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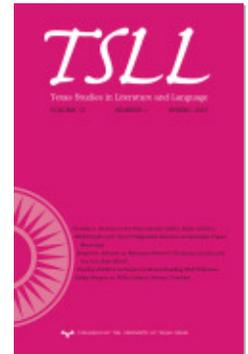
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## "Someone is looking at me still": The Audience-Creature Relationship in the Theater Plays of Samuel Beckett

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# “Someone is looking at me still”: The Audience-Creature Relationship in the Theater Plays of Samuel Beckett

*Matthew Davies*

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SECK: Unique, oblique, bleak experience, in other words, and would have had same effect if half the words *were* other words. Or any words. (Pause.)

SLAMM: Don't stop. You're boring me.

SECK: Not enough. You're smiling. (Kenneth Tynan 234)

Though Kenneth Tynan was a self-declared “*godotista*” (161), his skit-review of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* for the *Sunday Times* in 1958 articulated what has become received wisdom: whatever their literary merits, Beckett's “dramatic vacuums” (159) are difficult for audiences to digest. From his earliest full-length texts with the power to confound or to “claw”<sup>1</sup> through the increasingly eviscerated *dramaticules* delivered at often incomprehensible tempos—rapid (*Play, Not I*), slow (*Footfalls*), or hardly at all (*Breath*)—and culminating in *What Where's* “Make sense who may. I switch off” (504),<sup>2</sup> Beckett's dramaturgy of developing “impoverishment” approaches a “zero degree theater” (Duckworth 45) that seems “to be an assault on itself, an assault on theater” (Gontarski xvi), an assault on the audience that sustains it.

Yet in spite of Beckett's “pivotal” role in this “tradition of sometimes disdainful sometimes disconcerted ambivalence toward the audience” (Blau 34), his works were embraced by large sections of the public from the outset. *Godot's* 1952 premiere ran for over three hundred performances in Paris and, with *Endgame*, “enjoyed enormous success in Europe” (Tynan 160) before reaching England or America. Over the following decades every addition to the canon was greeted by the swelling ranks of Beckett's “adoring congregation” (Blau 32). His assertion that, done his way, *Godot* “would empty the theater” (Knowlson 379), seems as contradictory as it is self-defeating. As Blau writes, “The more synoptic and extrusive

[the plays], the more there is a sense of playing into a void, all the more when there is an audience . . . in respectful or even ritualistic attendance" (34). Clearly the relationship between Beckett's "creatures of illusion on stage" and the audience is, in Duckworth's understatement, "a confused one" (49). The playwright seems to have discovered "a new type of audience/stage transaction that does not fit either side of the traditional Stanislavsky/Brecht dichotomy" (Kalb 39). In this essay I will explore the nature and development of this new transaction.

Though constantly vexed, the relationship between Beckett's creatures of illusion and the audience altered over the course of a career that spanned four decades. I conceive this development in three chronological movements corresponding to Beckett's exploitation of the relations between the auditorium and the stage. The "proscenium arch" plays (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and the transitional *Krapp's Last Tape*) have fixed, if increasingly indefinable, settings. In the "elliptical light" dramacules (*Play*, *Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Come and Go*, . . . "but" *the clouds* . . .) location disintegrates into pools of light surrounded by an encroaching offstage darkness. Finally, in a small but significant pair of metatheatrical plays (*Catastrophe* and *What Where*) Beckett diverts or explodes the pools, forcing the light back into the auditorium and ultimately extinguishing the stage. Such categories are neither neat nor firm, and bleeding occurs across boundaries and time-lines. Yet, these movements suggest three veins of inquiry, each embedded in its appropriate substratum: the relationship between the audience and the onstage characters, the interaction between the audience and the offstage world of the play, and how that relationship mutates when the auditorium becomes host to the playwrights.

## I

It might seem misleading to apply the term "proscenium arch" to Beckett's early plays, many of which were designed for, and began life in, studio theaters. Nevertheless, photographic evidence and Beckett's own stage directions demonstrate the requirement for traditional theater architecture<sup>3</sup>—wings (*Godot*), flats with a door and windows (*Endgame*), raised stages (*Krapp*), footlights (*Play*), curtains (*Not I*)—that distances the audience from the stage in a relatively conventional pursuit of sustained theatrical illusion. Throughout his early period Beckett experimented within inherited theater practice. He hugged the walls of his atrophied *theatrum mundi*, exploring the limitations of his environment, testing for chinks in an armor that ultimately proves to be "all chink" (Tynan 159).

To express the sense of developing atrophy, Beckett made metaphors of his stages. In *Endgame*, he dead-ends *Godot's* open road that had promised the tramps at least a modicum of freedom, enclosing the theatrical

wings with a grey box set that is hermetically sealed save for two high windows on the back wall and a downstage door to the kitchen, an unwelcoming exterior: "Outside of here it's death" (*Endgame* 97). *Happy Days*, on the other hand, visualizes an unremittingly positive image that contrasts with *Krapp's* negative impression. *Krapp's* den is a treacherously underlit terrain of banana skins, scrawled ledgers and, later, spool boxes to be navigated by the myopic old man. *Happy Days* depicts the opposite: Winnie's tidy bourgeois principles are matched by a set of "*Maximum simplicity and symmetry. Very pompier trompe l'oeil backcloth*" (275). Yet the "blazing light" of perpetual day undermines Winnie's propriety by overexposing her voluptuous, aging upper body. Although the division between the audience and the stage remains clearly demarcated, Beckett's early plays already demonstrate a conflict between the convention of sets, wings, and auditoria, and the more radical operation of lighting and sound effects that increasingly came to dominate the onstage and subvert the audience's sense of place and function.

Denied front doors to suburban streets or French windows onto manicured lawns, Beckett's confined and increasingly immobilized characters find ways to fill that space between now and death: *Waiting for Godot*, narrating the chronicle of their days (*Endgame*) replaying that moment with "my face in her breasts and my hands on her" (*Krapp* 227), talking incessantly in "the old style" to avoid doing "something for a change" (*Happy Days* 293). They pass the time of day "just as we, the audience, pass the time of night," an activity that for Tynan distills the essence of drama into "a means of spending two hours in the dark without getting bored" (159). Not everyone sat around long enough to get bored, however. As Peter Bull, the original English Pozzo, recalls, it did not take long for certain viewers to exercise their ultimate sanction: "Waves of hostility came whirling over the footlights, and the mass exodus, which was to form such a feature of the run of [*Godot*], started quite soon after the curtain had risen" (Knowlson 414). The bewilderment, exasperation, even anger, inherent in such actions suggests that, despite a rapidly developing audience, some spectators felt they were being duped, conned. While Parisians accustomed to "the alluvium of the absurd" (Blau 43) embraced Beckett, he proved far more baffling to an "English theater that had been dominated for half a century by George Bernard Shaw" (Henderson and Oliphant 48), since he resolutely denied the kind of intellectual interpretations that would satisfy a predominantly middle-class, educated audience. "Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can't make out," Beckett responded bluntly to the various interpretations of *Godot*, offered in the English press (Knowlson 375).

Yet Beckett's evasion of the audience's "craze for explication" (*Catastrophe* 487) seems somewhat disingenuous. His long plays contain

traditional literary and dramatic qualities—recognizable characters, cultural allusions that suggest inherent significance, hints of plot and past lives, mutable relationships expressed through cross-talk and verbal gymnastics—that do more than suggest interpretation or emotional association: they demand it. Like the tree, the carafe, and the rope lowered from the flies in *Act Without Words I*, meaning and empathy are repeatedly dangled before the audience, violently withdrawn at the command of an offstage whistle, then dangled once more—a frustrating cycle of *cogitatio interrupta*. Beckett's technique of stroboscopic significance makes of his texts a mosaic of broken or incomplete metaphors and mythologies that defy interpretation, baffling audience and performer alike: "Hamm. We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something? Clov. Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah, that's a good one!" (*Endgame* 115). The texts demand interpretation precisely to show the futility of interpretation. The audience's teleological impulse is a reenactment of what is enacted on stage, the vain, if entirely human, struggle to "create a little order" in a senseless universe: "Ah the creatures, the creatures. Everything has to be explained to them" (*Endgame* 122).

Should the audience be reluctant to concede its participation in Beckett's futile universe, and seek instead to hide in the safety of the anonymous auditorium, the onstage characters occasionally reach out across the footlights as if momentarily sensing our presence. At critical moments in his long plays, Beckett creates hairline fractures, chinks in the fourth wall that confuse the boundary between representation and reality: "Estragon: Charming spot. [*He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.*] Inspiring prospects. [*He turns to Vladimir.*] Let's go" (*Godot* 8). Often comic, these schisms are also accusatory, discomfiting. After experiencing the "strange feeling that someone is looking at me," Winnie recalls, "Mr. and Mrs. Shower . . . —or Cooker" (names Beckett derived from German words referring to looking, spectating<sup>4</sup>), who have come to stare at and critique her: "What's the idea? he says—stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground" (*Happy Days* 293–94). Having thus far directed her monologue at the mound, the "zenith," and Willie's rear, the usually benign Winnie quite suddenly "[*raises head, gazes front.*] And you, she says, what's the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean?" (*Happy Days* 294). Is Winnie reiterating Mrs. Shower's attack on her husband? Or are Mr. and Mrs. Shower synecdochal figures for the audience? Prefiguring the narrative switch to third person adopted by Mouth in *Not I* and May in *Footfalls*, Winnie's derision makes the audience painfully self-conscious and uncertain of its function. Its gaze briefly inverted, the watchers become watched, though too remotely to allow us a shred of narcissistic pleasure. In a period dominated by naturalistic theater and an adherence to the suspension of disbelief, Beckett's assaults on the fourth

wall create metatheatrical fractures that undermine the egotistical nature of performance *and* spectating.

The “immaterialist” philosophy of the eighteenth-century Bishop Berkeley—*esse est percipi*—lies at the heart of Beckett’s dramatic conception of the performative self. The shaping conceit in Beckett’s screenplay, *Film* (1965), this Berkeleyan concept underpins most of Beckett’s theatrical works, for all his characters must be perceived to exist, and they must perform to be perceived: “I act therefore I am,” or, “I do not act therefore I am not (or, no more).” Beckett’s characters are all actors by necessity, their existence is theater: “this farce day after day” (*Endgame* 14); an “audition” for “my last soliloquy” (*Endgame* 77). They perform pratfalls and comedy routines with hats, songs, and stories, social activities that Alan Friedman calls “party pieces.”<sup>5</sup> Mostly they just talk: “*Clov.* What is there to keep me here? *Hamm.* The dialogue” (*Endgame* 135). Driving the dialogue is the characters’ terror that they are becoming invisible, unattended; that, in Beckett’s words, silence is pouring into their diminishing existence “like water into a sinking ship” (Graver 24). Vladimir registers his fear to the Boy in *Godot*: “Tell him . . . [*he hesitates*] . . . tell him you saw us. [*Pause.*] You did see us, didn’t you? *Boy.* Yes Sir” (45). Faltering perception is registered through hearing as well as sight: “*Nagg.* Can you hear me? *Nell.* Yes. And you? *Nagg.* Yes. [*Pause.*] Our hearing hasn’t failed. *Nell.* Our what? *Nagg.* Our hearing. *Nell.* No” (*Endgame* 102). And as responses diminish, merely the perception of being perceived suffices: “just to know in theory that you can hear me even though in fact you don’t, is all I need” (*Happy Days* 285). Increasingly, Beckett’s characters act not for us but for themselves; they are performing for their lives.

Yet herein lies the existential crisis for the audience, for while we do hear and see the performers, they rarely perceive us, recognize our participation. Kalb describes Beckett’s double-acts as clowns whose “jokes and gags may be perfectly executed yet not provoke laughs” (29). Onstage spectators largely ignore, reject, or disdain requests for attention. Hamm has to bribe his father with a bonbon to listen to his life story, while Nagg’s “tailor’s joke” receives only his wife’s blank expression: “It’s not funny” (*Endgame* 106). Their momentary sensations that, in Winnie’s words, “Someone is looking at me still” (*Happy Days* 299), painfully underscore our failure to fulfill our side of the transaction: *we*, the perceivers, are unable to meet the performers’ needs. We laugh at Nagg’s tailor joke, but he cannot hear our laughter, and he measures his fatal decline accordingly: “I tell this story worse and worse” (*Endgame* 22). Our introjective function frustrated, we become redundant voyeurs, our unresponsiveness making us complicit in Nagg’s death.

The audience feels as neglected, or rejected, as the onstage characters. Beckett creates of his fourth wall a two-way mirror through which

his performers, desperate for “Eyes on my eyes” (*Happy Days* 299), enact their solitude. Like all actors, when they stare into the auditorium, they discern only darkness—Krapp is shortsighted, Hamm blind, Clov sees only a reflection of his own “light dying”—with merely the residue of an offstage presence. Hamm throws the whistle toward the auditorium “with my compliments” (*Endgame* 154), but it doesn’t get there. Krapp kicks his banana skin off the stage into “the pit” (*Krapp* 222), no further. When Clov turns his looking glass on “the without,” he brings us too close for legibility: “I see . . . a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy. (*Pause.*) That’s what I call a magnifier” (*Endgame* 112). On his ladder, Clov pans between the two upstage windows and the only other available opening, the auditorium. The focus is better, but the view far worse: “Let’s see. [*He looks, moving the telescope.*] Zero . . . [*he looks*] . . . zero [*he looks*] and zero. . . . Corpse” (*Endgame* 112–13). The auditorium is a “charnel house” (*Godot* 57) from which Estragon “recoils in horror” (66). We are dead to the stage, redundant. The failure by both sides to make contact is rendered all the more painful by our brief glimpses of missed connections through Beckett’s ruptured fourth wall: “Estragon. You don’t have to look. *Vladimir.* You can’t help looking” (*Godot* 57).

Duckworth argues for the impossibility of tragic catharsis in Beckett’s “desperately private drama[s]” precisely because of this lack of contact: “the decisive encounter will not occur, in which the conflict will not take place” (95). Yet Beckett creates more than a spectacle, a *chose vue*, from which the spectator remains emotionally detached. In contrast to Brecht and Genet, “there is something beguiling about Beckett’s [longer] plays, a seduction in their dying fall, that is as accessible as it is forbidding” (Blau 34). There is a deep well of sadness in the pre-lives of Beckett’s early characters, a sense of lost chances and loves; of punts on streams or row boats on Lake Como; of journeying up the Eiffel Tower and down the Ardennes; of “something . . . dripping . . . a heart. A heart in my head” (*Endgame* 97). They are not mean or vicious by nature; they are made so by life: “Clov. That’s friendship, yes, yes, no question, you’ve found it. . . . Then one day, suddenly it ends” (*Endgame* 81). In the face of unremittingly tragic farce, they display a pathetic heroism that is deeply empathetic: “Clov. There’s no more painkiller. *Hamm* (*appalled*). Good . . . ! (*Pause.*) No more painkiller. (*Soft.*) What’ll I do?” (*Endgame* 71). Even at the end of the game decorum prevails: “Clov. Ah, pardon, it’s I am obliged to you. *Hamm.* It’s we are obliged to each other” (*Endgame* 81).

That the audience is kept at a distance from Beckett’s pathetic farces, forced to watch from the other side of the mirror, validates the bleak honesty of the picture. As Pinter wrote, contrasting Beckett’s characters to Brecht’s, “they are not selling me anything I don’t want to buy” (Kalb 46). Neither side has anything ideological or pedagogical to trade. None of the

common devices for crossing the fourth wall are proffered, no asides, nudges, or winks. No boy arrives out of the desert promising salvation. There is no “underplot,” just minor calamity suffered by “small men locked in a big space” (Knowlson 435).<sup>6</sup> Arthur Koestler describes this kind of catharsis as “a sense of individual tragedy . . . earthed in man’s universal tragedy, personal sorrow dissolved in a vaster feeling” (qtd. in Duckworth 95). In the following two decades, such universal empathy, however futile or bleak, became increasingly eviscerated for Beckett. As stage space conceded to the invading darkness of offstage, language diminished toward silence, characters devolved into creatures, and plays dwindled to *dramaticules*, the possibility of audience empathy would fade (almost) to zero. Yet an audience ignored would become an audience involved, implicated and, ultimately, liberated.

## II

Gontarski argues that Beckett’s works are all post-*Play* pieces. Taking sole directorial responsibility for the 1973 Berlin Schiller-Theater production of *Play* seems to have instigated in Beckett a process of dramaturgical diminution, of stripping away character, text, and narrative, retrospectively as well as in his future work. He was, in Gontarski’s words, “no longer throwing his bricks against naturalism . . . that particular victim was already on life-support, but against modernism itself” (xv). The already pared down style of *Endgame*, which Beckett had described as “elliptical” (“defective, or lacking . . . words” [OED 2]), became increasingly formal, patterned, verbally spare, and centered on the Cartesian division of mental consciousness and physical reality. Beckett explored Descartes’s mind-body dichotomy on stage through separating action and word: Camera and Joe in the television piece, *Eh Joe*; Eye (E) and Object (O) in *Film*; Mouth and Auditor in *Not I*; May (M) and Woman’s Voice (V) in *Footfalls*; W[oman] and V[oice] in *Rockaby*; Reader and Listener in *Ohio Impromptu*. This textual ellipsis seems designed to provoke even greater alienation in an audience scrambling not only for meaning but also for any kind of recognizable human qualities with which to associate or empathize. Destabilizing his audience also allowed Beckett to wield greater control, to impose his authority both on and off stage, even, as in *Play*, to embody himself in the auditorium.

At the same time that Beckett created dehumanized elliptical texts, he also developed a new kind of staging to express the physical entrapment of his increasingly disembodied creatures. Beginning with the prototypical *Krapp*, Beckett replaced sets and a fourth wall with elliptical—or spherical—pools of light, chiaroscuro playing spaces that are delimited, circumscribed, and controlled by directorial forces. Paradoxically, while textual ellipsis pushes the audience away, physical ellipses draw the

audience in, for a diminished onstage serves to enlarge the offstage that is sucked into the vacuum. The more compressed the lit area of the performance space, the more dominant the encroaching darkness that surrounds it, including not just backstage, wings, and the “dark aura” of the unlit stage, but the auditorium itself: by definition, spheroids have no sides. The audience’s anonymous space becomes part of the performance space, a penumbral anti-stage invading the stage, making the audience inhabitants of Beckett’s universe whether we like it or not. What we cannot be sure of is whether this offstage world is inhabited by the living or by the dead, and whether those inhabitants are benevolent or cruel.

In Beckett’s universe death, it seems, waits for an age: “. . . what? . . . seventy? . . . good God! . . .” (*Not I* 411). Those in their fifties and sixties—Didi and Gogo, Pozzo, Hamm, Willie—are rapidly approaching death; the prematurely old, like W in *Rockaby*, approach even faster. Those past seventy might already be posthumous: “M. What age am I now? . . . M. Ninety. / V. So much?” (*Footfalls* 428); while those with uncertain ages seem uncertain whether they are alive or dead: “M. What age am I now? / V. In your forties. / M. So little?” (428). Krapp, however, knows his age exactly—he has measured out his life with birthday spoons—and seems to understand its limit. At sixty-nine he tries, and fails, to record his final tape: “Nothing to say, not a squeak. . . . Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. [Pause.] Leave it at that” (*Krapp* 227–28). Beckett told the German actor, Martin Held, “Old Nick’s there. Death is standing behind him and unconsciously he’s looking for it” (Pilling 82).

*Krapp* transitions into a series of plays that could, therefore, be termed purgatorial as well as elliptical, with Beckett’s creatures approaching, listening at, or passing through, death’s door. The shuffling Krapp visiting his offstage kitchen with increasing frequency, first for beer, then spirits, as if absorbing alcohol for the Stygian journey to which he has sacrificed a lifetime’s preparation, weaves drunkenly in and out of the darkness, flirting with death. And darkness, or death, is what all Beckett’s purgatorial creatures await, or have already experienced, with a craving plagued by contingency: “Dying for the dark—and the darker the worse. Strange” (*Play* 365). In crossing the outer ring of the ellipsis, Krapp comes precariously close both to death and to the audience. Briefly we share the same penumbral space, the same light. It is a convergence that poses an uncomfortable question for the audience: who is walking on whose grave?

By *Footfalls* (1975), Beckett had almost entirely obliterated the division between light and dark, stage and offstage, bringing Clov’s vision of the “hell out there” into the whole theater—stage and auditorium: “Gray. Gray! GRRRAY! Light black from pole to pole” (*Endgame* 112). The audience peers voyeuristically through a keyhole, a “chink” that opens onto the stage rather than into the auditorium, as if the light is succumbing to

the offstage darkness, succumbing, perhaps, to us. May paces a flattened ellipsis, a corridor squeezed dry of light, measuring her diminishing life cycle over three scenes, until the gloaming rises for a final time on a bare stage that “comes very close to zero” (Cohn 335). Beckett’s complex narrative similarly collapses in on itself, blending matter and anti-matter. The mother’s voice speaks intermittently through the body of her daughter, Amy, who then tells a tale of May (M), (an anagram of herself), and the fictional girl’s mother, Mrs. Winter (Mrs. W), an inversion of M. As Knowlson writes, “We realize . . . that we may have been watching a ghost telling a story of a ghost” (qtd. in Cohn 337). In a denouement that is visually startling and viscerally chilling, the audience relives the moment of death, the point when *Footfalls*’s ellipsis “flatlines,” and the corridor is emptied of life. The division between stage and offstage is so faint that M’s devoiced body might have drifted into the auditorium, not so much bringing the dead to life as mortifying the living. In contrast to the fatal disconnectivity of the proscenium plays, there is, nonetheless, something bleakly comforting in the convergence of dying characters and dead audience in *Krapp* and *Footfalls*, a sense of communion captured in the resigned defiance of V’s valedictory “Fuck life” (*Rockaby* 470). Into the dark liminal spaces of *Play* and *Not I*, however, Beckett introduced shadowy figures that worry the onstage characters and make uneasy alliances with the spectator.

In *Play* a man (M), his wife (W1), and his mistress (W2), heads “lost to age” protruding from “identical grey urns” (*Play* 355), reiterate the tawdry events of a *ménage à trois* that may have led to murder and/or suicide: “M. She had a razor in her vanity bag” (358); “W2. I felt like death” (358). Their melodramatic moments of *crise* and *ennui* are spliced together by a “unique inquisitor” (367), who operates a “single mobile spot” on the three speakers. In effect, Beckett diminishes the elliptical performance space to the size of a head and the top of an urn, as each “victim” (366) is provoked into response by the brutal, capricious spotlight: “Looking for something. In my face. Some truth. Not even” (366). The interrogation is something upon which all three have become dependent: “W1. Is it something I should do with my face, other than utter? . . . M. Am I as much as being seen?” (366) They are obliged to speak, rather than told what to say, by a “torturer”<sup>7</sup> whose inhumanity is laid bare: “W2. Some day you will tire of me and go out . . . for good. W1. Hellish half-light” (361). Beckett stages “a conflict between antithetical desires: to lose the self in darkness and to confront the self in light” (Lyons 101), an antithesis that has metadramatic implications for an audience that, residing anonymously in the “hellish half-light,” is compelled to wonder as to which side of the conflict it belongs.

Beckett specifies that the “source of the light . . . must not be situated outside the ideal space (stage) occupied by its victims” (366). The operator,

however, cannot share the stage without masking our view of urns that are only "one yard high" (367). That the faces must be lit "at close quarters and from below" (366) suggests that the operator is standing at the foot of the apron—in the auditorium, back clearly visible to an audience that shares "its" space. The inclusion of lighting technician, Duncan M. Scott, in the program for the Royal Court production in 1976 suggests that the spot operator, as well as the light itself, becomes a major, and highly provocative, figure in performance. Does the inquirer stand between the audience and "its" victims, barring our empathetic responses? Or is "it" our representative, "a metaphor for our attention, relentless, all-consuming, whimsical"? (Kenner 141). Are we frightened by its brutality or impressed by its skill? Above all, do we, like Beckett's creatures, need the inquisitor to fulfill our defunct introjective role, to make *Play* play? In situating such a dominating presence between the auditorium and the stage, Beckett provokes fundamental questions about the power struggle inherent in dramatic production between spectator, producer, and performers.

*Not I* introduces Beckett's most striking, and certainly most realized, presence in the "hellish half-light," the "Auditor . . . a tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood fully faintly lit" (405). Downstage, "audience left," the figure listens intently as an upstage Mouth, eight feet above the stage and enveloped by darkness, disgorges a logorrhea of broken recollections of her tragic life from premature birth and abandonment, through a trauma-induced muteness (aside from occasional winter outbursts), to a sudden release of words, possibly at the point of her death—the moment which we are now experiencing. Her life literally flashes past her: ". . . dull roar like falls . . . and the beam . . . flickering on and off" (411). Though Mouth's narration militates against audience involvement—she is distant, remote, disembodied, and barely intelligible—the effect of the tightest elliptical stage in the Beckett canon draws us ineluctably to the object of the noise: "We pass through the same stages as she is describing" (Kenner 214).

While critics have noted the Auditor's dramatic impact, its purpose and efficacy are debatable.<sup>8</sup> Schneider wrote to Beckett from rehearsals in New York: "Figure confuses almost everyone, not location but presence. I find the juxtaposition of two arresting but not really explainable" (162). Beckett acceded to requests to drop the figure from the French premiere in 1975 (an extremely rare move on his part), reinstated it for his own staging three years later, before conceding in 1986 that it might have been "an error of the creative imagination" (Knowlson 617). Watching Billie Whitelaw's reprisal of the Mouth on the small screen in 1977, Beckett realized that the sustained close-up without the Auditor was "far more arresting, sensual, than anything that could be achieved in the theater" (Friedman 163). The stage demise of the Auditor (it has been retained in the text) is significant

in demonstrating a developing feature of the elliptical plays: Beckett's growing domination over both his creatures and his audience.

Inherent in the notion of "someone watching the watcher" (Knowlson 161) is the dilemma that the Cartesian division of listener and speaker, intrinsic to Beckett's work, risks being replaced by a more practical problem—split focus. By instigating a three-way dialogue among Viewer, Auditor, and Speaker, Beckett risks releasing the "claw" of his text, thereby letting his audience off the hook. The voyeuristic discomfort of watching a figure listening to a dying cripple describing her sense of guilt for a past sexual experience ("when clearly intended to be having pleasure . . . she was in fact . . . having none" [407]) is perhaps too easily mitigated by our association with the figure's sympathetic gesture "of helpless compassion" (405), the raising and falling of its arms. Replicating Mouth's self-defensive refusal to "relinquish third person" (405)—" . . . what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she!" (406)—the third-person audience, the plural "we," can too easily abrogate responsibility to the onstage Auditor and retreat into a deeper darkness: "shut out the light . . . reflex they call it . . . no feeling of any kind" (408). If we are compelled, however, to focus on the manifestation of female expression floating hypnotically above our heads, then the receptacle of language begins to resemble a female sexual organ, a "tiny little thing . . . godforsaken hole . . . no love . . . spared that" (411), through whose lips words come rushing forth like titillating tidbits: "a tongue in the mouth . . . all those contortions without which . . . no speech possible" (409). To borrow Friedman's phrase, the audience (rather than the Auditor) "silently insinuates itself inside Mouth's head" (160). We are no longer a "spectator of the anguish but a participant" (Knowlson 214). We become complicit in the interrogation.

In the version of *Not I* stripped of its "figure," Beckett's technique of elliptical staging reaches its zenith. Unlike the early proscenium arch plays that deny the interaction both characters and audience require for self-validation, Beckett's increasingly diminished ellipses work like visual vacuums upon an audience drawn to the diminishing stage light like moths to a dying flame. The pathetic creatures that inhabit this penumbral space—decrepit, sinister, wraithlike, dismembered—make discomfiting, even alarming, company, working "on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (Gontarski xvii).<sup>9</sup> They are not, however, fearful monsters raging at the dying of their light, but pitiful creatures compelled to "revolve" their disappointing lives and their distended deaths by a heartless interrogator emanating from the auditorium with whom we, by virtue of the theatrical setting, are inherently complicit. *Not I* graphically realizes this guilty collusion by contrasting the image of the voluptuous Mouth with the voice of the "old crone" (Knowlson 522)<sup>10</sup> who is seventy years old, the dying age for Beckett's creatures. By generating an almost necrophilic response

to Mouth, the audience confronts the truth that Beckett's *dramaticules* play, or make plays upon, the body parts of the dead and the dying, bodies brought into increasingly obscene focus through a series of contracting elliptical lenses.

The inherent voyeurism in Beckett's *dramaticules*, and our participation in it, is neither lubricious nor cruel, but rather the theatrical manifestation of the friction between the artist's existentialism and a dramatic medium "that has caused us since its first humiliated appearance to think about the theater with the most appalling doubt" (Blau 181). If, as Pozzo says and Didi repeats, human existence is giving birth "astride of a grave" (*Godot* 82–83), what story does humanity offer the dramatist but its dying, and where else can an audience view that story but six feet under, looking up? Such a perspective is as honest as it is obscene. In subverting the fourth wall, bringing darkness to the light, and blending both into "Grrey" (*Endgame* 114), Beckett's *dramaticules* collapse the Cartesian division between watcher and watched. Witnesses to the point zero of human existence, the conception of our deaths, we become midwives at our births, mourners at our funerals, participants in our universal anguish. And we have plenty of company.

Since *Godot* first failed to arrive, audiences have wondered who (or what) screams or whistles, holds the goad or rings the bell, guides the light or asks the questions in Beckett's plays. *Not I* depicts this presence in the auditorium as an interrogative light that, unlike in *Play*, derives from a sinister, unseen force emanating from the beam's source. Differentiating itself from *Play*'s capricious "inquisitor," this intangible presence appears to have a purpose, demanding accuracy and absolute obedience: "She did not know . . . what position she was in . . . whether standing . . . or sitting . . . or kneeling . . . but the brain, . . . what? . . . kneeling? . . . yes" (*Not I* 406). Mouth directs her ravings, revised and corrected, to a bullying pedant in the darkness. Rather than asking the questions, the Auditor merely responds with a helpless shrug. Billie Whitelaw, who underwent the disorienting ordeal of being suspended, caged, hooded, only her mouth unmuzzled, to perform *Not I*, similarly (if surprisingly fondly) describes Beckett as "very particular and meticulous . . . insist[ing] that it be right" (Friedman 210). The association between the directorial light and Beckett as *auteur*—as "authority of stage as well as page" (Friedman 149)—becomes unavoidable in *Not I*. It is as if Beckett is drawing attention to his own dominating presence in the auditorium; he is making himself known.

### III

Self-exposure by such an intensely private artist was slow to be performed. A decade after *Not I*, Beckett wrote two overtly political plays, the first of which, a self-imposed catastrophe that threatened to dismantle not only

the theater's conventional fourth wall but Beckett's entire theatrical edifice, would turn his dramaturgy inside out. *Catastrophe*, the centerpiece to "A Night for Vaclav Havel," was first performed at the Avignon Festival in 1982. Havel, political prisoner and future Czech president, was also a renowned playwright, so there is, for Beckett, an uncharacteristic logic to the play's metatheatrical metaphor of the twin tyrannies of dramatist and director. Yet, in staging a rehearsal in which the "final touches" are made to the "last scene" (485) of an undocumented performance, Beckett seems to be concluding the action of his own personal and professional drama. With *Catastrophe* and *What Where* (1984), he plays out a swift and brutal epilagic endgame to his career; in turning the interrogatory light upon himself he catches the audience in the corona of his self-examination.

As early as *Rough for Theatre I*, which was written in the late fifties, Beckett began assigning reduced nomenclature to his degenerating characters. *Catastrophe's* abbreviations, however, go beyond the reductive to imply something self-critical, with D variously suggesting the dramatist, dramaturg, director, dictator. Paired with his obedient (A)ssistant, D and A replicate the master-servant genetic code that reaches back to Pozzo and Lucky. The Director's dialogue is dense with politically barbed humor ("Step on it, I have a caucus" [486]), meta-theatrical derision ("This craze for explicitation!" [487]), and, considering the "unbecoming vigilance" (Blau 34) with which Beckett has recorded his own productions, pointed self-mockery: "For God's sake! Every i dotted to death!" (487). A shows traces of humanity: she observes that P is shivering (whether with cold, fear, or anger), but yields instantly to D's commands in the debased language of shorthand: "I make a note" (486). All the while P—protagonist, performer, puppet, political prisoner—stands on an 18" dais on the stage like a black-garbed David or a degenerative Hamlet, an actor robbed of his lines. Michael Billington captures the powerfully unadorned metaphor of the work: "the tyranny of the state is combined with the inherent autocracy of the theater . . . dictatorships venerate and persecute artists at the same time" (Beryl and John Fletcher 264). Yet the metatheatrical nature of the work also makes the aesthetic criticism personal.

In a diastolic gesture unique to his *oeuvre*, Beckett returns light to the house to expose the power behind the play. As *Catastrophe* opens, D is discovered in the auditorium, "in an armchair downstairs audience left. Fur coat. Fur toque to match" (485). He smokes a large cigar while receiving the ministrations of his attractive assistant. When he quits his seat and retreats to the back of the theater to check for sight lines, we are compelled to shift perspective, to twist in our seats so as to seek out the smallest of all Beckett's ellipses: the tip of D's smoldering cigar. D treats his actor like a creature, barely human: "Take off that gown. . . . Could do with more nudity. . . . Bare the neck. . . . The legs. Higher" (488). Pedantic, voyeuristic,

casually lascivious, D poses the same questions and makes demands reminiscent of those to which W1 and Mouth have already responded. Beckett has D embody the interrogatory light of *Play* and *Not I*, which, followed to its source, can have only one name: Beckett.

*What Where*, Beckett's final play, also depicts the tyrannical director, though he is now a fully separated egotistical force termed V "in the shape of a small megaphone at head level" (496). Through the seasons of his existence he demands of four figures (one being himself) the answer to "it," "what," "where," "And where" (500 *et passim*). Each failed interrogator is tortured in turn, until the final figure, *Bem*, offers to give an answer without giving it—presumably because no answer exists. This response does not interest V who, having finally been offered what he has demanded, replies: "Good. I am alone. . . . Time passes. Make sense who may. I switch off" (505). D, in *Catastrophe*, having similarly shaped and carved P into his desired image, declares no interest in the performance: "Good. There's our *Catastrophe*. In the bag. Once more and I'm off" (488). Beckett in effect admits to having manipulated, goaded, tortured, and generally brutalized his performers in his quest for existential answers that do not exist, while placing little or no value on the reception, the product(ion). The exploration, the rehearsal, is everything, the performance nothing. Such anti-theatricality seems to be a critique not of Beckett's actors, who often engage in "acts of silent opposition" (Friedman 175), but of the audience's complicit participation in his activities.

Luke, D's offstage deputy, dims the house lights in *Catastrophe*, creating, for a final time, a diminishing ellipsis that comes to rest on P's head, whereupon P performs a gesture that is as shocking as it is unique: "*P raises his head, fixes the audience*" (489). For the only time in the canon, a Beckett character stares directly at us, "eyes on [our] eyes" (*Happy Days* 299) with a look that is accusatory, chastening, defiant. "There's no ambiguity there at all," Beckett told Knowlson. "He's saying, you bastards, you haven't finished me yet" (598). As the sound system plays a "*Distant storm of applause*" that "falters," then "dies" (*Catastrophe* 489), the audience is left utterly confounded as to the appropriate response. To remain silent would confirm our redundancy as an audience, to applaud would confirm our subservience to the playwright. We have been perceived for what we are and might always have been in Beckett's theatrical universe: willing pawns in an endless game sustained by our own participation. As Hamm says, staring blindly into the auditorium: "Old stancher! / [Pause.] / You . . . remain" (*Endgame* 154). Politically and aesthetically, *Catastrophe* argues that, without the support of a suppliant audience of adoring acolytes, theaters of torture, like theaters of war, would cease to exist.

Should the audience feel betrayed, even outraged, by Beckett's ultimate repudiation of its function, or concerned that his artistic crisis

has reached a critical mass from which there was to be no return? Alternatively, might we feel energized by a political call to arms or wryly amused by the ultimate Beckettian conundrum: theater staging rejection of the theater? Were Beckett asked these questions he would probably, like his shadowy Auditor, shrug his shoulders "in a gesture of helpless compassion" (*Not I* 405). Yet Beckett's slap in the audience's face is hardly a *volte-face*. As we have seen, persistent artistic and philosophical anxieties concerning Beckett's power relations with his actors and his audience were embodied as early as 1969 in *Play's* inquisitorial light and only fully realized in *D* thirteen years later. By returning to a conventional dramatic format with *Catastrophe*, Beckett squares the ellipsis of his career, returning, as his narratives always do, to a diminished beginning, achieving in his valediction that which he desired at the inception of *Godot*: an empty auditorium.

On the other hand, *Catastrophe* is Beckett's penultimate rather than final play, and its tone is energetically didactic rather than valedictory. His return to the proscenium format can be read as an iconoclastic gesture, an expansion that collapses his theatrical boundaries as much as it assaults the ideological wall dividing east from west. By bringing light to the auditorium, Beckett converts the failed contacts of his proscenium plays into the full contact of a metatheatrical affront. He switches allegiances rather than "switch[es] off" and "let[us] have it" (*Catastrophe* 489) between the eyes, the ocular challenge of *P* shaming us out of the theater and onto the streets. The stare is purposeful. "He'll have them on their feet," *D* concludes, deaf to the irony. "I can hear it from here" (489). Judging by *Catastrophe's* artistic, and arguably political, success, *P's* silent defiance did not fall on deaf ears.

Among Beckett's plays, *Catastrophe* is ultimately, and uniquely, optimistic in the expectations it places on its audience, and the play's didacticism perhaps mitigates for Beckett the persistent paradox that his audience refused to listen to him: they continued to come. *Catastrophe* was a smash hit when it transferred to New York in 1983, and Beckett hailed a "living genius" by the *Times* critic, Frank Rich. When The Samuel Beckett Theater opened on Broadway a year later, *Footfalls* was the "most sought after event of the season" (Knowlson 604). Beckett's audience was swelling, not diminishing. As Schneider wrote, in appropriately otherworldly terms, "All hell is breaking loose" (qtd. in Knowlson 604). Beckett's "dead voices . . . babbling from the Lethe" (*Embers* 201) joined other dissenting speakers to create a clamor heard by alternative audiences, absent, antagonistic, yet seemingly attendant to the message emerging from a theater without walls. While we can only surmise what influence "A Night for Vaclav Havel" exerted on the Czech authorities' decision to release their celebrated dissident in 1983, Havel's subsequent letter to Beckett

expressed his personal gratitude to one who “does not give [himself] away in small change. . . . For a long time afterwards there accompanied me in the prison a great joy and emotion that helped [me] to live on amidst all the dirt and baseness” (Knowles 598). Perhaps the biggest change that Beckett “give[s] away” in *Catastrophe* is that which had always made him uncomfortable: his status as the Audience, the dominant force in the auditorium. The dramatist-director-dictator defers to the dissident, to an audience of one in the “dark offstage” of a distant cell that asks nothing and receives everything. As Winnie says, “Someone is looking at me still. [Pause.] Caring for me still. [Pause.] That is what I find so wonderful” (*Happy Days* 299). Beckett reconciles his paradoxical urge to communicate to an empty house by having a full house interact with a single human being, a dialogue that betrays neither his audience, nor his play, nor himself: a shy man speaking quietly into a void that listens.

This essay has explored Beckett’s troubled relationship with an audience that he largely avoided and whose opinions he invariably rejected. At the heart of his ambivalence resides a solipsistic dependency between watcher and watched that instigated in him an artistic crisis of Pirandellian proportions. For Beckett’s plays, like the creatures that inhabit them, need an audience in order to exist; just as Beckett’s audience, seeking vainly for recognizable characters, needs his plays in order to spectate. Perhaps as an attempt to reconcile, or at least equilibrate, this ontological servility, Beckett set about manipulating the audience’s environment—the auditorium—in relation to his stage, with a diligence that increasingly bordered on domination. The “proscenium” plays force us to recognize through absence, through a kind of cathartic cold turkey, our dependence on Beckett’s characters, without whose recognition we become pointless. Players fight for the right to be heard and patrons for the right to hear, both fearing imminent betrayal by the theatrical event itself. Beckett’s “elliptical” *dramaticules* increasingly enact this betrayal, sucking life from his creatures, light from the stage, and darkness from the auditorium to fill the void. As the division between stage and auditorium dissolves, the audience—participants by propinquity—approaches annihilation. Yet into this suffocating darkness even the tip of a burning cigar enlightens. By returning light to the stage of *Catastrophe* and allowing it to spill into the auditorium, thereby illuminating the theatrical architecture and reauthorizing the audience, Beckett finally relinquishes control. Switching on the lights, he begins the process of switching off his career.

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## NOTES

1. Vivian Mercier summed up Beckett's ability to confound in the remark that *Godot* is a play in which "nothing happens—twice," while Beckett himself admitted to the "power of [*Endgame*'s] text to claw" (Harmon 11).

2. All citations of Beckett's plays are from *Samuel Beckett: Dramatic Works*, the Grove Centenary Edition, vol. III.

3. In a rehearsal photograph from the Schiller-Theater production of *Endgame* in 1967, Beckett's conversation with Nagg and Nell in their ashbins is conducted at head height, the actors on the stage and Beckett standing below them in the auditorium (Dukes 27).

4. Beckett wrote to Alan Schneider: "Shower (rain). Shower & Cooker are derived from German 'schauen' & 'kucken' (to look). They represent the onlooker (audience) wanting to know the meaning of things" (Harmon 95).

5. Friedman's book, *Party Pieces: Oral Storytelling and Social Performance in Joyce and Beckett*, examines the "social performances . . . embedded in the fiction of James Joyce and the drama of Samuel Beckett" (xv).

6. Interview with Peter Woodthorpe, 1994. The passage refers to Beckett's disappointment upon watching a BBC broadcast on 26 April 1960. He concluded, "My play wasn't written for this box. My play was written for small men locked in a big space. Here you're all too big for the place" (Knowlson 435).

7. George Devine, director of the National Theatre production of *Play*, likened the light to a dental drill, an image the actress playing W2, Billie Whitelaw, took a step further: "It is a torturer" (Gontarski xix).

8. Lambert called the figure a "Cro-Magnon man mourning across the aeons," and Harold Hobson wrote, "the dramatic force of the play lies in this strange figure . . . even more than it does in the attention-catching mouth" (Beryl and John Fletcher 210).

9. Beckett telegraphed his response to Jessica Tandy's concern that *Not I*'s running time of twenty-three minutes rendered it incomprehensible: "I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect."

10. Beckett describes W in *Not I*: "I knew that woman's voice in Ireland. . . . There were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, by the hedgerows" (Knowlson 522).

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