PROJECT MUSE®

Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative (review)

Alan Warren Friedman

James Joyce Quarterly, Volume 44, Number 1, Fall 2006, pp. 176-178
(Review)

Published by The University of Tulsa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjq.2007.0008>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217424>

empty of figures, in "The Sisters." Nor should we forget Joyce's interest in film.

One last wacky, Wakean translation: "Pompéïa, un instant surprise par ce langage énergique, se ravise"; "Pompéïa, momentarily surprised by this energetic language, is thrilled" (74, 75). Perhaps the publishers at Carnegie Mellon should have kept their thrills in check and, like the prudent madam, had a second thought.

Reviewed by William Sayers
Cornell University

BECKETT, JOYCE AND THE ART OF THE NEGATIVE, edited by Colleen Jaurretche. New York: Rodopi Press, 2005. 246 pp. \$63.00.

Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative is an issue of the *European Joyce Studies Annual* pretending (though not very hard) to be a book. It offers no principle of selection or coherence; Beckett is included because someone suggested including him; the essays are, arbitrarily, "arranged alphabetically by author" (14); there is neither a list of contributors, nor a Works Cited page, nor an index. Criticism has increasingly found good reasons to link Joyce and Samuel Beckett (as I have myself in a recently completed manuscript), but only one of the book's twelve essays discusses both writers, while four are on Joyce and seven on Beckett.

The umbrella title and perfunctory introduction gesture toward unity: "Samuel Beckett and James Joyce write with deep awareness of ancient, medieval and modern philosophical and theological traditions that express negation and its correlative states—absence, void, emptiness and nothingness—as central to language and representation" (11). But the introduction provides no discussion of Joyce and Beckett's special, if not unique, relationship; nor is any linkage posited between and among these essays other than the sweeping thesis that "[n]egation is the dark metaphysical heart of modern literature" (11)—not at all unreasonable on its face, but needing more than mere assertion.

The essays vary considerably in length, quality, and methodology, with the Joyce ones being most eclectic. The book's longest piece, Keri Elizabeth Ames's "Joyce's Aesthetic of the Double Negative and His Encounters with Homer's *Odyssey*," could have benefited most from an editor's hand since its reasonable conclusions (that Joyce had excellent Latin and poor Greek and that he encountered *The Odyssey* in multiple translations) are demonstrable in far less space and without exhaustively nit-picking, tangential digressions. Fritz Senn's

"The Joyce of Impossibilities" offers a clear and succinct warning to critics: "it appears next to impossible to make a valid, unqualified, abstract statement with 'Joyce' as its subject that would be both true and meaningful" (197), although Senn would seem to be doing just that. All readings of Joyce—generic, textual or contextual, optical and acoustic, narratological, summarized, annotated, translated, dramatized—Senn argues, are equally impossible and equally necessary. In "Joyce's Negative Esthetics," Jean-Michel Rabaté's rather abstract discussion of Joyce's "negative theology or apophatic mysticism" and "esthetic of negativity" culminates in "[t]he language of the Night confront[ing] the inexpressible" (193-94), while engaging only minimally with *Finnegans Wake*. Nels Pearson's "Death Sentences: Silence, Colonial Memory and the Voice of the Dead in *Dubliners*," an insightful and largely persuasive discussion of silence, death, and Ireland's colonial status that produces the "unidentifiable, unspeakable but imaginable thing . . . that binds together a people" (170), is the only essay that both comports with the book's rubric and offers a significant rereading of a Joycean text.

The collection's other essays are more "negatively" focused. Dirk Van Hulle's "'Nichtsichtsundnichts': Beckett's and Joyce's Transtextual Undoings" elaborates, in effect, on Beckett's comment—"[t]he more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance"¹—finding a shared interest in undoing language via Fritz Mauthner's linguistic skepticism, which sent them in opposite directions: "Joyce was looking for words, Beckett tried to find the 'unword'" (54). The Beckett essays largely enact the book's theme through indirection, viewing Beckett's texts through thick philosophical lenses (as Rabaté does for Joyce using Immanuel Kant and Jacques Lacan): for example, Russell Kilbourn's "*The Unnamable*: Denegative Dialogue" (Sigmund Freud, M. M. Bakhtin, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida); Lois Oppenheim's "The Uncanny in Beckett" (Freud); Asja Szafraniec's "'Wanting in Inanity': Negativity, Language and 'God' in Beckett" (Derrida); and Yuan Yuan's "From Ideology of Loss to Aesthetics of Absence: The Endgame in Beckett's *The Lost Ones*" (Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, François Lyotard, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Kant, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida).

Both Oppenheim and Szafraniec quote from the same 1937 letter—"more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" (136; 213-14, 226)²—though Oppenheim then ranges widely throughout Beckett's writings seeking traces of the Freudian uncanny, oedipal complex, and castration anxiety, while Szafraniec finds the absence of God in Beckett's discourse a focus "on articulating God as absence" (215), primarily in *Watt* and *Worstward Ho*.

Like John Pilling's "Something for Nothing: Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*," which examines "negational strategies" (of generic expectations, plot, causality, place, social cohesion, "any 'solution of continuity'") in Beckett's early novel, Szafraniec's study similarly locates the origins of Beckett's *via negativa* (217-18), while Yuan calls *The Lost Ones* "a story of absence: no plot, no character, no story, no time, no name, no voice" (244).

Perhaps, as the introduction might have suggested, Kilbourn's "Denegative Dialogue" is the key Beckett essay (though I am not sure how "denegative" differs from "negative") because it resonates with and links several others. Seeking answers to the "formal questions raised by [*The Unnamable*, which] remain inadequately addressed forty years after its initial publication" (65), Kilbourn, like Rabaté (193) and Szafraniec (218-20), draws on both "apophatic and non-apophatic texts" (65) in contemplating the mystery and failure of Beckettian narration. His discussion of silence nicely parallels Pearson's analysis of *Dubliners*. His treatment of Dantean purgatory and inferno in the *Trilogy* (67-68) complements Ulrika Maude's analysis of "Mingled Flesh" in *The Lost Ones*; John L. Murphy's of "Beckett's Purgatories" in *Play, How It Is*, and *The Lost Ones*; and Yuan's consideration of *The Lost Ones* as an "allegory of its own impossibility and failure of representation" (244). Kilbourn's insistence on the primacy of voice (76) enters into dialogue with Maude's notion of "a perceptible questioning and withering of the sense of vision within the narrative environments" (94) and Oppenheim's "The Uncanny in Beckett," which maintains that "Beckett's thinking is predominantly visual" (127).

I do not mean to suggest that the introduction should necessarily make these connections, only that they (and many others) are there to be made, that making them goes a long way toward enriching one's reading of the essays, and that, without such an effort, the collection seems arbitrary and unnecessary. Making a good, comprehensive book from these essays (or, even better, from *some* of these essays plus other, solicited ones) would have required a significant editorial commitment, one that would have been well worth the exertion.

Reviewed by Alan W. Friedman
University of Texas

NOTES

¹ Samuel Beckett is quoted in Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," *New York Times* (5 May 1956), section 2, p. 3.

² Beckett, letter to Axel Kuan, trans. Martin Esslin, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), pp. 171-73.