Theodor Adorno’s essay “Trying to Understand Endgame” never refuses the challenge to interpret Endgame but it does not for one moment pretend that theory can unlock the meanings of an aesthetic object without putting its own processes, concepts and style into question – a challenge that is posed by the aesthetic object itself. The autonomy of Beckett’s art must be acknowledged yet at the same time be seen to engage in the most demanding questions of our time. How Adorno manages to keep the critical force of these axioms together is the subject of this essay. Far from being rendered irrelevant by postmodernism, I argue in the conclusion that such a critical project provokes the question of the future of modernism, not its demise.

Adorno’s reading of Endgame (Adorno, 1992) is a crystallisation of his approach to modernist art in general: it attempts to retain the autonomous and radical aspects of Beckett’s aesthetic while also imputing to it a highly charged constellation of social and political meanings. But according to Adorno, Beckett’s play neither reflects nor expresses any of these meanings. The relation between modernist art and the political and social world in which it is embedded is for Adorno an oblique one; it is difficult, enigmatic (rätselhaft) and, moreover, non-programmatic. The theorisation of this oblique relation too is difficult. This is because Adorno attends to the problematic and complicated nature of his object of study in a way that does not reduce that difficulty. In order to understand modernist art, theory cannot take on those categories of reflection and understanding actually left behind by modernist art. It can no longer rely on the direct presentation of meaning. As such, theory has its own autonomy arising from its responsibility not to falsely promise reconciliation and atonement.
Beckett shrugs his shoulders at the possibility of philosophy today, at the very possibility of theory. The irrationality of bourgeois society in its late phase rebels at letting itself be understood; those where the good old days, when a critique of political economy of this society could be written that judged it in terms of its own ratio. For since then the society has thrown its ratio on the scrap heap and replaced it with virtually unmediated control. Hence interpretation inevitably lags behind Beckett... One could almost say that the criterion of a philosophy whose hour has struck is that it prove equal to this challenge.

(Adorno 1992, 244)

Adorno conceives his own work as an attempt to prove equal to this challenge. But this is not limited to a dialogue between a thinker and an artist. This is a challenge for the interpretation of all difficult works of art. It is also a challenge, more specifically, for Beckett studies which, akin to nearly all of literary, cultural and aesthetic studies today has the tendency to fall into the trap of merely seeing the object of study as a depository of non-aesthetic meaning: there is little proper reference to, or negotiation of, the aesthetic form of the object. Rather, form not only mediates the social meanings to be found in it but, in fact, is the first (and last) point of access to them. In other words, the primacy of form is paramount and must be taken seriously in any examination of ‘content’.

This ‘axiom’ (of the constitutive difficulty of the object of interpretation) and this ‘challenge’ (to respond to that difficulty) also extends to the analysis of the social and the historical. In other words, there is also a sociological reason for this emphasis on the essential opacity of modernist works of art. Society too, for Adorno, can no longer be rendered by ‘clear and distinct’ concepts; it does not admit of rationality because it is no longer (if it ever was, but this is another matter, another debate) itself rational. Or, to be more exact, if society can still be said to be rational then it is a rationality which Adorno exhorts us to critique and to a large extent abandon: for this same rationality has degenerated into the total administration of culture and