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Beckett and philosophy

'We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression
that we exist' *Waiting for Godot*
'Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*]
Ah, that's a good one' *Endgame*
'All life long the same questions, the same answers' *Endgame*¹

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906–89) is the most philosophical of twentieth-century writers. As we hear from Hamm in *Endgame*: 'I love the old questions. [*With fervour.*] Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!' (110). Beckett's writings contain a kind of arbitrary collection or *bricolage* of philosophical ideas. His characters exult in endless, pointless, yet entertaining, metaphysical arguments. His work exudes an atmosphere of existential Angst, hopelessness and human abandonment to the relentless course of the world. Beckett's characters portray a rootless, homeless, alienated humanity. One no longer at home in the world; one lost in a meaningless void. Every play and prose piece reinforces and deepens this dark diagnosis of the human condition, generating an overarching world view that has justifiably been called 'Beckettian' (akin to the 'Pinteresque')

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world of Pinter). His 1981 piece *Ill Seen Ill Said* sums up this world as:

Void. Nothing else. Contemplate that. Not another word.
Home at last. Gently gently.
Modern humanity is at home in its homelessness.

This stark Beckettian world cries out for philosophical interpretation. Indeed in his plays are embedded vague hints and suggestions of deliberate philosophical intent. The outwardly pessimistic atmosphere, the bleak post-apocalyptic landscapes, hopeless characters and the overwhelming sense of the aimlessness and meaninglessness of life, the 'issueless predicament of existence'² as Beckett himself put it, has led many critics to try to pin down the overall philosophical position to which Beckett supposedly subscribes.

Yet Beckett's relation to philosophy is difficult and complex. He was not a philosopher; if he had been, he would not have needed to engage with art. As an author, he strongly resisted every attempt to impose any philosophical interpretation or meaning on his work. Beckett's answer to philosophy is to refuse it, give it a 'kick in the arse'. His use of ideas is always accompanied by reticence, ambiguity, and humorous deflationary counterpoint. Ideas are presented somehow as magnificent edifices that stand apart from the miserable small-mindedness of the human condition. Ideas console, edify, bemuse and entertain, but they are always also misrepresentations, illusions, exaggerations, blinkers, detours that take us blithely beyond the real and pathetic circumstances of our own condition. Thought is a pleasant distraction, but it essentially misleads.

Beckett compounded this refusal to interpret his own work philosophically by claiming not to understand philosophers: 'I never understand anything they write.' And again he wrote: 'I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess.'³

We need then to proceed with caution. To over-emphasise the philosophical in Beckett would be to underplay his deeply

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serious aesthetic commitment, his lifelong interest in Dante ('Dante's damned'),⁴ his admiration for poets such as Rimbaud and Apollinaire, whom he translated, his deep admiration for surrealism, for André Breton and Celine, and, of course, the *nouveaux roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet where objects can be described in a flat neutral tone for pages on end.

Beckett's paradigm of the great artist was James Joyce, whom he regarded as the greatest living prose craftsman and whom he came to know in Paris. These two Irishmen, exiled, living for their art, shared an austere 'art-for-art's-sake' aesthetics that raised the artist up to the quasi-divine craftsman whose work has to stand alone, independent of the world, independent of everyday concern, pairing his finger nails, as Joyce put it. Both were devoted to crafting perfect forms, the right words in the right order; or, in Beckett's case, the least number of words and those showing their inadequacy. There is an extraordinarily formal rigour in Beckett as in Joyce. Form is ruthlessly imposed on a wild concoction of different elements. Magpie-like, there is much stealing from music hall, Vaudeville, ordinary conversation, philosophical themes, even theology. In his prose especially, Beckett maintains a restrained conversational tone, a detached gentlemanly politeness, even during the most extraordinarily gruelling moments.

Despite their different religious and intellectual formations they were both committed to the religion of art, successors to the Romantic and Symbolist cult of the artist. Although they were both Dubliners, their intellectual backgrounds were quite dissimilar. Joyce had grown up in the Neo-Thomist Catholic intellectual climate at Clongowes, Belvedere, and University College, which is deeply informed by the system of Thomas Aquinas, as is evident from the discussion of beauty in *Portrait of the Artist*. Beckett, on the other hand, was a complete stranger to that world, although he did later try to come to terms with it, reading Dante and Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain.⁵ The vision of naked humanity trapped inside a vast cylinder, wandering about searching for a way out, in his 1971 prose piece *The Lost Ones*⁶ is

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reminiscent of the cycles of Dante's *Inferno* and the paintings of Breughel.

Beckett's bourgeois Protestant outlook, formed in the upper middle class suburb of Foxrock, at Portora boarding school in Northern Ireland, and at Trinity College, was not at all intellectual; it was 'low down Low Church Protestant' as he calls it in *More Pricks Than Kicks*. Indeed, his upbringing and family circumstances reeked of solid, bourgeois respectability, exactly as satirised by Jean-Paul Sartre in his novel *Nausea*. Beckett would fall asleep during sermons in his local church. He was expected to enter the family business of quantity surveying, or settle down as a lecturer at Trinity. But he wanted art, art as a way of transforming if not overcoming personal suffering.

There is undoubtedly a certain psychoanalytic aspect to Beckett's work. His bouts of depression and psychosomatic illnesses led him to London where he was analysed by the famous Freudian analyst Bion. He attended a lecture given by Jung at the Tavistock Centre and later one used the material in one of his works. Jung has talked of someone who gave the impression of never having been fully born, an event that recurs in *All That Fall*.⁷

Beckett's great aesthetic transformation took place when he had the revelation that his art should primarily be drawn from his self-experience. He broke from his artistic torpor and began the extraordinary creative work that would gain him the Nobel Prize in 1969. To look for philosophical commitments outside Beckett's artistic work itself would be to betray its artistic intention and so we should be unsurprised by his silence. Silence and exile, at least, Beckett learned, if not exactly *from*, then at least *alongside*, Joyce in Paris.

Samuel Beckett studied languages not philosophy at Trinity College, although his overall academic tutor was A. A. Luce, an authority on the Irish idealist George Berkeley, whose *esse est percipi* Beckett's playfully explores in *Film*. Berkeley maintained

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that matter did not exist; indeed the very notion of matter was, as he put it, 'repugnant', by which he meant 'self-contradictory'. Matter, for the good bishop, was an outrageous invention of scientists and as such, a great temptation to atheism. Berkeley's response, in defence of theism, is his *immaterialism*, his celebrated doctrine that nothing exists except the mind and its ideas. In short there is God's mind and human minds and God puts the ideas of everything directly into our minds rather than routing it through the medium of an alien matter. To be is to be perceived. Everything that is is an idea in the mind.

Clearly such a position is both deeply eccentric and deeply appealing. Berkeley promoted his outrageous immaterialism with a quite rigorous and impressive battery of arguments, such that he came to represent for many the very paradigm of the solipsistic thinker. Berkeley thought of himself as simply defending common sense. That common sense could in fact be the conduit for such a bizarre idea, as that everything in the world is nothing more nor less than the idea we have of it, is itself a very challenging thought. Such exuberant ideas offered in the spirit of common sense consolation were Beckett's bread and butter. Berkeley is clearly Beckett's kindred spirit!

Beckett did philosophy quite intently, especially in the nineteen twenties and thirties – notably René Descartes, the father of French philosophy. Descartes was a deeply logical and mathematical thinker who speculated on the possibility that all of experience might be systematically false, misleading as a dream, a delusion brought about by an evil demon who delights in tricking us. Beckett's characters often make reference to Cartesian positions and his characters frequently detach from their pains and emotions in order to comment on them in a dry, analytic manner which makes their calm rationality all the more absurd and disconnected. His characters actually live through the Cartesian divorce of body from mind. The body doesn't do what the mind wants. There is a great deal of solipsistic soliloquy especially in the novels, so that one can even speak of *Watt* and other novels as explorations of the disembodied, emotionally detached Cartesian subject, albeit

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always aware of the manner in which soliloquy is also a theatrical artifice.⁸

HAMM: I am warming up for my last soliloquy.⁹

Beckett's first published poem, *Whoroscope*, is based on an early biography of Descartes by Adrien Baillet (1649–1706) in 1691 that Beckett read in Paris. It is a pretentious and somewhat bombastic piece, festooned with learned allusion, adorned with footnotes (following the fashion set by T. S. Eliot), purporting to be in the voice of Descartes himself. It even quotes St. Augustine, *si fallor sum*, even if I am in error I am, an earlier version of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Nevertheless, it won a prize of 10 pounds in 1930 for the best poem on the subject of time and was published in a limited edition by Nancy Cunard. It is of no philosophical interest, rather it involves Joycean punning combined with veiled allusions to Galileo, Harvey, and Franz Hals. The scene in St Augustine's *Confessions* in the garden of his house ('in the shrubbery') where he hears a child singing '*tolle lege*' (take it up and read) and which he takes to be an exhortation to read the Word of Scripture, is rendered in the poem as

He tolle'd and legged
And he buttoned on his redemptorist waistcoat.¹⁰

Besides Augustine and Descartes, Beckett also read Malebranche and was particularly fascinated by the minor Flemish Cartesian follower and occasionalist Arnold Geulincx (1624–69). Geulincx is the originator of the idea that the relation between the mind and the body is like the relation between two synchronised clocks that exactly agree without influencing each other causally. Geulincx advocated a freedom of the mind that abandons all attempts to influence the course of the mechanistic material world, a condition which aptly describes Molloy, Malone and the other anti-heroes of Beckett's novels.

Not surprisingly Beckett was also attracted to Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism. Schopenhauer is referred to in the essay 'Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce' (1929) that Beckett

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contributed to the volume *Exagmination*. In his early monograph on Proust Beckett cites Schopenhauer's definition of art as the 'contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason' and applies it approvingly to Proust.¹¹ Art tells it like it is not as it rationally should be.

'It was while he was teaching at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1928-29 that Beckett read Descartes. Among the elite students there at that time were Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone De Beauvoir. Beckett, born in 1906 and Sartre, born in 1905, were almost exact contemporaries. Indeed, Beckett met Sartre at the Ecole Normale and they continued a distant relationship through the forties. Beckett was aware of Sartre's literary reputation and, in 1946, submitted a short prose piece, *Suite* ('Continuation'), and then a series of poems to Sartre's journal *Temps Modernes*.¹² Beckett's experiences with Simone de Beauvoir were somewhat more difficult, as she rejected the second part of *Suite* when Beckett submitted it to *Temps Modernes* maintaining the first part stood on its own.

Beckett's occasional allusion to philosophers and their ideas is usually casual and playful. For instance, in his first novel *Murphy*,¹³ Neary is a Pythagorean who speaks of *apmonia* (the Greek term for 'harmony, accord'). In *Murphy*, a room is described as windowless 'like a monad', a reference to Leibniz. There is a reference to Zeno as 'that old Greek' in *Endgame*.¹⁴ His script for his 1964 almost silent *Film*,¹⁵ directed by Alan Schneider and featuring Buster Keaton, opens by directly citing Berkeley: *Esse est percipi*. All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

Film exploits the relation between perceiver and perceived with a man (Keaton) being pursued by the camera and at certain times (due to the angle of the camera) realises he is 'seen'. There is, as in Sartre's voyeur caught on the stairs looking in the peephole, the unbearable of being perceived, of being objectified. In the case of *Film*, however, perceiver and

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perceived are the same person; one is in flight from one's own self-perception. But these are fragments, teasers.¹⁶ Later references to philosophy are even more sporadic. Beckett's 1934 poem 'Gnome' summarises his position towards intellectual learning in those years:

Spend the years of learning squandering
Courage for the years of wandering
Through a world politely turning
From the loutishness of learning¹⁷

There is no doubt that Beckett did think that much learning was a form of loutishness and continued all his life to savagely dissect and debunk intellectual pretensions.

Merely listing the occasions on which Beckett refers to philosophy, then, would be both tediously pedantic and entirely beside the point. To address the theme of philosophy in Beckett one must do more than rattle off the occasions where philosophy appears in his work.

The theme of Beckett and philosophy can be approached in yet another way. Besides philosophers influencing Beckett, Beckett has also interested – even mesmerised – contemporary philosophers and critics, from Sartre, Lukacs, and Theodor Adorno, to Julia Kristeva,¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, Alain Badiou¹⁹, Gilles Deleuze,²⁰ George Steiner, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Wolfgang Iser, Slavoj Žižek, and many others. They have all been attracted to Beckett's relentless vision of the world and our human place in it. They have sought to reflect on Beckett's meaning from quite divergent points of view,²¹ seeking to recruit Beckett to one cause or other: from modernism to postmodernism, from structuralism to deconstruction.

Sartre, himself the author of existential plays such as *Huis Clos* (1946) saw himself as engaged with his fellow dramatist Beckett in a common cause of producing a drama that 'decentralised the subject'.²² The Hungarian Marxist critic George Lukacs saw the Beckett's work as exemplifying capitalist decadence and abstract bourgeois individualism. The German

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Jewish philosopher and critical theorist Theodor Adorno, however, strongly disagreed with Lukacs. *Endgame* in particular had a very powerful impact on Adorno, who saw in Beckett a kind of 'organised meaninglessness'.²³ For him, Beckett exposes the bankruptcy of philosophy 'as the dreamlike dross of the experiential world and the poetic process shows itself as worn out.'²⁴ Beckett identifies the tedium of spirit of our late age. For Adorno, Beckett portrays the 'irrationality of bourgeois society on the wane' and the manner it resists being understood.²⁵ According to Adorno, Beckett's work also challenges and overcomes the individualist ethics underlying existentialism.

Of course, Adorno too overreaches. When Beckett met Adorno in Germany, the philosopher frustrated the dramatist by insisting that Hamm in *Endgame* was short for 'Hamlet' and that 'Clow' was a 'clown' and so on. Despite being corrected by Beckett, who repudiated any such deliberate allusion, Adorno persisted to give this explanation in his speech. Beckett commented sarcastically on the ability of science to progress by self-correction.

The French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida felt so close to Beckett that he was unable to write about him at all,²⁶ and Richard Kearney, in an insightful essay in *The Irish Mind*, sees Beckett as close to Derrida in pursuing a kind of deconstruction.²⁷ For his part, Gilles Deleuze speaks of an 'aesthetic of exhaustion' in his long essay on Beckett.

The French poet and critic Maurice Blanchot, writing on *The Unnamable*, sees Beckett as exploring the point of origin of the creative process, the experience of origin which risks negating the self.²⁸ Blanchot raises the question of who is speaking in Beckett's works. For Blanchot, it is not Beckett, but the urge to speak of language itself. In an earlier 1943 essay, 'From Dread to Language', in *Faux Pas* Blanchot himself speaks of writer finds himself in this more and more comical position of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it. This effectively states Beckett's position. There is no doubt too that Beckett himself tried himself to frame an

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aesthetic, somewhat in advance of his main work. There is his famous German Letter written to Axel Kaun²⁹ in 1937 where he tries to suggest that the true power of art is to show up the failure of language. He is seeking to break through language to whatever (being or nonbeing) lies beneath. It is to be a literature of the 'unword'. Blanchot suggests that the 'I' who speaks in Beckett's novels is attempting to reassert mastery over a world and over its own experience when such is plainly impossible. According to Wolfgang Iser,³⁰ too, in Beckett's trilogy of novels, the first-person narrator gradually retreats into anonymity. The attempt at self-observation leads inevitably into fiction: 'Saying is inventing' as Molloy says.³¹

The theatre critic Martin Esslin has perhaps been most successful in grouping Beckett with Ionesco and Genet as part of the 'theatre of the absurd' using the concept of the absurd as defined by Ionesco:

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions have become senseless, absurd, useless.³²

These diverse approaches certainly highlight aspects of Beckett's work. But, I tend to agree with Beckett that we should resist any one-sided monolithic interpretation of his complex work. Certainly there is no shortage of big ideas in Beckett. His work in one way or another undoubtedly engages in the great themes of philosophy – the meaning of life in the absence of God, suffering, the nature of hope and disappointment, human nature, the condition of embodiment, the experience of being born, dying and just living, the search for value, the human capacity for thought and action or inaction, the nature of time, the poverty of language, the failure of art, and so on. It is also undoubtedly true that contemporary philosophy, e.g. Nietzsche's nihilism, Sartre's and Camus' existentialism, Wittgenstein's relentless formalism and modernism, Heidegger's conception of man as existence (Dasein), and as being-towards-death, Blanchot's and Derrida's dissections of the failure of language, can shed light on aspects of Beckett.

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But there is the danger here, which Beckett rightly sensed, of bypassing the works themselves in favour of some ‘big idea’ –translating Beckett into philosophy. Overemphasising the supposed philosophical message of Beckett’s plays tends to downplay their extraordinary humour and anarchic subversion of any overarching fixed meaning. *Waiting for Godot* is billed by the author as a ‘tragi-comedy’ and all through Beckett’s novels his mordant wit is combined with a playful delight in absurd comic routines that Beckett borrowed heavily from Vaudeville theatre and the silent movies –Chaplin, Buster Keaton, later the Marx brothers, in his sequences of hat exchange, distributing sucking-stones between pockets in a fixed manner in *Molloy*, eating bananas in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, exchanging hats. Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, as we learn in *Endgame*. This relentless black humour supplies the transcendence lacking in the attempted philosophical justifications.

Of course, this humour is tempered by his recurrent sepulchral and at times even almost apocalyptic imagery of unyielding grey light, ashes, sand, fallen leaves... Life is like that, veering haphazardly from the tragic to the ridiculous. In reaction to this, Beckett lets the voices of the mundane penetrate the rarefied atmosphere of the conceptual systems. He won’t yield to the seduction of the big, comforting philosophical speculation. The world is a world of the small, the displaced, the *clochard*, us. In *Waiting for Godot* Pozzo inspects the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon and says they are human beings, of the same species as myself, ‘made in God’s image’, a remark whose theological resonance undercut by the scene of dishevelled humanity before our eyes.

In illustration of the manner in which the philosophical sublime is traduced by the mundane, let us examine Beckett’s treatment of three different themes –time, reason and language.

The Experience of Temporality: A major *topos* in Beckett is the experience of time, a topic that intrigued philosophers from Plato and Augustine to Henri Bergson, William James and

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Martin Heidegger, not to mention writers such as Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf.³³ Beckett's time is quotidian, empty, repetitive, and vacuous. It does not lead to the Pauline and Heideggerian moment of insight and decision. It just goes on.

HAMM: What time is it?

CLOV: The same as usual.³⁴

Portentous remarks like: 'we are born astride of a grave, are undercut by comic observations:

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.

ESTRAGON: It would have passed anyway.³⁵

Clearly, *Waiting for Godot* may be seen as explorations of the condition of *waiting* (Heidegger writes analogously on the phenomenon of boredom). By the condition of waiting, I mean that there is a phenomenon of experiencing time in a certain mode, the mode of expectation. As the philosopher critic Günther Anders puts it. In *Godot* there is a sense that 'we remain, therefore we must be waiting for something'.³⁶ But waiting does not have a theological gloss. The prisoners of San Quentin prison were treated to a performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1957 and they grasped what the sophisticated New York audiences had not, namely, that the play is about what it is like to wait: waiting for release; an expectation they know will be disappointed.³⁷

Ironically, we know from John Calder, Beckett's publisher and friend, that Beckett himself was extremely punctilious in all his business appointments and could not stand someone being late.³⁸ We are always waiting for something to happen. We are waiting for school to be over, for work to finish, for love to arrive, for Christmas to arrive, summer to come, war to begin, war to end, death to come, dying to be over. It is this constant waiting in human life that is given theological interpretation as waiting for salvation, waiting for the Redeemer to come. Beckett's response is to go for the cheap laugh, pull the music hall stunt:

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CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM: Mine was always that.³⁹

Time is always the same time, the usual. But there is another kind of experience dominant in Beckett and that is the nature of hope and disappointment and the operation of chance in our lives. One of the thieves was saved; one was damned. 'It's a reasonable percentage' Estragon comments, in *Waiting for Godot*.⁴⁰ But doubts are raised; because only one of the four Evangelists mentions the thief who is saved. Why believe one out of four? An unreasonable percentage.

Beckett's characters always enjoy absurd speculation pursued and defended with a rigorous logic. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon engage in speculation and then they argue:

ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's contradict each other.⁴¹

There is a wonderful passage in the novel *Malone Dies*⁴² where Malone, confined to his bed, is reduced to finding things and exploring his space with his walking stick. His only other possession is a pencil. He records his day to day decline with a kind of clinical detachment. Then one day he loses his walking stick. This gives him an opportunity to engage in a marvellous metaphysical reflection on the manner in which reason transcends the mundane to contemplate, in detached Platonic manner, the *essence*:

I have lost my stick. That is the outstanding event of the day, for it is day again. The bed has not stirred. I must have missed my point of purchase, in the dark. *Sine qua non*, Archimedes was right. The stick, having slipped, would have plucked me from the bed if I had not let it go. It would of course have been better for me to relinquish my bed rather than lose my stick. But I had not time to think. The fear of falling is the source of many a folly. It is a disaster. I suppose the wisest thing now is to live it over again, meditate upon it and be edified. It is thus that man distinguishes himself from the ape

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and rises, from discovery to discovery, ever higher, towards the light. Now that I have lost my stick I realise what it is I have lost and all it meant to me. And thence ascend, painfully, to an understanding of the Stick, shorn of all its accidents, such as I had never dreamt of. What a broadening of the mind. So that I half discern, in the veritable catastrophe that has befallen me, a blessing in disguise. How comforting that is. Catastrophe too in the ancient sense no doubt. To be buried in lava and not turn a hair, it is then a man shows what he is made of. To know you can do better next time, unrecognizably better, and that there is no next time, and that it is a blessing there is not, there is a thought to be going on with. I thought I was turning my stick to the best possible account, like a monkey scratching its fleas with the key that opens its cage. For it is obvious to me now that by making a more intelligent use of my stick I might have extracted myself from my bed and perhaps even got myself back into it, when tired of rolling and dragging myself about the floor or on the stairs. That would have introduced a little variety into my decomposition.⁴³

The image of reason being used by humans for a perfectly satisfying but wholly inadequate purpose, scratching oneself, is magnificent. In *Waiting for Godot* Estragon wonders why people choose to believe the one Evangelist who writes of the thief that was saved as opposed to the three who did not mention this: 'People are bloody ignorant apes'.⁴⁴

Beckett exults in the manner in which this meandering reflection can both satisfy and annoy. Thought is to adapt Marx's phrase 'the opium of the people'. Recall Beckett's translation of Sébastien Chamfort's short prose pieces, 'Huit Maximes' ('Eight Maxims'):

La pensée console de tout et remédie à tout. Si quelquefois
Elle vous fait du mal, demandez-lui le remède du mal q'elle
Vous a fait, elle vous le donnera

Literally translated this poem reads:

Thought consoles all and heals all. If sometimes
It does you wrong, ask it to heal the wrong that it has done you,
It will give that to you.

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Beckett's translation, of course, compresses this much further into a rather more austere if traditional rhyming couplet:

Ask of all-healing, all-consoling thought
Salve and solace for the woe it wrought.

Thought damages us, but it also distracts. Beckett's characters regularly try to think or remember having thought or wonder whether thought is possible.

There is a moment in the second act of *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting by the tree and they make an effort to 'converse calmly since we are incapable of keeping silent':

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.
VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.
VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.
ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
VLADIMIR: Like sand.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

Silence

....

[Vladimir and Estragon listen and comment on the voices they hear. They all speak together, each speaks to itself.]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?
ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.
VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.
ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.
VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.
ESTRAGON: it is not sufficient.

Then again the refrain continues:

like leaves
like ashes
like leaves.⁴⁵

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They enter into a discussion to stop thinking. They agree to contradict each other and that diversion continues for a while with Estragon proclaiming: ‘That wasn’t such a bad little canter’.⁴⁶ Thinking is ‘not the worst’.⁴⁷ The servant/slave Lucky, according to his master Pozzo, ‘used to think very prettily once’.⁴⁸ He is invited to think as a form of entertainment (to pass the time). Lucky cannot think without his hat on. But then he bursts forth in a terrifying monologue that Beckett’s stage directions describe as a ‘tirade’. Lucky’s ‘think’ is an incoherent rant framed in a scholarly and quasi-legalistic language, invoking the attributes of God ‘outside time without extension’ – his lack of time, speech, action, feeling, *apathia*, *aphasia*, *athambia*. metaphysical notions like *esse in posse* (being in possibility) and the ‘good Bishop Berkeley’ but it is also peppered with autobiographical allusion (including the name Cunard and listing games from golf to tennis):

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and we can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labours left unfinished crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in-Possy of Testew and Cunard it is established beyond all doubt all other doubt than that which clings to the labours of men that as a result of the labours unfinished of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that in view of the labours of Fartov and Belcher left unfinished for reasons unknown ...⁴⁹

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As Beckett knew, philosophers, theologians and lawyers love that little Latin word ‘*qua*’, or ‘as’. One can think of Jesus as man or as God, *qua* man, *qua* God. But this clever splitting of meaning does not result in a refined system, rather it produced a mess.

Beckett’s aesthetics, as he explained in his conversation with Georges Duthuit, is based on the artist renouncing his/her traditional mastery over creation. Instead, art should now draw attention to its own failure to express and to the fact there is nothing to express. Beckett’s poetic and dramatic exploration of the essential failure of art and of language brings him closest to contemporary philosophy, whether to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*’ proclamation ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’), or Heidegger’s reflections on the failures of inauthentic idle talk in *Being and Time*, or in the post-modern meditations on language’s lack of origin and failure to refer. How do words refer? How does language hook onto the world? Beckett’s art at the same time isolates and inhibits the move to complete expression of meaning. He recognises the inescapable need to say, to name, to put the word on it. He puns on the very phrase ‘needless to say’.

Beckett’s last stuttering poem ‘*Comment dire*’ (what’s the word) written in October 1988 encapsulates this search for the right word, trying to say, seeming to glimpse the word.

glimpse—
seem to glimpse—
need to seem to glimpse—
afaint afar awayover there what—
folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar awayover there
what—
what—
what is the word—
what is the word—⁵⁰

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Beckett becomes less tolerant with words and their limitations, their poverty, not – as in Joyce – their rich polysemy. Yet he also exults in words, in the poetry of disrupted expression. His late prose pieces reverse grammatical order, breaking the stranglehold of grammar over linguistic expression.

It is wrong to think of Beckett as having a simple philosophical message and especially not a bleak one. Rather Beckett's experience is of a world lacking any overall, final meaning. It is not even, as Hobbes asserted, that life is nasty, brutish and short. Rather, it simply goes on. Beckett remains fascinated with the way life continues:

What counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial, so long as one is on earth. To breathe is all that is required, there is no obligation to ramble, or receive company...⁵¹

Life ticks on through the boredom of youth and the loneliness of old age. But in all that tedium, there is, especially in the novels and plays in Beckett an almost manic, exulting, joy. Life is like that. Take it or leave it. But enjoy the joke.