Viva, Sam Beckett, or Flogging the Avant-Garde

By S. E. Gontarski

The surge in global popularity of Samuel Beckett’s work—or perhaps just the commercial image of “Samuel Beckett,” as “author,” particularly during the centenary year of 2006—is something of a mixed blessing. This Beckett sans frontières, or, as it is here termed, transnational Beckett, reflects the extension of a particular western European moment, Modernism as the avant-garde’s interrogation or critique of the cultural and moral bankruptcy of bourgeois Europe, onto a pan-cultural stage where it is now embraced not only by those cultures that were the object of its critique but also by cultures where the European moment barely resonated, or if it resonated did so belatedly. Whether such response represents a victory for or signals a crisis in the arts is an issue that itself wants interrogation. Are we in the midst of a global triumph of the avant-garde or simply witnessing its reduction to nostalgia or its assimilation into commerce and so into kitsch? In the case of Beckett, 2006 witnessed the commercial and popular embrace of a twentieth-century icon who happened to be not a rock star but an esoteric Hiberno-Gallic poet. That is, the transnational popularity of the European avant-garde with cultures that could hardly have generated such radical social production is fed by or is an echo of a parallel phenomenon, Beckett as constructed social icon, the latter evident in the growing number of allusions to him or his work in popular culture where he and his work are often reduced to a few immediately recognizable emblems, clichés, or catch phrases, like trash cans, bowler hats, or the act of waiting itself. Such popularity, distorted as it is, tinged with sentiment and sporting the trappings of kitsch, remains, nonetheless, a measure of his cultural impact, part of his legacy as he is absorbed into and celebrated if not revered by a twenty-first-century global economy, and so a commodity in the culture industry. As the narrator, Sam, perhaps, says of Watt, “One wonders sometimes where Watt thought he was. In a culture park” (77).

I opened the introductory essay to On Beckett: Essays and Criticism trying to assess that legacy:

On 13 April 1986 Samuel Barclay Beckett will mark his eightieth year, an event that will be commemorated by international festivals, performances and publications unprecedented in an author’s lifetime. Such attention was neither sought nor particularly welcomed by Beckett . . . but is fully the measure
of his impact on the literature and culture of the latter half of the twentieth century, on that period now regularly called Postmodern. (1)

What I feared at the time was overstatement, of Beckett’s coming in from the cold in his lifetime, say, now appears more like understatement in the after Beckett. Witness the opening of Marjorie Perloff’s presidential address to the Modern Language Association in December of 2006, a year that has come to be called the year of Beckett:

This year marks the centennial of Samuel Beckett’s birth, and the celebrations around the world have been a wonder to behold. From Buenos Aires to Tokyo, from Rio de Janeiro to Sofia, from South Africa (where Beckett did not permit his plays to be performed until Apartheid was ended) to New Zealand, from Florida State University in Tallahassee to the University of Reading, from the Barbican Theatre in London to the Pompidou Center in Paris, from Hamburg and Kassel and Zurich to Aix-en-Provence and Lille, from St. Petersburg to Madrid to Tel Aviv, and of course most notably in Dublin, 2006 has been Beckett’s Year. Most of the festivals have included not only performances of the plays, but lectures, symposia, readings, art exhibitions, and manuscript displays. PARIS BECKETT 2006, for example, co-sponsored by the French government and New York University’s Center for French Civilization and Culture, has featured productions of Beckett’s entire dramatic oeuvre, mounted in theatres large and small all over Paris, lectures by such major figures as the novelists-theorists Philippe Sollers and Helène Cixous, the playwrights Fernando Arrabal and Israel Horovitz, and the philosopher Alain Badiou. To round things out, in 2007 the Pompidou Center will host a major exhibition of and on Beckett’s work. . . . Who, indeed, more global an artist than Beckett? (652)

Many of these symposia and performances were financially supported not only by universities, foundations, and cultural arms of governments but by banks, airlines, and other corporate entities. One might well ask what drives such acceptance, such institutional enshrinement? In the decades that separate 1986 and 2006, Beckett and his work have continued to accumulate commercial capital, and the corporate embrace of the avant-garde has by 2006 been long established. But the Modernist avant-garde as a popular culture, as indeed the decorative art of our time, and thus the avant-garde at the moment of its greatest appeal, simultaneously suggests its degradation, if not the instant of its annihilation, the inherent cultural critique smothered in mass embrace. Does such global acceptance represent a blunting of the resistance inherent in Modernism and, for our purposes, in Beckett’s
work in particular? Roland Barthes had already anticipated such rehabilitation of Modernism in the 1960s: “the bourgeoisie will recuperate [the avant-garde] altogether, ultimately putting on splendid evenings of Beckett and Audiberti (and tomorrow Ionesco, already acclaimed by humanist criticism)” (69). The festivities commemorating the year of Beckett may have been just such recuperation, such a series of “splendid evenings” in the culture park.

Degradation may be endemic, immediate in the arts, of course, as Beckett well understood, beginning at the moment of art’s passing into social space—which, ironically, is the only place where it could hope to have any impact—but exposure to an audience, to the public, either through publication, exhibition, or performance begins a process of commodification. Whatever subversive or political edge a work may have had in its narrow context is transformed into commodity with increased exposure, such as Matisse prints used to decorate Las Vegas hotel rooms, Salvador Dali neckties, or Ché Guevara T-shirts, radical politics reduced to fashion statement, and such decorative tokens are readily available for Beckett as well. eBay sellers offer any number of Beckett T-shirts and “signed” photographs, for example, and the recent special anniversary issue of GQ, GQ 50, lists Beckett as among the fifty most stylish men of the past fifty years (388). For GQ Beckett is a hip trendsetter, a celebutant, one of the fashionistas of haberdashery, “A timeless figure, both ancient and modern, traditional and (whether he liked it or not) hip, he favored black (which ignited his blue eyes) and wool or tweed coats that could have come from any number of centuries.” Little matter that his wife bought his clothes at the marché de puces in St. Ouen, for GQ Beckett wore Prada.

In our current economy Beckett is apparently suitable for and recommended to infants. The current web page “Beckett for Babies” is only half in jest, as it proclaims, “Stimulate your infant’s intellectual development with Beckett for Babies, an introduction to some of the most important—and most difficult—literature of the twentieth century. If it is never too early to read to your baby, it is never too early to prepare her for graduate school.” The Guinea Pig Theatre’s animated Waiting for Godot is also as much homage as travesty, while the Muppets’s Monsterpiece Theater’s production of Waiting for Elmo seems to be wholly homage, the beginnings, perhaps, of “Beckett for Babies.”

Witness as well graffitist artist Alexander Martinez’s stark community mural of Beckett (used as a cover of this volume). It is located on Blenheim Crescent, just off the Portobello Road, the antique Mecca and tourist destination in London’s W11. Beckett’s face, admittedly deteriorating from the moment of its completion, something of a quick or instant ruin, dominates the side of a building as if he were a local politician, a notable neighbor, or a local hero, which he may be for the artsy Notting Hill set. The iconic mural, doubtless a heartfelt tribute, has, nonetheless, all the trappings of celebrity, of a cult of personality. Furthermore, an enterprising Irish group committed to commercializing graffitist art that calls itself “Helterskelter” spotted the mural, and the image is featured on
a free postcard the group distributes all over Ireland. The postcard fails to list the mural’s precise location, nor has the group identified the painter (himself a noted graffiti artist), whom they list as “Unknown.” While the group says of itself, “we have collected graffitti (sic), stencil art and murals wherever we have found them.

They continue to be printed at regular intervals and are still free to pick up from city card racks throughout Ireland,” one may cynically ask, is there not a T-shirt or poster in the offering?

Beckett had usually resisted at least the most overt commercial exploitation of his work, or at least that is the image he himself worked assiduously to promote. In 1969, for instance, he refused to allow his publishers to reissue (or re-cover) his work in order to capitalize on the newly awarded Nobel Prize, but within the cultural field, to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, such resistance is futile. Art is commodity, and Beckett’s cultural capital altered with the award as production moved from small to large scale in response to increases in promotion and consumption, much of that increase driven by institutions like universities and fueled, unsurprisingly, by Beckett’s American publisher who circulated various readers’ guides to Beckett’s work. The award of the prize also spurred Grove Press to issue in 1970 the first Collected Edition of Beckett’s work, in sixteen volumes, and Beckett was delighted with the result. Under different management, Grove Press went on to issue a second uniform edition to mark the 2006 centenary, a handsome, four-volume, boxed set, edited by Paul Auster, with introductions by contemporary literary luminaries Edward Albee, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, and Colm Toibín. Both sets were designed as and have become collector’s items, materialist trophies. In fact, one dare not break the shrink-film on and actually read the 2006 centenary edition for fear of devaluing the object. But many of us recall that suggestions to Beckett that he might or ought to be selected for inclusion in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* evoked a disdainful sneer from himself. Such honorifics seemed to interest him little. More commercially, his French publisher has resisted such inclusion, or collections of Beckett’s work generally, as a devaluation of its own commercial capital. There is no French edition of the three great French novels often misleadingly called *The Trilogy*, for instance. What he would have thought of being commemorated on Irish currency, on 10 Euro silver and 20 Euro gold coins, proof sets of which were presented by the Irish Ambassador to Japan to the author’s heir, Edward, at the Tokyo *Borderless Beckett* symposium in September 2006, is not difficult to imagine.
Such overt commodification is admittedly no more crass than Beckett’s image being used to flog Apple computers in its solecistic “Think Different” campaign. Beckett joined an impressive Pantheon of twentieth-century icons such as Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, and John Lennon in the Apple promotion, the campaign using the outsider status of these immediately recognizable icons in commercially brilliant ways, eliding the gap between art (or independent thought, or moral integrity) and commerce. But that gap has long been bridged by the late Twentieth Century. Lawrence Rainey traces the assimilation of art and commodity, or art by commodity, to the social provocations of the Futurists between 1912-1914 as the artist had “to come to terms with the new institutions of mass culture and assess their bearings on the place of art in the cultural marketplace.” Such reassessment precipitated “a permanent collapse of all distinctions between art and commodity, [and effected] the perceptible and irreversible leveling of both within the single and amorphous category of commodity” (38-39). In the twentieth century the artist need merely to wander across the bridge to the New Jerusalem of commerce. Call it, alternatively, the Elvis effect; that is, the sexually gyrating Elvis who recorded “That’s All Right [Mamma]” at Sam Philips’s makeshift Sun Studios in Memphis in 1954 and who threatened and finally upset middle class respectability was not the 21-year-old Elvis who played the Venus Room of the Las Vegas New Frontier Hotel in 1956, which billed him as “The Atomic Powered Singer,” or the Elvis who came to the desert in 1963 to film “Viva Las Vegas” with co-star Ann-Margret, or the Elvis who opened The International Hotel in Las Vegas in 1969 and became a fixture in that desert city, the darling of the blue-haired middle class. Beckett’s name has yet to appear on a Las Vegas marquee but it is worth noting that his most “popular” play is not Waiting for Godot or Endgame, but “Breath,” that is, in a sense, Beckett: The Musical. Its longest run was as the opener, called “Prelude,” to the Jacques Levy directed and Kenneth Tynan conceived sextravaganza, Oh Calcutta, Calcutta, the image and title adapted from the painting by Camille Clovis Trouille’s posterior odalisque, with its pun on the French “O quel cul t’as,” said “cul” prominently displayed. Tynan marketed the thirty-second playlet by adding three words to the opening tableau. Beckett wrote, “Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish,” to which Tynan added, “including naked people.” Leading off with Beckett, Oh Calcutta premièred at the Eden Theater in New York City on 16 June
1969 (the 65th Bloomsday). After a cautious tryout with thirty-nine previews, it opened, moving to the Belasco Theater on Broadway on 26 February 1971 where it ran, and ran, and ran, with only slight interruption, until 6 August 1989. Finally, 85 million people saw 1,314 performances during its eighteen-year run, making it, incontestably, the most viewed Beckett play ever, a record unlikely to be broken. Moreover, the musical was subsequently issued as an LP, was made into a Hollywood film, and remains currently available in CD, VHS, and DVD formats, and Oh, Calcutta received a full spread “pictorial essay” in Playboy magazine (October 1969: 166-71). Oh Calcutta did not play Vegas, but it certainly might have today given that Las Vegas has become the culture, well, theatrical, well, entertainment capital of the United States, if not the world.

The flamboyant centenary celebrations in Dublin were themselves crowned by another pop icon, U2 lead singer Bono, who was prevailed upon to pen and perform a tribute to Beckett and to (Gate Theatre impresario) Michael Colgan in a piece recorded for RTÉ and called “Waiting for Colgan.” As Bono’s monologue suggests he was persuaded to publicly acknowledge his admiration for Beckett over dinners at The Unicorn with Colgan, presumably, buying bottles of Puligny-Montrachet, at “200 quid a bottle,” according to Bono with his curious reference to British slang. For Bono’s participation Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism John O’Donoghue in turn rewarded him with a trophy, a signed first edition of Murphy, the irony of the quid pro quo gesture obviously lost on the principals. These Beckett celebrations were certainly big business.

The Apple campaign, moreover, while it plays on, or off, popular culture also invokes the messianic possibilities of the featured icons. It established a religious mood, and thereby reasserts authority, an incontestable, unimpeachable, indisputable authority, even as the object of the campaign is undisguisedly commerce. The cultural skepticism of these figures becomes colonized by the bourgeoisie, and the icons thereby validate rather than interrogate contemporary culture and institutions. The mass-produced Apple posters, moreover, have themselves become collectors’ items.

Beckett, of course, knew well the distinctions between Bohemia, the little world to which he aspired, and the big, quid pro quo world of the bourgeoisie, particularly that of Dublin, which he fled and castigated, almost viciously, in his first novel. In France the distinction lay between perhaps the democratic café and the aristocratic salon. Most simply it was the difference between art and money, or the relationship between art and money. But casting the issue as an exclusionary binary is distortive. Beckett sought, indeed assiduously pursued, both. Bourdieu would suggest that Beckett’s work (and the avant-garde in general) has always had “two different economies coexisting within it” (145), that is, art is always commodity, and the rise of the transnational avant-garde represents a shift in that balance toward its more commercial pole, toward the commodity culture that we often associate with postmodernism. Barney Rosset, Beckett’s American
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publisher, took on Beckett as an author in June of 1953 for his aesthetic and political qualities, but he was also a commercial publisher who expected to earn a return on his investment. He certainly saw both economies clearly, and built his enterprise, which would feature Beckett and other writers of the European avant-garde, as something of a second phase of Modernist publishing with emphases on a little, literary review, *The Evergreen Review*, and limited editions, author-signed artifacts. He also set about encouraging the commercial appeal of the avant-garde in general and Beckett in particular, selling, for instance, the paperback *Godot* for $1, a marketing strategy to broaden sales, particularly among the young and particularly at performances. Beckett was enthusiastic about such market expansion. But Rosset simultaneously published limited, signed, and numbered editions of all of Beckett’s work, for investment, for the collector’s market. And Rosset prevailed upon Beckett to participate in the book business and to write, even if not directly, the occasional book blurb, in this case for Beckett’s friend Robert Pinget, whose novel *The Inquisitory* is called, apparently by Beckett, “One of the most important novels of the last ten years.” Admittedly, the prose sounds little like Beckett, but it is attributed to him on the cover of the hardback edition. He thus became part of the Grove Press marketing strategy. What Rosset seems to have understood, instinctively perhaps, was that an anti-bourgeois art needed substantial and broad bourgeois support, and that Beckett’s name already had considerable commercial cachet by 1966. That cachet increased substantially with the award of the International Publisher’s Prize in 1961 (which he shared with Jorge Louis Borges) and which Grove Press engineered for its author, and the Nobel Prize itself in 1969.

Stephen John Dilks in his study *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace: His Life as a Professional Writer* details what he takes to be Samuel Beckett’s complicity in the shaping and marketing of his own image as an ascetic, anti-commercial author. That is, Dilks poses the paradox that Beckett commercially exploited his image as an anti-commercial artist. As he notes, using Beckett’s association with the *Index on Censorship* as a prime example:

Against those who treasure the idea that Beckett was some kind of latter day saint (as John Calder suggested with no apparent irony in an article “A Saint Born on Good Friday,” in *The Independent* on April 13, 1990), unique in his indifference to “the favour of the multitude” [. . .] we assert that Beckett’s life as a writer is most productively seen in terms of the materialist approach inaugurated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and brought into the modern Academy by D. F. McKenzie in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1985). In the context of the sociology of texts, Beckett’s participation in the campaign for *Index on Censorship* makes sense, providing an excellent introduction to the life and work of an author who worked extremely hard to establish a viable literary persona,
cultivate a loyal posse of supporters, posed for hundreds of publicity shots, signed numerous collectors’ editions of his texts, granted “non-interview interviews” at key moments in his career, and carried the supposed burden of fame with impressive adroitness and dignity. (5)

The degree of Beckett’s complicity in the marketing of his own image, particularly for the Index on Censorship campaign with its compelling image of the author gagged, is still very much in question, although Dilks’s text argues and asserts that complicity with certainty. The marketing of Beckett’s image, now perhaps run rampant, with Beckett’s active or passive compliance, is very much of a piece with the larger issue of the marketing of the avant-garde and, in Beckett’s case, the almost inexplicable number and scope of celebratory activities that marked the centenary of his birth in 2006, the publicity for almost all of which was dominated by his iconic face.

Speculation such as Dilks’s, even when it is less than convincing and falls short of argument, posits possibilities nonetheless, theorizes Samuel Beckett as one “Samuel Beckett,” a cultural construct, created with or without his complicity. If such a position sounds like little more than speculation, we need to remind ourselves that to theorize is to speculate, and such speculation allows us to approach Beckett’s social production, his literary output, in ways hitherto unthinkable. It affords a set of questions made possible in, say, a space cleared by theory, as Beckett’s first full-length play, Eleutheria, cleared a space (almost literally) for what would develop as Beckettian theater.

The essays gathered in this volume, part of the transnational phenomenon, themselves grow out of a particular historical moment, out of an international colloquium held at Florida State University in February 2006, Beckett at 100: New Perspectives, where some 120 lectures were presented. The symposium provided the opportunity for interrogating the Modernist agenda in a new century,
in terms of its traditions, its politics, its economy, and its globalization, through the particularities of one of its major authors. What is new for the twenty-first century, at the onset of Beckett’s second century, is the questions we ask, the questions we can now ask about not only Beckett’s work itself, but its emergence from and impact on particular social contexts or transnational environments, its participation in a global economy where the revolutionary edge of Modernist imagisme is transformed into postmodern commodity. That is, with such worldwide adulation (and here the conference organizers and the volume’s editors acknowledge their complicity) there seems precious little for Beckett’s art to oppose in a new century. Has Beckett’s art thus lost its power to shock as it is embraced and celebrated by global cultures and applauded (literally in the case of theatre) by bourgeois audiences in late or post-industrial cultures?

The most vulnerable part of Beckett’s oeuvre, vulnerable because of its alliances, necessary as they are, with commerce, may be the theatre. And here the question most pertinent may regard the degree of oversight or constraint the Estate exercises over artistic (theatrical) production. Of concern is not only the immediately practical but the theoretical implications of such oversight, which promises an “authentic Beckett”; but such authenticity is always suspect, itself becoming a commodity to be sold, like distressed blue jeans. As I have noted in a recent essay:

The inevitable question that arises in the early years of the 21st century, 50 + years after the premier of En attendant Godot, in the 15th year of the after Beckett, is whether Beckett is thus rapidly becoming theatrically irrelevant. Put another way, will the year of celebrations of Samuel Beckett’s work in the centenary year of 2006, including innumerable productions, presumably all authorized, be its headstone as well. Put yet another way, is there a future for Beckettian performance? Can it be re-invented again, and if so what might such reinvention look like given the restrictions on performance imposed by the legal heirs to the work, heirs who function with all the droits d’author, but none of his flexibility. Must the avant-garde, already “the parasite and property of the bourgeoisie,” accept its own impotence, as Roland Barthes has asked, or worse bring about its own death? (69). In addition to their most publicized interventions into performance, the Executors have all but kept from the public the principal work of the final two decades of Beckett’s creative life, his continuation of the creative process, his full revisions of his dramatic texts. These revisions are, of course, available in a limited capacity, in the very expensive editions of The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, which Beckett himself had not only authorized but financed as well, but their cost severely restricts their availability. Even university libraries resist such expenditure under current
So what’s new? The century, yes, of course. Our own critical perspectives, yes, perhaps, as we audaciously claimed in our symposium subtitle. But what of Beckett himself? Is this transnational Beckett that we celebrate a new Beckett for a new century, or another Beckett, the earlier version renovated out of existence? What frictions result from the conjunction of the early- to mid- twentieth-century western European revolt, against tradition, against art itself, and more global cultural economies? Are these cultures misreading, misappropriating, or just mis-taking Beckett? And is there something to be gained in such misreading, misappropriating, or mis-taking? Many of the essays that follow pick up and interrogate those themes that ran through the symposium, and their representation here in print offers a new set of contexts. Gathered in an admittedly celebratory volume, the essays break from conference taxonomies to engage each other yet again and comment on each other from plural geographies and through diverse psyches. And although Beckett has left the building, symposia like that held at Florida State University and those subsequently held transnationally allow us to rethink Beckett against an overt commodity culture, and even perhaps proclaim, in the early years of the twenty-first century, with the rest of the world, with or without irony, Viva! Sam Beckett.

Notes

1. One of those belated resonances is certainly evident in Japan, whose post-war embrace of western European culture was accompanied by resistance not only from those dedicated to the traditional pre-war culture but by a post-war generation who took on the role of more radical politics and an avant-garde sensibility in the arts.
2. My thanks to contributor Rina Kim for sending me this postcard.
3. Beckett’s send up of Dublin salon culture is, of course, featured in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (199-241) and the short story derived from it, “A Wet Night.”
4. Substantial expense was saved by eliminating the production photos from the hardcover edition and reducing the size of the 1951 publicity photograph of Beckett, the latter originally published internally (eliminated) and on the back cover (reduced in size).
5. Much of this is detailed in Dilks.

Works Cited


