Stan E. Gontarski, *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn*

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Stan E. Gontarski, *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn*, foreword by Anthony Uhlmann, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 297 p.

I remember, I remember... twenty-plus years ago, at the Tallahassee home of Stan and Marsha Gontarski, listening in fascination as Stan told of Barney Rosset and Grove Press, the vagrancies of that precocious and preposterous publishing house and its aggressive, politically active and reckless policy that led to controversy, bankruptcy, regeneration and social change; a house still synonymous with the publication of Samuel Beckett in North America. Essay 2, "Publishing in America: Sam and Barney", is a compelling reminder of that evening.

That experience, and my collaboration with Stan over the next two decades, endorses the tribute of Anthony Uhlmann in his "Foreword" to these invaluable essays: that criticism in the richest sense is no mere academic pastime, and that Stan's friendship with the author (the younger man was a catalyst for "Ohio Impromptu"), his tangible engagement with productions and publishing, and his intimate contacts with virtually every Beckett critic of note, position him as one for whom these essays are not a valedictory exercise but rather (in Uhlmann's words) "an ecosystem of creative activity" (p. xiii), exemplify the vital criticism of their age even as they anticipate perspectives yet to come.

Each of these thirteen essays has been delivered or published earlier, but they are now more accessible and, chosen carefully and positioned deftly, they assume a new "narrative" momentum, to illuminate one another unexpectedly. They do not appear in chronological order, nor according to genre; but there is a broad thematic drift from "Samuel Beckett and *Lace Curtain* Irish Modernisms" (how an early essay, "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934), anticipates such themes as "the breakdown of the object" that inform later works); through intriguing accounts of textual "aberrations" in the published drama and equivalent "perversions" in the theatrical world; towards the intersections of the theatrical and the theoretical (the "sense of unending").

One danger in a gathering of earlier essays is eclecticism, that of offering isolated insights which finally do not testify to an integrated argument. Gontarski does not entirely avoid this peril, but the force of that charge is largely deflected by his Introduction: "Demonology, Sade-ism, and Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn". This essay, too, has previous history, for it was delivered as a keynote address at a "Beckett and Vice" conference of 2016, but it was clearly conceived as a prologue for the forthcoming volume, by situating Beckett's work (and hence Gontarski's response) within a specific historical context, which might be summarised as "Beckett's interest in and connections to European intellectual currents and avant-gardes" (p. 28). That interest ranges from Decadence (Nordeau, Huysmans, Wilde, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire), then back to Sade (art and pornography), before moving forward to Surrealism and the "decadent" works of German expressionism that Beckett in 1936 had striven to see before their desecration by the Nazis.

This “Introduction” is remarkable, but equally frustrating, for while it is an effective hold-all for the essays to follow (and, to a considerable degree, integrates their diversity), by virtue of its brevity it underlines the urgent need for a bigger book, as yet unwritten. The titular “Decadent Turn” alludes to what has been called the “empirical turn”: that rejection in Beckett studies from the mid-1990s of a post-structural hermeticism to promote such aspects of the “grey canon” as biographies, notebooks, letters, genetic criticism and annotations. Celebrating Beckett’s attraction to the underbelly of the beast, this essay responds to an aspect of post-Joycean Modernism often neglected, that may be defined as the aesthetic of the shabby: not simply the recognition of the commonplace as uncommon, the ordinary extraordinary, with the commensurate appreciation of beauty in mud as much as marble; but further (as in a portrait by Rembrandt, where a wart on the nose of a wealthy patron is drawn with fidelity), with the same loving care and attention devoted to the foul as to the fair.

This study may be more important for what it foreshadows than for what it garners. It is not without a few small warts: *Watt* first appeared (Paris, Olympia, original magenta wrappers series) in 1953, not 1958 (p. 19); “Verhulst Pim” is disordered (p. xvii); a study of European decadence might have mentioned Mario Praz; and more might have been made of Beckett’s early poetry and prose, and his reading of lurid accounts of flagellation and onanism (his notes listed in the “Dream Notebook” between Augustine’s *Confessions* and the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis, with no moral inflection of tone or interest). As Gontarski’s recent studies of Bergson have revealed (not, alas, included here, but intimated in the “Introduction”), the eternal challenge to cultural and social expectation, in these essays, defends and defines the decadent as inseparable from the neoteric. This is no small matter.

Chris ACKERLEY

***Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens* [2007], Louise Ryan, Margaret Ward (dir.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2018, 258 p. (édition revue).**

L’ouvrage collectif *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens*, dirigé par Louise Ryan et Margaret Ward et publié pour la première fois en 2007, a fait l’objet d’une réédition à l’occasion du centenaire de l’obtention du droit de vote par les femmes britanniques et irlandaises de plus de trente ans. Le vote du Parlement britannique en février 1918 fut l’aboutissement de décennies de luttes pour l’obtention de ce droit, un mouvement déjà relativement bien documenté pour la Grande-Bretagne, mais beaucoup moins pour l’Irlande, ce que les autrices de cet ouvrage (un seul homme parmi elles) se sont attachées à faire.