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The Influences of and on Samuel Beckett

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Gontarski, S.E. and Anthony Uhlmann, Eds. *Beckett after Beckett*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2006. ix, 227 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

Caselli, Daniela. *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005. x, 240 pp. \$74.95 cloth.

This article reviews two books, Beckett after Beckett, edited by S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann, and Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism, by Daniela Caselli. Beckett after Beckett is an anthology of essays written since Samuel Beckett's death in 1989. Most of the essays approach Beckett's works through a discussion of images, afterimages, ghosts, or other elements that tend to linger after they should logically be gone. Beckett's Dantes is an analysis of the presence of Dante in Beckett's works, which Caselli expands into a discussion on the question of authority that underlies any author's use of quotations from or allusions to previous writers.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett / Dante Alighieri / intertextuality / image

In the necessarily abstract and obscure world of Beckett criticism, Gontarski and Uhlmann's anthology provides a collection of essays that is remarkably grounded and accessible while dealing directly with notions of the abstract in Beckett's work. The essays discuss the full gamut of Beckett-related topics, including issues related specifically to performance of his plays, the theory and philosophy present in his works, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of the artist and the author's role in creating literature.

The collection is divided into two parts: "Beckett and Theory" and "Beckett and Praxis." The common thread throughout all the critical essays Gontarski and Uhlmann chose to include, all written since Beckett's death less than two decades ago, is the question of what remains after someone or something has departed. In the appropriately titled introduction "Afterimages: Introducing Beckett's Ghosts," the editors explain that their "collection is organized around notions of the image and in particular the afterimage that lingers, as a memory, a haunting, a not-yet-vanished impression that merges with and changes the images that are forever

being impressed upon us in the present. . . . It is something that lingers, haunting, no longer there but all the more there in not quite being absent" (3–4). The essays that compose *Beckett after Beckett* all, in varying degrees, deal with this concept of the afterimage.

The other guiding principle behind the anthology that Gontarski and Uhlmann describe is a persistent allusion to a dialogue with an idea André Breton presents in *Nadja*. The novel opens "with a search for self 'Who am I?' [Breton's] strategy was to create another, to imagine himself a ghost who haunts the streets of Paris wondering in turn 'whom "I haunt"' (1). The purpose of the *Nadja* allusion is twofold. First, it introduces the theme of the search for personal identity, which the editors link to the driving force behind Beckett's artistic production, and by extension, the driving force behind all artists' production. Second, the *Nadja* allusion presents a ghost not simply as a lingering afterimage of a prior existence, but also as the condition of the artist, whose works "haunt" their readers or viewers.

The most significant of the texts that make up this anthology is a letter from Samuel Beckett, written to Georges Duthuit on March 9 and 10, 1949. In it, Beckett shares his views on the nature of an artist. Beckett writes, "By relation we mean, naturally, not only that primary case, between the artist and what proposes itself to him from outside, but also and above all those which, within him, provide him with lines of flight and recoil, variations of tension, and give him, among other benefits, that of feeling himself to be plural (at the least) while all the time remaining (of course) one single being" (18). Beckett builds two significant ideas upon this definition. The first involves the effect of an artist's personal relations upon his or her work. He claims an artist will necessarily sever, to some extent, his relationships or dependence upon other individuals in order to create great art. He claims the artist must also sever his relationship with himself or herself, so as to achieve a form of "expression in the absence of relations, as much between the I and the not-I as within the former" (18). He claims that these two categories of relations are not actually separate, but rather two forms of the same relation. He writes, "the break with the outside implies the break with the inside, . . . what we call the outside and the inside are the very same thing" (19).

Beckett's second idea is the necessity of an artist's multiple perspectives, the artist's plurality. He describes it as "the happy knack of existing in several forms, in which each in a sense takes turns at certifying the others" (19). Both this plurality and the severing of relations within these several forms are vital for Beckett's ideal artist.

In "Beckett and the Occluded Image," Anthony Uhlmann discusses in detail the concepts of image and afterimage that he and Gontarski describe in their introduction, building upon an extensive critical tradition involving the image in Beckett's works.

An image, and the kind Beckett uses in particular, is not necessarily a metaphor, and it is not always expressed through language. An image is both more and a little less than a metaphor. It is more because it belongs to a philosophical conceptual lineage that

relates it to immediate perception, to a plenitude of sensory information that is only later filtered by conscious perception. It is less because it does not necessarily include a point of relation (whereas metaphors, which compare two things, necessarily involve relations). . . . The image can exceed the metaphor because it asks to be understood, but unlike the metaphor, which tends to point us in a given direction, it leaves meaning open and in question. (79)

Uhlmann shows that Beckett tends to borrow images from other writers and artists, and that those borrowed images both “hide or block as much as they reveal and . . . draw their power from such occlusion” (80). For Uhlmann, Beckett’s methodical and meticulously planned use of images mimics a technique frequently found in philosophical writings in which such an occlusive image is used to clarify a difficult idea.

Uhlmann extends his interpretation of these occluded images from the contents of Beckett’s works to the circumstances of his writing. For this section of the essay, he focuses on one image in particular: the presence of Dun Laoghaire pier in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Young Krapp’s tape-recorded voice recalls a vision he had had there, which, according to Beckett biographies to which Uhlmann refers, is loosely based on one of Beckett’s own experiences. In Krapp’s experience, a storm approaches as he is at the pier, which would, according to Uhlmann, obscure the otherwise clear view of the Martello Tower, famous for briefly housing James Joyce and for its role in the opening episode of *Ulysses*. As a result, “in the storm Joyce’s tower disappears, and what is left is Beckett/Krapp or some imagined version standing alone against a storm. . . . This might contain something of the substance of the revelation Beckett described: that he could go where Joyce was afraid to go” (82). Joyce seeks to create order within chaos, whereas Beckett believes “that the modern world was a world of chaos, and the task of the artist now was to accommodate the mess, to let it in, and not to pretend that the chaos could be fully understood or that it was really something else” (82). This image is occlusive insofar as Joyce is present only because he, or an image that recalls his presence, is being obscured from view, and for Uhlmann, this image represents not just an element of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, but an insight into the artistic ideals according to which Beckett wrote.

Uhlmann is also responsible for the translation of Bruno Clément’s French essay, “What the Philosophers Do with Samuel Beckett.” Clément, dealing with French-language criticism in particular, examines “certain discourse—especially philosophical—that [Beckett’s] work has given rise to” (116), rather than Beckett’s actual texts. After paraphrasing many early Beckett critics, Clément points out that most of them used similar methodological approaches, particularly that of trying “to create a kind of critical equivalent of the work itself” (119); they would make abstract analyses for abstract texts and draw potentially nihilistic conclusions when dealing with potentially nihilistic works. Their critical investigations into works that seem to deny the existence of absolute truths would overtly claim their own findings are disputable. Since 1992, however, Clément argues that there has been a

noticeable shift in the way Beckett critics write: “one could say that we have passed, little by little, from a mimetic criticism . . . to a philosophical criticism (that can give the impression of making Beckett’s oeuvre do, sometimes against its expressed desires, exactly what the criticism desired that it do)” (120). Clément favors this shift because “periodic re-reading” is inordinately valuable in and perhaps necessary for a text to continue to be read and appreciated once a significant amount of time has passed since its composition.

S.E. Gontarski’s essay “Greying the Canon: Beckett in Performance” focuses on Beckett’s commentary upon his own works. “While [Beckett] told critic Colin Duckworth in 1965, ‘I’d be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my work’ . . . , his own musings—recorded in his manuscripts, theatrical notebooks, and letters to directors and publishers—constitute, collectively, just such a critical introduction” (141). In keeping with the emphasis upon “praxis” in the anthology’s second half, the bulk of the essay is dedicated to the practical implications Beckett’s comments have had upon the staging of his plays, and much of the essay deals with the idea of introducing “an authorial presence into the theatrical process” (143). Referring to Beckett’s *Theatrical Notebooks*, Gontarski analyzes many of Beckett’s suggestions to actors, most notably those with whom he worked when directing *Endgame* in 1967 and his consultation on a performance in 1957.

In one of the collection’s final essays, Wai Chee Dimock examines one of Beckett’s allusions to Dante. She begins her essay, “Weird Conjunction: ‘Dante and the Lobster,’” by defending her presence in the anthology as a nineteenth-century American literature scholar: “I will argue that it is indeed nonsensical, but nonetheless not trivial, to put Beckett and American literature side by side, linked by the word *and*, just as Beckett himself seems to think it is nonsensical, but nonetheless not trivial, to put a medieval poet and a crustacean side by side, linked by the same word” (197). Three possible meanings of the word “and” are at stake. The first is the taxonomic linking of like elements; the second involves a cause-effect relationship, or an indication of influence. Dimock dismisses both as insufficient to explain the phrase “Dante and the Lobster.” Cued by another Beckett title: “Dante . . . Bruno . Vico.. Joyce,” Dimock notes the absence of the conjunction “and” where it seems it should be present: “Most of us would have said, ‘Dante and Bruno. Vico and Joyce,’ or, less commonly, ‘Dante and Bruno and Vico and Joyce.’ Beckett, on the other hand, leaves out the word *and*” (198). After contrasting the structures of Dante’s *Comedy* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, she eventually concludes that “the two authors are linked together . . . only by virtue of the fact that there is something that has *not* been passed on” (200). This is the same use of the word “and” that connects Dante to the lobster. The link “invokes the tripartite structure of the *Divine Comedy* only to shortchange it drastically” (200). The essay concludes by linking Beckett to Dimock’s field of expertise, nineteenth-century American literature, by invoking an excerpt from Emerson involving Dante and the linking conjunction “and.”

Dimock’s essay in *Beckett after Beckett* makes a conjunctive transition to Daniela Caselli’s book *Beckett’s Dantes*. Caselli explores the seemingly ubiquitous presence of quotations from and allusions to Dante in Beckett’s oeuvre. She attempts

to differentiate her analysis from previous studies of Dante's influence on Beckett. Rather than identifying references to specific passages from Dante and declaring a relationship of influence, Caselli argues that "Dante is assumed as an external source of literary and cultural authority in Beckett's work, and also participates in Beckett's texts' sceptical undermining of kinds of authority" (2). Throughout the book, Caselli engages questions of authority, particularly the authority granted to a particular text and authority derived from a particular author. As she explains in her introduction, the book asks "what it means to claim that a linguistic element comes *from* Dante" (3).

Not surprisingly, the first section in Caselli's book addresses Beckett's essay "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico. Joyce," which Beckett wrote at Joyce's request and which addresses the influence of the first three of those authors on Joyce's *Work in Progress*, later to be renamed *Finnegans Wake*. The essay argues against what Beckett terms the "neatness" of identifying allusions in a text and creating direct comparisons based upon them. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which ideas that are significant in those authors' works and in those authors' bodies of work echo throughout Joyce's text. Caselli explains that

Beckett's essay concentrates on the way in which the vernacular was theorized by Dante, and it contends that this new language broke the literary conventions of its time, thus causing the public's moral and aesthetic disapproval. . . . The rhetoric of the essay aims to demonstrate how the idea of Dante as the quintessentially classic author has developed over time, whereas his art was initially perceived as far too daring an experiment. Joyce's language, the text argues, is an artificial construction which can paradoxically "desophisticate" language through the unity of form and content. . . . The reaction against the conventionality of a worn-out language—Latin in Dante's case, English in Joyce's—is for Beckett a common characteristic of the two authors, both free from narrow national or regional prejudices. (11)

Caselli's own arguments with *Beckett's Dantes* largely mirror the framework Beckett uses when he discusses the relationship between Dante and Joyce. Individual references and quotations are de-prioritized in favor of discussion of the ways in which the influence and effects of Dante's works permeate the spirit of Beckett's texts.

The first work of Beckett's fiction that Caselli discusses in depth is *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. She sets up the novel as an example of the thesis she presents in her introduction: "intertextuality [in this novel] is both a dismantling practice and a verbal game. By establishing a constellation of texts of reference while reacting against that same literary legacy, *Dream* constructs a canon in order to question it" (35). Caselli notes the profusion of Dante allusions within the novel and claims that in them, "Dante is outside the text. . . . *Dream's* intertextuality simultaneously maintains and challenges structure of the *ipse dixit*, questioning the issues of power and authority implied in the use of quotations, allusions, plagiarism, criticism, and parody" (35–6). As a result, this text is both an example of and a criticism of Dante's authorial influence on Beckett.

Caselli's treatment of *Murphy* centers around the idea that Beckett incorporates Dante into these texts in a way that is opposite of his inclusion of Dante in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, but which has essentially the same effect. In *Dream*, the permeating presence of Dante is the foundation of the criticism of authorial influence. In *Murphy*, that same criticism is based upon the absence of Dante in the works. The primary method Caselli uses to establish Dante's absence in *Murphy* involves her investigation of Beckett's "Whoroscope" notebook. She outlines the ways in which "the first sections of the 'Whoroscope' notebook (all crossed over in blue pencil) invoke and evoke Dantean structures that will not be 'explicitly illustrated' in the text yet to be written" and she adds that "direct quotations from Dante reappear further on in the notebook, after the sections intratextually related to *Murphy*" (83).

Throughout *Beckett's Dantes*, Caselli eschews discussion of Beckett's drama in favor of his novels and short fiction. However, the analysis of *How it is / Comment C'est* plays upon Beckett's renown as a dramatist and emphasizes theatrical elements of the text in demonstrating the ways in which Dante permeates it. The chapter begins by returning to the figure of Belacqua, the description of whom is repeated on several occasions throughout the text, creating a recurring reminder of Dante's presence in the work, as she had argued in her discussion of *Murphy*: "In *Murphy* Belacqua is not a character but a structured presence in *Murphy*'s mind: Belacqua is a state to which *Murphy* aspires" (87). In effect, the character is created in a way that mirrors the influence of Dante on the "Whoroscope" notebook. Caselli's discussion then focuses on a specific motif in *How it is / Comment C'est*: mud. She begins by explaining, "Mud is the main Danteian element in *How it is / Comment C'est*. Michael Robinson states that the narrator 'exists in a landscape which is composed of a number of details from different circles of the *Inferno*. The mud through which he crawls is reminiscent of the fifth Circle, where the Wrathful are confined'" (154). The importance of the mud is elevated by its relationship to speech within the text. The mud acts both to obstruct the narrator's speech and is also "a source of oral pleasure" (157) in that it slakes his thirst.

In essence, the mud, acting as "the stage" and the primary source of the association with theater, acts to create a text throughout which Dante's presence is continually being performed and in which that presence plays a key role.

Beckett's Dantes does an excellent job of elucidating the presence of Dante in Beckett's works. The subject frequently involves convoluted, intricately intertwined webs of references and relations, and Caselli does not allow the complexity of her task to hinder her analysis. *Beckett after Beckett* and *Beckett's Dantes*, in conjunction with each other, create a productive dialogue examining the concept of influence as it relates to the works of Samuel Beckett. Caselli's book supplies a detailed analysis of Dante's influence on Beckett and the way it manifests itself in Beckett's texts, while the essays in Gontarski and Uhlmann's collection study the aftereffects and afterimages of those texts, effectively describing some of the influence Beckett has had on the literary world.