

## **External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Galina Nixon Kiryushina**

### **"Cinema, Television and Conceptual Transformations in Samuel Beckett's 1960s Prose" ("Film, televise a konceptuální proměny v próze Samuela Becketta z 60. let 20 století")**

**Submitted in 2022 at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures**

#### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

Based on a wide range of documentary evidence, including letters, published works, and the relevant critical literature, Galina Nixon Kiryushina argues that, following his longstanding engagement with the theory and practice of film dating back to the 1930s, it was Beckett's work on *Film* and his writing for television, as well as his engagement with intermedial adaptations of his work, in the early 1960s that enabled him to develop a radically new style and a new approach in his prose writing after *How It Is*. According to Kiryushina, that new style and approach is reflected in works such as *All Strange Away*, *The Long Ones*, and *Ping*, where themes such as the subject/object relation, the nature of perception, and the possibility or impossibility of knowledge (all of which are present in Beckett's earlier works) are explored in new ways, with the 'eye of prey' modelled on the camera operating in a closed space.

#### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

This doctoral thesis is of a very high quality. It makes a compelling and extremely well-evidenced argument for the profound impact of Beckett's early interest in, and knowledge of, film theory and practice, together with his writing for film and television in the early 1960s, on his late prose, which Kiryushina sees as commencing after the completion of *How It Is*. In that, she implicitly takes persuasive issue with commentators of Beckett's work who see his later style commencing with his last full-length novel, which was published in 1961. Drawing on the evidence from the archives, letters, the published work, relevant books and films with which Beckett was familiar, and the work of a wide range of Beckett scholarship, Ms Kiryushina demonstrates brilliantly and with consistent lucidity how Beckett's early interest in film, the depth of which is evidenced not only by his references to it in his correspondence, but by his expressed wish to work with Sergei Eisenstein in Russia in the mid-1930s, was reactivated three decades later through his work on *Film* and *Eh Joe*, as well as adaptations of his work for film and television, enabling him to find a new style and a new approach in prose, realized in radically original works such as *All Strange Away*, *The Lost Ones*, and *Ping*. Her central argument is made with remarkable skill, and the close readings of the 1960s prose works shed considerable new light on them. Indeed, having read this thesis, it is impossible not to recognize the transformative effect of Beckett's engagement with film and television on his

prose. In that respect, the thesis an outstanding exploration of an intermedial oeuvre.

### III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

Ms Kiryushina's research fills a vital gap, or what she calls the "missing link" (8), in our understanding of Beckett's development as a prose writer post-*How It Is*, reinforcing the sense of him as an inexhaustibly modernist and even avant-garde writer, in the sense that, like Joyce before him, he was never content to remain within a particular style and approach, even if his fundamental material remained more or less constant. As Kiryushina shows, those constants included his interest in the nature of perception, the subject/object relation, and the possibility (*recte* the impossibility) of objective knowledge. If these themes were already being explored in depth in the works of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the radical departure that was *All Strange Away*, of which Kiryushina provides a highly insightful close analysis, was one in which the 'savage eye' of the camera, to which Beckett had alluded as early as 1930, when writing his short study of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, is the model for a new kind of ostensibly objective observation.

Drawing on Esslin's idea of Beckett's "poetry of moving images" (13), Kiryushina reveals in detail what such a poetry can mean in a minimalist prose that focuses on the ostensibly objective description of figures. One of the signal strengths of the thesis in this respect is the brilliant reading of *The Lost Ones*, in which Kiryushina shows how Beckett subtly subverts the apparent objectivity of the perceiver/narrator. Comparing and contrasting this approach with that in the 1930s film *Man of Aran*, of which Beckett was highly critical, she reveals the political and cultural stakes at play here, highlighting Beckett's implicit critique of both colonialist and nationalist ideologies.

While she acknowledges that there is not currently enough evidence to prove Beckett's familiarity with Eisenstein's 1930 essay 'The Cinematographic Principle and Japanese Culture', published alongside work by Beckett in *transition* magazine, Kiryushina demonstrates its relevance to her argument, also helpfully highlighting Eisenstein's interest in Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the opening chapter, the analysis of the historical-cultural milieu in which Beckett's interest in film arose is very skilfully handled; indeed, it is the finest that I have read on that topic. The impact of Beckett's reading of Arnheim is also explored with skill and insight in that chapter. As Kiryushina demonstrates, in his 1930s writing, particularly his reviewing, Beckett tends to rely on filmic metaphors, rather than adopting in his own fiction an approach shaped by his understanding of film techniques such as montage. That adoption would be delayed until the 1960s.

Another aspect of the thesis that is particularly helpful in enhancing our understanding of Beckett's oeuvre and his development is the reflection on the relation between his engagement with film and television and his commitment to what in 1937 he identified as a "literature of the non-word" and as "logociasm". It was in film and television that this became possible, although not ultimately through silent film; arguably his work in television is more successful than his work in film, and, although Kiryushina does not make this point quite so bluntly, one could, based on her work, argue that it was in his late prose that Beckett made

the most innovative advance as an artist, even beyond what he achieved in later television plays such as *Ghost Trio* and ... *beyond the clouds* ... It is there that the prioritization of image over narrative is particularly acutely registered.

Another aspect of the argument that warrants highlighting is how effectively Kiryushina shows that Beckett's anti-realism, as articulated in the 1930s through various attacks on writers such as Balzac, is also very much present in his reflections on film. This, too, fills in a significant gap in our understanding of Beckett's aesthetics.

### 1. *Structure of the argument*

The dissertation is extremely well structured, with the chronological approach reflecting Kiryushina's aim to show how Beckett's enduring interest in visual media ultimately enabled him to break through into a radically new kind of prose writing, unlike that of any other writer of the period. Chapter 1 focuses on the 1930s, when Beckett's interest in the theory and practice of film developed through his reading of books such as Arnheim's and his regular film viewing. Kiryushina shows how his strong views on montage, on black-and-white, and on silent film emerged, and how they related to his more general aesthetic concerns. Chapter 2 then shows how Beckett's direct engagement with writing for the cinema and television, as well as his experience of his works being adapted for television, reinvigorated his interest in the media and the ways in which they might impact on his prose. Both of these chapters are rich in original insights, and provide a comprehensive perspective on vital influences and collaborations, including those of the French television director Michel Mitrani as well as Michael Karmitz. The analysis of Grove's *Evergreen Review* shows how vital cross-cultural, transatlantic engagements were for Beckett in intermedial approach.

In the final two chapters, Kiryushina devotes her attention to close readings of crucial 1960s prose works, from *All Strange Away* and *Long Observation of the Ray* (chapter 3) to *The Lost Ones* and *Ping* (chapter 4). While she might have extended the focus here to include other prose works of the period, the concentration on those four texts is a very effective means of making the core arguments around the impact of film and television on his approach. As she indicates, one could analyse in a similar vein the later prose works such as *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Company*, and even *Worstward Ho*, although the constraints of the thesis do not provide the space for that analysis in any depth. If the thesis is developed into a full-length monograph, as I very much hope it will be, it would be fascinating to see a more in-depth analysis of those later prose works, as well as some of the shorted prose of the 1970s. This would not necessarily demonstrate a simple continuity. As Kiryushina demonstrates, there are both ruptures and continuities in Beckett's development as a writer.

It is also worth noting that the dissertation is written with admirable lucidity. At no point is the reader left confused by the points being made. The English is of the highest standard. Indeed, the quality of the writing is already clearly at publishable level.

### 2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

Formally, the dissertation is almost faultless. Referencing, footnotes, and bibliography are all

at publishable standard, demonstrating absolute consistency. There are almost no linguistic felicities or typographical errors. All formatting is correct throughout the dissertation.

#### *Use of sources and/or material*

Kiryushina engages with a wide range of the relevant secondary literature, citing judiciously from it. In all instances, she works transparently with those sources. There are no obviously relevant secondary sources to which she does not refer. All of the primary sources are also appropriately referenced, and include Beckett's published works, manuscript material, diaries, and letters. All sources are employed throughout in a methodologically correct manner.

#### *3. Personal contribution to the subject*

Throughout the dissertation, Kiryushina employs the primary and secondary sources to make an original argument, casting very considerable light on how Beckett found a way forward in his prose writing of the 1960s, achieving a radical break, at least in some formal respects, with his earlier work. The overall argument of the dissertation is thoroughly evidenced and persuasive. It undoubtedly achieves what it sets out to achieve, namely to identify the missing link in Beckett's development as a prose writer after the completion of *How It Is*. Far from being a compilation of existing scholarship, this dissertation constitutes a very significant contribution to knowledge in its field. Our understanding of Beckett's development is significantly advanced by Kiryushina's scholarship. She quotes from material only when it is absolutely necessary and contributes to the argument; this is a considerable skill.

#### **IV. Questions for the author**

There are a number of questions that it would be helpful to have answered at the viva. Of these, the two most pressing are the following:

The first concerns Beckett's interest in montage. This technique is clearly central to Beckett's conception of film, or at least the kind of film that he valued. It would be helpful if Kiryushina could provide a little more on the nature and value of montage as a filmic technique, on the extent to which it features in Beckett's own televisual work, and how it translates as a technique in his 1960s prose.

Secondly, Kiryushina demonstrates very clearly how Beckett's approach remains modernist and even avant-garde throughout his writing career. Like Joyce, he continues to seek new and radical ways of writing, even as his fundamental themes remain more or less constant. In this context, it would be helpful to understand how Kiryushina sees this radicalism sitting alongside Beckett's resistance to various forms of technical innovation, including sound and colour. In the 1960s, the Nouvelle Vague in France (led by Jean-Luc Godard) embraced both American film and colour; Beckett did not. How might we consider his work in that cultural context? The 1930s historical-cultural context is examined in depth in the thesis; the 1960s

context is not. This is understandable, but some discussion of it would be helpful.

Thirdly, Kiryushina touches on the idea of the “male gaze” (via Laura Mulvey, 1975) in relation to *All Strange Away* (82). It would be helpful to understand how widely across Beckett’s later prose, with its intense focus on the image and the eye, Kiryushina sees the embodiment and/or critique of a gendered gaze as extending. To what extent is the closed space a heterosphere in which it is the male gaze that prevails? (In this context, it is striking that none of the films referenced were directed by female directors, and the same goes for Beckett’s engagement with television.)

## **V. Conclusion**

As indicated above, this is a dissertation of the highest quality, original in argument, a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of Beckett studies, and outstandingly well presented. I am therefore delighted provisionally to classify the submitted dissertation as passed.

26 July 2022

Shane Weller