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Samuel Beckett : Drama as philosophical endgame ?

Diane Waggoner (ed.), *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens—British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*

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REFERENCES

Diane Waggoner (ed.), *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens—British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875* (Washington and Farnham: National Gallery of Art and Lund Humphries, 2010), 230p, ISBN 978-I-84822-067-6.

- 1 This book is the catalogue of the eponymous exhibit which was held at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington from 31 October 2010 to 30 January 2011, and then at the Musée d'Orsay from March 8th to May 29th, 2011. The book deals with the mutual influences of photography and painting from the 1850s to the mid-1870s, during the emergence of photography as a new art form, and reflects on the ways Pre-Raphaelite painting was shaped by the formal and thematic innovations of photography, and vice-versa.
- 2 Diane Waggoner, the curator of the exhibition, starts by examining how the supposed accurate reproduction of reality by photography contributed to realism as the century's dominant visual mode. Hunt's intention was to try and paint outdoors from direct observation of nature, following Ruskin's exhortation to painters to pay great attention to minutiae and detail—as he did himself in *The Stones of Venice*, inspired by his collection of daguerreotypes. The crisply detailed botanical picture became a standard motif, to the point that the Pre-Raphaelites were suspected of copying photographs too meticulously, which, even if it was hardly the case most of the time, shows how the two media were related in the public imagination. Other similarities in the features and effects of Pre-Raphaelite pictures and photographs included flattened

relief, organised planar recession, lack of modulation between forms, abruptly cropped field of vision, delineated and hard-edged outlines.

- 3 The Pre-Raphaelites were personally acquainted with some photographers, for whom they sometimes sat, or whose photos they used to assist them in completing their pictures. However, William Bell Scott was the only Pre-Raphaelite who explicitly acknowledged the seminal influence of photography on the painters' attention to the "impartial agency of sunlight" (7).
- 4 Shaped by their antiquarian interests and initial training in painting, the early practitioners of photography looked to Pre-Raphaelite subject matter and visual strategies as a means of legitimising their medium's status as fine art. Rejlander, Robinson and Cameron often chose their subjects from the same literary sources as the Pre-Raphaelites (Shakespeare, Tennyson, Arthurian lore, religious texts and modern life) and drew on the same range of expressions and poses for their models, who stood out against the same shallow backgrounds. Photographers such as Cameron aimed at greater gradation of tone through manipulation of focus, so as conform to the poetic strain of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites.
- 5 Tim Barringer mainly dwells on the ambivalence of Ruskin's approach to photography. Ruskin commended the faithful rendering of nature, which photography made possible in a radical manner, but deplored in photography the fact that it was too easy and automated, and did not really acknowledge the photographer's labor, input and creativity. If the camera excelled in the pursuit of sharp and focused detail—"rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing"—advocated by Ruskin, he accused paradoxically photography of being too fastidious in its verisimilitude. Nevertheless, Ruskin also likened Turner's works to some photos, admiring the "misty and faint" blurring and overexposed appearance of the sunshine, and saying the medium's potential went far beyond the focused restitution of minute details. So it seems that Ruskin was very divided, somewhat afraid of this new and unfamiliar medium—which offered what he was looking for, but perhaps in too novel and radical a way.
- 6 Jennifer L Roberts, in probably the most fertile and richest chapter, examines the rhetoric of the "Sun-as-author" of photography (*heliography*) and outdoor painting. The sun's action, she says, was one of formal, emotional, chemical and botanical decomposition.
- 7 The parcellation and all-over glittering hues of Pre-Raphaelite pictures tended to compromise spatial recession and create forward-thrusting spatial effects—doing away with Claudian formulas. Pre-Raphaelite pictorial fecundity owed to the biological fecundity of shadow in which thrive plant life and ecosystems, now fully represented.
- 8 The sunlight's effects on all local surfaces, including its physical toll on human skin, produced a shared emotional state that also broke down the social barriers between the viewed and viewer. Indeed, the blemished complexions of the flirtatious shepherd and shepherdess in the *Hireling Shepherd* made viewers and critics blush alike, mirroring for an instant the sunburnt redness of the shepherd and shepherdess. These sensory responses in the viewer were enhanced by the general glaring overvisibility, the absence of shaded foregrounds, framing coulisses and other protective devices from the depicted space.
- 9 The actinism of the Sun (literally ray power) also governed organic growth, thereby linking photographic and botanic experiments. In a self-reflexive manner, the

innumerable foliage studies of Victorian photographers “developed through the same processes of actinic exposure as the images that captured them”, making the photographer a “harvester of the products of the sun’s actinism” (66).

- 10 This photographic rhetoric of actinism which breaks down chemical compounds both in photography and botany implied metaphorically the destruction of existing forms to make new ones. But more broadly, actinism confronted viewers with a fundamental misalignment between the natural world and its estranged and alien visual image, in that certain wavelengths acted more effectively on the sensitive paper than others, thereby decentring human perception as the organizing principle of visual aesthetics. A number of strategies were devised to reharmonize with familiar perception, creating new viewpoints, with a high or nonexistent horizon line—so that the blues of the sky were removed—, or close studies to reduce tonal discrepancies.
- 11 Diane Waggoner’s second essay deals with photographic portraits, approached by Wynfield and Cameron with a greater breadth of tone. They manipulated focus in an attempt to create muted, softer images that emulated the old masters. Lady Clementina Hawarden’s pictures, despite their descriptive clarity, also conveyed a general effect of softness.
- 12 These portraits share a sensibility and formal correspondences with those of Rossetti and Watts, to whom they were personally connected. The cross-fertilisation between Cameron and Watts is testified by the portraits the two made of the actress Ellen Terry in 1864 and 1865, who was also photographed at that time by Dodgson. Watts sometimes was quite critical of the awkward composition or repetition of Cameron’s photos, but he complimented her on the sculptural quality and the tonal range of her portraits, which he believed was comparable to the use of color in painting.
- 13 In July 1865, Rossetti commissioned the photographer John Robert Parsons to take a series of portraits of Jane Morris at Tudor House, the painter’s London home. He subsequently used the photographs as visual source for Morris’s facial features, hair and body posture for a series of oil paintings. Despite his admiration for Cameron’s allusive work, as aide-mémoire, Rossetti deliberately preferred photographic readability, which was characteristic of Dodgson’s portraits. Dodgson had reservations about Cameron’s photographs, maintaining that clear delineation was essential to successful photographs.
- 14 Joanne Lukitch’s mainly focuses on the opinion of the Pre-Raphaelites about Cameron’s art. Cameron probably met members of the Pre-Raphaelite group through Tennyson or through her sister’s (Sara Prinsep) famous Sunday salon. William Michael Rossetti initially lauded Cameron’s ability to transfigure both the subject matter and the reproducing process itself, which he considered as merely transcriptive. Yet later, he disparaged her fallacious images of groups and her contrived practice of literary titles, with which she tried to imitate the double visual and verbal works of the Pre-Raphaelites. Cameron praised Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works (*Found*) for being Italian-like, and he praised hers for the same reason and for her skill in staging models and effects of tone. Most of her works depict women with unbound hair and prominent necks (among which Rossetti’s model Marie Spartali), a typical Rossetti physical type starting in 1859.
- 15 Britt Salvesen focuses on the Victorian voracious taste for didactic narratives, which they considered as the distinguishing characteristic of British art. Pictures either had enough detail and symbolic allusions to allow for the deciphering of an invented

narrative or illustrated familiar texts (Edward Moxon's publication of Tennyson's poetry in 1857 was illustrated with drawings by Rossetti, Hunt and Millais). Literary titles conferred to pictures a higher status than the genre of portraiture, and also had the additional advantage of giving them greater intelligibility. Galleries and museums were also social places where visitors demonstrated and observed viewing behaviour, modelled by the reviews of critics.

- 16 Even if both photography and painting borrowed from one another, it seemed that photography would later shake traditional painting to the core, much more so than the opposite. As it supplanted the fine arts in its ability to record minute factual detail, it challenged painting to find a different aesthetic niche.
- 17 This edited collection is quite welcome since little scholarly attention has been paid to the influence of Pre-Raphaelites on contemporary photography practice, apart from a few books. This thought-provoking book is more pioneering in its focus on a subject which had not hitherto been treated for its own sake, than in the content of its reflections.
- 18 The fact that it groups chapters written by different authors provides for a welcome diversity of thought, but also means there is no overarching structure. Repetitions between chapters are not rare, and some ideas are evoked in certain chapters which would better buttress arguments in other chapters. Moreover, sometimes a statement in a chapter contradicts what is asserted in another chapter, for instance the Pre-Raphaelite's use of photography as a practical device to aid the completion of a painting. Furthermore, some chapters are a little piecemeal, with a hodgepodge of examples, and lack demonstrative argument and consistency. In addition, the term Pre-Raphaelite encompasses a vast number of painters in this book, but the contours of this corpus—whose scope varies from book to book—is not precisely defined.
- 19 As for the material aspect of the book, the book provides a short useful glossary of the photographic processes discussed in the volume and has many large high quality reproductions—including works that are seldom viewed. Unfortunately, the pictures or plates described or alluded to are sometimes on the page, but more often in a separate section, which does not always make for easy and smooth reading.

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Keywords: photography, Pre-Raphaelites, heliography, Actinism, botany, Stones of Venice (The)

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