Peter Gidal and Anarchic Criticism

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In 1983, Frederik Smith made use of the occasion of a special edition of Modern Fiction Studies to take stock of Beckett criticism. Smith argued that given Beckett's attitude to the distorting glass of language, a critical book on him was "almost a contradiction in terms," for in writing on Beckett we distort him. Smith boldly concluded that it was "theoretically impossible to write sensibly about Samuel Beckett" (Smith, 1983, p. 127). In its immediate context, Smith's essay was a brief introduction to a number of new critical works. However, within the larger, historical context of Beckett scholarship, he had made a point with such clarity and incisiveness that one wonders, when reading it, how it had not been made before. Perhaps it had, but amid the burgeoning years of the Beckett critical industry, who would have been likely to stop writing on Beckett's writing out of a fidelity to the metaphysics of the text? Many a good critic had established a reputation in writing "about" Beckett, and despite that, a Nobel laureate who had captured a world audience in such a way as Beckett did was destined to be written about for some time to come, despite his much discussed poetics of silence.

This perception of the impossibility of criticism developed out of an ongoing recognition throughout the 1970s of the failure of most of the available critical methodologies. Beckett's work of the 1950s and 1960s had strained the expository and discursive possibilities of mimetic criticism. The minimalism of his drama, its stringent economy of word and gesture, and the verbal entropy of his prose texts subverted recognizable modes of representation, and implicitly the critical practices which supported them. Written text and performance were events of structure and space, and the interpretive problems which they gave rise to were analogous to those which confronted critics of abstract painting and atonal music — problems of naming, of genre, and, ultimately, of seeking a figure in the carpet.

Ever since Beckett criticism entered its deconstructionist incarnation in the early 1980s, critics have habitually emulated Smith's apparent sine qua non — just as it was commonplace for critics in the 1970s (when Beckett criticism became as much a focus of debate as Beckett's texts themselves), to preface any new critical work with an observation on the saturated state of Beckett scholarship. Far from being ironical, this apparently contradictory situation, where criticism is relentlessly produced on the assumption of its theoretical impossibility, attests to institutional hegemony. The institution of Beckett criticism, that self-generating discursive formation which produces the articulation of, and explanations of the articulation of, the writings of Samuel
Beckett, evidences a dynamics of repetition, circulation, and exchange. Steven Connor has pointed out that despite division and contradiction, the relentless production of critical work transgresses the problem of where and how criticism stands in relation to the Beckett text. For Connor, the critical act itself is the most enduring affirmation of the “possibility of speech and commentary even where these are denied” (Connor, 1988, p. 190). Criticism is, in this sense, a metaphysics of presence, for the very fact of its continuity as discourse testifies to what Rodolphe Gasche has referred to as “the possibility of decision” (Gasché, 1986, p. 266).

The first major collection of postructuralist criticism of Beckett, *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, is located by its editors within a particular network of critical discourses, noting that this “new Beckett” (“the poet of the post-structuralist age”) is “thinkable only in the most recent critical terms” (x). “Rethinking,” according to Butler and Davis, is an “endless process,” (xi) and it is the identification of Beckett’s profound difference which accounts for the relentless continuity of critical discourse, as well as some of the more interesting reflexive attitudes to critical practice expressed in recent years. Mary Doll, for instance, in her *Beckett and Myth*, notes:

My approach in this book is to argue, as other postmodern critics do, that the serious issues of our time require a communication that breaks form. The forms that held our thought systems together logically, sequentially, hierarchically, no longer speak to our understanding. Ours is a world governed by uncertainty, illogic, and pluralism. (pp. 3-4)

*Beckett and Myth* fails to live up to this promising, revisionary attention to critical discourse itself. Despite Doll’s invocation of deconstruction’s rupturing of the authority of an interpretive position outside the text, she still constructs a grand narrative of mythic archetypes to explain Beckett’s writing. Doll’s professed difference is actually just another critical sameness, whereby postmodern attitudes to textuality and the problematical nature of writing about Beckett are merely subjects of the anteriority she rejects.

The implications of Beckett’s difference for the mode of critical discourse have rarely been addressed within Beckett scholarship. Even within something which purports to be at the cutting edge of critical practice, such as *Rethinking Beckett*, the standard academic essay, unselfconscious and apolitical, remains the standard form of locating Beckett as a writer. Even the state of the art concepts of deconstruction utilized by critics in their discussions are subsumed into the fabric of its authority. The only exception to the prevailing academic style of the volume is the “supplement” to Stephen Barker’s
otherwise conventionally written essay “Conspicuous Absence: Trace and Power in Beckett’s Drama,” which consists of a collage of fragments from Beckett, Nietzsche, Lacan, and Derrida, organized around the themes of trace, absence, silence, and erasure. But even here, there is a unifying, thematic language, provided by Barker himself, which contextualizes his sampled fragments of Beckett as illustrations of post-structuralist strategies (he notes as much in an early intervention.) Barker’s supplement gives the impression of collage, but it is more programmatic, and works in a similar way to Floyd Merrell’s demonstration of the contiguity of Beckett’s work with deconstructionist thought in his Deconstruction Reframed. In this work, Merrell argues that deconstruction is “part of a larger Western World intellectual movement,” (p. ix) and throughout the book he punctuates key points in his argument with quotations from the work of Musil, Borges, and Beckett’s trilogy. The predominance of quotations from the trilogy (the book is in fact peppered with correspondences with Beckett) has the effect of dramatizing his main point, by way of suggesting (through juxtaposition) that the anti-Cartesian principles implicit in Derrida’s thought are also to be found in Beckett’s writing, which significantly pre-dates Derrida’s by at least a decade.

The discursive style of Stephen Barker's supplement has a precedent which is more elaborate and sustained in its exploitation of the heterogeneity of collage. Peter Gidal’s Understanding Beckett: A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett occupies a special and unique place within Beckett scholarship, for it is the only critical text written in English which radically alters critical practice to accommodate the metadiscursive and ideological problems which Beckett’s work entails. Understanding Beckett, despite its unassuming title, is the most theoretically informed discourse on Beckett’s writing.

Gidal is perhaps more widely known as the vigorous proponent of materialist film theory and practice than as a scholar of Beckett. However, as a filmmaker Gidal has been highly influenced by Beckett’s fragmentation of the unified subject. Beckett’s Unnamable suggests that the only way to “go on,” to sustain discourse, is “by aporia,” and the contradictoriness of his/its speech undermines the very notion of a unified, enunciating subject (“... affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered ...”).

This tension between the relentlessness of discourse, the stress on a speech act, and the uncertainty of who speaks it, is utilized by Gidal, for example in Room Film 1973, to construct a problem of authorial intentionality, in the dialectical interaction between the restless mobility of a hand-held camera’s perception of objects within the formal constrictions of space (a room). As
a film theorist, Gidal is opposed to dominant cinematic discourse, and argues for a politically motivated structural/materialist film which deconstructs the repressive and mystifying devices of the film process. Materialist film (Gidal's neologistic conflation of materiality with materialism) "attempts to be non-illusionist," a "record (not representation, not a reproduction) of its own making" (Gidal, 1975, p. 190).

Since the early 1970s Gidal has displayed in his theoretical writings an acute awareness of the problem of writing about non-representational film, and indeed the interpretation of any radical art which "deals with the manipulation of materials made conscious, and with the inexpressible" (Gidal, 1974, p. 183). Gidal's 1974 discussion on "the theory of a non-interpretive art" ("Beckett & Others & Art: A System") is prefaced by Wittgenstein's dictum "What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of a language. What can be shown, cannot be said." Such an apparently contradictory situation (undermining the validity of his own discussion before it has even begun) reinforces the conviction of many postmodern artist/theorists that inside/outside oppositions do have a significance beyond high theory, and must impinge upon, and transform every social and intellectual practice:

... the dominance of transparency as an ideology, as a political reality, as an economy, functioning on many levels, must be smashed for the culturally induced processes of men's and women's identifications to be smashed as well. (Gidal, 1979, p. 73)

Gidal has appropriated the implications of Beckett's dissolution of the subject in discourse into his own writing style. Like Beckett, Gidal stresses the idiosyncracies and rhythms of subjectivity through contradiction, repetition, and obsessive intercalation. However the degree of such verbal devices simultaneously dissolves the illusion of subjectivity, and foregrounds the spectacle of discourse:

Suppressed in Anglo/Saxon structural and structural/materialist film is any attempt at theory. Advanced (mainly French) theory (not necessarily directly concerning film) is either not capable of dealing with film or else posits retrograde, illusionist, post-Bazinian manifestations of such. With the (at best) nearly total demise (flourishing) of New American Cinema mainly through its resurgent romanticism, or (at worst) its continued operation as pseudo-narrative investigations, there remain the few English (one Canadian,
one Austrian) structural/materialist film-makers, lamentably largely existing without the beginnings even of a theoretical/historical approach. (Gidal, 1975, p. 190)

Gidal's opaque and, at times, tortuous prose style, is complicated by other devices such as disjointed comment arranged under specific thematic headings, and frequent, intrusive quotation, which is often digressive and uncontextualized. The dismantling of a univocal position in Gidal's theoretical writing reinforces the indifference to the origin of the voice which Foucault perceived in Beckett ("What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking," Foucault, 1977, p. 115). Understanding Beckett is a discursive act irreducible to any single author. The entire book (250 pp. excluding notes) is a sustained collage of fragmented quotation, comprising Beckett's writing (principally his dramatic works), theoretical and polemical writings, and an array of miscellaneous texts (annotated typescripts, reported conversations, letters, photographs). There is absolutely no sense of a conventional, hierarchical arrangement of material; there are no inverted commas to distinguish a passage from Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" as being in any way an object of dominant, authorial metalanguage. Gidal's commentary, which is equally fragmentary, circulates around ideas implicit in the quotation, without overtly recognizing it. Rather than synthesizing the multiplicity of writings of which the book is composed into a coherent, linear argument, Gidal's commentary reinforces the provisionality of the book's "fragmentary composite of subjective voices" (Dusinberre, 1977, p. 81).

Understanding Beckett is subtitled "A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett." There is nothing academic or studious about this discourse, and Gidal's first enunciation in it, "Is speech a channel of communication or not?" (p. 1) is the only remotely heuristic device in this writerly text. The reader is constructed as a participant in, rather than an observer of, the problem of speech and communication in Beckett, in Understanding Beckett.

With respect to the institution of Beckett scholarship, Understanding Beckett is something of a pariah. Its indifference to who is speaking represents an irreverence for the assumptions and procedures of standard academic discourse, supplanting the authorial subject with textual subjectivity:

As with many books it might be useful not to start at the beginning. Perhaps Chapter XVIII or XX, and certainly the Notes (pp. 251-78). Then from p. 1. (Introduction to Understanding Beckett, p. xviii)

This irreverence signifies the politics of difference, and every facet of
*Understanding Beckett*, layout, typography, the construction of chapters, its alinear, fragmentary style of commentary, its rampant intertextuality, is an inscription, a signature of the text’s operative and constituent means of production. The interrogation of the status of the book’s purported univocal signatory (Gidal) permeates its textuality, such that the presence of a nominal author(ity) is written out of the text; what is left is *Understanding Beckett*, “the archive of his own effacement” (Derrida, 1984, p. 146).

*Understanding Beckett* represents an anarchic attitude to critical practice, generated by a perception of the rehabilitating mastery of conventional critical discourse, which smooths over and unifies the complex epistemological tensions in Beckett’s writing. Livio Dobrez noted in 1983 that criticism needed to be non-reductive, “characterised by fidelity to the question posed by the text” (Dobrez, 1983, p. 85). The fundamental issue which anarchic criticism gives rise to is that of representation, and in particular, as Gregory Ulmer has noted, criticism’s representation of its object of study (Ulmer, 1983, p. 83). Ulmer’s categorization of post-criticism, which appropriates modernist practices of montage and collage, is oriented in a similar way to Dobrez’s notion of anarchic criticism, for both eschew the objectification of the work of art. Ulmer notes, by way of Roland Barthes’s dismissal of the separation of criticism and literature, that:

> The relation of the critical text to its object of study was to be conceived in terms no longer of subject-object but of subject-predicate (authors and critics both facing the same material — language), with critical “meaning” being a “simulacrum” of the literary text, a new “flowering” of the rhetoric at work in literature. (Ulmer, p. 86)

Apart from its affront to the look and texture of standard academic discourse, *Understanding Beckett* is confrontational in another sense, in that it shortcircuits the referential link between criticism and other criticism. When David Hesla observed of Hugh Kenner that he had “touched on nearly every theme, problem, or idea worth serious study,” he indicated that the object of his own critical point of view (Kenner) had reproduced Beckett in a discourse which could itself be quoted from (as has indeed been the case with Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study), and that quoting Kenner was to quote Beckett, twice removed (Hesla, 1971, pp. v-vi). But how do metacritics handle a critical text which is not mimetic and which, as a collage of samplings, of quotations drawn from an eclectic range of contexts, destabilizes any semblance of a unified context prior to it?

*Understanding Beckett* must, however, be understood as a radical political
moment, rather than the avatar of a new critical stance within Beckett scholarship. Subsequent criticism exemplifies the continuous diversity of approaches which has characterized the history of Beckett criticism, from synoptic overview (Why Beckett, Enoch Brater, Thames & Hudson, 1990; Understanding Beckett, Alan Astro, University of South Carolina Press, 1990), to thematic specialization (Mary Doll, Beckett and Myth: An Archetypal Approach, Syracuse University Press, 1988, Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi, University of Illinois Press, 1990). Gidal’s work on Beckett is possibly compromised in another way in that being an experimental discourse it requires to be named as such to generate the idea of its difference within Beckett criticism. To describe it, in the manner which Paul Bove has described the Beckett text, as enacting “the drama of a reader-writer alienated from the models of understanding which no longer work as expected” (1980, p. 50) is to conceptualize it in the language of sense and convention, and it is through this location that it gains its relevance and its status as a politically oppositional work within the Beckett critical tradition. This reliance on the logocentric and institutional practices of traditional academic discourse continues to be the unassailable stumbling block of experimental writing. Writing which seeks to evade interpretation or the mediatory intervention of metalanguage inevitably remains caught within a hierarchy of discursive registers, as is evidenced by the following example from Ulmer’s Teletheory:

I am telling not only how to make a mystery, but why I want to make one. I do not expect to be able to persuade anyone by means of argument that conduction is an effective inventio, but it is important to note that this argument itself is constructed conductively, as well as inductively and deductively (as is usually the case in descriptions of genre). (Ulmer, 1989, p. 82.)

Ulmer’s desire to introduce a new genre which integrates orality, literacy, and videocy brings him up against the problem of naming, of description, of, ultimately, relying on a univocal language of transparency. Ulmer not only attempts to describe mystery mystically, but provides an actual example of mystery, his “Derrida at the Little Big Horn.” What he can’t evade is the necessity of circumscribing both his mystoric argument and his own mystery by metalanguage. Analytico-referentiality reigns supreme. In much the same way, to describe Understanding Beckett as a post-critical essay is already on the way to distorting it into intelligibility.

The problem facing me in this very essay is the perpetuation of the look of anteriority, of the location of myself “beyond the fatuous clamour” of
Beckettian critical discourse. However, my attention to the question of where critical practice stands in relation to Beckett’s fragmentation of the unified subject can only have a relevance from within Beckett scholarship. Anteriority is part of a complex discursive network, accepted by its producers and its participants as a necessary fiction. Beckett’s writing will continue to problematize critical practice, and it will continue to be noted that it does so, and that it has been noted that it does so. It is to be hoped, though, that Gidal’s work is not the last attempt to redefine criticism’s relation to Beckett’s writing. Gidal’s anarchic attitude to critical practice is a timely reminder that critics of Beckett need to be forever vigilant, reflexive, for when dealing with an art of the inexpressive, they, too, are “skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression.”

REFERENCES