

5-21-2014

Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition

Dina Sherzer

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Recommended Citation

Sherzer, Dina (1990) "Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1248>

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Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition

Abstract

Review of *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition*, by Sylvie Debevec Henning

Book Reviews

Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988

How can one write about Samuel Beckett in the late 1980s? How can one come to terms with Beckett's powerfully meaningful laconicity? Is it appropriate to develop or unpack the philosophical tradition which Beckett expressed through his refined formulas? What critical method(s) should be used at this point? Should the critical endeavor aim at providing yet another interpretation of Beckett's works, or at underscoring how meaning is produced in them? *Beckett's Critical Complicity* addresses all these important questions. Hence its value for Beckett specialists and for readers interested in literature, philosophy, and the arts in general.

The material chosen for discussion is judicious. It includes Beckett's early criticism and essays edited by Ruby Cohn in *Disjecta* (Grove Press: 1984), *Murphy*, *The Lost Ones*, and *Film* (which have not yet been widely studied), and the well-known *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, for which the author offers new insights. The critical orientation that informs this analysis is definitely postmodern. It is based on the Bakhtinian concepts of carnival and dialogism. Drawing as well on concepts derived from deconstruction, it underscores undecidability, movement, heterogeneity, and process at work in Beckett's texts. This study is also well served by the critical complicity of the author, who dialogs with other Beckettian critics and with Beckett's works other than the ones she studies.

This is a study which spells out how Beckett draws on Western philosophical tradition, but unlike previous such studies Debevec Henning's brings to the fore the fact that Beckett sets up a dialogue between different philosophical formulations rather than expressing one point of view. Such a reading dispels the negativity that is most often associated with Beckett's works and brings out the dynamic interplay of possibilities that he stages. It should not be construed that the author replaces negativity by positivity; rather she captures what Beckett is all about: power, energy, and openness generated paradoxically by negative and positive elements working simultaneously. Placing Beckett in a postmodern epistemology she analyzes how he stages confrontations between contending forces, establishing networks of signifying elements that never coalesce into a total interpretation. According to Debevec Henning, the result of this textual strategy is another type of

dialogism, this time not within the text, but between text and readers, due to what she calls the solicitous force of Beckett's writing (195), which incites readers to carry the text's dialog further, to continue its questioning. This solicitous force is indeed attested by the enormous quantity of critical studies that Beckett's works have generated.

From my own experience of Beckett's texts as well as my own bias and orientation, I judge this study as tending to privilege Beckett's philosophical and metaphysical dialogism and as not taking enough into consideration the carnivalesque component of Beckett's language. The heterogeneity of his discourse, his parodies, and his excesses are a form of linguistic, narrative, and discursive dialogism that not only shape his philosophical confrontations but are part of it. I also found somewhat disturbing a device frequently used which consists in attributing to the characters intellectual activities and positions which are perhaps Beckett's or which do not exist at all. Thus we read that in *Endgame* "Hamm and Clov are too aware of Murphy's failure to retain any illusions about their ever reaching . . . a meaningful *telos*" (85).

These remarks are not meant to overshadow the fact that *Beckett's Critical Complicity* is an excellent study. Elegantly written, sophisticated, and readable, it brings new insights to the existing Beckett scholarship.

Dina Sherzer
University of Texas, Austin