

Alix Beeston, *In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 280 pp.

Reviewed by **Stuart Burrows**, Brown University

Alix Beeston's *In and Out of Sight* is one of several exciting and innovative accounts of the relation between literature and photography to appear in recent years, studies that have charted a new course for the field away from a focus on questions of realism and indexicality. I have in mind such works as Louise Hornby's *Still Modernism: Photography, Literature, Film* (2017) and Christina Walter's *Optic Impersonality: Science, Images, and Literary Modernism* (2014). These works explore a set of new and compelling contexts for literary modernism, inspired in part by Michael North's *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (2005), which first made the case for uncoupling photography from its default association with literary realism. Hornby's work in particular is very closely related to Beeston's powerful new study, sharing her fascination with questions of seriality and stillness. Beeston makes a number of important contributions of her own, in part thanks to her highly impressive range. One of the most striking aspects of recent first books is the ease with which they toggle between various distinct disciplines. This surely owes much to the extraordinary demands made of junior scholars, who feel the imperative to produce mature, sophisticated work almost at the very beginning of their careers. *In and Out of Sight* displays an admirable grasp of work in art history, philosophy, cultural history, feminism, queer studies, ethnic studies, and literary theory, as well as with the extensive criticism of the works under discussion.

The central concern of *In and Out of Sight* is to map modernist narration "onto the conspicuous appearances and disappearances of female bodies that are constituted in, and constituent of, that narration" (5). Beeston situates her work as related to feminist and queer studies scholars' recent attempts to recuperate "the radical potential of the absent-present female body in photography and cinema" (6), pointing especially to Karen Beckman's *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, Feminism* (2003). In the process she is somewhat critical of earlier work on the relation between literature and photography, which she argues fails to attend to the serial production of female subjectivity she places at the heart of the modernist project (full disclosure: my own book, *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1839-1945*, is judged culpable in this regard, whether fairly or not I leave to readers to decide). Beeston challenges the idea that photography should be thought of as a singular form, noting its various means of circulation: the production of albums, archives, montages, collages, and slideshows. For Beeston, "the irrepressible movement of photography toward multiplicity and sequentiality might well be understood as its elemental property" (14). Her introduction provides ample evidence for this claim, citing among other works Eadweard

Muybridge's sequences of photographs of movement, Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic images, and August Sander's photographic portraits.

Beeston focuses on five literary works: Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909); Jean Toomer's, *Cane* (1923); John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925); and F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, along with his screenplay "Cosmopolitan," loosely based on the short story "Babylon Revisited." For Beeston, "each of these texts encompass a number of generic borderlines. But they are all composite in form inasmuch as they operate in a segmented, serialized mode of narration and characterization that constructs narrative persons reiteratively, as aggregates or assemblages" (4-5). Such language recalls Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines*, his extraordinary 1992 study of literary naturalism. Beeston's reading of modernism makes it sound at times as a version of Seltzerian naturalism, which makes her decision to leave the relations between the two movements unexplored all the more disappointing, with the exception of a brief but thought-provoking comparison between the heroine of *Manhattan Transfer*, Ellen Thatcher, and Carrie Meeber, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, a novel explicitly concerned with serial female identity. Beeston's omission is all the more striking since her study begins by examining a key work for studies of visuality in the late nineteenth-century literature: British scientist Francis Galton's composite portraits, images made from a series of photographs, each one underexposed in inverse proportion to the total number of pictures being melded together. Beeston argues, with striking originality, that "[r]ather than a genealogy of biological types, Galton's composite portraiture offers a genealogy of its own mediated technology: a history of textual reproduction" (4). Seen in this light, Galton's images, she contends, offer "a surprising but compelling model for the poetics and politics of modernist literary texts" (4).

One of the most exciting aspects of *In and Out of Sight* is its repeated juxtaposition of literary texts alongside serial works of portrait photography. Beeston reads *Three Lives*, for example, in the context of several surrealist works, most notably Salvador Dali's 1933 *la phénomène de l'extase*—his collage of female faces mostly drawn from Jean-Martin Charcot's file of female hysterics—and Claude Cahun's *Portrait de Mademoiselle X* (1930), a collage of female faces and body parts recasting the "silence, absence and death of the female self-other as a form of witness and presence (54). Yet perhaps Beeston's most valuable service is simply her insistence on reading the three narratives of *Three Lives* against one another, a move which allows her to see Stein's heroine Melanctha as one of a series of vanishing women. Beeston uncovers the same structure in Toomer's *Cane*; in her eloquent formulation, "*Cane*'s women-in-series materialize and dematerialize in flashes of light" (80). Here again this movement is thrown into relief by way of a comparison with a photographic series, in this case Alfred Stieglitz's composite portrait

of Georgia O'Keefe, "in which the object of sight is liable to disappear in her very visibility" (81).

Beeston's most fully realized chapter is her reading of *Manhattan Transfer*, which coolly dispatches critical truisms concerning Dos Passos' supposed camera eye. *In and Out of Sight* contends that the text "shows its debt to photographic technologies in its essentially iterative mode of narration and characterization. By the novel's composite logic, both women's bodies and the modern city are rendered serially, accrued and assembled in sequence" (109). The chapter makes this argument by way of a fascinating account of the novel's relation with popular theater, most notably the Ziegfeld follies, famous for their tableaux vivants. In Beeston's arresting formulation, "The Follies girl was . . . poised, cool and gleaming, at the interface between the singular and the multiple, the personal and impersonal, and the animate and inanimate" (115). According to Beeston, drawing on Siegfried Kracauer's important work on vaudeville in the 1920s, the Ziegfeld follies featured "girls whose celebrity counterintuitively rests on their anonymity" (120).

Beeston's focus on the chorus line makes for a satisfying transition to her final chapter, on Fitzgerald's late work for Hollywood. Breaking free of the hagiographic approach of so much Fitzgerald criticism, she argues brilliantly that a novel such as *The Last Tycoon* "recalibrate[s] the trope of the woman-in-series in concert with 'the generalized logic of substitution, citationality, and seriality'. . . constituent of Hollywood film production" (149), with its "chain of stand-ins and body doubles" (149). She describes Hollywood as "a magical zone . . . where things, and bodies, always happen more than once" (161), a place of stunt doubles and assembly-line writing. Beeston connects the editorial labors on this unfinished manuscript with the multiple authorship of the screenplay, a text she rightly places back at the center of modernist literary production.

*In and Out of Sight* is at times somewhat diffuse—a result perhaps of its willingness to examine so many different artistic forms and movements—and the link between literary text and photography can be somewhat strained. Yet the readings that emerge are powerful and persuasive, whether or not the reader is completely convinced by Beeston's contention that the texts she analyzes release "the [photographic] women-in-series from the tyranny of fetishization, objectification, and destruction" (140). *In and Out of Sight* is a welcome contribution to modernist and visual studies, persuasive evidence that these intertwined fields remain as vibrant as ever.