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Research Resources: the Beckett Collection, University of Reading

The University of Reading rightfully boasts that the Beckett Archive is the largest and most comprehensive collection pertaining to the life and work of the playwright, author, and poet Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). The broad range of material in the collection allows scholars from diverse disciplines to enhance knowledge of Beckett's work by applying it to many different fields, including neuroscience, the visual arts, philosophy, postmodern poetry and literature and, naturally, theatre and the performing arts.

The archive's origins can be traced back to 1971 when James Knowlson (Beckett's official biographer) and John Pilling decided to mount a Beckett exhibition at Reading. When Knowlson visited Paris to collect items from his personal collection he learnt that, having been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, Beckett had begun to think seriously about his long term legacy. Following the success of the exhibition the university continued to acquire Beckett ephemera and associated materials. As a result the Beckett International Foundation was founded in 1988 to support teaching and learning activities and to develop scholarship in this area. The archive has been used as the basis for several publications including *Beckett's Dream Notebook* (1999) and *The Ideal Core of the Onion* (1992). The Film, Television, and Theatre department at Reading has an MA programme entitled Samuel Beckett: Archive, Text, and Performance. The fact that the Beckett Archive module is compulsory for the MA students is testament to the collection's efficacy as a research resource and an artistic tool.

The most recent boon for the Foundation was Beckett's original manuscript of his first published novel, *Murphy*, which was acquired at Sotheby's auction house in July 2013. Following the actor's death Billie Whitelaw's archive was donated to the Foundation in 2014. It includes extensive press cuttings

relating to the publication of her autobiography *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?* (1996). John Minihan's photographs of Whitelaw exemplify the fierce precision Beckett's roles demand from actors: Looking at a photograph of her in *Rockaby* one's gaze is drawn to the punctum of her half drawn eyelids; her focus is simultaneously directed inwards and outwards.

Two other gems include the model stage for the original French production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 and Peter Snow's design of the 1955 English production. Snow's design intriguingly sets the play indoors and was approved by Beckett. Unfortunately owing to budget constraints it was never realised, but it is nevertheless fascinating to ponder how this curious play might have been received differently by audiences had it been staged.

In the minds of many Beckett is a man of the theatre first and foremost, an understandable state of affairs given the impact *Waiting for Godot* had on critics and audiences in a Britain that was still reeling from the effects of the war. Beckett's genius as a playwright was to stage rather than merely verbalise humanity's search for meaning in a godless universe. This resulted in the sophisticated and still radical experimentalism of staging states of mind, as seen in plays such as *Footfalls* (1975) and *Rockaby* (1980). But his genius for playwriting has often eclipsed his achievements in literature and philosophy. Beckett's influence on postmodern thought can be also be attributed to his novels *Murphy* (1938), *Molloy* (1951), and *Watt* (1953) as well as his plays. The inner voices of the protagonists drive the narrative but exceed the conventional first person perspective by constructing the reality they inhabit: fragmented, unordered, disjointed worlds where any semblance of intelligibility is subtended by the struggle to anchor themselves in the here and now. The same motif is employed in *Not I* (1972) and to a lesser extent in *Happy Days* (1961) where Mouth's and Winnie's ability to speak is the only thing keeping them alive.

These recurring themes and devices have an explicitly philosophical bent that can be traced back to Beckett's largely self-taught fascination with many

different schools of philosophy. His interests spanned the pre-Socratic traditions all the way up to the nineteenth century. The archive holds Beckett's notebooks on philosophy, which afford researchers an opportunity to chart the development of his thinking and to identify his influences. Professor Steven Matthews is the co-editor of a forthcoming Oxford University Press publication based upon these materials. The book will act as a useful resource in broadening knowledge of the philosophical implications of Beckett's oeuvre.

Like all archival materials, the revelations that the Beckett collection engenders is often highly surprising and relates as much to their form as it does to their content. As well as being an uncommonly skilled writer Beckett had a distinctive command of visual language. Bill Prosser's *Human Wishes* (2008) is a series of the artist's drawings based upon the many doodles found in Beckett's manuscripts. The title of the book is taken from Beckett's unfinished play (c.1937-1940). On the manuscript many ostensibly unimportant doodles are inscribed in and amongst the dialogue, which Prosser interprets as "pictorial leakages which refract a creative mind" (ibid, p.2). The doodles give the researcher an additional avenue into Beckett's thought process underneath the textual layer. Such doodles can be found in many of Beckett's manuscripts and were the subject of the Leverhulme Trust sponsored research project *Beckett and the Phenomenology of Doodles*. In 2012 Warwick collaborated with the universities of Reading and Birkbeck on an AHRC funded project entitled *Beckett and the Brain*. The project investigated how Beckett's work could be used as a point of departure to advance understandings of mental disorders. Following the success of *Beckett and the Brain*, the team launched the *Modernism, Medicine and the Embodied Mind: Investigating Disorders of the Self* project, which will culminate in an international conference to be held at the University of Bristol in 2016.

The diversity of these outputs demonstrates the devotion of staff at Reading to further knowledge of Beckett's seismic contribution to theatre and post-modernist thinking in general. Foregrounding the Beckett archive as a pedagogical tool means the MA programme can potentially act as a blueprint for scholars who wish to incorporate archives into a taught module's content. The depth and scale of this research reflects the Beckett Archive's power to promulgate ideas and questions that expand the possibilities of how we study the human condition.