Poetry’s Beckett

Samuel Beckett’s Poetry, ed. James Brophy and William Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xiii + 271pp. £75, hardback. ISBN: 978-1009222549.

I

Genre, as a taxonomic border, is often used to interpret and render legible a work of literary or artistic production. In the process, genre inaugurates a way of reading, a formal code of receiving and interacting with literary works. Poetry is one such code that affords readers a literary context in which to trace, and maybe even circumscribe, a poem’s semantic and formal liberties. In Beckett’s case, such a context has had to be invented in recent years, both because of the relative scholarly ignorance of Beckett’s poetry and the scant use of poetic genres as a way of reading Beckett’s literary corpus. It is this absence that makes the arrival of the collection, *Samuel Beckett’s Poetry*, a crucial landmark. Masterfully edited by James Brophy and William Davies, it is a substantial and enduring contribution to an emerging field of study that has still not had a complete monograph since the publication of Lawrence Harvey’s *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (1970), but has since generated several important articles, comparative studies, a definitive collection of poems, and an exhaustive analysis of the ‘Comment dire’ manuscript (Van Hulle, 2011). In many ways, Brophy and Davies’s collection unifies these heterogenous undercurrents, presenting a compelling and timely argument for Beckett’s poetry not to be viewed as a minor aspect of a major author’s work. Instead, the volume’s contributors collectively argue for the necessity to see Beckett’s poetry as a generic encounter that makes possible a new reading of his oeuvre, while at the same time offering a fresh perspective on the history of twentieth-century poetry.

In their introduction to the collection, Brophy and Davies note how ‘from start to end, Beckett’s poetry remained an odd endeavour’ (1). This odd endeavour, full of lyric disobedience, bilingual intrigue, missing poems, and genetic criticism, is what the collection addresses. The poetic endeavour, however, is also tied intimately to the fashioning and identification of the author-figure, something Brophy and Davies map at the outset by citing the June 1930 issue of *transition*, in which Beckett is introduced as ‘Samuel Beckett, an Irish poet and essayist’, and then *The European Caravan* (1931) where he becomes ‘the most interesting of the younger Irish writers’ who ‘has adapted the Joyce method to his poetry with original results’ (2). The lyric impulse attributed to him in 1931, and particularly to his work as a poet, is something that resurfaces time and again in readings of Beckett’s prose. The most famous instances are Marjorie Perloff’s invocation of the concept of ‘poeticity’ and ‘text-sounding’ (2021) in Beckett’s prose – with a focus on his experimental use of language and sound – and Badiou’s references to a latent poeticity in Beckett’s prose and late drama (2003). Both of these readings assume a poetic impulse in Beckett’s works in different genres without turning to or verifying this impulse with Beckett’s own poetry. Brophy and Davies, too, reference this impulse by pointing out how *Watt* breaks into poetry, but for them this testifies less to the submergence of poetry in prose than to a continued and intermedial engagement with poetic form: ‘the eighth addendum [in *Watt*], a quatrain beginning ‘Bid us sigh on from day to day’, similarly suggests that verse remained in and on Beckett’s mind while writing his novel’ (2). In a gesture not dissimilar from Perloff’s, the introduction extends this impulse to Beckett’s late works, arguing that the textual experience of these prose works relies, among other things, on their lyricism: ‘In the experimental prose Beckett began writing in the early 1960s with works like “All Strange Away” (1964), “Ping” (1966)

and “Lessness” (1970), the poetic impulse toward lyricism morphs into an attention to language, to its sound and rhythm, that is fundamentally poetic in nature’ (3).

Mark Byron’s essay in the collection, ‘Whole Fragments: Beckett and Modernist Poetics’, offers a grounded and revisionary history of this lyricism, or lyric impulse, in Beckett’s poetry. Byron turns his attention to the sub-genres of troubadour poetic forms and argues how Beckett’s early poems do not merely adopt these generic conventions but rather rework them and, in the process, bring to the fore tensions and contradictions that are foundational to these generic formations. Byron provides a crisp summary of the Occitan troubadour forms that play an all-important role in Beckett’s development as a poet:

The enueg (from the Latin inodium or ‘vexation’) is a poetic genre used to register complaint against insults or social irritants. The alba is a notably dramatic poetic genre, where two adulterous lovers are warned by a watchman of the approaching dawn (and potentially a jealous husband). Finally, the serena is a lover’s song expressing impatience for the evening and the presumed consummation of his desire. (42)

John Pilling, in his chapter, ‘Romance under Strain in “Cascando”’, asserts something similar about Beckett’s 1936 poem that is as much a meditation on love poetry as it is a love poem itself. Beckett’s reference to the poem in a letter to Thomas MacGreevy as ‘the last echo of feeling’ highlights for Pilling the conflict between genuine emotion and artistic manipulation. ‘Cascando’, for him, reveals the ‘beautiful lie’ of love poetry, where genuine feelings are transformed into crafted artifice (150). Beckett submits to the lie, while also revealing the dichotomous structure from which the poem emerges.

One way to understand Beckett’s relationship to poetic modernism, Byron contends, is through studying how he embraces and reworks older lyric forms. Beckett transforms these lyric forms from the outset in his early collection *Echo’s Bones* (1935). Byron states that ‘“Alba” establishes itself as the antithesis of its genre in its first line: “before morning you shall leave”’. In Beckett’s ‘Alba’, the speaker’s lover is depicted as absent, evoking anticipation and desire rather than the conventional themes of regret over morning’s arrival and the inevitable departure and anxiety over the jealous husband’s approach (44). For Byron, this lyrical affinity and yet also revisionism ties Beckett to other high modernists, especially Ezra Pound, who had previously dedicated substantial effort to translating and critically assessing Provençal poetry and incorporating its forms, imagery, and rhetoric into his own poetic style.

In his essay ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ (1934), Beckett offered a critical analysis of Irish poetry of the period, expressing his dissatisfaction with the prevailing themes and stylistic choices, including the sentimentality and nationalism of the older poets, while highlighting and valorising the genuine artistic innovation and depth of Ireland’s younger poets. The poets Beckett singled out included Brian Coffey, Thomas MacGreevy, and Denis Devlin, praising them for how they interrupt and revise lyric conventions, something Beckett at the time was attempting in his own verse. In a chapter entitled ‘Samuel Beckett and His Irish Contemporaries’, Gerald Dawe, however, offers a crucial addendum to this assertion, arguing that Beckett’s ‘rhetorical claim on behalf of his friends’ only reveals how ‘badly wrong he got it all’. Dawe claims that ‘judging by whatever literary yardstick one chooses, in the immediate decade after his leaving Dublin in 1937, Irish poetry continued to follow some of the tried and tested routes back to the Celtic Twilight with diminishing success’ (82). Dawe’s claim reveals the limitations of the lyric revisionism Beckett envisioned and perhaps prescribed for Irish poetry. At the same time, it highlights an important lineage for poets like Ethna MacCarthy, and later, Patrick Kavanagh, who emerged from the very context Beckett discusses and continued to contribute to and to take Irish modernism into new directions.

II

As much Beckett's early poetry is a story of continuities and affinities, it is also a salient staging of difference. In the late 1930s, this difference is inscribed into the poems through Beckett's bilingualism: the linguistic plurality in the composition of the poems informs the semantic and ontological difference at the heart of Beckett's literary imagination more broadly. In the chapter entitled, 'Gender, Pronoun and Subject in "Poèmes 1937–1939"', Daniel Katz explores the poetic evolution that followed Beckett's departure from Ireland. He reads Beckett's 'Poèmes 1937–39' as an 'evolutionary step', crucial for Beckett's development of 'a new awareness of the lyrical potentialities of the French language', which serves as an important stepping-stone on Beckett's path to becoming a French novelist and playwright' (103). However, beyond the cross-linguistic difference and its generative impact on Beckett's writing, Katz argues that the 'Poèmes' also present the earliest 'instance of what would become one of Beckett's most enduring questions, to wit, that of the relationship between difference and sameness' (101). This dichotomous structure has among other things a distinctly gendered component mainly due to separate gender agreements in the two languages, which according to Katz 'allow different things to be elided, and are forced to mark, or unable to mark, different differences' in the French and English versions of the poems (106). Katz points to several noteworthy effects of this structure, exemplified in the very first sequence of 'Poèmes 1937–39': 'with each the absence of love is different / with each the absence of love is the same' (91).

Pascale Sardin traces this indelible difference in Beckett's self-translated poems, such as 'Là' and 'Dieppe' from 1948, where the French and English versions function as 'individual, self-contained entities' (170). In her chapter, 'Samuel Beckett's Self-Translated Poems', Sardin argues that the poems are 'different and the same', with poetic tensions being re-created in each language rather than merely reproduced in the target text. The tension Sardin refers to here, present in its singular form in both the English and French versions of 'Là' and 'Dieppe', suggests a difference that precedes the linguistic variations. This internal dichotomy could refer to several structural elements of the poem, or to language in general, but in Beckett's post-war poetry, it is put into effect in the distinction between sound and sense. In 'Beckett's Sound Sense', Will Davies analyses the poem 'Saint Lô' by identifying four distinct phases of sound in its composition. He notes,

Four sound phases track through the poem: the vowel sounds of the axiomatic "Vire will wind"; the second line's soft "b" of "unborn", "bright" and "tremble"; the third's "d" in "old mind" (the old mind calling back to the "wind" and the "shadows" of the first line); and the staccato "forsaken", "sink", "havoc" which close the poem (213)

Davies emphasises the poem's auditory construction, highlighting how its 'formal and metrical intelligence' align with or instead skew the poem's thematic explorations of the wind's movement. Davies also notes the progression from vowels to harsher consonants, marking a shift 'from stillness to sharpness' and, therefore, not towards peace but discord in the post-war landscape. This crescendo, according to Davies, creates a 'ghost poetry', which mourns the silenced voices of the war's casualties (213). This attention to sound and metrical elements in Davies's chapter, as well as in many of the volume's other chapters, demonstrates how a new critical context for reading Beckett's poetry can be advanced, one that does not remain subservient to the thematic or formal elements of Beckett's prose but that reorients itself based on the economies of poetic form, its metrical and prosodic specificities.

III

There is, however, another economy at play in Beckett's poetry: the economy of the page. Its material facets, its tyranny, its representational logic, and, most importantly for poetry, its capacity to stage absence within its four corners. The distinction between sound and sense,

after all, is still situated on the page, which is where language attains or resigns to its materiality. This aspect of language as a 'thing', Dirk Van Hulle points out, becomes increasingly important in Beckett's late verse, both in the poems themselves and for readers who receive the poems *as* things, as 'finished' artefacts. In his chapter, 'The Matter of Absence: The Manuscripts of Beckett's Late Poems', Van Hulle takes the case of 'hors crâne', which was composed on 1 January 1974, 'on the back of torn Craven 'A' cigarette packets and auctioned as a lot at Sotheby's in London on 13 July 2006'. He argues that the poem indicates 'a deliberate attempt to downplay the *sérieux* of poetry and emphasise the connection with everyday objects' (224). Van Hulle posits that the scraps on which Beckett's poems are inscribed act as objects with agency that are as intimately bound to the poem and its overall meaning as they are to the words that constitute it. Invoking Bill Brown's thing theory, Van Hulle underscores Beckett's 'genuine appreciation of the "scrappiness" of scraps, an appreciation of what they are, as objects with a value of their own, objects that become "things" when they lose their function' (224–5). Once the object onto which Beckett's poem 'hors crâne' is composed loses its original use value, it is transformed into something new, an artefact. By drawing attention to this material transformation, Van Hulle directs us to another analogous transformation in poetic form itself: in 'hors crâne', the everyday language of communication overcomes its functional trappings and transforms into the language of poetry.

Mark Nixon's speculative chapter, 'The Missing Poème: Beckett's fêtes galantes', carefully plots the enigma around one of the Beckett's missing poems in the 'Poèmes 38–39' sequence, which when published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946, was numbered to thirteen but only contained twelve poems. Nixon notes how it might be tempting to consider 'Match Nul' – a poem only discovered in 2013 by the poet Peter Manson at the Getty Archives in Los Angeles – as the missing poem in Beckett's sequence, but Nixon argues that the poem's tone and mood do not cohere with the twelve published poems, but rather disrupt 'an otherwise reasonably coherent collection'. Nixon's investigation does not identify or disclose the missing poem, but it ensures that the reader will not be able to return to 'Poèmes 38–39' without being haunted, however marginally, by what the sequence seemingly lacks, its missing poem 'XI'.

Adam Piette's contribution, 'Beckett's Poetry and the Radical Absence of the (War) Dead', points us towards another spectre that haunts Beckett's poetry. Reading Beckett's post-war poems such as 'Saint Lô' and *mirlitonnades*, Piette contends that the poems are haunted by the war dead, who instead of being explicitly memorialised are radically absent in the poems. He connects this gesture to 'the form and logic of annihilation associated with the post-traumatic experiencing of destruction', in which 'memory and imagination withdraw to a time beyond the concrete world' (202). Piette also advances a new way of reading the transition between Beckett's early and late poetics. Often understood as simply a transition from erudite verbosity to minimalism, Piette contends that Beckett's poetry also moves 'from its surrealist roots to its radical post-war phenomenology of spectral encounter'. This shift aligns Beckett more closely with Mallarmé, whom he translated early in his career, particularly drawing parallels with Igitur. Piette argues that 'Igitur's pure time, heavy with the weight of the past, in suspense before any future can occur', reflects the same suspension that characterises the landscapes of Beckett's late poems (202).

While death or the dead are transposed negatively in the atemporality of Beckett's late poems, what remains on the surface, plainly apparent, is the residue of life or living: not life itself, but what remains after life is stripped of its vitalism. Edward Lee-Six's chapter, 'Romanticism and Beckett's Poetry', focuses on Beckett's complex engagement with Romanticism through his concern with the residual. This reveals yet another underexplored literary and specifically poetic affinity in Beckett's work, his relationship with British and

German Romanticism and the ways in which they shaped his use of lyric forms, personal pronouns, and the natural landscapes in his poems. Lee-Six makes the innovative claim that in Beckett's poetry Romantic regret is turned into residua. Eschewing the simplistic formula that Beckett remodels Romantic exuberance with 'lessness' as other readers of Beckett's Romanticism have done, Lee-Six analyses the poem 'Dieppe', in which, he argues, the term 'of old' is invoked not nostalgically but as a residue, 'indicating the act of imagining itself, rather than evoking a lost golden age' (135, 134). For Lee-Six, the residua are what sets Beckett aside from the dominant mood of regret and nostalgia in Romanticism. While Romantic poets such as Wordsworth mourn the subject's loss of unity with nature and with the world, Beckett's poetry is attentive to what is left behind after this unity has been exhausted. However, the residua are not substance or leftover matter but a reflexive moment that turns to imagination itself as a source and site of residue. Lee-Six, reads this reflexivity as a lesson Beckett learns from Romanticism and not just a 'lessened' version of Romanticism. James Brophy's 'Beckett Growing Gnomic: The Poems of 1934' provides a detailed and very useful genealogy for this 'lessness' in Beckett's early poetry by drawing attention to 'gnome' as a poetic form or practice. Brophy analyses poems like 'Gnome', 'Da Tagte Es', and 'Up he went', written in 'tightly rhymed quatrains', for how they help Beckett to move towards a pared-down style, emphasising 'polished, rhythmically conspicuous' writing that delves into the 'idiomatic stratum of our language' (86). Although Brophy and Lee-Six read Beckett's poems from different periods and unveil different connotations of 'lessness', their readings are unified in the crucial acknowledgement that Beckett faces 'epistemic humility and aesthetic crisis' during the 1930s and that the gnomic and the residua are forms that in different ways address the 'subject/object problem' (88). Through their close discussion of poetic form, both Lee-Six and Brophy reorient a problematic germane to Beckett studies – what remains and what is reduced – and bring attention to the singular response of Beckett's poetry to the tyrannies of language.

IV

The collection is careful in reminding us that there are also futures of Beckett's poetry outside his own writing – not merely the suspended sense of future within the poems, but the futures that his work has predicted or made possible for other poets. Hannah Simpson's chapter, 'Samuel Beckett's Legacy in Northern Irish Poetry' examines how poets Padraic Fiacc and Leontia Flynn, and before them Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon, engage with Beckett as a forbear of Irish writing. Simpson notes that 'If Mahon and Muldoon anxiously probe their claim to allegiance with Beckett's legacy, Padraic Fiacc and Leontia Flynn reckon more confidently with the pressures of that Beckettian legacy on their own poetic practice and cultural identity' (260). While Fiacc sees Beckett's presence as authoritative and even oppressive, Flynn's irreverent engagement with this legacy creates a generative margin of difference in her work. Beckett's 'northern sons (and daughters)', as Simpson puts it, adapting lines from Howard Wright's 'Beckett in Belfast' (2010), give him a new afterlife through their complex invocations, reworking and asserting their own place in this genealogy and in contemporary poetry. The hope generated through Simpson's essay but also through the arrival of a collection like *Samuel Beckett's Poetry* is that as much as one can now extend the work of reading and attending to Beckett's poetry as a standalone literary artefact, one can also go further and trace a Beckettian impulse in twentieth-century poetry more widely, an impulse that reverberates with Beckett's anti-lyrical and anti-expressive gestures. Such a reading is tasked with finding poetry's Beckettian impulse, or simply poetry's Beckett.

WORKS CITED

Badiou, Alain (2003), *Beckett: The Scene of the Unseen*, trans. David Webb, Manchester: Clinamen Press.

Beckett, Samuel (2012), *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling, New York: Grove Press.

Perloff, Marjorie (2021), ‘The Trembling of the Veil: Poeticity in Beckett’s “Text-Soundings”’, *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 179–203.

Van Hulle, Dirk (2011), *The Making of Samuel Beckett's* Stirrings Still / Soubresauts *and* Comment Dire / What is the Word, Brussels: University of Antwerp Press.