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*Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents*

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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BARRY ALLEN SPENCE\*

**Beckett, Decadence, and the Art of Revisioning**  
**Review of Stanley E. Gontarski, *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 320**

Abstract

The recent collection of occasional pieces by renowned Beckett scholar Stanley Gontarski situates the Irish Modernist's life and work within the broader historical context of the cultural and intellectual trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly those trends which ran counter to bourgeois values and expectations. Within that context, he explores, among other subjects, the complex and varied forms of rewriting and revisioning central to the writer's creative process, the most important of which are realised in the writer-cum-theatre director's close involvement staging his dramatic works, whether for the boards, radio, television or film. Gontarski's friendship with Beckett often imbues the collection with the authority of an eyewitness, a privileged proximity always kept in service to meticulous scholarship.

KEYWORDS: theatre; Samuel Beckett; decadence; Barney Rosset; revisioning

"He is a man of extreme modesty, in spite of the obscenities with which he freely sprinkles his books."

Paris bookseller Adrienne Monnier on Samuel Beckett  
(Gontarski 2018: 23)

With *Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn*, Stanley E. Gontarski, one of the preeminent voices in Beckett studies, has produced an omnibus, drawing together thirteen previously published essays, many of which originated as plenary talks or conference papers, spanning the years 1986 to 2017, the lion's share produced in the last two decades. As thirteen chapters distributed in three parts – "A Professional Life", "A Theatrical Life", and "A Philosophical Life" – along with a sweeping introduction that contextualises Beckett's work within the tradition of the "decadent turn" of the nineteenth century as it emerged as one ground of twentieth century Modernism, these pieces shine an oftentimes rigorous and always interesting light on various aspects of Beckett's creative work and life.

Gontarski, the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English at Florida State University, is the author or editor of a long list of important critical works

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on Beckett, among them, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Indiana UP, 1985), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Volume II: *Endgame* (Grove, Faber & Faber, 1993), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Volume IV: *The Shorter Plays* (Grove, Faber & Faber, 1999), *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1928-1989* (Grove Press, 1995), *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Life, Works, and Thought*, edited with C. J. Ackerley (Grove Press, 2004), *Beckett after Beckett*, edited with Anthony Uhlmann (University Press of Florida, 2006), *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), *Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), *Beckett Matters: Essays on Beckett's Late Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), and *Beckett's 'Happy Days': A Manuscript Study*, 2nd, revised edition (The Ohio State University Press, 2017). This is only a partial list of his far-reaching interventions. In addition, from 1989 to 2008 he served as editor of *The Journal of Beckett Studies*. His work at the intersection of Beckett studies, Modernist studies, and performance studies is reflected in his general editorship of four book series: *Crosscurrents: Comparative Studies in European Literature and Philosophy* (University Press of Florida), *Anthem Studies in Theatre and Performance* (Anthem Press, London), *Other Becketts* (Edinburgh University Press), and *Understanding Philosophy / Understanding Modernism* (with Paul Ardoin and Laci Mattison) (Bloomsbury). For the last series, he is a co-editor of *Understanding Bergson*, *Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury Books, 2013) and *Understanding Deleuze*, *Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury Books, 2014).

As the brief foreword by Anthony Uhlmann stresses, Gontarski is someone with “skin in the game” (Gontarski 2018: xi). Like a number of Beckett critics—Ruby Cohn, James Knowlson, Herbert Blau, and Martha Fehsenfeld, to name but a few—he was something of a friend and creative interlocutor, not just a scholar, of Beckett's. The point is illustrated with the well-known story of how, as he was preparing a conference at Ohio State University in honour of Beckett's seventy-fifth birthday in 1981, Gontarski wrote Beckett asking whether he had a new play that could be performed on the occasion. This prompted Beckett to write his late play *Ohio Impromptu*. The sense of critical scholarship informed and shaped by personal connection and creative drive is evident throughout this volume. As Uhlmann notes, Gontarski's work has been an essential part of the “ecosystem that allowed Samuel Beckett's works to emerge” and has helped them continue to thrive (2018: xi).

Gontarski's introduction centres the notion of a “decadent turn” in relation to Beckett. He offers a brief overview of the artistic and aesthetic trends and cultural shifts that marked the period in Europe from the mid nineteenth century up to the Second World War. While most of the book's chapters attend to Beckett's work and life in the second half of the twentieth century, the introduction recognises Beckett's work, his aesthetics, his critical and theoretical convictions as best understood as emerging from within this alternative, anti-bourgeois cultural tradition. He traces, for instance, the cultural rise of realism, that led to naturalism, that in turn led to the varieties of “distortive figuration” distinctive of Expressionism, Futurism, post-Impressionism, and Cubism, until figuration was abandoned altogether in the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism (2018: 2). Given Beckett's well known aversion to realism and his late prose and theatre's strategies of stasis, ar-



rested movement, and expressive dismemberment, this act of historical contextualization seems unquestionably accurate.

The introduction gives a sense of those voices attempting to dictate cultural and aesthetic purity and correctness that assailed this rising countercultural tradition. He pays particular attention to the critical sway of Max Nordeau during this period, whose *Degeneration*, published in 1895, was, in the United States, already in its ninth edition by 1898. Gontarski quotes Nordeau:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes and lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as members of the above mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil. (3)

Nordeau's moralizing crusade against what he saw as the rising decadence of cultural forms—attacking, for instance, Charles Baudelaire's embrace, in poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, of a "rejected, essentially seldom-seen world" (11), or the more general orientation, among Symbolists and others, against what Nordeau calls the "Ego-mania" of those who "see and use language as a non-referential medium" (4) – clearly did not find a sympathetic ear in Beckett. Gontarski indicates how Beckett's own attention to the polysemous power of language led him to mine Nordeau's *Degeneration* for words useful to his own fiction ("corporalalia", "cicis-bei", "obsidional", "Gedankenflucht", "aboulia", "echolalia", "precarious ipsissimosity") (5). This magpie approach to creative composition evokes in some measure, as Gontarski notes, the practice of Beckett's model and fellow countryman James Joyce, both of whom had a bricoleur's scrutiny for the found word or phrase. Beckett's culling, in this case, suggests a positioning within the *demimonde* as transgressive artist repurposing the pseudo-diagnostic language of the defender of received but misguided social values and moral rhetoric.

The introduction sketches, if in understandably glancing fashion, the historical context of the decadent turn of the *fin de siècle*, with its "rejection of neoclassicism" and "erosion of Enlightenment values", that then informs Beckett's development as an artist and thinker (6). One example of his engagement with cultural works deemed unacceptable, indecent by bourgeois standards, came in 1938 when Beckett tentatively committed to translating the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* for Jack Kahane's Obelisk Press, a work of which he commented in a letter to George Reavey, "The surface is of an unheard of obscenity & not 1 in 100 will find literature in the pornography, or beneath the pornography, let alone one of the capital works of the 18th century, which it is for me." (Beckett 2009: 604-5). The work would appear in English only in 1954, not from the publishing house of Kahane, but from his son Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press, translated by Austrin Wainhouse, rather than Beckett. About the same time, Girodias would publish Beckett's novels *Watt* and *Molloy*. While Beckett's wariness of how such a translation might endanger his literary prospects—a rare concern with careerism for the budding late Modernist—contributed to his decision not to go forward with the translation, Beckett's other translation work served not only to keep him afloat

but to further this so-called decadent culture targeted by Nordeau. This is evident in his extraordinary translation of Arthur Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre" (1871, translated in 1931) and Guillaume Apollinaire's "Zone" (1912, translation published 1950). Beckett also translated other representatives of those writers condemned by Nordeau's alarm bell: André Breton, Paul Eluard, Henri Michaux, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Alfred Jarry. Any sense of his having been too chary of the prospect of translating Sade must be tempered and subsumed within an understanding of Beckett's direct experience with censoring authority, since his own first collection of stories, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, had been banned in his home country in 1934. From our historical vantage point one might conceive the status of being banned a badge of honour, but it is clear that for Beckett it was something of a cause of discretion, if also of greater resolve, and for his family shame.

Gontarski's use of Nordeau as an example of one form the cultural tensions took at the onset of Modernism, his highlighting of Beckett's interest in Sade, and his foregrounding of the role of intrepid upstart publishers like Jack Kahane, Maurice Girodias, John Calder, and Barney Rosset (Grove Press)—all of whom would face legal battles of one sort or another for their part in furthering this modern turn in literature and art—as instrumental to the development of this broader cultural shift, sets the stage for the in-depth focus on Beckett in the chapters that follow. Importantly, Gontarski also situates Beckett's six-month tour of Germany between 1935 and 1936 as a significant factor in this narrative of his artistic development. As Gontarski describes it, "Such decadent or 'degenerate' art...such private ventilation of private secrets, emotions, dreams, fantasies and the conflicted ambiguities of desire, an art of the margins, was much of the driving impetus" (Gontarski 2018: 13) for Beckett's trip and effort to see

before much of it was removed, hidden or simply destroyed, German modernism, art that flourished under Weimar Germany, the work of Max Beckmann, Otto Dix and Georg Grosz, among others, art deemed, after Nordeau, culturally undesirable and so decadent by Weimar's successors, the regime in power during Beckett's tour, headed by Adolf Hitler. (ibid.)

His experience of this censorious authoritarianism, witnessed on the rise in Germany, would only further his resolve in the many battles, legal and otherwise, which Beckett successfully waged and endured in the production, publication, and exhibition of his fiction and theatre.

For Gontarski, these tensions "helped shape [Beckett's] understanding of what art is, what art does or what it might do" (14-15). Beckett's interest in this decadent art

suggest[s] a thinker willing if not eager to look beyond accepted values and not only to critique those values...but to search out, design, and express alternative values, literary and ethical, even (or especially) the value(s) of language itself, the issues or limits of its own possibilities, that is, to debunk the expectation of a neutral language expressing a stable reality, a reality prior to its linguistic expression. For Beckett there may be no 'reality' separate from an artistic expression. (19)

While this emphasis on the decadent turn pertains primarily to the cultural upheaval of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its effects on Beckett's developing artistic identity—a surely convincing argument but one which is not exactly revelatory, — the other propositional term in the book's title, "revisioning", carries a stronger multivalency. On the one hand, he calls on the reader to revision understanding of Beckett's life and work within this milieu, as an essential part and extension of that movement. On the other hand, he will explore the importance of the process of revisioning both to Beckett's compositional practice and in his nineteen-year directorial career in which he staged over twenty productions of his plays, in English, French, and German (172). Sometimes this revisioning is a matter of his gaining greater visualization through staging a play, which prompts textual adjustments, typically involving a paring down process; other times the term applies to the cuts and emendations necessary to receive the British Lord Chamberlain's license for performance. Conceptually, Gontarski's previous genetic work on Beckett's composition process as one of "undoing" (see his *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, 1985) informs the arguments and methodology of a number of essays in this collection. The integrative element in this omnibus volume, beyond the positioning within the decadent culture that emerged as one ground of twentieth century Modernism, is this notion of revisioning, a concept that is fundamental to thinking about Beckett. Gontarski argues that Modernism is a "way of thinking" (14), not simply a historical period or movement, and that among Beckett's innovations as a late Modernist in this cultural flow of thought is his intensive and ongoing process of revisioning, whether in the "progressive disintegration of literary character" that Gontarski points to (249), or in the rhizomatic way his reading is grafted to his prose (264), or in numerous other instantiations in which he sharpens a work's realization through post-publication revisions. The extended, processual nature of Beckett's compositional practice is then central to the resulting picture Gontarski creates. As he quotes the narrator of *From an Abandoned Work*, "I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way" (249). The practice of revisioning is shown as central to Beckett's artistic labour, as it is to its cultural reception.

The first chapter, "Samuel Beckett and *Lace Curtain* Irish Modernisms", touches on the prescient power of Beckett's early essay review from 1934 "Recent Irish Poetry", which appeared in *The Bookman* under the pseudonym Andrew Belis. That essay fired a critical volley in the contentious struggle between the art of the traditionalist (nationalist) Celtic Twilight — "the antiquarians, delivering with the altitudinous complacency of the Victorian Gael the Ossianic goods" (Beckett 1984: 70) — and an emerging (cosmopolitan) Irish Modernism. Beckett's central charge is that the parochialism of the predominant Celtic poetry — including in his sweep such publicly sanctified figures as George Russell, James Stephens, and Austin Clarke — failed to address the "breakdown of the object" (70) and persisted in being "[un] aware of the vacuum which exists between the perceiver and the thing perceived" (Gontarski 2018: 38). Beckett trains the lens here on a concern that his prose and theatre will persistently close in upon through the remainder of his life, arguably the central and defining epistemological dilemma of the modern condition. Just as Beckett's essay sought, in the 1930s, to revise the educated notion of what is vital

in Irish poetry, so in the summer of 1971 the essay was republished in the fourth issue of the brief literary venture, the journal *The Lace Curtain: A Magazine of Poetry and Criticism* as a way of fortifying a renewed attack, by its editors, on this traditionalist Twilight poetry as recently exhibited in *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*. Both Beckett's original publication, which promoted a "home-grown Modernism", and the reissue of the essay in 1971 were occasion for a critique of "hermetic Irishness" and Hibernian anti-cosmopolitanism (51). The same fourth issue of 1971 also included another of Beckett's early essays, originally published in 1934 in *The Dublin Magazine* as "Humanistic Quietism", a review of his friend Thomas McGreevy's poetry which he notably begins: "All poetry, as discriminated from the various paradigms of prosody, is prayer" (Beckett 1984: 68). In these essays poets such as McGreevy, Denis Devlin, and Brian Coffey are heralded by Beckett as distinctly urban, bringing an antidote to the inward-looking celebration of the Irish cultural past. In this early stance on poetic values one can perceive qualities characteristic of his late work and which contribute to Gontarski including him "among the last humanist European authors" (Gontarski 2018: 255).

This first chapter – which originated as a keynote address to a meeting of the Flann O'Brien Society—uses the subject of the reissuing of Beckett's critical work of the 1930s in *The Lace Curtain* of the 1970s as a way of discussing connections between Beckett and O'Brien, another writer associated with Hibernian late Modernism, but one who chose to eschew exile and struggle and work within the "stifling ultraconservatism" (36) of the homeland, delivering the innovative word within, what Beckett called, the "sterile nation of the mind and apotheosis of the litter" (Beckett 1984: 87).

This is the first of three chapters under the topic "A Professional Life". All three position Beckett as an outsider to convention and approved cultural practice. The second essay, "Publishing in America: Sam and Barney", details the important relationship between Beckett and the American publisher Barney Rosset, taking note of the commonalities shared by the two principled decadents. In 1951, the bold, would-be publisher purchased a small reprint house, Grove Press, and set up shop in the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village. In June 1953 he took on Beckett, then living in Paris and writing in French, and he would remain Beckett's American publisher well beyond the writer's death in December 22, 1989. Rosset's Grove would become "the most aggressive, innovative, audacious, politically active, and so sometimes reckless publishing concern in the United States for over three decades" (Gontarski 2018: 58). Rosset would encourage Beckett to return to writing in English, an encouragement that would result in the publication of Beckett's first radio play *All That Fall* and the play *Krapp's Last Tape*. As Gontarski points out, Rosset was one who recognised that the act of translation for Beckett was a vital facet of the creative process (67). More than just a champion of Beckett, he commissioned the film script that became Beckett's one foray into cinema, and he served as the writer's theatrical agent in the United States from 1957 until 1989. Gontarski's personal connection to both men deepens the portraiture here. The descriptive force of this personal connection is furthered by Gontarski's scholarship, in particular his familiarity with a wide range of consequential letters from Beckett that have not been included in the four volume collection *The Letters of Samu-*

*el Beckett*, recently published by Cambridge University Press (2009-16). Many times in the essays in this volume Gontarski fortifies his arguments with excerpts from Beckett's letters not easily available to the average reader. This is one of the clear services Gontarski performs, even as it might suggest questions about the selection criteria of the editors of the *Letters*.

Gontarski's relationship with Beckett and Rosset factors in as well to chapter three's focus on Beckett's first full-length play *Eleuthéria*, which was begun in January 1947. "*Eleuthéria: Samuel Beckett's Suppressed Bohemian Manifesto*" was originally published as Gontarski's introduction to the posthumous publication of the play in 1995 by Foxrock, Inc. The essay argues the multiple ways the early play—which was never staged during Beckett's lifetime — anticipates the innovations of his mature theatre. He also emphasises the central anti-bourgeois theme of the drama which presages Beckett's own exilic trajectory. Gontarski includes mention of his own role in the machinations surrounding the publication of the play, for instance, the fact that he made the first translation of it into English with his graduate students (85). He offers an eyewitness account of the evening of Beckett's eightieth birthday and the intimate gathering at La Coupole in Paris, during which Barney Rosset arrived to announce he had been sacked by the new owners of Grove. Giving Rosset the play for publication was one of Beckett's gestures intended to support Rosset during this downturn in personal fortunes, even if he thought better of it once he revisited the play. With this chapter Gontarski republishes an important assessment of this early, often critically neglected work's significance for his later theatre. When published in 1995, this essay amounted to a scholarly recuperation of a play Beckett had in later life reconsidered but decided was better abandoned. Gontarski situates it, quoting Carlton Lake, as a significant "transitional work," one that functions as a "sociological manifesto on the artistic as opposed to the middle-class life" (91-2).

The next six chapters, of which part two – "A Theatrical Life – is comprised, bring a revisioning focus on Beckett's theatre from *En attendant Godot* on. Gontarski's encyclopedic command of Beckett's oeuvre, works of criticism, prose fiction, theatre, radio, television, and film, affords him the sort of compass in his analyses that regularly produces insights on a fluid range of texts even as a single work is ostensibly considered. In "Textual Aberrations, Ghost Texts, and the British *Godot: A Saga of Censorship*", which originated as a keynote address at a Beckett conference in 2016, Gontarski gives a detailed study of the negotiations over the textual "modifications" (102), i.e. cuts and replacement language, needed in order to receive from the British Lord Chamberlain a license to stage the play in London's West End. Gontarski's assiduous scholarship is on display here as he catalogues the individual edits demanded by British censorship, including as well precise details of the various exchanges with the Lord Chamberlain's office (with two facsimiles), and the unrectified persistence of these edits in subsequent editions of the play published both in England and the United States. Gontarski identifies, in other authoritative sources, failures in accuracy and misinformation concerning this pivotal period, such as in the version of this history recounted by curators at the University of Texas Harry Ransom Center (citing in particular the 2006 web-published exhibition catalogue *Fathoms from Anywhere: A Samuel Beckett Centenary Exhi-*

bition) and in the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*. One source of this misinformation is traced to “an unexamined and under-researched error” in Deidre Bair’s 1990 biography of Beckett (112).

This matter of how *Waiting for Godot* violated the bounds of public decency, with in-depth tour of the particulars involved in placating the arbiters of good taste while maintaining artistic integrity, is followed in chapter five, “‘nothingness / in words enclose?’: *Waiting for Godot*”, with a brilliant study of the forms of meaning the play takes. This essay, which was first published in 1994 in a *Festschrift* for Yasunari Takahashi, offers one of the best brief readings of the play anywhere. The title is drawn from a short poem on old age which Beckett included as an “Addenda” in his novel *Watt*. It foregrounds the central issue of nothingness, which on the one hand recalls a favourite adage (“Nothing is more real than nothing”) from one of Beckett’s most quoted philosophers, Democritus the Abderite, the laughing philosopher (128). On the other, it echoes the play’s opening line, “Nothing to be done”—a play of which the critic Vivien Mercier observed “Nothing happens, twice” (127) – and the fact that in the play, as Gontarski argues, “reality... may be...an absence” (136). While the play is typically diagnosed as existential in its primary thematic thrust, for Gontarski, “Beckett’s play is about imprisonment and impotence, not about the power of the self to create itself” (140). He offers this summary takeaway from his analysis of the groundbreaking play: “Hope in Beckett, some cause for optimism, and these are words that admittedly one does not often use in regard to Beckett’s work, resides not within the systems man has traditionally used to order his life, religion, law, any political system, or even language itself, but in the formal, essential, transcending artwork” (142). Art mediates an absence. The assertion of the transcendent importance of art to Beckett’s worldview is in line with Gontarski’s arguments elsewhere in this volume, and in line as well with the notion of Beckett as a late Modernist, rather than postmodernist.

Chapter six, “An End to Endings: Samuel Beckett’s End Game(s)”, in its interpretative focus on *Endgame*, with special attention to issues of incompleteness, echoing, and cyclical time, complements well the previous chapter. Only a sprinkling of typographical errors mars the volume as a whole, but this chapter is one in which the reader might take notice (for example, “reconing closed and story ended” and “Hamm beins his story anew” (148)). First given as a keynote address at a Beckett conference in Tokyo in 2006, it saw subsequent publication twice before appearing here. Chapter seven, “Samuel Beckett’s Art of Self-Collaboration”, one of the strongest in the collection, focuses on the role that staging his plays had in Beckett’s creative process. Here again Gontarski makes extensive use of letters omitted from the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*. He includes discussion of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, a play that caused Beckett to realise “that the creation of a dramatic text was not a process that could be divorced from performance” (161-2), as well as *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Footfalls*, and *Quad*. Beckett’s commitment to realising his plays through the process of staging and performance is, in Gontarski’s estimate, the “single most significant element in Beckett’s evolution from playwright to complete theater artist, from writer to director” (174).

Part two of this volume is rounded out with two chapters that look at Beckett’s theatre from a more theoretical angle. In “Beckett’s Keyhole Art: Voyeurism,

*Schaulust*, and the Perversions of Theater” Gontarski looks at the role of scopophilia, voyeurism, and exhibitionism in Beckett’s late theatre as well as in what he calls the “closed space” (249) fictions, like “Imagine Dead Imagine” (184). In quoting Herbert Blau’s reading of Beckett, that “we are always looking at what, perhaps, should not be looked at” (187), he argues that Beckett’s theatre “explores the complementary drives of voyeurism and exhibitionism” as it “remains a site of resistance and concealment” (189). Chapter nine, “‘He wants to know if it hurts!’: The Body as Text in Samuel Beckett’s Theater”, shifts the argument to the importance of the body to Beckett’s work. In Gontarski’s view a primary innovation of his theatre results from Beckett “considering the body textually, the body in performance” (196). Beckett was, in his estimate, drawn to the theatre precisely because of the body and the way it shapes and forms the text in performance (195). He discusses here the theatre (*theatron*) as a space of looking, echoing arguments made in the previous chapter, and considers in particular Beckett’s exploration of the fear of being seen, which comes to the fore in works like *All That Fall* and *Film*. Gontarski focuses on the late Modernist’s preoccupation with “how to represent in language and stage images the incomplete being, the *être manqué*” (201). And he describes the last phase of Beckett’s creative life thus: “By 1976 Beckett continued his ontological exploration of being in narrative and finally being as narrative, producing in the body of the text the text as body” (202).

The term ‘chapter’ used in this review is arguably misleading, since it suggests the overarching homogeneity of focus usual with a monograph. But these essays have seen little in the way of smoothing out redundancies and overlap between these separate interventions from disparate occasions. One clear advantage to this is that the reader can enter the volume at any point and read the essays in any order. As has been said, the introduction draws on the common elements they share and unites them under the overarching themes concerning, on the one hand, the role of revisioning, and, on the other, Beckett’s perceived transgression of forms of bourgeois acceptability. The introduction succeeds in answering the question, why these essays together? But there is little that is inevitable about this grouping. This collection of occasional pieces offers important articulations of a piece with Gontarski’s sustained scholarship of over forty years. It is a compendium that offers numerous insights and interesting analyses largely accessible to the lay reader as well as to the Beckett scholar versed in Gontarski’s previous critical work.

Part three, “A Philosophical Life”, comprises four essays that deal more with the intersection between Beckett’s work, philosophy, and political thought, all while remaining keyed to the writer’s creative working methods. At roughly fifty pages, this is the shortest section of the three. It offers symmetrical balance to part one’s similar length, and both parts support the central part two, which is twice their length and includes perhaps the volume’s strongest essays. Certainly the more extensive focus on Beckett’s theatrical life is in order, but the notion of the writer’s philosophical life is important, given Beckett’s well-known period of tutoring himself in the history of Western philosophy, the fact of the way the lauded opacity of his fiction and theatre yields a consequent “universal relevance and force” (Feldman 2015: 19) that leads naturally to philosophical reflection, and, finally, given the regularity with which Beckett scholars have coupled the late Modern-

ist with various philosophers (the pre-Socratics, Schopenhauer, Arnold Geulincx, Fritz Mauthner, Wilhelm Windelband, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida, to name but an obvious few). The scope of these four brief essays is, however, understandably modest.

In “Theoretical and Theatrical Intersections: Samuel Beckett, Herbert Blau, Civil Rights, and the Politics of *Godot*” Gontarski brings together a number of elements in considering the political aspects of Beckett’s theatre. He discusses the Free Southern Theater group’s 1964 tour of *Waiting for Godot* through parts of the poor rural south, particularly Louisiana and Mississippi, with an all African-American cast in whiteface. He explores as well the role of American theatre director and performance theoretician Herbert Blau – a Beckett friend and collaborator who was involved in the 1957 San Quentin State Prison production of *Godot* – in the political evolution of theatre in the United States during the post-war period. Blau’s eventual “overt shift to the performing self on the *mise en scène* of the page[;] the shift of playing space from the boards to what Blau calls ‘the chamber drama of the *mise en scène* of the unconscious’” (Gontarski 2018: 218) resonates in many ways with the demonstrably performative nature of Beckett’s late closed space fictions.

“Beckett and the Revisioning of Modernism(s): *Molloy*” brings a quasi-philosophical perspective to looking at the ways Beckett revisioned Modernist storytelling practice for the late modern sensibility. Here, Gontarski takes the novel *Molloy* as “Beckett’s most deliberate undoing of the potential or perceived replication of Joyce in particular and of the Modernist text in general as it demarks a post-Joycean aesthetics” (233). While James Joyce is the obvious model against which Beckett situates his work, Gontarski includes both Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust among the Modernist models being re-written. The specific storytelling conventions that Beckett revisions are argued as three types of narrative: the journey or quest, the detective, and the oral tale. The subject of the traditional trope of the journey continues as one focus of “A Sense of Unending: Fictions for the End of Time”. In this essay the dominant concept of “unending” is seen in the tendency to “fragmentation, caesura, incompleteness” (247). The arguments range from Beckett’s fascination with Schopenhauer’s “intellectual justification of unhappiness” (248), to the “omnidolent characters” who evince the theme of the journey in novels from *Murphy* to *Watt* (249), to Beckett’s subsequent transformation of the journey theme away from a goal or destination orientation toward a state of just moving—“stories featuring stillness or some barely perceptible movement, at times just the breathing of a body or the trembling of a hand” (ibid.). We can see the results of this narrative revisioning in such plays as *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Play*, *Not I*, *Footfalls*, and *Quad*. The “closed space fictions” that embody this include “Still”, “Sounds”, “Afar a Bird”, “Company”, “Ill Seen Ill Said”, “Ping”, “Imagination Dead Imagine”, and “Worstward Ho” (249). Gontarski goes on to discuss the importance of the philosophical notion of apperception – “for Leibniz, Kant, and even Schopenhauer, apperception was the active process of the mind’s reflecting on itself” – to Beckett “even as his distrust grew of the synthetic unity of the perceiving subject, the ‘I’ to whom the field of immanence is ascribed” (251).

The final, lucky number – recall that Beckett was born on April 13 – thirteenth essay, “The Death of Style: Samuel Beckett’s Art of Repetition, Pastiche, and Cut-



ups”, concludes the volume with a brief exploration of how Beckett launched an assault against style itself (256). The writer’s elite education (both formal and autodidactic) and consummate erudition, which “even James Joyce envied”, contributed to the fact that the “humanist idea of authorship that Beckett both epitomized and simultaneously dismantled remained central to his creative makeup and output” (255). Gontarski to some extent anatomises this conscious dismantling through the idea of Beckett’s “development of pastiche” (265) and the important part played by what James Knowlson called his “grafting technique” (258), which might be thought of as the particular way his writing processes his reading. The similarities between Beckett’s and Joyce’s grafting techniques are duly noted. But whereas Joyce’s seems clearly in service to furthering his storytelling encyclopedism, Beckett’s arguably aided his liberation from style. As Gontarski says, “Despite his struggles to free himself from the prison house of style, much of Samuel Beckett’s writing is intimately, even inextricably, tied to his reading; that conclusion is one of the seminal developments of recent Beckett criticism and may define Beckett scholarship well into the new century” (258). Indeed, the archival turn in Beckett studies in recent decades is everywhere apparent in the literature, a seismic trend in which Stanley Gontarski remains a principal agent; witness this many-faceted, engaging collection.

## Works Cited

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