

## Kafkaesque Absurdity in the Aesthetics of Beckett and Giacometti

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### Abstract

The complex zone of what I refer to as the aesthetical absurd is examined in the works of Modernists Kafka, Giacometti, and Beckett. This aesthetic zone, addressed through cognitive poetics, exists between artistic notion, the artist's ideal cognitive image, and the actual performance or resulting image born in reality. Artistic ideal is evaluated as the aesthetic image or notion that exists in a tentative nascent and emotive state, but one that the artist strives to produce in the world—to reconstruct from the cognitive zone of creativity—but at times fails to bring to completion or fruition. This ever present bifurcation between these two conflictive states leads to a new view of the Sisyphean absurd. Kafka stands as the beginning point of the discussion. His fragmented, at times incomplete, writing serves as a touchstone to position the aesthetics of the later Beckett and Giacometti, a sculptor. Beckett mirrors Kafka's sensibility, and relates his negative aesthetic, one lacking or hiding any visible scaffolding for the artistic process. Beckett and Giacometti were friends and collaborated on crafting props for a staging of his signature play *Waiting for Godot*, a failed attempt. An assessment of the aesthetics of these three artists advances the understanding of their works in terms of the aesthetical absurd.

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### Keywords

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Kafka, Giacometti, and Beckett have long confounded followers and admirers, for the creative work of these three artists is often judged by audiences as falling into the realm of the inexplicable if not inaccessible in terms of definitive understanding. There exists an impasse between certain artists, their art, and viewers. In such instances as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Beckett's aesthetics resist audience intersection and interpretation, leaving a continuing gap of some magnitude between object and subject. This interesting separation can be compared to the asymptote, a graphic figure from analytic geometry in which the ray of a curve continues to run closer and closer to a set line but never overlaps the line, even as the distance between the two only appears to approach zero as the rays tend off toward infinity. Comprehension and object fail to meet. Identifying Beckett as the ray of the curve that seems to move closer to the line of intelligibility offers a graphic instance of the relationship. Beckett, who is perhaps more aware of his own fissures than the other artists of their own, confesses in *Disjecta*: "There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said" (144).

Grappling for their own understanding of Beckett's work, critics add confusion to a work's interpretation and reader response. Vivian Mercier, an Irish reviewer, wrote in 1956 that Beckett's "*Waiting for Godot* has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since

the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens twice" (6). This response is in itself code-layered, as it only continues, if not heightens, the enigmatic play's reception. There are two acts in *Waiting for Godot*, a point which accounts for the definitive "happens twice." But what about the two words "nothing happens"? There is a lot that goes on in the two acts: characters move about onstage, make entrances and exits, exchange dialogue, make faces, and think. Consequently, something is going on; and, paradoxically, nothing is not going on.

The intersection of these three twentieth-century artists in terms of the complex, often inscrutable, concept of the absurdity recognized in their epistemological approaches to aesthetics is the focus of this paper. The aesthetical absurd is defined as a measure of the distance or gap, however wide or narrow, that separates, and sometimes degrades, the artistic impulse or will toward creation from the physical reality of that incarnation. This is the incommensurability of the artist and creation. This means that a measure of distance persists between the author's intent or desire or will and the resultant manifestation. In simplistic terms, one can turn to popular song lyrics: "You can't always get what you want."

Cognitive poetics, as identified by Reuven Tsur, Peter Stockwell, and others, offers meaningful insight into this aesthetic asymmetry predicament existing between artist and art. At the vanguard of literary criticism, cognitive poetics has dug in at the frontline of the interpretation of literary texts and art objects. As a perspective focused on the reader's cognitive categories, cognitive poetics has borrowed from the New Critics and reader-response critical methodology, and yet remains cognizant of the value of biographical, archetypal, modernism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and other views. These forerunners have been in the past lavishly applied to Kafka's *The Trial*, Giacometti's *Man Walking*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, yielding thus far mixed and often disappointing results. In the present day, cognitive poetics that relies in part on empirical approaches to creative mental constructs is used here as a lens through which to examine these artists' works.

Applications of cognitive poetics consist of a three-fold approach: a close adherence to the work, focus on reader-response outcomes, and the application of principles related to cognitive science. Cognitive poetics is an effort to apply identifiable tools of the science of the mind to the understanding of aesthetics. Clearly adherents of this movement anticipate their research to identify an evolutionary step in the study of aesthetics, although the step has not yet landed those subscribers to cognitive poetics on firm ground. Not yet, anyway. As the understanding and tools of cognition have developed rapidly over the past four decades, it is logical to apply these present-day empirical tools and findings to the realm of sensuous aesthetics. Part of that evolutionary hope is that the footprint taken toward greater understanding of the link between art and science is toward the high ground, a mesa or even summit, well above the marshland of Postmodernism and its offspring, relativism.

Scientific approaches in cognition applied to aesthetics offer potential insight, as long as the grip does not become a vise or the direction become overtly forced and pragmatic. Merlin Donald in "Art and Cognitive Evolution" offers the questionable view that "Art should be regarded as a specific kind of cognitive engineering. As a first principle, art is an activity intended to influence the minds of an audience. It involves the deliberate construction of representations that affect how people (including the artist) view the world"

(4). Beckett, in particular, was not one who saw the first duty of the artist to please audiences.

Unlike the New Critics, cognitive poetics privileges reader over author, a view that diminishes the creative element in cognitive poetics. It is true that we cannot qualify the artist's mental content at the time of a work's creation, but yet examinations of the artist's particular creative process, to whatever extent this is possible, should not be ignored. The uneasy relationship between Kafka, for instance, and the reader can be fairly assessed as one of incommensurability. The ideas expressed in the words chosen by Kafka, the author, whatever he knew the ideas to be, fall at times out of sync or register with a reader's receptivity. This disorientation, or parity violation, is evident in the text's disjointed images, confused causal action, fragmentation, and incomplete manuscripts. Gregor Samsa's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* into a beetle remains open to a range of interpretations: Marxist, gender, deconstruction, and others. A blurring results in the reader's cognitive understanding, similar to the smudgy printing that results when the four colors on a printing press are not in proper alignment. This impediment toward a cognitive harmonic realization in outcomes leads to a continuous reader-response impasse.

This falls outside what Tsur describes in *Some Aspects of Cognitive Poetics* as the two ways readers accept words and concepts as stimuli for understanding: rapid and delayed categorization. The former is a reader who progresses without incident through a text as a driver down a familiar lane toward home; the latter is the reader who is confronted by delays, road hazards, missed road signs, and other perils of the journey, but nevertheless considers them critically and drives forward. Poetic expression has escaped, "in the linguistic medium, from the tyranny of clear-cut conceptual categories" (Tsur, *Some Aspects* 280). He maintains that people who resist uncertainty and ambiguity in readings are prone to gravitate toward rapid categorization, but in doing so they may miss the various rich aesthetic layers below the top soil.

This impasse can lead to a deadlock in transferability of content between reader and work. But the reader, being empowered by the culture of reader-response privilege, is not content with this stalemate in the game. The reader is like the barbarian intent on overrunning the writer's castle perched on the hilltop. His act is to fell the castle and make the edifice his own. Before sacking the castle walls to break open the meaning of the text, the reader may actually praise the lord for his fine tapestries and other precious trophies, but this is merely a ruse, and he is nevertheless unsatisfied until the trophy belongs to him. He alone can better judge the value of the trophy. But this sacking of the castle for possession of the icon all presupposes that, as in the question if an artistic work affords meaning, that the rich icons are actually stored in the castle vault, and the siege is not predicated on a heightened or overvalued reverence for favored canonical works. This represents a strategic change from the reader-response approach to the artist-work examination. And for this reason this paper does not take up the argument regarding Postmodern's favored position on the validity of acceptable multiple meanings found in a work of art.

The author-work equation should be scrutinized for equity in the value of all terms: rational and irrational. Is there a measure of X degree that an author's work can be found to be out of step with the author's own impulse, and, when this is the case, then evidence for the telltale aesthetical absurd is identified. Rather than faithfully accepting a work as complete, fully unified, in harmonic convergence, its constellation of myriad images gravitationally intact, and complete with meaning and intention, the work must sit in the docket for a critical inspection by way of aesthetic interpretation. This approach priv-

ileges the object as possessing an aesthetic status, and does not consider the work as a historical piece, wherein its value is given weight due to its age and social and cultural politics.

The aesthetical absurd differs from Albert Camus' more traditional absurd which tends toward recognition of the distance between two other positions: the individual's perspective and a brute exterior world. In one instance, this entails the individual's existence and the fleeting time he or she has on this earth. That absurd is a measurement between the desire for human attainment and meaning in the face of a damning realization that man has been shortchanged in this pursuit by the blade of mortality. Why strive when death awaits? Events in one's daily life call attention to the absurd as one becomes conscious of how one wastes away precious hours on the tasks of getting on and along in life. In another case, one has a concept of perfect justice, but the actual encounters fall far short of that Platonic ideal, and this gap leads to the frustration recognized as the absurd. For some the desire for a benevolent and involved God is pitted against the awareness of an indifferent, if not hostile, universe. This is the French author and philosopher's widely accepted existential absurd.

Camus does not address the aesthetical asymmetry. This absurd is the separation between what the author desires, his or her impulse, to create or recreate, an emotive or psychic craving, and the limitations of the artist's own ability and the imperfection of his or her tools, words in the case of writers, to bring into physical form that personal ideal vision. This reiterates the subject-object problem. With many Modernist artists the subject-object dilemma was cast anew. Rather than the Neoclassical position, in which the object stood across the room in an objective position from the artist, and the Romantic fusion of the two terms or entities, to where they both sat in close proximity, even side by side, the later Modernist took note of the external world or object, considered it at some length, employed it in the work, but soon found the object, which had served as the catalyst, so to speak, now to appear at odds with the inner vision of the artist. Essentially, the artist brackets and even erases the object from the canvas, and does so by necessity and not choice.

There exists a noted history that recognizes the curious relationship between art and cognition. Literature of the absurd as with Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" and *The Stranger* spawned insights into the precarious human condition, and this led to more exacting ontological questions demanded by existential literature and philosophy such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *No Exit* and Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. These two literary and philosophical antecedents opened the door to what neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl pioneered as logotherapy, partly in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, a psychological examination and treatment focused on the value of one's authentic existence. Today, cognitive poetics seeks to build on this past by the use of empirical concepts and tools. Current research into cognition and creativity includes Terry Dartnall in *Creativity, Cognition, and Knowledge: An Interaction* (2002); John A. McCarthy in *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature* (2006); and Mark Turner in *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (2006).

Kafka comes first. The work of the German-language writer from Prague functions as a key to an exacting understanding of the problematic aesthetics of the later Giacometti and Beckett. This focus pinpoints one of the central scenes in the writer's novel, *The Trial*, and this is "The Painter" in Chapter 7. Joseph K, the protagonist, is beleaguered by his sudden arrest and his subsequent prolonged entanglement within the mysterious courts. He does not know why he was arrested or the nature of the charges

against him. To help his troubled defense, he seeks the help from many people, one of whom is the painter Titorelli, a person whom has been recommended by Mr. Block, a tradesman, who has also fallen into the same snare of the malevolent court system.

The painter lives in a dilapidated tenement building in a decaying neighborhood. The reader discovers later in the chapter, as Joseph K does, that the building sits adjacent to the court offices, allowing the interpretation that the courts are ubiquitous. As K approaches the tenement building at the beginning of the chapter, he sees a broken hole in the wall that serves as a crude doorway entrance. His advance is marked by the encounter of a “repulsive, yellow, streaming liquid [...] causing some rats to scurry away.” He sees a small child lying on its belly in the street, but its cries are drowned out by the noise of nearby workmen. A hunchback girl of thirteen is the leader of a group of young miscreant girls, and this female retinue serves as a chorus in the chapter. Their faces “reveal a mixture of childishness and depravity” (142).

A plethora of images, graphic and dizzying metaphors and symbols, infiltrate the chapter. Additional images include hidden doorways, paintings of judges and landscapes, suffocating atmosphere in the studio, etc. According to this author’s count, twenty two images cluster in this chapter. Someone else’s list would no doubt vary in the tabulation, but the exact number of images is not crucial. I present a count so as to magnify the magnitude of what appear as disparate images. What is important, rather, is the type, use of, and aggregate of these Kafkaesque images.

The comingling of the words “childishness” and “depravity,” for instance, begs the question as to what sort of children are these when we first meet them? The word depravity, for instance, may suggest to readers a wide spectrum of connotations and images, ranging from prostitutes, street urchins, runaways, to the more acceptable connotation of unclean or unhealthy. Depravity, an open-ended term, resists certainty. Kafka’s words used to name physical objects or emotions offer only approximations and not exactitude in terms of translatability and transference of intelligibility. Cognitively, a reader must grab words and fit them into his or her own constellation of concepts and experiential meanings. Add to this cluster of images the crying child lying in the street and the indifferent workmen, plus the rat and yellow ooze. The reader must add these together to affix a mental construct from the collection of words. These words or images are in free play, echoing Jacques Derrida, in Kafka’s funhouse. Kafka is not seeking to claim ownership over meaning, but he is suggesting meaning and identity, and this turning loose of meaning shifts responsibility to the reader.

Kafka’s painter, looking disheveled and dressed in only his nightshirt, answers Joseph K’s knock at the door. He reveals that he is an influential friend of the courts, and serves as the court painter of the many powerful judges. Titorelli then informs Joseph K of the three forms of acquittal available through the courts. These are absolute acquittal, apparent acquittal, and deferment. Titorelli’s explanation of these legal possibilities is voiced in a very discursive, empirical, and logical manner. But Joseph K soon realizes that none of the forms of acquittal will actually free him from the courts’ pernicious reach and scrutiny. Absolute acquittal has never been conferred on any defendant, and the other two forms require a lifetime of continued active defense and prostrations before the courts. Joseph K plunges deeper into the realization of the absurdity of his predicament as a defendant. But this absurdity in the storyline, certainly reverberating later with Camus, is understood in light of the obvious irony between the words shaping a logical framework and the reality of outcomes. Here again organization is transparent. The painter offers three forms of legal outcome, again betraying the author’s manipulation, for the notion

of Kafka's three is as fundamental in storytelling, if not clichéd, as three strikes and you're out. It is the structure of the three explanations that frames the reader's experience at this point, as there well could have been a longer list of possible outcomes.

An important image surfaces later in the studio. Joseph K shows surprise when he finally recognizes a figure of justice in one of the artist's paintings. "Now I see," said K., "here's the blindfold and here are the scales. But aren't those wings on her heels, and isn't she moving?" "Yes," said the painter, "I had to paint it like that according to the contract. It's actually the figure of justice and the goddess of victory all in one" (182). Joseph K argues that equipping the woman of justice with wings on her heels will render justice as unstable. "That is not a good combination," said K. with a smile. "Justice needs to remain still, otherwise the scales will move about and it won't be possible to make a just verdict." "I'm just doing what the client wanted," said the painter. (182). The painter confesses that he has never seen the lady of justice or the throne that is shown with the seated judges in the painting, but that he has invented the images based on the judges' instructions.

Kafka's structure in the chapter offers a more exact empirical analysis. The form is straightforward, balanced in action, and reveals the skill and presence of the author's hand. Joseph K's entrance and exit from the building frame the chapter. His discernible goal is to meet the painter and learn what, if anything, the painter can do to aid his defense, which he succeeds in doing. The knowledge gained is far from reassuring to the protagonist, in that he learns that he has little chance of ever escaping the omnipresent court system. Meanwhile, the crowd of young girls, acting as a Greek chorus, appears and reappears at timed intervals. Their presence marks the secondary action, as they enter and exit the story to deflect the weight of attention from the main action. The organization of the short section is finely wrought. The bones of the chapter furnish a confident sense that this is a pocket of the real world, all the while a collection of intriguing, uncomfortable, and jarring odd images swarm about.

The New Critics in the first half of the twentieth century emphasized a close reading of the text and regarded the literary work as sacrosanct vessel: a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. They favored the author over the reader. Each word and image is considered necessary and not conditional in the construction of the integrity of the whole. Images are not merely ornamental, but integral to the complete work. Cognitive poetics follows this emphasis on close textual analysis, with its cornerstone principle as the interpretability of the poetic language. What, if anything, do these images add up to? Do they coalesce? How are they more than decorative? Can studies of the mind and its fabricated images help to explain these metaphors in ways that earlier critical theories have not? Each image viewed independently can be examined in detail if delayed cognitive assessment is afforded. The yellow ooze can be explained in a realm of possibilities, but not in a definitive sense like the more narrowly pregnant simile. Kafka's images paint a landscape, and this is contrasted to the serene landscape paintings Joseph K finds in Titorelli's studio.

Kafka's final product, the outcome from an ideal impulse and reality, must be questioned, and this excludes accepting any intentional certainty, known or not known. And, of course, the reader cannot know to what degree the author knew what his intentions were in the writing process. The focal point is not on the reader's frustrated attempts to piece together Kafka's puzzling and often uncompleted manuscript into that unified and explanatory whole, to make sense of it, to solve its riddles, like that of the parable *Before the Law*, but rather the focus here falls on the evidence at hand that points to the au-

thor's uncertainty about his own manuscripts. This differs from Wimsatt and Beardsley's intentional fallacy, that the reader cannot know the author's intention or thought process regarding a creative work. Their position neither affirms nor negates authorial certainty. They, rather, contend that it cannot be known. The position presented here differs, with the shift of focus to the uncertainty of the work's integrity. Is it watertight in terms of lacking cracks and flaws? In the Kafkaesque, readers can only approach meaning, never reach the goal of understanding, unity, and wholeness. The work at hand is the primary evidence. So too this casts the same light on the author's predicament of his or her own work. This is not always because the artist has deftly eluded us or hidden the keys to meaning in clever ciphers. A counter argument is that the artist like Kafka struggled with meaning, vision, and corporeality. The evidence lies in the work itself.

Although literature became Kafka's method of understanding himself and the world, he "took a dim view of artistic 'truth'" in the revelation of his aesthetic skepticism (Corngold 141). But Kafka's work was not by necessity a form of mental therapy, but writing as an obsession toward self-expression and creation. In his letters, Kafka wrote about "The tremendous world I have inside my head" (*Diaries, 1910-1913* 288). While the statement contains a sense of aesthetic drive, it is not a unique revelation among artists or humanity in general.

David Constantine in "Kafka's writing and our reading" explores the domain of the author's questioning of his own abilities: "Was there ever a writer so convinced of failure? All writers are, more or less. Failure is intrinsic in writing. It is there most palpably in the gap between conception and realization" (15).

Stanley Corngold in *Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka* addresses Kafka's creative impulse in terms of its complexity and inherent irrational appearance. Kafka at moments betrays an equivocal position regarding his writing, as he dismisses much of his journal writing as a "heap of straw." Self-doubt leads the author in a struggle to comprehend his mental state: "My state is not unhappiness," he writes, "but it is also not happiness, not indifference, not weakness, not fatigue, not another interest—so what is it then?" (quoted in Corngold 21). Corngold follows Kafka's journals: "This feels like a moment of ardent enough self-questioning, for here, too, the (diary) entry enacts its own argument: "That I do not know this is probably connected with my inability to write"" (21).

Corngold: "It is not enough to say 'I do not know.' What, after all, is the cause of Kafka's 'inability to write'? There would be some profit in getting to the root of this inability" (21).

Kafka recognizes the gaps in his awareness and the questions the capability of his creative process. He draws on the metaphor of a simple blade of grass:

all those things [...] which occur to me, occur to me not from the root up but rather only from somewhere about their middle. Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a blade of grass and hold fast to it when it begins to grow only from the middle. (quoted in Corngold 21)

The artist sees the blade of grass, like the story or novel, not germinating from a seed or from the gestation point, but after the vision has already partially gained form and developed.

Corngold adds:

The blade of grass, Kafka's thought, does not grow from the root up; hence, its way of growing, its way of being, cannot be traced back to the root. Kafka cannot get to the bot-

tom of his thought. Between his being and any thoroughgoing self-knowledge that might arise from thinking, there is disparity—a gap between the root and the middle. (25)

Every fair narration of what occurs in thought would have to begin *in medias res*.

This summation of Kafka's aesthetics very clearly echoes statements made later by Beckett: "it is likely that *all* of Kafka's stories and novels will reflect this drama of writing, the inability to write, and the impossibility of not writing." Beckett in *Disjecta* plays with his readers by talking about the artist's "fidelity to failure" (Corngold 145).

The Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti, although perhaps lesser known than Kafka and Beckett in literary critical circles, remains regarded as one of the most original artists of the twentieth century. He is recognized today for his disturbing and perplexing human shapes, figures like *Man Pointing* (1947), *Walking Man I* (1960), and *Tall Figure II* and *Tall Figure III* (1960). These works are not mimetic in the classical sense of portraying the ideal or real contours of the human body, as with Michelangelo's *David*, but are works that present the human figure at the other end of the spectrum, that of extreme attenuation. They pose a question about the ontological nature of humankind rather than attempting to affirm existence.

Giacometti's figures like *Man Walking* are hardly recognizable of human reality. His figures are elongated and emaciated, ashy and burnt-out. Giacometti's faces and bodies appear to be hacked and knifed in coarse manner. They more resemble figures following the Holocaust or the burned bodies after a nuclear apocalypse. Although he worked from models, often using his brother, his figures bear little or no resemblance to those models. His aesthetic process is that he worked at a piece of clay by steadily carving away at the form, resulting in the full body, arms and legs ultimately reduced to matchstick thin size, essentially skeletal form. His process is reductionist, creation through destruction.

He recognized the presence of the divide between the vision and reality. His vision took over the object, changing and reducing it to an essence of his vision, and the result was the many skeletal forms in space. James Lord, Giacometti's noted biographer, reveals:

The more I looked at the model . . . the more the screen between his reality and mine grew thicker. One starts by seeing the person who poses, but little by little all the possible sculptures of him intervene. The more real vision of him disappears, the stranger his head becomes. One is no longer sure of his appearance, or of his size, or of anything at all. There were too many sculptures between my model and me. And when there were no sculptures, there was such a complete stranger that I no longer know whom I saw or what I was looking at. (*Giacometti* 165)

Lord examines the artist's limitations:

we [are] confronted by the utter impossibility of what Giacometti is attempting to do. A semblance, an illusion is, in any case, obviously all that can be attained, and he knows it. But an illusion is not enough. This inadequacy becomes literally day by day, I think, less acceptable, less tolerable — almost in a physical sense — even as he strives to go on, to go further. There is always, perhaps, a possibility of going a little further, not very far but a little further, and in the realm of the absolute a little is limitless. It is this possibility, I think, that gives to Giacometti's work such arresting intensity, an intensity that has increased with time. But it may also be that it is just this possibility which has made it more and more difficult for him to produce work that seems conventionally 'finished.' (*A Giacometti Portrait* 91)



Other scholars have described Giacometti as the artist of negation, deformity, attenuation, but that is to argue that that is either the intended outcome or how we view the work. This falls within the reader-response view. According to Cecile Nebel's *The Dark Side of Creativity: Blocks, Unfinished Works, and the Urge to Destroy*, Giacometti realized that his paintings were never finished. And if a work is never finished can it then be complete, particularly in reference to an ideal unified whole? Giacometti confessed to Alexander Watt that certainty about a work was out of the grasp of even the artist.

This was due in large part to the difficulty of grasping as a coherent system or whole what David Sylvester excellently summarizes as the accumulation of memories none of which is quite the same as any other, because each of them is affected by what has gone before, by the continually changing relation between all that has already been put down and the next glance at the model. (Nebel 122-23)

Giacometti's work explores the realm of defamiliarization, which was not a new concept even in the middle decades of the twentieth century, but one that the artist elevated to new understanding and recognition. He found that to encourage more intensity from viewers, the artist must produce the known images in an unfamiliar manner.

In defamiliarizing it he transformed it to such a degree that he felt lost, unable to formulate another way of seeing things and making them hang together. He was in a no man's land where traditional points of view no longer worked; he had to grope to find new ones. This was because the reality he painted became uncertain: The sculptor said, 'its projection in my head is uncertain or partial'. (Nebel 123)

Lord documents Giacometti's claim that he did not paint his vision of things but a residue of this vision as well as his consciousness of it. This consciousness grasped forward toward an uncertain goal due to the changing landscape of mental images that dart as shards in and out of moments of time. He wanted to give a whole, fully integrated representation but could not succeed—he found his vision too volatile. As a result, he neither had nor could have a theory to help him fit the discontinuous nature of what he saw into a unified pattern.

Nebel emphasizes the prevalent position that Giacometti, following the Impressionists and Surrealists, wanted to possess the experience of reality and not the reality itself. He is clearly putting forth his experience of reality, but we need to weigh on a finer scale what Giacometti's experience of reality is. His work begins with impressions, as all thought must, considering Locke's basic work in mental understanding and cognition. Giacometti employed models, often his wife Annette and his brother Diego. Some of his sculptures bear resemblances to his models, but many depart in an extraordinary manner from the original bodies, including *Bust of Carola*, done in 1959, based on Paola Carola. This vision stands at war with reality: refutes and denies it.

The reality that Giacometti begins with is almost absent and negated at the end. The models he uses bear little if any resemblance to the finished form. More clearly, the model and reality get in the way of the mind's vision and creation, two separate forms of cognition.

Samuel Beckett is the final artist discussed here. The Irish dramatist wrote much of his work in French and received the Nobel prize for literature in 1969. Beckett is recognized for his astonishing and bewildering images, those like Winnie buried up to her neck in a mound of earth in *Happy Days* and Hamm's aging, legless parents, Nagg and

Nell, peeking out of trash cans in *Endgame*. These images haunt theatregoers long after the curtain falls. Beckett, first pointed out as an absurdist dramatist by Martin Esslin in his 1961 text *The Theatre of the Absurd*, is the creator of the poetic drama, static drama, drama painted with stationary images and symbols.

Beckett's link to Giacometti is a direct one. The two artists were friends in Paris and collaborated on designing a tree as a prop for a 1966 production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Odeon Theatre in the French capital.

The tragi-comedy *Waiting for Godot* has gained a wide and iconic familiarity since its debut in 1951. It is a play that portrays two tramps named Vladimir and Estragon who in the two simple acts patiently wait the arrival of someone named Godot, a character who never takes the stage. It is perhaps a drama built around the human predicament of waiting and how to pass the time.

My focus falls on one element from Beckett's seminal play that can, arguably, be said to encompass or represent many of the images cast in Beckett's dramatic oeuvre, as that single element absorbs and encompasses most others. This is the tree in *Waiting for Godot*. The tree is the lone stage prop on the boards, beyond the poor paper moon hanging in the sky. The tree functions to mark the physical location at which the characters meet and talk along a country road. They never stray far from the tree. A similar focus is evident in the mound of earth in which Winnie is buried in *Happy Days*. The tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* is another such central metaphor.

Beckett's tree falls into an open-ended, enigmatic cluster of Beckettian images. Standing on a barren country road, it is small, diminutive, sort of on the scale of a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, propped up by Beckett in what can only be referred to as a landscape from T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. The tree stands poor in stature and poorer in foliage. It is, to put it plainly, unremarkable. Perhaps that is the author's intent. Besides marking the stage, the tree functions to further the dialogue and plot. Estragon and Vladimir, the two hobo tramps in the play, look at it from time to time and foolishly talk about hanging themselves from its thin branches. The puzzlement of time, change, and action is furthered by this very tree.

Beckett invited his friend Giacometti to construct this tree for the play's performance. Giacometti had never developed scenes or props for the theatre. The collaboration was far from fruitful. According to Giacometti's biographer, James Lord, "Alberto made a marvelously curvaceous, dendriform creation in plaster" (*Giacometti* 429). But Giacometti and Beckett both met the result of the creation with misgivings. They worked through the night trying to perfect the tree, to bring their idea of the tree to fruition. Giacometti said that "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" (*Giacometti* 429).

The image of the tree wasn't exactly right. There was a recognition that a violation in parity, however narrow or wide, existed between the artistic thought, the ideal, and the actuality given to the thought. This recognition of "maybe" is what Beckett terms, famously, the inevitable failure of the artist, and this is the artist's duty. Beckett says in *Worstward Ho*, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better" (89). What does Beckett mean by failure? Perhaps that the artist fails to realize fully his creative impulse in the physical world. Words themselves, the blood of the playwright's creation, hamper the very creation they are intended to facilitate.

Drama, like sculpture, ultimately forces the artist's hand. The playwright/director must manifest objects for the physical world by putting them on the stage. These images

have definition, shape and edge, dimension, finite form. Beckett's tree, at one time safely hiding in the creative realm of the play's text, must be forced out of the birth canal to be born in the physical world. On stage, it stands a concretion, no longer enjoying or assuming the multitudinous forms freely called forth in the mind of readers. With Kafka's Titorelli and his attic studio in the text of the novel, each reader paints his or her own picture. Onstage, the dramatist's props and characters are physically defined and present.

Lord adds that Giacometti and Beckett,

Driven beyond the conscious self by a need to express what defies expression, found the strength to sustain that need in the ironic authority derived from a mortifying acknowledgement of failure. Beckett had learned that words are powerless to convey an idea or feeling, just as Giacometti had found that neither paint nor clay can possibly embody the experience of vision. (*Giacometti* 337)

A noted passage found in *Disjecta* offers Beckett's attitude toward art: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure in his world and the shrink from it desertion." He goes on to talk about "this fidelity to failure, as a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (145).

In conclusion, Kafka, Giacometti, and Beckett represent artists for whom the argument for the aesthetic absurd seems a valid measure of their works. As noted earlier, Camus makes no note of this troubled condition, this aesthetic asymmetry, at odds within the artist. In his work "Absurd Creation," there is brief mention of the human contradiction, not in the logic of thought itself, but in the struggle between the thought and the creative act. This dimension of the absurd is that separation between the will, the impulse toward creation, and the consequent difficult manifestation of that unpremeditated idea into physical reality. The aesthetic absurd maintains itself as a proximal zone, no man's land, contested territory, where the artist struggles not with the audience but with his own abilities.

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