

Beckett beyond the avant-garde: the case of "Casket of Pralinen for a daughter of a dissipated Mandarin"

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CONOR CARVILLE

**Beckett beyond the Avant-Garde: The Case of
'Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin' (1931–32)**

It is the fate of all Beckett scholars to find that whatever obscure byway we travel down in our researches, James Knowlson will be waiting for us at its end. Not only that, but it is very often a comment, a note or an aside in either his magnificent biography or one of his many other books that has set us off in the first place. This is certainly true of my own research, as will be immediately apparent from the following to anyone who has, for example, read his meticulous work on the Sinclair's apartment in Kassel and the paintings that hung there (see Knowlson 2005). It is also gratifying to be able to record here how I, like countless others have benefited greatly from Jim's warmth, generosity and kindness. This essay is dedicated to him with all admiration and affection.

From early texts such as the poems of *Echo's Bones* to late work like the TV plays *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds...*, Samuel Beckett's writing pays close attention to the visual image and to the relationship between the perceiving subject and those images. Often it is to religious painting he turns and in doing so, I suggest, he reflects the widespread interest in that tradition which marks the visual culture of the 1920s and 1930s. All across Europe painters moved away from abstraction and back to figuration. For many the religious painting of the past formed a resource which could be exploited to pursue new forms of figuration in the wake of Cubism's demise (Rewald 2006). Nowhere was this more true than in Germany, where the great traditions of mediaeval painting, of Dürer and Grünewald and their associated techniques, assumed immense importance. And yet the forms and methods of mediaeval painting were put to very different purposes in the Germany of the period, reflecting the charged political atmosphere of the times. That is to say, if religious painting is referred to it is often in the service of an art that is resolutely materialist and socially engaged. This is the context in which I want to look at the use of painting in one of Beckett's early poems.

The poem 'Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin' was

published in *The European Caravan* in 1931 and thus predates the completion of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, although it alludes to Ewald Dülberg's *Das Abendmahl* (Last Supper), a painting the novel dwells on at some length (*Dream*, 77-80). At one point in *Dream*(35) the narrator memorably evokes a 'creedless, colourless, sexless Christ' and one of the attractions of the *Abendmahl* for Beckett is its negation of such an idealized image. Certainly this would seem to be the import of the poem's reference to Dülberg's 'Radiant lemon-whiskered Christ' and his 'blood-faced Tom' (ie St. Thomas): it is the intense, non-naturalistic use of colour that Beckett responds to.¹ There is also a general emphasis on the bodily appetites at work in the scene, both gustatory and erotic. In Beckett's interpretation, Dülberg relocates the Last Supper to a Parisian bar and the poem as a whole is unremitting in its evocation of the consumption and expulsion of food, drink, tears and spittle. Even when a voice commands the poet to reach for a more exalted register and treat of a capitalized, abstract 'Beauty', the bodily mechanics of such a process are comically laid bare: 'Now me boy / take a hitch in your lyrical loinstring'.

Such ironic tactics are all too common in the poem, and yet there are moments when the force of a particular utterance cannot quite be defused by its deflationary coda. Take the following for example:

Oh I am ashamed
of all clumsy artistry
I am ashamed of presuming
to arrange words
of everything but the ingenuous fibres
that suffer honestly.
Fool! Do you hope to untangle
the knot of God's pain?

Melancholy Christ that was a soft one!

The desire here to have done with representation in favour of the truth of the body, the materiality of the 'ingenuous fibres' of the physical world, is announced only to be

dismissed. Yet notwithstanding the coy self-criticism of the final line quoted, the idea of the ‘knot of God’s pain’ goes to the heart of this poem and much of Beckett’s writing in the period. It is precisely the impossibility of untangling the ideal from the material, of separating the human, suffering Christ from the divine Father, that haunts the poem and constitutes an important contradiction within it. Beckett takes this age-old theological problem and uses it to investigate some very modern aesthetic concerns. One can trace a similar trajectory in Thomas MacGreevy’s work, though here there is a much stronger sense of an accommodation between the real and the ideal, as in his comment on Giorgione’s painting that ‘dream and imagination [...] the transcendent and the immanent, seemed in perfect fidelity’ (MacGreevy 1991, 153). As we shall see, Beckett will have no truck with such complacency.

In what follows I want to pursue one particular strand of the poem’s concern with the problem of materiality, its engagement with historical violence. The allusions to Dülberg’s painting are quickly superseded when the voice of the poem changes to a headline-like imitation of an English accent (reminiscent of Eliot’s use of capitals in *The Waste Land*) saying that the last supper would have been:

THE BULLIEST FEED IN ’ISTORY
if the boy scouts hadn’t booked a trough
for the eleventh’s eleventh eleven years after.

The reference is to a party marking the anniversary of the armistice between Britain and Germany in 1918. By comparing the last supper to a lavish commemoration of the horror of the Western Front Beckett is again insisting, hyperbolically, on the earthly (and indeed ’istorical) aspects of the former. Importantly, the ‘trough’ mentioned here is picked up again in the valediction of the poem’s closing stanza: ‘Though the swine were slaughtered / beneath the waves/ not far from the firm sand / they’re gone they’re gone’. Despite the fact that the immediate allusion is to the parable of the Gadarene swine, the incongruous verb ‘slaughtered’ sends us back to the earlier reference to the mechanized death of World War I. Indeed this association of the Biblical parable with the war has a precedent in D.H. Lawrence’s 1916 reference in correspondence to ‘the Gadarene slope

of the war' (2000, 102). It is this mingling of the poem's religious images with an anti-Imperialist account of recent history that will be our concern.

The end of the poem turns to another religious painting, Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c.1480). The poem again emphasizes the physicality of the chosen image. Now, however, it concentrates on the way this physicality impedes the viewer's ability to see Jesus as divine – insists instead on his status as a mortal man:

Now who'll discover in Mantegna's
butchery stout foreshortened Saviour
recognitions of transcendent
horse-power?

A later, unpublished, draft of the poem is more complex and ambivalent but still clearly concerned with the relationship between materialist representation and idealizing reading. Significantly this draft, like the published version, attributes to Wordsworth the role, in the past, of sponsoring such ideas of immortality and transcendence:

Albion Albion mourn for him mourn,
mourn I mean for William Wordsworth
for who is there now to discern in Mantegna's
foreshortened butchers of salvation
recognition of transcendent might and right? (*CP*, 34)

The temporal marker 'Now' at the beginning of these lines picks up on the earlier references that indicate a setting in the aftermath of World War I. The suggestion seems to be that where Mantegna's revolutionary naturalism, his image of Christ as mortified and heavy with death, might once have been recruited to some notion of a supernaturally justified power, that moment has gone.

Significant too is the way in which the revision of the line 'butchery stout foreshortened Saviour' to 'foreshortened butchers of Salvation' transfers the emphasis from Christ's body to the act of looking. That is to say the adjective 'butchery' describing

the thickened, stolid slab of flesh is replaced by the Cockney rhyming slang of ‘butcher’s (hook)’ (i.e. ‘look’) to mark the way the viewer’s gaze is overtly and dramatically manipulated by Mantegna. There are further traces of English slang in the poem, alongside the references to war and Imperialism mentioned earlier, which support this reading of the revision. The choice of Mantegna as painter is also apt in that his work is often associated with another Imperium, that of ancient Rome, viz. his enormous *Triumph Of Caesar* hanging in Hampton Court.

For now, however, I want to stress the way the relationship between the two drafts of the line demonstrates Beckett’s attentiveness to the movement between the material and the ideal in painting. For where the first version of the line locates the distinction of the painting in its revolutionary realism, the second version defines it as being primarily about the formal manipulation of the gaze to inculcate the idea of transcendence. The difference between the two versions clearly demonstrates an increasing sensitivity to the way in which the painting’s formal construction – in particular the unprecedented foreshortening – is in the service of an attempt to insist on the abstract idea of Salvation: although this is a dead Christ, we still seem to be watching him ascend.

Beckett goes on to translate the theological purpose of the image into the more clearly historical and political terms of a justification of ‘transcendent horse-power’ in the first draft or, alternatively, ‘transcendent might and right’ in the second. Both versions appeal to ‘Albion’ to mourn for Wordsworth, implicating a certain version of pastoral in this process. Hence the first draft sees Wordsworth pressed into ideological service as a ‘son of the soil’, while in the second he is a ‘landscape gardener’, suggesting that Beckett is also alive to the nationalist politicization of landscape painting that was rife in Britain, France and Ireland in the period.

What the poem seems to be engaging in, then, is what would now go by the name of ideological critique, an exposure of the way in which art is implicated in the machinations of power and subject-formation. Such critical tactics are of course familiar to us today (indeed over-familiar). But this is 1931, and what we know of Beckett’s reading in the period does not provide us with convincing sources for this relatively novel way of thinking about art. In the next section I want to suggest one possible transnational context for such thinking, a context reflected, as we shall see, not only in the content of

the poem, but in the material circumstances in which it was both composed and, at least initially, read.

Questions of the ideology of the image are rarely overtly engaged with in critical accounts of Beckett's work. Yet Samuel Beckett's friend and tutor at Trinity College, Thomas Rudmose-Brown, described his student as an 'anti-Imperialist'. Knowlson persuasively attributes this to Rudmose-Brown's own influence, but another candidate for it would be Beckett's uncle, William 'Boss' Sinclair. As his brother Harry pointed out in the obituary he wrote for *The Irish Times*, Sinclair was heavily involved in the Irish Revolution of 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence: 'intensely interested in the Republican movement, a friend of both Griffiths and Collins, [he] took part behind the scenes in many a vital and difficult affair' (A Correspondent 1937, 10). This is corroborated by Maurice Goldring's *Odd Man Out* where, in his account of his own time in Dublin, the radical journalist reports that Sinclair 'grew a beard, took to politics and left the business' that he ran with Harry (1935, 181).

It was Sinclair's relationship with radical Republicanism that was the main reason for uprooting his family and moving to Kassel, Germany, in 1922. In James and Elizabeth Knowlson's *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*, Beckett says:

My aunt Cissie was the only daughter. She married a Jew called William Sinclair. They had a shop in Dublin. Cissie was musical. But she had a very difficult time with her husband. He had some political troubles in Dublin and had to leave. That's why he chose Kassel [...]. There was a friend of his there: the poet [and painter] Cecil Salkeld. He was there. That's why he chose Kassel. I met him [Salkeld] when I was there. (2006, 35)

The obvious interpretation of this account is that Sinclair had fallen foul of the Free State administration that emerged after the Civil War: the date of departure of 1922 coincides with the onset of the new administration in an atmosphere of intense bitterness and recrimination after the intimate violence of the war, when executions were carried out by

both sides.

Sinclair's choice of Kassel in Northern Germany was dictated by the presence there of Cecil Salkeld, another dissident, much younger than himself, who had also fought in the War of Independence.² As pointed out by Beckett himself in the quotation above, Salkeld was studying at the Kunstakademie in Kassel under the painter and set-designer Ewald Dülberg. By all accounts Salkeld threw himself into the febrile world of the 20s German avant-garde. In Kassel he encountered the painting of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, with its 'severe stylization, sharp forms and emphasis on a flattened picture plane' (Kennedy 2004, 93). An emphasis on line, form and flatness would remain characteristic of his whole oeuvre.

According to Kennedy, in May 1922 Sinclair joined the Union of Progressive International Artists in Düsseldorf. This must be a reference to the important Congress which took place that month, when artists from various avant-garde groups across Germany and France debated the relations between art and politics. Delegates included Raoul Haussman, Theo van Doesburg representing *De Stijl*, the Russian Constructivist El Lissitsky in his capacity as editor of the journal *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* and Hans Richter.³ Intriguingly, Otto Freundlich and Jankel Adler were also in attendance, as members of the radical Berlin group around the communist journal *Die Aktion*. Beckett would become close to both in the late 1930s. Salkeld shortly afterwards exhibited with the Young Rhineland Circle of Painters, to which Adler and Otto Dix were affiliated. He was thus aligning himself with the radical leftist, anarchist and pacifist elements of the German art world. This is precisely the terrain of the historical avant-garde, where, as Andreas Huyssen puts it, 'the early modernist autonomy aesthetic [clashes] with the revolutionary politics arising in Russia and Germany out of WWI' (1987, vii).

Salkeld divided his time between Germany and Ireland until late 1925, when he settled in Dublin, although if Beckett, as he states in the interview with Knowlson, met him in Germany he must still have been going there at the end of the decade. In Dublin Salkeld again became active in avant-garde circles. Alongside Beckett's future university friend Con Leventhal, he set up the radical little magazine *To-Morrow* in 1924. Here he published his two part essay 'The Principle of Painting', written while he was still in Kassel. In this little manifesto Salkeld articulates an aesthetic that is clearly congruent

with the kind of New Objectivity that was so influential in Germany and to which Dülberg had introduced him.

Thus in the essay we find Salkeld distancing himself from Cubism: ‘it is necessary to refute the arguments of the Cubist school, who have gone over to Absolutism, and who maintain that painting must be the contrast of purely abstract forms’ (Salkeld 1924, 3).⁴ Instead he argues for what he calls a ‘constructive or symbolic naturalism’, a phrase that is suggestive in its combination of a left modernism (Constructivism) with a return to some form of figuration. The end of the article includes a list of recommendations, several of which are clearly indebted to contemporary German aesthetics: ‘the value of decorative painting’ and ‘a smooth application of colour [and] an incisive simplicity of drawing’, to take two examples. It also suggests as models ‘the Indian and Persian court painters of the Great Moguls; the painters of the Early Renaissance in Italy and the German Gothic’ (Salkeld 1924, 3). The last two periods were particularly important to Beckett throughout his life, and in 1936 he went out of his way to see a collection of Indian miniatures in Berlin.

While Deirdre Bair argues that Sinclair chose Germany as his bolt-hole in order to import antiques back to Ireland, the attractions of Salkeld’s links with the left-wing avant-garde must surely have appealed to him (Bair 1978, 59). Sinclair, like Salkeld, held politics and painting to be inextricable. This is immediately apparent from his essay ‘Painting’, which appeared in the *Irish Review* in 1912 and was later published in book form (1918). *The Irish Review*, short-lived but influential, was edited by Joseph Mary Plunkett – who would be executed for his part in the 1916 Rising – and Padraic Colum. Leading figures from all factions of the Irish cultural and political ferment of the early century can be found in its pages, including W. B. Yeats, AE, Standish O’Grady, Thomas MacDonagh, Arthur Griffiths, Roger Casement and Daniel Corkery. Sinclair appears first with an account of an exhibition at the Hibernian Academy in 1912, the most important body for the promotion of the visual arts in Ireland and very much an establishment organization.

The review takes issue with the exhibition’s salon-style hanging, criticizing it in a way that suggests a preference for the more avant-garde curatorial fashion of widely-spaced paintings in a single line. More radically, Sinclair argues that the

‘Academy [...] leaves one bored and tired, vainly trying to find a reason for its existence’ (Sinclair 1912, 183). This is of a piece with the general tenor of an essay that, while starting rather lyrically, builds to a corrosive critique of the malign influence of academicism in the Irish visual arts. In the process Sinclair makes a clear equation between traditional aesthetics, aristocracy and the market on the one hand and the avant-garde on the other in terms that are intriguing enough to deserve quoting at length:

today many painters [...] are prepared to throw in their lot with sheer ugliness rather than allow the ancient past to direct the vital now. The post-impressionists and the futurists are to be welcomed if not for their importance at least for what they affirm, that it is the right of the individual to assert his own expression in his own age and out of his own environment, a right which has long been denied by the aristocrats of the past, who still persist in viewing the present in the eyes of the past. Not that one has anything but reverence and appreciation for the great painters of the past, but when they are dethroned from their high palaces and made sterile to do duty in the market-place for the benefit of bolstering useless if not harmful institutions to the detriment of painters of power and vitality it is high time for Picasso or Cezanne, Severini or Boccioni to held a revolt against the tyranny of tradition. (Sinclair 1912, 184)

The Hibernian Academy is targeted in the essay as ‘a useless if not harmful institution’. Indeed, the whole concept of the art institution and its relationship with creativity is subjected to scrutiny, with the Academy being seen as innately conservative, complicit with market forces and interested only in its own perpetuation. What is particularly striking about Sinclair’s treatment of aesthetics, however, is that, while there is clearly a cultural politics at work, it is not a cultural-nationalist politics. That is to say, in a journal in which Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and others were arguing that art and culture had a political role to play in the formation and maintenance of oppositional movements, Sinclair is at once more specifically concerned with the history of aesthetics

itself, and at the same time with much more radical, universalizing ideas. Hence the essay ends:

The stars do not speak, nor does the moon deliver sermons. And when the pressing problems of the soul and body, male and female, capital and labour are all solved, painting will assert itself as the sun-born art –the Joyous One – the praise of perfection. (Sinclair 1912, 185)

The combination of Marxist terminology and reference to the gender question in the context of a defence of Picasso and Futurism places Sinclair in an ideological position long occluded by the conservatism of the new Irish State. Indeed, in its attack on the Academy it conforms exactly to definitions of the early twentieth-century avant-garde advanced by Peter Burger and others.⁵ Sinclair's 'Painting' clearly equates political radicalism with avant-garde aesthetics and in doing so alerts us to an important and overlooked Irish context for Beckett's own early work.

Nicholas Allen has recently argued that the ferment of ideas represented by magazines such as *The Dublin Review* continued well into the 1920s and 1930s. Thus he writes of a 'subterranean Dublin where writers, actors, musicians and politicians mingled in the margins. They experimented in forms of burlesque and low comedy, pamphlets and periodicals, the erotic and irreverent – all expressions of a society newly mutable' (Allen 2009, 54). When Allen describes the positions of some of those involved as combining 'the iconoclasm of continental modernism with pointed antagonism to Imperialism' he could be describing Sinclair's essay.

It could equally be describing what we have seen of the tactics and content of Beckett's poem 'Casket of Pralinen'. And this is no surprise, for what is striking about the radical Dublin underground of the time is just how many of Beckett's close friends and acquaintances were involved. Thomas MacGreevy and A. J. Leventhal, for example, set up the modernist review *The Klaxon* in 1924, its editorial advocating 'a whiff of Dadaist Europe to kick Ireland into artistic wakefulness' (Emery 1923–4, 1), and as we have seen Cecil Salkeld along with Leventhal and Francis Stuart were behind the equally avant-garde *To-morrow* later the same year. Other friends such as Estella Solomons, Jack

B. Yeats, Percy Ussher and Mary Manning were also able to occupy positions in a mutable social space that appears to have been hospitable to a very wide spectrum of dissent from the increasingly assertive Catholic nationalism of the new state.

Allen's *Modernism Ireland and Civil War* draws particular attention to a small but lively *demi-monde* of experimental theatre, performance and cabaret that was oppositional in both its aesthetics and its politics. It is thus intriguing that Bair describes how in 1926 Beckett 'became a regular customer at Madame Cogley's cabaret' alongside 'Liam O'Flaherty, F.R. Higgins and Austin Clarke' (Bair, 1978, 46). Madame 'Toto' Cogley was the pseudonym of Helen Carter, who would later be a director of the Gate Theatre. Her cabaret, also known as 'The Little Theatre', took place on Saturday nights in South William Street. Relying on memoirs of the period by Rosamund Jacobs amongst others, Allen argues that Cogley's cabaret was a key node in a network connecting political activists, the avant-garde and a youthful Bohemia. Michael MacLiammoir describes it from the bohemian point of view: 'the Dublin Twenties pursued their wild way, with saxophones ever waxing and skirts ever waxing and Toto Cogley's cabaret and the Kitchen, that inimitable and delightful haunt of the happy, growing later and noisier' with discussions revolving around 'the merits of Joyce and Picasso' (qtd. in Allen 2009, 57). Another contemporary account mentions a 'fourth-dimensional playlet', suggesting an interest in the new mathematics that was also preoccupying the Parisian avant-garde, while reference to conversations on 'birth control and the evil literature commission' evoke an atmosphere of political dissent (57). It seems that the future author of 'Che Sciagura' and 'Censorship in the Saorstát' would have felt very much at home here.

Carter was also involved in the Studio Cabaret in Harcourt Street, which was decorated by the communist activist and painter Harry Kernoff with cut-out heads in a cubist-futurist style (see O'Connor 2012). Kernoff went to Moscow in 1931 with 'The Friends of Soviet Russia' (along with the above-mentioned Rosamund Jacobs) and is thus more than likely the model for the 'communist decorator' that attends the Fricka's party in *Dream and More Pricks than Kicks* and 'who is just back from the Moscow Reserves' (*Dream*, 219). Kernoff's backdrops for productions of radical plays like Georg Kaiser's *Gas* and Karel Capek's *RUR*, clearly informed by German and Soviet aesthetics, again suggest the presence of European avant-garde ideas amongst visual artists in Dublin of

the 1920s. Similarly, another acquaintance of Beckett's, the painter Norah McGuinness, designed a set in 1927 for Denis Johnson's play *From Morn to Midnight*, which draws on the lurching, angular streetscapes of German artists like Beckmann and Kirchner as well as referring to Soviet Constructivism (see Sissons 2010).

Beckett also moved on the fringes of two relevant acting troupes in the period. One of these, 'The Dramiks' was a sub-set of the Dublin Drama League who, according to Clarke and Ferrar, 'presented material informally during the at-homes for the League's consideration for regular scheduling' at the experimentally-inclined Peacock Theatre (Clarke and Ferrar 1979, 14). Bair says they were 'especially interested in German Expressionism, and performed plays by Toller, Werfel, Wedekind and others' (236). This accords with Elaine Sisson's claim that the Dramiks were 'a 1925 off-shoot of the Dublin Drama League for players who had a specific interest in radically avant-garde plays' (2010, 146 n.5). What is significant for the present essay, however, is the way that German leftist drama enables both the Peacock and the Gate to establish their distance from the state-sanctioned aesthetic of the Abbey Theatre. My wager here is that in a similar way Salkeld, Sinclair and other radical, dissident artists and intellectuals, including Jack B. Yeats, deployed influences from German painting as an alternative to the officially-approved naturalist aesthetic of the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art under Sean Keating. This is the context in which the combination of anti-Imperialism and ekphrasis in 'Casket of Pralinen' might be read. There is however, an important qualification to be made to any such reading, which can be illuminated through recourse to another text by William Sinclair.

In 1933 William Sinclair returned to Dublin from Germany and the institutional critique of his earlier essay on painting resumes in a less strident, more ironic form in the shape of a lecture on German art that he delivered to the Society of Dublin Painters at 7 Stephen's Green.⁶ Here again there is a strong sense of that performative quality that Allen attributes to Dublin's avant-garde underworld. Sinclair's story about wandering along the hills above Howth looking for a place to think on his chosen topic is itself a wandering, fractal narrative, though one with flashes of more serious intent. Various asides criticize the new Irish state: the litter at his feet, the new municipal housing he sees and, in repeated references to the 'Irish tobacco' he is smoking, the economic

protectionism that de Valera's new administration had recently implemented, one example of which was the stipulation that all cigarettes should contain a percentage of home-grown tobacco. After much further humorous and sardonic digression Sinclair recounts stripping naked the better to contemplate matters aesthetic. At last he finally accepts that he should actually impart some information about German art to his audience. This turns out to be the way in which in Germany, 'I never saw a picture, old or modern, with glass on it', a fact about which he has very strong opinions:

Have you not all experienced the eye-squint torture [...] the bumping into somebody else in your effort to see the picture, only to find that no matter what you do you cannot see the picture. You can't see all of it at once.⁷

In complaining about the practice of displaying pictures behind glass, Sinclair once again conforms to avant-garde attitudes. In 1924 Mina Loy had complained that although 'the flux of life is pouring its aesthetic attitude into your eyes, your ears [...] you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition' (qtd. in Siraganian 2012, 80–1). For Ezra Pound in his 1920 essay 'The Curse' meanwhile, aesthetic experience has 'leaked away into [...] the plate-glass cabinet in the drawing room' (81). Both poets see the glass case in classic avant-garde terms as an artificial barrier that sequesters art from life, inhibiting the revolutionary possibilities of the work. Crucially, however, Sinclair's criticism of exhibition practice in Ireland takes a distinctively local turn when he argues that to encase the picture in glass is to 'put a uniform on the picture just as if they were policemen and soldiers'. The significance of this becomes clearer when he then alludes to the G.K. Chesterton 'Father Brown' story 'The Invisible Man' – where a murderer famously eludes suspicion because he is a postman – and adds 'murderers can wear uniforms too'.⁸

Here the performative, knockabout quality of the lecture suddenly shifts into something much more risky, in an Ireland where the executions of the Civil War are still a live issue. For Sinclair is very clearly alluding to the well-known incident that took place in April 1931 at a performance of Denis Johnson's *The Moon in the Yellow River*. In the course of that play a character is shot by state forces while attempting to blow up a

new power plant, and it was famously objected by Free State supporters that it was a scandal ‘for a man wearing a national uniform to commit a murder on the stage’. As Michael Rubenstein points out it was widely assumed at the time that the controversial target of this aspect of the play and the force behind the reaction to it was Kevin O’Higgins, the Justice Minister who authorized the executions of seventy-seven Republican prisoners between 1923 and 1924 (Rubenstein 2010, 159). Sinclair, himself a Republican just returned from exile in Germany, thus seems to be settling an old score.

It is important to stress that Beckett himself cannot easily be assigned to such defined political positions. On the contrary, the position he saw himself adopt was that of ‘the quietism of the sparrow alone upon the house-top’ (*LSB I*, 257). It is thus salutary to note the way Beckett’s work registers Sinclair’s criticisms of exhibition practice, making of them something rather more subtle and strange. Thus in ‘Love and Lethe’ from *More Pricks than Kicks* Beckett, referring to ‘the Magdalene in the Perugino Pieta in the National Gallery of Dublin’, adds the following footnote:

This figure, owing to the glittering vitrine behind which the canvas cowers, can only be apprehended in sections. Patience, however, and a retentive memory have been known to elicit a total statement approximating to the intention of the painter. (*MPTK*, 81 n.1)

Here, however, the barrier of the vitrine is the spur to a philosophical and aesthetic thought-experiment that dwells, in a language redolent of Husserlian phenomenology, on the question of time and memory in the encounter with the visual image. The same intrusive element that incites Sinclair to political polemic results, in Beckett’s case, in philosophical reflection.

But what then of the politicized, avant-garde concerns of ‘Casket of Pralinen’? As we have seen, there are two versions of the poem. The first, written in Paris and published in *The European Caravan* in 1931, was possibly sent the same year to William Sinclair while he was still in Kassel. Pilling argues it was to atone for Beckett’s rather brutal treatment of Sinclair’s daughter Peggy, to whom he had been engaged (*CP*, 306). It is not however a particularly humble or conciliatory piece of work. It is violent, coarse, abstruse

and disturbing. My suggestion is that the poem is an attempt to repair the relationship with Sinclair through an appeal to the latter's politics, in particular his aesthetic politics, and through the evocation of the radical milieux in which Sinclair moved in both Dublin and Germany. In this sense Dülberg's painting functions in the poem as a talismanic, intimate image, addressed to a specific person and triggering shared associations. Dülberg's painting hung in Sinclair's Kassel apartment where Salkeld and Dülberg himself often visited. Its inclusion in the first poem acknowledges the central role that the apartment played in the formation of Beckett's early aesthetics.

The second, draft of the poem is less overtly political than the first. The capitalized reference to 'the bulliest feed in 'istory' is removed, for example, as is the closing reference to the 'slaughter' of the pigs. Furthermore the section on Dülberg's painting is expanded to twice its length, and Beckett examines its composition and imagery in a more conventional and less instrumentalized manner. Finally, as we have seen, the treatment of Mantegna is also more sophisticated in its grasp of the dexterity of the painting's formal manipulation of the viewer.

While the poem continues to engage ideological questions alongside personal and theological ones, the extensive revisions render the poem slightly less scabrous and rather more attuned to the integrity of the two central images it examines. In this the second draft displays a greater fidelity to the poem's animating anxiety: the question of the 'knot of God's pain'. For the sense of the inevitable imbrication of the material with the ideal implicit in this phrase is at odds with the notion of a thoroughgoing demystification of the image along the lines of an ideological critique. The radical, avant-garde notion of a revolutionary cleansing of the image, an unmediated return to the 'ingenuous fibres' of the physical, material and the historical is impossible. The poem admits this impossibility, indeed makes of it a stylistic principle in its constant oscillation between the real and the ideal, the sincere and the comic. The flirtation with the kind of aesthetic politics that William Sinclair espoused must thus be downplayed. And yet the political critique of the image cannot be completely erased if the poem is to remain faithful to its own original occasion in a spirit of rapprochement with Sinclair. That Beckett was unable finally to resolve this contradiction may be the reason why, when the collection *Echo's Bones* finally appears, 'Casket of Pralinen', despite its extensive revisions, is not

included. For by then Beckett had moved beyond the avant-gardes of both Dublin and Germany, and begun to stake out his own territory.

NOTES

1. 'Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin', in *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London, Faber, 2012), 235-7. All quotations from the poem are from this edition.
2. See C.S. Andrews' account of sharing a cell with Salkeld in *Dublin Made Me: An Autobiography* (1979, 137).
3. See De Stijl, 'A Short Review of the Proceedings [of the Congress of International Progressive Artists], Followed by the Statements Made by the Artists' Groups' (1922) in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: da Capo Press, 1974), 58-68.
4. The term 'absolutism' was also used by both Beckett and MacGreevy in this period to describe art and aesthetic positions they disliked. See for example Beckett's praise for the 'absolute absence of the Absolute' in Joyce in 'Dante ...Vico . Bruno .. Joyce' (*Dis*, 33).
5. See Burger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984). This book has its critics of course, most recently Marjorie Perloff and Hal Foster. However, as we shall see Burger's definition of the historical avant-garde as engaged in an institutional critique which attempts to break down the border between art and life exactly describes Sinclair's position.
6. See James and Elizabeth Knowlson Collection, University of Reading, folder entitled Sinclair, Morris (JEK A/2/274).
7. See JEK A/2/274.
8. See JEK A/2/274.

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