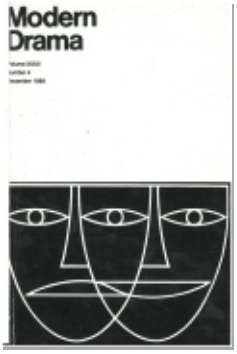
PROJECT MUSE®

Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett ed. by Alan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman and Dina Sherzer, and: *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* ed. by Ruby Cohn (review)



Jonathan Kalb

Modern Drama, Volume 32, Number 4, Winter 1989, pp. 588-592 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1989.0027*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/498827/summary

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 15:47 GMT) Fudan University

period (one wonders whether the next fifteen years will have Baraka and Hochhuth, say, in boldface), this device also shows who has been neglected. One envisions the emergence of dissertations, articles, and books on such unboldfaced dramatists as Crommelynck, Hankin, Rice, Stein, and Zangwill (who coined the term "The Melting Pot" in his play of that title about immigrants in America), as well as on unfamiliar writers in boldface (for example, Cankar, none of whose entries is in English). But perhaps my imagination is too vivid: the immediately premodern Ostrovsky has yet to make a major critical or theatrical impact in the English-speaking world.

MDS&C chiefly chronicles drama, not theatre, though depending on relevance to a play Carpenter is flexible enough to include material on the latter, and he is permissive for major dramatists. He defines dramatist as a writer of at least one stageable play (Hemingway qualifies) but not of TV or radio plays unless the author is important (Beckett and Pinter, for instance). Others may quarrel with his motto "When in doubt, include"; I don't. Nor do I dispute such entries as John Simon's nine-page article in *Hudson Review* (1975) on Shaffer's *Equus*, a play I loathe, since Simon's piece is more an analysis than a review.

I've picked only a few nits. Grotowsky, who is not a dramatist, is included; but Randolph Goodman's *From Script to Stage* (1971), which has useful interviews with Peggy Ashcroft on *Hedda Gabler* and Mary Morris on *Desire Under the Elms*, is not. Since oversights are inevitable and since *MDS&C* is computerized, Carpenter promises to supplement significant omissions (as he does his annual *MD* Bibliography) by incorporating them in future compilations. Write to him at SUNY-Binghamton.

In brief, this Bibliography is indispensable for any library with pretensions to decency. Since the price, as hardback books go these days, is relatively inexpensive, individual scholars too might consider the investment worthwhile.

BERNARD F. DUKORE,
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE & STATE UNIVERSITY

ALAN WARREN FRIEDMAN, CHARLES ROSSMAN and DINA SHERZER, eds. *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press 1987. Pp. 245, illustrated. $24.95.

RUBY COHN, ed. *Beckett: Waiting for Godot*. Casebook Series. London: Macmillan 1987. Pp. 216. £20; £6.95(PB).

There is a great deal of good thinking and writing in *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, but the truth is, its twenty-one essays don't all belong in the same volume. The first forty-seven pages deal with Beckett's bilingualism and self-translation; the rest of the book is really a miscellany that could and should form the basis for several independent collections. The editors tried valiantly to bind everything together with clever subtitles: "Conceptual Transmutations" introduces topics as diverse as Dante,

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 15:47 GMT) Fudan University

television drama, and Duchamp; "Genre Transformations" groups articles on sundry issues of classification such as autobiography, the pastoral, and the *Magna Mater* myth; and the book ends with two sections, "Transpositions for Stage and Screen" and "Transcreations: Language and Painting" that introduce yet four other subjects. Rarely has the prefix "trans" been enjoined to serve such Procrustean ends.

Apart from the superfluous "trans" words passim, though, the ersatz organizational principle doesn't do much mischief to the occasionally fine scholarship it tries to contain. The opening section, for instance, makes a fruitful start at dealing with some of the labyrinthine and long neglected questions about textual authenticity, definitiveness and originality, that Beckett has raised by translating his own works. In " 'The Same Old Stories': Beckett's Poetics of Translation," Lori Chamberlain points out that Beckett's critics, as if by unspoken agreement, have all but dropped the standard scholarly procedure of quoting texts in their "authorized versions," i.e. the original language, instead treating the French and English as equally "original" and quoting one or the other "depending on audience ... or the speaker's own linguistic affiliation." In other words, we critics beg the question of translation by "[pretending] that there is no 'problem.' " Chamberlain's formulation of this standing ambiguity is extremely clear, even if her suggested "solution" to approaching it, based on Gilles Deleuze's *Différence et Répétition,* isn't, and the fact that several other contributors fall into exactly the fallacies she describes only emphasizes the book's lack of cohesion. (Oddly, some contributors appear to have had access to their co-contributors' work, others not.)

In the very first essay, a valuable general overview entitled "The Writer as Self-Translator," Raymond Federman points out that bilingualism is one of precious few new frontiers left in Beckett criticism. It constitutes a wide open book or dissertation opportunity, and Federman even outlines a possible plan for such a book. The two essays following his, though, by Brian Fitch and Marjorie Perloff, concentrate on amassing an impressive arsenal of examples to prove specific points, mostly about *Company* and *Ill Seen, Ill Said* – all very edifying except that posterity is left with the job of fitting their observations into more general theories. Without question, the authors of these first three essays possess all the requisite competence to undertake a book like the one Federman describes – the section's only intellectual shortcoming is an utterly unoriginal article by Dina Sherzer, one of the book's editors – and yet, according to the Contributors' Notes, none is now at work on such a project. The greatest disappointment of *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett* is that it turns out to be neither the book promised by its title nor a harbinger of that book.

Among the half-dozen or so other excellent contributions – a respectable tally for any collection – is a gracefully written piece by David Hayman entitled "Beckett: Impoverishing the Means – Empowering the Matter." Hayman's topic is Beckett's aesthetic of withholding, the way the author has employed literary conventions by negation, using and then subverting them, raising and then disappointing conventional expectations, thus establishing a "tension ... between the actual and the potential text, between his vehicle and the powers so palpably and firmly spurned." Numerous examples from various genres are used as illustrations: *Watt* is remarkable for its "power

to conjure up *the hope of* a story, a coherent allegory and perhaps a truly credible act or persona"; the 1964 production of *Film* with Buster Keaton was an "exercise in rigorous excision" whose peculiarity consisted in the effort to "photograph an actor famous for his face almost entirely from the rear." In each of his works, "Beckett has removed some strategic pillars, leaving others, though never the same ones, in place to support a tottering edifice," and Hayman's speculations about this "edifice" are what distinguish his comments from the bulk of previous criticism on Beckett's manipulation of conventions. Placing what he sees as the author's larger artistic ambition in the context of "post-Flaubertian modernism" (the necessity of that redundant modifier is never explained), Hayman argues very persuasively for a kind of modernist reading that sees the author's "diminution of means as a fundamental strategy pretty much from the start."

Two other pieces, by H. Porter Abbott and Frederick N. Smith, are also noteworthy for their relatively broad perspectives, both covering topics I approached initially with considerable skepticism. Abbott's "Beckett and Autobiography" does not, thankfully, reiterate the handful of stories we have heard *ad nauseam* about direct connections between Beckett's life and works: e.g. *Godot* and the walk to Roussillon, a passing comment about Hamm and Clov being "Suzanne and me." The essay rather fits Beckett into some general observations about the way the genre of autobiography has been interpreted as fictive by certain twentieth-century authors who dispense with the genre's pretension to literal truth but still seem to make the subsidiary claim of "ostentatious originality." Similarly, Smith's "'A land of sanctuary': Allusions to the Pastoral in Beckett's Fiction" is far more interesting than its pedantic title implies. Making all due concessions to the author's irony, Smith points out that "Beckett seldom mocks the pastoral" and, in fact, usually "[takes] the pastoral world quite seriously." Any benighted critic who still thinks only fuzzy connections exist between Beckett and Spenser, Milton, or Pope should take a look at this perceptive article.

Several other essays are valuable for their factual offerings. Martin Esslin's "A Poetry of Moving Images," for example, an English version of a piece that first appeared in French in Pierre Chabert's special Beckett number of *Revue d'Esthétique*, contains much significant material about productions of the television plays, though it's curious that an article coining the apt phrase "visual poetry" contains little in the way of elaborated comparisons with the poetry and prose. Ruby Cohn's "Mabou Mines' Translations of Beckett" is also full of useful historical information, in this case about an avant-garde theater troupe whose history is almost always told murkily. I don't share Cohn's seemingly categorical admiration for the Mabou Mines Beckett adaptations, but, as always, her data and descriptions are significant and dependable.

There are other noteworthy pieces in the book, some of them interesting because of risks that didn't pay off: for instance, several comparisons of Beckett with visual artists. Most of the rest of *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, however, consists of second-rate articles of the kind Beckett criticism has been plagued with from the start: efforts by bookkeeperish minds to list correspondences with this or that theme, analyses of comedy oblivious to the fact that Beckett's writing makes fun of their like, and yet more heartbreakingly sincere attempts to read Beckett literally, as a writer of political

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 15:47 GMT) Fudan University

parables, which are never so much wrongheaded as the most obvious and unprovocative approaches to this author imaginable. It's both ironic and unsurprising that a book clearly born out of a desire to reassess a flooded field, to take stock of the deluge of writing produced during the past few decades, should itself show signs of inundation. As the Unnamable asked, a sigh of futility in his (its?) voice from the outset, "Where now? Who now? When now?"

Questions of direction also underlie Cohn's new casebook on *Waiting for Godot,* as they have several other recent collections such as *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context* (edited by Enoch Brater, 1986) and *On Beckett* (edited by S. E. Gontarski, 1986). It seems reasonably safe to guess that Cohn is the only person ever to have published two casebooks, almost identically organized, not only on the same author but on the same play. To an extent, this new version overlaps with the earlier one, published by Grove Press in 1967 and now out of print: both are collections of excerpts from books and periodicals, designed to give an overview of the public reception of Beckett's most famous play. Some of the same books are quoted, using different excerpts, in one case nearly the same one, and several pieces were writen expressly as revisions of articles used in the Grove edition. The overlap is hardly a problem; Cohn, rightfully, appears to have been satisfied with her earlier work and to have seen her task this time as updating and filling out the material. The two casebooks are about the same length but the later one quotes from roughly one third more sources.

The most important criteria for any such survey-book, it seems to me, are whether the collection represents a fair-minded cross-section of scholarly opinion on the subject and whether its extracts are sufficiently engaging to send the reader back to the source material. In both senses, Cohn's book is a success. She goes to considerable effort to include a broad range of views, some disagreeing specifically with her, and I would like to believe that the book's only prominent blemish – several opaque, jargon-ridden pieces cluttering up the middle section – is a result of fairness. In a few cases, I might have excerpted differently; the section from Bert States's *The Shape of Paradox,* for instance, doesn't give a strong enough sense of the wisdom and originality in that book. For the most part, though, the extracts made me want to read, or re-read, the unabridged texts.

Beckett *aficionados* will be happy to learn that this casebook, like its predecessor, also contains some previously unpublished and previously untranslated writings. Among the more illuminating are: Antonia Rodríguez-Gago's brief report on the first *Godot* productions in fascist Spain, Linda Ben-Zvi's description of a 1985 Israeli *Godot* whose text shifted back and forth between Arabic and Hebrew, and a lucid essay by James Mays, entitled "Allusion and Echo in *Godot,*" which discusses the slippery issue of secondary meanings in the play's dialogue.

Content aside, what is perhaps most remarkable about this casebook is the self-evident fact that it exists at all. By now it's old news that *Godot* won widespread acceptance to the classic canon in an unusually short time-span; a glance down the list of titles in the Macmillan Casebook Series, though, brings the enormity of that achievement into focus: Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales, Jonson's *Volpone,* Joyce's *Dubliners,* 19 volumes on Shakespeare, along with dozens of other "masterpieces" by Austen, the Brontës, Dickens, Fielding, Keats, and Marlowe, to give just a sampling. That a play by a living author can be located among this company and *not* raise any eyebrows is surely still worth a moment's pause.

JONATHAN KALB,
YALE UNIVERSITY

RICHARD ALLEN CAVE. *New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage, 1970–1985.* New York: St. Martin's Press 1988. Pp. 335. $29.95.

Cave's book is one every scholar, teacher, and serious student of contemporary British drama needs to own. But scholar, teacher, and student should note that the format of the book is atypical of many surveys. The author does not divide chapters into major playwrights and movements; there is no extensive effort at organization; there are no long bibliographies or lists of sources.

New British Drama is, first of all, a short survey. The explosion in British drama that occurred in the mid-1950s continues, and the author's method is, roughly speaking, to divide the drama of the fifteen years he covers by genre (to use the word with more latitude than is usually the case). Cave places the major figures of these years in separate chapters to distinguish the themes and methods that separate them from their contemporaries. For example, he devotes separate chapters to Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, describing Pinter's subject as "Man's yearning for wholeness and permanence in his emotional being and the traps the mind can spring against itself to keep it from a state of bliss" and Beckett's as "Man's hunger for metaphysical satisfaction."

Cave's conscientiousness as a scholar lies not in minute analysis, but in the dedication with which he has watched and written about the plays of the period. Readers will be struck at how often the author mentions subsequent performances of a play. Not only did Cave attend the same London plays many times, he often compares London productions with New York productions.

Students will find this book a good guide to the major figures of the period. Teachers will get a sense of each playwright's canon and will know which to focus on. And the scholar will appreciate the informed lucidity of an academic who is so at ease with his subject that when he discusses Beckett's *That Time* (a play in which one voice is projected from three different sources), he naturally refers to Shakespeare's Richard II, playing several parts in his prison cell. When Cave summarizes English political drama of the past two decades he refers to the "Aristophanic spirit," the "healthy scepticism," of this drama. And when he analyzes the resurgence of the history play, Cave does so against the background of Brecht's *Galileo* and *Mother Courage* (Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill, he says, "have broken away from Brechtian practice without losing touch with Brechtian principles.").