Kant: Borges and Beckett, Where Reason and the Ineffable Coexist

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the way in which Kant's thought influenced the writing of Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett. The former occasionally mentioned Kant, almost in bewilderment; the latter hardly ever, and yet Beckett's intense interest in Kant is demonstrable in his "*Philosophy Notes*" from the 1930s. In both cases, we are left with a practice of writing between infinity and finitude, where reason and everything that withdraws from our ultimate knowledge of the world co-exist.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Epistemology, Immanuel Kant, Literature, Paradox

This paper will focus on the way in which Kant's thought influenced the writing of Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett. It will examine how his ideas impacted these two very different writers' reflections on our place in a world that fails to provide absolute answers.

Now, while Borges' oeuvre consistently engaged with the kind of metaphysical questions that pertained to what Kant called "dogmatic metaphysics," Beckett's emphasized the limits of our knowledge given our embodied finitude. Both writers, fair to say, found Kant's work difficult to understand. The former occasionally mentioned Kant, almost in bewilderment; the latter hardly ever, and yet Beckett's intense interest in Kant is demonstrable in his "*Philosophy Notes*" from the 1930s.[1] In both cases, we are left with the practice of writing between infinity and finitude, where reason and the ineffable coexist.

[1] Of the five hundred pages in his "*Philosophy Notes*" on philosophy in general (ancient Greek philosophy, Platonism, medieval philosophy, modern philosophy, including German idealism, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), Beckett dedicated 172 pages to Kant alone and 20 to The Thing-in-itself, which he often abbreviated as TII.

Jorge Luis Borges and Infinity

Jorge Luis Borges' work belongs to world literature, much like that of Kafka, and for certain Continental philosophers—such as Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard—it also belongs to the realm of philosophy.[2] However, in relation to our topic, while Beckett's notebooks contain countless references to Kant, Borges only makes a handful of mentions of him. However, I want to argue that the number of references does not tell the full story. Borges' favorite philosophers, based on the number of mentions, were Berkeley, Schopenhauer, Zeno, and Hume, in that order. What intrigued Borges above everything else were questions of ultimate reality and time, and their connection, of course, to writing.

As early as 1923, with the publication of his first book, *Fervor of Buenos Aires,* a book of poetry about his native city, Borges focused on the notions of time present and time past, on memory, and the "reality" of space. This is significant because while Borges understood that the "Buenos Aires" of the book was his "Buenos Aires" and no one else's, that Buenos Aires seemed to exist for him in a Heraclitean universal time, outside of subjectivity. In a 1932 essay, "The Penultimate Version of Reality," he declared: "I return to metaphysical consideration. Space is an incident in time and not a universal form of intuition, as Kant imposed" ("Discusión", p. 200, my translation).[3] At this point in his life, still under the sway of his literary mentor, Macedonio Fernandez, Borges felt a certain unease about abandoning metaphysics, which brings us to Kant's notion of space and time and its significance for rethinking metaphysics.

Here is what Kant famously wrote in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> Both [time and space] taken together are, namely, the pure forms of all sensible intuition, and thereby make possible synthetic a priori propositions. But these a priori sources of cognition determine their own boundaries by that very fact (that they are merely conditions of sensibility), namely that they apply to objects only so far as they are considered as appearances, but do not present things in themselves. Those alone are the field of their validity, beyond which no further objective use of them takes place (p. 166, A39/B56).

[2] Borges plays a major role in Deleuze's concept of seriality in *The Logic of Sense*, while for Lyotard and Baudrillard he is an important figure in his questioning of scientism and aesthetic realism.

[3] All page references to Kant, Beckett, and Borges will henceforth appear in parentheses; all other references will be given in footnotes.

What Kant did here was to remove us from the abstraction of absolute time and space, and place time and space within us by conceiving of them as "conditions of sensibility." In other words, he replaced the "transcendental realism" of Newton with his own "transcendental idealism." According to this view, whatever we can say or experience of the world results from the very structure of our minds, which imposes certain schemas upon the objects of perception—i.e., appearances—beyond which we have no access. Yet what fascinated Borges was not the limits of pure reason, but rather the possibility of thinking the unknowable—the old metaphysical questions of Being, and cosmic time and space. This fascination is evident from the very beginning, as seen in a poem like "Break of Day" from *Fervor of Buenos Aires*, where Borges hopes that the city of Buenos Aires exists in universal time and space and is not merely an object of the mind. He writes:

> I recalled the dreadful conjecture
> of Schopenhauer and Berkeley
> which declares that the world
> is a mental activity,
> a dream of souls,
> without foundation, purpose, weight, or shape (p. 23).

He will, in later years, find solace in the Berkeleyan notion that objects persist in existence outside the human mind because there exists a transcendental entity, namely God, who, by perceiving them, also sustains their existence.[4] But it will be in essays and stories such as "A New Refutation of Time," "The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise," "Avatars of the Tortoise," "Death and the Compass," "The Library of Babel," and "Funes, His Memory" where Borges will delve into the metaphysical themes for which he is known. These include questions concerning time: eternal and circular; space: infinite and periodic; and the limits of reason as a labyrinthine adventure.

Now, if we begin with "A New Refutation of Time," which is two essays in one, even the title already presents a series of problems, begin-

[4] "Schopenhauer speaks of the dreamlike essence of life, and for Berkeley, universal history is a long dream of God who creates and perceives it infinitely," wrote Borges in the prologue to the Italian writer and journalist, Giovanni Papini's (1881 – 1956) books: *The Tragic Everyday, The Blind Pilot, Words and Blood* published in one volume in Spanish (*On Mysticism* 103). Incidentally, Beckett also wrote a review of the English translation of Papini's book *Dante Vico* entitled "Papini's Dante" (*Disjecta,* pp. 80 – 81). But where Borges had nothing but praise for Papini, Beckett had nothing but criticism for his bombastic, impressionistic style.

ning with the very word "new"; for if time is, as Borges wants to at least partially claim, universal and transcendent, then time cannot be refuted. For Borges, temporality is a slice of time, and to refute that is to refute our very existence. As such, writing, as a manifestation of our being, "is so saturated and animated by time that, quite possibly, not a single line in all these pages fails to require or invoke it," writes Borges (p. 318). If writing is like Escher's drawing of a hand drawing itself, which reminds us of the impossibility of negating identity in time, then its opposite, say of a hand erasing itself, would amount to the same thing. Interestingly, Borges in both versions of the essay, A and B, cites Berkeley's famous assertion that *esse est percipi*, or the notion that nothing exists outside a mind. He interprets Berkeley's notion of the "succession of ideas in my mind" as an affirmation of the existence of time, for clearly, the idea of succession contains the idea of time. On the other hand, a few pages later, he writes:

> I deny, in a large number of instances, the existence of succession. I deny, in a large number of instances, simultaneity as well. The lover who thinks "While I was so happy, thinking about the faithfulness of my beloved, she was busy deceiving me," is deceiving himself. If every state in which we live is absolute, that happiness was not concurrent with that betrayal. The discovery of that betrayal is merely one more state, incapable of modifying "previous" states, though not incapable of modifying their recollection. Today's misfortune is no more real than yesterday's good fortune (p. 322).

In short, as he says, "every instant is autonomous" and unique within time, but "if time is a mental process, how can it be shared by countless, or even two different men?" he asks, almost as if suggesting a possible answer, something akin to Kant's, which, on the other hand, he seems reluctant to accept. And yet, later, he writes: "All language is of a successive nature; it does not lend itself to reasoning on eternal, intemporal matters" (p. 324). This is reminiscent of what Kant states in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* about language, wherein he writes:

> All language is signification of thought and, on the other hand, the best way of signifying thought is through language, the greatest instrument for understanding ourselves and others. Thinking is speaking with oneself (the Indians of Tahiti call thinking "speech in the belly"); consequently, it is also listening to oneself inwardly (by means of the reproductive power of the imagination), (p. 86).

The point here—as with Borges—is the simple assertion that language is the external means by which we communicate the interiority of thought. Interestingly, Kant even seems to locate language in the body, as if to highlight its limited reach. And insofar as writing is also a form of listening to oneself—an aspect of self-reflection—it becomes a product of the "reproductive power of the imagination." That, according to David E. Johnson in his article "Kant's Dog," is precisely the problem for Kant. Johnson writes:

> We understand ourselves, our thought, through language, which always comes to us from another and which always necessarily points away from itself in pointing toward thought. Yet, Kant explains, such understanding, which can never be immediate self-understanding, because the condition of possibility of understanding is time—that is, designation, referral—is never secure…[5]

But, of course, it is not secure; we can hear Borges answer. Nothing is secure. We have language because we don't have access to things themselves. The role of language, inseparable from the imagination, is to produce or create truths and/or fictions: images of thought, as Deleuze might say. The Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal world, was for Borges the recognition that the mind functions 1) in terms of series, 2) binary oppositions or antinomies, and 3) synthetically, or what was the same for him, metaphorically and symbolically. The analytic proposition of identity (A is A) and the principle of non-contradiction or excluded middle were dead ends. In fact, what fascinated Borges about paradoxes was that they served him as examples of the infinity of thought; infinity here understood as conundrums of thought. In his short story, "Funes, His Memory," he imagines a character, Funes, who "literally" exemplifies the opposite of what John Locke held to be either impossible or pointless: a language "in which each individual thing—every stone, every bird, every branch—would have its own name" (p. 136). Borges writes:

> The truth was, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf. He resolved to reduce every one of his past days to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would then define by numbers. Two considerations dissuaded him: the realization that the task was interminable, and the realization that it was pointless (p. 136).

[5] Johnson, D. E., 2004. Kant's Dog. *Diacritics* 34(1), p. 32.

Borges then goes on to tell us that Funes "was incapable of general Platonic ideas," so he was not able to see, for instance, "that the generic symbol 'dog' took in all the dissimilar individuals of all shapes and sizes. It irritated him that the 'dog' of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally" (p. 136). In other words, Funes was incapable of thinking conceptually. He was the exemplar of "particulars" without universals, which in itself is also a pointless abstraction. He lacked the "transcendental schematism" to which Kant refers in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Obviously, Borges, without ever mentioning the name of Kant, was inspired, if that is the word, by Kant's posing of such an epistemological/metaphysical problem concerning particulars and universal. In the *Critique* Kant writes:

> The concept of a dog signifies a rule in accordance with which my imagination can specify the shape of a four-footed animal in general, without being restricted to any single particular shape that experience offers me or any possible image that I can exhibit in concreto. This schematism of our understanding with regard to appearances and their mere form is a hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty. We can say only this much: the **image** is a product of the empirical faculty of productive imagination, the **schema** of sensible concepts… (p. 272, B181).

Now, while Kant distinguishes between image as a product of the imagination and schema as that of "sensible concepts," Borges does not. He agrees with Kant that it is due to the imagination that my "dog" is not such a particular abstraction so that when I see my dog a second later, I can recognize it, but he does not agree with Kant that this is solely due to the understanding, devoid of any empirical content. For Borges, the understanding and the imagination are always conceived together. In his essays "The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise" and "Avatars of the Tortoise," Borges takes on Zeno's famous paradox concerning non-movement. In the first, he deals with philosophers' treatment of the paradox, ending with Bergson and James, after which he ironically concludes:

> I have reached the end of my article, but not of our speculation. The paradox of Zeno of Elea, as [William] James indicated, is an attempt upon not only the reality of space but the more vulnerable and sheer reality of time. I might add that existence in a physical body, immobile permanence, the flow of an afternoon in life, are challenged by such an adventure. Such a deconstruction, by means of one only one word, infinite, a worrisome word (and then a concept),

> we have engendered fearlessly, once it besets our thinking, explodes and annihilates…Zeno is incontestable, unless we admit the ideality of space and time. If we accept idealism, if we accept the concrete growth of the perceived, then we shall elude the *mise en abíme* of the paradox (p. 47).

And in "Avatars of the Tortoise" he writes:

> It is venturesome to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much. It is also venturesome to think that of all these illustrious coordinations, one of them – at least in an infinitesimal way – does not resemble the universe a bit more than the others. I have examined those which enjoy certain prestige; I venture to affirm that only in the one formulated by Schopenhauer have I recognized some trait of the universe. According to this doctrine, the world is a fabrication of the will. Art – always – requires visible unrealities. Let it suffice for me to mention one: the metaphorical or numerous or carefully accidental diction of the interlocutors in a drama. . . Let us admit what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities which confirm that nature. We shall find them, I believe, in the antinomies of Kant and in the dialectic of Zeno (pp. 207 – 208).

In short, Zeno's paradox is an example of a series of antinomies: beginning/end; motion/stasis; divisibility/indivisibility; finitude/infinity, etc., and it is by thinking it in such terms that the "dialectic of Zeno" can be understood. And again, this is precisely the aspect of metaphysics that interested Borges. Where Kant had mocked Swedenborg's "metaphysical pretensions" and his mystical visions, Borges had nothing but admiration for him. Not because Swedenborg presented scientific truths but rather because through writing, he attempted to do what Kant found objectionable in dogmatic metaphysics: pretend to transcend phenomena. For Borges, then, writing was an expression of speculative metaphysical questions, an attempt to say the ineffable. And in this way, books were transcendental vessels, each of which reflected some aspect of totality. At the end of "The Library of Babel," Borges writes: "The library is unlimited but periodic. If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope" (p. 118). Now, where there is hope in Borges of someday establishing some relationship with the noumenal world (even as thought experiments) there is little to none in Beckett. Where the former emphasized the notion of infinity, the latter underscored that of finitude: ten-

sions that lie at the very heart of Kant's philosophy: critical, practical, and aesthetic. And Didi and Estragon wait for Godot.

Samuel Beckett and Finitude

"The entire works of Kant arrived from Munich. I had to go away beyond the Gare de l'Est to collect them. I haven't had the time to open them, two immense parcels that I could hardly carry from customs to taxi," wrote Beckett to his friend, the Irish poet and critic, Thomas McGreevy on the 5th of January of 1938. The complete works of Kant were comprised of eleven volumes, the last volume, a monograph by Ernst Cassirer, entitled *Kant's Life and Thought*, which Beckett would consult time and again throughout the 1930s. In fact, most of the notes concerning Kant came from three primary sources, as can be seen in the *"Philosophy Notes"* as well as in the "Whoroscope' Notebook". These sources were Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* and Jules de Gaultier's *From Kant to Nietzsche*.[6]

What is interesting is the way in which Beckett's reading of Kant impacted his writing almost from the very beginning. Not much differently than Borges, Beckett would occasionally disavow the importance of philosophy in general for him. But this was clearly not the case as *"Philosophy Notes"* patently proves. He often expressed frustration with their convoluted arguments that seemed to him to go nowhere, as we will note later. In any case, philosophy in general, rationalists and idealists like Descartes and Berkley, and Kant in particular provided him with material that he would turn into a very unique kind of philosophical literature.

In "Tristesse Janale," a poem written in French sometime in the 1930s, Beckett explores the sadness of looking to the past or the present, evoking the dual-faced Janus. He equates the beauty of Pierre Louÿs' fictional Bilitis from *Songs of Bilitis* with Kant's *thing-in-itself*: "Le Chose kantienne, l'icone bilitique" (*Collected Poems,* p. 44) or "The Kantian Thing, the Bilitis-like icon" (my translation). This idealized beauty remains an unattainable ideal in a world marked by dualities, where "fierce ecstasies" devolve into "convulsions of filth". And in an untitled poem that begins with "ainsi-a-t-on beau" ("so it goes"), Beckett explores similar themes. Here is a translated excerpt from the poem:

[6] Beckett read Windelband's *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1935) in German and *Gaultier's De Kant à Nietzsche* (1900) in French. See the chapter, "Philosophy" in Van Hulle, D., Nixon, M. *Samuel Beckett's Librar*y. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 128 – 169.

> as if it were yesterday one recalled the mammoth
> the dinotherium the first kisses
> the glacial periods bringing nothing new
> the great heat of the thirteenth of their era
> over smoldering Lisbon Kant coldly bent (p. 98).

And here once again, we encounter a series of dualities: the ice age juxtaposed with the warmth of first kisses, the fires caused by the great earthquake of 1755 in Lisbon where between thirty and forty thousand people died, and Kant's cold response to the earthquake. This reference to Kant and the Lisbon earthquake came directly from Cassirer's *Kant's Life and Thought*.[7] According to Cassirer, the earthquake that had precipitated the debate between Rousseau and Voltaire on the question of whether this was "the best of all possible worlds" made Kant look for rational justifications for it.[8]

Yet all these factoids, while somewhat fascinating, are rather trivial. They are only significant as starting points. Much worthier are the connections between Kant and Beckett at the level of the latter's writing and worldview. A case in point is Beckett's second novel, *Watt*, a deeply philosophical novel that in many ways engages with the idealist philosophical tradition, including Berkeley, Descartes, and especially Kant.

The title is also the name of one of the characters, though it would be difficult to call Watt the "protagonist" of the story, as he doesn't seem to stand for anything in particular. He is, in fact, a "what?"—a question mark—who goes to work for a Mr. Knott, a man with many servants. Though I would not want to push the analogy too far, P.J. Murphy in his essay "Beckett's Critique of Kant" suggests that where Watt could be associated with the interrogative pronoun, Knott could be associated with the negative adverb "not" and by extension with Kant and can't. "The Kantian negatives concerning what man could and could not know are dramatized in the journey of Watt to take up a position as a servant at Mr. Knotts establishment. Kant/Knott is itself a double negative whereby Beckett punningly sorts 'can't' from 'cant,' the knowable from the unknowable," writes

[7] Cassirer, E., 1981. *Kant's Life and Thought*. Trans. James Haden. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 59.

[8] In the *"Whoroscope" Notebook* (verso 97) John Pilling points out, Beckett had made the following note concerning Kant: "Kant's exact description of Westminster Bridge (without never having set foot outside of Prussia)" (p. 45). This was Beckett's reference to a passage in Cassirer's *Kant's Life and Thought* (p. 46). While Cassirer intended this as praise for Kant's imaginative powers, Beckett's parenthetical remark, "without never having set foot outside Prussia," appears to be a critique of Kant's philosophical abstractions.

Murphy.[9] But unfortunately, here we are still at the surface.

More significantly is the episode of the bell that keeps on ringing in Erskine's room, Mr. Knott's gardener. When Watt, like a Borgesian detective, goes to investigate, he finds that there is indeed a bell in Erskine's room, but that it is broken, which only adds to the mystery: how could a broken bell have sounded? Watt becomes exasperated. His failure to locate the source of the bell's sound represents his failure to fulfill his duties, to know where everything is, and to maintain order in Mr. Knotts' house. This failure to know, to arrive at some indubitable knowledge, Beckett tells us, mirrors our own existential and epistemological failures. Just as Watt cannot understand the mysteries of Mr. Knott's household, we, too, struggle with the limits of our knowledge and the incomprehensible nature of reality, reflecting a deeply Kantian perspective on human understanding and its limitations. Beckett writes:

> And so always, when the impossibility of my knowing, of Watt's having known, what I know, what Watt knew, seems absolute, and insurmountable, and undeniable, and uncoercible, it could be shown that I know, because Watt told me, and that Watt knew, because someone told him, or because he found out for himself. For I know nothing, in this connexion, but what Watt told me. And Watt knew nothing, on this subject, but what he was told, or found out for himself, in one way or in another (p. 109).

What is worse for Watt is that having located the bell in Erskine's room, as we noted above, doesn't lead him anywhere, except to even more mysteries, for while in Erskine room, he makes another discovery that is equally puzzling: "The only other object of note in Erskine's room was a picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground of this picture. Was it receding?" (p. 109).

Watt can't tell what he is looking at or whether it's real or an illusion, and wonders if the object before him is receding. But everything is receding… in *Watt*. The thing-in-itself is wholly inaccessible. All we have are inventions and constructions. We don't know who or what Watt was before he entered the novel. Watt is the invention of a character named Sam, who states that what he has written down are Watt's revelations to him and that the events he narrates may never have happened (p. 65). Then suddenly, toward the end of the novel, a footnote appears addressed to the "at-

[9] Murphy, P. J., 2011. Beckett's Critique of Kant. *Sofia Philosophical Review* 5(1), p. 199.

tentive reader" (p. 183) that recalls the first words of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, "idle reader." The novel as an object exists because there is a reader; however, in the subject-object distinction, the difference is moot. Sam the character is as much an object as Sam the writer, the author of *Watt*. In the entry on *Watt* in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Ackerley and Gontarski write: "…Mr. Knott needs the succession of servants [*Watt* 114] that he might be witnessed and thus not cease to be. This inverts Berkeley's *percipi* as Watt may not appreciate."[10] The positive value that Berkeley's idealism held for Borges, in Beckett is critically questioned. While for the former the gaze guaranteed existence, for the latter that was precisely the problem. One may recall here Beckett's *Film* (1964) where O (object), the character played by Buster Keaton, paranoically runs away from E (the eye or the gaze). To exist is to suffer, and what we want to do is to escape, in Buddhist fashion, the cycle of rebirth and continual existence without meaning or answers. Or perhaps not, as Beckett often seems to suggest. In any case, we have bodies that bleed and ooze, and as in that early poem, "Tristesse Janale" experience "ecstasies" and "convulsions of filth."

On May 12, 1938, four months after mentioning to McGreevy that he had received Kant's complete works and following his recovery from a stabbing incident in Paris, Beckett wrote to his friend Arland Ussher: "I read nothing and write nothing, unless it is Kant (*de nobis ipsis silemus*)…" (p. 622). This Latin phrase, taken from the motto of the second edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, is quoted by the narrator of *The Unnamable*. "*De nobis ipsis silemus* [we are silent about ourselves], decidedly should have been my motto," says the unnamable (p. 329). But this is the dilemma that all of Beckett's personages run into in the trilogy, and Beckett himself in in his own writing and aesthetics: the conflict between wanting, desiring silence, to speak no more, to cease to be, and the contradictory drive to go on existing, saying, inventing. Molloy says: "All I know is that the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little man, with a beginning, a middle and an end, as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing" (p. 31).

However, having said that, Molloy quickly reverses what he just said, as though not wanting to arrive at a conclusion that in itself would constitute an invention. He then declares: "Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all

[10] Ackerley, C. J., Gontarski, S. E., 2004. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press, p. 300.

you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears as it is wept" (p. 32).

In Beckett's light the writer is not a creator, an imperial subject, a form of God that shapes the world as she or he sees fit. And thus, Kant's epistemological finitude becomes in Beckett an existential (emotional and bodily) and aesthetic of finitude. It is not simply that we lack knowledge of the objects of our perception, much worse, we lack knowledge of ourselves. We don't speak, we stammer as we try to make sense of the world. Thinking is a burden, a punishment that we must all bear as finite beings because it tempts us like Tantalus with unrealizable possibilities. If Kant could derive some relief from thinking that in eternity the crooked timber of humanity could be straightened out, there is no such faith in Beckett. And so, in *The Unnamable* the narrator says:

> I spoke, I must have spoken, of a lesson, it was a pensum I should have said, I confused pensum with lesson. Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation. I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is (p. 310).

All the narrator knows is that he was given a "pensum to discharge" but he does not remember what it was, though he thinks it was given to him "as a punishment for having been born." Significantly here is the word "discharge" for thinking according to Beckett is always bodily, which again is the reason why it will never achieve absolute knowledge of anything. "Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace" says the unnamable (p. 311). What Beckett finds puzzling is that in the drive to say, to speak of oneself, is the drive toward silence, in the form of a hope, a word that Borges also occasionally employed. But while Borges turned to writing on things beyond our capacity to know, Becket paradoxically turned to silence with words.

So, how are we humans to grapple with all these questions that go beyond our capacity? For Beckett, the answer did not lie in reason, as it did with Kant. In an interview with Michael Haerdter, he once remarked:

> The crisis started with the end of the seventeenth century, after Galileo. The eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, le siècle de le raison. I've never understood that: they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraissonent*!

> They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak. The Encyclopedists wanted to know everything … But that direct relation between the self and – as the Italians say – *lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken.[11]

And yet, it is the limits of human reason and finitude that propels him, that impels him forward, even at the end of his life to say: "So on unknowing and no end in sight" ("Stirring Still"), (*The Complete Short Prose*, p. 263).

"Last words"

Analogically, the difference between Borges and Beckett may be something like the difference between Schelling and Fichte or Freud and Jung. Where Borges built baroque cathedrals of words, Beckett built sparse spaces of words and silence. Both, at times, grew impatient with philosophy. Borges, for instance, one confessed with some frustration that he had failed to understand the *Critique of Pure Reason*. And Beckett's Unnamable complains about the incomprehensible discourse of certain philosophers "with all their balls about being and existing" (p. 348).

"Have contemporary philosophers had any influence on your thought?" Gabriel D'Aubarède asked Beckett on 16 February 1961, to which Beckett responded: "I never read philosophers," which, of course, was not entirely true. He may have stopped studying philosophy by that point, or he may have been using the word "read" ironically in his response, but it is doubtful that philosophy had ceased to be of interest to him. Later when asked whether existentialism could be a key to understanding his work, he answered: "There is no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms".[12]

Clearly, for Borges and Beckett, literature and philosophy were not equal but complementary endeavors. Beckett turned universals Meaning, the unknown) into particulars (Watt, Molloy, Didi and Estragon) and Borges particulars (Buenos Aires, Funes) into universals (Ideas, the Will, Eternity). Borges did do with the irony of the antinomies and Beckett with the bitter humor of finitude. Nevertheless, in both cases, their philosophical engagement with Kant remained undeniable and profoundly significant.

[11] Cited in McMillan, D., Fehsenfeld, M. 1981. *Beckett in the Theatre*: *The Author as Practical Playwright and Director*. New York: Riverrun Press, p. 231.
[12] Feldman, M., 2010. Beckett and Philosophy, 1928–1938. *Samuel Beckett Today* 22. Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies, p. 163.

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