

Absurd Consequences: Beckett and Berkeley by Einat Adar

Opponent: Em. Professor Matthew Feldman

This is an insightful and compelling doctoral project. “Absurd Consequences: Beckett and Berkeley” builds upon, and extends, empirical / primary source scholarship upon Samuel Beckett’s reading and notetaking on western philosophy. It then turns toward salient interpretations regarding the significance of Beckett’s connection with his fellow Irishman, Bishop George Berkeley, deriving from the former’s 1930s readings and then charted across both his pre- and post- Nobel Prize (1969) writings. The knowledge of Beckett’s texts and their intersection with Berkeley’s Early Modern philosophy of idealist immaterialism is impressive throughout, while the argument for their interaction in specific works by Beckett (notably *Murphy*, *Molloy*, *The Unnamable*, *Film*, *Rockaby*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and above all, *Film* and the “Three Dialogues”) is convincing. For these reasons, Einat Adar’s chapters collectively represent a **clearly passing work that should be awarded a PhD.**

As a whole, moreover, “Absurd Consequences” is largely well-written, well-researched and well-argued. The final bibliography makes clear the wide-reading characterising this project, especially that from within the discipline of Beckett Studies (and in particular, the limited work to date on Beckett’s readings and influence from Berkeley). There are places where the combination of archival research, secondary source analysis and nuanced evaluation are excellent: this is certainly the case in the introduction and first chapter; the second chapter on *Murphy*; but also, in the approach to Samuel Beckett’s ‘Three Dialogues’ and several other places (such as the discussion of *Film* and the thesis’ summative conclusion).

Importantly, there is an awareness throughout that Beckett’s art need show no *philosophical fidelity* to Bishop George Berkeley’s system of thought – especially that espoused in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* – but instead can take *artistic license* with these ideas via pastiche (although this is sometimes unhelpfully characterised as ‘paranoid’ rather than satirical; cf. pp.118, 127, and particularly on p. 198). Ms Adar is certainly right that what Beckett allegedly termed the ‘shape of ideas’ was what intrigued him; this is doubtless no less so than in his engagement

with Berkeley's ideas – though this point might have been driven home more clearly prior to the concluding chapter (and abstract).

Furthermore, as the first full-length study of Beckett and Berkeley there is no reason keeping this work from appearing as a monograph within the next circa twelve to eighteen months (for such a timeline, I would recommend the new ibidem / Columbia University Press series, edited by Professor Paul Stewart, 'Beckett In Company', whose remit would fit this project perfectly). Accordingly, the remainder of this External Examiner's report will be taken with suggestions for converting this thesis into a publishable monograph in Beckett Studies. **(NB: Please note that portions of the electronic .pdf text highlight in green represent typographical errors – which are largely minor, save for footnotes, which often do not italicise published titles – while other colours represent the External Examiner's points of emphasis and/or areas of interest.)**

First, relatively little use of Beckett's 'Philosophy Notes', particularly regarding selected portions on Berkeley, are in evidence here. Given Ms Adar's access to these sections, greater use of this material may be expected in a monograph; particularly in what is presently pp.24ff). Importantly, references to Beckett's demonstrable knowledge of Berkeley's 'metaphysics of inner experience' and 'extreme nominalism' (here TCD MSS 10967/207r; the latter has recently become a subject for discussion in Beckett Studies, and might also receive some analysis in this section). Similarly, other post-Cartesian philosophers consulted by Beckett – notably the Occasionalists; but also extending to Spinoza and Leibniz – might also be given some attention in this vital opening chapter, if only in terms of comparing and contrasting Berkeley's early modern philosophy with theirs).

Secondly, the overall structure needs to be either clearly chronological **or** clearly thematic (in terms of Beckett's fiction; drama and then critical writings on art and literature). As things stand, the structure is something of a mix between these two familiar approaches; for example, one might have expected discussion of *Watt* to follow the second chapter on *Murphy*, but the jump is to extended analysis of the 1949 "Three Dialogues") and thus is not chronological, *strictu sensu*. Likewise, a précis of Berkeley's key tenets might be usefully included in either the introduction or first chapter; this might too, indeed, extend to a short overview (literary and/or biographical) of Beckett's artistic development. In places greater explanation at the outset of chapters might also be 'signposted' in terms of coverage. This is

notable, for instance, in the case of the fourth chapter on the 'trilogy' of novels, but which makes only one proper reference to *Malone Dies* (cf. p. 94).

Finally, while the dogged pursuit of argumentation is admirable in this thesis, allowing for other explanations may help to nuance an ensuing monograph. For instance, the case is convincingly made for Berkeleyan influences in *Murphy* – but the Ancient Greeks are also discernable throughout this novel, as is the influence of Geulincx and others. In a similar manner, some reference to Beckett's wider interest in subject-object relations in the 1930s (bringing in Kant, Schopenhauer and others, and making greater use of the contemporaneous reviews in *Disjecta*) might actually serve to strengthen the argument, by situating Berkeley as *amongst* the leading philosophical influences on Beckett – rather than making intertextual influence something that, in places, comes close to a zero-sum equation.

In places reference to Berkeley takes a back seat to close readings of Beckett's texts. Given that this is a contribution to Beckett Studies this is fine, although gain, in places highlighting general Berkeleyan themes may help to better orient the more general reader. So too with 'artistic license' and the epistemological divergence between Berkeley and Beckett (aptly described on p.96 in the following terms: "For Berkeley, the creation and combination of ideas is a way to create and improve knowledge, but with Beckett they serve to prevent the creation of knowledge."). Repeatedly stressing the epistemological and contextual gulf between these two Irish intellectuals will, furthermore, doubtless help to underscore Beckett's use of satire and irony – but also the recourse to certain artistic tropes, such as the recurrence of veils, windows, curtains and the like to denote the well-parsed triptych subject-material / means of expression-object that is present in works across Beckett's six decades of writing.

Finally, in a monograph there may be places to highlight some of the seminal discoveries in this thesis. This pertains particularly to Beckett's later work, which is much less covered than his 'early and 'middle' periods. Here, the approach to *Ill Seen Ill Said* is both novel and makes an original contribution to knowledge. This discussion, sandwiched between the equally insightful trope of blindness in Beckett's work and the (to my knowledge) previously neglected Molyneux Problem in Beckett Studies deserve to be highlighted as the groundbreaking insights that they appear to be.