

“One glimpse and vanished”:

The Limits of Representation in Samuel Beckett’s Criticism and Fiction

Tim Lawrence

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University of York

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Abstract

This thesis examines how philosophical influence shaped the representation of vision in Beckett's critical writing and fiction. In order to undertake this analysis, I draw on trends within Beckett studies, especially those focused on the relationship between Beckett and phenomenology, while also seeking to draw on textual and rhetorical approaches from outside Beckett studies. Beckett's writing and thinking on visual art are examined in detail, and it is argued that Beckett's essays were crucial to the development of his literary aesthetic. This thesis examines how Beckett's use of the figural suggests an implicit philosophical perspective, grounded in concerns about the status and nature of representation. It details these philosophical traces in Beckett's writing in relation to theories of art, perception and consciousness with which Beckett is known to have engaged. The first chapter focuses on the Kantian philosophical tradition and its manifestations in Beckett's essay *Proust* (1931) and his novel *Murphy* (1938), before considering their relationship to Beckett's novel *Watt* (1945) and the essays written in the immediate post-war period, such as "Peintres de l'empêchement" (1948). The second chapter considers affinities between these works and Surrealism, focusing on the relationship between the visual and philosophical in Surrealism. Chapter three considers the role of other reflections on the visual and figural, including Wassily Kandinsky's writing on art, while it documents Beckett's work alongside the art critic Georges Duthuit on the review *Transition* (1948-50). Drawing on these discourses, the theme of the dissolving figure in *Watt* and Beckett's novellas, such as *Premier amour* (1946), is considered in relation to interests in visualising the limits of representation. Chapter four considers the role played by the limit and limit-states in Beckett's later prose, moving from *L'Innommable* (1953) to the short "residua" gathered in the collections *Têtes-mortes* and *Foirades*, by way of a dialogue between Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophies. I end by suggesting that a thematic continuity grounded in the interplay between representation, perception and consciousness underpins the changes in the role played by the visual and figural as Beckett's prose style developed.

Contents

Abstract.....	2
List of Contents	3
Acknowledgments	5
Author's Declaration.....	6
Note on the presentation of text.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Chapter One: Representation and resistance: Beckett as reader and critic	30
Figural evocations.....	31
Kant, Schopenhauer and Beckett's philosophical influences.....	34
Kant, Cassirer and interwar politics	44
Schopenhauer and the Proustian equation	51
Beckett and the "art d'incarcération"	60
A(p)erception and the eye.....	67
<i>Watt's</i> pots and Kantian objects.....	72
Vision and unknowing.....	78
Chapter Two: Beckett's visual aesthetic and Surrealist influences	87
"these long shifting thresholds": figuring disappearance	88
The Surrealist situation and <i>Murphy</i> in translation	95
André Breton and the Surrealist Image.....	101
<i>This Quarter</i> and Beckett's poetic adaptations	110
Surrealist revisions and Sartrean objects	119
Chapter Three: Periodical culture and Beckett's revisions of the visual.....	134
Beckett in <i>Transition</i> : revising and reflecting on Surrealism.....	134
Beckett and Kandinsky: critical and creative abstraction.....	154
Formal reflections of Kandinsky in <i>Watt</i> and beyond	163
Kandinsky's concretions: philosophy and form.....	172
Figure and ground, vision and voice in <i>Premier amour</i>	177
Chapter Four: "This running against the walls of our cage": Beckett at the boundary	183
Figural connections: <i>L'Innommable</i> , <i>Mercier et Camier</i> and <i>Foirades</i>	185
The fragment between criticism and fiction.....	196
Beckett, Bataille and the ends of limitation	199
Wittgenstein's aesthetics and the late Beckettian limit.....	201
The impossible view: the limits of thought in "Imagination Dead Imagine"	212
Figuring the unfigurable: Blanchot, Bataille and rhetorical delineations of the limit	217

Conclusion	228
Abbreviations	232
Bibliography.....	234

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work, apart from those instances in which I quote or draw upon the work of others, where acknowledgement is clearly given through references within the text. Part of chapter three will be published in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 27, "Beginning of the murmur': Archival Pre-texts and Other Sources," edited by Mark Nixon and Conor Carville (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015). No other work in this thesis has been published and no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other institution of learning.

Note on the presentation of text

Where relevant, for French-language sources, both the original text and a translation are provided. The original or translated passage is usually given in parentheses, following the reference for the first citation. Longer citations from an original source are presented in a footnote, except those for works by Beckett, where the original and the translated passage are placed alongside one another in the body of the thesis. Where my own translation is given, this immediately follows the reference for the original citation and, to avoid confusion, is placed [in square brackets].

Words or philosophical terms without a single, specific source are isolated in ‘single quotation marks’ rather than the “double quotation marks” used for citations. Individual foreign-language words or phrases, in neither English nor French, are italicised.

Introduction

Beckett's œuvre is marked by evocative tropes of perception, mind and body. Over the decades, much attention has been paid to the ways in which these tropes function, aesthetically, structurally, conceptually and philosophically. Early approaches to philosophical influence in Beckett's work were primarily attentive to the Beckettian tensions between mind and body, especially Maurice Blanchot's essay on the voice, language and silence in *L'Innommable* (1953) and Hugh Kenner's work on the Cartesian opposition between self and body in Beckett's post-war novels.¹ By contrast, recent scholarship has paid closer attention to Beckett's philosophical influences in relation to theories of perception and the status of the image; several studies have drawn upon Gilles Deleuze's conception of the image, while Deleuze's own commentary on the issues that Beckett's television plays raise in relation to the rest of his œuvre has proven an important reference point for several studies of Beckett's work.²

The approach to questions of philosophical influence undertaken in this thesis is indebted to studies of Beckett's writings that draw closely upon the intellectual, artistic and broader cultural contexts of their composition and reception. Above all, my approach is informed by Ulrika Maude's study, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (2009), and the collection co-edited by Maude with Matthew Feldman, *Beckett and Phenomenology* (2009). Both studies have

¹ Maurice Blanchot, "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?" in *Le Livre à venir*, Collection Folio Essais (Paris, Gallimard, 1986), 286-295; trans. Charlotte Mandell as "Where Now? Who Now?" in *The Book to Come* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 210-217; Hugh Kenner, "The Cartesian Centaur," in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London: John Calder, 1962), 117-32.

² Gilles Deleuze, "L'Épuisé," in *Quad et Trio du fantôme, ... que nuages ..., Nacht und Träume*, suivi de *L'Épuisé par Gilles Deleuze*, by Beckett, trans. Edith Fournier (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), 57-106; trans. Anthony Uhlmann as "The Exhausted," *SubStance* 24, no. 3 (1995): 3-28. Deleuze's theories are extensively discussed in: Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mary Bryden, ed., *Beckett's Proust/Deleuze's Proust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); Colin Gardner, *Beckett, Deleuze and the Televisual Event: Peephole Art* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012).

widened the field in which philosophical influence can be considered to operate on Beckett's work, and it is on the basis of the work undertaken here that much of my research rests.

A significant aspect of my discussion in this thesis involves the ways in which tropes of visibility (involving, sometimes, the negation of the visual) remain integral to the figuration of the limit in Beckett's essays and fiction, as well as aspects of his poetry. Beckett's focus on the visual and the liminal also provides the site at which his fiction and critical essays meet. These limits are especially important to several of Beckett's texts, which themselves occupy a liminal place in considerations of Beckett's canon. These preoccupations with representation, the visual and the liminal are of central importance to Beckett's visual aesthetic as it is employed both in the major novels such as *L'Innommable* (1953) – with its English counterpart, *The Unnamable* (1958) – and in the landscapes of the late fiction. Aesthetic concerns in Beckett's fiction contain many important affinities with themes developed in his critical writing. The register deployed in Beckett's late prose text, *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), demonstrates these aesthetic lineages shared between the creative and critical:

Quick the eyes. The moment they open. Suddenly they are there. Nothing having stirred. One is enough. One staring eye. Gaping pupil thinly rimmed with washen blue. No trace of humour. None any more. Unseeing. As if dazed by what seen behind the lids. (*IS*, 463)

The sudden appearance and disappearance of the “staring eye” reappraises visual themes expressed in Beckett's earlier critical essays, such as the oft-overlooked essay “La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon” (1945-6), which memorably emphasises that it is “impossible de vouloir autre l'inconnu, l'enfin vu” (*D*, 135) [impossible to want otherwise the unknown, the seen at last]. Anticipating the “dazed” eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, Beckett's essay crucially presents artistic vision as a surprised sight – the “enfin vu” – offering a glimpse of the unknown.

The unknown is crucial to many of the ways in which Beckett's writing figures the limit. The desire to speak the ends of language in *The Unnamable*, for example, uses ignorance to present states of absence, such as silence and invisibility, not as negative ideas, but parts of a positive aesthetic principle that guides and shapes the stories told by Beckett's lone speaker. Ignorance is articulated through figures of the visual; the Unnamable's voice speaks of itself through a figuration of the unseeing but feeling eye: "I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly" (U, 298). *The Unnamable* contains many similar aphorisms about sight and the limits of perception. The very dynamic of the sentence is built upon a carefully structured relationship between the subject, knowledge and perception. The structure of these terms even introduces a hierarchy, in which the slim remains of the knowable are grounded in perceptual experience. The eyes confirm their own existence through their capacity to cry, and the liquid sensation of tears reveals the eyes themselves as the organ that allows the narrator – who knows "nothing" of himself – to say "I". This state of persistent perceptual impoverishment endures, and gradually reveals something inaccessible to clear-sighted reasoning: "What I see best I see ill" (U, 291).

From *Murphy* to *Molloy*, *Watt* to "What is the word," Beckett's novels, novellas, prose fragments and poetry rely upon tropes that connect visual perception to modes of consciousness resistant to intellectual revelation. Similar patterns are at work in Beckett's critical essays on painting and literary history. For Beckett as an essayist, it is at least partly because the unknown is hidden and resists revelation that it offers a privileged state for addressing questions of artistic value. If, as Lois Oppenheim argues, the incoherent patterns that characterise the Beckettian visual work to resist the rationalisation of art and aesthetic experience,³ then Beckett's statements on the aesthetic importance of the unknown must be taken into account by any study that seeks to elucidate the framing of vision in Beckett's writing. Perhaps the most striking of

³ Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue With Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 85-94.

these statements is given in Beckett's early essay *Proust* (1931), which opens by expressly declaring the unknown as the repository of value: "The unknown, choosing its weapons from a hoard of values, is also the unknowable" (*P*, 511). These terms serve to define the "unknown" as a hoard, a secret stash, both cache and *caché*, that make up what Beckett's essay calls "The Proustian Equation." Yet these values are not simply unknown, they are "unknowable." In one metonymic move, by making the description of a state of affairs (what is unknown) synonymous with its possibility (the unknown can only be unknown), Beckett's essay also demarcates strict limits on what is knowable. By equating the unknown and the unknowable, and by making the aesthetic values to which Proust subscribes the sum of this equation, Beckett is implicitly suggesting that if the *unknowable* can be adapted towards literary ends, it will not be through a literature that seeks to make the values it contains knowable or comprehensible.

Within Beckett scholarship, it remains striking how little attention has been paid to the range of Beckett's critical writing. This is particularly true of his two essays in French on the Dutch painters Geer and Bram van Velde, "La Peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon" (1945-6) and "Peintres de l'empêchement" (1948), which are usually overshadowed (particularly in anglophone scholarship) by "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" (1949). Yet these three essays are part of the same continuum: the final of Beckett's "Three Dialogues" draws upon the earlier essays in its presentation of Bram van Velde as the exemplary modern painter.

Despite these important continuities between Beckett's essays, the only published monograph dedicated to either part of Beckett's critical or poetic output remains Lawrence Harvey's seminal study *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (1970). At the time of writing, Beckett's critical writing, encompassing essays, reviews, art and literary criticism, constitutes the sole aspect of his work that still awaits a full scholarly reissue from any of Beckett's international rights holders: Les Éditions de Minuit, Grove/Atlantic and Faber. Readers interested in Beckett's art criticism and reviews must work from Ruby Cohn's edited collection, *Disjecta* (1983). The title was suggested to Cohn by Beckett as an Ovidian echo of the phrase 'disjecta

membra,' meaning 'discarded remains,' and over the decades many of the remnants collected in *Disjecta* (such as Beckett's 1937 letter to Axel Kaun) have become the repository of oft-repeated quotations. But extended commentaries on these remnants remain rare. Even Harvey's study places its discussion of Beckett's criticism after a lengthy treatment of his poetry, as though the former required the latter to justify scholarly attention. In other words, many of these pieces received the treatment invited by the title of Cohn's collection.

There is a growing awareness and an ongoing project to redress the imbalanced neglect Beckett's critical writing has received.⁴ Nevertheless, these difficulties have impeded scholarship on Beckett from being able to achieve a full understanding of the connections between the poetic and the critical in Beckett's writing, of its complex inheritances, and of its concern with the status of the visual. Unusually, Beckett's combination of the poetic and critical – when responding to a work of art, or an artist – evade engagement of a strictly ekphrastic nature. Rather than adapting the mimetic relationship inherent in the ekphrastic poem, or legitimising the critical encounter with the art work through its attentive description, Beckett's essays on painting instead tend to figure the conditions of visibility itself.

Affinities between the poetic and the critical have arguably received fuller attention in French-language scholarship. Following Bruno Clément's *L'Œuvre sans qualités* (1989), several studies have focused on how specific rhetorical devices and formal patterns shape Beckett's prose, such as Pascale Sardin's *Samuel Beckett, Auto-traducteur de soi ou l'art de l'empêchement* (2002) and Diane Lüscher-Morata's *La souffrance portée au langage dans la prose de Samuel Beckett* (2005). Within recent English-language scholarship on Beckett, however, the trend has been discernibly more historicist, led by an 'archival turn.'⁵ My thesis is situated between these two trends.

⁴ Detailed in Mark Nixon and David Tucker, "Towards a Scholarly Edition of Beckett's Critical Writing," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 49-56.

⁵ Often seen to begin with the publication of Knowlson's biography, *Damned to Fame*, in 1996, although Beckett's centenary year in 2006 and the growth of the Beckett International Foundation archive at Reading University offered further catalysts to Beckettians' own archive fever. See the commentary on these issues in Nicholas Johnson, "A Theatre of the Unword: Censorship, Hegemony and Samuel

Drawing upon oft-overlooked archival material such as Beckett's essay drafts and Georges Duthuit's correspondence with Beckett, I aim to document the historical situation of Beckett's writing by tracing patterns of influence in dialogue with formalist aspects such as the inter- and intra-textual motifs which prevail across Beckett's critical and creative texts.

A telling example of the ways in which Beckett's critical writing has been overlooked is found in the influence his reported statements on Joyce have held over his own work's reception. Beckett's overt statements about Joyce's influence have, as Kevin Dettmar has noted, significantly framed critical interpretations of Joyce's aesthetic in their own right, while they "served to downplay [Beckett's] own continuity with the Joycean project."⁶ The reading Beckett promoted in interview deliberately opposes, in suspiciously general terms, his own mature aesthetic to Joyce's late style. Joyce is presented as an exponent of composition through accumulation, whereas Beckett's stated method of composition lies in abstraction or negation. Yet this line of interpretation has trumped the critical positioning of Joyce's *Work in Progress* in Beckett's 1929 essay "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce," which depicts the Joycean aesthetic as an expression of language's poetic foundations precisely to the extent that its use of language resists the expectations for narrative coherence placed upon the novel. The essay's central argument about the form of *Work in Progress* includes the well-known claim that "Here form *is* content; content *is* form" (DB, 503). But the distinction between form and content is not as fixed as this statement implies: "sense," Beckett argues, is "for ever rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself" (504). The assimilation of sense to form extends to a privileging of "apprehension" over reading; sensory appearance over description and explanation. Joyce's words are "alive," the "extraction of language and painting and gesture,

Beckett," in *Ireland, Memory and Performing the Historical Imagination*, ed. Christopher Collins and Mary P. Caulfield (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 39-40; S.E. Wilmer, "Negotiating the Archival Turn in Beckett Studies," *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 4 (2012): 585-588.

⁶ Kevin J. H. Dettmar, "The Joyce That Beckett Built," *James Joyce Quarterly* 35, no. 4 – 36, no. 1 (Summer-Autumn 1998): 606.

with all the clarity of the old inarticulation” (504-05), and they visibly “blaze and glow and disappear” (505) precisely because they are *not* comprehended.

The association between visual perception and incomprehension would clearly remain important for Beckett. Following from his illstarred translation of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” episode in *Work in Progress* in 1930,⁷ Beckett’s essay on Proust would further emphasise the dualism between sense perception and the intellect with the “Proustian equation.” An important aspect to the alignment between aesthetic value and the unknown Beckett argues for in *Proust* is the essay’s distinction between the authenticity of direct perception and its distortion by the intellectual and habitual. Thus, for Beckett, the innovations of *À la recherche du temps perdu* are made through its “non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility” (P, 550). In an echo of Joyce’s “clarity of the old inarticulation,” Beckett argues that for Proust, only in “the light of ignorance” may objects become sources of “enchantment” (P, 517).

“Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce” could be regarded as a paratext for *Finnegans Wake*, designed to disseminate and shape the eventual reception of Joyce’s *Work In Progress*. Beckett’s interviews also possess a similar status with regard to his own œuvre, especially his reported answers to Israel Shenker in 1956, Tom Driver and Gabriel d’Aubarède in 1961, his 1964 interview with John Gruen,⁸ as well as the weaving of interviews into scholarly biographies such as Richard Ellmann’s biography of Joyce and Knowlson’s *Damned to Fame*.

⁷ To the consternation of Beckett and Alfred Péron, Joyce replaced their translation with one credited to another translation group led by Philippe Soupault. See Megan Quigley, “Justice for the ‘Illstarred Punster’: Samuel Beckett and Alfred Péron’s Revisions of ‘Anna Lyvia Pluratsel’,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2004): 469-487; Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42-7; Sam Slote, “The Joyce Circle,” in *Samuel Beckett in Context*, ed. Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 149-159.

⁸ Beckett’s interview with Gruen is usually misdated to 1969, when Gruen’s article was published in *Vogue*. See Erik Tønning, *Samuel Beckett’s Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen 1962-1985* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 59n6.

The same opposition is emphasised almost every time Joyce is addressed in Beckett's interviews. As he is reported to have put it to Shenker, in his first published interview:

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. [...] My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.⁹

Beckett would repeat the same opposition between Joycean “omniscience” and his own “ignorance” in one of a series of interviews he gave to James Knowlson towards the end of his life: “I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more [...] I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge.”¹⁰ The “lack of knowledge” upon which Beckett reportedly placed so much emphasis involves not simply negation but the exploration of hitherto unexplored territory – “that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists” – revealed only outside the constraints of the intellect.

The same connections between artistic expression, ontology and anti-intellectualism were redescribed by Beckett in several different ways. In a memorable phrase recorded by Lawrence Harvey in 1962, in an interview towards *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, Beckett stated that his aim was “to let Being into art.”¹¹ Patrick Bowles, with whom Beckett co-translated *Molloy* from French into English, recorded Beckett describing his own writing in 1953 as “pre-logical,”¹² a phrasing which further echoes Beckett's characterisation of Proust's “impressionism” over two decades earlier in *Proust* as the “non-logical statement of phenomena”

⁹ Israel Shenker, “An Interview with Beckett,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge, 1979), 148.

¹⁰ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 352.

¹¹ Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 435.

¹² Patrick Bowles, “On Beckett in the Early 1950s,” in *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*, ed. James and Elizabeth Knowlson (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 109.

(P, 550). In the Shenker interview, Beckett provides an important addendum to his statements on ignorance and impotence: “I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower.”¹³ The “experience of a non-knower,” according to the dichotomy between sense and intellect introduced in “Dante ... Bruno . Vico.. Joyce,” is neither less nor more than experience itself, and the essay places Joyce’s writing firmly on the side of that experience. Beckett’s multiple statements on the theme of ignorance in relation to literary value reveal an important contrast in his depiction of Joyce’s writing and its influence upon his own style. While Beckett’s early essay places Joyce’s writing on the side that pairs perception with ignorance, in interview Beckett situates Joyce as the exemplar of the opposite pairing between consciousness and knowledge. Beckett’s later insistence on locating his writing in a realm of ignorance means that he in fact places his own writing where he had previously situated Joyce and Proust.

The complicated distinction between sense perception and the intellect in Beckett’s reading of *Work in Progress* crucially reflected the philosophical debts behind Beckett’s critical conceptions of representation. As my first chapter outlines in some detail, Beckett’s understanding of representation implicitly relies on the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, the unknowable ‘things in themselves’ introduced in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 & 1787). One of the questions Beckett frequently wrestles with in his essays is whether representation can accommodate the unknowable. Richard Beckman contends that for Joyce, the distinction does not exist: “Kant’s *Ding-an-sich*, thing-in-itself, is all but useless to Joyce because it implies a sharp division between the phenomenal, or knowable, world and the noumenal, or realm of the unknowable.”¹⁴ Beckman focuses on the primacy of unknowability in *Finnegans Wake*, wherein “that which is sensed and that which lies beyond the senses are

¹³ Shenker, “An Interview with Beckett,” 148.

¹⁴ Richard Beckman. *Joyce’s Rare View: The Nature of Things in Finnegans Wake* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2007), 64.

equally unknowable [...] What exists constantly recedes from knowledge.”¹⁵ My reading of Beckett’s response to Kant’s division between *phenomena* and *noumena* slightly departs from Beckman’s assertion that the Kantian distinction is too sharp to be of use. Instead, I show that according to Beckett’s reading, Joyce maintains the distinction between knowable and unknowable by positioning sense perception against the distortions created by the reader’s intellect. This distinction is developed in *Proust*, where it informs Beckett’s theory of direct perception as a suggestive way to lead towards the unseen and unknowable, and beyond Beckett’s essays, where the trope of deliberately undefined figures retreating from view presupposes that their refusal of knowability can be represented.

At this point, it is instructive to consider recent critical work beyond Beckett studies. Notably, in the fields of French Symbolism and English Romantic poetry, there has been a recent turn towards tracing patterns of influence by attending to the figures communicated within and between poetic texts. Many of these recent studies have productively engaged with visual culture and the deep connections between word and image. Sophie Thomas’s 2008 study, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* is important for my approach, as it is self-avowedly concerned with “instances where the visual takes *itself* as its subject [...] especially when the encounter engages the border between the visible and the invisible.”¹⁶ By focusing on instances of self-reflexive visuality, Thomas produces a detailed analysis of what she terms Romantic poetry’s “textualization of the image,”¹⁷ specifically considering how Keats, Coleridge and Shelley responded to the pictural, and how their own poetic theories understood the picture to be conditioned by its “verbal representation.”¹⁸

Similarly, Ewan Jones’s *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (2014) argues that the status of visuality is so significant because it provides a unique mode for literary form to reflect

¹⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶ Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

upon its own representational status. Indeed, Jones lays claim to the idea that Coleridge's extensive notebooks and essays – and above all his *Biographia Literaria* – do not present Coleridge's primary mode of philosophical reading. Where Coleridge's entries on Spinoza, Kant and Berkeley frequently turn upon a common self-reflexive theme, "groping for a means to explain the conditions under which the affectivity suggested by 'sensation' *can become* 'perception', can begin to represent itself to itself,"¹⁹ these readings feed into his poetry through transfiguration between the seen and the unseen around the margins of what the poem's form allows to appear. So, in discussing the lines "He gazes still, – his eyeless Face all Eye; – / As 'twere an organ full of silent sight,"²⁰ from Coleridge's poem "Limbo," Jones observes that "the poem reinhabits the negation that had comprised it. [...] Eyelessness, unlike all the privations that preceded it, actuates experience through what it is not."²¹ By attending to the dynamism that characterises the theme of "eyelessness," Coleridge's figure of "silent sight" is shown to incorporate a series of philosophical concerns about representation and perception without becoming fixed by citation.

The manner in which Coleridge figures sight is not far removed from the Beckettian visual, and Jones's description could apply to several scenes in Beckett's oeuvre. One may find Coleridge's "organ full of silent sight" echoed in *Ill Seen Ill Said's* "Silence at the eye of the scream" (*IS*, 458), for example. Another crucial scene for the development of Beckett's visual aesthetic lies in Beckett's novel *Murphy* (1938), in which its protagonist, Murphy, stares into the eyes of a Dublin asylum patient, Mr. Endon; but, "seeing himself stigmatised in those eyes that did not see him," Murphy finds himself "reduced" to "a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen" (*Mu*, 149-150). As Beckett had written of one of Proust's literary dilemmas, Murphy "is present at his

¹⁹ Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43.

²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Limbo," in *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 132, lines 16-17.

²¹ Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*, 142.

own absence” (*P*, 520), while his reflection in the gaze of an unseeing eye, as Carla Taban has noted, foreshadows his depiction of the “empêchement-œil” as a metaphor for artistic vision in the post-war essay “Peintres de l’empêchement.”²²

Beckett’s figures of the eye give form to philosophical questions regarding the representational status of the work of art. The term ‘representation’ has historically defined the work of art as something that copies, that *re*-presents, reality. This conception had both been used to condemn poetry in the classical world (as Plato famously does in book ten of *The Republic*), and as the basis for its praise. Sir Philip Sidney managed as much for the latter in his 1595 *Defence of Poesie*: “Poesie therefore is an Art of Imitation: for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis* – that is to say, a *representing*, counterfeiting, or *figuring forth* – to speake metaphorically, a *speaking picture*.”²³ Sidney’s account is elucidatory because, though it partially concedes the criticism that poetry “is an Art of Imitation,” the art of “representing” is no simple matter: it is a “figuring forth,” a “speaking picture.” As Sidney’s emphasis on vision and voice indicates, by the sixteenth century, the term ‘representation’ had come to signify a series of complex workings between modes of appearance that were bound up with theories of the metaphorical and the figural.

The other use of the term ‘representation’ with which I am concerned has a more modern set of associations. This use acquired its meaning as a specific philosophical designation originally used by the English empiricists, notably John Locke, to refer to the appearance of objects to the mind. ‘Representation’ became – and remains – the word generally used in both English and French (as ‘représentation’) to translate the terms *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung*, which

²² Carla Taban, “Samuel Beckett : du discours descriptif, fictif et critique sur la peinture à la contiguïté du discursif et du pictural,” *Word and Image* 27, no. 2 (2011), 220-233.

²³ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*; my emphasis. Citation slightly adapted from the modernised edition in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 217.

underpinned Immanuel Kant's presentation of conscious subjectivity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The *OED*'s entry draws attention to its eighteenth-century philosophical interpretations:

Philos. An image, concept, or thought in the mind, esp. as representing an object or state of affairs in the world; *spec.* a mental image or idea regarded as an object of direct knowledge and as the means by which knowledge of objects in the world may indirectly be acquired (now chiefly *hist.*). Also: the formation or possession of images, concepts, or thoughts in the mind, esp. as representing, or as a means of acquiring knowledge of, objects or states of affairs in the world.²⁴

Considered alongside the position summarised by Sidney, a strange correspondence arises from this definition: it becomes apparent that for these two conceptions, human consciousness and the work of art occupy parallel positions. And as the descriptions of 'representation' as both a "speaking picture" (for Sidney) and a "mental image" (in the dictionary) suggest, a hesitance remains about the status of 'representation' as both a psychological and an aesthetic concept. The visual representation may be perceived or imagined, or may lie uneasily between both. Ambiguity is built into these terms from the beginning.

This ambiguity is relevant to my approach to Beckett's writing. It is also relevant to the intellectual cultures of pre- and post-war Paris, where the shared ambiguity in the conception of representation provided a space where artistic theory and critical philosophy productively encountered one another.²⁵ The meeting points between Surrealism and phenomenology, for example, were often located within reflections that pertained to redefine and redraw the limits of representation. These matters have been documented in detail in Martin Jay's study *Downcast Eyes*, which historicises the discursive interrogations of visibility in francophone twentieth-

²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "representation," n.1, def. 9b.

²⁵ Lois Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996); especially chapter two, "Paris, 1928," 32-52, and chapter seven, "France," 140-167; Shane Weller, "Post World-War Two Paris," in Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett in Context*, 160-172.

century literary theory and practice. In a related mode, I show that Beckett's texts most actively and significantly engage with philosophy not through networks of citation but through modes of visual figuration that reflect upon the status of representation.

Further aspects to Beckett's philosophical influences include the politicised and gendered presumptions ingrained in the traditions of thought his writing pervasively calls upon. Many philosophical readings of Beckett's work, including the existential humanist and later readings indebted to Blanchot's perspective, have tended to present Beckett's subjects as expressions of a universal, human condition, emphasising the relevance of themes such as Blanchot's 'neutral,' or 'neutre,' in relation to Beckett's post-war fiction in particular.²⁶ Although I do not present a sustained reading from a gender-studies perspective, however, I understand Beckett's subjects to be essentially gendered. Throughout Beckett's critical essays, including *Proust*, even where the gender of the subject is not expressly indicated, the subject remains implicitly masculine. Furthermore, the subject throughout the philosophical tradition drawn upon by Beckett is emphatically male. As one example among many, Schopenhauer's notorious essay "On Women" unambiguously states that the philosophical subject can only be a man because the "reasoning power" in women is of "a very limited sort."²⁷ Meanwhile, Beckett's writing during the 1930s and 40s, especially in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932) and *Premier amour* (1946), almost universally depicts women as promiscuous and dim-witted foils to his protagonists.²⁸

²⁶ Blanchot employs the term when discussing *L'Innommable* in his review essay, "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?" See Leslie Hill, who makes special use of the term 'neutre,' formulated as "in-difference," in his influential study *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁷ Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), 82.

²⁸ See Susan Brienza, "Clods, whores and bitches: misogyny in Beckett's early fiction," in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 91-105. Even John Pilling's sympathetic reading of Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks*, the collection of stories culled from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, admits that women in the stories "seem to become victims [...] only by staying put." Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's "More Pricks Than Kicks": In A Strait Of Two Wills* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 41.

The gender hierarchy in Beckett's fiction of this period exposes a fault-line in his apparent attacks on the rational and intellectual. By approving the taxonomy that aligns intellectual superiority with the masculine and physicality with the feminine, Beckett is shown to validate discomfiting aspects within the Western intellectual traditions his writing otherwise resists.²⁹ A deeper awareness of the limitations to Beckett's literary innovations will help to specify the specific areas in Western thought, especially aesthetics, to which they pose a challenge.³⁰

One of the most fruitful areas challenged in Beckett's writing involves the philosophical assumptions underlying received notions of visual representation. It is well known that Beckett's literary engagements with the visual image invite philosophical readings of his work. According to Anthony Uhlmann, the novels that comprise Beckett's post-war Trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, collectively present an "image of thought" that impresses upon itself and the reader an "ontological image [...] which reveals itself and the cause which it is."³¹ Beyond the self-reflexive "ontological image" described by Uhlmann, however, it is pertinent to emphasise that Beckett's self-revelatory texts do not work through abstract evocations of the "image" alone, but by repeating particular figures of visibility that reflect upon their own representational status. For example, towards the end of *The Unnamable*, the eye is evoked as a desired object at the centre of a landscape at once imagined, visualised and remembered, "an eye, at the window, before the sea, before the earth, before the sky," which appears through

²⁹ Mary Bryden points to the importance of binary separations between male and female characteristics in Beckett's presentation of women, notably drawing from Aristotle's contrast between features of the "Limited" and "Unlimited" in the *Metaphysics*, and Hélène Cixous's critical revision of such lists in "Sorties." See Bryden, *Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 3-10.

³⁰ See Rina Kim, *Women and Ireland as Beckett's Lost Others* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Kim draws on these limitations and ambivalences in Beckett's oeuvre to argue for a Kleinian reading that connects Beckett's gender and national politics around the themes of absence and lack.

³¹ Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141.

“shreds of old visions” (*U*, 399). The Unnamable’s fragmentary vision of the eye is one part in a wider aesthetic whole towards which Beckett’s visual tropes gesture.

The specificities of Beckett’s visual figures, tropes and metaphors in texts like *The Unnamable* connect with the “return to form” explored by Thomas and Jones in relation to Romantic poetry. My thesis argues that Beckett’s texts most productively register their influences through formal dynamics rather than instances of “occluded allusion.”³² In particular, there are manifest and manifold differences between the content of Beckett’s constructed formulations of aesthetic lineages in interviews and essays, and the ways in which his use of literary form engages with those same sources.

Beckett’s implicit and explicit dialogues with the painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky are representative of this issue. The partial theory of art Beckett developed in his essays on painting shares concerns and aspects of its vocabulary with the theories of abstract painting outlined in Kandinsky’s two seminal pamphlets, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926). Beckett directly mentioned Kandinsky’s work several times, in his reviews and essays as well as in interview. The ways in which Beckett directly addressed Kandinsky’s painting display admiration mixed with caution regarding Kandinsky’s mysticism and his conception of abstraction. Hence, Beckett’s deprecating remarks towards Kandinsky – describing his theories as “the every man his own wife experiments of the spiritual Kandinsky” (*TD*, 563), for example³³ – were often offset by other passages that placed him (or people close to him such as Paul Klee and his biographer Will Grohmann) in the highest orders of art and criticism, among “the great of our time” as his 1945 review “MacGreevy on Yeats” put it (*D*, 97).

³² *Ibid.*, 48.

³³ Beckett is alluding here to the “Scylla and Charibdis” episode of *Ulysses*, in which Buck Mulligan parodies Stephen Dedalus’s theory of *Hamlet* by conceiving of an absurd play, “Everyman His own Wife or A Honeymoon in the Hand (a national immorality in three orgasms).” James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 208.

Beckett's 1964 interview with John Gruen further complicates any attempt to assert (or exclude) Kandinsky's influence over Beckett:

If my work has any meaning at all, it is due more to ignorance, inability and an intuitive despair than to any individual strength. I think that I have perhaps freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps, like the composer Schönberg or the painter Wassily Kandinsky I have turned towards an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretise the abstraction – not to give it yet another formal context.³⁴

There are two main points of interest in Beckett's declaration here. Firstly, as I have already outlined, the prominence Beckett gives to "ignorance" is far from a singular statement on his behalf. The emphasis Beckett placed upon the state of ignorance here and elsewhere suggests that "ignorance" lies at the root of a more active aesthetic principle than is commonly presumed, and that the meaning which it bestows upon his work is connected in some regard with the "abstract language" he connects to Kandinsky. Secondly, the terms of Beckett's praise and criticism towards Kandinsky are reversed compared to his earlier criticism of Kandinsky in "Peintres de l'empêchement," where he remarks: "Il semble absurde de parler, comme faisait Kandinsky, d'une peinture libérée de l'objet" (*D*, 136; "It seems absurd to speak, as Kandinsky did, of a painting liberated from its object" *NO*, 880). In his interview with John Gruen, however, Beckett signals his distance not from abstraction, but from the concrete, whether form or the "formal context" of theory.

Beckett's assessment of Kandinsky's abstract form mirrors his discussion of Joyce and, to a lesser extent, Proust. The terminology Beckett uses to describe Kandinsky's abstract form in his interview with John Gruen at least partially evokes Kandinsky's short text "Abstract and Concrete Art," thought to have been translated by Beckett in 1939,³⁵ where he argues that

³⁴ John Gruen, "Samuel Beckett talks about Beckett," *Vogue* 154 (December 1969): 210.

³⁵ See John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 83.

“abstract” painting is better expressed by the term “concrete painting.”³⁶ Nevertheless, Kandinsky’s theoretical texts are far from simply “yet another formal context.” The terminology used by Kandinsky activated principles his painting put into practice, while these ideas had a life of their own beyond Kandinsky’s own painterly practice. Kandinsky had a profound influence in inter- and post-war Paris,³⁷ and the presence of his terminology in Beckett’s writing attests to this influence as well as Beckett’s connections to a readership cultured in the discourses of contemporary art. These connections are founded in theories of the visual, derived from artistic and philosophical concerns, and offer a wider context for why vision, more than the other senses, provided the dominant sensory concern in Beckett’s criticism and fiction.

As this introduction has shown, my thesis seeks to address the overlooked responses that Beckett’s critical writing offers to diverse philosophical and intellectual movements. I show that Beckett’s philosophical inheritances were specific, and that his work incorporates lineages indebted to the Kantian philosophical tradition. This tradition is shown to inform Beckett’s approach to questions of knowledge, ignorance and representation in his essays, from *Proust* to his later writing on visual art.

My first chapter discusses the significance of the distinction between objects of representation and ‘things in themselves’ in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, before it goes on to detail how Beckett’s critical texts respond to Arthur Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant in *The World as Will and Representation*. I show that Beckett’s approach chimes with a particular

³⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, “Abstract and Concrete Art,” in *Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: Da Capo, 1994), 840.

³⁷ Kandinsky’s influence over the post-war art-scene in Paris was formidable. Several important exhibitions of his work were held between 1946 and 1951 in Paris, while his widow Nina Kandinsky established a contemporary art prize in his name in 1946. Kandinsky was a figure of importance for expatriate artists resident in Paris, and despite becoming a naturalised French citizen in 1939, the *École de Paris* controversially excluded his work from showings on the basis that he was not a sufficiently ‘French’ artist. Kandinsky’s posthumous presence in Paris is detailed in Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 82-92.

understanding of ‘representation’ which accords with Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s closely related conceptions of *Vorstellung*. Tracing this dynamic leads the chapter to focus on Beckett’s early essay *Proust*, before moving on to consider the development in Beckett’s critical writing from expressions of failed relations recurrent in his pre-war essays, through themes such as the “breakdown of communication,” to a deeper “resistance” that signals a refusal of the subject by the object.

In order to consider how Beckett’s philosophical metaphors are crystallised in Beckett’s writing, this chapter also outlines the roles played by the peripheral theme of apperception and the recurrent figure of the eye. I show that Beckett’s use of these figures is integral to the developing complexity of metaphors of representation in Beckett’s writing. I show that literal and metaphorical scenes of vision in *Murphy* and *Watt* suggest affinities between Beckett’s “poetics of ignorance” and Georges Bataille’s concept of ‘unknowing,’³⁸ in so far as Beckett’s uses of the visual exhibit anxieties surrounding knowledge and representation that Bataille was theorising during the same period of time. Beckett first expresses these anxieties in *Proust*, through his axiomatic “Proustian equation,” for which “The unknown [...] is also the unknowable” (*P*, 511). But these anxieties are also shown through particular concretions of the visual. Beckett’s novel *Murphy* presents a crucial turning point here, as the moment when tropes of gazing and glimpsing become ubiquitous. Beckett’s novel sets up a dialectic of refusal and resistance between eye and object that forms part of a wider exploration of the limiting

³⁸ The term “poetics of ignorance,” which has come into fairly widespread use in Beckett studies, was coined by Dirk Van Hulle, “Samuel Beckett’s *Faust* Notes,” in “Notes Divers Holo: Catalogues of Beckett’s Reading Notes and Other Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, with Supporting Essays,” ed. Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 16 (2006): 283-98. Bataille’s theory of unknowing is pervasive in his theoretical writing, although its relation Beckett is evoked in Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Bataille, Beckett, Blanchot: From the Impossible to the Unknowing,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 21 (2012): 56-63; and Adrienne Janus, “Laughter and the Limits of Identity: Joyce, Beckett and the Philosophical Anthropology of Laughter,” *Études irlandaises* 38, no. 1 (2013): 173-186.

possibilities and impossibilities underlying representation in Beckett's critical writing, poetry and fiction.

Chapter two develops these readings of visuality and philosophical influence in the light of Beckett's responses to Surrealism and phenomenology. I trace connections between Beckett's literary texts, his professional translations of other writers and his engagements with Surrealism alongside other philosophical and literary reflections on the visual arts. In particular, the chapter considers how Beckett developed themes present in *Proust* and *Murphy* through engagements with Surrealist visuality. I discuss Beckett's translation of *Murphy* into French in 1940, and his translations of Paul Éluard and André Breton's poetry for *This Quarter* in 1932, arguing for their importance alongside Beckett's essays after *Proust* in his construction of an original visual aesthetic.

By drawing on Beckett's interactions with the poetic, the visual and the critical, I seek to illuminate the aesthetic context to Beckett's own critical writing on visual art, especially in his review "MacGreevy on Yeats" and his post-war essays in French on Geer and Bram van Velde. I argue that themes and metaphors in Beckett's poetry and fiction from the 1930s to the post-war period owe much to Surrealism. In particular, Beckett's representations of the eye in diverse texts are shown to revolve around a particular interplay between the look, the gaze and the glimpse that was also central to the concerns of the Surrealists. This chapter details the relevance of the reflections on representation in Breton's novella *Nadja* and Sartre's novel *Nausea* to Beckett's depiction of the subject in instances of his writing after *Murphy*, such as the poem "je suis ce cours de sable" and the novels *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Finally, this chapter considers the relevance of the dramatist Roger Vitrac's difficult relationship to Surrealism for Beckett's own revisionary relationship with Surrealist style.

Chapter three considers Beckett's critical output in the context of Surrealism's post-war situation, before developing this reading to consider other theories of art concerned with the processes of visual figuration. The short-lived post-war review *Transition* provides a crucial context for my reading in this chapter. Drawing on Beckett's published and unpublished

correspondence with the review's editor Georges Duthuit, and the recurrent themes of pieces published in *Transition*, this chapter evaluates the ways in which Beckett's writing during this period responds to post-war aesthetic concerns through its focus on liminal states and the idea of the threshold. Further to my discussions in the previous chapter, I contend that, more than a static medium of publication, literary magazines such as *This Quarter* and *Transition* provided a snapshot of wider philosophical and intellectual debates that informed Beckett's textual aesthetics. I investigate the relation between Beckett's thinking about art and the methods outlined by Wassily Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* and *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, drawing upon Gestalt psychology's theories of perception, which were themselves of importance for post-war phenomenology and familiar to Beckett from the 1930s. I look at how themes explored by Kandinsky are foregrounded in *Watt*, completed in 1945, and the novella *Premier amour/First Love*, first written in French in 1946. This section of the chapter investigates how ocular figuration in *Premier amour* translates into other sensory descriptions, especially of the voice. I argue that the peripheral brings the visual into contact with other forms of sensory figuration, thus presenting that which is glimpsed as one trope in a series of related perceptual tropes that refuse the knowable.

My final chapter discusses Beckett's short prose fragments, mostly written during the 1960s and 70s, which are among those texts in the Beckett canon that have received the least attention. These overlooked texts are commonly categorised as "closed space" fiction, after the title to one of the texts in the collection *Foirades/Fizzles* (1976), and it is a term that seems to dictate interpretation. In this chapter, I look at how Beckett's late prose texts contribute to his long dialogue with representation and the figural. I consider the significance of Beckett's return to painterly landscapes in *Foirades/Fizzles* and textual fragments such as "Pour Avigdor Arikha" (1966).

The chapter goes on to argue that Beckett's move towards texts that seem increasingly hermetic and abstract deserves to be read in dialogue with traditions of thinking upon the liminal reflected in writings by Beckett's contemporaries such as Georges Bataille and Maurice

Blanchot. I also address Beckett's evolving relationship to the Kantian theory of representation by reading Beckett's "Imagination Dead Imagine" (1965) in relation to the theory of representation in Ludwig Wittgenstein's famously aphoristic *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I argue that Wittgenstein's theory represents a culmination of the Kantian perspectives on representation with which the thesis begins, while it also shares with Beckett's texts an attempt to focus on the limits and grounds of representation. By the end of the thesis, I aim to have developed a suitably nuanced account of how the repeated visual figures in Beckett's late prose thematise their representational limits, and place the form of his fiction in dialogue with the philosophical concerns of his criticism.

Chapter One

Representation and resistance: Beckett as reader and critic

Beckett's letters to Thomas MacGreevy in the wake of *Proust* offer precious insights into his early reflections on representation. MacGreevy, already a successful literary and art critic, had responded warmly to the essay, and Beckett manifested his surprise upon hearing of his appreciation.³⁹ He confessed that he had “read the book through quickly and really wondered what I was talking about” (Beckett to MacGreevy, 11 March 1931, *LI*, 73). The same letter laments his inability to explain “the mystery” of Rimbaud's poetry to his students at Trinity College Dublin, and recounts how Rimbaud's line “Et pour des visions écrasant l'œil darne,” stylishly rendered by Beckett as “eye suicide – pour des visions,” had only encouraged laughter (*LI*, 73).⁴⁰

This letter offers one of many instances in which Beckett comments on his sense of having failed as a critic. However, Beckett's critical writing is never separated from other writerly projects, particularly his work as a translator. Over a year later, in December 1932, Beckett translated Rimbaud's narrative poem “Le Bateau ivre,” much of which illustrates the “dérèglement” of vision that Beckett venerated in the above letter to MacGreevy. This letter – like many others – illustrates the convergence between Beckett's wide-ranging reading of texts

³⁹ Before *Proust*, Beckett's contribution to *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, “Dante... Bruno . Vico.. Joyce” (1929), was his only published work of criticism. On the other hand, MacGreevy had published review essays in several publications with a wide circulation, including *Criterion* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, as well as publications such as *transition* that were closer to the small circle of intellectuals in Paris to which Joyce and Beckett belonged. In January 1931, just before *Proust* was published, MacGreevy's monograph *T.S. Eliot: A Study* was also released under the same “Dolphin Books” series as Beckett's study, to some praise; a fact on which Beckett remarks. See the detailed “Biographical Timeline of Thomas MacGreevy,” in Susan Schreibman, ed., *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), xxi-xxiv; John Pilling and Andrew Nash, “The ‘Shatton and Windup’ affair,” in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: The British Library, 2011), 11-22.

⁴⁰ Rimbaud's line is taken from his poem “Les Poètes de sept ans” (1871).

dealing with representation and vision, and his approach to translation. Although Beckett's aesthetic is very different from Symbolist concerns, he shared Rimbaud's sense of vision as a source of poetic creativity freed from the constraints of the intellect. This was also the conception Beckett extended to artistic creativity in general, finding its expression in writers and painters such as Proust, Joyce, and Geer and Bram van Velde.

Figural evocations

After *Proust* and up to the point at which he completed the typescript for *L'Innommable* in 1950, Beckett wrote a series of closely connected critical essays on modern art. This shift from literary to art criticism also signalled the point when Beckett turned away from English to write predominantly in French. These essays formulate concerns that also recur in his correspondence with MacGreevy throughout the 1930s and Georges Duthuit after 1945. Duthuit commissioned Beckett to undertake editorial and translation work for the short-lived revival of *Transition*, and it is well known that Duthuit's correspondence with Beckett provided the raw materials out of which "Three Dialogues" was fashioned.

In "La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon" (1945-6), "Peintres de l'empêchement" (1948), and the oft-quoted "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" (1949) in particular, Beckett advocates a new mode of artistic representation, and celebrates the innovations of his friends, the Dutch brothers Gerardus (Geer) and Abraham (Bram) van Velde, both abstract painters.⁴¹ The van Velde brothers become something of a double-act in Beckett's essays and letters during the post-war period, at least until Beckett started preparing "Three Dialogues," where Bram alone is considered. For Beckett, their paintings advocate a new kind of artistic practice, and are self-reflexive and radical manifestations of the limitations of

⁴¹ "La Peinture des van Velde" was published in *Cahiers d'Art* 20-21, edited by Christian Zervos, in October 1946; "Peintres de l'empêchement" was published in *Derrière le miroir* in May 1948, to accompany an exhibition of Geer and Bram's paintings at The Galerie Maeght; "Three Dialogues" appeared in *Transition Forty-Nine* 5, published in December 1949.

representation. Beckett's essays are rarely specific, supplying scant examples of particular works of art or uses of technique. Instead, the essays articulate their positions with a philosophically-inflected vocabulary, concerned with the figurative principle underlying the van Veldes' painting, referred to as an "occasion" in "Three Dialogues."

Diane Lüscher-Morata argues that Deleuze's description of the role of the figural in Francis Bacon's painting offers an instructive parallel with Beckett's own approach to the figural.⁴² Certainly, Deleuze's description of a type of painting which uses the figure to go "beyond figuration,"⁴³ and which seeks to "release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation"⁴⁴ chimes with Beckett's characterisation of his approach to Geer and Bram van Velde's painting in terms of "défiguration verbale, voire un assassinat verbal" (*D*, 124) [verbal disfiguration, nay, a verbal assassination]. For Beckett and Deleuze, a self-reflexive use of the figure attacks the cerebral mask of figural painting, bringing the work of art towards its own fundamental conditions. But Beckett's essays only demonstrate growing scepticism towards the possibility of passing beyond or beneath representation, and the theme of art's imprisonment by representation is integral to his writing on visual art. Rather than looking outside the domain of representation, Beckettian "défiguration" releases the presences which ground representation. Beckett's attacks on the stable figures of realist representation therefore do not transcend or negate representation. Instead, they come to figure the limits of representational possibility.

As Beckett's emphasis on *verbal* "défiguration" shows, his adaptations of visual figures draw upon literary modes of figuration as well as forms derived from the visual arts. The figure is integrally tied to representation, but this does not commit figuration to a mimetic concept of

⁴² Diane Lüscher-Morata, *La Souffrance portée au langage dans la prose de Samuel Beckett* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 146.

⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

the figure, such as in the *OED*, which defines “figure” as the “image, likeness, or representation of something” in narrative and visual art.⁴⁵ It is useful to bear in mind Hayden White’s account of literary representation in *Figural Realism*, which outlines a conception of “linguistic figuration” as the novel form’s “dominant trope,” serving “as the paradigm in language for the representation of things as parts of identifiable wholes.”⁴⁶ White’s terminology is sensitive to the intellectual traditions that shaped the meaning of the term “figuration” in twentieth-century philosophy, visual studies and literary theory.

The terms White uses to describe literary figuration demonstrate affinities between twentieth-century behavioural psychology, phenomenology and art theory. His reference to “things as parts of identifiable wholes” in particular recalls the theories of perception outlined by Gestalt psychology in the 1920s and 1930s. The school’s leading practitioners, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, argued for the primacy of the visual field in the subject’s perceptual landscape, describing visual perception in terms of the interplay between “segregated wholes,” and the relation between figure and ground, defining the latter term as the “homogeneous plane on which the figure lies.”⁴⁷ The perceptual architecture of Gestalt psychology informed many important developments in twentieth-century theories of visual art and vision, including Wassily Kandinsky’s theories of art, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work on phenomenology and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology. Gestaltist reflections on art and philosophy also underpinned and inflected Beckett’s perspectives on visuality at several points in his writing, such as the novel *Murphy*.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “figure, n.” def. 9a, accessed November 19 2014, <http://www.oed.com/>.

⁴⁶ Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 22.

⁴⁷ Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* [1929], reissue of 1970 ed. (New York: Liveright, 1992), 202.

⁴⁸ C.J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy* (Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 1998), 36; Laura Salisbury, “Psychology,” in Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett in Context*, 312-323.

Beckett's critical writing approaches the question of representation as a concept that bridges philosophical theories of conscious subjectivity and modern theories of artistic representation. The presence of these discourses in Beckett's writing shows Beckett participating in what Hugh Culik calls a "cultural anxiety about the limits of representation" which "situated the mind as a sort of boundary phenomenon."⁴⁹ Beckett's writing manifests this "cultural anxiety" about the status of representation through visual tropes which draw upon specific philosophical conceptions of representation, and which in doing so foreground the foundations and limits of subjective consciousness. Within the circuit of liminal visual figures which pervade Beckett's essays as well as his fiction, the term 'representation' comes to express the limits of possibility, and it underpins the theory of art as the self-reflexive, "impossible act" of representation that Beckett polemicises in the final of the "Three Dialogues" (*TD*, 561).

Kant, Schopenhauer and Beckett's philosophical influences

It is clear that the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant had a decisive influence over Beckett's essays of the 1930s, especially *Proust*.⁵⁰ In contrast, Beckett's later critical vocabulary is more clearly aligned with contemporaneous discourses in phenomenology. The development in the philosophical concerns expressed by Beckett's critical vocabulary also finds

⁴⁹ Hugh Culik, "Raining & Midnight: The Limits of Representation," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (2008): 127.

⁵⁰ For empirical readings of Kant's influence on Beckett, see P.J. Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers" in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 229-37; and "Beckett's Critique of Kant," in "Beckett/Philosophy," ed. Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani, special issue, *Sofia Philosophical Review* 5, no. 1 (2011): 193-209. Regarding the influence of Schopenhauer on Beckett's work, the most comprehensive account is given in Ulrich Pothast, *Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of it* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). The influence of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory on Beckett's compositional practice is also discussed in Anthony McGrath, "An Agon with the Twilighters: Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of the Aesthetic," *Irish University Review* 42, no. 1 (2012): 6-23; and Erik Tønning, "'I am not reading philosophy': Beckett and Schopenhauer," in Feldman and Mamdani, "Beckett/Philosophy," 19-44.

reflection in Beckett's novels *Murphy* and *Watt*. Matthew Feldman has argued that *Watt* "represents Beckett's 'phenomenological turn' in literature,"⁵¹ and while I seek to foreground Beckett's essays, and to read them in the framework of phenomenology as represented by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty whereas Feldman's reading focuses on phenomenology's Husserlian conception, I agree with Feldman's claim that Beckett's post-war philosophical framework is more explicitly engaged with the concerns of twentieth-century phenomenology. However, these concerns and the Beckettian framework they operate within are still traceable to Kantian preoccupations.

In this section, I examine the influence of Kantian representation on the artistic and philosophical discourses woven into Beckett's early critical texts. According to the Kantian model, representation is incomplete. Because it necessitates an unrepresented remainder, representation acts as a means of separation and limitation as much as one of revelation, and it is this aspect of Kant's philosophy that most decisively influences Beckett's essays. Representation, especially in the visual arts as Beckett would characterise it in "Peintres de l'empêchement," brings forth "la chose que cache la chose" (*D*, 135) [the thing that hides the thing]⁵² rather than the thing itself, because "L'objet de la représentation résiste toujours à la représentation" (135; "the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation" *NO*, 879). Like Beckett's other critical texts, "Peintres de l'empêchement" threads motifs of visual perception into its reflections on the abstract significance of painting and its imaginative capacity. The occlusive nature of representation informs the essay's central question: "Car que reste-t-il de représentable si l'essence de l'objet est de se dérober à la représentation?" (*D*, 136; "For what is there left to be represented if the essence of the object is to elude representation?")

⁵¹ Matthew Feldman, "But What Was this Pursuit of Meaning, in this Indifference to Meaning?: Beckett, Husserl, Sartre and 'Meaning Creation,'" in *Beckett and Phenomenology*, ed. Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 14.

⁵² Beckett translated "Peintres de l'empêchement," into English as "The New Object," for an exhibition of Bram's paintings which took place at the Kootz Gallery, New York in March 1948. His translation is often liberal, so where a line or phrase is not translated, as here, I provide my own translation.

NO, 880). The presumptions and preoccupations underpinning this question informed Beckett's engagement with modern art and literature from *Proust* to "Three Dialogues." The question of representation as it is stated in "Peintres de l'empêchement" has a clear philosophical basis that does not exclusively refer back to Beckett's readings of Kant and Schopenhauer, but responds to the presence of Kantian philosophy's central concerns in Beckett's contemporary intellectual climate.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to consider Kant's and Schopenhauer's perspectives on representation. From both perspectives, representation is considered to be the screen of conscious appearance, and a mechanism that simultaneously reveals and occludes. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, places strict limits upon the possible bounds of individual consciousness. In the *Critique*, Kant argues that the conscious subject apprehends objects as knowable entities through their representation, or *Vorstellung*, while behind each represented object Kant posits a 'thing in itself' (*Ding-an-Sich*).⁵³ Developing a dichotomy introduced by Plato, Kant argues that things in themselves exist as the *noumena* of which *phenomena* are the representation. Because all perception is mediated by consciousness, the perception of an object can only be representation; the 'thing in itself' lies hidden, unknowable, and only *phenomena* are knowable.

Matthew Feldman's empirically-guided research has shown that Beckett's first thorough grounding in many schools of philosophy, including Kant's, can be confidently dated to his encounter with Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, from which Beckett took extensive notes between 1932 and 1933.⁵⁴ Windelband's study pays close attention to Kant's *Critique of*

⁵³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1999), 178; A30 & passim.

⁵⁴ David Addyman and Matthew Feldman, "Samuel Beckett, Wilhelm Windelband, and the Interwar 'Philosophy Notes,'" in "Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive," ed. Peter Fifield and Bryan Radley, special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 755-77; Matthew Feldman, "Samuel Beckett, Wilhelm Windelband and Nominalist Philosophy," in Feldman and Mamdani, "Beckett/Philosophy," 89-121;

Pure Reason, especially the status of phenomena and ‘things in themselves,’ and summarises Kant’s theory of knowledge as follows:

the only object of human knowledge is experience, i.e. phenomenal appearance; and the division of objects of knowledge into phenomena and noumena, which has been usual since Plato, has no sense. A knowledge of things-in-themselves through “sheer reason,” and extending beyond experience, is a nonentity, a chimera. [...] Human knowledge is limited to objects of experience.⁵⁵

The kinship between representation and knowledge expressed in Kant’s *Critique* is more complicated than Windelband’s summary suggests. Nevertheless, Windelband emphasises that Kant does not support the monist reduction of all substance to phenomena. Instead, Kant argues for a position called “Transcendental Idealism” that Windelband insists “must, therefore, not deny the reality of noumena; it must only remain conscious that they cannot in any wise become objects of human knowledge. Things-in-themselves must be thought, but are not knowable.”⁵⁶ *Noumena*, Windelband emphasises, are “thinkable as *limiting conceptions of experience*.”⁵⁷

Schopenhauer was an important figure in the construction of a wider Kantian school of philosophy, and there are clear signs that his reappraisal of the Copernican Revolution contained within the *Critique of Pure Reason* shaped Beckett’s reception of Kant’s philosophy.⁵⁸ Schopenhauer’s writing expressly sought to revise and develop the conception of representation

Feldman, *Beckett’s Books: a cultural history of Samuel Beckett’s “Interwar Notes”* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 48-52.

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. James H. Tufts, 2nd ed., (New York and London: Macmillan, 1901), 546-547. Beckett’s notes transcribe most of §38, “Objects of Knowledge,” including this passage and those cited below, directly from Windelband’s study. TCD MS 10967, fols. 223r-228v.

⁵⁶ Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, 548.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 547.

⁵⁸ The comparison with Copernicus was first made by Kant himself, in the preface to the second (1787) edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 110; B xvi.

presented in Kant's first *Critique*, focusing its engagement with Kant's system on the opposition between *phenomena* and *noumena*, while also developing the aesthetic theory presented in Kant's third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), into a more focused theory of art. Beckett's indirect approach to Kantian doctrines has a clear intellectual context, and relates to a long-established tradition of reading Kant through more creative renderings of his philosophy and through Schopenhauer. The visual style of the Symbolists found philosophical roots in Schopenhauer,⁵⁹ while Hegel's rival development of Kant's doctrines and Nietzsche's reappraisal of Schopenhauer were formidable influences on the Surrealists and their leading dissident, Georges Bataille.⁶⁰

Schopenhauer's two-volume magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819 & 1844), presents itself as a development of Kant's critical philosophy. Starting from the *a priori* forms of "time, space, and causality" in consciousness, Schopenhauer outlines these categories as "modes of perception or intuition of the subject, or qualities of the object *in so far as it is object* (with Kant, phenomenon, appearance), in other words, *representation*."⁶¹ The modes and forms of representation, for Schopenhauer, form the "indivisible boundary between object and subject."⁶² This boundary serves a dual function: it separates the subject from its object while binding one to the other. Consequently, an object is not thinkable without a thinking subject,

⁵⁹ Shehira Doss-Davezac, "Schopenhauer according to the Symbolists: the philosophical roots of late nineteenth-century French aesthetic theory," in *Schopenhauer, philosophy and the arts*, ed. Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 249-276.

⁶⁰ As Roth observes: "thinkers like the surrealists and Bataille [...] had long thought about Hegel and Nietzsche together." Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 191.

⁶¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. J.F. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:119; §24.

⁶² *Ibid.*

nor are objects thinkable in themselves.⁶³ Schopenhauer also stresses that Kant's distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is the necessary condition for any meaningful reference to representation: "if the objects appearing in these forms are not to be empty phantoms, they must point to something [...] that is *not a representation*, but a *thing-in-itself*."⁶⁴ At the end of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer gives an appendix titled "Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy," where he reiterates the revolutionary importance to this distinction between the representation and the 'thing in itself' made by Kant's philosophy: "*Kant's greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself*, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the *intellect*, and that on this account they cannot be known according to what they may be in themselves."⁶⁵

The relation between subject and object that Beckett outlines in "Peintres de l'empêchement" is clearly indebted to Schopenhauer's general theory of representation, and to his association between representation and the 'subject-object relation.' The opening of *The World as Will and Representation* stresses: "everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation."⁶⁶ Schopenhauer's influence over Beckett's critical vocabulary is most apparent through his conception of the 'thing in itself,' which significantly redefined Kant's term. Kant's *Critique* posited an indefinite plurality of 'things in themselves,' or *noumena*, which individually correspond to objects of cognition. By contrast, Schopenhauer's *noumenon* is an indivisible, universal form, simply called the 'will.' It is characterised as the source of life, whose essence is vain striving and suffering: "All *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus

⁶³ A fact recognised by Kant, who also remarks in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "the 'I think' must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 246; B132.

⁶⁴ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:418.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:3.

from suffering.”⁶⁷ *Phenomena* he refers to as a “veil of deception,”⁶⁸ which hides and distorts the will underlying all its representations.

In outlining his theory of the will and representation, Schopenhauer is notably far more alive than Kant to uses of metaphor. Among the most influential of these metaphors on Beckett’s writing is the “veil of *Maya*,” a concept Schopenhauer incorporated from the *Upanishads* and used throughout *The World as Will and Representation* to refer to the world as mere representation.⁶⁹ In a further departure from its Kantian foundations, the veil metaphor also introduces a negative mysticism into Schopenhauer’s philosophy of representation. Schopenhauer’s account depicts the veil of *Maya* as the internal screen of subjective consciousness onto which the external, phenomenal form of things is projected. Lifting the veil – an impossible and incomprehensible occurrence – reveals the will lying behind the phenomenal world, after which the subject would perceive the essential falsity of the world as representation: “[he] knows the whole, comprehends its nature, and finds that it consists in a constant passing away, vain striving, inward conflict and continual suffering.”⁷⁰ Lifting the veil dissolves both subject and object, the procedure summarised in *Proust* as “complete identification” (*P*, 535).

Several accounts of Beckett’s readings from Schopenhauer have emphasised the importance of Schopenhauer’s aestheticisation of suffering to the ethical and existential themes raised throughout Beckett’s work.⁷¹ Much can be said also about the relationship between Schopenhauer’s distillation of the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* and Beckett’s interest in conceptualising the unknown. Feldman asserts that Beckett only came to

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1:196; §38.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1:8; §3.

⁶⁹ David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 268-271.

⁷⁰ Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 1:379.

⁷¹ See, for example, Yann Mével, *L’Imaginaire mélancolique de Samuel Beckett, de Murphy à Comment c’est* (New York: Rodopi, 2008), 208.

seriously revise the empirically rooted theories of knowledge with his later notes on psychology, Fritz Mauthner and Arnold Geulincx, written between 1934 and 1938: “With the ‘Psychology Notes’ one first glimpses the intellectual – as opposed to artistic – enshrinement of a major theme in Beckett’s later writing: *knowing is not enough*.”⁷² But roots for this enshrinement of ignorance are also present in Schopenhauer’s theory of representation. Most notably, Schopenhauer’s mistrust of the intellect is closely reflected in Beckett’s expressions of ignorance through nonintellectual figures of perception. In *Proust* and his 1938 novel *Murphy* in particular, Beckett presents the artist as a figure striving towards the quietist suspension of the vain striving that characterises everyday life, rising towards a state of “will-lessness” through renunciation of the world and pure contemplation of artistic ideas themselves.⁷³ The influence of Schopenhauer’s denigration of representation on Beckett’s aesthetic thinking is perhaps clearest in his oft-cited letter to Axel Kaun, written in 1937, which directly recalls Schopenhauer’s description of representation as a veil: “more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it” (Beckett to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937, *LI*, 518). In a manner comparable to Schopenhauer’s argument on how aesthetic contemplation can approach the will, Beckett posits an essence behind the materiality of language and life which art can transcend, and for which nothingness lies as a ready resource.

Schopenhauer’s veil metaphor is also indebted to Kant’s distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. For both Kant and Schopenhauer, ‘things in themselves’ are never immediately

⁷² Feldman, *Beckett’s Books*, 108.

⁷³ Schopenhauer’s doctrine of will-less contemplation is described as “absolute unreason of objectless will” in Beckett’s notes from Windelband (Feldman, *Beckett’s Books*, 49-50), while the doctrine of will-lessness forms the central tenet of Geulincx’s Occasionalism, from whose main works— the *Ethics* and *Metaphysica Vera* – Beckett also took extensive notes. Geulincx furnished Beckett with several images, including Murphy’s rocking-chair, and the axiom *Ubi nihil valet, ibi nihil velet*, which works its way into *Murphy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. See David Tucker, *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: Tracing “a Literary Fantasia”* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 16-24, 37-9, 131-133.

present to the subject, but remain incommunicable and unknowable. Representation can only reveal objects of consciousness; for the conscious and willing individual, representation is the only mode of revelation available. Subject and object relate to one another precisely because they are separated – the “indivisible boundary” shared between both terms joins the two aspects of representation in terms of revelation and occlusion.

Despite his significant interest in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Ackerley and Gontarski claim that Beckett’s sense of Kant was “derived largely from Windelband,”⁷⁴ whose *A History of Philosophy* was certainly among his main sources. As John Pilling notes, Kantian phrases crop up at several points in Beckett’s “Whoroscope notebook,”⁷⁵ kept between 1932 and 1937. Before this period, however, the status of ‘thing in itself’ seems to have already peculiarly preoccupied Beckett. In 1930, Beckett delivered his faux-lecture “Le Concentrisme,” which briefly refers to “la Chose de Kant” (*D*, 42), while in the same year his poem “Tristesse Janale” made a poetic icon of “La Chose kantienne”:

C’est toi, o beauté blême des subtiles concierges,
La Chose kantienne, l’icone bilitique;
C’est toi, muette énigme des aphasiques vierges,
Qui centres mes désirs d’un trait antithétique.

(CP, 44)

[It’s you, o beauty blemished by nosy neighbours,
The Kantian Thing, the icon bilitique;
It’s you, mute enigma of aphasic virgins,
Who holds together my antithetical desires.]

⁷⁴ C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber, 2006), 295.

⁷⁵ John Pilling, “Dates and Difficulties in Beckett’s Whoroscope Notebook,” in *Beckett the European*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005), 39-48.

By qualifying the addressed “toi” as the unknowable “Chose kantienne,” the poem transforms its subject into an uneasy object that binds together a network of conflictual, impossible desires. Echoing the character Bilitis, the courtesan at the centre of the *Chansons de Bilitis* by Pierre Loÿs (1894), the “icône bilitique” reflects the narrating subject’s desires reach for the “Chose kantienne,” the noumenon behind the phenomenal veil, the unknowable substance of the known object. The use Beckett makes of the Kantian principle lifts its use of philosophical sources above pastiche, and it introduces themes of greater substance than its juvenile tone suggests. The mention of “aphasiques vierges,” for example, gestures towards the condition of aphasia which would feature strongly in several of Beckett’s later texts, such as his final poem “Comment dire”/“What is the word” (1989), in the shape of linguistic fragmentation and forgetting. Although in one sense the desired woman at the centre of “Tristesse janale” is classically elevated, presented as an unknowable “muette énigme,” Beckett’s use of the Kantian framework makes the poem speak not simply from a voyeuristic perspective. Moreover, the poem’s voicing of desire parallels some of the ways Surrealist poetry in particular was drawing from philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks during the same period of time.

Shortly after completing the typescript for *Murphy* in June 1936, Beckett visited Germany for six months, returning to Paris in October 1937.⁷⁶ During this time, he visited many museums, galleries and art exhibitions, saw many paintings deemed “degenerate” by the National Socialist government, and kept an extensive diary documenting his observations and impressions.⁷⁷ This was when he ordered *Immanuel Kants Werke*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, which he got sent to Paris ahead of his return.⁷⁸ P.J. Murphy asserts that Beckett’s reading of Cassirer’s edition marked his primary encounter with Kant’s philosophy.⁷⁹ This reading is somewhat affirmed by Beckett

⁷⁶ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 230-261; Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries 1936-1937* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁷⁷ Referred to in scholarship on Beckett as Beckett’s German Diaries. At the time of writing, these diaries await publication, and Nixon’s study offers the most detailed account of their contents and context.

⁷⁸ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 761n161.

⁷⁹ P.J. Murphy, “Beckett’s Critique of Kant,” 195.

himself in his 1939 letter to Arnold Ussher, which cites Kant's epigraph to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "I read nothing and write nothing, unless it is Kant (de nobis ipsis silemus) and French anacreontics" (Beckett to Arnold Usher, 12 May 1939, *LI*, 622). However, Beckett engaged with Kant's philosophy in an uneven way and, as Pilling and Murphy separately suggest, its usefulness lay in furnishing Beckett with the categories and vocabulary to think through many of the dissonances and divides raised in his writing.⁸⁰ Multiple writerly perspectives therefore may be undertaken within the framework of Kantian philosophy. Dowd's studies on Kantian resonances in Beckett's writing, for example, draw on Deleuze's readings of Beckett and Kant to establish a series of "poetic formulas" at work in Beckett's writing.⁸¹ I also share Dowd's reservations about transposing scientific principles, such as Popper's principle of falsifiability, to literary studies in general and to Beckett's work in particular. As Dowd observes in his rejoinder to Feldman's method of "excavatory reason," given how Beckett's writing resisted the cultures of rationalism to which Popper's principle of falsifiability is inextricably linked, it is difficult to produce a reading in sympathy with Beckett's texts solely spoken from the verificationist standpoint.⁸²

Kant, Cassirer and interwar politics

Beckett's reading notes and marginalia from Kant's *Werke* indicate that he read the last volume, *Kants Leben und Lehre*, a biography of Kant by Cassirer, with attention.⁸³ The decision to read

⁸⁰ Pilling, "A Critique of Aesthetic Judgment: Beckett's 'Dissonance of Ends and Means,'" in S. E. Gontarski, ed., *A Companion to Beckett* (Oxford: Wylie-Blackwell, 2010), 70; Murphy, "Beckett's Critique of Kant," 194;

⁸¹ Garin Dowd, "On Four Kantian Formulas that Might Summarise the Beckettian Poetic." *Journal of Beckett Studies* 10, nos. 1-2 (2001): 53-68; "Beckett's 'Dislocations,'" chapter six in Dowd, *Abstract Machines*, 225-262.

⁸² Dowd, "Prolegomena To A Critique Of Excavatory Reason: Reply to Matthew Feldman," in "Des éléments aux traces," ed. Matthijs Engelberts, Danièle de Ruyter, Karine Germoni and Helen Penet-Astbury, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 20 (2010): 375-388.

⁸³ Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 138-141.

Kant through Cassirer connects to a wider context. At an infamous conference in Davos in 1929, Heidegger's brand of phenomenological ontology was seen to attain pre-eminence over the neo-Kantian school represented by Cassirer – a divide announced in relation to lectures that outlined their competing understandings of Kant's philosophy. As one of Germany's leading Jewish intellectuals, Cassirer was forced out of his university post after the National Socialist party was brought into power in 1933. By contrast, the change in government allowed and encouraged Martin Heidegger to publicly embrace Nazism and attain the rectorship at Freiburg university later in the same year.⁸⁴ By 1937, Cassirer had been living in exile from Germany for four years. While Heidegger's school of existential phenomenology attained pre-eminence, Cassirer's work and his school of neo-Kantianism were irrevocably taken out of the picture in Germany.

Considered against the backdrop of National Socialism, Cassirer's biography presents a provocative picture of Kant, who appears as a pan-European figure akin to Rousseau (despite Kant's famous reluctance to travel outside his hometown of Königsberg). Towards the end of his biography, Cassirer reads Kant's late work *Perpetual Peace* as an avocation of cosmopolitanism and the Enlightenment ideal of natural right:

for the establishment within a nation of a constitution strictly democratic and republican in spirit also offers the external guarantee [...] that the intent of unjustly oppressing one nation by another, and likewise the means of realizing this intent, are progressively weakened, so that the approximation to the "cosmopolitan" condition is also progressively fulfilled in the history of nations.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 25, 41.

⁸⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 407.

The irony of Cassirer's account could scarcely have escaped Beckett, Hitler having suspended the Weimar republic's own "constitution strictly democratic" in 1933. The implicit politics to Beckett's reading in philosophy was partly typical of his preference for reading biographies and summaries before deciding whether to dive into the works themselves – but the circumstances of Beckett's reading, the fact that he bought the "antediluvian set" while seeking out "degenerate" works of art in Germany, throw these politics into relief.

A particularly crucial instance of Beckett's engagement with philosophy as a historical encounter is found in his poem, "ainsi a-t-on beau," written in early 1938, in the wake of his experiences in Germany. The poem is important here because it suggests that Beckett's reading of the Western philosophical canon was attuned to the historical circumstances shaping philosophical positions such as Kant's, and mindful of their ethical and political lacunae. At line 8, the poem reads: "sur Lisbonne fumante Kant froidement penché" [over Lisbon smouldering Kant coldly leant] – a line which Lawlor and Pilling affirm to have been culled from Cassirer's biography⁸⁶ – followed by the second half sestet:

rêver en générations de chênes et oublier son père
ses yeux s'il portait la moustache
s'il était bon de quoi il est mort
on n'en est pas moins mangé sans appétit
par le mauvais temps et par le pire
enfermé chez soi enfermé chez eux

(*CP*, 98)

[dreaming among generations of oaks and forgetting his father
his eyes, if he had a moustache
if he had come to terms with what he died from

⁸⁶ Seán Lawlor and John Pilling, "Commentary," *CP*, 383. See also Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 139.

having eaten with no less appetite
through the bad times and through the worst
sealed in himself and sealed among them]

Beckett's poem gives voice to anxieties following the death of his father in 1933;⁸⁷ the anxiety of forgetting is forcefully and characteristically focused on the lingering image of his eyes. But the background of Kant coldly considering Lisbon refers to the infamous 1756 earthquake – an event which proved a catalyst for much Enlightenment thought, most famously Voltaire's *Candide*. As Cassirer documents,⁸⁸ the event moved Kant to reassess the spiritual teleology that characterised his early philosophy. Perhaps more importantly, the event has been seen to influence Kant's aesthetic theory, in particular his doctrine of the Sublime as an experience of overwhelming natural forces, of beauty mixed with terror.⁸⁹ But Kant "froidement penché" suggests a distrust of Kant's intellectual and programmatic submission of the world to reason, "enfermé" from and by circumstance.

The suspicion of Enlightenment mastery evidenced in "ainsi a-t-on beau" shows how the "loutishness of learning" anatomised in Beckett's earlier poem "Gnome" (*CP*, 55) caught Beckett between working through and turning away from the appreciation of systemised thought that underpinned his bad habit of "note-snatching."⁹⁰ Thirty years later, in another reported remark made in 1967, Beckett draws an important lesson about the limits of the knowable from the historical circumstances of the Enlightenment claims to rationality: "The

⁸⁷ Lawlor and Pilling, "Commentary," *CP*, 383.

⁸⁸ Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, 38-9.

⁸⁹ Earthquakes are evoked in the *Critique of Judgement's* description of the "Dynamically Sublime" among other catastrophic events where "In the immeasurableness of nature and the inadequacy of our own faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*, we found our own limitation." Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91; §28.

⁹⁰ Beckett to MacGreevy, n.d. [August 1931], quoted in John Pilling, ed., *Beckett's Dream Notebook* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999), xiii.

eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la raison*. I've never understood that: they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak." He goes on to affirm "that direct relation between the self and [...] the knowable, was already broken."⁹¹ It is interesting to see how Beckett regarded this signal moment in the history of philosophy, and how far his statement strays from the "syntax of weakness" influentially attributed to his fiction during the same period as this interview.⁹² After all, Beckett describes reason as "weak," an attribution which hints that the irrational and the unknowable are considered as sites of strength or power.

Beckett's construction of Kant as an emblem of philosophical circumstance in "ainsi a-t-on beau" manifests as a subtle ethics, which militates against the claims of rationality to a position of mastery.⁹³ What Beckett's poem recognises to have been lost, or broken, is forgotten through the cold regard of the dead philosopher. Beckett's poem also resists the demands of Kantian rationality by foregrounding the fragmentary echoes of the Sublime in Lisbon's scene of disaster.

The fragmentary remains of the Sublime in Beckett's poem also bring out an important way in which the demands of Kantian rationality were resisted. Although for Kant the Sublime is largely contrived as an aesthetic experience of nature, the description of the Sublime in his *Critique of Judgement* was central to Schopenhauer's theory of artistic representation. The Kantian Sublime is an experience at once of limitation and infinitude that inculcates a self-reflection on the grounds of the aesthetic experience. "The *quality* of the feeling of the Sublime," according

⁹¹ Beckett, quoted by Michael Haedter, in Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre* (London and New York: John Calder, Riverrun Press, 1988), 230-31.

⁹² Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 95.

⁹³ For Jean-Michel Rabaté, Beckett's remarks to Haedter ally him with Sade and Adorno against Kantian ethics: "Beckett's sadism inverts any transcendent law above humanity, which is the thesis of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*." Rabaté, "Think Pig! Beckett's Animal Philosophies," in *Beckett and Animals*, ed. Mary Bryden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117.

to Kant's description, "consists in its being [...] a representation which derives its possibility from the fact that the subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the same subject."⁹⁴ In Kant's formulation, the tension that arises from a simultaneously felt limitation and limitlessness results from the felt contrast between an imaginative failure to comprehend the phenomenon, and the rational faculty, which has an unlimited capacity of comprehension; the limits met by the subject are sensory and imaginative, while the "consciousness of an unlimited capacity" belongs to the capacity of rational consciousness. As Sophie Thomas observes, the rational operates as a "recuperative concept" for Kant which assures that the disjunctive and the fragmentary can be rejoined in a manner analogous to how the whole can be known from its parts.⁹⁵

Later formulations of the Sublime, however, deny this recuperative power to rationality, while the disruptive possibilities afforded by placing limitation and limitlessness in dialogue were emphasised. Schopenhauer's formulation of the Sublime was appreciative of Kant's formulation (calling it "the most excellent thing" in Kant's aesthetic theory⁹⁶), but critical of the privileging of the rational faculty, what Schopenhauer's reading notes refer to as Kant's "fatal reason."⁹⁷ For Schopenhauer, the experience of the Sublime is a self-conscious transcendence of the constraints of consciousness.⁹⁸ While his formulation of the Sublime resists claims to any ultimate intelligibility behind the experience, Schopenhauer still contends that it allows for the subject to realise their position as the source of the world as they experience it. As the ground for the appearance of representation, the subject in itself cannot be known as an object of

⁹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 89; §27.

⁹⁵ Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality*, 22.

⁹⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:532.

⁹⁷ Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Berg, 1988), 2:320.

⁹⁸ Sandra Shapshay, "Schopenhauer's transformation of the Kantian Sublime," *The Kantian Review* 17, no. 3 (2012): 502.

representation.⁹⁹ The Kantian hierarchy, which placed the rational in control of the imaginative, would also be inverted by several later aesthetic theories, especially Surrealism's visualisation of the unconscious, which followed upon Schopenhauer's suggestion that the sensory and the imaginary offered a recuperative power to the irrational.¹⁰⁰

While Beckett's representations of the object implicitly reformulate the Kantian aesthetic through Schopenhauer, the multiple manifestations of the object between Beckett's critical writing and his fiction do not offer a coherent revision of the Sublime. *Proust's* emphasis on "direct perception" in distinction to intellectual coherence or the rational tallies with Schopenhauer's main criticism of Kant's aesthetic of the Sublime, but Beckett's theory of "empêchement" refuses the idea of revelation through felt experience. Indeed, the critical emphasis on "resistance" and non-revelation in his essays on the van Veldes brings him closer to the aspect of the Kantian formulation that emphasises the significance of the failure of the imagination to fully apprehend the overwhelming phenomenon, by making this imaginative failure a constitutive component of the "limitation" that is integral to the feeling of the Sublime: "the *Sublime* is what pleases immediately through its resistance to the interest of the senses."¹⁰¹

A Beckettian Sublime does not quite move towards a postmodern Sublime either, although affinities have been observed.¹⁰² As Andrew Eastham has argued, Beckett's Sublime incorporates the remainders of Sublime thought in a form already fragmented, "which reanimate

⁹⁹ See Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), especially chapter seven, "Knowing the Thing in Itself," 188-207.

¹⁰⁰ On how Dada and Surrealism fostered a revision of Kantian aesthetics, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (MA and London: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁰¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 97; §29.

¹⁰² See Derval Tubridy, "Beckett's Spectral Silence: *Breath* and the Sublime," *Limit(e) Beckett* 1 (2010): 102-122, <http://www.limitebeckett.paris-sorbonne.fr/one/tubridy.pdf>. Tubridy draws upon Lyotard's essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" to argue for a "sublime of the absolute minimum" in Beckett's famously brief and characterless play, *Breath*. Also see Andrew Slade, "Samuel Beckett, The Sublime, The Worst," chapter three in *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras and the Postmodern Sublime* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 53-75.

the rhetorical remainder of the Romantic sublime”¹⁰³ without recuperating the ruined into a theory of the kind offered by Jean-François Lyotard or Jean-Luc Nancy. The crucial aspect, or moment, in the Sublime to the prevalent motifs developed in Beckett’s fiction comes before an experience of the Sublime is drawn into the synthesised whole of the rational faculty, the “temporary breakdown in the subject’s capacity for representation,” which Beckett’s fiction develops into an ongoing failure to recuperate wholeness.¹⁰⁴ This failure is also mirrored at the figural level, with the relation between parts and wholes also rendered in visual terms through the Gestaltist interplay between figure and ground. According to Claire Lozier, the dissonance between parts and wholes, which is one of the characteristics to the Kantian sublime, is reflected on the narrative level by developing a “trope téléologique” that uses incomplete, fragmentary narratives to create the illusion of a grand unending narrative.¹⁰⁵ The fragmentary and the elusive, rather than overwhelming natural forces, are those features to the Sublime of most importance to Beckett.¹⁰⁶

Schopenhauer and the Proustian equation

The capacity of consciousness revealed through Sublime experience also, crucially, speaks of a desire to demarcate the limitations in the subject’s capacity for representation from a perspective located outside those limitations. In philosophical discourse, this is often referred to as the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* (‘under the aspect of eternity’). The concept is important to

¹⁰³ Andrew Eastham, “Beckett’s Sublime Ironies,” in “All *Sturm* and No *Drang*: Beckett and Romanticism,” ed. Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 17 (2007): 125.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰⁵ Lozier, *De l’objet et du sublime: Georges Bataille, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 198-260.

¹⁰⁶ According to Myskja, the focus on elusive objects in Beckett’s novel makes it an example of the ‘Mathematical Sublime,’ associated with what resists the interests of our senses, rather than the ‘Dynamically Sublime’ associated with feelings of terror before overwhelming forces. Bjorn K. Myskja, *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 280.

Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, and it appears in later philosophies often influenced by Schopenhauer or seeking to elucidate a mystical, quietist point of view; most famously, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is expressly concerned with this perspective and the possibility of drawing limits to representation.¹⁰⁷ This perspective is voiced and visualised throughout Beckett's later prose texts, where it is integral to their narrative point of view,¹⁰⁸ but it is also present in *Proust*, where Beckett attempts to separate out perception from the "consciousness of perception" (P, 544) and temporal, everyday reality from "extratemporal" experience (544).

As Beckett's only work of literary criticism to receive publication in its own right, *Proust* allowed Beckett to pursue his own critical interests and to step out of the shadow Joyce's itinerary had cast over his 1929 essay "Dante... Bruno . Vico.. Joyce."¹⁰⁹ However, *Proust* does not offer a more detailed analysis of *À la recherche du temps perdu* than Beckett's previous essay had managed for Joyce's *Work in Progress*. Both essays use an obscure critical framework to draw a series of general aesthetic principles from their respective literary subject. Whereas Beckett's essay on Joyce signposts its main sources, the roles of diverse theories in determining *Proust's* critical framework – led by Schopenhauer's conception of representation and Henri Bergson's theories of time, memory and habit – are often occluded.¹¹⁰ Yet these occluded sources are no

¹⁰⁷ The series of sub-propositions for proposition 5.6 in the *Tractatus*, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," develop the connection between representation and the subject through the theme of limitation, especially Wittgenstein's assertion: "The subject does not belong to the world, but is rather a limit of the world" (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.632). The Schopenhauerian origins behind this section in the *Tractatus* are analysed in detail by Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, 317-342.

¹⁰⁸ This perspective is most systematically foregrounded in "Imagination morte imaginez"/"Imagination Dead Imagine" (1965), which is discussed in chapter four of this thesis.

¹⁰⁹ The circumstances behind *Proust's* difficult publication are detailed in John Pilling and Andrew Nash, "The 'Shatton and Windup' affair," in Nixon, *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 11-22.

¹¹⁰ A feature observed and criticised by James Acheson in the article discussed below, "Beckett, Proust, and Schopenhauer," *Contemporary Literature* 19, no. 2 (1978): 165.

less significant for being hidden. Throughout *Proust*, Beckett's attention turns away from its subject, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, to make a generalised statement that relies on an unnamed source text (such as a passage in *The World as Will and Representation*) to complete the interpretation it intends to demonstrate. For example, Beckett's assertion that "No object prolonged in this temporal dimension tolerates possession, meaning by possession total possession" (*P*, 535) recalls Schopenhauer's statements on the necessary separation between subject and object, such as his insistence on the "inseparable and reciprocal interdependence of subject and object, *together with the antithesis between them which cannot be eliminated.*"¹¹¹

Schopenhauer's philosophical vocabulary directly supports Beckett's dual reading of *À la recherche* as at once a supremely negative presentation of everyday life, and a modern affirmation of artistic transcendence. That Beckett was steeped in the Schopenhauerian point of view is unsurprising, and well-known from his letter to Thomas MacGreevy, written in July 1930, where he declares that he is reading Schopenhauer because he provides an "intellectual justification of unhappiness" (*LI*, 33). Beckett probably started writing *Proust* on 25 August in the same year,¹¹² and as James Knowlson makes clear, Beckett's engagement with Schopenhauer in 1930 was "the reading that most affected his approach to Proust."¹¹³

The influence of Schopenhauer on Beckett's essay was noticed at a relatively early stage in Beckett scholarship: John Fletcher observed the connection in a brief 1964 article, "Beckett et Proust," while Harvey's *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* mentions affinities with and allusions to

¹¹¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:31.

¹¹² In a letter to MacGreevy of the same date, Beckett writes "I started writing this morning," before lamenting "I can't do the fucking thing. I don't know whether to start at the end or the beginning." In any case, he is tellingly keen to detail his further reading in Schopenhauer and argues the case for his influence on Proust's aesthetic: "I am now going to try his [Schopenhauer's] 'Aphorismes sur la Sagesse de la Vie', that Proust admired so much for its originality and guarantee of wide reading – transformed. His chapter in *Will and Representation* on music is amusing & applies to P., who certainly read it." Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 25 August 1930, *LI*, 43.

¹¹³ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 118.

Schopenhauer at several points in his study.¹¹⁴ However, it was not until James Acheson's 1978 article "Beckett, Proust and Schopenhauer" that an extended piece gave specific and systematic attention to what was, by then, an oft-observed, but little-analysed, connection.¹¹⁵ Acheson in particular is keen to emphasise the essay's failings as a sign of Beckett's growing "impatience with the practice of literary criticism."¹¹⁶ These failings, by any normal standard of literary criticism, also extend to the essay's emphasis; selections from Proust's work often demonstrate aesthetic and philosophical points with which Schopenhauer rather than Proust is concerned.

Nevertheless, the persistent elements of *À la recherche* strongly connected to *The World as Will and Representation* implicitly underlie several aspects of both texts discussed in Beckett's essay: the role of involuntary memory, their shared denigration of habit and the role of music as the semi-mystical evocation of art as the expression of a greater truth. These elements are all unified in relation to an ever-present, ungraspable unknown aspect beneath the representations of art and the phenomena of life. Proust's narrator addresses this theme early on, in *Du côté de chez Swann*, with the spires of Martinville church, where – in spite of his anxious attention to their different aspects – he feels something remains "which they seemed at once to contain and conceal"¹¹⁷ ("quelque chose qu'ils semblaient contenir et dérober à la fois"¹¹⁸). This theme returns throughout *À la recherche* in many guises, from the trees that call to Proust's narrator on the road leaving Balbec,¹¹⁹ to his anxious, and failed, desire to capture and contain Albertine in

¹¹⁴ John Fletcher, "Beckett et Proust," *Caliban* 1 (1964): 98-99; Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, 407, 411, 423.

¹¹⁵ James Acheson, "Beckett, Proust, and Schopenhauer," *Contemporary Literature* 19, no. 2 (1978): 165-179.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹¹⁷ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, bk. 1 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2006), 1:183.

¹¹⁸ Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, bk. 1 of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et. al., Collection Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 148.

¹¹⁹ "Je regardais les trois arbres, je les voyais bien, mais mon esprit sentait qu'ils recouvraient quelque chose sur quoi il n'avait pas prise, comme sur ces objets placés trop loin dont nos doigts allongés au bout

La prisonnière. Proust's focus on themes of entrapment and evasion is brought into relief in Beckett's essay with its declaration that no object tolerates possession. However, such aesthetic statements also refer to Schopenhauer's depiction of representation as a veil which simultaneously reveals and hides the thing itself through a mechanism of division and relation between subject and object.

Beckett summarises *À la recherche* in terms that could just as well summarise parts of *The World as Will and Representation*. This is true for the essay's earlier description of the desire for possession, which moves from a brief account of Proust's narrator's desire for Albertine to the general and abstract assertion that "whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable" (P, 515). This assertion of insatiable possession informs the essay's later characterisation of representation as the impermeable veil that prevents the object's "total possession": "All that is active, all that is enveloped in time and space, is endowed with what might be described as an abstract, ideal and absolute impermeability" (P, 535). Beckett's essay presciently describes *À la recherche* as a narrative of phenomenal imprisonment, emerging from a world inhabited by "creatures" who are "victims and prisoners" (P, 512). The focus on phenomenal imprisonment in *Proust* inaugurated a central theme to which Beckett's post-war essays would return. "Peintres de l'empêchement," for example, uses closely related metaphors of imprisonment to theorise the van Veldes' canvases as examples of an "art d'incarcération" (D, 136-7).

Kantian concerns with conscious representation and its limitations are addressed in the "Proustian equation" ("The unknown, choosing its weapons from a hoard of values, is also the unknowable" [P, 511]) with which *Proust* begins. A "Proustian solution" to this equation is

de notre bras tendu, effleurent seulement par instant l'enveloppe sans arriver à rien saisir." Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, bk. 2 of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 568; translated as: "I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it had not grasped, as when things are placed out of our reach, so that our fingers, stretched out at arm's-length, can only touch for a moment their outer surface, and take hold of nothing." Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, bk. 2 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1:653.

found posited towards the end of the essay in the form of the most definitively Proustian narrative device, involuntary memory. Even though Schopenhauer is only named a handful of times,¹²⁰ Beckett reads involuntary memory from a strikingly Schopenhauerian perspective. Recalling the past is only a secondary aspect of involuntary memory. Above all, Beckett's essay presents involuntary memory as a mechanism that promises the possibility of transcending the world as representation:

the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extratemporal. But if this mystical experience communicates an extratemporal essence, it follows that the communicant is for the moment an extratemporal being. Consequently the Proustian solution consists [...] in the negation of Time and Death. (*P*, 544)

Although Beckett would later insist in his correspondence with Thomas MacGreevy that he had never held any inclination towards the transcendental or “supernatural,” instead preferring to adopt a “removal of the transcendental application of the quietist position,”¹²¹ his reading of Proustian involuntary memory does not quite support this assertion, beholden as it is to the communication of “an extratemporal essence” through what is surely a “transcendental application.”

¹²⁰ First mentioned, briefly, in parentheses, “(an objectification of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say)” (*P*, 515). A more developed assertion is made during the essay's description of Proust's anti-intellectualism: “We are reminded of Schopenhauer's definition of the artistic procedure as ‘the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason’” (551). Finally, Schopenhauer's theory of music is evoked: “The influence of Schopenhauer on [the musical] aspect of the Proustian demonstration is unquestionable” (553). A sustained discussion of the role played by Schopenhauer's theory of music on Beckett's aesthetic theory in *Proust* is found in Catherine Laws, “Beckett, Proust, and Music,” chapter one in *Headaches Among the Overtones: Beckett in Music/Music in Beckett* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi 2013), 27-62.

¹²¹ Mark Nixon, *Beckett's German Diaries: 1936-1937*, 56.

Beckett's phrasing in *Proust* also indicates some continuity with his earlier critical concerns, clearly recalling the "direct expression" he had located in Joyce's *Work in Progress* (DB, 502). But *Proust* goes further, arguing that if the subject pays direct attention to an object, severed from its causal relations with the world, while refusing to judge it according to his "consciousness of perception" (P, 544), the object may escape the "Deformation" (512) imposed upon it through his conscious perception of its existence as mere representation. If the subject achieves this, he transcends time, space and death too; in fact, both subject and object are abolished, and their shared "extratemporal essence" expresses the "purified subject" as "the Model, the Idea, the 'Thing in itself'" (P, 552). Furthermore, referring to a "Model" implies a mimetic relationship between phenomenal reality and the "Idea" or "Thing in itself" which draws upon Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetic contemplation.¹²²

Schopenhauer contends that the world as representation comes into being as the collective expression of a unified will, and his philosophy exalts the artist who attains a direct perception of the essence behind phenomena which lies as the source of both himself and the object(s) of his attention. This essence is described as "the *Idea*, the eternal form, the immediate objectivity of the will."¹²³ The Idea is the pure form of the object, and requires a pure subject who perceives it directly; it is the nearest he can come to identifying with the object while retaining his identity as subject, because a complete identification would require that he grasp the 'thing in itself,' collapsing their relative identity as subject and object.¹²⁴ Schopenhauer claims

¹²² According to John Wall, "For Beckett, the great virtue of the Proustian method is that it makes available to perception the Schopenhauerian Idea – that is, the proper object of art – perceivable only when the subject abandons itself to a state of will-less contemplation." Wall, "A Study of the Imagination in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*," *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 535. The article goes on to argue that the Proustian model helps to shape the presentation of imagination in *Watt*, a reading which is relevant to my discussion of the novel later in this chapter.

¹²³ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:257; §52.

¹²⁴ Pothast argues that Beckett imported an exclusively Schopenhauerian conception of the "subject-object relation," which is understood by Beckett to be "the most general form of representation," and

that if we “devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein,” we “lose ourselves entirely in this object [...] and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception.”¹²⁵ This passage finds striking affinities with Beckett’s “direct perception.” However, because the desire for “complete identification” negates the identity of the subject and object, the desire to possess the object is fundamentally destructive. This destructive dynamic is emphasised in *Proust* by twinning destruction with possession, and describing this as a narrative strategy adopted in *À la recherche* through the theme of “complete identification.”

Proust’s adaptation of Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theory exacerbates an unresolved tension contained within the concept of direct perception. Whereas greater attention towards the Idea behind the object, free from its worldly relations, yields a perception of the world from outside its forms of representation (“the subject’s consciousness of perception” which separates the subject from the pure object [P, 544]), the perceived object yields its essence only through inattention, so that it is directly revealed through involuntary memory rather than Habit’s predetermined mechanism. This tension contained in an aesthetic of willed inattention is also reflected in the essay’s presentation of habit. *Proust* presents Habit as the scourge of artistic revelation – it means individuals can go on in the world, but it also closes them from any direct relation with another thing or being: “Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment” or, more savagely still, “the ballast that chains the dog to its vomit” (P, 515). Beckett’s characterisation of Proustian habit counterbalances the essay’s assertion that when the perceived object “appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and only then may it

“a necessary condition for there to be a subject on the one hand and an object on the other.” Pothast, *The Metaphysical Vision*, 23-4.

¹²⁵ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:178; §34.

be a source of enchantment” (517). Yet this ignorance must be knowingly chosen, just as the object must be attentively unfocused.

Ignorance possesses a complex series of meanings in Beckett’s essay. It is evoked in connection with “direct perception,” as the “light” which illuminates the essence of the object. However, the “light of ignorance” requires that its object lies “isolated and inexplicable,” necessarily unknowable and unrepresentable. So the essay has to turn elsewhere. The blame for the essay’s failure to lift the veil at once covering and displaying its muse lies squarely with Habit: “Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence – the Idea – of the object in the haze of conception – preconception” (*P*, 517). The haze of habitual “preconception” is contrary to involuntary memory, which Beckett claims opens the way to the Idea, because its perception of the object is not preconceived, and it is therefore free from the dread constraints of Habit. Yet, his essay requires a kind of willed inattention to the object, so that it may be deliberately perceived without being comprehended, and consequently can be determined as a resource for a transcendental vision of art where transcendence is reached through the “complete identification” that annihilates subject and object to unveil the world of representation. Yet the realm beyond appearance thus unveiled is by definition unrepresentable. Clearly, this is a very difficult negotiation, and Beckett’s essay seems committed to mutually contradictory positions largely because the deference of its philosophical vocabulary to Schopenhauer (with Bergson an uneasy ghost behind the figures of time and memory¹²⁶) means that it lacks the resources to describe the representation of being

¹²⁶ Beckett’s debts to Bergson have been widely documented. See especially: S.E. Gontarski, “‘What it is to have been’: Bergson and Beckett on Movement, Multiplicity and Representation,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 2 (2011): 65-75; Uhlmann, “Beckett’s aesthetic writings and ‘the image,’” chapter two in *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 24-35. For a discussion of the influence of Bergson’s theories of time and memory on Beckett’s *Proust*, see S.E. Gontarski, ed., introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 4-8; and Paul Ardoin, “Perception Sickness: Bergsonian Sensitivity and Modernist Paralysis,” in *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, ed. Paul Ardoin, S.E. Gontarski and Laci Mattison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 128-140.

otherwise than in terms of the 'subject-object relation,' leaving the "light of ignorance" and the "unknowable" hoard of artistic value inaccessible to representation.

Beckett and the "art d'incarcération"

By the time Beckett came to write his post-war essays on Geer and Bram van Velde, the style of his critical writing had demonstrably changed. The uneasily absent hinterland of *Proust* is, for the post-war essays, an important resource for aesthetic contemplation. Despite Beckett's claim in "La Peinture des van Velde" that "art adore les sauts" (*D*, 128), however, Beckett did not make this change in one bound. The review essays after *Proust* slowly reevaluate and lead away from the totalising aesthetic of Beckett's early ventures in literary criticism. In "Recent Irish Poetry," written for *The Bookman* in 1934, Beckett noticeably revises the desire for an aesthetic "identification" between subject and object that had operated in *Proust* by drawing attention to an aesthetic of mutual "breakdown" in the subject and object, a "rupture of the lines of communication" (*D*, 70). Out of this rupture, Beckett asserts, "[t]he artist who is aware of this may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects," referring to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Jack Yeats's paintings together as expressions of this rupture (*D*, 70).

The "space that intervenes" in "Recent Irish Poetry" gestures towards a representational territory exposed by the rupture of communication (or relation) between subject and object, a territory which is more thoroughly addressed in Beckett's post-war essays. In "Peintres de l'empêchement,"¹²⁷ for example, Beckett presents Geer and Bram van Velde's paintings as staging a shared intervention both within the artistic establishment and the preconceived possibilities of painterly representation. By contrast to the "history of painting," Beckett argues

¹²⁷ The word "empêchement" has no exact equivalent in English. However, given the importance of resistance as a principle in the essay, "resistance" is the primary sense given here. In this regard I follow C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski (*The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 430), and Morin (*Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 134) as opposed to, among others, Oppenheim and Cohn's more literal rendering as "impediment," in Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 80-81; Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 154-155.

that the van Veldes' produce a type of painting "libre de tout souci critique, d'une peinture de critique et de refus, refus d'accepter comme donné le vieux rapport sujet-objet" (*D*, 135, 137; "The painting of the van Velde brothers emerges, uncritical, acceptant, from a painting of criticism and refusal, refusal to accept as given the old subject-object relation" *NO*, 878, 880). The substance of the van Veldes' work is almost not at issue in Beckett's essay. Bram and Geer are presented less as characters than as examples of a tendency exhibited in Beckett's essay on Proust, wherein the figure of the artist crystallises a supremely general artistic situation beyond the work with which Beckett's essay is ostensibly concerned.

Beckett's essays on the van Velde brothers claim that the limit (or the fact of limitation) forms the material basis of their art. In "Peintres de l'empêchement," these painterly limits instigate a conscious shuddering:

Le frisson primaire de la peinture en prenant conscience de ses limites porte vers les confins de ces limites, le secondaire dans le sens de la profondeur, vers la chose que cache la chose. L'objet de la représentation résiste toujours à la représentation, soit à cause de ses accidents, parce que la connaissance de l'accident précède celle de la substance. (*D*, 135)

The instinctive shudder of painting from its limits is a shudder toward the confines of those limits, and the reflective all in depth, from without to within. I mean only that the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation, either on account of its accidents or on account of its substance, and primarily on account of its accidents, because in consciousness accident is anterior to substance. (*NO*, 879)

Yet the approach "vers la chose que cache la chose" is frustrated by the object's resistance to representation, which leads processes of "unveiling" in "Peintres de l'empêchement" to become an interminable act of repetition, a "dévoilement sans fin" (*D*, 137). For Beckett as for Schopenhauer, lifting the veil works as a metaphor for transcendence, where the subject surpasses both himself and his representations. However, Beckett's post-war essays invite the

transcendental possibility associated with the metaphor of unveiling only to withhold this possibility from being actualised. The “complete identification” proffered in *Proust* as artistic creativity’s transcendental ideal is replaced in Beckett’s van Velde essays by a principle of aesthetic “impossibility,” which in “Three Dialogues” obligates the artist to maintain “fidelity to failure” (*TD*, 562).

The difficult relationship highlighted by metaphors of veiling and unveiling suggests a paradoxical aspect common to many reformulations of representation after its Kantian framing, where the thing revealed carries a hidden aspect demanding further revelation as a condition of its appearing. As Beckett had previously claimed in “La Peinture des van Velde”: “Pour le peintre, la chose est impossible. C’est d’ailleurs de la représentation de cette impossibilité que la peinture moderne a tiré une bonne partie de ses meilleurs effets” (*D*, 126) [For the painter, the thing is impossible. Moreover, it is from the representation of this impossibility that modern painting drew many of its best effects]. This line of reasoning on representational failure continues into “Peintres de l’empêchement,” which answers its question about what can be represented if the essence of the object always evades representation by stating “Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade” (*D*, 136; “There remain to be represented the conditions of that elusion” *NO*, 879). Artistic representation is obliged to turn to the elusion itself: “Un dévoilement sans fin, voile derrière voile, plan sur plan de transparences imparfaites, un dévoilement vers l’indévoilable, le rien, la chose à nouveau. Et l’ensevelissement dans l’unique, dans un lieu d’impénétrables proximités, cellule peinte sur la pierre de la cellule, art d’incarcération” (*D*, 137; “An endless unveiling, veil behind veil, plane after plane of imperfect transparencies, light and space themselves veils, an unveiling towards the unveilable, the nothing, the thing again. And burial in the unique, in a place of impenetrable nearness, cell painted on the stone of cell, art of confinement” *NO*, 880). The “pure object” of *Proust*, passively waiting to be revealed by the perceiving subject, is here displaced. Rather than revealing the ‘will’ or the ‘thing in itself,’ to lift the illusory veil of everyday perception reveals its concrete negation through its own repetition and reproduction: “le rien, la chose à nouveau” (“the

nothing, the thing again”). The essay’s nonrevelatory “endless unveiling” thus becomes an accumulation of stone cells painted on top of one another, and this accumulation produces an “art d’incarcération” (*D*, 136).

Beckett’s metaphors of endless unveiling – of “finalité sans fin” – develop the claim made earlier in the essay, that consciousness of the “confines” of the work of art’s “limitations” leads towards the “thing that hides the thing” rather than the ‘thing in itself.’ This resistance to unveiling is perhaps announced in *Watt*, in the shape of Mr Knott, whose procedure of dressing and undressing is uncannily presented as a perpetual veiling that leaves his “veritable aspect” unrevealed: “Mr Knott did not do as most men, and many women, do, who, before putting on their nightclothes, at night, take off their dayclothes, and again, when morning comes, once again, before they dream of putting on their dayclothes are careful to pull off their soiled nightclothes, no, but he went to bed with his nightclothes over his dayclothes, and he rose with his dayclothes under his nightclothes” (*W*, 342). In “Peintres de l’empêchement,” however, the endless procession of veils morphs into a series of imperfectly transparent planes. This partly signals Beckett’s engagement with theories of perception and the visual arts, notably Kandinsky’s theories of abstraction. But the trope of repetitious veiling anticipates the voice in texts such as *The Unnamable*, which follows a rhetorical logic that oscillates between unsatisfied accumulation and failed negation.

The interminable play of nonrevelatory limitations forms the substance of Beckett’s “art d’incarcération.” Incarceration within a “stone cell” is a concrete instance of “empêchement” in action: while the cell bounds and constrains, it refuses to yield. This resistance stems from a coincident evasion on the part of the subject and the object, a situation mirrored by the relationship of the artist to the work. As Lois Oppenheim argues, “La Peinture des van Velde” and “Peintres de l’empêchement” present a Schopenhauerian picture “of the world as phenomenon of disclosure and resistance at once” which renders “the contradiction inherent

in creative expression – the visual rendering of what cannot be seen.”¹²⁸ For an “art d’incarcération,” the plane of representation itself becomes a limit, “un lieu d’impénétrables proximités” where everything is too near to open up a space of communication, but holds instead to a tentative existence incommensurable with the subject (*D*, 137). The cell remains absolute, lacking any way in to or out from itself; by its nature, the cell is “incarcerated.”

For Beckett, the artist can express the evasion of the work of art either in the mould of Geer van Velde’s paradigm of *objective* resistance to representation, the “empêchement-objet,” or according to Bram van Velde’s commitment to *subjective* representational resistance yielded by his “empêchement-œil.” Beckett’s binary approach, dividing the object from the subjective eye, is necessitated by what he characterises as Bram and Geer’s mutual “refus d’accepter comme donné le vieux rapport sujet-objet” (*D*, 137; “refusal to accept as given the old subject-object relation” *NO*, 880). Because the object does not give itself over to the eye of the viewing subject, its representation cannot be so much as given, let alone unveiled, as Beckett has the two artists testify: “L’un dira: Je ne peux voir l’objet, pour le représenter, parce qu’il est ce qu’il est. L’autre: Je ne peux voir l’objet, pour le représenter, parce que je suis ce que je suis” (*D*, 136; “The one will say, I cannot see the object to represent it because the object is what it is. / The other, I cannot see the object to represent it because I am what I am” *NO*, 879). Beckett’s critical conception of representation as “empêchement” resists the possibility of “complete identification” which characterises the ‘subject-object relation’ in *Proust*. In “Peintres de l’empêchement,” subject and object are incommensurable terms engaged in an exchange of flight and evasion, much as the Proustian equation frames the known and unknown domains. That is to say, the subject cannot be wholly assimilated to the object, in the same way that the unknown cannot be made known. Although both of these positions are elucidated in *Proust*, Beckett did not productively engage with the content of this resistance inherent to the ‘subject-

¹²⁸ Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 77.

object relation' until he began to write on visual art – a thematic turn that also aligns with his turn to writing in French.

The Proustian equation itself may have been sourced from Schopenhauer's essay "On the Antithesis of Thing in Itself and Appearance." The essay was originally published in *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), but also variously collected alongside other essays Beckett is known to have consulted in 1930 before completing *Proust*, notably "On the Suffering of the World," from which the word "defunctus," *Proust's* final word, is drawn (Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 5 October 1930, *LI*, 36). Schopenhauer's essay directly addresses the relationship between knowledge, representation and 'things in themselves,' in terms echoed by Beckett's "Proustian equation": "all that of which we complain of not knowing is not known to anyone, indeed is probably as such unknowable, i.e. not capable of being [represented]. For the [representation], in whose domain all knowledge lies and to which all knowledge therefore refers, is only the outer side of existence, something secondary, supplementary."¹²⁹

Schopenhauer's essay does not depart from the central thesis of *The World as Will and Representation*. Its insistence that the phenomenal is a surface exterior to being (the *noumenon* or 'will'), however, develops aspects of Schopenhauer's theory of representation, particularly with its emphasis on the diminishing powers associated with relation *per se* through its claim that things exist as knowable only in an accidental or arbitrary (or "supplementary") position to the 'will.' The pointed denigration of the realm of representation in Schopenhauer's essay clearly presages *Proust's* presentation of knowledge as limited to a phenomenal reality which is only a "hermetic" surface (*P*, 544). But the essay leaves its mark elsewhere in Beckett's writing. Beckett's essays, such as "Peintres de l'empêchement," frequently use figures of embodied perception, such as the figure of the "empêchement-œil," to literalise concepts present in

¹²⁹ Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, 58. My quotation from Hollingdale's translation adapts the translation of *vorstellbar* and *Vorstellung* to 'represented' and 'representation,' against Hollingdale's 'conceived' and 'Idea.' I do this in order to maintain consistency with Payne's translation of *Vorstellung* by 'representation' rather than 'idea' in his *World as Will and Representation*.

Schopenhauer's writing, and Kantian philosophy in general, that are central to the theory of literary representation abstractly argued for in *Proust*.

Although, in contrast to Kant, Schopenhauer is keen to use visual metaphors to discuss the body and art in their materiality, and he regarded the eye as the primary sensory organ, the eye is essentially depicted as the conduit between the knowing subject and the world as representation.¹³⁰ Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory is caught between an affirmation of perception and the need to correlate the artistic perception to a metaphysical revelation of truth akin to Plato's Ideas. McGrath has argued that "Beckett shared Schopenhauer's views about the primacy of the percept in art without accepting their metaphysical premises."¹³¹ I agree with McGrath's observation about the primacy of the percept for Beckett. But Beckett's aesthetic stance was far from fixed, and *Proust* closely adheres to Schopenhauer's metaphysical premises. The primacy of the percept would only be definitively divorced from metaphysical possibility with Beckett's later theory of "empêchement."

The metaphysical implications to *Proust's* theory of "direct perception" lie in the "complete identification" of subject and object. At the same time, however, Beckett's essay maintains that both perception and artistic representation in *À la recherche* are "apprehended metaphorically by the artist," who formulates "the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception" (*P*, 551). All perception being "indirect and comparative" or metaphorical, while providing the sole means of apprehending the world for the subject, indicates a limitation on the part of that subject and a separation from direct identification with others: "All that is active, all that is enveloped in time and space, is endowed with what might

¹³⁰ For Schopenhauer, the eye first brought the world into existence before a knowing subject, but the world as representation is still supported by the knowing subject, not the organ of sight: "the existence of this whole world remains forever dependent on that first eye that opened, [for] such an eye necessarily brings about knowledge, for which and in which the whole world is, and without which it is not even conceivable. The world is entirely representation, and as such requires the knowing subject as supporter of its existence." Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 1:30; §7.

¹³¹ McGrath, "An Agon with the Twilighters," 9.

be described as an abstract, ideal and absolute impermeability” (P, 535). Perception is therefore already mediated and conditioned by a world outside and prior to the subject’s consciousness, and this world becomes accessible only through a metaphorical relation which occludes direct apprehension of the ‘thing in itself.’ On this point, *Proust* introduces a set of concerns taken up in Beckett’s subsequent critical writing. Through metaphors constructed around themes of veiling and incarceration, for example, “Peintres de l’empêchement” more thoroughly considers ideas of metaphorical apprehension and impermeability introduced in *Proust*, and allows these ideas to become central to the condition of artistic creativity. Beckett’s critical writing also moves into greater proximity with Merleau-Ponty, who aligns visual art and perception not in terms of the transcendental “direct perception” of the ‘thing in itself,’ but through a common grounding in the subject’s primary experience of the world.

While *Proust* eludes the implication that mediation is irremediable, claiming that the artist “does not deal in surfaces” (P, 539) and – as discussed earlier – arguing that the subject can transcend the constraints of time and space to become an “extratemporal being,” it is telling that the artistic situation presented in “Peintres de l’empêchement” is transformed from one predicated on the possibility of revelatory unveiling to the perpetual veiling of stone cells. “Peintres de l’empêchement” thus adopts *Proust*’s “metaphorical apprehension,” but it relinquishes its claim upon “complete identification.” For Beckett as a critic in the post-war period, the ‘subject-object relation’ is determined by evasion instead of the longed-for identification.

A(p)perception and the eye

Beckett’s essays metaphorise the difficulties surrounding representation and the status of the work of art. Moreover, their emphasis on themes of representational limitations, expressed by terms such as “imprisonment” and “incarceration,” indicates that a self-reflexive aesthetic is at work. In *Proust*, for example, Beckett asserts that Proust’s subjects can be purified only “in the transcendental aperception [*sic*] that can capture the Model, the Idea, the Thing in itself” (P,

552). As I will detail in this section, this apparent misspelling of ‘apperception’ provides an instance of the connection between Beckett’s foregrounding of vision and his philosophical influences.

Kant describes “transcendental apperception” as a ground of representation, the “unity of consciousness [...] in relation to which the representation of objects is alone possible.”¹³² Transcendental apperception describes the cognitive process of self-realisation, the self and world become present to the subject. However, no ‘thing in itself’ can be captured, or possessed, as Kant emphasises: “Appearances are the only objects that can be given to us immediately, and that in them which is immediately related to the object is called intuition. However, these appearances are not things in themselves, but themselves only representations, which in turn have their object, which cannot be further intuited by us.”¹³³ Kant’s transcendental therefore grounds representation, establishing the possibility of the ‘subject-object relation,’ whereas Schopenhauer conceives of transcendence as the means of escape from the phenomenal world.

In addition to the philosophical theme of ‘apperception,’ the suggestive misalignment in Beckett’s spelling is shadowed by the verb ‘apercevoir’ – ‘to glimpse.’ Glimpsing constitutes a central motif in Beckett’s closed space fiction of the 1960s and 70s,¹³⁴ which is related to the resistance of perception theorised in “Peintres de l’empêchement.” Beckett’s emphasis on ‘aperception’ also acknowledges the unknowable as the quality which resists objectification by the subject’s gaze, and returns him to the conditions of cognition by testing those limitations, or by surpassing the subject’s conscious capacity in a way related to the Sublime. Indeed, the

¹³² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 232; §13, A107.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹³⁴ Tropes constructed around the word “glimpse” in English, and the two verbs “apercevoir” and “entrevoir” are especially prominent in the vocabulary of Beckett’s late texts. The phrase “premier aperçu” also works its way unchanged from the French *Le Dépeupleur* (1970) into the English *The Lost Ones* (1972), while Beckett’s last work, the poem “Comment Dire”/“What is the Word” is constructed around the “need to glimpse.” A fuller discussion of these visual patternings in Beckett’s late writing is given in chapter four.

word ‘aperception’ recurs in “La Peinture des van Velde,” where Beckett emphasises how Bram’s paintings test the limits of conscious representation through an “effort d’aperception si exclusivement et farouchement pictural que nous autres [...] ne le concevons qu’avec peine” (*D*, 125) [an effort of aperception so exclusively and bitterly pictorial that we others (...) can barely conceive of it]. The meaning of ‘aperception’ in this passage recalls its Kantian sense. Yet Beckett’s description of ‘aperception’ reflects the inherently pictorial connotations to representation that, in theories from Sidney’s *Defence* to Heidegger’s essays on art, underlie the work of art’s relation to reality.

Such bitter exclusivity behind Bram van Velde’s presentation of the pictorial may arise from the fact that his painting foregrounds the grounds of representation. As Maude observes, Beckett’s interest in the visual reflects the association between vision and subjectivity described in Heidegger’s essay “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), which argues that the essence of modernity lies in the idea of man as subject, who grounds the expression of the world as picture.¹³⁵ Beckett’s description of a bitterly pictorial “effort d’aperception” highlights an important relationship to the viewing subject: the opacity of Bram’s painting reflects back upon the viewer without revealing any conceivable object to the viewer.

This connection between ‘aperception’ and the verb ‘apercevoir’ is reflected in one of *Murphy*’s crucial scenes: Murphy’s attempt to force an act of recognition out of Mr. Endon, the chess-playing asylum inmate of the Magdalene Mental Mercyseat who is impenetrably indifferent to the phenomenal world. The failure of Murphy’s project is confirmed in a moment of shared narrative and perceptual “prolonged attention” to Mr. Endon’s eyes, when Murphy sees at last, “in the cornea, horribly reduced, obscured and distorted, his own image” (*Mu*, 149). Murphy glimpses himself in an act of aperception, as he is reflected back to himself as an image in the cornea of Mr. Endon’s eye, which does not see him. Murphy perceives his distorted reflection unexpectedly, in spite of his attention, and instead of complete identification with

¹³⁵ Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25.

another subject, Murphy is thrown back upon himself as mere representation, “his own image.” As Carla Taban observes,¹³⁶ by presenting the glimpse as a mode of self-perception resisted by the constraints of the intellect (the operation framed in *Proust* as the “consciousness of perception” that vetoes “direct perception”) this scene connects with Beckett’s depiction of the “empêchement-œil” as a symbol for artistic creativity. The return to the self which Murphy experiences is thus a kind of transcendental ‘aperception.’ Murphy’s enactment of ‘aperception’ through his peripheral self-reflection within the cornea of Mr. Endon’s opaque, gazing eye presages a series of tropes in Beckett’s œuvre that use figures of nonrelation to thematise the impossible. However, this scene does not threaten *Murphy*’s structured narrative. Murphy’s chess-game encounter with Mr. Endon only spurs the novel towards its dénouement with Murphy’s ambiguous death.

The scene precipitating Murphy’s demise, then, at once invokes and resists the “complete identification” between subject and object on which Beckett had placed so much emphasis in *Proust*. Beckett’s heightened ambivalence about the possibility of complete identification anticipates Sartre’s description of the appropriative or possessive conception of knowledge in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). “To know is to devour with the eyes,” he writes:

In knowing, consciousness attracts the object to itself and incorporates it in itself. Knowledge is assimilation [...] There is a movement of dissolution which passes from the object to the knowing subject. The known is transformed into *me*; it becomes my thought and thereby consents to receive its existence from me alone. But this movement of dissolution is fixed by the fact that the known remains in the same place, indefinitely absorbed, devoured, and yet indefinitely intact, wholly digested and yet wholly outside, as indigestible as a stone.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Taban, “Samuel Beckett: du discours descriptif, fictif et critique sur la peinture à la contiguïté du discursif et du pictural,” 230.

¹³⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 599-600.

Sartre's unpicking of knowledge as assimilation complements *Proust's* reading of Schopenhauer's conception of knowing as the "complete identification" of subject and object. Something indigestible remains at the centre of Sartre's alimentary metaphor: the essence of the devoured object, the core of the 'in-itself' that forms the unknowable substance of the known. As I will go on to discuss, the metaphor of indigestion is indebted to the Kantian conception of the object shared by the notion of 'choséité' Beckett would invoke in *Watt* and the essay "Peintres de l'empêchement." Sartre's insistence that "To know is to devour with the eyes" gives a tactile energy to sight, and places the eye in the circuit of the body's digestive processes. The idea plays on the distinction between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*, between knowable and unknowable, and derives from philosophical concerns common to Beckett's description of object and eye as a metaphor for artistic creativity. At the centre of Beckett's essays on painting is a privileging of resistance over revelation: the object and the eye in Geer and Bram van Veldes' canvases do not appear but resist assimilation.

Sartre's contrast between devouring and non-devouring sight is also reflected by Beckett's contrast between gazing and glimpsing. Both dynamics draw upon Gestalt psychology's emphasis on the relation between figure and ground, and the argument that this primary visual pattern grounds consciousness; these foundational, pre-conscious cognitive and perceptual structures constitute the primary relations between the subject and the world. In certain respects this develops the Kantian origins of phenomenology. As Merleau-Ponty neatly characterises this kinship: "Kantianism, would seem to have seen quite clearly that the problem of perception resides in its being an originating knowledge. There is an empirical or second-order perception, the one which we exercise at every moment, and which conceals from us the former basic phenomenon, because it is loaded with earlier acquisitions and plays, so to speak, on the surface of being."¹³⁸ The relationship of the phenomenal to the concept of an "originating

¹³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 50.

knowledge” is a central question that structures Beckett’s oppositions between the strictly perceptual and the intellectual. It is through these oppositions that themes and figures addressed in Beckett’s essays on Proust and the van Velde brothers are seen to shape other parts of Beckett’s writing.

Watt’s pots and Kantian objects

Several critics have found in *Watt* a series of responses to the Kantian concern with an “originating knowledge.” John Wall, for example, argues that Beckett’s presentation of Watt’s mind is rooted in Kant’s theory of the imagination as the faculty that conditions all *a priori* knowledge by synthesising intuition with apperception.¹³⁹ Other readings have drawn from the line, in the addenda to *Watt*, “das fruchtbar Bathos der Erfahrung” [the fruitful Bathos of experience] – another reference Beckett drew from his reading of Cassirer’s biography.¹⁴⁰ Kant’s formulation of Bathos refers to the grounds of experience, making it a mirror image of the Sublime.¹⁴¹

As Jean-Michel Rabaté observes, Beckett’s phrase also alludes to Alexander Pope, who used Bathos as an example of a “ridiculous or failed sublime.”¹⁴² However, in and beyond *Watt*, Beckett’s texts incorporate Kantian philosophical concerns about the status of representation, including theories of the bathetic and the Sublime, through formal devices other than citation.

¹³⁹ Wall, “A Study of the Imagination in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*,” 538; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 238, A118-119.

¹⁴⁰ Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, 139.

¹⁴¹ “My place is the fertile *bathos* of experience, and the word: transcendental [...] does not signify something that surpasses all experience, but something that indeed precedes all experience (*a priori*), but that, all the same, is destined to nothing more than solely to make cognition from experience possible.” Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 125n.

¹⁴² Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Beckett’s Three Critiques: Kant’s Bathos and the Irish Chandos,” in “Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive,” special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 699-719. See also Frederik N. Smith, “Pope, Beckett, and the Aesthetics of Decay,” chapter seven in *Samuel Beckett’s Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 132-155.

P.J. Murphy has perhaps most clearly argued for Kant's critiques as a direct and demonstrable source of influence on Beckett's fiction, claiming that "*Watt* is a Kantian novel." He argues that the novel is essentially based around "the difficult and paradoxical situation of man as phenomenally determined but noumenally free."¹⁴³ The "difficult" situations presented in Beckett's novel would thus reflect upon and be illuminated by the difficulties met within a Kantian interpretative framework. Within such a framework, the division between phenomenal determination and noumenal freedom finds itself repeated in other formulations of these terms, such as the oppositions between the visible and invisible, the known and unknown, the present and absent, where the inseparability of one from the other is established at the "indivisible boundary" between them. By implication, "freedom" gestures towards an absence attained through negation, while the determination behind Beckett's aesthetic of incarceration gestures towards the accumulation of oppressive presences. In *Watt*, modes of negation often follow upon modes of accumulation, enumerating possibilities, such as the list of twelve possible permutations for Mr. Knott's mealtime arrangements (*W*, 239).

Structures of repetition are not simply bound to *Watt*'s propensity for listing, however. According to Deleuze's oft-quoted essay on Beckett, "L'Épuisé" ("The Exhausted," 1992), *Watt* exhausts the possible by adopting a "combinatorial" mode of exhaustion, "the art or science of exhausting the possible, through inclusive disjunctions."¹⁴⁴ This idea of "inclusive disjunction" has been more firmly elaborated by other accounts of Beckettian repetition, especially by Steven Connor, who observes: "Watt opts, not for silence, but negation, that semiotic form which compounds absence and presence; negation is always secondary, always dependent upon a statement or sequence that has come before it and that must implicitly be reinvoked before it can be annulled."¹⁴⁵ So in *Watt*, "the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something" (*W*, 229).

¹⁴³ P.J. Murphy, "Beckett and the philosophers," 229-230.

¹⁴⁴ Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 5.

¹⁴⁵ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 38.

Through the novel's accumulation of negations, *Watt* contends with the formative paradoxes related to these binary formulations between presence and absence. An aspect of Kant's thought that reverberates into *Watt*'s disjunctions comes from a failure in Kant's thought to definitively synthesise one of the central aspects to the theory of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: whether *noumena*, as strictly unknowable concepts, can be conceived of positively, and thus having a substance that can in some way be thought by the subject, or only negatively, as concepts that restrict the realm of representation.¹⁴⁶ Watt's realisation that "nothing" can only be spoken of as "something," which suggests that it cannot be spoken of at all, repeats the paradoxical claim that Kantian 'things in themselves' must be thinkable but unknowable.

Watt transposes questions concerning the nature of *noumena* onto the "something" of elusive objects through narrative figures that shape the resistances lying behind the processes of naming and representation. These evasions are staged at several points, although they are most obviously foregrounded in the description of Watt's desire for "words to be applied to his situation [...] to the conditions of being in which he found himself," despite finding himself "in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance" (*W*, 232). Even the humble pot evades its name. For Watt, "it was not a pot of which one could say Pot, pot, and be comforted" (*W*, 232). The pot's resistance to being named, coupled with Watt's failure to apply words to his "situation," bring into relief a series of related concerns addressed in the fiction and criticism written by Beckett in the period immediately after the completion of *Watt*. The role of the "nothing" never signifies an emptying of value or meaning.¹⁴⁷ But nor is

¹⁴⁶ Responding to claims that the *Critique* lacked any "positive utility," Kant's preface to the second edition introduces a notoriously hazy distinction between thinking in general and cognition, by defining cognition as thought requiring proof. On the basis of this distinction, his preface argues that although "we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself [...] even if we cannot cognize these same objects as things in themselves, we must at least be able to think them as things in themselves." *Critique of Pure Reason*, 115; B xxvi.

¹⁴⁷ There are many readings of Watt's pot as an example of linguistic/perceptual slippage and nonrelation. Katherine White pertinently reads the scene as an example of how "unknowability" procures mental derangement." White, *Beckett and Decay* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 93. By contrast,

its value fixed in relation to its opposite “something”: as the formulation in *Watt* hints, the concretion of “nothing” into “something” is only apparent: speaking of the absent nothing “as though” it were present hints at an understanding of presence as a mask, beneath which the hidden can slip through precisely by being hidden, while the fact of its nature as hidden is remarked upon.

If, in his letter to Kaun, Beckett advocates an aesthetic that seeks to “tear” the veil of language, *Watt* offers a more subtle series of constructed accumulations and repetitions which highlight the negations and occlusions through their absence behind the veiling “something” of the text. More than a borrowing from his reading of Schopenhauer, Beckett’s use of the veil metaphor in “Peintres de l’empêchement” operates as a structuring metaphor for the figuration of the object in *Watt*. Dichotomies between forms of presence and absence, the known and the unknown, are foregrounded in *Watt* through a tension between positive and negative instantiations of the thing, both “something” and “nothing.”

The pot’s resistance to its own name is also echoed in the failure of the protagonists in Beckett’s other fiction of the post-war period, to vocalise their presence. On the contrary, their narratives seem to inaugurate a separation between their being and its appearance. For example, the narrator of Beckett’s *nouvelle* “La Fin” (1946), which Beckett translated into “The End” with Richard Seaver in 1954, fails to quite “be there,” breaking his account to say “Strictly speaking I wasn’t there. Strictly speaking I’ve never been anywhere” (*E*, 288; “Au fond je n’étais pas là. Au fond je crois que je n’ai jamais été nulle part” *NT*, 111), yet he fails to achieve repose in the desired nothing: “To see nothing at all, no, that’s too much” (*E*, 291; “Ne rien voir du tout, non, c’est trop” *NT*, 117). Displacing the subject to the elsewhere elided by the objects of representation and figures of perception, the bind of estrangement brought forth by repetition is a crucial conception that connects visual representation with the linguistic procedure of

John Bolin reads the ungraspable aspect of Watt’s pot in relation to Surrealist and Sartrean object anxieties, ground which my next chapter discusses in further detail. See Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102-104.

Beckett's post-war fiction. Whereas *Watt* tends to accumulate signification, both *L'Innommable* and its English counterpart *The Unnamable* are decisively determined by a structure which continually oscillates between affirmation and undoing, so that the "nothing" is repeatedly gestured towards without being determinatively constructed into a "something."

In many respects, the play between presence and absence in Beckett's fiction performs a set of philosophical concerns. For example, the relationship between absence and presence was a central concern in contemporaneous strands of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* regularly addresses the paradoxes and difficulties of representation, experience and consciousness, in ways that resonate with Beckett's writing, as Maude has shown. The intersections between Beckett and Merleau-Ponty's work do not raise questions of conscious influence, but demonstrate how, as Maude argues, the products of a shared intellectual climate can illuminate one another.¹⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty's conception of presence and absence draws upon intellectual traditions known to Beckett; the Gestalt interplay between figure and ground, for example, is revised by Merleau-Ponty to suggest a deeper ontological significance to the interplay between figures in visual perception.¹⁴⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, transcendence is effected through a relation to the world that never places the subject in a position of mastery:

If the thing itself were reached, it would be from that moment arrayed before us and stripped of its mystery. It would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment when we thought to possess it. What makes the "reality" of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp. The aseity [independent reality] of the thing, its

¹⁴⁸ Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ As Rockmore describes in detail, Merleau-Ponty's relation to Kantian idealism and Gestalt psychology was a critical one of both appropriation and rejection. Tom Rockmore, "Kant, Merleau-Ponty's Descriptive Phenomenology, and the Primacy of Perception," chapter six in *Kant and Phenomenology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 187-208.

unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws, are two inseparable aspects of transcendence.¹⁵⁰

Reality for the subject is therefore grounded in a perpetual attempt at attainment that can never be completed because an identification with the “thing itself” sees its presence recede into absence. The unrevealed “thing itself” (or “chose même”¹⁵¹) alludes to the Kantian noumenon: the “thing itself” is present insofar as it remains unapproachable, always able to recede into itself.

Reading Beckett in the light of Merleau-Ponty’s work reveals how Beckett’s uses of literary form complicate the Kantian division between representation and the domain of the noumenal ‘thing in itself.’ In *Watt*, the relation between the perceived object and the ‘thing in itself,’ or between the thing and the “thing itself,” is figured through the narrative’s attention to processes of perceptual appearance and disappearance. Watt’s presence among increasingly elusive objects sees him face the reciprocal relationship between “unchallengeable presence” and the “perpetual absence into which it withdraws” which, to Merleau-Ponty, are the defining features of objects in general.¹⁵² The reciprocal connection between presence and absence in *Watt* is reflected in its use of modes of repetition observed by Deleuze and Connor. But by describing the oscillation between absence and presence as constitutive of the “thing itself,” Merleau-Ponty’s approach also helps to thematically connect Beckett’s critical concern regarding the object with the playful mediations between incompleteness and negation which characterised his post-war prose, especially the narrative voice of *L’Innommable/The Unnamable*. Beckett’s critical vocabulary engages with persistent concerns about the nature of the object and the work

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 271.

¹⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 270.

¹⁵² Following Maude, on Merleau-Ponty and Beckett’s post-war and late fiction, see Amanda Dennis, “Refiguring the Wordscape: Merleau-Ponty, Beckett and the Body” (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011); on Beckett’s theatre, Trish McTighe, *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

of art in twentieth-century phenomenology. As Emilie Morin observes,¹⁵³ the “choseté” that Beckett identifies in “Peintres de l’empêchement” (*D*, 136), its “thingness,” as Beckett translates the term (*NO*, 879), evokes Heidegger’s concept of *Dinglichkeit*, also translated both as ‘thingness’ and as ‘choséité’ in essays including “The Origin of the Work of Art,” where the essence of the ‘thing’ is characterised by its stubborn evasion of thought.¹⁵⁴ For Beckett, the fact that the object is unattainable in itself associates the object’s “thingness” with an “unveilable” nothingness (*NO*, 880). There is, then, a sense in which Beckett’s depiction of the thing is invested in twentieth-century representations of the Kantian object. In this sense, Beckett’s writing could easily be incorporated into the trajectory outlined by Paul Crowther, which claims that the critical encounter with the work of art was central to how a common set of aesthetic concerns was established between Kant’s *Critiques* and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and applied well beyond their concerns into domains claimed by postmodernism.¹⁵⁵ The painterly object in Beckett’s post-war essays thus forms an emblem of resistance to figuration and representation much as the “nothing” in *Watt* recedes behind the “something” of the object’s material presence.

Vision and unknowing

Similar self-negations and contradictions are also present in “Three Dialogues,” where B. claims Bram van Velde’s painting “the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms” (*TD*, 563). The “absence of relation” supports a bathetic movement towards the grounding limits of representation, literalised in the twin, yet non-convergent, “empêchement-œil” and

¹⁵³ Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 134.

¹⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 31; lecture delivered in 1935, essay published 1956. Lois Oppenheim also parallels Heidegger’s essay with Beckett’s descriptions of visual art. See Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 77-78.

¹⁵⁵ Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 40-71; chapters 2-3.

“empêchement-objet” of “Peintres de l’empêchement,” which conceptualises the embodiment of art not as a metaphor for its transcendental potentiality, but as its imprisonment, its concrete materiality. The conditionality of representation as imprisonment emphasises the generative value of limitation. This significant connection between the concrete and the conditions of the art work’s appearance is registered by Beckett in a diary entry written from Germany in 1936, where he records his response to Karl Ballmer’s painting *Kopf in Rot*, “Would not occur to me to call this painting abstract. A metaphysical concrete. Not Nature convention, but its source, fountain of *Erscheinung*.”¹⁵⁶ The Kantian “fountain of *Erscheinung*” refers to the ‘appearance’ of the phenomenon on which Heidegger notably placed special emphasis. For Beckett, the source of “Nature” in Ballmer’s painting appears through the communication between the work and its viewer: “The communication exhausted by the optical experience that is its motive & content.”¹⁵⁷ Through observations of this kind, it becomes clear that Beckett found an ideal “concrete” form for exploring the underlying source of representation in the “optical experience” offered by modern painting such as Ballmer’s, an experience which reveals the grounds of its appearance as representation, of *Erscheinung*, by exhausting the painting’s communicative possibilities.

The emphasis placed upon embodied vision in artistic practice was emboldened as the cinema grew throughout the 1920s and 30s, associated particularly with Surrealism. The conflict between material perception and intellectual vision was emphasised by different editing and filming techniques, the latter kind of vision exhibited by the “camera eye,” theorised by later critiques of monocular vision in cinema surrounding the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in particular. According to Martin Jay, the “camera eye” extended the presumptions underlying Western conceptualisations of visuality:

¹⁵⁶ Beckett, quoted in Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 156.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the perspectivalist mode of representation, with all its artificial privileging of the fixed, monologic eye, had in fact persisted in photography and cinema. [...] This visual regime goes along with an idealist belief in the homogeneity of all Being and the transcendent subject who can view it from afar. The disincarnation of that subject's eye is furthermore abetted by the way in which it is no longer tied to a concrete body situated in a specific time and space, but can roam freely wherever the camera can go.¹⁵⁸

Tied to the idealist vision of the transcendent subject, the disincarnated camera eye privileged an isolated, intellectual vision of the perceiving subject over a materialistic, embodied alternative viewpoint. The use of experimental film techniques (such as montage and reverse shots) allowed the "camera eye" to bypass physical limitations and to "stitch together the dispersed and contradictory subjectivities of the actual spectator into a falsely harmonious whole by encouraging him or her to identify [...] with the gazes of the characters in the film, gazes which seem to come from centered and unified subjects."¹⁵⁹ Yet these connections between the camera, the gaze and "unified subjects" were also dispersed by Surrealist uses of the physical eye in film, photography and painting that sought to express principles of incoherence and irrationality.

As Yoshiki Tajiri has discussed in some depth, Beckett's texts across the oeuvre adapt the technological "camera eye" strongly emphasised in silent film, including Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, in order to thematise the physical eye's "monologic" perspective, which occupied Surrealist writers and film makers (the most striking case in point being the opening scene of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 film, *Un chien andalou*). Indeed, as Beckett's schematic script outlines, his *Film* (1965) uses the technological camera eye (E) to focus on and defamiliarise Buster Keaton's character O[bject]'s physical eye: "the abnormally

¹⁵⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 473.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 474.

magnified eye [...] in the opening close-up strongly evokes the strange physicality of the human eye, which tends to be disembodied in the traditional linkage between vision and intellect. With the aid of the camera eye, Beckett defamiliarises this body part in the manner of surrealist photographers who discovered new attractions of the human body.”¹⁶⁰ The camera eye is associated here with the pure seeing of the mind’s eye, the “long image of the unblinking gaze” Beckett’s outline calls for (*CDW*, 329) is a troubling perception of the intellectual gaze that desires to know and to unveil its objects of perception. Yet by taking up the eye in extreme close-up, the opening of *Film* emphasises its embodied materiality, and the failure of the intellectual, camera eye to contain O’s physical eye, the fact that the shot is overwhelmed by O’s eye, reflects back upon and undermines the assumption that E is all-seeing and all-knowing.

Film is largely predicated upon the visualisation of the divide between self-conscious and bodily perception. As I have already detailed, this distinction between varieties of perception in terms of their relationship to the intellect and self-consciousness was also present in *Proust* and *Murphy*. *Proust* even draws a direct analogy between the eye and the camera. The “camera eye” is invoked through the essay’s reading of the gaze of habitual vision in *Le côté de Guermantes*. In the episode where Proust’s narrator visits his grandmother, he details the effect upon him when she fails, for a moment, to realise that he is there; because he is absent to her, he realises her death in advance of its actual occurrence.¹⁶¹ Beckett summarises the experience as follows:

He is present at his own absence. And, in consequence of his journey and his anxiety, his habit is in abeyance, the habit of his tenderness for his grandmother. His gaze is no longer the necromancy that sees in each precious object a mirror of the past. The notion of what he should see has not had time to interfere its prism between the eye and its

¹⁶⁰ Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 122.

¹⁶¹ Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes*, bk. 3 of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 853-54; translated as *The Guermantes Way*, bk. 3 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1:971-72.

object. His eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera; it photographs the reality of his grandmother. (*P*, 520)

The “cruel precision” that Beckett describes indeed fits Proust’s description of his narrator’s eye during this scene.¹⁶² But the photographic view of the narrative eye also belongs to Murphy’s view of Mr. Endon’s eyes. *Murphy*’s narration of perceptual attention responds to the interplay between vision as the disembodied conduit of knowledge and the eye as Murphy’s object of desire, which refuses to yield the subjectivity he expects to unveil. Tajiri claims this anticipates *Film* because, through Murphy’s gaze, Mr. Endon’s eyes “are reduced to sheer material properties in a depthless visual field, as if they were inanimate objects.”¹⁶³ The narrative, taking up Murphy’s gaze, functions as a camera eye. Yet it is just their sheer materiality that Murphy’s own eyes would, in Sartrean terms, “devour” only to find at the core of their materiality remains an immovable, indigestible residue. Keeping the dual meanings of ‘aperception’ in mind here, this scene suggests the interplay between glimpsing and gazing may be extended to that between the physical and camera eye, with the former capable of peripheral, distorted and non-attentive modes of seeing, and the latter gazing fixedly upon its objects of attention. However, by adopting the camera eye, the narrative is ill-equipped to respond sympathetically to the representational problems raised by Mr. Endon’s bodily eye.

The uneasy relation between objects of knowledge and objects of perception in *Murphy* is one aspect of a lengthy series of exchanges between Beckett’s theorisation of the relation in essay form and his uses of the difficulties and breakdowns within that relation to structure crucial aspects of narrative figuration in his fiction and poetry. But it also mirrors avant-garde concerns with the visual contemporary to Beckett. In this regard, Bataille’s theory of

¹⁶² “The process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph.” *The Guermantes Way*, 1:971; translation of: “Ce qui, mécaniquement, se fit à ce moment dans mes yeux quand j’aperçus ma grand-mère, ce fut bien une photographie.” *Le côté de Guermantes*, 853.

¹⁶³ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, 115.

‘unknowing’ forges an especially important relation between Surrealism and the role of ignorance in Beckett’s work.¹⁶⁴ This conclusion deserves thorough investigation: the place of vision is crucial to Bataille’s literary and philosophical project of ‘unknowing,’ which Martin Jay claims “always defeats the ability to think it clearly and distinctly.”¹⁶⁵ The resistance of ‘unknowing’ to intellectual clarity and figuration through metaphors of pure sight drew upon Bataille’s more longstanding critique of the rational primacy of vision, and that in undoing *savoir* “he certainly understood the importance of *voir* for *savoir*. It could be undermined only through the explosive sound of laughter or the blurred vision produced by tears.”¹⁶⁶ Although Bataille introduced the concept in *L’Expérience intérieure* (1943), Jay’s summary refers to the final of three informal lectures Bataille delivered between 1951 and 1953 on the theme of ‘unknowing,’ titled “Laughter and Tears.” Here, Bataille claims:

That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable* [Supposons que le risible soit, non seulement inconnu, mais inconnaissable]. [...] We perceive that finally, for all the exercise of knowledge, the world still lies wholly outside its reach, and that not only the world, but the being that one is lies out of reach. Within us and in the world, something is revealed that was not given in knowledge, and whose site is definable only as unattainable by knowledge.¹⁶⁷

Laughter is a direct response to the unknown, it is both an experience and an expression of the unknowable, launching the subject into a state of ‘non-savoir,’ or ‘unknowing,’ a state not of poverty but excess: an opening of experience beyond the limits of rational thought. Laughter is not the only response to the unknown: tears are its important counterpart in the essay, and the

¹⁶⁴ Rabaté, “Bataille, Beckett, Blanchot: From the Impossible to the Unknowing,” 63.

¹⁶⁵ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 223.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Bataille, “Un-knowing, laughter and tears,” trans. Annette Michelson, in *October* 36, *Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing* (Spring 1986): 90-91; translation of Bataille, “Non-savoir, rire et larmes,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 216.

blurred vision produced by tears is crucial to how Bataille used visual metaphors in order to resist intellectual coherence.¹⁶⁸ Bataille's fixation on resisting rationality through states of excess, intertwining ecstasy with terror, also gestures towards theories of the Sublime, and their presence in twentieth-century thought more generally as both a legacy of Kant's thinking and a site of resistance to Kantian rationality.¹⁶⁹ As one way of visualising his encounters with excess, Bataille developed a theory of 'l'informe,' the impossible representation of the formless that passes the bounds of aesthetic form.¹⁷⁰ Bataille's challenge to formal boundaries had recourse to innovative aesthetic preoccupations concerned with dismembering and disfiguring, preoccupations which drew upon the Enlightenment via its dark avatar, Sade, rather than its aggrandised leaders.

Bataille's preference for material, unknowing sight, "blurred by tears" was most notoriously given its literary representation through the extreme and explicit surreal disfigurements of his clandestine novella, *Histoire de l'œil*, where the eye functions as the object *par excellence* of "base materialism." The physical penetration of the eye which begins Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou*, was greeted enthusiastically by Bataille in an interesting note on the word "œil" for his journal *Documents*.¹⁷¹ Figures of the closed or the slit eye proffered a complex symbolism that was central to the Surrealist aesthetic, sensing "the miraculous potential of the cinema in the direction of the *unseen*, the *unknown*."¹⁷² For Bataille, art offered the potential to realign the neat binary opposition between seen and unseen, known and unknown, by pairing the unknown with the seen. Furthermore, by founding representation upon relations characteristic of perceptual figuration (rather than between already known

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁶⁹ See Claire Lozier, *De l'abject et du sublime*, 28-32.

¹⁷⁰ See Bataille's entry, "Informe," to the "Dictionnaire" in *Documents* 1 (1929): 382.

¹⁷¹ Bataille, "Un chien andalou," *Documents* 4 (1929): 216.

¹⁷² Ramona Fotiade, "The slit eye, the scorpion and the sign of the cross: surrealist film theory and practice revisited," *Screen* 39, no.2 (1998): 113-114.

objects), representation in Surrealism was divorced from rational requirements, but could put its impulses in play.¹⁷³

Beckett's post-war prose does not adopt the visual discourses of phenomenology without significant mediation, and Bataille's responses to representation through 'unknowing' play an important part. For example, Bataille's realignment of perceptual and epistemological binaries through laughter and tears implicitly frames the Unnamable's contrast between seeing through tears and the knowing, clear gaze: "I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly" (*U*, 298; "Moi, dont je ne sais rien, je sais que j'ai les yeux ouverts, à cause des larmes qui en coulent sans cesse" *I*, 29). Laura Salisbury's description of the role played by laughter in Beckett's mature prose is also useful here. Salisbury posits laughter, after Bataille, as a state that occupies a threshold between knowledge and representation, determined by an ethically informed preference for the felt over the known. For Beckett, Salisbury argues that laughter is one way of resisting the "historically specific compulsion to represent, alongside a philosophically and aesthetically driven obligation to resist the violent assimilation of the scene through knowledge."¹⁷⁴ Salisbury's perspective echoes Rosalind Krauss's observation that Bataille's lectures on unknowing put forth a "nonappropriative, nonproductive form of representation" which is "born [...] at the limit."¹⁷⁵ For Beckett, the eye materialises the tension between appropriative and non-appropriative sight,

¹⁷³ Bataille's discussions of 'unknowing' are also importantly addressed in Blanchot's review of *L'Expérience intérieure*, collected in *Faux Pas*, which Beckett read (Beckett to Duthuit, 3 January 1951, *LII*, 219). In Blanchot's summary, "unknowing concerns the very fact of being, excludes it from what is intellectually possible and humanly tolerable; it introduces the one who experiences it to a situation past which no more existence is possible." Blanchot, "Inner Experience," in *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 38. Blanchot's summary is notable for emphasising unknowing as a limit experience, and attributing to it an ontological significance inaccessible to the intellect.

¹⁷⁴ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 178.

¹⁷⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "Antivision," *October* 36, *Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Unknowing* (Spring 1986): 150-1.

and the preference for ignorance over knowledge is aligned with its non-appropriative form. Hovering between a status as subject and object, the figure of the eye manifests tensions about the status of representation in Surrealism and across twentieth-century philosophy.

By frequently turning to gaze upon the eye, Beckett's writing makes the eye uneasily symbolise the viewing subject, the viewed object and the means of sight. The individual terms comprising the 'subject-object relation' are all contained in the figure of the eye, and it is therefore situated at the threshold between multiple states and significations which, as Beckett made clear with "Recent Irish Poetry" in 1934, he considered to have been ruptured by modern poetry and painting (*D*, 70). In Beckett's fiction and essays after the early 1930s, the eye works to undermine the monologic gaze of consciousness offered in *Proust*, and changes in its figural presentation also demonstrate how changes in Beckett's writing reflected philosophical themes dormant in twentieth-century movements, such as Surrealism, which unfolded through their revisions of vision and rationality.

Chapter Two

Beckett's visual aesthetic and Surrealist influences

In the previous chapter, I argued that specific philosophical debts shaped the way in which Beckett's essays conceptualised representation. I also suggested that Beckett developed his theory of representation in dialogue with his experiments in fiction, especially in his novels *Murphy* and *Watt*. Beckett's early critical essays take up a conception of representation firmly placed within the Kantian tradition, directly drawing upon this notion of representation in order to map the aesthetic principles which govern Joyce and Proust's works of literary modernism. It is also apparent that Beckett attempted to synthesise abstract philosophical terminology with the formal demands of literary criticism by locating metaphors and figures of vision within the primary text (*Work in Progress* or *À la recherche du temps perdu*) that were congenial to the suggested philosophical framework. Yet the visual tropes that suited Beckett's philosophical readings were caught between revelatory vision and impaired sight. This tension arises from the more abstract, philosophical construction of the object of representation, which is seen to be revelatory of itself but not the value it hides.

Beckett's essays express the realisation that the growing formal demands placed upon representation obligate works of literature and art alike to move beyond the "limits of the possible" (*TD*, 562). The formal characteristics of a van Velde canvas are reflected in Beckett's visual landscapes, which are caught between unveiling and veiling, relation and nonrelation. Isolated eyes, objects and veils form persistent tropes throughout Beckett's critical writing, where they are given an unusually high status: visual motifs do not simply embellish Beckett's arguments, they are integral to his critical conception of artistic representation. Beckett's essays in French on Geer and Bram van Velde, "La Peinture des van Velde" and "Peintres de l'empêchement," build a theory of art around metaphors for impeded artistic vision. The most arresting of these is the "empêchement-œil," which appears in "Peintres de l'empêchement" as a symbol of Bram's painterly eye, which also figures the essay's broader presentation of

embodied, resistant materiality rather than pure presence at the heart of the van Veldes' creative impulse (*D*, 136). The “empêchement-œil” is only one instance of Beckett's figures of embodied and fragmentary vision – what Ulrika Maude calls Beckett's preoccupation with “the fleshly nature of vision.”¹⁷⁶ By the time when Beckett began to formalise a theory of art built around notions of visual resistances and states of impossibility in his essays on the van Veldes, his fiction was already developing tropes out of non-appearances, failed and receding figurations.

It is telling that the difficulties raised by the attempt to reflect the workings of conscious representation only decisively surfaced in Beckett's writing in *Murphy*'s radically challenging encounter with Mr. Endon's blank gaze, a narrative event which focuses on the act of visual perception in isolation, and which propels the novel's protagonist towards his end. Of course, Beckett was not alone in wrestling with the complex connections between consciousness, perception and representation. These connections were a matter of interest shared by several interwar movements that sought to practise or present a unified theory of artistic creativity, and were of particular concern for the Surrealist writers André Breton and Paul Éluard, several of whose texts Beckett translated in the 1930s.

“these long shifting thresholds”: figuring disappearance

In August 1938, after the publication of *Murphy*, Beckett wrote the unpublished essay “Les Deux Besoins,” which announced a significant change in direction from *Proust* and the review-essays that had filled the intervening six years. The essay signalled a new direction in two regards: Beckett wrote the essay in French, where his previous essays had been in English, and it sought to develop a general theory of artistic, rather than literary, creativity embodied in the artist guided by the two principles of need, “Besoin” and “Besoin dont on a besoin” (*D*, 55), the

¹⁷⁶ Ulrika Maude, “‘Material of a Strictly Peculiar Order’: Beckett, Merleau-Ponty and Perception,” in Maude and Feldman, *Beckett and Phenomenology*, 90.

relation between which produces the necessary conditions for art.¹⁷⁷ The principle of art as the expression of need that Beckett theorised in this essay foreshadows the artistic “obligation” put forth in “Three Dialogues” (*TD*, 563). With “Les Deux Besoins,” Beckett opened the series of essays on contemporary visual art written by Beckett during the next fifteen years, clustered around three substantial pieces on the van Velde brothers, and drawn to a close with “Henri Hayden, homme-peintre,” written in 1952 and published in *Cahiers d’Art* in 1955.

Beckett’s turn to writing on art also followed the six months he spent travelling through Germany from October 1936 to March 1937, during which time he gained access to many so-called “degenerate” artworks prohibited from public view by the Nazi government.¹⁷⁸ The immediate effects of the journey are perhaps most clearly shown in his letter to Axel Kaun, written in July 1937 from Clare Street in Dublin, where Beckett repeats the desire for a revelatory unveiling expressed in *Proust*. Thematically hinged between Beckett’s pre- and post-war output, the letter is often cited as an announcement of the programme to follow, “the obvious place to start an assessment of the work done, or attempted, after *Murphy* [...] and before *Watt*.”¹⁷⁹ Certainly, it registers Beckett’s sense of dissatisfaction with his literary output thus far, and hints at the reasons for his imminent turn to writing on the visual arts: “more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it” (Beckett to Kaun, 9 July 1937, *LI*, 518). But this letter’s desire for unveiling is inverted in the essays that followed. “Peintres de l’empêchement,” written a decade later, theorises artistic creativity as a perpetual veiling. Between Beckett’s letter to Kaun and his post-war essays, he had clearly revised important aspects in his aesthetic point of view.

¹⁷⁷ See Llewellyn Brown, “Visible et regard chez Beckett: ‘Le besoin de voir,’” in *Samuel Beckett 2: Parole, regard et corps*, ed. Llewellyn Brown, *La Revue des lettres modernes* (Caen: Lettres modernes Minard, 2011), 108.

¹⁷⁸ See Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 132-141.

¹⁷⁹ Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot*, 151.

With reference to the Kaun letter, Leslie Hill writes tellingly, and indicatively, about Beckett's post-war turn to writing his fiction in French and the first-person voice: "A decade later, Beckett came to realise, it seems, that to cast aside the veil it was necessary to assume another veil, or veil of otherness, that a language not his own alone could supply."¹⁸⁰ However, Hill repeats one of the most common misconceptions about Beckett's turn to writing in French. Hill's description of Beckett's realisation a "decade later" refers to the understanding that Beckett's turn to writing in French was post-war, and is locatable to a specific moment while writing the short story "Suite" in 1946 (which became "La Fin" and, finally, "The End," the closing stories in the *Nouvelles/Four Novellas*).¹⁸¹ Although it is correct to locate an important shift in the language of his fiction to this moment, Beckett's poems and criticism had already systematically shifted into French. Beckett's essays "Les Deux Besoins" and "La Peinture des van Velde" are earlier examples of this transition; however, a further counterpoint is offered by Beckett's translation of *Murphy* into French (although unpublished until 1947) in 1940. In other words, by the time Beckett came to explicitly utilise metaphors of veiling in his post-war essays, he had already realised "that to cast aside the veil it was necessary to assume another veil."

Nor was this realisation strictly limited to Beckett's writing in French. *Watt* (1941-5), Beckett's major piece of English fiction written during World War Two, clearly benefitted from the cross-pollination afforded by his poetry and essays' movement between languages, while the novel also fed into the critical work that would follow. When, for example, Watt's journey has come full-circle, and having left Mr. Knott's house – the 'Big House' location where most of

¹⁸⁰ Leslie Hill, "Samuel Beckett (1906–1989): Language, narrative, authority," in *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*, ed. Michael Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 400.

¹⁸¹ Dirk Van Hulle, "Publishing 'The End': Beckett and *Les Temps modernes*," in Nixon, *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 73-82; Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, 129. Van Hulle writes (with reference to Cohn's summary): "Beckett wrote about 28 pages in English, but suddenly stopped on 13 March [...], he recapitulated in French, marking the transition from English to French with a horizontal line across the page" (74).

the novel plays out¹⁸² – he waits, ready to depart from the train station where he arrived at the novel’s beginning. At this point, the reasonable reader may feel entitled to expect a scene which provides at least some closure, a sense of culmination. Watt is instead visited by a lone “figure,” the significance of which lies precisely in its resistance to Watt’s gaze:

What so agitated Watt was this, that in the ten minutes or half-an-hour that had elapsed, since he first became aware of this figure, striding along, on the crest of the road, towards the station, the figure had gained nothing in height, in breadth or in distinctness. Pressing forward all this time, with no abatement of its foundered precipitation, towards the station, it had made no more headway, than if it had been a millstone.

Watt was puzzling over this, when the figure, without any interruption of its motions, grew fainter and fainter, and finally disappeared. (*W*, 355)

The figure’s refusal to meet Watt’s attentive gaze does not withhold signification from the scene: Watt only attends to it because of the puzzle it presents, and the narrative is concerned to describe this scene of puzzlement. All the reader, and Watt himself, learn about the figure is that it “gained nothing” despite “pressing forward,” before growing fainter and disappearing. With all eyes focused on the ambiguous status of the “figure” itself, the significance of the scene lies in the figure’s non-revelation.

Much of the significance of this scene lies beyond the novel’s borders. *Watt*’s focus on figures deliberately withheld from view seems to have constructed a more general, foundational scene that Beckett would mine for both theoretical and literary tropes in his post-war writing. This shared landscape, populated by figures that perform their refusal of revelation or clarification, is perhaps most directly and demonstrably returned to in Beckett’s post-war poetry.

¹⁸² See Seán Kennedy, “‘Bid us sigh on from day to day’: Beckett and the Irish Big House,” in Gontarski, *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 222-234.

Images of mists and veils prominently resurface in “je suis ce cours de sable” (1947), published in parallel French and English versions in issue two of *Transition* in 1948:¹⁸³

je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse
entre le galet et la dune
la pluie d'été pleut sur ma vie
sur moi ma vie qui me fuit me poursuit
et finira le jour de son commencement

cher instant je te vois
dans ce rideau de brume qui recule
où je n'aurai plus à fouler ces longs seuils mouvants
et vivrai le temps d'une porte
qui s'ouvre et se referme

my way is in the sand flowing
between the shingle and the dune
the summer rain rains on my life
on me my life harrying fleeing
to its beginning to its end

my peace is there in the receding mist
when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds
and live the space of a door
that opens and shuts

(CP, 118)

¹⁸³ The first of the poems Beckett grouped under the title “Trois Poèmes”/“Three Poems,” published with the French and English *en face*, in *Transition Forty-Eight 2* (1948): 96-97.

The opening lines to the poem's second stanza, "cher instant je te vois / dans ce rideau de brume qui recule," translated by Beckett as "my peace is there in the receding mist," may be more literally translated as "precious moment I see you / in the receding veil of mist." Of course, translation could render "rideau" otherwise: the word can only be translated to "veil" so long as this is understood as a material partition. Nevertheless, in the French lines, the speaker playfully addresses this "cher instant" (or a mute, possibly intimate other therein), while all that the poem reveals to the reader is the "rideau de brume" leading the scene away from view. Rhythmically, the poem also supports this aesthetic of non-revelation, structured around repetitions that half-recall one-another. For example, "brume qui recule" repeats its stress on the long /u/ vowel, but whereas "brume" ends assertively on the consonant sound /m/, the phoneme /ule/ that ends "recule" stretches the vowel out into a faint consonant which recedes almost indistinguishably into silence.

Such internal patterns based on the implied phonics of the poem form a verbal structure that parallels and supports the visual image of the "receding" mist.¹⁸⁴ Like the French version, Beckett's rendering in English reinforces the poem's vagueness of visual texture, but it employs a slightly different strategy suited to the changed language. In the English version, auditory consonance coalesces around the present continuous tense. Thus, its lines express ongoing, incomplete action, while implying that the speaker's space is one of diminution without end by a series of carefully chosen repetitions and rhymes that repeat the gerund: "sand flowing / [...] harrying fleeing / to its begining to its end / [...] in the receding mist / treading these long shifting thresholds."

As Garin Dowd's reading of Beckett's poem demonstrates, the subject of this poem impassably inhabits the threshold, "the very ground of structure itself," and the "peace" at its

¹⁸⁴ Beckett's incorporation of such poetical patterns between the verbal and the visual not only approximated the synchronicity between form and content which he identifies in "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce," but calls upon important Symbolist and Modernist poetic lineages. See Adam Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words: Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

crossing is paradoxically attained “at the cost of a fall into molecularity and chaos.”¹⁸⁵ Rather than the outcome of negation or Schopenhauerian “complete identification,” however, the fall into chaos takes place at a receding threshold. The poem’s liminal territories – “thresholds,” the “mist” and the “space of a door” (or its ‘time’ in the French line, “le temps d’une porte”) – are neither contained by the ‘subject-object relation’ nor threatened by a breakdown in that relation.

Beckett’s fixation upon thresholds in “je suis ce cours de sable” shares themes expressed in Beckett’s essays. The “space of a door” echoes Beckett’s description of the “space that intervenes” in “Recent Irish Poetry,” while the imagery in the line, “dans ce rideau de brume qui recule,” gestures towards the tropes of veiling explored in “Peintres de l’empêchement.” In addition, the “mist” that refuses to coalesce under the speaker’s gaze appropriately mirrors Beckett’s translation of “Peintres de l’empêchement” as “The New Object,” where he opaquely translates “empêchement” – literally “impediment” or “prevention” – as “mist” (*NO*, 879).

The poem’s evocations of a scene at the threshold between land and sea through continuous “flowing,” “treading” and “shifting” reflects the phrasing used in “MacGreevy on Yeats,” Beckett’s 1945 review of Thomas MacGreevy’s *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation*, published in the *Irish Times*. Beckett’s review concludes by evoking an archetypal scenario for Jack Yeats’s paintings: “the turning to gaze from land to sea, from sea to land, the backs to one another and the eyes abandoning, the man alone trudging in sand, the man alone thinking (thinking!) in his box – these are notations having reference, I imagine, to processes less simple, and less delicious, than these to which the plastic *vis* is so commonly reduced” (*D*, 97). Repetitions of turning, abandoning, trudging and thinking serve the same purpose as the devices employed in “my way is in the sand flowing.” The “turning to gaze,” “the eyes abandoning” and the “man alone trudging in sand” form “notations” of processes, rather than the fixed terms that form the “old subject-object relation” (*NO*, 880). Beckett’s characterisation of Geer and Bram van Velde’s painting in “La Peinture des van Velde” also shares its vocabulary and imagery

¹⁸⁵ Dowd, *Abstract Machines*, 255.

with the poem, asking what can be said of “ces plans qui glisse, ces contours qui vibrent, ces corps taillés comme dans la brume” (*D*, 128) [these planes that flow, these contours that vibrate, these bodies like incisions in the mist]. These characteristic elements of the van Velde brothers’ style pose a question fundamental to modern art: “comment représenter le changement?”

The static, mimetic conception of representation is challenged by an art that represents a principle of change, and the resistance of the object at the core of Beckett’s critical concern in essays such as “Peintres de l’empêchement” progressively renders the ‘subject-object relation’ into an inextricable division. Nevertheless, the relation remained central to Beckett’s conception of representation. “Three Dialogues” ends with Beckett (speaking as “B”) describing an art shadowed by the “anxiety of the relation itself” (*TD*, 562), while Beckett’s 1952 essay “Henri Hayden, homme-peintre,” speaks of a “crise sujet-objet” (*D*, 146). Between “Peintres de l’empêchement,” “Three Dialogues” and “Henri Hayden,” then, Beckett’s conception of the “subject-object relation” advances from “empêchement,” to an “occasion” that provokes “anxiety,” to a state of “crisis.”

The Surrealist situation and *Murphy* in translation

Beckett’s turn of phrase in his essay on Hayden could not fail to recall the “crise de l’objet” coined by André Breton, a phrase Breton uses in several pieces of writing, including as the title to a 1936 essay published in *Cahiers d’Art*, the journal edited by Christian Zervos, which also published Beckett’s essay on Hayden and “La Peinture des van Velde.” As this context suggests, Beckett’s attempts to develop, if not a formal theory of art, at least a working critical conception of what one might be, drew upon the Surrealists’ visual vocabulary. In particular, “Peintres de l’empêchement” thematises the idea of an “art d’incarcération” grounded in the mutual resistance between the “empêchement-œil” and “empêchement-objet,” and an understanding of modern painting as a “dévoilement sans fin [...] vers l’indévoilable” (*D*, 136). While this aesthetic of non-revelation subtly revises Beckett’s former position, the idea of art existing at a

point of tension between the eye and the veil of perception also revisits the visual terrain on which Surrealism had sought to establish itself.

In keeping with Breton's poetic and critical responses to the visual arts, Beckett's post-war pieces responded to the formal innovations of modern art by developing motifs around isolated figures, such as eyes and windows, which express the grounds and limitations of visual representation.¹⁸⁶ These figures are positioned between motifs of veiling and unveiling, exploring the viewing subject's paradoxical relations with the visible and the invisible, in important ways which unite Beckett's essays with the often divergent manifestations of the Surrealist aesthetic, whether the "official" forms consecrated in Breton's manifestoes and groups, or its dissident forms most notoriously adopted by Bataille and the contributors to the often short-lived yet immensely influential journals and communities he cultivated, especially *Documents* (1929-30) and *Acéphale* (1936-39).¹⁸⁷

However, Beckett's proximity to Surrealism was not merely coincidental. His work as a professional translator during the 1930s and 40s predominantly involved translations of Surrealist writing. Rather than marginal activity driven by financial necessity, as Deirdre Bair has asserted,¹⁸⁸ these translations seem to have provided essential nourishment for Beckett's approach to literary composition, providing a resource of material that he could mine for germane figures before adapting and reshaping them into his own writing.¹⁸⁹ As Thomas

¹⁸⁶ Diane Lüscher-Morata, "À l'épreuve de l'image": 'beginning life behind the eyes', in "Présence de Samuel Beckett," ed. Sjef Houppermans, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 17 (2006): 67-82. Oppenheim, in *The Painted Word*, affirms "the unifying force of Beckett's work is a preoccupation with the visual as paradigm" (142).

¹⁸⁷ Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, eds., *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006).

¹⁸⁸ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 142. Originally published in 1978, Bair's biography was the first study to draw attention to these translations (142-3, 153).

¹⁸⁹ See Pascale Sardin and Karine Germoni, "'Scarcely disfigured': Beckett's Surrealist translations," "Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive," special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 739-753; Daniel Albright, introduction to *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-27; Peter

Hunkeler has documented,¹⁹⁰ Beckett encountered Surrealism in a wide variety of ways, often tied to the material circulation of periodicals such as Eugene Jolas's *transition* during the interwar period. Indeed, although Beckett's relationship to *transition* is usually framed through Beckett's relationship to Joyce, and Jolas's important place within Joyce's circle in the 1930s, several canonical Surrealist texts were published in *transition*, while the two manifestoes produced by Jolas bear several hallmarks of the Surrealist preponderance towards manifesto declarations.¹⁹¹ Among Beckett's translations, the most significant and well documented single commission came from Edward Titus, for his little magazine *This Quarter's* 1932 Surrealist special number, guest edited by André Breton. The issue itself provides a wide survey of the canonical Surrealist texts (at least according to Breton) and line-drawing copies of some of the best known examples of Surrealist art, such as Man Ray's *Object to be Destroyed*. Beckett was tasked with translating poems and prose by Breton, Éluard and Tristan Tzara. Despite the many difficulties the translation process faced, Titus lauded Beckett's commitment in his editorial for the issue, stating: "His rendering of the Eluard and Breton poems in particular is characterisable only in superlatives."¹⁹² Although Titus's recognition of Beckett in print doubtlessly undermined Beckett's carefully constructed anonymity (a position Beckett would maintain for almost all of his professional translation work),¹⁹³ such strong editorial praise testifies to the quality of Beckett's work and the interest he sustained in the material.

Beckett also engaged with Surrealism through translation work elsewhere. His work on the post-war *Transition* (1948-50) for Georges Duthuit included translations of pieces ranging

Fifield, "Samuel Beckett and the interwar Avant-Garde," in Gontarski, *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 170-184.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Hunkeler, "Beckett face au surréalisme," in "Présence de Samuel Beckett," ed. Sjeff Houppermans, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 17 (2006): 35-52.

¹⁹¹ Especially relevant is Jolas's second manifesto, "Poetry is Vertical," published in issue 21 of *transition* in 1934, which lists Beckett as a signatory. See Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 55

¹⁹² Edward Titus, introduction to "Surrealist number," ed. André Breton, special issue, *This Quarter* 5 (Sept. 1932): 5.

¹⁹³ Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 28-29, 129.

from Guillaume Apollinaire's proto-Surrealist poem *Zone* and Alfred Jarry's *The Painting Machine* to work by established Surrealist writers – such as Éluard's *The Work of the Painter* – and post-war work written under Surrealism's shadow – notably Henri Pichette's *apoèmes*, which reproduce the strategies of automatic writing and free association systematised in Surrealism's early experiments.¹⁹⁴ Despite this, *Transition* is rarely considered alongside Beckett's engagements with Surrealism in the 1930s; Daniel Albright's survey of Beckett's debts to Surrealism in *Beckett and Aesthetics*, for example, omits mention of these pieces altogether. Beckett famously published "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" in *Transition*, which also published his own poetry, along with extracts from *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*. In contrast to Beckett's previous work on literary and cultural periodicals, his own writing presented a response to the style and contents of *Transition*. The tripartite division of "Three Dialogues," published in issue five of *Transition*, reflects and reciprocates the issue's preceding piece, a review by André du Bouchet titled "Three Exhibitions: Masson – Tal Coat – Miró." As a piece addressed to Duthuit, as the editor of *Transition*, and structured in a way that reflects du Bouchet's contribution to the review, "Three Dialogues" offers an example of how Beckett's writing could be shaped by the circumstances of its publication. Although Beckett's familiarity with Surrealism is most clearly documented through his translations of (mostly) poetic texts, Beckett's writing forms further dialogues with Surrealist poetry and the Surrealist essay, genres which Breton in particular honed through a visual language shared between prose, poetry and painting.

Beckett's later self-translations reincorporate images and associations which appear in his early writing. To return to the encounter with Mr. Endon which ends chapter eleven of *Murphy*, Beckett's 1940 translation into French features two subtle yet significant changes which

¹⁹⁴ Particularly evidenced in Breton and Philippe Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920). Pichette was more closely associated with the theatre than any other medium. Nevertheless, in his 1961 study of avant-garde theatre, Martin Esslin emphasised the importance of free association to his category of the "poetic avant-garde," among whom he counts Pichette, and whose plays "are in effect poems, images composed of a rich web of verbal associations." Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 7.

depart from a strictly faithful rendering of the original text. The first comes when Murphy and Mr. Endon begin to regard one another:

Murphy [...] took Mr. Endon's head in his hands and brought the eyes to bear on his, or rather his on them, across a narrow gulf of air, the merest hand's breadth of air.

(*Mu*, 149)

Murphy [...] prit la tête de Monsieur Endon entre les mains, et braqua son regard myope sur les grands phares parallèles, à travers un étroit abîme d'air, à peine plus large que l'éternelle zone d'évaporation.

(*MuF*, 178)

Beckett's translation makes a few insertions: Murphy's gaze becomes short-sighted ("son regard myope"), and he more explicitly seeks guidance from Mr. Endon's eyes, which project parallel beacons of light ("les grands phares parallèles"). But the most significant change is the introduction of the phrase "zone d'évaporation." Beckett had used the expression "zone of evaporation" in his first attempt at a novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), having snatched it from his reading of Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*.¹⁹⁵ The phrase was also inserted into Ralph Manheim's translation of Georges Duthuit's *Les Fauves* as *The Fauvist Painters* in 1949, which Beckett significantly revised.¹⁹⁶ In the context of its transmission between modes of reading and writing, the "zone of evaporation" functions as a particularly interesting marker, a signature that, through translation, brings Beckett's writing into communication with his responses to the words of others. This transmission also provides an example of Beckett bringing the genres of fiction and art criticism into dialogue with one another.

¹⁹⁵ Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 70, 233n56.

¹⁹⁶ Duthuit, *The Fauvist Painters*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1950), 75.

The second change in Beckett's translation presents a more subtle metamorphosis: "Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen" becomes "Monsieur Murphy est un atome dans l'inconnu de Monsieur Endon" (*MU*, 150; *MUF*, 179). Across translation, Mr. Endon's empty gaze moves from unseen to unknown, with the shift in emphasis working to reintegrate Mr. Endon's gaze into an instance of the unknowing similar to the "direct perception" theorised in *Proust* (*P*, 544). Figures balanced between the unseen and the unknown provided Beckett with the occasion to concretise philosophical concerns surrounding the abstract distinctions between intellectual and perceptual modes of representation advanced in his early essays such as "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce," even as his ambivalence towards the artistic "occasion" (*TD*, 562) grew.

Similar concretisations of philosophical concerns were undertaken in Surrealist writing, which also often found in modern painting the opportunity to express more general aesthetic concerns. Before his first pieces of art criticism were published, Beckett translated one of Breton's short essays, "Wolfgang Paalen" (1938) for the February 1939 issue of the *London Bulletin*, the journal of the British Surrealist Society edited by the Belgian Surrealist E.L.T. Mesens. The bulletin had already published earlier pieces by Beckett alongside his friends Brian Coffey and George Reavey on Geer van Velde in a 1938 catalogue issue, although Beckett's contribution is a short and dry biographical entry for Geer, and as I will document in the next chapter, much of the significance of Beckett's entry lies in its proximity to Reavey's essay.¹⁹⁷

Breton's essay on Wolfgang Paalen anticipates Beckett's art criticism in notable ways, both stylistically and thematically. Breton particularly emphasises the philosophical resonances that Paalen's paintings possess. They are, Breton claims, "pregnant with poetic meaning as well

¹⁹⁷ On the *London Bulletin* and Mesens's role in avant-garde print culture of the period, see Rod Mengham, "'National Papers Please Reprint': Surrealist Magazines in Britain," in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 689-703.

as being centred upon philosophical problems.”¹⁹⁸ Paalen becomes a strange synecdoche of art’s possibilities; the distinctive modes of visuality in his paintings present the possibility for direct communication between poetry and philosophy. Breton freely describes the same principles at work in other essays, where artists and poets such as André Masson and Picasso, Rimbaud and Éluard, are seen to express equivalent representational possibilities. A similar principle of exchange operates throughout Beckett’s essays on art, where the van Velde brothers’ paintings express ideas common to Beckett’s interpretations of other painters, such as Jack Yeats and Avigdor Arikha.

André Breton and the Surrealist Image

Surrealism’s visual language spanned (often simultaneously) multifarious media, while the principles that informed this language were disseminated beyond its borders through artists and writers who refused formal association with the movement, such as Picasso, Henri Michaux and Georges Bataille. However, Breton remained the central figure for the movement’s definition and direction, earning him the title “Pope of surrealism.”¹⁹⁹ Beckett’s choice to translate several of Breton’s poems and prose pieces for *This Quarter* and the *London Bulletin* is therefore important, especially when taken alongside manifestations of Surrealist imagery in Beckett’s later work, including Dalí and Buñuel’s 1929 film *Un chien andalou*, the typescript for which was published alongside Beckett’s translations in *This Quarter*’s “Surrealist number.” The presence of images from Dalí and Buñuel’s film at several points in Beckett’s work is well-known: to Enoch Brater’s observation that “the Eye of *Film* and the Mouth of *Not I* curiously resemble

¹⁹⁸ André Breton, “Wolfgang Paalen,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald and Co., 1972), 136; “chargées de sens poétique en même temps qu’involontairement centrées sur des problèmes philosophiques de l’ordre du devenir et de la rencontre.” André Breton, “Wolfgang Paalen,” in *Le surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 180. Beckett’s translation is discussed below.

¹⁹⁹ Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1973), 14.

the opening sequence of *Un chien andalou*,”²⁰⁰ one can add Knowlson’s observation that Winnie’s burial in a mound of sand throughout *Happy Days* (1961) strongly recalls the film’s final scene, and I note the resemblance between the film’s famous close-up on Simone Mareuil’s slit eye and Mr. Endon’s eye in *Murphy*.²⁰¹

Figures most pertinently fail to form at the peripheries of the visual field. *Murphy* incorporates this dynamic of withheld, resistant visual figures into the architecture of its plot, while the chess-game scene of failed encounter between Murphy and Mr. Endon directly evokes the nascent series of relations between the unknown, perception and consciousness. However, the apparent unity underlying this tripartite connection necessitates a paradoxical separation between them. The split between perception and the consciousness of perception was a definitive aspect to both the Surrealist conception of the image and Beckett’s early characterisation of aesthetic value, in essays such as *Proust*, as the expression of the unknown.²⁰²

Beckett’s lyrical attempt to mirror the state of separation between the cognitive coherence and an experiential aesthetic that privileges states of irrationality finds further reflection in Beckett’s attempts to figure the separation between inner, private being and its outer manifestation. This framing is extended in response to Jack Yeats’s paintings in Beckett’s 1945 review, “MacGreevy on Yeats,” which lyricises the presence of a patterned separation between inward and outward “search” in Yeats’s painting, the “being in the street” separated from the “being in the room” (*D*, 97). For example, in the Unnamable’s attempt to fathom

²⁰⁰ Enoch Brater, “Dada, Surrealism and the Genesis of *Not I*,” *Modern Drama* 18, no. 1 (1975): 54. The typescript for *Un chien andalou* in *This Quarter*’s Surrealist special issue was translated by Richard Thoma, in *This Quarter* 5 (Sept. 1932): 149-157.

²⁰¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 475.

²⁰² Writing in 1956, Adorno reflected that Surrealism produced divided “historical images in which the subject’s innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical.” The Surrealist image, according to Adorno, is therefore placed between internal and external as a “photographic negative.” Theodor Adorno, “Looking back on Surrealism,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 89.

where his knowledge of the world comes from, he declares: “no one has ever intruded on me here. Elsewhere then. But I have never been elsewhere” (*U*, 291; “ici personne ne m’a jamais dérangé. Ailleurs alors. Mais je n’ai jamais été ailleurs” *I*, 17). Like the divided being Beckett finds in Yeats’s paintings, this “elsewhere” occupies the Unnamable’s unattained self, and it helps to establish the narrator as a subject divided between the unknowable self and its representation. In this sense, as I will outline, Beckett’s presentation of divided being in *The Unnamable* replays several themes addressed in Breton’s writing, especially the first Surrealist manifesto (1924) and his semi-autobiographical novel *Nadja* (1928).

Breton’s first Surrealist manifesto ends on a note that, with striking similarity to *The Unnamable*, emphasises separation over synthesis by evoking being in proximity to an absent elsewhere: “The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.”²⁰³ (“La terre drapée dans sa verdure ne fait pas plus d’effet qu’un revenant. C’est vivre et cesser de vivre qui sont des solutions imaginaires. L’existence est ailleurs.”²⁰⁴) By thus ending the manifesto, Breton refuses to formally conclude his polemic. Indeed, the significance of his refusal to propose a solution is itself resistant to definition, not least because the problem to which life and death are “imaginary solutions” goes unmentioned.

Nadja opens by addressing the ghostly theme on which Breton’s manifesto ends: “Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt’”²⁰⁵ (“Qui suis-je? Si par exception je m’en rapportais à un adage: en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je ‘hante?’”²⁰⁶). Breton’s ghosting of presence is itself haunted by philosophical influences shared with Beckett’s post-war narratives,

²⁰³ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 47.

²⁰⁴ Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 64.

²⁰⁵ Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1999), 11.

²⁰⁶ Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 11.

and both writers display a penchant for delivering stories in the form of posthumous accounts of a life inexplicably continuing. For example, “The Calmative” (“Le Calmant,” 1946) begins “I don’t know when I died” (C, 261; “Je ne sais plus quand je suis mort” CF, 41), while Molloy turns to pained questioning: “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?” (M, 31; “Ma vie, ma vie, j’en parle tantôt comme d’une chose finie, tantôt j’en parle comme d’une plaisanterie qui dure, et j’ai tort, parce que elle est finie et elle dure à la fois, mais par quel temps du verbe exprimer cela?” MF, 47). *Nadja*’s opening question, “Qui suis-je?”, and its interrogation of the pronoun, also operates on the same territory as *The Unnamable*’s beginning: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I” (U, 285; “Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant ? Sans me le demander. Dire je” I, 7). The unsettling proposition that to commentate upon one’s own life is to haunt one’s own life is not Beckett’s imposition. There are many philosophical and literary concerns behind Beckett and Breton’s expressions of the conflictual self, including Rimbaud’s famous expression “Je est un autre.”²⁰⁷ *Nadja*’s opening pages develop the manifesto’s description of split presence into a meditation on the divide between the narrating and narrated self:

what I regard as the objective, more or less deliberate manifestations of my existence are merely the premises, within the limits of this existence, of an activity whose true extent is quite unknown to me. My image of the “ghost,” including everything conventional about its appearance as well as its blind submission to certain contingencies of time and place, is particularly significant for me as the finite

²⁰⁷ Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, 1 May 1871, in *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: Chicago University press, 2005), 370.

representation of a torment that may well be eternal. Perhaps my life is nothing but an image of this kind.²⁰⁸

This “unknown” activity is more fundamental than mere everyday existence. Breton also adapts a philosophical framework strikingly similar to Beckett’s incorporation of Schopenhauer in *Proust*; in particular, his description of “existence” and the “unknown [...] activity” implicitly adapt the division between *phenomena* and *noumena* in a manner paralleled by Schopenhauer’s contrast between representation and will.²⁰⁹ The qualities Breton gives to both domains reinforce this parallel: like the will, Breton’s unknown domain is eternal, lying behind and beyond the “finite representation” of everyday life.

Beckett’s creative-critical interest in the visual arts crystallised during the interwar period when Surrealism could scarcely be ignored as a new and increasingly mainstream force, and Surrealist practice had wrested dominance in the public domain from its Dadaist and abstract expressionist forebears. Beckett also came to know several of the leading figures in Surrealism – not always for the best. Philippe Soupault, who co-authored *Les champs magnétiques* with Breton in 1920 before leaving for Joyce’s circle, supplanted Beckett and Alfred Péron’s translation of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” episode in *Work in Progress*, in circumstances that Beckett would still

²⁰⁸ Breton, *Nadja*, 12. The translation inverts two important word pairs in Breton’s original, where the ghost is presented as representation, and the torment as image: “La *représentation* que j’ai du ‘fantôme’ avec ce qu’il offre de conventionnel aussi bien dans son aspect que dans son aveugle soumission à certaines contingences d’heure et de lieu, vaut avant tout, pour moi, comme image finie d’un tourment qui peut être éternel. Il se peut que ma vie ne soit qu’une *image* de ce genre.” Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 12.

²⁰⁹ Breton’s relationship with *Nadja* is also founded on narrative falterings and constructive silences. The non-reflexivity of *Nadja*’s eyes interestingly anticipates Mr. Endon’s non-reflective gaze in *Murphy*. As Richards observes: “whether or not the narrator is capable of seeing in *Nadja*’s eyes the capacity for perception even as she functions as an instrument of self-reflection is one question that propels this narrative forward.” Michael Stone Richards, “Encirclements: Silence in the Construction of *Nadja*,” *Modernism/modernity* 8, no. 1 (2001): 138.

recall with bitterness half a century afterwards.²¹⁰ Considering Breton's early interest in André Masson, whose work garners substantial attention in essays such as "Le Surréalisme et la peinture" (1928), and Masson's own role as an illustrator of Surrealist texts such as Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* (also written in 1928), Beckett's choice to make him the subject of the second of his "Three Dialogues" recalls Breton's own essayistic canon as well as dissident forms of Surrealist visuality.²¹¹

Breton's essays frequently characterise artistic representation according to figures of the relation between eye and object. For example, in "Surrealism and Painting," Breton asserts: "There is no reality in painting. Virtual images, corroborated or not by visual objects, more or less fade away before our eyes."²¹² Breton seems to play with his terms here, employing the "virtual," "visual" and the "image" without elaborating the context of their use. However, abstract terms like these form the core of Breton's visual vocabulary, which places painting and poetry in dialogue with one another by positing a common mode of relation between the linguistic and the visual:

The need to fix visual images, whether or not these images pre-exist, the act of fixing them, has exteriorised itself from time immemorial and has led to the formation of a veritable language which does not seem to me any more artificial than spoken language [...] I owe it to myself to weigh the present state of this language in exactly the same way that I would weigh the present state of poetic language.²¹³

²¹⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 128, 728n43.

²¹¹ For a reading of *Fin de partie/Endgame* as a response to Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil*, see Peter Fifield, "Accursed Progenitor! *Fin de partie* and Georges Bataille," in "Debts and Legacies," ed. Erik Tønning, Matthew Feldman, Matthijs Engelberts and Dirk Van Hulle, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010): 107-121.

²¹² Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," in *Surrealism and Painting*, 28; translation of: "Il n'y a pas de réalité dans la peinture. Des images virtuelles, corroborées ou non par des images visuels, s'effacent plus ou moins sous notre regard." Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 47.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 2; translation of: "Le besoin de fixer les images visuelles, ces images pré-existant ou non à leur fixation, s'est extériorisé de tout temps et a abouti à la formation d'un véritable langage qui ne me paraît

Focusing its visual aesthetic on *need* rather than desire, Breton's critical terminology sets an interesting precedent for Beckett's own theory of artistic need in "Les Deux Besoins." Breton tacitly establishes an association here between "the act of fixing" visual images and the creation of a visual language. The status of language significantly changes because of this association. Rather than existing in the abstract, even high poetic language is built upon the subject's primary relations with the world.

"Surrealism and Painting" expresses the subjective need to fix images into language in support of a more general and abstract contrast between inner and outer:

It makes no difference whether there remains a perceptible difference between beings which are evoked and beings which are present, since I dismiss such differences out of hand at every moment of my life. This is why it is impossible for me to envisage a picture as being other than a window, and why my first concern is then to know what it *looks out* on, in other words whether, from where I am standing, there is a "beautiful view", and nothing appeals to me so much as a vista stretching away before me *out of sight*.²¹⁴

The central elements to the visual language of "Surrealism and Painting" are evident in Breton's later essay "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism" (1941), where he praises Ernst's painting for having "introduced an entirely original scheme of visual structure yet at the same time corresponded exactly to the intentions of Lautréamont and Rimbaud in poetry."²¹⁵ He also

pas plus artificiel que l'autre [...] Tout au plus me dois-je de considérer l'état actuel de ce langage, de même que l'état actuel du langage poétique." Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," 12.

²¹⁴ Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," 2-3; translation of: "Entre ces êtres évoques et les êtres présents, la différence a beau rester sensible, il m'arrive à chaque instant d'en faire bon marché. C'est ainsi qu'il m'est impossible de considérer un tableau autrement que comme une fenêtre dont mon premier souci est de savoir sur quoi *elle donne*, autrement dit si, d'où je suis, 'la vue est belle', et je n'aime rien tant que ce qui s'étend devant moi *à perte de vue*." Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," 13. Note the return to an imagined sight leading "à perte de vue" in Éluard's poem translated by Beckett, "À perte de vue dans le sens de mon corps," discussed below.

²¹⁵ Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism," in *Surrealism and Painting*, 64.

describes the common compositional traits which constitute this visual structure: “The external object had broken with its [habitual] environment, and its component parts had, so to speak, emancipated themselves from it in such a way that they were now able to maintain entirely new relationships with other elements, escaping from the principle of reality but retaining all their importance on that plane (disruption of the concept of relationship).”²¹⁶ The opposition between external and internal perception clearly expresses a commonly held point of view. This was influentially expressed by Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which combined the need for art to be guided by a principle of “internal necessity” with the “emancipation” from “the outward appearance of nature.”²¹⁷ Breton thought highly of Kandinsky; his 1938 essay on Kandinsky emphasises the “philosophical undertones” in Kandinsky’s painting, praising his “marvellous eye, scarcely blurred behind the lens.”²¹⁸ Given that Breton claims to reject reality’s objective manifestations in *Nadja*, it is unclear exactly what Ernst’s painting escapes if it disrupts the “habitual” environment’s relationships, only to replace these with new ones on a new plane. It seems that, if reality consists in these relationships, its escape and rejection is not so easily made.

Breton’s language in “Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism” – with its emphasis both on the break in the relation between the object and its “champ habituel” and on

²¹⁶ Ibid., 64, 66; translation of: “L’objet extérieur avait rompu avec son champ habituel, ses parties constituantes s’étaient en quelque sorte émancipées de lui-même, de manière à entretenir avec d’autres éléments des rapports entièrement nouveaux, échappant au principe de réalité mais n’en tirant pas moins à conséquence sur le plan réel (bouleversement de la notion de relation).” Breton, “Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme,” *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 91.

²¹⁷ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, in *Complete Writings on Art*, 197-199.

²¹⁸ See Breton, “Kandinsky” (1938): “Kandinsky, in my view, presents deeper philosophical undertones in his work than any other artist since Seurat: making a clear distinction between those aspects of nature surrounding him which are essential and those which are accidental, he is supremely capable of inducing nature to yield to us a true image of ourselves. [...] Kandinsky’s marvellous eye, scarcely blurred behind the lens [...] belongs to one of the most exceptional, one of the greatest, revolutionaries of vision.” Breton, “Kandinsky,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, 286.

the establishment of “rapports entièrement nouveaux” – both echoes Beckett’s description of habit in *Proust* as “a compromise effected between an individual and his environment” (*P*, 515) and anticipates the process of indeterminacy between formal disintegration and reconstitution which characterises Geer and Bram van Velde’s painting in “Peintres de l’empêchement”: “entrevoiant dans l’absence de rapport et dans l’absence d’objet le nouveau rapport et le nouvel objet” (*D*, 137; “discerning in the absence of relation and the absence of object the new relation and the new object” *NO*, 880). Breton plays with the tension between destruction and creation in the art work, yet he also plays with the relation between the painter and the painting. Indeed, in a short piece on Yves Tanguy, “What Tanguy Veils and Reveals” (1942), Breton conflates Tanguy’s act of creation with the canvas itself. In his canvases, Breton claims, the viewer sees Tanguy “Jumping out of the window of his own eye”²¹⁹ (“Comme on se jette par la fenêtre de son propre œil”²²⁰). Tanguy is invoked as a dynamic figure, almost as though he were an actor following a stage direction to perform Breton’s earlier metaphor in *Surrealism and Painting*, of paintings as windows framing vistas stretching “out of sight.” Breton’s use of Tanguy as a concrete figure to perform aesthetic theories on the page offers an interesting counterpart to Beckett’s own sense of Bram’s painterly eye, which also leads the canvas to step, window-like, outside and back into itself.

Breton’s writing also variously concretises such dynamics between the seen and its limitation by the unseen through figures of sight which betray their own limitations. These interactions between figures and their discreet limitations are also recalled by Daniel Albright, who places Beckett’s late fiction in proximity to Surrealist visuality by developing an interesting parallel between Giorgio de Chirico’s Surrealist paintings and Beckett’s late prose pieces such as *Mal vu mal dit/ Ill Seen Ill Said*, which “look like a realization in prose of Surrealist acephalism, the collapse of the boundary between person and environment, subject and object.”²²¹ However,

²¹⁹ Breton, “What Tanguy Veils and Reveals,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, 176.

²²⁰ Breton, “Ce que Tanguy voile et révèle,” in *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, 232.

²²¹ Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics*, 18.

this collapse is not an exclusive gesture towards Surrealism alone. As I have argued, a shared set of concerns aligned twentieth-century theories of art with theories of representation that formed the longstanding concerns of Kantian philosophical aesthetics. Between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, theories of art and vision became more concerned with the grounds of appearance, with the peripheral and the unseen, and less concerned with objects of knowledge, and Beckett's understanding of visual art was shaped by this shifting dialogue. Albright's account also gestures towards the significant connection between the oscillation between figure and ground, "person and environment," and the philosophical terminology Beckett encountered through Schopenhauer, whose theory of representation strives towards the collapse between subject and object.

Breton's description of Tanguy's painterly eye as a window is extremely pertinent to Beckett's development of specialised fictive figures. Much later, the eye conceived as a figure that frames its background weaves a motif through *Mal vu mal dit / Ill Seen Ill Said*, for example: "L'œil fixe la fenêtre dégarnie. Rien au ciel ne l'en distraira plus" (*MV*, 8; "The eye rivets the bare window. Nothing in the sky will distract it from it more" *IS*, 456; my emphasis). Beckett's critical concern with grounds and limits appears in the eye looking at the window and the sky. This is a dominant trope in Beckett's fiction, and their aesthetic unity can be traced back to motifs of the visual present in Beckett's essays on art and his engagements with avant-garde writers such as Breton and the Surrealists, who developed modes of essay writing concerned less with descriptive art criticism than with adapting and incorporating formal innovations in the modern visual arts to the expressive possibilities of the textual.

***This Quarter* and Beckett's poetic adaptations**

As I have already discussed, Beckett translated poems by Breton, Éluard and Tristan Tzara for *This Quarter's* 1932 special issue on Surrealism. The eye appears as a figure in every one of the poems Beckett translated, and also recurs as a trope throughout Éluard and Breton's collaborative prose poem *L'Immaculée Conception (The Immaculate Conception, 1930)*, from which

Beckett translated the excerpts “Simulation of Mental Debility Essayed” and “Simulation of General Paralysis Essayed” for the same issue.²²² In the original poems and Beckett’s translations, the eye fixes upon an ambivalently desired subject who persistently resists possession. Hesitation about the status of the subject inflects these poems and their voicing of desire. Personal pronouns often slide into the definite article, signalling a hesitance about the status of the visual and its association with the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect. This change in the poem’s grammar envisions a subject for whom the outer and inner do not neatly align. Agency is given to sensory organs or limbs in isolation, especially to the eye and the hands, rather than a homogeneous subject.

In Éluard’s “À perte de vue dans le sens de mon corps” (“Out of Sight in the Direction of My Body”²²³) for example, the loved-one is introduced in an extended visual metaphor developed through the figure of her eye. The line “Au loin la mer de ton œil baigne,” translated by Beckett as “Afar the sea that thine eye washes” returns as “La ressemblance des regards de permission avec les yeux que tu conquis,” or “The eyes consenting resembling the eyes thou didst vanquish” (*CP*, 73).²²⁴ Such keen focus on parts of the body in fragmented isolation could be seen as an instance of the aesthetic of disfiguration behind Beckett’s “défiguration verbale” (*D*, 124), but it also inscribes a more general shift in priority from a conception of the individual as the willing subject to the embodied self. Beckett’s earlier statements of resistance to the intellectual and preference for the perceptual are reflected in the terms of Éluard’s poetry, while they also offered an example of how abstract principles derived from renewed conceptions of the self could be put to expressive use by being suggestively, even desirously, visualised. Beckett chooses to concretise the “regards,” rendering an extra pair of eyes in place of the original’s less strictured emphasis, which suggests the act of looking. Beckett’s choice of the word “direction”

²²² See Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 56.

²²³ Collected in *La vie immédiate* (1932), along with “À Peine Défigurée,” also translated by Beckett.

²²⁴ Paul Éluard, “À perte de vue dans le sens de mon corps,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Lucien Scheler and Marcelle Dumas, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 364.

for “sens” highlights a tension between visual perception and bodily experience. Bodies have unseen sides even to their inhabiting subjects, who can still only see one aspect of even the most keenly desired figure of beauty. Beckett’s rendering of the title echoes Breton’s thematisation of Tanguy’s painting amongst others: an artistic vision sees what is out of sight.

Anxieties about subjectivity that are concretely figured in the eye are also reflected in the use of pronouns in Beckett’s renderings of Éluard’s poems. Sardin and Germoni, writing on Beckett’s Surrealist translations, have also noted that Beckett’s translation of the original poems’ familiar “tu” form of the second-person pronoun by “thee, thou, thine” forms throughout his translations of Breton and Éluard is an imposition, which they call an “archaizing impulse” possibly inspired by Ezra Pound, that “far from contradicting the modernist injunction to ‘make it new,’ actually contributes to it by inventively departing from ordinary language.”²²⁵ However, as Breton’s parallel polemics for the artistic exploration of the “new world” suggest, Pound and the modernists were far from claiming exclusive rights over such inventive departures.

Beckett’s use of archaic forms emphasises the depersonalising process present in the originals, which not merely disfigures the body but actively distances it from either the narrating (desiring) or observed (desired) subject. A similar movement occupies the first stanza of Tristan Tzara’s “Reminder,” which appeared in the same issue of *This Quarter*. The poem was probably translated by Beckett from *L’Arbre des voyageurs*,²²⁶ which Tzara originally produced in collaboration with Joan Miró, who densely illustrated the work. In the poem, the eye is estranged from the subject, yet bound to its power of sight: “I have opened my eyes on loves without limit / and the new shadow on the new land / a silence trod on our bodies it was only the flash of a day / and the eye closed fright” (*CP*, 85). Twinning bright light and silence leads to “the eye closed” apparently of its own accord. Having seen an unknown land – “the new shadow on the

²²⁵ Pascale Sardin and Karine Germoni, “‘Scarcely Disfigured’: Beckett’s Surrealist Translations,” in “Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive,” special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 745.

²²⁶ Lawlor and Pilling, “Commentary,” *CP*, 371.

new land” reflects Breton’s “new world” – the day imposes on the poem’s lovers, to which the eye rather than the intellect responds by closing in fright.

Another instance of the eye being a figure for resistance and estrangement comes with Breton’s poem “The Free Union,” (“L’Union Libre,” 1931), also translated by Beckett for *This Quarter*. Once again, Breton’s narrator treats the eye as an erotic and dehumanised object. The poem ends with a sexualised metamorphosis of the eye into a container of the visual landscape:

My woman whose rumps are spring-time
Whose sex is iris
My woman whose sex is placer and ornithorynchus
My woman whose sex is mirror
My woman whose eyes full of tears
Whose eyes are compass needle and violet panoply
My woman whose eyes are savanna
My woman whose eyes are water to drink in prison
My woman whose eyes are wood under the axe for ever
Whose eyes are level of water level of air earth and fire ²²⁷

(CP, 69)

Metaphorically slipping “sex” into the “iris,” in, Breton’s poem uses the space of reflection afforded by the image of the eye as a “mirror” of its own view to displace the eye and transform it into a symbol for the visual image’s elemental possibilities. Thus transformed into “savanna”

²²⁷ Translation of: “Ma femme aux fesses de printemps / Au sexe de glaieul / Ma femme au sexe de placer et d’ornithorynque / Ma femme au sexe d’algue et de bonbons anciens / Ma femme au sexe de miroir / Ma femme aux yeux pleins de larmes / Aux yeux de panoplie violette et d’aiguille aimantée / Ma femme aux yeux de savane / Ma femme aux yeux d’eau pour boire en prison / Ma femme aux yeux de bois toujours sous la hache / Aux yeux de niveau d’eau de niveau d’air de terre et de feu.” André Breton, “L’Union libre,” in *Le Revolver aux cheveux blancs, Œuvres complètes d’André Breton*, vol. 2, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et. al., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 85.

drawn out from the elements – water, air, earth and fire – the “woman’s eyes” posit an unseen unity between fragmentary vision and Breton’s presentation of the subject. The interplay between the fixed gaze of sexual desire and the peripheral glimpse, which signals a space that eludes intellectual intentionality, creates a dynamic of suggestion, where the thrust of the poem follows the gaze towards its centre, while the margins are elusively present at the edges of possibility evoked through self-reflexive visual scenes gesturing outwards, towards the unseen. The figure of the eye depicts a relationship between figure and ground, wherein the figure works in a manner similar to Rosalind Krauss’s description of the collage element in modern painting as “a figure of a bounded field” which means that the field “is thus constituted inside itself as a figure of its own absence.”²²⁸

Beckett’s work as a Surrealist translator in 1932 evidently affected his own approach to writing poetry. Perhaps the most arresting example of this early influence lies in a 1932 letter he wrote to Thomas MacGreevy shortly after completing his batch of translations for Edward Titus. Several features are noteworthy here, including Beckett’s mention of a note from Nancy Cunard: “She has some Breton & Eluard MSS. I wrote saying it was always a pleasure to translate Eluard & Breton” (Beckett to MacGreevy, 18 October 1932, *LI*, 135). However, Beckett makes some deeper points regarding his own poetry. He admits that most of his poetry “fails precisely because it is *facultatif*” (*LI*, 133). In its dominant sense, “*facultatif*” means optional, unnecessary, yet given Beckett’s conceptualisation of poetry at the time, it seems reasonable to suggest that Beckett had in mind a secondary meaning from the English use of “facultative”

²²⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “In the name of Picasso,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 37. Also see the relevant entry in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, produced by Breton and Éluard in 1938, which describes collage as: “quelque chose comme l’alchimie de l’image visuelle. Le miracle de la transfiguration totale des êtres et objets avec ou sans modification de leur aspect physique ou anatomique.” [It (Collage) is something like the alchemy of the visual image. The miracle of the total transfiguration of beings and objects with or without modifying their physical or anatomical aspect.] André Breton and Paul Éluard, *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, in *Œuvres complètes d’André Breton*, vol. 2, 800.

(the word is embedded in a letter written in English): “of or proceeding from the faculties of the mind.” It seems to me that this argument explains why Beckett calls the “facultatif” quality a form of failure, not least because it suggests that his practice as a poet was not meeting the terms laid out in his prior essays “Dante . . . Bruno . Vico .. Joyce” and *Proust*, which characterise authentic artistic expression as direct perception divorced from the intellect – the vision of the eye alone.

However, Beckett is prepared to name a few successful poems in the same letter to MacGreevy, of which “Alba” is one. The poem echoes Éluard’s use of the second-person pronoun to foreground the relationship between the narrating male subject and an unencompassable object of desire, with its opening line, “before morning you shall be here” (*CP*, 10), voiced by a speaker whose addressed interlocutor seeps into an indifferent landscape, moving towards an affirmation of finitude and death at the poem’s end: “so that there is no sun and no unveiling” (10). If Beckett did not regard this poem as “facultatif,” it seems to be because its images do not draw out into obscure and arbitrary symbols. Instead, Beckett depicts the poem drawing itself over the “tempest of emblems” in “a statement of itself” (10).

The distinction between “statement” and “description” was an important one for Beckett,²²⁹ and later in the same letter to MacGreevy, Beckett returns to the importance of statement versus description in order to explain the qualified success of the small group of poems that would go on to form the basis of his collection *Echo’s Bones* (1935):

I cannot explain very well to myself what they have that distinguishes them from the other, but it is something arborescent or of the sky, not Wagner, not clouds on wheels; [...] a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit. Is not that what Eluard means?

²²⁹ See Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries*, 179.

Quel est le rôle de la racine?

Le désespoir a rompu tous ses liens.²³⁰ (*LI*, 134)

Beckett's preference for statement over description supports varieties of imagery not fixed by the intellect, but which occupy the background or vanishing point of sight. Preferring "something arborescent or of the sky" over Wagner, "statement" over "description," Beckett's letter again reframes the opposition at play in *Proust* and "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce," where direct "expression" or "perception" is positioned as the authentic mode of artistic representation. The letter foreshadows "Three Dialogues," which merges expression and statement to theorise the new artistic "act": "an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (*TD*, 563). The figuration of the "arborescent" by its nature resists being fixed into an object of description, or foregrounded into a figure, because it refers to a quality that lies in the background of the visual field. Beckett's terms here open up a space of contradiction, inside which artistic authenticity is associated with the figuration of a state that by its nature lies behind the figure. In a similar fashion to Beckett's characterisation of the elusion at the heart of the object of representation in "Peintres de l'empêchement," theories of artistic "statement" and "expression" support a general presentation of impossibility and opposition between consciousness and perception as the necessary preconditions for authentic artistic expression.

Later in the letter to MacGreevy, Beckett speaks of his mourning for the "integrity" he finds in "Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind" (*LI*, 134-135). Beckett's letter sets up its visual metaphor in relation to his repeated critical opposition between the intellectual and the perceptual, as Maude notes, "suggesting, like Merleau-Ponty's work, the primacy of perceptual

²³⁰ In Beckett's translation of Éluard's poem, "L'Invention," these lines read as follows: "What is the role of the root? / Despair has broken all his bonds." Paul Éluard, "The Invention," trans. Beckett, *CP*, 75.

consciousness over intellectual consciousness.”²³¹ Beckett’s praise for “the integrity of the eyelids” revisits his earlier praise of Proust’s impressionism, “his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility” (*P*, 550). By privileging the perceptual over the rational, the visual metaphors in Beckett’s letter to MacGreevy also recall the broader Surrealist association of subjectivity with anti-intellectual figures of sight exhibited in poems such as Breton’s “L’Union libre.”

Beckett’s letter recognises another one of Surrealism’s most important poetic filiations in Rimbaud, who he names before he quotes Éluard. Although he was a symbolist poet, Rimbaud, alongside Lautréamont was one of the lodestars for Breton’s conception of a painterly poetry. Nadeau asserts in his seminal *Histoire du surréalisme*, published in 1947, that after Rimbaud “it became impossible not to appeal to the authority of his work,”²³² not least because Rimbaud’s early abandonment of poetry – the silence which covers most of his life – left the sense of a project that still demanded to be completed: “Rimbaud was not able to realize his ambitious programme. It seems that, having reached the gates of the unknown, he lost his nerve, turned away.”²³³

Rimbaud was certainly close to Beckett’s thoughts at the time of writing his 1932 letter to MacGreevy. Beckett completed his unpublished translation of “Le Bateau ivre” (“The Drunken Boat”) later that year; although intended for Titus’s *This Quarter* following his Surrealist translations, the periodical ceased publication in December 1932. Of the other poems Beckett approves of in his letter to MacGreevy, the poem that would become “Enueg I” in *Echo’s Bones*

²³¹ Maude, “‘Material of a Strictly Peculiar Order’: Beckett, Merleau-Ponty and Perception,” 79. Elsewhere, Maude cites the same passage’s “integrity of the eyelids” to affirm the importance of vision for the subjectivity of Beckett’s characters: “For Beckett, the subject is of the order of the world, rather than existing in relation to it, a factor Beckett foregrounds throughout his landscapes in which figure is forever threatening to merge into ground. The eye situates the subject in the world rather than detaches it from its surroundings.” Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, 46.

²³² Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 79.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

stands out here. Far from possessing originality, the most interesting lines in the poem come at the end, with a stanza plagiarised from the refrain in Rimbaud's prose poem "Barbare," collected in *Illuminations* (1874):

Ah the banner
the banner of meat bleeding
on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers
that do not exist.²³⁴

(CP, 8)

By ending in this way, calling forth an image only to refuse it, Beckett's poem situates itself in relation to Surrealism's denial of reality. Rimbaud's "the banner of meat bleeding" clearly presented an image of interest to Beckett, and it reappears in "La Peinture des van Velde":

Impossible de vouloir autre l'inconnu, l'enfin vu, dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part; ni le seul agent capable de le faire cesser; ni le but, qui est de le faire cesser. Car c'est bien de cela qu'il s'agit, de ne plus voir cette chose adorable et effrayante, de rentrer dans le temps, dans la cécité, d'aller s'ennuyer *devant les tourbillons de viande jamais morte et frissonner sous les peupliers*. Alors on la montre, de la seule façon possible. (D, 127; my emphasis)

[Impossible to want otherwise the unknown, the seen at last, whose centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere; neither the sole agent capable of putting a stop to it, nor the goal, which is to put a stop to it. For this is what it's all about, no longer seeing this adorable and alarming thing, coming back into time, into blindness, to boredom before *the banners of meat never dead and trembling beneath the poplars*. So it is shown, in the only way possible.]

²³⁴ The lines in Rimbaud's poem "Barbare" reads: "Le pavillon en viande saignante sur la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques; (elles n'existent pas.)" Rimbaud, "Barbare," in *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, 340.

The pair between the “unknown” and “the seen at last” which precedes Beckett’s occluded citation from Rimbaud is indicative of the close association between visual representation and states that resist representation according to fixed categories. The focus in this passage is therefore not on specific objects of representation, but processes and motions of change. A glimpse figures the unknown – the “seen at last” that has no “circumference” – while an endless, “trembling banner” is evoked that, like the “long shifting thresholds” of “je suis ce cours de sable,” suggests an unlimited limit similar to the periphery of the visual field.

Surrealist revisions and Sartrean objects

This is a useful point to return to some passages that I have already discussed in Beckett’s review essays, and reconsider them in the light of Beckett’s construction of idiosyncratic artistic lineages and his engagements with Surrealism. In particular, Beckett’s review essay “Recent Irish Poetry,” published in 1934, came shortly after his Surrealist translations for *This Quarter*. As “a rough principle of individuation,” Beckett’s introduction to the essay proposes “the degree in which the younger Irish poets evince awareness of the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again, namely the breakdown of the object” (*D*, 70). Beckett’s revision from “new” to “old” hints back to a tradition of “breakdown.” This is evidently not the tradition guarded by the Irish revivalists, “the thermolaters” who, with barely disguised disdain, Beckett claims “would no doubt like this amended to breakdown of the subject. It comes to the same thing – rupture of the lines of communication” (*D*, 70). This notion of rupture informs the theory of artistic tradition advanced later in the essay, when Beckett asserts that Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey are “the most interesting of the youngest generation of Irish poets” because “they have submitted themselves to the influences of those poets least concerned with evading the bankrupt relationship referred to at the opening of this essay – Corbière, Rimbaud, Laforgue, the *surréalistes* and Mr Eliot, perhaps also those of Mr Pound – with results that constitute already the nucleus of a living poetic in Ireland” (*D*, 75-6). The terms of Beckett’s praise may seem counterintuitive here, praising those who do *not* evade the “bankrupt relationship” between

subject and object. However, by grasping the nettle of this rupture, Beckett argues that the artist seizes a new domain of representation: “The artist who is aware of this may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects” (*D*, 70).

Beckett’s review reveals its kinship with the concept of art Breton developed during the interwar period. Over the course of this period, Breton’s essays display a marked shift away from the productive, transcendental theory of the relationship between elements of the artwork in “Surrealism and Painting,” written in 1928, to the “disruption of the concept of relationship” in “Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism,”²³⁵ written in 1941, after the German occupation of Northern France and Breton’s flight to the United States. Also, Beckett does not respect strict divisions between artistic movements: his list of laudable poetry from Corbière to Eliot cuts across familiar literary genres and modes. Instead, Beckett connects individual poets in terms of his own particular aesthetic of rupture. The implicit point is that a disruptive conception of the relationship between subject and object lies at the basis of productive artistic procedure. This procedure alone can state the “space that intervenes” between subject and object. Peripheral, intervening spaces are integral to the ways in which Breton and Beckett’s writing, encompassing essays, poetry and fiction, sought to figure the grounds of representation as unknowable and resistant – “l’inconnu, l’enfin vu.”

At this juncture, it is worth returning to Beckett’s review of Thomas MacGreevy’s pamphlet *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation*. Published in the *Irish Times* in August 1945, its composition was roughly contemporaneous with “La Peinture des van Velde.” Unlike Beckett’s other published essays and reviews, however, a draft typescript of his review for the *Irish Times* survives. In its draft form, “MacGreevy on Yeats” makes unusually direct philosophical and contextual references, including to Schopenhauer and Hegel,²³⁶ all absent from the final fair copy. These extractions of direct citation and demonstrations of learning in

²³⁵ Breton, “Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism,” 66.

²³⁶ “The proud Schopenhauerian distinction between the assembled and the organic, meaning between the Phenomenology of Spirit and the World as Will etc.” Beckett, TCD MS 9072, fol. 10, p. 2.

Beckett's review present an early instance of the compositional "vaguening"²³⁷ which characterised his process of drafting after 1945. In the second paragraph of the typescript, Beckett revisits and revises the familiar contrast between perception and consciousness of perception:

But if understanding closes the eye intolerant of its "higher" connexions, it may open these by the same beautiful machinery sealed, tightly and in terror sealed, to all that does not confirm their representations of security, the friendly solid diminishing as it recedes, the light duly shed, the shadow duly cast, the face duly masked [...]. There is at least that to be said for mind, that it can delight mind. And at least this for art-criticism, that it can lift from the eyes, before rigor vitae sets in, some at least of the weight of congenital prejudice.²³⁸

Beckett sees an active role for the intellect in enlivening perception here. This is an uncharacteristic statement, but it crucially endows the eye with its own "connexions" prior to the intellect. Beckett recalls some of his concerns regarding visuality which persisted throughout the 1930s. The eye "tightly and in terror sealed" gestures back to his translation of Tzara's "Reminder," where "the eye closed fright" (*CP*, 85) and the formal "integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind" (*LI*, 134-5) described by Beckett in his earlier letter to MacGreevy. It is perhaps telling that the published review picks up the typescript from the sentence above: "There is at least that to be said for mind, that it can delight mind." However, the final version of the line contains an important change, and bears a changed relation to the sentence that comes before it:

²³⁷ Rosemary Pouteny, *Theatre of Shadows: Samuel Beckett's Drama, 1956–1976* (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), 149.

²³⁸ Beckett, TCD MS 9072, fol. 10, p. 2.

It is difficult to formulate what it is one likes in Mr Yeats's painting, or indeed what it is one likes in anything, but it is a labour, not easily lost, and a relationship once started not likely to fail, between such a knower and such an unknown.

There is at least this to be said for mind, that it can dispel mind. (*D*, 95)

Mind may no longer "delight" mind, but "dispel" it; and the eye's relationship to the "higher connexions" of the "understanding" are subsumed into a relationship between the knower and the unknown. The value of the intellect consists in its self-negation, in stripping away intellectual function, and by doing this Beckett claims for Yeats's painting a relationship that brings the knower into a relationship with the unknown, while this relationship still prevents the dissolution of the boundary between the two terms.

The image, for the Surrealists, drew rational thought outside itself by bringing the imaginative towards the perceptual and a direct expression of the unconscious. The elusory quality of visual representation had been given literary expression by Proust before the Surrealists. However, one of the most important twentieth-century fictionalisations of the phenomenal image was Sartre's *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938), which Beckett had read and admired.²³⁹ The importance of the novel to Beckett's fiction lies in its narrativising of its protagonist Antoine Roquentin's failure to penetrate the surface of representation. *Nausea* develops this attempt and its failure into a novel self-reflection upon the limitations and conditions of the novel form in a way that reveals some of the phenomenologically fundamental aspects to the grounds of representation.

²³⁹ In 1936, Beckett wrote to Thomas MacGreevy: "[Joe Hone] was crying out for a book to translate in the long winter evenings. I suggested Breton's *Nadja*" (Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 7 August 1936, *LI*, 366-367). Hone, an early biographer of Yeats and George Moore, may be the butt of a joke here. Hone's aesthetic and political leanings diverged from Breton's in important ways; Hone is known to have shaped Yeats's own readings of Nietzsche and Berkeley, and – as W.J. McCormack has recently argued – to have registered these ideas in close dialogue with fascist conceptions of the individual. See McCormack, *"We Irish" in Europe: Yeats, Berkeley & Joseph Hone* (Dublin: TCD Press, 2010).

Roquentin's experience of nausea recalls aspects of the Sublime, but Roquentin's felt conflict between noumenal freedom and phenomenal incarceration does not find the rational recuperating terror with pleasure. His experience of nausea is a viscous, slippery vertigo, a moment suspended between letting-go and falling. In one sense, this is a temporal equivalent of the "space that intervenes" hypothesised by Beckett, but as Connor suggests (with reference to Beckett's famous, but unreliable, interview with Tom Driver, and his reported claim to "accommodate the mess"²⁴⁰), "where Sartre insists on the primal horror of being sucked or swallowed up in mess or mire [...] Beckett's writing at times seems to find some accommodation with, or even a kind of appetite for the mess."²⁴¹ The nauseatingly unresolvable space that intervenes beneath the knowable and nameable is central to Beckett's production of narrative tension in *Watt* and throughout the post-war Trilogy of novels. Indeed, *Nausea* signals a crucial revision of the Surrealist mode of attention to the object, and an important counterpoint to Beckett's own aesthetic and his earlier construction of the visual in *Proust* and *Murphy*.

The revelation of the chestnut tree root before Roquentin's eyes derives from an intentional forgetting very close to what Proust describes as the impossible "direct and purely experimental contact between subject and object" (*P*, 544), and the annulment of their respective differentiation under these categories. In *Nausea*, the dismantling of the categories of meaning leads to the nauseating realisation of the phenomenal. I select from some crucial moments in the long scene:

usually existence hides itself. [...] That root, on the other hand, existed in so far as I could not explain it. I had already scrutinized, with that same anxiety, unnameable objects, I had already tried – in vain – to think something about them: and I had already felt their cold, inert qualities escape, slip between my fingers. [...] It didn't make sense,

²⁴⁰ Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 219.

²⁴¹ Steven Connor, "Beckett and Sartre: The Nauseous Character of All Flesh," in Maude and Feldman, *Beckett and Phenomenology*, 68.

the world was present everywhere, in front, behind. There had been nothing before it. Nothing. There had been no moment at which it might not have existed. It was that which irritated me: naturally there was no reason for it to exist, that flowing larva. But it was not possible for it not to exist. That was unthinkable: in order to imagine nothingness, you had to be there already, right in the world, with your eyes wide open and alive ...²⁴²

For Roquentin, the impossibility of nonexistence makes a prison of phenomena, while its unchallengeable and absolute existence places it beneath explanation. Peter Lamarque has argued for an “implicit philosophy of art” in this scene, with Roquentin’s attention to the chestnut tree affording a revelation about the nature of phenomenality that Sartre elsewhere ascribes to works of visual art.²⁴³

So far as the narrative leads from Roquentin’s attentive gaze upon the chestnut tree root to the containing walls of phenomena, Sartre’s theory of art is echoed in Beckett’s “art d’incarcération” (*D*, 137). This is especially apparent when considered against Sartre’s original French. Roquentin describes the “objets innommables” slipping between his fingers as objects that “se dérober, glisser entre mes doigts.”²⁴⁴ The verbs ‘se dérober’ and ‘glisser’ anticipate the “dérobade” which characterises the trope of representational “elusion” in “Peintres de l’empêchement” and the “glissement” that recurs at several instances in Beckett’s writing, including the “plans qui glisse” in “La Peinture des van Velde” (*D*, 128) which, as I will explore, are integral to *Watt*.

The aesthetic of incarceration in “Peintres de l’empêchement” also finds further Sartrean affinities in relation to the essay’s extended metaphor of artistic imprisonment as the “stone of the cell.” Beckett’s aesthetic principle of mutual “empêchement” between the eye and

²⁴² Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2000), 183-192.

²⁴³ Peter Lamarque, “Art, Ontology and the End of Nausea,” chapter ten in *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209-219.

²⁴⁴ Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 183.

the object is also anticipated within the above scene from *Nausea*, Roquentin recalls the object that triggered his “nausea” to begin with as “that wretched pebble,” before stating “I couldn’t remember exactly what it refused to be. But I hadn’t forgotten its passive resistance.”²⁴⁵ Indeed, it is because of its weakness that the stone’s passive resistance is the least possible to overcome; it refuses to bring itself forth to Roquentin’s attentive gaze. This scene manifestly stands behind the metaphor of “indigestible” stone in *Being and Nothingness*, and it may suggest a broader, deliberately constructed engagement with the Sartrean rendering of the ‘in-itself’ operating through Beckett’s preoccupation with stone. Molloy’s ritual with the sucking stones, for example, narrativises the elusive quality that lies behind repetition – the remainder that repetition promises to deliver but that always inexplicably remains.²⁴⁶ The sucking-stone, from the Sartrean standpoint, therefore operates as a metaphor for the object’s stone-like resistance and refusal to be wholly digested by, or assimilated into, the subject.²⁴⁷

Sartre’s relevance to Beckett in the light of Surrealist influences is a complex matter, but one that helps to contextualise the sense in which Beckett’s narrative unfolding of liminal and impossible representational states finds its meaning. John Bolin has argued that Sartre’s *Nausea* offered “one conduit through which techniques and interests associated with Surrealist practice seeped into Beckett’s writing in and after *Watt*.”²⁴⁸ Bolin highlights the “crise d’objet” and the

²⁴⁵ Sartre, *Nausea*, 187; translation of: “le galet, ce fameux galet, l’origine de toute cette histoire: il n’était pas... je ne me rappelais pas bien au juste ce qu’il refusait d’être. Mais je n’avais pas oublié sa résistance passive.” Sartre, *La Nausée*, 183.

²⁴⁶ On this point of “surface repetition” in *Molloy*, see Damian Tarnopolsky, “Staying on the surface: Figures of Repetition in Beckett’s Postwar Trilogy,” in “Revisiting *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt*/*Malone Dies* and *L’Innommable*/*The Unnamable*,” ed. David Tucker, Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 26 (2014): 299-311.

²⁴⁷ “Je profitai de ce séjour pour m’approvisionner en pierres à sucer. C’étaient des cailloux mais moi j’appelle ça des pierres.” *MF*, 93; “I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I called them stones.” *M*, 63.

²⁴⁸ John Bolin, “‘A demented form of the particular’: Surrealism, Suite and Eleutheria,” in “Filiations & Connexions/Filiations & Connecting Lines,” ed. Yann Mével, Dominique Rabaté and Sjeff Houppermans, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 23 (2011): 265.

principle of “changement” as aspects shared by Breton and Sartre which are expressed in Beckett’s novel *Watt*. Certainly, the figurations of states of change in *Watt* suggestively respond to a crisis in the coherence of object representation, as evoked in the parallels between the slipperiness that separates Knott’s pot from its name and Roquentin’s scene before the root of a chestnut tree.

Further lineages can be traced, however. In particular, the “changement” highlighted by Bolin is integral to the theory of representation in “La Peinture des van Velde.” The theme of change is signalled in *Watt* with a moment of self-citation that revisits an old figure from Beckett’s poem “ainsi a-t-on beau.” Arsene narrates his feeling of the “change” as an unexplainable experience that leaves behind it the “perception so sensuous that in comparison the impressions of a man buried alive in Lisbon seem a frigid and artificial construction of the understanding” (*W*, 202). The productive mastery represented by the figure of Kant itself becomes the victim of its own ruination, the “artificial constructions of the understanding” are shattered, while the “sensuous perception” of this breakage usurps the throne from which Kant, as the figure of “understanding” had stood, “froidement penché” over the ruins of Lisbon.²⁴⁹

Watt’s concerns gestate theories bound up with Beckett’s expressions of “the change” and objective resistance as crucial elements to artistic representation. Much like with Roquentin,

²⁴⁹ Other important ruins are found in Saint Lô, the port town “bombed out of existence in one night” during World War Two, where Beckett worked with the Irish Red Cross from August 1945 until January 1946. Written and intended for broadcast on RTÉ, the title Beckett gave to this bleak, lyrical testimony of his work setting up a temporary hospital in the city, “The Capital of the Ruins,” alludes to Éluard’s famous collection of poems, *Capitale de la douleur* (1926). Beckett, “The Capital of the Ruins,” *As the Story was Told: Uncollected and Late Prose* (London and New York: John Calder, 1993), 17-28. It is also worth noting that, although Dougald McMillan’s introduction to the first publication of the piece by John Calder asserts that Beckett read the script “on Radio Éireann on 10 June, 1946” (McMillan, introduction to “Capital of the Ruins,” in *As the Story was Told*, 11), this assertion was strongly disputed by S.E. Gontarski in his notes to *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: Grove, 1996), 285-286. See also Anthony Uhlmann’s discussion of Beckett’s radio essay through the theme of exile in the context of post-war relations between France and Ireland in *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 148-155.

the “change” rests on an indefinable “slip” that undoes the subject’s relation to the object. The novel, as Mooney suggests, is “consumed by an interest in the gap between the aspirations of representation and language and their object, which is unnamable.”²⁵⁰ This gap opens up an aesthetic of nonrelation, which is reflected both in the ways language shadows and doubles itself through repetition and the workings of translation, and how scenes of perceptual or imaginary appearances are led towards, and undone by, the demands of consciousness.

Beckett’s translation of *Watt* into French, eventually published in 1968 after the collaboration of Ludovic and Agnès Janvier, emphasises some of these important connections to Beckett’s critical writing. Descriptions of “the change” are rendered as “le changement,” the same phrasing used to describe the representational paradox central to the modern work of art in “La Peinture des van Velde,” and the “slip” is rendered as “glisse” and “glissement,” the wording used to poeticise the “shifting thresholds” in “je suis ce cours de sable.”²⁵¹ The role of objects as sites for “changement” and “glissement” echoes Roquentin’s dilemma in *Nausea*, while the emphasis on “barely perceptible” figures that appear outside of and destabilise the “artificial construction of the understanding” brings to the surface the buried textualisation of Surrealist concerns with the visual. Similarly to *Murphy*, although taking place over a significantly longer span of time, Beckett’s translation of *Watt* into French emphasises the particularities of these connections by realising a series of exchanges with Beckett’s critical and poetic vocabulary. The principle of “changement” is one of both objective resistance, with Sartrean echoes, and one concerned with figuring a visual domain outside the fixations of the intellect – the

²⁵⁰ Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 4.

²⁵¹ In Arsene’s monologue, for example: “Le changement. En quoi consistait-il ? Difficile à dire. Quelque chose glissa. Me voilà assis, chaud et clair, tout à ma pipe à tabac et au mur chaud et clair, quand soudain quelque part il glissa quelque chose, un petit quelque chose, un infime quelque chose. Glisse – isse – isse – STOP.” *WF*, 43. On the “empêchement-glissement” connection in “Peintres de l’empêchement” and Beckett’s post-war novels, see Eric Migernier, *Beckett and French Theory: The Narration of Transgression* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 125-127.

“consciousness of perception” Beckett had identified in *Proust* – which incorporates figures and concerns established in closer proximity to Surrealist concerns.

In the post-war landscape Sartre’s writing helped to reshape the relationship between Surrealism and its audiences. Shortly after his return from exile, largely spent in the United States after fleeing Vichy France in 1942, Breton staged an exhibition at the Galerie Maeght, titled “Le Surréalisme en 1947.”²⁵² Breton’s return to cultural life in Paris was widely commented on, and spurred Sartre to make his famously cutting response to the Surrealist exhibition and Surrealism more generally in his essay, “Situation de l’écrivain en 1947” (“Situation of the Writer in 1947”), included in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (*What is Literature*, 1947). The dispute between Breton and Sartre was prominent enough in Georges Duthuit’s mind, as editor of *Transition* in 1948, to parodically pair the two together in his essays accompanying extracts from *What is Literature*, declaring “everybody knows Sartre is a surrealist.”²⁵³ Yet, as Duthuit’s playfulness recognises, the dispute between the two was part of a posturing for position that took place within overlapping intellectual territories.

The thrust of Sartre’s ire in *What is Literature?* is aimed at what he sees as two forms of dishonesty in the Surrealist aesthetic: firstly, that its professed revolutionary ideals are a bourgeois pose masking the movement’s essentially apolitical nature; and, secondly, that Breton’s beholdenness to Freud leads Surrealism to falsely privilege the unconscious over consciousness.²⁵⁴ However, one of Sartre’s secondary points within this argument is important to framing the relevance of Surrealism for Beckett’s post-war aesthetic. Surrealism, he argues, operates at “the *Impossible* or, if you like, the imaginary point where dream and waking, the real

²⁵² Beckett would become associated with The Galerie Maeght when it exhibited Geer and Bram van Velde’s paintings in 1948. “Peintres de l’empêchement” was written to accompany the exhibition, before being published in the gallery’s newsletter, *Derrière le miroir*.

²⁵³ Duthuit, “Sartre’s Last Class (II),” in *Transition Forty-Eight 2* (1948): 109.

²⁵⁴ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949); Surrealism’s relationship to Freud and psychoanalysis addressed at 175-176, its relation to Communism on 182-186; the 1947 Surrealist exhibition is directly addressed in a lengthy annotated footnote, 191-198.

and the fictitious, the objective and the subjective, merge. Confusion and not synthesis, for synthesis would appear as an articulated existence, dominating and governing its internal contradictions.”²⁵⁵ The confusions and tensions that Sartre claims compromise Surrealism’s integrity could easily describe a series of relationships present in Beckett’s post-war writing. Sartre’s position articulates a position strikingly close to Beckett’s in “La Peinture des van Velde” and “Three Dialogues”; the “impossible” point is opened through contradiction rather than synthesis, and the mutual nonrelation between the subject and object. The refusal of synthesis which Sartre laments in the Surrealists reflects a revision of Kantian philosophical traditions and claims to privilege the rational which Sartre, to an extent, still stood within. Sartre’s reading offers an important context to Beckett’s writing after 1945, which I understand to have adapted, rather than rejected, the influence of Surrealism in the light of its changed reception voiced by Sartre.

Surrealism’s movement from a position of importance, central to Paris’s intellectual and cultural circles during the 1920s and 30s, towards the post-war apotheosis of its late period,²⁵⁶ when Surrealism as a coherent group under Breton’s control had definitively dissolved, was

²⁵⁵ Ibid; translation of: “il convient plutôt de le nommer l’Impossible ou, si l’on veut, le point imaginaire où se confondent le songe et la veille, le réel et le fictif, l’objectif et le subjectif. Confusion et non synthèse: car la synthèse apparaîtrait comme une existence articulée, dominant et gouvernant ses contradictions internes.” Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 186.

²⁵⁶ The nature and duration of Surrealism’s later period is debated, and I call upon some of these discussions in chapter three. I date the start of Surrealism’s final phase to the 1938 Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The term “postsurrealism” is also useful, but adopting it here would possibly invite confusion. By the post-war years, “postsurrealism” was being used in two distinct senses: firstly, to describe the emergence of a particular set of American painters and visual artists, including Helen Lundberg, in the 1930s, and secondly (in the sense more applicable to Beckett’s milieu), to describe the aesthetic concerns held by a fragmented, but still interrelated, set of artists, who emerged out of the dissolution of Surrealism as a cohesive grouping. See Anna Balakian’s 1948 article “The post-surrealism of Aragon and Eluard,” *Yale French Studies* 2 (1948): 93-102.

registered by Beckett in his play *Eleutheria*, written in early 1947.²⁵⁷ Rather than rejecting Surrealism, the play accommodates the influence of the movement in the light of its ambivalences and the ways in which it was parodied and revised. Beckett's ambivalent relationship towards Surrealism is embodied in *Eleutheria* through embedded gestures towards sources and contexts that incorporate this ambivalence. One of these sources is Roger Vitrac's play *Victor, ou, Les enfants au pouvoir* (1928). Several commentators have observed these affinities between *Eleutheria* and *Victor*, while it is well-understood that Vitrac applied many of the techniques and innovations from Surrealist poetry and painting as well as from avant-garde theatre.²⁵⁸ But Vitrac's play also signals a reflective relationship with Surrealism, gesturing towards the contradictions and difficulties that would define the late moment of its long decline.

The titular protagonist of Vitrac's play lends his name to the central character, Victor Krap, in *Eleutheria*. Vitrac's play was first produced in 1928, and was directed by Antonin Artaud, at a time when both men had moved away from the close circle of Surrealists loyal to Breton and the principles outlined in the First Manifesto of Surrealism. Although Vitrac was not singled out for public excommunication from the group as Artaud had been, Breton had begun to quietly extradite Vitrac from the group in 1926. Indeed, the production of *Victor* at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry was the final catalyst needed to justify Artaud and Vitrac's final expulsion from the

²⁵⁷ Beckett dated the notebook in which the play is written, as begun on January 18th, and completed February 24th 1947. See Carlton Lake, ed., *No symbols where none intended: A Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, and Other Materials Relating to Samuel Beckett in the Collections of the Humanities Research Center* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas at Austin, 1984), 51. The next piece begun by Beckett was "Peintres de l'empêchement," undertaken in March 1947. See Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, 100.

²⁵⁸ The most sustained account of Vitrac's possible influence on Beckett is offered by Matthijs Engelberts, "Victor(ious) retreats: Beckett's *Eleutheria* and Roger Vitrac's Departure from Surrealism," in *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances and Cultural Contexts*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi, (Tel Aviv: Assaph Books, Tel Aviv University, 2003), 109-110n35. Vitrac's own avant-garde lineages are extensively treated in Brendan Béhar's influential biography, *Roger Vitrac: Un Réprouvé du surréalisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1966); on the wider influences of Dada and Surrealist visuality on Vitrac's theatrical presentation, see Martin Antle, "Towards Re-Presentation: Spatiality and Voice in Roger Vitrac's Surrealist Sketches," *Modern Language Studies* 20, no. 2 (1990): 19-27.

Surrealists under Breton's control in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism.²⁵⁹ Whether the play represents Surrealist drama in the strict sense has been a matter of debate, but at the time Vitrac conceived of the play he could be described as a dispossessed Surrealist.²⁶⁰

In Beckett's play, however, Surrealism is directly mentioned by Henri Krap to Dr. Piouk (suggestively named *André*), who states that his wife Violette "est restée un après-midi entier sous l'emprise de l'Exposition surréaliste" (*EIF*, 48; "was under the spell of the Surrealist exhibition for one whole afternoon" *El*, 42). Albright registers this as an ironising acknowledgement of the spell's power, leading from this line to assert that "Beckett himself spent his whole life under the spell of the Surrealist exhibition."²⁶¹ But this surely claims too much, and strangely dehistoricises Beckett's relationship to the movement. After all, the exhibition referred to was still in recent cultural memory; as Engelberts's reading of *Eleutheria* in the light of Vitrac's drama observes, precisely *which* Surrealist exhibition Beckett has in mind is unclear; he could be referring to the 1936 International Exhibition in London, to the 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in Paris, or to the "Surréalisme en 1947" exhibition at Galerie Maeght.²⁶² The first exhibition is perhaps the more likely reference – the manuscript of *Eleutheria* being completed in February 1947, before Breton's latter exhibition, while George Reavey, to whom Beckett was close, was involved in the organising committee for the exhibition in London.²⁶³ However, these historical points of detail are less important than the fact that

²⁵⁹ Breton lists those to be "left to their sad fate" outside Surrealism as: "Messrs. Artaud, Carrive, Delteil, Gérard, Limbour, Masson, Soupault, and Vitrac." Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 129-130.

²⁶⁰ For a concise account of the play's productions and its acceptance into the canon of Surrealist theatre, see Derek F. Connon, "In the Gutter, Looking at the Stars: Dualism in Vitrac's *Victor; ou, Les Enfants au pouvoir*," *Modern Language Review* 89 (1994): 595-605.

²⁶¹ Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics*, 9.

²⁶² Engelberts, "Victor(ious) retreats: Beckett's *Eleutheria* and Roger Vitrac's Departure from Surrealism," 109-110n35.

²⁶³ See Fifield, "Samuel Beckett and the interwar avant-garde," in Gontarski, *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 175.

Beckett engages with Surrealism by directly addressed mockery and embedded gestures towards Vitrac's heretical subversion of the movement.

If *Eleutheria* performs a burlesque of Surrealist theatre, as Bolin has suggested,²⁶⁴ its more powerful remnants remain in the terms described by Sartre in his critique of the movement. Through figures that visualise the unknowable and other states in resistance to representation, Surrealist tropes and practices are themselves used to revise Surrealism's claims upon unconscious expression as a revelatory mode of transcendence, while conversely drawing upon elements contained in these tropes that challenge to the Kantian subordination of representation to the rational.

Reverberations of various moments in the Surrealist aesthetic are plainly apparent in Beckett's later drama, especially, for example, the iconography of Surrealism and early cinema in *Happy Days/Oh les beaux jours* (1961) and the ghost of Tzara's Dadaist *Le Cœur au gaz* (*The Gas Heart*, 1921) in the Mouth of *Not I/Pas moi* (1972).²⁶⁵ Vitrac's drama shadows Beckett's writing through a more subtle series of remnants. The famous statement on death in *Victor*, "je meurs de la mort,"²⁶⁶ anticipates Beckett's desire to speak death in mature prose such as *Malone meurt*.²⁶⁷ The tautological nature of Vitrac's phrase, the conclusion to which is derived from its premise, is also apparent as an example of Beckett's "statement of itself" (*CP*, 10). By the nature of its form – finding, in Eliotian fashion, its end in its beginning – this use of language reflects back upon its own conditions of expression, the point past which nothing more can be said. Vitrac uses this form in a sentence that expresses the ontological limit-point of death; indeed, the repetitious nature of the statement only emphasises its deathliness.

²⁶⁴ Bolin, "A demented form of the particular," 269.

²⁶⁵ Brater, "Dada, Surrealism and the Genesis of *Not I*," 51; Knowlson, "Note sur les images visuelles de *Oh les beaux jours*," *Littérature* 167 (2012-13): 23-27.

²⁶⁶ Roger Vitrac, *Victor, ou, Les enfants au pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 89.

²⁶⁷ See Elizabeth Barry, "One's Own Company: Agency, Identity and the Middle Voice in the Work of Samuel Beckett," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 2 (2008): 119.

For Beckett, the reflection of form and content was an early point of interest, and rhetorical devices such as tautology provided a means for the style of Beckett's prose to address thematic concerns. As Christopher Ricks notes,²⁶⁸ "death-dealing tautology" is a prevalent feature in Beckett's poetry and prose, as, for example, when Mercier cries out: "Blessed be the dead that die!" (*MC*, 473; "Heureux les morts qui meurent!" *MCF*, 201). The reflection of ontological limits through a form seen to inhabit the limits of language is a philosophically important one, and one that I shall return to. An architecture of influence constructed to accommodate modes of formal reflections and affinities would suggest a Beckettian mode of influence through ongoing revision and rewriting, where scepticism is integral to the process of creative adaptation.

Through the influence of Surrealism, and Sartre's and Vitrac's ambivalent counterreactions, patterns are established in Beckett's texts through images associated with processes of vision. These processes include acts of looking similar to those listed in my citation from Beckett's 1945 review essay, "MacGreevy on Yeats," at the beginning of this chapter. Beckett's use of nominalised verbs in his list ("the turning to gaze"), and of the present continuous ("the eyes abandoning") suggest these "characteristic notations" involve both a concretion of the act and a preoccupation with ongoing movement, with the "changement." It is impossible to stop the "enfin vu" and fix it into a figure or an object of knowledge because, like the "cours de sable," it flows at the thresholds of vision.

²⁶⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 23.

Chapter Three

Periodical culture and Beckett's revisions of the visual

Beckett's artistic kinships were often established through publication. As my previous chapters have documented, Beckett's professional work was often inextricably linked to specific artistic communities. In the period from 1929 to 1939, Beckett's role as a translator and disseminator of material from Joyce's *Work in Progress* established a position within Joyce's circle, while his work as a translator of Surrealist poetry for *This Quarter* placed him, albeit liminally, in contact with Breton's Surrealist group. By contrast, Beckett's involvement in the production of the post-war *Transition* under Georges Duthuit's editorship provided a crucial occasion for him to adopt an aesthetic position of his own. As I will detail, *Transition* registered the aesthetic sensibilities and the concerns of several groups, without being reducible to any one position, while, as his close correspondence with Duthuit during this period attests, Beckett's work was no longer subordinated to the aims and ideals of others.

Beckett in *Transition*: revising and reflecting on Surrealism

Duthuit's post-war revival of Eugene Jolas's *transition* as *Transition*, signalling its new status by capitalising its initial letter, could not live up to the promise of longevity afforded by the legacy of its title. In spite of the presence of both Sartre and Bataille on its editorial board, its title signified the review's transitory status all too literally, and it would last for a mere six issues between February 1948 and October 1950. However, *Transition* was far from a fleeting concern for Beckett. As John Pilling and Seán Lawlor recently showed, Beckett's input actively determined the direction the review took.²⁶⁹ Not only did Beckett contribute his own work, including "Trois poèmes"/"Three Poems" in issue two and "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" in issue five of *Transition*, but he would translate and revise pieces for every one of the

²⁶⁹ John Pilling and Seán Lawlor, "Beckett in Transition," in Nixon, *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 83-95.

review's issues. Indeed, Lawlor and Pilling attest that Beckett served as the main editor for the fifth issue in which "Three Dialogues" appeared. In a sense, *Transition* was a product of Beckett's intellectual kinship with Duthuit, but it was not the only example of collaboration between the two men. As one of Duthuit's closest confidants during this period, Beckett also translated and revised much of Duthuit's own work as an art critic, including his book on Fauvism, *Les Fauves*.²⁷⁰

Duthuit clearly announced his intentions for *Transition* in the opening issue's editorial, placing its publication squarely in the context of post-war recovery: "TRANSITION, which appeared between the wars, and now TRANSITION Forty-eight belong to the close of something – in fact, of our civilization. To predict and measure disaster is the function of the journalist: the poet, the man who reflects and creates, moves instinctively from ends to beginnings. And beginnings are the matter here."²⁷¹ Moving from ends to "beginnings," Duthuit's declaration also makes it clear that his review will neither live under the shadow of its old self, Jolas's *transition*, nor the decade which encompassed its publication and in which it found its audience. Nevertheless, although *Transition's* editorial line almost exclusively focused on the dissemination of French texts in English translation, it remained like its precursor insofar as it naturally positioned itself towards a small, elite English-speaking audience, whose members would not have been far removed from Duthuit's and Beckett's own social standings. David Hatch has argued that the elisions in Beckett's text rely on the particular kind of elite audience to which they belonged: "the community of artists, critics, and aesthetes who one might expect to understand the enthymemic assumptions in the text."²⁷² Beckett's "Three Dialogues," then, manifests many of the broader cultural assumptions on which *Transition* was grounded.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

²⁷¹ Georges Duthuit, "Editorial," *Transition Forty-Eight* 1 (1948): 5.

²⁷² David Hatch, "Beckett in (t)*Transition*: 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,' *Aesthetic Evolution and the Assault on Modernism*" (PhD Diss., Florida State University, 2004), 141.

Duthuit himself had lived in New York from 1939 until the liberation of Paris in 1944.²⁷³ Meanwhile, Beckett's status as a foreign-born writer is highlighted in his short biography for the second issue of *Transition*: "a Dublin poet and novelist who, after long years of residence in France has adopted the French language as his working medium."²⁷⁴ The entry drives home his status as *étranger* by playfully quoting his "account of his reasons for now writing in French" in the deliberately chosen awkward French of a non-native speaker: "in a strong or rather weak Dublin accent: *'pour faire remarquer moi.'*"²⁷⁵ However, as others returned to a France they had abandoned during the war years (Duthuit and Breton included), Beckett's status as a writer from the politically neutral Ireland, who nevertheless had kept "long years of residence in France" subtly separates his reluctance to step forth from the shadows of literary composition and largely unsigned translations from any idea that he was disengaged from the debates of the times.

Some of the most crucial debates to which pieces in *Transition* often addressed themselves concerned whether Surrealism should be consigned to the past, or offered a rejuvenating force in the movement "from ends to beginnings" to which Duthuit had committed the review in his opening editorial. In and beyond *Transition*, one of the most prominent subjects of debate concerned whether Surrealism was truly a revolutionary force, as Breton continued to claim, or a conservative, fundamentally bourgeois group. Thus issue two of *Transition* published as a piece by Breton, "One Cause, Two-fold Defense," a translation which joined together an article first printed in *Fontaine* and Breton's introduction to his exhibition "Le Surréalisme en 1947." By contrast, "The Church and the French Writers" (divided into two parts, in issues 3-4 of *Transition Forty-Eight*), directly references Bataille in

²⁷³ See Rémi Labrusse, "Georges Duthuit: Notice bio-bibliographique," in Georges Duthuit, *Les Fames: édition critique*, ed. Rémi Labrusse (Geneva: Michalon, 2006), 431-37.

²⁷⁴ Georges Duthuit, "Note on Contributors," *Transition Forty-Eight* 2 (1948): 147.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

relation to Surrealism, while its title hints at Bataille's assertion in a review of Breton's 1947 exhibition that "the Surrealist Group is the Church and poetry is the God (or Devil)."²⁷⁶

The post-liberation period in France saw the return of exiled Surrealist figureheads such as Breton to Paris, and provided a fertile period of reflection upon the movement. In 1947, Maurice Nadeau, who would influentially review and promote Beckett's work, published his *Histoire du surréalisme*, while Theodor Adorno, Maurice Blanchot and (once the enemy of Surrealism's official group) Georges Bataille – all writers who would review, theorise and help to disseminate Beckett's post-war theatre fiction in the decade to come – wrote important, reflective articles on the movement before the end of the 1940s. In the conclusion to his *History of Surrealism*, even Maurice Nadeau admitted "it is easy to speak of the surrealist failure."²⁷⁷ Blanchot's "Reflections on Surrealism," published in issue eight of *L'Arche* in August 1945 (just three months after VE day), and collected in *La Part du feu* (*The Work of Fire*, 1949), perhaps announces the nature of Surrealism's remaining power. In his article, Blanchot argues that the formal dissolution of Surrealism as a distinct group does not negate the nebulously pervasive influence of its aesthetic: "There is no longer a school, but a state of mind survives. No one belongs to this movement anymore, and everyone feels he could have been part of it. [...] Has surrealism vanished? It is no longer here or there: it is everywhere. It is a ghost, a brilliant obsession. In its turn, as an earned metamorphosis, it has become surreal."²⁷⁸ Surrealism's influence, by Blanchot's assessment, thus became more deeply pervasive precisely because it had lost the definition that would commit it to an empirical, knowable presence.

²⁷⁶ Bataille, "Surrealism in 1947," in *Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 1994) 69; translation of: "le groupe surréaliste est l'Église et la poésie est le Dieu (ou le Diable)." Bataille, "Le Surréalisme en 1947," in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 260.

²⁷⁷ Nadeau, *History of Surrealism*, 240.

²⁷⁸ Blanchot, "Reflections on Surrealism," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 85.

Although atrophied, a certain form of Surrealism survived the war. Breton's own exhibitions and publications, notably "Surrealism in 1947," continued to garner attention and a new transatlantic following, despite the fact that the movement no longer crystallised around a defined circle with Breton at the centre. Bataille's more violently revolutionary (politically, sexually and aesthetically) "dissident" Surrealism perhaps took the most energy from this period. Yet Bataille's post-war discussions of Breton are warmer than the pre-war, for example (in conversation at Club Maintenant, 1948): "For Breton, painting is the same thing as poetry, and painting only exists insofar as it is poetry. I am more or less in agreement with him."²⁷⁹

The recurrence of Surrealist motifs and references to the movement throughout the diverse texts in *Transition* at least partly indicates that the Surrealists' search for a visual language did not speak to Beckett in isolation. The movement's formal prioritisation of the visual over the intellectual filtered into creative and critical discourses, a path strengthened by phenomenology's contemporaneous turn to the sensory, led by the publication of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. Yet, while the relevance of phenomenology's canon to Beckett's work has proven well-trodden ground, it has only recently been approached in a historicised context. Beckett's 1945 review for the *Irish Times*, "MacGreevy on Yeats," for example, draws towards its conclusion with a list of "the great of our time," in which he argues Jack Yeats belongs: "Kandinsky and Klee, Ballmer and Bram van Velde, Rouault and Braque, because he brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence" (*D*, 97). This is certainly an interesting list of names; Ballmer's painting *Kopf in Rot* was admired by Beckett during his 1936-7 tour of Germany which also brought him into contact with paintings by Kandinsky. Yet Ballmer was of further importance as an early critic of

²⁷⁹ Georges Bataille, "The Surrealist Religion," in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, 87. For related considerations of these post-war reflections on Surrealism, see David Cunningham, "The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde," *SubStance* 34, no. 2 (2005): 47-65 and Ellen E. Adams, *After the rain: Surrealism and the post-World War II avant-garde, 1940-1950*, Ph.D. Diss. (New York University, 2007).

Heidegger's writing, and Beckett had read his 1933 pamphlet, *Aber Herr Heidegger!* by the time of his review.²⁸⁰

Ballmer's pamphlet is important, as Matthew Feldman describes, because "it provides early evidence of a deep synthesis of contemporary philosophy with modernist art."²⁸¹ In agreement with Feldman, I add that by placing Ballmer among artists belonging to apparently disparate movements, Beckett actively contributed to this synthesis between modern art and philosophy, which took place both in pieces like his review of MacGreevy's study, and through the pages of *Transition*. For example, while Bataille only contributed briefly to the first issue with a reprint of his short essay, "The Ultimate Instant,"²⁸² he was a presence behind the pages as an advisory editor along with Sartre, and both are often mentioned as and among poets, artists and philosophers.²⁸³ Such unremarked pairings between philosophers and artists suggest that they were tacitly assumed to engage in closely related disciplines. Duthuit's mission to "reconcile the philosopher and poet," stated in *Transition's* final issue,²⁸⁴ is less a declaration of intent than an observation about one of *Transition's* guiding principles.

In the spirit of this disciplinary mixture, Beckett's post-war essays developed the peculiar lineage for modern art established in earlier pieces such as "MacGreevy on Yeats" and "Recent Irish Poetry," which brought together artists, such as Jack Yeats and Georges Braque, who belonged to otherwise disparate movements. For example, Beckett's essay, "La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon" begins on such familiar critical territory, leading from an

²⁸⁰ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries*, 154.

²⁸¹ Feldman, "Beckett, Husserl, Sartre and 'Meaning Creation,'" 27.

²⁸² Originally published as "Dernier instant," *Critique* 5 (1946): 448-57, repr. *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 116-25.

²⁸³ Such as the unsigned translation of Maurice Nadeau's review, first published in *Combat* in December 1947, of Bataille's *Haine de la poésie* (later revised and renamed *L'Impossible*), "Georges Bataille and the 'Hatred of Poetry,'" *Transition Forty-Eight* 4 (1948): 109-112.

²⁸⁴ Duthuit, "Sartre's Last Class," *Transition Fifty* 6 (1950): 87.

observation about Kandinsky's debts to folk iconography,²⁸⁵ to a remark on Karl Ballmer's affinities with Heidegger's philosophy calling him the "grand peintre inconnu [...] que les écrits de Herr Heidegger faisaient cruellement souffrir" (*D*, 133) [the great unknown painter (...) to whom the writings of Mr. Heidegger have been a source of cruel suffering]. The essay's emphasis on Ballmer's feelings of "cruel suffering" establishes a line of influence not in terms of a painterly aesthetic, but the artist's felt experience. Beckett's presentation of the relationship between artistic expression and experience develops networks of influence (such as Ballmer's suffering in response to reading Heidegger) which are wholly absent from the canvas, and only present for the artist. A work's philosophical situation, according to Beckett's argument, is registered through the artist's experience, and the compositional process expresses that experience. The important implication to Beckett's line of thinking is that lines of influence are displaced from the created object to the creating subject – from the work of art to the artist. This goes some way to explaining the most pressing lack in Beckett's essay on the visual arts: the works themselves. Personal affiliations and the creative experience of the artist are of the highest importance to how Beckett conceives of artistic influence.

It is far from insignificant that Blanchot followed his "Reflections on Surrealism" with a series of contributions to *Critique* between 1945 and 46 (when Georges Bataille was its principal, and sometimes sole, editor)²⁸⁶ that directly intersect with Beckett's work for *Transition*. These articles by Blanchot for *Critique* include a piece on René Char, a former Surrealist, whose "Pulverized Poem" ("Le poème pulvérisé," 1947) Beckett helped Maria Jolas translate for the first issue of *Transition* (Beckett to Maria Jolas, 1948, *LII*, 72) and "La parole sacrée de Hölderlin," which Beckett translated for a projected, but ultimately unrealised, 1951 issue of

²⁸⁵ "Grohmann démontre chez Kandinsky des réminiscences du graphique mongol." *D*, 118. Morin also notes that this comment reveals "that he [Beckett] was sensitive to the residual ethnic grounding of Kandinsky's work." Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 133.

²⁸⁶ See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: an intellectual biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 368-375.

Transition.²⁸⁷ Both of Blanchot's pieces posit a conception of the poetic image influenced by both Breton's and Heidegger's writings on art. As Christophe Bident puts it, Blanchot's essays during this period sought to "réhabiliter le surréalisme [...] et surtout celui de Char comme un art du refus"²⁸⁸ [rehabilitate surrealism (...) and above all Char's, as an art of refusal], and as such they often directed themselves towards the transformations of the image, and the divide between inner and outer contained in the Surrealist image.

According to Blanchot, Char's poems exist in a space of ignorance which shapes and defines the poetic imagination: "Poetic imagination does not attach itself to things and people such as they are given, but to their lack, to what is in them of the other, to *the ignorance that makes them infinite*."²⁸⁹ Refusing the limits imposed by "things as they are given," Blanchot posits ignorance as an active principle which binds "lack" to the infinite. With reference to Char's reflections on poetry, "Partage formel" ("The Formal Share," 1943), he writes: "the poem stays unjustified; even realized, it remains impossible: it is 'the mystery that enthrones' [...]. In it are united, in an inexpressible and incomprehensible connection, the obscure depths of being and the transparency of awareness that grounds."²⁹⁰ The poem "precedes all qualification, escapes all determination, and signifies only its own impossibility."²⁹¹ The inexpressible connection out of which, for Blanchot, poetry arises in the form of an impossible self-expression is repeated in Beckett's own assertion of artistic "impossibility" in "Three Dialogues": "an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility" (*TD*, 563). Blanchot also mirrors Beckett's assertion in "Peintres de l'empêchement" that the van Velde brothers' canvases lead towards "la chose qui

²⁸⁷ As Adam Winstanley details: "Beckett encountered Blanchot's work as early as October 1948, when he thanked Duthuit for an unspecified article, before translating passages from Blanchot's 'La parole "sacrée" de Hölderlin' and *Lautréamont et Sade* for prospective publication in *transition* [*sic*] in the Spring of 1951." Adam Winstanley, "Blanchot, da Vinci and Beckett's *Three Dialogues*," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 137.

²⁸⁸ Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible* (Seysel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 243.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Blanchot, "René Char," in *The Work of Fire*, 105.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

cache la chose” (*D*, 135), by asserting that “the poetic image, in the very absence of the thing, claims to restore the very foundation of its presence to us, not its form (what one sees) but the underside (what one penetrates), its reality of earth.”²⁹² The presentation of poetry as the penetration of the unseen is a familiar Surrealist pattern, yet Blanchot’s emphasis on conceptions of the ground incorporates Surrealist influences in proximity with phenomenology.

In “La parole sacrée de Hölderlin,” Blanchot readdresses the theme of the poetic image in relation to Heidegger’s concept of ‘the Open.’ Blanchot’s essay claims Heidegger’s term designates “the movement of opening that allows all that appears to appear,”²⁹³ although Blanchot resituates the term to once again address poetry’s “impossibility.”²⁹⁴ For Blanchot, the impossible provides the poetic value that Hölderlin calls Sacred, in a description that strongly suggests a reciprocated engagement with Beckett’s work:

How can the Sacred, which is “unexpressed,” “unknown,” which is what opens provided only that it is not discovered, which reveals because unrevealed – how can it fall into speech, let itself be alienated into becoming, itself pure interiority, the exteriority of song? In truth, that cannot really be, that is the impossible. And the poet is nothing but the existence of this impossibility, just as the language of the poem is nothing but the retention, the transmission of its own impossibility [...] it is linked to an “I speak, but speaking is not possible,” from which nevertheless emerges the little sense that remains to words.²⁹⁵

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁹³ Blanchot, “The ‘Sacred Speech of Hölderlin,” in *The Work of Fire*, 113.

²⁹⁴ Heidegger’s own use of the term “the Open” emphasises the indissoluble “rift” of clearing and concealedness at work in the appearance of the figure upon the ground: “set back into the earth and thus fixed in place is *figure, shape, Gestalt*. Figure is the rift in whose shape the rift composes and submits itself.” Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” 16.

²⁹⁵ Blanchot, “The ‘Sacred Speech of Hölderlin,” 126.

Given the fact that Beckett worked on translating Blanchot's article, a translation with which he struggled (Beckett to Duthuit, 10 April 1951, *LII*, 230-233), it is difficult to imagine that Beckett would not have recognised themes present in "Three Dialogues" and *L'Innommable*. Blanchot's description of Hölderlin anticipates themes addressed in his well-known discussion of *L'Innommable* in the review essay "Where now? Who now?", published and collected in *The Book to Come (Le Livre à venir)* in 1953, which asks "What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears into it?" The "void that becomes speech" in Beckett partakes of Hölderlin's Sacred, the "transmission of its own impossibility." The impossible and the unknown also proffer important connections between Blanchot's and Beckett's vocabularies. Blanchot's Beckett accords uncannily with Beckett's Proust, in whose work the unknown is unknowable, and Beckett's Bram van Velde, whose paintings express their impossibility.

The influence of phenomenological concerns on Blanchot's depiction of Beckett's literary style can also be traced in relation to Beckett's first practice as a translator of art criticism. In 1939, *The London Bulletin* (the short-lived production of the British Surrealist Society, edited by E.L.T. Mesens) published Beckett's first translation of a critical piece (and probably the only example of a completed translation of art criticism besides Duthuit's): Breton's laudatory exposition on Wolfgang Paalen.²⁹⁶ By then, Mesens's bulletin had already published Beckett's first piece on the van Veldes – a very short biographical note on Geer van Velde, printed alongside George Reavey's longer, philosophical assessment of his painting, and a poem by Brian Coffey, titled "The painter van Velde."²⁹⁷ This single page in the second issue of *The*

²⁹⁶ Pilling, *A Beckett Chronology*, 83.

²⁹⁷ The meeting of these three names on the same page materialises already present connections between the writers. George Reavey, as Beckett's first literary agent, published Beckett's *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* as one of the first releases from his own Europa Press in 1935. This was followed in 1937 by Coffey's collection *Third Person*, and the 1936 collection of Surrealist poetry *Thorns of Thunder*, which collected translations by both Coffey and Beckett (Beckett's drawn from his 1932 translations for *This Quarter*). Beckett had also praised Coffey's poetry in 1934, with "Recent Irish Poetry" (*D*, 75).

London Bulletin was one in a regular series of inserts from the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery, which appeared until the onset of war brought *The London Bulletin* to a close at the very end of 1939. Although easily passed over, Beckett's small contributions merit some attention here.²⁹⁸

"The bars open, we are in *Paalen's domain*"²⁹⁹ declares Beckett's rendering of Breton. This domain is not described critically, but evoked poetically. Subtly, Breton momentarily abandons a critical voice in order to take up a performative one. Having opened the bars, the visual form of Paalen's painting is evoked:

The long poplar avenue of the mind winding through childhood's visionary fears, the gnashing of teeth of the sentinel milestones flooded in light. Giant shades lurking in the shadow of the props of a theatre of shades that loom like fishing-sails ideally faded and rubbed with phosphorus by the moon.³⁰⁰

There are interesting parallels between how Breton contrasts light and its shadow, the "theatre of shades," and Reavey's description of Geer van Velde's painting. Towards the beginning of his contribution on Geer, Reavey asserts that "In his [Geer's] world there is no shadow, no grey waste, no plastic form, no classical perspective." Aspects from both Breton's and Reavey's essays are revived by Beckett in "La Peinture des van Velde," which echoes Breton's "grande allée mentale de peupliers" (alongside its allusion to Rimbaud's "Barbare") in the line: "s'ennuyer devant les tourbillons de viande jamais morte et frissonner sous les peupliers" (*D*, 127) [to bore oneself before the banners of meat never dead and trembling beneath the poplars], before going on to echo Reavey's description of Geer's world with the claim that the world inhabited by

²⁹⁸ Beckett submitted an unaccepted typescript of three poems in French to Mesens in 1939. John Pilling has speculated that the longest of these ("Match Nul") is likely drawn from his relationship with Peggy Guggenheim. The poems with commentary on them by John Pilling are currently unpublished, held but uncatalogued at the University of Reading.

²⁹⁹ Breton, "Wolfgang Paalen," trans. Samuel Beckett, *The London Bulletin* 10 (1939): 16; translation of Breton, "Wolfgang Paalen," in *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, 179.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Geer's painting is "sans poids, sans ombre" (*D*, 128) [without weight, without shadow]. Reavey's essay argues for a unique world constructed by Geer's paintings with specific reference to Heidegger's *Ungrund* – the ungrounded ground, formulated as 'the Open' in Heidegger's later work. Reavey writes of Geer that "In his world the familiar immediate object ceases to exist," and that any affirmation "is merely another mask beyond which lurk the terrors of the immeasurable *Ungrund*, the dark, irrational and inexpressible abyss."³⁰¹ Light and shadow operate as elements integral to an abstract, visual vocabulary also drawn upon in Beckett's essays. Reavey's assessment of the van Veldes and Breton's characterisation of Paalen cast their shadows upon Beckett's increasingly lyrical evocations of the contrast between Geer's light, weightless world and Bram's dark, internal state.

Beckett's translation of Breton's essay bears further traces of a conscious engagement with Surrealism via the language of phenomenology. Breton is clear about the original value offered by Paalen: "It was Paalen's achievement to succeed in seeing, in enabling us to see, *from within the bubble*."³⁰² According to Breton's argument, the view "from within" in Paalen's paintings stems from a particular visual mode that partners philosophical introspection: "charged poetically and at the same time spontaneously concentrated on such philosophical problems as those of becoming and encounter."³⁰³ Beckett's choice of "becoming" and "encounter" to translate "devenir" and "rencontre" suggests a ready understanding of the English equivalents for French philosophical terminology: "meeting" would be a more everyday rendering than "encounter," although Beckett's choice suggests the standard rendering of phenomenological concepts such as the "rencontre avec l'Autre" by the "encounter with the Other." Perhaps more importantly, Beckett's word-choice carries the sense of separation at the heart of this event lost in the English "meeting," and crucially it resists the implication that

³⁰¹ George Reavey, "The Painter van Velde," *The London Bulletin* 8 (1938): 16.

³⁰² Breton, "Wolfgang Paalen," trans. Beckett, *The London Bulletin* 10 (1939): 17; translation of Breton, "Wolfgang Paalen," *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, 180.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 16; 179.

Paalen's paintings represent resolved, complete worlds. What Breton characterises as a Surrealist problem in Beckett's rendering of this essay – "the problem of how to replace visual perception by the inner image"³⁰⁴ – arguably presents a deeper problem in Blanchot's handling of the poetic image. Nevertheless, Blanchot's theory of the image harks back to Surrealist visuality in a similar way to Beckett's reflective revisions of Surrealism.

Unsurprisingly, the post-war conditions of phenomenology (in the figure of Sartre) and Surrealism (Breton) form *Transition's* most clearly recurrent preoccupations.³⁰⁵ Spurred by extracts from *What is Literature?* in the first two issues, all but one of the issues in *Transition* stage a continuing dialogue between Duthuit and Sartre in the shape of Duthuit's continuing essay "Sartre's Last Class." Many features of Duthuit's essay are highly idiosyncratic, not least in its playfully argumentative style, often fixed around dialogues which dramatise a staged rivalry between Sartre and Breton. Indeed, in the essay's last instalment, Duthuit's narrator becomes a character apparently placed under interrogation, and obliged to make a personal avowal: "My mission: to reconcile the philosopher and poet [...] the twin mirrors of the coming festivities of humanity's revels: Sartre and Breton."³⁰⁶ As Pilling and Lawlor have detailed, Beckett was directly involved in the translation and editing of several of these instalments, including the above, final instalment for issue six.³⁰⁷ Beckett's presence was important enough to the review for Duthuit to ventriloquise his narratorial voice at the very end of this essay: "And Samuel Beckett. The voice falters, the scene grows dim, beings dissolve and merge, time flows in upon itself, relief is blurred, whiteness wells and ebbs, words quail and vainly seek surcease in the inviolable silence of the innermost dereliction."³⁰⁸ Although Duthuit does not directly cite from Beckett's work here, Duthuit clearly seems to be ventriloquising recognisable traits to Beckett's

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 17; 180.

³⁰⁵ See Uhlmann, "Beckett, Duthuit and Ongoing Dialogue," in Gontarski, *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 146-152.

³⁰⁶ Georges Duthuit, "Sartre's Last Class," *Transition Fifty* 6 (1950): 87.

³⁰⁷ Pilling and Lawlor, "Beckett in Transition," 89.

³⁰⁸ Duthuit, "Sartre's Last Class," 90.

literary voice. Added to its positioning as Duthuit's final words in the final issue, it almost reads as a gesture acknowledging *Transition's* indebtedness to Beckett's efforts.

This gesture was not singular on Duthuit's part, however. Duthuit's correspondence with Beckett indicates that he was rather fond of such ventriloquising, especially in dialogue form. Indeed, in a 1949 draft letter written by Duthuit, he stages a fascinating dialogue between himself and Beckett's character Malone, introduced with the declaration "Non. C'est trop délicat. Je préfère m'adresser à Malone."³⁰⁹ Such examples of dialogue form preceding Duthuit's role in "Three Dialogues" indicate that he was more active in shaping its composition than generally credited. Beckett's role in the production of *Transition* itself also suggests that Duthuit proactively shaped Beckett's responses to competing reassessments, like Sartre's, regarding the status of the work of art itself.

In the second extract from *What is Literature?* to appear in *Transition*, "Why Does One Write?" Sartre could as well be speaking for the writer as the painter: "He never touches anything but his own subjectivity, the object he has created being out of reach since it is not created *for him* [...] He goes right to the limits of the subjective but never crosses them."³¹⁰ For Sartre, although the work of art is brought into existence by a subjective perception that puts it out of reach – "it exists only when we *look* at it"³¹¹ – this does not undermine its status as an object. Sartre's essay claims the value of the work of art inheres in freedom, which he defines as the transcendent revelation of the object through creation: "since ordinarily the world appears merely as the boundary of our situation, the infinite distance which separates us from ourselves [...] aesthetic joy reaches that level of awareness on which I recover and assimilate what is pre-eminently *not* myself."³¹² Sartre's theory of "aesthetic joy" lapses into a weak echo of the

³⁰⁹ Georges Duthuit, undated typescript [1949], Archive Duthuit MS 206, fol. 6.

³¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Does One Write?," translated by Sonia Bownell, *Transition Forty-Eight 2* (1948): 87.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 93-94.

transcendental outcome to transcendental contemplation expressed by Schopenhauer; the “infinite distance which separates us from ourselves” is apparently not far enough to prevent the subject from recovering and assimilating the other side of the world’s boundary. In “Pour Avigdor Arikha,” his 1966 “lyric of criticism,”³¹³ Beckett calls this other side of the world “pre-eminently *not* myself” the “unself” (*D*, 152). Like Sartre’s description of the “*not* myself,” the “unself” does not signal a simple negation of the subject. Yet Beckett’s “unself” is not a recoverable aesthetic object; instead, it lies in the “impregnable without” after which eye and hand are forever “fevering.”³¹⁴

Although Beckett’s short text seems to respond to one of Arikha’s paintings, it does not exclude other possibilities (indeed, only the title is directly suggestive of a particular relation to the artist or his work). The “unself” is bound to a conception of Being through absence fundamentally resistant to any notion of aesthetic recovery. However, as David Lloyd has recently argued, Arikha’s fixation on “spaces that are ‘in-between’” finds a textual equivalent in Beckett’s development of scenes figured through scenes that are restricted to indeterminate “closed spaces.”³¹⁵ The “in-between” space exhibited in Arikha’s painting also carries significations from Beckett’s focus on the “space that intervenes” (*D*, 70) and the rupture of the perennial ‘subject-object relation.’

The conception of the world as a boundary of the subjective which the work of art can put into question reflects Sartre’s definition of Nothingness in *Being and Nothingness*: “Nothingness is the putting into question of being by being – that is, precisely consciousness.”³¹⁶ Although Sartre’s idealist claims for art seem outdated after his own innovations in existential phenomenology, the connection between art and consciousness, both bound to separation and

³¹³ Ruby Cohn, commentary to Beckett, “Pour Avigdor Arikha.” *D*, 178.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ David Lloyd, “‘Siege Laid Again’: Arikha’s Gaze, Beckett’s Painted Stage,” in Gontarski, *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 35.

³¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 102.

self-negation or (positively) self-reflection, would be a foundational proposition for other theories of art within and beyond phenomenology, from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*. In Duthuit's response to "Why Does One Write?" (separated from Sartre's text by the paper-thin divide of Beckett's own "Three Poems"), Sartre is first described as Surrealist, "under cover, perhaps, of a very special vocabulary; but a surrealist without parallel in the annals of surrealism."³¹⁷ Duthuit's argument partly rests upon several passing nods to *Nausea*, yet it would be difficult to square Duthuit's claim with Sartre's position in *What is Literature?* As well as taking direct aim at Surrealism, *What is Literature?* feels distinctly more conservative than the earlier novel. Whereas Roquentin's epiphany before the chestnut tree root is a moment of intense aesthetic and existential awareness, culminating in the sense of nausea founded upon his *failure* to meet the demand to "recover and assimilate" the essence of the tree, which mutely refuses to give itself up to his gaze, aesthetic contemplation in *What is Literature?* argues that the work of art comes into being at the moment when it gives itself up to the observer.

In addition to the problems inherent in resolving Sartre's texts with one another, it is even more difficult to understand where Duthuit's response situates itself in relation either to phenomenology or Surrealism. At no point in its five parts does "Sartre's Last Class" justify its association between Sartre and Breton, instead merely falling back on the claim that "everybody knows" this is so.³¹⁸ What further exacerbates the problematic status of Duthuit's commentary is its peculiar style of argumentation, slipping between praise and deprecation, (apparent) sincerity and (apparent) parody, without leaving any sense of a consistent viewpoint beneath its ironic play. However, Duthuit's correspondence with Beckett suggests the continuing importance of the 'subject-object relation' as the site of meaningful discussion and dispute.

³¹⁷ Duthuit, "Sartre's Last Class (II)," in *Transition Forty-Eight* 2 (1948): 109.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

More importantly, its role in their correspondence traces an exchange between the acts of translation, criticism and literary composition.

A letter written by Duthuit in June 1949, most likely within a few weeks of the time when Beckett began composing “Three Dialogues,” provides a notable example of this exchange. Duthuit praises Beckett’s essay “Peintres de l’empêchement,” while signalling his distance on one important point. Duthuit speaks here on behalf of fauvism, the movement he was in the middle of documenting, as he was working towards completing his book *Les Fauves*, which was loosely drawn from a series of short essays published in *Cahiers d’Art* between 1929 and 1931. Ralph Manheim’s translation in the same year, as *The Fauvist Painters*, would be closely supervised by Beckett at Duthuit’s request.³¹⁹ In his letter to Beckett, however, Duthuit departs from discussing fauvism to directly address Beckett as an artist and theorist in his own right. Duthuit makes it clear that the painters he associates with this movement in *Les Fauves*, including Cézanne, Braque and especially Matisse “ont considérés, comme tu le notes toi-même, que dehors et dedans ne faisaient qu’un, cela qu’on les voie disposer quelque ‘sujet’ sur une toile ou plus ou moins se passer de sujet” [considered, as you note yourself, that outside and inside are but one, whether they seek to arrange some ‘subject’ on the canvas or more or less dispose of the subject].³²⁰ Duthuit’s letter goes on to argue that if “outside and inside are but one,” as he claims the artists supported by him to assert, “Il n’y aurait donc de réalité que subjective et l’opposition classique, (comme tu maintiens pour en rejeter l’un et l’autre terme) sujet-objet, ne serait pas profonde: tout est sujet quant à la réalité. [...] Si la matière n’était pas elle-même réalité subjective, d’elle à nous rien ne passerait” [the only reality would be subjective and the classical opposition, (which you maintain in order to reject the one and the other term) subject-object, would be superficial: everything in reality is subject. (...)] If matter were not itself subjective

³¹⁹ John Pilling, “‘B’ and ‘D,’” *Journal of Beckett Studies* (2011): 200.

³²⁰ Archive Duthuit, undated letter to Samuel Beckett [circa. 10-11 June 1949]. MS 112, fol. 1. Parts of this letter are also reprinted in “Extraits de la correspondance entre Georges Duthuit et Samuel Beckett,” in *Tal-Coat devant l’image*, ed. Claire Stoullig (Geneva: Musées d’Art et d’Histoire, 1992), 111-112.

reality, from it to us nothing could pass].³²¹ Duthuit makes it clear that he admires the sentiment behind Beckett's claim to reject the 'subject-object relation' *tout court*, but he also regards this position to be mistaken. The "refus 'd'accepter comme donné le vieux rapport sujet-objet" (*D*, 137; "refusal to accept as given the old subject-object relation" *NO*, 879) expressed in "Peintres de l'empêchement," to which Duthuit refers here, is only at first glance a complete rejection of the 'subject-object relation.' Duthuit recognises that by committing himself to its rejection in both "La Peinture des van Velde" and "Peintres de l'empêchement," Beckett's theory of art paradoxically needs to maintain the "classical opposition" between subject and object.

Beckett and Duthuit's shared enamourment with the relation, or opposition, between subject and object brings with it the ghost of Beckett's approach to the question of artistic value in *Proust*. To recall the "Proustian equation" at the beginning of the essay, the "hoard of values" provides the "weapons" that keep the unknown unknowable (*P*, 511). By implication, the "unknown" protected by these values is the *valuable*. A valuable work of art would therefore be fundamentally resistant to revelation, to being "known" as an object. Beckett's reading of Proustian artistic values ghosts his post-war essays insofar as the value of the van Veldes' painting is seen to reside in the capacity of their canvases to represent processes of resistance and refusal, processes which signal the meeting of their surface with a kind of aesthetic content contained outside the bounds of possible representation. This content may be characterised in various ways – whether as the noumenal space of value or the ontological substance of Being – but its fundamental quality is one of resistance to representation, and it is frequently evoked in Beckett's post-war essays through their demand to reject the 'subject-object relation' *per se*. By requiring that they maintain the relation in order to reject it, Beckett's essays place their painterly subjects in an impossible situation. However, the impossible situation is precisely where Beckett – in common with Blanchot but in distinction to Duthuit – locates the resource of creativity, the source of artistic value.

³²¹ Ibid.

Duthuit's above assessment keenly dissects the significance of this paradox, connecting it to a dominant painterly concern. Yet, he then suggests merely rejecting half of Beckett's opposition, leaving the subjective to stand alone. But this misses the importance for Beckett's argument in these essays of the paradoxical bind produced by the artist's search for liberation. It is because this bind produces an impossible situation that "Peintres de l'empêchement" tentatively theorises the van Veldes' self-reflection on the form of this bind as an "art d'incarcération" (*D*, 137; "art of confinement" *NO*, 880). As John Bolin has observed: "Beckett argues that the modernity of the van Veldes' paintings is inseparable from their use of a self-reflexive form that [...] discovers a final image 'buried' beneath these levels: an image that reveals the incarceration of the artist within his work."³²² Indeed, the conclusion to Beckett's essay declares its internally paradoxical aesthetic (resting upon what it rejects), finding in the "absence" of relation and object "le nouveau rapport et le nouvel objet" (*D*, 137; "the new relation and the new object" *NO*, 880). Bound to recreate anew the terms it rejects, Beckett's art criticism uses the theme of absence to manifest the impossible.

Beckett's theory of an "art d'incarcération" expresses the deep connection between freedom and imprisonment at the root of artistic representation, a sense echoed in the "expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, *of its obligation*" which defines the modern work of art in "Three Dialogues" (*TD*, 563). As Peter Fifield notes,³²³ if "Three Dialogues" refuses freedom to the artist, they are still left with "obligation" as the other side of the Sartrean coin – expressed in Sartre's oft-repeated statement that "man is condemned to be free," most famously delivered in "Existentialism and Humanism" (1946).³²⁴ Beckett's critical insistence that artistic creativity is bound to an impossible situation can be seen to reappraise

³²² Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel*, 122-3.

³²³ Fifield, *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 26.

³²⁴ Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," trans. Philip Mairet, in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 32.

the tension arising from the Kantian division between *phenomena* and *noumena*, the divide revisited in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological writings.

Varieties of visual figuration recur throughout Beckett's post-war essays and fiction that cannot be easily accommodated in response to any one conceptual framework alone, whether Kantian, Sartrean or Surrealist. There are, however, shared motifs which cut across artistic, literary and philosophical movements referenced or gestured towards throughout Beckett's texts. One of the most persistent of these moments in Beckett's texts is a movement of incomplete emergence and dissolution between figure and ground. The repetition of elements in these scenes also suggests an expression of, if not a theory, at least an implicitly defined aesthetic within these texts. I further contend that these rest upon the "art d'incarcération" suggested in "Peintres de l'empêchement." Beckett's avowal of artistic modernity through incarceration supports the absence of relation attributed to Bram's painting in "Three Dialogues" (*TD*, 561), which in turn shadows the recurrence of scenes that narrate non-emergent visual figures in Beckett's fiction of the same period, from *Watt* to *Molloy*. In other words, this connection between "Three Dialogues" and Beckett's fictional voice is intimately connected to the idea of an "art of incarceration," where communication, relation, subject and object are never conclusively ruptured because they are posited as absent to begin with. In "Peintres de l'empêchement," which introduces the "art of incarceration," Beckett's argument is, as Duthuit suggests, wedded to these terms through their rejection. But, as Beckett suggested to Duthuit in a long letter which details his thinking on Bram van Velde while writing "Three Dialogues," he is interested in Bram's painting as a "refusal and refusal to accept refusal" ("refus et refus d'accepter son refus"; Beckett to Duthuit, 9 March 1949, *LII*, 136, 140). In "Three Dialogues," and through his correspondence with Duthuit, Beckett uses the themes of "absence" and "impossibility" to develop the germinal idea of incarceration further, making out of it an aesthetic framework that prevents the appearance of any assertion definitive enough to be rejected. Rejection, in other words, must reject itself.

The tension between freedom and limitation in Beckett's criticism works as an active mechanism beyond the Sartrean paradigm. A major aesthetic question raised in Beckett's critical writing relates to theories of abstract art, and the possibility raised by Wassily Kandinsky of a painting liberated from the constraints of classical, representational art – a painting concerned with form rather than the object. These debates also touch on Beckett's concerns with ignorance as a creative principle, and provided a background against which this principle could be visualised within the literary text.

Beckett and Kandinsky: critical and creative abstraction

In order to properly situate the relevance of Kandinsky's writings to Beckett's aesthetic, Beckett's relationship to abstract minimalism needs to be accounted for. As David Cunningham has outlined, the development of Beckett's prose style has long been framed as a movement from relative plenitude to one of abstract minimalism.³²⁵ Spurred by the switch from writing in English to writing in French, Beckett's gradual move towards a form of abstraction specific to his work was frequently read as a process of casting off national and historical markers and traces of other literary influences. Critical responses to Beckett's early writings in French were commonly articulated along the lines suggested by A. Alvarez, who was content to call French "the perfect instrument" for Beckett because "its own special rhetoric runs continually towards abstraction."³²⁶ Alvarez went on to argue that, by adopting an inherently abstract language, Beckett "has evolved a style which is clear, hard and precise and yet as without history and associations as the characters who speak it."³²⁷ Yet this narrative of progressive abstraction rests on a concept of the abstract that Beckett understood in relation to specific theories of visual art,

³²⁵ David Cunningham, "Asceticism Against Colour, or Modernism, Abstraction and the Lateness of Beckett," *New Formations* 55 (2005):104-119.

³²⁶ A. Alvarez, *Beckett*, Fontana Modern Masters (Glasgow: Fontana and Collins, 1973), 46.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

such as the legacy of Schoenberg and Kandinsky's "abstract language" John Gruen reports Beckett observing in his own work.³²⁸

Beckett's statement to Gruen makes it clear that his movement towards increasingly abstract forms of writing took place in relation to traditions of artistic abstraction that he understood well. This position certainly complicates claims that his abstract language produced a style "without history and associations."³²⁹ Rather, as Sinéad Mooney has suggested, affinities between the linguistic and the visual have less to do with a downward spiral into the void of isolated abstraction than with foregrounding the hesitation marks between presence and absence, the qualities that Beckett found in Bram van Velde and that are reflected in rhetorical processes common to Beckett's prose Trilogy.³³⁰ Although the conception of Beckett's writing as a steady movement towards absolute minimalism remains resiliently present,³³¹ several recent studies have unpicked the various historical settings and influences that informed Beckett's uses of abstract style in specific relation to Kandinsky's theories of art.³³² Beckett's mention of Kandinsky as a forefather is just one sign among many others of his ongoing engagement with Kandinsky's work and the principles of abstraction that underpinned the painter's compositional practice and theory.

³²⁸ Gruen, "Samuel Beckett talks about Beckett," *Vogue* 154 (December 1969): 210.

³²⁹ With some irony, Alvarez's description of Beckett's abstract style reflects the ways a nationalist tradition of French poetry was constructed by several writers, notably Thierry Maulnier, whose *Introduction à la poésie française* argues that French poetry is the closest expression of the poetic itself because the most abstract. Beckett was familiar with Maulnier's argument, his *Introduction* being among the most well-used volumes in Beckett's library at his death. See Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 75; Maulnier, *Introduction à la poésie française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), especially 35-36.

³³⁰ Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 130.

³³¹ A prominent example being Pascale Casanova's 1997 study *Beckett l'abstracteur*, trans. Gregory Elliott as *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*.

³³² Tønning, *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama*, 64-68; Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 127-35; Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson, "Beckett and Abstraction," in Feldman and Mamdani, "Beckett/Philosophy," 251-264.

Kandinsky was, like Beckett, an exile. In 1934, faced with persecution and censorship from the newly ascendant Nazi leadership, Kandinsky moved from Germany, where he had achieved prominence largely through his association with the Bauhaus, to Paris, where he settled until his death in 1944. Beckett was certainly aware of the challenge Kandinsky's use of abstract form posed to Nazi ideology. During his journey through Germany in 1936-37, Beckett was alerted to the ways in which abstract art such as Kandinsky's had been labelled "degenerate"; details of Beckett's discussions with Will Grohmann, among the most influential early critics and biographers of Kandinsky, are well known.³³³

In the last decade of his life, Kandinsky became an influential presence in the Parisian communities of artists and his influence was deeply felt long after his death. He is certainly present in Beckett's writing during the 1930s and 40s: his name and the conceptual terminology he coined recur in Beckett's essays on modern art, which regularly invoke visual elements such as "coloured" and "receding" "planes" that were integral to Kandinsky's practice as an artist and a theoretician. The synthesis of colour and form pioneered by Kandinsky can be seen, for example, to inform "Three Dialogues" at the moment when Beckett's critical persona, "B.," asks, "For what is this coloured plane, that was not there before?" (*TD*, 563). Moments like this are easily overlooked, not least because, by their nature, the terminology used to describe principles of abstraction possesses a beguiling generality that seems to resist traces of influence. But, as Michel Henry observes, "Kandinsky considers points, lines, planes and colours to be the 'basic elements' of all painting,"³³⁴ and Beckett's uses of these terms are often brought forward in specific proximity to mentions of Kandinsky's name.

Even where Beckett's essays give Kandinsky short shrift, their frequent recourse to the terminology of visual abstraction so integral to Kandinsky's writing belie a deeper commitment to Kandinsky's methods, which is manifest through the recurrence of visual tropes harking back

³³³ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries*, 135, 139; James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 250-52.

³³⁴ Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: on Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 10.

to Kandinsky's major theoretical writings (such as the coloured plane). At other times, Beckett's seemingly honest statements of opinion cover a barely-suppressed irony. Thus, in "Peintres de l'empêchement," Beckett remarks: "Il semble absurde de parler, comme faisait Kandinsky, d'une peinture libérée de l'objet" (*D*, 136; "It seems absurd to speak, as Kandinsky has, of a painting freed from the object" *NO*, 879). Yet what Beckett calls absurd here is closely reflected by the state of "impossibility" lauded in "Three Dialogues" as the foundation of a legitimate art form.

In remarking upon the absurdity of an art "freed from the object," Beckett's essay touches upon one of the most salient concerns addressed in his post-war essays: whether it is possible to discover, or create, a mode of artistic representation not bound to "le vieux rapport sujet-objet" (*D*, 137; "the old subject-object relation" *NO*, 880). This relation is a recurrent concern in Beckett's essays on modern art, where it is used to frame visual representation according to the relationship between a knowing subject and a known content, and asks (albeit implicitly) whether unknowable states can be given a visual representation on the painter's canvas. To a certain degree, Beckett's post-war essays on art develop the dichotomy between perception and the intellect or consciousness that was already present in his first essays on literature, "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce" and *Proust*. But Beckett's post-war essays on visual art intervene in the more immediate context of contemporaneous debates about the premises of Western mimetic art.

Beckett's correspondence with Duthuit reveals his keenness to work through the intractable difficulties posed by a theory of art that would attempt to escape the trap of representational relations between subject and object. His letter to Duthuit of 9 March 1949 reveals the seriousness of his reflection: "Whatever I say, I shall be locking him [Bram] into a relation. If I say that he paints the impossibility of painting, the lack of all relation, object, subject, it will look as if I am putting him into relation with this impossibility, this lack; in front of them. He is inside: is that the same thing? Rather, he is them, and they are him, fully" (Beckett to Duthuit, 9 March 1949, *LII*, 136, 140). These comments are immediately followed by a plea or protestation: "I am only trying to point to the possibility of an expression lying outside the

system of relations [système de rapports] hitherto held to be indispensable to anyone who cannot be content with his own navel" (*LII*, 136, 140-41). In the published version of "Three Dialogues," which derives from these letters, Beckett ties this "system of relations" more directly to a critique of the dominant presumptions made by Western art, and defines a history of the "increasing anxiety of the relation itself" via "its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee" (*TD*, 563). Speaking as "B.," Beckett goes on to make his closing "case" for Bram van Velde's art as "an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" after evoking "a kind of Pythagorean terror, as though the irrationality of pi were an offence against the deity" (*TD*, 563). Beckett's evocation of Pythagoras, like the "coloured plane" that intervenes at the end of B.'s statement, may seem inexplicable. Yet the theme of obligation is also paired with a Pythagorean metaphor in "Les Deux Besoins," which draws out its metaphor for artistic creation from the Pythagorean star formed by two intersecting triangles. The Pythagorean "signature" outlines the essay's argument that a negotiation between irrationality and the principle of "besoin" (*D*, 56), or "need," which is present again in the "besoin de voir" that fixes the object in "La Peinture des van Velde" (*D*, 126), is integral to artistic expression

Beckett's use of the term "besoin" both anticipates the "obligation" faced by the artist in "Three Dialogues," and draws upon the principle of "necessity" Beckett had used to describe his most successful poetry in the early letter to Thomas MacGreevy I discussed in chapter two, drawing a parallel with an anti-intellectual, poetic quality that he calls "arborescent or of the sky" (Beckett to MacGreevy, 18 October 1932, *LI*, 134). By framing artistic creativity in terms of "need" and "necessity," Beckett lays claim to the idea that, as Morin argues, "literature should not serve representation, but, rather, a principle of necessity internal to itself,"³³⁵ a set of concerns significantly shadowed by Kandinsky's principle of "internal necessity" as it is

³³⁵ Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 130.

expressed in *On the Spiritual in Art*. For Kandinsky, the truth of the pure work of art derives from internal necessity, and he employs a series of metaphors involving vibrations of colour, form and various kinds of aesthetic harmony in order to articulate a new theory for representing the object itself. The “choice of object” by the artist is only a “contributory element in the harmony of form,” and Kandinsky argues that the artist should make this choice by looking within his or her psyche, rather than towards “Nature.” Any choice of artistic subject matter or substance, in other words, “must be based only upon the principle of the purposeful touching of the human soul” – or “the principle of internal necessity.”³³⁶

That Beckett expressed many of these connections to Duthuit is no small matter. *Cahiers d'Art*, edited by Christian Zervos, published several pieces by Kandinsky, as well as Beckett's essay “La Peinture des van Velde” and several articles by Duthuit, which largely focused on Byzantine art and Fauvism. Kandinsky expressed interest in Fauvism, drawing attention to his feelings of closeness to Matisse,³³⁷ while Duthuit, Matisse's son-in-law, is widely recognised as a vital intermediary between Beckett and the art world. Beckett knew Duthuit's work as an art critic well beyond his translation work for *Transition* and on *Les Fauves*.³³⁸ Duthuit's own take on art history was distinctive: he was an expert on Byzantine art, which he vaunted for its non-representational aesthetic, arguing in his 1933 study of Byzantine art that, contrary to “le goût des historiens contemporains de formation classique” [the tastes of contemporary classical historians],³³⁹ the Byzantine artist “obéit à une impulsion contraire et cherche à mettre en valeur les qualités mêmes de la matière sur laquelle il opère, tenant compte, pour établir sa composition, des dimensions, de la forme, des colorations changeantes de celle-ci, de ses facultés de transparence ou d'assourdissement. Il travaille avec les clartés, avec les ombres, avec l'éclat

³³⁶ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 169.

³³⁷ Christian Derouet, *Kandinsky in Paris* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1985), 47-48.

³³⁸ Lawlor and Pilling, “Beckett in Transition,” 88-92.

³³⁹ Duthuit, “L'Art Byzantin,” in *Représentation et présence: premiers écrits et travaux*, ed. Yves Bonnefoy (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 260.

étouffé du jaspé et de l'onyx."³⁴⁰ [The Byzantine obeyed a contrary impulse and sought to bring forth qualities common to the material on which he worked, taking account, in creating his composition, of its dimensions, its form, its changing colourations, its transparent or muted aspects. He is working with illuminations, with shadows, with the suppressed glimmerings of jasper and onyx.]

The significance of Byzantine art for theories of modern painting lies in its capacity to convey the conditions of its creation and tackle aspects of lighting and colour as being part of a continual process of change, refusing any fixity of interpretation, whether by the casual viewer or the art historian. Duthuit's reflection on the endurance of Byzantine mosaic and sculpture, which observes "Il s'agit là de pierres extrêmement résistantes" [These are extremely resistant stones],³⁴¹ foreshadows several aspects of Beckett's thinking on visual art. However, it particularly resonates with the language of painterly resistance in Beckett's essay, "Peintres de l'empêchement," which argues that since "L'objet résiste toujours à la représentation," "il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade." (*D*, 135-26; "The object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation. [...] There remain to be represented the conditions of that elusion" *NO*, 879). These states of continuous "resistance" and "impossibility," which Beckett connects with an object that cannot be represented, are here presented as a great resource for artistic creativity and the imagination. This theory of artistic abstraction shares common ground with Kandinsky's concerns and with some aspects of Duthuit's emphasis on art history as non-representational. Interestingly, in an undated letter to Beckett from 1949, Duthuit describes Kandinsky around 1913 (the period when he produced *On the Spiritual in Art*) as the leading light in a generation that has rarely dared to follow the "chemin parallèle à la présence et à l'absence, c'est possible, avec des franges en bordures, des deux côtés à la fois"

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

[path that parallels presence and absence, it is possible, with the borders touching the edges, the two sides at once].³⁴²

As mentioned previously, Beckett encountered Kandinsky's work in diverse contexts. John Pilling has argued that Beckett may have translated Kandinsky's short contribution to the catalogue for Peggy Guggenheim's 1939 exhibition "Abstract and Concrete Art."³⁴³ Beckett certainly knew much of Kandinsky's work from the Bauhaus and later Paris periods. The two men even met at the end of that year, after which Beckett would describe Kandinsky to George Reavey in warm (if rather condescending) terms, calling him a "Sympathetic old Siberian."³⁴⁴

It is telling that Beckett should continue to reflect on Kandinsky's writing after the War. In a 1950 letter, also addressed to Reavey, Beckett evokes his reading of *On the Spiritual in Art* and his difficulty with the introduction to the 1947 American edition by Stanley William Hayter (Beckett to George Reavey, 9 May 1950, *LII*, 202). Interestingly, this short essay, entitled "The Language of Kandinsky," summarises several aspects of Kandinsky's painting in ways that resonate with Beckett's own critical preoccupations at that time, particularly with his evocations of an artistic search to represent change or motion in "La Peinture des van Velde" (*D*, 129). Hayter opposes the "arrested" representation of the object to Kandinsky's abstraction:

In the traditional art of the West motion had been represented almost exclusively as arrested; depicted as that position of an object which called for a conclusion by the observer as to its consequence. Kandinsky, however, figures motion as an element itself without invariably representing that which moves or has moved [...]. Sometimes a series of points,

³⁴² Duthuit, undated letter to Beckett, Archive Duthuit, MS 108, fol. 2.

³⁴³ It seems that Beckett's translation was another piece intended for publication in *The London Bulletin*. Kandinsky's original French is reprinted in issue 14 (May 1939), without Beckett's translation. However, it carries the strangely defensive editorial note in the issue's addenda, "'The editors of the London Bulletin accept no responsibility for the ideas expressed in the article by Mr. Kandinsky printed on page 2 of this number.'" See Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, 83.

³⁴⁴ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 289; Beckett to George and Gwynedd Reavey, 6 December 1939, *LI*, 670.

traces like trajectories or orbits describe this movement; often an unbalance of tension between the forms demonstrates the motion.³⁴⁵

Beckett's characterisation of Western mimetic art in "La Peinture des van Velde" leads to a similar discussion, but in highly generalised terms (with an echo of *les arts décoratifs* and Kandinsky's criticism of representational art): "A quoi les arts représentatifs se sont-ils acharnés, depuis toujours? A vouloir arrêter le temps, en le représentant" (*D*, 126) [For what did the representational arts always work so fiercely? To want to arrest time, in order to represent it]. By contrast, Beckett argues that the cutting edge of modern art, as represented by the paintings of Geer and Bram van Velde, distinguishes itself because this work resists the necessary fixity of the viewer's gaze, "the need to see": "C'est la chose seule, isolée par le besoin de la voir, par le besoin de voir. La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l'objet pur" (*D*, 126) [It's the thing alone, isolated by the need to see it, by the need to see. The thing immobile in the void, here lies the visible thing, the pure object]. If representational painting accedes to this need without question, the van Veldes take up the question "au cœur du dilemme [...]: Comment représenter le changement?" (*D*, 129) [at the heart of the dilemma (...): how to represent the change?]. Such "changement" opposes the fixed object of representational painting, which the "need to see" halts in time. Motion is represented by figures that disintegrate into their backgrounds but never crystallise into objects. Tension and imbalance becomes the rule, and the spaces between figures – the background, the plane, the surface of the canvas itself – gradually acquire a signficatory potential.

Beckett's essay also addresses this question in the only section of his essay that examines the question of form in the van Veldes' paintings: "Que dire de ces plans qui glissent, ces contours qui vibrent, ces corps comme taillés dans la brume, ces équilibres qu'un rien doit rompre, qui se rompent et se reforment à mesure qu'on regarde? Comment parler de ces

³⁴⁵ Stanley William Hayter, "The Language of Kandinsky," introduction to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, edited by Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, 1947), 16.

couleurs qui respirent, qui halètent?” (*D*, 128) [What about these planes that flow, these contours that glisten, these bodies like incisions in the fog, these delicate balances it would take nothing to break, which break apart and reform as long as one watches? How to express these colours that respire, that gasp?]. Beckett’s analysis draws on a vocabulary distinctly reminiscent of Kandinsky’s theorisation of planes and colours, and of his arguments on the dynamism of colour. In *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912), Kandinsky evokes colours that “can recede or advance, strive forward or backward, and turn the picture into a being hovering in mid-air,”³⁴⁶ and in *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), he describes planes that *flow*, placing figure and ground in a dynamic, ever-changing relation to one another, according to “indistinct and mobile” boundaries.³⁴⁷ The mixture of abstract principles with organic descriptions and metaphors (“bodies” that “respire” and “gasp”) opens up an interesting context for reading Beckett’s use of visual tropes in his drama as well as his fiction, where forms and colours often abide by an organic principle, and are often endowed with an active agency and a peculiar vitalism.

Formal reflections of Kandinsky in *Watt* and beyond

The idea of a mode of abstraction rooted in organic or anthropomorphic principles expressed through movement and change is articulated directly in two interconnected scenes in *Watt*, which pointedly evoke Kandinsky’s theories. Firstly is the scene where Watt tries to interpret the point, line and plane picture that hangs in Mr. Knott’s room:

A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue [...] Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and circle entered together

³⁴⁶ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 195.

³⁴⁷ Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in *Complete Writings on Art*, 609.

upon the same plane. [...] And was it not rather the circle that was in the background, and the point that was in the foreground? (*W*, 272)

Emilie Morin and C.J. Ackerley have separately discussed the influence of Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* on this scene.³⁴⁸ However, early critical interpretations of Mr. Knott's picture tended to read the painting as a contrived analogy of Watt's position in the household. In one of the earliest studies on Beckett's canon, Ruby Cohn claimed this scene formed one of many in *Watt* dealing with "images that contain [...] a comic and pathetic symbolism," and that "Watt's anxiety about the dot's relationship to the circle – broken though it is – must be seen as his anxiety about himself in Mr. Knott's world, since he has voluntarily abandoned any other. [...] he cannot situate circle and dot on the same plane; he can establish no relationship with Mr. Knott."³⁴⁹ John Fletcher committed a similar reading, limiting its place to an analogy of Watt's transitory position in the Knott household, a figure occurring "in the same context of alienation from and integration into one's proper context."³⁵⁰ More recent interpretations have been less restrictive, among which C.J. Ackerley's annotation once again emphasises that behind Watt's need to interpret the painting according to the relation between two Gestalt figures lies his need to be situated in the world: "point and circle [...] testify to Watt's inability to find stability in a world where figure and ground do not form a firm Gestalt."³⁵¹ According to this view, the role of Knott's painting is far from simply mimetic; instead, it foregrounds the foundational visual relationships that structure the subject's perceptual experience of the world.

The structure of the picture resurfaces once more when Watt waits at the train station: "Watt was beginning to tire of running his eyes up and down this highway, when a figure, human apparently, advancing along its crown, arrested, and revived, his attention. Watt's first thought

³⁴⁸ Ackerley, *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys: The Annotated Watt*, 129.4; Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 135.

³⁴⁹ Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1962), 79.

³⁵⁰ John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), 360.

³⁵¹ Ackerley, *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys*, 129.4.

was that this creature had risen up out of the ground, or fallen from the sky” (*W*, 353). The figure before Watt gradually dissolves under his attentive gaze, disappearing “without any interruption of its motions,” its only description is that it “grew fainter and fainter” (*W*, 355). This visual motif, involving an attention to the interaction between figures and their background, anticipates some persistent visual motifs in Beckett’s later fiction. These visual tropes recur – without being theorised – in his art criticism, for example in his description of Jack Yeats’s painting as “the turning to gaze from land to sea” in his 1945 review essay “MacGreevy on Yeats” (*D*, 97), written in the same year as his completion of *Watt* and his first van Velde essay. In parallel, Beckett’s fiction of the 1940s often describes a dynamic opposition between glimpsing (or glancing) and gazing, which frames accidental perception as the originating moment of consciousness.

The unresolved problems posed by figuration in *Watt* resonate with Kandinsky’s description of the fundamental principles of abstract composition in *Point and Line to Plane*, where Kandinsky describes the canvas in terms of the interplay between forces:

Whereas the straight line is the complete negation of the plane, the curved line bears the kernel of the plane within itself. If conditions remain unchanged, and the two [horizontal and vertical] forces continue to bowl the point further and further forward, the resulting curve will sooner or later arrive once more at its starting point. Beginning and end converge and at the same time vanish without trace. The least stable and at the same time the stablest plane figure comes into being – the circle.³⁵²

The language used by Kandinsky to describe the presence of visual figures on the canvas is reflected at numerous points throughout Beckett’s writing, especially at moments where it fixes on the act of figuration itself. Erik Tonning has convincingly argued that Kandinsky’s early, abstract compositions decisively informed Beckett’s later theatrical works, with their own drama

³⁵² Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, 599.

of contrasting “forces” between “remnants of certain emblematic objects [...] in protracted, gestural form.”³⁵³ Similar reflections are present in Beckett’s residual prose pieces, such as “Imagination Dead Imagine” (1965), which presents two bodies in the form of “two semicircles” within a white rotunda, coming in and out of being in a movement of endless vanishing without trace (“No trace anywhere of life [...] ascend, it vanishes” *TFN*, 87) and reappearance (“Rediscovered miraculously after what absence” *TFN*, 88). Despite the apparent bareness which defines this scene of imaginative extinction, the interaction between planes and figures offers an emblematic instance of Beckett’s continuing engagement with principles of abstraction expressed by Kandinsky.

Beckett’s sometimes deprecating remarks towards Kandinsky— whether calling his vision of art liberated from its object “absurd” (*D*, 136; *NO*, 880) or referring to “the every man his own wife experiments of the spiritual Kandinsky” (*TD*, 563) – take on a different dimension when examined in the light of his many borrowings from Kandinsky’s terminology, or when they are examined alongside other declarations situating Kandinsky (or people close to him such as Paul Klee and Will Grohmann) among, for example, “the great of our time” (*D*, 97). There are other manifestations of his ambivalent admiration: Morin observes that an early draft of “MacGreevy on Yeats” finds Beckett making a brief reference to Kandinsky’s theory of the Spiritual in art as “something of a celebration of Beckett’s conceptual breakthrough.”³⁵⁴

Beckett’s 1964 statement on abstraction and the legacy of Kandinsky also takes on a different dimension when examined in this context. In his interview with Gruen, Beckett readily pairs “ignorance” with intuition, an “intuitive despair,”³⁵⁵ suggesting that at the root of his conception of the creative process lies a connection between a cultivated state of ignorance and the cognitive foundations of representation. Beneath this, Beckett also establishes a secondary connection with an “abstract language” that signals his distance not from abstraction (the

³⁵³ Tønning, *Samuel Beckett’s Abstract Drama*, 65.

³⁵⁴ Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 130.

³⁵⁵ Gruen, “Samuel Beckett talks about Beckett,” 210.

liberation from the object), but from the concrete, from both form and the “formal context” of theory.³⁵⁶ We may trace in Beckett’s terminology some of the debates around the term “abstract” taken up by Kandinsky at several points, including in the catalogue piece “Abstract and Concrete Art,” which emphasises that “abstract” painting is better expressed as “concrete painting.”³⁵⁷

Kandinsky’s writings define the role of the background according to an active conception of space, forces and tensions, describing planes capable of receding and accumulating. This conception resonates with the ways in which Beckett describes the different approaches of the van Velde brothers in “Peintres de l’empêchement,” united in their capacity to portray “plan sur plan des transparences imparfaites” (*D*, 136; “plane after plane of imperfect transparencies” *NO*, 880). In Kandinsky’s compositions, the background is not connected to a mere absence of form, but an organic entity open to mutability. As Christopher Short has noted,³⁵⁸ Kandinsky’s theoretical writings display a penchant for prefixes such as *ur-* when describing general compositional frameworks, for example: *Urbild* (“primal image”³⁵⁹) and *Urgestalt* (“primordial form”³⁶⁰). The “ur” state of pictorial form, in turn, harks back to Goethe’s *Gestalttheorie*, a unified theory of the organic and aesthetic that spurred Goethe’s conception of an *Urphänomenon* underlying and encompassing all representational form in his *Theory of Colours* (1810) – a text that deeply influenced Kandinsky. It is also significant that, when Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus school (1922-33), these ideas became important for experimental psychologists such as Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler, whose works were well known to students and teachers at Bauhaus, especially Paul Klee.³⁶¹ Beckett’s own interest in experimental psychology,

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Kandinsky, “Abstract and Concrete Art,” 840.

³⁵⁸ Christopher Short, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909-1928: The Quest for Synthesis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 34-37, 138.

³⁵⁹ Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, 552.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 555

³⁶¹ Rainier K. Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, trans. Stephen Mason and Simon Lèbe (Osfieldern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz, 1999), 200.

including Gestalt psychology, has been well-documented. These shared interests also go to a wider framework of common influences over Beckett and Kandinsky's conception of art – including various strains of mysticism and, perhaps most substantially, Schopenhauer's theories of art and optics.³⁶²

Beckett's "poetics of ignorance"³⁶³ displays striking similarities with Kandinsky's aspiration to represent the non-intellectual or unknowable, and with his view that the conditions of cognition can only be represented by expression purged of intellectual form – or by perceptual form deliberately held in abeyance. By placing ignorance in dialogue with abstraction, Beckett acknowledges in the Gruen interview the intellectual traditions behind much twentieth-century art theory, particularly that which was interested in figuring the primal through vibrations which, like Molloy's thoughts, operate at "le niveau inférieur à celui de la ratiocination" (*MF*, 66; "a lower frequency [...] than that of ratiocination" *M*, 45).

This uneasy vacillation between intellection and ignorance is addressed in Kandinsky's 1929 recollection, "Two Suggestions." Here he recounts the advice that two art teachers impressed upon him: the first said to him as a schoolchild, "Boys, drawing is a difficult thing. It's not like Latin or Greek – here, you have to think!", and, much later, the second, Anton Azbè, infamously said, "You've got to know anatomy properly. But woe betide you if you think anatomy in front of the easel! When he's working, the artist shouldn't think!" Recalling their advice, Kandinsky concluded: "I have followed these two suggestions to this day and have remained true to them to the end."³⁶⁴ Remaining "true" to the contradictory demands to think and *not* to think clearly forces a space of impossible obligation at the core of his artistic procedure. This pursuit of a learned project to represent the unknown, freely and knowingly chosen, is central to Kandinsky's theoretical and autobiographical writings, and it resonates with

³⁶² Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, 116; James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 118.

³⁶³ Van Hulle, "Samuel Beckett's Faust Notes," 291.

³⁶⁴ Kandinsky, "Two Suggestions," in *Complete Writings on Art*, 736.

Beckett's critical essays. For Beckett, however, the requirement knowingly to choose ignorance renders any successful conclusion to the search for artistic plenitude impossible.

For Beckett and Kandinsky alike, forms and colours contain an organic principle, endowed with an active agency, a life force. Beckett's faintest texts and plays, which are in many respects about the *processes* of figuration, still revolve around a body associated with a sign of life. Facialised vision – as suggested in the word 'visage' – offers a site of aesthetic continuity between Beckett's fiction of the post-war period and later work in different media such as his television plays: *Ghost Trio* (1975-76), for example, twins a faint female voice with the "sole sign of life" (*CDW*, 408-09), a faint male figure among faint shades of grey. By keeping the figure in the hesitant space of incomplete emergence from the background, the figure is all the more able to manifest the motion and change which are central to both Beckett's and Kandinsky's theories of representation. An anthropomorphic principle is at work here too, and both Kandinsky's organic paintings of his final Paris years (the so-called Grand Synthesis) and the moments in Beckett's post-war texts that focus on figuration *per se* privilege recurrently facialised figures.³⁶⁵ For both Beckett and Kandinsky, figure and ground realised through a productive tension. This is deeper for Beckett, however, where the relation between figure and ground often takes the form of contradiction and cancellation. This tension appears in the praise Beckett offers Cézanne's "deanthropomorphized" landscapes of the Mont Sainte-Victoire (Beckett to MacGreevy, 8 September 1934, *LI*, 222-223), which he finds hostile to the organic potential of figuration. The colours Beckett describes in a van Velde canvas do not simply respire, they are gasping for breath, strangled.

The motif of failed figuration so persistently recurs in Beckett's fiction of the 1940s that it suggests an underlying aesthetic continuity. The figure in the scene from *Watt* considered earlier (*W*, 355) does not yield to Watt's attentive gaze; it gradually dissolves instead, in the scene considered earlier in this thesis. Beckett's aesthetic preoccupation with the hesitant borderland

³⁶⁵ Out of many examples from Kandinsky's painting, see *Three Ovals* (1942) and *Isolation* (1944).

between figure and ground is most powerfully present in his fiction through the dynamic opposition between glimpsing (or glancing) and gazing, which frames accidental perception as the originating moment of consciousness. *Intentional* perception is imposed upon this originating ground through the order of aesthetic judgement, which operates within the territory of the known. To recall Merleau-Ponty, it is a “second-order perception, the one which we exercise at every moment, and which conceals from us the former basic phenomenon, because it is loaded with earlier acquisitions and plays, so to speak, on the surface of being.”³⁶⁶ Within such an architecture, accidental perception reveals this “surface of being,” a visual ground similar to Heidegger’s ‘Open,’ or *Ungrund*. For Beckett, this space is at the extreme limit of the visual field as well as the possibilities of representation, whether according to the post-Kantian conception of cognition (which Merleau-Ponty addresses) or, in Beckett’s critical language, the inescapable mode of artistic expression. In his post-war novellas the importance of peripheral vision as a “basic phenomenon” is emphasised by connecting the narrators’ eyes to elemental figures, such as the sky, which are resistant to being concretised, but which in their high generality remain in the background. Such background phenomena, resistant to figuration, appear to Beckett’s narrators through deliberately nonattentive vision.

As with the earlier encounter between Murphy and Mr. Endon, the eye and the face are complex, resistant figures of a humanity proffered and refused, yet Beckett’s novellas, all written in French in 1946, signal a shift from *Murphy* by resisting the form of the fixed, attentive gaze. In “L’Expulsé,” for example, the narrator pauses before setting out to leave his hometown: “Mais d’abord je levai les yeux au ciel, d’où nous vient le fameux secours, où les chemins ne sont pas marqués, où l’on erre librement, comme dans un désert, où rien n’arrête la vue, de quelque côté qu’on regarde, sinon les limites de la vue” (*NT*, 18; “But first I raised my eyes to the sky, whence cometh our help, where there are no roads, where you wander freely, as in a desert, and where nothing obstructs your vision, wherever you turn your eyes, but the limits of

³⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 50.

vision itself' *Ex*, 250). At the end of *Le Calmant* too, the narrator turns to the sky as a background and limit: "je levais sans espoir les yeux au ciel, pour y chercher les chariots" (*NT*, 75; "in vain I raised without hope my eyes to the sky to look for the Bears" *C*, 274). *Mercier et Camier* too repeats deeply similar scenes, ending with Mercier alone, "Seul il regarda son ciel s'éteindre, l'ombre se parfaire. L'horizon englouti, il ne le quitta pas des yeux, car il connaissait ses sursauts, par expérience" (*MCF*, 210; "watch[ing] the sky go out, dark deepen to its full. He kept his eyes on the engulfed horizon, for he knew from experience what throes it was capable of" *MC*, 478). The sky not only flows between colours, but at night goes into "sursauts" or "throes" – the death of a respiring being. Behind these brief narratives of nonattentive vision, the "colours that flow" and the respiring, gasping planes in Beckett's criticism would at the same time feed and determine the possibilities of visual representation within the fictional text.

Kandinsky does not present his writing simply as a commentary on painting, but an extension of its underlying principles into the domain of the textual; his texts are both description and performance. Kandinsky's theatre and poetry too suggests this deliberate flowing together of forms and media of expression. His 1913 collection of poems, *Sounds* (*Klängen*), as its title suggests, is particularly concerned with the connection between sound and sight. As one among many examples of his use of themes that foreshadow Beckett's figures of visuality, the poem also titled "Sounds" stands out: "Face. / Distance. / Cloud [...] Eyes look from a distance. / The cloud ascends."³⁶⁷ The faint signals of agency are attributed not merely to the face and the eyes that look, but to the cloud that "ascends" – movement, rather than fixation, is the crucial sign of life. To represent this movement requires a deliberate ambiguity and vagueness, so that the text only suggests a particular scene beneath its description. This is common to the above scenes in Beckett's novellas, oscillating between the subject's eye and an unfocussed sky. If abstraction is conceived as a movement from the centre to the periphery, or from the second order phenomenon (object) to the basic phenomenon (ground), rather than as

³⁶⁷ Kandinsky, *Sounds*, in *Complete Writings on Art*, 317.

a process of diminution that signals a rejection of intertextuality and influence, Beckett's fiction moves ever closer to the landscapes of Kandinsky's poetry.

Kandinsky's landscapes are also characterised by the movement of the visual into other sensory domains. In poems throughout *Sounds*, the visual possesses aural qualities, in particular the quality inculcated by "distance," where the occluded source still makes its effects felt through vibrations and tension within the composition. In his theoretical writing, Kandinsky is particularly keen to describe principles of visual representation in musical terms, among which "chord" and "composition" stand out. As in musical composition rests and silences between notes define the piece's rhythm as much as the notes themselves, so the "Distance" which Kandinsky's poem names becomes an active element rather than a mere connection between "Face" and "Cloud." The background in Kandinsky's abstract work is defined by an active conception of space, which is described in terms of planes capable of receding and accumulating one upon another, much as they do on a van Velde canvas according to Beckett in "Peintres de l'empêchement": "plan sur plan des transparences imparfaits" (*D*, 136) [plane upon plane of imperfect transparencies]. In Kandinsky's compositions, the background is far from a mere absence of form. It is an active opening, with strong parallels to organic mutability and change.

Kandinsky's concretions: philosophy and form

Kandinsky's argument that abstract art expresses a principle of "internal necessity" underpinning the appearance of visual figures is of a piece with twentieth-century phenomenology's interest in the foundations of representation. Indeed, Kandinsky's nephew was Alexandre Kojève, who was immensely influential in laying the conceptual framework behind French phenomenology. Kojève's lectures on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, delivered between 1933 and 1939 at the École des Hautes Études in Paris and later developed in 1947

Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, proved influential in their own right through their select audience, which included Breton, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Bataille.³⁶⁸

Kojève remained on good terms with Kandinsky, and in 1936 he wrote an interesting article on his painting, “Les peintures concrètes de Kandinsky.” Kojève’s essay makes similar use of the term “concrete” to Kandinsky’s in “Abstract and Concrete Art,” inverting the presumption that Kandinsky’s non-representational painting (“la peinture ‘non-représentative’”) is abstract. Taking against the accepted narrative that the modes of representational painting which dominated the Western canon are more authentically anchored in the material world than its modern “non-representational” counterparts, Kojève argues that it is the Western canon of representational painting that is “abstract.” Kandinsky’s painting does not stand in a representational relation to the outside world; instead, it foregrounds the general conditions of representation on which the realist painter’s apparently authentic representation of the object relies:

Chaque tableau de Kandinsky est un univers réel, complet, c’est-à-dire concret, renfermé en lui-même et se suffisant à lui-même: un univers qui, tout comme l’Univers non-artistique, l’uni-totalité des choses réelles, n’est qu’en soi que par soi et que pour soi. On ne peut pas dire que ces tableaux “représentent” des fragments de cet Univers non-artistique. On peut dire tout au plus qu’ils sont des fragments de cet Univers: les tableaux de Kandinsky font partie de l’Univers au même titre que les arbres, les bêtes, les pierres, les hommes, les Etats, les images..., que toutes les choses réelles qui font partie de (sont dans) l’Univers en constituant cet Univers.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ Nikolaj Lübecker, *Community, Myth and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 14; see also Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France*, especially 295-296.

³⁶⁹ Alexandre Kojève, “Les peintures concrètes de Kandinsky,” repr. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 90, no. 2, (April-June 1985): 164-5.

Each of Kandinsky's tableaux is a real, complete, and therefore concrete universe, self-contained and self-sufficient: a universe that, just like the nonartistic Universe, the unicity of real things, is only in itself, by itself, and for itself. One cannot say that these tableaux "represent" fragments of that nonartistic Universe. One can say at the very most that they *are* fragments of that Universe: Kandinsky's tableaux belong to the Universe in the same way as do trees, animals, rocks, men, States, clouds ..., as does everything real that belongs to (is in) the Universe while constituting this Universe.³⁷⁰

Kojève is concerned with the representational status of the painting in more than one sense – and Kandinsky's painting operates as a loose metaphor for how the work of art stands in relation to the "nonartistic" Universe. In strikingly similar fashion, Beckett developed a theory of art grounded in the elusive nature of visual representation, similarly denigrating "representational" art with the figure of the "réaliste" painter "suant devant sa cascade et pestant contre les nuages" [sweating before the waterfall and cursing the clouds] in "La Peinture des van Velde" (*D*, 126). In detailing the connections between Beckett's reflections on representation and Kandinsky's development of an aesthetic of abstraction, Emilie Morin notes that "in addressing the conceptual foundations of non-representational painting, Beckett merely shares in Kandinsky's own preoccupations concerning the possibility of abstraction."³⁷¹ Following Kojève however, this observation can be pushed further to say that Beckett's readings of the van Veldes' canvases, and his reflection of Kandinsky's visual language in texts such as *Watt*, present an understanding of representation shared by interpretations of Kandinsky's work such as Kojève's, and that these interpretations reflect the pervasive concerns with representation and the figural in twentieth-century phenomenology.

³⁷⁰ Alexandre Kojève, "The Concrete Paintings of Kandinsky," trans. Lisa Floram, in *Concerning the Spiritual and the Concrete in Kandinsky's Art* by Lisa Floram (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 164.

³⁷¹ Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 134.

Kandinsky's writing on art had many philosophical influences of its own, especially within the tradition of German idealism. The lines of influence between Kant, Goethe and Schopenhauer proved especially influential on Kandinsky. This lineage would direct twentieth-century advances in the emergent fields of phenomenology and cognitive psychology between the 1920s and 40s. This was especially true for Gestalt psychology, which asserted a unity between cognition, interpretation and perception, established according to perceptual wholes divided into figure and ground. As Wolfgang Köhler's 1929 study put it: "an area becomes solid when it has shape, and is in this sense a figure," whereas the environment possesses a loose "ground character."³⁷² Gestalt psychology's description of the visual field in terms of the interplay between figure and ground proved especially powerful for theorists and practitioners, including Kandinsky, who sought to bring the experience of subjective being into dialogue with the experience of aesthetic judgement integral to appreciating a work of art.

Gestalt psychology also attracted Beckett's interest in the 1930s. In his "Notes on Psychology" taken between 1933 and 1935 (largely from Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology*), Beckett dedicates a headlined section to "Figure and Ground in Gestalt Psychology." The section notes phrases including William James's "big blooming buzzing confusion" (which would work its way into *Murphy* [*Mu*, 437]³⁷³), before going on to note that "the figure stands out naturally from the ground in virtue of the fundamental distinction between them" and that "The seeing of figures is inherent in perceptive activity."³⁷⁴ Beckett's notes often accord with standard schemas of the school, such as Köhler's and Kurt Koffka's. Indeed, certain descriptions seem to clearly inform the interplays of figure and ground in Beckett's post-war fiction: "The unshaped environment is localized further backward, and actually seems to extend behind the figure as a homogeneous plane on which the figure lies. The sky above houses [...]"

³⁷² Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* [1929], reissue of 1970 ed. (New York: Liveright, 1992), 203.

³⁷³ See C.J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 4.3.

³⁷⁴ Beckett, "Notes on Psychology," TCD MS 10971, 7, fol. 6.

has this character of a ground which spreads behind the houses as figures.”³⁷⁵ For Laura Salisbury, the Gestalt schema as it is filtered through Beckett’s notes means that “both figure and ground signify in ways that allow the emergence of something that is essentially meaningful.”³⁷⁶ However, for Köhler, only the *figure* meaningfully signifies, whereas Kandinsky’s use of Gestalt form seeks expression through movements of tension and dissolution between figure and ground that, for Gestalt psychology, lead to a *loss* of meaning. In this sense, Beckett’s compositional uses of his note-taking move the Gestalt interplays between figure and ground in a parallel direction to Kandinsky’s abstraction, away from the privileging of the foregrounded figure or object.

The interplay between figure and ground in the van Veldes’ painting as Beckett’s essays conceive them is also marked by breaks, gaps, fissures reminiscent of the terms in Beckett’s “German letter” to Axel Kaun: “To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today’s writer” (Beckett to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937, *LI*, 518). Yet, as I have already indicated, Beckett’s later literature would repudiate the implicit claim in this letter to be able to attain or grasp this undecided “something or nothing” as an object. Instead, as Sjef Houppermans describes, these gaps and fissures are “traces de violence” that undermine the stability of the figures on the canvas.³⁷⁷

The Gestalt appearance of figure from ground interestingly anticipated Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological “birth of the landscape.” This phrase belongs to a series of public radio lectures delivered in 1948, collected as *The World of Perception*. In the second of these, he said: “If

³⁷⁵ Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*, 203.

³⁷⁶ Laura Salisbury, “Art of Noise: Beckett’s Language in a Culture of Information,” in “Debts and Legacies,” ed. Erik Tonning, Matthew Feldman, Matthijs Engelberts and Dirk Van Hulle, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujour’hui* 22 (2010): 358.

³⁷⁷ Sjef Houppermans, “Beckett et le frères van Velde: entre peinture et écriture,” in *Samuel Beckett 2: Parole, regard et corps*, ed. Llewellyn Brown, *La Revue des lettres modernes* (Caen: Lettres modernes Minard, 2011), 88-9.

many painters since Cézanne have refused to follow the law of geometrical perspective, this is because they have sought to recapture and reproduce before our very eyes the birth of the landscape.”³⁷⁸ Returning to this theme in his final lecture, he added: “If I accept the tutelage of perception, I find I am ready to understand the work of art. For it too is a totality of flesh in which meaning is not free, so to speak, but bound, a prisoner of all the signs, or details, which reveal it to me.”³⁷⁹ Beckett would also be inclined to establish Cézanne as the progenitor of a modern visual perspective, distinguishing modern art from the “déplorable siècles de peinture précézannienne” in “La Peinture des van Velde” (*D*, 121). Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of painting in terms of the connection between perception and the “birth of the landscape” is also reflected in Beckett’s scepticism, shared by Kandinsky and Kojève, towards the idea of painting as the fixed representation of an already established world outside the canvas.

Figure and ground, vision and voice in *Premier amour*

The representation of the “birth of the landscape” can be traced throughout Beckett’s fiction. Among the most clearly signposted examples of this occurs in *Premier amour*, written in 1946, and belatedly translated as *First Love* in 1970. While Ulrika Maude has drawn attention to the crucial importance of “verbs of vision” in Beckett’s novellas,³⁸⁰ *Premier amour* sets itself apart by narrating the interplay between figure and ground in a way that emphasises the heard over the seen, adapting the visual and spatial focus in Beckett’s immediate post-war writing to the vocal and the aural. However, *Premier amour* exploits one crucial difference between the visible and the audible. The object at the source of a sound can be occluded, placed outside the limits of perception, while leaving the sign (the sound, the voice) in place. Beckett’s narrative presents the mere sign, doing away with the object. Given Beckett’s characterisation of the object as

³⁷⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-1.

³⁸⁰ Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, 33.

fundamentally resistant to revelation in his van Velde essays, *Premier amour* by giving a figure in isolation, apparently manages to circumvent the object. Although this cannot perform the longed-for unveiling of the world as representation, it brings it closer to the foundations of representation itself, the condition of the object's evasion.³⁸¹ Composed between "La Peinture des van Velde" and "Peintres de l'empêchement," Beckett's novellas were instrumental for the development of his critical texts, ghosting and shadowing one another. When Beckett's narrator leaves Lulu/Anna, his lover of one night, he asks her to sing him a song. It is monotonous, "sans changer de position" (*PA*, 34; "without change of attitude" *FL*, 239), until:

Puis je m'éloignai et tout en m'éloignant je l'entendais qui chantait une autre chanson, ou peut-être la suite de la même, d'une voix faible et qui allait s'affaiblissant de plus en plus à mesure que je m'en éloignais, et qui finalement se tut, soit que j'en fusse trop loin pour pouvoir l'entendre. Je n'aimais pas rester sur une incertitude de cette sorte, à cette époque [...] Je fis donc quelques pas en arrière et je m'arrêtai. D'abord je n'entendais rien, puis j'entendais la voix, mais à peine, tant elle m'arrivait faiblement. Je ne l'entendais pas, puis je l'entendais, je dus donc commencer à l'entendre, à un moment donné, et pourtant non, il n'y eut pas de commencement, tellement elle était sortie doucement du silence et tellement elle lui ressemblait. Quand la voix s'arrêta enfin je fis encore quelques pas vers elle, pour être sûr qu'elle s'était arrêtée et pas seulement baissée. Puis me désespérant, me disant, Comment savoir, à moins d'être à côté d'elle, penché sur elle, je fis demi-tour et m'en allai, pour de bon, plein d'incertitude. (*PA*, 35-6)

I started to go and as soon as I went I heard her singing another song, or perhaps more verses of the same, fainter and fainter the further I went, then no more, either because

³⁸¹ A similar connection between revealing the conditional and evacuating the "intentional object" from the scene has been observed by Elaine Scarry. See "Nouns: The realm of things, Six Ways To Kill a Blackbird (or Any Other Intentional Object) in Samuel Beckett," chapter four in *Resisting Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 91-100. I discuss this in relation to *The Unnamable* in chapter four.

she had come to an end or because I was gone too far to hear her. To have to harbour such a doubt was something I preferred to avoid, at that period [...] So I retraced my steps a little way and stopped. At first I heard nothing, then the voice again, but only just, so faintly did it carry. First I didn't hear it, then I did, I must therefore have begun hearing it, at a certain point, but no, there was no beginning, the sound emerged so softly from the silence and so resembled it. When the voice ceased at last I approached a little nearer, to make sure it had really ceased and not merely been lowered. Then in despair, saying, No knowing, no knowing, short of being beside her, bent over her, I turned on my heel and went, for good, full of doubt. (*FL*, 239-40)

Lulu's voice holds a specific, although tentative, bounded location, making it a figure similar in kind to a visual point. The scene's figuration of sound in terms of a figure faintly emerging from the background draws on a conception of the figure Beckett had used to evoke peripheral sight – in *Watt's* figure that inexplicably rises out of the ground and faintly disappears “without any interruption of its motions” (*W*, 355), for example. Beckett's abstract vocabulary, founded in the movement between figure and ground, fosters a synaesthetic mixture similar in kind to Kandinsky's performative associations between seen, heard and felt in work such as *Sounds*, associations underpinned by his theoretical descriptions of visual qualities according to musical terms such as “chords.”

In *Premier amour*, Lulu's voice is held in a state of indeterminacy between figure and ground which resists interpretation, while it simultaneously leads beyond the bounds of the narrator's visual field, pushing the text in the direction of the unseen and unknown. Lulu's sonic disintegration also reverberates into her visual form. Her face remains troublingly indeterminate, explicitly resisting the narrator's gaze, which hovers between perception, memory and imagination: “Elle ne semblait ni jeune ni vieille, sa figure, elle était suspendue entre la fraîcheur et le flétrissement. Je supportais mal, à cette époque, ce genre d'ambiguïté” (*PA*, 37; “It looked neither young nor old, the face, as though stranded between the vernal and the sere. Such

ambiguity I found difficult to bear, at that period” *FL*, 240). So deeply does this indeterminacy trouble the narrator’s account, that any attempt at aesthetic judgement of the beautiful seems impossible as a consequence:

Quant à savoir si elle était belle, sa figure, ou si elle avait été belle, ou si elle avait des chances de devenir belle, j’avoue que j’en étais bien incapable. J’ai vu des figures sur des photos que j’aurais peut-être pu appeler belles, si j’avais eu quelques données sur la beauté. Et la figure de mon père, sur son lit de mort, m’avait fait entrevoir la possibilité d’une esthétique de l’humain. Mais les figures des vivants, toujours en train de grimacer, avec le sang à fleur de peau, est-ce des objets?” (*PA*, 37-8)

As to whether it was beautiful, the face, or had once been beautiful, I confess I could form no opinion. I had seen faces in photographs I might have found beautiful had I known even vaguely in what beauty was supposed to consist. And my father’s face, on his death-bolster, had seemed to hint at some form of aesthetics relevant to man. But the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects? (*FL*, 240)

Traces of figural motifs present in Beckett’s art criticism are registered in the way Lulu’s “figure” is presented, as a voice and a face dissolving into the background. Something troubles the story in the way memories of her resist being fixed into an object by the textual mind’s eye. Lulu’s dissolution is a sign of life and movement, a reproach which refuses to definitively dissolve. Not unlike the voice in Beckett’s first television play, *Eh Joe* (1965), where the whispering voice’s ineffaceable faintness makes its presence in Joe’s guilty conscience more terrifyingly inescapable, it touches something about the characters in their subjectivity and not merely the telling of the story. The incompletely figured face, or voice, like the flowing of planes on the van Veldes’ canvases, respiring and gasping, represents the aesthetic principle of “changement,” privileged in Beckett’s post-war essays, by virtue of the indeterminacy opened by their faintness and flux. These connections also gesture towards the cultural forms behind the text, such as the fragmentary presence of folk song and Irish ballad forms in Lulu’s singing,

which is evoked beneath its abstract form, a feature noted by Beckett when he observed Kandinsky's debts to Mongolian iconography.³⁸²

The compositional tension inherent to the indeterminacy of this passage, refusing to decide the question of Lulu's beauty, is emphasised by the next sentence, which turns to describe the scene's background in isolation, "l'eau immobile, ou qui coule lentement" (the "still or scarcely flowing water") – adapting water as the defining element of flux – striving forth, "vers celle qui tombe, comme assoiffée" (*PA*, 38; "as though athirst, to that falling from the sky" *FL*, 240). This scene is kin to the other novellas' motif, presenting the protagonist turning his face to the sea or sky, but here the narrator momentarily dissolves into the scene described. It is a scene whose object is the background itself, a reflection on its condition as a text as much as, for Kojève, Kandinsky's paintings are self-reflections on their medium, or Char's poetry is for Blanchot, and Bram van Velde's painting for Beckett. This self-reflection demonstrates the limits of the work, its incarceration within itself and the bonds which tie it to the world.

Beckett's critical responses to disparate modes of visuality, whether belonging to Surrealism or Kandinsky's modes of abstraction, indicate that he used figures of sight to further concretise the Kantian opposition between the known, phenomenal domain of representation or appearance, and the unknown, noumenal realm of the 'things in themselves.' Heidegger's response to Kant in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* – which came out of his 1929 lectures delivered at the infamous conference in Davos – pertinently focuses on Kant's demarcation of foundational limits, on "appearance" and knowledge in particular, positioning Kant's methodology in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as that which "proceeds into and points towards the unknown. It is a philosophical laying of the foundation of philosophy."³⁸³ Heidegger's emphasis on the "unknown" as the "foundation" of philosophy offers a keen reflection of Beckett's

³⁸² Morin, "Samuel Beckett, the wordless song and the pitfalls of memorialisation," *Irish Studies Review* 19, no. 2, (May 2011): 185–205; Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 133.

³⁸³ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. by James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962). 42.

emphasis on the “unknowable” as the resource of aesthetic value in *Proust*. Both positions are examples of the denigration of conscious power in twentieth-century philosophy and avant-garde literatures in favour of unconscious, unknown forms figurable only through states that move towards absence and invisibility. Moving from figure to ground, Beckett’s vision of art “moves instinctively from ends to beginnings.”

Chapter Four

“This running against the walls of our cage”: Beckett at the boundary

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Beckett developed a visual vocabulary that expressed a network of related aesthetic and philosophical concerns. Naturally, the question remains as to how the means Beckett had developed for giving literary expression to aesthetic concerns were carried forward into his later writing. This chapter therefore contextualises the rhetorical and figurative affinities between Beckett’s post-war narrative fiction and his post-Trilogy prose in the light of the peculiar forms of discursive reasoning undertaken by some of his key philosophical contemporaries.

These reciprocal affiliations can be outlined by paying attention to the influence Beckett’s own prose had on writers such as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, as well as the traces of shared influences held between Beckett and his philosophical contemporaries. As I have argued, the marks of these influences on Beckett’s writing are apparent at the figural level, especially during the period leading from the completion of *Textes pour rien* in 1951 to *Foirades/Fizzles*, released in French, English and collaborative editions in 1976, which collected disparate texts Beckett had begun writing as early as 1954.³⁸⁴ As the interaction between figure and ground became more integral to how Beckett’s writing adapted philosophical concerns with representation, the variant surfaces of Beckett’s prose texts attain an increasingly rarefied texture that is never obviously marked by any source material. The apparent evacuation of influence that took place through processes of rarefaction in Beckett’s minimalist prose from the 1950s to the 1970s is an integral part of their sustained figuration of unknowable and liminal spaces lying outside the constraints placed upon representation by the ‘subject-object relation.’

Anticipations and sideshadowings between Beckett and his contemporaries can be explored through the theme of the fragment. This theme proved a useful metaphor for writers

³⁸⁴ Nixon, preface to Beckett, *TFN*, xvii-xix.

such as Blanchot, who found in the fragment a germane source for reflection, and it provided a recurrent theme in much of his writing after the publication of the revised and redacted *Thomas l'obscur* in 1951, especially *L'Espace littéraire* (1955) and *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980). During the same period, Beckett's prose frequently took the short, fragmentary form in which Blanchot's theories increasingly became invested.³⁸⁵ Beckett took a pointed interest in writing short *hommages* for exhibition catalogues featuring friends' paintings. But these painterly evocations are not critical pieces – their relationship to the work of art is never one of description. Instead, they lie uneasily between genres, inviting the aphoristic but refusing the genre's closure and formal self-sufficiency.

The term 'fragment' applies to these pieces not because they are formally incomplete either, although this was sometimes the case, and sometimes highlighted within the text itself, as with "From an abandoned work" (1956) and *Faux départs* (1965). Rather, I suggest that these texts are grounded in an abstract vocabulary focused on processes of figuration, and that the meaning of their isolated figures is often found through their repetitions between texts. Consequently, texts like the *foirades* always gesture towards a wider whole outside the text where their meaning is found. As I have already outlined, the relation between parts and wholes was integral to Kantian aesthetics and the theory of the Sublime, and by standing as a present part that invokes a departed whole, these philosophical and poetic discourses regarded the fragment as a symbolic figure that "represents what *eludes* representation."³⁸⁶ The fragment therefore offered a visual equivalent to this interaction between parts and wholes, which is also visualised in the relation between figure and ground. This understanding of the fragment reconnects the texts considered in this chapter with philosophical discourses explored earlier in this thesis, such as those on the Sublime, that offer a way of thinking about the imagination's limited capacity. In order to think about the limit and the relationship of the liminal to the development of

³⁸⁵ See Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), especially 17-19.

³⁸⁶ Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality*, 22.

Beckett's thinking about representation and the figural, the fragment – containing the idea of the part broken from the whole – will prove an important idea underlying my argument.

Figural connections: *L'Innommable*, *Mercier et Camier* and *Foirades*

Although “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit” was the last of Beckett's sustained critical encounters with the van Veldes, it would not be his last piece to address Bram's work in some form, nor his last critical engagement with the visual arts. His next essay, “Henri Hayden, homme-peintre” was written in 1952 for a small catalogue to a private exhibition of Hayden's paintings, and republished in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1955, the same publication where “La Peinture des van Velde” had found its unlikely home a decade earlier. Written two years after the collapse of *Transition*, at a time when his friendship with Georges Duthuit was beginning to show the strains that would soon break it apart,³⁸⁷ “Henri Hayden, homme-peintre” shows that Beckett remained unwilling to relinquish certain longstanding aesthetic themes, especially the idea of modern art as a response to the failure of representation and relation. There is modern painting after the van Veldes after all, although the recurrence of “la crise sujet-objet” (*D*, 146) in Hayden's canvases (again, Beckett omits any mention of a particular painting) suggests the predicament facing the artist in “Three Dialogues” remains “neither to be wooed nor to be stormed” (*TD*, 558). More importantly, it suggests that the terms raised in Beckett's essays were still pertinent to his thinking two years after he had finished composing *L'Innommable*, which was still in progress when Beckett completed “Three Dialogues,” and a year after completing *Textes pour rien*.

The sense of ongoing crisis in “Henri Hayden, homme-peintre” reflects on what remained after the sustained attacks on the principles of realist representation in *L'Innommable*. The novels of the Trilogy on which the essay followed undermine stable principles of

³⁸⁷ The precise reasons for the break in their relationship remain uncertain. See *LIII*, 30n2; Dan Gunn, quoted in interview with Rhys Tranter, *The Quarterly Conversation* 31 (2013): <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-dan-gunn-interview>.

representation in terms of what Anthony Uhlmann calls the “ontological image [...] which reveals itself and the cause which it is” through frequently violent encounters and self-negations.³⁸⁸ Despite appearances, however, such seemingly self-sufficient and self-directed images do not appear *sui generis*. Instead, these “ontological” images arise by repeating specific series of figures. The kinds of figures that I am concerned with here can be summarised as figures of visuality that reflect upon their own representational status. For example, towards the end of *L’Innommable/The Unnamable*, the eye is evoked as a desired object at the centre of a landscape at once imagined, visualised and remembered, which appears when the Unnamable voice seeks to deny it:

je n’étais pas là, et *l’air* l’été le soir pesant sur les *paupières*, il faut des *paupières*, il faut des *globes* [...], *l’œil*, à la *fenêtre*, devant la *mer*, devant la *terre*, devant le *ciel*, à la *fenêtre*, contre *l’air*, l’été, le soir, s’ouvrant, se refermant, *gris*, noir, *gris*, noir, j’ai dû comprendre, j’ai dû le vouloir, vouloir *l’œil*, pour moi, [...] ils le parlent penser, ce sont des visions, des restes de visions [...] (*I*, 198; my emphasis)

I wasn’t there, and the summer evening *air* weighing on my *eyelids*, we must have *eyelids*, we must have *eyeballs* [...], an *eye*, at the *window*, before the *sea*, before the *earth*, before the *sky*, at the *window*, against the *air*, opening, shutting, *grey*, black, *grey*, black, I must have understood, I must have wanted it, wanted the *eye*, for my own, [...] they call that thinking, it’s visions, shreds of old visions [...] (*U*, 398; my emphasis)

The words and phrases I emphasise in this selection present individual lexical units that form distinctive yet generic figures repeated alongside one another at many moments in Beckett’s fiction. As Elaine Scarry highlights, the “elemental settings” in Beckett’s fiction – sea, earth and sky – serve “to eliminate or at least minimize the presence of any intentional object in order to

³⁸⁸ Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 140-41.

emphasize the necessary universality of the condition itself.”³⁸⁹ These settings reflect Beckett’s concerns with the status of the representational object in his essays, and the importance of the object’s resistance and elusion to his visual aesthetic. When coherent objects evade the Unnamable’s sight, and he trains the gaze of his mind’s eye on fragmented “shreds of old visions,” the elements that remain visible (the eye, eyelids, windows, sea, earth and sky) are therefore generic and non-specific. As generic figures, the eye and sky in *The Unnamable* refuse any codified symbolic status; while the eye resists narrative fixity because it is not itself an object of its own vision, the sky manages to be both pervasive and peripheral because it belongs to the background of the scene against which other more defined figures are foregrounded.

The “evening air” *weighing* upon the Unnamable’s eye recalls the interplay between ocular and haptic in “La Fin”/“The End,” where the narrator looks to the sky – another instance of the post-war novellas’ prominent visual motif – only to have the sky release unexpected sensory qualities:

Je regardais vers le *ciel* la plupart du temps, mais sans le fixer. C’était un mélange le plus souvent de blanc, de bleu et de *gris*, et le *soir* il venait s’y ajouter d’autres couleurs. Je le sentais qui pesait avec douceur sur mon visage, je m’en frottais le visage en le balançant d’un côté à l’autre. (*F*, 108-09; my emphasis)

Most of the time I looked up at the *sky*, but without focussing it, for why focus it? Most of the time it was a mixture of white, blue and *grey*, and then at *evening* all the evening colours. I felt it weighing softly on my face, I rubbed my face against it, one cheek after the other, turning my head from side to side. (*E*, 287)

Visual figures such as those experienced and expressed by the narrator of “La Fin”/“The End,” by vagueness and blurring out of focus, cross the boundaries of vision and evocatively lead into the haptic sensation of weight, which extends the perceptual association between vision and

³⁸⁹ Scarry, *Resisting Representation*, 93.

voice in *Premier amour* to suggest a pervasive sensation beyond the bounds of the figure.³⁹⁰ These visual vagaries are evoked through figures such as the sky and the colour grey, which belong to a visual vocabulary utilised in *L'Innommable/The Unnamable*, and are rooted in figures of the elemental and the peripheral.

Similar tropes, outlined at the margins of sight, are frequently repeated in Beckett's fiction of the 1960s and 70s, which are usually categorised as "closed space" texts. The term "closed space" was introduced to categorise a grouping of Beckett's fiction by S.E. Gontarski in his introduction to *The Complete Short Prose*, adapting the name from the abandoned opening words to one of the most peripheral groupings of Beckett's late prose, the *Faux départs*, and the English title to *Fizzzle V*, "Closed place." Beckett translated the *fizzzle* in 1974 from the French text, which was written in 1968 and published the year previously in issue four of his French publisher's journal *Minuit*. The French *foirade* departs from its English counterpart at the outset; despite opening with the line "Endroit clos," the piece is titled "Se voir." The title's subtle self-shadowing through translation connects ideas of self-perception to the theme of the enclosed space, a connection similar to Beckett's development of a principle of artistic vision into an "art d'incarcération." Such close self-reflections between the aesthetic and formal may be considered as instances of what Gontarski calls the "closed space" genre's examination of "the diaphanous membrane separating inside from outside, perception from imagination, self from others, narrative from experience, 'neither' wholly the one nor wholly the other."³⁹¹ As unifying principles manifest throughout Beckett's closed space fiction, tropes of self-perception and

³⁹⁰ There is a parallel here to Trish McTighe's observation about the "process of image-making" in *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), which "directs the eye of the spectator's mind to the frame as a perceptual limit, involving the sense of a tactile enclosing darkness, where touch, rather than vision, acts as an epistemological tool." McTighe, *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett's Drama*, 75.

³⁹¹ S.E. Gontarski, introduction to *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1996), xxix.

reflective sight persistently thematise liminal spaces, the “diaphonous membrane” represented by figures of thresholds and boundaries.³⁹²

Visual patternings develop through associations between particular, individual words and the figures associated with them. Beckett’s later prose pieces collected under the titles *Têtes-mortes* (1967), with its English counterpart *Six Residua* (1978), and *Foirades/Fiẓẓẓles* (1976)³⁹³ are connected together through such patterns. Some of these intertextual connections are displayed in the bilingual *Foirades/Fiẓẓẓles*, illustrated by Jasper Johns, and released in a limited run in 1976. Despite the fact that the two men worked separately, and Beckett had already written the French texts that would appear in the collaborative edition, the production of this edition was a spur for Beckett to complete his translations of the already existing *foirades* into the five English *fiẓẓẓles* selected for the edition.³⁹⁴ The production of this illustrated text underscores the reciprocity between the visual and the textual in Beckett’s writing of the period. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue accompanying the release of the book, Judith Goldman writes that “Johns’ etchings do not illustrate Beckett’s text; they consider and acknowledge it. An image elaborates

³⁹² Although little sustained scholarly attention has been paid to the closed space genre in its own right, see Elissa Justine Bell Bayraktar, “Samuel Beckett’s Closed Space Narratives” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2009).

³⁹³ Beckett himself suggested the titles for all of these collections. The *Six Residua* (London: John Calder, 1978) repeated the selection of texts that made up the second edition of *Têtes-mortes* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967; repr. 1972): “D’un ouvrage abandonné”/“From and Abandoned Work”; “Assez”/“Enough”; “Imagination morte imaginez”/“Imagination Dead Imagine”; “Bing”/“Ping”; “Sans”/“Lessness” (the latter added to the “expanded” 1972 edition). However, the *Six Residua* incorporated *The Lost Ones* (1972), Beckett’s translation of *Le Dépeupleur* (1970), which had hitherto only been published as extracts within literary magazines and in standalone editions by Calder, Grove and Minuit.

³⁹⁴ Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 177-178; and “Beckett and the *Livre d’artiste*,” in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 187-204; Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, 194-195. Oppenheim, in *The Painted Word*, claims the texts were rendered into English “for the undertaking with Johns” (177); however, Pilling’s account is more cautious, and the dating of events in the *Chronology* leads towards the conclusion that Beckett had already begun to translate these texts before Johns approached Beckett.

a sound, a meaning or illuminates a phrase, but that is all.”³⁹⁵ Nevertheless, she asserts, “each variation” in Johns’s visual elaborations “questions perception, representation, art, and inevitably the role of the artist.”³⁹⁶ This is a statement that could apply to Beckett’s rendering of visual scenes in *Foirades/Fizzzles* and much of his other writing. As Oppenheim observes, Johns’s illustrations concretize the Beckettian subject “in very distinct images of fragmentation,”³⁹⁷ and, like Johns’s images, Beckett’s individual *fizzzles*, *foirades* and other residual prose pieces elaborate one another through fragmented figures that gesture towards a wider whole of further meanings located outside each text.

An example of this figural elaboration can be found by pairing between the *Tête-morte* “Sans” (1969), translated as “Lessness” (1970), with the *foirade* “Pour finir encore” (1975), translated as “For to End Yet Again” (1975). Both texts draw markedly similar figural connections between the “ciel” or “sky” and the colour grey. So, the ruined landscape of “Sans”/“Lessness” is constructed from earth, sky and air mingling together: “Air *gris* sans temps terre *ciel* confondus même *gris* que les ruines lointaines sans fin” (*TM*, 73-74; “Grey air timeless earth *sky* as one same *grey* as the ruins flatness endless” *TFN*, 130; my emphasis). A similar description of the grey sky extending “sans fin” takes place in “Pour finir encore”: “*Ciel gris* sans nuages lointains sans fin air *gris* sans temps” (*PFE*, 9; “Grey cloudless *sky* verge upon verge *grey* timeless air” *TFN*, 151; my emphasis). The figures mingled together here concretise features in the visual field which resist being foregrounded: the sky, air and earth are elemental, planar features that typically lie in the background of the visual field, while the colour grey is both invitingly non-determinative and resistantly pervasive.

³⁹⁵ Judith Goldman, introduction to *Foirades/Fizzzles*, by Beckett, illustrated by Jasper Johns, ed. and designed by Katy Homans, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), n. pag.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 177.

These faint figures germinate other permutations. The sky is often brought into dialogue with other figures in the landscape through the faint appearance of ruins or a human shape. Sometimes these figures appear through another figure that frames part of the scene, such as a window. In Beckett's uncollected late text, "La Falaise" (1975), the window provides a hinge between the sky and earth: "Fenêtre entre ciel et terre on ne sait où" ("Window between sky and earth nowhere known"; *TFN*, 163), while the window similarly helps to locate the gaze between eye, sea and sky. Similarly, "Vielle terre," also first published alongside "Se voir" in 1973 before being translated as the *fixe* "Old earth," ends "debout devant la fenêtre, une main au mur, l'autre accrochée à la chemise, et voir le ciel, un peu longuement, mais non, hoquets et spasmes, mer d'une enfance, d'autres ciels, un autre corps" (*PFE*, 34; "standing before a window, one hand on the wall, the other clutching your shirt, and see the sky, a long gaze, but no, gasps and spasms, a childhood sea, other skies, another body" *TFN*, 149). The window offers a threshold between inside and outside, guiding the passage between figure and ground. It also guides the line of sight in the text towards its pervasive, elemental, peripheries, and establishes important aesthetic continuities between fractured texts apparently sealed away from the world outside their carefully demarcated limits.

The interaction between intertextuality and visual self-reflection comes to the fore in *L'Innommable/The Unnamable*, when "the pseudocouple Mercier-Camier" stumble into each other:

Deux formes donc, oblongues comme l'homme, sont entrées en collision devant moi. Elles sont tombées et je ne les ai plus vues. J'ai naturellement pensé au pseudo-couple Mercier-Camier. La prochaine fois qu'elles entreront dans le champ, allant lentement l'une vers l'autre, je saurai qu'elles vont se heurter, tomber et disparaître, et cela me permettra peut-être de les observer mieux. Ce n'est pas vrai. [...] C'est que, regardant toujours dans la même direction, je ne peux voir, je ne dirai pas distinctement, mais aussi

distinctement que la visibilité permet, que ce qui se passe droit devant moi [...]. Leur approche, je ne la verrai jamais que confusément, du coin de l'œil, et de quel œil. (*I*, 17)

Two shapes then, oblong like man, entered into collision before me. They fell and I saw them no more. I naturally thought of the pseudocouple Mercier-Camier. The next time they enter the field, moving slowly towards each other, I shall know they are going to collide, fall and disappear, and this will perhaps enable me to observe them better. Wrong. [...] My eyes being fixed always in the same direction I can only see, I shall not say clearly, but as clearly as the visibility permits, that which takes place immediately in front of me [...]. Of their approach I shall never obtain more than a confused glimpse, out of the corner of the eye, and what an eye. (*U*, 291)

The Unnamable's monocular, fixed eye is caught between a surprised gaze, unable to clarify whatever comes before it, and a "confused glimpse, out of the corner of the eye." The "two shapes" only bring forth Mercier and Camier as possible, imagined interpretations, constructed out of half-recollection and partial perception, where memory and sight confusedly mingle.

The glimpse demarcates a visual space bounded by nonspecific figures which draw the narrative towards the edges of the eye's visual field. In parallel, the narrative expression of that space is brought into proximity with the limits of signification that bound and shape the Unnamable's use of language. Even Beckett's relatively uncomplicated, natural translation of the passage into English produces a text that occupies a relocated imaginative space. Where the passage in *L'Innommable* reveals its two forms "du coin de l'œil," the status of uncertainty that is an essential feature of the glimpsed "pseudo-couple" is even further emphasised in the English "out of the corner," which (though an equally everyday phrasing) adds further hesitancy about their position, and whether they are present in the Unnamable's field of vision, or already departed. The English passage above thus redraws the boundary, first marked in the French text, separating present and visible figures from figures of the absent and invisible. This shift is not determinative, in the sense of a deliberate intervention. Instead, it indicates something

important about how the process of translation can move a translated text beyond redescription by revisualising imaginative spaces.

Confusion pervades all of the modes of seeing undertaken by the Unnamable, whether gazing, glimpsing or imagining. This confusion stems from mutual resistance between eye and object, such that the main subject in the above scene is the eye's confused sight: as a figure of vision, the eye is thrown back upon itself by the limits its failing sight places upon the Unnamable's narrative. The Unnamable sees through an "empêchement-œil" before which everything perceived rests unknown.

The Unnamable's confused sighting of Mercier and Camier constitutes another instance of Beckett developing a literary scene that figures the complex interactions between subject and object continually redescended in his essays. In "Henri Hayden," both concepts are characterised as foolish, abandoned creatures: "Mais c'est à part et au profit l'un de l'autre que nous avons l'habitude de les voir défaillir, ce clown et son gugusse. Alors qu'ici, confondus dans une même inconsistance, ils se désistent de concert" (*D*, 146) [But it is aside from this and to the advantage of one and the other that we are in the habit of seeing them fail, this clown and his lackey. While here, confounded by the same weakness, they withdraw together]. Bound to one another as they withdraw together, the "clown et son gugusse" echo other pairs in Beckett's fiction, such as the men, A and B, observed in *Molloy*: "Ils se tournèrent vers la mer qui, loin à l'est, au-delà des champs, montait haut dans le ciel pâissant, et ils échangèrent quelques paroles. Puis chacun reprit son chemin, A vers la ville, B à travers des régions qu'il semblait mal connaître" (*MF*, 10; "They turned towards the sea, which, far in the east, beyond the fields, loomed high in the waning sky, and exchanged a few words. Then each went on his way. Each went on his way, A back towards the town, C on byways he hardly seemed to know, or not at all, for he went with uncertain step and often seemed to look about him" *M*, 5).³⁹⁸

³⁹⁸ Notice the French, A and B, changes to A and C in the English version, which also repeats the phrase "each went his way." This is one instance among many, I note in passing, where translation leads to multiplication rather than reduction.

Doubles are a well-noted presence throughout Beckett's writing. Even before the belated publication of *Mercier et Camier* in 1970 (composed in 1946, and translated by Beckett into English in 1974), Hugh Kenner drew attention to the "pseudocouple" Mercier and Camier as a foreshadowing of Vladimir and Estragon.³⁹⁹ In Beckett's essays, Geer and Bram van Velde, and the "clown et son gugusse," could also be considered as examples of this mirroring of character. The trope of doubling builds upon the interaction between creative and critical metaphors in Beckett's writing, especially where the renewed focus on doubled figures which reflect one another in *Molloy* and beyond integrates the breakdown of the 'subject-object relation' theorised in Beckett's previous essays.⁴⁰⁰ Indeed, *Mercier et Camier* itself contains one of Beckett's most direct reflections of a theme introduced in his criticism, repeating the "Deux Besoins" of Beckett's 1938 essay in a list of thirteen "concepts" which, despite the significant redactions Beckett made in his "impatient" translation,⁴⁰¹ are also retained in the English *Mercier and Camier*: "There are two needs: the need you have and the need to have it" (MC, 436).

Considering the long lag between the original text and its English translation, it is striking to see both *Mercier et Camier* and *Mercier and Camier* littered with isolated phrases and scenes recycled elsewhere in Beckett's writing.⁴⁰² The presence of scenes focused solely on the

³⁹⁹ Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, 146-50. The theme of doubling and *dédoublement* was raised by Bernard Pingaud in an early review of *Watt*'s French translation for *Quinzaine Littéraire* in 1969. See Pingaud, review of *Watt*, trans. Larysa Mykyta and Mark Schumacher, in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 132-136. The theme of doubling is integral to Sarah Gendron's reading of Beckett's place in contemporary philosophy. See Gendron, *Repetition, Difference and Knowledge in the works of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴⁰⁰ Nixon and Van Hulle argue that, by labelling these characters as A and B, and A and C, this scene in *Molloy* echoes Kant's terminology in the chapter on "Analytical and Synthetic judgments" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, marked in Beckett's "antediluvian set" and in his "Whoroscope Notebook." See Nixon and Van Hulle, *Beckett's Library*, 139-40.

⁴⁰¹ Steven Connor, "'Traduttore, traditore': Samuel Beckett's Translation of *Mercier et Camier*," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 11-12 (1989): 27-46. See also Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine*, 101-06;

⁴⁰² The most provocative of which is probably the phrase "Fuck Life!" (MC, 474) spoken by Watt in Beckett's English translation, and repeated in *Rockaby* (1980; CDW, 442).

interaction between the eyes and the landscape is also striking – and this focus is only tightened in translation. In a scene anticipating the Unnamable’s ceaselessly tearful eyes, Mercier’s eyes are at one point described as filling with tears, “Ses yeux écarquillés s’emplirent de larmes” (*MCF*, 49). The English, however, figures the eyes in isolation: “The staring eyes filled with tears” (*MC*, 404). Eschewing the possessive pronoun, the English displaces Mercier’s agency onto the eyes, the organ of sight, rather than Mercier himself. This shift in emphasis registers an implicit aspect to the figure of the eye, contained in the French version by the verb ‘écarquiller,’ which ambiguously lies between ‘staring’ and ‘straining.’ The “yeux écarquillés” suggests eyes both outstaring and being struck, similarly to Rimbaud “écrasant l’œil darne,” rendering the eye as a figure divided into source and object of vision.⁴⁰³ The later translation, focusing on the “staring eyes” in isolation as both the subject of the sentence and the object of vision, therefore follows through an implication to the figure of the eye in the earlier, French text, while this subtle shift also registers a faint trace of how Beckett’s other texts in the 1970s envisioned the figure of the eye.

This point about the visual aesthetic in *Mercier et Camier* gesturing towards some of the formal features that bind Beckett’s late texts to one another is apparent elsewhere in the novel:

On parle beaucoup du ciel, les yeux s’y portent souvent, ils se détachent, histoire de se reposer, des masses permises et voulues, pour s’offrir à ce monceau de déserts transparents, c’est un fait. Qu’ils sont contents alors d’aller fouiller à nouveau dans les ombres et papilloter parmi les présences. Voilà où nous en sommes. (*MCF*, 62)

In an extreme example of distillation through translation, *Mercier and Camier* takes up the theme of the eyes offering themselves to the “déserts transparents” and reduces the paragraph to a single sentence: “With what relief the eyes from this clutter to the empty sky, with what relief

⁴⁰³ Solveig Hudhomme, “Les ‘yeux écarquillés’ ou ce qui s’appelle voir dans l’œuvre de Samuel Beckett,” *Littérature* 167 (2012): 103-113.

back again” (*MC*, 411). This inspection of the scene, verblessly focused on the eye and sky, is formally closer to the texts Beckett was writing at the period of the text’s translation. The *fizzele*, “Still,” for example – written in English in 1974, and translated in 1975 as “Immobile” – evokes the eyes alone against a faintly stirring landscape: “Eyes stare out unseeing till first movement” (*TFN*, 155; “Les yeux fixent sans voir le dehors jusqu’à ce que tout premier mouvement” *PFE*, 42). Character is evacuated from the scene, and like Mercier’s eyes in the English passage, the eyes alone “stare out.” But subjectivity is faintly glimpsed behind the figure, glimpsed behind the staring eye in the unknowable space behind the perception. This scene is typical of Beckett’s fragmentary prose writings, which often crystallise around scenes of looking focused on the eye and isolated, elemental figures, but which in doing so draws upon formal concerns contained within Beckett’s earlier narrative-driven prose such as *Mercier et Camier*.

The fragment between criticism and fiction

Beckett’s concern with visualising the boundaries of representation in his critical writing substantially shaped the form of his closed-space fiction, most markedly in the *Têtes-mortes/Six Residua* and *Foirades/Fizzeles*. Although these texts have formed a very uneasy canon in their own right, there is a further category at the margins of Beckett’s closed space fiction that, I contend, directly continues themes central to Beckett’s critical writing on art. The texts that belong to this subcategory of Beckett’s late prose often signal their status either as dedications to other artists, or pieces written specifically for a catalogue or performance of their work. The artists in question were relatively few: Jack Yeats (“Hommage à Jack B. Yeats,” 1954), Avigdor Arikha (“Pour Avigdor Arikha,” 1966), Bram van Velde (“La Falaise,” 1975) and, moving from the visual arts to musical collaboration, Morton Feldman (“neither,” 1977). On the other hand, this apparently meagre group of peripheral texts indicates that Beckett’s engagement with contemporary art had moved beyond the aesthetic territory defined by his essays on the van Veldes between 1945 and 1950.

These texts seek to speak the ends of representation – the suggestive opening of the visible onto the invisible, the speakable to the unspeakable, the impenetrable distance that separates the subjective from the objective. These movements belong to figures deeply attached to Beckett’s critical voice: doors and windows (also poetically recurrent), the processes of change, the opposition between the eye and hand. Because they create spaces of gestation where different textual modes ably cross and interpenetrate, these fragmentary pieces benefit from their liminal status. In the crucial sense that these texts cannot be incorporated into a single genre, my categorisation follows upon Ruby Cohn’s apt description of “Pour Avigdor Arikha” as a “lyric of criticism” (*D*, 178).

“Pour Avigdor Arikha” develops Beckett’s poetics of figuration towards the conditions of figuration. Ostensibly one of Beckett’s most obscure and bare texts, both the English and French texts consist of a mere six sentences:

Siège remis devant le dehors imprenable. Fièvre œil-main soif du non-soi. Œil par la main sans cesse changé à l’instant même où sans cesse il la change. Regard ne s’arrachant à l’invisible que pour s’asséner sur l’infaisable et retour éclair. Trêve à la navette et traces de ce que c’est que d’être et d’être devant. Traces profondes. (*D*, 152)

Siege laid again to the impregnable without. Eye and hand fevering after the unself. By the hand it unceasingly changes the eye unceasingly changed. Back and forth the gaze beating against unseeable and unmakeable. Truce for a space and the marks of what it is to be and be in face of. Those deep marks to show. (*D*, 152)

Beckett originally wrote this liminal text for a 1966 catalogue of Arikha’s paintings, following up with the English translation a year later. The original text is subtly, yet significantly different. In particular, its verbs often foreground a violent potential not present in their English equivalent, especially the doubled “s’arracher” and “s’asséner” which imply a movement back and forth between the struggle for release and a violent blow. The French text is also bound, towards its beginning and end, by a repetition of “devant.” However, these examples of

mirroring in the French text emphasise the situation in an impregnable domain shared by both versions, grounded in a situation similar to what he had found expressed in Bram van Velde.

Finding in Arikha's painting the marks of "ce que c'est que d'être et d'être devant," Beckett revisits the language he had used to describe Bram van Velde to Georges Duthuit in 1949. However, Beckett praises Bram for standing in opposition to the artist "qui ne cesse d'être devant" ("he-who-is-always-*in-front-of*"), and Bram's painting is seen to refuse "l'état d'être devant" ("state of being in front of"; Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 9 March 1949, *LII*, 136, 140) – precisely the state that marks the space in his dedication to Avigdor. These texts' shared vocabulary, then, suggests that the space associated with Arikha is marked by what Bram had refused. This signals a further legacy Beckett's thinking about the van Veldes had left over his aesthetic; namely, those visual features which Beckett had argued were refused by Bram's painting never left the scene. Like the "crise sujet-objet" Beckett observed in his essay on Henri Hayden, written after a series of essays that argued Bram showed modern art rejecting the principle of relation *per se*, the crisis goes on because the relation remains in spite of its rejection.

The figures common to both versions of Beckett's dedication to Arikha – eye and hand, the gaze (or look), the unseen and unself, as well as its setting in a firmly closed space – comprise a series of persistent tropes across Beckett's fragmentary writings. The final of the *Texts for Nothing*, for example, ends in "no place, born of the impossible voice and the unmakeable [*sic*] being" (*TFN*, 53; "ici, où il n'est pas de jours, qui n'est pas un endroit, issu de l'impossible voix l'infaisable être" *NT*, 220), while "neither," Beckett's text written for Morton Feldman, moves "from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither" (*TFN*, 167). By pairing the eye and hand "fevering after the unself" with the gaze "beating against the unmakeable," "Pour Avigdor Arikha" coalesces figural concerns present in other, disparate texts. The way common elements of vocabulary such as the "unself" and "unmakeable" are adapted between these texts can also be revealing. In particular, the attribution of "unmakeable" to the "being" in *Texts for Nothing* gestures towards an occluded ontology beneath the "unseeable and unmakeable" in his homage to Arikha.

Between all of the liminal presences that mark “Pour Avigdor” lies an impassable separation between inner and outer. The boundary thus marked out, however, leads the narrative away from a linear movement and towards a pendular oscillation. This oscillation registers some of Beckett’s most persistent aesthetic concerns: the text’s “unceasingly changed” eye particularly recalls the “changement” expressed in *Watt*, while the French text’s phrasing “sans cesse il la change” echoes Beckett’s evocation of the van Veldes’ canvases in “La Peinture des van Velde” as a ceaseless stasis, where “tout cesse sans cesse” (*D*, 128). The self-reflexive processes which characterise “Pour Avigdor Arikha,” then, are intimately connected to Beckett’s concern with art and the visual and the expression of an ontological content – “the attempt,” as Beckett described to Lawrence Harvey, “to let Being into art.”⁴⁰⁴

Beckett, Bataille and the ends of limitation

The desire to exceed the limits of the visible and makeable in “Pour Avigdor Arikha,” the “siege laid again to the impregnable without,” finds affinities with Bataille’s terms in his preface to *Madame Edwarda* (1941). Bataille’s preface was written for the novella’s republication in 1956 by Les Éditions Pauvert, and an annotated copy of the 1979 edition was in Beckett’s possession at his death.⁴⁰⁵ Bataille’s defence of his novella is sympathetic to Beckett’s interests in the figural, evidenced in works like “Pour Avigdor Arikha,” which express the conditions of representation through failed figurations of invisible states outside the bounds of representation. Bataille describes the limits of representation by evoking the notion of excess, which (similarly to the theories of ‘unknowing’ and ‘l’informe’) he uses to address states exceeding the capacities of consciousness and perception:

⁴⁰⁴ Beckett, quoted in Lawrence E. Harvey, “On Beckett, 1961-2,” in *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*, ed. James and Elizabeth Knowlson (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 134.

⁴⁰⁵ And, as Nixon and Van Hulle record, in the preface to Beckett’s copy of *Madame Edwarda* “an unusually large number of individual words and phrases are underlined in pencil.” Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, 80.

Que signifie la vérité, en dehors de la représentation de l'excès, si nous ne voyons ce qui excède la possibilité de voir, ce qu'il est intolérable de voir, comme, dans l'extase, il est intolérable de jouir? si nous ne pensons ce qui excède la possibilité de penser...?⁴⁰⁶

(What does truth signify if we do not see that which exceeds sight's possibilities, that which it is unbearable to see as, in pleasure, it is unbearable to know pleasure? What, if we do not think that which exceeds thought's possibilities?)⁴⁰⁷

For Leslie Hill, Bataille understands limitlessness to be “properly unspeakable, since it is only possible to speak of limitlessness by adopting the very limits whose stability is threatened by the limitlessness of which it is necessary to speak.”⁴⁰⁸ The unspeakable nature of the limit, Hill continues, thus shapes how Bataille conceives of the relationship between thought and being:

if limits are what found the finitude of being, it is clear that limitlessness or excess, to the extent that it is the negation of limits, cannot itself be founded. Yet it is what makes limits possible. To think being at all, it is therefore necessary, according to Bataille, to think that which is beyond the bounds of thinking.⁴⁰⁹

The impossible imperative “to think that which is beyond the bounds of thinking” was certainly not unique to Bataille. As Hill's summary suggests, the limit as conceived by Bataille shares similarities with the Heideggerian *Ungrund*: the ‘ungrounded’ or ‘primal’ ground of perception. As my second chapter outlined, this aspect of Heidegger's thought was likely familiar to Beckett from the 1930s, through Karl Ballmer's pamphlet *Aber Herr Heidegger!* and George Reavey's discussion of the concept in his short essay on Geer van Velde in *The London Bulletin*, which

⁴⁰⁶ Bataille, *Madame Edvarda*, in *Romans et récits*, ed. Jean-François Louette et. al., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 320.

⁴⁰⁷ Bataille, *Madame Edvarda*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, MA: 1997), 226.

⁴⁰⁸ Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

shared its page and subject with Beckett, as well as his work translating “La parole sacrée de Hölderlin” for Duthuit.

Heidegger and Bataille both adopted the fundamentally Kantian view that the limits of the thinkable are what both grounds and bounds consciousness – a point of view shared by Beckett’s three essays on Geer and Bram van Velde. Indeed, the “art d’incarcération” Beckett proffered in “Peintres de l’empêchement” advances a theory of representation founded on an idea of the art work failing to realise the demand for it to reveal and reflect upon its own condition, while remaining permanently bound to this impossible demand. Yet this failure reveals the foundational aesthetic value of the work of art in general: it cannot step outside its limits precisely because these limitations ground its condition as representation. In a mode reflecting Bataille’s attempt to “think being” in post-war writings such as *Madame Edwarda* and *L’Impossible*, which were themselves subject to Bataille’s ongoing revisions of his texts, Beckett’s obsessive narrativising of a perspective outside the bounds of its own representation, contained in the unseeable and unmakeable, commits these texts to a reflection of the being beyond representation – “that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable”⁴¹⁰ – through the “expressive act” of itself and this impossibility.

Wittgenstein’s aesthetics and the late Beckettian limit

Despite their exhaustive attention to descriptive detail, Beckett’s closed space texts are ultimately expressive rather than descriptive, and they express aesthetic principles which Beckett’s essays had previously sought to describe. The closed spaces of *Foirades/Fizzles*, for example, are underpinned by an aesthetics of incarceration, which Beckett theorised in “Peintres de l’empêchement,” as well as a further set of influences present in twentieth-century art theory. Furthermore, as David Addyman has recently shown, Beckett’s mature conceptions of literary and theatrical space were significantly shaped by his discussions with Duthuit, and related

⁴¹⁰ Shenker, “An Interview with Beckett,” 148.

terminology such as the “espace-limite” employed (although in order to oppose its value) by the painter André Masson in his article “Divagations sur l’espace,” published in issue 44 of *Les Temps Modernes* in 1949.⁴¹¹ Beckett had already drawn upon this article for “Three Dialogues,”⁴¹² especially in the second dialogue titled “Masson,” so the continual refigurations of limit-spaces in the later *Foirades/Fizzles* suggests that the aesthetic position put forward in “Three Dialogues” was central to Beckett’s late literary compositions.

The persistent uses of visual figures that gesture towards the ends and the beginnings of the text is at the centre of the aesthetic peculiar to Beckett’s fragmentary prose texts. Because of the singularity of the aesthetic concerns within these texts, in my view they invite a reading in proximity to another set of philosophical concerns, also embedded within the Kantian tradition but at a remove from philosophies of Being such as Sartre’s which underpinned the existential humanist readings that dominated interpretations of Beckett’s prose canon. Accordingly, my reading at this point argues that the texts which comprise Beckett’s contributions to exhibition catalogues as well as the collections *Têtes-mortes/Six Residua* and *Foirades/Fizzles* trace a conception of the limit that usefully parallels some of the central concerns in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. What I want to suggest is that a Wittgensteinian reading can develop Bataille’s perspective on the limit, and that it can further illuminate how the limit is figured in the closed spaces of Beckett’s later fiction. My reading here will focus on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), outlining its place in readings of Beckett’s work, before drawing upon this perspective in relation to Beckett’s closed space text “Imagination morte imaginez”/“Imagination Dead Imagine” (1965). Then, I will approach the

⁴¹¹ David Addyman, “En attendant Godot: A New Landscape,” in *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*, ed. Peter Fifield and David Addyman (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 63-85; Addyman, “Where Now?: Beckett, Duthuit and *The Unnamable*,” in “Revisiting *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt/Malone Dies* and *L’Innommable/The Unnamable*,” ed. David Tucker, Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 26 (2014): 179-192.

⁴¹² Addyman, ““Where Now?: Beckett, Duthuit and *The Unnamable*,” 190n4.

question of influence by bringing Beckett's thematisation of the limit into dialogue with Maurice Blanchot's reading of Wittgenstein.

The reading I suggest here stands against the backdrop of many early critical misreadings of Beckett's work in relation to Wittgenstein, which have significantly undermined the perceived legitimacy of any firm association between the two writers. In one of the first readings to seriously argue for a connection between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Beckett's writing, Jacqueline Hoefler suggested that the passage in *Watt*, "What was changed was existence off the ladder. Do not come down the ladder, I for, I haf taken it away" (*W*, 203) could be a direct allusion to the *Tractatus* proposition 6.54: "whoever understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)"⁴¹³ When John Fletcher prepared his highly influential book *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, he sought to verify Hoefler's reading, and asked Beckett if Wittgenstein's penultimate proposition in the *Tractatus* indeed provided the source here. In a footnote to his chapter on *Watt*, he reports: "Unfortunately this interpretation is quite erroneous. Mr. Beckett told me in 1961 that the 'ladder' reference is to 'a Welsh joke' (an *Itma* classic I'm informed), making the pronunciation not German but Welsh, and that he had read the works of Wittgenstein only 'within the last two years'."⁴¹⁴ Remarkably, this quotation has often been read as an account of Beckett's authorial rejection of Wittgenstein's influence.⁴¹⁵ Yet for Beckett, who claimed in the same year as his conversation

⁴¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2001), 6.54.

⁴¹⁴ Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, 87-8.

⁴¹⁵ See, for example, Linda Ben-Zvi's influential article on Beckett and Mauthner, "Samuel Beckett, Fitz Mauthner and the Limits of Language," *PMLA* 95, no. 2 (1980): 182-200. Ben-Zvi addresses this issue in a footnote, and retraces the source of the ladder metaphor to a passage in Mauthner's *Beiträge* (n19). In a more recent study, Paul Stewart asserts "Beckett came to a similar yet independent understanding of the limitations of language which Wittgenstein discusses." Paul Stewart, *Zone of Evaporation: Samuel Beckett's Disjunctions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 65. For a reading of Beckett and Wittgenstein with

with Fletcher that “I never read philosophers,”⁴¹⁶ to directly admit that he *had* read Wittgenstein in “the last two years” is unprecedented in its directness. As Nixon and van Hulle’s catalogue of Beckett’s library testifies, Wittgenstein would remain a steady presence in Beckett’s philosophical diet from the 1960s until his death. Indeed, his library held more books by and about Wittgenstein than any other philosopher.⁴¹⁷

Until the recent revelations afforded by the publication of Beckett’s library catalogue and parts of his correspondence, readings of Beckett’s writing in the light of Wittgenstein almost universally only read any parallel between his philosophy and Beckett’s work in passing, and without suggesting any deeper filiation. The few exceptions to this rule – for example, Marjorie Perloff’s chapter on Beckett and Wittgenstein in her study *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* – have been put off from making a sustained Wittgensteinian reading of Beckett’s texts.⁴¹⁸ Also among these few, Elizabeth Barry’s account in *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* addresses in detail how both the complex strangeness in Wittgenstein’s theory of ordinary language and the “poverty” of Beckett’s narrators display “a knowing innocence” aimed at “dismantling the postures of rhetoric.”⁴¹⁹ Most recently, Andre Furlani has spiritedly argued for the importance of Wittgenstein’s conception of the limit to Beckett’s late aesthetic, noting important biographical affinities between the two men.⁴²⁰ However, I would like to mark a separation in my approach

reference to this critical history, see Andre Furlani, “Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification,” *PMLA* 127, no.1 (2012): 38-57.

⁴¹⁶ Gabriel D’Aubarède, “Interview with Samuel Beckett,” in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 217.

⁴¹⁷ Nixon and Van Hulle, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, 163-167.

⁴¹⁸ Marjorie Perloff, “Witt-Watt: The Language of Resistance/The Resistance of Language,” chapter 4 in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 115-144. Perloff largely reads Wittgenstein’s relation to Beckett’s novel *Watt* through biographical accounts of Beckett’s work in the Gloria SMH Resistance cell.

⁴¹⁹ Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 188-90.

⁴²⁰ Andre Furlani, “Earlier Wittgenstein, Later Beckett,” *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1 (2015): 64-86. See also Furlani, “The Contradictions of Samuel Beckett,” *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 3 (2015): 449-

from Barry's, which primarily draws upon Wittgenstein's ordinary language theory, and from Furlani's, which suggests that Beckett's writing displays a consciously occluded engagement with Wittgenstein's work,⁴²¹ rather than an engagement with philosophical and aesthetic concerns stretching beyond Beckett's personal sense of Wittgenstein as a philosopher. As I have suggested in relation to other lines of philosophical influence in Beckett's work, an empirical approach comes up short where these influences are registered through figuration rather than suppressed citation.

My reading is compelled by a sense of sympathy between Beckett's and Wittgenstein's perspectives on representation, and the way in which this shared view is registered on the surface of the text defines how Wittgenstein illuminates my reading of Beckett. In many respects, I take my point of departure from Terry Eagleton's lamentation that the Anglo-American view of Wittgenstein "seems to have lost that distinctively European timbre, that dimension of sheer strangeness and intractability" so characteristic of Wittgenstein's philosophy.⁴²² Aspects of "strangeness and intractability" are particularly important in relation to Beckett. The ways in which Wittgenstein's writing intersects with European literary and philosophical concerns is central to my assertion that there are important affinities between Wittgenstein's and Beckett's writings and the philosophical perspectives offered by contemporaries, such as Bataille and Blanchot, whose proximity to Beckett is more easily recognised.

Compelling connections deserve to be drawn between the closed space genre of Beckett's fiction and Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly the *Tractatus*. A provocative

470, and (at the time of writing) the forthcoming *Beckett After Wittgenstein* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

⁴²¹ Take for example Furlani's assertion that Wittgenstein's thought "fostered and even emboldened" Beckett's purposes in his later work, an assertion made with reference to memoirs by Barbara Bray and E.M. Cioran, where both men are seen to occupy a "limit situation" similar to the one reflected in their work. Furlani, "Earlier Wittgenstein, Later Beckett," 66, 71.

⁴²² Terry Eagleton, "Wittgenstein's Friends," in *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), 99.

relationship between the limit and figures of visibility in Beckett's fiction is limned by Wittgenstein's depiction of the relation between the subject, the eye and the visual field in the *Tractatus*:

The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.

Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?

You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do *not* see the eye.

And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.⁴²³

For Wittgenstein, the subject constitutes the unseen limit of his world. As a consequence, the periphery of the visual field has an existential significance. Wittgenstein goes on to place this specifically in relation to death: "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. [...] Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits."⁴²⁴ This section of the *Tractatus* presents a useful opportunity for reflection upon the relationship between sight and subjectivity in Beckett's writing. For Shane Weller, in his study on Beckett's writing and nihilism, the unstated implication of the *Tractatus*'s discussion of death in relation to the limits of the visual field is "that we mortals are, as mortals, in a sense immortal."⁴²⁵ However, there are further implications in relation to Wittgenstein's theme of the unlimited limit.⁴²⁶ The eye is figured as the invisible source of vision, where it is associated with the subject, who lies at the limit of the world and, as the unrepresentable source of representation, cannot be placed as an

⁴²³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.632-5.633.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.4311.

⁴²⁵ Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda, 2005), 40.

⁴²⁶ It is also indicative of the relative lack of serious attention paid to Wittgenstein's philosophy within Beckett studies that the two other major studies on death in Beckett's writing – Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew, eds. *Beckett and Death* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012) and Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words* – leave Wittgenstein wholly unmentioned except for one passing citation from the isolated line "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death" in Ricks's study. See Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*, 50.

object within the world. Beckett's figurations of the absent and invisible share with Wittgenstein the understanding that the subject is debarred from representation except through figures that gesture towards the invisible grounds of the visible and which, in the failure to represent the subject, mark out the limits to representation as the meeting point between the representation and subjective being.

Following upon Wittgenstein's discussion of the visual field in the *Tractatus*, Beckett's own markings in his copy of the *Tractatus* (a reprinted edition of the parallel German-English edition published by Routledge 1961) demonstrate a significant interest in the common boundary between language and the subject's perception of the world. These markings are mainly found within Bertrand Russell's introduction, famously derided by Wittgenstein himself. Beckett's edition includes underlinings of the following passages:

According to [Wittgenstein's view] we could only say things about the world as a whole if we could get outside the world, if, that is to say, it ceased to be for us the whole world. [...] That the world is *my* world is shown in the fact that the boundaries of language (the only language I understand) indicate the boundaries of my world. The metaphysical subject does not belong to the world but is a boundary of the world.⁴²⁷

Despite Wittgenstein's significant reservations about Russell's introduction, it actually quite neatly re-describes Wittgenstein's theory of subjectivity outlined after proposition 5.6 in the *Tractatus*: "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*" As I will detail, however, according to Wittgenstein's notebooks towards the *Tractatus*, artistic expression offers a glimpse of the impossible view from the other side of these limits, the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity'). For Wittgenstein, the subject exists at a kind of limit point that bounds the world as it appears, a boundary which is also marked out by the limits of language.

⁴²⁷ Bertrand Russell, introduction to Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, xix, quoted in Nixon and Van Hulle, *Beckett's Library*, 250n66.

The attempt to describe the values that lie at this boundary, especially reflection on ethics and aesthetics, strives to attain an impoverished form of the divine perspective. This striving is hopeless, but the failure is not without value. In his 1929 “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein describes the value of ethical thought as just such a fruitless striving:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. [...] What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.⁴²⁸

The subject may speak, but subjectivity in itself remains unspeakable, just as the perceiving subject, *as* subject, remains unperceivable. For the subject to speak upon his life as a whole would necessitate a self-negation – he would have to be simultaneously subject and object to himself. The impossibility of this act inscribes those limits on being that are expressed in silence and by the mystical. In Wittgenstein’s notebooks towards the *Tractatus*, the “complete expression” of the work of art “is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*” just as “the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.”⁴²⁹ As the notebook entry for 10th October 1916 goes on to assert, this “is the connection between art and ethics.”⁴³⁰ Wittgenstein’s phrasing here undoubtedly foreshadows his assertion of unity between ethics and aesthetics in the *Tractatus*.⁴³¹ Insofar as both ethics and aesthetics posit a kind of transcendental challenge to the limits of phenomenal experience, both the work of art and the ethical act, made without self-interest,

⁴²⁸ Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (January 1965): pp. 11-12.

⁴²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p. 83.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴³¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.421.

submit to the impossible demand to look upon the phenomenally bounded world as representation from outside those bounds.

The unity between ethics and aesthetics, so enigmatically posited by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and his *Notebooks*, rests within a strong Kantian tradition. As Hanne Appelqvist notes, the unity between regarding the work of art and the “good life” in Wittgenstein’s writing on ethics and aesthetics gestures towards the *sub specie aeterni* perspective with a further end in mind. This perspective is ascribed so much importance because it would allow the ideal reflection on the “necessary preconditions of value, that is, with the underlying form of any given ethical or aesthetic attitude.”⁴³² While this perspective continues Kant’s connection between aesthetic and ethical judging formulated over his three *Critiques*, it has been argued that Wittgenstein more consciously reframes the Schopenhauerian revision of Kant’s system. Bryan MacGee’s seminal study of Schopenhauer, for example, asserts that Wittgenstein’s “mystical” conception of the world is strongly rooted in his reading of Schopenhauer.⁴³³ The connection between art and ethics as a means of transcendence is detailed at length in Schopenhauer’s work, particularly when outlining the nature of aesthetic contemplation and the sublime, and Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the point of view *sub specie aeternitatis* draws upon Schopenhauer’s transcendental “complete identification.”⁴³⁴ However, Wittgenstein is stricter: the limit occupied by the subject cannot be crossed by that subject. The impossibility of this scenario is non-negotiable for Wittgenstein, whereas for Schopenhauer the *possibility* (however remote) of transcending these

⁴³² Hanne Appelqvist, “Why does Wittgenstein say that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same?” in *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: History and Interpretation*, ed. Peter Sullivan and Michael Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40.

⁴³³ Bryan Magee, “Schopenhauer’s influence on Wittgenstein,” in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 311-338. See also Christopher Janaway’s partial response, which takes issue with Magee’s assertion of Schopenhauer’s singular influence over Wittgenstein’s thinking, in “Remarks on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche,” chapter thirteen in *Self and World in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 317-358.

⁴³⁴ Sophia Vasalou, *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 77-81.

limits is offered by the identification between subject and object in renouncement of the will (an ethical act of disinterest) or certain kinds of aesthetic realisation.

With reference to the well-documented influence Schopenhauer held over Beckett's literary development, the Wittgensteinian perspective throws some light on the ontological vision in Beckett's late prose, and how this developed the perspectives he incorporated from his early, self-directed reading. As Janik and Toulmin's study of Wittgenstein's intellectual heritage makes clear, Wittgenstein's philosophical influences lie firmly within the Kantian tradition, and he shared with Beckett a significant interest in Schopenhauer's writing, as well as Fritz Mauthner's nominalist philosophy.⁴³⁵ Beckett brings further affinities with Wittgenstein to the fore in a 1936 letter to Thomas MacGreevy, where he praises Arnold Geulincx's "saturation in the conviction that the sub specie aeternitatis vision is the only excuse for remaining alive. He does not put out his eyes on that account, as Heraclites did and Rimbaud began to" (Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 5 March 1936, *LI*, 319). Vision operates as the conduit between a metaphor of the ideal metaphysical perspective and its concretion in poetry, which Beckett's gesture towards Rimbaud and his "eye suicide" hints to have turned against itself with self-destructive ends in mind. This vision, the "only excuse for remaining alive," comes from an impossible perspective outside the limits of representation.

This sense of the instability that results from trying to pass through or to step outside and look upon what the limit contains is central to Wittgenstein's last work, published as *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein's reflections develop an especially useful term, calling statements of certainty the "foundation-walls [*Grundmauer*]" of language.⁴³⁶ At once limiting and grounding, the "foundation-walls" are neither doubtable nor knowable: "At the foundation [*Grund*] of well-

⁴³⁵ Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973). See especially chapter five, "Language, Ethics and Representation," 120-166.

⁴³⁶ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M Anscombe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 248.

founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”⁴³⁷ The idea of the grounding limit is integral to the work’s extended reflection on the meaning of doubt and why facts that are beyond doubt are also unknowable. For it to be possible to know something, it must also be possible to doubt it, and vice-versa: “But what could make me doubt whether this person here is N.N., whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.”⁴³⁸

Wittgenstein’s description of doubt and the “foundation-walls” of language bears a suggestive relationship to Beckett’s depiction of the unstable interaction between figure and ground in his fiction. Marjorie Perloff’s discussion of Beckett and Wittgenstein alludes to a connection between Wittgenstein’s thinking around doubt and Beckett’s novel *Watt*, and there are clear affinities between Wittgenstein’s discussions about the unfounded foundations of judgement and other reflections on foundational states that are relevant to the wider philosophical setting of Beckett’s texts, especially Heidegger’s notion of the *Ungrund*. As Lee Braver observes in his extensive comparative study of the two philosophers in terms of their connected conception of the grounds of understanding, for both Wittgenstein and Heidegger “that which determines our thinking and acting cannot itself be grounded in anything deeper.”⁴³⁹

Wittgenstein’s perspective on the ground opens up the troubling instability before the world experienced by many of Beckett’s protagonists. Molloy, for example, suffers a “defect of the understanding” at the “lower frequency” than the rational, a fact which fundamentally estranges him from a stable subjectivity or a place within the world, making words akin to the “unspeakably painful [...] buzzing of an insect,” and causing him to misjudge “the distance separating me from the other world” (*M*, 45). Molloy’s doubts and difficulties, which displace him outside the world, arise at the precise point where Wittgenstein claims that “doubt would

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 253.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 613.

⁴³⁹ Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2012), 194.

seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.” Wittgenstein’s development of the *Tractatus* picture of language into one that accommodates states of doubt produced a conception of language founded on the use of expressions that are radically unknowable.

The impossible view: the limits of thought in “Imagination Dead Imagine”

Read through a Wittgensteinian framework, the prose fragments which make up Beckett’s *Têtes-mortes* and *Foirades* give literary expression to self-contained spaces, viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, from outside the “foundation-walls” which bound these spaces. These Wittgensteinian affinities are especially apparent in “Imagination morte imaginez”/“Imagination Dead Imagine.” The French text begins: “Nulle part trace de vie, dites-vous, pah, la belle affaire, imagination pas morte, si, bon, imagination morte imaginez. Iles, eaux, azur, verdure, fixez, pff, muscade, une éternité, taisez” (*TM*, 51). Beckett’s English translation introduces the glimpse as a figure in itself: “No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, *one glimpse and vanished*, endlessly, omit” (*TFN*, 87; my emphasis). By concretely figuring the glimpse, the English version foregrounds the trope of glimpsing and gazing more hesitantly present in the background of the French text. However, common to both is the attempt to evacuate an imaginative space from the perspective of a narrative eye alternately descending into and ascending from a bare rotunda, glimpsing its creations only to immediately negate them. Read as an imperative, the title suggests an impossible order to think what is beyond the bounds of thinking, while the text performs this impossibility by inscribing its own limits from within after failing to meet the demand to cross both sides of these limits. But the failure to “think that which exceeds thought’s possibilities” is no negation. By contrast, it recognises the bare evidence of an imagination still alive, and it leads towards the impossible appearance of a faint rotunda, which the imaginary eye descends into and describes: “Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure” (*TFN*, 87; “Jusqu’à toute blanche dans la blancheur la rotonde. Pas d’entrée, entrez, mesurez” *TM*, 51). In the meeting of vision and imagination, the

appearance of the rotunda following the failure to imagine the death of the imagination connects the failure to pass the impossible limit with the groundless grounds out of which the rotunda's bare figures appear.

A thematic sympathy between “Imagination Dead Imagine” and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* has been suggested by Irit Degani-Raz, who argues that Beckett’s text presents “an impossible task, of the kind that Wittgenstein faced in his *Tractatus*, [...] to outline the limits of thought.”⁴⁴⁰ Yet both texts are predicated on demonstrating the impossibility of their own task; as the *Tractatus* contends “that one cannot demonstrate the limits of thought since this requires that we think the unthinkable,” “Imagination Dead Imagine” similarly “requires imagining what cannot be imagined.”⁴⁴¹ Degani-Raz goes on to argue for a “structural homology” between the *Tractatus* and “Imagination Dead Imagine,” since both texts “seem to give [...] a figurative account of our inability to grasp (imaginatively) what the death of imagination would involve.”⁴⁴² Beckett’s and Wittgenstein’s texts therefore both seek to thematise the self-contradictory implications led to by their reflection upon the limits of their own representational form. They express the impossibility of what they seek to achieve: a figurative account of a state irreducible to any figure.

These contradictory implications are present in Wittgenstein’s introduction to the *Tractatus*, which hesitates over a small but significant choice of terms: “the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”⁴⁴³ But the *Tractatus* clearly states that philosophy “must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what

⁴⁴⁰ Irit Degani-Raz, “Cartesian Fingerprints in Beckett’s *Imagination Dead Imagine*,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 225.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 225-26.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁴³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 3.

cannot be thought. It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.”⁴⁴⁴ Within the *Tractatus* itself then, Wittgenstein deliberately sets philosophy a task which, in his introduction, he recognises to be impossible.

There are strong thematic parallels between Wittgenstein’s conception of the limits to thought and Bataille’s enquiry to “think that which exceeds thought’s possibilities,” with both seeking an impossible perspective from outside “sight’s possibilities.” This close connection between the limits of thought and perception are drawn together in the mind’s eye of “Imagination Dead Imagine”; as Wittgenstein’s analogy with the visual field suggests, the limits of the thinkable are unthinkable just as the limits of the visual field are invisible.

Thought’s limits structure the representational relationships that constitute the thinkable, and on this basis the *Tractatus* specifies its pictorial theory of representation:

Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language.⁴⁴⁵

For Wittgenstein, the relation between “reality” and its description or representation relies on a shared form that is itself indescribable and impossible to represent because this form makes description and representation possible. These aspects to the *Tractatus* picture theory of language place Wittgenstein’s argument in the tradition of Western writing on mimesis and representation in art or poetry. While a theory of art built around Wittgenstein’s picture theory would logically

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.114.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.12, 4.121.

accept the mimetic premise that the meaning of the work of art lies in the relation between the work and the world with which it shares necessary formal properties, it would also have to oppose any claim that what makes the work meaningful can be described. The aesthetic theory implicitly contained in the *Tractatus* thus legitimises aesthetic contemplation while it presents a challenge to the central presumptions on which art criticism, or any attempt to describe what the work of art *shows*, is founded.

The implicit aesthetic standpoint contained in Wittgenstein's opposition between description and expression, the difference between saying and showing,⁴⁴⁶ privileges self-reflexive modes of art and literature that thematise the bond of consciousness. This sense of consciousness as a bond that binds is pervasive, despite the apparent vacuity of influences and formal self-sufficiency which characterise both the *Tractatus* and Beckett's closed spaces. The double-edged conception of consciousness works its way between many strains in Kantian thought, from Schopenhauer's theory of representation to the post-Heideggerian revision of the relationship between consciousness and being through projects such as Sartre's phenomenological ontology. Among Beckett's nearer contemporaries, Blanchot's post-war writing on literature is especially concerned with how literary experience is shadowed by the impossible scenarios reflection on representation and consciousness leads to. "Through consciousness," Blanchot would say in *The Space of Literature*, "we escape what is present, but we are delivered to representation."⁴⁴⁷

As if emphasising the text's approach towards its own limits, the "rotunda" into which the inner eye of "Imagination Dead Imagine" repeatedly descends is frequently shaken; *frissons* abound: the "frisson primaire" – or "instinctive shudder" – of painting approaching its limits in "Peintres de l'empêchement" becomes "the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed"

⁴⁴⁶ See Marie McGinn, "Saying and Showing and the Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 9 (2001): 24-36.

⁴⁴⁷ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, paperback ed. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 134.

(TFN, 89).⁴⁴⁸ The various iterations by which the act of shuddering is nominalised – more varied in Beckett’s French, which offers *frissons*, *frémissements* and *tremblements* – placed against the equally varied cycle of English synonyms for the liminal – “threshold,” “boundary,” “limit” – suggest a directed attempt to variously figure a moment of foundational encounter across boundaries at once experienced and expressed.⁴⁴⁹ According to Laura Salisbury, Beckett uses “shuddering” as “an anxious form of mimesis, because it involves an assimilation to the world, an expressive and affective affinity with it.”⁴⁵⁰ A “shudder” is not simply an expression of a separate experience, nor is it an experience hidden to the observer and open only to the subject of that experience. Instead, it stands at the threshold between the experiencing subject and the world of phenomena, and between this encounter and its expression. It is a behaviour closely felt.

Shuddering and trembling thus faintly register the presence of the body in the Beckettian text, as well as its presence as a site that resists conceptual categorisation.⁴⁵¹ The faint figures of a shuddering man and woman in “Imagination Dead Imagine” – who lie opposite each other, “sweating and icy” – visually reflect their mutual shuddering in the alternating sight of their rhythmically opening eyes, which “at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure” (TFN, 89; “les yeux gauches qui à des intervalles incalculables brusquement s’écarquillent et s’exposent béants” TM, 56). Never looking at each other simultaneously, except for one tantalising break in the routine when “the beginning of one overlapped the end of the other,” the vision here reflects the rotunda’s resistance to the clear-

⁴⁴⁸ See also James Hansford, “‘Imaginative Transactions’ in ‘La Falaise,’” repr. in *The Beckett Studies Reader*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1993), 202-212, which connects figures in texts such as “La Falaise” and “Pour Avigdor” to Beckett’s critical theory of “empêchement.”

⁴⁴⁹ As Garin Dowd remarks, the “figure of the threshold” is one among “a wider range of spatial configurations,” and as such thresholds “are necessarily at once embedded within and blended with the spaces thus evoked.” Dowd, *Abstract Machines*, 245.

⁴⁵⁰ Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, 233.

⁴⁵¹ See Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, 101-03.

sighted vision of the mind's gaze, which ultimately abandons the scene whence it came, to "the great whiteness unchanging" (TFN, 89).

Figuring the unfigurable: Blanchot, Bataille and rhetorical delineations of the limit

As Guillaume Gesvret has observed,⁴⁵² the *frissons* and *tremblements* which pervade Beckett's late prose fragments bear a striking similarity to Blanchot's description of the image in *L'Entretien infini* (*The Infinite Conversation*, 1969). Blanchot is concerned with the condition of the image's coming into being and its status as a figure, for example: "L'image [...] est essentiellement double, non seulement signe et signifié, mais figure de l'infigurable, forme de l'informel, simplicité ambiguë qui s'adresse à ce qu'il y a de double en nous et réanime la duplicité en quoi nous nous divisons, nous nous rassemblons indéfiniment."⁴⁵³ ("The image [...] is essentially double, not only sign and signified but figure of the unfigurable, a form of the nonformal, an ambiguous simplicity that addresses itself to what in us is double, reanimating the duplicity through which we divide and reassemble ourselves indefinitely."⁴⁵⁴) As "figure of the unfigurable," the image in *L'Entretien infini* fosters an important expression of the "expérience-limite." This mode of figuration, which Blanchot claims to be integral to the image, doubles back on itself, leaves itself in order to repeat itself from outside: "L'image tremble, elle est le tremblement de l'image, le frisson de ce qui oscille et vacille: elle sort constamment d'elle-même, c'est qu'il n'y a rien où elle soit elle-même, toujours déjà en dehors d'elle et toujours le dedans de ce dehors, en même temps d'une simplicité qui la rend plus simple que tout autre langage et est dans le langage comme la source d'où il 'sort'."⁴⁵⁵ ("The image trembles, is this

⁴⁵² Guillaume Gesvret, "Espace et affect dans les dernières œuvres de Beckett: variations d'échelle," in *Samuel Beckett 2: Parole, regard et corps*, ed. Llewellyn Brown, La Revue des lettres modernes (Caen: Lettres modernes Minard, 2011), 97.

⁴⁵³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 476.

⁴⁵⁴ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Lydia Davies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 324.

⁴⁵⁵ Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 476.

trembling of the image, the shiver of that which oscillates and vacillates: it constantly leaves itself, for always already outside itself and always the inside of this outside, there is nothing in which it can be itself, being at the same time of a simplicity that renders it more simple than any other language, and in language being like the source from which it ‘departs.’⁴⁵⁶) In trembling, the image registers a resistance to fixation, the categorisation of subject and object, while it also fosters the non-coincidence out of which divided representation is born.

The image, then, grounds the situation; it delivers us to the representation, which it is, at the limit, always seeking to escape. Through its attempt to step outside itself and figure the unfigurable, the image reproduces itself anew in a perpetual vacillation that doubles and displaces itself. Language too is grounded in the image, but it is thus grounded in an image of reality that has already displaced, departed from and doubled itself. Holding Blanchot’s formulation of the image in mind, Beckett’s figurations of unfigurable states and the glimpses of figures fading into the background, which characterise his late closed space texts and their figurations of their conditions as representation, reflect both the “hairbreadth departure” between word and world that troubles Watt (*W*, 232), and the elusion of the object of representation in “Peintres de l’empêchement,” because they are conditioned by an image of representation that has already departed from itself, that eludes itself in its moment of appearance.

Wittgenstein, Blanchot and Bataille, in their formulations of the limit, develop dichotomies which develop the Kantian division between representation and ‘thing in itself.’ The boundaries of representation draw language, imagination and perception together, while limiting the images they contain to the conditions of representation. Shared between imagination and vision, representation’s “grounding-walls” inform the *Tractatus* and “Imagination Dead Imagine,” both of which utilise the rhetorical mode of *enargeia* – a way of

⁴⁵⁶ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 324-5.

using language to recreate visual perception in the mind of the reader.⁴⁵⁷ *Enargeia* can be seen to anticipate Wittgenstein's picture theory of language, for which words function like a picture that "reaches right out to" and touches reality on the basis their shared "logico-pictorial form."⁴⁵⁸ Because language shares its form with perceived reality, linguistic picturing in the *Tractatus* is the foundational mode of relation between the subject and the world.⁴⁵⁹ Such a conception of picturing is germane to Beckett's visual modes. After all, much of the strangeness shared between Beckett's critical writing on the visual arts – in "Peintres de l'empêchement" especially – and late fiction like "Imagination Dead Imagine" lies in these texts' performance of figurative principles derived from an implied understanding that the paradoxes of representation could be performed in like manner both by the visual arts and literature, and that the written is best able to reflect on its status as representation through a visual language.

The unrepresentable is also an integral aspect to Wittgenstein's and Beckett's perspectives on representation. Wittgenstein's conception of the linguistically-bound visual world is negatively marked by an unrepresentable, unspeakable outside, and this is very close to vocabulary in persistent exchange throughout Beckett's writing, manifest as the "impregnable

⁴⁵⁷ "The graphic portrayal of living experience, through *enargeia*, is intended to construct a credible image which will take the audience into the presence of an object by attempting to place things before the eyes." Gerard Paul Sharpling, "Towards a Rhetoric of Experience: the Role of *Enargeia* in the Essays of Montaigne," *Rhetorica* 20, no. 2 (2002): 173-192. *Enargeia* would also prove an immensely important concept for the development of the practice of art criticism in France, especially Diderot and Baudelaire's *Salons*. In spite of their display of contempt for the "Paris school," Beckett's essays on art seem to uneasily call upon this tradition. See Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, *In the Mind's Eye: The visual impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003).

⁴⁵⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2.1511, 2.1515, 2.2.

⁴⁵⁹ In constructing a connection between mental picturing and linguistic expression, *enargeia* also intersects with *ekphrasis*. Indeed, theories of *enargeitic* representation from Rhetor to Montaigne provided a framework which legitimised *ekphratic* depictions of painting and poetry as "sister arts." See Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), especially chapter 6, "The Poetics of Ekphrasis and Enargeia," 57-61, and chapter 12, "Ut Pictura Poesis," 89-119.

without” in “Pour Avigdor Arikha,” or Hamm’s line in *Endgame*: “Outside of here it’s death!” (CDW, 96, 120). Most famously, the *Tractatus* ends by emphasising how absolute and unspeakable this outside is: “That of which we cannot speak we must pass over in silence.”⁴⁶⁰ It would also be in relation to the role of silence that Wittgenstein’s philosophy would receive its belated engagement in France,⁴⁶¹ and to which Blanchot’s evocations of Beckett as well as Wittgenstein are most often addressed.

Blanchot’s readings of Beckett focus on the theme of silence through a dialogue between language and its impossible absence. The neutral, indifferent voicing of silence is highlighted in Blanchot’s oft-cited discussion of *L’Innommable* in the review essay, “Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?” (“Where now? Who now?”), collected in *Le Livre à venir* (*The Book to Come*, 1959): “quand elle ne parle pas, elle parle encore, quand elle cesse, elle persévère, non pas silencieuse, car en elle le silence éternellement se parle”⁴⁶² (“when it does not speak, it is still speaking, when it ceases, it perseveres, not silently, for in it silence speaks eternally”⁴⁶³). In a later reflection on Wittgenstein, Blanchot again invokes the theme of silence as an impossible state, asserting that Wittgenstein’s mysticism “viendrait de ce qu’il croit que l’on peut montrer là où l’on ne pourrait parler. Mais, sans langage rien ne se montre. Et se taire, c’est encore parler. Le silence est impossible. C’est pourquoi nous le désirons”⁴⁶⁴ (“must come from his believing that one can *show* when one cannot *speak*. But without language nothing can be shown. And to be silent is

⁴⁶⁰ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.

⁴⁶¹ As James Helgeson observes, Wittgenstein’s philosophy was largely passed over in silence in France until the 1960s. Against the delayed translation and dissemination of his writing (the first edition of Wittgenstein’s writing in French was a double-edition of the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by Pierre Klossowski, published in 1961), Blanchot’s brief engagements with his philosophy take on a deeper significance than they would in the Anglophone context. See Helgeson, “What Cannot Be Said: Notes on Early French Wittgenstein Reception,” *Paragraph* 34, no. 3 (2011): 338-357.

⁴⁶² Blanchot, “Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?” 286.

⁴⁶³ Blanchot, “Where Now? Who Now?” 210.

⁴⁶⁴ Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 23.

still to speak. Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it”⁴⁶⁵). Between these two evocations, the impossible speaking of silence is a corollary to the envisioning of the invisible; states of invisibility and silence are instances of the desire to figure the unfigurable grounds of representation that structure the image.

A less well-known instance of Blanchot reflecting on Beckett’s figurations of impossible states outside representation is found in *L’Entretien Infini*, which discusses Beckett’s novel *Comment c’est* at length in relation to the interplay between the visible and invisible: “ainsi se trouve justifiée, dans le cas de Beckett, la disparition de tout signe qui ne serait signe que pour l’œil. Ici, ce n’est plus la puissance de voir qui est requise: il faut renoncer au domaine du visible et de l’invisible, à ce qui se représente, fût-ce négativement. Entendre, seulement entendre”⁴⁶⁶ (“we find justified in Beckett’s case the disappearance of every sign that would merely be a sign for the eye. Here the force of seeing is no longer what is required; one must renounce the domain of the visible and of the invisible, renounce what is represented, albeit in negative fashion. Hear, simply hear”⁴⁶⁷). Renouncing “what is represented” leaves open the question of what is left to hear as well as see. If these reflections on *L’Innommable* and *Comment c’est* move towards a coherent position on Beckett’s aesthetic, then Blanchot implicitly obliges his ideal Beckettian reader to “hear” silence as a negation the visual. The impossible command creates a space of self-contradiction that lends weight to the demands Blanchot places on the “expérience-limite,” through which his reading of Beckett in *L’Entretien infini* is framed. (Indeed, Blanchot’s discussion of Beckett precedes a brief chapter which formulates the impossibility of a language describing its own structure as “Le problème de Wittgenstein.”⁴⁶⁸)

⁴⁶⁵ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, new ed. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 10-11.

⁴⁶⁶ Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 482.

⁴⁶⁷ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 329.

⁴⁶⁸ Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 487-97; *The Infinite Conversation*, 332-338.

Self-effacement sustains a dialogue between the present text and its absent outside while it fosters a productive space of impossibility. The movement into a space created out of contradiction is integral to Beckett's late aesthetic as well as Blanchot's post-war theories of literary representation. This oscillation reverberates in Beckett's text for Morton Feldman, "neither," a text that recuperates the vocabulary of "Pour Avigdor." It too evokes an impossible crossing: "to and fro in shadow from inner to outershadown / from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither" (*TFN*, 167). Even the title, gesturing towards an absent "nor," suggests a motion of self-effacement through oscillation between absence and presence. The pattern made visible here is memorably instantiated by the demand contained in the title "Imagination Dead Imagine," a demand that transports the text beyond its own possibility.

The internal connections between death, silence and abstracted visual tropes in Beckett's fiction, such as the glimpsed figure and the white background, suggest a Wittgensteinian sensibility that desires impossible states. Blanchot's comment on Wittgenstein in *The Writing of the Disaster* expresses this proximity too: "Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it." The limit is unspeakable, but this unspeakability is expressible, able to make "an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility" (*TD*, 563). The "very experience of neutrality" ("l'expérience même de la 'neutralité'") that Blanchot, in *Le Livre à venir* argues brings *L'Innommable* towards "the moment when literature might be grasped"⁴⁶⁹ ("le moment où la littérature pourrait se saisir"⁴⁷⁰) is part of Blanchot's more prevalent concept of the 'neutral' ('neutre'), which is unknown because it "refuses to belong to the category of subject as much as it does to that of object"⁴⁷¹ ("refuse l'appartenance aussi bien à la catégorie de l'objet qu'à celle du sujet"⁴⁷²). Blanchot's emphasis on the neutral's resistance to the categories of knowledge, its refusal to be

⁴⁶⁹ Blanchot, "The Search for Point Zero," in *The Book to Come*, 209.

⁴⁷⁰ Blanchot, "La recherche du point zéro," in *Le Livre à venir*, 285.

⁴⁷¹ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 299.

⁴⁷² Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 440.

categorised into either subject or object, voices a concern equally central to the theory representation in Beckett's post-war essays.⁴⁷³

Beckett's post-war fiction draws upon a resource of visual figures closely aligned with the invisible and expressions of the unknown through states such as silence. The glimpsed figure revises the integrity of the object of the gaze analogously to how the negation of utterance brings forth the space (even if only a *negative* space of self-cancellation) passed over by the name. According to Bruno Clément, the reciprocation between affirmation and denial which defines texts such as *The Unnamable* utilises a particular rhetorical device, *epanorthosis*, which the *Trésor de la langue française* describes as a “figure de pensée qui consiste à revenir sur ce que l'on vient d'affirmer, soit pour le nuancer, l'affaiblir et même le rétracter, soit au contraire pour le réexposer avec plus d'énergie”⁴⁷⁴ [A figure of thought which consists in returning to what had been affirmed, in order to nuance, to weaken or even retract it, or to restate the contrary more forcefully]. As this definition suggests, the rhetorical model is not one so much of negation as revision, the weakening and restatement of a phrase. This aspect of the device is fundamental to Bruno Clément's study of Beckett's fiction, *L'Œuvre sans qualités*, for which *epanorthosis* is “une sorte de miroir: la figure qui figure la figure.”⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ I note here that figurations of “ungraspable” and “unknowable” states lying outside the ‘subject-object relation,’ could also be understood according to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the construction of subject and object as a symptom of Enlightenment claims to rational “mastery” in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), especially 13 and 26. Adorno also draws upon this critique in his notes towards the immeasurably influential “Trying to Understand Endgame,” asserting that the play “takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer [...] the nadir of what philosophy's construction of the subject-object confiscated at its zenith.” Theodor Adorno, “Notes on Beckett,” *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 19 no.2 (2010): 168.

⁴⁷⁴ *Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. def. 1. On uses of this rhetorical device in scholarship on Beckett, see Laura Maxia, “Samuel Beckett entre abstraction et figuration: Une critique *en mouvement* (1990-2010),” in “Filiations & Connexions/Filiations & Connecting Lines,” ed. Yann Mével, Dominique Rabaté and Sjeff Houppermans, special issue, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 23 (2011): 245-259.

⁴⁷⁵ Bruno Clément, *L'Œuvre sans qualités : Rhétorique de Samuel Beckett* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1994), 180.

This rhetorical method of breach and undoing is consciously announced in *The Unnamable*'s opening salvo, "how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?" (*U*, 285; "Comment procéder? Par pure aporie ou bien par affirmations et négations infirmées au fur et à mesure, ou tôt ou tard" *I*, 7). The qualifying phrase "or sooner or later" is an example of the indecision Beckett is reported to have emphasised in his 1961 interview with Tom Driver: "The key word of my work is 'perhaps'."⁴⁷⁶ For Shane Weller, the suspension of indecision contained in the word "perhaps" expresses a fundamental condition in Beckett's post-war novels, exhibited by a particular use of the conjunction 'or': "It is the very possibility of identifying what lies behind language as either a fullness or an emptiness, as either being or non-being, that is called into question by that conjunction."⁴⁷⁷ Further to calling language into question, however, the hesitance in and beyond *The Unnamable*, offered in this 'or' and the method of self-revision contained by *epanorthosis*, signals a rhetorical equivalent of the visual "tremblement" at the threshold between figure and ground, and an awareness that complete negation is as unachievable as affirmation.

What I want to suggest is that the weakening of textual definition here parallels Beckett's persistent prioritisation of visual figures belonging to spaces, such as the background and the periphery, that resist the object-status conferred upon them. *Watt* is famously obsessed with the slipperiness of names, yet this tension is more pronounced in the later texts, which challenge notions of the figure as a fixed form. Performance here displaces the text – by performing its liminality, the narrative removes itself to its own margin. Much as Kandinsky envisioned for his own canvases, the "necessary language" shared between Beckett's texts lies hidden beneath the surface play of figures, in the unspeaking centre of what speaks, and at the unseen margin of the seen. As I have already argued in the previous chapter, abstraction offers a movement towards such modes of self-reflection; by refusing definition and fixation into the knowable

⁴⁷⁶ Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 220.

⁴⁷⁷ Weller, *A Taste for The Negative*, 59.

object, figures centred around acts of looking towards the unfigurable peripheries of sight, for example, become poetic devices for communing with the unknowable domain inaccessible to rationalisation by the intellect.

Leslie Hill has described the dominant figural trope in Beckett's fiction as a "figure of indifference" caught in the slippage between objects. The "figure of indifference" is "neither an experience nor an object,"⁴⁷⁸ but it is the figure of that which resists being called forth, either as full presence (the object of the gaze) or lack. It is the element that resists capture: the figure 'perhaps' dissolving, 'perhaps' emerging. Hill's term draws upon both Blanchot's concept of the 'neutre' ('neutral') and Bataille's 'insaisissable' ('ungraspable'). Within such figures of indifference there lies here a substance common to what Wittgenstein described as the unspeakable foundation of ethics and aesthetics as that which can be expressed but never described.

In his review of *Molloy*, titled "Le Silence de Molloy," Georges Bataille draws attention to the significance of the 'insaisissable' and silence in noteworthy terms. *Molloy*, he claims, expresses a general condition, or foundation, of being:

le fond de l'être (mais "le fond de l'être," cette expression ne saurait *le* déterminer seule) que nous n'avons pas d'hésitation: à *cela*, nous ne pouvons pas donner de nom, cela est indistinct, nécessaire et insaisissable, cela est *silence*, c'est tout. Ce que nous ne nommons que par impuissance *vagabond*, *misérable*, qui en vérité est *innommable* (mais *innommable* est encore un mot qui nous embrouille) n'est pas moins muet que le mort.⁴⁷⁹

[the foundation of being (but "the foundation of being," this expression would not identify *it* alone) about which we do not hesitate: we cannot give a name to *this*, it is indistinct, necessary and ungraspable, it is *silence*, that is all. What we only impotently call

⁴⁷⁸ Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*, 52.

⁴⁷⁹ Bataille, "Le silence de Molloy," *Critique* 48 (1951): 387-396, repr. *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 12 (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 86.

vagabond, miserable, which is in truth *unnamable* (but unnamable is another word that troubles us), is no less mute than death.]

Bataille's ungraspable "foundation of being" offers another instance of thinking about the limits to the figurable in relation to Beckett. It is also worth noting parallels here with how Bram van Velde reflected on his own painting with reference to Beckett:

Je ne m'intéresse pas aux mots. Pour moi, il n'y a de réalité que visuelle. Le silence est très important. La chose la plus importante. Sans lui, rien ne peut s'élever. Rien ne peut faire surface. Le silence permet l'inconnu d'émerger. Peut-être cet inconnu est pour moi ce qui *L'Innommable* est pour Beckett.

(I am not interested in words. For me there is only visual truth. Silence is very important. The most important thing. Without it nothing can rise up from below. Nothing can surface. Silence allows the unknown to emerge. Perhaps this unknown is for me as Beckett's *Unnamable* is for him.)⁴⁸⁰

Bram's "visual truth," like Bataille's description of Molloy existing at the "foundation of being" and Blanchot's theory of the image as the "figure of the unfigurable," emerges in a vision of silence, which appears as a figure for the unknown quality that grounds the possibility of representation while resisting the categorical terms placed upon it as an instance of representation. The association between limiting and grounding is distilled by aspects of Beckett's late texts in relation to Wittgenstein's thought and his presentation of the limits to representation as the "foundation-wall" expressible only through the silence that results from the impossibility of describing or representing it.

⁴⁸⁰ Bram van Velde, quoted in *Word and Image: Samuel Beckett and the Visual Text/Mot et image: Samuel Beckett et le texte visuel*, ed. Breon Mitchell and Lois More Overbeck (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Press, 1999), 51.

Refigurations of the limit as the productive ground which conditions the possibility of representation recall Beckett's association between the "unknown" and aesthetic value, crystallised in the "Proustian equation," and kept in play by Beckett through his later fiction's explorations in the elusory grounds of representation. Furthermore, as Bataille hints with his prescient invocation of Beckett's "innommable," the language Beckett used to express the limit from *L'Innommable* to the *Têtes-mortes*, *Fizzles* and beyond would be inescapably drawn into specific philosophical debates and intellectual concerns that sought to claim Beckett's writing as their own uneasy outsider.

Conclusion

Beckett's fiction and criticism pose a challenge to received notions of representation. This challenge lies in a dialogue between aesthetic lineages recalled through citation and figuration. In particular, Beckett's uses of the figural interrogate the rarefied representation of vision in many of the philosophical sources Beckett's texts simultaneously invoke. The privileged status of the rational in philosophies of the Enlightenment, exemplified in Kant's *Critiques*, was supported by depictions of vision as the sense most clearly connected to the intellect. Beckett's depictions of the visual specifically challenge the presumptions underlying the "scopic regimes" that aligned sight with the understanding.⁴⁸¹ By evoking sight in relation to failures of comprehension, Beckett's writing constitutes a denigration of the visual in Martin Jay's sense; which is to say that the role of vision in Beckett's writing is imbued in wider concerns about the status of visual representation in twentieth-century art, literature and philosophy. By paying attention to visual perception, the challenges to Kantianism posed by overlapping strains in phenomenology, Surrealism and theories of abstract art unmoored the visual from the rational – not in order to foster clarity about objects of consciousness, but in order to clear the necessary space for reflection on the limits and grounds of representation.

As my thesis has shown, Beckett's writing was knowingly imbued in these wider cultural revisions of philosophical perspectives on representation. Figures that resist fixation by the rational into knowable objects prevail in Beckett's writing, and I have argued that through principles such as "changement" and "empêchement," Beckett's essays on art theorise representation in terms of its resistance to arrestation by the gaze and the scopic regimes associated with rationality and the knowable. The tensions between resistance and revelation inherent to these essays' depiction of representation are therefore featured foremost in the figure of the eye.

⁴⁸¹ Especially the perspectivalist "mental gaze" of the decarnalized eye. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 69-70, 166, 435.

Two of Beckett's late texts provide emblematic instances of the eye's crystallisation of persistent concerns with the limits of representation. First of all, a line in Beckett's last work, the poem "Comment Dire"/"What is the Word" (1989) rewards consideration. As Laura Salisbury observes, the poem responds to connections between memory, mind and language, as well as Beckett's personal experience of aphasia.⁴⁸² The poem is also constructed out of an accumulation of brief lines focused on the glimpse, as in the line at the poem's middle: "folly for to need to seem to glimpse" (*CP*, 228, line 26; "folie que de vouloir croire entrevoir quoi" *CP*, 226, line 27). As so often throughout Beckett's career, the poem is closely connected to the figural concerns of his fiction and criticism. In particular, "folly" and "folie" express a principle of irrationality, which is joined with vision by the "need to glimpse," which in turn recalls the principles of need and necessity Beckett had evoked in relation to an artistic representation of vision in the essays "Les Deux Besoins" and "La Peinture des van Velde." The poem's "seeming" also observes a difference between the glimpse in itself and its appearance, a difference contained in the divided notions of representation Beckett had metaphorised through the Schopenhauerian veil. This one line of "What is the Word" underscores a central argument I make in this thesis: that Beckett's writings repeatedly return to the aesthetic concerns of his essays through figures of vision, even where those texts are far removed from the circumstances in which his essays were written.

In similarly suggestive terms, the eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said* evokes the hesitantly seen as something unspeakable. Like the voice that rises uninterpretable and invisibly, it draws a common connection between vision and the voice through states of invisibility and silence. At the end of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the eye is evoked as an "unspeakable globe" which appears through an indescribable look following an "imperceptible tremor" (*IS*, 470). What could be considered to be failures in literary representation here manifest an engagement with unknowability as a

⁴⁸² Laura Salisbury, "What Is the Word?: Beckett's Aphasic Modernism," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (2008): 78-123.

principle expressive of the conditions of representation. Again, this expression takes place at the figural level, through figures that invoke the fragmentary relation to a wider whole by gesturing outside their limits towards the “unspeakable” and “imperceptible.” Through figures like these, Beckett’s late prose pieces, such as *Ill Seen Ill Said*, reflect persistent concerns expressed in his early writing. Thus the disappearing iris, “engulfed by the pupil” (*IS*, 470) arcs back towards Mr. Endon’s eyes in *Murphy*, “the pupils prodigiously dilated” and “the iris [...] reduced to a thin glaucous rim” (*Mu*, 149). Suggestive aesthetic continuities with Beckett’s early prose are raised as well as revised by the emphasis on the imperceptible and the unspeakable which characterises Beckett’s late prose. These states are shown through figures of vision marked by their limitations – by ill seeing – and the proper expression of those limitations comes through a language that, in revealing neither subject nor object, highlights its own “failure to express” – ill saying.

The analysis of aesthetic themes surrounding the visual in this thesis suggests that Beckettian intertextuality can be understood by attending to the figural evasions of Beckett’s texts, and their manner of gesturing towards themes that are not simply unnamed and absent from the text, but are themselves thematisations of that very unnamed and absent quality. This also leaves the question of how to best describe these patterns – the formal poetics of Beckett’s prose – which lie at the edges of representation, not to mention scholarly analysis. J.M. Coetzee has usefully spoken of philosophical affinities in Beckett’s writings in terms of a “sympathetic vibration,”⁴⁸³ and it is in vibrations and tremblings that the productive liminalities of Beckett’s writings are exposed. The increasing attention paid within Beckett studies to the domains of phenomenology, neurology and cognitive psychology indicates the proliferation of cultural discourses with which Beckett’s writing is recognised to have engaged. A scholarly approach to influence held in sympathy with signals of liminality – with the glimpsed rather than the grasped

⁴⁸³ J.M. Coetzee, introduction to Beckett, *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, xiii.

– would further illuminate the subtlety of this touching between the text and its outside, and would allow the invisible as well as the visible in Beckett's writing to unfold itself the more deeply.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in references to works by Samuel Beckett:

CDW, *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber, 2006.

CP, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*. Edited by Seán Lawlor and John Pilling. London: Faber, 2012.

D, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Edited by Ruby Cohn. London: Calder, 1983.

DB, “Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce.” In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 495-510.

E, “The End.” In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 275-293.

El, *Eleutheria*. Translated by Barbara Wright. London: Faber, 1996.

EF, *Eleutheria*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1995.

Ex, “The Expelled.” In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 247-259.

FL, “First Love.” In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 229-246.

I, *L’Innommable*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2004.

IS, *Ill Seen Ill Said*. In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 451-470.

LI, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Vol. 1, 1929-1940. Edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

LII, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Vol. 2, 1941-1956. Edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

LIII, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Vol. 3, 1957-1965. Edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University

- Press, 2014.
- M*, *Molloy*. In *Novels II*. Vol. 2 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 1-170.
- MC*, *Mercier and Camier*. In *Novels I*. Vol. 1 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 381-479.
- MCF*, *Mercier et Camier*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970.
- MD*, *Malone Dies*. In *Novels II*. Vol. 2 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 171-281.
- MF*, *Molloy*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982.
- Mu*, *Murphy*. In *Novels I*. Vol. 1 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 1-168.
- MuF*, *Murphy*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1965.
- MV*, *Mal vu mal dit*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981.
- NT*, *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien, avec 6 illustrations d'Avigdor Arikha*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1958.
- NO*, "The New Object." In "Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive." Edited by Bryan Radley and Peter Fifield. Special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2012): 873-880.
- P*, *Proust*. In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 511-554.
- PA*, *Premier Amour*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970.
- PFE*, *Pour finir encore et autres foirades*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1976.
- TD*, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit." In *Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*. Vol. 4 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 555-563.
- TFN*, *Texts for Nothing and other shorter prose 1950-1976*. Edited by Mark Nixon. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- TM*, *Têtes-Mortes*. Rev. ed. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.
- U*, *The Unnamable*. In *Novels II*. Vol. 2 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 285-407.
- W*, *Watt*. In *Novels I*. Vol. 1 of *The Grove Centenary Edition*, 169-479.
- WF*, *Watt*. Translated by Ludovic and Agnès Janvier, in collaboration with Samuel Beckett. Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

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