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JONATHAN KALB

The mediated Quixote: the radio and television plays, and *Film*

No epoch-making artist simply accepts his or her means of art-making as handed down from previous artists. From Aristophanes to Michelangelo to Shakespeare to Molière to Picasso to Beckett, all can be seen (sometimes only in retrospect) to have engaged in lifelong critiques of their working media. This is never in itself a reliable indicator of greatness, and in twentieth-century art - which, high and low, good and bad, has been preoccupied with reflexivity - it is an especially poor one. Sometimes, however, an artist's critique is so confident, thoroughgoing and persuasive that it causes significant change in the public's idea of what a particular medium is, or can be. As critics have frequently pointed out, Beckett's stage plays actually changed many people's notions of what can happen, or is supposed to happen, when they enter a theatre.

Due to a number of factors, the same claim cannot be made about his works for radio, film and television, which have had far less influence than the theatre works. First, Beckett's media plays (as these are now irrevocably called; why and when theatre ceased being a medium is a mystery) have had far less circulation. Rarely produced or re-broadcast after their premieres, they are largely inaccessible except as published scripts, which are in many cases coldly schematic guides to creating artworks rather than completed artworks themselves. Second and more fundamental, all three media are too young to have had much experience of significant change, their brief histories being dominated by distrust of alternatives to commercial programming, though this is less true in radio, and still less so in film. For an artist of Beckett's uncompromising temperament to turn his attention to any of them - especially television, in the second decade of its global domination - is for him virtually to ensure that his efforts will be marginal.

If one happens to be Samuel Beckett, however, marginalism isn't necessarily pernicious. 'Success and failure on the public level never mattered much to me', he wrote to Alan Schneider, his American director, in 1956; 'in fact I feel much more at home with the latter, having breathed deep of its

vivifying air all my writing life' (D, 106). In 1949, Beckett had argued in *Three dialogues* that a certain kind of creative failure had moral value: 'to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail [...] failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion' (D, 145). In other words, he seemed to say, lack of notoriety and influence mean nothing if they stem from monastic dedication, or from quixotic straining after some inner image of perfection. The novelist Robert Coover, comparing Beckett with the character Don Quixote, once described the enduring fascination commanded by 'the impotent old clown caught up in the mad toils of earnestness'1 - implying that, even in those arenas where Beckett won worldly success, it might be more appropriate and fruitful to speak of his field of impotence, not influence.

The point is, despite its relative lack of influence, Beckett's gaze at radio, film and television was just as piercing as it was at theatre; in fact, in some ways these media suited him better. In his perpetual search for purer and purer distillations of expression, the professional theatre, with its endless ego-battles, financial hassles and publicity pressures, was never an ideal working environment. Now and then he would put up with the public eye, in an effort to see his works realized according to his original vision, but it caused him much discomfort; the experience of travelling to New York for a film shoot in 1964, for instance, was so hard on him that he never again considered working in film or returning to the United States. Two other points are probably of more crucial importance, though: first, a perfectionist is better served by recordable media than by live media because the former offer the chance to freeze and preserve (nearly) perfect performances for posterity; and second, the distinctive formal issues associated with these media - questions of subjective versus objective point of view, the benevolence or malevolence of the camera eye, and so on - coincide surprisingly well with many lifelong preoccupations of Beckett's, such as the agonistic themes of darkness and light, sound and silence, and the problems of veracity and subjective identity in fictional narrative.

Moreover, the progression from radio to film to television in his career also involves a movement toward increasingly pure distillation. To borrow a phrase from *Footfalls,* Beckett seems to have spent years 'revolving it all' *(CSPL,* 243) imperfectly in various genres and media - 'it' being that totalized or essentialized artistic statement usually achieved once, if ever, in an artist's lifetime - until finding, in his seventh decade, a means of getting 'it' right (or, again, nearly) once and forever. In what follows, my emphasis will be on what appear to be Beckett's general aims, the 'it' or 'its' he was reaching toward both in each medium and in the three media as a progressIVe sequence.

THE RADIO PiAYS

The story of Beckett's introduction to radio drama has been told by numerous commentators, notably Martin Esslin and Clas Zilliacus, who provide valuable information about the circumstances of Beckett's first contracts with the BBC in the early I950S and his subsequent 'commission' to write *All that fall* in 1956. Between the lines in these accounts is the implication that Beckett's motivation for working in radio, and perhaps some aspects of his first radio play, were already clear in his mind when the BBC suggested he contribute something to its Third Programme. Disembodied voices, particularly the sort that act as goads to the imagination, had been an important feature in his prose fiction for years, and in retrospect it seems only natural that he would eventually make use of a medium in which dramas could be peopled entirely with invisible characters. The invisible as persistent prod to the visible, absence and silence as indispensable integuments for what is present and audible: these were trademark formal features in his work by the time he set about writing *All that fall.*

'Whenever he makes the test of a new medium, Beckett always seems to take a few steps backward [toward naturalism]', wrote John Spurling in 1972.2 At first it may seem strange to apply to radio a concept so bound up with stage pictorialism as naturalism, but anyone comparing *All that fall* with the radio plays that followed it would understand at once what was meant. Unlike the later plays, *All that fall* could be seen as a quaint aural picture of provincial Ireland around the turn of the century. To see it exclusively that way would be superficial, of course, but Beckett's free use of Irishisms (the play marks his return to English after a decade of writing in French) and the considerable trouble he took over details of local atmosphere cannot be ignored.

Also, as Esslin notes, in the prodigious literature of radio drama it would be difficult to find a work more concerned with visual textures than *All that fall.* The play, which tells a relatively straightforward story set in a fictional but recognizably Irish town called Boghill, is dense with tactile references: 'let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl'; 'As if I were a bale'; 'You are quivering like a blancmange' - all of these, incidentally, references to the central character, Maddy Rooney *(CSPL,* 14, 18, 29). The story follows old Maddy through various encounters with local residents as she goes to meet her blind husband Dan at the railway station, dwells for a while at the station as Dan's train is delayed, and then follows the Rooneys on their way home. The reason for the delay is the plot's one suspense element, and in the last line, when a subsidiary character reveals that an accident occurred involving a child who fell on to the tracks, the

suspicion arises (due to scattered hints earlier) that Dan was in some way responsible for it.

Zilliacus has called this work 'Beckett's To *Damascus,* a station drama portraying the passion of Maddy Rooney', and that description is helpful as long as one also understands that the 'passion' is fraught with satire and accompanied by several other, peculiarly Beckettian, structuring devices.[3] (The train-station/station-of-the-cross pun would certainly be typical of Beckett.) The play's first half is quite as much preoccupied with filling time and remarking on language as with revealing Maddy's personality - or soul, to continue the passion allusion - while she moves through her chance meetings-cum-stations, whereas the second half is a drama of delay on the model of *Waiting for Godot:* Beckett premises the action on a mystery and then makes it impossible for us to confirm or deny our suspicions about it. The play is constantly *not* satisfying the desire for information it generates and ultimately leaves us to discover for ourselves that the ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding the planted hints - such detective-fiction questions as whether or not the ball in Dan's hand belonged to the accident victim - are left intentionally open.

Informational considerations quickly become secondary, in any case, when one listens to *All that fall.* The primary experience of the play in performance is of a sound-world that does not attempt to convince us of its veracity except as a product of Maddy's (and Beckett's) imagination. The 'rural sounds' at the opening, for instance ('Sheep, bird, cow, cock, severally, then together' *CSPL,* 12), which return later, are not only flagrantly artificial in themselves - they were radio drama cliches even in 1956 - but are also continually used in ways that remind us of their radiophonic origin; animals and objects greet Maddy's mention of them with absurd efficiency and dispatch. Zilliacus writes that Beckett intends to contrast 'the imperturbability of the animal sound systems' with the myriad anxieties associated with human language;4 'Do you find anything...bizarre about my way of speaking?' asks Maddy of Christy, her first conversation partner *(CSPL, 13).* In any case, Beckett also clearly intends to suggest that the entire action may take place in Maddy's mind.

The quality of Maddy's voice in the first BBC production, directed by Donald McWhinnie, supports this. The actress Mary O'Farrell speaks closer to the microphone than the other actors, as if in confidence to the listener, and she often talks over the beginnings and ends of others' lines, delivering Maddy's numerous *non sequiturs* in a way that implies that others (including Dan) have no reality for her except insofar as they further her ongoing mental composition. As Esslin writes, Maddy's journal 'has a nightmare quality; it might indeed be a bad dream';5 we are never entirely

sure, however, whether it is her dream or ours. (It should also be mentioned that her nightmarish isolated condition is often said to be emblematic of the biblical fallen state. '"The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down,'" she says late in the action, after which she and Dan join in 'wild laughter' *(CSPL,* 38). The play's sundry references to falling mostly deflate the biblical conceit, reducing fateful misfortunes to clownish pratfalls, and death-and-damnation imagery to sexual innuendo.)

Maddy's conversations with her neighbours (and their dialogue exchanges with each other) notwithstanding, the action of *All that fall* is propelled by her monologuing. As with many other Beckett works, the idea that the central speaker may really be alone generates a network of underlying questions and themes related to the notion of 'company': can the imagination provide sufficient company to alleviate loneliness, especially the writer's special brand of that malady? When the artist is truly honest with himself, what can he say he knows for certain, or presume to depict outside the interior landscape of his skull? The subtext and formal features of *All that fall* convey the substantial content, through means similar to what Pierre Chabert has identified in *Endgame:* 'Words emanate from silence and return to it; movement emanates from immobility and returns to it. All movements, all gestures move, so to speak, within immobility, are a victory over immobility and have value only in the tension they maintain in relationship to immobility.'6 *All that fall,* which begins and ends with the image of an old woman alone in a house, playing Schubert's 'Death and the maiden', emanates from lonely silence and returns to it, achieving forward movement as a victory over a sort of fundamental paralysis. Maddy is constantly on the verge of stasis, inanition, not going on, the local cause of which is fits of sadness associated with memories of 'little Minnie' (apparently her dead daughter), the chronic cause of which is much more general and profound. 'Oh to be in atoms, in atoms!' she says 'frenziedly' at one point *(CSPL,* 17), as if her problems were traceable somehow to her existence as a coherently assembled human.

The play keeps on being detoured, 'derailed', by quasi-philosophical discourses that ultimately have to do with Maddy's fears, and the greatest of her fears is, apparently, of disappearance. Each time she feels ignored in a conversation she interrupts petulantly after a moment and asserts her existence: 'Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present' *(CSPL,* 25). Anthropomorphically speaking, even language itself ignores her as it goes about its business, forming expressions that become common to others' ears but remain strange to hers. Like 0 in *Film,* however, Maddy also has a conflicting fear of 'perceivedness', of being seen; confronted with

a hinny that won't stop gazing at her, for instance, she suggests moving out of its 'field of vision' *(CSPL, 13)*.

Beckett's primary focus in this uncharacteristically populous play, in other words, is a strange condition of precarious suspension between existence and non-existence, which radio is ideally suited to explore. 'Only the present speaker's presence is certain [in radio],' writes Zilliacus; 'the primary condition of existence for a radio character is that he talk.'7 Hence the author's famous objection to the idea of presenting *All that fall* on stage: 'Whatever quality it may have [...] depends on the whole thing's *coming out of the dark*', he wrote in a 1957 letter to his American publisher.[8] Artistic constructions based on the solipsistic notion of people and things jumping willy-nilly in and out of existence simply cannot function in fleshy, concrete media.

Embers, Beckett's next radio play, is a transitional work in which conventional plotting and recognizability of place have been sacrificed even though a strong interest in tactile pictorialism is still apparent. Unlike *All that fall,* in which a modest interpretative effort is necessary to see beyond the surface narrative about a nattering old woman, *Embers* has no surface narrative other than that of a haunted man talking about talking to himself, telling stories that he never finishes, and sometimes aurally experiencing (along with us) the ghostly people and things in his stories. Written in 1959, *Embers* opens with the sound of a man's boots 'on shingle' and the sound of the sea, at first 'scarcely audible', then incrementally louder *(CSPL, 93)*. Henry, the man, is wrestling with his imagination - a spectacle we witness in the form of sound-effect commands barked out as if to obedient radio technicians: 'Hooves! *[Sound of hooves walking on hard road. They die rapidly away. Pause.]* Again! *[Hooves as before.]*'

Henry, who mayor may not be walking by the sea with his daughter Addie nearby, addresses his dead father, who mayor may not have committed suicide in the sea. The father fails to respond - the text implies that he occasionally does respond at other times - and Henry tells a story about a man named Bolton (perhaps a father-surrogate) who has called for his doctor Holloway one winter night, for obscure reasons that may have to do with wanting to die. Henry then speaks to a woman, also apparently dead, named Ada, his former companion and mother of Addie, who speaks sympathetically but distractedly back to him. For most of the remainder of the action Ada and Henry reminisce about old times, some of which are dramatized as auditory flashbacks involving other characters. Henry complains several times of not being able to rid himself of the sound of the sea, and Ada suggests that he consult Holloway about both that and his incessant talking to himself. When Ada no longer answers him, Henry tries unsuccess-

fully to command the sound effects again, returns briefly to the Bolton story, and then ends by seeming to make a note in his diary: 'Nothing, all day nothing. *[Pause.]* All day all night nothing. *[Pause.]* Not a sound' *(CSPL,* 1°4)·

It is probably safe to say that the word 'nothing' in Beckett's work must never be taken literally. 'Nothing' is invariably his way of referring to not quite nothing - his favourite designation for something depleted, waning, but still there, or else for that enormous, ineffable something always left to express after the artist's 'power to express' has been exhausted. *('Nothing is more real than nothing,'* says Malone; T, 177.) The words 'not a sound' are both a lie (after all, we listeners have heard a great deal and so has Henry) and the truth (the play ends at that point, and whatever Henry heard was something other than sound if it occurred in his head). In *Embers,* as elsewhere, Beckett employs linguistic duplicity as an example of, and metaphor for, all that is ephemeral and unverifiable in life. Like the hearthfire burnt down to embers behind Bolton - the word 'embers', repeated several times in the play, is usually accompanied by the phrase 'not a sound' - Henry's imaginative stratagems for fending off the looming maw of nothingness, symbolized by the omnipresent sound of the sea, are always growing thin but never exhausted.

Embers is also transitional in that it contains in embryo many of the reflexive formal games that Beckett would later focus on obsessively in the radio plays (the exception being *Rough for radio II),* the television plays, and the middle and late prose fiction. Both Henry's closing lines and his opening line, 'On', for instance, are as much simple technical references to the play's beginning and ending as they are orders to his mind or descriptions of its activities. In Everett Frost's 1988 production, actress Billie Whitelaw's sing-songy, confidently feeble, self-consciously spectral voice made especially clear that Henry switched Ada on and off, and removed all possibility of her being understood as a physically present conversation partner independent of Henry.

The switching word, 'open', which later plays an important part in *Cascando,* also appears in *Embers* and again recalls the issue of 'company' mentioned above: after seeing Holloway through the window, Bolton 'goes down and opens' *(CSPL,* 94). To open one's house or mind, either to someone or to the memory of someone, is to interrupt the bliss of solitude and silence that the Beckett hero always longs for but never quite possesses (and never finds to be bliss after stealing a taste of it - e.g., after death). Like *Krapp's last tape,* in which a sixty-nine-year-old switches back and forth over the same bit of audiotape, listening to himself whispering 'Let me in' to the memory of an old lover's eyes *(CSPL,* 61); like *.. .but the clouds...,*

whose climactic moment is a man blurting out 'Look at me' to the remembered image of a woman *(CSPL,* 261); like *What where,* in which the main character punctuates the dialogue with the phrases 'I switch on' and 'I switch off' and, after obscure interactions with other characters who look conspicuously like him, says, 'I am alone' *(CSPL,* 311) -like these and many other Beckett works, *Embers* poses an irresolvable dilemma concerning the relative values of solitude and companionship. The protagonist wants his imagined creations to exist as concretely and satisfyingly as corporeal companions but then to go away, to switch off, at less than a moment's notice.

The explicit association of mechanistic switching with the engagement of the imagination, which would become one of the most fruitful metaphors of Beckett's later career, is one of two salient distinguishing features of the last three radio plays, *Words and Music, Cascando* and *Rough for radio I* (the latter an early study for *Cascando* whose performance Beckett discouraged). The other feature is the introduction of music as an autonomous character, which also anticipates another important later development, primarily in the media work: collapse of faith in verbal language. The author himself drew attention on several occasions to musical structures in his plays *(Endgame* as 'a string quartet', *Playas* 'a score for five pitches', for instance),9 and even if he had written nothing but novels and stories it would be clear from the cadences and phrasings of his prose that he possessed a highly developed musical sensibility. In the final radio plays, however, he does not so much embrace music as an overarching structural concept that subsumes writing as rather pit music against language in a dramatic showdown over their relative merits.

Written in 1961 as a collaboration with a specific composer, the author's cousin John Beckett, *Words and Music* begins with the sound of a small orchestra tuning up and a man's voice competing for air space as he too 'tunes up', reciting sentences by rote describing the passion of 'sloth' *(CSPL,* 127). A crotchety man named Croak shuffles on, refers to Words as 'Joe', to Music as 'Bob', and enjoins them: 'My comforts! Be friends!' Croak turns out to be an impresario of sorts who thumps a club on the ground and barks orders to Words and Music, alternately and together, to entertain him by illustrating first the concept of love, and then that of age. The two 'comforts' or 'balms' compete to satisfy him, Music playing love- and age-themes, Words reciting more rote formulations, poems and nostalgic descriptions of a woman's face, which causes the impresario to groan and cry out 'Lily!' at one point *(CSPL,* 132). In the end he shuffles off as if unable to bear the memories which the descriptions awaken, and Words and Music are left alone, Words sighing, Music repeating one of its last phrases (an illustration of 'that wellhead' deep within Lily's eyes).

Unlike Dan or Ada, Words and Music prove to be at least partly independent of the central imagining agent in their play, Croak. They do not always obey him, they are heard before he enters and after he leaves, and it is possible in the end to read them as muses, creative forces in their own right living their own noumenal lives. This work, then, fits the general trend of the radio dramas toward focusing on communicative means, which muses (among other things) incontestably are. *Words and Music* also presents a special problem, however: its action consists of a relatively conventional dialogic exchange, but the dialogue is missing half its lines - lines that the play implies should match, sentence for sentence, in musical terms, the specificity and subtlety of Beckett's language.

It is hardly surprising that neither his cousin nor subsequent composers have been up to the task. In one case (John Beckett's score) the music proved unable to communicate ideas specific enough to qualify as rational lines, much less repartee, and in another (Morton Feldman's score for Frost's 1988 production) the composer came to feel constrained by the text's requirements. In the director's words, Feldman struggled 'in the face of the imposed concisions'. Frost adds: 'I do not mean to imply that I am in any way regretful [...] Such is emphatically not the case. But with this play more than the others, it will take several productions with a variety of musics before we can feel reliably that we have begun to get to the bottom of its complex and interesting possibilities.'[10] But the play's production difficulties run far deeper than questions of agreement in style; unless Music convinces us that it has at least held its own in the strange mimetic competition with Words, the action of the play lacks dramatic tension. Beckett once reportedly said to Theodor Adorno that *Words and Music* 'ends unequivocally with the victory of the music'.[11] Yet far from proving the superiority of music as pure sound, liberated from rational ideas and references, the play confines it to a function very similar to that of a filmic signature score. *Cascando,* written in French a month or so later, seems planned explicitly to overcome this mimetic limitation.

Cascando is also a collaborative work for which Beckett did not write the necessary music. This time his first collaborator was the Romanian-born Marcel Mihalovici (who had previously written an opera based on *Krapp's last tape)* and the original *Cascando* on French radio (RTF) was considerably more 'operatic' (meaning more extensively orchestrated) than any other Beckett radio production before or since. With this play, however, even a seemingly weighty matter like extent of orchestration *can* remain a question of style, because Beckett's text does not require music to function as a conventional conversation partner. In fact, the characters Voice and Music operate virtually independently of each other.

Like *Words and Music, Cascando* has a central imaging agent, named Opener, but he takes a much softer approach with his muses than Croak does. Instead of barking specific orders, Opener calmly speaks the generalized phrases 'I open' and 'I close', and the action that follows is more like tandem or parallel monologues than dialogue. Sometimes Voice and Music start and stop without Opener's explicit sanction, and some of Opener's lines imply that Voice and Music occasionally work together to a common purpose - 'as though they had linked their arms' - although this is unverifiable in the text *(CSPL,* 143). Music's part is indicated only by dots extending across the page like a long ellipsis, and Voice's consists of a frequently interrupted story which he cannot finish and which he is not sure is 'the right one' (like the narrators in the novels) about a man named Woburn, one of those quintessential, stumbling Beckett figures walking by the sea in a greatcoat. Opener speaks haughtily between the story sections, scoffing at the notion that he and Voice might really be the same character ('They say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head'; *CSPL,* 140), and, of course, the more he insists that there is 'No resemblance' the more we listeners suspect that there is *(CSPL, 142).*

From the outset, the central question in *Cascando* is not 'who may speak?' but rather 'when may *I* speak and with which voice?' In contrast to *Words and Music,* the characters do not begin by tuning or warming up, practising for some future performance that will be more authentic or significant than this one. Co-operatively, they plunge straight into a concerted, multiform effort to finish a story, giving the present-tense action a greater urgency and forward momentum than any of the previous radio plays had - primarily because listeners do not spend time wondering about plot questions, such as why Words and Music don't co-operate. Like *Embers, Cascando* contains Beckett's first rethinking for performance of formal techniques originally cultivated in his stories and novels. Voice's relationship to his subject (read: surrogate self), for instance, is the same as Jacques Moran's in *Molloy,* E's in *Film,* and the spotlight's in *Play,* one of pursuit; Woburn is as much chased as described. Also, Opener's repeated denial that he is the storyteller (or, by extension, the story's subject) and Voice's constant self-interruption - each two- to four-word phrase is followed by an ellipsis - prefigure the self-denying, fragmentary character Mouth in *Not I* and Beckett's habit through the 1970S and 1980s of using the fragmentary as a metaphor for a damaged whole.

Most important, though, *Cascando* contains Beckett's purest distillation of the essence of the radio medium. The stage direction *Silence* appears twenty times in the eight-page play (more than in any other radio play except *All that fall,* which is over three times longer), and a significant part

of listening to a production is the experience of being returned again and again to one's own sound-space. With only the thinnest of fictional conceits – actors pretending to be characters, actors and characters pretending to be in places and times other than here and now - the author transports the ephemeral products of his imagination by the most ephemeral means (electronic waves and sound impulses) and makes them oscillate in a sort of minimalist dance between presence and absence, between 'going on' (the 'obligation to express') and what professionals call, usually without Beckettian irony, 'dead air time'. Of all media, radio offered Beckett – to use his own wry description of his writerly efforts - the purest opportunity to put a 'blot on silence'.12

'FILM'

Like *All that fall,* Beckett's one work for cinema has been frequently described as a 'commission'. In 1963 Barney Rosset, his American publisher, decided to expand into film producing and invited Beckett (as well as Harold Pinter and Eugene Ionesco) to write something for the medium. As with radio, however, it is unthinkable that Beckett would have turned his attention to film solely because an opportunity arose for immediate production. The text of *Film* shows that he had given the medium hard thought for some time; indeed, according to Deirdre Bair, his fascination with it dates back to 1935 when, as a young man searching for professional direction, he wrote to Sergei Eisenstein in Moscow asking to be hired as an apprentice.13

Film is, as Linda Ben-Zvi writes, 'a film about film'.14 Its very title is generic, like that of *Play,* indicating that the work will deal with fundamental qualities or principles of its medium rather than simply use film as an unobtrusive story-telling vehicle. Unlike *Play,* however, *Film* was the first and only work Beckett wrote for the medium, and unlike *All that fall* and *Eh Joe* (his first work for television), it was not originally produced under state-of-the-art studio conditions. To be sure, the published text contains wisdom about the medium, but technical naIvety on both Beckett's and director Alan Schneider's part prevented some of it from surfacing in the completed first version. (Schneider had never directed a film before.)15 Yet *Film* is also a work of its time, displaying many of the same formal obsessions as the French New Wave, just burgeoning in the early 1960s: a reflexive concern with the staring camera eye, an invocation of Hollywood icons such as Buster Keaton along with a general consciousness of film history, and a resistance to montage in the Bazinian tradition (surprising considering Beckett's early interest in Eisenstein, but not surprising con-

sidering the absence of montage and cross-fading techniques in the radio plays).16

The deceptively simple action of *Film* consists of a cat-and-mouse game played by a single protagonist 'sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit'. E is the camera, O the character on-screen, and E pursues O from behind, trying not to exceed a 45-degree angle beyond which O 'experiences anguish of perceivedness' *(CSPL,* 163). It is 'a variation on the old Keystone Kops chase',17 writes Ben-Zvi, which Beckett says should have a 'comic and unreal' climate. Comedy aside, much in the film depends on establishing two different visual 'qualities' clearly distinguishing between O's point of view and E's - one of many details that proved far more technically complicated than either the author or the director realized. Only in the end do we see O's face (Keaton with a patch over one eye), after which a quick cut to E (another view of Keaton, with the opposite 'quality') reveals that 'pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self' (*CSPL, 163).*

The three-part, silent, black-and-white action moves from a public to a private milieu, with most of part one omitted in Schneider's production because the footage turned out to be unusable and re-shooting prohibitively expensive. The printed text of part one ('The street') calls for O to come into view 'hastening blindly' along a wall, dressed ponderously in a 'long dark overcoat,' as surrealistic couples in summery costumes rush by in the opposite direction. A woman he jostles 'checks him' with a firm 'sssh!' - the film's only sound - which communicates humorously that the work is silent by conscious choice, perhaps even out of homage, not for want of resources. (Beckett rarely uses a technical means simply because it is available; in fact, he is likely to reject as a 'gimmick' any technique that lends an air of adroitness or ingenuity to his terra infirma.) The woman and her companion then express horror upon looking straight at the camera, establishing the convention of 'agony of perceivedness' *(CSPL, 165).*

Part two ('The stairs') consists of another brief encounter leading to horror of the perceiving camera, this time by an old woman carrying flowers. Finally, part three ('The room') deals with O's fate when he relaxes in an 'illusory sanctuary'. After an extended, comic section in which he covers a window and mirror and ejects or covers anything with eyes or resembling eyes (dog, cat, goldfish, an envelope with round fasteners – an early title for the work was *The eye),* O sits in a rocking chair and inspects seven photographs of himself at various points throughout his life - as compact a biography as the one told when Krapp listens to his taped self describe an earlier taped self. O destroys the photos, as well as a print of 'God the Father' hanging nearby, before falling asleep, and then E creeps

round along the wall and ends up in position to stare 0 in the face. 'Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception' is Beckett's summary of the action *(CSPL, 163)*.

Much critical commentary on *Film* has centred on the work's Latin epigraph - '*Esse est percipi*', to be is to be perceived - from the philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753), who believed that the material world had no independent existence outside sentient minds, which in turn exist only because God perceives them. Two lines after this quote, however, Beckett, in typical fashion, backs off from fully endorsing it: 'No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.' Anyone familiar with his language games, or with his famous statement that 'it is the shape that matters', understands that issues of 'structural and dramatic convenience' are invariably metaphysical concerns for him, and questions about the pertinence of Berkeley's dictum are inevitable for those studying the work.

Some, recalling that Berkeley was an Anglican bishop, suggest that Beckett intends to give a religious maxim an atheistic twist. Vincent Murphy, for example, regrets that 'E becomes a kind of surrogate of God in a world in which God no longer perceives'18 - a desolate view that overlooks, among other things, the degree to which Beckett's humour undercuts all definite, and therefore over-serious, identifications, such as E with God. Others point out that 0 and E are partly blind and therefore imperfect perceivers (recall the eye patch), suggesting that Beckett is well aware of the devalued sort of being conferred by terrestrial perception such as E's, and that his intention is to underscore that fallen state; Sylvie Debevec Henning, for instance, writes that 'there can never be full unity of the self, nor any perfect self-identity - not, at least, that we would ever be aware of'.19

Still another reading might focus on the eye/I pun (later made central in *Not I)* and on the way Beckett again pursues a metaphysical meditation through critiquing his working medium. The pun hangs on the notion that E mayor may not be ultimately equivalent to 0 and that the seeing 'eye' is primarily occupied with acquiring self-knowledge, the problem of clearly seeing an 'I'. In contrast to Bishop Berkeley, who would say that such clarity is impossible without the perceiving light of God, Beckett wonders about the validity of all neat subject-object distinctions, divine or human (that notion of 'company' again). A contemporary theorist might add that neither a film's characters nor its narrator-surrogate (the camera-eye as subjective 'I') really *exists* until a machine shines incandescent light through celluloid, generating sharp, ephemeral images that fool viewers into believing that the camera-eye is perceiving in the present and that perceivedness is necessarily desirable. Decades before the word 'scopophilia' became fashionable, driven

partly perhaps by his abhorrence of publicity and bloodhoundish critics, Beckett was asking essential questions about the invasiveness of the camera and the use of it as an ontological validator.

THE TELEVISION PLAYS

That Beckett wanted to write for a medium like television at all is as interesting as any of the works he made for it. As mentioned above, television has been dominated by the narrowly circumscribed formats of commercial programming since its birth, and those formats have contributed to egregious, worldwide psychological changes: shrinking attention spans, discouraging reading and encouraging passive, narcotized habits of viewing art of all kinds. Unlike radio and film, television has not (yet) been through anything like a Golden Age in which individual artists could exploit it for idiosyncratic purposes. Apart from the efforts of a few quixotic souls like Beckett, whose art always distinguished itself by demanding a greater than usual level of viewer/reader concentration, the medium's high-art potential remains untested. 'In being popular culture's *raison d'être*, television is [...] identical with power', writes Alan M. Olson.[20] Beckett, the inveterate outsider, used it to consider his lifelong issues of powerlessness: 'I'm working with impotence, ignorance [...] I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er.'21

Some academic critics, wishing to protect these works' canonical position by treating them exclusively as 'video art' (i.e. for privileged viewers in gallery and museum contexts), may bristle at this way of introducing them; and it must be conceded that, though Beckett did own a television set, there is no proof he was reacting against any specific object. The five works he created for television (six counting *Was wo,* his adaptation of *What where)* contravene common preconceptions mainly by answering to standards of compositional precision that we have come to expect only in other media, such as painting. From the vaudeville gags in *Codot* to the casting of Keaton in *Film,* however, Beckett has a long history of mixing high- and low-culture (one reason why he so often figures in debates about Post-Modernism), and the subtitles and original production circumstances of these works make clear that he thought of them specifically as 'television plays' for mass broadcast.

Predating his next work for the televisual medium by a decade, *Eh Joe* (1965) is a transitional piece in which Beckett is still using the camera as an antagonistic pursuer, as in *Film,* but the setting has become entirely interior and sound has returned, literally with a vengeance. Generally, the main

difference between a film image and a television image is that the latter is fluorescently back-lit, cruder in resolution and confined to a small box; taking this into account, Beckett now poses ontological questions not by 'sundering' a highly mobile protagonist on a big screen but by setting up ambiguities about the relation of a spoken text to a relatively still visual picture. These plays contain very little physical movement - and certainly no chase scenes, except perhaps *Quad,* in which the figures seem driven by some inner demon. Unlike *Film, Eh Joe* is an insular, inward-referring work designed for a medium typically watched by supine viewers isolated in intimate spaces.

The play begins with a man sitting on a bed, seen from behind, who peremptorily inspects three rectangular openings - window, door and cupboard - locking each afterwards and drawing a curtain over it, as if to ensure he is alone. He returns to the bed and the camera approaches within a yard of his face, stopping when a woman's voice begins speaking: 'Joe ... Joe'. For approximately twenty minutes this Voice - which insists that it is not coming from his mind and identifies itself as one of his discarded lovers - harangues him about his past womanizing and other personal failings, and we watch the reactions of his face, which Beckett says is 'impassive except insofar as it reflects mounting tension of *listening*' *(CSPL,* 202). (From *All that fall* to *Ohio impromptu,* Beckett worked from the premise that the act of listening holds inherent dramatic value.) The words stop only for a few seconds at nine specified points, during which the camera pulls in closer to his face, so that by the final section only a fragment, from brow to lower lip, is visible as Voice finally fades out.

Eh Joe has never been a favourite of Beckett's critics, some of whom dismiss it outright as melodramatic and obvious: a lecherous man haunted by guilt in the form of a torturous voice from his past. As I have explained at length elsewhere, however, such analyses neglect formal features and ambiguities beneath the cliched surface that prefigure fundamental aspects of his subsequent, admittedly richer, television works.[22] Added to the standing uncertainty over whether Voice really comes from Joe's mind is an uncertainty over the relation between Voice and the camera: are they equivalent, allied? The camera never moves while Voice speaks, and it sometimes seems like a separate, perhaps subordinate, entity. After twenty minutes, the close-up of the man's face (the play was written for and originally produced with Jack MacGowran) becomes far more eloquent than Voice's monotonous verbal assault. Among other things, her loquacity may act as a smokescreen, designed to distract viewers temporarily from the complex depths of a portrait, making those depths all the more impactful when they are noticed later, and this effect is only heightened by the portrait becoming

fragmentary in the end. Beckett's aesthetic of wholeness-in-fragmentariness is pursued on television by means of rectangular framing.

Ten years later, when he began *Ghost trio* (1975), the author had already made the transition to his later stage dramas, and there is a complex mutual influence, which may never be fully teased out, between those dramas and his mature television work. The later stage dramas generally dispense with the provisional naturalism used in the plays up to *Happy days* (as well as in *Eh Joe* and *Film,* for that matter), presenting rather meticulously sculpted tableaux at which the audience stares while a musical flow of words with some enigmatic relationship to the tableau emanates from the stage. They are also populated with characters who are not only ephemeral (Maddy-as-sound impulse, O-as-light image, Joe-as-collection of fluorescing dots) but downright ghostly, possibly dead - 'not quite there', Beckett once said about May in *Footfalls*. The television plays from *Ghost trio* on also fit this pattern, the difference being that the visual images become more and more finely wrought, the texts increasingly sparing with speech.

Ghost trio takes its name and mysterious, ethereal atmosphere from a Beethoven piano trio (op. 70, no. I) entitled *The ghost* (written for an opera based on *Macbeth),* parts of which Beckett specifies should be heard at various points in the action. In the first of three sections ('Pre-action') we see a seated male figure (F) bent over a cassette player, 'clutching hands, head bowed, face hidden', and hear a female voice (V) describe the environment in tones that range from neutral to sardonic:

> Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. *[Pause.]* Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. *[Pause.]* It will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens. *[Pause.]* Look. *[Long pause.]* The familiar chamber. *[Pause.]* At the far end a window. *[Pause.]* On the right the indispensable door. *[Pause.]* On the left, against the wall, some kind of pallet. *[Pause.]* The light: faint, omnipresent. No visible source. As if all luminous. Faintly luminous. No shadow. *(CSPL,* 248)

The room, of course, is not at all familiar, to us or (apparently) to F, and as Ben-Zvi points out, the more V describes it the stranger it seems.[23] V instructs us to 'look closer' at 'the kind of wall [...] the kind of floor', and the camera responds (sometimes) by showing different grey rectangles, so plain we would take them for simple geometric cut-outs if V did not name them. 'Look again; she says. 'Knowing all this, the kind of pallet [...] the kind of window [...] the kind of door [...] Look again' *(CSPL, 249).*

Part two begins with V's statement 'He will now think he hears her', which reveals that F is waiting for some woman (an early title for the piece was *Tryst),* though it also reveals, in the light of the author's previous uses

of waiting, that the woman is unlikely to arrive and introduces questions about the identity of V. Is she the awaited woman? F's reluctant muse? Death, 'who will not come to release him from a life to which he barely clings?' (James Knowlson's suggestion).24 As V narrates - 'Now to door [...] No one [...] Now to window' *(CSPL,* 250) - F rises and, moving soundlessly in an almost puppet-like manner, inspects the room's various openings, including a dark, grave-like corridor outside the knobless door, then returns to his seat and music. In part three V does not narrate and F goes through similar bur not identical activities (examining his face in a mirror, for example), eventually opening the door to find a boy in a glistening black oilskin, who 'shakes head faintly', then 'turns and goes' *(CSPL, 253-4).*

The imperative 'look again' in part one applies not only to the rectangles but also to the rest of the play and, by extension, to the other television plays, all of which (except *Eh Joe)* employ cyclical repetition: 'look again', Beckett seems to say, not only at the picture at hand but at the way you looked the first time, at how that may have been inadequate. This might be called the model of the 'double-take' - contrasting distant and near views of the same scene - and it is another example of Beckett incorporating the viewer's process of viewing into his drama. Like many other Beckett works, *Ghost trio* is partly about the failure of a central agent to perceive clearly. F seems to have been in this 'familiar room' for some time, yet he moves soundlessly about the space, looking distractedly at his own face, as if everything were foreign; only at the end, after the boy has left and the Beethoven piece finishes, does he raise his head and smile, as if finally freed from anticipation. Similarly, viewers are distracted by the rectangles and the playfulness of the voice, which seems to say little that is vital for understanding the action, although, as Ben-Zvi writes, that distraction turns out to be vital:

> Each rectangular shape is seen against a still larger rectangle: the window against the wall, the door against the wall [...] All these rectangles, of course, are subsumed in the framing rectangle of the television screen, possibly being viewed in the rectangle of 'the familiar room' of the viewer [...][25]

Beckett's play, in other words, is partly about the fact that television itself has grown too familiar.

.. .but the clouds... (1976) was first broadcast by the BBe together with *Ghost trio* and an adaptation of *Not I* in a programme entitled *Shades,* but its elegiac, rueful tone recalls *Nacht und Triiume* (1982) more than the earlier television plays. The title is a phrase from the closing stanza of W. B. Yeats' poem 'The tower', which Beckett could recite from memory and which concerns reconciliation with the decreptitude of old age and death:

girding himself for a final bout of plying his 'sedentary trade' in a tower sanctuary, the indomitable poet half convinces us that, there, 'the death of friends' and similar losses can 'Seem but the clouds of the sky/When the horizon fades/Or a bird's sleepy cry/Among the deepening shades'. Beckett never completely relinquishes his sardonic tones, but there is a greater than usual level of earnestness in *.. .but the clouds...* and *Nacht und Triiume,* as if whatever mental censor had previously prevented his works from becoming saturated with emotion had suddenly disappeared.

...but the clouds... begins with a brief, obscure view of a man (M) bowed over an invisible table, a view the camera subsequently returns to fifteen times. As his voice (V) narrates, M is repeatedly seen moving in and out of a lighted circle surrounded by darkness, V explaining that the movement is his daily routine: arrival from 'having walked the roads since break of day' (entrance at left of circle), change into his nightclothes (exit and re-entrance at right of circle), and exit to his 'little sanctum' (top of circle), where he crouches in the dark and 'beg[s], of her, to appear' *(CSPL, 260).* This 'her' is a woman (W), presumably a lost loved one, whose face appears briefly on the screen whenever he speaks of summoning her. Pedantically distinguishing among four cases - W not appearing, appearing, appearing and lingering, appearing and speaking - V becomes emotional near the end and addresses her directly ('Look at me [...] Speak to me'; *CSPL,* 26r) before reciting Yeats' closing lines in synch with her inaudible lips.

Nacht und Triiume also begins with a view of a man (Dreamer) seated at a table, 'right profile, head bowed, grey hair' *(CSPL,* 305), only this time there is no narrator; the story is told entirely in pictures (as were the stories that seemed most reliable in *Eh Joe, Ghost trio* and *.. .but the clouds...*). The only speech is a barely intelligible line from a Schubert *Lied* - 'Holde Traume, kehret wieder' ('Lovely dreams, come again') – sung by a male voice, which lulls the Dreamer to sleep. In a square cloud above him we see his dream: himself seated in the other direction, being visited by disembodied hands that touch him gently, offer him a chalice, wipe his brow, then join with his hands to form a cushion for his head. This sequence is then repeated, except that the second time the camera pulls in close so that the dream cloud fills the screen, revealing details not perceivable before: among them, a distinct religious flavour and a congeries of references to classical painting. 'Look again', the work seems to say, not only at its particular action but at all secular and art-historical assumptions about this author.

Along with *Quad,* a compelling work completely without language, these two plays mark a great wordsmith's break with words near the end of his life, instances of him working more as a composer or painter than a tradi-

tional playwright. Indeed, Beckett took a painterly, 'hands on' attitude toward all his television plays, directing them himself and refining them at Siiddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart after assisting with the original BBe productions, ensuring that the images, sound and pacing would be preserved on tape exactly as he had imagined them... *but the clouds...* and *Nacht und Träume* are also particularly significant in his *œuvre*, however, because they use his real emotions about death unashamedly as artistic grist. Beckett was known for being tactically old his entire career, preoccupied with creating narrative personae who joked about death and half seriously praised the glory of ending. Where his personae exist in worlds peopled only by ghosts, and may in fact be ghosts themselves, the mental distance necessary for irony is harder to achieve.

There is a gem-like, iconic quality to all the television plays, particularly Beckett's own productions, which stands as a tacit criticism of all art that is made less painstakingly, with less monastic obsessiveness. Acts of formal originality such as the model of the 'double-take' are the closest Beckett ever came to explicit political critique, but, as with so much he said quietly and subtly, the power of the acts is extraordinary once they are understood. Beckett takes a medium famous for destroying the capacity of humans to think rigorously and perceive clearly and uses it to make plays about the infinitude of the soul and the grandeur of the smallest mortal memory. As a painter of miniatures employs a magnifying glass to achieve an impression of perfection, Beckett uses technical instrumentation to augment human perception and, by implication, dignify it, sending his ghostly emissaries from the humanist 'heap' through the air waves into people's living rooms.

NOTES

1 Robert Coover, 'The last Quixote', 139.
2 John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett the playwright, 44.*
3 Ctas Zilliacus, *Beckett and broadcasting, 37.*
4 Ibid., 50.
5 Martin Esslin, 'The art of broadcasting', 131.
6 Pierre Chabert, 'The body in Beckett's theatre', 25.
7 Zilliacus, *Beckett and broadcasting, 56.*
8 Quoted in Zilliacus, ibid., 3.
9 Ibid., 103·
10 Everett Frost, 'Fundamental sounds', 374-5.
11 Quoted in Zilliacus, *Beckett and broadcasting,* 114.
12 Quoted in Kalb, *Beckett in performance, 233.*
13 Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: a biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), 2°4·
14 Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett's media plays', 31.

15 See Schneider's apologia, 'On directing *Film*', in Samuel Beckett, *Film* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 63-94.
16 See Zilliacus, *Beckett and broadcasting, 60.*
17 Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett's media plays', 30.
18 Vincent J. Murphy, 'Being and perception', 47.
19 Henning, '*Film:* a dialogue between Beckett and Berkeley', 99.
20 Olson, 'Video icons and values', 2.
21 Beckett to Israel Shenker in 1956, in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: the critical heritage, 148.*
22 See Kalb, *Beckett in performance,* 95-116.
23 Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett's media plays', 36.
24 Knowlson, '*Ghost trio/Geister trio', 199.*
25 Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett's media plays', 35.

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