

⁸ Steven Matthews, “‘The Books are in the Study as Before’: Samuel Beckett’s Berkeley,” *Sofia Philosophical Review Special Issue: Beckett/ Philosophy* 1:1 (2011): 146-168. It was later reprinted in Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani (eds.) *Beckett/ Philosophy* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2015) 211-234. References will be made to the later edition.

⁹ Smith, 334.

discussed at the time. Beckett first read a work by the famous philosopher in 1933, starting with the *Commonplace Book* on the recommendation of his acquaintance Joseph Hone. He went on to read *Principles of Human Knowledge* at an uncertain date, and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in 1935. Dating these readings is important for any argument regarding Beckett's familiarity with Berkeley, especially in the early work. Beckett's knowledge of Berkeley extended even further than the primary texts, since he was also familiarized himself with other interpretations of Berkeley through his summaries of Windelband's *History of Philosophy* and his reading of other philosophers and commentators. The archive materials, in total, point to a consistent interest in the philosopher and a good familiarity with his major works alongside their contemporary interpretations.

Beckett's interest in Berkeley is reflected in his work throughout the years. This thesis shows that Berkeley's philosophy is an important source for *Murphy* rather than a passing reference inserted to display Beckett's erudition. It also discusses *Film* and its script which takes *esse est percipi* as its basic premise. The span of years between the early novel written in 1936 and the film produced in 1964 in itself indicates a lasting interest. In addition to these works whose connection to Berkeley is well-known, the thesis proposes new interpretations of texts that are informed by the philosopher without mentioning his name, especially the theoretical text *Three Dialogues between Samuel Beckett and George Duthuit* whose close resemblance to *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* was occasionally mentioned but not analysed in depth before. The short plays *Act without Words 1* and *Rough for Theatre 1* were also shown to be heavily indebted to Berkeleyan themes and images.

Additionally, themes taken from Berkeley appear in many of Beckett's texts even when they do not constitute the main source of inspiration. Chapter 4 illustrates how the anti-representational stance Beckett adopts from Berkeley plays out in the Trilogy and its anti-mimetic strategies. Chapter 5 explores the image as an interface between the sensual and the mind, as well as the play of perception between observer and observed, in the theatre plays *Play* and *Rockaby* and the late novel *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Chapter 6 traces parallels between blindness in Berkeley and the numerous blind people in Beckett's writings, including *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Watt*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *All the Fall* and the late prose fragments *Fizzles*. For most of these works, the thesis proposes a Berkeleyan angle of interpretation for the first time, highlighting aspects of the texts that have hitherto gone unnoticed.

Taken together, it is possible to see a consistent pattern of a peculiarly Beckettian interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. Beckett once told Harold Hobson "I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them."¹⁰ This sentence may characterise much of Beckett's reworking of Berkeley – he keeps the shape of the ideas while subjecting them to very different premises. It is possible to discern three characteristic ways in which Beckett creatively misreads Berkeley. One is materialistic renditions of Berkeley's philosophy that treat people as objects rather than spirits, the other is attributing malevolence to divine guidance, while the third highlights the difficulties of perception.

Berkeley's presence in *Murphy* can be seen as paradigmatic of the first tendency. Berkeley's philosophical system is deemed to be an unhelpful way of facing up to the privations of life, an attempt to ignore the problems encountered by the characters rather than courageously face them. Yet one aspect of Berkeley's work shapes the existence of the main character, i.e. the need for perception by the other, as in Berkeley's famous maxim: *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. The need to be seen is essential for Murphy but also to numerous other characters in Beckett's writing for page and stage. The need for interpersonal confirmation of one's existence is a constant motif in Beckett, which tallies well with Berkeley's philosophy.

As pointed out throughout this thesis, Beckett distorts the famous maxim. For Berkeley, as Beckett was well aware, there are two types of substances – ideas whose existence depends on perception, and spirits which are impossible to perceive and whose existence consists in active perceiving. By ignoring this distinction Beckett eliminates the spiritual existence of human beings, reducing them to mere bodies. Murphy's need for Mr. Endon's approval therefore expresses a materialist view of humanity that reduces a person to his or her body. A similar view of people as objects of perception also appears in the theatre plays *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Play* as discussed in Chapter 5. *Ill Seen Ill Said* adds another perspective on the maxim – the suffering of the perceiver who cannot break away from the existence it perceives.

Treating people as ideas rather than spirits opens the possibility of self-perception where the mind is perceiver and perceived at the same time. For Berkeley, self-

¹⁰ Harold Hobson, "Samuel Beckett. Dramatist of the Year," *International Theatre Annual* 1 (1956) 153.

perception is an impossible and contradictory notion, and yet plays a major role in Beckett. This is true for *Film*, usually considered Beckett's most Berkeleyan work, as well as *Rockaby* which is not usually read in relation to the Irish philosopher. The quality of self-perception is different in each work – in *Film* it is a threatening possibility that materialises in the end in a moment of horror while in *Rockaby* it is accepted with resignation and a growing sense of inner peace. In both texts Beckett uses Berkeleyan tropes to render an experience that is fundamentally alien to Berkeley's world view.

Alongside the materialistic reinterpretation of Berkeley's idealism, Beckett also undermines the religious optimism that informs Berkeley's writing. This tendency can already be seen in *Three Dialogues* where Berkeley's anti-representational philosophy of matter is being harnessed by Beckett for artistic purposes. Both authors reject external existence in favour of a direct relation of presentation, with Beckett adopting a similar title and structure to Berkeley's text. The difference lies in the certainty and constancy of the relation. For Berkeley, the denial of matter is no great loss since God safeguards the existence of the world and the reliability of the laws of nature which allow human beings to live and thrive. For Beckett, on the other hand, there are no certainties or rules that can be followed and the artist must work in the absence of stable relations. The language of absurdity and the threat of madness which Beckett's *Three Dialogues* conjures up clearly point to the dangers of pursuing such aesthetics in a Godless world.

Beckett reinterprets the relation between spirits and ideas as a psychological relation between individuals and an unknown entity that they depend on, but tends to fail them. The unseen provider of objects in *Act without Words I* is a malevolent divinity who gives the protagonist false hopes that are disappointed time after time. In *Film* the observer is a pursuer to be feared, while in *Play* the spot light is an interrogator that torments the heads who are forced to tell their stories without assurance that they are being heard or that their torment will ever end. A more conciliatory relation can be discerned in the late work where the observer comes into focus. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* we look at a woman through the eyes of an observer who wants nothing more than to watch her, conveying a melancholy and nostalgic mood that indicates a community of suffering, without threat or ill-will.

Finally, both Beckett and Berkeley were highly interested in visual images and the way our mind interacts with them, albeit with different emphases. Berkeley was

trying to account for our ability to intuitively decipher the meaning of visual input, while Beckett creates images that are opaque and difficult to understand, as can be gleaned even from his predilection for dark and mute colours. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* the narrating voice attempts to perceive and interpret what it sees of a woman inhabiting a certain area, but its ability to see is limited and the interpretation is uncertain. Trouble with sight and interpreting visual data also afflict Beckett's numerous blind men, an interest he shared with Berkeley. The blind figures of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *All that Fall* not only lack the ability to see the world, but they are also wanting in empathy and consideration for other people. Read alongside Berkeley's theory of the visual as a divine language that God is using to guide us, Beckett's blind men are completely without guidance on both the sensual and the spiritual levels.

An important alternative is presented in *Rough for Theatre I* where two unnamed characters, the blind A and crippled B, attempt to form a union in order to compensate for each other's deficiencies and fail. Their single moment of union can be seen as a dramatization of a philosophical problem that Berkeley addresses in several works – the Molyneux problem. An influential philosophical riddle, the Molyneux problem asks whether a blind man made to see would be able to distinguish by sight object that were known to him only by touch. Beckett's play brings together two beggars whose union can allow each of them to rely on the abilities of the other, giving the blind man, in a sense, the ability to see. Berkeley has emphasized the need for practice and adjustment in the process of gaining the ability to understand visual sense impressions, while Beckett's beggars fail exactly because they are unwilling to invest the necessary effort and time to coordinate their movements and intentions. Despite their ultimate failure, however, the blind beggar A remains a neutral figure, indicating a turning away from the malevolent blind men of the earlier plays.

The affinities between Beckett's writing and Berkeley's philosophy are apparent throughout Beckett's work. They can be seen to be embedded within the atheistic, pessimist and materialist convictions of the 20th century. Beckett didn't simply copy images and arguments from Berkeley but re-imagined his early modern philosophy in a world that was completely alien to it, where the horrors of WWII and other events of recent history stand in bleak contrast to the Good Bishop's optimistic outlook. This reinterpretation brings the 18th century concepts into our own era in an uncomfortable and jarring manner which forms part of the haunting atmosphere of Beckett's work.

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Academic Activities

Publications

- Adar, Einat. “*Or Percipere*: How Berkeleyan Is Samuel Beckett’s *Film*?” *Tradition and Modernity: New Essays in Irish Studies*. Eds. Radvan Markus, et al. Prague: Faculty of Arts - Charles University in Prague, 2014. 39-50.
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- . “From Irish Philosophy to Irish Theatre: The Blind (Wo)Man Made to See.” *Estudios Irlandeses* 12. 2017: 1-11.

Selected Conference Papers

- 2013: Beckett and the 'State' of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
- 2013: Tradition and Modernity: The 3rd International Postgraduate Conference in Irish Studies, Prague, Czech Republic.
- 2015: Metamorphoses: III International Flann O'Brien Conference, Prague, Czech Republic.
- 2015: Guest Speaker at Staff-Postgraduate Seminar Series, School of English, Trinity College Dublin.
- 2016: Beckett and Modernism, Antwerp, Belgium.
- 2016: Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities, Vienna, Austria.
- 2017: Acting Out: IV International Flann O'Brien Conference, Salzburg, Austria.
- 2017: Beckett beyond 'the normal,' Halifax, Canada.