

explorations



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REVIEW

S. E. Gontarski. 2015. *Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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In his introduction to the 2015 *New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* Dirk Van Hulle distinguishes two important trends which have been developed in the Beckett Studies in the last two decades. One is the historicist approach, focused on the new archival materials made available to scholars – the publication of Beckett’s letters is a case in point. The other one is informed by advanced theoretical investigations, aimed at situating the Irish writer (somewhat belatedly, let us add) in the context of poststructuralist, postmodern and deconstructive criticism. Hulle follows with a rather optimistic remark: “we have moved beyond that black-and-white antithesis” (xviii). If we add a substantial bulk of texts and discussions on the performative aspect of Beckett’s work (something Hulle mentions in passing), we can indeed conclude that the Beckett Studies are alive and kicking. Some convincing evidence may be found in S. E. Gontarski’s new book.

Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze deals with what might be termed the inventive modernity of Samuel Beckett. It gathers together different threads of the Beckett Studies in order to provide us with an intellectual portrait of the writer embodying the intellectual, philosophical and artistic tendencies of the XX century. In a loose sequence of essays devoted to various dimensions of the Beckettian corpus (the bodily metaphor is reinforced by the structure of the book, its crucial “Interior” chapters being embraced by more expository “Anteriors” and “Posteriors”) Gontarski, one of our finest Beckett scholars, presents a rich plethora of speculative contexts, from the Anglo-American discovery of Bergson to the poststructuralist hypotheses of the multiplicity of voice, identity and consciousness, and to most recent theatrical reinterpretations of Beckett’s plays. Such a variety of themes might conceal an author’s uneasiness about his/her critical arguments. Not in this case, however. Gontarski’s choice of subjects, sources, contexts and points of reference is careful and nuanced, and it results in giving us both a panorama of the intellectual landscape of modernism/postmodernism and a series of overlapping indications as to where the Beckett Studies might be heading in future. It is incidentally worth noting that, as we learn from a short advertisement added

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to the book, *Creative Involution: Bergson, Beckett, Deleuze* is the first title in the new “Other Becketts” series to be published by Edinburgh University Press. Prof. Gontarski, who is the series’ chief editor, claims that the main objective of the critical sequence is to provide the readers with interpretations focused on “alternative, unexplored, or under-explored approaches” (vii). The book reviewed here is a fine instance of such an interpretation.

Creative Involution opens with a working definition of modernism as “inherently transgressive, amorphous [and] protean” (1). Gontarski sees in it intriguing parallels to the philosophical writings of Bergson, and the French philosopher is consequently described as one of the trail-blazers of the modernist aesthetics. Bergson’s original concepts of time and time consciousness, as well as of memory as independent of mind, his vision of life as a never-ending progression, his coupling of biological evolution and creative processes – all these helped pave the way for the emerging modernist sensibility. It might be recalled here that some of the most important texts of the French philosopher were (excellently) translated into English by T. E. Hulme, the initiator of the Imagist movement. It seems, though, that Beckett’s interest in Bergson was triggered off by other causes. While enrolling as a junior freshman in Trinity College, Dublin, the seventeen-year-old Beckett found himself tutored by A. A. Luce, the author of *Bergson’s Doctrine of Intuition* (1922), one of the first monographs devoted to the philosopher. Luce turned Bergson into a mystic and a promoter of “Christian Knowledge,” ignoring the critical and scientific dimension of Bergsonism and in fact misconceiving its main tenets. Still, the young Irish student must have discovered in the book many correspondences with his own ideas and sentiments. Gontarski discusses the similarities, paying special attention to such moments as the “denigration of the rational process and the description of a universe in perpetual flux, without fixity, matter and memory inseparable if not indistinguishable” (79). One could argue with this contention and claim that both Beckett and other great Modernists (especially the poets like Eliot, Pound or Stevens) opposed the idea of the amorphous mind, promoting instead the New Critical imperative of the autonomous and closed work of art which in its turn reflects the separateness and autonomy of the human consciousness. Gontarski’s answer to such an objection would be that it is impossible to speak of one Beckett only. As a matter of fact, the very idea of the “Other Becketts” series seems to be based on the assumption that we have as many Becketts as there are attentive and devoted readers. True, we can find in the Irish writer a (somewhat composed) “rage for order” accompanied with a belief in artistic discipline and a strongly felt need to add clear outlines to one’s artistic vision. However, and Gontarski proves it in many passages in his book, we are perfectly justified in seeing *monsieur* Beckett as an artist managing to subvert the premises of the New Critical aesthetics, much in the spirit of Bergson’s philosophy.

In a way, the concept of involution is indebted to the philosopher whose claim to popularity rests on the book dealing with creative evolution (the title of Bergson’s most influential work). As it is, the term was introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Thousand Plateaus* (in a section titled “Memories of a Bergsonian”) where it is suggested, somewhat cryptically, that involution is a “very special becoming-animal traversing human beings” (qtd in Gontarski 57). Then, in the 1977 famous Parnet/Deleuze dialogues, the involutory idea was situated in the Beckettian context, with the philosopher saying: “Les personnages de Beckett son ten perpétuelle involution, toujours au milieu d’un chemin, déjà en route” (*Dialogues* 38; interestingly enough, this

reference is not mentioned by Gontarski). It is not difficult to see why the notion of involution proved so attractive to the critic. For one thing, Bergson's understanding of biological evolution was different from Darwin's. It implied a sense of internal continuity of life force, the latter manifested in various forms but also, and tellingly, bound by the law of artistic logic. As Gontarski has it, "Bergson's view would locate the driving force not externally but internally, tracing it to an inner life force, an *élan vital*" (56). Consequently, involution is defined as an "inward turn" (1), an unfolding of intellectual potential. The imagery of the inward-bound unfolding may seem a bit vague but the essence of what we can discover in Bergson and Deleuze is clear: "creative involution" is a process of breaking "free from a linear model of evolution ... in favour of multiple reinventions and regenerations" (56). This is what the American critic finds in Beckett's texts and in Beckett's theatre.

The last quoted words are worth stressing since Gontarski's key assumption is that it is the idea of multiplicity that best defines the essence of modernism. The thesis is convincingly developed in the second part of the book, and it paves the way for a radical critique of Cartesian dualism (it is worth remembering that both Bergson and Beckett, as well as Deleuze, perceived themselves as rebelling against the unbearable triviality of Descartes's postulate of mind opposed to matter). With this background sketched, Gontarski offers excellent interpretations of *Murphy* (where a special stress is put on the famous description of Murphy's mind in Chapter 6) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (with its deconstructive parody of the linear, the chronological and the rational). The critic arrives at the poststructuralist hypothesis of the disappearing author, the idea that we can detect in Beckett's early prose texts and first dramatic pieces, and ends with the chapter entitled "Becoming Degree Zero: Authors Vanishing into the Zone of Imperceptibility," a rather unexpected interpretation of William Burroughs interpreted as a part of the genealogy including Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze (179). Like Beckett, Burroughs is described as a modernist who consciously undoes the grand narratives of modernism. What is left after their legitimacy has been questioned and invalidated is a "multiplicity of simultaneous readings" (19) as well as a ceaseless effort to discover new meanings and produce new interpretations.

In an interesting aside Gontarski refers to what might be termed as the Beckettian "scene of reading": the readers may and should enter Beckett's texts which are "best read from the inside, the reader part of the process rather than apart from it" (67). This phenomenological petition would no doubt appeal to the Irish writer himself. After all, his works and theatre, discreet as they are, open themselves to the attentive eyes and ears, constituting a space of what Bergson once called a "kind of intellectual sympathy."

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