Samuel Beckett

Edited by
L. Graver and R. Federman

The Critical Heritage

SAMUEL BECKETT: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

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SAMUEL BECKETT

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

L. GRAVER AND R. FEDERMAN

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Chronological Table

1906	Samuel Barclay Beckett born on Good Friday, 13 April, at Foxrock, south of Dublin, the second son of William and Mary Roe Beckett.
1920-3	Educated at Portora Royal School, Enniskillin.
1923-7	Reads French and Italian at Trinity College, Dublin. Spends summer vacation of 1926 in France, summer vacation of 1927 in Italy.Earns BA degree in December, 1927.
1928	French tutor at Campbell College, Belfast. October - Arrives in Paris to teach in exchange program at the École Normale Supérieure. Gradually becomes involved in the literary life of Paris; meets James Joyce and editors and writers in the 'transition' circle. Does research on René Descartes.
1929	Essay called Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce appears in the anthology 'Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress,' in May, and in the June issue of 'transition.' Assumption, a 1,500-word short story, also appears in in the June 'transition.' Submits 'Whoroscope' (a monologue spoken by Descartes) in Nancy Cunard's poetry competition and wins the £10 prize.
1930	For Future Reference, a 74-line poem, appears in the June 'transition.' August - 'Whoroscope' published by the Hours Press, Paris. September - Appointed as Assistant in French at Trinity College, Dublin.
1931	19 February - 'Le Kid,' a parody of Corneille, presented at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, as one of three foreign plays staged by the Dublin University Modern Languages Society.

	5 March - 'Proust' published in London. May - Translation of Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle (in collaboration with Alfred Péron and others) appears in the 'Nouvelle Revue francaise.' Publishes four poems in 'The European Caravan: an Anthology of the New Spirit in Literature.' October - Alba, a poem, appears in 'Dublin Magazine.' December - Awarded MA degree from Trinity College, Dublin. Soon afterwards resigns his lectureship and travels in Germany.
1932	Lives for brief periods in Kassel, Paris, London and Dublin. Works on first novel, 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' (unfinished and unpublished). Two extracts, Sedendo et Quiescendo and Text, are published in 'transition' (March) and the 'New Review' (April). Dante and the Lobster, short story, published in the December issue of 'This Quarter.'
1933	Lives in Dublin and works on the stories that will make up 'More Pricks Than Kicks.' May - His cousin Peggy Sinclair dies at Wildungen. 26 June - William Beckett dies in Dublin. His son eventually receives an annuity of £200 a year. December - Makes plans to move from Dublin to London.
1934	Lives in London and tries unsuccessfully to support himself as a literary journalist. May - 'More Pricks Than Kicks' published in London by Chatto & Windus. A Case in a Thousand, a short story, and a pseudonymous article on 'Recent Irish Poetry' (signed Andrew Bellis), published in the August issue of the 'Bookman.' Christmas issue of the 'Bookman' has three reviews by Beckett on Pound, Dante and O'Casey.
1935	Writing 'Murphy' in London. September - Hears Jung lecture at the Tavistock Clinic. November - 'Echo's Bones,' a cycle of thirteen poems, published by Europa Press, Paris.
1936	Returns to Dublin and finishes 'Murphy.' Review of novel by Jack Yeats appears in the July number of 'Dublin Magazine.' October issue of 'Dublin Magazine' features Cascando, a poem. At the end of the year travels in Germany.
1937	Travels in Germany; returns to Dublin in the spring; moves to Paris in October. Works on a play about Samuel Johnson and Mrs Thrale.

	November - Testifies in Dublin at libel trial of Oliver St John Gogarty.
	December - Routledge accepts manuscript of 'Murphy' after it had been rejected by forty-two publishers.
	Beckett begins writing the poems in French that eventually appear as a twelve-poem cycle in 1946.
1938	7 January - Stabbed on the street by a Parisian pimp named Prudent. A pesser-by, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, a piano student, helps Beckett to recover. They live together and marry in 1961.
	7 March - 'Murphy' published in London.
	Ooftish, a poem, appears in the tenth anniversary issue of 'transition' (April-May).
	April - moves to apartment at 6 rue des Favorites, Paris.
	Begins work on French translation of 'Murphy.'
	September - Writes the essay Les Deux Besoins.
1939	Working on the French translation of 'Murphy.'
	When Germans invade Poland in September, Beckett is visiting his mother in Dublin. He returns to Paris.
1940	By the end of October 1940 he is involved with a Resistance group gathering information about German troop movements.
1941	James Joyce dies in Zürich.
1942	In August the Resistance group is betrayed to the Gestapo. Beckett and Suzanne hide in Paris and then flee to the south. By the end of the year they reach Roussillon, a village in the Vaucluse.
1943	Remains in Roussillon for the next two years, and during this period writes 'Watt.'
1945	Awarded the Croix de Guerre for work in the Resistance movement.
	April - Leaves Roussillon, travels to London and then to Dublin.
	Tries unsuccessfully to publish 'Watt.'
	June - Dieppe, a poem translated from the French, is published in the 'Irish Times.'
	Learns of the death of Alfred Péron.
	August - Review of Thomas McGreevy's book on Jack Yeats appears in the 'Irish Times.'
	August through October - Works as interpreter and storekeeper at the Irish Red Cross Hospital at Saint-Lô.
	October - Back in Paris.
	Essay entitled La Peinture des Van Velde; ou: le monde et le pantalon appears in 'Cahiers d'Art.'
	Beckett begins writing fiction in French.
1946	June - Sain-Lô, a poem, appears in the 'Irish Times.'

	July - Suite,early version of La Fin, first published French fiction, appears in 'Temps modernes.' Between July and December writes 'Mercier et Camier,' L'Expulsé, 'Premier Amour,' and 'Le Calmant.' November - Twelve poems appear in 'Temps modernes.' December - L'Expulsé published in 'Fontaine.'
1947	May - 'Murphy' in Beckett's French translation is published in Paris. During the year he writes 'Eleuthéria' and 'Molloy,' both in French. 'Eleuthéria,' his first completed play, has not been published. By winter he is working on 'Malone meurt.'
1948	Finishes 'Malone meurt' in May. Trois poèmes published in June 'transition.' October - Begins writing 'En attendant Godot.'
1949	Finishes 'En attendant Godot' in late January. Begins writing 'L'Innomable' at the end of March. Three Dialogues appear in the December 'transition.'
1950	Finished 'L'Innomable' at the end of January. 25 August - Mary Roe Beckett dies. 15 November - Contract signed with Jérôme Lindon of Éditions de Minuit to publish 'Molloy,' 'Malone meurt,' and 'L'Innomable.' Accepts UNESCO commission to translate anthology of Mexican poetry. The volume is published in 1958.
1951	10 March - 'Molloy' published in Paris. 8 October - 'Malone meurt' published in Paris.
1952	17 October - 'En attendant Godot' published in Paris.
1953	5 January - World premier of 'En attendant Godot' at the Théâtre de Babylone, Paris. 18 July - 'L'Innomable' published in Paris. August - 'Watt,' in English, published in Paris.
1954	'Waiting for Godot,' translated by Beckett, is published by Grove Press in New York.
1955	March - 'Molloy,' translated by Patrick Bowles and Beckett, published by Olympia Press, Paris, and later in the year by Grove Press in New York. Beckett working on 'Fin de Partie' at Ussy. Begins a novel in English; the result in the fragment later to be published as 'From an Abandoned Work.' 3 August - first British performance of 'Waiting for Godot' at the Arts Theatre Club, London. 18 November - 'Nouvelles et Textes pour rien' published in Paris.
1956	3 January - 'Waiting for Godot' performed for first time in USA at Coconut Grove Playhouse, Miami Beach. 10 February - 'Waiting for Godot' published in London. 19 April - 'Waiting for Godot' performed in New York.

	'Malone Dies,' Beckett's translation of 'Malone meurt,' published in New York. 7 June - From an Abandoned Work printed in 'Trinity News,' a Dublin weekly. 21 June - Beckett finishes 'Fin de partie.' September - Works on 'All that Fall,' a play for radio suggested by the BBC.
1957	13 January - 'All that Fall' broadcast by the BBC. 1 February - 'Fin de Partie' published in Paris (with 'Acte sans paroles I'). 3 April - World première of 'Fin de partie,' in French, at the Royal Court Theatre, London. 26 April - First French production of 'Fin de partie' at Studio des Champs-Élysées, Paris. August - 'All That Fall' published in London. October - 'Tous ceux qui tombent,' translation by Robert Pinget and Beckett of 'All That Fall,' published in Paris.
1958	28 January - 'Endgame,' Beckett's translation of 'Fin de partie,' performed for the first time in the USA and in English at the Cherry Lane Theatre, New York. 7 March - 'Malone Dies' published in London. 28 April - 'Endgame' published in London. Summer - 'Krapp's Last Tape' published in 'Evergreen Review.' 28 October - World première of 'Krapp's Last Tape' and first British performance in English of 'Endgame' at the Royal Court Theatre, London. 'Endgame' and 'The Unnamable,' Beckett's translation of 'L'Innommable,' published in New York.
1959	24 June - 'Embers' broadcast by the BBC. 26 June - 'Gedichte,' a collection of Beckett's poems in the original English and French, with German translations, published in Wiesbaden. Beckett receives an honorary degree from Trinity College, Dublin. October - 'Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable: a Trilogy' published in one volume by Olympia Press, Paris, and Grove Press, New York. December - 'Krapp's Last Tape' and 'Embers' published in London.
1960	'La Dernière Bande,' translation of 'Krapp's Last Tape' by Pierre Leyris and Beckett, published in Paris. 14 January - 'Krapp's Last Tape' performed for the first time in the USA at the Provincetown Playhouse, New York.

	25 January - 'Act Without Words II' first performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. 22 March - First performance of 'La Dernière Bande' at Théâtre Récamier, Paris. 31 March - 'The Trilogy' published in London. 'Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces' published in New York.
1961	9 January - 'Comment c'est' published in Paris. August - 'Poems in English' published in London. 17 September - World première of 'Happy Days' at Cherry Lane Theatre, New York. Later published by Grove Press. Beckett shares International Publishers' Prize with Jorge Luis Borges.
1962	1 November - British première of 'Happy Days,' Royal Court Theatre, London. 13 November - First broadcast of 'Words and Music' by the BBC.
1963	Beckett's translation of 'Happy Days' ('Oh les beaux jours') is published in Paris. May - Works on the scenario for 'Film.' 14 June - World première of 'Play' in German translation at Ulm-Donau. 'Poems in English' published in New York. 28 September - 'Oh les beaux jours' first performed at International Festival of Prose Drama, Venice (Teatro del Ridotto), with Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault. 13 October - 'Cascando,' written in French, first performed on ORTF-France Culture.
1964	4 January - 'Play' performed for the first time in English at Cherry Lane Theatre, New York. 7 April - First performance of 'Play' in Great Britain at National Theatre, London. 'Comédie,' Beckett's translation of 'Play,' published in Paris. 'How It Is,' Beckett's translation of 'Comment c'est,' published in New York and London. 11 June - 'Comédie' first performed in Paris at Pavillon de Marsan. July - Working on 'Film' in New York. 'Play' published in London (includes 'Words and Music' and 'Cascando'). 6 October - 'Cascando' broadcast by the BBC. 30 December - Revival of 'Waiting for Godot' at Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Anthony Page, with the assistance of Beckett.
1965	4 September - 'Film' shown at the Venice Film Festival.

	'Come and Go' performed in German at the Schiller Theatre, Berlin.
	October - 'Imagination morte imaginez' published in Paris.
	November - 'Imagination Dead Imagine' published in London.
1966	19 February - 'Assez' published in Paris.
	28 February - 'Va-et-Vient,' Beckett's translation of 'Come and Go,' performed at Odéon-Théâtre, Paris.
	8 March - BBC broadcast: 'Poems by Samuel Beckett.'
	4 July - 'Eh Joe' performed on BBC television.
	30 October - 'Bing' published in Paris.
1967	'Têtes-mortes' published in Paris. (Includes D'un ouvrage abandonné,' 'Assez,' 'Imagination morte imaginez,' and 'Bing.'
	'Eh Joe and Other Writings' published in London (includes 'Act Without Words II' and 'Film.')
	'Stories and Texts for Nothing' published by Grove Press in New York.
	'Come and Go' published in London.
	'No's Knife: Collected Shorter Prose 1947-1966' published in London.
	25 September - Beckett directs 'Endgame' at Schiller Theatre in Berlin.
1968	28 February - 'Come and Go' performed for the first time in English at Peacock Theatre, Dublin.
	1 March - 'Poèmes,' collected French poetry, published in Paris.
	'L'Issue,' a prose text, published in Paris.
	'Cascando and Other Short Dramatic Pieces' published in New York.
	'Watt,' translated into French by Ludovic and Agnès Janvier in collaboration with Beckett, published in Paris.
1969	'Sans' published in Paris.
	23 October - Beckett awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His editor, Jérôme Lindon, later accepts the prize in Stockholm.
1970	'Lessness,' Beckett's translation of 'Sans,' published in London.
	'Mercier et Camier' published in Paris.
	'Collected Works' published by Grove Press in New York.
	'Premier Amour' published in Paris.
1971	'Le Dépeupleur' published in Paris.
	August-September - Directs 'Glükliche Tage' ('Happy Days') at Schiller Theatre.

1972	'The Lost Ones,' Beckett's translation of 'Le Dépeupleur,' published in London and New York. 22 November - World première of 'Not I' at Lincoln Center, New York.
1973	16 January - First British performance of 'Not I' at Royal Court Theatre, London; Beckett assists Anthony Page with direction. 'Not I' published in London. 'First Love,' Beckett's translation of 'Premier Amour,' published in London. 'Breath and Other Shorts' published in London.
1974	'Mercier and Camier,' in Beckett's English translation, published in London and New York. 'First Love and Other Shorts' published in New York (includes From an Abandoned Work, 'Enough,' 'Imagination Dead Imagine,' 'Ping,' 'Not I' and 'Breath.')
1975	Directs 'Waiting for Godot' at Schiller Theatre, West Berlin. 'Pas Moi,' with Madeleine Renaud, performed at Petit Théâtre d'Orsay, Paris.
1976	May and June - 'That Time' and 'Footfalls' performed at the Beckett 70th Birthday Season, Royal Court, London. 'Pour finir encore et autres foirades' published in Paris. 'For to End Yet Again' published in London (the American edition, ordered differently, and titled 'Fizzles,' is published in New York). 'Ends and Odds' published in London and New York. 8 December - American premiere of 'That Time' and 'Footfalls,' directed by Alan Schneider, Arena Stage, Washington, DC.
1977	17 April - 'Ghost Trio' and '... but the clouds ...' performed on BBC television. 'Collected Poems in English and French' published in London. 'Drunken Boat,' translation of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre,' published in Reading, England.

Introduction

I

Samuel Beckett's writing has always posed stubborn problems for literary critics and historians. His astonishing inventiveness and the bizarre nature of his inventions; the mingling of anguish and elegance - talking of first and last things through the masks of clownish vagabonds - have made his work uncommonly difficult to describe and evaluate; and his movements through countries, languages and genres make a brief, comprehensive account of his career almost impossible to compose.

When he first began to write in English, Beckett published poetry, criticism, short stories and a novel. 'Whoroscope' (1930) and the collection of poems 'Echo's Bones' (1935) were generally unnoticed, but 'Proust' (1931), 'More Pricks Than Kicks' (1934) and 'Murphy' (1938) were reviewed by well-known (or about to be well-known) critics and poets. As if to predict the future, young Beckett's odd and refractory talent aroused contradictory responses, praise and blame coming from unexpected sources. In an essay devoted almost entirely to 'Remembrance of Things Past', the popular Desmond MacCarthy spoke of Beckett's eccentric, often obscure commentary as 'admirable ... one of the best ... on Proust' ('Sunday Times,' 24 May 1931); and the 'Times Literary Supplement' saw 'a great deal of subtle analysis packed into 72 pages' (No. 1). Bonamy Dobrée, however, in a generally sympathetic notice, complained of jargon, prolixity and excessive cleverness, traits that led the poet F.S. Flint to retreat behind an impatient confession of incomprehension (Nos 2 and 3).

Despite the strictures, Beckett could easily have found encouragement in these responses to 'Proust,' but he had little interest in analyzing the writing of others and was

never again to publish an extended work of criticism. Most of his creative energies in the early 1930s went into an unfinished novel called 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' and into the ten connected stories that make up 'More Pricks Than Kicks.' About this beginner's book critical opinion was understandably divided. Peter Quennell dismissed it as pastiche, annoyingly derivative of Joyce ('New Statesman,' 26 May 1934, 802). Arthur Calder-Marshall glimpsed Ronald Firbank rather than Joyce behind Beckett's strutting prose, yet he felt the Irishman 'capable of coming into the open as a humourist, instead of retiring as he too often does into the allusive shelter of the "really cultivated man"' ('Spectator,' 1 June 1934, 863). In the 'Observer' (10 June 1934, 6), Gerald Gould insisted that Beckett was not imitative of 'Mr. Joyce or anybody else'; and he spoke of Beckett's 'dry, harsh manner not untouched by beauty, though betrayed by an artificial whimsicality and unnecessary obscurity.' Similarly, the 'Times Literary Supplement' critic (No. 5) saw a fresh though uncertain talent in this 'very uneven book,' and made apt comments about the 'curious blend of colloquialism, coarseness and sophistication' so distinctive of Beckett's early comic style.

Edwin Muir's contention (No. 4) that in Beckett 'everything depends on style' was repeated in different forms by several early reviewers. Given the extravagant, often esoteric qualities of Beckett's language, it is not surprising that few readers could perceive serious emotions and ideas behind the chilly glitter of his university wit. Nor were they likely to recognize that in Belacqua, Beckett was experimenting with a new kind of anti-hero: a randy, quizzical, physically collapsing, 'sovereign booby,' ever in search of the means to 'consecrate his life to stasis.' With his obsessive system-making, crack-brained notions of perfection and 'strong weakness for oxymoron,' Belacqua was the first of many figures destined to perform in Beckett's 'tragi-comedy of the solipsism that will not capitulate.' Little of this, however, could be seen through the ornate screen of language in 1934.

When 'Murphy' appeared four years later, there was still talk of the quirky blend of bar-room humor, social satire and philosophical speculation. Frank Swinnerton found the first hundred pages 'almost intolerable in their jocose exhibitionism,' though he confessed that 'some of the later pages - particularly the account of the asylum - have an amusingness that is quite genuine and equal to about half of the author's estimate of their brilliance' ('Observer,' 20 March 1938, 6). Edwin Muir properly located a major part of the novel's interest in the picture of

Murphy's mind, but he was uneasy about the absence of plot, character and any 'perceptible aim.' After speaking of 'laboured' fantasy, he ended with a carefully hedged bet: '...if this book does not completely bore or exasperate the reader, it will probably give him more than ordinary amusement' ('Listener,' 16 March 1938, 597).

The critic for the 'Times Literary Supplement' (No. 6) showed greater responsiveness, praising Beckett for creating his 'own world, an elaborate parody of the world we know, but oddly real.' Yet he too found parts of the novel tedious and felt at times 'that the talent and knowledge it reveals deserve a theme of more depth and substance.' Writing in the 'New English Weekly,' the twenty-four-year-old Dylan Thomas recognized that 'Murphy' had a theme of depth and substance: 'the study of a complex and oddly tragic character who cannot reconcile the unreality of the seen world with the reality of the unseen' (No. 7). Although Thomas's statement was cribbed almost word for word from the dust-jacket, he did perceive Beckett's originality and general intention. Anxious, however, to match the author's verbal high jinks with his own, Thomas built an elaborate and unconvincing argument to show where the book went wrong, ending with a witless dismissal of Beckett's humor as 'Freudian blarney: Sodom and Begorrah.'

The only reviewer who greeted 'Murphy' with the kind of enthusiasm it was later to generate in other readers was Kate O'Brien. In the 'Spectator' (No. 8) the Irish novelist and playwright managed in less than five hundred words to convey both her pleasure and a reliable sense of the novel's peculiar distinction. Refusing to be bothered by Beckett's occasionally opaque scholasticism, O'Brien was delighted by the rare mixture of impudence, lyricism, crazy learning, and serious intellectual speculation. This 'book in a hundred thousand' - this 'glorious, wild story starred all over with a milky way of sceptic truth' - was a novel she would read 'again and again before I die.'

Although 'Murphy' was by no means a popular success, it did become something of a cult book. In the years following publication, a legend persisted that the novel was a failure and the bulk of the unsold edition of 1,500 copies were destroyed by the blitz. However, Norman Franklin of Routledge insists there is no truth to the story. Sales were satisfactory if not brilliant: 568 copies in the first year; 50 in each of the next three; and the remaining copies sold as a cheap edition in 1942. Among the novel's admirers were James Joyce and the young Iris Murdoch. Joyce was said to have been able to recite from memory the description of the disposal of Murphy's ashes amidst the detritus of a London pub; while Murdoch was so absorbed by

Beckett's philosophical comedy on the nature of contingency and desire that she placed it among Jake Donaghue's few choice possessions in 'Under the Net.' Joyce was also given to fooling with Beckett's name in 'Finnegans Wake': 'You is feeling like you was lost in the bush, boy? You says: It is a puling sample jungle of woods. You most shouts out: *Bethicket* me for a stump of a beech if I have the poultriest notions what the farest he all means.'

Between the spring of 1938 and the winter of 1950-1, Beckett published two reviews, two stories, two essays on painting, the Three Dialogues, sixteen poems and a translation of 'Murphy.' Of 3,000 copies of the French 'Murphy' only ninety-five were sold and there seem to have been no reviews. To follow Beckett's reputation in print during those years would be a barren gesture: for most readers who knew his name, he was a once promising novelist now silent - as Joyce put it, 'bethicketed, lost in the bush.' Silent in public, however, Beckett was immensely productive in private. Between 1942 and 1944, he wrote 'Watt' in English; from 1945 to 1952 he wrote 'La Fin,' 'Mercier et Camier,' 'L'Expulsé,' 'Premier Amour,' 'Le Calmant,' 'Éleuthéria,' 'Molloy,' 'Malone meurt,' 'En attendant Godot,' 'L'Innommable' and 'Textes pour rien.' When the last five of these works were published, performed and translated in the early 1950s, Beckett gradually became one of the most famous and controversial writers in the world.

II

To move from the last lines of Kate O'Brien's response to 'Murphy' (No. 8) to the opening paragraphs of Maurice Nadeau's review of 'Molloy' (No. 9) is a startling experience. O'Brien is praising a richly gifted beginner; Nadeau is talking about the accomplishments of a master. And yet, looking back at some of the earliest pieces on 'Molloy,' one is struck by how difficult a novel it must have been in 1951. Beckett once said that he often thanked heaven at not being a critic about to write a book on Beckett; similarly, it must have been an ambiguous gift to have been given an early review copy of 'Molloy.' Although the critics struggled manfully, scoring occasional hits and testifying to Beckett's dark power to disturb, 'Molloy' looks proudly unassimilable, beyond the reach of anyone trying to give an adequate account of its range and originality.

Most formidable about 'Molloy' was its grotesque mixture of elements rarely found together in the same narrative. The tale is murky, baffling, circular,

contradictory, full of offensive details, furious violence and sardonic, terrifying insights into the meaninglessness of human life. The speakers, moreover, talk in voices never before heard in literature. Sometimes detached, matter-of-fact, naive, even amiable, Molloy is at another moment sweaty with anguish and the sophisticated disillusionment of 2,000 years of European history. Suffering a torment 'with no limits to its stations and no hope of crucifixion,' he has a matchless - sometimes graceful, sometimes lunatic - faculty for analyzing his own desolation and for finding infinite, often comic ways to bear it. A poet of rich and expansive gifts, he can - in one mood - celebrate his bicycle with an ode beginning, 'I shall not call you bike, you were green, like so many of your generation'; and in another, mourn his barren testicles as 'decaying circus clowns.' Rhapsodist and elegist, he also has his epic moments, as in the heroic, 'inordinately formal' attempt to order his sixteen sucking-stones. In Wallace Stevens's phrase, he is 'prince of the proverbs of pure poverty,' and his acidulous reflections have a pithiness that is unforgettable. Who but Molloy - explaining how 'all things run together in the body's long madness' - can make us share his fascination and fright at 'contemplating this extraordinary body both at rest and in motion'? Inspired in his fantastic scheme for communicating with his mother, effervescent in his description of Lousse's parrot, brutal in his anger and atavistic fury, awesome in his indomitability - he is one of the most fully drawn and original of literary creations.

Moran, of course, is very different. Smug, methodical, sanctimonious, with an intelligence 'a little short of average,' he is by his own admission, 'cold as crystal and free from spurious depths.' At the beginning of his adventure, he is very much a creature of his garden, keys and bourgeois conventions, but sent in search of Molloy, he encounters ancient night, breaks down and is stripped of that which 'has always protected me from all I was always condemned to be.' He is forced in his suffering to recognize those parts of Molloy - the harsh primitivism and disillusioned sensitivity - that have been hidden elements in his own nature.

Of the early reviews of 'Molloy,' Maurice Nadeau's - though fragmentary and at times misleading - was one of the most perceptive (No. 9). Nadeau was especially adroit at describing the unsettling effects of Beckett's structural and stylistic subversions: how the events seem to have little meaning and manage to suggest 'all meanings'; and how the circular, obscure narrative and the ironical, insistently negative language both tease and

undermine our efforts to read the tale symbolically. Several of his phrases nicely caught essential Beckettian paradoxes: 'champion of the Nothing exalted to the height of the Whole.' He was also one of the first to argue that Beckett is better served by analysis than interpretation and to suspect that in fundamental ways he may not be well served by either (a suspicion that has haunted other critics). Like many early reviewers, Nadeau was dubious about the worth of summarizing the novel's plot, did so nevertheless, and in vital details got it wrong. (He thought, for example, that Molloy narrates his journey while it is taking place rather than afterwards while in his mother's room, an oversight that destroys several important structural ironies.) Despite the errors and a certain evasive rhetoric, Nadeau was the first critic to communicate the force and strangeness of one of Beckett's greatest novels.

The three pieces by Georges Bataille, Jean Pouillon and Bernard Pingaud (Nos 10, 11, 12) illustrate some of the extremes of emphasis and judgment in the immediate French reactions to the publication of 'Molloy.' For Bataille, Beckett had created a monstrous myth 'arising from the slumber of reason,' an epic about the essence of being - anguish, fathomless misery - and the language or silence we use to express it. In his abstract, solemn meditation, he says nothing about the novel's humor, but admits that this 'sordid wonder' has such 'unquenchable verve that we read it with no less impatient interest than a thrilling adventure novel.' Like Bataille, Bernard Pingaud also saw 'Molloy' as a 'monstrous and disturbing myth, mysterious in its origins,' and found its picture of degradation 'deeply credible' and 'not without seduction.' Pingaud, however, was so preoccupied with the pernicious possibilities of Beckett's narrative (a threat to rationality and decorum, a 'stone fallen from the sky'), that he was insensitive to much of the novel's art and variety. If Bataille and Pingaud stressed the fantastic, abnormal elements in the twin narratives of 'Molloy,' Jean Pouillon insisted that the novel's truths were more homely, more obviously related to the way we all behave in our ordinary lives, and he saw a certain joyful, perhaps even mischievous quality in Molloy's refusal to live life seriously, to 'play the game.'

The difference between these reviews (and the many others that appeared in the months following publication) justify the remarks made by Maurice Nadeau in the summer of 1951:

'Molloy' has been hailed both as an 'event' and a *ne*

> *plus ultra* of literature. It has been heaped with praise and learned comment, and such diverse meanings have been attributed to it that the more people talk about it the more obscure it seems. One person sees it as a masterpiece of humor, another as an epic of disaster. To some it is silence translated into words, to others no more than a literary exposition of complexes belonging more properly to psychoanalysis. In fact, everyone sees in it what he wants to see, which is proof at once of the book's richness and of its ambiguity. ('Mercure de France,' August 1951)

And proof too, perhaps, of some familiar lessons about the limits of criticism.

The publication of 'Malone Dies' in October 1951 added to Beckett's reputation as an enigmatic writer of great originality and power. Maurice Nadeau's brief review in 'Mercure de France' (No. 15) skillfully summarizes an argument that was already becoming familiar: Beckett's ruling passion was 'to hunt down an inner being ... which escapes all attempts at definition. Nothing is certain apart from that inaccessible reality which the narrator's voice alone ultimately expresses. However metaphysics here is very concrete and explosive, even merry.' Concluding that 'Malone Dies' (and a new work soon to be published - 'L'Innommable') will have taken this obsessive exploration about as far as it could go, Nadeau wondered (as many later critics were to do) if there was anything left for Beckett but silence.

At a time when Nadeau was speculating about the exhaustion of Beckett's unique yet claustrophobic area of concern, other writers were publishing essays to introduce the novels to a wider audience. The first of many such surveys was Richard Seaver's Samuel Beckett: an Introduction (No. 16), a useful sketch of Beckett's place among French and English writers in 1952 on the eve of 'Godot.' Although Seaver's essay was by design elementary and provisional, it did point to some of the subjects that would later dominate critical discussion of Beckett's achievement - the links to Kafka and Joyce, the role of a writer in exile, the switch from English to French, the increasing subjectivity, and the resistance of his work to conventional modes of analysis.

III

On 5 January 1953 modern literature and Beckett's life were changed in ways that no one could conceivably have

predicted. Under the direction of Roger Blin, 'Waiting for Godot' opened in Paris at the Théâtre de Babylone to a reception that was later repeated in nearly identical forms throughout the world: boredom, incomprehension, irritation, occasional ridicule from one part of the audience; exhilaration and passionate advocacy from another. In the first review to appear in print, Sylvain Zegel (No. 17) got the proportions right and proved to be an excellent prophet. Realizing that some people were frustrated by a play in which nothing seemed to happen, he nevertheless argued that they were blind to Beckett's magic and that 'Waiting for Godot' would be spoken of for a long time. Insisting that Beckett deserved comparison with the greatest writers of the European theatre, Zegel ended with a concise, sensible answer to what would soon be the most notorious question in modern drama:

> Who is Godot? [The two vagabonds] don't know. And in any case, this myth hasn't the same form, the same qualities, for each of them. It might be happiness, eternal life, the ideal and unattainable quest of all men - which they wait for and which gives them strength to live on.

Zegel's excitement was shared by Jacques Lemarchand (No. 18) and by several well-known writers. In the weeks that followed, Jean Anouilh compared the première of 'Godot' to the opening of Pirandello's 'Six Characters' in 1923 and coined the image that has since become the most frequently quoted description of the play: a 'music-hall sketch of Pascal's "Pensées" as played by the Fratellini clowns' (No. 19). Armand Salacrou confessed that 'we were waiting for this play of our time, with its new tone, its simple and modest language, and its closed circular plot from which no exit is possible' ('Arts-Spectacles,' 27 January 1953, 1). Jacques Audiberti insisted that symbolism might be optional but applause obligatory ('Arts-Spectacles,' 16 January 1953, 3); and Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote a passionate, admiring essay in 'Critique.'

The Continental success was repeated in London when 'Waiting for Godot' opened at the Arts Theatre Club on 3 August 1955. Among the most influential notices were those by Harold Hobson (No. 20) and Kenneth Tynan (No. 21) which captured the excitement and perplexity of sympathetic viewers first encountering a baffling new work. Both critics began defensively, as if in deference to hard-dying Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Beckett's play may seem drab and undramatic; it violates conventional expectations and seems to offer little to stir the senses or to engage

the understanding. Look past custom, however, and you will find a work of splendid originality and loveliness, a masterpiece that annexed previously unclaimed territory for the theatre. 'It is validly new,' Tynan said, 'and hence I declare myself, as the Spanish would say, *godotista*.'

These ardent responses and others like them guaranteed a modest commercial success for the Arts Theatre Club experiment; and five weeks later, after revisions to calm the Lord Chamberlain, the production moved to the Criterion Theatre. An uneasy reviewer for the daily 'Times' admitted that Beckett's 'sophisticated fantasy' appeared 'to hold last night's audience; and in the attentive silence one could almost hear the seeds of a cult growing.'

The cult, of course, was not without its debunkers. Some disgruntled members of the audience simply walked out; others (like the visiting American journalist Marya Mannes) spoke of the play as 'typical of the self-delusion of which certain intellectuals are capable, embracing obscurity, pretense, ugliness, and negation as protective coloring for their own confusions.' Terence Rattigan invented an imaginary Aunt Edna, a cagy, unpredictable representative of middle-brow theatre-goers, with whom to chat about the pleasures but inflated reputation of Beckett's first play. 'Waiting for Godot' had become quite literally the talk of the town and soon afterwards of the country. In February 1956, the published text was the subject of a long article, They Also Serve, in the 'Times Literary Supplement' (No. 22), that set off one of the liveliest literary controversies in years. Earlier critics had tended to treat 'Godot' as ritual rather than argument and implied that although the play certainly contained ideas no one idea was likely to contain the play. In his bold, ingenious and almost certainly reductive argument, the 'TLS' critic (later identified as G.S. Fraser) claimed that there *was* one shaping idea: Didi and Gogo stood for the contemplative life and Beckett, offering religious consolation, had written a modern morality play on permanent Christian themes.

The letters inspired by Fraser's article (and by Ronald Gray's on the same subject in the 'Listener,' 7 February 1957) testified to the remarkable impact of Beckett's play and helped to establish the lines of future contention about how it should be perceived. Some viewers saw Christ, some Marx, some Sartre as the guiding spirit of Beckett's insinuating parable; others argued that 'Godot' was not to be read as an allegory, but as a ritualized expression of basic human concerns - a play in which variations of feeling and mood - rhythmical rather than cognitive

progressions - were paramount. Years later, Beckett gave support to those in the second camp: '...the early success of "Waiting for Godot" was based on a fundamental misunderstanding, critics and public alike insisted on interpreting in allegorical or symbolic terms a play which was striving all the time to avoid definition.' Years later, in conversation, Beckett asked Raymond Federman: 'When are they going to stop making me mean more than I say?'

No matter how Beckett intended to avoid definition, the history of early performances suggests that 'Godot' had qualities destined to keep many people from taking him at his word. In the USA, for instance, the play was given four productions that added to its reputation as something of a theatrical Rorschach test, a work that meant wildly different things to different audiences. In Miami Beach, advertised as the 'laugh hit of two continents,' it infuriated vacationers looking for easy diversion. 'Sandbagged by an allegory' said the Miami 'Herald': and taxi-drivers quickly identified the Coconut Grove Playhouse as a spot to pick up early fares - after the first act of 'Godot.'

Following the fiasco in Miami, performances scheduled for Washington, Boston, Philadelphia and New York were cancelled and the original cast disbanded. Plans for a New York production were revived, however, with a different director and four new actors. After opening at the John Golden Theatre in April 1956, 'Godot' received as many different notices as there were critics to respond to it. Brooks Atkinson's 'New York Times' review (20 April) was breezy, generally positive, evasive and misleading. 'Don't expect this column to explain "Waiting for Godot".... It is a mystery wrapped in an enigma.' Admitting Beckett's strange power to convey 'melancholy truths,' Atkinson called the play 'an allegory written in a heartless modern tone,' and thought it perfectly natural for audiences to 'rummage through ... in search of a meaning.' His own hasty effort revealed that Godot most likely stood for God and that Beckett, though, puzzling, 'is no charlatan.' Exasperated theater-goers might 'rail at the play but they cannot ignore it.' Walter Kerr in the 'Herald Tribune' (29 April) called the work 'a cerebral tennis match' that 'can be read variously and furiously as Christian, existentialistic or merely stoic allegory,' and gave most credit for the pleasures of the evening to the antics of Bert Lahr. In the widely read 'Saturday Review' (5 May), Henry Hewes was more confident about how Beckett's 'guessing game' was to be taken:

[The vagabonds] are waiting for a mysterious Mr. Godot

> (God) who has promised to meet them there. Along comes a well-dressed European landowner named Pozzo (Capitalist-Aristocrat) followed by a wretched, exhausted slave named Lucky (Labor-Proletariat).... After this pair depart, one of Godot's two sons shows up to inform Vladimir, whom he calls Mr. Albert - (Schweitzer?), that Mr. Godot won't come this evening but will surely come tomorrow.

Hewes ended with praise for the director's ability to keep 'the vitality-level high on stage,' but observed that keeping it high in the audience was another matter: 'There Mr. Beckett's skeletal synthesis of postwar European despair engenders less dramatic excitement than it provokes post-theater discussion.'

Mistaken about Beckett's intention, Hewes was right about the discussion 'Godot' would inevitably stir. Playgoers huddled in groups, attended symposia and bought copies of the paperback recently issued by Grove Press. Two especially revealing encounters were recorded by Eric Bentley (No. 23) and Norman Mailer ('Village Voice,' 7 May 1956, reprinted in 'Advertisements for Myself,' 1959). Bentley provided an analysis of the play in the broad context of American cultural life; Mailer offered an idiosyncratic yet stimulating confession and an attack on the snobbery of sex-starved New York intellectuals. Although Mailer's personal interpretation will eventually be of greater use to his biographer than to an historian of Beckett's literary reputation, it again reveals the intensity with which first viewers were engaged by Godot.'

Two other American performances of 1957 contributed to the legend developing around the play. In response to the interest stimulated by the first New York performance, 'Godot' was revived with an all-Negro cast in January; and some months later, the Actors Workshop staged their version in San Francisco. Soon afterwards, the California company was invited to perform to an audience of 1,400 convicts at San Quentin prison. Blacks and convicts - connoisseurs of waiting - had eloquent and much-publicized reactions to Beckett's play (No. 24).

Since the middle of the 1950s, 'Waiting for Godot' had been one of the most influential and widely discussed works of modern literature. The original French performances numbered 400; the British 257; and hundreds of other productions have been staged around the world. Few serious playwrights have remained uninfluenced by Beckett's genius for talking about sacred and profane things in a relevant modern idiom. William Saroyan once said that 'Godot' would 'make it easier for me and everyone else to

write freely in the theatre'; and it is difficult to think of an important dramatist writing in the 1960s whose work did not (for good or ill) reveal some evidence of its author having been captivated by Beckett. Writers as different as Fernando Arrabal, Tom Stoppard, Edward Albee, David Storey and Harold Pinter were - to borrow Martin Esslin's phrase - children of 'Godot.' Pinter has always been passionate about his admiration for Beckett. He wrote to a friend in 1954:

> The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, *nothing from the bargain basement*. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy, he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not, *he hasn't got his hand over his heart*. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful.

In the late 1960s, Pinter habitually sent each of his new plays in manuscript to Beckett before anyone else was allowed to see it. 'He writes the most succinct observations,' Pinter said ('New York Times,' 18 November 1971).

As one further index of the success of 'Godot,' Grove Press announced in March 1975 that the American paperback edition had sold more than one million copies and was still selling at the rate of 2,500 a week.

IV

In 1953, however, Beckett was still very much an Irishman writing in French whose earlier accomplishments were forgotten, minimized, or seen simply as preparations for the major work in his adopted language. More than a hundred reviews and essays had already been devoted to 'Molloy,' 'Malone meurt' and 'En attendant Godot,' and many of the issues raised by those radical experiments in fiction and drama, and by Beckett's frightening vision of the world, were regularly discussed in French periodicals. Very little of this was known to English and American readers and what was known was often inchoate and distorted.

Three reviews published within a few weeks of each other illustrate the differences between French and English perceptions of Beckett's work at this period.

Maurice Blanchot's response to 'The Unnamable' (No. 26) represents early French criticism at its best. Having assimilated Beckett's other work and the arguments swirling about it, Blanchot described with great skill the intolerable pressure of contradictory compulsions that had by this time become a signature of Beckett's style. ('...in my life, since we must call it so, there are three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude.') Recognizing that 'The Unnamable' was a book of unendurable and yet mysteriously endured torment, Blanchot refused to domesticate it, to treat it (as critics sometimes did) as a manageable work of art. He admitted that Beckett was a hero for having gone down into the depths of consciousness where fictions may fail but misery and incomprehension still exist; yet he would not conceal his uncertainty about the nature, implications and value of the exploration.

Next to Blanchot's gift for conveying the unruliness and danger of Beckett's fanatic experiments in fiction - the way 'The Unnamable' is at once a break-through and a dead-end, an exorcism and a new curse - the pieces by Seaver and Hartley on 'Watt' (Nos 27, 28) were rather tame. In their praiseworthy effort to bring Beckett's work to a larger public, both reviewers assumed a chatty, familiar air, underplaying the savagery and dismay that make the comedy of 'Watt' so chilling. Seaver wittily remarked on the profit Beckett's characters sometimes gain from lying down (alive to inner voices, neglected sounds) without letting on that Watt is driven mad by the voices he is eventually forced to accommodate. Hartley's essay - the fullest account of Beckett's work yet to have appeared in England - fairly described the disintegration and ambiguity at the heart of every novel. But almost as if the nihilistic implications of his own summaries were too grim, Hartley ended by pointing to Beckett's hopefulness: 'Who knows? Godot may come after all.'

By the end of 1953, 'Godot' had arrived in Paris; Beckett was recognized as an important figure in French literature; and interest in his work was beginning to quicken elsewhere. He himself, however, had never sought fame and it was of no help in dealing with one of the most painful crises of his writing life. As he told Israel Shenker two years later (No. 33):

> I wrote all my work very fast - between 1946 and 1950. Since then I haven't written anything. Or at least

> nothing that has seemed to me valid. The French work brought me to the point where I felt I was saying the same thing over and over again. For some authors writing gets easier the more they write. For me it gets more and more difficult. For me the area of possibilities gets smaller and smaller.... In the last book - 'L'Innommable' - there's complete disintegration. No 'I,' no 'have,' no 'being.' No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on.

Beckett's way of 'going on' in 1953-4 was characteristic: he tried unsuccessfully to sustain a novel in English ('From an Abandoned Work'), translated 'En attendant Godot,' and worked with Patrick Bowles on an English version of 'Molloy.' Meanwhile his name was occasionally mentioned in British and American periodicals and by writers and editors on both sides of the Atlantic. Surveying the contemporary French theatre for the 'Listener' (28 January 1954, 174-6), Pierre Schneider called 'En attendant Godot' 'the most important dramatic work of the past few seasons'; and an anonymous writer for the 'Times Literary Supplement' (27 May 1955) named Beckett as the most significant of expatriate authors in Paris. The first general account of his work to appear in the USA was Niall Montgomery's No Symbols Where None Intended ('New World Writing,' April 1954, 324-37). Although Montgomery's swaggering style tended to trivialize his subject, the essay did bring Beckett's work to the attention of thousands of new readers in one of the most respected literary magazines of its day. The survey was accompanied by the first nine pages of the Bowles-Beckett translation of 'Molloy,' other extracts of which (particularly the sucking stones episode) were attracting attention in 'Merlin' and the 'Paris Review.' The same period saw the first American scholarly essay on Beckett (Edith Kern's Drama Stripped for Inaction, 'French Review,' 1954-5, 41-7); two of Vivian Mercier's perceptive early pieces ('New Republic,' 19 September 1955, 20-1; and 'Hudson Review,' winter 1955, 620-4); and French reactions to Beckett's crisis volume 'Nouvelles et textes pour rien' (Nos 31, 32).

By 1957 the English-speaking countries had begun to catch up with the French. Godot had entered the realm of contemporary mythology (in cartoons, editorials and graffiti); and translations of 'Molloy' and 'Malone Dies' had been reviewed in England by Vivian Mercier (No. 13) and Philip Toynbee (No. 14), and in the USA by Herbert Gold ('Nation,' 10 November 1956, 397-9) and Horace Gregory ('Commonweal,' 26 October 1956). And yet the title of Madeleine Chapsal's article in 'L'Express' (8 February

1957) - Un Célèbre inconnu - had an obvious pertinence and truth. Beckett was becoming internationally famous but the ambiguities of his work, the controversies that surrounded it, and his extreme personal reticence gave his name a significant aura of mystery. Having previously refused to be interviewed, Beckett relented once in the spring of 1956. The intensity of public interest and hunger for words in the author's own voice can be measured by the fact that every one of the remarks by Beckett reported by Israel Shenker (No. 33) has been quoted hundreds of times in articles and books around the world.

1957 brought an important article by Jean-Jacques Mayoux ('Études Anglaises,' October-December 1957, 350-66); a poem by Donald Davie; scores of essays and reviews; and two masterpieces by Beckett: 'All That Fall' and 'Fin de partie.' The Davie poem, Samuel Beckett's Dublin, is one of the first important tributes from another creative writer and skillfully sums up an essential Beckettian paradox in its final stages:

> When it is cold it stinks, and not till then
> Can it be fragrant. On canal and street,
> Colder and colder, Murphy to Molloy,
> The weather hardens round the Idiot Boy,
> The gleeful hero of the long retreat.
>
> When he is cold he stinks, but not before,
> This living corpse. The existential weather
> Smells out in these abortive minims, men
> Who barely living therefore altogether
> Live till they die; and sweetly smell till then.

V

Even as Beckett's work was being welcomed with increasing hospitality in England, critics were of very different minds about where to locate its distinction. Reviewing 'All That Fall' a week after the BBC broadcast, Richard Robinson ('Sunday Times,' 20 January 1957, 12) called the play remarkable, praised its strong dialogue and emotional power, but complained that Beckett,

> like all allegorists, has dwelt first and longest upon the universal significance ... and only secondarily upon the creatures who are to express it. His characters are not at all the *mere* symbols of the medieval allegorist, they are flesh and blood - but the flesh and blood has been grafted to them, they did not grow it of themselves.

For the 'Times Literary Supplement' critic (No. 34) exactly the opposite was the case. 'All That Fall' gained its phenomenal power from being set in a 'recognizable though stylized ... rural Ireland of perhaps thirty or forty years ago,' and not 'among allegorical dustbins.' He especially admired the rhetorical exuberance, wild laughter that had 'the effect of comic blasphemy,' compassion that broke through nihilism, and a richness of implication that allowed each auditor to interpret the catastrophe according to his own sense of evil. Donald Davie, though, deplored the particularity of setting, the fascination with blasphemy ('which most non-Irish readers will find childish and trivial'), and the 'tediously insoluble whodunnit' quality of the climax, with 'ambiguities flying off in all directions...' (No. 35). Despite his severe objections and a parochialism that in 1958 could claim Beckett had never before been seen as a comic writer, Davie offered several brilliant observations about Beckett's use of parody and his distrust of the language he so matchlessly manipulated.

The differences of opinion about 'Endgame' were even more extreme. Although Beckett was one of the most eminent writers in France, the management that had originally promised to stage 'Fin de partie' in late 1956 reneged and Roger Blin (already in rehearsal) accepted an invitation to hold the première at the Royal Court on 3 April 1957. Since the engagement was brief and the language French, there were not many early reviews. Among those that did appear, however, three of the most prominent divided along lines that had become predictable. Harold Hobson (No. 36) and Kenneth Tynan (No. 37) again devoted their Sunday columns to Beckett, but this time disagreed strongly about his achievement. Hobson argued that 'Fin de partie,' despite its desolation, was 'a magnificent theatrical experience,' evoking a 'sombre and paradoxical joy.' Tynan, on the other hand, found the agony skull-cracking and looked in vain for the satire, savage parody and glimmers of hopefulness that he thought existed in the printed text.

If Hobson spoke for those who saw nobility and variousness in Beckett's harrowing vision and Tynan for those who found it unbearably stifling, J.C. Trewin expressed another common viewpoint. Covering the play for the 'Illustrated London News' (20 April 1957, 652), he confessed to having been hardly able to fix his attention on this 'apparent mixture of repetitive repartee, chess symbolism and dustbins'; and to have relieved his boredom by spinning couplets: 'Clov and Hamm and Nagg and Nell/Lead us steadily to Hell/Life is fleeting; none can check it/

Hear at once the worst with Beckett.' Then, in the familiar Philistine tone of fatigued contempt for the vagaries of the avant-garde, Trewin concluded:

> Undeniably, these plays will be analysed to shreds. That is what happened to the worthier 'Waiting for Godot'. The libretti of the Savoy operas might help. Did not Lady Blanche, who lectures on Abstract Philosophy, propose to consider at length how 'the Is and Might be stand compared with the inevitable Must'? I am sure in the words of another opera, that Mr. Beckett is 'very singularly deep'; we have not seen the last of those dustbins.

Beckett later expressed disappointment with the London audience and felt the play worked more forcefully in Paris. As he told Alan Schneider: 'The creation at the Royal Court was rather grim, like playing to mahogany, or rather teak. In the little Studio des Champs-Élysées the hooks went in.' The French critics, though, were no more agreed about the meaning and merit of what they saw than the English. Like Tynan, Marc Bernard (No. 38) lamented the loss of the vitality he admired in 'Godot,' offered an allegorical reading (Hamm = Intellectual; Clov = Common Man) and ended by rejecting the play as product of a particularly nasty form of masochism. Jacques Lemarchand, however, saw universality and greatness in Beckett's vision of the terrible comedy 'that the end of everything arouses in man'; and he provided the most reliable early account of the play's sumptuous destitution (No. 39). For the philosopher Gabriel Marcel, 'Fin de partie' meant boredom, claustrophobia, and one of the most painful evenings he had ever spent in the theatre ('Nouvelles littéraires,' 20 June 1957). In a characteristically derisive review, Jean-Jacques Gautier called the play 'ugly, foul, unwholesome, vacant, wretched, infantile' ('Figaro,' 3 May 1957); and his contempt prompted the director of the Studio des Champs-Élysées to write asking if perhaps the ugliness was in the eyes of the beholder. A week later Alain Spiraux reported in 'Combat' that 'Fin de partie' (as could have been expected) had aroused some of the wildest controversy of the theatrical season (10 May 1957).

Despite these mixed notices, the oddities of script and staging and the growing curiosity about Beckett brought 'Endgame' international notoriety. Within days after the London production, articles appeared in Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia; and 'Life' magazine in New York ran a picture story about this weird 'blend of acid hokum and dank despair' attracting so much attention in Europe.

Like several other middle-brow periodicals, 'Life' sensed that Beckett was 'news' but with predictable coarseness patronized him as a quaint, eccentric old nay-sayer: 'an inveterate apostle of hopelessness, author Beckett finds no answer to the riddle of human existence. But like the image of his people in the ash can, the way he delivers his melancholy message is too compelling to dismiss.'

When 'Endgame' opened in New York on 28 January 1958, critics again split on the issues of pessimism and obscurity. Walter Kerr spoke of those already 'familiar problems' of Beckett's plays: 'an aura of smugness that always hovers around a private language, the defiant treadmill of directionless conversation, the knowledge that the author is deliberately playing blindman's buff, the emotional aridity of a world without a face' ('Herald Tribune,' 29 January 1958). Brooks Atkinson (No. 40) was not sure if Beckett's insistent negations were 'acceptable or rational,' but he did admit the production had 'a continuous tension and pressure' and his uneasy praise was influential enough to secure the production a modest success (see Alan Schneider's memoir, No. 41). The closing note on the first critical reception of 'Endgame' in the USA was sounded by 'Theatre Arts' in April. As they customarily did, the editors printed a 'critical box score' following their own harsh notice of the play: 'two of the six reviewers were generally favorable and there were three fairly negative votes.' 'Extraordinary,' as Molloy once said, 'how mathematics help you to know yourself.'

When 'Endgame' finally reached London in an English version (along with the world première of 'Krapp's Last Tape') resistance in some quarters had hardened and the production ran for only thirty-eight performances. Kenneth Tynan's review (No. 42) had some outrageously apt one-line jokes ('Themes, Madam? Nay, it is, I know not themes') and communicated the inverted forms of truth about Beckett's genius that good parody can often embody. But Tynan's cleverness could not conceal the fact that the two plays he ridiculed had not yet been intelligently perceived and would, when they were, enter into the repertoire of dramatic masterpieces. The widely-read reviews by T.C. Worsley ('New Statesman,' 8 November 1958, 630) and Alan O'Brien ('Spectator,' 7 November 1958, 609) were mixtures of intensity and ignorance that had little more than stridancy to recommend them. Worsley renewed the attack on Beckett as an obscurantist locked in the cage of his own neurosis. 'Endgame,' he said, 'tells us a good deal about Mr. Beckett's solitary despairs, if you are interested in them. But who is?' Dismissing 'Krapp's Last Tape' as 'a crazy monologue' that would have been 'yawned

off stage' if it weren't for the acting of Patrick Magee, Worsley expressed final relief at being able to move away from 'these inverted explorations of the seamier side of Mr. Beckett's nasty unconscious' to write about a revival of Gerhart Hauptmann. For O'Brien, the two plays were insufferable 'exercises in peevish despair'; and Beckett - 'terrified that he is swimming up too far towards the surface of comprehensibility' - was 'a literary suicide desperate to die alone.'

While Beckett's work was arousing uncomprehending irritation and anger, it was also winning admirers among theatre-goers, readers and critics who were responding with greater subtlety. Experience, of course, helped some; one idiosyncratic work illuminated another; a knowledge of 'Malone Dies' (a novel about histrionics and story-telling, among other things) helped clarify 'Endgame' (a play on the same subjects). Although a record of first reactions to Beckett sometimes looks as much like an epistemological nightmare as his novels and plays, criticism was a collaborative and progressive effort. Having read Beckett's four major novels and three great plays, critics began to see the magnitude and originality of his achievement. Essays with titles like Beckett Country were followed by Beckett's World and Beckett's Universe, and it was generally acknowledged that - like Balzac, Dickens, Faulkner, and Joyce - Beckett had created a distinctive environment with its own unexpected amplitude and surprising coherences. A reviewer for the 'Times Literary Supplement' (28 March 1958, 168) provided a most helpful account of how the fiction should be read, and argued that those grotesque stories 'exorcise and console, for the ludicrous horror of old objects and futile actions is brought into the light and undergoes a poetic transformation in the hands of one of the greatest prose-writers of the century.'

A few months later, K.W. Gransden, in a piece called The Dustman Cometh ('Encounter,' July 1958, 84-6), summarized the landscape and inhabitants of Beckett's 'world without end at the end of the world, a world always on the point of ending yet never quite able to bring itself to end.' He then offered a concise portrait of the Beckett hero: that decrepit, irascible, meticulous, horribly funny, lyrical, holy beggar with his axioms and reveries, his endless vicissitudes and his limitless gift for talking about dissolution and not dying.

> This view of the fag-end of human effort, the prolonged soliloquy at the cemetery gate, is Beckett's contribution to contemporary literature. 'It must be nearly

> finished': the last articulate mumble of man marooned in the moments between 'Time, Gentlemen, Please', and closing time. The trouble is, the next bloody awful day they open again. The end is what never ends. There is no doubt that Beckett refashions this medieval view of mortality in terms of modern spiritual decline with astonishing force and power.

At the same time in the USA, Granville Hicks praised 'The Trilogy' in 'Saturday Review' (4 October 1958, 14); Stephen Spender wrote about 'The Unnamable' for the 'New York Times Book Review' (12 October 1958, 5); and Hugh Kenner published the first of the essays that would culminate three years later in his important book ('National Review,' 11 October 1958, 248-9; and 'Spectrum,' winter 1958, 8-24). In 1959, Ruby Cohn wrote the first doctoral dissertation and edited the first journal devoted entirely to Beckett's work. The dissertation was later published as 'Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut'; the journal 'Perspective' (published by Washington University, St Louis) printed influential essays by Kenner, Jean-Jacques Mayoux, Edith Kern, Samuel Mintz and Jacqueline Hofer.

VI

In many respects 1960 marked a turning-point for Beckett's reputation in England and the USA. The New York production of 'Krapp's Last Tape' was warmly received, most notably by Robert Brustein (No. 43); and the publication of 'Molloy,' 'Malone Dies' and 'The Unnamable' in one volume brought substantial retrospective essays by three prominent modern critics: V.S. Pritchett (No. 44), Frank Kermode (No. 45), and Northrop Frye (No. 46). Valuable as single statements, these essays also demonstrated the challenges Beckett's work offered to three very different critical perspectives.

Pritchett's Beckett is a manic monologist speaking from the depths of Irish rage and European disillusionment. His themes are old age, flight, decrepitude, and the needful, hopeless search for self; his manner mocking and earnest, innocent and sly, vindictive and forgiving, lyrical and indecent, frenzied and serene. His true ancestor was Sterne not Joyce, and like the author of 'Tristram Shandy,' he is a wayward comic genius soliloquizing about some of our deepest, most vexing concerns. Kermode's Beckett is a more poised, speculative figure, grounded in Bergson and intuitionist esthetics of the 1920s, obsessed with the deadening effects of Habit, the 'inaccessibility of value'