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Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett and the Aesthetics of Inattention

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Drawing on the ideas of Jonathan Crary, this article positions Gertrude Stein and Beckett as part of a wider investigation of inattention in twentieth-century culture. Considering first the psychological experiments of Stein, and then Beckett's theatre of the 1970s, the article argues for the importance to literary modernism of language that is not perceived, or only dimly perceived, and exists on the fringes and peripheries of a perceptual field.

attention, distraction, experimental literature, experimental psychology, modernism, perception of speech

In his seminal study, *Suspensions of Perception* (1999), Jonathan Crary suggests that inattention became a major concern across Western culture in the late nineteenth century. In the period, he argues, a normative observer began to be conceptualized: "not only in terms of the isolated objects of attention, but equally in terms of what is not perceived, or only dimly perceived, of the distractions, the fringes and peripheries that are excluded or shut out of a perceptual field" (40). Crary links this development to the "physiological discovery of the nonhomogeneous nature of the eye itself", but the new model of vision, he argues, had a metaphorical impact that would transcend any particular empirical finding. Here, Crary cites the Freudian model of "an unconscious actively denying certain contents to attentive awareness", but also suggests that Freud's theory was one of many in the period to show a concern with themes of "inhibition, exclusion, and periphery" (40).

Crary observes the period's concern with inattention in scientific and philosophical, but also aesthetic works. In particular, his study reads the work of three painters, Edouard Manet, Georges Seurat, and Paul Cézanne, as "*constitutive* elements" of a widespread investigation into the concept of inattention in the period (8, emphasis in original). Each of these painters made "unprecedented discoveries about the indeterminacy of an attentive perception" (8). This focus on painting means that Crary's study inevitably emphasises the way in which aesthetic experimentation contributed to understandings of visual inattention – how we fail to see certain objects, or areas of a visual field. What the scope of his study causes Crary to overlook, though, is the extent to which the emerging interest in inattention affected modernity's relationship with other modes of perception, and in particular the perception of language. This article draws on Crary's argument that aesthetic works are constitutive elements of the modern study of inattention, but shifts its concern from the realm of vision to that of language (in its audible and visible forms). Focusing on Gertrude Stein's psychological experiments of the 1890s and Samuel Beckett's theatrical experimentation of the 1970s, I will argue for the importance to literary modernism of language that is not perceived, or only dimly perceived, and exists on the fringes and peripheries of a perceptual field.

Stein's Experiments with Inattention

As is fairly well known, Stein spent a portion of her early life working at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory. Here she was under the tutelage of two key figures in early experimental psychology, Hugo Münsterberg and William James. Her time in the lab manifests in some experiments – partly carried out with Leon Solomons – on human automatism. These experiments were what we might now call tests of selective and divided attention.¹ By this I mean that Stein and Solomons attempted to find out whether

1 The research of Solomons and Stein would inspire later experiments on divided attention. Spelke, Hirst and Neisser, for example, cite the methods of Solomons and Stein in a series of experiments which test

a subject could perform one linguistic task automatically while their attention was occupied by another. In one experiment the subject is asked to listen for and write down certain dictated words while attention is “occupied as fully as possible in reading” a novel (Solomons and Stein, 497). At first, it is observed, the subject is too “painfully conscious” of the writing task to comprehend what he is reading. Through training, though, the subject acquires a facility for “rapidly shifting attention from reading to writing and back” (497). This is said to involve “the formation of a motor impulse” and a “feeling of effort” (497). But, as the task goes on, both the motor impulse and the feeling of effort go away and the act of writing becomes “real automatism” (497). This usually occurs at points when the novel becomes particularly engrossing: “Every once in a while the story grows interesting and we return to ourselves with a start to find that we have been going on writing just the same” (499-500). It is concluded that, under certain conditions, a linguistic task can be performed without the subject’s attending to it.

There are numerous ways in which Stein’s encounters with scientific method have been seen to inform her later literary and theatrical practice. In terms of the latter, critics such as Adam Frank have highlighted the degree to which Stein’s ideas about theatrical experience were “indebted to her studies in the field of experimental physiological psychology during the 1890s” (99). Here, though, I wish to focus on Stein’s prose and, in particular, the psychological laboratory’s perceived influence upon Stein’s 1914 work, *Tender Buttons*. An illuminating, if slightly blunt, interpretation was made by the prominent behaviourist psychologist B. F. Skinner. In a 1934 article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Skinner suggested that in *Tender Buttons* Stein merely reproduced the “automatic” writing of her earlier psychological experiments (55). Skinner notes that Stein described the writing she produced in the lab as “ordinarily unintelligible” (55). From this he asserts that Stein “could not have failed to notice” the resemblances between this writing and the “unintelligible product” that is *Tender Buttons* (55). Puzzling Skinner, though, is the question of why Stein would choose to publish this product “as a serious artistic experiment” (55). Skinner’s article gives a sense of the potential for convergence between literary and scientific experimentation in the early twentieth century. He recognises *Tender Buttons* as the product of a scientific experiment but his concern is that it will not be recognised as such by all readers. The article betrays an anxiety that the experiment of the scientist can be confused with the experiment of the writer. Here, Skinner invokes Stein’s association with Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, suggesting that her engagement with these artists prompted her to confuse her earlier scientific experiments with art: “with such an experience behind one, it is not difficult to accept as art what one has hitherto dismissed as the interesting and rather surprising result of an experiment” (55). In Skinner’s version of events, Stein made a definite methodological break when she left the scientific lab and started a literary career. However, developments within the artistic world led her – mistakenly in Skinner’s opinion – to see artistic value in the products of her scientific experimentation. An alternative account would suggest that the practices of science and literature were not mutually exclusive – that writing offered Stein ample opportunity for scientific experimentation. Steven Meyer gives a detailed account of this: “Instead of being modelled on scientific experimentation, her [Stein’s] writing turns out to be a form of experimental science itself. It is not just that her ideas about writing were influenced by science; she reconfigured science as writing and performed scientific experiments in writing” (xxi, emphasis in original). For Meyer, Stein’s move to literature should not be seen as a complete methodological break. Rather writing is seen as a new form in which Stein could continue to perform “experimental science”.

Stein’s literary experiments came to the attention of Samuel Beckett, and what Beckett recognised in Stein’s writing was the way in which it brought language down to earth, making it material and permeable. In a much-discussed 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett contrasted James Joyce’s “apotheosis of the word” with Stein’s “Logographs” in which “the texture of the language has at least become porous” (1983, 172). What I think Beckett apprehends in Stein are, in Tim Armstrong’s phrase, “moments of linguistic breakdown or systematic overload” (194) – moments in which the capacity to make sense of language is stretched. Stein though, Beckett speculates, produced this effect “quite by chance” and retained a fairly naive view of language: “the unfortunate lady (is she still alive?) is doubtlessly still in love with her vehicle” (1983, 172). As Georgina Nugent-Folan has argued, Beckett’s fairly dismissive assessment of the earlier author underestimates Stein’s “deep-rooted dissatisfaction with received language” as well as her capacity to transfer the “conundrums of visual representation to

whether, through practice, subjects can acquire the ability to simultaneously perform two tasks that are initially very hard to combine.

the medium of language” (93-4). Particularly in *Tender Buttons*, Nugent-Folan argues, Stein self-consciously produces the “radical and aggressive attack on figurative language and metaphoricity” that Beckett would call for in his letter to Kaun (97). What Stein and Beckett share, in this reading, is a desire to produce literary works that sever words from their pre-existent meanings, and quickly become “unintelligible as word and referent are torn apart and placed in new, unfamiliar relations” (97). What is more, according to Nugent-Folan, Stein and Beckett, took inspiration for this project from a common source: the deanthropomorphised landscape paintings of Paul Cézanne, which, in a comparable fashion, had sought to distinguish “image” from “nature” (97). Like Beckett, in Nugent-Folan’s view, Stein recognised in Cézanne’s paintings “the qualities that she wished to achieve in or through language” (95). Both writers, then, wanted to import into literary writing a critique of representation that had already played out in the visual arts.

Nugent-Folan’s argument is a strong one and I wish to build on it in the remainder of this article. While I agree that Stein and Beckett make a comparable critique of the process by which *we make sense of words*, I would suggest that Beckett’s aesthetic productions go further than Stein’s in scrutinising the way in which words are *attended to*. Stein’s writing, as Nugent-Folan points out, is consistently concerned with “testing the boundaries of meaning” (96). Stein tends to assume that her words will occupy attention but questions the way in which reader’s make sense of them, and there is no doubt that Beckett takes part in this project. At least from *Watt* onwards, Beckett’s novels show a concern with the potential meaninglessness of words. As Laura Salisbury has put it, the novels often “evoke an interference that disarticulates the idea of language as a clear reflection of a pristine world of ideas where meaning noiselessly resides” (356). In *Watt*, for instance, the repetition of a few words over entire pages seems to reduce printed words to a kind of mental noise and this interest moves into audible language in *Molloy* (1951) when Molloy speaks of his tendency to hear words as sounds: “Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third as pure sounds, free of all meaning” (2009, 45). There is a consistent interest in the process by which words are left free of their referential responsibilities and persist as ‘pure sounds’.

This concern is developed in Beckett’s later work. In the text of *Not I*, for example, we are told of a protagonist who speaks but has “no idea” what she is saying (2006, 379). Here, though, Beckett moves from a question of what (or whether) words mean, to one of how they are attended to. This can be seen when the protagonist begins to speak and feels:

her lips moving!..as of course till then she had not...and not alone the lips...the cheeks...the jaws...the whole face...all those contortions without which...no speech possible...and yet in the ordinary way...not felt at all...so intent one is...on what one is saying (379).

The protagonist has moved from an “ordinary way” of attending to spoken words, which focuses on meaning, to an extraordinary one where attention is forced onto the sensory experience. In this case, Beckett is pursuing a possibility opened up by psychological experiments such as those of Solomons and Stein. He produces aesthetic works which explore the way in which we attend to words. For more evidence of this, we must turn to the staging of Beckett’s later drama. Here words are delivered into carefully-designed environments and made to compete with striking visual images. In what follows I will suggest that, in his drama of the 1970s, Beckett sought to bring language down to earth through an aesthetics of divided or selective attention. In plays such as *Not I* and *That Time*, as in many psychological experiments of the period, Beckett presents his audience (or subjects) with multiple channels of stimulation, only some of them being verbal. In these environments, it becomes increasingly difficult to attend to Beckett’s words (let alone engage in exegesis) and so we are left with moments of linguistic breakdown and systematic overload where the fragmented materiality of language comes to the fore.

Darkness as Distraction in *Not I*

Given that in most versions the on-stage action of *Not I* consists of a single mouth speaking, one might wonder how I come to define it as a play that presents multiple channels of stimulation and distracts its

audience from words. Indeed, the production history of the play might suggest that Beckett aimed at heightening our attention to speech. In the original version, the mouth was accompanied by the hooded figure of the Auditor, but in later versions – with Beckett’s approval – the figure was removed, leaving an elevated mouth alone on stage. Beckett also manipulated lighting conditions in an attempt, one might assume, to fix the audience’s eyes on the speaking mouth. In the auditorium, as James Knowlson puts it, “everything is blacked out except for the illuminous mouth” (592). Famously, Beckett and other directors of the play have even requested that the exit signs be turned off (Oppenheim, 111). If the theatrical production is successful, the only source of light should come from the mouth. In this stipulation of darkness, Beckett’s work engages with an aesthetic tradition that stretches back to at least the nineteenth century. For Crary, “[Richard]Wagner initiated the idea of near complete darkness as a way of heightening the intensity of lighting effects on stage and preventing peripheral distraction” (251). These methods have continued into the twentieth century and beyond, particularly in the cinema. Steven Shaviro writes: “The darkness of the movie theatre isolates me from the rest of the audience, and cuts off any possibility of ‘normal perception’. I cannot wilfully focus my attention on this or that. Instead, my gaze is arrested by the sole area of light, a flux of moving images” (47). Time and again, it is assumed that darkness will work to fix attention on the other perceptible stimuli.

There is something problematic about the assumption that darkness necessarily draws attention to other surrounding stimuli – that the theatrical environment Beckett stipulates for *Not I* simply fixes attention on the illuminated mouth and its speech. Is there not a way in which darkness itself might occupy attention? I would suggest that the intensity of the darkness that Beckett stipulates for the auditorium is so effective that it can pull against the audience’s attention to the speaking mouth. Darkness here might be seen to function as what Stephen Kern has called “positive negative space”, a supposed background that threatens to overshadow the nominal foreground (153). This effect can work in a number of ways. One can simply be taken in by the degree of darkness and become engaged in exploring the way in which darkness engulfs the body. Charles Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph* tells us that, in the performance, “you can’t see the hand in front of your face, just the moving lips as the speaker gabbles” (Spencer 2014). Attention, here, is divided between the speech itself and the effects of the darkness. Even as Beckett rids the theatrical environment of distractions by producing darkness, a problem of selective attention arises because the darkness itself becomes a channel that one might attend to in preference to the speaking mouth.

Furthermore, even if one does focus on the mouth, the darkness is likely to change the way in which it is perceived. Because of the darkness, the mouth becomes the object of a psychological illusion known as the “autokinetic” effect. The illusion works as follows: when only one source of light is available to the eyes, this source of light will appear to move around even though it is objectively still.² The mouth in *Not I* is, by design, completely still: Knowlson notes that when Beckett directed the play he made a great deal of effort to ensure that the actor playing Mouth did not “move her mouth even a few centimetres out of a very tightly focussed spotlight” (592). In spite of this, countless audience members have observed the mouth’s apparent mobility. Lyn Gardner (2013), for instance, notes that “the mouth seems to hover and move” as the words are delivered. This creates the possibility for distraction as the audience is brought to question the image that they are seeing rather than the words of the play. As Gardner puts it, the play begins to feel like “a kind of collective hallucination”. The mouth is no longer merely a means of communication but also a distracting object. Finally, the darkness can be a more chronic distraction. It can be terrifying and produce an impulse to get away from the performance. Indeed, conditions in the auditorium during *Not I* have induced panic attacks in members of contemporary audiences – presumably accustomed to the more partial darkness of the cinema (Lane). In this way, the darkness in *Not I* does not necessarily serve to fix or control the audience’s attention. It does not, as Crary puts it in reference to Wagner’s work, “impose a uniform mode of perception” (248). Rather, the darkness serves to splinter the audience. The potential for darkness to distract will depend on the individual audience member’s capacity to adapt to it. For some, the surrounding darkness will heighten the attention paid to the words of the play, but for others it will serve as a significant distraction from it. Any appreciation of the words of the play depends on the nature of an individual’s capacity for adaptation to darkness. Where Stein’s writing (and Beckett’s earlier work) was seen to put a strain on

2. See Adams for an early study of this effect which uses comparable methods to those used in the staging of *Not I*.

the representational capacity of words, Beckett's later theatre interrogates the human capacity to attend to them.

***That Time* and the "Cocktail Party" Problem**

Beckett's experimentation on linguistic inattention continues in the 1976 play *That Time*. Rather than an illuminated mouth, here, Beckett presents a live face (named Listener) alone in the dark. And, rather than speaking, the face is being spoken to. In the presentation of a flickering and often inactive face, Beckett might be seen to experiment on the process of attending to facial expressions.³ However, given the way in which Beckett presents the text of the play, he is also undoubtedly experimenting on the processes by which we attend to speech. The action of the play sees three recorded voices, A, B and C, come to Listener "from both sides and above" (2006, 388). The three voices give out three different memories, which we might assume are from different periods of Listener's life. They give out a huge amount of detailed information about what Listener has experienced and how he has experienced it. This verbal information was intended to be delivered quickly. In an early note, Beckett states that the play should last "15 min" and go at "200wds/min" (qtd. in Gontarski, 156). If the face provokes, what Shane Weller calls "a labour of interpretation" (131) by giving out a dearth of information, the voices provoke equal labour by presenting a torrent of detail. But how do these two sensory channels work together? James Knowlson has observed that in Beckett's drama of this period sight is played off against sound (624).⁴ In a sense, *That Time* is a perfect example of this conflict between ear and eye. It may be suggested that in *That Time*, the voices interfere with the audience's study of the face. Conversely, one might argue that the "labour of interpretation" provoked by the face distracts from the content being voiced. However, the visual and aural stimuli may also be seen to supplement each other. Put crudely, the material presented by the three voices might be seen to represent what is going on in Listener's mind. Thus the voices might help us interpret the face's expression and the face's movements might also help us to interpret the voices. Two sensory channels are, in one sense, competing for attention but, in another, combining to give the audience a sense of what is going on.

The verbal stimulus, though, was not intended as one continuous stream. It is broken up into different channels and these channels also have the potential to come into conflict with each other. This potential for conflict is evident in the manuscripts. Beckett toyed with various ideas as to how he would present speech in *That Time*. S. E. Gontarski recognises that in early drafts there was a large focus on processes of "interruption" and "conflict" between the three channels (156). In the initial draft, Beckett considered a set-up in which there were moments where two of the voices would speak together: "A beginning stops B or C, but for a moment 2 together. A may persist. B or C yield" (qtd. in Gontarski, 156). Beckett's mooted method bears a striking resemblance to a series of experiments that took place in twentieth-century experimental psychology. In presenting two recorded voices simultaneously, Beckett would have produced his own experiment on a psychological effect known as the "cocktail party" problem. This is the question of how, when presented with multiple voices, the human is able to attend to a certain voice and inhibit others. In his review of the field of selective attention, Jon Driver outlines this problem as such: "In many situations (e.g. a noisy room full of people), many sounds enter our ears at once. How are we able to pick out just those sounds that are relevant to us (e.g. the conversation we are taking part in)? Moreover, what is the difference in processing for such attended sounds vs. unattended sounds (e.g. the other conversations taking place in the room)" (54)? There are two questions to tackle here. First there is a question of separating signal from noise in any situation: for example, how I manage to attend to the music coming from my speakers and ignore the sounds of cars on the street, or the buzzing of my refrigerator. This is a question that Beckett had come across in his reading of Gestalt psychology. In his interwar reading, Beckett informed himself of the Gestalt idea of figure and ground. He noted how, when one is presented with aural or tactile stimuli, a "noise figure"

3. See Powell for a discussion of this.

4. Here Knowlson is surely referring to works such as *Play* (1963) and *Footfalls* (1976), as well as *Not I* and *That Time*.

will be recognised against a “noise background” and a “movement on skin” will be recognised against a “general mass of cutaneous sensation” (qtd. in Feldman, 103).

However, in the presentation of the aural stimulus in *That Time*, Beckett is negotiating a slightly different question. In presenting two voices simultaneously, Beckett would not have been asking an audience to separate figure from ground. Instead he would have asked them to choose between two aural figures, a process that became important in the study of attention in twentieth-century experimental psychology. Experiments by Broadbent (1958) and Moray (1959) studied this process through “selective listening” tasks (Driver 54). Here “two different spoken messages were played at the same time” and listeners were required to concentrate on one message rather than the other (54). Driver isolates two fundamental empirical questions that experiments on this subject investigated: first, “what differences between two messages are needed” for successful selective attention? Second, if one is able to selectively attend to one message, how much does one know about the unattended channel (54)? With regards to the first question, Beckett’s method poses some problems for selective attention. In *That Time*, the three channels presented are very similar in content so it would have been difficult to attend to one over the others. Voices A, B and C have the same voice and, as Gontarski notes all are apparently “memories belonging to the visible head” (150). The three channels share certain phrases; they are presented at similar speeds; in a similar tone; and there is nothing in the text to suggest that one is any more significant than the others (Beckett 2006, 388-90). There is, however, one difference that might enable selective attention. Psychological experimentation suggested that for efficient selective attention “there needs to be a clear physical difference between the messages, such as their coming from different locations” (Driver, 54). As he explains in a letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett went down this route: “The chief difficulty of A B & C being the same voice will be to make clear the modulation from one to another, as between attendant keys, without breaking the flow continuous except where silences indicated. I feel that dissimilar contexts and dislocation in space – one coming to him from left, a second from above, third from right – should be enough to do it” (qtd. in Harmon, 329). Beckett’s method, then, gives just enough of a physical difference to give a sense of “modulation” but he also wanted to keep the voices in a continuous flow. In this sense, he would have made selective attention possible but effortful.

With regards to Driver’s second question, it was found that, when one is able to select a particular channel for attention, little is picked up from the other channel. Given a physical difference between the channels, Driver notes, “people appear to know surprisingly little” about the unattended channel: they had little idea about the topic of its speech, and in many cases could not detect a change in language or the repetition of a single word (54). The only changes reported were “unsubtle” changes in physical properties, such as changes in pitch, or the sudden insertion of a loud tone (54). Thus, if Beckett had gone down the route of presenting simultaneous speech it would have likely resulted in chunks of A, B, or C becoming inaccessible. Performance would have probably seen random parts of the text undone. Gontarski suggests that Beckett’s eventually deciding against the presentation of simultaneous voices was part of a wider move towards formalism in the genetic process. For Gontarski, Beckett moved from “a pattern of simple hostility among the voices” to a “harmonious relationship” (156). Beckett’s labour in the writing process, Gontarski suggests, was primarily devoted to “orchestrating the fragments into increasingly complicated patterns” (157). Here, he continues, “the analogy with music is particularly apposite” (157). In Gontarski’s account, Beckett went away from the idea of presenting a dramatic conflict between three voices, towards one of presenting the voices as three elements of a single musical pattern. He goes on to suggest that Listener’s smile (which ends the play) can be explained in terms of an appreciation of form, rather than content:

What Listener appears to be responding to at the end of the play is not the content of the voices but their pattern. In the play’s first section, Listener hears the ACB pattern broken by the final CAB. In the second section, the CBA pattern is broken by the ending BCA. But in the third section Listener can take some pleasure in the restoration of order, or at least a formal harmony, as the BAC pattern is retained throughout the third part.

The notion that Beckett was occupied by formal concerns during the writing of *That Time* (and throughout his career) is beyond question. However, I think Gontarski may overstate the case a little. With regards to the smile, as Shane Weller points out, Gontarski assumes that it is “rooted in pleasure” – downplaying its enigmatic nature (Weller, 130). Furthermore, in Gontarski’s reading, Beckett seems to overestimate a theatrical audience’s capacity to apprehend the pattern that he presents. As an audience member, I would have little chance of keeping track of the complex pattern that unfolds. Though it is possible that Beckett might overestimate his audience in such a way, I wish to advance another theory. Rather, than simply moving from a version of the play which focuses on conflict between voices, to one which focuses on pattern, I would argue that Beckett is interested in playing these two versions against each other. Beckett, I suggest, is not producing patterns for their own sake. Rather, the play investigates how we move between attending to three distinct elements, and apprehending that those elements are a single continuous whole. Here, we can go back to Beckett’s study of Gestalt psychology. According to Matthew Feldman, the major point Beckett took from his notes on the Gestaltists was their insistence on analysing objects and experiences as a whole, rather than analysing them into their elements (313). Beckett’s presentation of the verbal stimulus in *That Time*, though, does not allow us to do one or the other. In a stage note, Beckett stipulated that the stimulus should produce a particular effect in which the switch between voices is “clearly faintly perceptible” (2006, 387). He did not want the verbal stimulus to be experienced as a continuous whole, but neither did he want the distinction between elements to be completely definite. Instead, he brings two degrees of attention into conflict. On the one hand, we might appreciate *That Time*’s text as a single musical piece that moves through a series of formal progressions. But on the other we are presented with three voices that tell different stories and compete for attention. Beckett, I suggest, was interested in exploring the psychological strains that reside between these two degrees of attention. The work is less concerned with what words express than with how they are attended to.

Conclusion: Aesthetic Labours of Attention

In this article, I have positioned Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett as part of a cultural investigation into linguistic inattention that encompassed (and blurred the boundaries between) aesthetic and scientific works. Both Stein and Beckett explored the psychological strains that derive from attending to words, and recognised how easily we can be distracted from verbal stimuli. Beckett’s aesthetic works, though, went further than Stein’s in asking questions about linguistic inattention and the aesthetic value of psychological labour. In works such as *That Time*, Beckett makes the process of attending to speech laborious, seeming to question whether this psychological labour can transition into aesthetic pleasure. In many ways, this question has framed the entire corpus of literary modernism. From the exacting projects of Proust, Eliot, Joyce and Woolf onwards, many prominent modernists work with the assumption that aesthetic pleasure can be derived from language that demands strenuous psychological labour. But Beckett’s work, with its emphasis on human incapacity and attentional strain, interrogates the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and psychological labour in a much more open-ended way. It is often said that Beckett’s writing is “hard work” (and it would be difficult to argue that Beckett intended otherwise) but the works themselves frequently ask us to consider whether this psychological labour is worth it – whether focusing our mind on these stimuli for an extended period of time is likely to deliver an aesthetic pay-off. This question is particularly important in a society in which a single verbal stimulus (aesthetic or otherwise) rarely obtains our undivided attention but competes with a variety of other channels. Beckett’s writing, I argue, helps us question how a literary text fits within a modern perceptual environment, and why we might attend to it preferentially.

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