

# BECKETT AND BION

The (Im)Patient Voice in Psychotherapy and Literature



IAN MILLER

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

KAY SOUTER

**KARNAC**

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*Ian S. Miller*

with contributions by Kay Souter

**KARNAC**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

“Do you take your work home with you?” had been a question often asked by patients in over thirty years of Ian Miller’s clinical practice as a psychologist and psychoanalyst. Very surprisingly, as he listened one evening to Conor Lovett’s Gare St Lazare Ireland performance of Beckett’s *First Love*, the answer seemed to be a resounding “yes”. That resonant experience was the beginning of this project.

Ian’s undergraduate education at the University of Pennsylvania focused on historical analysis of ancient manuscripts. His Doctorate in Clinical Psychology was followed by psychoanalytic training at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. He is currently based in Dublin, where he maintains a psychotherapy practice. He is a member of the Irish Forum for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy.

Kay Souter’s experience has mirrored Ian’s, with emphases reversed. She is a literary critic and educator, and has taught English literature at universities in Australia for over thirty years.

In the 1980s, she decided to learn more about psychoanalysis, and promptly found herself introduced to the work of W. R. Bion, whose extraordinary approach not only resonated for her, but also allowed

her to explain Samuel Beckett to the drama students she was working with at the time. She has published widely on psychoanalysis and representations of the family, and in recent years her work on Bion has allowed her to focus on learning space development. She is based in Melbourne, where she works at Deakin University. At the weekends, she works in the small family vineyard in the foothills of the Australian Alps.

# Introduction

This reading of Beckett and Bion is not simply interpretative, but a construction that has arisen from a very dynamic process, full of hypothesis and surprise. Far from negating other readings, it only adds density to the textured understanding of these two brilliant thinkers, each formally in different lines of work, but joined through what Bion himself might call a “reciprocal perception” of psychoanalysis. It is reciprocal because Beckett transformed psychoanalytic thinking into a literary genre while Bion transformed psychoanalytic thinking into process understanding. Each utilised the same object, but with different attentions to different ends.

Our collaboration began fortuitously, over a bottle of Souter Vineyard cabernet, after meeting at an international conference in Melbourne where Kay was a keynote speaker and I gave a paper. Somewhere approaching the lees, we got to talking about Beckett and Bion. Ian had recently seen Conor Lovett perform in *First Love*, and had a strong intuition about the narrative’s clinical underpinning. He had begun reading Beckett biographies as well as psychoanalytic papers about the Beckett–Bion relationship. Kay’s interest in Bion had long informed her teaching and writing (Souter, 2009).

Each agreed that something had gone missing in scholars' understanding of the Beckett–Bion relationship. Most glaring to us, as we began a second bottle, was a lack of critical thought concerning both the nature of Bion's Tavistock training at the time of Beckett's therapy and what, from the standpoint of now current theory, seemed to be Bion's violation of therapeutic boundaries in inviting his patient to dinner and a Jung lecture in October 1935.

Additionally, Beckett's own documented and prolific reading in psychoanalysis seemed nowhere to have been noted as a potential resistance to psychotherapy. In fact, it seemed to us as if the community of Beckett scholars, while mindful of psychoanalysis, had approached it as a theory alone rather than as an experiential clinical practice, and that the community of psychoanalysts, while mindful of the Bion–Beckett linkage, had insufficiently documented the terrific shifts in psychoanalysis, theory and training, both informing this early psychotherapy and subsequent developments in the field.

We agreed to collaborate on what was initially, to be a paper; so the work began. Biographies were invaluable, especially Knowlson's brilliant *Damned to Fame*, which allowed us to hypothesise about the young Beckett's emotional situation. Crucial to our research were Fehsenfeld and Overbeck's recently edited compilations of Beckett's correspondence. Reading them chronologically provided a rich resource in tracking Beckett's emerging thought and emotion, over time. Especially interesting to us were the many letters written during the period of Beckett's psychotherapeutic encounters with Bion. These provided an extra-therapeutic window on the treatment, from which, together with biographical materials, our changing hypotheses might be extended.

Reading, on the psychoanalytic side, the classic papers of Simon and Anzieu on the Beckett–Bion relationship provided a fine jumping-off point. Bion-related scholarship by Bléandonu and Conci was invaluable; as was Dicks's history of the Tavistock Clinic. The transcripts of Jung's 1935 Tavistock lectures provided not only important contents, but also much context about the institutional life of Tavistock at that historical moment. Certainly, we are also indebted to psychoanalytic scholars, from Breuer and Freud onward, whether of Freudian, Kleinian, or Middle persuasions (including ego-psychologists, interpersonalists, and relationists) for the wisdom they have imparted to us via theory, supervision, and personal psychoanalysis.

My reading of a footnote in Anthony Cronin's biography of Beckett opened up another fruitful avenue. It led to discovery of an unedited, taped interview of Beckett's lifelong friend, Geoffrey Thompson, in the Dublin archives of Ireland's national radio broadcaster, RTE. Thompson's interview provided much detail about the period of Beckett's psychotherapy—especially about the Jung lecture. This allowed us to reshape our hypothesis, deepening it with both complexities of institutional life and the possibility of creative solution to a therapeutic impasse.

Beckett's correspondence carried us forward in the Beckett–Bion relationship and provided a segue for the continuation of Beckett's transference to Bion through the war years to the novellas and the trilogy. At the same time, a chronological reading of Beckett's work, together with works by McGreevy and Aldington, were helpful in generating other threads in relation to Beckett's social world and evolving literary style.

My linkage of the novellas and the trilogy to *Studies on Hysteria* in preparation for a talk at Trinity College, Dublin, in February 2012, was a bridge to our understanding of Beckett's literary transformation of free association. This hypothesis received support as we read about Beckett's own interests in generating a post-Joycean, post-Proustian, personal literary voice. In addition, we were strongly mindful of Beckett's own struggle with debilitating panic and the familial stressors leading to Geoffrey Thompson's referral to psychoanalysis in 1933.

The decision to read Ernest Jones' writings of the 1920s, which formed a substantial portion of Beckett's study, was invaluable. Jones' evocative descriptions are critical elements in thinking about Beckett's transformation of psychoanalytic concepts in literature.

Perhaps most exciting was our recognition that Beckett's use of the reader shifted several times during the period immediately prior to his writing *Waiting For Godot*, and we were only reading in the English, leaving the back and forth of translation from French to English aside. From this, we were able to trace Beckett's own literary working through in fiction relative to the internalisation of Bion as analyst, especially within the trilogy. We hypothesised that development in Beckett's depictions of the dyadic relationship facilitated his own shift from novel form to drama through innovative and controversial use of the reader. Unwittingly, the reader participates in the author's

examination of internalised objects and, in so participating, also engages with a new and dynamic form of modern literature.

Our interest has been in understanding Beckett's translation of his own therapeutic experience into art. This extends the psychoanalytic contribution to Beckett studies beyond the psychoanalytically inflected contents of Beckett productions to the use of experience within the clinical practice of psychoanalytic psychotherapy as a conscious or unconscious vehicle that powerfully affects the experience of apprehension by reader or audience.

In approaching Beckett's creative development in relation to his psychotherapy with Bion, we also enquired into Bion's work subsequent to his engagement with Beckett. Just as Beckett's internalisation of Bion as a transference object would power his own creativity, we recognised the probability of Beckett's significant influence on Bion, long after they had last met in 1935. We conclude our work in turning to Bion's subjective use of Beckett as the Patient Zero of his own post-Kleinian developments.

The structure of the book is divided into two parts. Part I is a variation upon the case study. It documents the context and events of Beckett's psychotherapy with Bion. Part II rests upon this initial presentation in an interpretative construction of both Beckett's literary development and Bion's later clinical theories.

Chapter One presents a biographical introduction of Samuel Beckett. It sets the tone for Chapter Two, a discussion of Beckett's early metapsychological monograph, *Proust*. Chapters Three and Four present Beckett's two years in psychotherapy, 1934 and 1935, while Kay's contributions in Chapter Six discuss Wilfred Bion's history and background.

Beginning Part II, Chapter Seven addresses Beckett's radical use of free association as a literary form. Chapters Eight and Nine examine Beckett's novellas; Chapters Ten and Eleven discuss "the trilogy". Chapter Twelve examines Beckett's creative transition from prose to drama, and Chapter Thirteen, another significant contribution of Kay, discusses Bion's theoretical use of his work with Beckett.

PART I  
THE CONTEXT AND EVENTS  
OF BECKETT'S PSYCHOTHERAPY  
WITH BION





## Presenting problems

Recalling his lifelong friend, Samuel Beckett, the London psychoanalyst Geoffrey Thompson noted in a 1976 radio broadcast that an understanding of Beckett's relation to his mother, May, was fundamental to any understanding of the renowned writer (Thompson, 1976). While this reference to maternal difficulty suggests a simplified psychoanalytic shorthand, Thompson could not have been more correct in relation to Beckett's psychological situation during his twenties. Indeed, it was the tormented struggle to separate from his family of origin, while simultaneously affirming his identity as a writer, that framed Beckett's path to psychoanalytic psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion in London between 1933 and 1935.

For Beckett, his twenties was a decade of contrast, both rich and painful, resulting in the development of literary acquaintances and accomplishment as well as the experience of suffering great anguish. These contrasts took Beckett close to the limits of tolerance, but would ultimately empower him to individuate from the adhesive power of his family, played out through the "savage loving" (letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 6 October, 1937, Fehsenfeld & Overbeck (2009), hereafter cited as TM, followed by the date of the letter) between May Beckett and Sam, the younger of her two sons. Before achieving this

psychological consolidation, Beckett would endure almost a decade of personal challenge in struggling to affirm his adult identity as a writer. Complicating his distress was the underlying suffering of painful physical symptoms and panic attacks.

It was a decade in which Beckett would practise a continuous circuit of separation and return, both specifically from his family's Foxrock home, Coolindragh, and generally from Dublin, his spiritual home (O'Brien, 1986). Beckett's own oscillations, "a series of physical flights from one spectacle of suffering after another" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 159) foreshadowed his character Molloy's continuous psychological departure and return to his own mother, initiating the first novel of Beckett's "trilogy" (Beckett, 2006b). Indeed, Beckett's own path paralleled what he would describe in his psychological notebooks as "the vicious cycle of psychogenic illness: disappointment of desire, aggression, fear of results, object of desire turned into something terrifying, repudiation, disappointment, etc." (Feldman, 2006, p. 110) until achieving acceptance of a firm and actionable recognition that "I am what her savage loving has made me, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally" (TM, 6 October 1937).

Samuel Beckett began his undergraduate education at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1923, at the age of seventeen. While secondary school classmates at the Portora School in Enniskillen had recognised his tendencies towards moodiness, withdrawal, and introspection, these were to develop, over the period of his time as a Trinity undergraduate, into the difficult triad of superiority, contempt, and depression (Knowlson, 1996, p. 79). The development of physical symptoms, beginning in 1926, would include the diagnostic markers of panic attack including insomnia, heart palpitations, night sweats, and fear of madness (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Throughout this period of emotional turmoil, Beckett was able to maintain and burnish his extraordinary capacity for critical reading and writing. In terms of emotional balance, he demonstrated a determined and reliable capacity for intellectual activity, often reflected in his early writing, through his extensive use of dictionaries, etymologies, foreign languages, and literary allusions, which was strikingly at odds with his psychological disarray. His highly focused writing, including the extensive composition of letters and "notebooks" on literature, philosophy, and psychology contrasted sharply with the maddening distraction of emotional suffering. Writing functioned as

an intellectual buoy, a “psychic retreat”, in providing a reliable refuge from the experience, the near-despair, of personal suffering (Steiner, 1993). Beckett’s typed notebooks on the subject of psychoanalysis reached 20,000 words, primarily drawn from his reading of Ernest Jones’ extensive *Papers on Psycho-analysis* (1948) and *Treatment of the Neuroses* (1963) (Feldman, 2006, p. 100). Unlike the encyclopaedic quality of Beckett’s notes on philosophy, his “Psychology notes” suggest that Beckett used them as intellectual adjuncts in finding his way through personal suffering (Feldman, 2006, p. 96).

Late in 1935, and in attendance with psychiatrists Wilfred Bion and Geoffrey Thompson, Beckett would hear Jung argue that a writer’s characters develop autonomously from the unconscious experience of a personality’s symptom complexes. Jung’s comments both underlined and suggested the mobilisation of what Beckett had already studied in Ernest Jones’ guide for physicians in the treatment of neurosis. Jones defines “complexes” as

a group of connected ideas, invested with a strong body of emotion and having a definite conative tendency (wish, longing, etc). In actual practice it is found that such localized groups of ideas always present some propensity towards dissociation, the extent of which varies considerably in different instances; consequently there is generally some portion of the complex that is repressed in the unconscious. (Jones, 1963, p. 36, fn 1)

“Conation” is an early twentieth century psychological term referring to the mental precursor of thought as desire or aversion (McDougall, 1918, p. 29). The implementation of Jung’s suggestion would involve Beckett’s own narrative mobilisation of the conative, in articulating wishes and longings that were conventionally repressed in polite society, but which are aggressively resonant as currents of love and hate beneath the conventional surface of daily interactions.

It was in the exploration of this unconscious world, itself lived within every man’s daily life, that Beckett’s writing would also secure him a special kind of psychic retreat, wherein his own considerable sufferings might inform productive creative pursuit. “In a secret way”, according to Jung, the writer’s use of himself would narrate his own “indefinite, because unknown, number of complexes or fragmentary personalities” (Jung, 1968, p. 81). Not only would Beckett’s