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Arthur Rose. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Abstract

Review of Arthur Rose. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. Bloomsbury, 2017. 190 pp.

Keywords

Arthur Rose, Literary Cynics, Borges, Beckett, Coetzee

Arthur Rose. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. Bloomsbury, 2017. 190 pp.

Arthur Rose's *Literary Cynics* examines the works of three geographically diverse authors through issues of money, truth, sincerity, and location to establish a rhetoric of cynicism. Rose situates Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, and J. M. Coetzee as integral voices in the global post-war conversation about cynicism in literature and establishes a new set of conventions to aid the study of the genre. He begins by taking up the existing conversation surrounding literary cynicism and then maps out a multi-faceted relationship between art and cynicism as suggested by Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reasoning* (1983) and Michel Foucault's *The Courage of Truth* (1983-84). This text, rich in theoretical references, bridges gaps in knowledge concerning the aforementioned authors and the existing scholarship surrounding their work.

The chapters in this book typically find their strength by pairing two of the three authors together through some common theme or issue. In the beginning of chapter 4, for example, Rose synthesizes his analysis of Coetzee by juxtaposing an understanding of Coetzee's cynicism against that of Beckett and Borges. Borges's literary cynicism stems from the authority of literary traditions, and Beckett uses the authority of the theatrical subject as a starting point. Coetzee's, Rose suggests, "operates on the polysemy of words" (145). This book takes up the challenge of bringing together three writers that share common literary ground across different literary histories.

In their own way, Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee each write themselves into their work as a critique of their own textual environment. Rose analyzes the cynicism evident in those choices through several different lenses or paradoxes that bookend each of the four thematic chapters and serve to juxtapose the issues or ideas of Borges, Beckett, or Coetzee through one unified angle (28). The first theme, "money," like the focal points of other chapters, links the authors together through a network of theoretical ideas from both ancient cynicism and contemporary cynicism.

While this review could focus on Rose's use of paradoxes to establish a way of thinking throughout this book, it is equally important to see how those paradoxes inform the larger argument. The third paradox, "Borges, Beckett and the Sincerity Paradox" exemplifies the tone and structure present throughout. In the beginning of each new section, Rose reaffirms the thesis of each preceding chapter or paradox to demonstrate the challenges that occur when using these authors to establish the critical rhetoric of literary cynicism. The paradox of sincerity, like the others, reaffirms the previous chapter's ideas through an analysis of the intersection between Beckett and Borges in the former author's ending of *Waiting for Godot*. Other analyses of Borges and Beckett's work, Rose argues, have focused on a reading of shared literary elements of writing style or other common approaches.

However, here he suggests a reading focused on what does not appear in the work as a way of establishing a new relationship (101). In his acknowledgment of existing ways of reading Borges and Beckett, Rose shifts the conversation to an analysis of Borges's relationship with Beckett's work. While this particular paradox does not fundamentally dismiss existing conversations, it changes the frame of reference: Rose's concern is not in what has been discussed between these two authors, but rather where Borges and Beckett have not crossed literary paths (101). Through a brief engagement with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *More Kicks than Pricks*, Rose transitions away from this paradox, like he does with the others, by shifting the lens of analysis away from the text as an authority and towards the need for the author to recognize a teleological non-existing point of conclusion in the narrative. Rose demonstrates this point through the shared understanding that a third act in *Waiting for Godot* will come even though it will never arrive (105). Although these paradoxes do not necessarily resolve any problems, they establish a frame of reference that bridges the space between authors to be discussed in the main chapters.

In the opening of "Beckett's Impromptus," the title of chapter 3, Rose calls back to chapter 1 to further contextualize the relationship between chapters: "In my Borges chapter, I addressed literary cynicism as a response to traditions of literary authority In Beckett's late dramaticules, the same relationships function more as a series than a dialectic" (107). Rose's analysis of Beckett demonstrates a critique of authority that is grounded in the work of other scholars before him. The incorporation of other research is consistent throughout each chapter and only further demonstrates the depth and breadth of Rose's fluency in the existing scholarship. While Rose extends the parameters of the field, he firmly embeds his work in established theoretical ideas, thus linking the book's subject matter to a familiar canon and facilitating the scholarly reader's progression through each chapter.

Through thoroughly researched arguments that push existing scholarship of Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee in new directions, Rose establishes innovative intersections between these authors and their critique of the world around them. At times, the progression between chapters focuses on a framework of argumentation that prevents the reader from reading individual sections out of order. However, this text provides scholars of cynicism and cosmopolitanism with new and profound insights into the novels from the "high" periods of each treated author. While a familiarity with the subject matter helps the reader more fully appreciate this analysis, this book is also appropriate for the non-specialist, thanks to Rose's consistent contextualizations.

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