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REVIEW ESSAY

Beckett and the visual turn: two approaches

Beckett's art of salvage: writing and material imagination, 1932–1987, by Julie Bates, Cambridge University Press, 2017, x + 234 pp., 10 b/w illus., £75 (hbk/e-book), ISBN: 9781316711521

Beckett's thing: painting and theatre, by David Lloyd, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, xii + 252 pp., 13 b/w illus., 49 colour illus., £75 (hbk/e-book), ISBN: 9781474415729

The stockpiles of precious and discarded objects that appear throughout Beckett's work have often prompted laughter, bemusement and despair among audiences. For many theatre-goers, Hamm's toy dog and Winnie's parasol belong to some of the most memorable scenes in twentieth-century drama. Increasingly, scholars of all periods in literary studies have been turning their attention to the ways in which writers interact with physical materials, opening new avenues for discussion. What is the role of visual culture in social life? How concerned is Beckett by this question? *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932–1987* and *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* offer two contrasting responses.

Beckett's Art of Salvage focuses on the distribution of 14 objects across 55 years of Beckett's poetry, prose and drama. These objects are organised thematically according to those that costume characters (bowler hats and old boots); those that 'autograph' the self (greatcoats, ladies' hats, widow's weeds, maternal beds and rocking chairs); those that assist with mobility (bicycles, wheelchairs, crutches and sticks); and those that collect other items (pockets and bags). An original tally of 30, we are told, had been earmarked for consideration, including 'buttons, dressing gowns, glasses and spectacles, handkerchiefs, jars and urns, laces, pieces of string and elastic, trousers, books, keys, knives, lamps, locks, medicines and painkillers, mirrors, mysterious objects, pots, ropes, rubber balls, tins, travelling outfits, trays, umbrellas, parasols and watches' (p. 3). A prefatory concordance detailing the frequency of each object and locating its appearance within the Beckett canon might have helped to explain the rationale behind the final selection. Two larger ambitions underpin Bates's cross-examination of the entire Beckett corpus. The first, as Bates details, is to relocate Beckett within the shattered remains of a pre-war, classical European civilisation. This is essentially *The Last Modernist* thesis with which readers of Anthony Cronin's influential 1996 biography on Beckett will be familiar.¹ The second is to present his work 'in less rarefied and more accessible ways' (p. 1). In this, *Beckett's Art of Salvage* succeeds admirably.

Bates reveals the relatable Beckett as the *enfant terrible* who never stopped playing with props, discarded trash and family heirlooms. Her emphasis on the author's 'material imagination' (as contained in the book's subtitle) is a rebuke to the *Gnostic* imagination that has affected Beckett's reception to date: a shadowy, soundless, bodiless and placeless ascetic to which Beckett's life and work is all too often supposed to adhere. From the very first page, she dismantles the impression of Beckett as 'a purely cerebral' writer who aspired 'to escape all physical and material distractions' (p. 1). In the four chapters that follow entitled 'Relics', 'Heirlooms', 'Props' and 'Treasure', any object that happened to pass Beckett's way is reappraised as a creative opportunity for rendering the phenomenological effects of loss and discomfiture.

Drawing attention to the family pressures that inform Beckett's 'clowning non-conformism' (p. 27), Bates stresses the importance of Beckett's South Dublin middle-class (*not* Ascendancy) Protestant background, the cultural and intellectual insularity of which is most interestingly explored in the opening chapter of the book (pp. 22–47). Here, Bates reminds us that, unlike other émigrés, such as Sergei Dovlatov, homelessness was a state that Beckett consciously adopted for creative purposes. 'On a personal level', she observes, 'Beckett was an emigrant rather than an exile: his return home was not prevented by an antagonistic regime; rather, home had become untenable for him' (p. 24). Through this revised account of the author's family background and its formative influence over his passage into adulthood, Bates charts a Protestant work ethic in reverse. She likens Beckett's entire oeuvre to a giant anti-*bildungsroman* in which the manifest destiny of the individual subject is everywhere repudiated:

Absent in Beckett's writing are social and domestic relations, the progress of the protagonist through the period of youth and up the social ranks to maturity, the establishment of new relationships, or, indeed, any other indication of a prospective future for his characters. Instead, they are all in decline, fondling their memories and the objects that they have managed to save from the annihilation that surely awaits them all. (p. 20)

The point is wittily underscored by the word 'absent' at the beginning of the sentence construction.

The archival work behind *Beckett's Art of Salvage* is wide-ranging and includes new material from interviews. The account of the writer's study at Ussy-sur-Marne and of his kitchen and garage is based on personal discussions that Bates has had with the documentary filmmaker Seán O'Mórdha (pp. 56–7). Many of the astute and entertaining observations about Winnie's choreographed movements in the fourth chapter stem from Bates's readings of the *Happy Days* production notebooks, especially the one used for the 1979 Royal Court production (pp. 167–9, 176). The main strength of the book, as demonstrated by Bates's interpretations of Beckett's work in performance, is to resist ascribing too singular or prescriptive a meaning to the texts themselves. By treating objects as props for improvisation, Bates questions the need for *a priori* hypotheses about the author's writing.

The structure of the book does not always serve its larger purpose well. Some of the headings and subtitles that direct the content are exceptionally brief and can read like descriptive entries. A sub-section within the chapter on 'Relics' entitled 'Old Boots' consists of only one 12-sentence paragraph (pp. 47–8). Three sections follow over the next five pages (pp. 48–52). This is presumably intended for the convenience of Beckett scholars flipping through the book trying to find quick information, but it fractures the sustained investigation into Beckett's 'material imagination'. This is by far the more important aspect of the study, which explores the point of interplay between the brute, inert nature of objects and the countless forms that the writer-artist can bring to them.

As is clear from the title of *Beckett's Thing*, David Lloyd proceeds from a very different conception of visual culture and takes his definitions of 'objects' and 'things' principally from Kantian and Heideggerian epistemology (pp. 122–6). Objects, as in Bates's study, imply a history of possession, appropriation and use. They may be collected and displayed or well worn by the purposes they have served. Things, by contrast, arise when objects refuse to cooperate with us or perform their expected utility. Their functions do not conform to an anticipated need, but frustrate our most basic capacities to consume, exchange and appropriate. Where an object can aid the human subject as a 'possession' or 'tool', the thing refrains from mirroring our personal orientation and stands forth in the world that is its support or ground. The distinction has its most authoritative roots in Heidegger, specifically in the post-war lecture that Heidegger gave at the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in 1950, entitled *Das Ding/The Thing*, which both Bates and Lloyd acknowledge (Bates, p. 10; Lloyd, p. 122).

Bates does not engage, however, with Beckett's rejection of 'representation' as an aesthetic and political category. Lloyd, by contrast, draws extensively on German philosophical aesthetics to engage with Beckett's critique of representation at every turn. In total, Lloyd uses the word 'radical' 19 times to characterise Beckett's aesthetics, and his sensitivity to the jarring and destabilising effects of writers working in marginal or postcolonial contexts will be well known to those familiar with his work on Irish nationalism. His previous studies include *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Nationalism* (1987), *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (1993) and *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (2011).² *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* is Lloyd's first book since 1987 to focus on a single author.

It is solely Beckett the playwright and director that is under discussion here. Chapter one is partly reworked from a journal article that first appeared in *Field Day Review* in 2005. The main purpose of the revised chapter is to argue for Jack Yeats's importance in relation to the formation of Beckett's early plays: specifically *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the only finished play to be written and performed during Yeats's lifetime. The serious account that Lloyd provides of their relationship is a welcome corrective to Anthony Cronin's dismissive comments about their association.³ Two chapters follow, which discuss Beckett's engagements with Bram van Velde (in chapter two) and Avigdor Arikha (in chapter three). Each of these chapters begins with biographical information about these

artists before summarising their stylistic development. Lloyd supplements the latter halves of these chapters and the conclusion with several close readings of Beckett's work for stage and screen. These readings proceed chronologically from *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959) through *Play* (1962–1963), *Film* (1963–1964, the only work that Beckett produced in the medium of cinema), *Come and Go* (1965), *Eh Joe* (1965), *Not I* (1972) and *Footfalls* (1975) to *Catastrophe* (1982) and *What Where* (1983). Together, they demonstrate Lloyd's skill in detailed textual exegesis as well as philosophical commentary, and his judicious use of draft and performance materials. Especially incisive is the paradox that Lloyd identifies between the radical dimensions of Beckett's theatre and its preference for tight, neo-Aristotelian constraints (pp. 75–6). This accords well with Beckett's self-declared pursuit of a 'theatre reduced to its own means', and with his much-documented refutation of symbolic readings of his works.⁴

The book features attractive reproductions of artworks and photography, including 49 coloured illustrations. Examples range from Avigdor Arikha's large oil composition *Noire Basse* (1959) (Figure 3.4) to David Mamet's 2000 production of *Catastrophe* (Figure 4.2). Hundreds more paintings, designs and drawings have been consulted at the National Gallery of Ireland, the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Cabinet d'art graphique at the Centre Pompidou, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Marlborough Gallery in London. Despite this apparent wealth of archival detail, Lloyd is alive to the ways in which often-cited lines of influence do not define Beckett or his writing. Rather than search for visual prompts for a scenario, Lloyd is concerned with the underlying formal and aesthetic processes that Beckett borrowed from modern art. Beckett's 'learning', Lloyd notes, from contemporary artists 'is never direct, but involves a difficult work of intergeneric translation and a concomitant lag between what he sees in painting and what he is able to put into practice in another medium, whether stage, television or film' (p. 16).

A more serious question arises at the methodological level. How should scholars engage with an 'art criticism' that relishes in vain and erratic pronouncements? Enthusiasm rather than accuracy appears to have motivated many of Beckett's 'observations' about painting, which are typically self-serving. Despite his decision to revert to French to write *sans style*, Beckett's ego is still very much on display in his writings about art. Lloyd deals commendably with these and other difficulties. Indeed, chapter two is at its most effective when contextualising and re-historicising what the French art critic and post-war editor of *transition* calls Beckett's 'violently extreme and personal point of view' (pp. 103–9). Lloyd's interpretation of Beckett's exchanges with Georges Duthuit – by far his most important correspondent of the 1940s and 1950s – will be of great interest to Beckett scholars. It is complemented by a forceful critique of the 'by turns inane and disturbing ... rhetoric of reconciliation' which, in the wake of the destructive triumph of Nazi ideology, Beckett is seen to have been intellectually and ethically judicious to dismiss (p. 109).

Where Bates brings a humanist interpretation to bear on Beckett's creative trajectory, *Beckett's Thing* is explicitly post-humanist in focus and remains wary of

any attempts to invoke an irrepressible core of consolatory humanity. The front cover of the book is taken from an untitled oil composition painted in the Parisian commune of Montrouge by Bram van Velde in 1947, which is also reproduced as part of the argument in chapter two (Figure 2.17). Coloured lozenges and ovals that were once the fruits of the artist's earlier still-life paintings have here become lenses protruding from the ends of scope-like stalks. Lloyd connects this painting's dismantling of the organ of sight to Beckett's lifelong preoccupation with the subject's incomplete visual and representational field, especially after the trauma of the Second World War, when its possessive and capturing drives had failed.

The main drawback of Lloyd's focus on modern art is that it leads him to assign a comparatively minor place to the Old Masters. Only 3 of the 50 illustrations included here are *not* painted by contemporaries of Beckett: those being Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* (c.1599), *Ecce Homo* (1605) and *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (c.1608–9). And yet signs of the 'Caravaggesque' proliferate throughout *Beckett's Thing*, particularly in chapter three, where Lloyd shows how foreshortened perspectives, violent contrasts of lighting (tenebrism), close physical observation and restricted movements freeze the action on stage into moments of a significant tableau. Lloyd's account of Beckett's 'destruction of theatre' in the conclusion is intended to echo Poussin's legendary dismissal of his nemesis as an artistic Antichrist (Lloyd, p. 233).⁵ Lloyd also plays on the idea of Beckett as Caravaggio's successor by relocating Beckett's theatre, via Schiller, as the obliteration of a dramatic tradition that viewed the stage as a moral institution (pp. 233–5). That legacy is especially interesting and might have prompted further discussion. Beckett used to claim, after all, that he was born on Good Friday, 1906: the day of the Saviour's Crucifixion.

Beckett's Art of Salvage and *Beckett's Thing* make fruitful use of comparative frameworks to consider the author's place within pre- and post-war European intellectual and cultural tradition. However, two very different Becketts emerge from these single author studies: the conservationist and the demolitionist. If the books diverge in the Becketts they portray between the one steeped in family history and the other in German philosophical aesthetics, it is because there is room enough for both Becketts within the field of Beckett Studies.


Notes

1. See Anthony Cronin's, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1996).
2. David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
3. See Cronin, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 140.
4. Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 03/01/1951, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume II, 1941–56*, George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 218.

5. As Lloyd notes, the celebrated dictum that Caravaggio ‘came into the world to destroy painting’ was first attributed by André Félibien to Poussin after they met in Rome between 1647 and 1649 (p. 183). Lloyd has acknowledged his debt to Louis Marin’s ground-breaking study on Poussin and Caravaggio, *To Destroy Painting*, translated by Mette Hjort (first published 1977; Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994), in an interview with Rhys Tranter. See <https://rhystranter.com/2017/03/28/samuel-beckett-and-painting/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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