

‘...something that is not Beckett’: Beckett and the ‘problem’ of inheritance in early US postmodern fiction

James Baxter

In this paper, I intend to interrogate the complicated inheritance of Samuel Beckett on what Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery label ‘the first wave of American Postmodernism.’ The primarily Euro-centric notion of Beckett as ‘last modernist’ will be carefully reframed in light of the economic and cultural shift towards the United States as the site of a postmodern ‘exhausted’ impulse. Without effacing the known distance from which Beckett’s association with the US was conducted, the post-war influx from without of both European and global modernisms will provide the situation for my reading of Beckett’s exceptional legacy on US postmodernism. This will be reinforced via the criti-fictional texts of John Barth and Donald Barthelme, both of whom conceive of their projects as to a large degree in the wake of Beckett. In this context, Beckett is re-conceptualised as a ‘problem,’ regarding what Barth in ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ (1967) describes as ‘the used up-ness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities.’ Similarly—and emerging from a condition of being ‘overwhelmed by Beckett’—Barthelme proposes that one must ‘write in some sense in opposition to Beckett, as Beckett wrote in opposition to Joyce.’ As such, the ‘Nominalist irony’ posited by Beckett against the Joycean ‘apotheosis of the word,’ holds a unique place in the transition between literary moments, towards both the ‘felt ultimacies’ of Barth or Barthelme’s process of ‘not knowing.’ This will be conducted alongside the assertion in Richard Begam’s significant monograph on *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (1996), regarding the ‘differential conception of postmodernism’— ‘implicated in what it opposes.’ As such, I will propose that the same poetics of impasse and opposition can be mapped onto the fabric of Beckett’s US bequest, traces of Beckett visible in the working through of the author’s inheritance.

Short Bio:

James Baxter is a second year PhD candidate in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading. He is currently working on a thesis titled “‘the old aporetics’ of Samuel Beckett and the influence on narrative possibility in US metafiction.’ His broader research interests include: writing after Beckett, reflexivity, theories of reading, the history of Grove Press, and the works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo.