

*Negative Theology and Samuel Beckett's Strategies of Reduction: Visuality and
Iconicity in Beckett's Later Works for the Stage*

by

Sandra Wynands
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Supervisor: Dr. Sheila Rabillard

ABSTRACT

Over the course of his life Beckett's work moves through a process of reduction toward increasing simplicity and concentration of means. I trace this reduction in Beckett's later works for the stage and compare it with the dialectics of negative theology, both Buddhist and Orthodox Christian, paying particular attention to structures of visibility and iconicity (both visual and not) in Beckett's work. The visual enjoyed a status of peculiar ontological primacy for Beckett. In it he saw exemplified both the dualisms he worked to overcome throughout his career and the saving grace that will overcome them: a "breathless immediacy" (Beckett's words) that will skip the mediation of language and the linearity of discourse and present exquisitely balanced, essentially still, nondual images. Beckett's metaphorical, that is, vertically structured stage images are subtended by metonymic texts that run through a strategic process of self-emptying in a kind of kenosis of discourse. The aporetic figures thus produced form similarly iconic structures on the textual level as can be found on the visual level. In Beckett's horizontal world a displaced sacramentalism and a phenomenologically motivated process of enquiry into the nature of things combine to create an empty space, a gray area through which the divine can enter if the audience is inclined to make such an act of faith. Beckett creates an art of *Erfahrung* that leads to a confrontation with an Other beyond the limits of a reductive concept of instrumental reason.

Supervisor: Dr. S. Rabillard, (Department of English)

Contents

Acknowledgments	v
I. Introduction	1
II. Visuality and Iconicity in <i>Catastrophe</i>	37
III. Immanence and Transcendence in <i>Three Dialogues</i>	58
IV. Metaphor and Metonymy in <i>Not I</i>	93
V. The Empty Space of <i>Quad</i>	131
VI. The Reduction of <i>Film</i>	172
VII. Conclusion	207
VIII. Bibliography	212

List of Abbreviations

D	<i>Disjecta</i>
E	<i>Endgame</i>
F	<i>Film</i>
ISIS	<i>Ill Seen Ill Said</i>
MP	<i>Le Monde et le Pantalon</i>
P	<i>Proust</i>
SP	<i>Collected Shorter Plays</i>
TD	"Three Dialogues."
T	<i>Trilogy</i>
W	<i>Watt</i>
WW	<i>Worstward Ho</i>

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I. Introduction

A legitimate if unanswerable question for someone without previous exposure to Beckett's work to ask would be, "So what are Beckett's plays *about*?" And before launching into more precise and necessarily more contradictory analyses, it would be fair, albeit almost uninformative in its generality, to say that they are concerned with what it means to be a human being alive in the 20th century. With great compassion Beckett writes of the so-called "human condition" in its present incarnation. His works grapple with existential questions of the significance of life and ultimate meaning. They present characters who haven't quite grasped that significance yet, but for the reader there is a distinct intimation that the work is hovering on the edge of something momentous: a momentous change in outlook and attitude, not so much on the part of the characters as the reader herself. What is more, everything in Beckett seems to be charged with meaning. Images are pieced together of such few ingredients that everything seems deliberately chosen and placed. It is never clear what precisely the significance of these images is, since Beckett steers clear of a contiguous sense of realism in which things could find their place in a recognizable world. Beckett's work, if it is to make any sense, can only be read in metaphorical terms: that head floating in mid-space has to mean something other than a head floating in space ... thus inviting another meaning beyond the literally intelligible construct on stage. Beckett always makes reference to a vague form of transcendence. But it entirely lacks the reductive, limiting properties of symbol, thus leaving the audience at a loss for what is being signified. Any specific interpretation will inevitably limit the scope of what is insinuated rather than stated in the play: it remains a complexity that is always just beyond grasp.

Likewise, Beckett's characters illustrate human dilemmas of inauthentic existence (that is, of life unwilling or unable to take responsibility for its actions), and shackling attachment to ideas of self, of purpose: ideas of being as a servant, or of having to wait for Godot predefine the characters — excuses that keep them from the courageous step of taking their own transformation in hand and embarking on the path of liberation. This is not a liberation from an external force (the invisible tentacles of a Godot) but a liberation from self: after all, it is not Godot who chains Didi and Gogo to the tree, but the two

tramps themselves who cannot muster the courage to confront the essential openness of a life beyond the pre-conceived notion of themselves as passive "waiters." The characters keep going round in circles: Didi and Gogo cannot go beyond waiting their lives out; Hamm and Clov stay shackled to each other although their parasitical relationship traps them in a spiral of need; even, if more ambivalently, the recorded voice in *Rockaby* and *Mouth* do not escape their circular existences. The liberating door to the outside remains closed to them, but not to the audience, who can see the self-made shackles the characters are caught in.

These existential concerns, the vague but persistent hint at transcendent meaning, mixed in with Beckett's aesthetics of uncompromising reduction prompt me to explore the relationship and the intersections between Beckett and what is, for lack of a better term, called negative or apophatic theology. During the course of his creative life Beckett's style, never very ornate to begin with except in the early years of *Proust*, increasingly moves towards an aesthetics of minimalism: in short, pared down sentences ideas stand out motionless in momentary brilliance. Beckett turns towards sentence fragments without verbs to infuse them with action, so that they turn into images with very little of the linear thrust of discourse, rather than miniature movies, as it were. On the other hand, sometimes a single sentence undergoes a set of variations that are so minimally different from one another that they also approach motionlessness. The late theatre abandons character, plot and "set," in any conventional sense. In a play such as *What Where* the singularity of character is replaced by a succession of interchangeable ghosts that differ from each other by nothing more than the middle phoneme of their names (Bam, Bem, Bim, Bom), by a phonetic place of articulation that slides progressively further forward. Plot is non-existent in Beckett's late plays: nothing is ever resolved, because nothing ever happens. And finally, Beckett's sets do not describe or define places. They are non-places, as in the case of *Ohio Impromptu*, for example, or equally unplaceable metaphoric images of some indefinable, abstract meaning, as in *Not I* or *Rockaby*. There is meaning, for sure — but what that meaning is is less certain.

In Beckett's late theatre, there is a recognizable tendency towards "lessness" — a tendency that could be described as "negative" along the algebraic lines of a negative sign of subtraction. What then is negative about negative theology? Does it also subtract

something? Negative theology holds that God cannot be captured by human conceptuality and therefore by language. So it is negative only in the sense that, since we cannot know what God is, or since God *is* not anything in the sense that He is not a being (confined within metaphysics), it is sometimes easier to say what God is *not*. Negative theology subtracts only insofar as it can state with certainty that God is not good (or bad, for that matter), but it cannot say in any positive terms what He is, because that is outside of human power to conceive.

But negative theology does not negate God, nor does it proceed exclusively by negation. Its energizer and its driving force is *aporia*. Negative theology will make a positive, or *kataphatic*, statement about God, but since this statement cannot be adequate to God, its characteristic next move will often be to negate this statement. The *apophatic* moment draws its force from the semantic overflow that results from the clash of these incompatible statements as human reason grapples with something that does not fit a logic of non-contradiction. Really, then, negative theology could not be further from negating or denying God: its main concern can even be argued to be the *preservation* of God's absolute transcendence beyond human conceptuality. It is a persistent reminder that when we talk about God we should not talk of our own concepts of Him, but about God — which involves the recognition that we cannot talk about him adequately and that we can never be certain whether or not we delude ourselves into making God something that merely suits our whims.

Beckett and negative theology, then. Such a formulation makes it seem as if negative theology existed as a self-sufficient discipline under the larger umbrella of theology proper. While this is true insofar as negative theology has "aims" and strategies that identify it, it at the same time does not exist in isolation, but is of necessity intertwined with positive, or *kataphatic* theology: *kataphatic* theology will make a (necessarily conceptual) statement about God; *apophatic* theology will guard His absolute transcendence by asserting that whatever is said about Him is necessarily "under erasure" because it can only be said in the language of creatures and therefore inadequately. Although these two movements are inseparable, there has been ample discussion throughout history whether one of them is or should be privileged, and if so, which one? Does *apophatics* take precedence over *kataphatics*, or vice versa? Do we need *kataphatic*

theology first, and with it a revelation that offers itself to be interpreted? In this case negative theology would turn into a hermeneutic, a path towards a more accurate understanding of God. Or do we, on the contrary, need apophatic theology first, in order to guard God from becoming an object of knowledge, and in order to guard His mystery?

By way of a coarse generalization it can be said that scholastic Western Christianity tended to value positive theology over negative and as a result to construe negative theology as a corrective to positive theology. St. Thomas Aquinas's dialectic consisting of *via affirmativa*, *via negativa* and *via eminentiae* is the most prominent example: here a positive statement about God is duly corrected by a negative one and the result is greater understanding of the nature of God: the way of eminence. Eastern Christianity has put greater emphasis on the apophatic moment, insisting on the absolute unknowability of God's essence.

However, the point really is not to decide whether the positive or the negative comes first, since any such valorization is still a metaphysical gesture that defeats any attempt to free God from the constraints of conceptuality. Rather, negative theology properly understood is neither positive nor negative, but nondual. (As a result, a stance that sees the apophatic moment override the kataphatic, as is the case with the Pseudo-Dionysius, really recognizes that the nonduality of apophaticism undoes the opposition of kataphatic and apophatic.) Instead of a pure negation, negative theology must perform what Denys Turner, without discernible reference to Hegel, calls "the negation of the negation" (270) — a movement that makes it impossible to rest either with the positive statement or with its negation, but gives rise to an essential and originary self-negating negation, that is a self-negation that cannot be reduced to an origin or essence.

Therefore Kevin Hart reminds us that "we do not need a third theology, one neither positive nor negative — a theology of paradox — for negative theology properly understood, *is* that theology: a discourse which works at once inside and outside onto-theology, submitting its images of God to deconstruction" (1989: 186). A. Hilary Armstrong, the famous Plotinus scholar, is also aware of the two rival construals of negative theology outlined above. He calls the version that conceives of negative theology as corrective Middle-Platonist apophaticism, the fully nondual one Neoplatonic

apophaticism (1979a: 15-6), and for him (as for many other scholars) the latter — Armstrong's heart beats for Plotinus — is the genuine article.

The Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (AD 150 – ca. 250), in many ways a proto-deconstructionist, has no doubt developed the most rigorous of negative theologies along radically nondual lines. The radicalism of Nagarjuna's thinking is due to the fact that he makes *sunyata*, emptiness, the core of his thinking. He sets out to shatter all concepts designed to make the everyday world intelligible. "In the last analysis the endeavor is to convince that the ideas in question are, in rigour, *unthinkable*. Nagarjuna's rampage through the notions of the philosophers is directed at uncovering their ultimate nonsense with a view to releasing men from humiliating bondage to them" (Sprung in Candrakirti 6). As a result of Nagarjuna's rigorous deconstruction the core-concept of Buddhism, codependent origination, must really be rethought as non-dependent non-origination — which really it was all along. Nagarjuna just made explicit that if every element depends on every other, no single one can properly be said to originate in and of itself. Already the implications of Nagarjuna's thought for any discourse that hinges on an onto-theological transcendental signified are obvious. And he continues along recognizably Derridean lines: all propositions are shown to reveal their inherent aporia. According to Nagarjuna any possible proposition can have four possible forms: 1. that it is 2. that it is not 3. that it both is and is not 4. that it neither is nor is not. This figure is called the *catuscoti*. Mervyn Sprung, the translator of Nagarjuna's greatest commentator, his contemporary Candrakirti, elucidates its implications as follows:

Though the *logical* importance of the four alternative assertions may be, and has been, exaggerated, its importance for Madhyamika philosophy of language, and hence ontology, and hence understanding of human freedom is great. The *catuscoti* exhausts the ways in which the verb 'to be' may be employed in assertions: ... Nagarjuna and Candrakirti ... repudiate the ontological implications of the verb 'to be.' (Sprung in Candrakirti 8)

Christian negative theologies for the most part lack Nagarjuna's rigour. By comparison even Meister Eckhart seems to commit "hyperessentialisms," as when he defends himself after his condemnation for heresy as follows: "In saying that God is not a being and is above being, I have not denied being to God; rather I have elevated it in him"

(Eckhart 1981: 257). Admittedly, this is not a representative remark by Eckhart, spoken under duress and in the effort to point out to his inquisitors that his apophaticism does not attempt to abolish God. But Eckhart's adversaries summarize Christian objections to Nagarjuna well: to a Christian Nagarjuna's rigorous questioning may seem to dissolve the absolute transcendence of God. The difference lies in Buddhism's extraordinarily this-worldly orientation toward *praxis*, versus Christianity's vertical otherworldly orientation toward transcendence. Christianity is based on a vertical encounter of self and Other that is overcome in the mystical moment of nonduality, but the fundamental status of the Godhead as otherworldly has to be maintained. In Buddhism, the dualism to be overcome is not between self and transcendent Other but between self and world brought about by the self's own delusions. This does not mean that the un-deified human being in Christianity is not also split within itself (namely between deluded ego-identity and divine core), but rather that Buddhism, being a tradition of illumination, is structured horizontally, while Christianity, as a tradition of revelation, is structured vertically: the Christian hesychast may practice the Jesus-Prayer for as long as he likes, but ultimately his deification depends on divine grace, while the Buddhist practitioner may "achieve" enlightenment "by his own effort" (both of these terms are highly inadequate since enlightenment has nothing to do with achievement, effort, or ego).

The point of view that denies the adequacy of negation as corrective and emphasizes the fully nondual status of the negation of the negation to an extent converges with Derrida, for whom the aporia of revelation and revealability is at the basis of the Christian experience. Does one first need a concrete revelation in order to conceive of the originary possibility of revelation, that is, of revealability? Or does one first need the originary possibility of revelation in order to recognize a revelation when one sees one? The question, Derrida says, is an undecidability (1996: 80). While there is no straight correspondence between revealability and the apophatic moment, the originary openness of revealability destabilizes the kataphatic assertion of revelation, leaving an aporia in which neither term can stand on its own.

One point Derrida will not let go of, regardless of the great subtlety of his position on negative theology in his later works, is that however much negative theology may try

to pass through conceptuality to its suspension, it always ends up guarding onto-theology, in the way the line from Meister Eckhart above seems to do, because the apophatic moment is still a moment of trying to proclaim the truth about God: "In the most apophatic moment, when one says: 'God is not,' 'God is neither this nor that, neither that nor its contrary' or 'being is not,' etc., even then it is still a matter of saying the entity ... such as it is, in its truth, even were it meta-metaphysical, meta-ontological" (1993: 68). The question is, does this truth still constitute a "transcendental signified" in Derrida's picture if it is meta-ontological, if, in other words, one cannot say the truth, but simply say that one cannot say it? This gesture, if taken seriously, constitutes a safety mechanism that guards God's truth from being abused and deformed in the tentacles of the broken human mind, so that it remains its own irreducible truth, not a human construction thereof.

Derrida's point is, of course, that negative theology does not escape the snares of onto-theology, however much it may try. The very process of saying it leaves a mark on the absolutely singular and turns it into an onto-theological entity. Or, differently put, by always announcing its intent to say something in excess of what it actually says, negative theology manages to say it without saying it, to reify it although it claims not to. The excess leaves a mark on language and turns it into something rather than nothing (1993: 55). The absolutely singular, the ineffable, recedes as soon as one attempts to say it. By trying to say it one makes it into something that is no longer singular, that is part of the immanent realm of the iterative. So, one can see: the difference between the position negative theology takes and the position Derrida takes is minute ... and yet infinite in its consequences. Both are persuasive; the difference lies in their perspective: Derrida argues from an epistemological point of view; negative theology allows for the ontological point of view of the eternal, it's only that this point of view remains hypothetical to humans: we cannot know what it "really" is, so we put it under erasure.

In this context a word about the use of the term "transcendent" in this study is in order. The word can be a source of confusion since it can have a phenomenological as well as a theological meaning: in theology it refers to an objective realm beyond immanent creation; in phenomenology it denotes what is outside the immanence of consciousness. For the most part our investigation moves at such a level of generality and abstraction that it makes little difference whether reference is to theological or to

phenomenological transcendence: Beckett's concern is not with the nature of the transcendent but primarily with the limits of language. Another way of saying this is that the concern here is phenomenological rather than theological. Neither Beckett nor this study have anything to say about the truth, or meaning of that which cannot be said — that falls within the domain of theology. What interests Beckett (and phenomenology) is how it manifests itself as soon as it enters the realm of the immanent. Theology and phenomenology both bring relevant perspectives to bear on this question, but it is important not to confuse them. Phenomenology's transcendent is what is beyond the reduced consciousness. It is concerned with questions of possibility and impossibility, whereas theology deals with other "modes of being" as well as their meaning. Phenomenology will not be able to say anything about the nature or truth of divine revelation; it does not have the tools to do so. What it can do is theorize the circumstances of its occurrence, and the mode in which it gives itself to consciousness.

Both phenomenology and theology are concerned with the true nature of reality and the way in which phenomenology attempts to gain access makes it interesting to negative theologians: the *epoché* brackets all commonsensical beliefs, subjects the empirical world to a suspension of conviction, so that true consciousness may emerge. Negative theology does the same in order to preserve the iconic¹ status of God: to preserve His transcendence and protect Him from idolatry. So, in this regard negative theology and phenomenology inhabit the same space and work with similar tools. Derrida remarks that "transcendental phenomenology, insofar as it passes through the suspension of all doxa, of every positing of existence, of every thesis, inhabits the same element as negative theology. One would be a good propaedeutic for the other" (1993: 67).

At another level the two are antithetical to each other: phenomenology aims to disclose phenomena to the perceiving subject; that is, its goal is to know and to further knowledge. Negative theology, on the other hand uses similar strategies but to situate God securely outside human knowledge. The two meet again where phenomenology has to admit that the reduction can never be complete, that the object never entirely coincides with itself (and neither does the subject), and that hence there is an aspect to the world that

¹ "Iconic" in this study is never used in its Peircean sense, but always in its theological sense of being simultaneously inside and outside representation.

never discloses itself to the embodied subject because everything is subject to the deferral of writing. Marion's phenomenology of givenness, finally, is in no contradiction to negative theology at all, because the saturated phenomenon does not give itself to experience or to conceptual knowledge, but only to counter-experience, to that which "offers the experience of what irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects" (Marion 2002: 215). Likewise, the darkness negative theologians insist on does not indicate a lack of givenness, but the fact that God does not give Himself as an object of knowledge: "From the perspective of objectivity, one can and should say — without any contradiction — that the saturated phenomenon gives nothing to see ... there is nothing (no thing) to perceive" (244).

So, is not the Beckettian universe thoroughly Derridean in tenor? Is there room in Beckett for full-fledged transcendence of which we cannot say anything? To find this out and to locate this space in Beckett's art is the task this study has set itself. It should be clear that Beckett's world is far from unproblematically theological — in fact, there is much to suggest that it is atheological or even atheist. The dominant traditions of Beckett criticism have seen his work in decidedly atheist terms: first through an existentialist lens and then through a deconstructionist lens, when deconstruction was for many still synonymous with atheism.

A few words about biography, before I will forget about biography for the rest of this study. It is well known that Beckett himself was notoriously skeptical of organized religion and although he was familiar with the negative theologies of Eckhart and Dionysius he was nonetheless unable even to accept the God of negative theology for himself.² One reason might have been his strong ethical rather than theological concern and the formative realization that both his mother and brother did not find solace in their faith at the time of their deaths.³ This ethical concern is consistent with the secular, aestheticist, late-modern literary culture out of which Beckett's art emerged in Paris in the

² "I have no religious feeling. Once I had a religious emotion. It was at my first communion. No more." (Interview with Tom Driver [Driver 1961])

³ "My brother and mother got no value from their religion when they died. At the moment of crisis it had no more depth than an old-school tie." (Interview with Tom Driver [Driver 1961])

middle of the 20th century. Thus, no straightforward biographical argument can be made that Beckett was especially drawn to the theological transcendent of negative theology.

The world his characters inhabit is without doubt an atheological one. In their world there is no continuity between the philosophical and the theological dimensions. The characters never experience God (or what they conceive of as God) as an answer to their hopes, wants, petitions and prayers. The "God" they appeal to refuses to let himself be known by humans. Beckett's people are secularists living in an atheological world that has forgotten how to relate to God. They retain the impoverished, anthropomorphized versions and the empty forms through which a society for whom the divine is no longer a reality has taught them to relate to it ("let us pray" [1964: 38]). "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (38) concludes Hamm in *Endgame* after an attempt at "prayer" that can at best be called farcical and which foregrounds the mechanistic attitude with which modern humanity is likely to approach the divine. But criticism that interprets the fact that God does not reveal himself to Hamm (or to Vladimir and Estragon, for that matter) as evidence of the secularity of the Beckettian universe ought to bear in mind the farcical character of the scene, in which sudden divine revelation in the form of a *deus ex machina* would hardly count as confirmation of a theological universe. In contemporary theatre a *deus ex machina* will invariably have ironic and comic overtones and will confirm Hamm's position rather than refute it. Beckett is playing with form — theatrical as well as devotional. Traditional theatrical form calls for a *deus ex machina* at this classic juncture. The fact that Beckett fails to produce one in order to keep the play from drifting into slapstick is itself an ironic comment on the panacea status of this best-known of theatrical devices. The fact that Hamm pretends he has proved a point although he set the situation up to be a self-fulfilling prophecy produces a subtler form of humour.

The emptiness the characters feel is a direct result of the fact that God fails to do what they want him to do. Yet, if God complied with human whims he would not be God, but a corruptible entity to be manipulated: a human being. Or else: if Beckett's people insist on making God in their own image, they need not be surprised at the cruelty of the monster they have created. But although the characters' dissatisfaction with their God is obvious, they do not set out, as Richard Coe implies (1970: 91), on a conscious quest for a new and more convincing conception — as secularists born and bred they do not know

where to look. Nor does Beckett offer one. Importantly, though, he never ironizes a conception of the divine *other than* the anthropomorphized one, and while his sensitive nature is everywhere compassionate towards the plight his people experience as a result of God's failure to comply with their requests, his irony makes clear the bemused detachment with which he views his people's self-made misery. It is impossible to tell from the evidence of Beckett's texts whether he criticizes the theological world-view as such and interprets God's notorious absence from his people's lives as a sign of his nonexistence, or whether his contempt is limited to the anthropomorphized versions of the divine: if humans forget how to pray, God will remain absent from their lives.

Rather than calling Beckett's position "atheist" or "agnostic," maybe it can more accurately be called "absentheist," following Jean-Luc Nancy's terminology (2003) regarding Blanchot. In my chapter on Beckett's "Three Dialogues" I outline in detail what such a position might imply. Put briefly, it means an outlook from which God is absent, but in which a space that is fundamentally open — in the sense of being non-originarily fundamental and nondually open — is kept for God to fill. What I call absentheist, then, is fundamentally different from deism, because it does not imply a kind of natural religion where God is naturally present without any need for divine revelation. On the contrary, it suggests an absence of God but a fundamental openness, pregnant with possibility, and ready to receive divine revelation when it comes. This does not imply a faithful trust in revelation — that would be partial — but an openness so fundamental that it does not know whether the revelation is going to come, but does not doubt its occurrence, either. The Buddhist non-concept *sunyata* will help us elucidate its implications. Let us further adumbrate absentheism: theism has been dominantly understood as a positivism, and atheism, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, is not all that different from theism insofar as it has been unable to substitute for God anything other than another term of fullness: an end, or a good. "Absentheism" distinguishes itself from theism and atheism insofar as God is no metaphysical entity in any way, and it distinguishes itself from apophaticism in that it does not postulate a universe in theological continuity. For the apophatic mystic, the God who is infinitely and inconceivably beyond human categories is a palpable reality in everyday life; for Beckett He is not. Nonetheless his artistic radar works with the fullness of the divine reality that used to determine European thought, the culture within which he

works. He cannot turn his back on it (Christianity is a thought system with which he is, he admits, "perfectly familiar" [Duckworth 18]), and it remains a potentiality.

The only way to deal truthfully with this heritage is to acknowledge its influence. Its hold on European intellectual and spiritual heritage has to extend into the present in some capacity, not necessarily direct, or else Western culture is simply denying its past and trying to recreate itself *ex nihilo*. That is, even in a world that currently no longer defines itself in theological terms (and from which God is absent in this sense) a theological heritage is at work. If, however, the present is perceived in continuity with the past, then the future must be thought of in continuity with both present and past. That is, it must keep a space open for the potential return of God. At the same time such a meta-metaphysical space is the only thing that will enable the return of God after Enlightenment, humanism, and not least deconstruction have made it near impossible to accept a positivist, anthropomorphic, or kataphatic conception of God. It is worth distinguishing between the absence of God, his death (as proclaimed by Nietzsche), and His flight from the world (as conceived by Hölderlin) — a world in which people's lives are too busy, too wrapped up in themselves, to have room for Him. In the latter case, the fact that there is no God will not be experienced as an absence, because there is no awareness of absence or lack: humanity's vain pursuits and conceits fill up the picture. However, absence can be experienced as a presence, insofar as one can be acutely aware of absence, for instance, of the absence of God. Heidegger reminds us in "The Thing" that "absence is not nothing." It is the "presence, of what must first be appropriated, of hidden fullness and wealth of what has been" (1971: 184). In any society that declares God absent a meeting must take place with history, with the tradition of His "presence" in society. Hence even a society that proclaims God dead has to be open to His return (as a presence or as a ghost). For Heidegger it is the poet's role to keep this space for the divine open and also Blanchot, and by extrapolation Beckett, reserve such a place for the poet.

The bemused detachment that pervades Beckett's perspective on the human condition is the most persistent hint at such a space. From here Beckett develops his quasi-apophatic, quasi-deconstructionist techniques that create a space without any metaphysical foundation (in the shape of a centred character, a reliable narrator or the authority of authorial comment). The narrative is always already split, always engaged in a process of

self-referential critique. Frequently Beckett's narrators are able to relate their predicaments to the reader with great ironic distance, as if they were someone else, as if someone else were speaking in them. The narrator in *The Unnamable* is a prominent example: he/it never speaks from a position remotely resembling a centred subjectivity. The narrative position is dismantled to the point that it appears as if the text itself were speaking, caught up in a spiral of self-deconstruction from which the empty space of the text emerges.

However, in true deconstructionist fashion the splits also imply a channel for agency. Beckett's art persistently points to something beyond the mere absurdity and hopelessness of the fates it presents: there is Didi and Gogo's existence underneath the tree, but there is ample indication in *Waiting for Godot* that another existence is possible. There is an appeal to an "outside" of metaphysics, even if there can be no "outside." The structures of transcendence are present, although there cannot be an "exit" to that transcendence: that romantic idea of union is closed to Didi and Gogo. Their "salvation" can only be to hold on to the idea of transcendence, although transcendence is impossible, and find a kind of "immanent transcendence" of paradox and aporia: of the unrepresentable as unrepresentable in the immanent, and snatch a gleaning that way of what might be "beyond." This is a way of being oriented towards the transcendence without striving for it and without wanting union with it. As a result, the absurdity of the human condition loses its ubiquitous, unconquerable horizon — mostly for the audience rather than the characters, although the narrator in *The Unnamable* is not far from it. If it is possible to ironize one's predicament, it is possible to gain enough distance from it to conceive of other possibilities. But these possibilities are not specified in Beckett's work, but rather left open and blank: his is an art of the pause, of silence, and of the empty space. The "contents" of this emptiness can be partly arrived at by a process of *reductio ex negativo* from what they are not, but their complexity transcends what can be deduced by contrastive reason. The emptiness, or what might fill it, cannot be reduced to content. The emptiness will always remain an emptiness, or, more accurately, *sunyata*, because it is not to be filled with conceptual "content." It can only be pointed at rather than named (cf. A.H. Armstrong 1979b: 181).

Despite or even because of the numerous biblical and other religious references and allusions, which Beckett generally does not fail to ironize, there is a space for God in

Beckett's art, then: as early as 1976 John Pilling calls Beckett a "God-haunted man" (1976: 1). His work's most pervasive quality is something, which, for lack of a better term, might be called religious. It manifests itself as a metaphysical longing for the wholly Other: "His rejection of life is something other than that. It is a vast, insatiable hunger, a yearning, an immense ache and regret which is at the core of living" (Clurman 123); or as a quest for the ultimate truth of the human condition that Avigdor Arikha feels is at the core of Beckett's art: "[a]ll he wants is to tell the truth. That might be crazy in the last quarter of the 20th century, but truth is timeless. . . . I do not exaggerate when I say that is what his writing is all about. He questions everything. His writing is a perpetual questioning of what is true" (qtd. in Dobbs 18). This truth might be "something or nothing," but in every case it is of an order that is beyond the language of human conceptualization ("my own language appears to me like a veil that needs to be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" [Beckett 1983: 52]).

The space that this yearning and questioning produces cannot be filled by the traditional myopic image of the man with the long gray beard, nor, in fact, by ideas generally, for every attempt to do so results in failure, as Beckett emphasizes variously throughout his corpus. These conceptions are not able to fill the vastness of the longing. Nor can it be filled by a humanism cut off from God: the emptiness felt by Beckett's characters attests to this, as does the critique of (post-)Enlightenment humanism, especially Cartesianism (cf. Hugh Kenner's brilliant study on this subject [1961]), that pervades Beckett's work at least to the same extent as his criticism of popular religion. It is a space that, if it can be filled at all, can only be filled by the proportions of a divine.

In her study *God, the Quest, the Hero* (1988), in which she investigates the relationship of Beckett's characters and God, Laura Barge is careful to point out that what she calls the void and what I prefer to call simply and neutrally a space to be filled by God, is not in fact filled by God. Rather, it is "something only a God could fill" (Barge 57). Contrary to Barge, I would not describe this space in the negative terms of a "void" (evoking as it does hopelessness and meaninglessness) that calls to be filled, but rather as a fundamental emptiness, open to possibility and pregnant with potential meaning along

the lines of *sunyata*.⁴ This space is not simply there as something around which Beckett's quest, that of his reader or his characters revolves in an effort to fill the void, but it is in fact deliberately *created*, not to perpetuate the quest, but to create an emptiness of such proportions that no quest will ever turn up the thing that fills it. Barge is good at pointing out the longing for the wholly other in Beckett's work. But then she assumes the quest to be unending, since it cannot be fulfilled: the hero is on a quest for an experience of the divine, but the fulfillment of this experience is dependent upon God, upon God's revelation of himself to the world. Yet, since the Beckettian universe is allegedly godless, there will be no fulfillment and the hero must indefinitely continue his questing (cf. 59). Barge does not acknowledge numerous indications suggesting that Beckett thinks the quest itself a problematic concept: the "Three Dialogues" can be read in such a way, and Beckett's later writings generally betray skepticism towards the linearity of language. From this perspective the quest itself is what keeps it from being fulfilled. Part of the difficulty Barge's study encounters is that she ties her enquiry too closely to the characters: they never cease their quests, of course, so she has to acknowledge this if the characters are her measuring rod. This way she loses sight of the fact that formally Beckett's work does cease its quest, moving towards increasing restfulness and repose. An argument in favour of apophatic structures in Beckett's work is better made on the level of aesthetic, structural, rhetorical and thematic forms of displacement, balance, negation, paradox and aporia.

Coming from a quasi-Buddhist perspective, Richard Coe (1964) has an easier time recognizing the dilemma of the quest, or of will, more generally: "the Buddhist cannot desire nirvana, because Nirvana, by definition, is that which cannot be desired" (3). That is, the egocentricity of the will that drives the quest keeps the mystical moment at bay. But Coe also assumes that failure is a necessity because one cannot switch off will. "Art, in fact, is the elucidation of the impossible," says Coe, and therefore "it *must* fail" (4). He is right here, insofar as art is the elucidation of the impossible, but given that he has the audacity to question will, why not also question the everyday valence of one possible

⁴ Cf. Loy (1992): "The important terms *sunya* and its substantive *sunyata* are also very difficult to translate. They derive from the Sanskrit root *su*, which means 'to be swollen,' both like a hollow balloon and like a pregnant woman; therefore the usual English translation 'empty' and 'emptiness' must be supplemented with the notion of 'pregnant with possibilities.'" (233)

result of will, namely failure. Then "failure" as a concept steps out of a binary logic in true Buddhist fashion, as I will show in my discussion of *Film*. Failure is necessary in that it brings us face-to-face with what is outside the confines of reason or the concept. So, it is not the end-result of the artistic process (i.e. Beckett's oft-proclaimed "art of failure"), but a necessary, and therefore positive, step on the way to something else: the encounter with the Other.

Coe's Buddhism is intelligible, his enthusiasm for the Buddhist perspective palpable: he is convinced that Buddhism can do something unique for Beckett criticism and, one suspects, for the West in general. But he does not help his case of making Buddhism accessible to Westerners by muddling his terminology: he draws parallels with non-Buddhist schools of thought and faith traditions, but does not differentiate sufficiently between them and the position he aims to illustrate. As a result, the parallels appear as analogues. Thus, in connection with nirvana he refers to a "*néant* beyond space and time" (5). If this "*néant*" is to evoke that of existentialism it would be helpful to emphasize the differences between existentialist nothingness and Buddhist nirvana, notwithstanding the distance the two can travel side by side. One can elucidate the other, but only if they are recognized as different. They are not the same, and it does not help Western understanding of Buddhism to suggest (if only implicitly) that the West has readymade analogues for its terms.

As another side of the same difficulty, Coe infuses his text with a vocabulary that is Christian in origin. (For example, Beckett's people are in "purgatory" [5], he asserts.) As a result, it is never entirely clear whether his starting-point is a Christian or a Buddhist perspective. Obviously, his commendable intent is to emphasize for his readers the relevancy of his position for their own (Western, hence likely culturally Christian) existences, but sometimes the distinctions blur in this process and he hampers his case. For instance, in his valiant attempt to situate God outside the realm of Being, and to clear the way for a non-anthropomorphic God in Beckett's art, he ends up equating God and nirvana: "To say that 'God does not exist' (in Beckett's terms) asserts nothing about the existence of God. For if 'that which exists' is finite, then God, infinite, is precisely 'that which does not exist.' Nirvana is 'that which does not exist'" (94). There is no doubt that both Buddhism and Christianity refer to the same ultimate reality, but not least because

Buddhism and Christianity come from non-theist and theist perspectives respectively one needs carefully to differentiate between the two theoretical constructs. Again, the two traditions can fertilize one another only if they are recognized as different.

Coe's enthusiasm for his religious approach to Beckett surfaces most distinctively, and misfires most tellingly, when he asserts in an essay of the same period that "Beckett's people start out on their pilgrimage in a search of a new and more acceptable version of God" (1970: 100), namely a version that acknowledges "that no definition of God is possible, save in terms of that which he is *not*" (ibid.). There is no question that the only God compatible with Beckett's art is beyond the concept, but I think Coe is so taken with this (for his time) radically new way of looking at Beckett's work that he prefers not to notice that Beckett's people are not actually looking for God. For the most part they wander around in circles in their own self-created hells, driven onward by their obsessions (such as Watt's propensity for dissection and analysis) and it is only in Beckett's ironic perspective, in his rhetorical strategies, and in the work's metaphoricity that a transcendent realm is constantly present. Barge, for her part, does not commit herself quite as unambiguously as Coe: she leaves open what Beckett's heroes are questing for (whether they have a definitive idea that it is God, or what this God's qualities are, if any), and she emphasizes that their quest can only be fulfilled from God's side, so does not imply that Beckett's people live in continuity with a theological universe, which most definitely they do not.

Many years after Coe, in 1989, Paul Foster published another study of Beckett and Buddhism, entitled *Beckett and Zen*. Foster's study is at home in Buddhist terminology and able to take it on its own terms. In fact, few things in Foster's book invite criticism. In particular, it is a relief to see Foster focus on "the way out." Almost an anomaly among Beckett critics, Foster is aware that Beckett is indeed, through his very technique of reduction, hinting at release and relief from the condition he describes: to Foster, the path of reduction is the journey towards nirvana or enlightenment. The ubiquitous dilemma in Beckett's work is not unsolvable; or rather, the recognition that it is unsolvable is itself a major step towards enlightenment. This view is an important departure from earlier critics who were inclined (under the influence of existentialist criticism) to see Beckett's works as variations on the myth of Sisyphus. Foster's study is especially helpful in exploring the

intersections of paradox in Beckett and the extensive use Zen masters throughout history have made of the *koan* as a means of helping students towards Enlightenment. The koan incorporates paradox as a way of exhausting the logic of non-contradiction.

His study has two parts that could be characterized as "the outside world" and "the journey within," although, nonduality being at the centre of all Buddhist concerns, this distinction is artificial. In the first part Foster establishes the subject-object duality that defines our relationship to the "world around us" and then traces ways in which Beckett destabilizes it. In the second part he looks at the transformation of the self on the way to Enlightenment and he does this especially with reference to the narrative situation in *The Unnamable*. Foster is aware, of course, that the transformation of self in Buddhist spirituality implies a letting-go of ego-attachments: "There is, [Beckett] is saying, no name for the real 'me' (my true nature) and he is right. Any reference to 'me' is a reference to the fabricated ego I have formed for myself over the years" (1989: 227). Why, then, does he insist on equating the Unnamable with Beckett himself (cf. 213, "the dilemma Beckett (the Unnamable) finds himself in")? His declared goal in this passage is "to expel any remaining doubts that may be harboured with respect to Beckett's intention to lay bare the nature of his own [!] identity" (220). First, it is always dangerous to equate an author with the narrative voice of his text, and this is especially the case in a text that so obviously toys with the concept of identity. Secondly, the term "identity" implies the assumption of an origin. It is synonymous with ego attachment in that it has not yet progressed to the point where this origin deconstructs itself. The "nature" (in a Buddhist sense) of identity is thus a contradiction in terms, since any truth in Buddhism involves the recognition of an aporia. Even when he runs through plausible objections to his claim he does not grasp how fundamental a rethinking of identity is at stake in the novel: "We can argue that the term 'The Unnamable' refers only to the being in the jar. It is neither man, nor animal, nor anything to which we can give a name" (218). The latter half of this statement is exactly right, and therefore "the Unnamable" cannot be used as a name to designate what is in the jar. What is in the jar is not a "being" or anything that would fall within the metaphysical confines of identity. Treating it as a character called "the Unnamable," as numerous critics have done, means to misunderstand, hijack and abort Beckett's entire project. The full extent of the rethinking of identity in *The Unnamable* implies that the novel does not

speak from any fixed metaphysical position, narrative or authorial. As a result, one cannot be sure who is speaking in Beckett, as Blanchot points out in his essay "Where Now? Who Now?" (2003). The text itself is speaking, as it were, and it is engaged in a deconstructive process that hollows out all metaphysical positions.

Foster is not quite sure what to do with the references to God in *The Unnamable*, noting only that they constitute rejections of the yoke of suffering supposedly imposed on humans by divine will, but because God is entirely passive all our rejections are pointless and need to be continued indefinitely (1989: 214). One hopes that Foster does not believe the rejections of God exhaustively describe the position the text takes on the divine. This God was made "in my image" — Foster himself quotes the passage (213). A categorical rejection of God would be convenient for Foster because there is no transcendent God in Buddhism. But Buddhism does have the tools by which to think God differently, as Coe points out. What goes for our conceptualizations of self, or ego-identity, also goes for our conceptualizations of God (i.e. the God who will answer human supplications, or who will command and be wrathful if not obeyed; cf. the passage Foster quotes 213), so that eventually the "self" that is free from ego-attachments will inhabit the same nondual space as the divine. Making sure that we talk about God, rather than our conceptions of God, then, is also a way to liberate the self because the process exposes our own projections and presuppositions. Foster's fruitful approach to paradox in Beckett's work need not entail a rejection of the Christian God, but can involve a rethinking of the metaphysical, anthropomorphic God. His discussion of God in *The Unnamable* is hampered by his failure to take into account attempts within the Christian tradition to maintain a space for God that is not defined by human ego-attachments. If a Christian God is taken to be synonymous with an anthropomorphic God, then Beckett has no choice but to reject Him. But Christian theology is more complex and so is Beckett's position regarding divine transcendence. However, one must not expect Foster's book to achieve what it did not set out to achieve, since his declared project was a Buddhist look at dilemma. By the same token, it might therefore have been better for Foster not to discuss the Christian God at all.

Marius Buning's article "Samuel Beckett's Negative Way: Intimations of the 'Via Negativa' in his Late Plays" (1990) was one of the first contributions to explore the intersections of Beckett's work with Christian negative theology, especially that of Meister

Eckhart, whom Beckett studied in his early years. Maybe Western critics were more inclined to examine their own spiritual tradition again after a period of initial encounter during the 1960's and '70's in which Buddhism was in vogue in the West. Maybe the proximity of deconstruction to negative theology prompted literary critics of no obviously Christian inclination to look more closely at Christian negative theologies. Be that as it may, it was important to realize that one need not look as far as Buddhism to find a theology that can fruitfully contribute to a discussion of Beckett's work. After all, this was the first genuine encounter of Beckett criticism and theology, since Buddhism can still be passed off as a philosophy by the non-theologically-minded. As the attitude of Beckett's critics to theology was changing, Buning points out that Beckett's own perspective on religion also changed throughout his working life: the late plays have become more contemplative, more sober, "less ferociously ironical" (137). "This does not imply that Beckett has gone soft on Christianity, of course," Buning summarizes, "but it does indicate a change of direction. In the late plays the characters peer over the edge of existence" (ibid.). There is a tendency in Beckett criticism to approach the oeuvre as a continuous whole in which evidence from the novels can function to support findings regarding the drama and vice versa, regardless of period. It is refreshing to see Buning counter this tendency.

In the remainder of his article Buning proceeds to point out convergences between Beckett's late work and Eckhart's radical apophaticism. Thus he observes, amongst other things and without being able to go into much detail, that *Not I* can be read in kenotic terms, an idea we shall come back to. Much of what Buning observes in this article is symptomatic rather than analytical. The strength and purpose of pioneering work is trailblazing, not careful differentiating, and Buning's article is no exception. His idea of apophatics is not always clear. The reader suspects he mistakenly assumes apophaticism to be even more "radical" than it is, namely by doing away with God completely, rather than just the grey beard. Following a few words on Eckhart's Godhead Buning states that "[u]nlike the available God of theism, this Godhead is utterly 'unknowable' and 'unfathomable'" (136). Two assumptions are implicit here: that Eckhart's apophaticism is not a theism and, secondly, that, Eckhart's apophatic God is unavailable. Both are, of course, mistaken: all Christian apophaticism remains theistic; it "merely" postulates a God

beyond human conception and rationality. In this sense, it can even be argued to guard His absolute transcendence rather than dismantle it. There are forms of apophaticism that are indeed non-theistic, but these are not Christian, which Eckhart's most certainly is. The fact that God cannot be grasped by means of the concept, however, does not mean that He remains remote and unavailable to the concerns of humanity. God is, according to St. Gregory Palamas, very much present in creation and in the lives of human beings through His energies though not His essence. Likewise, it is possible for human beings to embark on the path of becoming like God, a process Orthodox theology calls deification.

Buning's slip may be just that: an oversight, but still a significant one. Criticism on Beckett and religion or theology does not yet have a long history, but now that the pioneering days are over in this relatively new branch of Beckett criticism it is important to approach the theological side of the endeavor with as much care as possible. Of course, literary critics are, for the most part, no theologians — and certainly this writer is not — so such interdisciplinary studies are fraught with difficulty, but we ought to look responsibly beyond the confines of English studies when we do.

About a decade later Mary Bryden attempts to provide the first comprehensive overview of Beckett and religion and her approach is very different from Buning's: it is far less speculative and as a result far less inspiring. However, her book *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God* (1998) is a landmark in Beckett studies. Bryden records Beckett's allusions to things religious or theological in painstaking detail and makes her book an indispensable resource. Her range of topics includes Beckett's uses of the Bible, of priests, crosses, prayer, piety, theology and spirituality as well as his allusions to and treatment of such central Christian themes as pain and punishment, solitude, stillness and silence. In each case Bryden spots the allusion (to scripture or devotional tradition) and analyzes it. Thus, she traces the theme of the two thieves throughout Beckett's work, including its permutations such as three crosses in a row or a central object being framed by two crosses. Without the attention to detail of such meticulous scholars as Bryden the subtlety of Beckett's allusion to religious themes would be lost on the merely averagely good reader.

Bryden's book does not say much about theology or religion as a formal force in Beckett's work, since this can be present implicitly without any explicit mention of

religious themes or allusions. By the end of Bryden's book the reader still is no closer to why Beckett's work consistently seems to be dealing with the nature of ultimate reality, despite his equally consistently ironic treatment of organized religion; or, more accurately, why his work induces in the reader a type of experience that may be called the discursive equivalent of an experience of the divine.

"Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned." With reference to this well-known line, which Beckett attributes to St. Augustine but which may just as well be his own, Beckett remarked to Harold Hobson that he was interested in the *shape* of ideas.⁵ Beckett was fascinated with this line (as with the image of the two thieves generally). He liked its parallelism, its balance and its undecidability and he alludes to it again in *Waiting for Godot*. There is in Beckett a great concern with how ideas *look* — the shape they assume in language or on stage. This is, of course, the fundamental poetic impulse, but I would like to read it more narrowly as what can be said aesthetically, or formally, in a work of art regardless of how the characters or even the author position themselves in relation to it. As a result, the sacred can be in a text even if the text makes no explicit reference to it, neither in positive nor negative terms. If the sacred involves a sacrifice of a temporal entity (for example, of the self or ego) for the emergence of an atemporal, or eternal, or continuous one, then the sacrifice that takes place in Beckett's text is that of the word, and implicitly of character, plot, narrative, and, finally, of the author. He works for a "literature of the unword" (D 54) whose aim it is to make emerge what is "crouching behind the word, be it something or nothing" (D 52). He sacrifices traditional narratological conventions such as character and narrative point of view to the point that the reader is no longer sure who is speaking: in *The Unnamable* the narrator works purposefully at his own deconstruction, for instance, and in *Not I* the remnants of a "character" called Mouth are engaged in a radical process of self-emptying. Finally, there is the sacrifice of the author himself. The author is dead, it is well-known, and works of literature cannot be read in terms of authorial intention. It can be argued that the pedantic authorial control Beckett kept over his own works, specifying each pause and

⁵ "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine: 'Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters" (Ackerley 1998: 169). According to Chris Ackerley's *Annotated Murphy* Beckett took the sentence from Robert Greene, who ascribes it to St. Augustine (Ackerley 1998: 169).

its length (*That Time* [SP 230]), the length of frames in seconds (*Ghost Trio* [SP 248]) and the intensity of light on a scale from one to ten ("Breath" [SP 211]), ensured merely that the works would deconstruct themselves as fully as they were capable of doing. Beckett the author hardly ever emerged from behind the mask of his writings. Public appearances and interviews are scarce, as are his critical writings. If the "Three Dialogues" or even an early text such as *Proust* are taken as measuring rods, he does not emerge from behind the veil of fiction even in his critical writings: the "Three Dialogues" are written in the form of dramatic dialogue and it is uncertain whether the conversation it records ever took place in a form remotely like the one represented. In *Proust* the author hides behind a thick curtain of rhetorical cleverness that says as little about the author's stance on Proust's work as it does about Proust.

What emerges in Beckett's art is a disembodied voice, a neutral empty space in which the work itself can speak, after both the author and his words have dissipated in the trace of writing. The space that emerges from this dissipation is not a nihilist space, but rather a sacred space. Critics have tried to clarify Beckett's relationship to God and the sacred by analyzing scriptural allusions in his texts or by extrapolating from his biography, rather than by looking at the text itself. I am not propagating a return to a neo-New Criticism type of approach, but a formalism that looks at the text as a performative entity. The question critics have most markedly failed to address is how the irreducible space of the sacred divine emerges from the emptiness of Beckett's text: there is a simultaneous and irreducible aporetic impulse towards dissipation and concentration in Beckett's work. Beckett creates images of utmost concentration from the most fleeting of impulses. The Unnamable is by definition always out of reach and yet it occasions all our endeavours in artistic creation. The space of that aporia, of acknowledging that art, and especially literature is always already split, is always the real and the imaginary at the same time, is iconic (rather than idolatrous). It has the irreducibility of the sacred.

The most sustained discussion of Beckett and negative theology to date is still Shira Wolosky's *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (1995). Wolosky pursues the thesis that Beckett "fulfills the negative model of mystical divestment only ironically, taking the sought-after nothingness at its literal word" (130) and she explains that in contrast to negative theology "Beckett arrives at nothing not

as a fullness, but as a void; at silence not as a plenum beyond language, but as linguistic failure; at unnamings not as ultimate name, but as a namelessness that represents nothing" (ibid.). Put in such neatly parallel terms this makes for a good conclusion, but I think Wolosky misrepresents both Beckett's position and that of negative theology. Beckett is not in pursuit of pure nihilism — even the existentialists understood this. But what enables Wolosky to fit her conclusion into such formulaic terms is that she establishes an opposition between Beckett and negative theology: nothingness versus transcendent fullness. She would do well not to simplify the position of negative theology into a mere hyper-essentialism. It is true that negative theology ultimately affirms (God rather than nothingness), but this affirmation does not take place at the level of Being, of the concept, or of existence. The meaning of terms like "fullness," "plenum," "ultimate name" do not apply to God because God does not "exist" as a being, which could be delineated by the conceptual content of such terms. This does not mean that the terms do not apply because God's fullness is even fuller than the fullness the term normally describes. In this case we would merely transpose an essentialism to a higher, more unassailable level — a hyper-essentialism. That is, the conceptual term would apply to God qualitatively, just not quantitatively. In fact, it does not apply at all.

The emerging non-entity does not find itself *in opposition to* the concept, language, Being, or existence, as Wolosky suggests: "God ... is beyond representation in language not only because he is beyond any category, but because his unity radically opposes the differentiations of language" (1995: 16). As soon as it could find itself in opposition to something it would immediately be sucked back into the realm of metaphysics; it would become another essentialism, only worse, since now it would be close to unassailable in its self-legitimation. Wolosky seems to think that this is happening in negative theology: it affirms a super-plenum, an ultimate name. This is the only conclusion to draw if one decides on the illegitimate move of opposing the difference of language to the "unity" of God. Properly, God cannot be put in opposition to anything. He is fully nondual. As soon as one recognizes this, Beckett is no longer so clearly in opposition to negative theology, because negative theology's position itself becomes more nuanced, less clearly situated on the side of essential fullness.

Of course, Wolosky is right to assert that "while Beckett certainly invokes the methods of negative theology, he should not be taken for a negative theologian" (1995: 93) and also that "Beckett's work frequently invokes religious materials, but it resides within none of them" (2). Beckett's world-view does not have the mystics' theological continuity — his is the position of a twentieth-century (post-)humanist, without the assurance that there is a God, but also without rejoicing in the virtues of an exclusive humanism. Rather, he tries to cut through the delusions of reason and self to create an open space, which God can fill if the reader who is being led to the brink of that open space is so inclined. At all times Beckett articulates not a received theoretical position (be that Bishop Berkeley's, Jean-Paul Sartre's, or Meister Eckhart's) but his own artistic vision, and to this purpose he uses ideas from a multitude of sources. At the same time, however, his use or understanding of negative theology is not simply in opposition to its original intent — both Beckett and negative theology are too complex entities for such an easy formula.

Wolosky's most willful misreading appears when she attempts to integrate Beckett's obvious critique of Cartesianism with his alleged position on the mystical endeavor. She stresses that for Descartes himself, as for St Augustine and Plato, mathematics was the path to a higher ontological realm (1995: 64): "[Mathematics] promises access to an ideal and nonmaterial realm, an ideal essence that it, above all, is privileged to represent" (68). In other words, she chooses to view Cartesianism as a phenomenon that is in continuity with the mystical. As a result, she can then regard Beckett's over-the-top "Cartesian litanies" (the fruitless attempts by Watt and others to control their environment through reason) as ironic of the mystical endeavor itself. This is a deviant and unlikely reading. The reason is precisely that Beckett does not undertake sustained investigations of other thinkers in his own art. This he would have had to do for the reader to understand that the usual connotations of Cartesianism (the foundation of secular modernity; its horizontal look at the world to supplant the medieval vertical one, and based on this its subject-object dualism; its subject-centredness and its favouring of reason, both implicit in the *Cogito*) are not what is implied here. It is much more typical for Beckett to abstract another thinker to a few representative buzzwords ("esse est percipi") and to investigate the implications freely, before the horizon of his own

preoccupations. Beckett is a modernist, his artistic sensibility emerged from a peculiarly modernist setting and he views everything in relation to the challenges he sees facing modernity: alienation, technological fragmentation, technocratization, the excesses of human reason in a world in which no other authority can hold it back. In this sense it is unimportant whether for Descartes himself mathematics was a path to a transcendent truth (which no doubt it was) and in no conflict whatsoever with the divine, because this is not how Cartesianism has played itself out in the West. Beckett's plays attest to the fact that his concerns exceed specificities in preference of more sweeping existential concerns. In other words, I am convinced (and Hugh Kenner seems to agree⁶) that Beckett criticizes the modernity Descartes has come to stand for and its excesses, not Descartes' own philosophical, let alone spiritual, position. Had Beckett looked for a thinker to whom to tie an ironization of the mystical impulse per se a whole range would have constituted purer choices, Meister Eckhart among them, whom Beckett takes very seriously.

At least when he talks about the convergence of Zen and Beckett's work John Leeland Kundert-Gibbs's study (1999) is probably closest to my own concerns. Kundert-Gibbs traces a movement towards nonduality chronologically through Beckett's work, from Hamm's sudden realization that the wall that separates his world from the nothingness outside is less substantial than it seems (cf. Kundert-Gibbs 87) (the implication being that one side of a binary contains in itself the essence of its opposite, and that the irreconcilable contrast between them is not that irreconcilable at all) to a merger of opposites in *Ohio Impromptu*, where Reader and Listener merge into the same character (163). Kundert-Gibbs's study aligns itself loosely with early deconstructionist readings in focusing on destabilizing hierarchical, binary, logocentric structures. Obviously, this is where his second object of investigation in relation to Beckett, chaos theory, comes in: what interests him is the break that chaos theory and quantum physics usher in in relation to traditional Newtonian physics. Suddenly physics is no longer a stable system that can explain the world in its entirety. In fact, throughout his book Kundert-Gibbs refers to the shift from dualism to nonduality as a paradigm-shift, from one

⁶ "[T]he Beckett trilogy takes stock of the Enlightenment, and reduces to essential terms the three centuries during which those ambitious processes of which Decartes is the symbol and progenitor ... accomplished the dehumanization of man." (Kenner 132)

frame of mind to another ("If Hamm could only look at his existential suffering in a new way" [88]), from Newtonian physics to quantum physics ... but precisely such a paradigm shift cannot occur if the nondual is to be fully nondual, because it would reinstate a dualism between dualism and nonduality.

Furthermore, it remains unclear why Kundert-Gibbs couples Zen with chaos theory. The surface similarities are clear enough: chaos theory has emerged from the same *Zeitgeist* as deconstruction, feminism and similar "movements" which can reconcile their interest in the destabilization of logocentric systems with Zen's preoccupation with nonduality. But apart from these surface similarities, how can chaos theory illumine our approach to Beckett without Zen as a mediator? Zen, as all negative theologies, grapples with the problem of representation and the conundrum of language as a means of representation. It is interested in the limits of language: what can and cannot be said? Or can what cannot be said be said somehow, after all? How to deal with a reality infinitely beyond our conception linguistically without reifying it? How and to what extent can language help us get closer to that reality? All of these questions are eminently relevant to Beckett's art, which is obviously concerned with the limits of language and with pushing language to its limits and beyond. It is not clear how chaos theory enriches this discussion, or how chaos theory is relevant to the study of language, both prosaic and dramatic.

The studies I have mentioned are the ones that touch my project most directly, but others are relevant tangentially, especially post-structuralist studies, studies that focus on Beckett's relationship to the visual arts and studies that focus on his minimalist tendencies. Carla Locatelli combines at least two of these by focusing on Beckett's "literature of the unword." *Unwording the World* saw the light of day in the general excitement about the fundamentally decentred nature of all discourse, hence Derrida's early work is the theoretical backbone of her study. Importantly, Locatelli diagnoses a shift in Beckett's approach after *The Unnamable* during which he "transform[s] his gnoseological quest into a modern epistemological analysis, based on a critical, self-reflective use of language" (2); he goes from seeing "language as a 'veil'" to seeing it "as an event" (35). All meaning is a result of difference, and thus the plethora of narrative points of view in Beckett points towards the "irreducibly interpretive nature of reality." Locatelli's point is not only

language as a differential system, but the ultimate inescapability of representation: at the end of all of Beckett's reductions is yet another representation.

Thomas Trezise's *Into the Breech: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (1990) was written in a similar theoretical *Zeitgeist*. It questions the model of subjectivity based on interiority and exteriority or on *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (meaning), or, put in different if not exactly corresponding terms, the presence of consciousness to itself and language — that is, on ex-pression — as inadequate to describe Beckett's work. Trezise calls this model "phenomenological" and suggests Beckett's much greater affinity to such thinkers such as Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze and Derrida. He argues that up until now Beckett criticism was dominated by ideology (that of the existentialist view of humanity) and that through the writings of Derrida and Blanchot "we are just beginning to hear Beckett's voice" (160).

Steven Connor (1988) also reads Beckett through Derrida and Deleuze. His was, in fact, the first major post-structuralist study of Beckett. He investigates the role of repetition in Beckett's work, so, like the other post-structuralist studies, he draws especially on some of Derrida's early work, *Writing and Difference* and *Margins of Philosophy*.

Going back a few years, Enoch Brater sets himself the task of developing a new critical vocabulary for Beckett's late minimalist style in the theatre. Brater explores the ways in which Beckett "relyricizes" the theatrical genre, shifting the emphasis radically from dramatic action to language. The conventional genres (drama, prose, poetry) are too confining. Beckett's theatrical art crosses and blurs generic boundaries and explores their boundaries. "Without Beckett making his theatre space new, there is no possibility of the physical apparatus achieving metaphysical resonance" (Brater 1987: 4). Brater argues that in his late theatre Beckett creates dense theatrical metaphors in which the stage image brings to life before our eyes the very poetic metaphor created linguistically. "[The] plays in performance were not so much experimental as they were experiential," Brater says (175), no doubt aware that in French the same word signifies these two concepts.

Brater's emphasis on the fusion of *mise-en-scène* and language provides a transition into the emerging work on Beckett and painting, especially the first full-length study on the topic, by Lois Oppenheim (2000), who lists Brater as a defining influence,

and the collection of essays of 1999 edited by her, as well as Michael Glasmeier's important essay (2000). Oppenheim argues that Beckett's ontological preoccupation with the visual is the unifying force throughout his work.

A recent work by Daniel Albright broadens Oppenheim's specific scope to a more general discussion of *Beckett and Aesthetics* (2003). Albright proposes that, out of an early disillusionment not to be able to wrench language to a presentation of "psychic authenticity," Beckett turned to allegories of artistic frustration and "proclaims an art of non-representation to arrive at some grasp of fact through an extremely indirect route" (2). This art of non-representation derives from a series of antitheses that remain paradoxes in Beckett's art and refuse to be sublated into syntheses. Among these Albright lists representation vs. non-representation, voice vs. écriture, improvisation vs. script, intimacy vs. remoteness, sequence vs. simultaneity (or *Nacheinander* vs. *Nebeneinander*) (3-7). Beckett arrives at these paradoxes by using technology in extremely circuitous ways, never merely eliciting from a medium what it is able to do well (the intimacy of voices, for instance, in the case of radio) but always emphasizing at the same time where the medium falls short. Thus he uses radio for a "*Verfremdung* of the medium, a chill of voices that confess their inability to speak" (6).

Albright traces the importance of Surrealism to Beckett's work and then argues that Beckett's art is both anti-mimetic and anti-symbolist: an attempt to stage *Endgame* in a post-nuclear wasteland can only be reductive, because the play is not meant to be mimetic (68); and all our attempts to read Beckett's plays allegorically are always thwarted because the suggestive elements are too diffusely, too richly suggestive to suggest anything specific (14). This denial of referentiality is also reflected in the theatricality of Beckett's plays. Albright speaks of a "lapsed stage" (64): "the stage has lost its integrity, broken into uncoordinated bits of business; [...] narrative has usurped the place of drama, since the drama can't constitute itself properly" (*ibid.*).

Albright's book is rich, stimulating and original. He is right to stress the denial of reference in Beckett's work, his move from the mimetic towards "imagelessness" (68) and "thinglessness" (14). But he does not make enough of the fact that Beckett's work elicits such a strong allegorical impulse in readers and that, as he admits, certain images, poems and so on in Beckett's late work "[enjoy] an odd prestige:" "the mysterious figures in

Quad (1982), gowned and cowed, silent, tracing designs in an invisible labyrinth — [...] have an aura of the sacred about them not easily found in Beckett's earlier deconstructive work" (133). Beckett's work is not merely lapsed and dispersed into non-referentiality, but it is also focused and concentrated towards something that exceeds the confines of being, thingness and referentiality.

And finally, to an extent every writer on Beckett still has to reckon with Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, the most influential piece of Beckett criticism ever. It is still necessary to drain Esslin's defining power, although by now Beckett has been associated with the most diverse schools of thought: deconstruction and post-structuralism (Connor 1988, Trezise 1990, Locatelli 1990), psychological models (O'Hara 1997), "phenomenology" (Garner 1994), feminism (Bryden 1993), myth (Burkman 1987, Doll 1988) and so on. The corpus is expansive — so expansive, in fact, that trying to read it in its entirety would constitute a serious challenge. Therefore my forays among the critics here have had to be selective. One criterion of selection is, of course, relevance to the topic at hand: Shira Wolosky might not be the most influential of Beckett critics, but her topic comes closest to my own; on the other hand no writer on Beckett can afford to ignore Ruby Cohn, but she has not contributed to the discussion of Beckett and negative theology. Other critics reiterate points made elsewhere, so I have chosen works that seem to me to be landmark contributions to a very specific question, namely the relationship of Beckett's work to negative theology.

For the purpose of my own study the term "negative theology" had to be narrowed down. There are, in fact, many negative theologies and I have chosen to ignore most of them. The best choice appeared to be not to compare or contrast Beckett with the thought of a specific theologian, but to approach the issue thematically: throughout his work Beckett is concerned with overcoming subject-object splits and with the havoc that dualist thinking can wreak with our humanity, so I chose nonduality as the central motif of negative or mystical theology, as some theorists prefer to call it. Then I singled out a few individual theologians, all of them uncompromising in their approaches: Nagarjuna's dialectics because his is the most thoroughgoing and unremitting negative theology I am aware of: the Buddhist perspective can help to uncover tenacious dualisms in the Christian perspective and Nagarjuna's spirit is akin to Beckett's own relentless questioning. I chose

the Pseudo-Dionysius's *Of the Mystical Theology* because of its obvious concern with the limits of human knowledge and for the clarity with which he articulates the core of apophatic theology. And I chose Meister Eckhart's idea of *Gelassenheit* because of Beckett's documented familiarity with his work as well as the rigor of his thought. Again, no attempt was made to present these theologians "systematically," but to hear their distinctive voices on the specific question of nonduality. Likewise, I do not weigh these theologians against one another — my task is not to decide on their relative merits in relation to one another, but to refer them back to Beckett. Much more could be said about what recommended these thinkers to me, but I trust that my "use" of them in the course of my argument will establish this. It is worthwhile saying again, in chorus with Wolosky, that Beckett does not fully "fit" into any single one of these apophaticisms, but they variously elucidate his complex position, so that with their help we can arrive at perspectives on his late work that can help in their turn to displace and to point out the inadequacy of the existentialist and related secular interpretations that still haunt Beckett criticism in Esslin's wake.

As the above overview has shown, approaches to Beckett and (negative) theology (or, more generally, God, or even more generally, religion) are varied and inventive and their insights are manifold. One can generally observe the tendency to tie the argument pro or contra religion to how the characters behave or what they articulate, or to what one can surmise the author suggests by employing this or that allusion (to scripture or popular piety). An easy conclusion to jump to is that Beckett's work must be atheistic because allusions to God or religion are usually of an ironic nature. Such approaches never seem to get at the root of the phenomenon, namely that Beckett's work evokes an ontological dimension one might call the divine or the sacred even without any specific mention of it, ironic or otherwise. In other words, in order to find out why this is it is necessary to look past the author and characters at what the writing itself does, or at how the theatrical image presents itself formally. The idea I pursue in this endeavor is that both linguistically and visually Beckett's art creates an empty or neutral space to which dualistic distinctions do not apply. This space turns the divine into an experiential category for the reader who is able to make such an act of faith. Beckett's goal is not to show the existence or non-existence of God, or to declare himself in favour of or against God. Such distinctions do

not hold in his uncompromising apophaticism. Resorting to them would mean slipping into metaphysical categories: if God "exists" he is made of the same fallible substance as any being, on a par with the rest of creation. Beckett's goal is rather to lead the reader to the brink of the metaphysical, the phenomenological, or the immanent, to where the categories of reason fail so that from there s/he can literally make a leap of faith.

Beckett's writings on painting, but also his deep friendships with a number of painters, especially Jack Yeats and Bram van Velde, point to the ontological importance Beckett ascribed to the visual, to visual art, and especially to painting. Hence, when we look for an ontological dimension in Beckett, the visual is a good place to start. Dualisms come to bear most directly on the visual in the form of perspectivism in painting, for instance, or the objectifying voyeurism of some photographic lenses. Beckett explores such visual patterns of objectification and exploitation in his play *Catastrophe* and I detail these concerns in my first chapter. At the same time, however, such scopic regimes can be broken: the Protagonist does so at the end of the play when he stares back at the audience, and Beckett makes clear in *Le Monde et le Pantalon* that for him visual art has the unique ability to muster the immediacy that overcomes such dualisms. I use examples from Byzantine iconography and Zen ink-splash painting as examples of visual art breaking through the dualist paradigm. For Beckett, it becomes clear, art — art that lives up to its highest potential — needs to be iconic: it needs to upset and abandon dualistic distinctions such as immanence and transcendence; it is simultaneously inside and outside representation or conceptuality. At least for Beckett, however, the term "iconic" also keeps its original visual valence: his is an intensely visual art and he privileges the visual over other modes of communication.

The second chapter maintains the focus on visibility, since the *Three Dialogues* is a text about painting, but it broadens its scope to discuss the possibility or impossibility of unconditional giving, of the true gift, as a way of creating art that is able to break dualisms. If art based on expression is an economy of exchange, then the expressionless art Beckett propagates in the *Three Dialogues* is an art that gives itself unconditionally, neither inside nor outside the economy of exchange (since every outside implies an inside and therefore a dualism). Jean-Luc Marion's saturated phenomenon suggests how a phenomenology of givenness that is able to upset the economy of exchange might be

thought. A saturated phenomenon can be anything that overflows the boundaries of traditional Husserlian phenomenology — anything that cannot be taken in in its entirety from a single vantage point. This need not be God: it could be the Battle of Waterloo, to use the example Kevin Hart singles out from the wealth of Marion's illustrations, and it can also be God. At this point we are able to crystallize the characteristics of the Beckettian art of the empty space: it is an art of reposeful stillness — the motionless image or the verb-less sentence — that does not participate in the linear quest for expression.

I said that it is necessary to look beyond author and character at the text itself, and yet I proceed to choose a critical or theoretical text, the "Three Dialogues," with the aim of clarifying Beckett's artistic theory. Isn't this a contradiction? I think not, because phrases such as "Beckett means" or "Beckett wants," as I use them throughout, are really just rhetorical conventions. In fact, the text does what it can to obfuscate the author or critic whose point of view it "expresses:" it is written in dramatic form, as a piece of fiction, complete with stage directions, rather than as a piece of art criticism, and Ruby Cohn suggests that Beckett wrote all of it (D 14), whether as a transcript of an actual conversation, based loosely on an actual conversation, or as a piece of fiction is uncertain (although the second possibility is most widely accepted among Beckett scholars). If, finally, Beckett wrote the whole text and we are meant to regard both B and D as reflections of Beckett's artistic theory we are dealing with a multi-voiced text in true Derridean fashion. It is never entirely certain that the text in fact reflects Beckett's own position.

The reposeful art of the empty space is manifested most fully where Beckett himself can use the visual most fully: in the theatre, especially in his mature art, where his artistic principles emerge most fully. Therefore the third and fourth chapters analyze in detail the visual composition of the minimalist stage images that define Beckett's late theatre. Their most striking characteristic is the large expanses of black empty space. What happens if we stop applying to those images the yardstick of fullness (by whose standards they must fall on the side of negativity and bleakness) and instead affirm their emptiness as a means of concentration? To this end I develop further the parallel with Japanese ink-

splash painting introduced in chapter one: Beckett's stage images are based on nondual aesthetic principles.

The third chapter has a second and arguably more important purpose: I choose to emphasize stillness and repose in Beckett's art and find a parallel inclination towards such stillness in both the theatrical and the prose works, and yet Beckett's work is often seen as sliding along a metonymic axis of motion and deferral. How do these two tendencies go together? Using *Not I* as an emblematic example it is possible to emphasize the metaphoric nature of Beckett's art with the help of David Lodge's application of Jakobson's distinction of the metonymic and metaphoric poles of literature, and to show how the metonymic and the metaphoric interlace towards the same end: the immediate impact of a single metaphoric image.

Full-fledged nonduality requires a fully formed duality of self and other to start with — be that a divine, vertical Other or a horizontal, ethical one. And while the mouth in *Not I* is merely a metonymic body part, not even able to form a self let alone show awareness of an other, the mouth is not the only "character" in the play: there is a subtle balance between it and Auditor, who is to all intents and purposes Mouth's Other: whole versus part, back versus front, darkness versus light, inactivity versus activity, towering height versus compactness. At the same time the work's metaphoric character indicates a vertical movement, rather than the horizontality of metonymy. The two combine to form intimations of a vertical — that is transcendent — relationship between self and other. To make this reading complete, we can expose conventional interpretations of Mouth's search for self as aspiring to the ubiquitous ideals of fullness and wholeness, of which Mouth consistently falls short. If, instead, we posit emptiness as an ideal (not as an opposite to fullness, but a nondual emptiness of the valence of Buddhist sunyata), then we can argue that the text itself is engaged in a kind of kenotic movement of self-emptying, to form the empty, neutral, nonexpressive space Beckett posits.

Quad, finally, is the apotheosis of Beckett's minimalist art: wordless, intensely direct in its visuality, motionless and at rest, and yet aware that this moment of repose can only be momentary as long as we are not divinized and needs to be recovered incessantly. *Quad* has most thoroughly emptied itself: of setting, of plot, character, language, and yet it does not lose its potential. Even though the ghostlike figures cannot meet in the centre (to

communicate, to make things happen, if only to abort the play prematurely with a collision) the centre remains charged as the place (of some mystique), which the figures cannot traverse. So, there is no nihilist emptying taking place here. The emptiness is seething with potential, but potential that cannot be pinned down or named.

Film is an oddity in Beckett's oeuvre, and I give it the odd, aporetic place it calls for: it is an afterthought, but an afterthought that collects and connects all the pieces. It is the only film Beckett ever tried his hand at. Even his work for television works with more or less static cameras and is dominantly metaphoric in tenor. *Film*, on the other hand, is flamboyantly, blatantly metonymic in structure and delights in an extremely mobile camera that doubles as a character in the film. So it could be said to be situated at the other end of the spectrum: if *Quad* is a kind of apotheosis of Beckett's work, *Film* is an atypical aberration without serious consequences, but that does not mean that it is unimportant. Much can be learned about the "typical" nature of Beckett's work by looking at experiments. More importantly, Beckett's concerns and obsessions remain the same and are differently illuminated from the angle *Film* chooses. Just as my chapter on *Catastrophe* introduces all the major themes subsequent chapters return to in greater detail (visuality, iconicity, *sunyata*, nonduality), *Film* brings these strands together again, though in an inverse fashion because of its irony: while most of Beckett's work is metaphoric, *Film* is provocatively, one could say ironically, metonymic. Its aesthetic is not nondual, but dual, though ironically so because the film's comic tone ironizes the characters' pursuits. It tells us about the ideals of Beckett's art by dealing ironically with their opposites.

Through its split of its central character into two halves *Film* asks the phenomenological question whether a state of undivided, pure consciousness from which phenomena, including God, become entirely transparent to the ordinary human mind is possible. Again, the question is situated in the realm that interests Beckett most: the visual. With E's pursuit of O, Beckett returns to his concern with the dualistic, aggressive tenor of the way the visual has been construed in the West: as that of a subject zooming in on a victimized object. The film's comic tone thoroughly ironizes and criticizes the quest E is engaged in, but at the same time the split — this time within the subject rather than between subject and object: Beckett plays with these two valences by externalizing half of

the subject — is recognized as a phenomenological necessity, because the subject can never entirely coincide with itself. Eventually, O does not merge with E. Union is not the same as nonduality. It is merely the flipside of duality. Instead, nonduality requires that we hold the two sides together for a fleeting moment of aporetic insight. *Film* argues from an entirely immanent, phenomenological perspective: it is not that the uncorrupted realm of union does not exist, it is only that we cannot will to perceive it in its entirety given our limited perspective as fallen creatures. Likewise, because of its phenomenological perspective, Beckett's art can only take its audience to the brink of an experience of the divine, a point at which subjective categories are shattered. He cannot affirm an objective given — and leaves the audience to this task according to each person's ability to make such an act of faith.

II. Visuality and Iconicity in *Catastrophe*

Counter to Beckett's usual practice when dedicating his work to individuals, *Catastrophe* is dedicated to someone whom Beckett did not know personally, but who is both an eminent political figure and a fellow artist. It is dedicated to Vaclav Havel and the occasion that prompted its writing was Havel's imprisonment in "socialist" Czechoslovakia for "subversive" political activities. This dedication is a significant and unusual gesture and *Catastrophe* is hence most frequently read in a political context: it is concerned with and speaks out against the exploitation of human beings by their fellow humans in institutionalized contexts that disguise and legitimize exploitation — and by so doing it defends human rights with silent eloquence in Beckett's trademark minimalist style. In a single condensed theatrical image at the end of the play, when the Protagonist raises his head and stares back at the audience, Beckett points towards everyone's complicity with such exploitative structures¹ more effectively and memorably than the evanescent nature of wordy eloquence would have been able to: cruelty does not call for words, but for action. Typically, he also thereby avoids the platitudes of polemics that political causes so often generate.

This is precisely the point: in what form does a man whose deeply philosophical mind does not believe in the unmotivated singularity of horrific events² react to the immediacy of a political cause? Beckett tends to look for the existence of unchanging structures that prompt such events in shifting manifestations throughout the history of humankind (a "human condition," as it were; a term so often used and abused in Beckett criticism). As was to be expected, *Catastrophe* is not a "topical play," analogous to the "topical song," i.e. churned out specifically in response to a specific political event and inevitably losing its bite and becoming unintelligible as soon as the circumstantial data have passed into oblivion.

¹ For this purpose the protagonist's stare back at the audience need not be one of defiance. Many other ways of performing this crucial moment are conceivable: an expression of pleading, for instance, would lend the play an entirely different tone.

² As Bert States saliently points out in his own analysis of *Catastrophe* (14), the first sentence of *Murphy* is "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" — a sentence that in many ways summarizes Beckett's artistic sensibility. It echoes, of course, Ecclesiastes 1:9: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun."

Even at the level of title (*Play* or *Film* illustrate the pattern) Beckett has a distinct tendency to turn his artistic statements into analyses of constitutive root problems — they transcend the specific into the universal. In the same way in which *Film* is a genre-exploration about film, exploring the visual mechanisms and philosophical assumptions at work in film-making and -watching, and by extension in the Western world in general, *Catastrophe* can be argued to be about social and perceptual practices that underlie the perpetration of violence. I will argue that *Catastrophe* "sees" at the base of the violence and humiliation to which the Protagonist is subjected throughout the play structures of vision and visibility deeply engrained in Western culture which enable and perpetuate dualistic thought. (It is useful to remember that "catastrophe" means "overturning" — maybe of a paradigm or an epistemology.)

This is not to suggest that visual structures are by definition exploitative, but that the practices of visibility as they occur predominantly in Western culture, originating in and perpetuated by the dominant Western philosophical and theological tradition, are of a dualistic kind. The nondual traits shared by Christian and Buddhist, Orthodox and Madhyamika, negative theologies point the way out of the problem that *Catastrophe* visualizes so poignantly and that in *Catastrophe* as well as in other (late, dramatic) works Beckett points towards such nondual directions that can best be understood with the help of negative theologies. This chapter will open up in a cursory and condensed way central concerns in Beckett's art to which I will return at greater length in the chapters to come.

It is, of course, no accident that Beckett should locate his reflections on the visual paradigm in the arts; more particularly, in a theatre — a fictional as well as an actual one. For one thing, it saves the play from degenerating into mere finger-pointing. Instead of finding wrong with specific "alien" social practices such as politics or science, Beckett instead locates the "enemy" in the artists' own ranks, within each individual. It has been pointed out that Havel's reply to Beckett, which came in the form of a naturalist play called *Mistake*, is about prisoners building within the prison walls a social order based on the same principles that oppressed them outside and thus obviously picks up on the same thought: individuals are the victims of their own practices, not of an outside force. Moreover, simply to say that science and politics are based on dualistic thought and

exploitation would not only have been stating the obvious, it would also have been uncharacteristically reductive.

As it is, though, the unavoidable undercurrent of the play is that art shares with science its basic assumptions, its fundamental dualism and hence its exploitative nature. The director in *Catastrophe*, does not tire of concocting ever new, ever more degrading poses for his Protagonist, whose shivering, half-naked, deformed body is exposed on a pedestal to the voyeuristic gaze of the theatre audience for the latter's entertainment and intellectual stimulation. As is often the case, the over-eager assistant, keen to earn her laurels and to make her way ahead by hook or by crook (and, in this case, by unbearable sycophancy) is willing even to overstep the rules of the game as they are: more than once the Director has to call her back from imposing a further humiliation on the Protagonist and admonishes her merely to "[s]ay it" (SP 297) — to stay confined to representation in language instead of insisting on the real thing.

Such an analysis of the dynamics of theatrical production work has to have consequences for, or will conceivably even spring from, Beckett's reflections on his own directorial work in the theatre. Beckett had the reputation for being a perfectionist who would not let things rest until he had produced an image on stage that corresponded to his own vision and he often pushed actors to the end of their tether in trying to make them conform to this vision. The circumstances in which *Not I*, for instance, came into being gives special relevance to the questions *Catastrophe* raises. *Not I*, being as fundamentally apophatic as it is, is far from trying to conceive of a conceptual image, of catastrophe or otherwise. But even though it does not set out to produce a representation of (human) misery for a theatre audience's "entertainment," the apparatus into which the actress's body had to be strapped for the play to achieve maximum impact nonetheless inflicted very real physical pain and emotional distress. Both Jessica Tandy, who premiered the play in New York, and Billie Whitelaw reported their discomfort. Whitelaw stated that she would never do the play again, for fear of losing her sanity (Gussow 88). For her, playing Mouth was "a terrible inner scream, like falling backwards into hell" (85) and, according to Linda Ben-Zvi (1988: 24), she was taken aback at her interlocutors' obvious insensitivity to her very real pain when friends suggested after watching *Not I* in the theatre that it was impossible to tell whether the mouth was real or recorded.

In *Catastrophe*, then, Beckett "links the theme of human victimization to the paradox of theatre preparing unpleasant subjects for the pleasure of an audience" Bert States summarizes (1987: 14). An old dilemma opens up — one that famously Theodor Adorno expressed in his well-known statement, directed at Paul Celan, that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric.³ A representation of holocaust atrocities can never give adequate expression to the inconceivable and inexpressible horror that was a daily reality in the concentration camps. By the mere fact of being a representation it will have to fall short of life itself, which knows no curtain and no suspension of disbelief. In fact, by making the atrocities part of an (inevitably) aestheticized representation, the artist robs them of their singularity by repeating them (in an aesthetic realm) and in the process bestows on them a certain legitimation: the cruelty and the pain are no longer unspeakable, and what can be signified in language is at least in principle repeatable because it falls within the limits of human conception. The degree of critical distance with which an artist approaches his or her topic does not change this basic mechanism.

Beckett, too, has an inherent mistrust of language and its capacity to express. His equally strong beliefs in language's inadequacy to express, yet also in what he calls the artist's obligation to express, and, finally, his conviction that expression itself needs to be overcome (cf. "Three Dialogues"), will become relevant later on. For the moment suffice it to note his acute awareness of the failure of language to render the experience of reality adequately — a problem that has a strong moral dimension when that experience is one of calamity, cruelty, catastrophe: "If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable. Whatever is said is so far from experience. [...] There is a danger of rising up into rhetoric. Speak it even and pride comes. Words are a form of complacency" (Beckett qtd. in Harvey 249-50). Again, according to Beckett, the fictional director and his assistant, as much as the real one and the real audience, take part in the complacent legitimation of violence à la Adorno.

Yet Beckett's critique in *Catastrophe* is more far-reaching than this, because it is not concerned exclusively with the representation of violence. Rather, the play seems to

³ "Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben." (Adorno 1977: 30)

insinuate that there is a gap between experience and its representation that makes the artist him- or herself a likely perpetrator of violence, because representation *itself* is violence. Beckett locates the core of the issue in the exploitative gaze that is enabled by the dualistic split inherent in representation itself. Thus, it is of secondary importance that the Director and the Assistant in *Catastrophe* want explicitly to construct an image of misery — this is, as it were, merely as far as Beckett is willing to go in order to make a (polemical) point. In fact, *any* image they could construct would participate in an economy of violence.

Catastrophe links the dualism of representation to visuality as the foremost perceptual practice and epistemological practice in the Western world. Especially during the Renaissance and *a fortiori* the Enlightenment the visual advanced not just to being the most eminent sense among several, which it had been through most of Western history, but to becoming the very paradigm of truth. The visual paradigm has governed Western culture to such an extent that we are hardly aware of its philosophical assumptions as they have infiltrated everyday language: visual metaphors abound. And at least since Plato's famous cave allegory the visual paradigm is, moreover, linked most directly to the dualist structures of representation. While it is true that in the cave allegory visuality figures prominently as a source of deception rather than illumination, and one will have to conclude that "Greek culture was not as univocally inclined towards celebrating vision as may appear at first glance," (Jay 1993: 28) Martin Jay summarizes that nevertheless "it must still be acknowledged that Hellenic thought did on the whole privilege the visual over any other sense. Even in its negative guises, its power was evident" (29).

Greek culture was dominated by a metaphysics of light which passed on easily from here into a full-fledged mysticism of light in the Middle Ages and onwards. The crucial moment in the history of visuality in the Western world is, of course, the development of perspective in visual representation during the Italian Renaissance — "one of the most fateful innovations in Western culture" (Jay 1993: 44). With the help of the rules laid out in Alberti's *De Pittura* three-dimensional, rationalized space could be rendered on — "translated" to, it seemed — a two-dimensional surface. For this analytical gaze — the gaze of Beckett's director and assistant — to be possible the visible has to become the object of *ratio*: a meaningless, observable object to be manipulated, not the

divine allegory of the Middle Ages in which everything is charged with meaning and human beings intimately involved in a narrative unfolding all around them. The observer has to perceive him- or herself as a distinct and separate subject looking at an object from a single fixed point of view (replacing mediaeval multiple vantage points) in order to be able to render the picture internally consistent. As a result, perspectivalism not only renders a given object from one specific vantage point, but prescribes this vantage point for the viewer as well. Thus, any act of viewing will involve two symmetrical pyramids, or rather, as Jay puts it, "a mirror intersecting one pyramid, which then reflected that pyramid's apex back in the other direction" (1993: 54). One apex is the viewer's eye, the other the point of convergence of the flight lines in the picture while the picture itself acts as the mirror. Especially the painted perspectival flats that were used in stage design in the 19th century (and which provoked Adolphe Appia's scorn because of their tendency to clash with the actual three-dimensionality of the actors and real objects on stage) reveal the extent to which theatre conformed to the regime of the monocular apex: the invisible fourth wall of the proscenium becomes the mirror.

The structure of the inverted pyramid becomes especially important with the advent of Descartes. Descartes is an inherently visual thinker who "tacitly adopted the position of the perspectivalist painter using a camera obscura" (Jay 1993: 69). In this way he is able to posit the radical split between self-reflexive subject and independent object that ushers in modernity. Because the subject is certain only of its own existence as a self-referential entity, the outside world must inevitably be envisioned as a separate phenomenon altogether, of which the subject can nonetheless gain true knowledge: in fact, the subject's self-certainty and self-identity which the *Cogito* poses is, according to Descartes, the only possible foundation of truth and therefore of philosophy as a whole. Not only does this establish the most far-reaching and fateful dualism in Western philosophy, it also elevates the visuality of the scientific gaze and the narcissistic mirror image inherent in identitarian reflexivity to an epistemological paradigm.

In *Catastrophe*, Beckett makes abundantly clear to a, by the end of the play, excessively self-conscious audience the extent to which the exploitative gaze of voyeurism operates. Yet instead of focusing on Beckett's critique of the visual paradigm in theatre directly, as especially Sartrean analyses will do, coming to it through the back

door of representation emphasizes the depth of *Catastrophe's* critique, which aims at the Western epistemological paradigm and goes back to where Western philosophy locates its own beginnings. Western theories of the theatre find their most fundamental reference point in Plato's critique of mimesis, and even in the "Theatre of the Real, or the Now" — theatrical movements that aim deliberately at overcoming mimetic constraints — theatre does not so much overcome its limitations as meet them: "face to face with its double, *the thing* it can never be" (States 1987: 21). For however much theatre will try to overcome representation, it will not overcome the difference between the staged act and life itself. In this sense, the flesh and blood of the actor, or the phenomenological givenness of the real object on stage, will only be present to the extent limited by the fact that they appear in a play: a real chair in the context of a performance will always be a chair playing a chair. Even shamanistic ritual, invoked frequently over the past twenty years or so as a way of tapping into some primordial, universal source of energy that will make theatre immediately experiential, is defined by the fact that it occurs in an controlled environment removed from the unpredictability of life itself: which enables the shaman to channel supernatural or cosmic energy in order to use it towards specific ends.

Hence it seems that Beckett's aim with a provocative critique like *Catastrophe* cannot be to urge audiences and theatre practitioners to *overcome* representation in the theatre. Yet while duality cannot be overcome from within the paradigm of representation as it is active in painting, theatre or language itself, by the same token nonduality is not representation's Other. The two terms cannot be conceptualized as opposites because this would imply a new dualism at the very moment when nonduality was supposed to neutralize such binary constructions. Rather, it is the nature of nonduality not to enter into binary constellations with other terms because it operates on a level that is not conceptual. This non-conceptuality has to be applied rigorously: it cannot be thought of as something that operates outside of conceptuality or language, as a transcendental signified, since this very movement would imply a reification. As Masao Abe puts it, simply and succinctly:

"... Shunyata is entirely unobjectifiable and unconceptualizable. [...] Accordingly, if Shunyata is conceived *somewhere outside* one's self-existence it is not true Shunyata any longer because Shunyata conceived outside one's

existence turns into *something* represented and called by oneself 'Shunyata.'
(Abe 20)

Since nonduality, then, is all things and in all things, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart, it is impossible to say that an entity is by nature either dual or nondual. Thus, to call language inherently dualist (because, one might argue, it consists of the dualist building blocks of subject and predicate), would indeed mean to commit a logocentrism that finds its transcendental centre in a pseudo-nonduality configured as a saving grace to catapult us outside of duality. But it is equally logocentric to postulate as the logical alternative to remain within language's system of differences (as Derrida does). Such a solution does not avoid reification, as it sets out to do, but rather reifies difference: having successfully deconstructed identity, it then fails to deconstruct its opposite.⁴

Rather, to the Madhyamika mind, language is both dual and nondual, and will show itself conceptually or non-conceptually, according to the way it is grasped. Nagarjuna uses the example of a snake ineptly handled to illustrate this point: rightly grasped the snake (of language) will be harmless, while it can be lethal when approached with a dualist, everyday, mind. Nagarjuna calls incurable those who will turn even nonduality — *sunyata* — into a concept. From the Buddhist perspective, epistemology — that is, mind at the relative, conceptual, representational level — is thus confronted with two truths: "that of a personal everyday world and a higher one which surpasses it" (Loy 1992: 239) where the higher truth is *sunya*: empty — but empty not in the sense of European nihilism, but emptied of limiting conceptualizations and hence open to other possibilities, to the impossible, as it were. Loy fruitfully attempts to translate as follows: "[*sunya* and *sunyata*] derive from the Sanskrit root *su*, which means 'to be swollen,' both like a hollow balloon and like a pregnant woman; therefore the usual English translation 'empty' and 'emptiness' must be supplemented with the notion of 'pregnant with possibilities'" (Loy 1992: 233).

This higher truth is not situated elsewhere, in a transcendental realm beyond this world, but within it, and unfolds, as it were, as soon as we stop looking for the transcendental, or, in philosophical rather than theological terms, for the groundbreaking paradigm shift that changes everything — otherwise our very efforts to "solve the

⁴ cf Coward (1990) and Loy (1992).

problem" are precisely what maintains the problem. There are "two truths," then, only from the conceptual, representational point of view. The higher one precisely undoes the opposition, but it cannot be known purely discursively. "Perhaps this is what we always sought," Loy summarizes provocatively: "not to become real, but to realize that we don't need to become real" (1992: 246). Nagarjuna's seventh century commentator Candrakirti glosses this point thus: "The very coming to rest, the non-functioning of perceptions⁵ as signs of all named things, is itself *nirvana*" (262). The core of the problem, then, is once again linked to structures of visuality: signs are used to objectify appearances into self-existing things of which a person's fragile ego-identity is one: *esse est percipi*.⁶ As soon as this process ceases in nondual unity of perceiver and perceived there disappears also the disconcerting paradox of our awareness of our own mortality, hence transience, and our clashing perception of ourselves as self-existing units.

This short detour was to prove that representations can indeed to varying degrees manifest nonduality and that, importantly, the search for a new paradigm of "expression" is indeed what keeps us from finding it. What is at issue in Beckett's critique of the visual paradigm and contemporary theatrical practice in *Catastrophe*, and finally in his reinvention of theatre in his less naturalist (if this term can still be used to describe *Catastrophe*) late plays, is not to turn theatre into a different genre in order to transcend its limitations, but to take it to its own limits in order to disrupt the complacency inherent in familiar perceptual practices and then to experiment with the energy, alertness and vulnerability thus generated for actors, director and audience in order to open the picture beyond its frame, as it were, unto those dimensions that are excluded from pure three-dimensionality: after all, the fact that we cannot "say" the divine, cannot package God

⁵ While it is true that the term "perception" refers to all the senses — not just the visual — at the same time most sense-perception in the Western world is of a dualist kind (cf. Loy 1988: 39). In this sense the visual, because of its cultural-historical prevalence, merely exemplifies in the most conspicuous way what is the case with all the senses. Although moments of nonduality occur more readily in the aural realm, especially in listening to music, nondual listening is, as Loy points out, by no means the norm (1988: 70). Compare, in this respect, the following quote from contemporary Zen master Yasutani Hakuun: "Usually when I hear a bell ringing you think, consciously or unconsciously, 'I am hearing a bell.' Three things are involved: I, a bell, and hearing. But when the mind is ripe, that is, as free of discursive thought as a sheet of pure white paper is unmarred by a blemish, there is just the sound of the bell ringing." (Yasutani qtd in Loy 1988: 71). David Levin, then, it seems to me, posits listening as an alternative mode of perception primarily because of the greater propensity of the aural to lend itself to nondual perception, not because it is by nature nondual.

within the confines of what is humanly conceivable (such a god would not be God) does not mean that he is absent from human, even human everyday, experience.

Theatre more than any other medium of representation depends upon structures of visuality: the theatrical performance is defined by an audience looking at actors in a more or less scenic presentation that unfolds before them. At the height of the naturalist proscenium stage (admittedly an atypical chapter in theatre history) actors were even expected not to acknowledge the audience's existence at all — a practice which intensifies the viewer's impression of being involved in a voyeuristic activity complete with the power-dynamic inherent in it: staring through the ubiquitous translucent fourth wall into the privacy of somebody else's living-room, objectifying what one sees there. This dynamic has to be broken in order to push the play, and representation, beyond its frame. It goes without saying that theatrical experiments other than the naturalist grant the actor far greater agency in reacting to the audience's gaze, but given that despite its stylization *Catastrophe*, more than any other of Beckett's plays, functions within a semblance of naturalism (and evokes it even though it transgresses it), it does not seem polemical to compare the play with what is otherwise Beckett's diametrical opposite.

The destabilization of this one-sidedness occurs when the Protagonist returns the audience's gaze. Like Sartre's voyeur who hears the rustling of the bush behind him, the audience is suddenly thrown back upon itself and becomes aware — in the few stubborn cases in which the penny has not yet dropped — of its own exploitative collaboration with the director and assistant. Most importantly, though, the play's fictional frame of reference is broken⁷ and switches from the fictional setting of the theatrical rehearsal to the actual act of performance, from the representation to the real. Or rather, from the (fictional) real of rehearsal to the actual performance — the play within the play is the real (rehearsal rather than performance) and the live performance is, in fact, a representation. *Catastrophe* enters into an intricate self-referential feedback loop that

⁶ Beckett makes Bishop Berkeley's motto the guide of his analysis of vision in *Film*. One wonders, moreover, whether it is completely without ironic allusion to Berkeley that Beckett calls one of his central theoretical statements on representation, vision and visuality *Three Dialogues*.

⁷ There are other instances in Beckett's work of characters looking directly into the audience, notably in *Endgame*, when Clov turns his telescope on the audience and says: "I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy" (E 25). Similar to the moment in *Catastrophe*, here also the gaze indicates a moment in which the play steps outside its fictional horizon and self-referentially acknowledges its metaphorical character as a

makes an unambiguous position impossible: the spectator of Beckett's play finds herself in a double bind: to clap one's hands at the end of Beckett's play to a certain extent means to applaud the very exploitation that the fictional audience (whose canned expressions of "transports of joy" are presented to the real audience like a mirror) applauded like a flock of mindless sheep, because, while *Catastrophe's* point is precisely the critique of this mechanism, the play's final moments point out that it does not escape it itself: the Protagonist's very act of resistance, the real catastrophe which transgresses the rules of theatrical etiquette and happens outside of the fictional director's control, is what is staged for the real audience night after night, thus being sucked back into the economy of exploitation.

Yet this is true only to an extent, because the Protagonist's stare also produces for the real audience in the theatre a kind of Brechtian alienation effect, so that from this moment on the awakened, cigar-smoking, critically distanced audience is acutely aware of the play's — any play's — two levels of reality, the fictional and the actual.⁸ As a result, the spectator of *Catastrophe* sees at the moment of the play's climax simultaneously the character in the fictional director's play, Beckett's play, and the actor on stage — whom she meets on a par, as in a Brechtian *Lehrstück*. In this moment of insight, when the actor momentarily steps out of his role to face the audience in the real theatre, the relationship between the actor/character in Beckett's play and the spectator is one of equality and reciprocity in which both, together with the playwright, assure one another of their common understanding.

Further self-referential instabilities open up when one reminds oneself of the extent to which *Catastrophe* plays with the assumptions of naturalism. After all, naturalism as a theatrical movement arose as a reaction to theatrical conventions of representation that were perceived as artificial, stilted, or foreign to the theatrical medium. What naturalism aimed to achieve was to break through petrified structures of representation and to reproduce life itself, and, importantly for the present context, it saw as its prime ally in this endeavour the dissecting gaze of science: Zola demanded that an

play on stage. In an ironically self-deprecating manner Beckett turns Clov's comment into a verdict on the entertainment value of his play: the audience, it is implied, is less than riveted by it.

artist "should emulate the scientist in both method and in aim, the method being the careful study of objective phenomena, the aim 'an exact analysis of man'" (M. Carlson 274). Adolphe Appia raged at the use of representational, perspectival painted flats as scenic designs and at the artificial convention of footlights, which he wanted to see substituted by real three-dimensional objects and diffuse ambient light. He drew attention to the physicality of actors. The everyday existence of physical beings was to be put on stage.

What naturalism ended up producing on stage was, of course, not life, but a representation thereof. At least the beginning of *Catastrophe* is situated squarely within the naturalist tradition, although the stylized, repetitive idiom ("I make a note") already signals some ironic distance from it. *Catastrophe* puts on stage the stuff that life in the theatre is made of: a rehearsal. It offers, as it were, a voyeuristic peek behind the scenes of theatrical illusion. It shows that illusion in the making; in other words, it shows not the illusion but life. It is part of the game of confusion *Catastrophe* plays with the spectator that in this logic even the "bare stage" (SP 297), so unlike naturalism, can in fact be seen as a naturalistic rendering of an avant-garde play in the process of being staged. In fact, *Catastrophe* takes naturalism at its word by incorporating as "actors" a real theatre audience and a real theatre, not adding the fourth wall but rather removing the remaining three: it is more real than naturalism ever was, although it does precisely what naturalism set out to do, and in this gesture oversteps the conventions of its model. The confusions that arise from conflation of the real and the fictional situate *Catastrophe* outside the confines of naturalist convention. By the end of the play, *Catastrophe* has moved from a realistic context ("*Rehearsal. Final touches to the last scene.*" [SP 297]) to an abstract space that finds the stage in complete darkness save an illuminated bodiless head floating in space. (But while the play thwarts precisely the expectation of showing the real thing, the finished artistic product (a naturalist play), by showing a rehearsal, it still shows the finished product: a new play by acclaimed Nobel Prize winning genius Samuel Beckett, thus in the final analysis the audience is free to reinstate transcendental signifieds against Beckett's explicit intention.)

⁸ cf. Gay McAuley: "The behavior of actors onstage is marked; spectators know that it is to be interpreted differently from apparently identical behaviors occurring in other places. Spectators in the theatre both believe and disbelieve" (39)

All of these mechanisms contribute to a process of destabilization completed in the Protagonist's return of the gaze that makes any stable one-sided viewing impossible. Instead, what is instigated is, as Barbara Freedman puts it, a "fractured reciprocity, whereby beholder and beheld reverse position in a way that renders a steady position of spectatorship impossible" (1). For Freedman, the deflection of the gaze is an important strategy in disrupting frames of representation.

Numerous artistic genres have tried to break out of, or widen, the confines of representation. It is worth dwelling for a moment on two seemingly disparate examples from the realm of the visual arts — Byzantine iconography and Buddhist ink-splash painting — because they link up directly with the return of the gaze and hence are relevant to the structures of visuality Beckett explores in *Catastrophe*. Finally, the two examples will emerge as not at all disparate.

Byzantine iconography faces the difficulty of "presenting" for the believer's veneration an image of the transcendent God that stays clear of the pitfalls of idolatry. In other words, the icon must not be a mere representation, because this would situate the divine in the realm of what is humanly conceivable, and the Eastern Church insists above all on the absolute unknowability of God. But it is not Gnostic, let alone agnostic. The unknowability of God implies, rather, that no conceptual statements can be made about God. It guards God's absolute transcendence, that is divine aseity. This negative-theological or apophatic approach finds one of its most eloquent expressions in Dionysius the Areopagite, but is present in all the Greek Fathers and is as such fundamental to the entire theological tradition of Orthodoxy (cf. Lossky 26). This does not mean that God is completely Other, irreversibly alien to human experience. Nondual union with the divine is possible, and human nature is affirmed in this way, but this union takes place beyond the conceptualizations of the human intellect in a "space" that resembles the *sunyata* of the Madhyamika. God is "beyond all being and knowledge" (Dionysius 1987: 135). The initiate renounces "all that the mind may conceive" and "is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing," Dionysius says (137).

Iconography solves this problem by what modernity has come to call "reverse perspective," but which is in fact the only possible and logical perspective from the

Byzantine point of view. Byzantine icons lack depth: there is no simulated third dimension in the form of flight lines converging in the back of the picture. Instead, the viewer is confronted with a wall of gold or, more modestly, ochre, that denies the gaze access to a dimension that remains unfathomable to human understanding. Jean Paris puts into words a radical conclusion that must be drawn from this:

If there is no depth in Byzantine mosaics, if the divine space prevents our intrusion by opposing a dazzling wall of gold to our own 'regard', as a supernatural frontier which reveals and at the same time forbids the absolute infinity of the Being, clearly the third dimension is not to be found in the background of the image, but *in front* of it, protruding straightforward as the very Regard of Transcendence itself: *we* are the third dimension, *we* are the picture. (Paris 39)

This radical reversal is emphasized by the gaze of Christ or the *theotokos* directed at the viewer in a direct line. In their purest form even depictions of the *theotokos* with the child show both looking not at each other, but at the viewer, with the *theotokos* standing upright and Christ oddly suspended in space in front of her (cf. Paris: "Right from the beginning, the Virgin Mary obeys the same canons as her husband and son" [43]), while depictions that are influenced by the profane space of the Italian Renaissance, i.e. by our human-centred relation to the image, tend to humanize the iconic space by seating the *theotokos* and emotionalizing the setting by having her exchange loving glances with her child.

In Byzantine iconography, then, the image does the looking: the unknowable God, infinitely beyond human conception and hence not to be unified within a concept of subjectivity that is in Western culture virtually synonymous with the monocular eye/I, gazes upon his creation, literally (in Christian belief) his image and likeness: the congregation in church. To emphasize this point, icons that depict biblical scenes will sometimes have flight lines that converge *towards* the viewer rather than away from her — a practice that has a profoundly destabilizing effect on the viewing experience: the image resists being seen, as it were, by persistently coming at the viewer instead of presenting itself complacently for consumption. Or else multiple perspectives or

viewpoints will clash in the same image, producing a similarly confusing effect for the viewer by giving her no stable position from which to survey the scene in its entirety.

If the apophatic principle is taken seriously, it becomes obvious that what is at work here is not a mere reversal of the monocular, monolithic vision of Renaissance perspective and the Cartesian *cogito*.⁹ The divine "entity" from which the gaze emanates does not gather itself back into a (hyper-)essential unity, the transcendental signified Derrida suspects negative theology of harbouring.¹⁰ Again, iconography, and apophatics in general, will not claim to be able to position themselves *outside* of the representational paradigm. Rather, they operate on the tacit understanding that their representations are going to be necessarily inadequate to the divine. The assumptions they make from the necessarily limited, relative point of view are, as it were, automatically under erasure, and as such apophatics assume only an adequation to itself (not to an outside reality, as does perspectivalism) — that is, to its own inadequacy. What the iconic gaze points towards is that the defining ingredient of the representation in question "comes to it from elsewhere,"¹¹ as Jean-Luc Marion puts it, that is, from the "absolute" which undoes the dualist distinction between relative and absolute.

For in being beyond the conceptualizations of which the mind is capable God in apophatic theology is also beyond the subject-object duality of representation. Dionysius says: "But then he¹² ... breaks free of them [those holy places to which the *mind* at least can rise], *away from what sees and is seen*, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (1987: 137; emphasis mine). Dionysius makes quite clear that the apophatic ascent to the unknowable God is not a mere valorization of negation — in which case apophaticism would remain stuck in one half of the binary — but a nondual transcendence of it in, as Marion will call it, a "third way": "Now we should not conclude

⁹ I am making a formalist argument rather than an art-historical one. In this I am following Jean Paris' example. Since chronologically Byzantine art precedes the Renaissance it would be anachronistic to speak of a reversal in temporal terms.

¹⁰ The continuing discussion that has been unfolding in this regard between Derrida and French negative theologian Jean-Luc Marion is rich and subtle and too complex to be treated here in passing. Instead, it will be discussed in detail with on its own with reference to Beckett's "Three Dialogues."

¹¹ "... what characterizes the icon painted on wood does not come from the hand of a man but from the infinite depth that crosses it [...]. The essential in the icon — the intention that envisages — comes to it from elsewhere" (Marion 1991: 21)

¹² The initiate. Moses, in Dionysius's text, but by extension everyone, i.e. every monastic, who seriously commits him- or herself to the spiritual path.

that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion" (Dionysius 1987: 136). In order to be truly apophatic the negative way must "not contend face-to-face with the affirmative way," Marion says (1999: 24). Instead, "both must in the end yield to a third way" (ibid.).

The Byzantine icon thus constitutes an intriguing parallel to the situation on Beckett's stage at the end of *Catastrophe*: in both cases the gaze emanates from what would conventionally be called the "image," destabilizing the distinction between reality and its representation. Both do so from a space that does not comply with Western viewing habits: Like the icon, Beckett's play has moved from a naturalist presentation that conforms to the parameters of Enlightenment vision to an abstract space presenting "a face freed from its moorings, floating as visual emblem in the stage's obscurity" (Garner 64), given to impenetrable surrounding darkness. Both appeal to dimensions other than the conventional three, manifesting those by stretching representation to its limits.

Not only the terminology in Marion's evocation of "the third way" is reminiscent of Nagarjuna's Madhyamika, that is, Middle Way, philosophy. In proposing the middle, nondual, way of *sunyata* Nagarjuna also makes "central" in his philosophy a non-representational non-concept. In fact, in a recent article by Junko Matoba *sunyata* is explicitly linked to Beckett's visual style in his late drama. Matoba observes that in many of Beckett's late plays the stage directions call for the main object to be placed off-centre and for part (the rest) of the stage to remain in darkness. Matoba then isolates darkness and decentration as the most important characteristics in Japanese monochrome painting and identifies the darkened area on Beckett's stage with the empty white space in Japanese ink paintings and thereby with *sunyata*. Herewith he insinuates a parallel between the non-representational "depiction" of *sunyata* in Zen ink-splash paintings and a nonrepresentational tendency in Beckett's late drama, but then his conclusion remains loyal both to dualism and to the established currents of Beckett criticism. He concludes: "The religious notion of nothing in Yohaku [the empty white space in Japanese ink painting] is positive, whereas Beckett's is a 'dung-heap' accumulated from an agnostic stance for neither the positive nor the negative" (Matoba 40; interpolation mine).

One can, of course, make a few easy objections to this conclusion. The first is that while the spiritual liberation that "arises from" the notion of "nothing," *sunyata*, rightly grasped and "applied," in human experience can on the conceptual, "human," level be called positive, *sunyata* "itself" is beyond the distinctions of positive and negative: its manifestation in language is purely as a guiding notion, that is, in Derridean terms a term under erasure. Matoba does not do the spiritual dimensions of *sunyata* justice by confining *sunyata* to the everyday (or, to what Nagarjuna calls cognitive notions).

Secondly, it is surely inadequate categorically to confine Beckett to the "dung-heap" of agnosticism. Beckett's personal beliefs and even his overtly critical attitude towards organized religion that pervades his work to some extent are irrelevant to the discussion of a body of work that grapples with questions of a fundamental-theological nature: the limits, and finally the futility, of human expression and cognition in the face of "the unnamable." Such concerns go far beyond the political perversions of state religion as Beckett encountered them in Ireland.

Matoba's voice is nonetheless useful insofar as it points out parallels between Mahayana Buddhism and Beckett's attempts to stretch the limits of (visual) representation in his late drama. These parallels need to be explored further, even though, or especially because, the relationship between them is not one of straightforward analogy: it is a gross simplification of Beckett's artistic scope merely to equate the white space in flung-ink paintings with the black space on Beckett's stage.

Norman Bryson, in a small essay entitled "The Gaze in the Expanded Field" (1988), offers a much more compelling account of the philosophical implications of Zen ink-splash paintings that will elucidate at greater depth why the parallels with Beckett's art are so compelling. Bryson establishes first of all that in order to overcome representation in painting the object needs to be lifted out of the frame. The frame fixes the point of view from which the object is depicted, prescribes a point of view for the viewer and at the same time wants to evoke the impression of showing the object in its entirety, when this is clearly impossible: a cube, for instance, can never be shown fully on a canvas, and yet we state without hesitation that we are in fact seeing a cube. Instead, Bryson suggests, the object needs to be placed "on the expanded field of blankness or *sunyata*" so that "[t]he object opens out *omnidirectionally* on to universal surround,

against which it defines itself negatively and diacritically" (100). He finds this "expanded field" at work in Ch'an painting — a discipline that arises directly from its practitioners' (normally monks) full immersion in the "concept" of *sunyata* — and he specifically discusses a landscape by Sesshu, whom Matoba also uses as an example, and who worked in China in the second half of the 15th century:

When we look at things, we do see only a tangent, and not the full radiation of light emitted omnidirectionally. Ch'an does not dispute that. What Ch'an does dispute is that the profile which thus appears can be identified with the object itself. [...] What the image needs to include is the fact of the object's remainder, the other views which pass out from the object to all those uncountable places where the viewer is not (Bryson 103)

It includes this by virtue of *sunyata* (which "inhabits" the empty space in the painting) and does so in the following way. The paintings, produced by accomplished Buddhist monks, emerge from a practice of meditation and an integrated way of life whose "aim" it is to transcend the dualist everyday perception of the world into a nondual one. Through a regime of concentration and meditation the practitioner attunes herself to a universal orderedness, so that a merging takes place between the meditating subject and the outside world. Consequently, when the practitioner flings ink onto the canvas, what emerges is not the result of random chance but a manifestation of that universal order: the picture is witness to the practitioner's own "being in the world" which is in turn tuned to a universe which does not function according to the laws of three-dimensional space and linear time and from which the practitioner is, as a result, not separated. Thus the artist's intuition is not merely a function of individual subjectivity. Artists commonly describe such moments of creation as inspired by God in which they were merely the executive organs: a widespread metaphor in Western culture to describe the nondual moment, David Loy suggests (1988: 153). Bryson evocatively summarizes the process thus:

The flinging of ink marks the surrender of the fixed form of the image to the global configuration of force that subtends it. *Eidos* is scattered to the four winds. The image is made to float on the forces which lie outside the frame; it is *thrown*, as one throws dice. What breaks into the image is the rest of the universe, everything outside the frame. (Bryson 103)

Life itself enters into the picture, but not because it is the more authentic cousin of representation and hence to be preferred to the weak copy, but because life *is* the representation; *nirvana is samsara*, as was suggested through Loy earlier.

Let us return to Matoba. I suggest that the fact that Matoba finds instances of "visual *sunyata*" in Beckett's stage presentation is a symptom of a larger project. As Beckett explores the limits of language and its capacity to represent, he increasingly makes use of other avenues of "expression" — visual and aural — that might, because they affect human beings more directly, because they can be starker, more immediate, and more enveloping than the written word on a cold page, come closer to the elusive nonentity that infiltrates his work. The most pervasive characteristic of Beckett's art is probably his frustration with the limits of language and hence with representation. In an early letter to a German publisher, Beckett writes:

Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine eigene Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen.¹³ (Beckett 1983: 52)

And, it seems, although he wrote this letter as early as 1937, he remained true to this credo throughout his writing career: to tear the veil of representation and to see what else art can do once it no longer perceives itself as bound by the paradigm representation constitutes. In the much-quoted, because brilliant, "Three Dialogues" Beckett approaches the same issue from a different angle: that of expression and, notoriously, proposes expressionless art, preferring instead "[t]he expression [!] that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (TD 139).

Ex-pression depends, of course, on duality: that of inside and outside, of an object to be expressed and a subject who expresses it, of signifier and signified. Art, Beckett appears to argue, tries to achieve what is impossible to do, namely to capture the unnamable within the limitations of language, because the duality of representation insinuates that this is the only way in which art can function. Yet, that which cannot be

¹³ "I find it increasingly difficult, indeed increasingly pointless, to write in an official English. My own language seems to me more and more like a veil that needs to be torn in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it." (translation mine)

named functions on a plane radically different from that of representation and conceptualization. Thus, all that representational art can ever hope to achieve is to get a little closer to, or allude in a way unseen before, to what ultimately will still be elusive: it beats about the bush in a multitude of different ways. These are for Beckett "puny exploits" — a "dreary road" that needs to be abandoned. In the nonrepresentational art discussed above — Byzantine iconography as well as Chinese ink-splash paintings — expression is no longer an issue because there is no split between expresser and expressed. It does not try to contain what cannot be contained. But maybe more importantly, this art, and this way of being, is not intimidated by the impossible: the paradox, the aporia, the place where logic and *ratio* are at an end, is for this art a place of strength. It is a place, as John Caputo says alluding to Derrida, from which we can *begin*:

... we must give in to that aporia but without giving up. With the madness of father Abraham himself atop Mount Moriah, we must, dagger in hand, tear up the circle of time and debt and plunge into the impossible, *doing* what is impossible, going where we cannot go. That moment of madness is the time of the gift. (Caputo 1999: 4)

When we recall Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as the thinking of representation and the thinking of representation as Enframing, the way in which visuality is complicit with the duality of representation immediately falls into place. Enframing or *Ge-stell*, Heidegger says, "is the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve" (Heidegger 1977: 23). *Ge-stell* is, in other words, the mind-set that rules Western civilization in which we perceive the world around us as instrumental to our whims and needs. Instrumentality, in turn, is determined by a logic of causality and hence of duality: a self-contained subject acts upon an isolated object and by so doing achieves a specific effect. In Heidegger's own well-known example of thought within *Ge-stell*, the river Rhine is no longer seen for what it is in itself, but merely as a source of hydroelectric power.

Enframing, representation, instrumentality is violence: the Holocaust, the world-wars, environmental destruction (to use only examples from the 20th century — the bloodiest in human history) all bear witness to it. Given the exalted position vision has had in Western metaphysics as an epistemological tool and then as a metaphor thereof,

David Levin surmises "that the thrust of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics brings forth serious questions regarding the complicity of vision — vision elevated to the position of paradigm for knowledge and rationality — in the historical domination of our 'universal' metaphysics" (Levin 1988: 7), so that, one might conclude, every effort to deconstruct metaphysics has to contend to some extent with visibility, as Beckett has clearly understood. To illustrate the predatory tendency of vision, Paul Virilio evokes a photo-report in a fashion magazine in which

an elegantly attired 'beauty queen' is filmed running through the ruin of Sarajevo among stoved-in cars, imitating the fatal flight of the town's inhabitants as snipers open fire on them. The sight line of the fashion photographer then becomes completely indistinguishable from that of the assassin lying in wait. It is his solitary excitement we are invited to share. (Virilio 1995: 19)

And Levin concludes, as if in conversation with Virilio, and as the perfect summary of *Catastrophe*: "Observation has become cruelty. Obsessed with the picture, the image, we take part, whether willingly or unwillingly, in the production of suffering" (1988: 194).

Heidegger develops as a way out of the problem of representation his concept of "Gelassenheit" — a nondual "concept" which he derives partly from Meister Eckhart, the most consistent and unremitting of Western negative theologians, and partly from Buddhism. With a view to these, as well as Orthodox Christianity, the following chapters will investigate how far Beckett is willing to go along the road of nonduality and what part language is to play in this endeavour. In the end when the Protagonist returns the gaze, destabilizes representation, the rigid, formalized, language of the director and assistant proves inadequate to the moment. Finally, language, but also sound — the audience's applause — and eventually all light fades, and what remains is darkness.

III. Immanence and Transcendence in "Three Dialogues"

"... if it is not almost everything, it is anything but nothing—
or, if it's nothing, it's a nothing which *counts*,
which in my view counts a lot" (Derrida 1992b: 73)

In his "Three Dialogues" Beckett ventures a startling artistic theory. He proposes an "expressionless" art: art not based on expression. According to Beckett, art that aims to express is an economy of exchange; it turns into a "farce of giving and receiving" (TD 141) because it perpetually falls short of its goal. Expressionless art upsets this economy in the direction of a non-volitional, non-linear nondual that gives itself in it, freely and of its own accord. Beckett sees the ideal of expressionless art realized in the paintings of Bram van Velde, but it is clear that his own art aspires to it.

The fundamental dilemma that occupies Beckett throughout his life resembles that of negative theology. Beckett is puzzled by the contradiction of having to use representational language (as a fundamental given of human communication) to speak, necessarily inadequately, of things of which one by definition cannot speak. Similarly, the perspective of negative theology as discourse grounded in the limitations of the relative, is epistemological: negative theology theorizes the very act of *talking* about God, of our ability (or lack thereof) to represent God through language, and it is at its most eloquent when it says that it cannot say anything, because at that precise moment it upsets conventional logic, drives it into aporia and situates itself both inside and outside discourse. Whatever ontological claims it makes must immediately be bracketed by God's aseity. So, at its most rigorous it cannot make ontological claims about the nature of God.¹ It is at a remove from its object insofar as it is not so much concerned with God as the kind of language we use to speak of him. At the same time, though, it recognizes a soteriological value in talking about God — and therefore continues to talk despite the impossibility of ever capturing Him.² The speaker in *The Unnamable* summarizes his problem thus:

¹ The nature of God is meta-metaphysical and meta-ontological. The danger is for negative theology to insist on this status so that it becomes ontological. Derrida is acutely aware of this problem.

² It also talks in the awareness that to fulfil its soteriological goal its own discourse will not suffice. It has to become experiential.

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never. (U 294)

In his "Three Dialogues," one of his few theoretical texts, Beckett returns to the same idea of having to speak yet being unable to speak adequately. The problem, in various stages and from various angles, remains Beckett's central obsession throughout his career. In the chapter on the ineffable in his book *Logic and Existence* Jean Hyppolite ventures the thesis that the ineffable is the absolutely singular, but the dialectical process, instead of culminating in the absolute singularity of the ineffable, cannot progress beyond the merely universal. Any proposition one may make about a singular entity (such as the individuality of a person) cannot help but slip into universals — abstract qualities that a man or woman (universals again) possesses.

We really believe that we grasp singular, immediate being as singular, but what we say is that there is something more universal, a 'this,' a 'this one.' But everything is a 'this,' every 'I' is a 'this one.' We believe that we grasp what is richest, but what remains of this experience for us is only the consciousness of our poverty. (1997: 13)

Translated into Derridean vocabulary this means that the double bind in which the artist is caught is the following: as soon as one wants to *say* the absolute, the unnamable, its absolute singularity withdraws as a result of inscription: the singular turns into the trace. This is also Beckett's problem in *The Unnamable*: the unnamable escapes his grasp like a slippery fish at the last moment because the moment of saying it turns it into something else: a mere trace of itself. This double bind the artist somehow needs to get out of. The apophatic process acknowledges this problem and tries to approach it through a split of its own: while the kataphatic moment aims to proclaim God's revelation and fails at the moment of inscription, the apophatic moment begins with the trace and tries to recover God's singularity, His absolute transcendence.

However, the important point is for the apophatic moment not to simply try to achieve the very thing the kataphatic moment did not succeed at, i.e. an articulation of

absolute simplicity, but to remain within the moment of doubling and to find "the third way" in the aporia of kataphatic and apophatic. Otherwise the endeavor would turn into a futile quest for the ineffable again. The conscious language of paradox, of doubling, is ironically, paradoxically (and then appropriately) the closest one can come to articulating utter simplicity. Beckett does not call for the double bind to be resolved but to embrace it in the language of paradox.

In the context of talking about three modern painters, Beckett suggests that art is (or should be) "[t]he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (TD 139).³ The question is where this obligation comes from. Why can the artist not stop writing and trying what seems manifestly impossible? Positioning Beckett, the alleged atheist, in relation to negative theology, will clarify this point.

First of all, although often claimed to be one, "atheist" does not correctly describe Beckett's position. Conventional wisdom has it that atheism and theism are based on the same principle. And, in fact, Jean-Luc Nancy points out that to this day atheism has not managed to substitute for God, conventionally conceived of as the supreme being or absolute presence, something other than another fullness or presence, an instance of supreme meaning (Nancy 2003: 67): a *telos* or a good. Yet any reader of the Unnamable or any other Beckett text will be able to attest to the fact that Beckett is not concerned with fullness or presence. The text does not seek to fortify an ontological or epistemological position. Rather, it is self-emptying, systematically undermines such positions and leaves the reader no safe place to stand — neither on the side of presence, nor on the side of absence. For Beckett is not a nihilist, either. In Beckett and in the most rigorous negative theologies a dialectical process of negation operates which negates not

³ Beckett seems to have adapted the formulation from Blanchot, who writes in his *Faux Pas* (2001) that "[t]he writer finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it. Having nothing to express must be taken in the most literal way" (3). Given the closeness of the two formulations a question the question of influence imposes itself: *Faux Pas* was first published in French in 1943, while the issue of *Transition* that contains the "Three Dialogues" first appeared in 1949. It seems atypical for Beckett to stick so closely to one of his contemporaries: he quotes and borrows widely, but usually not from contemporary sources. If this is indeed a question of influence (of Blanchot on Beckett) it is additional proof of the closeness in sentiment between these two thinkers. Blanchot himself demonstrates the closeness he felt to Beckett's thought by quoting from Beckett's work to illustrate his own (as in "Who now? Where now? [2003]).

only affirmation, but also the other half of the binary, negation, and thus enters a nondual space of undecidability whose discursive manifestation is the trace: only through the trace is it possible to keep positions from hardening into oppositional and essentialist structures. For negative theology what is at stake in this process is to safeguard God's absolute transcendence: to keep Him in a realm that is not of the order of beings (even if that be the order of a *supreme* being) and thus to emphasize that God will not fit into nor answer to the patterns of human conceptuality.

Thus Beckett and negative theology both understand that there cannot be a question of the *existence* of God (or His non-existence, for that matter), for the term "existence" implies the order of *existents*, of beings. On the basis of this understanding Nancy points out that the question of the existence of God annuls itself because any God conceived of as a supreme being must still answer to an authority or power (Nancy acknowledges the inadequacy of such terms in the given context) that does not range in the order of existents (Nancy 2003: 67). Thus to try and keep the so-called "question of God" within the realm of existence is to say that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle with another turtle underneath that: to say that it's "turtles all the way down" does not answer the question.

Since God does not range in the order of existents, He cannot be filled with conceptual content. "God" is thus no word like any other because properly speaking no concept corresponds to it, while other words do stand for concepts. Nancy therefore concludes that the important thing is simply to *pronounce* the name of God (2003: 67) and he emphasizes that this process of naming must not be understood as a process of signification or a designation of meaning (*ibid.*). That is, the important thing is to *keep open* the iconic space that the pronunciation of His name opens up. This is the obligation. In order for art to be expressionless, then, the compulsion that dominates *The Unnamable*, namely obsessively to look for a way to say what by definition cannot be said, must turn into seizing the obligation of tirelessly "naming" God, in Nancy's sense, and thus to keep one's own endeavors in a space that ceaselessly destabilizes the metaphysical, the idolatrous.

Nancy presses his argument forward with some observations on the name. He points out that the name of God "de-names" the name in general, that it is a call, and

finally that it is a cry. Let us follow this progression from de-naming to crying one by one. First of all, Nancy's choice of words evokes Marion's term "*dé-nomination*" to indicate the fully dialectical third way of negative theology. The term implies not only the process of un-naming or de-naming, but also negative theology's implication in (and potential deconstruction of) inter-denominational quarrels and monetary or economic exchange. Secondly, a name is different from other words in that it does not stand in for a generalizable concept. A name stands for a singularity, a unique being, although there may be millions of people on earth with the same name — and a unique being can never be captured in language (other than in generalities or concepts). In the case of God the name does not even stand for a being, a created. The name of God de-names the name because it lifts this characteristic of the name to yet another level: we cannot capture the singularity of a unique being, let alone the absolute singularity of the divine, the uncreated, singular unto Himself.

Further, the declamation of a name is always an appeal to an other (divine or human) that takes us beyond the bounds of our own subjectivity.⁴ In this case (of God), it is an other that exceeds the boundaries of exchange: what cannot be named and contained in a concept cannot participate in an exchange. It is an other that comes over us and overwhelms us, upsets the economy of exchange. So finally, to open an empty space "without meaning" in the sense of a lack of human conceptuality, as Beckett does, also means to open a space for a different kind of meaning — one not defined by totality but by excess. Or, to say it in words that are closer to Nancy's, surrender *of* meaning is also surrender *to* meaning if the latter exceeds itself (2003: 68: "cet abandon *du* sens qui forme aussi bien la vérité d'un abandon *au* sens en tant que ce dernier s'excède"). At this stage the call of the name turns into a cry for Nancy: a call that does not call *for* anything, but simply cries — in the wilderness, Nancy remarks (2003: 68), or into the void of conceptual meaning. It cries in the wilderness like John the Baptist, as a reminder of God and as a prophet of the return of God and to God: Beckett's is, after all, an absentism. If the name of God "dismantles" itself in this fashion and so uncompromisingly, then

⁴ In Levinas's ethical framework, for instance, the call of the other is absolute: what makes one's response ethical is that one answers another's call unconditionally: although one may never have personally harmed the person, or, conversely, although the person has never treated one especially favourably. One answers

speaking of God becomes a process, an attitude, and does not necessarily require actually saying the actual word "God" (although it might), since the latter does not denote any conceptual content.

It is true, then, that Beckett argues from an immanent perspective devoid of the continuity of a theological world-view. But in dramatizing the case of what Nancy calls a "humanism of the cry" (Nancy 2003: 68), or a kind of negative anthropology, or negative anthropotheology, Beckett deconstructs all "idolatry of the human" (ibid) and all anthropotheology. He thus rids atheism of its conceits (of proclaiming human fullness instead of divine fullness, but still proclaiming a fullness), and implicitly theism also (since in the history of philosophy both atheism and theism find themselves on the side of fullness and presence). By deconstructing the fundamental tenet of atheism (presence) he deconstructs that of theism, too. Therefore, by presenting a post-metaphysical humanism he also opens a space for thinking about and experiencing the divine anew in terms other than presence and totality, namely in terms of excess, since only a "post-humanism" can open itself sufficiently to do so.

Let us continue with the next word in Beckett's formulation "the obligation to express": expression. In the short interview excerpt that ushers in *Shades*, a BBC documentary of Beckett's life and work, Martin Esslin ventures a predictably existentialist interpretation of Beckett's preoccupation with the obligation to express: the modern artist has to express, regardless of the fact that in the existentialist godless universe his efforts will be futile ("because you know that you die and even the greatest fame will be forgotten"). In order to be a responsible human being the artist has, in fact, to express defiantly in the face of this futility, because expression, according to Esslin, is the defining characteristic of the human condition: "we experience something and because we experience it we must express it." Such an interpretation prides itself on having dismantled the safety-net of a god, but in the process it turns the artist into a heroic figure of almost god-like proportions: the artist is able to shoulder the bleak and purposeless reality of a godless existence. He has no need for the fairy-tale the majority of people

the call, in other words, although one is not indebted to that person and thus not chained to them in an economy of exchange.

relied upon throughout history in order not to have to accept responsibility for their actions, and he is therefore an example to his fellow human beings.

Yet Esslin's emphasis on expression in the face of hopelessness and futility is not at all Beckett's concern in the "Three Dialogues." More to the point, Beckett questions expression *itself*. The futility is, as it were, merely an after-effect of expression: expression brings about the futility. Beckett's idea is that in trying to "make it new," in trying to find ever new, more startling, revolutionary ways of expressing what fundamentally cannot be said, the avant-garde is, in fact, not making anything new at all. Beckett sees the history of art unified in the attempt to express in ever more adept and refined ways — and hence ever more perfectly — the object of its pursuits: "The more to express, the little to express, the ability to express much, the ability to express little, merge in the common anxiety to express as much as possible, or as truly as possible, or as finely as possible, to the best of one's ability" (TD 142-3). Yet what art, according to Beckett, fails to acknowledge is that since its "object" is unnamable, inexpressible, ineffable, it is following a futile path in attempting to express, mediate and hence conceptualize what by its very nature cannot be conceptualized. Art is caught in a vicious circle of trying in ever new ways what cannot be achieved ("There are many ways in which the thing I'm trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said" [TD 144]). It remains in the vicious circle of its efforts and thus within the economy of exchange Beckett diagnoses in language and conceptuality.⁵ It redefines the boundaries of what is acceptable, but it does not achieve fundamental change. All it disturbs is "a certain order on the plane of the feasible," Beckett summarizes provocatively (TD 139), eliciting from his real or fictitious interlocutor the objection that there is no other plane for someone who is, after all, a creator of material objects: "What other plane can there be for the maker?" (ibid.). Beckett agrees: "[l]ogically none" (ibid.) — but, one surmises, the demands of a logic of non-contradiction are precisely what Beckett expects artists to transcend.

Beckett proposes an art that recognizes this circle of ever new sameness and turns away from it, "weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able,

⁵ Thomas Trezise has previously diagnosed Beckett's "sustained interest in a 'general economy'" (6), especially in the "Three Dialogues." Cf. *Into the Breach* (1990).

of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further down along a dreary road" (TD 139). He proposes an art that is indifferent to the whole paradigm of expression and thus hypothesizes the possibility of art beyond the limits of representation. From a nondual perspective representation and expression are related terms since both imply a dualism between what is thought to be "real" and what is a copy: the object of perception and its representation or the original thought and its expression, respectively.

In a way, the whole question of expression (and how to create an art not bound by the limits of expression) in Beckett's artistic theory draws on the relationship of *Darstellung*, or sensible presentation, and *Vorstellung*, usually translated as the representation of an image or an idea. Which comes first, and, as a result, which one does one privilege? For Kant, a *Vorstellung* always precedes sense perception. Expression shares with Kant's privileging of *Vorstellung* the fact that both models are centered on the subject, and in fact the dualism derives from this, since every positing of a subject implies that of an object (the outside world in this case) no matter whether "objective" knowledge can be gained of it or not. Kant's *Vorstellung* has everything refer and defer to the subject's judgment, while expression believes in the self-presence of thought and thus also defers to a centred subjectivity.⁶

Is art to be thought of as *Vorstellung*, then? The representation of an idea? Or is it, rather, *Darstellung*, or sensible presentation, without a representation to subtend it? Beckett's advocacy of expressionless art seems to indicate that his ideal is the latter. The term "expressionless" does not imply bland, or boring, but rather the opposite: the end of the dualism of expression and a concentration of means so that the materiality of art itself, the intensity of the visual image or the texture of poetic language, can emerge with force. Beckett focuses on the tactile quality of art and on its sensuousness, not on its conceptual content, although it, too, plays its part, of course: there is no *Darstellung* without an element of *Vorstellung*, even in art that understands itself as *Darstellung*. Beckett's art is to hit the audience directly, in its materiality, and thus to free itself from the shackles of the concept — both in the creation and the reception process.

⁶ For a discussion of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung* in modern aesthetics see Asade Seyhan. *Representation and its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

The iconoclastic debate also takes hold with reference to *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung* and its import should be recalled briefly given the importance of iconicity in Beckett's art: it is impossible to venerate an icon in worship if the icon is conceived of as *Vorstellung*, as a mere representation of the "real" — this would be blasphemous and idolatrous. Thus it is necessary to develop a theology of the icon that frees itself from the dualistic implications of a reference to *Vorstellung*. A theology of the icon needs to upset the hierarchical logic of real and copy. Consider the following passage from 9th century theologian and monastic St. Theodore the Studite:

The prototype and the image belong to the category of related things, like the double and the half. For the prototype always implies the image of which it is the prototype, and the double always implies the half in relation to which it is called double. For there would not be a prototype if there were no image; there would not even be any double, if some half were not understood. But since these things exist simultaneously, they are understood and subsist together. Therefore, since no time intervenes between them, the one does not have a different veneration from the other, but both have one and the same. (Theodore 110)

Predictably for St. Theodore, "the prototype always implies the image," but more surprisingly for a man of his age, "there would not be a prototype if there were no image." The two are in a relationship of interdependence; one cannot exist without the other, thus one does not precede the other in a relationship of ontological primacy — although the two are in ontological interdependence. There is, of necessity, continuity between the divinity and its icon, because if Christ and his saints could not be depicted in the temporal realm, then the divinity of Christ's incarnation would be in doubt. An icon of Christ is, then, not a representation of Him, but a *Darstellung* of His divinity.

In redefining the artistic process, Beckett recognizes the importance of iconicity. His "new" art, in order to leave the "dreary road" of expression behind, must not redefine itself in a polemical gesture of newness by which the avant-garde sets itself off from its predecessors. It must not so much turn *against* the paradigm of expression as treat it with equanimity so as not to be bound by it: turning against it would reinscribe the new art immediately into the discourse of metaphysics. It would be based on the same dualism as

the mode of artistic ex-pression, based as it is, as Beckett points out, on a distinction between a something to express and a something from which to express. And, in fact, in the advent of the new art the notion of the avant-garde itself needs to be deconstructed, since it relies on a linear and even a military model.

Along these lines Kevin Hart points out that the aim for negative theology cannot be an exit from metaphysics, because "the *denial* of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical gesture" (1989: 201). Like deconstruction, negative theology cannot as such exit from metaphysics, but it can be argued that negative theology has the superior tools to complete the deconstructive effort that deconstruction only begins. Deconstruction deconstructs identity but valorizes difference, whereas negative theology, when it is at its best (that is, when it is understood that negative theology is not merely a corrective to positive theology), deconstructs both legs of the binary and situates itself in a third, fully nondual space neither inside nor outside metaphysics. Crucially and aporetically the way "out" will only materialize once one no longer desires to find it.

It is significant that, when discussing André Masson and his pursuit of "painting the void" (TD 139), Beckett objects to the phraseology and prefers "obliteration of an unbearable presence" (TD 140) to "void." "Void," after all, is a charged term, inscribed in metaphysics as the opposite of existence or fullness. It is, as such, a positive term (although its signification is negative): presence and void, though opposites, are categorically the same. Substituting a negative term for a positive one makes no difference to the ontological nature of the statement being made. "Obliteration of presence" tries to leave open a nondescript space or non-entity not filled with positive content (not even of a negative kind). The phrase attempts to insinuate destruction without replacement. "What is the use of seeking justification always on the same plane?" Beckett objects (TD 140). Masson does not openly acknowledge the paradox he tries to be rid of ("this anguish of helplessness is never stated as such" [140]), because he assumes that such an acknowledgement can only mean to state it explicitly (which is impossible) and so his endeavours remain locked into metaphysics. Instead of a negative ontology an art is needed that makes no ontological claims whatsoever. It helps here to remind oneself that the presences to be obliterated by Derrida and by Masson are quite different: Derrida tries to obliterate metaphysical presence, whereas Masson contends

with the presence of the very thing that for Derrida is the answer: paradox. He is, Beckett says, "literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression" (TD 140) in trying to express paradox or *aporia* — the very thing that defies conceptualization. Masson tries to complete the deconstruction by trying to paint, as Duthuit's voice has it, "inner emptiness, the prime condition, according to Chinese esthetics, of the act of painting" (TD 139). Yet the project is undertaken with the distinct aim to establish the data of the problem to be solved ("in search of the difficulty rather than in its clutch" [139]).⁷ Masson does not even get as far as Derrida. He keeps producing merely a metaphysical shadow of painting as *Darstellung*.

The presence Masson tries to "vaporize" by obliteration is unbearable because it is "neither to be wooed nor to be stormed" (TD 140) and produces therefore the "anguish of helplessness" (*ibid.*) inherent in every paradox. The paradox Beckett is thinking of here is, of course, the one of being "unable to act" yet "obliged to act" (TD 145) that is at the root of the artist's inability to express the ineffable. Paradox has the healing effect of stumping one into temporary inertia, catapulting one outside of well-trodden paths by forcing recognition of realities beside the ones our deeply engrained epistemological modes yield. Yet, according to Beckett, the *avant-garde* (and, one might add, Derrida) has to repeat this shock of recognition over and over because it "seek[s] justification always on the same plane" (TD 140). It valorizes difference by "making it new," thus remains in the orbit of metaphysics and therefore needs another revolution, another deconstruction as soon as fronts have hardened.

Beckett's ideal artist deconstructs both identity and difference and therefore escapes the vicious circle of endless deconstructions. The plane he moves on, then, is not a transcendental one that needs to be deconstructed but one that has "completed" the deconstruction, but the completed whole does not form an onto-theological totality, but a non-entity that has no Being. This possibility of being both inside and outside (language, metaphysics, the relative) — to at the same time express and not express — is what is at stake in the "third way" (Marion), or "Middle Way" (Nagarjuna) "beyond every denial, beyond every assertion" (Dionysius 1997: 136) that negative theology consistently evokes

⁷ Duthuit tries to present Masson as an "improvement" on Tal Coat's methodology, but precisely by presenting his project as a quest in search of a solution he unknowingly "re-metaphysicalizes" him.

— a nondual mode in which binary questions of either/or, inside and outside lose their relevancy.

Two of the most stimulating contributors to the question whether and how such a middle way can be thought have been Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, especially in their mutually inspiring theorizations of the gift. It is fair to say that Derridean deconstruction and negative theology share their most fundamental concerns, and, to a large extent, the way they propose to go about addressing them, although they disagree on some fundamental points. It is precisely their disagreements that tend to bring into relief the most challenging aspects of negative theology.

It is a function of the nature of the questions at stake that Derrida and Marion remain true to the aporetic tenor of the discussion by admitting that their respective positions are at the same time "very close and extremely distant" from one another — "others might say opposed" (Derrida 1992: 135). In the end, the either infinitesimally small or unbridgeable differences between them remain unresolved because, puzzlingly, despite their closeness they work from fundamentally opposed points of view: for one, language is solely a system of internal differences; for the other, it has reference to a reality that exceeds the finitude of language which, in turn, has its source in what could be called a transcendental signified under erasure: one without the characteristics Derrida posits to be common to all onto-theological metaphysics, because beyond the confines of the concept. Derrida's pertinent point in his discussion with Marion is how, given our epistemological limitations within the relative realm, we can theorize such a transcendental: how can it be what it is and still be intelligible to us? Is not every theorization of it automatically an idolatrous act limiting God to the categories of what is humanly conceivable and thus to language, necessitating in turn the endless trace of deconstructions? Or, if not, then how can one proceed to an "iconic" understanding of God and still be a human being ensconced in language and the relative?

These powerful objections need to be addressed before one can be tempted to embrace Marion's conception of the pure gift or begin to think the possibility of art without expression and exchange. The gulf between Derrida and Marion throws into relief the ontological revolution negative theology implies and the subtle rethinking of the interrelationships between the conceptual and the supra-conceptual, the relative and the

absolute, that it prompts. Comprehensive and well-informed overviews of the central points of the Derrida-Marion debate are available from authors whose theological expertise far exceeds mine,⁸ so it would be both misplaced and superfluous to attempt to repeat such an undertaking here. Instead, I will focus on those points in this analysis of the gift that are relevant to Beckett's work.

The gift, Derrida shows, is founded upon a system of exchange, a self-perpetuating economy in which a donor gives a gift, but in so doing inspires in the recipient a feeling of obligation to reciprocate and give a gift in return. The recipient is left with the guilt of debt. It can be argued that the donor does not give at all, but hands the recipient a blank IOU to be filled at his discretion. If, however, a gift could be thought that gives itself without reserve, in excess and without the expectation of reparation, this would open up the restricted economy beyond itself, beyond finite inscription in language. The source of such a gift, or rather the gift itself, since there could no longer be a distinction between giver and gift, between *causa agens* and *causa finalis*, can only be a kenotic one.

According to Derrida, the true gift, which gives itself freely without expectation of compensation, is unthinkable within the economy of philosophy, but in this impossibility to think it lies its potential for liberation. Indeed, the gift carries within itself an original ambiguity; it is poisoned at the root. (Derrida plays with the fact that the German word for poison is *Gift*.) As soon as the gift is given, the excess sets in motion an economic circle that, in turn, annuls the excess that constitutes the gift because another gift will be given in return. For one thing, then, the gift merely "gives time" until it is to be paid back. But this also means that it is automatically inscribed in a circle that implies the temporization of writing (Derrida 1992a: 40). The gift becomes synonymous with the supplement (that which is simultaneously excess and lack) and with *différance*. It is based on a constitutive aporetic ambiguity in that it annuls itself at the very moment of coming into existence.

As was to be expected, Derrida embraces this impasse. The gift does not adhere to a conventional either/or logic but upsets conventional thought structures by challenging

⁸Cf. Kevin Hart's groundbreaking study *The Trespass of the Sign*. Cambridge: UP, 1989. and John Caputo and Michael Scanlon's *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999.

the Western mind to think beyond what appears to be a logical opposition to an inclusive logic of both/and. By attempting to think the impossible the mind spirals towards what within the paradigm of Western reason can no longer be called rational. Derrida plays with Marcel Mauss's observations of the dynamics of potlatch. Potlatch spirals first into virtuality — itself a kind of madness that takes for real something that does not exist and thereby actually brings it into existence by way of its consequences — insofar as at a given point the total of capital exceeds the total of valuables in the community and it would therefore be impossible for all creditors to demand reimbursement at the same time. Finally it spirals into what appears to be pure madness in a practice in which large quantities of property are destroyed by their owners in what Mauss takes to be an attempt to avoid the impression of desiring repayment. At this point the logic of exchange by which the gift has been operating is broken. The central image for Derrida is Abraham atop Mount Moriah, who, armed with his knife and prepared to slay his own son, abandons the rational for faith and plunges into the unpredictability of madness. Derrida's ideas on ethical obligation and responsibility in this context open up interesting perspectives on the role of obligation in Beckett artistic theory and we will come back to them in due course.

For Derrida the structural madness inherent in the concept of the gift is a way of glimpsing what is beyond language as a restricted economy without actually being able to escape from this economy: there is, he has been telling us, nothing outside the text — the only reality humanly accessible is immanent. God, after all, would not be God if he were not the wholly other. Instead, the impossible as it presents itself in the aporia of the gift, is itself the moment of liberation. The gift is a limit concept and "as such," by its (non-) nature, reveals the limitations of conceptual discourse by opening out into what cannot be grasped by discourse. Like *différance*, it demands vigilance so as not to slip back into metaphysical limitations: "[t]he gift," Derrida says, "is totally foreign to the horizon of economy, ontology, knowledge, constative statements, and theoretical determination and judgment" (Caputo 1999: 59) and functions in a realm of which we know nothing because its principles are alien to those of our own experience. Therefore, "if there is a gift [...] it must be the experience of this impossibility" of the gift to exist and appear as such (ibid.), i.e. neither as a "regular" Husserlian "poor" phenomenon within a restricted economy, nor

as what Marion will call the saturated phenomenon, because, Derrida insists, there is no "phenomenology without as such" (Caputo 1999: 66). The gift, or *différance*, for that matter, does not answer to logocentric logic, but neither is it outside it because such a move would turn it, as Derrida keeps insisting, into a transcendental signified: it is neither of the two, exhausts or "deconstructs" the logical possibilities provided by Western reason.

For both Derrida and Marion the gift is completely alien to exchange, but for Derrida the epistemological position is a necessary one: we may give ourselves in faith — as Abraham does — to the knowledge that something beyond our epistemological grasp *is*, but it remains wholly other, entirely beyond our grasp and therefore "conceivable" only in the form of aporia: of a form that opens into an ungraspable but nonetheless real beyond. Necessarily, then, it is *Abraham* who, in the sacrifice of Isaac, gives the gift to God. Through his unconditional faith in a supra-conceptual reality infinitely beyond his understanding he upsets and terminates the economy of exchange. To Marion this epistemological bias must appear as if Derrida continued to think the gift within the horizon of economy and hence of the conceptual. Marion makes quite clear that, like Abraham, we facilitate the gift in faith, opening ourselves to it, but the essential ingredient "comes to it from elsewhere" (1991: 21), as he says in *God Without Being* about iconography. Marion, then, envisages a gift that gives *itself* in the same aporetic way in which Derrida's gift is given. This is what Marion calls the paradoxical or saturated phenomenon — the phenomenon without the "as such."

Derrida, by way of the ploy of the "non-concept," escapes re-absorption into the conceptual even less than Marion: *différance* turns into a concept signifying the non-conceptual. Neither Derrida's tireless efforts of finding ever new names for it, nor his vehement protestations could prevent that *différance* has become the central term within the terminology of deconstruction — the latter a name that even Derrida himself has in the meantime resigned himself to using. One may conclude that the Heideggerian ruse of putting concepts under erasure, which Marion also uses consistently in *God Without Being*, eliminates the duality of conceptual and non-conceptual only symbolically, and Marion faces a considerable challenge in attempting to circumvent the same difficulty and

we shall return to this question after having shown how this analysis of the gift relates to the "Three Dialogues."

Beckett's text abounds with economic terms and metaphors: "insuperable indigence" (TD 141), "esteemed commodities" (TD 143), "ultimate penury" (ibid.), "destitute" (ibid.), "possession-poverty" (TD 144), "expense" (TD 145). He sees "conventional," that is "expressive" art, which includes all art other than van Velde's, caught in an economy of exchange, and even if one does not share Beckett's idiosyncratic concerns and obsessions with the pursuit of the unnamable it is easy to see why he frames them in this way: the artist "gives" his audience a conceptually "translated" version of his artistic genius, fetishized as it is in Western culture, which s/he, in turn, has received from elsewhere: by way of intuition, a muse, or divine inspiration — those are the metaphors traditionally at hand in Western society to describe the artistic process. In fact, partly because art is so thoroughly inscribed in an economy of "spiritual" exchange in which the audience acquires a material token (and hence proof) of the artist's genius — most fully able to express what no one previously had been able to express — the work of art, most notoriously painting, enters the realm of monetary economy and becomes a significant economic asset. Millions of dollars change hands so that paintings by artists who, society agrees, are most fully masters of their expressive powers, can switch owners.

We habitually approach the world through antitheses and we apply the same categories to art, but, Beckett claims, this need not be so. At considerable risk ("let us for once be foolish enough not to turn tail" [TD 143]) it is possible radically to abandon the accustomed thought structures of exchange and duality and to venture into unfamiliar territory, but such a move would, accordingly, make a qualitative difference, not just a quantitative one. It would not just rearrange boundaries "on the plane of the feasible" (TD 139): "There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemed commodities. The one is a predicament, the other not" (TD 143).

Importantly, in this statement Beckett singles out world and self as our most valuable possessions: the world (as opposed to privileged pariah reservations such as monasteries) which imposes the ubiquitous quantitative measurements we find ourselves surrounded by; as well as the world more generally which enters into opposition to self —

the latter indeed the most prized possession in modernity and at the same time the one on which we have but the most tenuous grip, given its in-built evanescence in the face of the passage of time and eventually death. David Loy summarizes "the basic anxiety of our lives" as a contradiction between permanence and impermanence: "Despite the efforts we make to deny our temporality, we are all too aware of aging and death; yet on the other hand 'we nevertheless feel and experience that we are eternal' (Spinoza)" (Loy 1998: 219). Or, as Beckett puts it in *Proust*: "The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm. The whisky bears a grudge against its decanter" (10). Because we habitually experience the world in terms of a duality of self-existing, apparently permanent, objects separate from ourselves, our solution to the pressing awareness of our own transience is to deny it by creating the illusion of an equally self-existing self. To this end it is essential to construct a narrative of our lives, which, given the nature of narrative, focuses primarily on past and future and thus paradoxically confirms our transience because it reduces the present to an isolated moment in, as Loy appropriately terms it, a "'time-stream' understood to exist 'out there' — a container, as it were, like space, within which things exist and events occur" (1998: 220). The first thing to exist in it is the newly constructed self-existing self: a, as we try to make ourselves believe, non-temporal entity trapped irreversibly in the flux of time. This is not least the dilemma Beckett's short text more generally (beyond the confines of artistic theory) addresses itself to. For if Beckett's thoughts were to be taken seriously, what would change would not be merely an artistic theory, nor even only artistic practice, but the way we relate to the world generally. As Heidegger says at the beginning of "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," "if the answer could be given it would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about the matter at stake" (1993: 431).

What keeps us floating in the time-stream and functioning in the economy of exchange is obligation — the central term in Beckett's artistic theory: the obligation to express. It is a term that appears in the first part of his theory in which he analyzes the status quo of artistic practice: the artist is at the mercy of his need to express but lacks the means to do so. His means perpetually fall short of his aim, a fact that does not make the need disappear: "Like a child in mud but no mud. And no child. Only need" (Beckett qtd.

in Harvey 248). The artist is bound by this inescapable aporia: "unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (TD 145). Beckett thus concedes that unless the premise within which conventional art operates, i.e. the insurmountable need to express, is let go of, expressionless art is impossible to achieve and therefore has to be attempted repeatedly. Here one has to say allegorically that the avantgardist practice is an incomplete deconstruction — the Derridean one. In order to "complete" it the artist has to let go of the very premise of expression. This is the nondual, fully dialectical deconstruction. The question is what precisely is changed by this complete deconstruction, since it is obviously not the artistic product itself: to the onlooker a van Velde canvas appears to be situated as much within the canons of Western art as any other; it seems to express just as much or little. But we shall follow Beckett's train of thought and begin with the incomplete deconstruction, to which Beckett, both in this short text and in his own artistic practice, devotes at least as much space as to his own ideal model.

Because it is incomplete the Derridean model has to use the force of aporia over and over to break up petrified structures of thought in repeated deconstructive efforts. A "permanent" obliteration of presence here is as impossible as the expressive act itself — the artist is stuck in a dilemma. But always for Derrida aporia is the place at which to begin, not to give up. The painting, "the expression that there is nothing to express" (TD 139), riddled as it is with irresolvable contradiction, becomes a limit concept, like the gift. It is bound by the laws of the conceptual, but becomes an icon of the non-conceptual. Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* will show how.

The aporetic structure at work here is reminiscent of Derrida's thoughts on obligation. Derrida finds obligation and responsibility governed by the ubiquitous dilemma that each response to a given individual call, request, gaze or appeal for help involves at the same time the choice not to respond in the same way and in the same instant to everyone else (1995: 68). Obligation, then, is an aporia of answering to the general (which for Derrida is synonymous with the ethical) while doing so in one's singularity, thus finding oneself in each responsible decision "skewered on the ferocious dilemma," as Beckett would say, of alleviating misery in a specific case while necessarily allowing it to continue in countless others ... therefore we wriggle.

Beckett's artist fortunately does not face an ethical problem (or only insofar as he chooses to create art rather than be a political activist), but he or she is concerned with the same split between general and specific, or universal and singular. The expressions of artistic vision are necessarily conceptual, socially negotiated manifestations, while the acute awareness of their inadequacy comes out of a singular encounter with the absolute (in Derridean terms the call of the wholly other to which Abraham answers "Here I am") that points out the inadequacy of the relative. Without this inkling of the absolute the artist would have no idea of the inadequacy of her creation. Not wanting to stretch the specific parallels between Beckettian and Derridean obligation too far, the general parallels are clear. In both cases the aporia is between the general and/or conceptual ("the ethical involves one in substitution, as does speaking" [1995: 61]) and the non-substitutable call of the absolute that manifests itself in multiple guises — not least in that of the mundane appearance of the stranger at the door that calls forth unconditional welcome. The absolute is by no means confined to what contemporary secular society thinks of as some kind of unique "mystical experience." Obligation is a double bind: one is positioned between irreconcilable moral precepts that could lock one into inactivity if one did not accept the impossibility of one's situation and acted in it anyway, however inadequately. This leads Derrida to think that "absolute responsibility could not be described from a *concept* of responsibility and therefore, in order for it to be what it must be it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable: it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible" (1995: 61). Like any aporia, the aporia of responsibility is "nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude" (68).

It is interesting that Derrida should choose to emphasize the *revelation* of the limits of conceptual thought, a movement, in other words, that requires not just epistemological cognition on the part of the individual, but transcendent action, as it were, by the divine, or at least by an other: the "reasonable and bloodless sacrifice" that is celebrated in the form of the Eucharistic Gifts is, after all, made complete only through God's "divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit." For Derrida, no such gift can "cross" the realm of the relative without giving itself "as such," that is, without giving itself as a

phenomenon that adheres to the basic principles of phenomenology. The gift is never given but always and infinitely deferred.

Marion, on the other hand, allows for a phenomenon that will give itself in overflow. Such a phenomenon will upset Husserlian phenomenology: instead of an infinite intention or ideal that no intuitive content is able to fill there is a whole flood of intuitive content, filling the intention, or concept, to overflow. It stretches our cognitive faculties and blueprints to an extent no concept can contain. Faced thus with the "saturated phenomenon" all our ways of grasping and conceptualizing go out the window.

It is not clear why Derrida musters such loyalty to phenomenological principles in being as opposed as he is to the saturated phenomenon ("the first heresy in phenomenology" [Caputo 1999: 66]), since he more than anyone has made it his vocation to make us reflect on philosophical givens. One has to remind oneself that the problem is, among other things, one of perspective: if one assumes "the text" and therefore philosophical/ phenomenological categories to be the only unsurpassable horizon, as Derrida does, then indeed Marion's "solution" is unsatisfactory. One cannot build one's argument on phenomenological categories only to deny them later: like *différance* the saturated phenomenon is reabsorbed into metaphysics, because merely to *say* that it is non-finite and hyper-abundant does not yet actually make it so. It can only become fully operative when it is integrated into a system that presupposes philosophical-theological continuity and divine grace is hence an accepted force. This also means that in a purely textual context, which the literary or semiotic analysis of Beckett's texts and plays necessarily is, the two competing theories can at best be equally if differently plausible. One does not exclude the other.

It is important to remember, however, that Marion does not propose a theology of the gift so much as a *phenomenology* of the gift. From his perspective the hyperabundant gift will only be acceptable as the "norm" in a post-metaphysical phenomenology that no longer accepts as dogma the Husserlian definition of the phenomenon. Now, it is true that the saturated phenomenon may be divine (such as Christ as a gift from God the Father), but it need not be. What this means for our question — the economy of expression and how to break out of it — is that by enlisting Marion's help we do not wander into territory that is alien to Beckett's world. Marion's perspective is philosophical and immanent, not

theological. Like Beckett, he tries to create the preconditions — the space — for a post-metaphysical experience of the world, and like Beckett's art, Marion's phenomenology of the saturated phenomenon can take us to the brink of religious experience or encounter but not beyond. The act of faith by which we affirm God remains up to each individual audience member of a Beckett play. And importantly, Marion appeals to experiential categories rather than discursive ones ("counter-experience") when it comes to the saturated phenomenon.

There is another factor that makes Derrida reject the saturated phenomenon and it has to do with his acceptance of the Husserlian phenomenon that gives itself "as such." For Derrida, there is no phenomenology that does not disclose the phenomenon in its essence. For Marion to claim a place for the saturated phenomenon in phenomenology is to turn phenomenology into something else, or conversely, by being part of phenomenology the saturated phenomenon has to defer to the "as such" and stop being a saturated phenomenon as Marion conceives of it. The saturated phenomenon cannot really be post-metaphysical if it claims to be in continuity with a discipline that has traditionally affirmed presence. Negative theology is another such discourse. Derrida does not question a particular version of negative theology that has come to dominate the West through St. Thomas Aquinas. To Derrida negative theology's verbal acrobatics serve no other purpose than to affirm God's ineffable presence in a realm that claims immunity from deconstruction. Although he has modified his position in later texts towards affirming an aporia in negative theology, his early position, as articulated in his early text *Différance*, still basically holds:

... the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology [...] And yet those aspects of *Différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to

acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.
(Derrida 1982: 6)

Along similar lines, he says in "Sauf le Nom" that although on the one hand negative theology questions each ontological or theological proposition by "suspend[ing] every thesis, all belief, all *doxa*" (1993: 67), it fundamentally affirms the ontological foundation because "in the most apophatic moment, when one says: 'God is not,' God is neither this nor that, neither that nor its contrary' or "being is not,' etc., even then it is still a matter of saying the entity [*étant*] such as it is, in its truth, even were it meta-metaphysical, meta-ontological" (68).

It is questionable whether negative theology really gathers itself back into such hyperessential presence. Some less rigorous versions of negative theology do indeed gather themselves back into a hyperessential unity, and these Derrida takes to be representative. The great Plotinus scholar A.H. Armstrong makes a distinction between two rival construals of negative theology, one of which he calls Middle-Platonist apophasis and the second Neoplatonist apophasis (cf. 1979a). In Middle-Platonist apophasis apophatic theology functions as a corrective to its cataphatic counterpart and is fundamentally analogous to Aquinas's dialectical movement of *via affirmativa*, *via negativa*, and *via emanentiae*. Whatever can be said about God can never be adequate to the fullness of the divine itself, because language is a means of signification that is adequate only to creatures, not to the uncreated. Nonetheless, the qualities attributed to God do apply to him, only in an infinitely more excellent way:

... as we have seen, calling God good or wise doesn't simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness in creatures, but that he himself possesses these perfections in a more excellent way. As expressing these perfections the words apply first to God and then to creatures (since the perfections derive from God); but because we know creatures first, our words were first devised to describe creatures and so have a manner of expression appropriate only to creatures. (Aquinas 32)

What the *via negativa* does in this case is signal to the inherent inadequacy of the *via affirmativa*, but the negations pertain only to the mode of signification — language — and not to the actual qualities that are signified: God *is* wise and good, just in a way that

is more excellent than language is able to convey (Hart 1989: 191). As a result, this version of the positive/negative dialectic gathers God into a presence. On the highest, transcendent level God is once again affirmed as the highest value (*ibid.*), his aseity compromised because reduced to the level of value (a category that pertains to the realm of beings).

The other, in Armstrong's opinion pure and genuine version of negative theology (cf. A.H. Armstrong 1979a+b), is not satisfied with remaining on the level of a correction of the positive by the negative, but moves instead to what Denys Turner calls a second-order level discourse of "negations of the negations" (257). This version is fully dialectical, ascending by way of a state of ever-increasing uncertainty to Dionysius's "darkness of unknowing." This implies also that apophatic discourse does not necessarily make its points by way of explicitly *negative* language (although well-known exponents of the apophatic tradition have chosen to do so) if this use of negative language results in a valorization of negativity. It has to negate this leg of the dualist binary as well, so as to produce a "self-subverting" statement (cf. Turner 252 and elsewhere) that questions the distinctions (between positive and negative, interior and exterior and so forth) the first-order level has maintained.

In a way it can be argued that cataphatic theology taken to its extreme automatically turns into apophatic theology (and not by chance are the two usually intertwined, with a positive statement followed by a negative one): in *The Divine Names* Dionysius finds such an abundance of names for the divine that there cannot be any doubt that none of them describes the divine adequately. Instead of a process of naming what goes on in Dionysius's text is a process of de-naming, or non-naming — of "*dénomination*" (cf. Marion 1999: 25). The confessional and monetary allusions of the term are also significant: boundaries of confessional denominations are human inventions that a God without Being crosses as much as those of mercantile give and take. In its final stages, *The Divine Names* spirals into *The Mystical Theology*, not as a corrective, but as a necessary conclusion. In the nondual darkness of unknowing both affirmation and negation are deconstructed.

Hence Kevin Hart can summarize that

... we do not need a third theology, one neither positive nor negative — a theology of paradox — for negative theology, properly understood, *is* that theology: a discourse which works at once inside and outside onto-theology, submitting its images of God to deconstruction. (Hart 1989: 186)

To drive his point home Hart makes an important terminological observation: the word Dionysius uses to denote God's state of being or non-being is "*hyperousious*," misleadingly translated in some English renderings as "superessential" (cf. the translation by Rolt). Yet while the English word suggests that God is the highest being, higher than created beings, "[t]he Greek word ... makes no such claim; indeed, the prefix '*hyper*' has a negative rather than a positive force. To say that God is '*hyperousious*' is to deny that God is a being of any kind, even the highest or original being" (1989: 202); in other words, *hyperousious* signals a deconstruction beyond Aquinas's version of negative theology — one that deflates Derrida's objection almost to the point of disappearance.

The word "*ousious*" makes unmistakably clear that Dionysius makes an ontological argument, not mainly or only an epistemological one. It is not merely due to our creaturely limitations that we cannot fathom the mode of God's being. Rather, God has intrinsically, as it were, no being, because *ousia* is a characteristic of creatures. For although negative theology is in one way a kind of second-order discourse that is concerned with theological *language*, making sure, as Hart puts it rather confusingly, "that human speech about God is in fact about *God* and not a *concept* of God" (1989: 192),⁹ it nonetheless makes ontological claims about God, if only to deny his ontology since all that falls under the name of ontology is of a philosophical kind, applicable only to finite creatures. In fact, Hart's statement makes clear that it must be possible for the divine to be manifest in language: the fact that God transcends the conceptual does not mean that he is nowhere present in language, but everywhere present in "unmediated" experience. Negative theology must not establish an opposition between language and "experience." In fact, one were to misunderstand the Dionysian ascent if one were to assume that it culminates in the rarefied and reified transcendent silence of "mystical experience." The distinctly modern overtones of individualism inherent in this view are

⁹ It seems to be the case that all that negative theology can achieve is to save discourse from lapsing into idolatry. It can only be "about" God in the sense of this endless vigilance.

quite opposed to the apophatic spirit. This view of experience is in fact complicit with the emphasis on (self-) expression with which Beckett reveals himself to be so impatient in the "Three Dialogues."

Rigorously practiced apophaticism assumes a rather different position on the question of experience. It situates itself securely in the everyday, because apophatics can only be a way of life, that is, a fusion of the intellectually cognitive with the experiential. Enlightenment, the Soto Zen Buddhist tradition emphasizes, is "just sitting." The mystical experience (rather than the nonduality of the negation of negation, which is a second-order discourse on that experience) though not experientially empty, as Denys Turner claims, does not give itself to experience, but rather to counter-experience. In this sense, Turner is right to say that its power is instead its capacity to shape and transform human experience (178), so that, although nothing is changed, everything is changed because through a nondual approach the "phenomena" of the world cease to be self-existing and are thus no longer phenomena in the Husserlian sense. The rift between our own fragile selves and the outside world disappears. We are no longer caught irreversibly in the time-stream.

The Derrida-Marion debate is important because it points out that what may give itself in the nondual moment beyond the economy of expression is not bound by metaphysics and exchange, as Derrida insists. Having considered the challenges art faces at the limit of representation, we can now ask to what extent there is room in the artistic theory of the "Three Dialogues" for a Third Way that is not only Derridean, but fully nondual. By mere structure his own text provides a third way: "Three Dialogues" proceeds by way of dialectical progression, introducing in its third movement what Beckett hails as the solution of the dilemma of expression — namely, in principle, no solution at all, but simple acceptance of the dilemma. The idiosyncratic dialogic form ensures that the text can come to a satisfactory end, providing even some closure, without demanding rigorous proof that the "result" put forth is in fact feasible. It circumvents the linear structure demanded by the conventional academic text and sides with other discursive forms, such as Platonic dialogue and, crucially, literary discourse. In this sense it is deconstructive discourse, even more so given its multivoicedness and the distanciation effected by putting words in the mouths of (semi-) fictional characters.

Because the "Three Dialogues" present themselves as semi-fictional we cannot even say for certain that Beckett really held the beliefs set forth in them. Plato's dialogues are conventionally treated as if he held the views he develops, but there is no conclusive evidence against saying that they are not in fact discursive exercises set up to refute hypothetical points. Platonic dialogue is concerned less with the production and proof of a new thesis than with showing conclusively the invalidity of a given premise. Likewise, Beckett does not so much want to outline a complete new artistic theory (let alone in an unassailable or non-contradictory fashion) as show the dead end of art "as we know it." And then he ventures thoughts that could indicate another direction, but doesn't claim to have found a panacea.

Of course, Plato proceeds by unassailable logic and reason, and in this sense does construct linear arguments. Beckett, on the other hand, presents three notoriously elusive texts that draw extensively on allusion and the writerly infilling of blanks on the part of the reader. He situates his text securely in the literary realm, not the philosophically discursive one. Apart from a few early and quite self-conscious works of criticism he has never emerged from behind the mask of the artist. Further such framing is produced by the tactical move of writing about painting rather than about his own area of expertise, namely literature. It serves as an ironic guard against the text's being taken too seriously as a scholarly text: Beckett is, so he would like to signal to critics eager to pin him down, only dabbling in the subject matter he tackles: "the critic as amateur," as Lawrence Miller says (1992) — in both the original and the colloquial denotations of that word.

It is significant that he presents this short text, which has repeatedly been treated as his artistic credo, as a series of linguistically adorned and playful (semi-) fictional dialogues rather than as a linear theoretical text. It attests to the lack of confidence Beckett has in the theoretical text to challenge, or even exceed, the confines of expression and therefore of representation. No matter to what extent Duthuit the art critic in fact held the views ascribed to him here, his voice has nonetheless passed through Beckett's aesthetizing and fictionalizing lens. The same goes, of course, for Duthuit's interlocutor: Beckett himself prefers to present his theoretical views through the inherently ambiguous structures of literary genre. Any primacy granted to the theoretical/philosophical bias (as

is inherent in Derrida's position) is to Beckett an illegitimate foreshortening and reduction.

This important difference also has consequences for the way in which the problem of the limits of representation presents itself to Beckett, working, as he does, within a discourse that is by definition multi-voiced and multivalent. Much of the ground for which Derrida fights is a given in literary discourse, as Derrida acknowledges: "If there is no essence of literature—i.e., self-identity of the literary thing—if what is announced or promised as literature never gives itself as such, that means, among other things, that a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was completely self-referential would immediately be annulled" (1992b: 47). The reason why literature does not as yet annul itself is that it is made to be expressive of conditions in the world, that is, is representational. And yet, in what way can Beckett's artist claim to transcend representation and to have found the solution to the expressive dilemma if he produces "[t]he expression that there is nothing to express" (TD 139; emphasis mine)? Surely expressionless art is going nowhere if it is merely the *expression* of a lack of expression. How does one keep from making of "this fidelity to failure, a new occasion" (TD 145) and hence a new expressive act — as, according to Beckett van Velde manages to do, or rather not to do?

The artist makes an expression, but at the same time his "hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act" (TD 143). That is, on the one hand he does not "transcend" the conceptual, on the other hand he is not limited by it. How is one to integrate these conflicting positions? Lawrence Miller rightly points out that "Beckett is concerned ... to preserve the integrity of the artist's 'predicament,' and to deny its conversion into a problem that may be solved" (9), which seems puzzling because what Beckett thereby seemingly advocates is the continuing obsessively circular pursuit of the dilemma. Not so: what he asks is the abandonment of the *will* to transcend the dilemma of having to express yet being unable to express and an acknowledgement of it as the fundamental aporetic given of artistic creation. Acceptance of the problem is the only way to be free from it. Unlike in Derrida, here the force of aporia alone is not liberating, but liberation ensues once the aporetic structure is accepted and built upon.

Beckett criticism predominantly considers his work to be internally unified and essentially preoccupied with the same questions throughout. The plays are treated as commentary on the novels by different means and sometimes vice versa. But this assumption of stasis in Beckett's work is questionable. In particular, it is doubtful whether Beckett remains concerned throughout his career with the pursuit of the dilemma of the unavoidable obligation to express, which he articulates and investigates to perfection in *The Unnamable* ("I can't go on, I'll go on" [U 418]). *The Unnamable* can be seen as Beckett's ultimate statement concerning the limits of representation in a deconstructionist linguistic mode. With its completion Beckett had painted himself into a corner. He had so thoroughly dealt with the issues at hand as to render further performance by himself in that mode impossible, and in fact he hit a creative drought afterwards. It does not seem farfetched to suggest that his late work for the theatre pursues not so much the same questions by different means, but in fact uses the means specific to the theatre to investigate a problematic that is an extrapolation of his previous concerns: the avenues opened up by the realization that the potential harboured by the pursuit of the dilemma as such is exhausted, but fruitful perspectives are generated once the dilemma is taken for granted — accepted in repose instead of uneasy consternation or celebrated in revolutionary glee, as deconstruction does.

Beckett makes clear that the limit which the artist cannot pass is *itself* conceptual. It is not primarily and immediately the limit of the conceptual, i.e. the transcendent. The dilemma itself is only the *product* of the volitional linearity of expression. So, what needs to be overcome is will. The idea of willing nothing, of non-willing, appears in different incarnations all over the diverse canons of apophatic literature: Buddhist *sunyata*, Plotinian *henosis*, Eckhart's detachment or *Gelassenheit*, Marion's "gaze of boredom" all aim to illustrate this idea.

For the most part (Plotinus, Eckhart, to an extent Marion) these straight apophatic approaches presuppose an unproblematically theological universe: as soon as humans show themselves to be receptive to it, i.e., commit themselves to the spiritual path, the divine dimension will enter their lives as a matter of course. Beckett's world, on the other hand, is distinctly (post-)modern and arises from a predominantly secular context. It lacks the easy continuity of the theological world view. As Linda Ben-Zvi points out, Beckett

does not deny the absolute — his world is gray rather than black (1980: 192) — but the absolute is no automatic given. His work is pervaded by longing for it, even a call for it, but at the same time skepticism as to whether it will, in fact, "occur." Rather than of Eckhart's theological *Gelassenheit*, geared towards a transcendent beyond, Beckett's non-will is more evocative of Heidegger's, who is influenced by the so-called "mystical" tradition, but outlines his conception of *Gelassenheit* within a philosophical framework. By way of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* we will encounter a different relation to language and the text than the conventionally significationally one, one that indicates the way "out" of Beckett's expressive dilemma, and which allows for a theologically coherent apophatic gift to give itself in language if the audience is inclined to commit to an act of faith.

The "project" of going beyond will is beleaguered by an aporia. The realization that will keeps thought-structures locked in the dualistic patterns of representation, and finally the desire to abandon will as a result of this realization, is immediately followed by defeat: the will not to will is still a sort of will. But, Heidegger reasons, it is a different kind of will than the one that drives our quotidian desires, because in it is expressed that willing itself has become questionable. By willing non-will one prepares oneself for, shows oneself to be receptive to, the "real" non-will. In apophatic terms the will not to will is the first-order level of negation, which is still conceptual. Afterwards the effort has to transcend this antithetical moment to a third one which implies neither to will nor not-to-will but neither and both. This is the second-order level of the negation of the negation, the self-negating negation, or Derrida's denegation, that is an essential and originary self-negating negation, at which the artist finally confronts the nonconceptual. But because *Gelassenheit* is not bound, and in fact impossible within the patterns of the will, this third moment is, of course, beyond one's volitional control. There is no "awakening of *Gelassenheit*" but only "staying awake for *Gelassenheit*" because "we do not of our own accord awaken *Gelassenheit* in ourselves" (Heidegger 1959: 34; translation mine). *Gelassenheit* is a fundamental repose, a letting-go and letting-be (all of these valences are implicit in the German). *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger emphasizes, is not quietism or passivity, because it is outside of the distinction between activity and passivity. It is a moment of nonduality. Therefore, the thinking, painting or writing it enables is not *outside* of the thinking of representation. It is not the "real," authentic, uncontaminated

way of being in the world, outside of our present corrupted, fallen nature, but the realization that we will only find the "real" once we stop looking for it.

Beckett sees such an act of non-will in the "inexpressive" (TD 143) art of Bram van Velde. Although van Velde uses the conventional array of artistic means his tradition offers him (i.e. ones that operate within the economy of expression), he does so from a different starting-point. He accepts the impossibility of expression, and can hence move freely within the spectrum at his disposal, without using it to the same compulsive end. What emerges from this for Beckett's artist is the freedom to fail, as of necessity, by any conventional standard of efficiency, productivity, output, causality, ... expression: "van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" [145]) whereas art usually "attempts to escape from this sense of failure" (TD 145). According to the conventional view the artist will in ever more refined ways ("by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee" [ibid.]) represent the truth "in a kind of tropism towards a light as to the nature of which the best opinions continue to vary" (ibid.), depending, as Beckett insinuates, on which version of truth is most prevalent at the time, or which means are deemed to reveal the truth most successfully: the most romantic, realistic, surrealist, theistic, humanist depending on which one the artist subscribes to. Beckett finds, in other words, even in the most radically subversive of artistic movements a positivistic tendency for which "the irrationality of pi [is] an offense against the deity, not to mention his creature" (TD 145).

Derrida's *différance* fights the losing battle of preventing its own re-absorption into metaphysics. Despite Derrida's persistent efforts to make it as elusive as possible by inventing multifarious incarnations for it, the non-concept always has one foot in the morass of being a mere concept in the domesticated terminology of deconstruction. Duthuit urges Beckett to consider this danger: "But might it not be suggested, even by one tolerant of this fantastic theory, that the occasion of his [van Velde's] painting is his predicament, and that it is expressive of the impossibility to express?" (TD 143). Beckett had hinted at as much when stating in his bold thesis at the outset that he prefers to an art of expression "[t]he *expression* that there is nothing to express" (TD 139; emphasis mine).

In his final statement, though, he resists the suggestion that van Velde's art cannot escape the confines of expression:

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of its submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. For what is this coloured plane, that was not there before. I don't know what it is, having never seen one before. (TD 145)

Beckett declares himself unable to find "a new occasion" in van Velde's art that would turn his artistic endeavour into another expressive act. We are faced, then, with art that both is expression and is not, and while this is unacceptable by the standards of a logic of non-contradiction, here it is the necessary conclusion. The paradox will not be resolved one way or the other. This is the crux of Beckett's theory: the paradox of the impossibility of expression ("I can't go on, I'll go on"), and any paradoxical multivalence, is not to be resolved but to be accepted. The artist continues to use the means her tradition puts at her disposal (those of expression). In this sense what we are presented with is a "going on." But she does so from a position of *Gelassenheit* — which does not change the phenomena that surround us: a tree is still a tree and what was an expressionistic canvas still looks like one. ("The ontic range of *nirvana* is the ontic range of the everyday world. There is not the subtlest difference between the two" [Mulamadhyamakakarika chapter 25, verse 20]). And yet they are changed, because we look at them differently from within a Heideggerian "Gegnet." In Heidegger, the "Gegnet" is defined as the open as a place of gathering. Between *Gegnet* (as opposed to the usual term "*Gegend*," which implies opposition and horizon — "*gegen*" translates as "opposed") and the thing there is no cause and effect connection nor a transcendental-horizontal relation. The *Gegnet* lets the thing be. "Die Gegnet ist die verweilende Weite, die, alles versammelnd, sich öffnet, so daß in ihr das Offene gehalten und angehalten ist, jegliches aufgehen zu lassen in seinem Beruhen," Heidegger says, untranslatably (Heidegger 1959: 42). In this sense it is

not a "going on." The paradox itself loses its fascination and instead of mulling it over the artist can devote his energies to what can be done once one tacitly presupposes it as the inevitable precondition of any artistic endeavour. Everything is the same and yet all is changed — a difference with a difference: "Perhaps this is what we have always sought: not to become real but to realize that we don't need to become real" (Loy 1992: 246). There is no immanent realm and a transcendent one in opposition to it. The transcendent is in the immanent and vice versa — there is merely "a difference of perspective, or rather a difference in the way they are 'taken'" (Loy 1992: 247).

Hence what sounds like a dualism in Nagarjuna's distinction of cognitive and guiding notions is in fact only apparently one. The distinction is necessary on the relative level in order to remind ourselves that our conceptual horizon is not the only one. Because of the teaching of impermanence there are no self-existing things in Buddhism: words and concepts have no stable reference. In everyday contexts ("your lunch is in the refrigerator," to use Loy's example) using concepts as if they had "true" referents is not too problematic, as long as it is kept in mind that the cognitive notions one uses in the process are merely human constructs. This same only apparently referential way is used to speak about the absolute. This means that whatever concept is used to describe it can only be a so-called guiding notion (which in a sense resembles Derrida's "term under erasure"), "to suggest appropriate ways of coping with the putative realities on which it rests for its meaning and to which it lends meaning" (Sprung 17) and "serving to lead men toward freedom, but not claiming to describe any reality or convey any ultimate truth" (18). A guiding notion is a way of speaking of the absolute in relative terms that not only acknowledges its own inadequacy, as Western theistic apophaticism does also, but rather does not even *attempt* to achieve adequacy to a reality imagined to be existing independently of it. This is because there is, in Buddhist understanding, no unchanging transcendent reality. Buddhism here is more "pragmatist" than Christian apophaticism. It does not want to offer an ontology but an epistemology that allows the end of suffering: it is concerned more with liberation in this life than in the world to come. A guiding notion has no truth-value but use-value: it is eminently practical insofar as it has achieved its purpose when it has aided students on their paths to liberation, to *nirvana*. In this endeavor any putative absolute essence of the divine is irrelevant. The apparently dualist

distinction between guiding and cognitive notions is, then, a function of human limitations and from the perspective of the absolute it does not exist. Therefore, although ensconced in the relative without immediate access to the absolute we have no experience of *nirvana*, it is nonetheless essential to remind ourselves, necessarily conceptually, that there is no difference between *samsara* and *nirvana* because this realization is the volitional precondition, the first order negation, that will keep us from trying to "achieve *nirvana*," to *will* our own salvation by, as Loy puts it, trying to become real.

By contrast, Eckhart in all his radicalism remains typically Western in assuming a vertical transcendent. Eckhart's spark of the soul, the "*Fünkelein*," to which Beckett refers in entry 690 of the *Dream Notebook* as "the organ by which the personality communicates with God and knows him" (100), presupposes an anthropological-theological continuity that the Beckettian world-view does not have. The spark of the soul is proportionate to the divine itself. It contains in essence that which is beyond it, and as soon as the spark has been recovered from the infilling of attachments not only has communication been established between human and divine, but the two have become one by way of a merger of the divine element in human nature and the divine itself. "Eckhart's detachment, we might say, is archeological rather than architectural," Denys Turner summarizes (176). Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, on the other hand, is based on an entirely horizontal analysis: Being is not God (and neither is *différance*), although it cannot completely shake off the proportions of the metaphysical God. But Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* attempts to establish a nonduality between subject and object, human and world, disregarding God. But because of the nondual ground of Being, *Gelassenheit*, although not theologically motivated, makes a space for God. Thinking in the Heideggerian sense — i.e. the thinking of *Gelassenheit* — is "a gift or a grace, an event that overtakes us" (Caputo 1993: 282). Heidegger's and Marion's phenomenologies will take us to the brink of the metaphysical, the philosophical even, and at that point it is up to the reader to make the leap into the unknown and affirm a God by way of an act of faith — by way of "doing the truth." The gift will not be restricted to discursive economies. Beckett's art of *Erfahrung* will proceed in a similar manner. Once at the boundary, there won't be a signpost to say that "beyond is God" — such a gesture would

be atypically metaphysical. It would ruin his accomplishment. But Beckett will go to the brink of art, of philosophy, and then leave the act of faith up to the reader.

What does Heidegger's "thinking of *Gelassenheit*" mean for Beckett as an artist working with language and situating himself firmly in the multivocality of literary discourse? At the beginning of his essay "The Way to Language" (1993) Heidegger makes an important distinction between treating language in a conventionally conceptual way, based as it is on the distinction between word and referent, and a radically different way of approaching language, namely through *Gelassenheit*. This way is experiential ("To undergo an experience with something — be it a thing, a person, or a god — means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us" [Heidegger 1992: 1091]) and involves the recognition that language is not separate from us but that we are language, or that language is at least inseparably part of us: "[...] we are within language, at home in language, prior to everything else" (Heidegger 1993: 398). This abolishes the split between ourselves and what we think, or between our thoughts, imagined somehow to exist separately before they are put into words and expressed in language. Based on this realization Heidegger advocates undergoing an experience with language, "the house of Being" (1992: 1093), in which poetry becomes the voice of Being. Poetic discourse, for Heidegger, exemplifies a kind of nondual, non-representational thinking through *Gelassenheit*, "without science, without philosophy" (1092). Now, in rigorous apophaticism /deconstruction the reification of poetic discourse as privileged, which this view suggests, is as suspect as a dangerously "cataphatic" conception of Being based on ontological difference. But the basic conception of a radically different, nondual way of inhabiting language is very useful. The Unnamable can emerge from the interstices of language if the latter is inhabited and experienced, because the nondual will not be absent from language (or it would not be nondual). Such a conception of language does away with the distinction between word and referent and with the supposition that there is or can be adequacy between word and referent and that this adequacy finds expression in the word.

The idiosyncratic audacity of Madhyamika Buddhist philosophy opens up a way of speaking of ultimate realities that is likewise not based on an implied, and therefore at least attempted, adequacy between expression and the reality it "describes." A guiding

notion is not expected adequately to describe the Absolute because there is no Absolute in the form of a stable referent. Instead, it has served its purpose if it has brought the student face-to-face with the absolute. A dilemma of the "I can't go on, I'll go on" kind, as Beckett poses it in *The Unnamable*, does not arise in the Madhyamika model. Madhyamika does not hold on to the idea of a divine whose nature is proclaimed to be ungraspable in language but still posited as somehow hypothetically verifiable separately from the initiate's own transformation.

The crucial distinction between guiding and cognitive notions is the difference with a difference that frees the Beckettian artist from the expressive dilemma: the artist still produces what looks like an "expression" but now it does not matter whether, or rather that it is inadequate to the Unnamable; in fact, the question does not even arise. It does not matter whether — lapsing for a moment into representational logic — the expression has anything at all in common with the Absolute, its referent (supposing that one could find out). What matters is that the work opens up a space in which we, the audience or reader, may be helped to come face-to-face with it. Crucially, the work of art still looks like expression, bound by the conventions of the representational, but it is produced and received with the tacit understanding that it is a guiding notion.

But, one might object, does not the fact that Beckett's work never does end the torturous cycle of "I can't go on, I'll go on" contradict all of the above? Where is the liberation in the excruciating, almost physical pain of witnessing *Not I*, for instance? In Nancy's words one could say that even if there is no expression, there remains the obligation to "name." It is this process of "naming" that keeps the text in a process of self-subversion of its metaphysical assumptions, or rather, that keeps proclaiming the meta-metaphysical as if this proclamation were a request from elsewhere, not an expression of a tortured I, since this I needs to be decentred, post-subjectivist, kenotic to make the proclamation possible.

IV. Metaphor and Metonymy in *Not I*

Beckett's theoretical explorations of an expressionless art in the "Three Dialogues" do not remain without aesthetic and artistic consequences in his own work. A steady "neutralization" progresses throughout Beckett's work, especially his late plays and prose writings. Colours, still used to startling effect in *Happy Days*, for instance, disappear in favour of shades of gray and likewise acting and delivery are reduced to an increasingly "neutral" style from which all exuberance and emotion are excised while the prose itself tends towards increasingly pared down sentences. "Too much colour, no no, too much colour," Beckett kept repeating to Billie Whitelaw when rehearsing with her for *Not I*; "By which he meant: 'For God's sake don't act'" (Whitelaw 120). And yet this radically minimalist, "expressionless" theatre is intensely evocative.

This chapter will look at *Not I* both in terms of visual image and narrative technique in order to answer the question of how the ideal of "expressionless art" finds its way into Beckett's own work and what it means for him artistically. I will investigate in *Not I* how the horizontal and the vertical dimensions in Beckett's art interlock and will go about this task with the help of David Lodge's useful distinction, adapted from Jakobson, between the metaphoric and metonymic poles of modern literature. The question is whether Beckett's reduction towards an expressionless art is a kind of horizontal, secular, atheological apophaticism that moves primarily along the metonymic pole, or whether it tends more towards the metaphoric pole and towards a full-fledged vertical apophaticism, or whether the peculiar tension in Beckett's work derives from pulling equally strongly in both directions. If there is a pull towards both the metonymic and the metaphoric, can the two be seen to serve a unified end or do they create division in Beckett's work?

Lodge categorizes modern literature along the metaphoric/metonymic divide. Metonymy and its cousin synecdoche are not both sub-forms of metaphor (that is, all simply figurative transformations of a given statement). Rather, metaphor and metonymy are diametrically opposed, because they are generated by opposing principles. Metaphor belongs to the selection axis of language and works by way of substitution. Lodge's analogy here is dress: one selects just one item from a set (or paradigm) that constitutes a range of tops. If one has already selected a t-shirt, one does not need a blouse and hence

substitutes a t-shirt for a blouse (1977: 74). The items are substituted on the basis of similarity. In Lodge's master sentence "Keels ploughed the deep," "plough" can be used instead of the literal "cross" because the movement of a plough through soil is reminiscent of the movement of a ship through sea. Metonymy, on the other hand, belongs to the combination axis of language and works by way of contiguity or natural association. Metonymy is to put an attribute or an adjunct in the place of the thing meant: Keels are part of ships and depth is a property of the ocean. Hence "keels" finds its way into the sentence not so much by substitution as by a process of expansion and deletion (1977: 76): the long, non-figurative version of Lodge's exemplary sentence would be "The keels of the ships crossed the deep sea" (ibid.).

In other words,

[p]loughed has been selected in preference to, or substituted for, other verbs of movement and penetration ... which are conjoined in the code of English (by belonging to a class of verbs with approximately similar meanings) [...]. *Keels*, on the other hand, is conjoined with ships both in the code (as nouns, as items of nautical vocabulary) and in the notional message [...]. The contiguity of keels and ships in many possible messages as well as in the code reflects their actual existential contiguity in the world, in what linguistics calls 'context', whereas there is no such contiguity between ploughs and ships. (Lodge 1977: 77)

Metonymy, then, consists in a purely horizontal movement. It proceeds by way of notional association. Metaphor, on the other hand, works by way of a paradigmatic shift from *parole* to *langue* that is vertical, because there is no "natural," existential (as Lodge calls it) connection between a metaphor's tenor and its vehicle: in order to establish the connection a jump to the systemic (or paradigmatic) axis of language (*langue*) is required.

Although both the verbs "to cross" and "to plough" belong to the same paradigm (because of the similarity of the movement of a plough through soil and of a ship through water) "it is an essential feature of a metaphor that there must be a certain distance between tenor and vehicle. Their similarity must be accompanied by a feeling of disparity; they must belong to different spheres of thought" (Stephen Ullman qtd. in Lodge 1977: 75). There is, then, a certain similarity between tenor and vehicle on the

basis of which a group similarity can be established so that other people, i.e. readers of a literary work, will be able to make the same connection between tenor and vehicle. Only in this way can the metaphor be intelligible. But making the connection involves a leap from one notional context to another, in this case from that of a nautical context to that of agricultural machinery. The two items cannot be conjoined in the message because only one of them is required but they are conjoined in the system which underlies the specificity of the message, which in turn makes possible the vertical leap that is the peculiarly startling joy of reading metaphors: the tension of similarity and difference that opens up between tenor and vehicle is responsible for the specifically metaphoric semantic field that, in the best metaphors, always involves an element of surprise. (If there is no surprise, the metaphor is dead.)

Here is already an indication of why Lodge's distinction between the metonymic and the metaphoric modes proves useful with respect to determining the relationship between apophaticism and Beckett's art: metaphor's verticality acknowledges (semantic) dimensions not immediately present in the horizontality of the syntagmatic message, just as theology is based on an acknowledgment of transcendent dimensions beyond the horizontality of worldly existence. Thus, for Lodge there is no question that the metaphoric strand of modern literature is the more "religious."¹ This implies by no means that all works that tend towards the metaphoric pole are religious works or works based on a theological world-view — far from it. Metaphorical structures are no guarantors of theological meaning. They do, however, permit of theological interpretations. If Beckett's work could be shown to be predominantly or primarily metaphorical, one would have isolated the determining *formal* characteristic of the work in which it is possible to see a theological yearning. Beckett's personal leanings (his supposed atheism or agnosticism) become secondary to the interpretation the works themselves permit by way of these

¹ "In England the true successors of Dickens and Trollope were Gissing, Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy; just as the true successors of James were Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford and E.M. Forster. Neither line of succession is Christian, but surely there is no doubt which of the two is the more 'religious'? The concept of sin is at the heart of Ford's best work; *A Passage to India* is full of the longing for transcendence, even if it is ultimately unfulfilled; and was it not for their 'materialism' that Virginia Woolf condemned Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy?" (Lodge 51). Compare in this context the following quote from Virginia Woolf: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display ...? (Woolf qtd. in Lodge 44).

formal characteristics. Metaphoricity manifests itself in Beckett's late work for the stage primarily in the visual dimension. With the help of Norman Bryson and, through the back-door, Stanton Garner, I will show that the visual mode in Beckett's late stage work is aspiring towards non-representational, nondual aesthetic forms. It aspires, in other words, to the kind of nonduality that is at the heart of apophatic theology.

Not I is a play of extreme reduction: "action" and "movement" are reduced to a static stage image and this static image consists solely of an isolated, disembodied mouth and a faceless, unidentifiable, therefore strangely self-less hooded figure which the audience sees only from behind. There is no colour except for the small but prominent red dot in a sea of blackness that is Mouth. Furthermore, as Billie Whitelaw's recollection of Beckett's exhortations indicates and a viewing of her performance of the play confirms, Mouth's delivery of its breathless tale takes place in a monotonous voice at breakneck speed. *Not I* moves towards the colourlessness of extreme reduction on a number of planes simultaneously, by removing, first of all, the context of embodiment and, as a result, both the cohesion of self and of narrative continuity, and arguably dramatic alterity. It can be argued that by denying his character, Mouth, the continuity of selfhood, Beckett elides also the necessarily dualistic relationship of alterity between one character and another and finally between character and audience. However, in order to have a full-fledged apophatic nonduality one needs first a fully formed dualism between self and other, and between self and the ultimate Other, the transcendent God. Instead, it can be argued, Beckett slides along a horizontal, metonymic axis of fragmentation: a fragmented text is complemented on the visual level by a body part, Mouth, which takes the place of coherent character. Moreover, Mouth denies her own subjectivity and by extension the subjectivity of the other. In the TV version of *Not I*, though not at all in the stage version, this elision of subjectivity in Mouth is complemented by a complete disappearance of the dramatic other: auditor is excised from the play. In this interpretation Beckett turns away from a metaphysic of presence but then does not allow its alternative, nonduality, to ripen to fruition because he reduces its prerequisite, duality, to a kind of pre-dual rather than nondual stage that has neither self nor other. The result is a non-oppositional space that is

pre-dual rather than nondual, because it has fewer of the ingredients necessary for a full duality, let alone nonduality.

But is the play really that fragmentary and is Mouth really the sole (paradoxically decentred) focus of the play? Or do critics tend to emphasize what they see as fragmentation because they approach the play with the deeply engrained reference points of fullness and wholeness in mind? Because Beckett's (and many other avant-gardist playwrights') theatre is in part a reaction to the naturalistic stage, the latter lingers as an unconscious if unsatisfactory standard. If one compares *Not I* with the "fullness" of the naturalist stage, Beckett's stage will invariably appear as lack: it seems bare and pared down. Likewise, before concepts of wholeness and centred subjectivity Mouth's identity will seem fragmented. But what happens if one takes emptiness as a standard and starting point, if one, in other words, sees Beckett's stage not as potentially full and therefore in fact half-empty (or half-full), but, as Les Essif puts it, "as potentially and therefore essentially empty" (19)? And likewise, if one sees Mouth's verbal torrent not as a scattering of self but as a kind of programmatic self-emptying? In such a view the state of being emptied of self is seen as a positive ideal. Maybe Beckett's dramatic development as a whole, and *Not I* in particular, would no longer slide along a metonymic axis of fragmentation towards complete (and fairly predictable) destruction or deconstruction of the subject, but work steadily towards an increasingly clearer articulation of his artistic vision: a metaphoric depiction of emptiness — physical, but more importantly, metaphysical.

The text of *Not I* is certainly metonymic, but the text is only one dimension of the play, and arguably not the most important one. Too much Beckett criticism neglects theatricality, and especially Beckett's carefully crafted stage images, in favour of a textual approach, forgetting that Beckett was intensely interested in the visual arts, frequenting art galleries all over Europe, often planning entire trips around the individual pictures he wished to see. I will therefore analyze in detail the stage image of *Not I* and investigate how the text links up with it. I will structure my discussion along the major strategies of reduction in the play, beginning with Beckett's removal of the context of embodiment, continuing with the removal of narrative continuity and concluding with the removal of the continuity of selfhood or identity. Throughout, I will trace both the metaphoric and

the metonymic trajectories to find out what their interlacing means for Beckett's work in the terms of an apophatic vocabulary.

Let us begin, then, with the most determining and most obvious strategy of reduction in the play: Beckett's removal of the context of embodiment. Doubtless the isolated, tiny, brightly lit mouth lost in the enormous darkness of the stage space and chattering at breakneck speed is the play's most captivating and most radically original artistic move and its effect on the audience is remarkable. The immediate effect of *Not I* is visceral, experiential, not intellectual, and since the audience's aural memory is relatively short given the circumstances, it enters the play primarily through the *image* of Mouth, which is constant, rather than the *character* of Mouth (if it is permissible to talk about Mouth in such terms). Primary access is not through an individual character or constellation of characters, and not primarily through the text, which remains inaccessible because of the enormous strain it puts on the audience. In fact, by isolating a single body part to represent his character, Beckett does not allow the audience to build a relationship with a complete fictional person — he denies his audience the traditional access route into a play. A fully physically present body stands for a continuous identity complete with past and future. Instead, Beckett presents just a mouth, without even so much as a name: the mouth is identified merely by the generic name "Mouth." The concept of character is stretched to breaking point. Mouth is nobody (too metonymically fragmented to be anybody), but also everybody (metaphorically representing the human condition) by being nobody specific.

Fragmenting the body and isolating specific body parts, is, of course, a metonymic procedure: to have a part stand in for the whole, i.e. a mouth for the whole person, is synecdochic, and synecdoche is a sub-form of metonymy. The rhetorical device of metonymy means that an attribute or an adjunct stands for the thing meant. Les Essif, however, stresses that a reduction of a naturalist character to a shape strategically situated in a visual field is also a reduction to form (21). Essif very pertinently points out that

the reduction of the character to form implies a serious argument against claims of corporeal fragmentation. There is a tremendous difference between the literal value of a body part illustrated in a medical dictionary and the metaphorical value of one featured on a theatrical stage. (Essif 21-2)

An object or character is stripped of the context or utilitarian value that it usually inhabits on the naturalistic stage and it orients itself differently, namely as a component in a primarily aesthetic visual composition in which it fulfills a part that is quite different from its usual context based on natural contiguity. The contiguous context is overridden by compositional demands.

Furthermore, the critical emphasis on the fragmentation and visual as well as narrative metonymy of Mouth is concerned only with one half of the stage image, but I will argue that the stage image forms a metaphoric totality of which Mouth is only a part. Auditor's presence is a considerable counterweight. A perspective that problematizes the loss of dramatic alterity in the play focuses on Mouth as a solitary presence, and *Not I* is, in fact, the closest Beckett ever came to writing a mono-drama. A mono-drama would do away with dramatic alterity completely and thus dismantle a basic premise of theatre, but, significantly, Beckett stopped just short of going the whole way. Nonetheless, *Not I* occupies an extreme position within the Beckett canon: in all of Beckett's other plays the theatrical other, even if not physically present on stage, is of a more verbally articulate kind and therefore comes slightly closer to being a conventional character (cf. the off-stage voices in *Footfalls*, *What Where*, and even *Rockaby*), although no "character" in Beckett's late drama is developed along the lines of an identity modeled naturalistically. Auditor, on the other hand, is merely a silent, towering presence. But he interacts with Mouth, although the audience does not hear his interlocutions: presumably he is the source of the interpolations that cause Mouth to backtrack and correct herself.

His presence also establishes a curious balance on stage: what Mouth has in activity he compensates through size. The tiny, frantically hyperactive Mouth is counterbalanced by the Auditor's silent hugeness. The play strategically generates tension within the stage image itself — a kind of motionless dynamism — and furthermore between the audience and the image as a whole. *Not I* does not consist solely of Mouth's breathless flight from itself, to whose fleeting presence an audience would indeed have a hard time relating, but of the dramatic totality of the (thwarted) interaction between Mouth and Auditor as watched by the audience. Auditor, Mouth and the spectator form a totality of perception consisting of ear, mouth and eye.

The image that is thus created for the audience not only forms a formal and aesthetic unity, although this emphasis on form is an important precondition. Especially because of this formal emphasis, the stage image has to *mean* something. It is not merely imitative of the world in a kind of drawing-room aesthetic, but is rather in an allegorical relationship to it. Most of Beckett's work, and especially his late work for the stage (image and text), remains utterly unintelligible unless read metaphorically to signify a fundamental problematic of the human condition. According to Lodge all drama tends towards the metaphoric pole, but

many modern playwrights have put an extreme stress on the metaphoric dimension in drama. In Beckett's plays, for instance, there is no progress through time, no logic of cause and effect, and the chintz and upholstery of drawing-rooms has given way to bare, stark acting spaces, with perhaps a chair, a row of dustbins and a high window from which nothing is visible (*End Game*). These plays offer themselves overtly as metaphors for the human condition, for on the literal level they are scarcely intelligible. (Lodge 1977: 83)

Hence Lance Butler, for instance, insists on reading Beckett's work as what he calls "ontological parables:" metaphorizations of existential philosophical problems.²

Auditor is often neglected because he is far less dramatic in effect than Mouth (and, in fact, the TV version of *Not I* [with Billie Whitelaw] had no choice but to omit him in the process of adapting the play to the new medium), but his importance for the play in general and for the visual composition of the stage image in particular emerges with great force especially when one takes into account Beckett's sources of inspiration for *Not I*. Beckett's thought process in developing his ideas for *Not I*, as far as it can be traced through his inspirations for the play, provides important insight into what his focus was, and surprisingly his main interest seems to have been Auditor's unobtrusive presence.

² Butler, Lance St. John. 1984. *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being: A Study in Ontological Parable*. London: Macmillan. Butler approaches Beckett primarily through the lenses of various continental philosophers, and tests the ground of a theological perspective in only a few pages at the end of the book. He arrives there at the end of a continuous progression towards the divine from Sartre, through Heidegger, to Hegel.

The standard accounts of Beckett's life and work generally point towards two sources of inspiration for the play: Caravaggio's painting of the *Decollation of St. John the Baptist*, which Beckett had seen in Malta,³ and an Arab woman clad in a djellaba "crouched in an attitude of intense waiting" (Beckett qtd. in Bair 622) whom Beckett observed from a street cafe in Morocco and who turned out to be waiting for her child to return home from school: "Every so often, she would straighten and peer intently into the distance. Then she would flap her arms aimlessly against her sides and hunker down once again" (Bair 622; the same incident is reported by Knowlson 1996: 589).

The Arab woman is clearly an inspiration for the figure of Auditor, while the title of Caravaggio's painting seems to suggest the image of a head separated from its body, a mere step of further metonymic fragmentation away from the image of an isolated mouth. In fact, Beckett's reflections prompted by the painting progressed along rather different lines. Caravaggio's painting, like Beckett's stage image, consists of two parts: the painting leans heavily towards the left, where in the brightly lit foreground the gruesome scene of the beheading is taking place. But far off to the right (the painting is more than five meters wide), shrouded in darkness and hidden behind a barred window, the viewer finally notices a witness to the scene other than herself. Beckett told Gordon Armstrong: "Some years ago I visited the Valetta Cathedral in Rome [sic; SW] to view Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*. I stood there a long time in front of the painting. Gradually I noticed that I was not alone, that behind the screen at the side of the church [in the painting] was the face of a man watching me observe the scene of the beheading" (Beckett qtd. in G. Armstrong 69). What primarily sparked Beckett's interest, in other words, was not Mouth, was not the scene and centre of the "action," but the silent observer in the margins, unnoticed at first and apparently unimportant, who turns out to be indispensable to an understanding of the work, painting and play alike. Suddenly, Mouth appears almost as an afterthought or a kind of dramatic externalization of the condition that brings about Auditor's resigned helplessness. "[Beckett] told Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy [...] that Auditor was the real inspiration for the play" (Brater 1987: 24). In this light the title of the play, usually read to refer to Mouth's refusal to accept the

³ Beckett wrote to Knowlson: "Image of *Not I* in part suggested by Caravaggio's *Decollation of St. John the Baptist*" (Knowlson 1996: 588).

first person pronoun as referring to her own biography, and therefore to accept her own experiences as being her own, acquires a different valence: "not I but he, watching me watch a visceral assault on another individual" (Beckett qtd. in G. Armstrong 70).

In almost Derridean fashion Beckett takes a seemingly unimportant detail in the margins of the work and points out how the work hinges on this detail, how it changes not only the dynamics of the work internally, but, more importantly, how the author, in this case the painter Caravaggio, uses it to turn the reception-process of the painting into a self-conscious experience that allows the viewer no unambiguous place to stand: it is unclear whether the silent witness behind the window reprimands the spectator for her voyeuristic activity or whether he conspires with the viewer in the act of witnessing a horrifically brutal crime and will go out into the world together with the viewer to bear witness to it. In both cases the margin turns out to be the centre of the interpretation and cannot be dismissed. Auditor and Mouth are inextricably joined, to the point of appearing to represent two strata of the same personality or two faces of the same human condition. Mouth can be seen as an externalization of what is going on in Auditor's head, a state from which he is as unable to free himself as the audience, or the *whole* stage image can be read as an externalization of an inner state shared by the audience. The relentless onslaught of Mouth's monologue fills the audience's heads, works on its nerves, and there produces a version of the state of mind in which Mouth finds herself, and the audience's reaction to it is likely to resemble Auditor's. My contention is that *Not I* translates and transcends the inevitability of a human condition or experience (symbolized by the vicious circularity of Mouth's monologue), recognition of which the play can evoke in the audience by proxy through Mouth's monologue (because the audience knows from experience the "real thing"), into the verticality of a metaphorical image.

Antonin Artaud, like Beckett, knew of the inadequacy of "expression" and opted for a process of what he calls "dissimulation" and deliberate exploitation of the extralinguistic arenas of theatre. Les Essif takes Artaud as a starting point of his investigations into the "Concentrated (Empty) Image Behind the Fragmented Story In Beckett's Late Plays" (1998) and quotes as follows from *The Theatre and its Double*:

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is to *dissimulate it* [Artaud's emphasis]. True expression hides

what it makes manifest. [...] All powerful feeling produces in us the idea of the void. And the lucid language which obstructs the appearance of this void also obstructs the appearance of poetry in thought. That is why an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech and its analytics. (Artaud qtd. in Essif 16; ellipsis mine)

It should not concern us here whether Artaud's void, Beckett's void and that of negative theology are identical or whether Artaud's strategy of "true expression" can successfully render the void. These questions — as far as they concern Beckett — we have attempted to tackle in the previous chapter. Essif, for one, is convinced that "a truly Artaudian metaphysical approach to Beckett's theatre — one which reveals rather than obstructs our awareness of the void — would *fundamentally* prioritize visual over narrative story and concentration over fragmentation, as well as emptiness over fullness" (20). What is important is rather that the process of dissimulation that is at work here is a metaphorical one of translation into an alien paradigm, so that the emerging image does not describe and capture (a process that is necessarily derivative) as much as create from scratch an image that will produce an "experience," for lack of a better term, similar to the original, i.e. of the same existential substance but not necessarily of the same phenotypical material. The reception process, then, involves the same re-translation process that thrives on the associative field between tenor and vehicle. What Beckett tries to produce is, in other words, not adequacy to the original, but similarity of experience.

Another inference based on Caravaggio's painting, which so impressed Beckett, emphasizes the inseparability of Mouth and Auditor in the dramatic totality of the play. If *Not I* was Beckett's attempt to depict a disembodied voice, an existential condition, a "voice crying in the wilderness"⁴ (rather than a conventional character), then one figure in Caravaggio's painting finds its way to equal parts into Auditor and Mouth: an old woman — the only one in the painting to express horror — who, oddly, covers her ears rather than her eyes, as if in a futile attempt to block her ears to an inner scream of pain, necessarily silent. Her hands covering her ears are meant, it seems, rather to keep her

⁴ "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Mt 3:1-3)

head from exploding from the impact of the scream inside it. The figure triggers connotations of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). There, too, the scream is palpable and yet it is uttered in a painting: mute, silent and unheard. Billie Whitelaw describes her difficulties in performing in *Not I* thus: "What happened to me was a terrible inner scream, like falling backwards into hell" (Whitelaw qtd. in Brater 1987: 31). Despite appearances, in *Not I* it is Auditor who utters the silent scream in his gestures of "helpless compassion" (SP 215) and by the end of the play the audience does the same, its nerves worn thin by the torrent of sound coming from Mouth. In fact, when Beckett redirected *Pas Moi* in Paris in 1978 he increased the emphasis on Auditor especially at the end of the play: "Auditor now covered his head with his hands 'in a gesture of increased helplessness and despair, as if unable to bear any longer the torrent of sound'" (Brater 1987: 34). His gesture here is even more reminiscent of the old woman in Caravaggio's painting. Mouth, then, is literally a voice crying in the wilderness, unheard and unhearing, but Beckett's emphasis is on the silent scream her pain (which might be Auditor's pain) produces in Auditor and the audience. The externalization of Auditor's state, which might be Mouth, is necessary as a way of dramatizing in abstract visualization the contents of a character's head and to thus induce artificially in the audience the kind of existential experience of anguish with which the play is concerned. Like Munch's painting, *Not I* is a representation of anguish and pain as an existential human condition, untied to specific circumstances or analytic ideas. "I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect," Beckett told Tandy or Cronyn (qtd. in Brater 1987: 74; cf. also Bair 625).

If Auditor is removed, as happened for technical reasons in the original production of *Pas Moi* in Paris in 1975, the dramatic conflict between Auditor and Mouth disappears. Beckett agreed to the change only reluctantly and then reinstated and reinforced Auditor's presence in the 1978 production. *Not I* is not a monologic play. It relies on the alterity of Auditor. The communication between Mouth and Auditor, minimal and warped as it is, is essential to the dynamics of the play.

The above observations regarding metaphoricity and dramatic alterity are confirmed by the overall structure of the stage image. Once again, as in his near-

elimination of dramatic alterity in order to emphasize it, Beckett explores the very limits of the theatrical medium, stretching theatre to its breaking point. If, as Paul Lawley (quoting Ezra Pound) pertinently points out, the medium of drama consists not only in words but "persons moving about on a stage using words" (Lawley 407), then most of Beckett's late stage images (including that of *Not I*) verge on the anti-theatrical: movement is virtually eliminated and even the visual stimulus of the static image is reduced to a minimum: a tiny mouth and a shadowy monk-like figure seen only from the back.

Brater sees that the analogues and precedents for the stage image seem to be found in other visual media much more readily than in earlier drama and he draws an explicit parallel with painting: "Beckett's stage space in *Not I* looks very much like a surrealist painting come to life" (24). It is reminiscent of surrealism, which in Lodge's typology is metaphoric, because it presents objects in close proximity or juxtaposition that are in no relationship of natural contiguity to each other. There is no continuity between monks and isolated spluttering mouths suspended in mid-space except that the former in all probability possesses some form of the latter, though most likely not the spluttering variety since silence is an important monastic virtue — and one that Auditor exhibits prominently. In other words, any relationship of contiguity that could be established between Mouth and Auditor is at such a level of generality that it becomes meaningless. The image of the mouth onstage is certainly a fragment, which suggests metonymy, but on the visual level it does not appear in contiguity with, say, other fragmented body parts, as it does on the aural level.

Stanton Garner also observes the pictorial nature of Beckett's late stage images. Beckett "subordinates movement to position" (72), limiting movement to a kind of movement within stillness: Mouth moves rapidly but remains in its place and Auditor's minimal movements, too, remain confined to one location. Paradoxically, proxemics as a theatrical force is emphasized because of its near elimination. A burst of movement, expected as it is on the theatrical stage, would provide relief and release — both of which Beckett does not grant his audience. In addition to this lack of motion, depth, as Garner observes, is indeterminate in Beckett's late stage images (74). The depth element of his visual compositions does not seem to interest Beckett; he treats them much rather as two-

dimensional pictures. This is a logical derivation from the lack of movement, since depth becomes interesting only when one has characters moving through space changing their spatial relationship to one another. Since the images are to be observed from a frontal position only (the audience's perspective of the proscenium arch),⁵ depth becomes doubly unimportant since the audience for its part cannot change position and move around the characters. Frontal orientation is further emphasized by the characters' frontal posture (cf. *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Not I*, *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe*) and frontal illumination.

And yet, despite these "anti-theatrical" tendencies, the image is stunning in its theatrical effect and in the tension it generates. "To the objection visual component too small, out of proportion with aural, answer: make it smaller on the principle that less is more," Beckett defends his theatrical strategy (Reading Archive MS 1639, qtd. in Knowlson 1979: 219). And Brater concedes that "Beckett's 'drama stripped for inaction' ... implies, ironically, an extraordinary amount of tension radiating from the stage, simultaneously visual, verbal and aural" (1987: 35). Three times during the play the spectator shifts her focus from Mouth to Auditor,⁶ a process that emphasizes what Brater calls a "stark antagonism" between them (1987: 31). There is contrast and tension, but precisely for this reason there is also balance. The images of Mouth and Auditor are peculiarly complementary: the small but intensely active and brightly lit Mouth audience right is balanced by the towering but silent and "*fully faintly lit*" (SP 216) figure of Auditor audience left. What Auditor brings to the stage by virtue of pure size and awe-inspiring towering presence, Mouth compensates by means of activity and light. Both are perched on the edge of the stillness of an electric hum between repulsion and attraction. Big and silent balances small and active — and this holds true as much for the internal dynamics of the stage image as for the balance between the hyperactivity of the (short) metonymic text, or aural component, and the vast blackness of the metaphoric stage image, or visual component. Brater notes that it is "difficult to tell if *Not I* is primarily spectacle or literature — 'ill seen,' or 'ill said'" (1987: 18). Far too often in Beckett

⁵ Interestingly, Beckett, in all his questioning and pushing of boundaries in the theatre never actually transgressed the boundaries of the proscenium stage.

⁶ Partly, this happens for practical purposes, as otherwise the actor behind the mouth would slowly become discernible (Brater 1987: 31).

criticism the theatrical and visual aspect of his work recedes behind an analysis of the text.

Beckett's "less is more" is not a mere flippant remark. It should be taken literally and seriously. It is possible to approach emptiness positively if one detaches oneself from an uncritical acceptance of wholeness and centred subjectivity as paradigms to aspire to. The strategies of reduction Beckett employs both visually and textually then appear no longer as driven by the negative goal to eliminate visual stimulus and destroy the coherence of the text, but by the goal to concentrate and transcend. To be sure, Beckett moves towards increasing emptiness of the stage space, but if one detaches oneself from the conventional valorization of fullness and the concomitant negativity of emptiness this can be seen as a kind of full emptiness, an affirmative negativity, concentration rather than lack.

Stanton Garner recognizes the importance of the stage images in Beckett's art, noting that "[f]ew dramatists have assumed such control over the theatrical image, the arrangement of its elements, its formal articulation" (53), and despite his "phenomenological" approach, wont as it is to notice presence before non-presence and fullness before emptiness, he acknowledges the importance of the darkened, empty space as a constructive force: Beckett's use of light as an "active, even aggressive determinant of the theatrical image ... throws into relief the darkness around it" (Garner 65-6). "Through its sheer predominance in plays such as *Not I* and *Rockaby* [darkness] acquires pressing visual weight" (Garner 66).

What makes the dark empty space especially stand out is Beckett's off-centre positioning of his concentrated images. In our discussion of *Catastrophe* we have already referred to Junko Matoba's article on the empty space and off-centre position in Beckett's stage images and Japanese ink-splash paintings, and we complemented this perspective with references to Norman Bryson's essay on "The Gaze in the Expanded Field" (1988). With *Not I* we can add important aspects to this perspective before devoting an entire chapter to the construction of Beckett's stage images, and, finally, to Beckett's own discussion of vision and visibility in *Film*. The off-centre position introduces a pull into the stage image. The "figure" is not merely surrounded evenly on all sides and therefore framed by the darkness. Rather, the figure pulls to one side, or, more accurately, a kind of

balance not unlike the golden section ensues in which the tension between the pull of the object and the counterweight of the dark stage space remain in precarious equilibrium. Importantly, both Matoba and Bryson find a more positive role for the empty space than Garner, for whom Beckett's stage images are "a celebration of subversion and imbalance" (62).

Bryson emphasizes the importance of the "dark or unmarked remainder" (101) to Ch'an ink-splash paintings, which, by virtue of the Buddhist underpinnings that govern their "production," operate at the limits of representation. It is this dark space that opens the "object" up to all the places where the viewer and the object are not, to all the other views that are excluded (103). The converging perspective flight-lines that govern the conventional representational image lock the viewer into a specific position in relation to the image. This position is supported and held in place by the frame. In Ch'an painting the image emerges from the union of the painter's subjectivity with the objective world and gestures towards this "universal surround" by opening itself up beyond the frame, by freeing painting and viewer from a relationship of enframing, in Heidegger's terminology, and allowing *sunyata* (emptiness) to enter the image. *Sunyata* enters the image not so much by means of a representational empty space — the representation of empty space — as by the circumstances of the image's production: the monk produces the images in a meditative state that is *sunya*.

The role of the nonduality of *sunyata* in Beckett's stage images, and in *Not I* in particular, becomes especially interesting before the backdrop of Beckett's own recollections of viewing Caravaggio's painting in Valetta. His experience of gradually becoming aware of being watched by the sneaky witness behind the barred window at the far right margin of the painting parallels precisely Sartre's description of the person in the park who is thrown back upon himself by the rustling bush or the voyeur peeking through a keyhole who suddenly hears steps behind him. Where previously there was a clear hierarchical power relationship of predatory watcher and objectified watched in place, the converging flight lines of this relationship are now destabilized by a competing third party around which some of that energy now groups itself. The scene moves from a straight duality to greater heterogeneity, as the subject competes with another subject (the other watcher behind the bush) for the unchallenged centrality of its position. This frees

the "object" from its lack of agency, so that this party, too, can compete with the other two. Two subjectivities are engaged at any one point in a kind of staring duel, and it is from this that the destabilization results. This also implies, however, that the fundamental pattern of a subject-object duality based on a stable subject position remains intact: two dueling parties attempt to force the opponent into submission and acceptance of the object-position. This model is now permanently destabilized merely because each party has to divide its attention between two opponents competing with it and each other for this stable position. There is, in other words, now a constellation in place that inevitably destabilizes itself in the perpetual effort to establish stability and hierarchy. The Sartrean model, then, remains confined to destabilization in the pursuit of the old stability based on a subject-object divide.

This model can only be dislodged if it is replaced by one that does not allow for conventional subject-object positions. Such a new model would not have to be destabilized because it would not be in pursuit of stability, and at the same time it cannot be defined as unstable because it does not define itself in opposition to stability. Bryson convincingly argues that this can be done by allowing *sunyata* as the darkened or unmarked area to enter the picture. *Sunyata* opens the picture beyond the frame to the surrounding universe, which has in fact entered the picture during its production: it was created in nonduality of subject and object, artist and world, and hence does not permit a subject/object duality to govern its reception.

As a result, the off-centre position of the "figure" in Ch'an painting arguably does not introduce elements of subversion and imbalance into the image, as Garner, mistakenly, I suggest, finds them in Beckett's stage images. The figure has nothing it can be in imbalance with, because it has nothing it can be in opposition to: the world itself has entered the picture. I suggest that a careful distinction ought to be made between imbalance and a kind of non-fixity as a result of non-attachment. "Imbalance" is a negative descriptor whose positive reference-point is balance, whereas non-attachment in the Buddhist understanding avoids such polarizations (despite the lingering linguistic markers of duality) and is fully nondual and dialectical. It follows from this that "stasis" is no accurate term for the description of Beckett's stage images, either, as it has a negative valence whose positive reference point is "motion," or "progress." Moreover, in the next

chapter on *Quad* we will look in more detail at stasis, balance and movement in pictures in general and in Beckett's stage images in particular to point out the exquisite balance of Beckett's stage images. For all of these reasons I prefer "stillness" to describe Beckett's stage images. The term is sufficiently neutral not to be immediately associated with an opposite and Beckett himself suggests it to describe the peculiarly ambiguous nature of his late work: stirrings still.

The impression of stillness or balance radiated by the visual stage image finds a dramatic counterpoint in the play's aural dimension. There is (it appears) no stillness in Mouth's (near-) monologue. She pours out her reflections and recollections in a continuous verbal flow, a torrent of sound that moves along a horizontal axis of free association: "gradually realized . . . she was not suffering . . . imagine! . . . not suffering! . . . indeed could not remember . . . off-hand . . . when she had suffered less . . . unless of course she was . . . *meant* to be suffering . . . ha! . . . *thought* to be suffering" (SP 216). The individual thoughts and images that pop into Mouth's head are connected, yet not by a universally acknowledged principle of deduction, but through the associative patterns of Mouth's mind. Association functions by way of a pattern of close proximity in space and time: a (metonymic) relationship of contiguity. The instantaneous, momentary workings of this mind are further emphasized by a lack of complete sentences. Mouth's thought fragments find their expression in sentence fragments, all of approximately equal length. There is a dominantly paratactic relationship among the fragments. There is no hypotaxis: the interrelationships of the fragments are primarily of a temporal or causal kind ("till . . . then . . . till . . . when" [SP 219]), which again suggests horizontal progression.

If one figures into this paratactic, fragmented, associative picture the enormous speed with which a performance of *Not I* takes place, it comes as no surprise that reference relationships often remain unclear. Upon first exposure no audience member will grasp precisely the content and meaning of Mouth's ramblings — and, as Beckett's directions to Tandy and Cronyn indicate, the play is not intended to appeal primarily to the intellect. Instead, isolated intelligible fragments will leap out at the spectator (or listener, in this case), but what they refer to may not be so clear. "[T]ill it was back in her hand," Mouth says, and then backtracks and clarifies: "the bag back in her hand" (SP

219). In fact, for a reader of *Not I* it is clear from the context that the "it" refers to "bag" three lines and six fragments before, but the immediately preceding fragment suggests "mouth" as a subject: "mouth half open as usual ... till it was back in her hand" (SP 219). Once removed from context (a process facilitated by the fragmented structure and fast delivery), the fragments enter into different relationships with one another that suggest bizarre images of physical dismemberment: a mouth held in someone's palm, someone's back lying about in a field (SP 221), a face lying in the grass (*ibid.*) a hand disconnected from its body in someone's lap ("sitting staring at her hand . . . where was it? [...] . . . sitting staring at her hand . . . there in her lap" [SP 220]), or noted for its position at the end of an arm, as if it were not always there but rather sometimes took off on its own ("glad of the hand on her arm" [SP 221]).⁷ Beckett evokes these images of physical dismemberment consistently throughout the play and obviously delights in the ambivalence created by them: each fulfills a coherent function on the level of narrative (it is clear from the context that the hand on Mouth's arm is someone else's comforting touch), but seen in isolation also underscores the metonymic elements of the stage image: the isolated mouth.

So far it appears as if on the level of language and narrative *Not I* is straightforwardly metonymic. And yet Lodge shows that this metonymic mode when explored to its limits can slide over into the metaphoric — the other pole of Beckett's work that manifests itself in *Not I* (and many other plays) most readily in the visual component of his art, the stage image.⁸ It can hence be argued that the metonymic, when explored exhaustively, feeds into the metaphoric mode as its logical conclusion, since in the metonymic mode no further development is possible.

There is more. Before we look in detail at how an essentially metonymic text can be made to support the purposes of metaphoric writing by assuming characteristics that are metaphoric in their aims and assumptions, it has to be said that there are instances in

⁷ Paul Lawley (1983) analyzes the function of these images of physical dismemberment in *Not I* in terms of an interplay between the two planes of narrative and stage image.

⁸ At the highest level of generality a metonymic text is, of course, itself metaphorical, because it is unable to postpone its "metaphorization" indefinitely. Any work of literature, Lodge points out, is metaphorical by virtue of being an artistic construct that stands for something which it is about: "the text is the vehicle, the world is the tenor" (Lodge 109). Even at this level of generality, however, it is easier, Lodge points out, to read the metaphoric text as a "total metaphor" than the metonymic text. This ultimate metaphoricity of metonymy must not blur the valid and valuable distinction between the metaphoric and metonymic modes.

the text of *Not I* that are in fact indicative of the metaphoric pole. The series of *Not I* manuscripts held by the Beckett archives at the University of Reading reveals a loss of narrative continuity brought about by a movement away from naturalist narrative detail. I quote at length the beginning of MS 1227/7/12/3 to illustrate this process of paring down. Words that appear in brackets are crossed out in the manuscript and comparison with the familiar published version reveals further reduction and excision in subsequent versions:

birth ... into this world ... this world ... [of a] tiny little thing ... [five pounds] ... in a godfor - ... what? girl? ... [yes] ... tiny little girl ... birth into this ... in a godforsaken hole ... in the bog ... named - ... what? ... what? ... [the downs? ... godforsaken hole in the downs?] ... no ... no! ... the bog ... godforsaken hole in the bog ... named ... named ... [forgotten] ... [to] parents unknown ... unheard of ... he having vanished [into] ... thin air ... no sooner [done] ... [his devilish work] buttoned up his trousers ... and she similarly ... (MS 1227/7/12/3)

It is significant that what is being *omitted* here is naturalist detail that makes one association flow more logically into the next — such as the specification of the ambivalent "godforsaken hole" (as the place where Mouth lives and the vagina from whence she came into the world) as being located in the downs or the bog. Also excised from the text are grammatically functional words that establish the relationships between the fragments of speech. The reader now has to infer the relationship between the juxtaposed fragments more than was previously the case. This can be done fairly easily, because the text is still metonymic: it proceeds by association and connotation and, most importantly, it still preserves at least the rudimentary structures of narrative. (The more naturalist a narrative is, the more it tends towards the metonymic pole.) But Beckett breaks up the continuous storyline of naturalism, pushing his obviously metonymic text further towards metaphor. What makes mainstream film the metonymic genre per se for Lodge is the fact that it moves lineally through space and time following the conventional conception of time as "a series of discrete [i.e. metonymic] moments" (Lodge 1977: 146) and that in so doing it creates the illusion of life (1977: 84). Mouth, on the other hand, prefers to relate her story in a fragmented, though associative manner.

Her "theoretical" philosophical reflections are interspersed with biographical anecdotes that would lend themselves to being related in a conventionally naturalist style: of her gathering cowslips in the fields, of her going to the supermarket, and of her being stared at in the public lavatory. But she does not relate these incidents in linear progression. Instead she adds to the individual themes throughout, each of them identifiable by a recurring phrase, returning to them at regular intervals: first she relates the incident in the field when "the buzzing" first occurred (SP 216), then gets sidetracked into reflections on what the purpose and origin of the buzzing might be, and finally returns to her encounter with the buzzing "back in the field" twice more (SP 221 and 222) before the curtain goes down. Likewise, she returns to her "sudden urge to . . . tell" (SP 222) that always occurs in the wintertime (SP 222) a second time after having first alluded to it about five minutes previously ("always winter some strange reason" [SP 219]). Her more abstract reflections on "the buzzing," (SP 217, 218, 219, 221) the "sudden flash," (SP 217, 218, 219) the "mouth on fire" (SP 220) and "the brain . . . raving away on its own" (*ibid.*) are not of a linear kind either. They recur throughout in a similarly thematic way identified by variations on a theme: "whole body like gone . . . just the mouth" (SP 220, 221); "something she had to . . . had to . . . tell . . . could that be it" (SP 221); "but the brain" (217) "something begging in the brain" (220), "and the brain . . . raving away on its own" (*ibid.*) and so on. Mouth obsessively returns to these themes as one does to dilemmas, never finding a solution yet always having another stab at them. The text becomes repetitive and circular, rather than linear.

The textual evidence in the previous paragraph supports metaphoric tendencies, because of the movement away from naturalist plot, and also the metonymic characteristics of Beckett's text, because the move away from naturalism takes place in the form of associative metonymic fragmentation. Yet this apparent contradiction is in fact no contradiction at all: Beckett's text shows the symptoms of a metonymic text that uses the structures of metonymy to support and further the metaphoric mode. It is a metonymic text on the verge of metaphor. The metonymic, when pursued uncompromisingly to its extreme appears to slip into the metaphoric as the only way out. Lodge shows how Gertrude Stein, one of the most uncompromisingly methodical experimental writers, had to radically switch modes once she had explored the metonymic

mode exhaustively and reached this point of crossing over: "Gertrude Stein ... followed the aesthetic path later traced by Ortega y Gasset in *The Dehumanization of Art* (1984) with an unflinching resolve only equalled by the post-impressionist painters whose work she collected" (Lodge 1977: 151). This path led her conclusively from the extreme metonymy of *The Making of Americans* to the metaphoric mode in *Tender Buttons*. She goes from extreme length and verbal constructions to extreme brevity and nominal constructions (cf. Lodge 1977: 151-2). As a dramatist Beckett has at his disposal a wider array of expressive means than the prose writer. Apart from the prose dimension there is the visual and proxemic dimension. Instead of switching to a new artistic phase, as Stein did, Beckett pulls towards the metonymic pole *and* the metaphoric pole with equal intensity within the same work — two modes that, although they require a radical switch from one to the other, are in a relationship of peculiar logical inevitability to each other.

The dominant textual trait out of which the prose of the play is woven is strategic repetition with a difference — themes recur with slight variations or identical lines recur in slightly altered contexts. Beckett does not go quite to the same lengths of diligence with his pattern of repetition as Stein does in "Picasso," for instance ("One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming ..."), but all the major ideas of the text recur with variation more than once, perpetuating the impression that the text does not really go anywhere, but rather returns to the same preoccupations over and over. In other words, the text has movement, but the movement is circular rather than linear. Mouth is going round in circles obsessively and manically (which is the pattern that drives Auditor to exasperation). The stage directions require the actor to ad-lib from the text while the curtain is rising and to continue behind the curtain for ten seconds until the house lights are up. What the audience is subjected to for the duration of the play is, in other words, merely a snippet from an ongoing torrent of speech. When the curtain goes down and the audience's eye on the scene closes, Mouth in fact goes through the same or a very similar cycle all over again. The narrative dimension, apparently so full of motion, is in fact static.

Stein shows in "Picasso" and elsewhere in her repetition-with-minimal-variation texts that it is possible to reduce motion in the metonymic mode to such an extent that the texts recreate no longer a dynamic movement through time and space (which would be proper to the metonymic mode), but rather insinuate continuous sameness — an impression of never-ending now. This technique of minimal variation is still metonymic, because based on iterative difference, no matter how miniscule, but it is at the extreme end of what the metonymic mode can do before the artist has stretched it to such an extent that a radical change of direction becomes necessary. Employed also by Beckett, to a somewhat lesser extent than Stein, in *Not I* and elsewhere, this technique has the effect of "converting the dynamic into the static, the temporal into the spatial; this is entirely consistent with the aim of metaphor-oriented Symbolist and Imagist verse, or Pound's definition of the 'image' itself, which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." (Lodge 1976: 489). After this, Stein switched to the metaphoric mode of the short prose poems in *Tender Buttons*, which she calls portraits or still-lives — note the analogy to the stillness of Beckett's stage images. Beckett realizes this entirely metaphoric image in the visual dimension of the play. While in language this desire to have an intellectual and emotional complex present itself in an instant of time is always an approximation because of the inherently temporal nature of language, Beckett's stage images come closer to it because of their extreme reduction of movement and their approximation to the pictorial arts: although drama, as much as poetry, is a "time-art" Beckett's stage images as such remain largely unchanging throughout the plays.

The isolated mouth, equally present in the aural and the visual dimensions, is therefore the link that connects the metonymic aural dimension with its intimations of physical and other fragmentation, with the metaphoric visual dimension. *Not I* pulls towards both the metaphoric and the metonymic poles. At first glance this seems to indicate an irreconcilable tension to the breaking point. Upon further reflection, however, the two can in fact, although based on opposing principles, be argued to serve the same end in Beckett's work. The aural dimension moves toward and prepares for the metaphorical dimension in the visual sphere. To reiterate: the seemingly straightforwardly metonymic text of *Not I*, is in fact cyclical or static, not only because of its repetitive nature but also because the enormous performance speed condenses the text into a single

image. While the text washes over the audience the image of the mouth racing at breakneck speed stays with the spectator. Moreover, Stein's work indicates that if one exhausts the possibilities of the metonymic mode in the direction of repetition with minimal difference one ends up with the most extreme form of metonymic prose possible, but one that paradoxically also suggests stillness rather than extreme movement. An artist rigorously looking for further artistic development after this point will of necessity have to make the leap into the stillness of the metaphoric mode and it seems as if Beckett acknowledges this by emphasizing the logical continuity between the metaphoric and the metonymic by encompassing both modes in the same work, both serving the purpose of metaphor.

Exhaustion of the horizontal (in the form of reason, for instance) results in the verticality of the metaphoric. The metonymic dimension in the form it takes in Beckett's text serves the metaphoric dimension. Mouth goes through the motions of her iterative mind, caught in the confines of "the brain ... raving away on its own" (SP 220), unable to exit from the vicious circle of trying to make sense, returning obsessively to existential conundrums that have her stumped: the meaning of human existence ("tiny little thing . . . before its time [...] godforsaken hole [...] no love of any kind" [SP 216]), the role of suffering in it ("unless of course she was . . . *meant* to be suffering . . . ha! . . . *thought* to be suffering" [SP 217]) and the possibility of impossibility of mercy ("brought up as she had been to believe . . . with the other waifs . . . in a merciful . . . [*Brief laugh*] . . . God" [SP 217]). It is doubtful that Mouth ever finds the way out of the obsessions of her mind, but the audience, driven crazy by Mouth's perpetual onslaught, does and takes refuge in the quiet balance of the stage image.

Beckett's work is full of episodes that show human reasoning run wild. Beckett illustrates over and over the human inability to quieten existential anxiety by covering all eventualities, by conceptually ordering the world by means of reason to such an extent that nothing is left to chance. The sucking stones episode in *Molloy* is a prominent example (T 69-74), as are Watt's methodical musings about the mysterious availability of hungry dogs to eat the leftovers of Mr. Knott's dinner (W 88-97). Trying to have every possibility covered is, as Lodge points out, one way of avoiding the selection process

metaphor implies: "A more radical way of denying the obligation to select is to exhaust all the possible combinations in a given field" (1977: 230). Lodge is alluding here to Molloy's attempt to devise a system that will ensure that all of his stones will be sucked equally.

While Lodge is right and I would not attempt to argue that the episodes of obsessive ordering in Beckett's texts are not metonymic, it should be pointed out that there is a difference between the attempt to exhaust the possibilities by finding a rule to which they will all adhere and the attempt to "use everything" which Lodge isolates as a defining characteristic of Stein's *The Making of Americans*: "'Using everything,' the megalomaniac desire to cover, eventually, the whole field of human contiguities with language, defies the practical necessity to select, and insists on the essential uniqueness or 'difference' of each human being underlying their superficial similarity or 'resemblance' to each other," Lodge asserts (1977: 147-8). Beckett's people, on the other hand, are frightened by this proliferation of difference that they perceive as chaos and in their own way they do make an attempt at selection in the sense that they abstract from the chaos and try to formulate a system governed by rule, even (or especially) if that rule will eventually cover everything.

Even in Beckett's prose works, however, the metonymy of such exhaustively systematic reasoning is transcended into some form of metaphoric presence, such as the mysterious Mr. Knott (Mr. Not?). Among Beckett's works for theatrical and televisual performance, *Quad* contains — in fact *is* — the most prominent example of such rational systematization while on another level of generalization it also contains the metaphoric pole. The systematic scurrying of the five hooded figures is contained by a "set" and a stage image that epitomizes the utmost reduction and simplicity: it consists merely of the peculiar Cartesian monks' activity within a faintly lit quadrangle. Throughout, the set does not change, and neither does the camera angle. The camera maintains its position in front and diagonally above the stage. As a result, the figures' frantically scurrying motion is contained by an entirely static image and again the tension or balance between the metonymic and metaphoric poles is operative — this time in a much starker fashion than in *Not I* because of even more radical reduction. Both dimensions confront the spectator on the visual plane since all verbal language has been eliminated.

Finally, of course, *Quad* and *Not I*, as much as any other Beckett play, beg the question of meaning. What does *Quad mean?*, since at the level of "plot" it is not intelligible? At this point Beckett's work becomes ultimately metaphorical. Garner remarks that Beckett's would almost be an "'art of indeterminacy' were it not for the precision with which Beckett specifies the conditions of instability" (79). Nothing is left to chance, everything seems fraught with meaning. The precision of Beckett's stage directions, the minuteness with which his figures move about on stage and the reduction to bare essentials inspire a search for meaning that is by necessity beyond the conventional plot of the contained fictional world. There is no plot in any of Beckett's late plays and even in the earlier and better known ones that could still make at least an attempt to appeal to a plot-oriented audience, plot is reduced to a shadow of its fully-formed cousin in traditional drama. (*Waiting for Godot* is tied to the "plot" idea of two tramps waiting for someone who fails to materialize and *Endgame* has Clov threatening to leave but never actually doing so.) Along with plot, the other cognates of linear contiguity disappear: there is no progression through time, but stasis or circularity; no cause and effect logic; and no stage set imitating the natural world. Naturalist fourth-wall theatre and film try to make their audience believe that what they see *is* the world, whereas Beckett's stylized sets and dialogues leave no doubt that they are meant to *stand for* something else. They are in no relationship of contiguity with the natural world. To an extent, Lodge points out, this is the case in all theatre, regardless of how naturalist it is, because theatre depends on being recognized as performance, not the natural world:

[O]ur pleasure in the play depends on our continuous and conscious awareness that we are spectators not of reality but of a conventionalized model of reality, constructed before us by actors who speak words not of their own but provided by an invisible dramatist. The curtain call at which the actor who died in the last act takes his smiling bow is the conventional sign of this separation between the actors and their roles, between life and art. (Lodge 1977: 83)

For this reason Lodge argues that naturalism in theatre is really an aberration of theatre's metaphoric nature. "Arising out of religious ritual (in which a symbolic sacrifice was *substituted* for a real one) drama is correctly interpreted by its audience as being

analogous to rather than directly imitative of reality [...]" (Lodge 1977: 81). As a reaction to the naturalist trend that has dominated especially commercial theatre throughout the twentieth century, many avant-gardist playwrights have gone out of their ways to emphasize the metaphoric dimension of drama — Beckett among them, according to Lodge (1977: 83). Because it is not otherwise intelligible, *Not I* is read by critics in the most fundamentally metaphorical terms: as mystical encounter (Acheson); conversely, as a metaphor for the impossibility of salvation (Zeifman 43); or as a Jungian-inspired model of identity (cf. Howard 316) (although many of these interpretations then demand an amount of specification that pigeonholes the text). Brater, on the contrary, asks himself whether the play does not go "so far toward simplification and abstraction as to raise the question of whether it refers to anything outside itself" (1974: 256). *Not I* would then have fulfilled the Derridean dream of a self-annihilating piece of literature, freed from any referentiality and hence self-erasing.⁹ But this is not how *Not I* has been read, and to read it in such a way would indeed make it an anomaly in the theatre, because theatre (even more than the other literary genres) is based on communication and hence arguably more immediately connected with human existential concerns.

The question of what *Not I* might actually be *about* leads us to the strategy of displacement that is most centrally the concern of most interpretations of *Not I*: the elision of selfhood in Mouth and, hence, in the speaking voice. If *Not I* is about anything very obvious, it is Mouth's persistent refusal to acknowledge as her own the experiences she describes. Defiant of Auditor's admonitions or corrections (his part of the dialogue the audience can only speculate upon), Mouth continues to tell her story in the third person. Her refusal of the first person singular pronoun is so viciously insistent and the suggestion of it is so obviously painful — Whitelaw in performance clenches her teeth as if waiting for the pain to pass — that *Not I* has been seen in connection with mental illness. Mouth, it has been suggested, is schizophrenic (Acheson 93) or at least deeply disturbed. Like a survivor of some unspeakably traumatic experience, it could be argued, she tries to externalize that experience and distance herself from it by pretending that it happened to

⁹ "If there is no essence of literature—i.e., self-identity of the literary thing—if what is announced or promised as literature never gives itself as such, that means, among other things, that a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was completely self-referential would immediately be annulled." (Derrida 1972 b: 47)

someone else. And now Auditor assumes the role of the psychiatrist who tries to reconcile the two autonomous halves. Then the question becomes whether Mouth's psychological split is thoroughgoing and we are indeed listening only to Mouth's conscious self raving away (her quirkily obsessive reasoning leaves no doubt of her conscious self being dominant), or whether parts of her unconscious trickles in, as in a dream. C.G. Jung's theory of the shadow is often being cited in interpretations of *Not I*. Thus Acheson surmises (with Brater) that arguably "Mouth *has* been taken over by her shadow — the sum of her 'uncontrolled emotional manifestations'" (Acheson 92). But if that is so, it remains unclear how Mouth is able to be very consciously in control when she has to be in order to rebuke Auditor. "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation!" one hears *Catastrophe's* Director groan in the background (SP 299).

One problem with such interpretations is that the text does not provide sufficient information to support them. One cannot decide on the basis of a text that is barely seven pages long whether the character depicted in it is schizophrenic in any clinical (or even merely meaningful) sense, without lapsing into speculation. Much like *The Unnamable*, *Not I* operates at such a level of abstraction that it will support any number of "literal" interpretations: yes, one can speculate that Mouth was raped, as Jessica Tandy seems to have suggested (Bair 624; Knowlson 591) much to Beckett's dismay and even find indications in the text that can be read in this way. Invariably, though, one will drag the text down to a level of specificity it had already transcended, and as a result the interpretation, even if applicable, will always explicate only a fraction of what the text itself comprises. To an extent, this is the fate of any interpretive effort, but it becomes more pronounced the steeper the drop from abstract text to specific interpretation. Indeed, Beckett's texts are self-referential insofar as they are about language itself. They problematize and question the very process and paradigms of the production of meaning, and hence of the nature of meaning itself. Traditional interpretive efforts that attempt to impose narratives on the work to explicate it are anachronistic because they try to reinscribe the work into a representational paradigm that it itself questions. They quickly meet their limitations because it is not possible to procure "meaning" unproblematically in Beckett's texts.

For these reasons I will not attempt a traditional narrative interpretation of *Not I*, but limit the discussion to an analysis of the dissolution of Mouth's subjectivity in the light of Lodge's typology. The majority of interpretations of *Not I* see it as a kind of failed autobiography and diagnose that in order for Mouth to "get better" she will have to acknowledge her own biography as her own and thus stop the mad run away from herself that assumes the rhetorical shape of metonymic horizontality. The metonymic form with its implications of fragmentation is seen as something counter-productive that will have to be remedied by stepping back into the safe haven of the master narrative of a centred subjectivity. "Audiences beholding the versions of *Not I* which include Auditor may come to recognize that the entire set is an image of Mouth's complete self," Patricia Howard (316) asserts in accordance with such interpretations and continues: "The 'I' is the union of the conscious and the unconscious, of body and of spirit: the human being as unique and integral" (ibid.). Auditor once again appears as the benevolent giant whose admonitions Mouth had better heed if she wants to achieve an integration of her whole personality and thus be freed from her pain.

Yet such nostalgia for traditional logocentric centredness is not at all in keeping with the perspective Beckett expounds elsewhere in his work. Especially in *The Unnamable* he systematically undoes all certainty, dismantling (at the level of the novel as a conventional construct) plot, narrative, and character, and at the level of epistemology all ontological certainty based on the centrality of the subject. Beckett dismantles the subjectivity of the speaking voice: the speaker of *The Unnamable* knows that he thinks — what he tries to work out is what mode and level of existence or being, if any, can be ascribed to him on this basis.

At the same time, Beckett is not someone to revel in the bleak uncertainty and hopelessness of the meaningless void, despite persistent claims to this end from Beckett's so-called existentialist critics. Hersh Zeifman's position on *Not I* is consonant with the tenor of those voices:

The Mouth ... refuses to listen. Thus salvation is shown to be unattainable in Beckett's plays, not simply because it doesn't exist, but because the characters won't admit that it doesn't exist, and are therefore denied the only kind of

'salvation' possible to them: the 'peace' that comes from finally accepting that there can be no real peace. (Zeifman 43)

While it is true that Mouth does not listen and that Didi and Gogo refuse to acknowledge that their hope of Godot's arrival is a futile one, this does not imply that all hope would fail if they did. It is the (pseudo-)existentialist critics' choice to identify Godot with (false) hope and an abandonment of the idea of Godot with staring the existentialist void in the face. (With the result that in these critics' picture Beckett's people are caught between the horns of a dilemma: either they continue to exist in the hamster wheel of the inauthenticity of *mauvaise foi* or they confront the "truth" that there is no meaning: both forms of existence are versions of meaninglessness. There is no room left for authentic existence, which still figures so prominently, if untheologically, in Sartre's philosophy.) To a critic who does not accept the postulation of a void beyond *mauvaise foi*, the cyclical nature of Didi and Gogo's hell might merely imply that their conceptual attachments forbid them to risk an existence beyond *mauvaise foi*, where they would encounter genuine hope. What genuine existentialism and negative theology share is a common concern with cutting through human delusions and constructs in order to enable authentic existence (but the latter they configure very differently, of course).

By no means do the texts endorse the characters' situation (beyond compassion for their self-created hell) or present their mode of existence as inevitable and inescapable. Just as any other of Beckett's texts, the text of *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, does not aspire to a naturalist rendition of the everyday conversations of two stranded tramps. Extrapolating from Lodge's distinction, one could reason that a naturalist mode of presentation — imitative of the real world, rather than analogous to it — tries to mask the constructed nature of what is being presented and to pass it off for reality with all its claustrophobic inescapability. The obviously stylized nature of Beckett's dramatic dialogues and sets, however, draws attention to their constructedness and hence to the presence of the dramatist beyond the stage who has arranged the dramatic "text" in terms of metaphoric meaning. The implicit presence of the dramatist as the purveyor of meaning can well be read as a logocentric limitation in Derrida's scheme; what it also achieves, though (arguably to decentering effects) is a distantiating from the text: the

audience reads the play as an artistic construct, not an inescapable force of nature. The artist implicitly points towards the way out.

Beckett's pervasive humour and irony with which the characters' frequently dismal existences are infused are further means by which he achieves distance from the dramatic situations and people and allows audiences to envisage other, better, modes of existence. The most basic form of irony, in which the intended meaning is opposite or near opposite to what is actually said, and hence meaning is that which is *not* said, by definition opens up a dimension beyond the text. Most of Beckett's characters, notably the speaker of *The Unnamable*, have a remarkable degree of ironic distance from their own situations. A problem manifests itself only when this irony is then read as a stable representational paradigm on the basis of which it is possible to *translate* Beckett's "cryptic" texts into interpretations that produce representational discourse on particular topics.

As soon as one does not look for a paradigm of representation but reads Beckett's irony and humour rather as self-subversive mechanisms meant to undermine the very assumptions of a representational logic, then the text of *Not I*, for instance, stops to appear as an instance of failure — as failed autobiography and as a failure to produce representational discourse — because the paradigm of stable subjectivity cannot be applied to it. The majority of Beckett's critics approach his work with ideas of fullness and wholeness (the complete body and the centred self) that serve as reference points in their critiques, and then they see *Not I* as a case of unachieved integration, or, in the best of cases, as participating in the fragmentation of the subject as a postmodern commonplace. Enoch Brater, for instance, calls the "disintegration" of *Not I* an "ontological disaster" (1987: 23), but is it really that, if one shifts one's perspective from a bias towards fullness to emptiness? Emptiness here should be understood in all shades of its three implied meanings: literal emptiness of the stage space; emptiness in the sense of nondual *sunyata*; and emptiness in the sense of a process of self-emptying implicit in *kenosis*. In a cursory article on the parallels between negative theology and Beckett's art that overlooks a few crucial distinctions (such as the fact that Christian negative theology is still a theism), Marius Buning nonetheless sees that "*Not I* may be interpreted not only as dramatising *Mouth's* [sic] confrontation with her own Jungian shadow (as Enoch Brater has shown), or as a flight from self-perception and self-acceptance, but also as a struggle

to give up the Self in order to become aware of a wholly 'other' reality, although it cannot be put in words" (138-9).

The premise of Jina Politi's article on *Not I* offers an interestingly divergent starting point in the corpus of Beckett criticism with an argument that is in favour of Mouth's refusal to accept the first person singular pronoun: in bold opposition to the vast majority of criticism on *Not I* Politi questions the benevolence of Auditor. In her opinion Auditor tries to impose on Mouth a discourse written for her by others as her autobiography: "Like *The Unnamable*, the play appears to centre round the pressure exercised by the discourse of Authority upon the subject to accept as axiomatic the truth of their description" (353), and she concludes, forcefully, that

[t]o try, then, together with the Auditor, as with most Beckett critics, to read *Not I* as a miscarried 'autobiography', is to assume the terroristic position of an inquisitor who by hook or by crook tries to subjugate Mouth's narrative to the authoritative law of a subjectivist genre; secure the authenticity of the subject's discourse; pass judgment; close the case and dismiss the audience court. (Politi 354)

I would not go so far as to read this strong antagonism between Mouth and Auditor into the play, because it neglects the exquisite balance between them, especially in the stage image, but also as a semantic complementarity. Furthermore, Politi's emphasis on Mouth's "right to *author*" (345) remains noticeably within the discourse of subjectivity by maintaining that there is indeed a self to choose and to construct autonomously. What is important, though, is that Politi is able to see a positive force behind Mouth's refusal to accept the "I." Especially in view of Beckett's single-minded and methodical emphasis on reduction, concentration and emptiness in the visual component of his dramatic work it is worth suggesting that Politi did not go far enough in her critique of logocentrism and that both dramatic components, verbal and visual pull in the same direction away from any kind of subjectivity.

If the stage image constitutes the metaphoric pole and thereby opens not the necessity but at least the possibility of transcendent meaning, then maybe we can look at what may be a simple metonymic flow of words as a kind of emptying out of language, a kind of kenosis of discourse that has as its end the emergence of the transcendent

dimension. The subject empties itself in a torrential outpouring of the stuff that constitutes its subjectivity, and by emptying oneself of one's ego-centred subjectivity the divine likeness can emerge. Here the other obvious biblical allusion to St. Paul in the title of *Not I* comes into play: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20) and also: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

If one wants to abstract from this idea of "conventional" kenosis even further, it can be argued that what is at work in the text of *Not I* is a kind of kenosis of discourse. In other words, *Not I* is not simply the representation of an I divesting itself of its ego-centred subjectivity in order to allow the nondual divine beyond ego-attachments to show through. Rather, we move to a further level of abstraction at which the text itself divests itself of its own subjectivity. The text goes through a process of strategic self-emptying that frees the language of the text from all authority, all narrative, all dogma.

As Derrida emphasizes, no text belongs to the *via negativa* "pure and simple." If this were the case, the subversive power of the *via negativa* would have been forfeited because it would turn into just another positivism. Likewise and by the same token, even non-theological texts are "in some way contaminated with negative theology" (1993: 69). The text is split just like the apophatic process is split into a kataphatic and an apophatic moment and the kenosis of the text is a process of perpetual undercutting of every positive statement. For example, Mouth relates that "she" found herself "in the dark," though "not exactly ... insentient" (SP 217), but, at any rate, uncertain of spatial position, "whether standing ... or sitting" (ibid.). And just as the reader has convinced herself that this is a fairly miserable situation to find oneself in, the speaker postulates that nonetheless she was "not suffering" (ibid.) — at which point all theories about what might have happened to Mouth go overboard again. The text makes it consistently impossible to build a coherent theory of who Mouth is, what might have happened to her and what the nature of the state that she finds herself in is.

The apophatic moment negates the positive statement because the absolute singularity of that statement has already withdrawn at the very moment it is pronounced. The apophatic undercuts the everydayness of the postulation (for example, "God is

good") in order to preserve the absolute transcendence of God and at the same time it makes that transcendence emerge in the interstices of language because the content of the paradoxical statement that emerges in the process of negation overflows the standard semantic boundaries established by a logic of non-contradiction. So the apophatic simultaneously undercuts in a horizontal process of subversion or deconstruction, and it preserves transcendence, while this transcendence turns into a moment of paradox and undecidability, not a conventional logocentric transcendent.

It can be argued that these tendencies of simultaneous subversion and preservation can be found on another structural and formal level of the play, namely the metonymic and metaphoric poles, and that the former (subversion) is represented by the metonymic tendencies of the play, while the latter (preservation) is represented by its metaphoric tendencies. To push the analogy just a little bit further, one could then say that, although metaphor and metonymy are irreconcilable poles, in *Not I* they work together towards a nondual transcendent.

The notion of a kenosis of discourse in *Not I* is fortified by Blanchot's short text on the narrative voice in Beckett, "Where now? Who now?" (2003), because Blanchot's text pinpoints the (more general) loss of narrative authority by focusing on "having lost the ability to say I" (213). Language in Beckett is no longer governed by the primacy of the subject: the 'I' disappears in Beckett's text. What remains are "empty images revolving mechanically around an empty center that the nameless 'I' occupies," Blanchot says (2003: 212). And, since Blanchot's focus is *The Unnamable*, one might add that by the time Beckett's reduction process reaches *Not I* the speaker has most literally lost the ability to say 'I' and to acknowledge her own subjectivity. Thus Beckett's text becomes a vehicle for a central conception in Blanchot's own thought: the advance in writing and in literature of a *neutral* space that "expresses nothing" (Blanchot 1982: 22) because, as a neutral space, it cannot be the vehicle for a subjectivity that would seek expression for its innermost ideas. *The Unnamable* "is precisely experience lived under the threat of the impersonal, the approach of a neutral speech that speaks itself alone" (2003: 213). Here the text itself (rather than the author, plot or reader) performs its own fundamental emptiness.

This idea of the neutral space of writing (detached as it is from the individuality and the temporal reality of the author and even the reader) links up with Blanchot's divergence from Heidegger in the interpretation of the notion of death: for Blanchot death is not the moment that defines a person's life in its singularity (since no one else can die my death), as it is for Heidegger. Rather, the significance of death is the opposite: in death one is deprived of the world of action, or of possibility, that defines one's own existence as singular (in the sense that what is possible is what one can achieve through one's actions and action is a vehicle for one's individuality). Hence Blanchot calls death the "impossibility of possibility," in divergence from Heidegger's "possibility of impossibility" that generates all other possibility in life. In Blanchot's model of a contested subjectivity these two "versions" of death as possibility and impossibility vie with one another, simultaneously affirming and negating subjectivity (cf. Hart 2004: 130).

Blanchot, like Beckett, wants to open us to a passivity, an end of possibility, that, in turn, opens us beyond the world of subject-centred action in which language is a mere utilitarian carrier of information. He confronts us with an Other in what Blanchot significantly calls the "Outside" of language. Language as writing is an experience of loss and dispersal where language is not the mode with which *inner* thought is expressed, but rather is confronted with an *outside*. But given the way the neutral space is "structured," the path to this outside is a path towards a non-origin: the origin is always already split. The neutral is neutral in that "it cannot be central, does not create a center, does not speak from out of a center" (Blanchot 2003: 386). In Nagarjuna's words, it does not posit a thesis and therefore cannot be faulted: it grasps language in a space "outside" the binary distinctions that govern comprehension in conventional terms, a space "where speaking would neither affirm being nor need negation in order to suspend the work of being that is ordinarily accomplished in every act of expression" (387). To confront the neutral is not another possibility among many, but the very point where possibility, will and power are exhausted. To underline his point Blanchot distinguishes between the work and the book. The work (of writing) — as opposed to the book as cultural object — is a never-ending task of slippage during which the nature of literature, the trace, remains ineffable, emerges only in the interstices, in what literature manages to say without saying it,

because any conceptualization of this nature would place the work immediately on the side of the book.

It becomes clear that despite its name the Outside is not outside of language at all. It does not function by way of a logic of exclusion that would situate it either inside or outside. Rather, it is inside *and* outside at the same time, offering its own concepts up to deconstruction immediately. Strictly speaking, it is neither inside nor outside, because it does not even advance any concepts in the first place. The Outside is an aporetic space in which the rules of conceptualization do not take hold. A figure that is both inside and outside by turning a logic of non-contradiction into aporia is iconic (rather than idolatrous), a term that hails from the destabilization of representation in iconography, and in the context of Beckett's work it certainly retains its visual overtones.

It is important that Blanchot calls the Outside the Outside for yet another reason. With this name he hangs on to a structure of transcendence, the notion of an outside of language not unlike Derrida's impossible appeal to the end of metaphysics that cannot be reached because there is no way of leaving metaphysics. In its iconicity and its structural transcendence the Outside could be seen to assume the position of the sacred: it is a kind of displaced sacramentalism in a horizontal realm, in that it becomes an absolutely irreducible space.

There is no doubt in my mind that Blanchot is right in proposing that there is such a neutral space in Beckett's work, but he also needs to be careful before claiming Beckett unreservedly as his spokesperson. There are important, if minute, differences between Beckett and Blanchot: The Blanchotian Outside is a space of endless dispersal devoid of the gathering or concentration that emerges from Beckett's process of reduction. In Beckett's work this dispersal also takes place, most notably in *The Unnamable*, and still in later minimalist works such as *Worstward Ho*, where every assertion is systematically put under erasure by the moment of slippage between affirmation and negation. At the same time, however, the short sentence fragments of *Worstward Ho* imitate the concentration we have already observed in the stage images. Beckett "chops up" complex sentences to halt forward motion, making it possible to contemplate a thing in itself, by itself, say, a place and a body and being a body in space, rather than "a place ... for the body to be in," as Beckett's sentence would read were it ordinarily punctuated ("A place. Where none.

For the body. To be in" [WW 89]). Beckett's space goes into a phase of concentration after an indispensable process of dispersal that ascertains that what is being concentrated is not merely our own partial conceptuality. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that the simultaneous result of Beckett's process of dispersal is an uncanny concentration. Such a formulation would foreground the aporetic impulse in which Beckett's artistic endeavors are grounded. For the same reason Blanchot's neutral space also lacks Beckett's fascination with the immediate, momentous self-giving that he finds in painting and that increasingly found its way into his own art. Blanchot's neutral has nothing new or fresh that gives itself in it. It is eternal only in the sense that it endlessly repeats and regurgitates — which Beckett does, too, but the repetitions "culminate" in concentrated images of momentarily eternal stillness and repose. In both cases the text appeals to, creates, and performs an iconic space at the limit of discourse.¹⁰

In this chapter we have traced the various strategies of reduction at work in *Not I* in order to determine whether Beckett's can be seen as a vertical apophaticism or whether it is of necessity a horizontal, secular one. This is difficult to determine because his work rather diffusely points both ways. In order to cut the problem down to size and to approach it with a terminology native to the study of literature, we enlisted the help of David Lodge's typology of modern literature: the metaphoric pole is compatible with theological verticality, while the metonymic pole situates Beckett's work securely in the horizontal realm. At a glance it appears as if an oscillation is at work in the play: the text pulls toward the metonymic pole while the stage image is metaphoric. However, the text explores the metonymic to an extent at which it has all but exhausted movement. Movement has become miniscule and repetitive; it approaches the stasis of the visual image and the only means of further development at this point is a leap into the metaphoric. In reaching its limits, the metonymic works towards the metaphoric pole. What looks like an oscillation is in fact a transcendence of the metonymic into the metaphoric. This pattern is at work on more levels than one: contrary to most criticism on *Not I*, I chose to treat Mouth's refusal of the first-person pronoun, i.e. of centred

¹⁰ In so doing Beckett's *Worstward Ho* with its still iconicity ironically contrasts with the linearity of Kingsley's story of adventure, exploration, power and conquest. *Westward Ho!* is about individual and imperial exploits in a world of action and possibility while *Worstward Ho* dramatizes repetition and inaction and the concomitant dissolution of centred subjectivity, as well as aporetic states of impossibility.

logocentric discourse, not as a symptom of a straightforward Derridean decentered subjectivity, but, consonant with my positive evaluation of emptiness, as a symptom of a programmatic emptying-out of self and, on a more abstract level, as a kind of kenosis of discourse in which the text deconstructs its own narrative authority. The text is doubled — split into a kataphatic and an apophatic moment that can be argued to correspond to the play's metaphorical and metonymic tendencies and work together to make a non-logocentric transcendent emerge in the interstices of language and to safeguard it.

The purpose of this chapter was not so much to advance a specific interpretation of *Not I* (although it is that, too) as to make a formal observation that is in principle applicable to many of Beckett's late works for the stage, which consist in many cases of a text driven by horizontal movement and a static or still stage image. The reading I propose accounts for the persistent tendency of Beckett's works to gesture beyond themselves, not only insofar as they are, as Lance Butler calls them, "ontological parables," but especially because they do not simply take issue with fundamental ills of the human condition, but emphasize their humanly fabricated nature and gesture towards an exit from these ills as soon as human attachments are left behind. Butler is right in observing that Beckett finds "something wrong at the root of the human situation ... something wrong ontologically" (151) and arguably also in claiming that Beckett's work is a "vision of ultimate reality" (196), but this vision is, of course, never actually presented, or represented, on stage. The characters never find a way out of their manufactured predicaments. Rather, it is gestured at in the gentle humour with which Beckett portrays his people's dilemmas and in the serenity and stillness of his metaphorical stage images that suggest meaning beyond the horizontality of the characters' frantic pursuits.

V. The Empty Space of *Quad*

By the time we reach *Quad* the main divergence between Beckett's perspective and apophatic discourse becomes apparent: in apophatic discourse what cannot be said in language emerges in its interstices. Every proposition one makes about the divine reveals itself to be in need of correction, and often it is corrected by a directly contradictory proposition. The semantic force of the apophatic statement emerges from the tension between these two propositions. The apophatic proclamation 'God is beyond (language or reason),' for instance, immediately finds itself in a performative contradiction by setting up two conceptual spaces: one immanent and one transcendent. It generates a conceptual dualism in need of correction. The structures of apophatic discourse will then demand the opposite statement be made: 'God is immanent.' The tension between these two contradictory statements overflows the standard semantic boundaries and generates the semantic equivalent of the experience of union with the divine (or what Michael Sells prefers to call an "event," rather than experience, to avoid the connotations of individuality and quiddity that sometimes accompanies the concept of experience: in apophatic discourse questions like 'Do mystics of different traditions experience the same thing?' are pointless, since what is experienced is beyond such substantialist categories). However, since *every* statement is in need of correction the regress is endless and every glimpse of the nondual "beyond" is only fleeting. Apophasis does not have an issue with the forward movement inherent in the fleetingness: God cannot be pinned down and the forward movement is not teleological. Apophasis recognizes itself as discourse (that is, as different from the actual "event") and accepts the limitations of its discourse.

For Beckett the problem presents itself differently: first, up to and including *The Unnamable*, he goes all out in a quest-like pursuit of the unnamable (a pursuit apophatic language does not attempt because it does not assume that it can achieve adequacy to the divine in language) and once he recognizes this pursuit as futile he tries to abandon all quest-like, linear, sequential structures and therefore, finally, language as such.¹ The motionless stage images of his late work are, then, not only indicative of a tendency

¹ I see language as a "quest-like structure" because its movement from subject to verb and object can be seen as inherently linear and sequential. I am not attempting to insinuate that post-structuralist deferral, non-teleological as it is, betrays quest-like structures.

towards metaphoricity and verticality, but also of a fundamental mistrust of language. This means that if Beckett's art indeed progressively works toward reduction of the narrative/temporal element, because (as he proclaimed in his early German letter to Axel Kaun) the inadequacies of language became increasingly painful to him, then his late play for television, *Quad*, can be seen (and has for different reasons been seen)² as the culmination of his minimalist art: it abandons language entirely in favour of the undivided intensity of the metaphoric visual image. What makes *Quad* quintessentially theatrical, despite the fact that it abandons traditional notions of plot and character, is that it reduces and then foregrounds elements of artistic expression that are specific to the theatre: Beckett turns towards another medium, the visual dimension of the theatre, to further an artistic vision that defied further development in prose. Clearly, this trajectory is idiosyncratic to Beckett's predilections rather than written into the media themselves: apophatic writers are at home in iterative language, while paintings can be viewed dualistically from the position of a transcendent subject.

There are two foci for this chapter: in the first part I will examine Beckett's attempt to stop motion in order to avoid any semblance of teleology. Here I will use Gilles Deleuze's argument in "L'épuisé" (1996) as a foil for my own interpretation, because it advances some similar ideas while drawing radically different conclusions. Deleuze finds the idea of exhaustion with its nihilist implications essential to understanding *Quad*, while I find exhaustion in *Quad* only to the extent that the domain of the rational is exhausted so as to make room for a more contemplative intelligence that is reflected in the nondual principles in *Quad*. As in the chapter on *Not I*, I will illustrate the religious impulse and the theological questioning as formal forces, rather than attempt to find them in a hidden allegorical meaning. There is the counterproductive danger to allegory — one Beckett was well aware of — of reversing the conventional relationship between primary text and interpretive effort by trying to elucidate an abstract text with a specific interpretation and thus narrow rather than broaden the scope of the text. With the dominantly mimetic, metonymic *Film* it is easy to attach allegorical values to the two main characters without limiting a text whose narrative texture is minimal: in fact, the

² cf. Herta Schmid (1988) for whom *Quad* is "the culmination of the author's minimal art" (263) and "the quintessence of theater" (ibid.).

narrative structure seems to call for a parallel narrative on the allegorical level. A metaphorical text, by contrast, hints at such depth as is impossible to match in allegory.

This formal concern leads directly into the second part of the chapter, in which I will trace an aesthetic of nonduality in *Quad*, both in the composition of the visual image as well as in its presentation, i.e. in the acting. In the apophatic conception the structures of discursive reason reflect an alienated consciousness split into subject and object, whereas the nondual mind is engaged in an integrative form of contemplation (*theoria*, in Plotinus) — a contemplation that is hence not the contemplation of *something*. This emerges with particular force as soon as one traces the acting style Beckett favours throughout his late work and which in the absence of dialogue carries *Quad*, to the 20th century aestheticians of the theatre who have left their distinct marks on *Quad*: Edward Gordon Craig and Oskar Schlemmer. The major influence on Craig (and to an extent Schlemmer) is Heinrich von Kleist's essay on the marionette theatre, for which Beckett, in turn, has expressed great admiration. In this essay Kleist passionately argues for a consciousness unalienated from itself.

1.

In his early letter to Axel Kaun, who tried unsuccessfully to win Beckett's enthusiasm and expertise as a translator for a proposed Ringelnatz translation into English, Beckett spoke of his inability to produce official English because the latter appeared to him pointless, like a veil waiting to be torn that is draped over the things, or the nothing, behind it.³ He considers it his calling — any contemporary writer's calling — to poke one hole after another into the "terribly arbitrary materiality of the word-surface"⁴ (D 53) in order to dissolve it. He is aware of the ambitious nature of this undertaking and emphasizes the importance of modesty: "For the time being one has to make do with small steps. First of all, it can only be about somehow devising a method that will represent this contemptuous attitude to the word literally [or: by means of words. Beckett

³ Translation mine. "Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen." (D 52)

⁴ Translation mine. "Jene fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität der Wortfläche." (D 52)

is punning here]" (D 53; emphasis mine).⁵ He then draws a parallel between what he has in mind and the "logographs" (53) of Gertrude Stein ("the linguistic tissue has at least become porous"⁶ [ibid.]), not without qualifying the parallel straight away: unfortunately Stein has come close to his ideal only by accident. As far as Beckett is concerned, Stein still shows too much respect for language. She is in love with it ("Die unglückliche Dame (lebt sie noch?) ist ja ohne Zweifel immer noch in ihr Vehikel verliebt" [53]), teases it, plays with it, and this playing becomes an end in itself. She is so taken with the things language can do that the solution of the problem itself recedes into the background, of secondary interest to the effects she creates. In other words, what was intended as a deconstruction ends up turning into a reification. What was intended to break up the surface in fact turns into just another surface.

This Beckettian criticism of the Steinian method is not a rejection of the capacity of language to produce the semantic equivalent of an "experience" of truth (Stein's preoccupation with her own concoctions no doubt have their origin in her belief that they express especially well an extra-linguistic truth that could not otherwise be captured), nor even of the traditional artistic stance that through exercising a particular gift one can approximate one's vehicle (i.e. language or canvas) to the "truth" of one's perceptions (a precept to which Stein also no doubt subscribes), nor is it a rejection of a meaningful universe outside of the constructions of language. Language as such (apart from its petrified forms maintained through "grammar and style" [52]) retains the capacity to tear the veil, but it is important to treat it as what it is: a vehicle, a means to an end, not an end in itself. There is no valorization of language taking place here, but that does not mean that language as such is meaningless. It simply does not occupy a privileged position in a hierarchy of means. Beckett will use any means to the end of uncovering the something or nothing (no-thing) behind the surface conceptualizations of language. Structurally, it is important to recognize the clearly articulated dualism in Beckett's statement about the something or nothing behind the surface of language. It is a dualism that is essential to any theological enquiry: there is language and there is the truth beyond language —

⁵ Translation mine. "Selbstverständlich muss man sich vorläufig mit Wenigem begnügen. Zuerst kann es nur darauf ankommen, irgendwie eine Methode zu erfinden, um diese höhnische Haltung dem Worte gegenüber wörtlich darzustellen." (D 53)

⁶ Translation mine. "Das Sprachgewebe ist wenigstens porös geworden." (D 53)

whether this truth is something or nothing is another question and, for Beckett, remains to be seen, but the premise he works from is a fully articulated dualism of immanence and transcendence. In other words, although Beckett's enquiry is an immanent one, he does not abandon structures of transcendence.

Two details in the passage quoted above are striking. One is that Beckett should stress the preliminary nature of the strategy he proposes, implying that once one has acquired some practice, exhausted the potential of the method and as a result has succeeded in altering people's linguistic sensibility, there will be other, more far-reaching means. The other is that he wastes no time and provides an analogy to Stein's technique from the world of the visual arts: he mentions Feininger — presumably Lyonel Feininger, the Expressionist/Cubist painter and Bauhaus instructor.

Beckett is an extremely, if not quintessentially, visual artist — an oddity in someone who worked primarily as a writer, but an intriguing fact considering that he worked in the theatre and other visual media and had ample opportunity to express his visual temperament there. His predilection for the visual emerges even in his prose writings, especially his late novels, whose structure is determined by the images they present rather than by their narrative. Especially *Ill Seen, Ill Said* tends to read like a screenplay. Each paragraph presents one particular scene as if describing a stage set, illuminating one detail after another in the spotlight of its gaze and making it visible for the reader: "The cabin. [...] Chalkstones of striking effect in the light of the moon. [...] Rigid with face and hands against the pane she stands" (ISIS 50-51). Its sentence fragments sometimes resemble directions for camera angles in screenplays ("Close-up then" [57]; "the hands seen from above" [66]; "Close-up of a dial" [76]). Thematically, as the title suggests, the novel is concerned with seeing phenomena for what they are, with one's inability to see them for what they are "nor by the eye of the flesh nor by the other" (56) and with one's inability to represent the visual: "Such the confusion now between real and — how say its contrary? [...] And such the farrago from eye to mind" (72).

Beckett's closest friends were not fellow writers, but almost all visual artists: Jack Yeats, van Velde, Henri Hayden, and Avigdor Arikha are the most important ones. But, as Stanton Garner points out, "Beckett's temperament was more deeply visual than a study of allusions and influences might suggest" (53) and we will spend much of this

chapter exploring it. Few writers for the stage have retained the same amount of control over their theatrical images as Beckett, who specifies their composition in minute detail in his stage directions and who often worked as a director of his own plays, thus assuming ultimate control over the work as a whole, taking, as it were, a holistic approach to his own creation.

In his essay "L'épuisé" Deleuze also ascribes particular importance to the visual in Beckett's art. The essay is about the television plays in general (in which Deleuze finds the culmination of Beckett's art) and especially about *Quad*. Deleuze starts out by distinguishing between fatigue and exhaustion, assuming exhaustion to be the "goal" of all Beckett plays: "The fatigued person cannot realize anything anymore, whereas the exhausted one can no longer create any possibilities" (57).⁷ In other words, the former, due to his fatigue, cannot choose from an array of possibilities, whereas for the latter the very possibilities have disappeared. Deleuze proposes a kind of hierarchical progression of "languages" that Beckett invents in order to exhaust the possible. This progression is useful in illustrating the means by which Beckett will attempt to poke holes in the surface of language in order to get at the "something or nothing" behind it, and it is in accordance with what I would like to propose here, but the conclusions Deleuze draws from it are not.

The first "language" is a "disjunct, cut-up, chopped up" (66) language of enumerations, a language of nouns that Deleuze observes especially in the novels up to *Watt*. It is characterized by same combinatory logic that is responsible for the sucking-stones episode in *Molloy*. The second language is a language of "voices" that works no longer with combinatory atoms but with "streams to be blended and mixed" (66). It is to "exhaust the words themselves" (ibid.) as Deleuze puts it, by exhausting the streams from which they are made. Those streams are the others: other possible worlds. The third and final language is that of "the visual or acoustic ... image, provided one frees it from the shackles with which the other two languages hold it back" (70). In the first case the shackles would be those of a combinatory, rationalistic imagination, in the second an imagination held down by memories (ibid.) that root the image in the past. And then Deleuze offers a remarkable sentence to characterize images in Beckett. It appears in quite an unmotivated fashion in Deleuze's text and appears atypical of the nihilist tenor of

⁷ Translations from Deleuze's text mine throughout.

his text. Unless I misread, I agree with the implied purpose of Beckett's forays into the language of visuality:

It is very difficult to tear away everything that is connected with the image [...]. It is very difficult to create a pure, immaculate image that is nothing but image, to arrive where it appears in all its singularity, without being burdened down with anything personal or rational, and to penetrate to the indefinable as if to a celestial state. (Deleuze 71)

We have already noted the tendency in apophatic discourse to slip back (by necessity, given the nature of its project) into the dualist, substantialist discourse it attempts to deconstruct — which is why it has to repeat this effort over and over. The image Deleuze talks about is free from these limitations, does not need to renew its efforts, and in this sense closer, if not indistinguishable from the "event" itself.

One wonders, given Deleuze's agenda, to what purpose, unless for irony, he employs the religious vocabulary in this sentence, because the religious, insofar as it is built on an I-thou relationship, or one of immanence and transcendence or, more generally, one of self and Other, depends on a fully formed dualism in order to overcome it. This means that in order to have a fully formed Other a certain gathering movement has to take place: one will have to affirm something, whether it is indeed a something or a no-thing. The movement that takes place in Deleuze's vision of Beckett's art, however, is purely one of *dispersal*: to exhaust the potential of space and to disperse the power of the image. The end of this dispersing process is, in other words, a nihilistic one. Already, the divergences between Deleuze's approach and my own can be traced to a fundamental difference: Deleuze's approach is entirely horizontal, whereas I find in Beckett's work structures of transcendence, although Beckett's analysis is made from an immanent perspective.

What attracts Deleuze to the image is its ephemeral quality. It can, Deleuze says, itself become process (93). It can detach itself from its object, and become an event that does not need to realize itself in a body or object (ibid.), "similar to the grin without cat in Lewis Carroll" (ibid.). Now the trouble with celebrity philosophers writing on literature is that their own thought takes precedence over the work they are discussing. Deleuze does not spend much time on demonstrating where in Beckett's work he finds instances of

purely potential images. The most convincing example he mentions is the Stuttgart TV version of *Eh Joe* that *suggests* a smile by showing merely the possibility of one in the eyes as well as a few upward-curving wrinkles around the mouth but does not show the mouth itself (94). It is not clear, however, why Deleuze insists on treating this example as a potential image rather than a full-fledged but synecdochical image, but what he describes could just as well take place (through inflection of voice, for instance) in what he calls "acoustic" images — images created by means of language and mediated by language, but also images created by way of sound, presumably both musical and purely sonic, although Deleuze refers explicitly only to musical ones. There is nothing specific to visual images in the theatre in the phenomenon of potential images Deleuze describes, but there seems to be a distinct difference between visual and musical or sonic images.⁸

It seems to me, first of all, that especially theatrical images have a much *closer* relationship to their "signifiers" (for example, actors) than ones mediated by language, and hence cannot as easily be separated from the physicality of their object and that, secondly, as I will attempt to show throughout this chapter, Beckett's stage images do not disperse their power or potential. Because theatrical images tend to "show" rather than "tell," they have, in Peirce's terminology, an iconic quality to them. They convey their story by a set of signifiers that bears a certain resemblance to the signifieds, i.e. the actor playing Hamm, for instance, should exhibit some of the defining characteristics specified for the character of Hamm in order to cut a convincing figure. And neither of the two, Hamm nor the actor, could disappear without sacrificing the inherent nature of theatre (or, to a large extent, television), whereas a word can comfortably stand in for what it signifies. Of course, this does not mean that the two are inseparable. Any number of actors with given characteristics are suitable for a given role. But it does mean that there is a close connection between the image in its potentiality, which is also the one physically realized on stage, and the immediate physicality of the actors that anchors the play in the real world.

Further, Beckett's theatrical images are ephemeral only insofar as they remain part of an art form that unfolds in time. They will disappear as soon as the play has come to an

⁸ Deleuze does not differentiate between "visual" and "acoustic" images (Deleuze 70), but I wish to argue the case of visual theatrical images and will hence confine myself to those, without trying to suggest that the visual is the only dimension theatrical images consist of.

end, and this ephemerality is important, but within this definition they become as pictorial and unchanging as possible. Within the limits of this unchanging and static composition they have hardly any means of dispersing their power or potential. They remain physically static but dynamically charged within their physical stasis. I agree with Deleuze only insofar as the image is the most encompassing and effective means by which Beckett breaks up the surface structures of language, but rather than for the purpose of a dispersal this happens to achieve a gathering of potential and a concentration in reduction.

In the plays of the 1970's and 80's Beckett embarks on an exploration of the play as image that gains in definition and momentum as he experiments with increasing levels of reduction. In most of these plays language continues to play a role, but it is increasingly subordinated to the visual realm as the narrative dimensions of the plays shrink: dominated by patterns of repetition and meant to visualize internal states rather than external action, the language dimensions of the plays do not have much of a story to tell. The near-disappearance of narrative and the disciplined exploration of the visual is a confluence in which Beckett stretches the limits of the theatrical, but most importantly one in which he confronts the limits of the horizontal metonymic narrative. Narrative comes to a near stop: it approximates and converges with almost entirely still stage images that resemble paintings more than the moving and shifting world of theatre. Although Beckett only *approximates* stillness in both the domains of narrative and of the visual image, a development towards the stillness of the aesthetics of painting is traceable here. Beckett "privileges" the stillness of the visual and with it the vertical, metaphorical pole. This changes the perception of time in Beckett's art: the audience is urged to let go of its conceptualization of time as linear progression.

His attempts at poetry left aside, Beckett worked in the two narrative literary genres,⁹ the novel and drama. What the subsumption of novel and drama under the heading of "narrative" emphasizes is that they are both time-arts (in different ways,

⁹ I work with Seymour Chatman's proposition to subsume both novels and drama under the heading of "narrative." Under the traditional narrow definition the term narrative applies only to primarily diegetic forms of literature, excluding primarily "mimetic" forms such as drama. However, Chatman points out that "there is no great difference between the structures of the 'what,' the *story component* told by epics and enacted by dramas. Both rely on sequences of events, and both present a chronology of events different from the chronology of the discourse" (110).

obviously, since one can go back and re-read a few pages in a novel but one cannot turn back time in a play and look at the first act again) and that they are both defined by horizontal, linear unfolding in time. Prose, as categorized by Lodge, has a natural tendency towards the metonymic pole of literature, which is horizontal in movement and hence accompanied by a strong sense of the passage of time or the movement through time. Drama, on the other hand, is dominantly metaphorical, but its narrative dimension — the fact that it also tells a story — is equally defined by the passage of time. The fact that both drama and prose evoke an impression of linearity because of their time-dependent natures as narrative does of course not mean that the *stories* they tell have to be related in a linear fashion: the stories unfold according to a given sequence of events, but the sequence of events as they appear in the narrative, or discourse, may be jumbled up. The narrator may choose to start with the end or the middle, but this does not change the sequence of events. Both novel and play can work with "flashbacks" and other methods that jumble up the chronology of the story on the level of discourse. The impression of linearity remains because in their reception processes these art forms depend on the passage of time. This means that they prescribe an order in which the audience will take in the information that is offered. In a play or a novel one has no choice but to start on the first page or to follow the play from the moment the curtain rises to curtain call. And if one skips thirty pages, or if one leaves the theatre for a quick breath of fresh air during the second act, there is no guarantee that the rest will still make sense. In such a case one may have successfully rebelled against the inherent structures of the genre. One has, however, not exposed oneself to the work in the way deemed meaningful by the artist.

Paintings, on the other hand, are a non-temporal art form because they do not prescribe a particular sequence in their reception. They offer themselves all at once, in a single blink, to viewers, who can then proceed to process and digest them at their leisure. The viewer can start wherever she chooses, go from general to particular or vice versa, return to a particular detail repeatedly and so on. The viewing of a picture also takes (place in) time, but it is only the viewer's work that is temporal here, whereas in the case of the novel or play time is part of the work itself. "Paintings *present* themselves as if they were holistic; verbal narratives as if they were linear. They do so regardless of how

any given spectator or reader goes about perceiving any given work," Seymour Chatman summarizes (7-8).

Narrative, then, will always depend on the passage of time insofar as it presents itself in a given order in the reception process: the presentation of the novel or play takes a certain length of time during which it is presented in a given order (although in the case of the novel the reader has, of course, more freedom to take breaks, reread and so on). This external passage of time during the reception process is a characteristic of the genre Beckett can do nothing about. What he can do something about is the internal passage of time at the level of story (by not telling [necessarily chrono-logical] stories, i.e. by reducing "action") and discourse (by presenting whatever is left of story in such a way as to de-emphasize the chrono-logical aspect: repetition and circular structure). The previous chapter on *Not I* has already illustrated some of those means by which Beckett's texts approach the stillness of painting.

The texts (both drama and prose) written after the trilogy are increasingly dominated by patterns of repetition, following circular patterns, or patterns of variations on themes that, despite their miniscule forward motion, suggest stillness or at least a stand-still rather than motion. At the level of narrative this means that the text is not driven forward by action: the texts do not tell anything that could still be classified as genuine stories. Nothing happens; there is no action. "In the mid-1960s," S. E. Gontarski remarks, "Samuel Beckett's fiction took a dramatic turn, away from stories featuring the compulsion to (and so solace in) motion, toward stories featuring stillness or some barely perceptible movement, at times just the breathing of a body or the trembling of a hand" (1996: vii). Of the so-called "closed-space novels" (which Beckett wrote late in his career) *Worstward Ho* is the one that epitomizes this stage of Beckett's development to perfection. Here we have what could be called descriptions or images of internal (psychological) states. These images are evoked by means of short, mostly verb-less, noun-dominated sentence fragments that resemble Stein's still-lives. They describe the "core" of the sentiment by increasingly finely tuned approximation to it: "Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum" (WW 91). Process and action, indicated by verbs, have disappeared alongside the parts of speech that express them.

Even the paragraphs, as larger units of "narrative," are barely in a causal, chronological, or otherwise logical connection with one another. They are set far apart from one another in the typescript, intensifying the impression of a kind of virtual spotlight that comes on to illuminate one particular "state" before switching off to illuminate another shortly thereafter, and to return to the first within the space of a few pages with another approximation. The paragraphs are like short photographic exposures. Gontarski summarizes Beckett's achievement in the closed-space novels in a similar vein: "Beckett did something new not only with his own fiction but with fiction in general — a reduction of narrative to points of space" (1996: xxvi).

Linearity in narrative implies a goal to be reached as well as an origin of departure. In his late work Beckett embraces the fact that this origin is an unattainable figment. The impulse at the basis of literature or of narrative, for Blanchot as for Beckett, is still "the movement towards a point" (Blanchot 2003: 7). A point "that is not only unknown, ignored, and foreign, but such that it seems, even before and outside of this movement, to have no kind of reality; yet one that is so imperious that it is from that point alone that the narrative draws its attraction" (ibid.). An origin is evoked in the process of writing and yet it nonetheless recedes at the same time: it simultaneously flees and returns, as Nancy puts it with reference to the divine (66). In other words, the origin is always already gone. It is irretrievable to the point of not being there at all, of having no substance, and yet it instigates the narrative. It is important to understand this double movement at the root of narrative not as causally motivated (the narrative pursues *because* the origin recedes) but as aporetic, as simultaneous flight and return. It is indicative of the originary doubling that is at work in literature (literature is always the real and the imaginary at the same time, or, every proposition it makes is immediately under erasure), and therefore of the iconic space it generates. Where his earlier work, especially *The Unnamable*, still evoked the impression that it was out hunting against its own better judgment, Beckett's late work instead decides to embrace the fundamental emptiness at the root of literature — Blanchot calls it the neuter, or the Outside — that is the result of its drive to cancel itself out. The origin recedes as one approaches it, which means that literature will never be one with itself, coincide with itself so as to be reducible to an origin. Both literature, split into the real and the imaginary, and negative

theology, split into kataphatic and apophatic, are instances of originary doubling in this sense.

The trilogy had exhausted the linear motif of the quest — the narrative par excellence — at all levels: literally at the level of plot, technically at the level of narrative technique (it is no accident that the sucking-stones episode that so epitomizes Beckett's "combinatory" style is in the trilogy) and philosophically with respect to Beckett's project of (un)naming the unnamable. His was a quest-romance in Harold Bloom's sense to the extent that the quest played itself out in the artist's own imaginative life as he developed from one work to the next in the search for an imaginative manifestation that would express its object. If the romantic quest is a quest for unity, Beckett's was one for adequation — unity with the object in the sense that its transcendent being would suddenly disclose itself at the moment of adequation. However, Bloom configures the romantic quest as one immanent to the self: the quest is fulfilled when the imagination has been freed in a fusion between libido and ego (13). What is missing from this picture is the sense, in Beckett, of questing for something transcendent, outside the self and outside language. The Romantic poet fuses with nature at the moment he mends the rift within himself, but that is not the case in Beckett. No matter how unified the imagination, it may still not be able to be adequate to something whose nature is conceived of as fundamentally other than the immanent and which may, in fact, be inconceivable by nature. Finally, no such quest for a fusion within the self is conceivable in the (post-) modern Beckett: despite the quest he lacks the conviction that unity can ever be achieved.

When he abandoned his impossible quest for saying the ineffable after having explored its limits in *The Unnamable*, his technique had to change, too. After the trilogy, as I have suggested, Beckett's preoccupation with what is behind language shifts from trying (futilely) to capture it in language, to finding poignant images that will evoke it without trying to be equal to it. He abandons the model of adequation. All such an image can hope to achieve is to overturn the habitual structures of the mind if only momentarily.

Porter Abbott advances the thesis that "narrative was where Beckett dealt with the inevitability of time. So instead of abandoning narrative, he sought to change it from within, setting himself the impossible task of reforming its temporal logic" (14). But this time — as opposed to the cul-de-sac he hit after the trilogy — Beckett had not steered

himself into a dead end because prose is not the only means of artistic expression he had at his disposal. The visual means of the theatre allow a closer approximation to the complete stillness of pictorial images than the necessarily time-bound nature of the prose text: whether or not the mouth on stage continues to spew out words for the duration of fifteen minutes is inconsequential for the impact of the stage image on the spectator. Its composition does not change throughout the play and it is this composition that presents itself to the spectator holistically, to use Chatman's words. The fact that Auditor lifts his arms twice in response to the torrent of words pouring forth from Mouth is important for the play as play, but not for the image as a compositional unit. The metaphorical impact of the image as well as the dynamic forces at work in the image as a compositional unit remain unchanged no matter whether Auditor's arms are raised a few inches from his sides or not. Abbott summarizes:

From then [after *Godot*] on, most of Beckett's plays are quasi-paintings — of a Mouth in *Not I*, a head in *That Time*, a face in *Eh Joe*, a single figure standing by a bed in *A Piece of Monologue*, two identical figures seated at a table in *Ohio Impromptu*. [... B]y and large these are staged pictures, curiously disturbed by the action of speaking or by discrete, repeatable movements. (Abbott 16)

It is important to let the priorities implicit in Abbott's rhetoric sink in: while it is arguably as "unnatural" to the theatrical genre to have stage images that do not move as it is unnatural in the novelistic genre to have prose that aspires to complete stasis, the difference is that a still stage image *can* present itself holistically, whereas a linguistic image in a prose text will always unfold in time, no matter how much the author excises movement and action from it. As a result, Beckett's late stage images have in fact become *primarily* pictures "curiously disturbed" by whatever remnants of movement take place in them, rather than stage compositions peculiarly devoid of their proxemic element. They are, of course, compositions for the stage insofar as Beckett is always acutely aware of the medium for which he is writing, but they push theatre to its limits. These limits, however, are not alien to its nature: in order to push a genre to its limits one has to use and exploit a trait it possesses anyway. The visual nature of theatre allows for the exploration of atemporal territory that is by definition beyond that of prose.

With *Quad*, then, a turn away from language and from narrative is completed. Beckett embraces the image and it is an image that fails to tell a story of any kind. There is still the pacing of the hooded figures that takes place in time, and while a story or a narrative can, of course, unfold by non-verbal means, the figures' pacing, however, lacks the teleological aspect of narrative: no matter how decentred and devoid of closure even the most postmodern of postmodern narratives might be, the smallest unit of narrative composition — the sentence — moves irreversibly towards its own completion as a sense-unit (in time). The sentence, and with it narrative, is irreversibly linear. The figures in the square do not move towards anything. They exhaust all the possibilities of how and in what combinations four figures can traverse the sides and diagonals of a square, but this does not happen with a view to the end of rationally controlling — mastering — a given field. It is, rather, a farce of such a teleological undertaking, because, like *Not I*, *Quad* does not give the impression that there is any end to the "characters" pursuits. When one round of combinatory pacing is completed another one begins. The figures go through the motions over and over *ad infinitum*. So in all their movement there is really no movement at all. Rather, there is an evocation of eternity in the sense of an everlasting now — which is the only intimation of eternity temporal beings can have. As Michael Glasmeier in his perceptive article on *Quad* says, this type of going on and on, on the one hand makes one nervous, presumably because as 20th century western humans in the claws of capitalism we are used to being fruitfully employed in some kind of teleological endeavour and cannot well tolerate the impression of doing something merely for the sake of doing it. On the other hand, it is soothing because it gives rise to the feeling that it will always continue, that nothing will ever disrupt it (cf. Glasmeier 149).

The pacing, then, takes place without any goal, for its own sake, without any sense or purpose being ascribed to it. This said, it is possible, of course, to see it as being very much part of a (pointless) teleological endeavor. This would put it in line with all the other instances in Beckett's oeuvre of a combinatory logic running wild. These instances are invariably attempts on the characters' parts futilely to control an unpredictable world by rational means: if one knows all the possibilities and eventualities nothing can throw one. However, mastery is never achieved, simply because the world does not function exclusively according to rational principles. Overcome by anxiety the characters apply

their combinatorial logic to the most basic and mundane problems, such as the distribution of a number of sucking stones to four pockets in such a way that the stones will all be used to an equal degree. They find themselves in endless pursuit of an ever-elusive goal. Irony turns these instances into critiques both of the problems to which the characters apply their inexhaustible ratio (i.e. our propensity to lose ourselves in problems we have manufactured ourselves) and of the means applied to them (our tendency to pretend that we can be in control of the world and our lives).

This critique of rationality (we will return to it later) no doubt underlies some of the significance of the pacing in *Quad*, but it does not capture its full range. The non-teleological pacing-for-its-own-sake emerges more fully when we take into account the second version of *Quad* that followed the shooting of the first. The second version is shorter, but more importantly, it is also slower. It lacks the percussion accompaniment and it is shot in black-and-white. It is difficult not to laugh upon first encountering the frantic scurrying of the hooded figures in the first version, intensified as it is by the equally hectic percussion "music."¹⁰ One cannot help but think of caged rats, albeit strangely methodical ones. The second, slower version, on the other hand, much rather evokes connotations of a walking meditation: the figures properly *walk*, rather than scurry, with great attention devoted to the execution of every step. The alien percussion is gone and the faint shuffling sound of feet on floor (a sound properly part of walking) now constitutes the play's sole acoustic range. The aspects that made Glasmeier nervous in the first version have disappeared and what is left is merely the exercise of attentive walking for no other purpose, it seems, but that of being attentive: one no longer wonders what all that exertion of energy is actually *for* — the walking is slow and therefore less automatically directed towards an external purpose. (Even in everyday experience we are, after all, quite at ease with slow walking for its own sake, whereas we immediately assume that they must be going *somewhere* when people walk quickly.)

In the second black-and-white version the figures are less sharply distinguished from one another. In fact, they could be multiples of the first: in the stage directions Beckett specifies "identical white gowns" (SP 294) as costumes. The figures — neutral in

¹⁰ In one of the drafts of the *Quad* manuscript held at the Reading Beckett Archive one encounters an amusing slip of the pen that perfectly characterizes the impact of the percussion instruments on the listener. Under the heading "*Music if any*" it says: "4 types of concussion corresponding to four players" (MS 2189).

gender ("sex indifferent" [SP 293]) and appearance ("[a]s alike in build as possible" [ibid.]) anyway — become indistinguishable. Hence the method behind the walking patterns becomes blurred: now we have just some figures joining others in a kind of labyrinthine endeavour (labyrinths are, of course, traditionally used for walking meditations) while some others drop out to rejoin later. The focus is on the walking, not on the method. Upon viewing the second version, Beckett is reported to have said, "Marvellous, it's 100,000 years later" (Brater 109).

It is 100,000 years later, one surmises, because the figures have tired of their rational pursuits: their steps come more slowly; they are dragging their feet more than they did before. To use Deleuze's words, a kind of exhaustion has indeed set in: there is no purpose, goal, or preference. "Only the exhausted person is so uninterested, so scrupulous" (Deleuze 55). Exhaustion, according to Deleuze, is characterized by what he calls "inclusive disjunctions" (ibid.). No longer is of necessity only one of two given statements true; they are both true. But what Deleuze is driving at is not a straightforward Derridean, or even apophatic, aporia in which the two poles of an opposition fuse momentarily into a kind of nondual inseparability. Rather, the dualities between the terms remain, even are more clearly defined, but they are meaningless because they have no purpose except that of endless permutations (55), whose defining characteristic is an exclusively combinatory logic that is by definition without preference. Exhaustion, for Deleuze, is in other words still part of a combinatory logic; it is inseparable from it through another "inclusive disjunction": "Does one need to be exhausted in order to be concerned with combinatorics, or is it rather combinatorics that exhausts us, that brings about our exhaustion, or both at once, combinatorics and exhaustion?" (56).

Once again my interpretation diverges from Deleuze's. It seems to me that there are two distinct phases to a combinatorics as it appears in Beckett, illustrated by the two parts of *Quad* (and by the general tension between metonymy/metaphor and horizontality/verticality in Beckett's work). The question hinges on whether one sees combinatorics in Beckett as inherently without aim or goal or not. It seems clear to me that although combinatorics is all inclusive, tries to cover everything and in this respect refuses to make distinctions, Beckett's people use it in order to achieve mastery over what seems to them a hostile and chaotic world, i.e. they use it with a distinct purpose in mind.

It is true, however, that because the figures fail to achieve the desired mastery, the permutations do continue endlessly (as Deleuze says, "since *Murphy* the protagonist goes through all the combinations with the five biscuits" [54]) and at this point exhaustion sets in: the rational mind exhausts itself while caught in the hamster wheel it has created by the inadequacy of the method it has chosen to attack its problem. The problem is of an existential kind and hence, like a *koan*, unsolvable by rational means. To take the *koan* analogy further: the exhaustion is not a nihilistic end in itself. From it something new begins to appear, as in *Quad II* (or in the image as a formal construct which frames these pursuits).

Another way of illustrating this twofold structure is, then, by way of the image. All the frantic action — essentially static, as we have seen, because circular — is gathered together in a single image, captured by an unmoving, static camera position located somewhat diagonally above and in front the playing area. There is a position, in other words, from which we can regard the play (as well as our pursuits) holistically, and from which it will unfold in its metaphorical significance. It is important to remind oneself that the fixed camera position in *Quad* is a conscious choice on Beckett's part. It is not the product of some supposed dilettantism of one used to the perspectival confinements of the proscenium stage and not used to working with the possibilities of television. Beckett has always shown himself to be very conscious of the respective media in which he worked and to use different media for purposes that are specific and idiosyncratic to them. In *Film* he proves to be perfectly capable of working with a moving camera — and with an extremely mobile one at that — when he turns the ordinarily supposedly "objective," disengaged narrative eye of the camera into a subjective entity, a full-fledged character in his film in active pursuit of another one.

The camera position in *Quad* is partly explained by practical necessity: for the viewer to be able to follow the figures' precise trajectories across a geometric field, the camera needs to be positioned in an elevated position not vertically above the playing area. But the position is not of necessity a static one. In fact, left to their own devices, well-meaning, inept adapters to the televisual medium would probably have incorporated at least a few cuts from one camera position to another in order to make the presentation more "interesting" — as happened with devastating results in the BBC version of *Not I*

that appears as part of the *Beckett on Film* project: not only does the version excise Auditor (which would be forgivable), it then fails to zoom in on the mouth, showing instead the actor in full length, out of costume and in a chair vaguely resembling the one Billie Whitelaw was strapped into (rather too obviously playing on the similarity between this device and an electric chair), and to ruin the play entirely the camera then proceeds to cut from one position to another, showing the actor sometimes frontally, sometimes in profile as she delivers a monologue slowed to a pointless ramble. The contrast between the fast text and the stillness of the stage image is lost.

Quad, like *Not I*, depends on the apparent tension between the fast horizontality of the "action" and the stasis of the framed image. Glasmeier observes that in *Quad* Beckett leaves behind the last remnants of the literary: "He has become ... an inventor of images on the basis of the experience of images. His ekphrasis does not describe, it creates"¹¹ (156-8). He refuses to use space to tell a story, to lay out a narrative three-dimensionally in time. What he offers instead are images that fuse into a single image, gathered and framed by the camera. Because *Quad* does not "develop" in the same way traditional drama does (along the lines of plot development, however rudimentary) in principle any individual shot from *Quad* could be singled out to represent the "play" as a whole. Any development takes place not in the work but in the viewer, as her reactions to the unchanging sameness of the pacing figures change from baffled amusement, to annoyance, to boredom ... and probably back to head-shaking amusement at the minimalist audacity of Beckett's project. What remains are "images without before or after, images in naked presence"¹² (Glasmeier 154).

In this context Glasmeier reminds his readers of Beckett's fascination with the Dutch painters of the 17th century, especially Johannes Vermeer. These paintings celebrate what he calls "the theatre of stasis, of frozen gestures" (156). Scenes were not taken from nature, but they were built in the studio, "staged reality in diffuse spaces,

¹¹ Translation mine. "Beckett hat hier das Literarische endgültig abgestreift. Er ist, wie in seinem ganzen Spätwerk zu neobachten, zum Bilderfider auf der Basis von Bilderfahrung geworden. Seine Ekphrasis beschreibt nicht, sie kreiert." (Glasmeier 156-8)

¹² Translation mine. "Bilder ohne Vorher und Nachher, Bilder in nackter Präsenz." (Glasmeier 154)

painted stage, total artificiality"¹³ (ibid.). Glasmeier's implicit parallel between the 17th century Dutch masters and Beckett's own approach is useful insofar as it draws attention to their extreme formalism. Vermeer, in all his realism, did not attempt naturalist "slices of life." Therefore, there are no scenes capturing life in full-blooded motion, such as running children, wildly gesticulating people and the like. Figures appear in staged poses, and are hence largely still, as they are in Beckett.

However, the fact that these paintings do not represent motion or speed does not mean that they are static as pictorial compositions. In fact, Arnheim points out in *Art and Visual Perception*, images that arrest physical motion, such as snapshots, tend to look static — like objects frozen and displaced in space — although they capture moments of extreme action, whereas balanced compositions are always intensely dynamic affairs (cf. 412-15). Glasmeier does not distinguish sufficiently clearly between physical stasis and compositional stasis. Beckett's theatrical images are not "frozen" (153), although they are still. I would like to look briefly at the visual composition of Beckett's theatrical images in order to counter two contrary but complementary assumptions, namely, on the one hand Glasmeier's to the effect that Beckett's images are static; and on the other Stanton Garner's proposition that they are imbalanced (62). In fact, the majority of Beckett's images are neither. This excursion into visual composition is intended to complement my observations regarding the parallels between Zen painting and Beckett's images, because an imbalanced composition obviously cannot adhere to principles of nonduality, and a static composition is likely to be imbalanced.

"Equilibrium" Arnheim defines succinctly, "is attained when the forces constituting a system compensate each other" (26), but in order to be balanced a composition does not need to be symmetrical.¹⁴ Symmetry is merely the simplest form of achieving balance; most artists, however, work with some kind of inequality. Inequality of the two sides of a pictorial composition does not imply that the image automatically pulls in one direction: items carry different weight depending on where they are

¹³ Translation mine. "Denn hier wurde das Theater des Stillstands, der eingefrorenen Gesten zelebriert. Hier wurden Szenen im Atelier aufgebaut. [...] inszenierte Realität in diffusen Räumen, gemalte Bühne, totale Künstlichkeit." (Glasmeier 156)

¹⁴ Arnheim looks at drama in terms of the composition of its visual forces. Therefore he treats drama and painting/ sculpture as obeying the same basic principles: there are "similar, though often less sharply manifest, phenomena in the photographic and performing arts" (4) as there are in painting and sculpture.

positioned in the picture, so that, for instance, a small object can balance out a larger one provided it is located in the right spot. And at the same time the stillness of balance does not mean the absence of pulling forces. In other words, Beckett's images do not need to be "a celebration of ... imbalance" in order to be "charged with visual pull" (Garner 77). Arnheim points out that "[t]o the sensitive eye, ... balance ... is alive with tension. Think of a rope that is motionless while two men of equal strength are pulling at it in opposite directions. It is still, but loaded with energy" (16). Such tension is frequently more interesting than the kind Garner finds in Beckett's images, because it is both more subtle and more lasting: it has no outlet for discharge and so continues to sizzle behind the apparent restfulness.

Before we look at some images to which this analysis applies, it needs to be said that indeed not all of Beckett's late stage images are like this, but the ones that are not are frequently images that consist of just one unit, without a second entity to establish a counterweight. In *Rockaby*, for instance, the rocking chair is positioned slightly off-centre; the same goes for the face in *That Time*. In both cases dead-centre position would be too heavy: the image would be entirely devoid of tension and motion. It would radiate a complacency inappropriate to the disturbing tenor of the plays. Significantly, though, even the off-centre position chosen in these cases is not one of balanced tension. A slight off-centre position will always fidget, pulling either towards dead-centre or towards the restfulness of the golden section. The latter implies too much restfulness for Beckett's taste in these cases: he opts for outright imbalance.

Not I, for one, is a different matter. The image is structured centrally, with Auditor at the left and Mouth at the right. Mouth can balance Auditor because she is intensely active and brightly lit, while Auditor needs to be larger because of his relative (but extremely effective) inactivity, though faintly lit in order for his size not to overpower Mouth. Images are read from left to right, therefore objects on the left carry more weight than objects on the right (Arnheim 33) — a large, brightly lit Auditor on the left would hence be so extraordinarily heavy he would plunge right through the floorboards. Mouth, on the other hand, is heavier than her size indicates because she is positioned eight feet above stage level — rather high when seen from the position of a seated audience member. According to Arnheim, other factors being equal, objects positioned closer to

the top of a given visual field will carry more weight than objects at the bottom because our existence as gravitationally determined beings makes us accord more importance to the top: "To rise upward means to overcome resistance — it is always a victory" (30).

A similar balance can be observed in the stage image for *Ohio Impromptu*. The table at which Reader and Listener sit is positioned stage centre, anchoring the image centrally. However, both figures are seated at the right end of the table — Reader at the short side, so that the audience sees him in profile, and Listener towards the right end of the long side of the table and facing the audience. In terms of pure distribution of matter it seems as if the image should lean to the right, but in fact it does not. The weight of the two figures centers around the cut of the golden section — a restful point — while the empty left half of the table reaches into the empty side of the image connecting matter with non-matter. Furthermore, the empty half of the image is on the left — the side to which a viewer generally ascribes more weight. In a curious way it is the centre of attention, framed on one side by the proscenium arch, on the other by the two figures at the table. Were the two figures seated at the other end of the table, the empty stage space would be in some danger of becoming a negligible afterthought: it would trail behind the action, as it were, rather than establish a philosophically significant counterweight to it. One is reminded of the numerous Zen paintings in which the bough of a tree or a bamboo reaches into an otherwise empty image (cf. especially Niten, *Crow on a Pine Branch*, where the crow itself is at the far right of the picture — its tail barely in it — while a single branch reaches about three-quarters into the picture, leaving the rest of the canvas blank). The detail (the branch) merges with the whole that is suggested in the blankness of the canvas. The empty space offers the eye a place on which to rest itself while at the same time opening up the image to the contemplative concentration in which the image was produced. The empty space suggests the nonduality that underpins the image, reminding the viewer that a human construct such as the picture, if produced in the right state of mindfulness is never merely what is represented in the picture. The representation is necessarily incomplete and yet it is not: it is because the "whole," including its necessarily unrepresentable dimensions are never all in the picture, and yet it is not, because the empty space opens the image up to these dimensions. There is always something left unsaid that is nonetheless part of the image because the image would not

have come into existence without it. Rather than unbalance the image, the empty space truly balances it by connecting it with everything outside the frame. An asymmetric style is necessary to open the composition up whereas a symmetrical composition is closed and self-contained.

Quad is, of course, an entirely centred and symmetrical composition, the playing area being square and traversed by the figures along the four sides and the diagonals. The visual composition is framed doubly: first by way of the distinct outline of the playing area surrounded by a dark undefined space into which the figures disappear upon leaving the square (a technique that makes the otherwise rigid frame of the composition somewhat permeable), and secondly by way of the figures' movements which confirm the outer parameters of the playing area. They never diverge from the geometric pathways prescribed by the shape of the square — except when they approach its centre. There they come to a short, startled stop only to then circumnavigate the centre by way of a short deviation to the right and to resume their course along the diagonal on the other side. In *Quad*, the centre (ominously called 0 in the early *Quad* manuscripts)¹⁵ is where the image opens itself up to the "beyond representation." The centre is the crux of the matter — very literally: it is the axis of a cross-shape (and Beckett has, it is well known, an obsession with cross-shaped structures). It is what Deleuze calls "the potentiality of the square" (77). It is where everything comes together, it is the locus of meaning, as it were. And it is precisely at this point that the movements of reason, the smooth unceasing flow of endless combinatorics is disrupted. Significantly, at this point the methods of reason fail to grip. Reason has to admit defeat and bow before the power of something that cannot be grasped and traversed by its means. Unable to make it their own, the structures of reason grant it its own territory.

I would like to suggest that this central point hints at a God beyond representation — possibly even the Christian God: it is, after all, situated at the intersection of a cross which prescribes the paths of the figures and in which the figures' trajectories are inscribed. Christianity deeply informs Beckett's work — in an effort to discourage

¹⁵ In Reading Archive MS 2189 the centre is called 0. In MS 2198, 0 is crossed out and changed to E, obviously to continue the sequence established by calling the four corners of the square A,B,C and D. But then, in MS 2199, Beckett reverts to 0 on the first page and then continues with E from the second page onwards. Obviously, the idea of calling the centre 0 has a strange tenacity.

literalist interpretations that try to confine him to standard traditional Christian readings Beckett called Christianity "a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, and so naturally I use it" (Duckworth 18). There is a tendency in Beckett criticism to tie discussions of religion and theology in his work either to the characters or to the author himself, or both, as in Hélène Baldwin's *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, which regularly commits the standard interpretive *faux pas* of ascribing to Beckett beliefs professed by the characters. But even such a substantial and groundbreaking study as Mary Bryden's *Beckett and the Idea of God* does not always differentiate sufficiently between the characters' limited perspectives and what the work as a formal construct might signal. For instance, the assertion that Didi and Gogo find it easiest to identify with the victimized, human, Christ because they find themselves in a similar position (Gogo being systematically and regularly beaten up by strangers during the night) (1992: 46)¹⁶ and that Didi, Gogo and Christ are victims of human violence (1998: 141) does not warrant the conclusion that Christ appears in Beckett's work only in a form entirely divested of his divine attributes, "as a human exemplar" of suffering (1998: 140), in what she calls the "kenotic mode: emptied, made destitute, and available for suffering of the worst kind" (1998: 140). "[T]his Christ has no divinity," she concludes (1992: 53). She is, of course, right in saying that the kenotic is an important concept in Beckett's art, but the way she uses the word is misleading. Kenosis does not mean a shedding of divine attributes: Christ always has two natures, one fully human and one fully divine. What he chose to forego in becoming human was to use his divine nature to his advantage and in this sense became a slave or a servant. Therefore, as Graham Ward points out, kenosis is rather a doctrine of divine representation: "With the doctrine of kenosis ... we investigate exactly what it is to be incarnate. Put systematically, Christology grounds a theological anthropology, and a theological account of what we know of God and how we know it" (Ward 236).

Bryden's cruelly persecuted and slaughtered Christ puts rather too much emphasis on suffering, because as undeniably aware of human suffering as Beckett shows himself to be in his works, they are not full of unrelieved pain and squalor. They are also very funny — *Waiting for Godot*, Bryden's example, being a case in point — and their author

¹⁶ The chapter in *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God* (1998) is a rewritten version of this earlier article.

has a keen eye for presenting human folly with a gentle humour that makes clear that his people's self-created hell is not the only way. There is a kind of redemption in Beckett, but it tends to appear after the play is read or watched and the work is done. No Beckett character experiences redemption (with the semi-ironic exception of Murphy, who blows himself up in his chair during one of his meditations). In the meantime we need help understanding the nature of our self-created hells, because only when we understand our dilemmas as being of our own creation can we be open for redemption, and it is this concern that is prevalent in Beckett's work. Christian redemption, dependent on Christ's saving grace, is present in Beckett's work only insofar as none of the characters, not even a self-reflective one such as the Voice in *Rockaby*, is able to liberate him- or herself from her circular existence by the power of her own will. Fundamentally, redemption in Beckett is possible only as an act of self-recognition: it is up to the reader to garner enough momentum from the Voice's "fuck life" (SP 282) to act on a desire for a different type of existence. Whether this means entrusting oneself to the saving grace of a transcendent power is up to each audience member, but this latter is a decision based on the entirely secular delivery granted by the realization that we are the makers of our own prisons.

Rather, I think we find in the above mentioned two natures of Christ a structural hint of a far deeper fascination with the cross in Beckett. At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir evokes the cross, the crucifixion scene and thus the two thieves that were crucified with Christ: "One is supposed to have been saved and the other ... damned" (1954: 6). The idea fascinated Beckett. Vladimir is preoccupied with the fact that the four Gospels do not agree in their account and wants to know why he should believe the one who has the thief saved, so that it looks as if what makes this matter relevant for the tramps is indeed "an eschatological queue in which a salvation quota system is of direct relevance" (Bryden 1992: 46). But Beckett's fascination with it went deeper. What interested him was the essential undecidability of the question of whether one will be saved or not: "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned" (Hobson 153). Like the two natures of Christ, the cross becomes a sign of ambivalence under whose sway the categories of a dualist logic fail to grip. For Orthodox Christianity, to which an apophatic approach to God is central, such ambivalent

constructions are indispensable as a way of pointing out that God cannot be conceptualized and as a way of speaking about a God who cannot be conceptualized. The question how someone can be both fully human and fully divine boggles the mind, and indeed, there is no "logical" solution to it. There is no other way than to accept it in its rankling ambivalence. Through this ambivalence it generates meaning. To attempt to make sense of it solely by rational means is to sooner or later exhaust the rational mind and to accept the semantic overflow of the ambivalence. The strategy is well known from the Zen-Buddhist employment of koans.

Deleuze, however, sees in the squiggle the figures perform to circumvent the centre the very mechanism by which *Quad* achieves the exhaustion of space — an assumption that is in complete agreement with his nihilist interpretation: "To exhaust space is to withdraw from it its potentiality by making any form of coming-together impossible" (83).¹⁷ In other words, because the figures do not collide, they are able to continue their combinatory pursuits indefinitely, exhausting the potentiality of the space in the process. Granted, coming-together is not synonymous with collision, but what other possibility is there short of radically rewriting Beckett's play, which regularly has more than one figure arrive at the centre at the same time? Surely a collision would not equal the potential of the space coming into its own, but be merely an abortion of the play — a kind of misfiring and starting again. Were one, on the other hand, to rewrite the play in such a way that the figures traverse the centre in sequence (by, for instance, making them start from their respective corners in minutely calculated intervals) the exhaustion of the potentiality of space could indeed continue ad infinitum (or until physical exhaustion puts an end to the exercise), but it would be a pointless exercise, because, by not acknowledging the existence of the centre, in a way there is no potentiality to exhaust. The space is exhausted to begin with. My point in going through these hypothetical scenarios is to point out that every time one of the figures acknowledges the existence of the intraversable centre, the potentiality of the space and the image is reconfirmed, so that it cannot be exhausted. While Deleuze would like *Quad* to peter out into nihilism (since, as he says, the exhausted is entirely "uninterested" — apathetic), Beckett in fact *affirms*

¹⁷ Translation mine. "Epuiser l'espace, c'est en exténuer la potentialité, en rendant toute rencontre impossible" (Deleuze 83)

something that is situated beyond representation, metaphorically epitomized by the empty spot in the middle of the set, and for the experience of this the exhaustion of rational conceptuality (but not exhaustion per se) is a precondition.

Philosophically in Beckett's late art, then, metonymy is subordinated to metaphor and a purely rational (horizontal) intelligence to a more contemplative (vertical) intelligence epitomized by the stage image, and there is a corresponding principle at work at the level of visual composition. For, while there is motion of some kind in all of Beckett's late plays, this motion is not in a relationship of tension with the general stillness of the images. "Beckett subordinates movement to position," Stanton Garner writes, "circumscribing motion within the bounds of invariant location. The effect, far from transforming the performance image, is to confirm the fixity of position in that image" (72), and a page later he summarizes that "movement ... highlights the solidity of location ... endowing objects and figures with a sculptural quality" (73). Movement, then, in the contained and repetitive forms in which it appears in these late plays — the opening and closing of a mouth, the rocking motion of a rocking chair, a figure's helpless shrug — in fact *confirms* the geometric fixity of the broader performance image. None of these movements is teleological in its outlook: they do not impinge on their environment by changing it, leaving it instead as unchanged in its composition as a picture.

By approximating his stage images as far as possible to the stillness of pictorial compositions, Beckett not only furthers an abstract artistic project. In the reception process these late plays concretely and experientially alter the way we relate to time. If movement is reduced to the absolute minimum necessary not to overthrow the genre definitions (of theatre as a time-art), this also displaces our conventional perception of time as movement and change. This conventional perception is based on a dualistic idea: that unchanging objects exist in time as if in a container (cf. Loy 1988: 220), that they are, in other words, entities separate from the time-stream in which they exist. In this picture the individual is a constant, self-existing entity (since we do not like to see ourselves as mortal) caught against its will in the irreversible flow of time — caught in time, in other words, as if in a container that condemns us to dying.

Genuine nondual perception of time, on the other hand, does, of course, not depend on "actually" stopping time — ceasing all activity. Rather, one "becomes" time,

so that there can be neither stasis nor flux because one has, in effect, deconstructed the contrast between them: there can only be a concept of flux if there is an idea of stasis to contrast it with, and vice versa. The Buddhist law of impermanence hence does not imply renunciation of permanence and unconditional embrace of change, but rather an attitude of non-attachment: letting go of our attachments (to permanence), which means not to embrace the other extreme (which would be another attachment). The result is that time becomes eternal. This is the closest human beings can come in this world to being immortal.

This moment is represented in the play through stillness in change, or change in stillness. The figures' pacing, although "still" in the sense of not contributing to any development (plot or otherwise) is nonetheless a reminder of the image's fleetingness. No single "frame" can be caught and kept, each one is slightly different and falls away, but then none needs to be "kept" because each one, all of them, represent the play as well as any other, since they do not constitute singular stages in a linear development and do not alter the overall composition of the image. Likewise, in *Not I*, although the composition remains unchanged throughout, the opening and closing of the mouth is a reminder that one is looking at a fleeting composition in a theatre that will disappear as soon as the play is over. Any displacement of the dualism is, in other words, necessarily fleeting, just as the moment of nondual union with the divine cannot last because we always still have one foot in the temporal camp (through having a body, or through our obligation to tell others about our experience; cf. Schubert 44), although it is eternal while it lasts. The displacement is a necessary condition of the project, since the plays situate us in the realm of representation where not to displace means to collaborate with dualist notions and to forfeit one's ambition, if one's ambition is to create semantic equivalents of nondual events. In the still-life prose of *Worstward Ho* there is the distinct awareness that displacement is necessary:

A place. Whence none. A time when try see. Try say. How small. How vast. How if not boundless bounded. Whence the dim. Not now. Know better now. Unknow better now. Know only no out of. No knowing how know only out of. Into only. Hence another. Another place where none. Whither once whence no return. No. No place but the one. None but the one where none.

Whence never once in. Somehow in. Beyondless. Thenceless there.
Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there. (WW 92)

The text explicitly deals with causal relationships and hence with the linear passage of time. It consists, however, of a row of distinct, static observations, and Beckett goes to great lengths to keep them such. "A place whence none" would involve movement from one place to another, or from nothingness to thingness. To sever the connection and halt the movement Beckett inserts a full stop, so that the reader first contemplates a place and then, as a distinct second observation, nothingness. As is familiar from apophatic texts, one observation will be displaced and corrected with a contradictory statement that directly follows it: "A place. Whence none." How can there be something where there was nothing? Or, more distinctly, "How small," followed directly by "How vast." And Beckett repeats the exercise with distinctly apophatic vocabulary: "Know better now. Unknow better now." Throughout, games with similar-sounding words, internal rhymes and alliterations ("whither once whence") set the mind reeling: "Not now. Know better now." And then: "None but the one where none." Finally, in a culmination of all the rhetorical strategies the passage has hitherto used, the point of a presence or a place without before and after is reiterated: "Thence less there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there." The differences between this and the breathless quest of *The Unnamable* are clear. The text does not lose its static quality although the displacements occur.

Tellingly, in his text about (the) art (of the van Valde brothers), entitled *Le Monde et le Pantalon* (1989), Beckett observes in Bram van Velde a will to perceive in a way that is exclusively pictorial (MP 25), and then wonders about how it would be possible to *write* the will to perceive in a purely visual fashion. He concludes that that only way is to write a sentence that "does not make sense" in which the words cancel one another out or sublate one another (as they do in *Worstward Ho*), because only then will words begin to signify something beyond themselves (25-6).¹⁸ Only then can words be freed from time and thus become pictorial (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ "Ecrire aperception purement visuelle, c'est écrire une phrase dénuée de sens. Comme de bien entendu. Car chaque fois qu'on veut faire faire aux mots un véritable travail de transbordement, chaque fois qu'on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s'alignent de façon à s'annuler mutuellement. C'est, sans doute, ce qui donne à la vie tout son charme." (MP 25-6)

2.

In 1988 Herta Schmid published an article with a very different trajectory from mine: hers pursues the convergences between *Quad* and Wassily Kandinsky's artistic theory, but at the beginning of her article she points out the similarities between a play by Bauhaus theatre mastermind Oskar Schlemmer and *Quad*. I would like to pursue this connection a little further, not to establish a case of direct influence between the Bauhaus and Beckett (in fact it hardly matters whether Beckett really knew of Schlemmer's experiments), but because the Bauhaus connection leads the way to a cluster of 20th century aestheticians and theorists of the theatre whose ideas can clarify the subtle fascination of the ephemeral, elusive quality of the figures in *Quad*. In their nondescript neutrality they seem to signify something that intrinsically cannot be pinpointed and fixed. They have no role, definable within the plot of a play. The theorists with whose help I want to make this elusive quality graspable can loosely be grouped around Edward Gordon Craig and his theorizations of the marionette, namely Schlemmer himself, Adolphe Appia, and another writer who was an influence on the aforementioned and also an acknowledged influence on Beckett himself, Heinrich von Kleist. It is known that Beckett was fascinated with Kleist's essay on the marionette theatre, and referred to it explicitly during rehearsals for the 1976 BBC version of *Ghost Trio*, although he had no interest in Kleist's other writings (Knowlson 1979: 277).

Schlemmer conceived of a play in which three actors

dressed in the basic colors yellow, red and blue stride along a geometrical plane that is painted on the ground of the theatre, consisting of a square within a circle, the centre of which is crossed by diagonal lines. The movements of the actors follow the geometry of the painted planes.¹⁹ (Schmid 164)

The play remained unproduced because Schlemmer encountered the architectural limitations of the space he was working with: the audience would have been unable to follow the figures' trajectories from where it was sitting or standing — a problem Beckett solved by conceiving the play for the medium of television. However, what *Quad* and the

¹⁹ The play is without title, unless one wants to use the generic description *Gestentanz* as a title. Schlemmer's *Gestentanz* (or gesture-dance) experiments comprise more than just this one play.

Bauhaus stage share beyond these specific similarities is their concern with form. The Bauhaus dream of the completely mechanical stage leads to an extreme abstraction of the stage space. Theatre becomes an exercise in form, colour and light (cf. Gropius 88) — precisely what *Quad* is, too. The Bauhaus stage is a stage of abstract space and in order to be consistent with this vision the actor needs to undergo an abstraction from his or her own specificity. The actor is made to fit abstract space, rather than space molded to be a fitting backdrop for the specific three-dimensionality of the actor.

As a result, plays do not require plots. Theatre is no exercise in verisimilitude. In both the Bauhaus and *Quad* there are no characters to tell stories tied to the teleology of human existence leading from birth to death as a final stock-taking, and likewise there is no space formed by the specificities of human existence in which such a story would be told. The actor becomes an art figure and as such his or her own metaphysical implications are heightened: the art figure is an abstraction towards a universal and it becomes an entity more readily capable of conveying the universality of the human condition. The specificity of human experience and, likewise, of human embodiment recede behind the universality of human experience: the figures in *Quad* are "as alike in build as possible" (SP 293) and other idiosyncrasies — such as facial features or gender markings — disappear behind long gowns, hoods and bowed heads. The "place" where the play "happens" is likewise an entirely formal affair — a non-place, a neutral space apparently suspended in nothingness and devoid of markers that would turn it into a definable place.

Instead of facial features and such things which would single them out as individuals, the figures become distinguishable by formal markers: colour (of the gown) and originally also light. Each figure was to be associated with a particular colour of spotlight, but this plan proved impracticable as the different colours blurred to a muddled brown as soon as three or four figures populated the playing area. It should, however, be remembered that *Quad* was not Beckett's first attempt to use light towards intrinsically dramatic ends. Beckett had used light as an active dramatic force to great effect before, notably in *Play*, where the inquisitorial white spotlight that triggers the characters' speeches advances to the status of being a full-fledged character itself, and the one that holds the play together.

Instead of the specificities of individual human experience *Quad* with its hooded figures in full-length habit-like costumes evokes a tradition that is defined by its efforts to transform the specificity of individual personality into the emergence of the universality of Christ's nature. Primarily the figures evoke the tradition of European monasticism²⁰, especially in the second black and white version where their graceful composure emerges more strongly with the disappearance of the scurrying. Stills from the first *Quad* (unfortunately the form in which most people will encounter the play) show clearly why Beckett insists on "some ballet training" (SP 293) in the actors' backgrounds: the synchronicity in the figures' movements, the control with which they execute them as well as their balanced positions in the playing area evoke a ballet. For the same reasons, however, they also evoke cloistered monks. The reason will become clear when we turn to Gordon Craig and the rationale that turned him into a champion of the marionette.²¹

²⁰ Glasmeier sees in the hoods an evocation of the 17th century Dutch masters. Figures in their paintings often wear hooded items of clothing of various descriptions. This is, however, a very specialized connotation which in all likelihood would not be at the forefront of most of Beckett's audience's minds.

²¹ Craig was, of course, one of the foremost directors of so-called Symbolist theatre and, in fact, Beckett's stage, especially as I present it here, reveals quite a few parallels to the Symbolist aesthetic and was obviously influenced by it: the lack of depth and perspective in his stage images, their extreme reduction to essentials and the dehumanization of the actor, all in an evocation of a "mystical" reality, are all symbolist characteristics, as well as Beckettian ones. And yet, Beckett is no Symbolist. "At the centre of the symbolist poetic is the notion of poetry as an evocation of a hidden reality through symbolic means," Frantisek Deak summarizes (23). Symbolism is, in other words, ideatic: it aims to express an abstract Idea by symbolic means. And Beckett tries this, too: his is also a philosophical theatre of abstract ideas, but he does not assume any kind of translatability between the image and what it "stands for." Symbols *suggest* equivalence, which is especially problematic when such a one-to-one relationship is applied to the ultimate. Any assumption that ultimate realities can be evoked by means of symbols will result in inevitable reductions and simplifications on both sides of the equation: the symbol will be unable to encompass the divine and the divine will not allow itself to be reduced to a symbol. As a result, many Symbolist productions were rather counterproductively one-dimensional, instead of evoking the incomprehensible nature of ultimate reality. Beckett avoids the trap of equivalence: no single element straightforwardly *stands for* something else (in the way a rose stands for love), and in this respect Brater is right to suggest that *Not I* refers to nothing outside itself, but the inkling that the whole play is a metaphor for the human condition, or that every element of the play is somehow charged with some metaphorical meaning, is never far away. There are no straightforwardly "translatable" symbols, but rather a gesture towards meaning that cannot be pinned down. Beckett prefers instead to represent the unrepresentable as unrepresentable so that it may give itself in the entirely open nonduality of that (non)space ... a space that is itself subject to deferral and therefore unrepresentable. To put it succinctly, Symbolism engages in a "simplification of means in order to evoke the essence of things" (Deak 174). Beckett engages in the same simplification, but is unsure of the nature of the essence and instead waits for it to show itself in the immediate experience of theatre.

Hence Beckett uses the theatre to different ends than the Symbolists. The theatre as a medium troubled the Symbolists because it seemed so rooted in its materiality: the "messy" physicality of the actor always destroyed the abstract conceptuality of the drama (on the page). Hence the appeal of the marionette or puppet to the Symbolist mind: puppets have a greater degree of abstraction (i.e. they are capable of only a limited range of movements) and therefore lend themselves more easily to transporting a conceptual universe. Beckett, on the other hand, has never had issues with the pure materiality of theatre. His reduction

What Craig objected to was actors dominating the play with personality (i.e. with the specificities of their own or the characters' persons), which in his opinion was directly linked to perpetuating stage conventions that kept theatre from coming into its own as a medium. The cult of personality with its dictum of consistent psychologically-motivated characters locks the theatre into the limiting role of being a mere copy of the real world. The tenacity of a "debased stage realism" kept the theatre from unfolding its full potential as a medium: "Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage realism is produced and flourishes. [...] The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure — the Übermarionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name" (Craig qtd. in Kirby 49). Craig wanted a return of the theatre to its roots in ceremony and ritual — a return, in other words, to a fundamentally metaphoric rather than mimetic or, in Lodge's terminology, metonymic relationship to the world. The marionette acquires symbolic value. It can represent the existential concerns of humankind as such, because it is freed from the existential confinement of being a human.

Of course, Craig did not literally want to abandon the actor in favour of a puppet theatre. One would probably be not too far off the mark speculating that the aesthetic limitations of the marionette would eventually have left him frustrated. The marionette became for him the symbol of the ideal human actor. He trusted the creativity of the actor enough to envisage molding the dominant "psychological" acting style into one that would bring out in the human actor those characteristics that define the marionette.

Remarkably, Beckett's exhortations to Billie Whitelaw "not to act" are entirely consistent with Craig's vision. Like Craig, Beckett saw that it is possible to abstract the human actor so that she or he begins to resemble a puppet and become general. The reduction inherent in controlling one's emotions and fostering an emotionless acting style is thus not simply one that will transform his theatre into its most essential, most pared down aesthetic incarnation. As a strategy it is essential to Beckett's artistic vision because it actively fosters his art's "religiosity," as it were, by emphasizing its essentially metaphorical nature. Therefore the "characters" that speak in Beckett's drama are not so much characters in the naturalist meaning of the term, as formal principles representing

and abstraction of theatrical means work rather to focus and concentrate the immediacy of the theatrical image, that is, to emphasize the peculiar nature of theatre rather than to try to evade it.

forces in the human condition. If the extreme formalism of the dialogues and the extreme abstraction from the naturalist stage do not drive this point home to the reader, the figures' names will: especially in the late drama proper names for the characters — by tradition quirky and extravagant in Beckett's work — disappear in favour of phonemic variations (Bim, Bem, Bam, Bom in *What Where*) or, following a related pattern, the inversion of letters that turns "May" into "Amy" in *Footfalls*. But there is an even more important consideration that propelled Beckett towards the reduced, puppet-like acting style that he propagated among his actors, and that is that it unclutters the presentation so that the nondual ground of it (of, arguably, any art) emerges perceptibly from behind.

Kleist articulated this idea clearly in his essay on the marionette theatre and he looms as an inspiration behind Craig's aesthetic innovations in the theatre and Beckett's ideal of emotionless acting alike. The essay, "Über das Marionettentheater," was published in installments in the daily *Berliner Abendblätter* in 1810. Beckett had read the text in the original German (Knowlson 1979: 278), and Knowlson and Pilling declare that when Beckett referred to it during the rehearsals for the 1976 BBC production of *Ghost Trio* "[t]here was no doubt in the mind of anyone present that Kleist's essay also expressed memorably some of Beckett's own deepest aesthetic aspirations" (Knowlson 1979: 277). For our purposes the (related) perspectives of Craig and Kleist strengthen our point because they trace to a single origin — the ideal of emotionless acting in which human actors begin to resemble puppets — the ideal of nonduality that is at the core of Kleist's text and the verticality implicit in theological transcendence, articulated in Beckett through a strong metaphoricity. Metaphoricity and nonduality are not inevitably related, but in combination they provide the formal ingredients of the mystical moment.

Kleist's essay takes the shape of a fictional encounter between a narrator and a certain Herr C, a dancer at the municipal opera house, in the course of which the latter enlightens the former on the virtues of the marionette theatre, which the narrator had hitherto taken to be an artistically worthless diversion for the riffraff of society. According to Kleist's speaker, Herr C, marionettes possess grace and harmony of movement and expression greater than that of any human actor because they lack the self-consciousness that makes humans lose their own centre of gravity. With this, Kleist offers a positive interpretation of the marionette that is rather unusual before as well as after him

(the prevalent position is obviously the one that sees marionettes as mechanistic and soulless). Self-consciousness — the result of eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge — represents a very literal Fall from grace, because it introduces a division within the individual herself, because self-consciousness implies perceiving oneself as Other, and therefore also a division between a person and the world, subject and object, and human and God. The person can no longer have a centre of gravity, as it were, because she is constantly "beside herself," looking at herself from the outside, alienated from herself. The most uncompromisingly dramatized version of this problem in Beckett is, of course, the protagonist in *Film*, split into O (Object) and the on-looking eye (E), a character obviously off-balance because in perpetual flight from himself. In his own text Kleist makes this point unmistakably clear in the anecdote of the young man who spontaneously captured in his own expressive pose the grace and harmony of a statue previously seen in a museum but is unable to reproduce the same effect intentionally when he tries to do so in front of a mirror. The mirror image stands, of course, for the split that the self-consciousness of the intentional effort produces in the young man. The puppet's grace, on the other hand derives from the fact that every limb, like a pendulum, subjects itself and follows a single undivided centre of gravity. Rather than control each limb, the puppeteer only needs to control this one centre of gravity.

The real topic of Kleist's text goes a long way beyond "mere" aesthetic theory, then. Benno von Wiese pertinently observes that the subject of Kleist's text is, in fact, paradise lost and regained (206) — human recovery of union with God and with oneself. For also implicit in the idea of the marionette is the notion of subjection to a higher will: the will of the puppeteer, or, to transfer the image to the human dimension, the will of God with human beings as God's puppets. In this case, Wiese points out, God would be the real dancer, present in the centre of gravity of every human movement, and grace could only be attained if the split within the human as well as the split between human and God were healed. But, these two trajectories are not mutually exclusive ones, for "when the divine puppeteer puts himself into the centre of gravity of each of the puppet's movements, he simultaneously gives the puppet the freedom to be itself, and only itself"

(von Wiese 209)²². This kind of "bilateral" movement is almost an analogy to the compatibility of the respective viewpoints of theism and non-theism: while, from an (Orthodox) theist point of view the Buddhist tradition of illumination makes the human being receptive for divine grace, which overcomes all division and duality, from the (Buddhist) non-theist point of view, the apparent dualism of Christian revelation is subsumed in the nonduality of *sunyata*, founded as it is, in a human rather than a divine effort.

True knowledge, then, knows no division of subject and object. It is connected, complete, and nondual. It is important that in Kleist's text paradise is not regained by simple divine revelation; neither is it regained by a mere regression to a previous state of lost innocence, a forsaking of knowledge and consciousness. The development in his text is fully dialectical in that paradise is regained by taking consciousness further, into a third step, which is neither the original innocence that was lost nor the duality inherent in the divisive step that separated humanity from its original innocence. Human beings have to eat from the tree of knowledge one more time, Kleist says (16). This is to be imagined as a kind of circular movement (a "journey around the world," as Kleist puts it) that leads back to the origin, but this time from the other side: "paradise is locked and the cherub behind us; we need to go on a journey around the world and see whether it may be open again through a backdoor somewhere" (Kleist 12).²³ It is the same innocence, but at the same time different because infused with a different history: that of knowledge.

While this overcoming of self-conscious duality does not happen through divine revelation, at the same time it needs to be stressed that neither does it happen through a long personal period of maturation. Kleist explicitly states that it happens "suddenly" (he stresses this word by using it twice in close succession [16]), much the way the grace possessed by the statue appeared suddenly in the young man when he did not try to consciously engineer it before a mirror. It might be worth noting that in Kleist we find an idea similar to what we have already observed in Beckett, namely that the appearance of nondual grace upsets patterns of linear temporality: suddenly the statue (seen in the past)

²² Translation mine. "Wenn nämlich der göttliche Maschinist sich in den Schwerpunkt der Bewegung der Puppe hineinversetzt, so gibt er damit der Puppe zugleich die Freiheit, sie selbst, und nur sie selbst zu sein." (von Wiese 209)

and the young man with whom the narrator shares the same space are equally present at the same moment. Time is stopped in the sense that its linear chronology is transcended in the power of grace. This kind of "eternal moment" in which the distinction between eternity and temporality is (temporarily) displaced is an idea common in apophatic texts (Sells 70). Beckett tries to evoke it by making a necessarily transient moment (that of presenting a theatrical image on stage) as unchanging as possible.

All similarities between Beckett and Kleist aside, one does well not to equate Kleist's ideas with Beckett's. Beckett is not a Romantic, but a thoroughly Modern writer. He finds in Kleist a kindred spirit who, from his own vantage point, articulates ideas that resonate with Beckett primarily from an aesthetic point of view. For Beckett, what is at stake is not a question of recovering a lost original unity, say, of emotional depth that can only be reclaimed once the actor, or person in general, is no longer at odds with herself. Rather, the "nondual actor" will best embody Beckett's minimalist aesthetic because she or he will neither attempt to *project* a kind of "fake" depth of feeling nor embody a kind of "genuine" depth of feeling radiating from the integrated person, but because he or she does neither of the two. Knowlson emphasizes that Beckett's concern when directing his own work in the theatre was never on emotional depth or character delineation in psychologically convincing terms (Knowlson 1996: 502). In this sense, he was never an "actors' director:" actors would ask him for background-information on given characters in order to be able to portray them more "convincingly" and he refused to answer such questions — no doubt not out of spite, but because such questions did not interest him: for him a theatrical project was a formal exercise in "pace, tone and ... rhythm" (*ibid.*). While Kleist goes around the world to recover a lost undivided origin, this is not Beckett's project. Beckett does not attempt to present a recovered *unity* of subject and object, but rather a full-fledged nonduality of subject and object.

We have thus observed nonduality as a defining objective in the two major strategies of reduction that Beckett employs in his late drama: in the balance of forces in the minimalist visual compositions of his late stage images, which share important structural principles with Zen ink-splash paintings; and in his ideal of a "colourless"

²³ Translation mine. "Doch das Paradies ist verriegelt und der Cherub hinter uns; wir müssen die Reise um die Welt machen, und sehen, ob es von hinten irgendwo wieder offen ist." (Kleist 12)

acting style, from which all personality and emotion is eliminated. What does not entirely fit this picture, we have already noted, is the sheer indulgence in combinatorics prevalent in *Quad* and elsewhere. Combinatory logic is a peculiarly self-sufficient form of the Cartesian *cogito*: in its Beckettian incarnation it pursues the "I think" as an end in itself. The Cartesian revolution is based on the very dualism that Kleist, Craig and Beckett set out to overcome, namely the one between self and world. Beckett reveals himself to be extremely critical of the aspiration of human reason to be self-sufficient unto itself and to have no need to resort to categories other or larger than itself. Beckett's people consistently attempt to apply reason to the perplexing problems of existence, in an effort to reduce these problems down to their own scale, but this effort is futile. They try to cope with the anxieties and uncertainties of existence by forcing themselves, their rational categories, on the world as the measure of all things and the world stubbornly refuses to cooperate: the sucking stones episode is a brave and futile attempt to account for all eventualities so as not to allow the vagaries of human existence to catch one by surprise.

Beckett mocks reason as a (self-sufficient) path towards knowledge by making the discrepancy between the "problem" and the means applied to solving it as great as he possibly can: no one in their right mind would care sufficiently to attack the problem of the sucking stones (a quotidian banality, not to mention a pointless personal perversion) with quite the same amount of method and diligence as Molloy does. Molloy is killing a butterfly on a wheel, and much of the humour of the scene derives from this disproportion of the means chosen to handle the given situation. As in other instances of reason running wild in Beckett's characters, Beckett insists on the utmost precision and detail in the most mundane of circumstances. Watt, too, is an individual utterly obsessed with method and hence a well of examples: his theories about the never-ending supply of hungry dogs to eat the leftovers of Mr. Knott's dinner has already been mentioned, but Watt does not stop short of applying the same logic to his own immediate existence, as his systematization of the process of walking illustrates.²⁴

²⁴ "Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible to the south [...] and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination and could sit down." (*W* 28)

Life is an ongoing improvisation and walking is an appropriate image: one is really off-balance at each single point in the process — and yet one advances and does not fall over. But one has to be prepared to make a leap of faith and trust that walking is indeed possible, although it is an activity executed, as Hugh Kenner says, "in a manner too hopelessly immersed in the *ad hoc* for analytic reconstruction" (119). If, on the other hand, one arrests the flow of motion arbitrarily in order to take the time to analyze its parts, one will, in fact, simply fall over: reason turns into a self-fulfilling prophesy. This is the leap of faith the "dogged systematizer" (Kenner) Watt cannot make: he refuses to trust, prefers rather to trust only himself and proceeds to systematize even the simple procedure of walking, with obvious disastrous effects: he is awkward — indeed more awkward than his clueless unbalanced contemporaries who simply *walk*. There is no flow to his movements and certainly no one in their right mind would attribute to them anything resembling grace. Watt is continually beside himself — split and analyzing himself as if he were another.

The disproportion between a quotidian problem and the excessively elaborate means used to tackle it are certainly at the root of how Beckett creates humour with a view to criticizing an exclusive reliance on reason at the expense of other ways of knowing. At the same time, however, the mirth created this way for the reader is accompanied by the almost tragic awareness that Beckett's people are, for the most part, unaware of this disproportion. (The obvious exception might be the narrator of *The Unnamable* with his (its?) boundless self-irony.) Kenner writes of the sucking stones episode that "[n]o more desperate assault on the randomness of things has ever been chronicled" (111). And this is what it is, but the underlying randomness itself is a matter of perspective. The characters are unable to admit that the surface problems to which they apply their excessively active capacity to reason are merely symptomatic of a deeper compulsion to bestow a human order on a world that appears random because they lack the faith to see its fundamentally benevolent order. That is to say that Beckett is not simply compassionate with the hopeless and endless nature of their plight (although he is that, too). Such a position would turn the works into tacit confirmations of the way the characters have constructed the world (i.e. as inescapable hamster-wheels). Instead, Beckett criticizes through the humour with which he infuses these episodes of rampant

"reason" both the characters' method and the assumptions underlying their choice of method. The humour points to another way: I see in it an attempt to promote awareness that the characters' problems are fabricated ones, ones that can be changed and that would then disappear together with the assumptions on which they are based.

We have seen in this chapter that Beckett tries to eliminate all linear movement that could be interpreted as following a quest-like structure upon realizing that the unnamable cannot be grasped and captured in language — or, more to the point, after having dramatized the pursuit, which he knew to be futile, to perfection in *The Unnamable*, he worked on constructing motionless images, first imperfectly in language, due to its inevitable linearity, and then to perfection in his work in the theatre, culminating in *Quad*, which does completely without language and linearity. These images are distinctly metaphorical and follow nondual principles of composition and presentation.

Because at the outset Beckett configures the problem differently than traditional apophaticism (i.e. in terms of a quest) the question why he did not find the traditional apophatic route compelling is moot: apophaticism starts on a different premise (i.e. that adequacy to the divine cannot be achieved in language) and therefore can tolerate the endless succession of aporias its discourse produces — in fact, has to embrace them as the only viable strategy: to produce by way of (necessarily fleeting) aporetic structures the semantic equivalent of a nondual event — to, as it were, trick language into temporarily overflowing the parameters by which it and our thought processes work and into which they automatically slip back. Beckett's language in *The Unnamable* is frequently indistinguishable from apophatic discourse, but because its premise is different it had to ultimately frustrate him and feel like a failure. The fact that he was unable, upon abandoning the idea of the quest, to see the movement implicit in apophatic discourse as non-teleological and to adopt it as his own is also due to his original assumption: a continuation along the same route phenotypically, but this time under a different premise, would have involved no artistic departure, constituted new territory only philosophically and harboured the danger of lapsing into old patterns.

However, Beckett's late prose texts also reveal a change in methodology in comparison to the earlier ones. They are constructed to keep the linear progression of

discourse to a minimum. Beckett recognizes that a language-based apophaticism cannot function entirely without a strategy of displacement, but this strategy takes on a different form in his late prose. Daniel Albright poignantly observes that *The Unnamable* denies reference "semantically, by a strategy of perpetual contradiction of every proposition" (14), while, in keeping with the image-centredness of his late theatre, "the method of *Worstward Ho* is to deny reference imagistically, by constructing a lapsed and incoherent thing, by displaying its deformity, its blight, its muteness from every angle, by letting it vanish into thinglessness" (ibid.). In each case the sentences cancel each other out, or stand in contradiction to one another, but in Beckett's late prose this strategy keeps the reader from forming conclusive, mimetic images, while *The Unnamable* questions the viability of its own propositions. Thus the late prose (and plays) nonetheless remain dominated by stillness, reflecting the change of direction after the trilogy. It is Beckett's privilege as a literary artist to put his convictions into the starkest literary forms, where theology or philosophy as theoretically expository discourses would shy away from the ellipsis this involves. In this sense, Beckett's "literary apophaticism" is more uncompromisingly performative.

VI. The Reduction of *Film*

Film, first shown in 1965, was Beckett's first and remained his only excursion into the world of film-making. Not surprisingly, it is not the work of an accomplished filmmaker: it betrays Alan Schneider's inexperience at directing films — it was Schneider's first, too — as well as Beckett's. But the film falls short not only in terms of execution. Thematically also, critics have found it less satisfying than Beckett's other work: Jane Alison Hale, for instance, thinks that it is less complex and hence less evocative than much of Beckett's other work because in it Beckett limits himself to the illustration of one specific theme — *esse est percipi*. Hale goes so far as to claim that Beckett's central concern in *Film* is "to illustrate a philosophical 'truth'" (92). We shall return to this point of criticism by asking what precisely the relationship is between Beckett's film and Bishop Berkeley's famous dictum *esse est percipi*. Critics in general, and Hale in particular, have too readily assumed an equally straightforward and unproblematic relationship between the two.

One wonders to what extent the impression of single-minded one-dimensionality is much rather due to the very different formal structure of *Film* in comparison with Beckett's other work. David Lodge observes that, in contrast with Beckett's work for the theatre, the "plot" of *Film* follows a "logical space/time continuum" (Lodge 1977: 86), that, in other words, as soon as Beckett switches to a metonymic medium his otherwise dominantly metaphoric work conforms to the horizontal and linear structures of metonymy. If this is the case, one has to ask to what extent *Film* — especially given its title — is a fundamental appraisal of the genre, since it has obviously led Beckett in a direction he would not otherwise have taken. Beckett's tendency to explore the nature of a given genre and to take it to the limits of what it can do might find another manifestation here. This is one avenue criticism on *Film* has taken: Raymond Federman takes *Film* to be an investigation of "the essence of cinema, that is to say, visual expression of life and movement through photographic manipulation. If we accept this as the basic theme, we can then accept *Film* as a work of art which exploits its own substance so as to reveal its own limitations and failure" (366). Brater, although oriented differently, also puts the

emphasis on genre critique: "*Film* is, then, about the process of film-watching" (Brater 1975: 171).

Or, alternatively, does the critique of genre recede behind an illustration of Beckett's own artistic theory? Vincent Murphy is convinced that *Film* "condenses in it some of the most consistent and recurrent themes in the Beckett canon" (43) and Brater agrees that it presents those central themes in specifically cinematic terms (Brater 1975: 166). One has to ask oneself, then, to what extent Beckett might have chosen film because its genre-specific characteristics give him a unique opportunity to carve out central characteristics of his own artistic theory. *Film* does not merely illustrate a "philosophical truth," let alone one that defines a philosophical system quite different from Beckett's own (i.e. Berkeley's). While it does investigate a philosophical issue artistically, Beckett's emphasis, here as elsewhere, is the clarification of his own dilemmas and obsessions. Here, as elsewhere, Beckett tries to clarify his own relationship to visuality. I would like to suggest that *Film* is an allegorization of the process of seeing, and, by extension, an allegorization of the failure of the phenomenological reduction: can a thing be identical with itself and is it hence possible to perceive it in its essence? *Film* answers, no. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty teaches us that the phenomenological reduction is necessarily incomplete. We are no transcendental egos, pure intellect, but embodied, fallen, beings that are part of the natural world around them.

Whichever way one wants to interpret *Film*, one needs to answer the question why one suggests for contemplation a work that has often been called one of Beckett's less successful ones. For one thing, the fundamental nature of Beckett's work emerges by contrast when it goes as far down the metonymic route as it can, before it has to acknowledge its metaphoric nature at the most general level. More importantly, however, *Film* illustrates the two concomitant sides of Beckett's artistic theory as they present themselves in the *Three Dialogues*: the misguided quest for adequacy to the Unnamable and, on the other hand, the realization that only acceptance of aporetic structures offers a way out of the quest-structure. Whatever one may think of the evocativeness of *Film*, for the phenomenological point that Beckett makes — the incompleteness of the reduction — the metonymic structure of deferral is ideally suited.

In *Film* Beckett follows a long (and not always unproblematic) tradition based in Platonism and Neo-Platonism,¹ and continued through Western philosophical history, of equating vision with perception in general,² and, more importantly, with knowledge as such: throughout Western philosophical and theological history, knowledge, often of the highest order (as in "seeing" the light of God), has been represented in visual terms. (Everyday speech is permeated by reflections of this long tradition: we say "I see" when we mean "I understand.") St. Bonaventure's metaphysics of light, indebted as much to Plato, Plotinus and the Pseudo-Dionysius as to St. Augustine, is an example of this tradition. For Bonaventure all of creation reflects the light of God at least as vestiges, and, according to their place in the hierarchy, sometimes as images or similitudes. The light is reflected by creation and thus eventually returns to its origin: the arts are reduced to theology. Bonaventure uses this circle to emphasize the organic connection between God and the realm of creation.³

¹ cf. Martin Jay's work on ocularcentrism, especially "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay, 1988. 3-23. and *Downcast Eyes*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

² In (Neo-) Platonism, of course, ocularcentrism is not just a question of taking vision to represent or symbolize all of perception, but of following a kind of natural hierarchy of perception in which the visual sense is the least embodied and hence the one most suited to carrying the spiritual aspirations of the tradition.

³ At the same time St. Bonaventure is a good example of how his supposed ocularcentrism is not entirely unambiguous. It could be read both in onto-theological and in apophatic terms. On the one hand Bonaventure's vestiges of the divine can be taken to be human conceptualizations. He seems especially prone to the pitfalls of ontotheology since he proposes a hierarchy of arts, from the mechanical arts to theology, which reflects the divine light increasingly better until theology, the pinnacle, reveals the divine fullness to human understanding. Especially the abundance of systematic distinctions that Bonaventure introduces in best scholastic fashion makes such a reading tempting: the scholastic method constructs an entirely synthetic frame, that is, one that is humanly and rationally conceived, while patristic texts do not emphasize doctrinal exposition but function more like spiritual exercises integrated into a way of life that is at the same time a way of prayer.

On the other hand, Kevin Hughes suggests that Bonaventure's process of divine ascent owes more to the Pseudo-Dionysius, and is, rather, an ascent to divine darkness where the categories of human conceptualization fail. "[Bonaventure] distinguishes between two modes of knowledge, two epistemologies, in a sense. 'In comprehensive knowledge the subject grasps the object; in ecstatic knowledge the object grasps the subject'" (Hughes 538-9). The ascent to divine knowledge is of an ecstatic kind, not a comprehensive kind, Hughes suggests. But if this is the case, then why does Bonaventure not follow the Dionysian "mystical" lineage more explicitly? After all, other mediaeval theologians speak of divine darkness without qualms.

However, if Hughes is right, then the assertion that the Son is the Father's first image (Hayes 51) and that "in that first Image the most perfect harmony, proportion, and beauty is shared co-equally with the Father" (24) would be a serious challenge to metaphysics, for it would mean that the image can be of the same order as the original. The binary hierarchy would be obliterated or at least seriously destabilized by Bonaventure's text.

Beckett follows this occularcentric tradition because the patterns of visual perception (as opposed to, say, aural perception)⁴ can best illustrate the problematic nature of the assumptions with which *Film* works and which it criticizes: his investigations centre around the dualism between O and E and the possibility of fusing it into a monistic unity or allowing the opposites to interpenetrate one another in a nondual way. Since the recent critique of occularcentrism has found "scopic regimes" to be based on dualist assumptions and power structures more than other modes of perception, the visual mode lends itself especially well to Beckett's critique. But Beckett leaves his viewer no safe place to stand: the film is no illustration of Berkeley's philosophy. Berkeley's monism enters the picture only as a foil that makes the peculiarly modern, atheological, and dualist assumptions put forward in *Film* emerge with particular force. The latter are in turn questioned by the film's comical, ironic tone. But even in ironizing the dualism Beckett does not present a nondual approach so much as insinuate it as the "solution." Once again, the audience is asked to go beyond the characters' perspective. *Film* is no manifesto.

The metonymic structure of (the) film is appropriate to the quest-like structure of the plot of *Film*. As in the "Three Dialogues" Beckett's point is two-fold: given the dualistic assumptions of *Film* (the split of the protagonist into O[bject] and E[ye]) the quest-structure is inevitable and this quest will of necessity remain an unfulfilled, failed one because the dualism cannot be transcended in an unproblematic (romantic) effort for unity. The motivation that drives the quest for unity is the same as the one that produces the rift: the pursuit of unity is a teleologically motivated, linear endeavour that is by nature dualistic and thus in diametrical opposition to nonduality. Rather than the romantic aspiration of being able, against all odds, to disclose the Unnamable in language, what is needed is a genuine apophaticism that will, as far as its discursive strategies go, not pretend to be able to present the unrepresentable, but to present the unrepresentable *as* unrepresentable in language or conceptuality.⁵

⁴ cf. David Levin's work *The Listening Self* (1989) for an alternative model.

⁵ The phrase "to present the unrepresentable as unrepresentable" is, of course, Jean-Francois Lyotard's formulation of the sublime. But this does not mean that in postmodernity the apophatic inescapably turns into the sublime, or rather into an impoverished version of the sublime that makes no reference to transcendence. Laurence Hemming argues such a point in his forthcoming book *Postmodernity's Transcending: Devaluing God*. In Hemming's view postmodernity loses its sense of transcendence with its

abandonment of concepts like substance, because it no longer has a sense of where the immanent can be transcended *to*. First Kant splits the classical sublime into a separate analytic of the beautiful and the sublime in order to emphasize that one is a question of immanence and the other of transcendence, and then at Nietzsche's hands (and thereby postmodernity's) the sublime turns into a version of sublimity that is entirely immanent. It is worth quoting Hemming at length:

With the abandonment of substance, of the soul, and the unity of the cosmos is the rage to abandon upliftment itself, or rather to abandon that upliftment lifts up to some 'where'. Kant's distinction between beauty and upliftment [i.e. sublimity SW] was explicitly intended to demonstrate that beauty was an immanent, and upliftment a transcendent, value. For Nietzsche, however, all sublimity is immanent, such that all beauty becomes upliftment [sublime, SW]. All art, and so not only that which attains to substantiality, is sublime. [...] The term 'uplifted' (*Erhabene, Aufgehobene*) has disappeared, now even Nietzsche's German speaks only of the sublime (*sublimar*). This is the devaluation of upliftment itself, as that which once superseded beauty in the transcendental analysis of aesthetical judgement, superseding beauty in order to indicate an infinite — a devaluation to a mere description of a psychological process, an activity — not even of the mind, but of the body (as the originary, causal, ground of mind). (Hemming 215)

One can, however, take issue with the view that postmodernity makes no reference to transcendence. Hemming's point of view is based on the position (shared by David Harvey and Frederic Jameson) that all of postmodernism is nihilist: for Hemming nihilism is "the activity and manner of manifestation of postmodernity itself" (210). I would like to invoke here Graham Ward's distinction between radical and benign postmodernism. Ward counts Derrida, Irigaray, and Kristeva among the "benign poststructural philosophers" (Ward 235) and Barthes, Deleuze and Baudrillard among those of a radically nihilist persuasion (Ward 254, note 2). In the latter "strain," if such a grouping is permissible, difference loses meaning because in its play of surfaces all difference is equally nondescript. This is a type of postmodernism that revels in the ephemeral, the fragmented, the discontinuous, the chaotic, to choose some of the adjectives with which David Harvey describes the postmodern (44). The "other," "benign" postmodernism, on the other hand, can rather be seen to destabilize the power structures with which the former implicitly collaborates in going along with the play of surfaces that capitalism propagates and proliferates. This benign postmodernism remains phenomenological in that it attempts to cut through the baggage of so-called commonsensical assumptions and preconceptions, but it no longer proposes to be able to capture the things "as such." Rather, it can be seen to guard from the pitfalls of human conceptuality a truth that is infinitely beyond what we are able to conceive. It saves this truth from idolatry, if one wants. As such it opens a door to a rethinking of theology, as I have shown throughout these pages.

With this in mind I would like to return to the sublime and to another perspective on it. John Milbank (1998) also uses Kant's separation of the beautiful from the sublime as his starting point. He argues that because of this sundering of the two, the realm of the transcendent and the realm of representation, postmodernity no longer works with a full-fledged sense of transcendence. Postmodernity cannot fill the transcendent with meaning because the realm of representation, within which we create meaning, is sundered from that of the transcendent. "This means that all that persists of transcendence is sheer unknowability or its quality of non-representability and non-depictability" (259). In other words, there is a sense of transcendence in postmodernity — it is not merely immanent (as it is in Hemming's picture) — but it is an impoverished sense of transcendence in that it remains an empty transcendence. On the basis of this Milbank diagnoses in modernity a "yearning for the genuinely theological and for transcendence *rather than* sublimity" (272). Any attempt to recover this full-fledged transcendence will obviously try to reintegrate the beautiful and the sublime without trying to recover the unity of the classical world-view. I think that "benign" postmodernism is engaged in this project.

In his account of the shift to this modern sense of transcendence Milbank emphasizes the shift from classical poetics to modern aesthetics. In modernity, the emphasis is no longer on the objective, but on the subjective — not on what it takes to make a good piece of art, but on what it means to experience art. What this also means, however, is that "[n]o longer is sublimity construed as something to which one gives voice: instead it is something one regards, or rather [...] endeavours to regard but cannot regard" (Milbank

Through the figure of O/E, split both in half and within itself, *Film*, then, is simultaneously informed by the quest for unity (of O and E) and by the awareness that the quest for unity, for capturing the Unnamable unequivocally in language is impossible and misguided. However, a forward movement of sorts — not in the form of a teleological quest but rather in the form of a directionless trace — remains necessary: presenting the unrepresentable as unrepresentable is possible only through the ambivalent structures of apophatic discourse: the unrepresentable is momentarily and experientially present in the fleeting moment of tension between two conceptually incompatible statements that transcends both and either of these statements. It emerges in the interstices of language rather than in conceptual language as such. In this light, the split between O and E is a phenomenological necessity that has its roots in our existence as carnal beings: because we are carnal beings, phenomena do not disclose themselves to us in all their radiance. We are never fully grounded, never so fully one with ourselves, so as to allow for such

263). In other words, the shift goes from actively producing the sublime in language to reacting to something one has seen.

If giving a voice to the transcendent is a way of reintegrating the beautiful and the sublime into full-fledged transcendence, then maybe the tendency in some postmodern texts, especially Derrida's, to evoke the transcendent by performing it can be seen as an attempt at such reintegration. Derrida reintroduces the poetic or the beautiful into a type of discourse that would otherwise be entirely analytical. Classical discourse used the beautiful to affirm God "as the eminent infinite reality of every harmonious proportion and value" (Milbank 259). For Derrida as a postmodern the unrepresentable transcendent cannot be an ultimate value because the concept of value belongs to the realm of representation and is as such subject to human fallibility. Nonetheless, there is the attempt to produce or perform, rather than describe or behold, the unrepresentable in the realm of the beautiful, in language or representation. This endeavour remains distinctly modern insofar as what it aims to present in its performance is not the unrepresentable as such, but the unrepresentable in its affect for the one who experiences it, but it does grapple with something that is genuinely irreducible to the subjective horizon and as such transcendental.

The juxtaposition of the sublime and the apophatic is an uneasy and unequal one, since the sublime is primarily an aesthetic category, while the apophatic is primarily an experiential category that is hardly reducible to its aesthetic and discursive dimension. Derrida's tendency to evoke the transcendent by performing it is a means of moving the sublime closer to the apophatic by making it experiential. For Jean-Luc Nancy it is neither aesthetical nor ethical, but rather defies such distinctions (Nancy 1993: 49). Nancy thinks of the sublime as that which moves always at the limit, "unlimiting" (37) and "unbordering" (43) in the process. As a result, it is necessary to rethink such concepts as "presence" (with its logocentric overtones) and "the nonrepresentable" that find their way into all the classic definitions of the sublime: "one (re)presents its nonrepresentability, and one has thus aligned it, however negatively, with the order of presentable things" (41). The sublime "is presentation itself, but no longer presentation as the operation of a (re)presenter producing or exhibiting a (re)presented. It is presentation *itself* at the point where it can no longer be said to be 'itself' [...] and where it is consequently no longer a question of saying either that it presents itself or that it is nonrepresentable" (Nancy 1993: 43). As that which is always at the limit, the sublime makes necessary reference to the transcendent because it makes us aware of what is beyond the limit. But as an "unlimiting" force it questions even our conceptions of immanence and transcendence.

full disclosure. The origin has always already slipped. Merleau-Ponty does not betray a longing for a lost origin in his critique of the Husserlian reduction: the subject is always an embodied subject and therefore inevitably intertwined with the world. David Levin's work on "aurality" (*The Listening Self*, 1989) brilliantly proves what Merleau-Ponty himself had indicated in the last chapter of the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*: his thought was moving in the direction of nonduality. Loss of unity or the prospect of unity does not foreclose on nonduality — in fact, it is the precondition for it.

In this sense, what appears as a limitation or a failure (one has, after all, to give up on the idea of unity) is also the very condition that reminds us of the limitations of conceptuality (and thus of what is beyond it). It is thus this very split that reminds us of the pre-cognitive, pre-discursive element of the experience at hand: "Phenomenology," Kevin Hart reminds us, "does not attempt to render experience fully explicit to consciousness, but to make us aware of a pre-reflective dimension of experience" (1996: 8). Again, however, because we are embodied, temporal beings, this pre-reflective dimension can never be fully present: in order to allow for the possibility of presence of the pre-reflective dimension, one needs to allow for the hypothesis of the self-grounding, unified subject. But at the moment in which the subject grounds itself in the *cogito* and then bases its experience of something on the certainty of the *cogito* (I cannot be sure of the existence of fire, but I can be sure of my own sensation of heat and light) the pre-reflective dimension evaporates: the experience of fire is turned instead into the thought of the experience of fire. It is turned into a representation of fire.

With the help of *Film* I would like to dwell on the relationship between these two rifts around which Beckett's artistic theory groups itself: one is in the subject as well as between subject and object, and it is produced and maintained by a teleological quest to unify the subject with itself and with the object. This rift functions by virtue of the assumption that a fully grounded subjectivity or consciousness exists and that it only happens to be filtered through defective media: language or conceptuality. This is the romantic quest that believes in an undivided consciousness to be made fully present and recovered from behind the corrupted veils of language — if only one tries hard enough.

It might be useful to remember the fully apophatic movements of Buddhism that do without the Christian dualism of immanence and transcendence. Nirvana is not elsewhere: the ontic range of nirvana and samsara is the same.

The assumption is that as soon as consciousness is fully grounded the subject will perceive no duality between itself and the surrounding world, while, in fact, it is this quest for groundedness that perpetuates the very split it seeks to abolish. Although this rift goes along with a rift in subjectivity itself, it is best imagined in spatial terms, as a division between subject and object, because the quest-motif is also a spatial metaphor.

The other rift is more strictly located in subjectivity itself, and stems from an awareness that the quest for unity is misguided: there is no fully grounded subjectivity, but rather any subjective experience (of art, of God) is always already split, with the grounding origin always out of reach, so that the only thing art can hope to accomplish is to hold the two sides, the conceptual content and the pre-conceptual trace, the always receding origin of the fully grounded immediacy of experience, together in a passing aporia.

It is out of an awareness of this impossibility of immediacy and groundedness that (expressionless) art must spring. The artist must give up the quest for groundedness and instead take the work of art to its own discursive, dialectical limits, so that from there it will open out into the possibility of thinking the impossible: rather than trying to determine whether there is "something or nothing" behind the veil of language, Beckett's work generates the conditions for thinking and experiencing it. At this moment the subject/object duality produced by the quest falls away as well, but not into a fusion of subject and object, but into the aporia of a full-fledged nonduality.⁶

First it needs to be shown that *Film* is, in fact, an exploration of Beckettian ideas, not an illustration of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy or its shortcomings. The premise of *Film* is *esse est percipi*, Bishop Berkeley's well-known dictum, but the work is not a mere illustration of Berkeleian philosophy (as critics unanimously recognize), nor is it a critique or an artistic assessment of Berkeley's philosophy of perception, as Sylvie Debevec Henning seems to think: Henning knows that Beckett is not merely regurgitating Berkeley's ideas, but to her he is nonetheless trying systematically to work through Berkeley's main thesis: "I shall suggest, therefore, that Beckett is taking Berkeley seriously in *Film* in order to point up the weak spot in his generally fascinating work"

⁶ I am indebted to Kevin Hart's "The Experience of Poetry" (1998) in the conception of this chapter.

(89). And, in keeping with her thesis she concludes that Beckett's critique centres on Berkeley's failure to account for self-perception (92).

There are two main reasons for why I think that to assume such a straightforward relationship between Beckett and Berkeley is mistaken: the first is the qualification with which Beckett presents *esse est percipi* as the governing principle of *Film*: "No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience" (SP 163). Henning fails to grasp the extent to which this "disclaimer" functions as a distancing device between Beckett and Berkeley. It does not merely mean that the dictum does not represent a philosophical truth and is thus open to critique. Rather, Beckett does *not necessarily* propose that Being resides in any way in being perceived — neither in Berkeley's understanding of the process, nor in the interpretive variations it undergoes in Beckett's treatment of it. Rather, *esse est percipi* becomes a guiding line that is explored in a number of different directions. It yields insights precisely by allowing different approaches to co-exist and fertilize one another: Berkeley's as well as the one dramatized in *Film*, which Beckett presents no more as a philosophical truth than Berkeley's position, and finally the one that emerges as a result of the film's irony. It is important to reckon with the film's comic atmosphere and ironic perspective. The notes to *Film* point out the climate of the film as "comic and unreal. O should invite laughter throughout by his way of moving" (F 12). And then later: "[O] storms along in comic foundered precipitancy" (ibid.). It is thus impossible to expect O and E to dramatize a tenable philosophical position: they might well dramatize a perceptual (and lived) reality, but not a considered position that might seriously be put forth in response to a philosophical challenge — *esse est percipi* — unless Beckett were to descend into sarcasm, but sarcasm (apart from being out of character for Beckett) is not the tone of the film. It lacks the viciousness of sarcasm. We are encountering a familiar mechanism in Beckett's work: gentle humour and irony ask us to move beyond what the work shows to what it implies. Beckett's "disclaimer" asks the viewer to exercise critical judgment with respect to the form and content of the film before leaping to categories of philosophical truth.

The second reason is that it makes little sense to criticize Berkeley for not having taken into account a category (self-perception) that is by virtue of his premise an impossibility in his system: for Berkeley the self is the underlying unity that perceives

sense-data. It cannot itself be an object of perception, and as such the self in Berkeley cannot be split into two halves. The reason for the indivisibility of the self in Berkeley's philosophy lies, of course, in the existence of God (and Berkeley meant his theory, among other things, to prove the existence of God): God is the guarantor of the veracity of all sense-ideas given in perception. God cannot be called "extraneous" to the self's perception, because he is what all of the self's perception fundamentally depends on. Although Berkeley is a modern, to whom the horizontal division of the world into perceiving subject and perceived object is familiar, he does not abandon the verticality of the theological perspective.

The world of *Film*, however, is structured entirely horizontally and it is only with this horizontal presupposition that God's perception of the self can be regarded as extraneous so that O can rip the image of God the Father off the wall in order reach a state in which "[a]ll extraneous perception [is] suppressed" (SP 163). It is as if Beckett wanted deliberately to oppose to the verticality of Berkeley's perspective an exclusively horizontal one and to show where the excesses of modern subjectivist philosophy will lead. Because there is no overarching, omniscient perspective to guarantee the subject's perceptions, the subject now has to provide this check itself and to find itself constantly beside itself, distancing itself from its own perceptions in order to dissect them.

In Berkeley, sense perception has truth value. Berkeley's is an immaterialism: an object's existence independent of perception has no meaning for him. But this does not open the door to a subject-centred free-for-all. His denial of the perception / perception-independent object dichotomy does not result in an idealism or subjectivism. (This is rather a leap we 20th-century subjectivists perform because of our belief in a transparent objective realm separate from subjectivist assumptions. The mere proclamation of a subjectivism depends on the simultaneous proclamation of an objectivism, even if the latter is not valorized in the form of a materialism.) For Berkeley, rather, perception *is* truth, guaranteed by divine authority. Because this authority is missing in the picture *Film* presents, checks on the veracity of perception can never be conclusive because they are performed by a subjective, immanent and limited agency. The self that in Berkeley was the indivisible ground of all perception is now split, constantly checking up on itself,

constantly beside himself in an endless chase: "objectified in the form of a nervous fugitive" (Murphy 45).

The split within the self, then, is due to the more general subject/ object duality that governs the godless world of *Film*: only because the self is capable of perceiving objects as distinct from itself, or, more to the point, itself as distinct from objects, is it able to perceive itself as object. In such a world, it has often been pointed out, the subject becomes the new reference point in the place of God, applying its own categories and measures to the world that lies objectified before it, so that even God ends up being made after its own image. The result can only be a gross caricature: a sloppy cartoon figure with bulging eyes carelessly plastered to a wall.

It is, of course, not unusual for human beings to make themselves images of their God, in an idolatrous way (by ignoring the apophatic moment and relying entirely on their kataphatic affirmations) but also in an iconic way: icons are intrinsic parts especially of Orthodox worship. They depict scenes from Scripture, portraits of the saints, the Mother of God, or Christ himself, and they do so in a non-representational way: they do not claim to be a true-to-life likeness of a saint — in fact, such a claim would be contrary to the fundamental tenets of Orthodox theology. What matters in iconography is the true, as it were, not the real. This truth does not reside in the materiality of the icon, in its wood or colour or gold, if such is used. The icon does not materially participate in the holiness of the Saints or the divine nature of Christ. Therefore, one does not worship icons, one venerates them — and one does not venerate the materiality of the icon, but the sanctity of the prototype depicted in the icon. In other words, the icon remains an image, a copy of a prototype and not the "original." (Along these lines the Eucharist is not an icon, because it *is* the body and blood of Christ.) And yet, as St. Theodore has made clear, the icon as image is part and parcel of the thing itself: it is of the same order, not subservient or inferior to it. This radicality of iconography forces us to rethink the hierarchy of original and image. In iconography, one is always at the root of the other. There is the same originary doubling that we find here in *Film* and at the basis of all of Beckett's art. The icon does not move in the order of representation: it seeks rather to *present* a human being

in complete likeness of God. As art (which it is not)⁷ it is *Darstellung*, not *Vorstellung*. Therefore, as we outlined in the first chapter, the icon looks at the human being that brings herself before it, not the other way around.

Icons of Christ, however non-representational, are, of course, still depictions of God, but only of the incarnate God, that is the shape in which God himself chose to enter the representational realm. The incarnation of Christ is the precondition for making icons, and, in fact, to deny the validity of icons would be to deny the incarnation of Christ. However, under no circumstances is it permissible to make an image of God the Father. Beckett makes his point by doing just that: the cartoon-like image on the wall in *Film* is an image of God the Father. But the caricature of God the Father on the wall of the room setting in *Film* is not blasphemous — rather, it is a statement of fact, since any image of the transcendent God can only be a caricature, and, likewise, the idolatrous image is intrinsic in the dualist premise, the split between subject and object, with which *Film* works. A dualism always involves objectification and hence conceptualization: we construct according to our own parameters what we are able to see objectified before us.

Thus, Henning is mistaken to assume that Beckett takes us along a Berkeleian trajectory and only moves beyond it into a world without God as soon as the print of God the Father is ripped off the wall (92). *Film* was a godless universe all along; it is based on a thoroughly postmodern premise (the split of the subject). It did not suddenly become godless at the arbitrary moment at which O removes the eyes with which the "god" on the wall perceives him. Similarly, Beckett never really does take "Berkeley at his word" (91), as Henning suggests. He does not explore the Berkeleian premise until he can conclusively prove its weak spots (cf. 89). Rather, he starts from a premise that is diametrically opposed to Berkeley's and adopts Berkeley's dictum so that he can explore the weak spots of the premise *Film dramatizes*, which emerge with greater clarity when contrasted with Berkeley's position.

The postmodern premise of Beckett's endeavor in *Film* emerges with force when the other main emphasis of criticism on *Film* is foregrounded: that *Film* is about "the essence of cinema" (Federman 366), a critique of the genre. The identification of one of

⁷ Icons are material means to a spiritual end and have therefore primarily pedagogical value in bringing believers closer to God. To approach them as art is to move them perilously close to being ends in themselves and as such to being idols.

the characters (or half a character) with the eye of the camera (and, as Sidney Feshbach emphasizes, the working title of the film was, in fact, "The Eye" [336]) draws attention to the role of the camera in film-making and -watching. By personalizing the camera Beckett makes it impossible for the viewer to slip into the engrained habit of treating it as an impersonal and impartial medium that merely happens to grant the viewer privileged access to a sequence of events that would otherwise have taken place behind closed doors. The camera ceases to be merely an apparatus (to be made as invisible as possible to evoke the impression that it "merely" records) and becomes a character (whose doings and motivations are just as questionable as those of the other characters with whom the audience is used to dealing in a detached way). *Film* uses the eye of the camera for an allegorization of the ontological and epistemological implications of the phenomenological process of (visual) perception. Through its personification of the camera, *Film* makes the connection between a critique of seeing and a critique of the subject-position as ontological foundation unmistakably clear. In this way, the camera becomes less an instrument of film-making than a symbol of the splits and dualities that can lurk in visual perception as such. The critique of the dualist model as it is put forward in *Film* (as opposed to Berkeley's monism) is possible only from a point of view that understands the problematic nature of the model of a centred subjectivity. In fact, *Film* seems to say, a truly "centred" subjectivity based on the dualist model of subject and object is an illusion.

But the criticism of the dualist model set forth in *Film* does not call for a simple resolution of the dualism into a fusion of subject and object. In the final "showdown," when E finally emerges from behind O, leaves the so-called "angle of immunity" of 45° (within which O is oblivious to E's presence) and confronts O face to face, no merger between the two halves of the protagonist takes place. Instead, the characteristic look indicating acute "agony of perceivedness" comes over O before he covers his eyes with his hands, because, as a last resort, not to see now seems to be the only way to evade the agony of being seen. At this point critics like to say that eventually the split protagonist cannot evade self-perception and *Film* becomes yet another instant of what is seen as Beckett's all-pervasive "aesthetics of failure."

Henning praises Beckett for not succumbing to the temptation of allowing for the uncorrupted space that a union of O and E would open up, because to allow for the possibility of union would have, so she states, aligned Beckett with a tradition of what she characterizes as "conventional" thought, and with that tradition Beckett is usually incompatible: union of O and E

depends on the assumption that a realm of essential identity exists from which man is barred by his corrupted nature, a thoroughly traditional metaphysical assumption. If this were the case, then Beckett would appear to share some of the very conventional aspirations of those very conventional thinkers with whom he is usually completely at odds. (Henning 98-9)

And yet it seems that *Film* does not allow for union not because the uncorrupted, incorruptible space beyond the fallenness of human creatures does not exist (generally or in Beckett's view), but precisely because the emphasis in *Film* is on perception — that is, on the realm of representation: the very realm of human "corruption" in which essential identity is impossible. One might add that Henning reveals a very conventional attitude to theology: in the jaded world of nihilist postmodernism any positing of an uncorrupted space is seen as conventional.

In one sense, then, Beckett criticizes the split between O and E as dualist, as the mechanism that keeps the protagonist in the hamster-wheel of the quest for unity, doomed to failure from the start. On the other hand, he is indeed suspicious of the kind of romantic union of subject and object that would assume that somehow and against impossible odds the unnamable has found its way into a full-fledged expression in language or in the realm of representation: the unification of O and E fails. Yet, it can be argued, against the majority of critical consensus, that it is Beckett's very preoccupation with failure that lifts him out of the realm of nihilism and secularism, because in it he dramatizes not so much the failure of attempting to express the ineffable in language, but dramatizes rather the presentation of the unrepresentable as unrepresentable. In other words, he bids farewell the Romantic idea of being able to say the ineffable, and as such he is no longer concerned with the perpetual failure that this undertaking necessarily produces — in fact, does no longer see it as a failure — and engages instead in presenting the unrepresentable as unrepresentable. Failure in this sense becomes a prerequisite for success.

Beckett insists that the unrepresentable can only be caught in the interstices of language; that it can be seen in language only by its trace, and in this move he is entirely compatible with the apophatic tradition.⁸

Because Beckett foregoes the Romantic effort, the split between O and E is precisely an acknowledgement of the trace as unavoidable, as a phenomenological necessity. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that because of our situation in the world as carnal beings we do not have access to an entirely transparent realm of phenomena. Therefore, "[p]henomenology does not attempt to render experience fully explicit to consciousness but to make us aware of a pre-reflective dimension of experience" (Hart 1996: 8). This pre-reflective dimension can never be made fully present. The phenomenological reduction can never be complete, because we are fallen beings: we are never able entirely to disconnect from the worldly, natural, empirical apprehension of consciousness and to enter entirely into the pure phenomenological givenness of consciousness. The phenomenological process is rather an act of vigilance to remind us that we can never fully ground ourselves in thought, because the original experience that would make such a grounding impossible is always already past. "[T]he perceiving subject," as Hart puts it, "is unable ... to coincide exactly with itself. I am never able to say 'I perceive', only that an other subject, an impersonal 'one', perceives in me. The subject of experience is divided, then, as is the object of experience" (ibid.). The division that makes self-perception as it appears in *Film* possible would in this light not be a subject-object dualism, but a gap within the subject itself, and a necessary one at that.

If, however, the chase in which E is engaged in comes about *both* because of the split within the subject (because the subject is off-balance, never grounded in itself) *and* because of the attempt to overcome it (in an effort that seeks union between subject and

⁸ Beckett diverges from Western apophaticism insofar as the latter gears its efforts towards the certainty of the transcendent God, absolutely "beyond" being and the predications of language (while Beckett cannot be sure whether there is "something or nothing" beyond the veils of language. He does not say that it is nothing — and the strong metaphorical tendency in his work speaks against it — but he does not say that it is something, either. So, Beckett's effort can be said to end as much in a moment of nondual undecidability as the apophatic effort, but Beckett's is made from a position of immanence while the Western apophatic tradition argues from a position of transcendence. At this crossroads one is reminded of Thomas Carlson's thesis in *Indiscretion* (1999), where he argues that the postmodern thinkers of human finitude (Heidegger, Derrida) and the apophatic tradition converge in a moment of indiscretion: "The similarity of relation [between finitude and God] can be established, on my view, precisely because the final term in each relation can be neither identified with nor distinguished from the final term in the other" (Carlson 17). Maybe there is a similar convergence at work in Beckett and the apophatic tradition.

object which is synonymous with the expression of the ineffable in language), and if the moment of slippage within the subject is recognized as a necessity that is not *detrimental* to the phenomenological process but rather written into it, then the idea of failure in Beckett's artistic theory needs reevaluation. "Failure" in its conventional teleological interpretation of not achieving a goal becomes meaningless. In fact, the teleological motivation that thinks in terms of goals and failures needs to be given up because it is what maintains the split. And because the split within the subject is a necessity of our incarnate existence, it is hardly a failure, either.

With its teleological implications the term "failure" belongs to the realm of rationality and refers to it: what fails in Beckett's art, or, more to the point, what *explodes* in Beckett's art are the categories of rationality incapable of containing the phenomenon, in this case the work of art. The failure Beckett tries to perfect ("No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." [WW 89]) is the failure to conform to the teleological models that measure failure. "Failing better" is to devise a form of literary discourse that undermines itself increasingly successfully — a discourse that pushes oppositional structures to their limits until they are exhausted and forced into aporetic structures of undecidability.

To posit the failure of rational categories in the experience of the work of art is not to equate aesthetic experience with the saturated phenomenon, although the two have things in common. In aesthetic experience consciousness is confronted with a phenomenon that will not fit into the patterns of reason, but the experience remains a subjective one: the horizon of aesthetic experience remains immanent and subjective because experience has to be experienced by a subject. The saturated phenomenon, on the other hand, while also shattering the categories of reason, transcends the horizon of subjectivity as such: an other gives itself in it which does not depend on subjective categories for its existence. It comes *after* a phenomenology that has the subject and its limitations at its centre and does not accept modernity's subjective transcendental. We fail to comprehend the saturated phenomenon, but it still exists in its hyperabundant givenness although our subjective limitations suggest otherwise. We fail to comprehend the saturated phenomenon in all its fullness, but not because of a deficiency in intuition which falls short of the phenomenon's intended meaning (as is the case with Husserl's "conventional" phenomenon), but because of an intuition that gives itself in excess,

saturating the intention. The failure is in the concept, or in signification, that is, in the deficiencies of "translation" to a subjective horizon, not in givenness itself. Husserl's "conventional" phenomenon, on the other hand, posits an idea, a concept, an intention (a subjective construct) as the ideal that can never be fulfilled by the data actually given to the subject.

In other words, when we accept unfulfilled intention and limited intuition as basic phenomenological principles, we need to be aware that they are basic principles only from a human and subject-centred perspective. The picture changes as soon as one challenges Husserl's subjective transcendental by positing a givenness beyond and in excess of the ideal of subjective intention. That is, there are still limits to what the subject can perceive (the subject is not fully grounded) but it is capable of differentiating between regular "poor" phenomena and ones that remain incomprehensible because of an excess in givenness. The saturated phenomenon remains entirely consistent with a phenomenological horizon because it does not alter the epistemological limitations of the subject. What Husserl did not account for, however, was a phenomenon that explodes the ideal intention and thus dethrones the epistemology of the transcendental subject in positing phenomena that exceed and surpass the subject. The subject still does not experience these phenomena in their fullness, but rather acknowledges the incomprehensible existence of something that surpasses its deficient categories. The failure of rational thought in Beckett's work is hence a "success" insofar as it sees the limitations of rational thought for what they are and opens the subject beyond them. With this in mind we shall return to *Film*.

Film is often seen as going round in circles and therefore embodying failure: it begins and ends with a close-up of what critics like to call "Keaton's reptilic eye" (recalling the film's working title and its central theme of visual perception), union between O and E is never accomplished and therefore no resolution is achieved: E is as far from his goal as he was at the start. In short: the film is, once again, about failure. There can be no doubt that the frame of Keaton's reptilic eye introduces an element of circularity into what has so far been an entirely linear structure of pursuit. But is the image the reader encounters at the end really the same as the one at the beginning? Critics have latched on too readily to a conventional idea of failure and then have proceeded to

read Beckett's work as being single-mindedly preoccupied with what appears as a notional cluster of the inevitability of suffering and failing. As a result, Beckett's work has been seen as negative and pessimistic — an idea he steadfastly rejected.⁹

It is likely that the character(s) in the film, O and E, would on the next roll of film resume their old routine and plod along the same old route of quest for unity. But in the viewer's experience of the work the final image has changed, although it is the same as the opening. If the film has successfully brought its "message" across, then the viewer will have to approach the opening images in a different frame of mind, aware of the problematic nature of the quest — so, for the viewer at least, a learning process and on that basis an exit from the circularity of the situation is possible.

On his way to leading the reader to this realization, Beckett has explored limits: of the respective genre in which he works, and more generally of what can and cannot be said. An exploration of limits brings not only newfound freedom, but also an experience of one's own limits, because it implies a point at which one's own subjectivity ends. In the exploration of limits one meets, implicitly, one's Other. I would like to frame this discussion of limits in terms of the kind of aesthetic experience Beckett's art induces and hence how his art relates to the representational space whose limits it explores. At its metaphorical best Beckett's art tries no longer to say the unnamable, but tries rather to overcome linguistic mediation through the directness of the visual image and to induce an *experience* of what cannot be said.

The word "experience" is itself an ambivalent term. In German there are two words for it: *Erfahrung* and the newer word *Erlebnis*, the first appearance of which Gadamer traces back to one of Hegel's letters (55). If Gadamer is right, then the word *Erlebnis* would have risen to public consciousness (as a secondary formation of the older verb *erleben*) at the height of ontotheology and the apotheosis of the subject. It is hardly a coincidence that *Erlebnis* denotes an inner experience of a specific person (the person who lived through the experience) and the content of the experience remains in retrospect indelibly imprinted on his or her mind. *Erlebnis*, then, is a relatively stable experience:

⁹ In his collaboration with theatre photographer, John Haynes, James Knowlson relates the following episode: "I remember writing to [Beckett] shortly after Saul Bellow had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. At the end of the letter, somewhat misguidedly, I wrote: 'Another Nobel prize-winning pessimist'. Beckett wrote back wryly asking: 'Where did you get the idea I was a pessimist?'" (Haynes and Knowlson 19)

one that one lived through (as only one could) and then refers back to as a concluded affair. The central position of the subject in *Erlebnis* also ensures that perceptions are integrated into a meaningful whole that is then available to the hermeneutic process of the production of meaning.

Erfahrung, on the other hand, is an experiential and experimental journey one undertakes (*fahren* means "to travel"). Kevin Hart points out that this sense of experience preserves in its own way the Latin root of the English word "experience": *experiri*, which means "'to undertake', 'to attempt', 'to make trial of'" (Hart 1996: 12). He also points out that *experiri* contains within it *peri*, "from which we get peril" (ibid.) and he concludes that *Erfahrung* "keeps in play a notion of experience as a setting at risk, a voyage that may well involve danger" (12). *Erfahrung* is not at all stable: it is experience that challenges a person's cherished beliefs and conceptions; it is a danger to the stability of the subject.

I cannot help but think of O here, who literally ventures out into the world of agony and peril, the unity and stability of his identity at stake. But the analogy fails, because O is really on the run from *Erfahrung*: he is a panicked fugitive, not someone who confronts the challenges of his experience. The better image is the viewer's journey, the journey on which Beckett takes his audience. The journeys the viewer undertakes in experiencing Beckett's work are never journeys to a place a long way from the outset. They usually go round in circles, both for the characters and for the audience, who end up where they started out: with Didi and Gogo underneath the tree, in Moran's house, in Murphy's chair, or at the end of one cycle of Mouth's ramblings. The journey does not lead to a transcendent place outside of the immanent, away from the brokenness of the world. And yet the place to which the reader or spectator returns is changed — it is not the same place from which one started out, though outwardly it is.

Beckett's art is an art of *Erfahrung*. It embarks on the perilous journey of an exploration of limits: Beckett's journey, hence, is not primarily inward directed, although it is, of course, intensely inward. But it is not *Erlebnis*, that is, it is not subject-centred. Rather it contests a conventionally centred subjectivity. It is a meeting or a confrontation with an other in which it explores and exhausts that opposition dialectically in a process of reduction until the opposition turns into an undecidability. Here we encounter again the

Blanchotian distinction between death as possibility and as impossibility, or between that which generates or gives meaning and that which continuously evades being ascribed any meaning. In writing (or in literature) the subject (as constituted meaningfully by the world of possibility) encounters the neutral, which has no meaning as possibility, but contests such meaning and finds itself outside the distinction of possibility and impossibility (cf. Hart 2004: 139). That is the risk involved in the artist's journey, and it is why the place to which the reader returns is not the same place: it both is and is not the same place.

Such a conception of *Erfahrung* is a significant reinterpretation of the philosophical tradition, in which the objective externality of *Erfahrung* has dominantly been seen as deferring to the direct immediacy of *Erlebnis*. Kant's conception of *Erfahrung*, in the throes of the Enlightenment, focuses so much on the objectivity of the categories of experience that it reduces human reason to the position of mere servant to science. "The categories, with the help of their underlying basis, 'the transcendental unity of apperception,' mechanistically synthesize sensations received from a mechanistic natural world to produce a concept of experience which is predictably mechanistic in turn," Richard Wolin (33) observes. Notably the early Walter Benjamin took issue with this underappreciated idea of *Erfahrung* and developed a conception of "total experience" [*Erfahrung*], not the particularized ideal of scientific experience. To him, the very process of categorizing experience makes a unified, higher conception of experience, which would also allow for religious experience, impossible. In fact, religious experience holds a privileged position for Benjamin because it is able to transcend the dichotomy of subject and object that is implicit in subjective *Erlebnis* and objective *Erfahrung*.

The realization that Beckett's work is fundamentally an exploration of limits has important consequences for the idea of failure, as well as for the related issue of the transcendental in Beckett's art. Limits imply a beyond, or a transcendent (no matter whether one can have access to it or not) and thus hint at an exit, or: at "success" (insofar as an exit from the circularity of the self-created hell has been effected). At the same time, Beckett's reinterpretation of the concept of failure as a deconstruction of conceptuality and an embrace of aporia removes it from any context of duality or linearity and therefore from any context that could be segregated into success and failure.

What this means is that Beckett's analysis starts from an immanent perspective, and it remains immanent, but it retains the structures of transcendence. Beckett's observations on language (and, by extension, also on the nature of the dire human condition) always evoke a limit, and hence a beyond. Even in his German letter to Axel Kaun, in which he speaks of language as a veil to be torn to reach the things (or the nothing) behind it, the image evokes a boundary beyond which is something different. He is uncertain merely of what he will find there (it might be something or nothing) but the basic pattern of transcendence is unaffected by this. A notion of transcendence is also implicit in what Beckett told Tom Driver about the extent of human misery and confusion: "The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of" (qtd. in Driver 21). "The mess," in other words, can be transcended (there is hope of renovation), but in order to do that we need first to acknowledge its existence, and second, see it as being of our own production. This is a central aspect of Beckett's outlook on human misery and suffering that the (pseudo) existentialist critics preferred to ignore, but one that Driver articulates fully as early as 1961. Esslin and his followers liked to stress what they saw as the inescapability of human suffering: Godot never comes and Didi and Gogo will continue their monotonous existence of empty hours and night-time beatings. However, they will continue only for as long as they agree to play the central parts in the play — for as long as they do not acknowledge themselves as creators, perpetrators and perpetuators of their own situations. Driver poignantly concludes his reflections on his meeting with Beckett thus:

The walls that surround the characters of Beckett's plays are not walls that nature and history have built irrespective of the decisions of men. They are the walls of one's own attitude towards his situation. The plays are themselves evidence of a human capacity to see one's situation and by that very fact to transcend it. (Driver 24)

Beckett's position with respect to transcendence is comparable to Derrida's, who also argues from an immanent point of view (since, in his famous and by now critically overused phrase, "there is nothing outside the text"), but does so within a framework of reference that is structured towards a transcendent. His evocation of the "closure of metaphysics" implies another space that opens up beyond metaphysics or takes its place.

Again, deconstruction then goes about "dismantling" metaphysics from within, so that the "new era" after metaphysics, were it capable of arriving, would be an immanent one. But, of course, by the very nature of deconstruction this new era can never arrive: every deconstructive proposition immediately slips back into the conceptual structures it tried to undo. In other words, deconstruction is ordered towards an impossible transcendent. It is structured like a messianic religion around a longing for the transcendent that is never fulfilled: even Christianity, where the Messiah has already arrived, does not let go of it but instead invokes a Second Coming.

But the messianic or apocalyptic impulse in deconstruction, as in Beckett, is no license to wallow in expectant passivity. Deconstruction is always motivated by the desire to go where one cannot go, to disarm the powers of instrumentalist reason by exposing its dualisms as aporias, and, once "the way of knowledge has been blocked" (Caputo 1999: 3) to follow

the imperative of *doing* the truth, *facere veritatem*, which is what deconstruction is all about. To put it all in a very condensed formulation, in deconstruction, the very conditions under which something is impossible, is declared impossible by what calls itself 'the light of reason' or 'philosophy,' are likewise and especially the conditions of possibility. Being impossible is what ignites our passion, gets us off dead center, and drives our desire to make it happen. (Caputo 1999: 3-4)

Likewise, once Beckett has exposed the dead ends and absurdities into which his characters' blind adherence to reason (Watt, Murphy, Molloy) or their inability to awaken to the impact of their own decisions (Didi and Gogo) has lead them, the imperative for us as audience is not to assume the horizon of human suffering and blindness to be insurmountable, untranscendable (and thus to limit our insight to that of the characters') but to use our privileged insight and live accordingly.

If, then, art as *Erfahrung* is an exploration of limits, and if the latter necessarily involves danger, because it breaks the horizons of what we have come to expect and feel comfortable in, then one would expect that it also, at times, involves failure. This is especially so, since from the Derridean point of view "failure" is written into the picture because it is what maintains the longing for the "wholly other" — the basic structure of

religion. "Failure" is necessary because only through it are we reminded of another order beyond the limitations of our categories: God would not be God if it were possible to grasp him. Only through our failure to grasp him and own him do we maintain the desire to do the impossible.

In the vocabulary of instrumental, teleological reason this "failure" remains a failure, not least because it can be described as the failure *of* instrumental reason — the point at which the categories of instrumental reason fail to grip. Maybe the role of failure in Beckett's art, and the question of immanence and transcendence in relation to it, can be elucidated by remembering Adorno's conception of aesthetic experience. For Adorno, as for Beckett and Derrida, failure is a necessity. And for Adorno, as for Beckett, aesthetic experience is a matter of *Erfahrung*, not *Erlebnis*. Aesthetic experience is the encounter of something separate and different from the experiencing subject. The subject encounters its Other, and thereby its own finitude. But what happens in this encounter? The central term in Adorno's aesthetic theory is *Erschütterung*: an upheaval that rocks the subject to its foundations, because the Other — in this case the work of art — will overwhelmingly refuse to be pigeonholed by the categories according to which a human being in the grip of the dialectic of Enlightenment will structure her world: the categories of reason. *Erschütterung*, Adorno emphasizes, is thus diametrically opposed to *Erlebnis*, because it is not based on satisfaction of the ego. Rather, it is an instance of the "liquidation of the ego" (Adorno 364). An emotional response to art is hence not *Erschütterung*, because what breaks through in the emotional response is not the objectivity, or truth, of the work of art, but an otherwise suppressed subjectivity. Emotion is a confirmation of subjectivity, not its demise (cf. Adorno 365).¹⁰

However, although the subject encounters an objectivity beyond itself, and is thoroughly rattled by it, *Erschütterung* remains an entirely subjective category. *Erschütterung* is not the breakthrough of an objective given into the subject's realm against the subject's will, as it were. Rather, the categories of reason fail to grasp an

¹⁰ The question then presents itself to what extent experience without a subject to ground it is possible, especially given that the subject is a relatively recent concept in the history of philosophy. Cf. Martin Jay's article "Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel" (1998), in which Jay investigates the convention of free indirect speech as an example of experience without a subject. Free indirect speech is not unequivocally rooted in either the author's or the character's experience. Also interesting with regard to Beckett's linguistic pursuits is that in Jay's article *language* becomes the locus of such nondual experience.

object that the subject actively invites into its realm but then cannot process. In other words, the beginnings for aesthetic experience are always made in the subject, and no one but the subject can experience its own *Erschütterung*: aesthetic experience, according to Adorno, is firmly rooted in the subject.

For Adorno, this has to be the case, because there is no escape from the dialectic of Enlightenment. There can be no transcending its corkscrew mechanism and hence no positive experience of an Other, or of a transcendent reality. As a result, the experience of the Other in aesthetic experience is solely that of "a border and a beyond" (Hindrichs 140). The subject in *Erschütterung* has only a *negative* experience of an objectivity which in its quiddity remains beyond the subject's grasp. And this failure to grasp the object in its essence is the very definition of aesthetic *Erfahrung* — without it there would be no *Erschütterung*. Gunnar Hindrichs saliently points out that failure to grasp the object does not imply that any *attempt* to grasp it becomes pointless and superfluous. The attempt to grasp and define is a necessary precondition for aesthetic experience because it is precisely the failure to grasp and define the aesthetic object that constitutes its experience (Hindrichs 149). There is no aesthetic experience without failure. Aesthetic experience *is* failure.

To return the argument to the role of failure in Beckett's art, then, one can say that failure need not be seen as the seal to the misery of everlasting sameness beyond hope of salvation. In Adorno's conception, in fact, it is failure that orients us towards the transcendent (even if the latter cannot be experienced "as such") by making us aware of a border beyond which there is something that exceeds our rational categories. It makes us aware of a transcendent without giving us the ability to say what it is. Now, it is true, there is no transcendence in Adorno, as there is no transcendence in Derrida, either. Both argue from an exclusively immanent perspective. But Adorno (like Derrida) holds on to the idea of transcendence, although as a stance it does not exist for him.¹¹ Otherwise, as

¹¹ cf. Gunnar Hindrichs: "Während Benjamin an der Idee eines entrückten Standortes festhält, eines Standortes, der außergeschichtlich am Himmel zu suchen ist, gibt Adorno diese Idee auf. Der Standpunkt der Erlösung ist zu suchen, obgleich er als Standpunkt unmöglich geworden ist. Er muß innerhalb der Katastrophe gegen diese gefunden werden. Adorno behält sozusagen die Idee der Rettung bei, nachdem sich die Englein (und der Messias) vom Himmel auf die Erde totgefallen haben" (169). ["While Benjamin holds on to the idea of a remote position, a position to be sought in the heavens outside of history, Adorno abandons this idea. One is to try for a position of salvation, although as a stance this position has become impossible. It needs to be found within the catastrophe against the latter. Adorno holds on to the Idea of

Hindrichs points out and Adorno knows, philosophy would become a socially irresponsible endeavour: it would abandon human beings to the quagmire of their own existences without offering even an incentive for responsible living. If the dialectic of Enlightenment is an inescapable, escalating spiral anyway, why bother to try and make a difference? (Here I find Adorno's position implausible. Either the dialectic is inescapable — then why bother with an idea of transcendence, however "negatively" defined; or it is not — in which case the ability to analyze the dialectic rationally, as Adorno is doing, would mean that by rational means we can situate ourselves sufficiently outside the dialectic to be able to see it clearly. Thus it should be possible to defeat the dialectic by its own means, and this, in turn, would mean that a positive experience of the transcendent must be possible because then the dialectic would cease to be the only horizon.) Aesthetic experience provides this idea of transcendence without transcendence for Adorno because transcendence in it is exclusively negative and does not offer a positive ground outside the confines of subjectivity.

Derrida is similarly ambivalent when it comes to transcendence. Derrida, also, holds on to an idea of transcendence while at the same time denying any de facto transcendence. There is "nothing outside the text" and the text consists of "differences without positive terms," but at the same time Derrida maintains the formal structures of transcendence. A formulation such as "the closure of metaphysics," for instance, implies the existence of metaphysics as well as something else that follows metaphysics as soon as the latter is a completed project. At the same time, however, Derrida points out that it is impossible to leave metaphysics behind. This is the first of the long series of aporias in which Derrida delights. Here, the impossibility of leaving metaphysics behind at the same time opens up the possibility of deconstructing it from within (and, thus, doing, if only in a fleeting moment of slippage, something other than metaphysics).

Likewise, because Derrida holds on to structures of transcendence, *différance*, like the transcendent, is situated "outside" the cycle of deconstructions, but in a peculiar way: it cannot be deconstructed because it does not present conceptual knowledge; so one cannot say that *différance* is "inside," because everything that is, is potentially subject to

salvation after the angels (and the Messiah) have plunged down to earth and into their death, as it were." (translation mine)]

deconstruction. It does not come with a context that would allow us to fit it into our cognitive patterns. It is never really present. This condition of never being present keeps *différance* from slipping into logocentric structures, thus it is not really "outside" the cycle of deconstructions, because, if it were, it would, in Derrida's conception, be logocentric. So, is *différance* immanent or transcendent? It is, of course, both and neither, but it nonetheless shares an important characteristic with transcendence: its unattainability. Humans can never "have" God because "owning" him would mean containing him — at which point he would cease to be God and become a human concept. Transcendence is by definition elusive — it is a trace.

Derrida adopts the idea of the messianic as a further "incarnation" of the aporetic structure of *différance*. Messianic religions expect their members to structure their lives as if the Messiah came tomorrow. Their lives are spent in anticipation of and preparation for the coming of the Messiah, but at the same time those religions' *raison d'être* disappears with his coming. Structurally, the Messiah must not come. As a result, Christianity, which holds that the Messiah has come already, posits the Second Coming of Christ so as to maintain the tradition's messianic character and with it the defining feature of unattainability: Christians will spend their lives in a state of constant vigilance, not knowing when or if the Messiah will come during their natural lifetimes. It is, then, paradoxically, the very structure of transcendence that keeps the cycle of deconstructions — the vigilance that keeps one from becoming ensnared by logocentric structures — moving.

In this sense, deconstruction is indeed, as John Caputo and Michael Scanlon say, structured like a religion (1999: 4). Deconstruction and religion are both structured towards something just out of reach of the rational mind. In fact, faith begins where knowledge fails. Because *différance* transcends the structures of the rational mind, refuses to be compartmentalized and to remain a purely intellectual idea, Derrida, like Adorno, resorts to the rhetoric of experience — *doing* the truth — to elucidate its impact. "For Derrida," Caputo and Scanlon write, "the experience of the impossible represents the least bad definition of deconstruction" (3). This experience does not amount to anything more clear-cut than the confusing, boundary- and definition-shattering tumble into which an

aporia sends us, but this tumble means that at this moment the boundaries of intellectual cognition are transgressed into the experiential: it is necessary to *live* the aporia.

It is worth reiterating both Derrida's and Adorno's ambivalent positions with regard to transcendence because in Beckett we are confronted with a similar ambivalence: Beckett's world-view is a thoroughly immanent one (since there is no certainty of the existence of the transcendental dimension). But at the same time his work is permeated by an insistent gesture towards the transcendent: its fundamentally metaphoric structure, the aporetic nature of its prose, the Zen-inspired balance of his stage compositions all point towards a transcendence (and be it an "immanent transcendence,"¹² as in the case of Zen) that is never reached, possessed, let alone represented. Rather, it is the unfulfilled longing for the transcendent that fuels Beckett's efforts — and more accurately still: the longing for the transcendent is most properly the experience *of* the transcendent (or the closest one comes in Beckett's immanent world to an experience of the transcendent).

Eventually, Beckett — like Derrida and Adorno — resorts to the immediacy of experience as a purveyor of what cannot be represented in language. He held painting in especially high regard for its ability to bypass the mediation of language. In his homage to Jack Yeats he says: "In images of such breathless immediacy as these there is no occasion, no time given, no room left, for the lenitive of comment" (D 149). The immediacy of painting is able to rock — *erschüttern* — the subject's rational constitution in language, to overwhelm the subject-object dichotomies on which the subject ordinarily builds its interactions with the world, and to access a realm to which, it appears, Beckett ascribes greater proximity to an origin. Painting lacks the mediation of language and is thus able to convey a more immediate reality. In fact, in her book *The Painted Word* (2000), Lois Oppenheim argues that Beckett ascribes an ontological value to painting and to seeing itself. At a crucial, yet superficially argued stage in her argument she draws parallels between Beckett's attitude to painting and Heidegger's argument in "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which he argues the unveiling of Being at the moment of the apprehension of the work of art. She hastily concludes that "[s]o, too, Beckett situates art on the level of the primordial apprehension of the real" (78).

¹² "Immanent transcendence" is not to imply the modern sense of transcendent subjectivity, but to evoke linguistically the nondual aporetic moment in which the duality between transcendence and immanence disappears.

There are at least two problems with single-handedly equating Beckett's position with Heidegger's. Heidegger argues that the truth of the thing itself is imparted in the work of art. This can be construed as a logocentric argument for which Beckett would have little patience: Oppenheim herself remarks that Beckett's point of view on aesthetics is not so much aesthetical as anaesthetical insofar as Beckett will not allow himself to be pinned down to a coherent set of aesthetic assumptions that he pursues throughout his oeuvre. Secondly, Heidegger's argument is not specific or limited to the visual. For him poetry, too, has the potential to open our thinking to the unconcealment of Being.

Still Oppenheim's point cannot be dismissed. The philosophical assumptions implicit (at least in the Western tradition) in the perceptual process of seeing clearly pose an important problem for Beckett — one that, could it be resolved, would configure the human condition differently. Unresolved, it might even itself be the cause of the human condition. Again and again he struggles to overcome the Cartesian dualisms epitomized most poignantly by the process of seeing: *Catastrophe* deals most explicitly with the objectification and the power relations that can be implicit in seeing. *Film* continues this investigation on a more philosophical rather than political level. With the wordless *Quad* Beckett's intensely visual art reaches its zenith, and in the "Three Dialogues" he attempts to lay the theoretical foundations for an entirely "objectless" and "expressionless" (visual) art, an art not based on the autonomy of the work of art as an object of artistic expression. Interestingly, for Beckett the visual paradigm at once illustrates the dualism to be overcome and harbours the possibility of overcoming it. The work of art lies objectified before the beholder, but the immediate intensity of the visual image has the power to melt the dualism. Oppenheim summarizes that "[Beckett] cannot endure the defining relation of critic to art any more than he could 'the definition of the artist as one who never ceases to be *in front of*'" (88; the snippet Oppenheim quotes is from a letter Beckett wrote to Georges Duthuit).

In *Le Monde et Le Pantalon* Beckett again speaks of the immediacy of painting, which, again, he sees ideally realized in the art of Bram van Velde. In van Velde he observes a will to perceive in a way that is so exclusively and overwhelmingly pictorial that we with our "murmuring reflections," (MP 25) our whispering rational thought, have trouble comprehending it and can only comprehend it by drawing it back into a syntactic

succession, a "ronde syntaxique" (ibid.) — by, in other words, pulling it back into time (ibid.), from which it had already freed itself. He echoes his own words in the homage to Yeats when he says that van Velde's paintings have dumbfounded even those who otherwise are never at a loss for words (ibid.).

The immediacy of van Velde's art manages to free the object — the painting — from the constraints of the subject-object duality in which it is commonly regarded, so that in its immediacy it is possible to see "the thing for itself," to see the thing "strictly as it is" (MP 28) — the "pure object" (ibid.), yet not really an object because not reified by the beholder or by its context. Van Velde, according to Beckett, presents "the immobile thing in emptiness" (ibid.), and he does so not merely by "wanting to stop time through representing it," (MP 27) as the rest of painting has tried to do (ibid.), but by doing even more: by lifting it "out of time," as it were, insofar as our perception of time as a teleological arrow depends on a perceptual dualism, so in order for our conventional perception of time as a syntactic succession to disappear, the dualism has to disappear.

And yet, we are still fallen beings: the reduction is necessarily incomplete because of our inherence in the world, in nature, and nirvana does not last: after the enlightenment of nonduality we have to continue our embodied existence and return to the world to teach others. In other words, the motionless moment van Velde depicts is still a moment in time, we are still fallen and thus still inside time ... we just went *into* Sacré-Coeur in order not to see it anymore.¹³

This approach by his favourite Bram van Velde Beckett compares and contrasts with that of the artist's brother, Geer van Velde. He argues that although the approaches of the two brothers are in antithetical opposition to each other — and so radically so that Beckett thinks it preferable not to expose oneself to both in one day (MP 33) — they nonetheless have their roots in the same experience (37). That experience is that of nonduality, but while Bram van Velde presents the motionless thing in emptiness so immediately as not to allow for the dualism that enables rational thought and "the lenitive of comment," thus a moment of no-time, Geer van Velde presents *only* the flow of time. His art is, Beckett surmises, the representation of "the river into which no one steps

¹³ "Espace et corps, achevés, inaltérables, arrachés au temps par le faiseur de temps, à l'abri du temps dans l'usine à temps (qui passait sa journée dans le Sacré-Coeur pour ne plus avoir à le voir?)" (MP 26).

twice" (MP 34). It is nondual because it abolishes the notion of time as a "container," a flow of time that exists independently "out there" and in which there are contained objects, including a reified I, that are perceived as unchanging, self-existing (cf. Loy 1989: 220). This view of time as container reifies objects and I (as unchanging), as well as time: we are attached to a view of ourselves as unchanging and ever-existing, and in that sense eternal, while time forever drags this eternal I onwards towards death against its will. David Loy points out that the nondual solution is to realize that objects are not *in* time, but rather *are* time, which consequently implies that they are free from time (319), and in that sense *truly* eternal. There are no unchanging objects that are caught in time against their will, but rather objects are necessarily temporal. Likewise, they are not *in* (temporal) space, but they are "what space is doing in that place," as Loy puts it, (220-221). As a result, there is no dualism and hence no concept of time as reified, teleological flux, because there is *only* flux. The object (or the I) is not "caught" in it. Geer van Velde presents, then, an attitude of detachment from the attachments to and reifications of self.

Geer van Velde's approach Beckett likens to literature (MP 33). If one equates Bram van Velde's approach with the stillness of metaphor and Geer van Velde's approach with the flux of metonymy, one can say that Beckett knows that the two poles, metaphor and metonymy, complement each other towards the same nondual end. Beckett's own preference for Bram's approach would then be due primarily to his own development and predilections and to the fundamentally metaphorical nature of his art. Whether the flux of metonymy is perceived as nondual flux, or as teleological linearity is a matter of perception: the ontic range of *nirvana* and *samsara* is identical.

Before saying a few words on *Film* as film, I would like to suggest, then, that the importance of *Film* lies less in its being a film (and the first and only experiment of Beckett's with the genre) than in the opportunity it provides for Beckett to allegorize seeing (and, as the above analysis shows, by extension: knowing) itself. Phenomenology and negative theology are based on opposing principles insofar as phenomenology is in pursuit of knowledge and tries to turn human subjective knowledge into an absolute, whereas negative theology aims to guard God's absolute transcendence from the tentacles of human knowledge. But they meet as soon as phenomenology has to acknowledge that there is a remainder that consistently evades human knowledge. The ineffable, Hyppolite

says, is the absolutely singular, and this singularity dissolves, turns into the trace at the moment one tries to say it, at the moment of inscription. No thing, least of all the ineffable, ever coincides with itself — it is doubled as soon as it enters discourse. And yet: the nondual absolute will not be absent from language, or else it would not be absolute. If literature is the adventure of creating an absolutely irreducible space, as Beckett, Blanchot and Derrida suggest, and God is unsayable because He is *a se*, and hence absolutely singular, then the way of talking about God and about literature must be apophatic. But negative theology does this with regard to the transcendent while "apophatic" criticism of literature does it with regard to the transcendental.

Beckett's mission to abandon the quest for the unnamable will hence remain a quest if the aim is simply to articulate the singular moment, the still moment in time, because of the propensity of the singular to retreat at the moment of inscription. Both halves of the stillness/quest dualism are the same: an oscillation between them will not do. The stillness we perceive in Beckett's late work is rather the result of a full acceptance of the problem of inscription and a lack of desire to solve it. He has resigned himself to sticking with the nonduality of the aporia.

At obvious points the two trajectories — genre critique and phenomenological analysis — must necessarily interlace, since the "eye" of the camera attempts to imitate the eye of the viewer. Strikingly, however, there is no indication in *Film* of the enormous saving grace that the visual possesses for Beckett by way of suspension of the rational faculties. This is precisely where *Film* fails (here in the conventional sense) at its own task of "failing better" by destroying teleological models: it remains a "theoretical" or "analytical" work in the sense that it appeals primarily to the rational faculties. This is also why it falls short in comparison with the majority of Beckett's other works. *Not I* and *Quad* emphasize, in addition to the intellectual challenges they pose, the pre-rational element or work deliberately at wearing down the audience's rational shield (Beckett, one recalls, wanted *Not I* to work primarily on the audience's nerves, and the audience cannot evade a sense of annoyance at *Quad*). Moreover, the visual images of these plays have the very immediacy Beckett observes in Jack Yeats' pictures.

If *Film* is first of all an analytical work (even if it is extremely self-conscious about being analytical), then this is not least due to the metonymic structure of the

narrative of the film, and of film in general. Metonymy and analytic reason both follow along a linear trajectory. Beckett's otherwise dominantly metaphorical and nondual work that appeals to the experiential becomes metonymic as soon as he uses the filmic medium; or else, medium-conscious as he is, he uses a metonymic medium to make a primarily analytical point that foregoes the appeal to the experiential.

Given that *Film* is first of all analytical, in what way is an audience's reaction to it different from the reaction to Beckett's "more typical," that is, more dominantly metaphorical work? As one might expect, the difference is due largely to its metonymic character. The world of *Film*, though distorted through, amongst other things, O's "comic foundered precipitancy" (F 164) and his bizarre obsession with eliminating all potential sources of external perception, remains recognizable in its elements. *Film*, like all film, remains in principle imitative of reality: based on previous experience with the world, the viewer is to recognize a street, "about 1929," in a "small factory district" (F 164). Likewise, the house and room which O enters later in the film have a similarly recognizable quality: the viewer has seen hundreds of buildings like it and similar rooms. To increase the element of recognition, Beckett added the entirely unwarranted and unnecessary piece of information that the room is that of O's mother (maybe to make sure that the mimetic firmly overrides the bizarre contents of the room). As if in an awareness that film calls for linearly motivated narrative, Beckett adds this piece of homey detail to help the reader make sense of the proceedings: in the familiar world people generally visit their mother's rooms, never mind that those usually have the mother in them and look rather different from the one Beckett presents to us. Importantly, the reader/viewer can now ascribe a motivation to O's visit to the room; it is possible to fill the recognizable exterior with motivation and hence with metonymic progression.

Throughout *Film*, a mixture of recognizable elements and bizarre elements of alienation spurs the viewer on to generate meaning. These elements are presented metonymically and therefore in such a way as to invite the construction of a cohesive, linear narrative: the street in which the camera first encounters O is familiar and recognizable; odd is why the protagonist behaves in such a strange manner. He obviously fears observation or pursuit, but by whom and why? There is no one in sight but the camera. Could he be fleeing from the camera itself? Likewise, on the sidewalk and in the

vestibule, O encounters an elderly couple and an old woman, respectively. Both are recognizable and maybe even familiar types: the couple is "of shabby genteel aspect" (F 165), and the old woman is a small-scale flower seller with a vendor's tray slung around her neck. But both react to O's, or maybe the camera's presence with a reaction that is clearly out of the range of the ordinarily observable: they faint with a look of horror on their faces. Again, the viewer is urged to advance tentative hypotheses as to why this is. Either what the characters see is of such horrible aspect as to induce fainting, or else it is the mere fact of being the object of perception that has that effect on them. If the latter, then what is it about being looked at that is so objectionable? Here the viewer enters into the whole philosophical complex of inquiry surrounding perception and visibility, while using the rest of the film to test their hypotheses: how does *Film* as a narrative try to advance its thesis regarding these questions?

By contrast, Beckett's more typically metaphorical theatrical work is constructed quite differently. Narrative is largely absent. The stage images, or rather, the theatrical experiences the plays induce, do not appeal to familiar categories; they are overtly "strange," consisting of mouths or heads floating in mid-space, disconnected from their bodies, or, at their most "naturalistic," of strangely petrified bodies in mechanized rocking chairs or ethereal beings pacing back and forth in non-descript space. Since familiar rational categories fail to grasp the import of the images and the highly evocative texts (if present), they impact on the viewer at a more visceral, more experiential or existential level. Of course, Beckett's is a highly intellectual oeuvre and thus the intellectual effort is never far off, but it is of a different kind in the late theatrical work than it is in *Film*. It comes, as it were, after the fact, and it tries, futilely, to make sense of the experience or of the existential complex to which Beckett alludes in a given work. The divergence from his usual approach in *Film* is due to the (metonymic) medium itself, hence the frequent approach to *Film* as an appreciation of the genre.

It has often been observed that *Film* is a rediscovery of the roots of the filmic medium: it is a minimalist effort that reminds critics of the mood and substance of the experimental films of the 1920's (cf. Brater 1975: 167), when film was just emerging and was arguably doing so in its most genuine form. The film is shot in black and white, and its setting evokes the 1920's. As a conscious alignment with the aesthetic of the early

films Beckett's film is playfully, self-referentially, silent: the only "word" spoken is the admonishing "ssshh" that escapes the woman in the street in her effort to keep her husband from breaking into an even more substantially decorum-breaking scream upon encountering E head-on. The film, then, is silent by choice, not technological limitation, and it makes a point of drawing the viewer's attention to this fact. Beckett aligns his own project with an effort to "return to the essence of the medium" (Federman 363) and he had read Rudolf Arnheim's writings on film, whose conviction it was that film is "a unique experiment in the visual arts that took place in the first three decades of this century" (Arnheim 1958: 11). Thus Raymond Federman concludes that "*Film*, consistent with the Beckettian aesthetic system of destruction and purification, represents an attempt to expose one of the cinema's most flagrant failings today: the exploitation of sound, action, plot, and message to the detriment of the visual image" (363).

As a conscious divergence from the aesthetic of the early film-makers, however, the film does not follow the early film-makers into extensive use of metaphoric techniques, especially montage.¹⁴ On the level of technique, rather than style, *Film* adopts the extremely metonymic narrative structure of Hollywood — and it does this although it is common for contemporary experimental films to break up the metonymic, narrative, mimetic nature of film with self-referential devices (such as showing the camera on screen to expose the constructed nature of the film) or metaphoric techniques (like montage). In this sense, *Film* is not so much a return to an earlier film aesthetic, but more fundamentally a crystallization of those aspects that define the medium: a strong visuality best expressed in the contrastive patterns of black and white and emphasized by the lack of dialogue, as well as a metonymic structure.

Finally, though, *Film*, like any other of Beckett's works has to be read abstractly in metaphorical terms: *Film* is not at all imitative of reality: no one would take the world that *Film* portrays to be a copy of the reality they inhabit. At the highest level of abstraction *Film* is most obviously not "about" a "chase" in the same way in which a car chase defines an action movie (namely mimetically), but rather it invites viewers to read

¹⁴ Montage is metaphoric because it combines elements on the basis of contrast, not on the basis of natural contiguity. But even when it deliberately foregrounds montage, film has a hard time establishing a counterweight to its metonymic predisposition, because montage uses the same editing techniques [cut and splice] as are in general use in film editing.

it metaphorically as being an allegorization of seeing and, by extension, of phenomenological apprehension. Beckett resisted allegory, "that glorious double-entry, with every credit in the said account a debit in the meant, and inversely" (D 90) : "no symbols where none intended," it says at the end of *Watt* (W 255). And he discouraged philosophical readings of his works, emphasizing that if his work were reducible to philosophy that is what he would have written. But both of these objections have their roots in something other than a fundamental aversion to allegory. The first is an ironic stab at Beckett's numerous readers who labour to find significance in even the most insignificant detail (an attempt to combat hero-worship) and it is also an effort to retain authorial control, something consistently high on Beckett's list of priorities. The second is born out of a concern to preserve the inherent multivalence of literary language: it is no coincidence that Beckett did not choose the univocity of the philosophical text as his venue, but turns rather to a mode of discourse that is, as Derrida recognizes, inherently multivalent, always already under erasure. Derrida's concern is primarily philosophical and therefore he has to situate himself within philosophy and write deconstructively from within a logocentric discourse, while Beckett's priority is not to pick a bone with the philosophical tradition. His is not a stringently argued, linear argument, while at the same time it has consequences for the type(s) of discourse (such as the philosophical) with which it chooses not to interfere. "In the beginning was the pun," it says in *Murphy*. Beckett situates multivalence and the lack of stable signification and origins at the source (as it were) of human cultural pursuit. Hence there can be no one-to-one correspondence in Beckett between the allegorical text and what it "stands for" — that would be reductive. Any allegorical reading of Beckett can only be an attempt of many to make sense of a notoriously elusive text.

In the end, then, those critics who criticize *Film* for illustrating a "philosophical truth" have a point. While *Film* is not philosophical discourse — it shares with Beckett's literary works the fact that its points are made in a work of fiction that is automatically under erasure — it departs from Beckett's other work in that it does not appeal to a precognitive element in an experiential way. It posits the existence of this precognitive element analytically, but it does not make it an immediate reality for the viewing audience.

VII. Conclusion

O does not fuse with E, Mouth's ramblings do not cease, and Beckett's scurrying monks continue methodically along their imaginary pathways through the quadrangle. The phenomenological reduction cannot be complete because of our inherence in the world: We are incarnate, embodied (and fallen) beings rather than pure spirit or transcendental ego, and hence irrevocably part of a world of representation. Reflection is always a secondary activity. Because of this ineluctable inherence in the world it is equally impossible for us to see a worldly phenomenon in its essence as it is to see the divine in all its radiance.

The subject and the object never coincide with themselves or with each other: as soon as a phenomenon gives itself in experience or in language it is already doubled. It becomes a representation, an image of itself, or rather, it becomes an image for the observer and stops being the thing in itself, in its singularity. As soon as we begin to reflect on our experience, as soon as experience becomes the experience of a particular subject, it, like language, turns into a representation. That is, the "content" of experience dissolves together with the subject: it is possible to approach experience from a non-substantialist perspective, but only if one allows for a "decentred" subjectivity after the transcendental ego — a witness or a gifted, as Marion has it.

There is no thought (no reflection) and hence no subjectivity without language, because language is the body, not the clothes of thought, Merleau-Ponty points out. What this means is that thought does not exist separately from language, as much as that language, or thought, or conceptuality, is not irrevocably dualist (as something that is separate from the body), because language is, in fact, inseparable from embodied existence. Language is like a snake, Nagarjuna suggests: if one grabs it at the wrong end it will bite, become dualist and destructive, but this is not necessarily so. Hence Toby Foshay proposes, through Nagarjuna, that language is inherently empty (*sunya*), and hence can be nondual if approached correctly, that is, nondually, or through a frame of mind that is also *sunya*: "Everything depends on grasping language rightly" (Foshay 1994: 555). Only then thinker and thought can be grasped nondually, as inhabiting one another, rather than as being distinct and separate from one another.

The pre-reflective origin of cognition, then, which would make it possible to perceive a phenomenon in all its radiance, is always already gone. Therefore, there cannot be hope of any re-instatement of it in the place of a representation or image. The point, Beckett realizes after *The Unnamable*, cannot be to try to present this pre-reflective unity in language. This would mean to try futilely to make language do what it cannot do. Rather, the point is to embrace the originary doubling of language and experience in literature, and to find the way "out" of the dilemma by this much more direct and only apparently circuitous route. Apparently it is *The Unnamable* that hammers away relentlessly at the problem of not being able to (re-)present the un(re-)presentable. Simple acceptance of the dilemma seems to avoid the problem more than address it. In fact, Beckett's post-*Unnamable* approach addresses a more fundamental point that tends to go unnoticed because we are too busy hammering away at the dilemma: the dilemma itself is of our own making.

David Loy points out that the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination would more accurately be described as "nondependent nonorigination," because it describes,

not the interaction of realities, but the sequence and juxtaposition of 'appearances' — or what could be called appearances if there were some nonappearance to be contrasted with. What is perhaps the most famous of all Mahayana scriptures, The Diamond Sutra, concludes with a statement that 'all phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow, like dew and lightning.' [...] As soon as we abolish the 'real' world, 'appearance' becomes the only reality. (Loy 1992: 248)

He goes on to explain that for Buddhism,

our way of trying to solve a problem turns out to be what maintains the problem. We try to 'peel away' the apparent world to get at the real one [Beckett formulates this tendency in the letter to Axel Kaun], but that dualism between the two is our problematic delusion, which leaves, as the only remaining candidate for the real world, the apparent one — a world whose nature has not been noticed because we have been so concerned to transcend it" (Loy 1992: 248).

The real in Buddhism does not disappear in favour of the apparent. Rather, Buddhism realizes that the very idea of the real maintains a dualism between real and apparent that would otherwise disappear. It does not matter whether that we perceive is "real." What matters is our attitude to it. By no longer attempting, however futilely, to transcend the imaginary for the real, Beckett foregrounds the decisive characteristic of literature. Literature is by definition doubled: it is always the real and the imaginary at the same time, it says and unsays at the same time: every proposition it makes is automatically under erasure. As soon as we allow literature to become "real" in the sense of granting it the status to question comprehensively and existentially — more so than, say, the discourse of politics can — not of speaking authoritatively, we realize that we can become "real," that is, nondual, at the very moment we realize that we do not need to become real.

Amongst other things, for the late Beckett this means that the image, as the copy of an original or the representation of an object, is no longer derivative, as it had been throughout most of Western philosophical and theological history. The original and the image cannot be part of two distinct orders of being; St. Theodore the Studite points this out as early as the 9th century in his contribution to the iconoclastic debate. Beckett embraces the image, painted and theatrical, in his belief that it can give itself more immediately because nondually: he thinks that an image in its capacity to give itself all at once stands a better chance of breaking with dualism than the necessarily temporal and easily linear discursiveness of language.

The image, Beckett thinks, has greater potential than literature to give itself, and in the process to shatter the centred subject that has hitherto been seen as constituting the given phenomenon. This perspective does not lapse into a reversal of the dualism between the image and original in which the image would stand for the immediacy and originality (the presentation, which is usually accorded the original) and language would be relegated to the sidelines of "mere" representation. Rather, the image provides the chance to undermine the usual distinction between presentation and representation, original and copy, subject and object and Beckett then tries to imitate as closely as possible the workings of the visual and of the image in his late prose-work, which also proceeds imagistically rather than discursively. As something that has long been repressed and

subjugated to the rule of the "real," the image, understood in such nondual terms, is also a potent reminder of the elusive power of the pre-reflective dimension of cognition that is always out of reach yet fundamentally fuels our engagement with art.

Here again, we encounter the originary doubling that is at work in Beckett's art: unmediated presentation of the pre-reflective is always out of reach, yet it is also what drives his artistic vision. It is just as impossible simply to let go of it as it is to present it. One does not exist without the other. And instead of being vexed by this paradox and trying to resolve it, the late Beckett will simply recognize that his art needs the paradox, not its resolution, and revel in the energy it generates. It is important to grasp Beckett's dilemma as an undecidability, not a causality. In other words, the drive is no *result* of the unreachability and it does not aim at its own termination.

This type of originary doubling in the shape of an unresolvable paradox is iconic. Anything that is simultaneously inside and outside conceptuality, representation etc. is iconic because it destabilizes dualist and hence idolatrous attempts to represent and compartmentalize. Hence visual icons will reverse the conventional relationship between the real and the image, according reality to the image and categorizing what is usually called reality as delusional. As a result, icons can claim to present and not to represent the divine, but this claim is implicitly based on an iconic rather than an ontotheological understanding of divine presentation, namely on the idea that divine self-giving will always destabilize idolatrous conceptions.

There is a fundamentally empty space in Beckett's work by way of this originary doubling. "Empty" should not be seen in opposition to fullness, or as being somehow coded as negative here. Rather it needs to be understood along the lines of Buddhist *sunyata* as nondual emptiness pregnant with possibilities. It is emptied of everything that conventionally, and one might say idolatrously, defines literature: narrative, plot, character, linearity of discourse, the author and even the reader; and it reduces literature to the very originary doubling that is most "properly" its "essence." It is a space of fundamental openness carried by a spirit of radical contestation of all received concepts and values, and as such it is a space shared by phenomenology as well as theological and literary apophaticism. The nonduality of this empty space is absolutely irreducible; as is the aseity of the divine. It can be said that in the attempt to "represent" the aseity of the

unnamable, Beckett's work becomes a transcendental space that parallels the transcendent space of the divine. As soon as we try to grasp this space critically, the vocabulary, figures and circumlocutions necessary to do so become indistinguishable from that of negative theology.

Beckett holds on to structures of transcendence, not least in the fundamentally metaphorical nature of his art, although his perspective is not part of a theologically continuous universe. His point of departure is distinctly modern and phenomenological rather than theological and the fundamental openness of the empty space means that he is not able to affirm anything ... not yet: not God and not no God, but he holds a space open for Him to give Himself in.

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