

June 2020

Arka Chattopadhyay. *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Andrew J. Kettler

University of California, Los Angeles, andrew.kettler@utoronto.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Kettler, Andrew J. (2020) "Arka Chattopadhyay. *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2109>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Arka Chattopadhyay. *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Abstract

Review of Arka Chattopadhyay. *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 209 pp.

Keywords

Samuel Beckett, Jacques Lacan, mathematics

Arka Chattopadhyay. *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 209 pp.

In order to comprehend Arka Chattopadhyay's *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* the reader must have an intense knowledge of mathematical subversions within literary modernism. As well, they must have read nearly the entire canon of Samuel Beckett, with an emphasis on his later works though with full knowledge of his psychological and emotional origins as a writer. The reader also must have nearly complete understanding of the seminars of Jacques Lacan. The scholar who attempts this work must know the meanings (or beyond meanings) of *lalangue*, *sinthome*, the mirror phase, the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary with an understanding of both the roots of those terms within psychoanalysis and how those expressions work within the study of literary criticism. In general, these terms can only be defined (or are established as unable to define) within the realm of Lacanian criticism, as their denotations are often vague and reliant upon earlier understandings gained from reading through the sequence of Lacan's seminars and published works.

Not only must the reader have full and complete knowledge of these fields to be able to read the terminology of this work with any goals of applicability for their own studies, they must also understand combinatorics to such an extent as to comprehend the Borromean Knot within different mathematical, historical, and linguistic fields. Now, if the reader has these broad and intensive interdisciplinary tools, this is an attractive and important work in the field of Beckett studies. If the scholar does not have these skills, this book is probably one to forego, even with the broadly applicable assertion that mathematical questions of the psyche can be approached through literary analysis.

There are certainly fresh ways of thinking that emerge from reading Chattopadhyay, although it is generally difficult to tell if those new methods of understanding are what the author intended. Within the introduction, the audience is placed *in media res* within a debate on signification and meaning that ranges from recent works of Alain Badiou and Baylee Brits back to the writings of Parmenides and Aristotle. The outlines of Beckett studies within this introductory chapter place *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* as the first monograph to offer an intellectual bridge between the understanding of late Lacan and the writings of late Beckett using the corporeal definitions of the Real expressed through mathematical and geometric terminologies and an understanding of the aporetic logic of modernism through a reading of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary that highlight the importance of the inherently unspeakable. The work consequently engages with scholars working within fields of embodied mathematics, specifically through focusing on how the modernism of Beckett

implied challenging the limits of language to imply meaning through foregrounding the “human dimension of the mathematical in the literary” (9).

The next section, the finest of the work, focuses on Beckett’s *Comment c’est* (*How It Is*, 1961) to look at a torturing world of solitude made into company as a reading of the mathematical and corporeal aspects of the Real related to inscriptions upon the body and the signifying cut of language as an initiator of the Real existing between and as subversion of both the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The third chapter continues to look at mathematical aspects of the meanings of the one, the Other, motility, and the many in *Company* (1979). This reading focuses on Beckett’s use of diacritical marks to highlight relationships between the unspeakable and unconscious mathematical aspects of the Real and the Symbolic signification of numbers.

In the fourth chapter, Chattopadhyay explores *Worstward Ho* (1983) through a reading of how Beckett examines signification through an application of the corporeal and libidinal aspects of language. Through analyzing attempts to remove the Symbolic from language, or worsening language into language, Beckett is offered here as a modernist who debated whether the Real consists of an endless ending of an infinite series of incomprehensibility or has limits. The final chapter takes a broader look at Beckett’s later canon through his shorter works to search the possibilities of sexual rapport between mathematized bodies through the Real. A short conclusion wavers between mathematical and literary language in what seems to be an attempt to reiterate a thesis regarding how Beckett’s works consistently entomb the Real through an endlessly ending mathematical series striving to be apart from the Symbolic.

Essentially, the argument of *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* is that “The materiality of Beckettian textuality speaks to Lacan’s late insistence on the mathematical aspects of the signifier” (10). However, there is no simple conclusion to be made regarding why that communication between Beckettian textuality and Lacanian insistence of the mathematical matters. If it is purely an academic exercise that pulls two writers together, there is some applause that can be provided to Chattopadhyay’s ambition and personal grasp of the evidence at hand. However, the attempt seems something much greater and frustratingly inconclusive.

This work is not solely an exercise for Chattopadhyay. The author is consciously attempting to explain something deep within the human psyche that exists in the later literature of Beckett. To do this, Chattopadhyay studies the influence of mathematics within the endpoints of Beckett’s writing and Lacan’s psychoanalytics, and attempts a perplexing knotting. For a work that aims to describe a puzzling connection between the philosophies of two complex writers, the conclusions of *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* lack clarity, and it does not seem that the convolution in the work was meant to implicitly

teach the reader about the meanings of complexity or that the human psyche is an endless void that can never be captured.

Rather, there seems to be an attempt to argue that there are some logical and mathematical aspects of the unconscious, a “mathematical humanity,” that can be found through linking analyses of literature and psychoanalysis, as consistently cyclically and self-reinforcing fields of inscription, which can then crosspollinate to form common understandings of human universals (192-193). If this is the conclusion to be taken, that is a seemingly interesting analysis of misconceptions about the place of the mathematical unconscious within psychoanalytical discussions of what can be deemed “human.” But it is never quite understood that this conclusion is what Chattopadhyay wants the reader to gather, as contradictions abound as to whether this type of mathematical formalizing in literature and psychoanalysis can ever provide the scholar a better grasp of the endlessly ending void.

Andrew Kettler
University of California, Los Angeles