Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio: A Reassessment, eds. David Addyman, Matthew Feldman and Erik Tønning. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 308pp. £66.99, hardback. ISBN: 978-1-349-95130-7. £52.99, eBook. ISBN: 978-1-137-54265-6.

Beckett criticism is a universe in itself. It leaves no stone unturned in its quest for knowledge and understanding of that most elusive writer, whose works' resistance to exegesis, though frustrating, is for that very reason fascinating and perhaps even oddly gratifying as well. But while there may well be no topic related to Beckett that has gone completely unnoticed, inevitably some areas have been more scrutinised than others. The volume reviewed here, the latest title of Palgrave's 'New Interpretations of Beckett in the 21st Century' series, is a most welcome addition to the field precisely because it privileges a set of texts and considerations that are seldom given due attention: those related to the medium of radio.

Naturally, what could be described as scholarly neglect in Beckett studies would elsewhere easily qualify as widespread interest: the extensive fourth footnote to the introduction alone (16-17) is a suitable reminder of the sheer quantity of scholarly works already devoted to Beckett and radio – and it only encompasses some '[k]ey Anglophone works' (16). This book's salutary engagement with the critical discourse on radiophonic Beckett defines its very core, as it reads less like an introduction to the topic for the general public and more like a multi-faceted effort to bring to attention some choice selections from the microfilm and files to be found BBC's Written Archives Centre, which according to the editors 'shed light upon most BBC productions of Beckett's work over the last 33 years of his life' (12).

Indeed, a number of articles in this volume seem to aim at laying the groundwork for the benefit of present and future researchers rather than proposing new readings themselves. This is perhaps best exemplified by Matthew Feldman's article, which is for the most part a straightforward but most useful list of what he terms 'Beckett's "non-canonical" radio productions' (21). Other instances include Pim Verhulst's meticulous, play-by-play history of the inception, writing and production of Beckett's radio works; and Stefano Rosignoli's legal perspective on copyright and moral rights in Beckett's works, whose studious appendix on the Irish writer's agreements with BBC Radio, presented in table form, 'is meant to integrate critical discourse with supporting data' (147).

In the first half of this volume, however, that sort of selfless investigative fieldwork is more often than not combined with reassessments and fresh insights which stem directly from it. This is the case of Dirk Van Hulle's text on the BBC's changing attitudes towards a still relatively unknown Beckett (which also includes a thorough breakdown of Beckett's radio activities in the 1950s); Erik Tønning's take on the BBC's daunting mission of presenting modernism to a mass audience; and Verhulst's account of the BBC's structural changes and the tensions that ensued, as well as of Beckett's waning interest for radio and of how his return to the medium was greatly motivated by his desire to support family and friends.

As this admittedly simplistic outline suggests, however, there is a great deal of (sometimes but not always acknowledged) overlap between these three articles. It surfaces, rather naturally, when discussing the undeniable, indeed at times catalytic, influence that the BBC in general and the Third Programme in particular had in Beckett's writing and in the dissemination and reception of his works. The allusions to rising tensions within BBC after it was restructured is another

example of this phenomenon. Yet that overlap is also evident in the discussion of rather specific events. For instance, Tønning's discussion of the shift of the Third Programme's approach towards Beckett (from reticence and ambivalence to active if belated courtship), exemplified by the protracted radio production history of *Waiting for Godot* for British airways and corroborated by the BBC's memos exchanged at the time, is also discussed at length, using the same example and similar archival references, in van Hulle's text. While the repetition of certain quotes and details evoke a strong sense of déjà vu, the fact is that, though the subject matter is the same, it is taken in (slightly) different directions, and the importance of that particular episode certainly warrants thorough analyses which will inevitably have points in common.

Most of the articles that make up the second half of this volume hinge more on textual analysis of various Beckett works which were either written for or adapted to radio. Their value for our way of thinking about not only Beckett's radio pieces but also their literary and philosophical import is evident, as they provide readings which are at once solid and bold. For instance, musical notation theory (and more specifically Adorno's thoughts on the subject) gives impetus to Natalie Leeder's comments on works such as *Words and Music, Rough for Radio (I and II)* and *Cascando*, and this theoretical blueprint informs her exploration of the tension between text and performance in Beckett's radio plays. The interplay between words, music and the act of listening in the Irish writer's radio works is also discussed by Melissa Chia, in her study of poetry and music in Beckett, and by Catherine Laws, who imaginatively looks into 'reception' and 'interference' both in terms of the aesthetic listening experience and authorial meddling (or lack thereof) and in terms of the more prosaic but equally important dynamics of the physical broadcasting of content through the air.

While research on a hitherto overlooked but ultimately limited trove of documents is bound to generate repeated information in some instances, collecting essays that attempt to interpret the work of a famously inscrutable writer is more likely to yield a healthy breadth of valid but conflicting claims. In the present volume, this is attested by the welcome exposition of divergent arguments. For example, Steven Matthews considers the radiogenic nature of Beckett's later prose texts, drawing extensively on evidence of Martin Esslin's opinion that radio, 'beyond all other media', ought to be considered 'the proper mode for their dissemination' (250). Yet Paul Stewart's article (which, like Matthews's, also features abundant archival research and historical contextualisation – clearly a defining trait of this volume) questions that notion, partly given Beckett's later prose's 'highly abstract' and 'repetitive' nature (211). The radio production of *Lessness*, in which 'the adaptation for six voices coalescing about a single consciousness' creates a tension that is 'never properly resolved' (223), is deemed representative of the problems engendered by such adaptations. On a similar note, Elsa Baroghel, with a hybrid approach of archival evidence and literary criticism, takes pains to argue, essentially against Beckett himself, that *How It Is* might be 'one of Beckett's most radiogenic prose works' (185).

Special mention is due to Laws for her account of the Nobel laureate's radio productions and reception. Laws's very Beckettian emphasis on the limitations he faced gives rise to a better understanding of the circumstances and constraints related to the medium of radio in mid-20th century Europe; while Beckett's detachment from radio production work is often noted, the reader may be surprising to discover that the writer not only 'struggled to hear the broadcasts due to reception problems' but also 'was generally refused recordings that would allow for repeated

listening and detailed reflection and evaluation' (105). Perhaps more importantly, Laws's article also brings the actual technical production of sound possible at the time into focus. Thereby she seeks to challenge ideas which some scholars have taken for axiomatic in the recent past, such as the immediacy of radio (107) and the medium's potential for the unfettered materialisation of the author's vision. These notions are undermined by the story behind the use of human voices for the animal noises in the first production of *All That Fall*. This may be one of the most fascinating incidents narrated in this volume for readers less acquainted with the literature on Beckett's radio works, since it shows 'the truly significant artistic contribution of the production team for *All That Fall*' (129), as 'the decision to use human voices' actually 'came from McWhinnie, not Beckett', who incidentally 'was unhappy with the idea from the start' and would 'remained unpersuaded' of its merits (111-112).

It is not easy to think of ways this volume could have been improved. It might have been interesting to compare Beckett's radio work with that of some likeminded contemporaries (and friends) such as Harold Pinter and Robert Pinget. John Pilling, to his credit, does write on the history of *The Old Tune*, Beckett's translation of Pinget's *La Manivelle*, but this volume has little to offer in terms of comparative close readings. Having said that, this book explicitly sets out to reassess the complex and changing relationship between Beckett and BBC Radio – and it does that very well indeed. All in all, then, this volume does full justice to its intricate subject matter by dint of the vast array of different approaches and viewpoints it brings together.

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