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**S. E. Gontarski, *Beckett Matters: Essays on Beckett's Late Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 278pp. £75, hardback. ISBN: 978-1474414401**

S. E. Gontarski's collection gathers together a lifetime of Beckett criticism. Globally renowned, Gontarski is one of the foremost authorities on Beckett's work, especially his plays and shorter prose. Engaging with Beckett on practical, theoretical and critical levels, the collection highlights Gontarski's range of expertise, accumulated over several decades, on the work of the Irishman. This range is evident from the onset of *Beckett Matters*, which includes an enlightening introductory essay, 'The Remains of the Modern and the Exhaustion of Thematics', premised on a quotation from Jacques Derrida in *Act of Literature* (1991): 'The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem most 'decomposed', that's what 'remains' finally the most 'interesting', that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted' (Derrida, 1991, 60). Gontarski dedicates attention precisely to this signature, on a miniature, phrase-by-phrase scale, in a discussion of Beckett's work of what is left after we, as critics, have exhausted all possible attempts to analyse it. In many ways this is the perfect opening for *Beckett Matters*, a critical evaluation of the numerous reinventions and transformations that Samuel Beckett's oeuvre underwent throughout his writing career.

The volume consists of 14 original essays divided into three sections: 'Theory Matters', 'Texts Matter', and 'Performance Matters', which cover Beckett's drama, fiction, poetry, prose, and the staging of his work. 'Theory Matters' is perhaps the most varied and accessible section of this collection. It assesses Beckett's preoccupation with voice and how this evolved from a spectral presence to the focus of many of his works, with space, setting, and plot receding to the background. The first essay of the section, 'Beckett's Voice(s)' and is key to an understanding of the collection as a whole. In it, Gontarski explores the use of the schizoid

voice in Beckett's work, citing the much-discussed influence of Jung who 'argued that unity of consciousness was an illusion, because complexes could emancipate themselves from conscious control and become visible and audible' (24). This is evidenced in Beckett's experimentation with interior monologue, which stages a self-reflexive dialogue with the inner self. This is realized through recording technologies and the medium of radio in plays such as *Krapp's Last Tape* and *All That Fall*. Notably, radio and inscription technologies disassociate the voice from the speaker, and Gontarski argues that 'it would be Beckett who would exploit fully the possibilities of the disembodied voice in his fiction and drama' (23). This preoccupation with voice extends to the novels and later the plays, as an unabridged spasm of words and stories which act as an attempt to cleanse the brain, to rid the characters and players of distraction: the calmative, deathly and, ironically, rarely-achieved stasis.

The essays that follow evoke the themes of the opening chapter, with the second chapter extending this discussion with an emphasis on the oral tradition of Irish narrative that permeates Beckett's shorter fictions. Gontarski emphasizing how the short fictions inhabit 'the margins between prose and poetry, between narrative and drama, and finally between completion and incompleteness' (41). This, arguably, comes to a head within the Three Novels in which 'Beckett continued to probe the "pre-uterine"' (54) and moved beyond a discernible external reality and focused instead on consciousness and 'a concatenation of voices' (54). Highlighting Beckett's experimentation with pared-down language, Gontarski draws on the author's exploration of reduction, which would later emerge in the dramatic works as a restriction of space and movement. Throughout the chapters, Gontarski foregrounds the theoretical concerns staged in Beckett's writing and the 'grey canon', noting that Beckett's abandonment and resuscitation of his works was 'folded into the narratives themselves' (63). This leads to an exploration of consciousness and imagination within narratives 'that seem to have more in common with the spatiality of painting than with the chronicity of traditional story-telling' (66). The third chapter

builds on the discussion of 'voice' in the previous essays, adding a focus on Beckett's use of 'closed space' settings which move away from storytelling and instead focus on consciousness of the body and of nothingness. In the fourth chapter, Gontarski stresses again the intense genre-jumping of Beckett's work. The boundary between prose and poetry was 'breached' by Baudelaire, revisioned by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, and further breached by Beckett. His career as a writer, after all, started and ended with verse (76), and his prose and drama are populated with fictive poets. This breaking down of categorical boundaries is also applied by Beckett to the subject/object and internal/external dichotomies. If this method has a shortcoming, it is that this study fails to pay significant attention to the poetry of Beckett's writing, whether in the prose or the verse. The closing chapter of the section focuses on Beckett's resistance to the commodification of art and his attempts to distance himself from it, bringing attention to the intricacies and difficulties of publication and paving the way to the third section, 'Texts Matter'. This takes a more clinical approach to the ins and outs of Beckett's textual practice. Assessing his practice of revising his work and the issues that arise between producer and publisher, Gontarski evaluates Beckett's 'voice' and the fissures that result from his 'punctilious' approach to his texts and stage works (103).

This assessment is carried over to the final section of the collection, 'Performance Matters', in which Gontarski brings together a series of insightful essays that explore Beckett's regeneration of the stage. Notably, theatre is by default a collaborative medium in which it is difficult to retain a status quo, and Gontarski addresses Beckett's struggle with the contingencies of performance. Here, the difficulty Beckett had editing his work – as 'an incurable reviser' (121) – and the natural opposition that exists between the printed and performed work, are addressed. In chapter 10, 'Reinventing Beckett', Gontarski assesses Beckett's personal transformation from writer to director, which produced an abundance changes to the plays, as Beckett explored his writing through the lens of self-discovery and

self-reinvention. Like the texts themselves that were often abandoned and resuscitated, Beckett's own voice as director underwent a similar progression, harking to issues of authenticity that have preoccupied his writing from the onset. From unfinished and abandoned works to a series of textual variants that were largely the result of the publishing world's haste to get copies out, Beckett's 'voice' and work reached its peak on the stage. It was here that Beckett was able fully to explore the many voices that had haunted his work for decades.

Samuel Beckett's work, perhaps more than that of any other writer of the twentieth century, underwent transformations. His work is pushed, as Gontarski notes, 'beyond limits, restrictions, boundaries, and then pushed beyond yet again, to the exhaustion of the possible' (2). This has been mirrored in Beckett studies, which has produced a wealth of academic intrigue and avenues into the work, including what Gontarski calls the 'grey canon'. Throughout this volume, Gontarski's voice resonates with a supervisory, even paternal tone. Perhaps the father of Beckett studies, this collection of essays showcases the potency of Beckett's work, and the dedication of Gontarski himself. *Beckett Matters* is testimony to a lifetime of work and criticism, providing an engaging collection and an excellent resource to any researcher or student within the ever-flourishing and evolving field of Beckett studies.

Rosie Barron  
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