REVIEWS

"ALL VERY TRICKY TECHNICALLY": *SAMUEL BECKETT AND TECHNOLOGY*

The bare settings and few props in his work may make a title like *Samuel Beckett and Technology* seem oxymoronic to some ears. The only mechanism in *Waiting for Godot* is a pocket watch that is soon misplaced; Molloy relishes a bicycle that is eventually discarded, the pistol in *Happy Days* is never wielded; a car collides with Belacqua's fiancée in *More Pricks than Kicks*; an alarm clock is tested in *Endgame*; a clown hunches over a cassette recording of Beethoven in *Ghost Trio*. Yet his 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape* is one of the earliest dramas turning on a piece of equipment, and by that time Beckett had already written his first of five radio plays, *All That Fall*, about a delayed commuter train, and would soon write the movie *Film* before embarking on television production with *Eh Joe*.

The very rarity of machinery magnifies their effect, for they tend not simply to furnish an element to a scenario but to frame and impel the work. There is scarcely a device in *Film* or *Eh Joe*, but in the former a camera lens pursues Buster Keaton and in the latter a television lens inches towards Jack MacGowran. *Samuel Beckett and Technology* demonstrates that Beckett, who equated technology neither with progress nor regress, was fascinated by the almost wilful autonomy and uncanny expressiveness of technology, as well as by the biomechanical character of the self. In their introduction to this superb collection of original critical essays, co-editors Galina Kiryushina, Einat Adar, and Mark Nixon write: "While Beckett's writing, especially of the earlier period, often disturbs and problematizes the purported efficacy of modern technology that was increasingly infiltrating quotidian life, the latter part of the century saw him actively and extensively engaging with technologies both established and emerging, at times 'Up to the neck in technical muck.'" *E fango è la tecnica*. But also fertile. In the technical affordances of a given artistic medium Beckett recognized not inert instruments but singular agents determining an action. Thus the flies above the castaway in *Act without Words I* become lively automatons, as do the low stage lights in *Play*, the electrical current in *Rough for Theatre II*, the autonomous door of *Ghost Trio* and rocker of *Rockaby*.

In an informative essay concerning Beckett's neglected work in French television, Kiryushina underscores Beckett's initial disparagement of the medium. She quotes from a 1961 letter lamenting the BBC's production of *Waiting for Godot*: "that cured me – of my bright idea. Hilton Edwards – directing Irish TV drama wrote asking for a script. It's a medium for fleas." He was dissatisfied with *Tous ceux qui tombent*, Michel Mitrani's 1963 adaptation for Radiodiffusion-Télévision Français of *All That Fall*. Despite his disapproval of Mitrani's liberties, Beckett assisted him in the 1966 broadcast of *Dis Joe*, fresh from directing the BBC *Eh Joe* and the Süddeutscher Rundfunk *He Joe*. Illuminating this little documented production, Kiryushina notes how closely Beckett involved himself in a version that nevertheless "diverged greatly from both the BBC and the SDR versions." He had clearly become absorbed in a medium in which he would long continue to work.

Though it sometimes wreaked havoc on the intentions of a technical neophyte, the apparatus of radio, television, and film could also introduce fresh possibilities and increase Beckett's authorial control, as notes Clas Zilliacus, a pioneering authority on his broadcasting work. In his moving memoir of collaborating on the 1985 Süddeutscher Rundfunk adaptation of *What Where* (*Was Wo*), Walter Asmus describes Beckett's abandonment of technically impractical effects and his meticulous orchestration of the teleplay's barren mis-en-scène. Video allowed every last nuance to be weighed and varied to his exacting standard. "With his great musical sensitivity," Asmus documents, "Beckett reacts to the smallest irregularity. The better the process succeeds, the greater the desire for perfection. The image editor masters the fades like a musical instrument."

The limitations of technology could be equally portals of discovery. Pim Verhulst contends that weak and intermittent BBC signals not only frustrated Beckett's radio reception in Paris but also inflected the composition of *Comment c'est*. He quotes from Beckett's translation, *How It Is*: "ill-said ill-heard ill-recaptured ill-murmured." Listening now rivals speaking in his work. From poorly heard broadcasts comes the theme of poorly heard narration, which he would develop in the gloriously ill-recaptured late stories "Mal vu mal dit," "Company" and "Worstward Ho." Lucy Jeffery also finds in radio static not only the inhibition of a message but also its exhibition: "The very fact that radio, with its white noise and electromagnetic interference, can defamiliarize and obscure language in order to convey how the mind struggles to imagine or remember an image or a person would have appealed to Beckett." She focuses particularly astutely on the technical imperfections that obscure sounds in *Words and Music*. She writes that "Beckett's work for radio makes use of this sensory deprivation as a tool to reinforce his inherently ambiguous narratives and ephemeral characters."

Dúnlaith Bird too observes in Beckett the productive effects of failure. The tape recorder Krapp cannot altogether control in *Krapp's Last Tape* and the short-circuiting lamp in *Rough for Theatre II* convey the uncanniness of a technology that seems to talk back to the characters and intervene in the action. Bird compares *Rough for Theatre II* to a modern mystery play; here two clerks compile accounts on the value of a life hanging in the balance. "Rather than religious illumination the play offers only doubt and uncertainty from a different source of light," she writes. Feargal Whelan's illuminating socio-historical analysis of the suburban Dublin railway line that inspired *All That Fall* and *That Time* similarly emphasises not the ease and efficiency of modern infrastructure but its limitations, malfunction, and obsolescence. By contrast with the Futurist celebration of the railway, in Beckett the train "is a closed system of termini (a favourite term) rather than starting points, and of slowness rather than speed, representing the failure to fulfil a set timetable rather than to properly service its boundaries."

Yet the stalling, decrepit world of *All That Fall* is transmitted in a vital emerging electronic medium, and it is characteristic of Beckett to depict technology as vexatious while finding incentive in it. "I'm quite lost in TV technicalities," Beckett wrote in 1981 to his American director Alan Schneider while filming the German adaptation of *Quad* at Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart, "& shall never write again for that medium." The production however found its way and with its success he went on not only to write again for the medium but to direct the productions. So, though Bird, for instance, underscores Krapp's technical difficulties with the tape recorder, that machine is of course only a stage prop while the real reel-to-reel offstage is being manipulated seamlessly into the stage illusion. Man and machine are merging not only as Krapp operates the tape recorder but as the sound technician operates the recording.

That convergence of man and machine is the subject of Céline Thobois's insightful essay on Beckett's familiarity with Julien Offray de La Metttrie's eighteenth-century mechanistic tract *L'Homme-Machine*. Taking notes in the 1930s from Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* on La Mettrie, Beckett encapsulated his doctrine in a sentence: "Cartesian zoological mechanism valid also for humans." Thobois shows that, analogously to La Mettrie's proto-neurophysiology, *Krapp's Last Tape* represents "the human as an autopoietic machine." Ruben Borg considers what Beckett called "the purely buccal phenomenon" of *Not I* as a prosthetic mouthpiece, an autopoietic machine that however "never ceases to be flesh." He contrasts this disassembled body with that of Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*: "Beckett's machine aesthetic is different: not nearly so exuberant about the possibilities of merging the mechanical and the organic, not so obviously enamoured with the association of technology and modernity."

The ceaseless clockwork calibration of the six hooded players in *Quad* reflects this tempered conception of human mechanization, for the players are individuated by their audibly distinctive tread and by their determined deviation from the centre of the square. Naoya Mori speculates that Beckett's frustration during the Stuttgart production stemmed from difficulties trying to dramatize "the metaphysics of the irrational" that he derived from Pythagoras, Nicolas Cusanus, Gottfried Leibniz, Arnold Geulincx, and Immanuel Kant. Mori proposes that this aporia is staged in the teleplay as the "danger zone" that the cyborgian contemplatives scrupulously avoid.

Shot with but one exception in black and white on large soundstages, sparingly edited without cross-cuts, and conveying the illusion of live transmission, the teleplays conjure some of the conditions of early television, often evoking the supernatural character once ascribed to the emerging medium. Jonathan Bignell proposes that Beckett's innovations in television paradoxically rest on such apparent anachronism: it is "a critical and reflexive strategy about remembering how media work, which matches the plays' thematic concerns with memory, repetition and the slow pacing of action in screen time." Asmus's memoir of the Stuttgart production of *Was Wo* suggests more simply a visceral impatience with superfluous technical affordances and a passion for economy that such affordances can satisfy but also threaten. While working on light levels in the studio control room, Asmus recalls, Beckett disparages the machinery: "All the gadgets." He shrugs off a technician's caution that the dim screen would scarcely be visible to television viewers: "It's we who want to see it – not them." The televisual image is his single interest; transmission is not only a secondary consideration but a potential obstacle to fidelity to the image. "It's not for them, it's for us to be satisfied," he insists.

If this seems a naïve attitude to broadcasting, Michael D'Arcy's essay nimbly places naiveté at the forefront of Beckett's aesthetic. He relates Beckett's use of technology in *Krapp's Last Tape* to a perceived modernist recovery of what in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno call epic naiveté. Drawing on Friedrich Schiller's celebrated essay and Friedrich Nietzsche's adaptation of its distinction between naïve and sentimental art, D'Arcy argues that naiveté offers Beckett "a tenuous mode of aesthetic autonomy that both integrates and resists a particular kind of rationality that has been seen as ascendant in this period." Krapp becomes a kind of naïve and sentimental *artiste manqué* whose attempt to subdue rationally the tumult of his retrospect is jinxed by the recording technology. His memories rendered discontinuous by the tape recordings, Krapp is split between a decaying human physiology and an imperfect information

retrieval technology that organizes but also scrambles and undermines his pretense to an identity.

An equally adroit philosophical reading is offered by Shane Weller, who contends with the lugubrious terminology of Martin Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology." Heidegger understands modern technology ontologically as a false mode of "enframing" (*Gestell*); rather than "revealing" (*entbergen*) the Being (*Sein*) of beings, as *techne* properly does, technological enframing is an obstacle to truth that risks demoting Being to a "standing reserve" (*Bestand*) of instrumental applications. Heidegger contrasts this corrupting *techne* with the revelatory powers of *poiesis* (*Dichtung*). When, not 150 kilometers from Heidegger's Black Forest retreat, Beckett disdains in Stuttgart the *Gestell* of the television studio as "gadgets," he certainly treats machinery as some kind of impediment to the just image. Yet is there any such conflict between his *poiesis* and the *techne* of broadcasting? Weller links Heidegger's doctrine to the essay "The Exhausted," where Gilles Deleuze claims that Beckett's screen works, largely free of language, exhaust possibility itself. By contrast, scrutiny of the genetic materials of *Play* and *Film* show Olga Beloborodova that Beckett compensated for increased concentration on images by augmenting textual elucidations, many of them retained in the printed versions of these works. Her close and convincing genetic analysis reveals that in his "technological turn" Beckett comes to depend not on exhaustion of language but its displacement onto increasingly detailed printed instructions.

Weller joins those contributors who stress the failure of technologies in Beckett, noting, for instance, how Hamm jettisons the stage props at the end of *Endgame*. However, none of these tools are exhausted, much less defective, rather they all too ably perpetuate an existence that, with the imminent departure of his menial Clov, Hamm feels ready to terminate. Heidegger acknowledges that *poiesis* is a species of *techne*, not its contrary, and Weller writes that "one has to recognize that both modern art and modern technology belong to *techne* in this broader sense of modes of disclosure." This was evident to the Ancient Greeks, who preferred the artisanal term *techne*, which designates a shaping skill, to the more generic "making" of *poiesis*. They valued the *deus ex machina* and other stage machinery of the theatre, as they valued the *techne* of the poet's lyre and the storage-retrieval system of stylus, ink, and papyrus scrolls. Beckett depends on the successors of these innovations to perpetuate his own *techne* for stage, screen, and page. Most machinery in Beckett in fact functions smoothly, not least the machinery enframing the entire stage or screen entity. In *Act without Words II*, surprisingly overlooked by the book's contributors, a *diabolos ex machina* remorselessly executes its implacable mechanical will to exhaust a castaway Tantalus.

Insistence on malfunction risks reinforcing a reactionary stereotype of Beckett as hostile to technology, a misunderstanding countered by the book's captivating rare photos of Beckett intently collaborating on *He Joe* at Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1966: crouched over the console to listen to the rewind, bent over a monitor to scrutinize a shot and, on the book's breathtaking cover (itself worth the price of this handsomely designed book), looming over the huddle of technicians, machines, and actor preparing a take. It is not, after all, the machinery of the modern railway that postpones the train in *All That Fall* but, as in Buster Keaton's *The General*, good old human mischief. And like Keaton before him, Beckett comes out of the theatre avid to harness the special properties of screen arts. Kiryushina, Adar, and Nixon rightly stress in their introduction that "Beckett's process of creation searches for the fault lines, for the vulnerabilities and failings of technology as a spur to discovery through writing." And writing, they do not let us forget, is another technology. Thomas Thoelin glosses the allusion to the myth of Prometheus in the novel *The Unnamable* to argue that a "techno-logic" compels the writing to "go on" inventing "where, logically speaking, the writer cannot."

Technology shapes not only creation but also reception, and Dirk Van Hulle's essay elucidates the technology and techniques of the increasingly digitalized Beckett archive. Co-Director of the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, he contests the chimerical distinction between poetics and hermeneutics, as between empirical research and theory more generally, demonstrating that the Beckett archive (containing a wealth of such materials as early and cancelled drafts, *faux départs*, translations, adaptations, revisions, notebooks, letters, marginalia, doodles, etc.) is not a positivist refuge from interpretation but an atelier generating interpretation. Beckett's work especially rewards genetic criticism, Van Hulle shows, not only because he left a substantial archive but because of the writer's dedication to process over result. His "art of erosion" leaves the revealing pentimento of a process that every vital encounter with the work perpetuates.

Those encounters are increasingly occurring online, in open-source models, virtual reality adaptations, and with the use of artificial intelligence. In a codicil to the volume, Nicholas Johnson heralds Beckett's "viral" online dissemination as a salutary assault on authorial control. As a performance theorist wary of the reverence for authorship, Johnson promotes a dubious evolutionary paradigm: "it follows *the natural order* [his italics] that Beckett's ideas are now self-reproducing, invading new cells, rewriting the codes, cleverly adapting to conditions, to survive." "It's a disease," Beckett by contrast despaired in a letter about the popularity of *Waiting for Godot*, suggesting a moratorium on its performance.

The *techne* that went into the production of *Samuel Beckett and Technology* is equal to the subject, as the co-editors and Edinburgh University Press have created

an exceptional volume. The interest, range, and depth of the impeccably edited chapters makes the book something of a primer in late modernist technology studies, while the reproductions of Wilhelm Pabst's Süddeutscher Rundfunk photographs make up a kind of accompanying visual essay on Beckett's cautiously engrossed engagement with technology. "All very tricky technically," he wrote in eager anticipation of that production, and *Samuel Beckett and Technology* shows how much his art gained by the courage to plunge into the technicalities.

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