Beckett’s late pseudo-couple: Kafka and Kierkegaard

This paper will analyse Samuel Beckett’s engagement with the journals of Franz Kafka and Søren Kierkegaard. Kafka scholars have documented Kafka’s complex reception of Kierkegaard’s work, emphasising his awareness of the similar circumstances of their broken engagements. While there is some evidence of Beckett’s comparative awareness of the two writers from as early as 1945 - when Beckett considered both to be relevant to a study of Jean-Paul Sartre - in the early 1980s Beckett became concerned with both of their biographies and the aphorisms located in their journals.

Through Beckett’s letters and notebooks we can follow a small part of his interest in these lives, aphorisms and fragmentary journal entries, addressing subjects of procreation, sickness, late life and original sin. These subjects dominate Beckett’s “Sottisier” notebook, into which Beckett copied two aphorisms by Kierkegaard which are included among other pessimistic and melancholy phrases. One of Beckett’s letters from the early eighties recalls his reading of Kafka’s diary, although Beckett does not say when this reading occurred and the source of the quoted line is actually the eight octavo notebooks containing Kafka’s Zürau Aphorisms, several short stories and other philosophical and religious fragments. Kafka incorporates Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling into the particular octavo notebook from which Beckett quotes and through which the Zürau Aphorisms also run. This notebook represents the most explicit of Kafka’s appropriations of Kierkegaard’s work and some of Kafka’s most essential aphoristic writing.

The paper will describe the ways that Beckett participates in these sorrowful private lives and literatures, arriving after Kafka had self-consciously echoed the life and letters of Kierkegaard. It will ultimately focus on the neglected aphoristic status of the Kafka phrase remarked on by Beckett, which can be read as a biographical entry but also as part of a series of theological aphorisms.