

BECKETT, GIACOMETTI, AND THE GEOMETRY OF BEING

by

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
I Discovery: Beckett in Perspective--and out	4
II Space: The Sculptural Locus	13
III Space: The Geometric Grid	17
IV Time: Duration and Change	22
V Discourse: Text as Duration	31
VI Disappearance: Silence as Change	35
VII Sculptural Theater: In the Absence of Mallarmé	39
Notes	46
Works Cited	49

"To gather myself into the artifice of eternity"
 Yeats
 "To find a form that accommodates the mess"
 Beckett

Introduction

A recurrent motif in the plays of Samuel Beckett is the need to see and the difficulty of seeing. Winnie, in *Happy Days*, polishes her glasses in vain, doubling the visual aid with a magnifying glass for reading. In *Endgame*, Clov peers through a telescope though he gathers no useful information. After publishing *The Unnamable*, Beckett turned to the theater from the ordeal of writing novels, a pursuit which he felt to be advancing into the black.¹ His plays met a need to visualize the man he had been writing into existence and to put him on stage for others to see: "I wrote *Godot* to come into the light. I needed a habitable space, and I found it on the stage."² The positioning of his characters on the stage gave him the dimensions in which to work, but in addition the stage provided a pedestal on which to place a more profound expression of human experience. As Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote in an essay on Beckett, "The condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be *there*. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways of representing reality."³

Criticism of Beckett's drama generally addresses the three full-length plays: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. However, consideration of all the plays reveals variations on persistent themes which by and for definition must be brought to light and sound by means of performance. Beckett's work was a process, and the repertoire of plays represents a continuous obligation, as he believed, to fail again, fail better. This paper examines Beckett's dramatic repertoire in light of the physical presentation of performance. Specifically it

places his plays in relation to the visual arts, including the employment of perspective from its early significance to its rupture in twentieth century abstract art, and in particular it offers a comparison of the plays with the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti. Furthermore, it places this relationship in its broader matrix of geometry. As scientific method progressed dramatically through the twentieth century, geometry evolved from the basic tool for measurement of Euclid and Descartes to the means for describing the Einsteinian universe. Concurrently, certain artists have expanded the idea of form as a stylistic tool until it is inclusive of content. By means of possibilities indicated by the Symbolist poet-playwrights (the static and introspective stylization, the combining of once separate art forms), Beckett broke with literary and visual traditions to experiment with a theater synthesizing significant aspects of abstract art and modern science.

A similarity between Samuel Beckett's plays and painting has been observed by actress Billy Whitelaw and Beckett critic Ruby Cohn.⁴ But there is a fundamental departure from the analogy in that for Beckett the stage transcended the two-dimensional boundaries of painting and printing alike. Beckett wrote that "for Proust, as for the painter, literary style is more a question of vision than of technique" (*Proust* 67).⁵ Beckett shared with Proust that emphasis on vision, but the statement also suggests a crucial difference between the two. To the degree that dramatic style differs sharply from literary style, the transition to the stage required a contingent transition, of which Beckett the art critic was surely aware, from the methods of the painter to those of the sculptor. In his essays on the paintings of Geer and Bram van Velde, Beckett wrote that the history of painting is the history of its relations with its object, in the sense of representing breadth and variety, and of exploring depth which follows insight into the object and its chance presence, and leads "*vers la chose que cache la chose*" (*Dis.* 135). Like the literary style of Proust, painting is linked to evolving traditions of perspective and

composition which are components of narrative whether pictorial or literary. Beckett clearly abstained from representational painting, preferring the abstract: that which confesses to the artist "literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression" (*Dis.* 140). On the one hand, the artist must admit that he cannot see the object in order to represent it because it is unreachable and unseizable ("*l'empêchement-objet*"). On the other hand, the object cannot be seen because of who the artist is ("*l'empêchement-oeil*") (*Dis.* 136). In either case, what is to be depicted is the experience of the dilemma, although the predicament "seems to contain in itself the impossibility of statement" (*Dis.* 140). The wriggling consternation of commitment to the abstract in art is a mandatory escape from the tyranny of perspective and its battalions of complex solid objects.

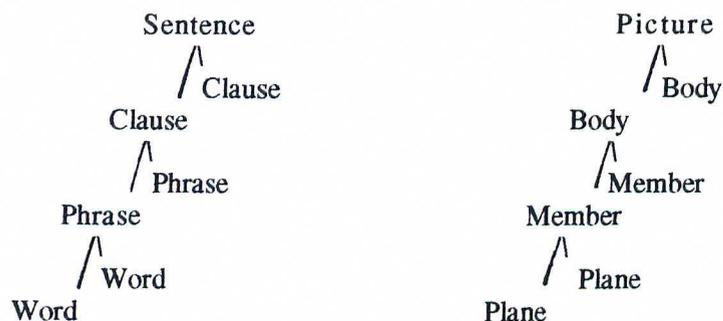
I. Discovery: Beckett in Perspective--and out

The visual sense has often been granted privileged status as the main organ of experience, and as such was the subject of extensive scientific and artistic inquiry during the Italian Renaissance, especially for what the image might contribute to religious experience. The religious image in painting flourished as a means to instruct and incite faith, and along the way provided a field for the interpretation of experience. During the Quattrocento, Brunelleschi and Alberti applied the science of optics to painting which resulted in the development of perspective, or the geometrically controlled picture space. The underdrawing of Italian Renaissance painting is often plainly constructed by means of a complex web of vanishing points. Anticipating the concerns of the time, Dante wrote, "One sees sensibly and rationally according to a science that is called Perspective, arithmetical and geometrical."⁶ In Alberti's *On Painting* of 1435, Book I is entirely a geometry of perspective. For the viewing public's comprehension of perspective, the painters relied on the emphasis given Euclidean geometry in civic education. The second four years of a child's schooling were mainly devoted to math and geometry, and fostered the prominence of mercantile geometry--gauging and proportion--in the experience of Renaissance painting. A geometric grid was readily perceived as a theoretical skeleton of space, and was used daily for surveying everything from buildings and land tracts to Bellini's *Transfiguration*.⁷ Such an emphasis on geometry skills was related theologically to moral and spiritual vision, and as such served the dramatic function of Biblical narrative. Perspective was used to edit reality by controlling the focus of the viewer and composing the space surrounding the main figures.

Composition was a related attribute, serving to connect the formal means to narrative ends. The method of composition invented by Alberti was "a systematic

harmonization of every element in a picture towards one total desired effect."

Alberti based his model upon that of the literary criticism of the humanists, ". . . for whom *composito* was the way in which a sentence was made up, with a hierarchy of four levels": sentence, clause, phrase, word. In terms of painting, "Pictures are composed of bodies, which are composed of parts, which are composed of plane surfaces."⁸



Again the basic building blocks are geometric--planes, proportion, volume--and the purpose is to narrate by dictating a specific and integrated time, place, and event.

Such was the concern of painting into the twentieth century. Cubism broke free of traditional perspective with its illusionistic space. Recasting the elements of the geometric plane, it explored the painting as an abstract arrangement of lines and color shapes that may be variously arranged. Perhaps the most influential outcome was the depiction of multiple perspectives, as for example Picasso's paintings of profile and frontal views seen simultaneously, so that not only was pictorial space reevaluated, but time was introduced. The breakthrough of abstract painting meant a further distancing from traditional perspective by a refusal to represent the object. Yet even abstract painting is defined by boundary or frame, and surface, and as such controls and captures the observer's point of view. The viewer's line of sight conforms to that which is upon the canvas, and the painting

provides the visual content inclusively: the frame is the parameter within which the painting functions.

Sculpture, by virtue of being freestanding, may escape the matrix of perspective and composition and so can more readily be divorced from narration. True, the subjects of Renaissance sculpture often derived from an event. But just as the work of Donatello shifted sculpture from an architectural element to the solitary figure on a pedestal, the intent shifted from the narrative context to the body itself, both technically and as an expression of the mind or soul. As the figurative volume became isolated in space, so too the mind was caught in a single state. The twentieth century rediscovery of the potential of sculpture was a return to basic elements stripped of narrative perspective: line and color, or geometric planes and solids interpenetrating the natural environment of space. Because literary style is, in the manner of representation and perspective, analogous to painting, a play may resemble sculpture.

Beckett's departure from the novel was a search for a more adequate form, one that would place man in the twentieth century, and more precisely, in the necessity of abstract art. The highly visual impact of a Beckett stage play seldom serves narration or depicts an event. Rather, Beckett performs a Cartesian stripping away of anything supposed extraneous to lay bare some basic fact. In *Three Dialogues*, Beckett reflects on his own esthetic when he refers to the artist Masson, "having remarked that western perspective is no more than a series of traps for the capture of objects, declares that their possession does not interest him" (*Dis.* 141).

The relationship of Beckett's drama with sculpture can be best illustrated in light of the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti.⁹ His characters bear a striking resemblance to Giacometti's figures, and the connection is neither accidental nor merely fortuitous. The two artists met about 1937, and sustained a close

friendship over the years. It is a risky conjecture to suppose mutual influence, but in Giacometti's work and scattered writings one perceives a shared aesthetic with Beckett. In their only documented collaboration they were of like mind. Beckett asked Giacometti to design the stage set, that is, the tree, for a revival of *Waiting for Godot*. As described by Giacometti, "All one night we tried to make that plaster tree larger or smaller, its branches more slender. It never seemed right, and each of us said to the other: maybe."¹⁰ The determination of Alberto's brother was required to call the tree finished, load it in a truck, and put it on the stage. And yet they continued to worry at it, as recalled by Jean Martin who played Lucky: "Every night Sam and Giacometti came before the beginning of the play. Giacometti would change the position of a twig a little bit and then Sam would come later and he would change it. It was just as if it was the most important thing. And in fact it was a very important thing you know."¹¹

Giacometti's biographer, John Lord, described his artistic method thus: "the pursuit of the real must begin with the elementary particle of the visible."¹² Giacometti recalled the frustrations of the quest: "A large figure seemed to me false and a small one equally unbearable, and then often they became so tiny that with one touch of my knife they disappeared into dust. But the heads and figures seemed to me to have a bit of truth only when small."¹³ The eventual outcome consisted of large figures distorted by elongation to the point of being abstract. "I saw anew the bodies that attracted me in reality and the abstract forms which seemed to me true in sculpture, but I wanted to create the former without losing the latter, *very briefly put*."¹⁴ In fact, it is only from a narrow corridor of distance, about nine feet, that the figures may be seen as human. They are more abstract than, for example, much of the work of Constantin Brancusi or Henry Moore; a bird's flight or maternity is an event with past and future. The elementary particle of the real

is ever elusive, liable to disappear into the surrounding space. Giacometti described the process of attempting to fix on the object:

. . . every time I look at the glass it gives the impression of reforming itself, that is to say, its reality becomes questionable, because its projection into my brain becomes questionable, or partial. One sees it as though it were *disappearing*, appearing again, disappearing, reappearing . . . that is to say, that it is damned well always between being and nonbeing. And that is what one wants to copy. The entire approach of modern artists is to seize, to capture something that escapes continually.¹⁵

Thus Giacometti articulated with remarkable synthesis his central artistic concerns: the primary field of space which is the only constant, the elusive object (the arbitrary glass in this instance) of perception, the brain which attempts to construct a reality by fixing on an object essentially from an alien dimension, and finally the efforts of the artist to capture the visual representation. The artist's endeavor was stated by Giacometti as a problem: to find the form that expresses that fleeting glimpse of the real, the *process* of perception--an effort destined to fail.

The same may well be said of Beckett's work in the theater. Like Giacometti, Beckett was concerned with stating the problem, not pronouncing the outcome. Thus he affirmed: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now."¹⁶ "Art has always been thus - pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric. . . ." (*Dis.* 91). Beckett experimented with prose form in order to write the text of the merest being. In *The Unnamable* the narrator/author describes himself: "perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, . . . that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness" (*Unnamable* 383). In Beckett's transition to drama, this slender Giacometti-like figure is placed upon the stage,

visually locating Beckett's unique style with which he would attempt to accommodate the mess. Beckett shared with Giacometti a conception of an abstract and elemental figure placed at a specified distance, and surrounded by space. Space as such is not background, but rather the primary field against which form, shape, and color gain delineation and definition.

The common terms of a shared esthetic immediately come to the fore when one compares two of Giacometti's sculptures with *Endgame*. Giacometti's *No More Play* (1933) is an abstracted chess board at the final stage of play. Two pieces remain standing, a skeletal figure is dimly visible in one of three "sepulchres" on the border between the two sides of the board, and all is frozen within the enclosure of the board. A second sculpture, *The Cage* (1951), supports two figures within a skeletal box mounted on a tall pedestal. One figure has greater mass but is seen as a bust only, and the other stands slender and tall to one side. Beckett's *Endgame*, or *Fin de Partie*, is also the end of a chess game, or the end of everything: "Finished . . . It must be nearly finished" (*Endgame* 1). Beckett described the play as "dark as ink," and as more claustrophobic than *Waiting for Godot*.¹⁷ The stage is used as an enclosed box minus the fourth side, and the only door leads to Clov's adjacent, though unseen, kitchen. In the play there is no communication to the outer world. There is minimal motion in the play, which opens with "*Brief tableau*." Nag and Nell are immobile, prematurely, but barely, entombed in ashbins. Hamm sits massively mounted on a wheel chair, his legs covered by a rug, recognizably human only from the chest up. At the close of the play the only mobile character, Clov, stands by the door "*impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end*." The last two pieces on the board are frozen in a tableau strikingly similar to *The Cage*.

Indeed, complementary images abound in other works. Giacometti passed through a period of conceiving of the figure as landscape (a head lying down or the

woman with her throat cut), and later focused entirely on heads, for years. His studies of the head of Diego atop a heap of plaster (1957) bear a striking resemblance to Winnie in her mound. And the rictus of *Head on a Stalk* (1947) morbidly echoes Winnie's song at the close of *Happy Days*. Other plays present heads: *Play* calls for three heads emerging from urns, and lighting is often used to isolate the head amidst drapery and darkness. Giacometti's *Between Two Houses* (1950) suggests the confinement of May's pacing in *Footfalls*. Moreover, Giacometti used the word "*personnages*" for the bronze figures in his studio, the technical French term referring to the characters in a play. In several etchings and lithographs from 1950 to 1954, often titled *Personnages dans l'atelier*, the sculptures are depicted in dramatic and dynamic rapport as witnessed by their creator. Between these two artists there was quite apparently a commensurate experience and language of form.

In considering Beckett's plays as sculptural one might logically exclude the radio plays. However, *All That Fall* is resoundingly visual by way of the audible. The central character, Maddy Rooney enters the scene by means of the sound of her feet dragging. She is soon offered a "lift" in Mr. Slocum's truck, and the capacious Mrs. Rooney directs him to heave her in, "As if I were a bale . . . Get your shoulder under it" (CSP 18). To extricate her from the truck a boy tugs at her while Slocum presses her down so that she will clear the door. She must then be supported while mounting the station steps which to her are equal to the face of a cliff. She must be held even while she stops for breath, and the assisting Miss Fitt threatens to drop her. When they finally reach the platform, Mrs. Rooney asks Miss Fitt to "just prop me up against the wall like a roll of tarpaulin" (CSP 25). The medium of radio of course transmits sound effects and text. But an unavoidable image of Maddy Rooney emerges from those sounds as a large piece of soft sculpture, something like Mrs. Potato Head, being lugged through the landscape.

Beckett said little to explain his plays, but he was definite about their production: "Any production which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me." Beckett's American publisher, Barney Rosset, stated further: "The set, the movements of the actors, the silences specified in the text, the lighting and the costumes are as important as the words spoken by the actors."¹⁸ Any production of a Beckett play is clearly intended to reproduce as accurately as possible the visual image Beckett intended. The stage directions generally designate the distance at which the characters are to be viewed, which includes the proportions of stage matter. The theater itself allowed Beckett to dictate distance effectively, as the audience is seated at a determined position and the stage itself provides the pedestal on which objects and actors are arranged, often with an eye to long, medium, and short range camera shots. For example, Beckett evaluated the relative effect of *Endgame* by theater size: "In the little Studio des Champs-Élysées the hooks went in" (*Dis.* 108). Winnie in the mound up to her waist in Act I of *Happy Days* resembles a medium camera shot, while in Act II the focus on Winnie from the neck up increases the claustrophobia by imitating a close-up. In *Play*, the stage directions designate that the urns containing the actors be one yard high, for which it is necessary to have traps in the stage for standing or to have the actors kneel. If the actors must stand, the urns enlarged to full length must be moved back to mid-stage so that they *appear* to be shorter. "The sitting posture results in urns of unacceptable bulk and is not to be considered" (*CSP* 159).

The nature of the surrounding space becomes through Beckett's oeuvre both more confined, by eliminating exits, and infinite by shading the stage into blackness. His first play, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), is traditional in terms of exits and entrances, and of uniform lighting. In *Endgame* (1957), the stage is more claustrophobic, and though an outside world is acknowledged there is no contact with it by means of exits, and it is described as uniformly grey, a site of death. In

Happy Days (1961), the mound is in blazing light, and behind it is a "*trompe-l'oeil* backcloth to represent unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in the far distance" (H.D. 7). Later plays such as *Play*, *Come and Go*, and *Footfalls* employ varied amounts of spotlighting on the actors while the surrounding stage shades to black. Increasingly the plays eliminate exits and entrances, backdrops, and even references to an exterior world. The stage evolves from the initial box or contained space to the suggestion of infinity. The proscenium is dissolved just as the frame of painting is dissolved by sculpture. The characters become spotlighted, barely mobile, and the stage recedes into infinite darkness and infinite space. By these means Beckett discovered the "infinite here," or "ideal space," on the stage to envelope his varied efforts of representing what it is to be human (CSP 158). But to understand the purpose of this evolution one must first ascertain his conception of space, and its geometry.

II. Space: The Sculptural Locus

" . . . a sense of the whole, a structure, also a sharpness I saw, a kind of skeleton in space."

Giacometti

Alberto Giacometti copied art of the past, painted, and drew endlessly, but never credited the outcome with accomplishing his goal: ". . . perhaps if I could draw them [figures] it would no longer be necessary to create them in space, but I am not sure about this."¹⁹ As Peter Selz put it in an essay for the New York Museum of Modern Art: "the problem that absorbs him today--to render precisely what he sees at a given distance. . . [The figures] do not allow us to come into intimate contact with them. They remain unreachable and can only be seen at the distance from which they were modeled or painted. Within the space that contains them, they become real. To be in a room with a figure by Giacometti is not to enjoy an object but to experience a presence."²⁰ What is meant by space is not that of the museum patron's walkway, but something of the universal. Pressing in upon the sculptural figure is the void. Describing a manic period of failure concentrating on details such as the end of the nose, Giacometti wrote, "The form dissolved, it was little more than granules moving over a deep black void . . ." ("*un vide noir et profond*").²¹ When sculpting the tiny pin-sized figures, Giacometti thought them "barely able to withstand the onslaught of the void."²² His fear of an imminent void at times explicitly occupied his work, as with *Invisible Objects (Hands Holding the Void)* (1934-35). As such, the "void" is neither distant abyss nor non-atmospheric space. It is the primary reality within which one constructs a form to organize the granules or the scaffolding awaiting the pedestal, which is the requisite environment for the sculpted figure. "Sculpture rests in the void. One hollows out space so as to construct the object, and the object as such creates space, the space that exists between the subject and the sculptor."²³ Giacometti went

further than merely reversing the order of sculptural importance of solid over void: ". . . by turning my back on the goal, I am only making by unmaking."²⁴ He laboriously emptied space.

Theater space is a ready component of all stagecraft. Acting is choreographed to utilize intervening stage space, measuring the distances across which dialogue is launched--or gazes, or swordplay--to suggest degree of intimacy or intensity. The undefined spaces beyond the stage are a repository of related events (e.g., battles or love affairs, the scene of the crime), or a spectral point of focus for the soliloquy, on one level the place of thought, on another a place shared with the audience only in their role of voyeur. However, Beckett referred to the stage as "ideal space" (*Play*), and by repeated physical and verbal clues he pointed toward an enviroing space of an augmented scale which by the fact of its ubiquitous employment would indicate a consequential component of the plays.

In connection with the sculptural similarity of Beckett's characters to those of Giacometti, Beckett positions his characters in space by means of exacting stage directions or, especially in the radio plays, by cumulative reference to a visualized position, as that of Maddy Rooney or Woburn's fallen state in *Cascando*. The space here indicated is not merely the floor, proscenium, and resident atmosphere of the playhouse. In *Rough for Theatre II* the scene is located relative to planet and galaxy (CSP 79). Amid vaudevillian stage business with mercurial lamps going off and on ("Mysterious affair, electricity."), character A contemplates the sky through the upstage window and says, "And to think all that is nuclear combustion! All that faerie!" (CSP 83-84). He then "has to lean out a little way, with his back to the void .] / B: Careful! / [Long pause, all three dead still.]" (CSP 85). In *Not I*, the Mouth is mounted eight feet above stage level, upstage audience right, surrounded by darkness. The repeated phrase "stare into space" refers to the moment before a transformation (death is the implication) toward darkness and a reality other than

that of domestic sense experience. In *That Time* a tri-partite memory regales an immobile auditor with "one of those things you kept making up to keep the void out just another of those old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you the shroud" (*CSP* 230). The characters, in their tenuous state of consciousness, are occupying, by some fluke, the universe. The stage is their pedestal (*base*), the play on stage the form to accommodate them.

Formalist art criticism assiduously employs the vocabulary of geometry to describe compositional devices in painting. Richard Wollheim points out, however, that such criticism invariably identifies the shapes or forms under consideration by the characters or events depicted.²⁵ Wollheim is discussing the inevitability of referring to the expressive and representative qualities of a work of art in criticism. However, the discussion suggests a unique quality of Beckett's work for the theater, which is a departure from traditional and non-traditional narrative. Beckett in a sense removed the active verbs: "nothing to be done" as Didi and Gogo reiterate. As previously mentioned, in *Three Dialogues* Beckett observed that in painting the presumption of a feasible representation results in merely rearranging the contents of that same representation through all of art history. Beckett recommends turning away from these "puny exploits," and going no further along that "dreary road," preferring "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express . . . together with the obligation to express." Beckett's dialogue (with himself, actually) revolves around his preoccupation with the rupture between subject and object--the unattainability of the object--though in this case he replaces the term object with "occasion" which means roughly the event of inspiration. The use of occasion for artists has been unproductive: an excuse for rearranging the given. The artist obsessed with the occasion and his expression of it converts everything to an occasion including his pursuit of the

occasion, hence the object of his artistic expression is in fact himself. To the contrary, Beckett wrote, "All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself" (*Dis.* 145).

By avoiding the depiction of an event or an occasion, Beckett averted the representational aspect in order to expose the formalist skeleton. Again in reference to space in the plays, the space or void is not *between* characters but *surrounds*, by means of lighting, curtains, verbal references. If it were between, it would indicate a situationally specific event such as absence or failure of communication (verbal or physical), or doings in the realm of the unspoken (surreal or subconscious). Space is not represented by composition, it is indicated as environment. As elucidated by Einstein, "Space' . . . is in principle an infinite rigid body (or skeleton) to which the position of all other bodies is related (body of reference). Analytic geometry (Descartes) uses as the body of reference, which represents space, three mutually perpendicular rigid rods on which 'coordinates' (x, y, z) of space points are measured in the known manner as perpendicular projections (with the aid of a rigid unit measure)." Further, "Geometry, from a physical standpoint, is the totality of laws according to which rigid bodies mutually at rest can be placed with respect to each other . . ." ²⁶ That Beckett is aware of this point is apparent in the plays from the first. Vladimir declaims, "What are we doing here, *that* is the question." He later posits an answer, "That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited . . ." (*CSP* 52, 58). The what and where of Beckett's static figures provided the means to extricate the experience of humanness from artistic and philosophic tradition and align it with the matrix of contemporary science, physics and geometry.

III. Space: The Geometric Grid

" . . . it is necessary for the purpose of describing nature, to make use of a co-ordinate system arbitrarily introduced by us . . . "

Einstein

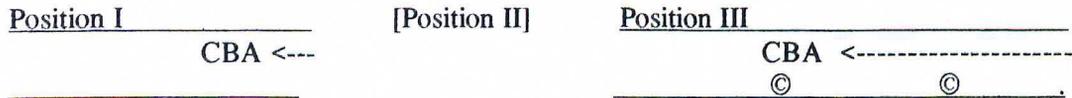
Beckett honored René Descartes with his poem of 1931, *Whoroscope*, touching themes borrowed from the life and thought of Descartes to which he would return again and again: the thinking being, the perceived being, the failed being, the aborted attempt. Despite the obvious homage in the poem to Descartes's contribution to epistemology generally, Descartes's greatest contribution to modern scientific thought derived from his conviction that a unified science of nature should be based on mathematics. Descartes built upon Euclidean geometry by his discovery of coordinate geometry, published in 1637. By means of coordinates on a theoretical grid, geometry was released from figures drawn by ruler and compass, location was no longer confined to the plane of paper or the quadrant coordinates, and geometry became the tool of theoretical mathematics and physics, of the infinitesimal and the infinite. The importance of such a tool lies in a fundamental activity of scientific inquiry as developed by Albert Einstein: the task of correlating the findings of various observers in order to judge "how much of a given physical observation belongs to the objective physical world and how much to the accidental circumstances of the observer."²⁷ To this end, a reference system is constructed. The phrase "frame of reference" is broadly applied to any set of orientations peculiar to a belief or occupation, reflecting the impact of the idea of relativity on non-scientific disciplines. As stated by the physicist Cornelius Lanczos, "The fundamental fact holds in all these endeavors that *we must be anchored somewhere*. We cannot be suspended in thin air, we must have a platform under our feet."²⁸ In physics the utility of the reference system becomes significant in connection with measurements and problem solving. The relevant scientific method at work

involves finding an equation which describes something in a "generally covariant form," referring to the fact that the equation may be formulated in an arbitrary reference system. Then one makes a wise choice concerning that particular frame of reference in which to solve the problem, "in view of the simplicity with which the formal solution will appear in that particular system."²⁹ Beckett defined "form" as a "problem,"³⁰ and his iterated presentation of the "kernel" of being neatly corresponds to the treatment of equation or problem in situating "it" on the geometric coordinates of theatrical space.

Beckett's idiomatic use of geometry is manifest in the dramatic repertoire, where borrowed terminology appears time and again. Beckett's characters are often denominated by letters rather than names (A, B, and sometimes C), by generic gender (He, She), by role (Animator, Auditor), or by sound (Words, Music, Croak). Out of thirty-two plays only nine name the characters, though even then by rudimentary monosyllable or sobriquet. All with names were written between 1952 and 1965, save one, Beckett's last in 1983. In . . . *but the clouds* . . . , the male character M sits motionless as his double, M1, appears and disappears in a five meter lighted circle, a suggestion of geometric doubling by means of the sign of prime. In *Nacht und Träume*, the Dreamer, A, is doubled by his dreamt self, B.

In addition, Beckett's stage directions frequently suggest a geometric grid against which the character is placed for observation. In *Rough for Theatre II*, props are placed "*equidistant from wall and axis of window.*" In *Rough for Theatre I*, character A's line of motion is directed by dialogue plus stage directions: "For example, I am at A. [*He pushes himself forward a little, halts.*] I push on to B. [*He pushes himself back a little, halts.*] And I return to A. [*With élan.*] The straight line! The vacant space! [*Pause.*] Do I begin to move you?" (CSP 69) In *Endgame*, Hamm insists upon being centered in the room: "Bang in the center!" (27)

Beckett's diagrams for blocking are even more explicit, as in *Act Without Words II*, in which dialogue is absent:



For *Film*, Beckett supplied diagrams for the specific angle of sight within which O (Object) is in perceivedness by E (Eye), or not. He further provided four pages of Notes specifying with diagrams relative movement, to scale. *Quad* involves the most detailed diagrammatic directions as the sum of the play is in fact the prescribed movement of four characters marking the coordinates of a quadrisectioned square. In *Embers*, a character acknowledges what may be true for Beckett's characters generally: his "strong point . . . geometry I suppose, plane and solid" (CSP 99).

In the minutiae of staging, Beckett's directions demand characters resembling the lean sculptural figures of Giacometti: their shades of gray, their lines and furrows tracing the ravages of time or the labors of the sculptor's hands. Beckett's characters are dressed in shades of penumbral gray, brown, or off-white. They present a famished, wastrel leanness. The activity represented is pared to the barest gesture, the most concentrated stride, even to immobility with or without utterance. Again and again the characters sift through the grains of their lives, revolving "it" through their minds. The playwright employed minimalist effects to get to the bare bones of life, the kernel of consciousness. The process smacks of Descartes's method of doubting continuously to discover that which remains as certain, the essential "*Je pense, donc je suis.*" However, both Beckett and Giacometti would add being *there* to mere thought.

The term "frontier" of existence has been used to identify Giacometti's locus of interest, which infers an adjacent line beyond which one ceases to exist. This

precarious state of existence is frequently enacted in the plays by characters seemingly alive by degrees. Proximity to the point and moment of extinguished life is implicit in the possibility of suicide. Didi and Gogo toy with the idea, and the gun in Winnie's handbag offers the choice. In *Eh Joe* a suicide is painfully described. But coming into life is equally problematic. In *All That Fall* a case is recounted of a child never fully born into the world. Moreover, this predicament is the basis of *Footfalls* in which May paces, revolving it all, in the home "where she - The same where she began. Where it began" (CSP 241). In May's description of entering a church to pace at night, she moves through a locked door by vanishing through it. Further, she claims to not have been there, at church, though her mother heard her respond. She is insubstantial to the point of becoming ethereal. In *A Piece of Monologue* the Speaker begins, "Birth was the death of him," and describes a life of "dying on" (CSP 265-6). Maddy Rooney objects to being thought of as half alive, claiming that she's not "anything approaching" the half-way mark. The woman's face in *Rockaby* rocks in and out of the light as if she rocks marginally in and out of life, while waiting for the end. In *Not I*, the Mouth is denied the resolution to her predicament (a partial death) because of her refusal to relinquish the third person. Her life-long silence denied the "I" and a fully-realized life. In productions of these last two plays with stringent adherence to lighting guidelines, optical tricks cause the intensely lit image surrounded by deep darkness to flicker in and out of vision.³¹ Recalling Giacometti's words, they disappear and reappear. It is uncertain whether Nag and Nell remain alive unless their ashbins are checked, and so too does Miss Fitt in *All That Fall* fear that she would no longer be here if her mother did not occasionally check. *Endgame* is a gradual cessation of the last living--"Outside of here it's death"--but life inside remains uncertain: "I was never there . . . Absent always" (*Endgame* 9, 74).

This line of life may be imagined as the coordinate axes. By the method of labeling position with Cartesian coordinates, all points in space may be caught. By a contingent move to the figurative west or south, the character point enters the minus quadrants by measurable degrees. Analytic geometry provides a theoretical skeleton for space, and for Beckett possibly provided a theoretical grid for change into or out of consciousness. Such a theoretical possibility may have occurred to Descartes who feared using negative numbers on his coordinates, occasionally resulting in faulty linear constructions. Beyond the rectilinear reference system we may imagine Beckett's use of a curvilinear or Gaussian system in which the grid is curved to represent the curvature of space. Space-time is not flat, but warped by the distribution of mass and energy in it. As such, points may be located and lines drawn upon the curved surface. But a line between two points may also be drawn through the space of the convex side: the line can be theoretically imbedded in space, imperceptible from the surface above. Is this the path taken by May to "vanish through" a locked door, or for Miss Fitt to wander down during church service?

IV. Time: Duration and Change

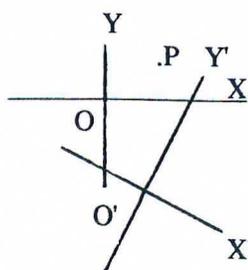
"From this hour on space as such and time as such shall recede to the shadows and only a kind of union of the two retain significance."

Minkowski (1908)

"What time is it?"

Hamm

Einstein's contribution to analytic geometry was to address a problem he perceived in the fact that reference systems are arbitrarily chosen from an infinite variety of such systems. "We cannot find an absolute center in space, nor are their preferential directions in space which would decide for us how we should orient our coordinate axes."³² Thus two hypothetical observations of a planet on its elliptical orbit may be designated as follows:



In the above diagram, the difference between the coordinate measurements of P as calculated from the two reference systems is related to the motion of O to O', Observer to Observer prime. The element of change has been added to the space relations of geometry because we must assume that our frame of reference is in motion. The project of scientific inquiry is "to correlate to each other the infinite variety of measurements made by all the observers who are attached to this bewildering variety of equally legitimate reference systems."³³ The significant point of departure from the Newtonian universe of absolute space and time is in this factor of change. Newton had constructed an edifice which assumed a preferential reference system of absolute significance. To illustrate by analogy, it was as if the

scaffold facilitating the construction of a building became so firmly cemented to the structure that it could not be removed without the building collapsing.³⁴ Einstein's correction was to insist that "a mere 'frame of reference' should not become an integral part of the universe; it must remain a mere tool for describing it. Thus he came to the formulation of his celebrated 'principle of relativity,' which demanded the following: 'It should be possible to formulate the laws of the physical universe in such fashion that they should hold in all possible frames of reference.'"³⁵ In the process of transforming measurements from one frame of reference to the other, the element of *change* is added to the space relations of geometry. Geometrical measurements are constantly changing because of the presence of time. We can set up our Cartesian axes in any orientation we like, but now we must take into consideration that these axes will generally be in a state of *motion*. Such a consideration demanded that geometry combine space and time.

The German mathematician Hermann Minkowski formulated Einstein's 1905 theory geometrically in 1908, and in so doing showed that the theory of relativity is equivalent to an extension of ordinary geometry from three to four dimensions. Graphs representing change over time are familiar to us as, for example, records of temperature cycles or commercial sales. Minkowski, however, included acceleration and deceleration, which represented more realistically physical details of the actual motion by graphic detail. The result was what he called the "world line." One must imagine that these world lines are not merely the method of representing motion in the form of a simple figure but are *actually* realized in the physical world, because in nature the thing that we conceive as "time" is in fact an added geometrical dimension. Imagining a skier racing down a mountain slope provides an excellent example of the coexistence of geometric theory and actuality. Despite the intensely theoretical nature of contemporary scientific inquiry, physics is evident in daily life, especially on ski slopes.

Aesthetic analogies abound in modern literature. Proust explored the parallax view driving by the steeples of Martinville. Joyce drew Bloom's world line as a path at 53 North latitude, Dublin, 16 June 1904, and brought it into relief by the observations and activities of others. To spatial descriptions has been added the dimension of time.

Likewise, Beckett's stage directions function to extend the configuration of characters, props and viewpoint through time. Though Beckett is often considered in terms of the textual significance of his plays, that is, of dialogue, he frequently "wrote" mime. *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*, *Film*, and *Quad* have no dialogue. *Breath* is just that, though in its economy of means it suggests perhaps the most rudimentary sound of life's pulsing duration: a performance of the single beat of living, in slow motion. These works do contain text as stage directions; however the emphasis of performance is the duration of life exemplified by light and studied gesture. Taking one step further with Einstein, Beckett makes extensive use of multiple observers and relative assessments. The spatial rapport between figures is altered slowly, minimally, as if in studied parallax as concentrated as Proust's altering perspective of the steeples, for instance, Clov's movement around Hamm and the tour of the room, Willie's final approach to Winnie around the mound, or the alteration of camera distance and position. Characters are often observed by an onlooker or auditor on stage. In *Film*, O is pursued by the "unbearable quality of E's scrutiny," and the audience accompanies the Eye by looking through the camera lens. The intensity of scrutiny is highlighted by the shifts to those who look at E: the couple, the flower-woman, O at the end with "an expression only to be described as corresponding to an agony of perceivedness" (CSP 165). The Auditor in *Not I* listens while watching Mouth, motionless but for raising the arms four times. In *Endgame*, Nag and Nell are observed by removing the lids on the trash cans. When unobserved it is uncertain if they live. Television

productions make use of the camera for controlled points of observation, as in *Ghost Trio* and . . . *but the clouds* The theater designates the position of the audience as observer of points designated by letter and positioned on the stage/space. The playwright occupies his own inscrutable locus, often by inference off-stage, for example, throwing the characters on stage (*Act Without Words*), supplying the stage business (Winnie's handbag), or casting spotlights of inquisition upon the actors (*Play*).

Central to the foregoing assessment of the four-dimensional stage is the character of the drama, whether present as a body, as a voice, or both. Unlike a novel or poem, a play relies on the expressive quality of the human figure: the actor. "Expressive" may be taken to mean something very close to its Latin etymology: *exprimere*, to squeeze out or press out. In the sense that a gesture or a cry is expressive, "we conceive of [a work of art] as coming so directly and immediately out of some particular emotional or mental state that it bears unmistakable marks of that state upon it."³⁶ Winnie represents no one and no type. In fact, her peculiar inappropriateness of dress combined with her enigmatic position confounds representation or symbolic attribution. Gestures of grooming are reduced to gestures of human expressiveness. For the same reason, Winnie's purpose is not to arouse the perception of correspondence in the audience, which would require matching her predicament with our inward state when in her condition. The spectator's "condition" cannot possibly match that of Winnie's (well, I doubt it), nor can we deduce her inward state (by reason of the first) further than that of distress. Yet Winnie holds an expressive, if ineffable, quality.

Apart from a few primitive cases, no physiognomic perception will be independent of what is for us the supreme example of the relationship between inner and outer: that is, the human body as the expression of the psyche. When we endow a natural object or an artifact with expressive

meaning, we tend to see it corporeally: that is, we tend to credit it with a particular look that the human body wears and that is constantly conjoined with an inner state.³⁷

Thus an abstract, non-representative, object may be eminently expressive of the human psyche, and conversely, the expressive gesture may be abstract.

Giacometti's sculpture of a hand extending upward into air (*Hand*, 1947) is more expressive of fear than an earlier work of a hand just caught in a contrivance of gears. The gesture precedes the act, it initiates the thought. Seldom in art history has the scream or the laugh been depicted. The paucity of examples shows how rare the incidence and how vividly troubling they remain. One may consider Nicolò dell'Arca's terracotta group, *Lamentation Over the Body of Christ*, or *The Cry* by Edvard Munch. Fixed for relative eternity by the plastic arts, these images impart suffering beyond endurance, monumental anguish, and are mercifully few. Such a seeming invasion of privacy disturbs and distances the viewer. But the gesture, that initial and therefore primary and primitive expression, is the psyche made public with tact.

By reducing acting to the bare outline of a gesture apart from narrative event, the inherent artificiality of the stage is subverted. No longer a mechanical fake or sham, gesture may be read as fundamental human expression. In the language of signs developed by the Benedictine order during the Renaissance, to "lift your arm gently . . . so that the back of the hand faces the beholder," indicated affirmation.³⁸ In *Not I*, the auditor's movement is directed as a "simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion" (CSP 215). Krapp is assigned two basic postures. The listening posture is "leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine" (CSP 57). The other: "broods." This may be simply staring forward, arms on the table. At the most it might be enacted by the familiar gesture of resting the chin on

the hand, a gesture used in painting and sculpture for melancholy and/or meditation. What these directions suggest is not acting in any traditional sense of interpretation. It is for this reason that Beckett said, "Not for me those Grotowskis and Methods. . . the best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I'm trying to find a way to write one."³⁹ We must remember that stage directions are text. His need to incorporate such a sentiment into a play, not a novel, indicates his focus on the gesture of a sculptural presence and the possibility of a near-universal lexicon of expression. The addition of stage business and text gives to the gesture duration and its companion, existence, completing the Einsteinian universe of space-time-matter.

In Beckett's work, any other object that might be expressive is carefully selected and the number minimized, as with the tree in *Godot*. Yet, the preoccupation with space-time is fleshed out with numerous images and props. The ruler, a tool to measure spatial distance, is used to beat time for a piano student, and the sound of footsteps or horses' hooves as they mark the distance walked is imagined a time keeping device (*Embers*). Clocks or watches appear repeatedly and seemingly arbitrarily. Clocks, defined by Einstein as "a closed system with periodical occurrence," keep local time as opposed to time in physics (i.e., propagation of light, which in its artificial replication is also an essential stage element of the plays).⁴⁰ And they do so by means of spatial occurrences. The motion of a clock pendulum depends on gravity. The advancing shadow of the sun dial is determined by the earth's rotation. To a scientist the presence of such tools is determined merely by use or convenience. But one must consider that Beckett as an artist is selecting a minimal number of props with extreme care; nothing in such barren landscapes could be arbitrary because simply "at hand." What is for the scientist a tool, becomes for the artist an icon. References to space-time props may also be used as conundrums or jokes, however. In *All That Fall*, the 12:30

train is late, but it is still the 12:30 train. In *Rough for Theatre II*, A and B decide, "Let us kill the time here," as they wait for a train while C suicides (CSP 86).

On a more subtle level, time is incorporated into existence by the corollary of duration, which Descartes held "to be necessarily contained in our conception of an existing material thing, since to conceive of it as existing is to conceive of it as continuing to exist."⁴¹ Beckett's *Proust* is a monograph on Time as the scaffolding of Proust's opus: "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation" (*Proust* 1). Beyond exegesis of Proust's opus, however, the work also illuminates much of Beckett's dramatic method, in particular the processes of duration. According to Beckett, Proust accepted "the sacred ruler and compass of literary geometry. But he will refuse to measure the length and weight of man in terms of his body instead of in terms of his years" (*Proust* 2). The study begins with an analysis of the two controlling mechanisms of Time, Habit and Memory.

Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment. . . . Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals. . . . Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations (because by no expedient of macabre transubstantiation can the grave-sheets serve as swaddling clothes) represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being (*Proust* 7-8).

Beckett quotes Proust, "If Habit is a second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first [i.e., reality], and is free of its cruelties and its enchantments" (*Proust* 11). Habit, then, is the stuff of living that either defends us from the bare realities, or

obscures what is both terrifying and essential. Habit is a buffer against change on the plane of ghastly horizons. Boredom represents "its adequate performance," but the omission of this fundamental duty of Habit results in suffering. "Suffering - that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom - with its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers, Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils" (*Proust* 16). In Beckett's artistic interpretation of Boredom, waiting--and its means--became his hallmark. Habit on the scale of life-sustaining activities includes everything from eating to playing golf. It gets you through *les petits moments*. Examples of waiting, grooming, iterated actions, abound in the plays. Habits provide the stage business for situations of duration devoid of event: Winnie's daily grooming, the annual recording sessions of Krapp, even the tenacious rocking in *Rockaby*.

Memory is a function of perception, and as such it is the store-house: the "ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key . . . This thoroughgoing democrat makes no distinction between the 'Pensées' of Pascal and a soap advertisement" (*Proust* 20):

[H]ere, in that 'gouffre interdit à nos sondes,' is stored the essence of ourselves, the best of our many selves and their concretions that the simplists call the world, the best because accumulated slyly and painfully and patiently under the nose of our vulgarity, the fine essence of a smothered divinity whose whispered 'disfazione' is drowned in the healthy bawling of an all-embracing appetite, the pearl that may give the lie to our carapace of paste and pewter" (*Proust* 18-19).

As to Proust's plumbing of involuntary memory, Beckett wrote that "The point of departure of the Proustian exposition is not the crystalline agglomeration but its kernel - the crystallized" (*Proust* 55). Again the word "kernel." Beckett further

elucidates the relation between the memory, the kernel, and the real: "The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. Such participation frees the essential reality that is denied to the contemplative as to the active life. What is common to present and past is more essential than either taken separately."

Beckett's continued explication concludes that memory in Proust's opus actually works to annihilate Time and Death. In Beckett's plays however, memory is coupled to physical presence, and thereby works to "stage" Time, or the duration of existence. Whereas Proust explored the relation of Time to existence from the physically detached moment of literary composition, Beckett clearly intended that the subject occupy space over time--on stage. Requested to comment on *Endgame*, one of the more text-laden plays, Beckett wrote, "Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, nec tecum nec sine te, in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could" (*Dis.* 109). Beckett's theatrical exposition of habit, memory and reminiscing reflects an insistence that space, time, and matter be organized equally for expressive potential.

V. Discourse: Text as Duration

"Time passes. First without words. . . Now with words."
V, *What Where*

Work is gainful employment of time. Creating text is the most obvious means by which a writer would use the time. Beckett has several characters tell stories or vaudeville jokes for the entertainment of those on stage as well as in the audience. In *Cascando* we hear the struggle to create a narrative in what may be Beckett's most autobiographical play. The discovery of the correct words may save a character (*Not I*), or create a character (in *Catastrophe* verbal expression by the "prisoner" on the plinth is resolutely avoided. In *Rough for Radio II*, the least utterance of a character much like that in *Catastrophe* must be controlled and confined; when not before his interrogator, Fox is gagged, for a "word let fall in solitude [is] thereby in danger." Fox is prodded by the blows of a ruler to say the one thing that remains unsaid "that can give you back your darling solitudes," and enigmatically make his keepers "free" (*CSP* 116, 121, 124).

The dialogue often reflects structures of memory and its convolutions of past and present. In *Play*, events are recalled by the three participants of a love triangle in haphazard order. It becomes apparent that one character did not necessarily know of events transpiring elsewhere until later, such that those events were placed in that person's experience out of chronological order. It may be that an important property of our sense experience is its time-like order, but it does not follow that chronology is a realistic means by which the memory sorts data. The auditor of *That Time* listens to "memory banks" from three stages in his life, one interrupting the other and without regard for chronologic order of experience, making events internally simultaneous: ". . . come and gone in no time gone in no time" (*CSP* 235). Similarly, multiple memories serve to illustrate the

change in a character over time. Reciprocally, change over time also connotes continuation through time. Winnie mulls over the old days while Willie sits upstage, as do Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Nag and Nell. In all these dialogues, there is shared memory out of long years of some sort of friendship or marital love. Such reciprocity is vital to Beckett. Out of one character's memory, another's past is made present again. The character's existence is prolonged in the mind of another. Collective memory, even on such a circumscribed scale, is a vehicle of self-validation. Also by means of memory, events become simultaneous with the present, confounding cause and effacing effect. The recitation accounts for the duration of the thinking character.

The resulting technique is combination rather than logical sequence. Renaissance painting often depicted supplementary events in the landscape, such as the slaughter of innocents in the hills behind an adoration of the magi. But the sequence was clearly understood by the catechized public, and the main event was front, center, and given due pomp and skill. Combination, by rejecting the simulation of time ordered toward a purpose, or of cause and effect, leads drama from "event" toward something resembling music. More abstract than the leanest line of paint or sculpture, music is non-representational and free-standing to the point of being invisible. Beckett used the means of music to intensify the sensibility of the abstract in the plays. Even programmatic music allows for personal reception. Beethoven's inscription "Merry Gathering of Country People" may in our listening minds indicate equally that of German peasants or a Bacchanalian feast replete with Centaurs, or microscopic cells combining and dividing, depending on our personal experience and predilection. Beckett does not delineate our line of sight and perception. He does not say, for example, "In this play two unemployed vaudevillian actors surviving on root stock alone have made an appointment with the great producer, Mr. G." The lines between cause and effect

are dissolved by a great simplification: "We are men." That this is fertile ground for the experience of art is evident in the fact that we may simultaneously identify that sentence with a particular play and know that is not what it is "about." Not one idea in the hypothetical description exists in the text of the play. "Naught is more real" (*Dis.* 113). Subject is no longer the *cause* of form but one of its effects.

Beckett said of Joyce that he used reality as a paradigm for the creative act of writing the book. What is heard in a Beckett play is inextricably linked to what is seen, or, for the radio plays, what is suggested by the sound and thus imagined by the listener. Space, time, and material intrusions are in continuum. Whereas Joyce sought to contain the reality of his world in a book--in the "apotheosis of the word"--Beckett sought the encompassing universe by means of sight and sound, and hence the advantage for him of the play. The two-dimensional page of Beckett's novels had evolved to four dimensions. Drama, like music, is intended to exist in the performance.

Einstein attributed to Henri Poincaré the identification of two kinds of alteration in the bodily object which clarify the nature of change in Beckett plays: "changes of state" and "changes of position." The latter is defined as that which may be reversed or repeated, as of planetary orbits, the tours around the room in *Endgame*, or *Habit*. Memory may be considered to contain elements of both. In that memory derives from perception, it indicates an alteration of perspective or a composite of multiple positions recalled: changes of relative position. However, memory also implies a succession of individuals within the one existence: a change in the state of the being. For human-kind, the ultimate change of state is death (and by complementarity, birth). Descartes, considering the mechanical nature of the body, thought live bodies differ from dead ones as stopped watches differ from working ones: Time has stopped.⁴²

"Change of state" is represented in Beckett's plays by those degrees of living discussed earlier, and by the ultimate, irrevocable change, death. Winnie's state is changed from Act I to Act II as she is sucked further into her mound, and the audience must suppose that the sequel is final suffocation. Such change is the ultimate mystery in this suspension of characters--or matter--in space-time. Change is the irrevocable process that memory wars against. Winnie cherishes "the old way," Krapp chides the optimism of his youth yet the fact of tapes to be replayed again and again is a wallowing in memory. For man, the significance of change lies in birth and death, and the required succession of the two in order. *Happy Days* is an ongoing conundrum with moments of humor, yet encroaching death is real. The silenced voice and the disappearance of the self are as inevitable, if odd, as is their appearance. Beckett plays out the event ad infinitum, searching for a more adequate form, assured of failure. But that failure to duplicate the form that accommodates the mess is man's crux. Man is less than the universe, divided from it by the very fact of his consciousness. It is this consciousness that fabricates philosophies and theologies to accommodate itself to the mess, and fails.

VI. Disappearance: Silence as Change

"[Silence]"

Beckett's compulsion to deploy silences and pauses has often been noted.⁴³ There is broad precedence for the use of silence in art. Henry James wrote psychological realism in discourse of extended, belabored silences for characters caught in the act of sensing a greater complexity than conversation could convey, or compelled to speak on a level of public decorum while silences beneath the surface eddy with unspoken passions and terrors.⁴⁴ Hugh Kenner deduced Joyce's use of silence as latent silence about a certain occasion: a conversation between Bloom and Molly after breakfast certainly occurred, though it is unwritten. Kenner elaborates on the "failure of role" in their bungled conversation, indicating that when personal roles break down for whatever reason, the conversation is deprived of a structure to give it impetus, just as if there were a technical failing of a playwright. The drama of the unspoken, or *Théâtre de l'Inexprimé*, addressed the psychological recesses as well as a surrounding spiritual vapor. John Cage, perhaps the best known theorist on silence in music, uses silence to expose the background noise, or people noise: there is never absence of sound. Again the main concern is the dramatic content of the silence. Beckett's silences are unprecedented because they are neither motivated by dramatic content nor are they accountable to acoustics, i.e., involving ears.

Music and words are used to extend time. But their deeper significance is that they are proof of a character's continued existence in space. In *Rough for Radio I*, the "ENDING" of Music and Voice suggests the end also of the character, He, as shown by his panic and despair. In *Embers*, "every syllable is a second gained" (CSP 102). The recorded voice in *Rockaby* repeats "time she stopped" sixteen times, doubled with the dying woman's live voice seven times, before voice and

woman stop, i.e., die. In Beckett's work, silences are frequently in direct association with such phrases as dead silence, uninhabited world, not a soul, nothing, not a sound, void. In *Rough for Radio II*, words and music are a continuing need, and silence means the end. The final line of *Embers* ("All day nothing.[Pause.] Not a sound.") indicates that nothing is happening, and no one is there (CSP 104). Silences are often cued with darkness, as in *Come and Go*, *Breath*, and *Footfalls*. WI states in *Play*, "Silence and darkness were all I craved. . . They being one"(CSP 156). In a letter of 1964 concerning the production of *Play*, Beckett wrote that less and more gradual light should correspond to less volume and speed of voice, which would reinforce "The impression of falling off . . . with the suggestion of conceivable dark and silence in the end, or of an indefinite approximating toward it . . ." (*Dis.* 111). Despite Beckett's disclaimer of his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun as "German bilge" (in his maturity he may have become circumspect to the point of silence as to his method), his description of a "literature of the unword" was later to some extent accomplished:

To bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it - be it something or nothing - begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts? Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven's seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence? (*Dis.* 52-3, trans. 172)

Beckett found his passage to the musical analogy by means of the theater. Beckett's text is not music in the sense of perceived sound only. The words are not nonsense. However, characters begin and end speech in the manner of musicians. Orchestra members do not disappear or leave the stage until the music signals the director to cue them in. They remain present, though silent, at least until the end of the concert toward which every beat moves ineluctably . . . when the lights will be extinguished. As Maddy Rooney remonstrates: "Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on" (CSP 25). Text as performance could be torn aside, not just by a sneeze or an ellipsis, but by an enormous timed pause. In *Ohio Impromptu* the final silence exceeds fifteen seconds.

The theatrical link between space-time and acoustics is silence. The silences are timed just as duration in space is timed. Words and music are a necessity to Beckett as a bridge across space-time. As such the ubiquitous silences are not a failure of the planks to connect: a failure of communication, of understanding, or of the playwright. Rather the silence admits the surrounding space-time. In *All That Fall*, following a "long silence" by Slocum, Mrs. Rooney asks, "What are you doing Mr. Slocum?" He responds, "Gazing straight before me, Mrs. Rooney, through the windscreen, into the void" (CSP 18). Beckett employed the vast enviroing of silence, even on the radio, to indicate a confrontation with the void. Silence is the "unfathomable abyss."

Syntax is a means of ordering and analyzing thought, of introducing linear perspective into discourse. Interrupting text with silence to track essential reality parallels the rupture of linear perspective and admits to consideration of the primal reality of space. Returning to Alberti's model equating the syntactical hierarchy with the relationship of compositional elements in painting, the silence and the dark in Beckett's plays interrupt the connective lines along both hierarchies. Words and phrases become isolated. Their source is often forgotten

(Winnie's recitations), they are reiterated in a technique of musical combination, repetition, and recapitulation (*Ohio Impromptu*, *Krapp's Last Tape*). On stage, the lighted volume of the actor, so often a gesture in the matrix of penumbral drapery, is isolated from the proscenium by darkness. The dramatic technique frequently depends on the imminent immobility of the actor, or on his absence, forestalled by the little habits of living. The result is a stripping away of all extraneous detail toward the simplicity of pure musical sensation. The simplicity or purity of image in Beckett's theater works approaches the musicality in pure sensation of abstract art.

VII. Sculptural Theater: In the Absence of Mallarmé

". . . the Orphic explication of the World, which is the poet's sole duty and the supreme literary game."

Mallarmé, "Autobiographie"

"Seen" vs. "unseen" is a debate aired regularly: Aristotle vs. Plato, realism vs. nominalism, active vs. contemplative life, materialism vs. spiritualism. At the close of the nineteenth century another alternative presented itself: everything in terms of nothing--Matter is illusion, there is no God, the cosmic order is a house of cards. But the universe exists, universal laws await discovery, and we are conscious. There is a dark and uncharted reality, perhaps ultimately unknowable, horrifying in its alien vastness. Yet we are compelled to explore, to explain, to find a possible link with human expression in the arts. Beckett surely grasped the possibility as well as the inevitability of failure. Giacometti expressed it thus: "Art and science try to understand, comprehend. Success and failure are both secondary."⁴⁵

Symbolism, as an art movement developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, is generally understood to have been a rejection of realism: a rejection of art's main endeavor for at least two thousand years to represent reality. Aristotle considered the essence of artistic endeavor to be the imitation of reality. And though the relative merits of imitation versus unbounded imagination were debated at intervals (e.g., Sidney), it was not until the fin de siècle that the implications of a break with imitation became apparent. Symbolism's sympathizers such as Maeterlinck and Yeats perceived physical reality as an illusion, as a veil beyond which lay the inner landscape, the unconscious life which operated in the realm of the unsaid or the unseen, or even a metaphysical unity, a greater reality, waiting to be tapped by symbol or by silence. To the contrary, Stéphane Mallarmé recorded his honest and terrified appraisal of his inner self as a blank (*le néant, le vide*)

and of the oneness of his creative consciousness in its pure state, without habit or tradition, if you will, with the void of the universe.

Mallarmé struggled at the borders of a realization that art could somehow be linked to this more real "real." For *Un Coup de dés*, the type was actually set on the page to admit the primary space that contained it as an analogue, more or less, of stars distributed through the universe. As such, the fragmented text became line and color, an abstraction floating on the silent space of the white page. Jean Genet's observations on Giacometti's drawings underline a striking parallel: "The strokes are there only to give form and solidity to the whiteness. If you look closely, it is not the stroke that has style, it is the white space contained by it. It is not the stroke that is solid, it is the whiteness."⁴⁶ Though Mallarmé's efforts to write drama were unsuccessful in terms of the performable, by means of personal influence and public support the poet advocated theater as a viable form for his aesthetics and encouraged the attempts of Symbolist playwrights.⁴⁷

Artists toyed with the ramifications of an invisible reality by showing our visible, speakable world to be built on absurd and meaningless connections between cause and effect, or on surreal operations above and beyond the reality art had taken for granted. Positivist examination of the object and detailed characterization had illuminated little. Hence artists were encouraged to discover symbolic evidence which would explain relationships between objects or persons, those invisible connections, and further which would manifest links to the transcendent or Ideal. The aim of the Symbolists was neither art for art's sake nor social utility, but rather the effect of truth. In 1886, Moréas wrote what became known as the Symbolist manifesto, which described the movement as a departure from romantic subjectivity, classical description of the Parnassians, or declamatory observation of Hugo. Its aim was to "attire the Idea in a perceptible form." Ideas are not perceptible to the senses, but symbols are. Art became a search for symbols--a

search for a form--an arbitrary compromise between the requirements of perception and its incompleteness, between the visible and the invisible.

Concurrently the scientific world embarked upon a radical departure from traditional interpretations of data on reality. Scientific method was no longer only concerned with close observation of the object. By means of experiments with steam engines and thermodynamics, invisible energies were glimpsed by their effects, and the world of quantum mechanics began to be constructed beyond the misleading or contradictory evidence of the observed world. Max Planck gave his first paper on a distribution law of radiation at the Paris Exhibition of 1900, which prepared the ground for quantum physics. In 1905, Albert Einstein published three remarkable papers, one proving the existence of the atom, the other two uniting space and time as one principle. In 1915 matter was added to the continuum. The Newtonian universe, while useful for daily muddling through, was an illusion based on limited and limiting perceptual data. (As G. B. Shaw said with characteristic disrespect, "Newton was able to combine prodigious mental faculty with credulities and delusions that would disgrace a rabbit."⁴⁸) This mistake of the absolute universe from which all corollaries and hypotheses were deduced also exposed the frailty of deductive reasoning. The dynamic forces of our universe, the essential and perpetual building blocks, were now fully realized to be invisible, and to the non-scientific community unknowable. Physics had pierced through the illusions collectively fabricated by our five senses and the imitation of scientific tradition to the void beyond, to the vast space of the universe where the drama of quantum particles and entropy, is played out--somehow--against the space-time-matter continuum.

Piet Mondrian, in 1937, wrote of the failure of Surrealism to grasp reality because the movement instead depicted romantic dreams: "As for surrealism we must recognize that it deepened thought and feeling, but since this deepening is

limited by individualism it cannot reach the foundation, the universal. So long as it remains in the realm of dreams which are only a rearrangement of the events of life, it cannot touch reality."⁴⁹ To discover reality then one might destroy the world of appearances, the means for which also derived from the unobservable atom and is the domain of the military. Alternatively, the artist may imagine a world stripped down to its barest essentials. Pure art would then consist in the depiction of fundamental relations of line and color.

Beckett wrote in this experimental break with tradition. Some have interpreted the genre as the end of the world: the annihilation of the moral world or the spiritual world, the desire for the imminent destruction of our world, or the realization of the vaporous self--the evaporation of character development, knowable plot, the narrator, the author. However, in Beckett's dramas there are persistent references to the ongoing existence of the universe. He was not philosophically bound by a choice between imitating or abandoning "the world." Repeatedly, with an austerity of organization that is sculptural in effect, his characters are positioned in the universe and are conscious, either overtly or subliminally, of the primal reality of universal space, of the void.

Einstein mused that what was most incomprehensible about the universe was that it was at all comprehensible. The flip side of the obvious significance of the statement is that it is even partly comprehensible *to us*. A carbon-based bipedal life-form comprehends that it is descended from apes, lives ninety-two million miles from a sun located on an outer arm of a spiral galaxy, individually does not last very long, and generally finds even that short allotment trying. Mallarmé, reflecting on the static nature of Hamlet, wrote that character is an important element of drama not for an expression of a personal history (*reportage*) but for its revelation of the antagonism between dream and fatality, which is the universal condition of our existence. In *Catastrophe* the Protagonist is placed on a

plinth eighteen inches high and formed to the specifications of the Director. "Why the plinth?" he asks. "To let the stalls see the feet." A Protagonist is sculpted, figuratively and textually, on a pedestal so that he--the condition: human and suffering--may be seen.

Beckett's last play, *What Where* (inclusive of *When* by virtue of the continuum) of 1983, begins with a report on the torture of the fifth unnamed character who refuses to say "it." Apparently the torturer is at fault and must in turn be given the works. The characters are Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom--a, e, i, o. The unnamed must be the fifth vowel, with the ubiquitous B and M: the Bum. (Has the playwright come full circle to the bums, or *clochards philosophes*, of the first play?) As the vowels are erased from u to a, the first, the author, empties the stage of characters and discourse. "Time passes. That is all. Make sense who may. I switch off" (CSP 316).

The goal of the mystery sleuth is to discover who was in the right place at the right time. Remove the sleuth and the clues, and the mystery remains: *What Where*. Beckett's plays essentially locate figures on the abstract geometric grid of space for a length of time. The traditional literary order of exposition--development--conclusion is overthrown by extended exposition. The links to the surroundings in terms of movement, plot, or character development, are torn by pervading space: the textual line is torn by silence, the visual line by darkness. Abstracted at roughly center stage is a gesture atop a drapery here and now. At the root of Einstein's inquiries was the assurance that simplicity holds the greatest complexity. If these spare figures are symbols, they stand only for themselves. They are not an Idea, but a fact--not a fact but an experience: fullness of symbol exploded to null. If symbols in art are "iconic," and Beckett used symbols to stand for nothing but themselves, then he has achieved a translucence in which the visual/verbal experience expresses the primal state of being freestanding of its

historical accumulation or of a newly acquired significance via the artistic medium. The refusal of the artist to grant an invented significance may be read as an insistence upon the failure of the artist, though he has succeeded in the compulsion to create. The artist's repertoire in this situation comprises his style, a style in which the form contains the content. Picasso responded to a woman in a gallery who asked what a painting meant: "My dear Madame, if I could tell you what it means, I'd be a novelist, not a painter." Beckett also preferred the experiment of the visual artist, though of the sculptor in the case of the plays. Tools that improve vision are invented by scientists to see what has hitherto been invisible: particles too small or too far away, motion too rapid or too slow. To change the way we see is to change the way we experience and interpret our world.

For Beckett, the process of discovery, the search for a form to accommodate the mess, led through literary discourse to a continual emptying of the dramatic space, textual and visual. The result is a simple positive in terms of a discovered work of art: a coming to light and clarity, however inconclusive. As the Voice of M states in . . . *but the clouds* . . . , after a dreary night busying himself with "cube roots" and "nothing, that MINE": ". . . with break of day, to issue forth again, void my little sanctum" (CSP 261-2). Aside from the characteristic scat prank, the emptying of the habitual space (to void the sanctum) is to bring to light. It is no accident that the elemental parts of the visual experience, line and color, should remain on the theoretical, though often delineated, geometric grid. With the discoveries of Einstein, "Geometry became the fundamental entity which included all existence."⁵⁰ Renaissance Italy believed that a work of art was not complete until nothing else could be removed from it. Their sense of the necessary was of course quite different from ours. The modern scientific model derives its utility by leaving out almost everything in the natural world, most significantly man, consciousness, and the change into or out of consciousness. Reduction to such

simplicity emphasizes the disjuncture, the crux that can perhaps only be occupied by the artist or the scientist, those whose work is creativity.

Writing on the differences between the objectives of science and religion, Albert Einstein defined science in terms applicable to Beckett's dramatic forms:

Science is the century-old endeavor to bring together by means of systematic thought the perceptible phenomena of this world into as thorough-going an association as possible. To put it boldly, it is the attempt at the posterior reconstruction of existence by the process of conceptualization. . . It is the aim of science to establish general rules which determine the reciprocal connection of objects and events in time and space.⁵¹

Or as Beckett wrote in *Proust*, ". . . for the artist, the only possible hierarchy in the world of objective phenomena is represented by a table of their respective coefficients of penetration, that is to say, in terms of the subject" (64). For the artist of the abstract imagination, clarification--bringing to light--by means of primary structures should include the figure upon whom the mystery reflects. By means of his dramatic repertoire, Beckett arrived at a sculptured theater so abstract that it resides in the realm of analytic geometry.

Je crois que la Littérature, reprise à sa source qui est l'Art et la Science, nous fournira un Théâtre, dont les représentations seront le vrai culte moderne; un Livre, explication de l'homme, suffisante à nos plus beaux rêves.

Mallarmé, "Sur le Théâtre"

Notes

- 1 Jane Alison Hale, *The Broken Window: Beckett's Dramatic Perspective* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 1987) 18. As quoted in Paul-Louis Mignon, "Le Théâtre de A jusqu'à Z: Samuel Beckett," *L'Avant-Scène* 313 (15 June 1964): 8. ". . . on s'avance dans le noir ."
- 2 Enoch Brater, *Why Beckett* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989) 55.
- 3 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Samuel Beckett, or 'Presence' in the Theatre," *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 108.
- 4 Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 31.
- 5 Citations from Beckett's works appear parenthetically in the text, and refer to the complete documentation under "Works Cited."
- 6 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (1988; rpt. Oxford UP, 1989) 124.
- 7 Baxandall 108.
- 8 Baxandall 135.
- 9 Similarities in the work of the two artists has been explored in *Dialogue in the Void*, by Matti Megged. Primarily from the point of view of the art historian, this slim volume unfortunately and repeatedly misreads Beckett. He also slights Giacometti, however, for example by using a photograph of *No More Play* in which the figures are missing from the board, though he writes about them. The title alone denotes his understanding of the void as something like a tearoom. A penetrating discussion of the philosophical similarities, referring primarily to Beckett's novels, appears in Reinhold Hohl's book on Giacometti (see Works Cited).
- 10 James Lord, *Giacometti: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 429.
- 11 Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre* (London: John Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1988) 80.
- 12 Lord 201.
- 13 New York Museum of Modern Art, *Alberto Giacometti* (dist. by New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965) 28.
- 14 New York MOMA 26.
- 15 Quoted in Herbert and Mercedes Matter, *Alberto Giacometti* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987) 208. From interview with André Parinaud, "Pourquoi je suis sculpteur?" *Arts - Lettres - Spectacles* (13 June 1962): 5.
- 16 Tom F. Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum* IV (Summer 1961): 23.
- 17 Brater 78.
- 18 Brater 107, 110.
- 19 New York MOMA 28.
- 20 New York MOMA 9.
- 21 New York MOMA 18-19.
- 22 New York MOMA 11.

- 23 *Alberto Giacometti* (Basel: Editions Galerie Beyeler 1964) 98. From interview with Perinaud.
- 24 Alberto Giacometti, *A Sketchbook of Interpretive Drawings*, Text by Luigi Carluccio, trans. Barbara Luigia la Penta (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d. [1966]) ix.
- 25 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge UP, 1980) 12-14.
- 26 Albert Einstein, *Out of my Later Years*. (1950; revised rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970) 42.
- 27 Cornelius Lanczos, *Albert Einstein and the Cosmic World Order*. (New York: Interscience Publishers, div. of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965) 19. Lanczos is from the School of Theoretical Physics, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. The text is of six lectures delivered at The University of Michigan, Spring, 1962. While Einstein excelled at verbalizing what are essentially geometric and mathematical concepts, Lanczos' book has been valuable in that it organizes Einstein's several separate papers into a more easily grasped progression of ideas.
- 28 Lanczos 20.
- 29 Lanczos 31.
- 30 Driver 506.
- 31 *Rockaby*, dir. Robert McNamara, with Mary Ellen Nester, Scena Theatre with San Quentin Drama Workshop, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Washington D.C., May, 1990. *Not I*, dir. Xerxes Mehta, with Wendy Salkind, Seth Goldstein, The Maryland Stage Company, U of Maryland, Baltimore County, October, 1990.
- 32 Lanczos 24-25.
- 33 Lanczos 25-26.
- 34 Lanczos 29.
- 35 Lanczos 30.
- 36 Wollheim 31.
- 37 Wollheim 32-33.
- 38 Baxandall 61.
- 39 to Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 513.
- 40 Einstein 68.
- 41 Bernard Williams, "Descartes, René," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., & the Free Press, 1967; rpt. 1972) 351.
- 42 Williams 353.
- 43 For example, Ihab Hassan (*The Postmodern Turn*. Ohio State U P, 1987) employed Beckett's silences to illustrate his theory of postmodernism, aligning them with the prose of nihilism and absence and the Theater of the Absurd ("Silence is the vicar of death"). Likewise, he used the title to indicate that *Godot* is about absence. He thus overlooked the subject of the title, "Waiting," and its reiteration in the Hamlet inspired dialogue following "What are we doing here," perhaps the most lyrical moment of Beckett's play (quoted above, page 16). Given the perspective of this paper, the play is about presence, not absence.
- 44 Two relatively terse examples from *The Golden Bowl*: "She stood before him a moment - it took that time to go on. Depth upon depth of her situation, as she met his face, surged and sank within her . . ." (London: Penguin Books, 1988. 464.). "She put her hand over his shoulder, and their eyes were held again

together by the abiding felicity; they smiled in emulation, vaguely, as if speech failed them through their having passed too far . . . (573).

⁴⁵ Hold 209.

⁴⁶ Bernard Lamarche, *Alberto Giacometti*, trans. Kit Currie (New York: Tabard Press 1989; Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Françaises, 1984) 160.

⁴⁷ Curiously, Mallarmé praised Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* for its sculptural quality (cited in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*); curiously, because the text reads as a romping, adolescent *Tamburlaine*, but the performance must have been otherwise. The same performance elicited Yeats' forecast of the savage god in the arts, which suggests its distance from his own distinguished and indirect Noh plays.

⁴⁸ Lanczos 113.

⁴⁹ quoted in Maurice Jacques Valency, *The End of the World: An Introduction to Contemporary Drama* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980) 40.

⁵⁰ Lanczos 102.

⁵¹ Einstein 24, 27.

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- . *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1984. References in text are as "Dis."
- . *Endgame*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958.
- . *Happy Days*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961.
- . *Proust*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1957; rpt. 1978.
- . *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1955. Evergreen Black Cat Edition, 1965.
- . *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954; renewed 1982.
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