SEEING THINGS:
The Brain and Beckett’s Archive

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This article considers two contemporary cultural preoccupations – brains and archives – in the light of Samuel Beckett’s work. It sees these not so much as a pseudocouple but twins proper, connected by their recourse to materiality. It addresses the experience of working with archival material, and concentrates particularly on the effects of handling Beckett’s handwriting; the contact that this creates and how we can account for it. It finally turns to the theory of the extended mind, and considers the implications of this theory for our work and our accounts of physical culture.

It is unsurprising that the ever-increasing public exposure of brain science coincides with the flourishing of archival work on Samuel Beckett, which also has its public dimension. Both respond to an excitement and an anxiety about materiality. They are founded on the promise of a certain substantial resource from which to draw, and against which to check something more intangible: an effect of mind, whether deficit or excess, or an interpretation. They answer to our urge to see and to touch something that cannot be gainsaid, and in doing so give the false impression that the explanatory buck stops here, at this or that immovable object. In the figures of the brain and the archive we appear to have something solid: solid enough to stand by, solid enough to read from. They represent an antidote to theories of mind and psychological and psychoanalytic assertions that resist reliable demonstration, as well as to textual interpretations that feel as insubstantial as they are rhetorically sophisticated. The chimerical nature of this corporeal comfort is one sense of my title, “seeing things.” But I would like to suggest that this fascination with substance has another important element, which has nothing to do with epistemology or the scientific method, but that is illuminated by the research done in the brain sciences.

If Beckett studies – and indeed literary criticism more widely – has felt the effects of an occasionally overstated falsifiability problem (see Feldman 2006a), this is an epistemic near neighbour of the replication
crisis found in psychology. Driven by new technologies, materials and methods, psychology has found that some of its central principles, especially priming effects, are not reliably repeatable.\(^1\) This not only threatens the formulation of a specific set of theories but the constitution of the discipline itself as a science. Ed Yong has pointed out the disproportionately positive findings of psychology journal articles, and how these fit within a broader narrative that denigrates the repetition of experiments and champions – and funds – the production of new discoveries (2012). As such, while psychology’s knowledge claims are founded on its experimental rigour and the elimination of false theses by demonstration, its practice relies on the surprising effects gained from experiments done as few times as is respectable.

While literary studies has not, to my knowledge, suffered from this collective bad faith there is a parallel. The continued expansion of the canon associated with important revaluations of culture in light of social, racial, gender and sexual factors has, inadvertently, led to occasional denigrations of quality, an idea now tainted with connotations of retrogression and elitism. That is, the essential reformulation of a canon – and especially its growth – has sometimes obscured the individual principles that demand such a reformulation, even cementing the privilege of hegemonic authors and groups. Novelty has become the criterion not only for commercial but for academic interest. To find something new frequently carries great prestige, and quietly passes over the less glamorous reality of archival work. Like much science, the archival scholar’s results are predominantly negative. At the time of writing, the *Times Literary Supplement* had recently celebrated the discovery of a new poem by the bankable Philip Larkin, “In and Out.” The subsequent disappointment and embarrassment caused by the discovery that it was the work of a different Hull poet, Frank Redpath, only serves to demonstrate the disproportionate value given to ‘new’ work by established authors. The poem was withdrawn from the *TLS* website, and will likely return to obscurity. What is less frequently noticed is how this type of scenario constitutes a part of a broader recourse to the material – unknown manuscripts found in dusty folders – and an anxiety or distrust of its opposite. Insubstantial and immaterial are terms of dismissal.

There is a sense of wonder common to each of popular culture’s frequent visits to the brain. As the curator of the 2012 exhibition at the Wellcome Trust, *Brains: The Mind as Matter*, observes in his preface to the accompanying volume, it is *de rigueur* to express surprise at the dull