

Inversions of Modernity: Beckett and Karatani on Language and Literature

Douglas Atkinson

While it is impossible to deny the international influence that Beckett's writing has had concerning the nature of Modernism and the question of literature, it is equally evident that the reception of Beckett in Japan was of an entirely different order. Furthermore, it can be argued that the motivation for the more or less immediate acceptance and celebration of Beckett's work was not simply a fortunate coincidence or a matter of chance. Rather, following the argument made by Karatani Kojin – Japan's foremost literary theorist – I will argue that the unique political, sociological and cultural context of 20th century Japan created a perfect storm for reflections on the nature of Modernism and, indirectly, the reception of Beckett's work. I argue that Karatani, a colleague of both Derrida and de Man at Yale, mirrors the movement of Beckett's Trilogy both methodologically and thematically in order to arrive at the ideological constructs of his key terms, namely "Origins", "Modern", "Japanese" and "Literature." And where Beckett used "his" masters of Modernism – namely Joyce and Proust – as points of departure, Karatani will also follow suit here by addressing Japan's foremost modernist, Natsume Soseke, in order to identify and critique the elements of an essentially Japanese experience of Modernism. Karatani's genealogical critique of the essential attributes of modern Japanese fiction – setting, interiority, confession, illness, power and "The Extinction of Genres" - is a perfect parallel to Beckett's deconstruction of the elements of narrativity, thus clearly showing the necessity for reappraising the import of Beckett's work via Karatani's appropriation of his major motifs and strategies for questioning the nature of literature and its import on Modernism's search for a source of the Self.

Short Bio:

Douglas Atkinson teaches at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels) where he lectures in critical thinking and academic composition at The Doctoral School. Additionally, he gives courses in Advanced English Proficiency for students in Literature and Linguistics. He is also adjunct professor of Rhetoric and the Humanities at Vesalius College. He holds a PhD in Philosophy and specializes in 20th century Continental Philosophy, with a focus on the intersection between philosophy and literature. His current work is on the philosophic import of Maurice Blanchot and his influence on Samuel Beckett, phenomenology, hermeneutics and philosophy of language. He is currently co-supervising a PhD project at the VUB on Beckett and Joyce, and has promoted a wide range of Master's Theses in literature. His literary interests focus primarily on Beckett, Modernism and Post-Modernism, phenomenology, deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, death and modern Japanese literature.