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Samuel Beckett's "Philosophy Notes." Ed. Steven Matthews and Matthew Feldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 576. \$125.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Marc Farrant, University of Amsterdam

Samuel Beckett's "Philosophy Notes" comprises the Irish writer's (largely) complete notes on the history of Western philosophy, an autodidactic enterprise undertaken in the 1930s alongside—and between—the publication of his first forays in fiction, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) and *Murphy* (1938). First discovered in a trunk in his cellar after his death in 1989, and hitherto unavailable to a general academic audience, this Oxford University Press edition of the notes consists of the full text of two manuscripts held at Trinity College Dublin, consisting of some 267 folios totalling over 110,000 words. The moniker "Philosophy Notes" derives from a prior publication of the volume's coeditor, Matthew Feldman's *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (2006)—a seminal publication of the archival turn in Beckett Studies. Feldman and his coeditor, Steven Matthews, do an excellent job of framing the material that is included here (which runs to over five hundred pages), suggesting ways for the reader to navigate Beckett's compendious research into what he referred to once as the "loutishness of learning."¹

Indeed, this volume's introduction is exceptionally useful. Building on Feldman's prior work in this area, the introduction consolidates a narrative of Beckett's engagement with philosophy

that helps crystallize several significant hermeneutic focal points. Feldman lays out Beckett's engagement with philosophy in several works that argue that the "direct relationship between 'Beckett and philosophy'—meaning Samuel Beckett's struggle with Western philosophy as it influenced his poetics and outlook—lasted only a decade, from 1928 to 1938."² Based on the extant archival notes themselves, Feldman's thesis is convincing and is further compounded by the publication of *Beckett/Philosophy*—a 2015 essay collection that might be considered a companion to this Oxford University Press edition of the notes (chapters are cited repeatedly in the editors' introduction). What follows from this narrative is a twofold skepticism towards both Beckett's own claims of ignorance regarding Western philosophy—"I never read philosophers"—and theoretical or philosophically inspired readings of Beckett's works.³ For Feldman, these readings all too often repeat their axiomatic premises at the expense of the works themselves. An implicit claim here is that a "work" of literature points more in the direction of its origin (its author; its archival beginnings) than its destination, the countersignature of the critic or reader. In other words, for Feldman's empiricist approach, the question of the philosophical *meaning* of Beckett's works is separate from the question of Beckett and philosophy (Feldman, "Beckett and Philosophy, 1928–1938," 167).

This Oxford University Press edition follows Feldman's empiricist lead. This is amplified by the fact that the notes themselves, as the editors remark, consist of "a kind of edited version from parts of three major source texts" that Beckett largely copied verbatim, with a minimum of interventional commentary or "authorship" (Matthews and Feldman, xxv, xl). Thus, although the notes offer little to help form an idea of Beckett *as* philosopher, as a documentary record of his engagement with the philosophical tradition they do help categorically to refute the idea that he was writing from a position of ignorance with regard to the major ideas and debates that had preoccupied philosophers from the pre-Socratics to Friedrich Nietzsche (where the notes abruptly end). As a work of scholarship, too, the *Philosophy Notes* are a remarkable achievement. The footnotes that run throughout track every reference to Beckett's published works, allowing the reader to shuttle back and forth with ease. The introduction is also, on its own, a significant resource. Therein the editors extensively detail and date (where possible) Beckett's note-taking practice, developed alongside his period spent with James Joyce working on *Finnegans Wake*. The specific philosophy notes included in this volume were begun in 1932 in London (although they contain no internal dating). The first major work they were to influence was *Murphy*, begun in 1935. The novel features references to several thinkers, notably Democritus's famous "Naught is more real" and post-Cartesian ideas of mind/body interaction, which inflect Beckett's approach to psychology (the famous chapter six on Murphy's mind).

Beckett's later works move away from the "gaudy shows of erudition" that mark his early works (xix). The editors note that the notes themselves evolved similarly: "the nature of Beckett's notes changed markedly between the late 1920s and late 1930s, from pastiche to summative to largely direct quotation" (xxiv). It appears that Beckett worked in a rough chronological order, completing in 1937 and 1938 the "final 300 or so years of Western philosophy to the turn of the twentieth century" (xvii). Drawing on three major sources, it is notable that Beckett's substantial enterprise involved very little firsthand engagement with primary philosophical texts. Instead his chosen commentaries were Archibald B. D. Alexander's 1908 *A Short History of Philosophy* (abandoned after the chapter on the middle ages), John Burnet's 1914 *Greek Philosophy; Part I: Thales to Plato*, and Wilhelm Windelbrand's *A History of Philosophy* (first translated in 1893). The editors note the especial significance of Windelbrand, who envisages Western philosophy as a system comprised of more than the sum of its parts. Both Burnet and Windelbrand provide for Beckett a framework through which to engage key thematic preoccupations that reverberate across his critical writings, namely: the problem of reality, subject/object relations (see "Recent Irish Poetry" [1934] and "Three Dialogues" [1949]) and the relation between universals and particulars (translated into philosophical parlance by the editors as realism versus nominalism).

600 It is Burnet who furnishes Beckett with a host of images that recur in the later fictions: Anaximander's conception of the earth as a small cylinder in "The Lost Ones"; Zeno's grains of millet that appear in *Mercier and Camier* and *Malone Dies*; Empedocles's systole and diastole as in *Molloy* and *The Unnamable*. But it is through Windelbrand's neo-Kantian systematizing vision of Western thought—or rather, through Beckett's equally systematic excision of Windelbrand's interpretative commentary—that Beckett's nominalist preference for the "demented particulars" is felt most forcefully.⁴

Dubbed "non-Euclidian logic" by Feldman, Beckett's antisystematizing intellectual proclivity is present throughout the notes (Matthews and Feldman, xxxi). Rather than extensive conceptual elaborations, Beckett focuses on names and dates, echoing his later comments that: "I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos any more than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know."⁵ This emphasis displaces Windelbrand's effort to conceive of philosophy as "an organic whole," as the editors argue: "[Beckett] perverts Windelbrand's 'take' on the transcendental and evolutionary development of Western philosophy, providing instead [in the 'Philosophy Notes'] the very catalogue of detail which *A History of Philosophy* only reluctantly includes in its later editions" (Matthews and Feldman, xxxvi, xxxix). Indeed, despite the very few instances of direct intervention by Beckett across the notes, it is in the last ninety or so pages on Kant and the nineteenth century where this incredulity towards wholeness manifests most explicitly in aspersions against "anthropologism" and around the Kantian notion of the Thing-in-Itself. This is also where Beckett's key philosophical influence makes an appearance—Arthur Schopenhauer, or "dear Arthur" (322, 447). It is with Schopenhauer that "[i]rrationalism comes to full development"; denying any grounds of access to things in themselves, "since world is nothing but self-revelation (objectivation) of the will, it must be a balls aching world" (447).

This edition will be invaluable for future scholars working on the topic of Beckett and philosophy. In particular, the link established between Beckett's interest in Greek philosophy and medieval nominalism—as attested by these notes—ought to yield significant dividends when thinking about Beckett's own proximity to philosophers of the twentieth century, notably the postwar school of French irrationalism to which Beckett was more than just a fly on the wall. Indeed, as the grey canon emerges ever more out of the gloom, as the provenance of every allusion or pen stroke is tracked and traced—now that we finally have "Every i dotted to death!", as Beckett writes—it should be hoped that such a compendious resource as this Oxford University Press edition becomes a spur to the imagination, to embrace afresh the conjunction—Beckett and Philosophy—not only in terms of (archival) origin but also of (readerly) destination.⁶

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Sean Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber, 2012), 55.

2. Matthew Feldman, "Beckett and Philosophy, 1928-1938," *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010): 163–80, 163.

3. Beckett claimed that he had "never read philosophers" in an interview in 1961, see in: *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1997), 217.

4. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (London: Faber, 2009), 11.

5. Samuel Beckett, quoted in James R. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 244.

6. Samuel Beckett, "Catastrophe," in *The Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber, 2006), 459.