

“Anti-human and Reactionary”: Reading Beckett with Orwell

Richard Pettifer and Andrew Fuhrmann

For all that his work deals in situations of mud-spattered consternation and mouldering scatological humour, Beckett seems to have left behind what George Orwell once called a very clean smell. It is the problem of saintliness: what has Beckett, with all his stuttering deferral and disengagement, to do with the world of action? In this paper, using the optic of Orwell's committed humanism, we interrogate Beckett's contemplative art of withdrawal and non-attachment and consider recent attempts to recruit Beckett to the global anti-capitalist cause. Crucial to this investigation is the essential ambiguity of Beckett's art, the possibility that he might be integrated into almost any political system without seriously undermining the organisation of state power. Indeed, the only real political effect of Beckett's art might be to subvert the necessary relationship of the arts and social activism. By depicting the retreat into contemplation as a necessary survival strategy, Beckett's writing tends to promote continuity and encourage docile acceptance: the I-can't-go-on-I'll-go-on of the oppressed, the theocrat's injunction to fail better, the revolution put off until tomorrow, surely tomorrow. What is the contemporary ethical situation for a writer whose work not only traces the dark fissures of a fragmented world but also declares at every turn that the work of reconciliation is futile? And what hope is there in a vision of bankrupt subjectivities withdrawing en masse from history in the face of ecological crisis?

Short Bio:

This paper is co-authored by Richard Pettifer, an Australian theatre director and artist based in Berlin, and Andrew Fuhrmann, Master of Arts by research at the School of Culture and Communications, University of Melbourne, and Melbourne theatre critic.