***Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze*. Llewellyn Brown. Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2019. Pp. 625 (cloth).**

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The problem of the gaze is intrinsic to the arts of painting, cinema, theatre, and photography. While the painted word of a literary text does not have the same ocular dimension, the act of reading a text on paper and even more so on screen, phenomenologically speaking, has a significant aspect of the gaze operative in it. Visual culture has been a major point of discussion in Modernist studies. For example, in *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (2001), focusing on theorists like Maurice Blanchot and auteurs like Vladimir Nabokov, Karen Jacobs shows how the Modernist literary period is remarkable for situating the human body as an "afterimage."[1]

Literary Modernism emerges in the beginning of the twentieth century almost at the same time as the visual medium of cinema comes into being, and the influence of cinema on literature is unmistakable. The art of photography develops in the same historical period. Georg Lukács famously identifies (or misidentifies) Modernism as a "photographic" form of naturalism, devoid of any subjective possibility of choice and freedom.[2] In the context of the broader movement from the sacred visuality of Renaissance art to the more secular regime of the gaze in Modernist art and literature, how do the works of Samuel Beckett complicate the ocular in the literary? This is the central question that underwrites Llewellyn Brown's *Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze* (2019), a sequel to Brown's earlier book, *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* (2016),[3] which also appeared in the Samuel Beckett in Company series from Ibidem Press.

[1] Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 2.

[2] For instance, see the preface to Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970).

[3] For my long review essay on this book, see Arka Chattopadhyay, "Reading *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice*: Ventriloquism of the Literary Object," *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 9 (2016): 182-94: http://www.lineofbeauty.org/index.php/S/article/view/72/91.

As is obvious from the title, Brown approaches the trope of the gaze (as he did with the voice) from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, in which gaze is a drive-object. Just as Freud had theorized oral and anal drive-objects, for Lacan, gaze and voice are objects of unconscious drives. The gaze is not a matter of the human subject in this tradition of thought. The scopic object anchors its link with the subject at the level of the drive that goes around the object without reaching it. This not only characterizes the gaze with an uncanny dimension but also the fate of futility—a major preoccupation in literary Modernism in general and in Samuel Beckett, in more specific terms. The gaze cannot make everything visible and this is what constitutes its failure. The way the gaze is stripped of its classical omnipotence forms the kernel of Brown's ambitious intellectual inquiry, bringing together the best of both English- and French-language Beckett scholarship. It also offers a detailed comparative analysis of the French and English works of Beckett.

It is not that Beckett studies as a field has not had a discussion of the importance of the image. David Lloyd and Pascale Casanova, among others, have talked about the importance of painting for Beckett.[4] Branka Arsić has commented at length on Beckett's fondness for Bishop Berkeley's philosophy of gaze-dependent human existence and its cinematic translation in his script, *Film*.[5] Anthony Uhlmann has offered an extensive reading of the different kinds of images in *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (2007), covering his engagement with the Cartesian cogito, with Arnold Geulincx, and with the relation between image and reality, not to mention the ontological image or the image of "embodied being" in late plays like *What Where* and *Quad*.[6]

The image and the gaze are not the same even though their intimate relation is undeniable in Lacan. The gaze has to factor in the Imaginary order and especially the mis-recognition of the specular image that establishes the ego in Lacan's famous idea of the "mirror stage." If the Imaginary order speaks to the gaze, so

[4] See David Lloyd, *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); and Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006).

[5] See Branca Arsić, *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[6] Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 149.

does the body and the Real because as a drive-object, the gaze is associated with the anatomic cut of the eyes or what Brown calls the ocular "cup," following Lacan. The eye is not the gaze. This is the fundamental scission in Lacan's theory. The eye merely looks at things while it is the things that look back at us. They look back at the eyes in the form of an uncanny gaze. The gaze is thus the category through which the Other registers the subject in the world. The gaze-object is a bridge between the subject and the Other. The gaze thus opens up the problematic of the Other for the subject. The drive-object is homologous to the *a* object or the object-cause of desire that creates another link between the subject and the Other.

Brown's book begins with the transition in cultures of the gaze from the Renaissance to Modernism, i.e., a movement from the divine visibility of everything to an understanding of the immanent and the invisible. Can the visible define the real? Is all that is invisible unreal? These are important questions in this investigation. The introduction sets the tone by evoking the central argumentative threads. Brown's survey of Lacan's and Foucault's contesting readings of Velázquez's painting "Las Meninas" or the former's interpretation of Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors" establishes the exteriority and the obscurity of the gaze. The gaze has an outward movement as much as it encounters what is not easy to perceive, like the distorted and anamorphic skull in "The Ambassadors." Passing through exhibitionism, voyeurism, and the problem of surveillance, we arrive at the core question of the void. How does Beckett's work gaze at the abyss of existence or, in Lacanese, the hole in the Real opened up by the crack in the Other? How does the melancholic deal with the lost object? These are questions that run from one end of the book to another.

The first chapter, "The Collapse of Collective Reality" develops the notion by talking about subjective alienation as the subject is rendered unstable due to the unsteady gaze of the Other. The subject wants to be an object in the Other's gaze but in the absence of the Other suffers from a melancholic exclusion from the geometric frame of representation. Brown's reading revolves around Lacan's theorizing of the Other in the "mirror stage":

> What is crucial in this case, in order to humanise the experience of the reflection in the mirror, is what Lacan calls the founding "assent of the Other" […] That means that the child does not simply identify himself all

> alone in the mirror: the experience necessarily involves the decisive presence of an Other. (67)

The reading of Beckett's play *That Time* in terms of the split-speaker's self-identification with an image in the Portrait Gallery and the intertextual use of Yeats's "cold eye" to pair with Beckett's "savage eye" are notable aspects of this exploration.

Chapter two (one of the longest in the book), "Mirrors and Frames," isolates the two aforementioned tropes in Beckett to discuss the operation of gaze where the mirror hides the nothing behind it and the frame creates a window to delimit the gaze. We have Molloy, looking at his distorted image on the mirroring water-surface, much like Narcissus: an image of the subject not as a master of the gaze, but as its object. A journey through *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, and *Texts for Nothing* establishes the psychoanalytic anchorage of the mirrors in the parental images of the mother and the father. We can consider the father's ageing in the misted mirror in *Texts for Nothing*, the poignant evocations of his mother's eyes in Beckett's letters and the maternalization of the gaze in plays like *Rockaby* and prose works like *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Apart from Beckett's critique of "ocularcentrism" (102), what emerges from this chapter is a startling insight into the gaze as that which remains unseen. Through echoes of Dante and his eye of betrayal, Brown comes to the idea of an empty gaze that performs what Beckett calls "space-gazing" (134), in order to approach the relation between gaze and the void.

To write a "frame" on the surface is to make a window which is like framing the *a* object. The window, on the other hand, functions like an eye. As Brown observes, "[t]he window breaks this fatal reciprocity of gazes and founds the dissymmetry formulated by Lacan: You do not see me from where I see you" (143). This Hegelian point about the dissymmetry of gazes in Lacan charges the reading of windows as tropes in *From An Abandoned Work*, a text seldom given the kind of primacy that Brown gives it. The story provides a peak into the ego-ideal or the Other's condemnation of the subject as nothing in melancholia, touching on the choice of suicide. The examination of *Murphy* and the failed scopic encounter between Murphy and the psychotic Mr Endon yields a double-

monologue of gaze (Murphy's) with non-gaze (Endon's). The non-gaze of the Other triggers suicide:

> if his nothingness appears to be an ideal to be achieved, it still preserves its original association with the subject as being refused any reassuring identification by his Other, and whose presence was at least represented by the stars. Thus if his Other desired nothing—or nothing utterable—then the subject can only find some indispensable identification by means of this very "nothing." (156)

Brown goes through the aggressive, if not symptomatic destruction of photographic images by Beckett characters in *Film* and *A Piece of Monologue.* There is a failed attempt to escape the gaze of the Other in O (*Film*), while the nameless speaker in *A Piece of Monologue* dwells on the remnant of parental photo frames on the wall. This wish to destroy the images of the Other that picture the subject as contingent upon the Other's gaze in these works contrasts with the failure to imagine the dear care-givers at the end of *Murphy*. A discussion of Beckett's subversion of language in search of the void that underwrites it connects back to the monadic problem of window and windowlessness vis-à-vis the subject and the Other in plays like *Endgame*. In conclusion, the chapter returns to how gaze divides the subject in relation to the Other, failing to attain any stable relation between the two:

> The absence of a founding exchange of gazes incites Beckett's characters to examine the eyes of others, as in Murphy's unsuccessful attempt with Mr Endon: an experience that reveals a fundamental dissymmetry, since it is impossible to see oneself from the point of view of the Other. With the fragility of the imaginary register, the gaze often passes through appearances rather than perceiving them as a screen to be scrutinised. (191)

The third chapter deals with the interdependence of light and darkness in Beckett's theatre and other works. The eye is seen as a cup that drinks light while gaze becomes the embodiment of light where the subject is watched by the light. This light often has a negative connotation, as in the opening sentence of *Murphy*: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new." Be it *Play* or the *Trilogy* or

the half-light of the play, *Come and Go*, or the shadowiness of *Company*, there is a tormenting aspect to the light without source. Brown reflects:

> Light is therefore a reduction of the threads of the action to the essential, which is not defined as a diminution but as the approach to an unendurable point: to where light is unveiled, so that it no longer serves to show up forms—representations as imaginary—but excludes any vision, being contiguous with blindness. (210)

From the evil machinations of the light, we come to the motif of the screen that hides the real as much as it points to it. There is an exploration of the white space in terms of the Mallarméan blankness as an aesthetic ideal through the prose of *Ping* and the TV play, *Quad*. Brown's central thread remains the dialectic of inter-subjective desire: "*What am I in the absent gaze* [sic] *my Other? ; If the gaze of my Other remains irremediably external (or 'without'), how can I find my place in it*?" (232; emphases original). The reading of *Quad* offers an idea of inscription of the bodies on stage that point to "what cannot be named" (241). Brown's critical project is centred on "locating the gaze object as a real" (244), expressed in the figure of the impossible, as in the danger zone around which the walkers move in Beckett's last enigmatic work for the television. The chapter illuminates the connection between speech and the duo of light and dark, the relation between darkness and non-being, the origins of writing, the figure of the unborn, and, most fundamentally, the Beckettian nuance that the inextricability of light and dark (and not darkness alone) is the true source for the problem of incomprehension. The brief fourth chapter looks at the spectral doubling that happens in the field of the gaze. We return to the critical intersection between melancholia and mourning as the Other's disappearance fragments the subject in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The chapter highlights subjective anxiety at this loss as it examines space as a metaphorical eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and, most importantly, the problem of failed identification.

The short chapter that follows (Chapter 5) deals with the difficult notion of an ideal in Beckett. The highlight of the chapter is a unique reading of the incalculable sky as a curtain over the void in texts like *Malone Dies* and *Company*. The ideal of the sky works in tandem with the astral moral law. This is Freud's ironic identification of the super-ego with the stars outside and the Kantian moral law

within. As we know, Beckett was well aware of this Kant-Freud connection. Brown observes:

> The distance of the sky, perceived as incalculable, results from the refusal of the Other to enter into any verbal exchange. It is also related to the fact that the sky is the part excluded from the framework whereby perspective encloses physical reality: it thus belongs to the realm of the gaze as an all-enveloping *a* object. (354)

In both *Malone Dies* and *Company*, we have variations of the same vignette in which the mother violently rejects the child's question about the sky's distance from the earth. Brown does not mention the third variation on the same moment in the short story "The End," where the mother says the phallic signifiers, "fuck off" as she scoffs at the child's question (unlike the other two cases where her actual response is either omitted or summarized in indirect speech):

> The earth makes a sound as of sighs and the last drops fall from the emptied cloudless sky. A small boy, stretching out his hands and looking up at the blue sky, asked his mother how such a thing was possible. Fuck off, she said.[7]

Unlike the two other occasions, here the boy's inquiry is not about the sky's distance but about the sounds of the earth as the last raindrops fall from an "empty" sky. This sound points to what lies on the other side of the sky. We have a glimpse here of the Real nothing that lies behind the sky's curtain. As Brown says, "[t]he sky itself is little more than a fragile veil cast over the invisible" (325). The example of "The End," strangely missing from his analysis, would have bolstered Brown's argument. The latter half of this chapter goes into an exploration of the mask as the face of the Other: "[t]he face of the Other appears as an impassive mask, which does not dissimulate a 'true' face but embodies the effect of the petrifying gaze" (355). We are back to the problem of a shaky Other that destabilizes the subject via a flickering gaze. But the chapter does not fully address

[7] Samuel Beckett, *Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed. Stanley Gontarski (London and New York: Grove, 1995), 81.

the question about the status of the divine Other which it evokes in Beckett. Is there a transcendental Other of the gaze in Beckett? One wonders!

The sixth chapter takes up the windowless monad from Leibniz and forges a dialogue between Beckett and Lacan's independent readings of the philosopher. At stake in Beckett is the dynamic of the closed space, while for Lacan the monad is associated with the Real One of the subject. The problem of self-enclosure without an outside is studied in *Murphy* and *The Lost Ones*. The existence of the mysterious boy outside the shelter in *Endgame* brings back the motif of the double. The double here is stuck in the Real, without having an Imaginary access, as Brown contends. The analytic excursus through *How It Is* sees Beckett's trope of the corporeal "sack" as the monad with Lacan's logic of cords, sacks, and knots for company. The reading of *The Lost Ones* holds on to the paradox of the Other's absent gaze that "deprives the subject of an identification" (401). The examination of *Worstward Ho* zooms in on the One without a place: "The Beckettian subject, devoid of an Other capable of situating himself in relation to his others, is obliged to be his 'own other'" (407). The chapter develops interesting ideas like uncoupling the act of seeing from being seen, and life that exists behind the eyes, as one closes the lids. Brown reads *Company* as a text that activates this other side of the eye and peppers the dark through the light of a child-like manipulation of language or what Lacan names "lalangue" (lallation offering a sonic material order of language). The opening and closing of the eye in endless oscillation is seen in tandem with the tormenting *jouissance* of *fort/da* that marks the pleasure principle and its beyond.

The long eighth and final chapter tackles the technological aspect of the gaze from a mediatic perspective, taking it through Lacan's ruminations on science in the capitalist era. The political overtones make for a radical reading of Lacan's take on scientism (fetishism of science as the only discourse of truth) in the capitalist epoch and his mobilization of the Real as an impasse in the subject of science which is also the subject of the unconscious for him. Technological modernity produces a gaze of the medium itself, be it the camera or the audio-recorder, as it subjects the subject to its pictorial or auditory frame. What technology highlights in its divisive function is the "lost" aspect of gaze as an *a* object:

> Technology reveals the gaze as an invisible "object," one that deprives the subject of an illusory autonomy, whereby he believes he can contemplate a spectacle laid out before him: the gaze is an agent of manipulation. What comes to the fore in Beckett's creations is rather the undermining of identification: a disembodiment, whereby the visible is emptied of any suggestion of physical presence that might offer the spectator a comforting mirror-image. (465)

Technology devours the subject in all its uncanniness, making an object out of it. The detailed reading of Beckett's *Film* demonstrates this point through a skillful co-invocation of Berkeley by both Beckett and Lacan. What initiates the uncanny doubling of the gaze is Beckett's own division of the subject into E (Eye) and O (Object). This division is produced by the cinematic medium of the camera, as Brown argues. What remains ambivalent in this discussion is the apparent synonymy between the subject as its own other and the gaze of the Other. Does this signal a collapse of the Big Other (Symbolic) into a small other (Imaginary/specular alterity in the mirror)? If such a collapse at all happens in Beckett's works, it will speak to the Imaginary order's prevalence in the hegemony of optics inside capitalism.

The analysis of the TV plays in the latter half of the chapter further shows the inflection of technology on the gaze. *Eh Joe* brings to the fore, the twin operation of voice and gaze as the dead Other continues to torment the subject. As Brown suggests, unlike the visual angularity that creates some immunity for the subject in *Film*, Joe has to face an increasingly confrontational gaze of the camera in a restricted space. *Ghost Trio* continues with a notion of the monadic space. However, the closed locus opens itself to an encounter with the Other, though we are not sure if it is a past version of the subject that he is made to accost. Technology tries to supplement the hole of missing identification but it can only produce a compromise: "The creator sees himself from the constructed point of view of the Other, but he will never have access to the latter's real point of view: the missing identification will never be recovered" (518). The interpretation of *…but the clouds…* follows a similar track by establishing the non-rapport between the subject and the amorous Other in terms of a silent image that nonetheless speaks in the "unstillable" psyche. The teleplay *Nacht und Träume* makes us think about the relation between dream and gaze. How does the Other's gaze function

in a dream vision? The aforementioned ambivalence between the small and the big Other is operative in this play as well but Brown's analysis does not address the far reaching consequences of this conundrum between the Symbolic and the Imaginary alterities.

The discussion of *What Where*, adapted for TV from the stage, follows the spectral figures in the acts of permutation in which they appear, disappear, and reappear. The play's concentration on torture brings back the trope of *jouissance* as the figures/faces are located as objects more than subjects. The chapter focuses on the linguistically constructed solitary being of the subject. Its final comment on Beckett's use of technology is as follows:

> Beckett uses technology to give existence to the human understood as belonging to a dimension excluded from properties or identification: the inhumanity of technology—a product of science and capitalism—points to what, in one's existence, is ungraspable and untameable: creation then represents the singular response of the speaking-being, who thus gives form to his humanity. (566)

This last reflection points to a lack in the chapter. It would have been all the more engrossing if the analysis of the plays had gone back to the theoretical discussion about techno-capitalism in Lacan. The political implications of technology evoked early on in the chapter unfortunately do not return in the reading of the particular plays.

The brief "conclusion" connects the book with Brown's previous, bilingual (in French and English) work on Beckett, Lacan, voice, and saying, and places the present work in that line. It summarizes the key arguments of the book around the failure of identification, production of doubles, the instability of the Other's gaze, and so on. The book ends with the Beckettian subject's melancholic hesitation between desire and drive, as is evident in gaze as an object-cause of desire as well as a drive-object. Brown's conclusion shows a Beckett in his ontological quest for the impossible in the dark that can only be dimly lit up by weak acts of language.

To conclude our discussion of Llewellyn Brown's *Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze*, the book takes a thorough and detailed approach to multiple aspects of the gaze in

Beckett, covering varied themes like space, light, darkness, mirror, sky, visibility and invisibility, eye, frame, window, tableau, image, medium, and technology. The rigorous use of the psychoanalytic framework shows that gaze is not only an important Lacanian heuristic lens for cinema but also for literature in general. Through psychoanalysis, the book offers new insights into the dynamic of inter-subjectivity and into the problem of the Other and the object in Beckett's profoundly complex corpus, cutting across media and genres.