

is something the later Freud began to admit: in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he considers the possibility that the pleasure principle actually serves the death instincts. To use Bataille's emphasis, death is desired to the very extent that it is feared, since at the bottom of all human desire is an affinity for transgression: only that which threatens to punish us most inexorably can become an image of sacred freedom. Our fear of death heightens our longing for it. Bataille writes further, in *Le Coupable*, that sanity involves the recognition that what he calls "the laughter of freedom" is always anxious. Of course Dickens mourned Mary Hogarth. But his lifelong fascination with her can easily be seen as a desire for the terrible transcendence conferred on her by death and, in this way, as an attempt to exorcise his grief. The eroticism of *The Old Curiosity Shop* lies precisely in the constant alternation of extreme attitudes: death is successively horrible and glorious.

Dickens' horror of death—and his wish for us to be horrified by it—is critical. Yet it seems fruitless to deny, as Schwarzbach does, that Dickens was also drawn toward death—not as a representation of "existential freedom" but as a horrifying negativity that nevertheless, by abolishing all that is false in human life, authenticates the lives of those who can internalize its negative power. It also seems—and this point is more important—difficult to deny the centrality of death's appeal in Dickens' work. My reading must stand on its own as an attempt to prove this assertion in the context of a single novel. But other evidence cries out for notice. Surely it is not an inferior "idealism" that makes contact with death the central experience for the heroes of *Our Mutual Friend*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, and other novels. The plots of these novels are usually dismissed as a lesser ingredient in Dickens' art because, I believe, traditional criticism has failed to come to terms with the centrality of Dickens' attitude toward death. If, as Schwarzbach suggests, the good Dickens is the Dickens of the "real" (by which I'm guessing he means the energetic character portraits), what psychological insight can we infer from the violence (and sometimes suicidal passions) of his artist figures—Jasper, Gowan, Jenny Wren, Mr. Venus? What can we make of Dickens' barely contained fascination with his deathly villains? What of Dickens' personal freedom from death inhibitions: his attraction to the institutions of death (in *The Uncommercial Traveller*: "Whenever I am at Paris, I am dragged by invisible forces into the Morgue"); his fascination with (and simultaneous abhorrence of) public executions; his insistence on keeping up the reading of Nancy's murder despite

his doctor's advice that he was killing himself with the strain (John Carey's *The Violent Effigy* is replete with similar accounts)? The point here is aesthetic as well as thematic: critics see Dickens divided into the insipid, moralistic sentimentalist and the probing realist when they fail to recognize the extent of his attempt to found the conservative claims of moral order directly on the abyss of death and violence.

I regret that neither my article nor this reply gives me scope to discuss in the necessary detail the ways that Victorian culture adopted death as a ritual of social origination. Let me suggest only that the stigma of repression with which we define many aspects of Victorian culture stems in large part from our self-flattering refusal to see the connection between radical, death-related desires and Victorian concerns with renunciation as a cornerstone of social cohesion. It is no accident that the nineteenth-century English novel brings into conjunction a fastidious concern with individual identity and a relentless insistence on the heroism of personal abnegation. It is interesting, too, that the doubts of post-Victorian novelists about the solidity of the self coincide with skepticism about the value of self-sacrifice as an act redeemed in a social order. Victorian concerns with grief are much more complex than the traditional explanations that Schwarzbach offers, and one key to that complexity is the doubleness of human attitudes toward death.

JOHN KUCICH  
*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

#### Beckett and Mauthner's Influence

To the Editor:

Linda Ben-Zvi's article on Fritz Mauthner and Samuel Beckett ("Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language," *PMLA*, 95 [1980], 183–200) presents the detailed discussion of Mauthner's *Critique* that has long been needed in Beckett studies. As Ben-Zvi herself remarks, the lack of an English translation of Mauthner's major work has been the crucial obstacle that her own translations will help to eliminate. Her attempt to establish parallels between the whole of Mauthner's *Critique* and all of Beckett's work is admirable in its scope and because of her comprehensive knowledge of both authors. However, Ben-Zvi's decision to discuss Mauthner in relation to Beckett's entire corpus results in her overlooking some important differences among Beckett's works. In particular, she fails to point out that Beckett first becomes a "Mauthnerian" artist in *Watt*.

Beckett scholars generally agree that *Watt* is

Beckett's seminal work: in *Watt* he achieved for the first time a literary form that exemplifies the art of incompetence and failure, the aesthetic he later defined in his "Three Dialogues" (1949). *Watt* has the very characteristic that Beckett had earlier praised in Joyce's *Work in Progress*: it is not merely *about* something; it *is* that something itself. One of the reasons that Beckett was able to achieve a new mastery of form in *Watt* is that he put his knowledge of Mauthner's theory into practice, something he had not done in his previous work.

Although I agree with Ben-Zvi that no one influence can thoroughly "explain" Beckett's work, a close comparison between Mauthnerian philosophy and Beckettian artistry in *Watt* does show that Mauthner is the dominant philosophical influence in the novel. In my article "Mauthner's 'Critique of Language' in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*" (*Contemporary Literature*, 15 [1974], 474–87), I examine the detailed parallels between Mauthner's theory of language and Watt's failed quest, which is largely conducted *through* language. And after *Watt*, Beckett continued to employ a Mauthnerian view of language as the basis of his subsequent works up to the present time. Beckett remains a Mauthnerian in the works after *Watt* because he continues to employ as the basis of his language and form the same aesthetic of failure inspired by Mauthner. Ben-Zvi's many examples from Beckett's work after *Watt* and her quotation from the recent *Radio II* illustrate this point.

However, I cannot agree with Ben-Zvi's implied contention that all Beckett's work written after his first reading of Mauthner in 1932 is Mauthnerian in the same way as *Watt* and the works that follow. The language, forms, and techniques of *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) and *Murphy* (1938) simply do not support this hypothesis, and Ben-Zvi's few references from these works are not convincing. Beckett's prose before *Watt* had not yet attained Mauthnerian simplicity, and his characters' quests were not yet the eternal failures of thought, language, and action of the later works. Not a single character after *Watt* has escaped his situation through death as did Belacqua and Murphy. This fact alone points to an essential difference between works written before *Watt* and those written afterward. The deaths in these works, as well as Murphy's temporary attainment of "felicity," are indications of non-Mauthnerian thought, not supporting evidence of Mauthner's influence, as Ben-Zvi maintains.

The attempt to show parallels between Mauthner's *Critique* and all Beckett's work tends to result in glossing over distinctions. A close reading of

individual works will show that, although Beckett may have read Mauthner in 1932, he did not become a Mauthnerian writer until he composed *Watt* about ten years later. A major change occurred in *Watt*, the product not only of Mauthner's philosophy but also of Beckett's continued apprenticeship to his own art and his personal experience with the German occupation of France.

JENNIE SKERL

*Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*

*Ms. Ben-Zvi replies:*

Jennie Skerl seems to misunderstand the intentions of my article. First, I do not "establish parallels between *the whole* of Mauthner's *Critique* and *all* of Beckett's work." Such an undertaking would be impossible, given the complexity of Mauthner's three-volume, 2,200-page analysis of language. As I stated in my article, I only selected those elements that had direct applicability to Beckett's use of language. I also did not intend to discuss which Beckett work is the most "Mauthnerian," to use Skerl's word. If such were my intention, I would certainly agree with her selection of *Watt*. My aim, however, was to indicate the major elements in Beckett's theory of language and how those elements derive in part from the ideas Mauthner set forth in his *Critique*. My procedure was to isolate specific areas of linguistic interest and cite examples of Beckett's handling of these areas in specific works.

As to my "glossing over distinctions" in Beckett's writing, may I say that I am not making distinctions at all. I am using the works to illustrate the central points in what I judge to be Beckett's theories of language as they parallel Mauthner. I agree with Skerl that the early works do not have the same degree of specificity about language; that is why I do not quote at all from the early *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) and use only one reference to *Murphy* (1938) to make exactly the point that she does. There are obvious borrowings from Mauthner in *Murphy*—the ladder image, the realization of the limits of language—yet they are not as pervasive as the later handling of the same images and ideas in *Watt*. I do not indicate that they are.

Actually, from the wording of her letter, I would fault Skerl for "glossing." If she is concerned with distinctions among works, as I was not, why does she group all the works after *Watt* together and summarily say of them, "Beckett continued to employ a Mauthnerian view of language as the basis