

**Reseña / Review**

Rose, Arthur. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

**Abstractions of Privilege**

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We are fifty years removed from the explosive year that, within the Western world, changed just about everything. 1968 was a watershed that has come to typify a larger moment in which the way we talked about politics and culture would be put on the table. Mainly young people, and predominantly students among them, in northern Europe and the United States, though the resonance would be felt throughout the world, examined authority and the institutions and aesthetics that buttressed it to ask broadly “Does this work for *me*?” Part of what made this moment so powerful was the vast number of people that responded to that question in the negative. The power of feminism, the reexamining of interracial relations, and class conflict, as we conceive them in the present day, owe a lot to this moment. Universities, themselves, bear as much the imprint of the movements born out of 1968 as anything that preceded it. This was meaningful and important, a necessary

reconciliation with the political and cultural canon's indebtedness to those marginalized, silenced and ignored previously.

One must wonder if 2018, and the years leading up to it, will mark the end of the expanse. The more revealing questions yet: Is this a natural end that has achieved the goals of successful inclusivity or is it the exposure of the flaws embedded within a political impulse whose original thrust has evolved from meaningful representation into the fetishization of marginality? Semantically alone, revolution cannot go on forever. It is either successful, at which point those previously on the outside become the authority and try to thwart revolt; or it stymies. Here we may have some of both. Like the often remarked upon scene in Nellie Campobello's Mexican Revolution novel *Cartucho*, there is a moment when all the prevailing revolutionary generals experience panic when they gaze across the battlefield and realize that the only remaining enemies are themselves. The internal conflict between trying to occupy a space of privilege and to do so under the guise of marginality is bound to combust, as did the rigid privilege that marginalized voices prior to 1968.

Arthur Rose's *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* is a timely study of authors that resonate with both ends of the fifty-year revolution. In a critical world that feels splintered, one that has many eyes peering out over it wondering where the next enemy is, Rose presents an illuminating study of authors who do not fit neatly into narratives of either victimhood or privilege. They were white men. They were from stable economic backgrounds. They thrived within intellectual circles. These factors surely facilitated the vocabulary of genius that has been used to describe their work. Yet, they were from countries considered provincial in their time. They overcame their own hardships. They, in short, embodied both privilege and precariousness.

As Rose argues, this shared experience of what we could call a provincial cosmopolitanism plays out in an aesthetics of cynicism, or "cynical cosmopolitanism," as Rose refers to it. Who is better to represent high cosmopolitan aesthetics for their respective nations than Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee? Yet, how can they take these forms to the letter if they do not represent their local experiences and the margins to which they have, at least, been witness? This insider-outsider status, neither fully at home nor out of place in either, opens a unique perspective to sociopolitical structures, be they highly canonical or revolutionary. For Rose, these authors triangulate a (high) aesthetics of the Global South. They, as he quotes Nick Salvato in saying, "simultaneously accommodate power and preserve an exteriority [to it]" (9). Perhaps the canon that will be born out of the dialects of 1968 and 2018 will

comprise authors that survive the critical logics of both, as Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee do. They are both open to the voices left out by old orders and wary of the rigid logic of new ones. According to Rose, they maintain a desire for sincere voices to be heard from every walk of life and a cynicism for “normalized sincerity” (22). For Rose, this cynicism is a “corrective to normative projects,” and that “cynicism’s deconstruction of privilege is only possible through its accommodation with privilege” (25).

Privileged in their own right, yet sympathetic to victimhood, for Rose, these authors present a collective aesthetics for a sub-section of World Literature. His study is well comprised with thematic notes on the respective authors relationship to literary fame, money, and intellectual drive. It is an audacious, and one might venture out of critical vogue, challenge to link authors from three continents. Bound by the experience of “gateway” privilege and the poetics of peripheral cosmopolitanism, however, Rose’s study presents a convincing argument that these three authors act as a cornerstone for a canonical aesthetics of the Global South, at least one that is honest about notions of “peripheral privilege.”

If we define privilege as being presented with experiences not afforded to others and marginalization as being closed out of experiences, then these authors share aspects of the cultural logics of both 1968 and 2018. It is easy to see why they resonate complexly, beyond the rigid semantics of revolution. Their literature is filled with the paradoxes of success. Every victory means one fewer edifying opponent. Every step toward empowerment takes the author closer to the bounds of authority. Rose describes literary fame for these authors as an “acquiescence” felt comfortably not an achievement celebrated (74).

This argument will not be unfamiliar with scholars who have followed debates surrounding World Literature and economies of prestige. Nonetheless, there is something innovative in the way Rose places his global literary schematics in the shadow of identity politics. By explicitly choosing to focus on three white men at the center of the literary canon, we cross-examine scholars that were both too quick to canonize writers of their demographic previously and perhaps too quick to exclude them today. We reflect on Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee in today’s *parlance*, using race and gender and wonder simultaneously wouldn’t Borges and Beckett, whose very names are icons of complexity, have considered such measures a tad elementary? By the same token, prior to identity politics should the canon have been justifiably filled with so many white men? Most would wager that the answers to both questions

would be “no.” To that end, there is a twenty-first century resonance to Rose’s text. By starting with authors who survive a stern reexamination at the confluence of sociopolitical paradigms, we have here examples “certified,” or “real,” canonical writers.

*Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* is a study that will serve scholars of any of these respective authors looking for a thematic connection across continents. More meaningfully, it is revelatory in its theoretical discussion of revolution at its thresholds. The last connection shared among Borges, Beckett, and Coetzee is the common religious heritage of their home countries. This is also the philosophical yolk of revolutionary politics that seek the higher ground of utopia. All of the writers are careful to ask: Do we want deliverance? It means our destruction.