

***A Beckett Canon* by Ruby Cohn**

University of Michigan Press, 2005, 423 pp.

Magda Romanska (Emerson College, Boston)

Do We Need Another Book on Beckett?

During the year 2001, there have been 21 books on Beckett published in English and French alone, the same number in 2000 and 15 in 1999. Among them are such titles as *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett* (2000, Pattie David), *The philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (2001, John Calder), *Beckett and Religion* (2000, Marius Buning) *Beckett and Eros* (2000, Paul Davies), *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (1999, Anthony Uhlmann) *Beckett and Beyond* (1999, Bruce Steward), *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political* (2001, Henry Sussman), *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (2000, David Weisberg), *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue With Art* (2000, Lois Oppenheim), *Samuel Beckett and the Arts* (1999, Lois Oppenheim), *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (1999, Daniel Katz), *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett* (2001, Less Essif), *Samuel Beckett's Theatre: Life Journeys* (1999, Katharine Worth), *After the Final No: Samuel Beckett's Trilogy* (1999, Thomas Cousinau), *Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* (2000, Herbert Blau), plus memoirs and critical collections: *How It Was: a Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (2001, Anne Atik), and others entitled simply *Samuel Beckett* (2001, Peter Brockmeier, 2000, Manuel Montalvo, 2000, Jennifer Birkett) or even simpler, *Beckett* (1999, Didier Anzieu).¹ Only a few authors in Western Literature have been written about so often, but the writing keeps coming, and Beckett has the luck (or misfortune) to be one of the most popular targets. We can't go on, but

¹ Year 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005 were comparatively weaker to previous years, so there were only 30 titles all together (in English alone), but 2006 again picked up with 11 English language tomes.

we go on. Fact: there is a vast body of work to ponder and Beckett's elusiveness is particularly open to generating what Gordon Rogoff calls the Beckett Industry. Can it be that, by now, we don't need another book on Beckett?

With Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's essays on the death of the author as function of criticism, it would seem that participating in any cult of an Author would be a critical *faux pas*. Not so with Beckett. The critical worship of Beckett as Author-Prophet and existential therapist-mystic still looms heavily in Beckett criticism. In 1968, Barthes wrote: "criticism still largely consists in saying that Baudelaire's *oeuvre* is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's is his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: *explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his 'confidences.'² And following Barthes, Foucault added in his 1969 essay, "What is an Author?": "the subject [Author] must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse."³ Which is like saying that the author truly does not exist. Or, at the last, his biographical self has no relevance while approaching his work. If Beckett's criticism still largely consists of saying that Beckett's texts are the reflection of Beckett, what then does the Beckett Industry tell us about the current Beckett discourse? And where in this context does the latest Beckett publication, Ruby Cohn's *A Beckett Canon* fit?

Those in the writerly business know that the relationship between creative writing and criticism has always been ambiguous, if not to say, antagonistic. In Beckett's case, the problem becomes even more complex, and not only because of

² Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill, 1977) 50.

³ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP; New edition, 1980) 138.

Beckett's candid derision of "the critic." Beckett appeals to what is highly mature and highly immature in us; he arouses both the highly rational and highly irrational, and the highly analytical and highly emotive. Thus, the analytical aspects inspire criticism while the immature impulses inspire idolatry. Paradoxically, between the need to worship and the need to criticize, the critic who declares his love for Beckett is caught in a double-bind. He finds even his own laudatory writing sacrilegious: if one truly claims to understand Beckett, one should understand that even the desire to analyze him undermines the very claim to comprehension. Beckett – or so it seems - should be absorbed like a religious experience - no explanations, no understanding, and God forbid, no criticism needed. Any other approach negates the very essence of his *oeuvre* the same way that the scientific formula for light particles negates the aesthetic experience of the sunrise. The critics self-conscious of their treachery validate their right to criticize the "uncriticable" by appealing to what will prove that they *did* absorb Beckett on the mystical level; their criticism, they might say, came only as a secondary response to Beckett's unsurpassable sublimity.

In *A Beckett Canon*, Ruby Cohn, is conscious of the dilemma. Indeed, she even entitles her opening chapter "Rather Highly Self-Conscious," and as with many before her starting with Martin Esslin, Cohn emphasizes the personal nature of her Beckett endeavor. The opening paragraph recalls her first encounter with Beckett's work which generated her long-lasting relationship and many books on the subject. The important fact, however, about this initial Beckett encounter was that Cohn had never heard of Beckett before and thus, her fascination germinated from Beckett's pure genius, or rather from her own pure genius in recognizing him as such without having other critics as arbiters of his greatness. Analyzing Beckett we are like adults explaining ourselves as former teenagers to our teenage children. Why indeed do we

love Beckett? There is something shameful in loving Beckett without wanting to analyze him. Yet, there is also something shameful in analyzing Beckett without asserting that once upon a time one has loved Beckett without wanting to analyze him. *Ad absurdum...* It is this dilemma that makes Beckett criticism so drudgerous to read. The relationship with Beckett – as Cohn also asserts - is always personal, but on this personal level, the writing loses its object and loses itself in one's own divagations on Beckett's greatness and the ontological impact his work had on the eager critic. Obviously, not all critics are Becketts and the personal on Beckett becomes neither Beckett nor personal.

Although Cohn is not like other self-respecting critics who need their “take on Beckett” for the sake of having their “take on Beckett,” the question still remains which “take on Beckett” is worth our forever unregainable weekend we have spent reading it, with twenty other books published yearly on Beckett alone, and a couple of thousand on other subjects? Or are we just better off simply reading Beckett? Alas, Beckett scholars should read all Beckett books to write more Beckett books for another Beckett scholars to write their own? *A Beckett Canon* is a culmination of Cohn's life work on Beckett and without questions, it is a thoughtfully researched and well-organized book. Every theatre scholar or dramaturg will find it a useful reference tool, but does it add any astounding intellectual breadth or originality to the Beckett canon? After the highly self-conscious first chapter, Cohn catalogues chronologically all of Beckett's works, including his lesser known poems and critical essays, summarizing each one and pointing out its referential position in the entire Beckett *oeuvre*. The references to Beckett's life construct a historical framework for his texts, and the book abounds in logistical details and structural and semantic connections which solidify the Beckett Canon as a unified and cohesive body of one Author's

work. But “Literary criticism is not a bookkeeping” – wrote Beckett in the opening sentence of his Proust essay, Cohn reminds us. Indeed, it is not.

Cohn published *Beckett Canon* for the first time in 2001, and she reprinted it (as new edition) in 2005. The new edition does not add much to the first Beckett Canon (especially in light of other books on Beckett popping up on every corner), yet it was readily reprinted. Why? Cohn is one of the last critics who knew Beckett. She’s aware that she is a part of the passing entourage. “For some of us,” she writes about Alan Schneider’s death – Beckett’s foremost director - “it was the end of an era of fidelity to Beckett.” For the coming generation, the history of the twentieth century and the history of the twentieth century literature will become indeed only history. Is it “good” that our most shameful century will cease being memory and will become a history or is it “bad”? I don’t know. Along with the Twentieth century becoming history, Beckett himself is becoming a history and the few remaining scholars who knew Beckett and his times have an obligation to report what they know before the second-hand Beckett Industry completely overflows us with cultish quasi-criticism. As critics, however, they also have an obligation to desacrilize their idol. What is a better tribute to one’s master than trying to overtake him? As Foucault would say, our books on Beckett say more about us than about Beckett. In a hundred years, scholars will read Beckett criticism analyzing how we produced our truth to ourselves via our truth to Beckett. And they will be right, for what gives us more access to the truth to ourselves than trying to analyze someone else? Do we say about Beckett that which we don’t dare to say about ourselves? Do we then need another book on Beckett? No, we don’t. Yes, we do.

***Performance and Place* edited by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris**
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 296 pp. (paperback)

Michael Pinchbeck (New College Nottingham)

Odd. The word Leslie Hill uses to describe tourists who queue to see the Mona Lisa only to take a photograph. In *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us From Seeing*⁴ Darian Reader points out that more people visited the Louvre to see the empty space left behind. Hill bemoans the fact there is no Live Art Louvre we can visit to see Carolee Schneeman unravel her infamous *Interior Scroll* (6). And if we did would we take a photograph?

Edited by artists Hill and Paris, with insightful contributions from placers and makers *Performance and Place* is a timely, and at times, poetic engagement with an elusive sense of place. Operating between opposite poles of “place” and “placelessness”, writers hop from personal recollection to academic rhetoric. Lois Keidan reminisces about Forced Entertainment’s ‘sublimely bleak’ early work for audiences ‘who grew up with the television always on’ (12) before describing a ‘place for audiences to contemplate their own relationship with “the Other”’ (14). Perhaps Emily Puthoff’s television is always on, her claim that the notion of ‘place’ has become ‘so multi-faceted it shimmers’ (76) credits a hair commercial bracketed by live coverage of the Indonesian tsunami. The unfolding debate is controlled by a creative but restless editorial remote control. It can be difficult to locate the “place” inhabited by writing on “place”. The words, like the notion, shimmer.

Where there are ludic games they are best played in the chapter titles: *Out of the Furnace and into the Cyberplan* (34) is Martha Wilson’s erudite description of Franklin Furnace’s online forays. Wilson echoes the editors’ view that cyberspace is ‘the ultimate example of placelessness, a meeting place that is no place at all’ (3).

⁴ Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us From Seeing*, (London: Faber: 2002).

Johannes Birringer plays games of site and semantics. He argues that place ‘no longer holds a self-evident authority nor provides stable context; it is as fictively constructed as any other mediated reality.’ Birringer proposes site-specificity as medium-specificity in the case of videodance, where the camera is implicit in both content and context and the dancer’s body when remediated or choreographed digitally is ‘no longer in (one) place’ (89).

Theatre in a Crowded Fire (209) invites artists or incites alchemists to wreak havoc with their laptops, what Hill calls ‘electronic tinderboxes’ (211). As I write, news breaks of a book shop raided in Birmingham for selling ‘incendiary works.’⁵ As I read, Hill asks ‘Where are the contemporary spaces that offer the heat and friction, the danger and excitement the theatre tendered back in the days when it was the most combustible building in the city?’ (211). Though Andrew Kötting gathers wood for the fire and words for the text at his Pyrenean Retreat in *Hidy Hole and Inner Sanctum* (234), there is nothing inflammatory here. Only funders and curators burning their candle at both ends.

Mark Waugh quotes Derrida via Sir Christopher Frayling (30) as he comments on the disorientative, making sense of the margins of his 1980s notebooks. He asserts that ‘Live art is a passport that simulates belonging to multiple states of perception’ (29) in relation to the anarchic interventions of Mad for Real. Pinning up a certificate banning them from the Tate as an artwork in another gallery. Raising the politics of belonging and a smile. Performance memories collide with curatorial remit as Helen Cole reflects on the dislocative and relocative power of the medium. In response to the post-event statement ‘You had to be there’ she asks the question, ‘If Live Art is placeless, where then is ‘there’?’ (21). Live Art is ‘leaking’ (19) she says. Seeping

⁵ Byers, David. *Islamist bookshop was known to sell ‘incendiary works’*. Times Online. 31 January 2007 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2576281,00.html#cid=OTC-RSS&attr=Britain>>

through the walls of venues. Eluding definition and location before we can pin it down. Or pin it up. Like a certificate.

For Lin Hixson, Director of Goat Island, 'there is no place for performance until taped lines go down on the floor' (213). Literally outlining where 'the beginnings of landscape architecture take place' (214) and time becomes a perpendicular bisector of performance. The gymnasium floor where Goat Island conceive their work is covered in traces of tape from each piece they have created. Palimpsests of performance. Perhaps the company has chosen to make their current work their last because there is no floor left to tape. On tour, as a rectangle of tape delineates audience and location, so the location delineates time zone. London or Chicago. Their work is conscious of its different localities. And the time the 'get out' takes is as important as the time it takes to perform. As Mark Waugh points out 'the journey [is] as significant as the destination' (32). It is no coincidence that Matthew Goulish forensically follows the architectural footprints of Lawrence Steger in *The Ordering of the Fantastic* (252). Goat Island are architects of both space and time.

Through the Wrong End of the Telescope sees Graeme Miller 'peel back the present' (104) in his account of a forgotten landscape along the M11 rebuilt in radio transmissions until the transmitters fail. On recalling an emotive visit to Dungeness he writes 'A moment overtook me, place-full and timeless, urgent and meaningful with meaning which seems not to refer to anything or anywhere else. In an overpowering second you are revealed exactly where you are. Where you are is a kind of who you are' (105). His tracing of lost cartographies best illustrates the need for a narrative of nostalgia from those who were there witnessing, funding, curating or creating the work as and where it was 'placed'. As if now there is no land left to map, we must map the past instead. As Hill says: 'They happened. And then they were over. You

really had to be there' (6). Perhaps what *Performance and Place* fails to map is the process of placing rather than the product placement. The conceptual space rather than the space left behind. Not a placelessness. But a placefulness. Perhaps as a result this is a photograph of the empty space. Odd.

***Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, edited by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, xii + 259pp. (hardback)

Amy Simpson (University of Hull)

The title, or more accurately sub-title, of Ackerman and Puchner's *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage* is deceptive. What presents itself as a study of modernist theatre (the 'modernist stage') is in fact a far more wide-ranging project. There is, surprisingly, little discussion of the key modernist movements in performance, with Dada and Futurism, arguably epitomic of 'creative destruction' getting only passing mentions. Instead, the collection incorporates analysis of play texts, scenography, opera, and the Symbolist and Primitivist trends, amongst others, alongside wider arts movements (fine art, cinema, and the novel). Running through the diversity of the articles is the central theme, the question of 'anti-theatricality', the 'Against Theatre' of the title.

It is good to see the (anti-)theatricality debate contextualised in terms of modernist culture, and Ackerman and Puchner's collection encourages the reader to see the multiple facets not just of the term 'theatricality', but also of the modernist movement itself. It is the scope and variety of the text which is most beneficial to the reader. The essays themselves range from adequate to exceptional in their form, content, and expression. Marjorie Perloff's exploration of the work of John Cage (133-148) is particularly strong, and, shirking the trend towards anti-theatricality,

begins with Cage's whole-hearted avocation of theatre as an expressive medium. Perloff analyses the theatrical in Cage's less overtly 'theatre-centred' performances, clearly demonstrating the artist as striving after the theatrical moment in opposition to the anti-theatricality of his counterparts. Similarly well argued is Herbert Lindenberger's discussion of 'Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth Century Opera' (58-75), which achieves the difficult balance of being both accessible and engaging to the non-specialist.

However, it is the sum of the book, rather than its parts, which is most valuable. The interdisciplinary focus allows the reader to make connections across the diverse subject matters. Like the modernist artists, *Against Theatre* clearly understands and exploits the potential of collage as a technique. Ackerman and Puchner encourage the reader to make connections across articles in their concise introduction and contextualization, and this is reinforced by the clear structure of the book which, by dividing the essays into three main areas manages to give diversity a certain coherence. As a result, it is impossible to see the articles in isolation, and each impinges on the reading of the others. This cross-fertilization is effective in prompting the reader to engage with the ideas presented, as well as maintaining interest in the central theme of anti-theatricality.

Paradoxically, although the scope of the articles is to be commended, it is also the text's greatest source of problems. The terms 'theatricality' and 'anti-theatricality', as the editors acknowledge in their introduction, are multi-faceted in the extreme. As a result, Ackerman and Puchner wisely offer a broad and workable definition, that "anti-theatricalism always emerges in response to a specific theatre and, by extension, that the modernist form of anti-theatricalism attacks not theatre itself but the value of theatricality as it arose in theoretical and practical terms

throughout the nineteenth century” (2). In light of this statement, as Herbert Blau asserts in the collection’s concluding article (231 - 247), Ibsen and Brecht are both equally ‘theatrical’ and equally ‘anti-theatrical’.

The definition of ‘anti-theatricality’ encouraged by Ackerman and Puchner is without a doubt inclusive. It is also, however, problematic: each contributor defines ‘anti-theatricality’ on their own terms. These constantly shifting definitions make it difficult to orientate oneself as reader, although the best articles make their use of terminology clear from the outset (for example, in Elinor Fuchs’ contribution on anti-theatricality in clown shows, 39-57). Articles which do not immediately make these definitions clear are harder to engage with, and at times the reader is left playing catch-up on the author’s argument.

If there is a further criticism to be made of *Against Theatre*, it is the assumptions made in certain articles regarding the prior knowledge of their readership or the material with which they are working. Charlie Keil’s ‘All the Frame’s a Stage’ (76 - 91), for example, although an interesting discussion of the advent of sound in cinema in light of the anti-theatricality debate, assumes a degree of understanding of film terms on the part of the reader. This is doubtless a result of the restrictions in terms of space placed on articles in a volume of this nature. Although understandable in light of the interdisciplinary nature of the collection, the theatre-specialist - attracted by the ‘modernist stage’ referenced in the book’s title - can find engaging with the text problematic.

In other articles, notably Kirk Williams’s ‘Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism’ (95-111) or Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s ‘Narrative Theatricality: Joseph Conrad’s Theatre of the Page’ (171-188), connections are assumed but not fully interrogated. Walkowitz repeatedly references theatre, in terms of the stage adaptation

of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, but never makes explicit how her discussion of the novel relates to the stage. Analysis of the stage version is repeatedly deferred or referenced tangentially, leaving the reader desiring more from the article. In contrast, Williams's work presents as natural assumptions which could easily be challenged: his claim that the weavers in Hauptmann's play are 'truly anti-theatrical in that they are, for all intents and purposes, dead bodies' (104), for example, does not take into account Roland Barthes well-known claim that theatre and death are synonymous (Barthes 31).

These are, however, minor criticisms of an overwhelmingly worthwhile project. The indeterminacy of 'anti-theatricality' as a term, combined with an interdisciplinary focus, leads to a productive and engaging plurality in *Against Theatre*. The reader is encouraged to read one article against another and to seek out their own location in the matrix of ideas. The pinnacle of the book is Blau's masterly 'Seeming Seeming', reflections on the plausibility, even possibility, of 'anti-theatricality' as a concept. Both challenging and absorbing, Blau's poetic style pulls the reader into a world of questions and doubts. A microcosm of the book as a whole, 'Seeming Seeming' raises more questions than it answers. Appropriately, Blau ensures that *Against Theatre* ends on a note of thought-provoking uncertainty which is, arguably, no bad thing.

Barthes, Roland *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage. 2000.

***Here We Stand: Politics, Performers and Performance*, by Colin Chambers**

London: Nick Hern Books, 2006, 256 pp. (hardback)

Vicky Angelaki (Royal Holloway)

In *Here We Stand: Politics, Performers and Performance* Colin Chambers, Reader in Drama at Kingston University, London, does not embark upon an easy task. There is one main reason for this: The fruit of Chambers' labour is not a primarily critical/theoretical work that draws its conclusions from its many case studies. On the contrary, *Here We Stand* features three main protagonists: Charlie Chaplin, Isadora Duncan and Paul Robeson. It is these three artists, pivotal enough to their place and time to bestow upon the performing arts universe a significant inheritance, that constitute Chambers' respective case studies. The engagement with the life and work of these performers, however, only forms the first part of Chambers' extensive study. The second section, more general in its scope, examines issues that are highly pertinent to the domain of performance in our time. These relate to the artist/performer's position in societies of censorship and to the link between questions of politics and the performing arts. Chambers' work also provides the reader with a bibliography of print as well as electronic resources related to his undertaken analysis. These are valuable suggestions for further reading to the researcher, who will be interested in pursuing questions and exploring areas similar to those that the author visits in this work.

As regards the three case studies, the reader will find that *Here We Stand* follows an approach whereby the individual as a personality shaped through concrete life experiences and the individual as an artist displaying a range of career choices are two entities irrevocably linked. This is a characteristic element throughout the first part of the work and accounts for one of the virtues of Chambers' study, as we are

presented with a wealth of varied information. This not only illuminates the realities of Robeson, Duncan and Chaplin as performers, but also enables one to arrive at interpretations of their respective artistic courses, attempting to trace the causal relationships between the life and the work. Chambers' decision to provide complete portraits of these intriguing personalities makes this book a helpful tool in the hands of an academic, researcher, or student.

We must bear in mind the intensity of the life and art of these individuals: Robeson was a renowned and politically vocal African American performer, who did not sacrifice his convictions in spite of mainstream approval. Duncan was a female dancer/choreographer who exceeded gender and geographical limitations and articulated her stance through her work, embracing unfamiliar environments without hesitation. Chaplin, finally, was a legendary filmmaker who bent the boundaries between the commercial and the political and lived to endure the public consequences, while even recognition in later life did not alleviate the severity of the political cost he paid in previous decades. The substantial level of detail disclosed in the three case studies will be largely appreciated by part of the readership and perhaps to a smaller extent by another share, interested in less biographical accounts of artists' activity. This does not necessarily constitute a shortcoming for the book: Chambers merely follows the route more commonly pursued in dealing with case studies such as these investigated here and it rests with the individual reader to focus on that degree of information that s/he deems essential for the understanding of these practitioners' work.

The second part of this book is what will undoubtedly be of more use to the reader who is not specifically researching the life and/or art of the three performers on whom Chambers focuses in the first and more extensive section of this work. "Would-

Be Gaolers of the Imagination: Contexts of Coercion and Control,” the first of the two chapters in this section, offers a rich, highly informative account of situations whereby the production and consumption of performance in various *media* has been directly affected by sociopolitical conditions. The findings of Chambers’ research are such that the reader will encounter a wide range of examples, some extremely recent, which are handled with remarkable ease and succeed in mapping a territory so extensive that most of the readership is bound to identify areas that are pertinent to individual interests and/or research. However, without reducing the relevance of what has been addressed by Chambers until this point in the book, it is the ensuing chapter that deserves a particular mention. This section concentrates on what has essentially been one of the most intriguing questions of theatre-related discourse: Namely, the relationship between politics and aesthetics and the ways in which politics can be or have been conceptualized in the performing arts. Similarly to the preceding chapter, this one takes into account a variety of crucial factors, too, providing a study that is detailed as much as it is engaging. Indeed, Chambers seems to further advance this ongoing debate by entering into the consideration of phenomena where art and politics intermingle, taken directly from the realm of contemporary quotidian reality. By virtue of this fact, the readability and applicability of his text are significantly enhanced. While this is an area that will be of great use to those sharing Chambers’ research concerns, it is also a section that a wider share of the readership will be able to appreciate.

In these two chapters the link between Chambers’ case studies and the more theoretical part of his work is not severed: The interaction is maintained and it is more an instance of placing the specific in a more general context, enriching the study in terms of content and providing an altogether more solid substantiation. Overall, *Here*

We Stand offers an insightful look into its chosen subject matter, constituting a helpful source of reference to those interested in the necessary connection between artist, performance and politics. The wide chronological scope of this study must also be noted as one of its main advantages. Certainly recommendable.