

SAMUEL  
BECKETT

*100 years*

centenary  
essays

edited by  
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# RICHARD KEARNEY

*imagination wanted:  
dead or alive*

**M**y first impressions of Beckett were very unimpressive. In fact I found him a pompous bore. I first encountered him in his poetry in the 1970s. I'd bought his slim *Collected Poems*, containing a long poem written in one day on 15 June 1930 when Beckett was still a student in Trinity College. It sported the clever and somewhat cheeky title 'Whoroscope', a mixed pun on whore and horoscope. I myself was a young student at UCD and bought the book as a birthday present for my friend Ronan Sheehan. On my way to his Dublin home to deliver the gift, I started reading the volume on the bus and immediately found myself recoiling from Beckett's stiff, arcane verse penned in a pretentiously Italianate style. I presented the gift to my friend anyway; but I felt a little guilty, not only for having read it beforehand but for still offering it as a present after having found it so unpalatable.

My second encounter with Beckett was hardly much better. This time it was his early prose essays on Joyce and Proust. Again I found the material indigestible in the extreme – morbid pseudo-intellectualism allergic to the joys of

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existence and desperate to impress. The person Beckett was especially trying to win over was, of course, his then mentor and role model, James Joyce, whose unofficial Paris secretary – the term is not quite right – he had just become. But to Beckett's chagrin it was less Joyce's attentions he managed to secure than those of his highly strung daughter, Lucia, who became quite smitten with the newly arrived Dubliner.

My third encounter with Beckett was more personal but no less dispiriting. When travelling to Paris one summer I was encouraged by the poet John Montague to visit Beckett in his Rue St Jacques apartment with a view to conducting an interview for the Irish journal *The Crane Bag*, which I was co-editing at the time. I duly wrote to Beckett requesting the favour of a brief meeting. Within days I received a curt and cryptic reply. It culminated with the unambiguous line: '*merci mais non merci*'. Thanks but no thanks. That's just about how I felt about Beckett too at the time.

Fortunately, that was not the end of the story. Were it so, I would not be delivering this Thomas Davis lecture today. Everything changed for me one year in the mid-seventies when I had the good fortune to see a number of wonderful productions of Beckett plays in Dublin. The first I remember was *Endgame* by UCD Dramsoc. This was followed by *Happy Days* and *Waiting for Godot*. There were some hugely gifted actors and directors at college at that time – including Dermot Moran, Jim Sheridan, Joe Long, Gerry McNamara and Cathy Leeney – but I cannot recall who exactly played what roles in those plays. All I remember, and remember vividly to this very day, was the *humour*. The laughing out loud from the pit of my being. The irony, the satire, the parody, the hilarity – and, above all, the irrepressible sense of humanity in the face of pain and paralysis. Sitting there in the dark theatre my ear suddenly became attuned to another frequency, a strangely new acoustic. I was at last beginning to get it, to hear the tones, inflections and nuances of the distinctively Beckettian voice. The word had finally become flesh for me, incarnate in the ingenious repartee of those moving, struggling, suffering but

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unsundering characters. I can still see their ragged shapes shuffling about in the tacky amateur conditions of a Belfield Basement, the notorious LG1. A new world opened up for me: the world of Beckett's imagination.

After the magic of the plays came the comic brio of the novels. I recall feelings of irrepressible mirth as I read of Murphy turning right down a Dublin street as his mind decided to turn left, thereby illustrating the absurdity of Descartes' claim that the mind (as thinking *cogito*) is dualistically separated from the body (as extended matter). Or the character deputed but miserably failing to flush the ashes of a recently deceased friend down the toilet bowl of the old Abbey Theatre. Or Molloy as he engaged in the crazy antics of sucking stones in logical sequence, or relieving himself on the sports pages of *The Irish Times*. All these vice-narrators, as Beckett liked to call his loquacious soliloquists, were up to no good but they rarely committed evil. They were, to a man, woman and child, human – *all too human*. *Des hommes moyens sensuels*. Guys in the street. The descendants of Molly and Bloom with a dash of Irish Protestant melancholy and a large dose of enlightenment rationalism (brought to parodic extremes). As Beckett himself once put it, 'when you are in the last ditch, only one thing is left – to sing'.<sup>1</sup> Beckett's characters did just that. They couldn't go on – for there was no good reason for going on – but they went on just the same. And as they hobbled along their forsaken boreens, they conjured up words of dark beauty in the midst of loss. They made, like the dead voices in *Godot*, noises that sounded now like leaves, now like sand, now like leaves again ... Haunting stuff.

But for me – as a philosopher – the work of Beckett's that intrigued me most in the end was a short text entitled *Imagination Dead Imagine*. This little prose experiment is less a novel than a post-novel. Or better still, a postscript to a novel. First published in 1965 it was one of a number of minimalist exercises that Beckett called variously 'texts for nothing', 'residua' or simply '*textes manqués*' (failed texts). It corresponded very much to Beckett's deep literary conviction, expressed in

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various exchanges with friends and interviewers, that if Joyce represented a literature of *omnipotence*, his own work should be read – contrariwise – as a literature of *failure*. Or as Beckett put it in his conversation with one critic, his work was concerned with exploring the contemporary ‘rupture of the lines of communication’. There was, he explained, nothing left to express and no way to express it. All that remained was to bear witness to the simultaneous ‘breakdown of the object’ and collapse of the author’s interior existence.<sup>2</sup>

This had radical implications for what was generally meant by the term imagination. Beckett was certainly determined to deconstruct the popular romantic view that imagining is a way in which the writer’s will imposes itself on the world and on others, reducing the enigmas and contingencies of reality to one’s own fantasies and projections. This attitude of ‘voluntary imagination’ he denounced as the tyranny of the ‘eye of prey’. Against this, Beckett championed the operations of involuntary experience celebrated by Proust. Only by overcoming our willful imagination, it seemed, could we remain fully attentive to the ‘suffering of being’<sup>3</sup> which, for Beckett, constitutes the irreducible truth of existence. Hence the move to declare imagination dead!

But Beckett realised that even such a strategy was doomed to failure. For in imagining imagination dead are we not still imagining? There is no way to escape imagination. So the question then arises: can we somehow redeploy imagining so that it respects the ‘suffering of being’ and avoids the imperiousness of romantic egotism? That was the key challenge for the author of *Imagination Dead Imagine*.

Before proceeding to this text, however, let me pause for a moment to unpack Beckett’s pivotal distinction, in his early essay on Proust in 1931, between voluntary and involuntary images. Whereas the involuntary yields to a genuine ‘revelation of reality’, the voluntary, he writes, ‘is of no value as an instrument of evocation and provides an image [...] far removed from the real’.<sup>4</sup> The danger of much modern and romantic literature, according to the young Beckett, is that it

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ignored the true otherness of being by transforming experience into an aesthetic projection of the author. In one particularly trenchant passage, Beckett seems to be prefiguring the postmodern call for a debunking of the humanist imagination when he declares that 'art', which had for centuries been revered as the 'one ideal and inviolate element in a corruptible world', is in fact quite as 'unreal and sterile as the construction of a demented imagination'.<sup>5</sup> No amount of creative human activity could, it seems, recreate a genuine experience of things. The fictional imagination thus appears to be little more than a distortion, a process wherein a human self forges the world according to its own preconceived image. The voluntary imagination is denounced accordingly by the angry young Beckett as the 'inevitable gangrene of romanticism'. The mere 'dream of a madman'. He concludes: 'imagination, applied *a priori* to what is absent, is exercised *in vacuo* and cannot tolerate the limits of the real'.<sup>6</sup>

This position results in a deep paradox at the heart of Beckett's own writing, namely, the attempt to dismantle fiction by means of fiction. 'The same lie lyingly denied,' as he expressed it in the thirteenth of his *Texts for Nothing*.<sup>7</sup> Hence we find so many of Beckett's narrators – or vice-narrators as he liked to call them – undermining their own narratives from Krapp and Estragon to Murphy and Malone. They generally did this by means of cynical and self-negating asides such as 'This is awful writing' or 'What a misfortune, the pen must have slipped from my fingers' and so on. Indeed, this performative contradiction is brought to the point where traditional notions of authorship, narration, character and plot began to collapse altogether. One even finds narrators of one text referring across to narrators in other texts, creating the impression that literature is like one big labyrinth of mirrors, a panelled cave of echoes, a padded cell of repetitions from which there is no exit. Take this typical passage, for example: 'But let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise, in two or three days, if I remember rightly. Then it will all be over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on

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beyond the grave.<sup>8</sup> Even the self-parodying imagination cannot, it seems, escape itself. The crime of fiction – which Beckett seems to equate here with lying, illusion and evasion – returns to plague the inventor, just like Prometheus, a favourite hero of Beckett's narrators, who stole the fire of imagination from the gods only to be plagued by a vulture sent down by Zeus to torture him every day. Once one enters the fictional hall of mirrors there seems to be no way out.

In this sense, we could read Beckett's writings as a series of ironic attempts to bring imagination to an end. Exercises in terminal fiction without termination, so to speak. Why? Because fiction is, for Beckett, a self-reflexive play which cannot undo itself except by inventing another fiction – and so on *ad infinitum*. It is as self-defeating as trying to quench your thirst by drinking sea-water. The more you satiate your craving the more the craving grows. It is in this context that we might best understand Beckett's advocacy of an aesthetic of failure in his famous 1949 dialogues with George Duthuit for the Paris journal *transition*. He seems here to be making a virtue of necessity, testifying to the impotence of the artist to transcend art by paradoxically exposing its own artifice. Here is one particularly revealing passage:

to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion. [...] I know that all that is required now, in order to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.<sup>9</sup>

The impossibility of imagination to escape from itself is the main theme of *Imagination Dead Imagine*. The self-regarding irony of the title makes this clear. The text takes the form of a monologue in which an unnamed narrator describes a rotunda-shaped skull (the narrator's own head seen from the inside?). The outer world is reduced to a pulsing white light



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that comes and goes. We find ourselves in a colourless, expressionless space – Beckett's chosen metaphor for the postmodern imagination condemned to itself. All that seems to remain of western humanist culture is this anonymous place where the time-honoured distinction between the imaginary and the real has collapsed. Imagination has, it seems, self-destructed into a void. It has ceased to operate as a human agency of expression, will and creativity and become instead a mechanical pulse of repetition. Even the two white automatons slowly expiring within the rotunda are mere doubles of each other, lying back to back, head to tail, in a condition of suspended animation; the only hint of life is to be found in mist on mirrors held before their faces. (It is hard not to think of the final scene in *King Lear*.) These mute doubles of the dying imagination are disconcertingly inhuman. They might well pass for inanimate, the text tells us, 'but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible. [...] The faces too, assuming the two sides of a piece, seem to want nothing essential.'<sup>10</sup> Struck by the terrible silence and immobility of these moribund marionettes, the narrator can still remember a time when things were otherwise. But it is no more than a memory, a vague recall, a remembrance evacuated of images. And there is, apparently, no way back to that past. And no way forward either. The narrator is caught in the paralysis of an immutable present that is eternally recurring. Hell on earth.

We, the readers, are thus confronted with a strange phantasmagoria which refuses to translate itself into recognisable human forms. We are exposed to a scene which frustrates our natural desire for representation, meaning, expression. Even action – the basic ingredient of any story as Aristotle recognised in the *Poetics* – seems impossible. Plot has become a parody of itself, pitilessly reduced to the technical repetition of an algebraic formula. But this entropic decline of imagination into emptiness cannot even rely on the finality of death as a solution. What we have is an ending without end,

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an apocalypse without apocalypse. For even as we imagine imagination dead, we still find ourselves caught in the reflexive spiral of imagining. Life and death have become indifferent, indistinguishable. 'No trace anywhere of life,' the narrator tells us at the outset (182), 'you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine.' Indeed, he finds the world 'still proof against ending tumult. Rediscovered miraculously after what absence in perfect voids it is no longer quite the same, from this point of view, but there is no other' (184).

That last phrase says it all. There is no *other*: no other perspective, no other reality, no other world, no other being *tout court* – animal, human or divine. Only a dying imagination which cannot die, one moment affirming that 'there is better elsewhere', only to deny it the next, 'there is nothing elsewhere'. The age-old metaphysical quest for some original experience, some lost holy grail, some transcendental truth, seems irreversibly suspended, 'and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness' (185).

Reading these lines I was reminded of Herman Melville's terrifying description of the all-consuming, neutralising whiteness of the whale in *Moby-Dick* – what he termed that 'colorless all-color of atheism'. Or the famous passage in the *Gay Science* where Nietzsche declares how the 'death of God' exposes us to a blank universe where, as he puts it, 'we have unchained this earth from its sun [...] moving continually backward, forward, in all directions [...] straying as through an infinite nothing [...] feeling the breath of empty space?'<sup>11</sup>

The way that Beckett plays with the solar image is significant I think. The use of the sun as metaphor for the ultimate origin of light and warmth was a key figure in Plato and the entire history of western philosophy. For Plato and the ancient Greeks the sun symbolised that otherworldly source of truth which the human imagination sought to faithfully copy. As M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) has accustomed us to think, with the modern turn towards romanticism and existentialism the metaphor of the sun still

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dominated though with this crucial difference: it was now celebrated as a *lamp* within the human imagination which projected light and meaning onto the world, rather than as a passive *mirror* that simply imitated a transcendental form that pre-existed it. This turn from the mimetic imagination of antiquity to the productive imagination of modernity was what Emmanuel Kant called the 'Copernican revolution' in western thought.

In Beckett, it seems, we have a radical reversal of both versions of the solar image – premodern and modern. For in Beckett's postmodern scenario it is no longer possible to trace the 'rise and fall' of the sun back to any origin whatsoever. Neither back to a divine transcendental source *above* us (as in Plato), nor to a human transcendental source *within* us (as in Kant and the romantics). Instead we find a sunless light which comes and goes from *nowhere*. We cannot tell whether it comes from within the white skull of imagination or from without. 'The light that makes all so white no visible source, all shines with the same white shine, ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow' (*Imagination Dead Imagine* 182). Indeed the ostensible movement of this pseudo-sun itself – 'from white and heat to black and cold, and vice versa' (183) – defies all human expectations. As soon as you think you have tracked its course, it reverses and undoes its own trajectory: 'the rise now fall, the fall rise'. Imagination is thus reduced to a skeleton of itself – imagining, as it were, its own posthumous existence, its life after death. In other words, no longer able to represent the transcendental sun in mimetic copies (as in Platonism) or to project the sun's light from within its own creative subjectivity (as in romanticism), the postmodern imagination of Beckett's text becomes the pawn of an electronically computerised system – a world where an artificial light comes and goes according to a logic of mathematical precision and technical reversibility which it is beyond the powers of a human self to control or comprehend.

So, is Beckett then an inveterate pessimist? A dour old nihilist? A disconsolate Dubliner without love or hope? Is that

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the sorry conclusion we must draw from this curious text? The matter is not so simple. In fact, if Beckett is saying, in one breath, that imagination is dead even as it lives, with the other he is countering: imagination lives even as it appears to die! Like the two partners in the rotunda skull, there are two sides to Beckett's story: one tragic, the other comic; one despondent, the other defiant. The imaginary scenario depicted here, like most of Beckett's other texts, is suspended half-way between a grave and a womb (to borrow one of his most famous images from *Godot*). One moment, the figures in the white zone resemble half-dead corpses, the next living embryos. This paradoxical attitude is succinctly summed up, I think, in Beckett's heart-felt confession of never knowing for certain but always hoping against hope: 'Where we have both dark and light, we have also the inexplicable. The key word in my plays is "perhaps".'<sup>12</sup> And not just in the plays, I would suggest.

Beckett's work has, I believe, a particular resonance for our time. And a very special relevance too. His depiction of an undecidable zone between the imaginary and the real is arguably a prophetic prefiguration of the virtual world of anonymous high-tech communications in which we now find ourselves. A world where so much of our experience is disembodied, vicarious and impersonal (how many people's lives today are lived in front of electronic and digital screens?) Indeed, as the Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin argued: contemporary humanity is fast approaching a consumer society of such mass-produced simulation and voyeurism that we may eventually forfeit all our powers of creativity and, instead, become spectators of our own self-destruction – and this without batting an eye. 'Mankind,' as Benjamin put it, 'which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself.'<sup>13</sup>

But Beckett's apocalyptic fantasies may also serve to remind us that the ideological and religious fanaticism that governs so much of our world today, and is the cause of so much war and violence, stems from a refusal to experience the ambiguities and paradoxes of existence. It stems from a denial of the

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complexities that make up human reality. Beckett's own refusal of easy solutions to life's ultimate questions – life and death, theism and atheism, meaning and absurdity, self and other – may well be one of his most abiding gifts. Not forgetting, of course, the sheer fun, music, tenderness and unmistakable mischievousness of the writing itself. A writing that never seems to come to an end, for as one of his unnamable narrators puts it, in words no doubt close to Beckett's all-too-human heart: 'I can't go on, I'll go on.' Here Beckett would seem to endorse the conviction of Paul Ricoeur in his classic study of narrative imagination, entitled *Time and Narrative*:

Maybe we are the witnesses of a certain death of the art of narrating. [...] But maybe it is necessary, in spite of everything, to continue to believe that new forms of narrative, which we are not yet in a position to identify, are already in the process of being born, forms which would testify that the narrative function is capable of metamorphosis without actually dying. For we have no idea of what a culture would be in which one no longer knew what it means to narrate.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, then, might we not say that Beckett's undoing of storytelling itself takes the form of stories told, untold and retold. So that the very attempt to bring the story to an end is itself 'a search for a story to begin':

[Y]ou must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me [...] perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my own story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.<sup>15</sup>