

Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

English Faculty Publications

English

2014

Samuel Beckett and Testimony [Book Review]

Marc A. Ouellette

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Current Issues
Contributors
Past Issues
Call for Papers
Editorial Board
Submissions
Search
Tweet

[Return to Contents»](#)

Samuel Beckett and Testimony . David Houston Jones, Palgrave, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-27576-8, ISBN-13: 978-0-23027-576-8. Hardcover, \$90.00. / Review by Marc A. Ouellette

<1> Having previously published a book on the self and text in the works of Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett, David Houston Jones turns his attention to the latter's important but generally underexamined prose fiction. Moreover, as Jones argues, this work has been misread or underappreciated when it has been considered at all, especially in terms of the tremendous and careful work Beckett does to show without showing the horrors of the Holocaust. In the author's words, the concern "is not to document the differing understandings of language and identity in post-structuralist as opposed to humanist thought, but to examine some of the most revealing encounters between Beckettian testimony and recent rethinkings of human epistemology, in particular the emergence of the critical categories of the posthuman and the inhuman" (16-7). What becomes clear in reading Jones's new work, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, is that both the source and the analysis forcefully and yet subtly call for and demonstrate the need for the interpretive work of reading. The subtlety is perhaps the most laudable since Beckett's prose more than his plays play with the indeterminacy of language and the resultant status of any signifier as a metaphor for something, if not some thing.

<2> Thus, one is left with no empty signifiers since the account becomes its own justification through the demand for readings (23). Moreover, these readings apply to multiple and simultaneous senses, especially given that witnessing is an aural as well as a visual act. The key, then, lies in the recognition that as much as testimony is a public act which needs its own witnesses, it remains a personal experience. It is at once a personal and an impersonal act. Reconciling the rift between the intensely personal experience of the witness and the depersonalization of the testimony can only occur in and through language. While Beckett himself circles this arc in an almost elegiac manner, Jones echoes this pursuit of understanding the unfathomable by returning to it in the fifth chapter in terms of finding "a way out" (151). Jones' return maps onto the concern by highlighting the seemingly imperceptible interstices between the unspeakable and the unsayable. Here, Jones finds the fractured syntax of *The Lost Ones* to be particularly salient in terms of its interplay with the embedded metanarrative of entropy as understood by thermodynamicists. For this former thermodynamics student turned scholar, it serves as a reminder that even entropy occurs within particular bounds since the problem must always involve multiple and simultaneous constants; indeed, entropy is occasioned by the very forces that constrain its apparent chaos. Moreover, entropy ultimately only exists in and through the entropic interplay of language and interpretation.

<3> The first chapter, on siting testimony, is so very, very foundational as to be a likely candidate to find its way into any dissertation on Beckett for the foreseeable future. To be sure the chapter title and the relevant themes fittingly serve as a wonderful play on sight, cite, and site while reminding readers of all three. For, first and foremost testimony entails that a witness recite what has been seen and this must be located within a relevant framework in order to be understood, if not by the audience but at least by the witness him or herself. Indeed, within the works to which Jones devotes the study, it is the inability to comprehend what has been seen that occasions the testimony as something more than a reportage. Testimony becomes an accompaniment to the interpretive process of the individual as well as the recipient, since it requires "the direct intervention of a witness" (27). Thus, the chapter lays the crucial groundwork for what really stands out for me, which is the work of viewpoint and its demands for multiple and simultaneous readings while still disavowing the primacy of any one of them (43). The privileging of any one viewpoint reminds readers (both of Jones and of Beckett) that scrutiny is the logical successor of testimony (37). This leads me to find the answer to the unspeakable and unknowable and the indeterminacy of language and of truth is in the simple but complicated realization that any act of description (dog chases cat) is an act of interpretation and storytelling (instead of cat was chased by dog). This is important because, as Jones argues (especially with regard to *The Lost Ones*, *Texts for Nothing*, and *The Unnamable*) it is precisely through the destabilization of truth as a construct that truth can exist as an essence.

<4> Indeed, as the succeeding chapters indicate the point to which *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* most frequently returns is the ongoing portrayal of Beckett's works as testimonies

to the roles and functions of narrative viewpoints. In Jones's terms, "The dilemma of the status of the narrator's discourse is key to a testimonial understanding of the text" (51). The narrator can only be understood through the testimony, but that testimony is always already flawed, incomplete, imprecise or otherwise open to interpretation since it is an interpretation first and foremost. In this last instance, *How It Is* most directly challenges and plays with the status of the narrator through its juxtaposition of the public and the private through a mapping onto the simultaneity of attraction and repulsion. Waste and other discards are sought out as the irreducible traces of humanity in contrast the inhumanity of cleanliness and sterility. This is no mere trite French act of finding the beauty in the grotesque or ugly. As Jones observes regarding the "overwhelming presence of the figure" of the numerical sequences tattooed on prisoners' arms, the "reduction of human identity to numerical sequence seems to cancel the possibility of testimonial narrative" (57). Said another way, the numbers become a metaphor for any arrangement of figures, up to and including language (whose own syntax is as much a matter of combinatorics as of creativity). Beckett tackles the problem of representing the unspeakable by showing that it is ultimately unsayable, as well. Therefore, it must find other means of conveying its (version of the) truth. This is significant because it places testimony within the realm of (any) literary fiction, a realm in which the "paradoxical openness" to fiction in the testimonial process (59). This leads to the important double bind of testimony: neither abdication nor absolution reconciles the inherent possibility of fiction.

<5> However, this should be seen as a productive outcome since it depends on an imaginative, creative impulse, one which confirms humanity even in the face of unspeakable, unsayable inhumanity. It is in this last regard that the book turns to the problem of representation and specifically the paradoxical challenge of representing something (atrocious) without representing it. As much as the points-of-view prove important in terms of the often-overlooked editorializing of any visual reproduction or representation, the discussion ultimately returns to the centrality of language. As Jones elaborates, this becomes the central issue of several of Beckett's work, but most importantly of *Imagination Dead Imagine* and most specifically with respect to the "visual documentation of the death camps" (81). What falls out is an almost phenomenological debate between the visible and the invisible, one which recognizes the limits of the former and its always already placement within the bounds of (a) language (101-2). Equally, the invisible-that which cannot be spoken or represented-carries the weight of the signification system. At the very least each of these owes its existence to some kind of "interpretive clue," one which represents the object as knowable if not representable (104). In the case of *Ill Seen Ill*, this object is the crucifix, itself a long-debated icon and long-debated icon of contested representation. In Jones's words, these and other "recalcitrant figures" add layers of debate, complexity and connections with the previously considered aspects of Beckett's prose-fiction (107). Where this becomes most apparent is in juxtaposition of the visual with the archival. These are linked through their shared relationship with and as informational technologies. Again, what stands out is the simultaneity of the paradoxical relationships Beckett is debating in and through the debates of his characters, their sights, their sites and the debates they themselves are citing. Indeed, the visual objects should be seen as further means of testimony rather than confirmation of what has been stated.

<6> In finishing the course of his analysis, Jones returns to the earlier promised attempt on his part, and on Beckett's, of finding a way out of the problematics of testimony and of representation. As much as Jones offers Derrida's readings of the archive in *Archive Fever* and in *Geneses*, specifically with regard to the text as a repository of knowledge, as a means of understanding Beckett's testimonial narratives, what really happens is that the debates within Beckett offer a means of resolving Derrida's dilemmas, as well. Said another way, Beckett seems to anticipate the rise of electronic means, especially in terms of "the integration of works" within a structure capable of producing "new, unexpected connections" (116). The familiar figure for this process is that of the rhizome. However, Jones points out that Beckett figures this process in and through the body. Not only does this give the collected testimonies a material form, it offers a poignant reminder that of the "very grave problems of conceptualisation" in textual studies (117). Moreover, attaching the process to the body gives it a life and a presence. This move brings the understanding of testimony simultaneously toward and away from the Boolean logic of true and false and the inhumanity of the ones and zeroes through which this is represented.

<7> In Beckett's texts, it is the archival function in *Watt* that solves the problem of the unsayable vs. the unspeakable, the visible vs. the invisible and the representation of all (121). This process repeats in *Krapp's Last Tape* through its intertext not just with Augustine's *Confessions* but with the mathematics of probability, for it is through probability that one can represent, if not reify, the likelihood of the possible connections to be derived in the ongoing transmission of the archive to witnesses and in the resultant accounts of that transmission. Instead of rhizomes, the process could be figured in a(n endless) series of gated decisions that map onto the processes digital logic as employed in electronic means. In this way, there is always the opportunity for embellishments, emendations and editorializing. There is always something more. This move returns the discussion to the previously cited notion of entropy and its representation, especially in *The Lost Ones*. Testimony is reliant on "the vagaries of consciousness" (164). These are in turn predicated on the need for the system-in this case the knowable, representable as figured in and through the body-to protect, to sustain and to reproduce itself. Thus, information technologies, including and especially testimony, become the most important means through which this occurs. Far from being inhuman

technologies, this actually seems to return Beckett, as well, to the very Modernist concerns regarding the limits of the human and the power of human creativity to outstrip and outlive those limits.

<8> Here, Jones invokes Lyotard's work on preserving the human through the informational in *The Differend* by reading it alongside several of Beckett's works, especially *The Lost Ones*. The central connection of the two is the previously cited double bind of testimony. More specifically, they treat human survival in a situation "in which the human can have no voice" (143). I mention this because *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* is so complete and thorough that it comes as a surprise worth reconciling and understanding that certain images, concepts and themes are absent from the book. While this review, like Jones's text figures on the central debates, it likewise takes its cue from Beckett and his works in avoiding any attempt to portray or discuss the actual content of the actual testimony of actual witnesses of the actual concentration camps and/or the Holocaust. Here, I was wondering if Lacan might appear, especially in terms of the entry into language via the mirror stage and the subsequent misrecognition of someone who is an ostensible eye-witness. Admittedly, though, this is a book about discourse and reconciling Foucault (from and through whom all discursive considerations, especially those of power must flow) with Lacan is not always an easy task.

<9> That said, I wonder if the conversation could be extended to include the notion of the visible and the invisible on the subject's self-recognition as human via the omnipresence of surveillance, not only in the camp, but also in terms of the scrutinizing of the testimony. Understanding the debates helps to at least understand the problematics of discussing, portraying, witnessing and otherwise reproducing the Holocaust through any means other than fiction; that is, through any means other than metaphorical representation. This confirms the enormity of the problem, one which may or may not be reconfigured as productive challenge instead of a defining limitation, while reminding readers that language is inherently metaphorical. Thus, it was also a surprise to find a discussion of testimony as an elegiac mode did not appear either. Again, this is not a criticism of Jones's study but rather another way of considering a situation which the human can have no voice. Instead of theories of the elegy being read through or applied to Beckett's works, I think Beckett may have something more to say regarding the elegy, not only as *differend* but as *différance*. Regardless, this points to the very heart of Jones's study, which is the important work of fiction as theory and as debate. Indeed, this only suggests the need for more discussion and more debate as well as more re-readings of Beckett alongside Jones.

Return to [Top](#)»