

Bypassing Narrative.
Modernist Interiority in the Plays of Samuel
Beckett: An Explication

by

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Abstract

This project examines the accomplishment of Samuel Beckett, particularly in his plays, in discovering new ways of registering interiority in an age marked by catastrophe, and the religious, social and psychological upheaval that was its result. Beckett's achievement is viewed as grounded in and an extension of the new approaches to literary representation found in the work of his Modernist predecessors – T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats. Like his forbearers, Beckett jettisoned sequential narrative and relied on images and techniques of fragmentation to engage directly with interiority and with themes of isolation, alienation and death. The study concentrates on contextualizing Beckett's plays through modernist texts rather than through scholarly ones. It pays special attention to Beckett's work as theatre, to the vital, unencumbered and inescapable interaction of theatrical performance, communicating as it does through the senses and nerves of the audience rather than debating with their intellectual responses.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; English Literary Modernism; Representations of Interiority; Theatre

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Approval..... | ii |
| Partial Copyright Licence | iii |
| Abstract..... | iv |
| Table of Contents..... | v |
| | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| | |
| Working in the Theatre | 18 |
| | |
| Image | 35 |
| | |
| Layers and Fragments..... | 47 |
| | |
| Frameworks of memories | 56 |
| | |
| Representing Present Reality | 67 |
| | |
| Death | 75 |
| | |
| Being Blind and Being Watched..... | 80 |
| | |
| Conclusion | 86 |
| | |
| Works Cited | 90 |

Introduction

The destruction of social, political and religious certainty in the early part of the twentieth century left serious artists in all media questioning not only the assumed truths of earlier works but also the constraints of form in which those ideas were expressed. The literary struggle to find forms that might express the reality of personal identity came to the surface with the Early Modernists: T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and even W.B. Yeats, who each found ways in which to break with, or break down, familiar templates in order to open up the possibility of registering an interior truth more authentically. It is possible, however, that this search found an ultimate, distilled embodiment later in the century, in the repeated words and empty stage-scapes of Samuel Beckett's plays. Beckett told Anthony Page, the first director of *Not I* (in English), that he wanted the work to "bypass the intellect."¹ By stripping away social convention, recognizable context and literary description, his plays are able to express an internal experience of human need without offering the havens of comfort available in plot and circumstance which literature had previously offered the reader when the reality they were being asked to consider became too frightening.

¹ This remark was referred to by Anthony Page in a talk at the Royal Court Theatre in May 2013. It is also referenced by Lisa Dwan, also present at the talk after her performance of *Not I* that evening, and in interviews with several journalists including <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/10946793/Playing-Beckett-First-Im-blindfolded-then-I-place-my-head-in-a-vice.html>

In this study I explore some common themes and techniques pioneered by early Modernist writers that Beckett also explored in the pursuit of better representing personal truth. While, as Marshall Berman asserts, there must be a “dialectical interplay between unfolding modernization and the environment, and the development of modernist art and thought,” what comes out of that dialectic, in much of the work of Eliot, Woolf, Pound and Yeats, is literature constructed in a radically new way to express more than the surface challenges of life in a modern environment. These writers used the revolutionary spirit of the “modern world” to undermine familiar assumptions, not only about how literature should be structured, but about the types of human experience, both intellectual and visceral, that that literature could represent. The literary tools and techniques forged in the Modernist era to express what was seen under the surface of the modern world were refined and repurposed by those that followed to serve the aesthetic and political needs of their own time. Among those inheritors, Samuel Beckett not only approached literary form in the same revolutionary way as the Early Modernists, but he did so to expose still more of the same bleak and often tortured interior experience. By undertaking to communicate an interior reality in the theatre, Beckett presented this interiority directly to the senses of his audience, rather than explaining it through philosophical argument or describing it in a prose narrative. To use Andrew Kennedy’s phrase, in “the minimalist purity of performance poems” Beckett was ‘making it new,’ on the moving platform of verbal art.” In this project I hope to explicate how his work continued, and distilled, the mission of the early Modernists to find a way to express the timeless truth of human experience in a new literature that could cut through the uncertainty and distraction of modern existence.

I will look at the empowering effect of performance on the ways in which the writing of Beckett, and his Modernist forebearers, communicates to an audience. I will examine how Beckett centered his work in images, rather than explanation or naturalistic description, and built up fragments and layers of memory into a whole piece of theatre, instead of using a sequential, external plot. The inclusion of death as an almost negligible part of the struggle of living rather than religious apotheosis made a structure based on working through a "life story" inappropriate for Beckett as it had been for Virginia Woolf or for Ezra Pound. Beckett shared the self-awareness with which twentieth century writers examined human consciousness and this, in turn, necessitated new kinds of literature. Beckett extends this overt self study further than the early Modernists, often depicting his characters as separated from their own voices. These new ways of working, both in the work of Modernist writing and in Beckett, often employed distancing, non-naturalistic, even absurd, elements to create a different, internally focused, reality separated from assumptions about what makes up "real life" for any one reader or audience member. I believe that this understanding of human experience is shared by Modernist writers and distilled to an extreme, often harrowing, essence in the plays of Beckett.

I have chosen to explore these themes and commonalities mainly through a direct examination of the primary texts rather than through extensive reference to existing critical analysis. I have made this choice because I believe that one of the objects of the journey into a world outside conventional literary forms made by Eliot, Woolf and their fellow travellers, and by Beckett, was to find ways to speak directly to the visceral core of the reader, rather than to debate with their intellect. I therefore feel that it is more appropriate to investigate the work directly rather than through its relation to

literary or philosophical theory. Clearly, High Modernist thought is often grounded in a hugely intellectual and highly educated understanding of history, philosophy and language but, at its most exciting, the literature generated uses that knowledge to deconstruct familiar narratives so as to encapsulate human experience. In this spirit I have chosen to contextualize Beckett's work in terms of primary Modernist material, although my focus has been sharpened by a familiarity with the fields of "Beckett Studies" and Modern Literary Criticism.

Anthony Uhlmann wrote about Beckett's relationship to intellectual constructs:

The writer and the philosopher might at times be said to approach similar ideas or set of ideas from different starting points. The philosophers often set out from the concept so as to describe a sensation, whereas [...] Beckett often sets out from sensations which indicate or congeal about concepts. (Uhlmann 28)

It is inevitable that we read, and watch, this work with a post-modern, even post Post-Modern, perspective, but I believe that for this study a direct contextualization within the Modernist aesthetic is the most revealing approach for understanding Beckett's accomplishment. Lucky's monologue in *Waiting For Godot* is often cited as an example of the post-modernism in Beckett's work, and it can be seen as a breathtaking explosion of post-modern intertextuality. However Lucky also exists in the on-stage reality as an integral part of Pozzo's self-realization, and their abusive interdependency is part of the dramatic context that sets off the human connection in the relationship of Vladimir and Estragon as they struggle to find a way to go on living. As such, the analytical, globally aware, contradictory post-modern speech is only a part of the isolated, lost reality of the human drama that Beckett offers as a complete piece of theatre.

While most Modernist work was written as poetry or in novel form, each of the main figures in the movement, with the exception of Virginia Woolf, experimented with drama, perhaps hoping to harness the vital connection to their words found in a theatre. Only Eliot and Yeats had any real success in the medium, but their bringing together of the verbal economy and heightened impact of poetry with the real voices of actors and the focus of a dark auditorium seems to have offered something meaningful in the quest for a more immediate communication.

Most writing in English in the period before the First World War, including that for the theatre, had described personal experience in a sequential, developing pattern. Characters, on the page or stage, spoke in well-turned arguments and phrases as a plot emerged and was resolved. An examination of the fractured way in which ideas and emotions occur, and recur, in real human thinking, informed by the nascent science of psychoanalysis, seems to have led the early Modernists to a shared desire to break with this narrative framework and represent consciousness in a more authentic, challenging and fragmented way. The increasing understanding of the disjointed and non-sequential scraps of memory that tormented many survivors of the war (termed shell shock by James Myers in 1915) offered a new way of looking at the effects of trauma. Eliot and Woolf in particular considered and represented this kind of experience in their work. The truths this investigation revealed, and the broken, unconventional style in which they were encapsulated in writing, created a new kind of literature which Ezra Pound described as one without “rhetorical din... austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (“A Retrospect” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* 12). It is interesting that, after the Depression of the 1930s and another devastating war, that description could so accurately be applied to the dramatic works of Beckett.

Social upheaval across Europe, which was both empowered and interrupted by the 1914–18 war, left a world with few certainties. The old accepting world-view where “the rich man in his castle” and “the poor man at his gate” (Alexander) were ordained to those lives by an omnipresent and unquestionable God was, at best, under concerted attack. Those old fashioned certainties expressed in the novels of the previous century had fitted admirably to the well-ordered, externally determined plots and constructs of the traditional novel. The lives of individuals in an accepted social order had been harshly exposed, their consciences and moral degeneration closely examined, from Eugene Onegin to Maggie Tulliver, but the rigid structure of the world into which those characters fitted, more or less badly, aligned well with the structure of the novel form itself. Actions had predictable consequences, personal development was revealed in coherent thought and clearly signposted by a narrator. Perhaps the pre-eminence of the novel form in the nineteenth century underlined a sociologically driven view of human experience in which the characters are created precisely to show how society, and its norms and taboos, shapes the individual. The rebellion and isolation that novelists explored in their protagonists, so often identified as unfortunate outsiders or misfits, served to underline the rigidity of the society into which they fitted, so revealingly and so poorly. Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, even David Copperfield or Jean Valjean, say as much about the world that rejects them as they do about an interior personal struggle. The trajectory of their lives is mapped out in the progress of the narrative. They do grow and mature as they face their various battles, but the portrait of an unchanging, corrupt or, at least limited, society forms the fixed topography through which that journey is made.

In the new century this kind of external narrative seems to have felt inadequate to express the lives, and the society, that writers of the Modernist school wanted to examine. In her Essay *Modern Fiction* (1925) Virginia Woolf describes the tyrannical thrall that she felt obliged writers to “provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole” (*Selected Essays* 7). She expresses a new certainty that life is “very far from being like this” (*Selected Essays* 160). Woolf continues, laying out an image of how she experiences living and, in the modern, post war world, how she feels writers should liberate themselves from a sequential, plot driven, logical method of trying to represent it:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel... 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, what aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (*Selected Essays* 8).

Virginia Woolf acknowledges the contribution made to this quest by Joyce and Conrad, among others, and she takes up her own challenge in her later novels.

It is interesting that the book Mrs. Ramsay has left on the train in the first part of *To the Lighthouse* is *Middlemarch*, often credited as being the most perfect example of the nineteenth century, three-volume novel. Her concern is that she “would ever know what happened in the end” (133). George Eliot concludes her complex picture of English Society by suggesting that the “growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts...” and the existence of those good people who “lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (*Middlemarch* 896). Mrs Ramsey is certainly a force for

good in her small society but Woolf examines her impact on the individual minds that she touches rather than on the outside world. With her later writing Virginia Woolf seems to be marking the end of a world in which there could be a neat “ending” of a definitive sort in a novel that seriously tried to represent human experience. For Virginia Woolf there had been “the war to end all wars” and nothing important had been resolved, though much was lost, and the gentle routine of rural England could not continue, or be described, as before. As Philip Larkin much later observed: “Never such innocence, never again.” [“MCMXIV”]

Virginia Woolf, perhaps as fundamentally as anyone else of her time – even Joyce – took the form and melted it to make a something plastic enough to portray her characters in the new, structurally mutable, modern world. In *To the Lighthouse* the first section, “The Window,” more than half the novel, is centered around the perspective of Mrs. Ramsay, though the thoughts and connections of the whole group are captive, somehow, in her orbit. Her thoughts carry the reader through the details of a few hours on a pre-war family holiday. The narrative is layered in thoughts, moderated only with the creeping of time, and the abandoned hope of a boat trip. This setting is placed in the social network of a familiar, prewar model, even though the interior monologues that mesh to form the piece are independent of authorial comment, and flow together in a new way. In the second section of the book, “Time Passes,” only twenty-three pages, the war and all of its attendant horror and devastation goes by with only the most perfunctory comment. Mrs Ramsey’s death is summarized with a perfect participle and in brackets:

[... Mr. Ramsey stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out remained empty.] (*TTLH* 175)

The death of her son, Andrew, and of the men who died with him in the war are similarly presented passively in a few words (in brackets) a few pages later. The same brackets enclose a note on a more minor character, Mr Carmichael, whose occupation as a writer allows Woolf to make occasional observations about the relation of writing to modern life throughout the book:

[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.] (TTLH 183)

With these facts established, concerns about dampness and the dusting mingle with gossip and the authorial voice shifts, seeming to become the voice of the holiday house itself as the post-war world is prepared for the returning guests. There is no attempt to engage with the catastrophes of war or social upheaval in graphic terms or to recite the history in any kind of sequence: it is mentioned in passing if it flickers through someone's thoughts, but otherwise the drama written in this book is inter-personal, and generally unacknowledged within the group. The overt emphasis on the day-to-day, subjective thoughts and minor incidents that are re-established at the centre of each character's concerns, once peace returns, give a different perspective to the reality of lives that had spanned the Great War. These characters continue their own, personal, battles despite the historical events that are taking place. It is a perspective that is rather shocking in its honesty and interiority.

After the wholesale slaughter and industrialized devastation of the Great War many writers felt forced to consider themselves, and their characters, in a broader historical context, if only in terms of an inherited responsibility, or at least recognition, of the horrors that had created their age. Steven Connor suggests that "the effort of the

modernist poem was to condense the complexity of time and history, to make them apprehensible in a single frame” (Connor 63). What the poems leave us with is a sense of being part of, even the result of, all of that time and history. As Beckett himself wrote in his 1931 essay about Proust: “We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday” (Beckett, *Proust* 3). This same “other” understanding of what life in the twentieth century must be, for a thoughtful person, and the search for ways of representing this new awareness of interior truth is, I believe, at the heart of literary Modernism. It is not just that T.S. Eliot or Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound or James Joyce recognized that their reality was not defined by a linear, accepting progress through the events of their lives, but that they reformed the shape of their poems and novels to reflect that fragmented, inherited, uncertain state of mind. Virginia Woolf, in particular, pulls back from the big worldly stories of the period and rather allows the sporadic, real time thoughts of individuals to reveal the depth of uncertainty and unhappiness of those living through them: each “powerless to flick off these grains of misery which settled on his mind one after another” (*TTLH* 253). Here again the theme is taken up by Beckett and is presented, undiluted by social naturalism, in the heightened reality of the theatre.

Proust investigated the dilemma that faced many in the wealthy, leisured classes of a shockingly new and sceptical twentieth century: a social milieu with exaggeratedly effete superficial manners and deep private and visceral corruption. In a huge work that studies the minutiae of a mind examining every moment of his own life, Proust’s protagonist, Marcel, accepts this decaying social norm, while trying to define his personal identity within it. The same inherited ambivalence informed Franz Kafka’s work, transforming Gregor Samsa’s physical form in response to his inability to live fully within

the social restrictions and conditioning of his life. Kafka's introduction of a material absurdity and Proust's creation of such a massive piece of work with little conventional, developmental plot are obvious examples of new ways of presenting self-examination in writing. The solutions found by the English modernists, as extreme in their own way, continued the same struggle to find a way of working that fitted the twentieth century experience.

Perhaps because the scale of the barbarity of twentieth century European war was so unimaginable and so inhuman, the Modernists, Eliot and Pound in particular, saw the daily struggle of ordinary human beings as sharing the same intensity as those of ancient Gods and heroes. The narratives of these superhuman individuals that had answered questions of human life in an allegorical unreality in classical times are brought back in their work and brought directly into representations of twentieth century life. T.S. Eliot, an American and so neutral for most of the first world war (though he did try to enlist in the US Navy when America joined the war in 1917), embedded images from the war, juxtaposing them with allusions to the wars of antiquity in his poem *The Waste Land*. The following example from the first part of the poem mixes familiar images of everyday city life with the specters of sprouting corpses and links those scenes back to the churned up fields of Northern France or, equally, to classical epic:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, ...
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!"

“You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (Eliot 65)

The poem dismembers any expected narrative sequence and leaves jagged slivers of misery poking through the cuts. Eliot conjures images from ancient texts directly, the ships at Mylae, and also in layered allusions, for example to the human trees in Dante’s *Inferno*, but puts them beside banal images from his walk to work in a London Bank (in his “Notes” to the poem he remarks that the dull sound of the church bell is “a phenomenon I have often noticed”) (Eliot 81). The poem maintains this stratified and fragmented pattern, connected by the un-noticing flow of rivers, to create a kind of archaeology of suffering, as well as a portrait of contemporary London haunted by images of war. Eliot walks his readers through that city like Cassandra walking through the ruins of Troy.

The idea that each life has struggles as valid as those of ancient heroes echoes through Modernist work and informs the terrifying, but oddly domestic, suffering of Beckett’s protagonists in their minimally elaborated tragedies. Beckett abstracts the experience of his characters from a recognizable daily reality in the stark, unrealistic or even bizarre stage pictures that confine their existence while keeping the few words they do speak as “normal” and everyday as any piece of social realism. The discord of situation and dialogue, of familiar concerns and unfamiliar surroundings, has something of the same, distanced, power to address the central concerns of human existence as Greek tragedy. No one attending the theatre in the classical period had, one assumes, been forced to sacrifice a child to get good sailing weather or had inadvertently married their mother, but the emotions portrayed in the words of Agamemnon or Oedipus reflect

the interior anxiety of small compromises and misfortunes in many lives on a very large, and therefore accessible scale.

Writing in his poetic drama *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935, while the Great Depression further undermined social assumptions, Eliot examines the idea of a “world that is wholly foul” and assigns an historical moment, the murder of Thomas Beckett, to mark the beginning of this hopelessness:

We understood the private catastrophe,
The personal loss, the general misery,
Living and partly living;
The terror by night that ends in daily action,
The terror by day that ends in sleep;
But the talk in the market-place, the hand on the broom,
The night-time heaping of the ashes,
The fuel laid on the fire at daybreak,
These acts marked a limit to our suffering.
...
But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,
An instant eternity of evil and wrong. (*Murder in the Cathedral* 82)

Juxtaposing personal confusion with the political, or established religious, structure of society continued to interest Eliot, and others in the emergent Modernist movement as the century unfolded. Eliot seems to have struggled to find forms in which to express this sort of world of misery and contradiction in a country that had ostensibly “won” a war, but which had been irreparably damaged by what had been seen and felt in that time. He turned, increasingly, to the internal struggle to understand this world

scarred by battle wounds and festering in poverty, and battling the consequent political extremism of the 1930s. Large social or political conflicts are expressed in his work in terms of individual experience: the “whimper” that ends the world is a small, personal sound.

The most self-conscious comparison of ancient heroes and the smallness of modern life is, perhaps, James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, published in 1922. Joyce co-opted the journey of the epic and, without breaking the unity of a single day, laid it across the perambulations of two men walking through Dublin (with the significant addition of the interior monologue of Leopold Bloom’s wife Molly). The events of the day are represented directly, often and in various, recognizable and distinct literary styles, adding further to the sense of an accumulated history that has brought humanity to the modern era. The uninterpreted, even unpunctuated, thoughts of Joyce’s protagonists reflect the fragmentary, non-sequential nature of thought and memory and, especially in the case of Molly Bloom, allow a stream of consciousness to carry the reader into an uncensored encounter with the mind of his character. There is no omniscient narrator, or even a consistent style, to direct reaction to the thoughts of the figures in the novel, creating an immediacy and self-awareness in the way the novel engages the mind of the reader.

Beckett, who had worked with Joyce as a young man on *The Work in Progress* (later *Finnegan’s Wake*), constructed his own early novels in a very Joycean way. Aside from the obvious structural parallels, in *Mercier et Camier*, for example, there is an unabashed honesty in recounting the most basic of human functions which clearly owes much to Joyce: the episode of Bloom defecating which was so shocking in 1922 has echoes in the personal activities of Murphy or *The Unnamable*: the sawdust added to

“the bottom of my jar which she changes every week, when she makes my toilet” (*Three Novels* 325) the sordid reality of which the speaker in *The Unnamable* devotes his mental energy to “getting used to” because “It’s an occupation” (*Three Novels* 325). Here the bodily function is graphically portrayed, as it was for Joyce, but the character is so far abstracted from a “normal” social existence that the relationship he has to any aspect of being alive, however basic, is somewhat different. For Joyce it was important that this fundamental part of the everyday be acknowledged in the writing, bringing the basics of human existence into the sanitized, indoor world of literature; for Beckett it is a part of a carefully contemplated record of a living torment.

The environments in which the characters in Beckett’s novels exist, even those set outdoors, are increasingly non-specific in each successive novel: Murphy journeys through a recognizable London but by *The Unnamable* the context is “Where now? Who now? When now?” Interestingly “Where now?” is the first question asked to begin the book. Whether because geography distracts from the inner commentary of the characters or diminishes their universality, the novels become more and more generic in their settings, just as the characters become increasingly candid about their thoughts. This is a familiar framework from the desiccated, non-specific landscapes found in many of the poems of Eliot or Pound. *The Unnamable* draws to his conclusion (leaving behind even the anchor of divided sentences), still struggling to define his place in the world:

I haven’t stirred, that’s all I know, no, I know something else, it’s not I, I always forget that, I resume, you must resume, never stirred from here, never stopped telling stories, to myself, hardly hearing them, hearing something else, listening for something else, wondering now and then where I got them from, was I in the land of the living, were they mine, and where, where do I store them ... (*Three Novels* 405)

In his novels, and later in his dramas, Beckett presents characters struggling with their memories, trying to pull an idea of themselves into focus from a myriad of tiny, jumbled recollections. This same sense of stretching out to grasp an interior truth from among layers of remembered and glimpsed fragments of experience can be found in Virginia Woolf's later novels. Especially in *The Waves* Woolf depicts a cacophony of interior voices and differently remembered events from which her characters create their ideas of themselves. There is little progressive action to frame a "plot" for the novel: the memories of isolated childhood moments, a picnic, or a meal as adults are presented in isolation and in the interior voices of the various participants. The one really significant event, the death of Percival, is only reported in correspondence and reaction, but the affect on the self-images of the other characters is devastating and revealing. These events form a saga every bit as complex as those of Dickens or Hardy, but one taking place on an interior, personal plain.

In poetry too the convention at the end of the nineteenth century was for narrative pieces, not lacking in rather sentimental, or at least easy, emotion: Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" or Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," for example. The poetry that emerged from the horrifying experiences of poets in the trenches of the First World War was savagely different, though still generally composed in a conventionally structured stanza form, placing chillingly graphic images at its centre. The returning witnesses of war crystalized their experiences in what Yeats later called "The unpurged images of the day" ("Byzantium" Yeats 210). The placing of the image at the centre of a literary work, especially in poetry, was focused further in much Modernist writing and allowed the work to transcend the specifics of any experience to distill a moment, an emotion, or a state of mind as well as evoking a particular exterior reality.

By the time he completed *L'Innommable* Beckett had steadily deconstructed his relationship to exterior context from the Joycean progresses of *Murphy* and *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to an almost un-anchored battle of an individual with isolation and identity. In doing so he seems to be following a path evident in other early Modernists and developed by later Europeans (for example Camus, especially in the voice of *L'Etranger*) to make the form and focus of the novel better express the place of an individual in a world without any certainty about life. However, quite suddenly after the end of the Second World War, Beckett took his work in a new direction and began to work for the theatre. Here he was able to shape a form of expression freed from the need to involve his language in the description of external circumstances. In a later conversation with Barney Rosset, Beckett recalled "When I was working on *Watt*, I felt the need to create for a smaller space, one in which I had some control of where people stood or moved, above all, of a certain light. I wrote *Waiting for Godot*" (Ziefman 136). In this new phase of his writing, the thoughts of his characters and the implications of their struggles could be presented in a shared space with searing clarity and inescapable humanity.

Working in the Theatre

“Something for the modern stage” (Pound 186)

In this section I will briefly examine the theatrical elements, including set, lighting, sound and acting, which bring the drama of Samuel Beckett into an intense focus for those taking part on either side of the curtain. The careful, holistic approach specified in the stage directions of his work suggests a continuation of the search for a complete expression of twentieth century experience found in the work of the early Modernists. Not only does the vitality of living performers and the sensory stimulation of sound and lighting envelop those watching in what is portrayed, but Beckett’s words, relieved of the task of explaining or describing what happens, achieve intense focus in communicating the living reality of the figures on stage.

In embracing the change of focus implicit in removing ideas from the page and representing them on a stage, in a room that could exclude all distraction and all escape, Beckett took the Modernist quest for an arresting medium in which to explore what it is to be human to a new level of intensity. He made pieces of theatre where all of the elements, visual and auditory, combined with the spoken words to create a complete experience. They are not “well made plays,” with a beginning, middle and an end, any more than the poems of Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot are ballads. The challenging structures of Beckett’s plays pull the audience out of any complacency and demand engagement with the ideas of the work in a fresh and unsentimental way, just as the poems of the Modernists twisted the expectations of their readers to open up complex truths.

There are various ways in which the plays intensify the received experience, including the rejection of naturalistic settings, to give the visual elements that do appear weight, in a way that echoes the effect of Imagist poetry. An overt acknowledgement of being in a theatre in much of the work removes the accepted, though imagined, fourth wall and pulls the audience into the suffering being expressed on stage. The Modernists too, especially Pound, reference the process of making their work or call in discordant notes from outside the framework of the piece to alert the reader to the intellectual journey being made with the poem. The challenge that Beckett's plays present seems to answer Pound's enjoinder to the new world to

go to practical people—

go! Jangle their doorbells!

Say that you do no work

and that you will live forever. (Pound 87)

There is something in Pound's piece that implies a shared struggle or protest, calling out to the complacent members of a stagnant society so as to offer them a more vital, challenging life through art. This is certainly dramatic poetry, but not in any mimetic or conventionally narrative way; rather in the sense that it engages the reader in the drama of their own daily lives, and acknowledges that this is what is being done.

The role ascribed to "*dramatic* poetry" by T.S. Eliot in his essay "The Social Function of Poetry" seems appropriate to the shift in the field of engagement between a novel or conventional poetry which are, for the most part, written and read alone and a piece of theatre which is a shared endeavor:

For whereas most poetry to-day is written to be read in solitude, or to be read aloud in small company, dramatic verse alone has as its function the

making an immediate, collective impression upon a large number of people gathered together to look at an imaginary episode acted upon a stage. (*On Poetry and Poets* 17)

The creation of this kind of “immediate, collective impression” is minutely detailed in Beckett’s plays; every technical element is laid out with the same level of precision as the sparse dialogue. By framing his ideas on a stage, Beckett could remove any ambiguity from the situation perceived, at least while he was directly involved in the production. The scene in front of the audience when the curtain rises, or the lights come up, on any piece of theatre is more controlled than one in a book, in that it is not created in the viewers’ imagination or just from their own associations with the words on the page; it is starkly, solidly present both in constructed scenery and in the atmosphere created with the quality of the light and sound. This tangibility allows a different kind of control over how the scene is understood, but also over the environment that the watchers themselves are occupying for the duration of the piece. Actors and audience are in the same room and tacitly agree to inhabit the small world it contains.

Speaking to the cast of the 1967 production of *Endgame* in Berlin, his assistant, Michael Haerdter, recalls Beckett, having cited a time before the Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century when it was possible to “know everything”, saying:

Now it’s no longer possible to know everything. The tie between the Self and Things no longer exists. One must make a world of one’s own in order to satisfy one’s need to know, to understand one’s need for order ... There for me lies the value of the Theatre. One turns out a small world with its own laws, conducts the action as if upon a chess board .. yes, even a game of chess is too complex. (Quoted in Chronin 558)

Making this “small world” is crucial to Beckett’s work, and he allows no ambiguity to surround its constructs. Inviting the audience to share experiences within that structure, he offers a chance to move past external obsessions and look into an interior reality.

At the time of its first production, the almost empty stage of *Waiting for Godot* was considered shocking. Martin Esslin summarizes the play in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*: “*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation” (46) and the newness of that approach to drama should not be underestimated. The situation is not presented in a familiar, indoor way: as the lights come up there is only “*A country road. A tree. Evening*” (*Godot* 11) on stage. Although Yeats and Synge had both used similar devices, their work was not very widely known outside Dublin. Yeats often marked his poetic drama to be set on a bare stage and Synge’s *Well of the Saints* is set on a “*Roadside with big stones, etc. on the right; low loose wall at the back with gap near centre; at the back doorway of church with bushes beside it*” (Synge 59). For Synge the roadside represents a timeless, if not mythic, rural Ireland where travellers and blind beggars are commonplace (these are stock figure features in plays by Yeats too) and a saint can offer a miraculous cure with revealing results. It is worth noting that Beckett’s good friend Jack Butler Yeats had made illustrations for Synge’s early work and may have collaborated on the set for *The Well of the Saints* (Pyle 93), and according to Anthony Chronin (Chronin 405) and Roger Blin, the first director of *En Attend Godot*, knew the work of Synge and respected it. The figures who come and go, or don’t move, on Beckett’s “country road” have just a bare tree and the text adds little to place them in a particular country or time. Like Dante’s dark wood or Robert Frost’s yellow one, this is somewhere anyone might find themselves.

Having cut across the expectations of the audience regarding “scenery” Beckett’s plays engage their watchers without some of the socio-political assumptions of the traditional setting. In recent times many stage designers have moved further from the “realistic” settings, even in popular theatre, so the stage picture in Beckett’s work is less

surprising today than it was to the first audiences, but it is still strikingly stark. Freedom from naturalistic staging can be traced back to the Modernist era when the Ballet Russe, for example, used sets and costumes designed by Picasso (1917-1920) and Edward Gordon Craig created non-realistic sets for Moscow Arts Theatre (Stanislavski's *Hamlet* in 1911-12 being notable). Craig presented W.B. Yeats with a set of his moveable screens, a kind of universal scenic devise, which Yeats credits as influencing the direction of his dramatic work (Taxidou 102). Craig explored ideas of theatre from the Japanese Noh tradition in his work, and in his publication *The Mask*. It is interesting to note, here, that both Yeats and Pound worked on translating Noh dramas from Japanese (between 1913 and 1915). Pound described the Noh:

We do not find, as we find in *Hamlet*, a certain situation or problem set out and analyzed. The Noh service presents, or symbolizes, a complete diagram of life and recurrence. (Fenollosa/Pound 17)

The idea of a "complete diagram of life" is one which could be applied both to much of the poetic work of Pound and Eliot, but also makes a rather neat summary of Beckett's stage pieces. These are not detailed paintings with elaborate backgrounds and colours; rather, in their stark simplicity they do offer the kind of instructive view of, and often through, the aspects of human experience they illustrate.

Clearly Beckett was not the only writer who took his work away from the representational portrayal of social situations, and he was aware of his intellectual context. He worked in post-war Paris and had also spent time there as a young man, with Joyce, at the hub of Existentialist and Modernist debate. The exploration of the way in which abstracted and absurd circumstances could reveal something of the human condition was being attempted by many intellectuals throughout the early Twentieth

Century so the work did not come about in a vacuum, even in the theatre. However, as James Knowlson points out, among other Absurdist work only Jean Genet's *Les Bonne (The Maids)* had been produced before the staging of *Waiting for Godot* (Knowlson 366). Beckett was disinclined to accept the label of "Absurdist" but his work was written in the same place and time as the great works of that movement and, in most cases, predated them at least in reaching the public. As such, it was, at the very least, part of the fabric of a type of theatre that Esslin was later to dub "Theatre of the Absurd." The labeling of a literary movement is often a retrospective, or critical, convenience, though this is less true of Modernism where Pound's declaration that "The age demanded an image/Of its accelerated grimace" (Pound 186) demonstrates an awareness of artists working together in an historical context. However, the freedom attributed by Peter Brook in his 1960 work *The Empty Space* to one of the key figures of Absurd drama, Antonin Artaud, "that only in the theatre could we liberate ourselves from the recognizable forms in which we live our daily lives" (60) seems to fit well to the work of Beckett. The quest for that liberty can also be seen in the poems of Pound or Eliot or the novels of Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Artaud, a close associate of Roger Blin, the first director of *Waiting for Godot*, described his vision for his own production space, the Alfred Jarry Theatre, in a letter to Bloch in 1931 and identifies his starting point:

...the point of departure and touchstone of real theatre is *mise en scene*, if the term is understood in its profound sense of the visual, auditory, and special power of the theatrical style of a written work. (Artaud 204)

This positioning of ideas in a theatrical context is crucial to the work of Beckett and to the way in which he develops, and continues, the struggle of the early Modernists

to change the accepted forms of literature to embody their contemporary experience. Beckett embraced the concept of relating his words to the mise-en-scene to create a complete sensory experience. He includes very particular instructions concerning lighting, for example in *Happy Days* where the “Blazing Light” specified in the stage directions (Beckett 138) is a real and active part of the torture Winnie undergoes in the play. In the same play a piercingly loud bell that governs Winnie’s waking and sleeping is something with which she engages directly in her second act monologue:

The bell. [Pause] It hurts like a knife. [Pause] A gouge. [Pause] One cannot ignore it. [Pause] How often ... (pause) .. I say how often I have said, Ignore it, Winnie, ignore the bell, pay no heed, just sleep and wake, sleep and wake, as you please (Beckett 162).

For the audience, sitting in the auditorium, the bell is as physically painful and alarming as it is for Winnie on stage and, especially as each scene starts, the lights are so bright that the scene can seem to burn the retina of those watching and the eyes on stage. There is no possibility of watching this character’s torture passively, detached from these sensations, and so her agony, and her acceptance, must affect the audience differently from something that is just described, however vividly, in words on a page.

Other artists working at the beginning of the Twentieth Century sought ways to express their experience using the extra sensory possibilities of cinema or radio. These burgeoning media offered new possibilities outside the written context to make a more complete, stimulating and exciting way to convey information and ideas. These new arts also offered new ways of engaging with subjects that, in turn, affected the way in which writers put their ideas on the page. The flickering, and often too rapid, images of newsreels, for example, are reflected in the pace and discontinuity of work such as *The Waste Land*. The cutting together of images in movies and how that technique rapidly

switches the point of view in a scene is somewhat similar to the montaged voices and visions of *The Waves*. Radio drama too, made use of juxtaposed voices and soundscapes to tell stories, conventionally narrative ones in the main, but to tell them without an authorial voice explaining their geography or referencing an established tone. Here again the snippets of conversation and drama, which are crucial to the panoply of images and emotions woven into *The Waste Land*, have the directness of the snatched voices one might hear when tuning in a radio set. These works by Eliot and Woolf, as with others in the Modernist tradition, use the fragmented, rapid pace of new media to break away from the linear narrative of conventional prose or poetry and expose the reader to a barrage of perspectives and a sense of the hurry of modern life by bringing to the words on the page with something of the urgent motion of the cinema.

Beckett made his theatre when the cinema, radio, and latterly television, had become a normal part of daily life for most of his audience. He was presenting drama to people who were sophisticated in decoding the rapid stimuli of the modern world. Significantly, he also wrote for radio and television himself, (even undertaking the extraordinary experiment *Film* in 1963). Bringing together the elements of a broadly based sensual experience to make the work engage with that, differently sensitized, audience added to Beckett's extraordinary theatre. He insisted in his stage directions, for theatre as well as for other media, that the situational elements of sound and light appear in his work as more than a subconscious context for the action but as a critical part of the relationship that the piece established with the audience. In work that is often so brief on the page the unity of the performance is key to what is being said, creating a vital experience that affects the audience in a physical way, through several senses, and, as Anthony Page remembers Beckett saying, attempts to "bypass the intellect"

(See footnote 1). While for the early Modernists the flicker and distraction of the cinema and radio age is brought directly into their portraits of that time, for Beckett, working rather later, the techniques are there but they are brought into a simplified space where distractions are distilled and put to serve a devastatingly minute vision. The one sided conversation in *Not I*, where an imagined voice, or at least one not heard by the audience, interrupts Mouth as she pieces together a history from a stored history of experiences and ragged memories, shares the fragmented shape of *The Waste Land*, but the presentation is situated in a physical manifestation where nothing, not even the rest of the body, exists for the speaker or the watchers. The speed and jagged discontinuity of the words in *Not I*, like those of *The Waste Land*, are alarming to read, even though the play is only a few pages long. However, when reading one can slow down, re-read sections and consider the implications of each tiny phrase. The actress Lisa Dwan described speaking the words “at the speed of thought,” (Dwan) as she was taught to do by Billie Whitelaw (who in turn was directed by Beckett himself); the result is an assault on the consciousness of the audience that exceeds their intellectual capacity to rationalize and works, as Beckett told Jessica Tandy when she took the role in New York, “on the nerves of the audience, not on its intellect” (Knowlson and Pilling 195).

In some pieces the only character on stage interacts with a recording, most obviously in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, but also, later, in *Rockabye*. By bringing recorded sound, more usually just an environmental element that is accepted as part of the stage reality, into such an active role in the scene, Beckett offers an extended landscape and emphasizes the artificiality of all representations of life on stage at the same time as offering an ostensibly valid record of history. Particularly in the case of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, where the recordings form a kind of metatheatre, the layering of the live and

recorded voices make the play about perspective, as much as about the event described. Just as the cinema-like flicker and splice of voices and images in Eliot's work underlines the pace and uncertainty of the world he is portraying, the acknowledged theatricality of Beckett's piece stops the watcher from losing themselves in a narrative, but rather underlines the nature of mutable, and subjective nature of any representation of "real life."

Other work emerging at the time was equally disregarding of theatrical convention but, in some cases, it seems that the breaking down of the old form was an end in itself. Interestingly, as Martin Esslin mentions in his Introduction to *Absurd Drama*, many pieces can be associated directly with dreams, a place of self-revelation identified by Freud and Jung, but they also often circle back behind the "well made plays" of the recent past to older, more socially allegorical traditions found in Greek drama (Aristophanes' *The Birds*, for example) or, even, in Jacobean theatre. The images that comprise many Absurdist pieces are often even more elaborate or outlandish than those chosen by Beckett who stripped away everything meretricious from his work. In Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* for example, the stage directions require that

Powerful noises of moving rhinoceros are heard, but somehow it is a musical sound. On the up-stage wall stylized heads appear and disappear; they become more and more numerous from now until the end of the play. Towards the end they stay fixed for longer and longer, until eventually they fill the entire back wall, remaining static. The heads, in spite of their monstrous appearance, seem to become more and more beautiful. (Ionesco 110)

It is a wonderful theatrical image but the language of the characters playing out the final scene of the play in front of the image seems to fall short of bringing the audience into a

direct engagement with the idea. Allowing for a slightly lumpy translation, the piece is still somehow a little superficial or at least obvious. The play ends:

Now it's too late! Now I'm a monster, just a monster, Now I'll never become a rhinoceros, never, never ... I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end, I'm not capitulating (124).

The intention of this, and many other Absurdist works, seems somewhat didactic; indeed the form served revolutionaries like Vaclav Havel well in their campaigns for political reform, but it is interesting to see the form taken by Beckett to make much more inward looking, though equally cataclysmic, portraits. Something in the spare language and stark stage image pulls the watcher more deeply into the experience being portrayed than even contemporary theatrical experiments.

Starting with the Modernists, twentieth century writers challenged all of the assumptions of literary form in order to better express their experience, and conventions of theatre were exploded just like those of prose or poetry. Along with the distancing socially specific settings of the “well made play,” there was also the unspoken, and unbreakable, assumption that what is happening on stage continues unaware of the watching audience: behind a “fourth wall” (Bell 203). This notion is re-examined by Beckett and other early twentieth century dramatists seeking a more authentic relationship with their audience. The idea of theatre as a drama played out by writers and actors who “think no more of the audience than if it had never existed” (Cuddon) was expressed by Diderot in 1753 and it circumscribed much of what was written thereafter. Each drama of lives played out on stage, whether the lives are heroic, wealthy or commonplace, followed its own narrative but never questioned or acknowledged the artifice of the situation in the theatre. Looking back much further than

the eighteenth century, or into less elite stage forms, such as pantomime, there are a number of cases where actors do speak directly to the audience and challenge or involve them in the action. Shakespeare (for example at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and other Jacobean writers occasionally addressed the spectators, especially in the characters of villains (Bosola, among others), where soliloquys were often played in a knowing way to include the audience. Contemporary movies and television, such as Kevin Spacey's *House of Cards*, exploit the same technique as a matter of course as do contemporary playwrights, for example Peter Shaffer in *Amadeus*. Music hall, melodrama and pantomime push the idea further and include the same half-awkward, half-exciting audience participation as a modern game show or a bar-room cabaret.

There are many examples of breaking down the convention of the fourth wall in early Twentieth Century drama: Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) explores the process of making a play directly; his stage directions specify that

When the audience enters the auditorium the curtain is up and the stage is just as it would be during the daytime. There is no set and there are not wings; it is empty and in almost total darkness. This is in order that right from the very beginning the audience shall receive the impression of being present, not at a performance of a carefully rehearsed play, but at a performance of a play that suddenly happens. (1)

Frederick May, who translated the play into English in 1954, describes it as “a dramatic analogue to *The Waste Land*.” While it does offer some of what he calls “a high poetic record of the disillusionment and spiritual desolation of its time” (*Six Characters* “Introduction” x), the piece seems to lack Eliot's subtle weaving of images and universality. The metatheatre in Pirandello's piece is self-aware and challenges the audience to think about the process that they are engaged in watching a play. Surrealists, such as Jarry – who used slapstick and puppets in his Ubu plays, pushed

the boundaries further than any serious dramatist before him and, in the years that followed, Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble made theatre that crossed conventional lines to make a political point.

The work was “Rough Theatre” in the lexicon of Peter Brook (78) and was confrontational and fierce but never allowed the audience to forget that they were watching something pretending to be real life. Brecht’s alienation technique deliberately put cabaret-like, two-dimensional characters on stage so that personal empathy should not sentimentalize the political message of the work (though it is hard not to care about even the most confrontational Mother Courage or helplessly abused Shen Te). Even accepting that Brecht’s empathy and human narrative outruns his political vision for his work, his stated intention is that he, “the refugee/ Playwright instructs (you) in the/ Art of observation” in order “To turn the struggle into common experience and/ Justice into a passion”(Brecht 237-8). The vision of the Modernists seems to ask for more than this sort of polemic from art, however energetic and politically astute it might be. Ezra Pound did not omit his sociological stance from his work but his poetry has more to say about the inner human experience than the political framework implies. “Commission”, for example, includes the exhortation that his work should contain “contempt of oppressors” but spreads that revolutionary language to challenge a list of sufferers from “unconscious oppression” (Pound 89) and recognizes a mental anguish rooted precisely in that inability to experience the new or authentic.

While the political affiliations of Modernist writers were sometimes questionable, especially with hindsight, even the most overtly political, W. B. Yeats, who wrote many of his early plays and poems in the service of Irish cultural identity, questioned the “terrible beauty” (“Easter 1916”) of the uprising that resulted, in part, from that cultural movement.

Yeats may have wondered “Did that play of mine send out. Certain men the English shot” but, however naively, he did write the words with a revolutionary stamp and give them to his beautiful, and strongly Nationalist, muse, Maud Gonne, to perform, harnessing the political power of theatre.

It is interesting that Eliot, in *Murder in the Cathedral* and in his transported vision of the Oresteia story, *Family Reunion*, as well as Joyce, in *Exiles*, and even Pound in *Elektra*, found that writing for the theatre was a suitable medium in which to experiment with sociological ideas, though often in an historical context or style. Yeats identified his part in the 1916 uprising as that of someone who “lived where motley’s worn.” Beckett had little time for the ancient heroes resurrected, or at least polished up, by W.B. Yeats (In *Watt* a character is found beating his head on the buttocks of the statue of Cuchulain in the General Post Office in O’Connell Street). His exile from Irish life he found stifling, much like Joyce’s earlier in the century, gave Beckett the freedom to write with greater personal authenticity. This exile also allowed both men to examine the linguistic traits of their native dialect dispassionately, in Beckett’s case by writing in French and then translating back into English, and to bend the understanding they gained to shape a lexicon that only engaged the “glamour” of an Irish brogue in specific and self-conscious ways. The same distance, interestingly, can be seen in the work of the Americans Eliot and Pound, working in Europe in the Modernist mode.

Although his politics are rarely directly represented in his plays, and they were, in life, very far from the more elitist position of Eliot and Woolf, the fascist sympathies of Pound or the blend of nationalism, eugenics and whimsy that variously enamored Yeats, Beckett did concern himself with personal freedom in much of his drama. In 1982 Beckett dedicated a piece, *Catastrophe*, to Vaclav Havel, after an approach from the

International Association for the Defense of Artists for a festival in Avignon where one night was to be devoted to Havel who was then in prison (Knowlson 677). The piece ostensibly examines the process of making a piece of drama out of exposing a human being to total degradation. In this it can be seen as a successor to *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or even Yeats's *Death of Cuchulain*, in both of which the process of making humans into theatrical characters is addressed. However here there is a spare, less messy, and so more menacing process at work. The "Protagonist" in *Catastrophe* is manipulated and framed in relation to the space on stage, and, significantly, to the lighting by a "Director." Mute and compliant, he is treated both by the Director in the play and, to some extent, by the writer and director of the play, as a piece of scenery; he has no speeches and only exists on stage as a figure being manipulated or abused. However, Beckett told Knowlson (680) that the Protagonist is "saying: you bastards, you haven't finished me yet!" in the final moment of the play when he "raises his head" and "fixes the audience" (both watching in the theatre and as they are represented by the recorded applause on stage). In this single moment so much is encapsulated about the relationship of the audience to the play: their complicity in what is happening on stage is represented by the recorded applause. Considering the piece as a whole as they leave the theatre, the audience might also wonder about their complacency in the face of the sort of personal oppression suffered by political prisoners, especially those (specifically Havel) who express their resistance in art.

Although *Catastrophe* ostensibly examines the dehumanizing of a person forced into an on-stage persona, in directing, or advising, actors in his own work Beckett repeatedly insisted that they reduce any histrionics. Billie Whitelaw recalled Beckett saying to her during rehearsals for *Not I*, "'Too much colour, too much colour,' which she

correctly interpreted as ‘For God’s sake don’t act’” (Chronin 551). It seems as if the imposition of particular character traits and emotional intensity might break the balance of all the elements of the piece and make a falsely theatrical note to separate the figures on stage from those watching. The more individual, majestic, even loveable, his characters become the more the plays become a personal narrative. Theodore Adorno describes this process in his work on *Endgame* as being like “playing chamber music” and that “the persons, no longer persons, become instruments of their situation”(Adorno 145). The same need to de-personalize emotion in order to make properly authentic work is explained by Eliot in his “Tradition and the Individual talent”:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (Eliot Prose 44)

As with the glimpsed emotions of Woolf or Eliot, the more coolly the figures on stage occupy their place in the whole work, the more the audience is forced to embrace the whole experience of the work. In sentimentality there is warmth and comfort but also distance, the kind of limited sympathy deliberately evoked in much storytelling. By objectifying or normalizing the suffering of the figures on stage, Beckett refuses his audience the chance to comfort themselves with the idea that their lives are “not like that,” but rather demands that they accept that all human life is exactly “like that.” Pozzo articulates this:

One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll all go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Godot* 83)

In later work this microcosm of life is only implied by a perfect scene, at once minute but also all embracing, which includes everyone in the room.

It is worth noting that the “alienation technique” espoused by Brecht to keep his audience sharp to the political message of his work and protect them from the easy romanticism of the bourgeois theatre could also be used to describe the acting technique recommended by Beckett. However, in the case of Beckett’s work there is a precision of language and a searingly honest inward perspective that could be compromised by a dramatically emotional performance. The circumstances are so bleak and so unsoftened by social norms that too much emotion might tip the whole into melodrama while, if the performance stays in balance with all of the elements of the piece, an insight of savage intimacy is offered. The intense emotion that does, often fleetingly, appear in the text is intensified by the calm rather than diminished, and the overall effect can be harrowing and revealing. Something of the same refusal to dip into sentiment can be seen in Virginia Woolf’s matter-of-fact dismissal of the death of Mrs. Ramsay, or indeed all of the victims of the First World War, in “Time Passes” or in the anonymous “many” undone by death in *The Waste Land* (Eliot 65). Theatre, like poetry, is an innately emotional experience but at its best, and the distilled, unsentimental works of Beckett might be an example of that best, there is a genuine connection between the consciousness of the audience and the consciousness of the writer, and “personality” and “emotion” are bypassed in the moment of deeper understanding they share.

Image

“Those images that yet fresh images beget” (“Byzantium” Yeats 210)

The simplicity of the images in the language of Beckett’s plays, as well as those realized on stage, gives an universality to the work. They encapsulate an idea, sensation, or a state of being in a way that resonates across time or social circumstance. The use of visual images is as old as literature, even older, forming the core of myths from prehistory and is at the heart of all truly great poetry. In the early twentieth century the Modernist poets, especially those who saw their work as Imagist (principally Ezra Pound) stripped away the explanatory setting and imposed logic of nineteenth century writing and let their images stand almost alone to create distilled, unencumbered work that draws the reader towards an inner truth about how life is experienced at the deepest level. Taking this approach to stage work, with all of the intensity of a shared environment and the energy of performance, Beckett, once again, journeys further along a road first explored by Modernists writers. In this section I examine the use of the image as a method of conveying human experience in the modern world, a method shared by Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Woolf and also Beckett, which has a vivid impact at a level of understanding that is more immediate and more profound than that typically reached by description or argument.

As the Modernist movement questioned the usefulness of naturalistic settings or linear story telling in literature and re-examined the construction of form, a focus on individual images became more central, especially in poetry. Freed from the clutter of

narrative logic it was possible for images to carry the kernel of meaning. Ezra Pound went so far as identify himself as an "Imagist" and to edit a publication in 1914 called *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, including work by William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, H.D and James Joyce. Pound defined an image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" or an "interpretative metaphor" and defined his purpose to recover an "explicit rendering, be it of external nature or of emotion," that he found missing in earlier work and to do so with "fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it" (Pound Essays "A Retrospect" 11-12). The power of a single, universalizing image to connect with the reader and encapsulate an experience, without the need for an elaborate context, must have felt more relevant than ever in a world where the search for personal truth seemed to be taking place across a wider, bleaker plain and where the landmarks of religious certainty or accepted social structure had been destroyed by war, revolution and scientific discovery. T.S. Eliot describes the Twentieth Century poet as living in an age when

it is not merely the inability to believe in certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to *feel* towards God and man as they did... When religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless. [*On Poetry and Poets* 25]

It could be said that the exchange between Estragon and Vladimir at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot* answers the same question with an image:

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.

VLADIMIR: You should have been a poet.

ESTRAGON: I was. (*Gesture towards his rags.*) Isn't that obvious?
(*Godot* 21)

Leaving aside the joke about the financial status of any poet, this exchange takes a question about traditional religious dogma and answers it with a candid personal reality. There are no words wasted to explain how the edicts of the Bible might have influenced Estragon in his world view or the extent to which he might accept those principles, just an authentic recollection of the book itself and, by extension, to an idea of what it might mean to be happy. Although not a poem as such this moment in the play does seem to answer two of Pound's requirements for "a new fashion in poetry":

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation ("A Retrospective" *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 11).

Imagist work developed throughout the early part of the century, at a time when D.H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats still rooted their work a little more deeply in conventional form ("Piano", for example, or "When You Are Old," which still grow out of narrative settings), while Pound and his "School" made small, lapidary pieces out of a single, perfectly polished image. Examples such as "Fanpiece, For Her Imperial Lord" or "In a Station of the Metro" illustrate the movement perfectly. Yeats, while constructing work more often from a collage of images and symbols, never quite let go of a somewhat exterior, political reality – "The Second Coming" or "The Circus Animals' Desertion" being exemplary in their carefully woven fabric of images with an overlay of personal or political history. Clearly the description of a visual image in prose calls up a picture and enhances the reader's understanding, but the Modernists, to various degrees, ask more of their images. Dickens' mud accumulating "at compound interest" (*Bleak House* 49) certainly recalls autumn in the streets of London to those who have struggled through

them, even in later centuries, but the purpose does not seem to require any association with primordial mud or the clay from which Adam was formed: it is part of a very vivid picture, but doesn't need to be more than that. This may have to do with expectation in the reader: the beginning of a nine hundred page novel, even to a first time reader, promises story and diversion and, if you know anything about Dickens, astute observation and social comment. When a reader looks at three or four short lines in a book of poems, even in an anthology with no categorization, there is an implied suggestion of an intense expression made in very carefully selected and loaded words. Entering the theatre, particularly a small one with no neon signs outside, frames yet another expectation. In the case of Beckett's work, an atmosphere a little like the quiet contemplation of a minutely and perfectly crafted poem is created in the space whether that is expected or not.

Like some of the most successful Modernist pieces, Beckett's work explores a way of bringing an image to the centre of the communication of his idea and of allowing it to inform without being reduced in impact by explanation. Clearly, the idea of using a visual image to sum up a character was not invented by the Modernists: writers of all ages have used this technique. Miss Havisham or The Reverend Casaubon are given little inner narrative of their own but their association with dusty books or decaying catering defines them both for the reader and in relation to how the protagonists, whose feelings are explored more thoroughly, see them and relate to them. However the Modernist movement, especially in poetry, pulled the study of humanity away from exterior life and chose their images to encapsulate inner experience. Eliot's evocation of "rat's feet over broken glass/ In our dry cellar" ("The Hollow Men" Eliot 89), for example, brings the reader back, very directly, to the examination of their own nature. The

encounter is not anchored in what was done or said by any individual in life but rather gives expression to an intangible sensation of being alive, perhaps in a bewildering or frightening world. The image brings with it all the associations of rats (especially for those familiar with the war in the trenches) and glass and cellars but, together, an evocation of something greater and less specific than any of those things emerges in the mind of the reader.

When an image is transferred to the stage, it can stand alone, tangible and concrete in front of both actors and audience, just as it does in visual media such as painting or sculpture. At its simplest, the image can be an object; in the case of Beckett the tree in *Waiting for Godot* is the most obvious case. It is an image that Yeats had used in *Purgatory*, though in the play Yeats gave his character lines instructing the audience to “study that tree. It stands there like a purified soul” (*Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* 688); the tree is still beautiful in the only lit place on the dark stage but the words of explanation reduce the universality of the image. Just by standing on stage, and in the case of Beckett’s work standing there entirely alone like the few words of the Imagist poems, the tree brings with it all of the history of trees in legend, art and literature. From Genesis, through Dante, Jack in the Green or Minerva and all of the hangings and lynchings in history, the image of the tree reverberates with myriad associations. The two leaves in Act Two of the play can symbolize hope, underlining the “reasonable percentage” that the characters cling to as they wait for some uncertain salvation, or they might just suggest that it is a new day, or a new season: Beckett rarely explains or coaxes his audience. Those myriad associations aside, the tree is just a tree and offers an opportunity for hanging one’s self (though not a certainty of success).

With the tree established on stage, powerful in its solitary, largely de-foliated, presence, Beckett gives his characters a discussion that goes to the deepest human understanding of what it might mean to not be alive or to be alive but completely alone. The discussion that Beckett builds as Vladimir and Estragon consider the tree explores the most fundamental question of life: whether to go on living it or not. It is interesting, and moving, that what gives these characters “pause” is, ostensibly, rather the prospect of one of them living on alone than a fear of death. It is ultimately unendurable loneliness, too, that finishes the tormented existence of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s forerunner of the Modernist novel, and he too is denied the (reliable) physical ability to end his own life. The humor and pace of the language prevents the discussion from becoming too maudlin, but what is on stage in focus for the audience, a bare tree, is the only object left in the lives of two people that might offer an escape from the misery of living, at once offering hope and uncertainty.

The subject of suicide is a common one in twentieth Century writing. Having removed the element of “mortal sin” previously attached to the act of “self slaughter,” the discussion opens up. Albert Camus, writing in his 1942 essay “Absurdity and Suicide” maintains that

.. in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death. (Camus 13)

Beckett’s characters, it seems, have been placed just at the edge of this state, held into some kind of meaningful life by the remnants and reminders of a lost home (Winnie’s

cosmetics or Hamm's dog for example) and an almost irrational hope: "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes" (*Godot* 355). Camus writes, "Living is keeping the absurd alive" and states that "it is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself" (Camus 52-53). Beckett, perhaps addressing the same question, puts on stage two figures, one with his trousers around his ankles, testing, and breaking, the rope that might have allowed them to hang themselves. Beckett's figures decide to wait until tomorrow in case they might be saved.

The hope offered is not one of escape or avoiding the issue for the characters speaking: they are often captive in a physical or psychological stasis and that entrapment is expressed in an arrestingly stark image on stage. Beckett's plays are often described as bleak, even as among the bleakest, of the Twentieth Century's literary portrayals of existence, but rarely is there no hope at all. The audience members, too, are trapped, unless they are prepared to stagger out of the dark theatre. There is nothing much to separate them from the experience of those on stage so the journey to the edge of despair and to the edge of hope is shared. The suffering figures in the plays are made so separate from normal life by the surreal image of their physical circumstance but, conversely, made so accessible by their familiar, everyday language that they are given an essential humanity. They are reduced to a sort of symbolic status that can be rejected altogether as ridiculous or embraced without the reservation that they are "not like us." The audience cannot comfort themselves that Beckett's characters are of a different background, differently educated or employed than they themselves because the setting gives no clues about time or place or social status.

When the broken hearted Konstantin shoots himself at the end of Chekhov's *The Seagull* the watchers are shocked and leave the theatre saddened because they have come to know the young man and his unhappy life in moving, complex glimpses through the course of the play, but they can comfort themselves that they are, rarely at least, in a similar position to Konstantin. There is catharsis, just as there might be when Agamenon sacrifices his daughter or Othello kills his wife, but because Chekhov lays out the situation so specifically, the reaction is one of deep sadness, certainly, but not a questioning of the need to go on living. A single shot rings out poignantly on stage and the play is brought to a conclusion with a comment rooted in realistic practicality:

DORN: *[Puts his arm around Trigorin's waist and leads him to the footlights.]*

Take Irena Nikolayevna away from here somehow. The fact is, Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself. ...

CURTAIN. (Chekhov, 183)

Seeing Estragon with his trousers around his ankles because he had offered his belt as a potential, though unsuccessful, noose is an image of simultaneous comedy and deep tragedy that contains no resolution: "they do not move." (Godot 357) Fixed in a theatre seat the audience can, perhaps, see a reflection of their own capacity to make just such an attempt.

Throughout Beckett's work there is no attempt to portray things as realistic: the images of Lucky with his self-imposed burdens and his staggering, later sightless, tormentor or of Nagg and Nell in their bins are clearly not part of a naturalistic, daily reality. However, the tenacity demonstrated by their continuing to live, if only by crying or carrying is figuratively, but still heartbreakingly, familiar. Their tragedy is emphasized by their supporting role; they suffer but the life of the piece goes, reluctantly, on. In *Happy*

Days the absurd image of imprisonment presented on stage becomes even more pivotal. Winnie is absolutely, and physically, at the centre of the stage. Her physical confinement in the landscape, under the “blazing” light and against the “pompiers tromp-l’oeil backcloth” contextualizes everything that she says. Winnie makes very little direct reference to her situation and when she does it is by an implied contrast to “the old way.” In *Happy Days* the impossibility of leaving is manifest in a surreal, physical image. Didi and Gogo “do not move” but Winnie cannot move. Her entrapment is finally, tragically underlined by Willie’s crawl, on all fours and in morning dress, to greet her in a monosyllable and, finally, engage her gaze in the closing tableau of the piece. For most of the play she has struggled on alone, in the second act without any response from another being, and is incapable of moving more than her eyes and mouth. As an image of human loneliness, unable even to escape into sleep, there is little as bleak in the theatre. The image on the over-lit stage is redolent of the tortures perpetrated in Revenge tragedies (Lucius sentence on Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is to be buried up to his neck); it is a picture that must etch itself on the retina of the viewer. However, in this horror Winnie talks about “The pink fizz.. the flute glasses” (Beckett 166) as she recalls a sliver of romance from the past. This disjoint is as shocking and every bit as heroic as the howls of Electra or the frozen virtue of Hermione.

The examination of torture and endurance in *Happy Days* is minutely described: even Winnie’s facial expressions seem to be part of her confinement. The battle to maintain her outward appearance in this impossible situation as her props and tools – hairbrush, toothbrush, lipstick – disintegrate are used up or put beyond use by her further burial emphasizes the gap between the outer woman described in detail in the

stage directions, and the inner reality of Winnie and her battle to get through “Another heavenly day.” At the top of Act II she underlines the dilemma:

I used to pray. [Pause.] Yes I must confess I did. [Smile] Not now. [Smile broader.] No no. [Smile off. Pause.] Then ... now ... what difficulties here, for the mind. [Pause.] To have been always what I am – and so changed from what I was. [Pause.] I am the one, I say the one, then the other. [Pause.] There is so little one can say, one says it all. [Pause.] All one can. [Pause.] And no truth in it anywhere. [Pause.] My arms. [Pause.] My breasts. [Pause.] What arms? [Pause.] What breasts? (Beckett 161)

Clearly, as we are transfixed by the head “*which she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise*” and the “*movements of eyes as indicated*” (Beckett 160) pinioned like the head of a traitor on a city wall under the blazing light, it is not an experience any one of us could claim to have lived through. Nevertheless, facing the incomprehensible decay of one’s physical body as old age creeps on is something that everyone over fifty, especially perhaps the women, can relate to at a very visceral level.

It is interesting to compare Winnie’s courage in face of the desiccating sun with the moment in Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* when the paper shade Blanche has put up to hide her aging face from the harsh, revealing light of the naked bulb is torn away: the moment in Williams’ play is highly dramatic, but Williams’ character is allowed back into her old self-image, however damaged. Blanche’s reality is present in the performance she keeps up as, violated and distrusted, she faces incarceration, but also in the simultaneous guilty pity and rejection offered by the other characters; Beckett forces his audience to face the full horror of Winnie’s decline without intermediaries. Blanche can’t be allowed to exist in the world of Stella and Stanley not only because of what she reveals about Stanley, but also because of what her decline promises for Stella. Winnie spends much of her time on stage desperately clinging to the idea that

she is not alone, that her relationship with Willie, reduced as it to a mostly one-sided conversation and the impossibility of physical contact, still exists. However, what is seen is mostly her isolated figure, and we are shocked when, at the end of the play, Willie crawls out to face her. There is a kind of universality in Winnie's surreal circumstance, which is somewhat hidden or mitigated in the social realism and specifics of the plot that surround Blanche. Both figures elicit our pity but, even as a woman facing late middle age, one has the chance to leave the theatre feeling less empathy with Blanche perhaps because her circumstances, however harsh and damaging, have a real world setting that is plausibly different to our own. The absurdity of Winnie's circumstance can create an emotional distance that audiences might find impossible to cross, just silly or arty, but the potent image of the buried woman on stage juxtaposed with the simplicity, even banality, of her language and the tenacity of her spirit do offer a bridge to an essential portrait of the encroachment of age and decrepitude.

The figure of the aging woman is a familiar one in Modernist poetry too: Lil who "ought to be ashamed .. to look so antique. (And her only thirty-one)" (Eliot 68) in *The Waste Land*, or the image of the "ancient women/gathering fuel in vacant lots" which Eliot uses at the end of "Preludes" (Eliot 25), or Pound's woman "dying piece-meal /of a sort of emotional anæmia" in "The Garden" (Pound 85). Even Clarissa Dalloway as, juxtaposed with her daughter, she recalls her girlhood, rehearses the theme. Nowhere, however, is the image as brutal as it is in *Happy Days*. In centering his exploration of the human condition around a single image and using that to look at a question as profound as suicide, or aging or loneliness, Beckett uses the techniques and continues the tradition of the Modernists. By then allowing his characters, whose humanity is so touching, to debate or illustrate these issues, Beckett drags the focus of the work

towards terrifying and yet fundamental subjects. There is little story to ease one along or to sneak these troubling ideas past one's guard, but in the stark images on stage there is still humanity and even humor to attest to a life force, and to offer hope.

Layers and Fragments

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (Eliot 79)

The telling images of Beckett’s work, and those of the Modernists, are often presented as though shattered and then reassembled to create single, challenging pieces of art that express an inner truth in a newly disjointed world. The disjoint grew out of the atrocities of war and the social upheaval of industrialization and revolution. The new forms of literature grew out of a need to express what it was like to exist in the resulting chaos. By refusing to tell a story from the beginning to the end in order and, instead, relying on snatches or detailed, but isolated, scenes from a life or society, Modernist writers broke down the traditional expectations of readers to create a new way of looking at experience. In addition to rejecting linear sequences of events as the basis of their literary structures, Modernist poets, in particular T.S. Eliot, experimented with repetition, moving beyond the traditional “refrain” and abstracting the words from any logical context until they drill into the consciousness of the reader, rather like a beating drum or religious chant. I think it is important to look at patterns of repeated words used both by Beckett and Eliot and the way in which those repetitions alter our understanding of the language itself. Finally, in this section, I will explore the affect achieved when fragments of ideas, images and language itself are placed on stage and contextualized by action.

Martin Esslin described the work of Beckett in the context of his concept of a Theatre of the Absurd:

Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author's intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction. (Esslin 45)

Esslin recognized a characteristic of Beckett's work that can also be found throughout the work of the early Modernists: a kind of fragmentation that heaps images together to create a whole work. As much could be said of the soliloquies in Shakespeare or the Metaphysical poems of Donne, but what is new in the twentieth century is that the picture which emerges is not a representational one, as you might find on completing a jigsaw puzzle, but rather a jagged, tantalizing refraction of images as from the pieces of a broken mirror. The Jacobean world was riven with new ideas and discoveries, but it had a core of religious and social certainty (though one marred by doctrinal difference and Humanist questioning); the world that faced writers in the aftermath of the two major wars of the twentieth century was also alluringly and terrifyingly new, but the framework of church and state was in ruins along with everything else. Modernist poets, but also Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in more expansive forms, pulled together vivid images to create a collage of sensation in the mind of the reader in order to express their experience of living in that world. Shards of sensation or image reflect a state of mind in tiny moments while the whole piece reveals unsettled figures standing in a contemporary landscape. The fragmented language of thought, which characterizes these works, ensures that the reader is led to examine the outside, modern world through an interior, overtly subjective lens.

The tiles of any written mosaic are words, often very simple but repeated over and over in patterns that deny the listener the chance to “skip forward,” assuming an understanding of what is said rather than allowing the connotations of the words to be properly absorbed. “Ash Wednesday” is a beautiful example of the entrancing result. The repetitions punctuate and propel the whole piece but these few lines illustrate the pattern:

Although I do not hope to turn again

Although I do not hope

Although I do not hope to turn (Eliot 104)

Especially when read aloud, this sort of cascade of words, which occurs throughout many of Eliot’s poems, recalls the King James Bible (for English readers), church liturgy or Eastern chant, and these associations inform the poems. There are also echoes of the familiar form of folk ballads or children’s rhymes (also used by Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*). Significantly, in this context the story-telling element is missing so that the words themselves become the point of focus. In *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot uses the disjointed repetition and twisting of phrases to characterize the Tempter, and here the religious context and liturgical rhythm add to the affect:

 Tempter: You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
 You know and do not know, the action is suffering,
 And suffering action neither does the agent suffer
 Nor the patient act. (*Murder in the Cathedral* 49)

Spoken on stage the repetition of this language can become mesmerizing, and this effect is key to several of Beckett’s later plays. In *Rockabye*, for example, the recorded voice repeats her fragmented story while the figure rocks alone on stage. There is a story being told but it is fractured and the sense of a whole life being passed in a

confined, lonely way, reduced here to a compulsive rocking motion, becomes stronger and more pitiable with each demanded, shifting reiteration:

W: More

[Pause. Rock and voice together.]

V: till in the end
the day came
in the end came
close of a long day
when she said
to herself
whom else
time she stopped
time she stopped
all eyes
all sides
high and low
for another
another like herself
another creature like herself
a little like
going to and fro
all eyes (Beckett 435)

In moments of confusion and distress people are often observed to repeat phrases or actions, not necessarily directly connected to their immediate situation. Beckett puts on stage figures who seem to be living entirely in a state of distress, and who frequently are withdrawn from the social world. Several key Modernists works charted a similar withdrawal into confusion and isolation, though often in a wider context. For Virginia Woolf this was a personal trajectory in and out of mental illness and for Eliot, perhaps, the result of carefully watching his wife deal with her instability.

The sense of being without certainties, either personal or religious, and of a social order being chipped or gouged away is one of the most familiar themes in the twentieth century. The extraordinary increase in pace and distraction that characterized urban life was, perhaps, pivotal in the recognition that established literary forms were no

longer adequate to express modern experience. Along with the destruction of innocence in the First World War, later remarked on by Larkin, and the physical devastation and death suffered by so many participants, the war also dealt a final blow to many assumptions of social order across Europe. In London the typist with her drying underwear in Eliot's vision of the city had something of the same independence as the privileged and protected Elizabeth Dalloway on adventure across the same city on the top of a bus. Social order, most especially in Britain, had always been a house of cards that had remained standing because no one dared breathe a word against it. The angry shouts of those returning from the war and the bereaved who had waited in vain brought at least the outermost cards tumbling down; the world described in much Modernist work is that of the fallen cards scattered across the floor.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot created a vision of contemporary life in which fragments from the mundane to mantra's of major philosophies are filleted together; time and place are chopped up and snatches of conversations, in the voices of various barely identified characters, enact fragmented stories. The work as a whole creates a rather terrifying impression of post-war London but, perhaps more importantly, seems to express the mental maelstrom of a sensitive person trying to live within it. After the second pan-European conflict, writers were faced with more devastation to make sense of. Images of the churned up landscape of rural France and Belgium covered in trenches, mud and barbed wire were seared onto the western consciousness by the end of the First World War by the newsreels and the paintings of artists like Paul Nash. After the 1939-45 war, pictures of the rubble of so many bombed out cities, along with those of millions of displaced survivors would have burned still further into the contemporary consciousness, were they not eclipsed by the footage of the cadaverous victims and mass graves of the

holocaust and finally the almost clinical horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Against this background the response of literature seemed frozen, perhaps even irrelevant. In the aftermath of the First World War there was a more cohesive sense of grievance: “if any question why we died, tell them it was because our fathers lied.” (Kipling 136). After the second the examination often dealt with a greater sense of personal responsibility. The response of many writers, Beckett, Gunther Grass and Albert Camus among others, turned inward to examine an individual’s sense of place and isolation in this new world where the boundaries of what was possible – both in positive innovation, but more tellingly, in barbarity and complicity – had been rubbed out. If nothing else the huge numbers of lives cut short in both wars must have called into question a literature based on the timeline of personal aging or the incremental progress of an established society. The shards of time chosen for much modernist writing, the single day of *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway* for example, fit with a new way of seeing a human life. The repeated activity of the, possibly contiguous, days in *Waiting for Godot* seem to question even that certainty about how human lives are measured.

Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Beckett share a separation from the mainstream response to the war in that they were all foreigners. Irish or American, they were not required to fight (at least initially in the case of the Americans) and so had a somewhat different relationship to the patriotic element in either war. Beckett did, however, choose to play a part in the French Resistance, exposing him to the corrosive sense of danger and vulnerability as well as the overriding duty and comradeship that form a part of war for combatants. This being said, he never wrote directly about soldiers, but rather shared with T.S. Eliot the careful study of those who live in the jumbled aftermath of war. Oddly, some of the most direct engagement with military experience in the Modernist tradition

comes from Virginia Woolf who saw in the devastated psyches of survivors with “shell shock” a parallel to her own periods of mental illness. The glimpses of Septimus Smith’s thoughts in *Mrs. Dalloway* capture the terrifying mental agony of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and his death, juxtaposed with the concerns of Clarissa Dalloway or those attending her party, jars the reader and comments on the incongruity of what had been experienced in the war with the realities of “normal” life.

In *Jacob’s Room* Virginia Woolf reflects, in the fragmented conversations and interspersed observations, the sense of absence that characterized society at the end of the fighting. The invasive thoughts of the horror of war, which must have mixed with every unguarded moment for those left behind, are present in the fractured logic of Betty Flanders listening to the

dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets. There was Morty lost, and Seabrook dead; her sons fighting for their country. But were the chickens safe? Was that some one moving downstairs? Rebecca with the toothache? (*Jacob’s Room* 246)

Betty’s tormented and yet mundane thoughts, at a distance from the fighting, make the snatched image of her holding Jacob’s shoes in the, ironically well-described and solid architecture of his room all the more poignant as a summary of the “silent boy” because he, Jacob, does not have a developed voice in the novel that is centered on his short life. Woolf doesn’t frame the snatches of conversations in a fully explained story. She allows the various encounters in the book to frame an image of Jacob from the, sometimes rather minor, impacts he has on those who knew him. The accumulation of these snatches of memory into a sketch of the character named in the title encapsulates a way of looking at the world in terms of interior experience rather than external narrative. It is a reaction to the horror and upheaval of war that Woolf explores in other

work and one she shares with Eliot. This same angle of focus can be seen in *Endgame* where the post-apocalyptic, outside world can only be imagined through Clov's descriptions, while the intimate destruction of the group, Hamm, his parents and Clov, is played out on stage both visually and in the caged violence of Beckett's language.

The dichotomy of mundane thoughts and tragic circumstances in *Jacob's Room* or *Mrs Dalloway* has clear parallels in the work of Beckett— notably, in Winnie singing her song and reciting her mantra of “another heavenly day” (Beckett 138) while she is stifled in encasing earth, and in the repeated fragments of Krapp's tape recording almost, but not quite, telling the story of a day long in the past. However, the juxtaposition of those slivers of memory with what is actually happening, in the case of the end of *Jacob's Room* with the finding of shoes, movingly points up the gulf between the ostensibly complete surface reality and a personal interiority fractured by loss. The same technique of juxtaposition is crucial to much of Beckett's work. The action is stripped back, in his later work to almost nothing, but what the actors physically do, or cannot do, on stage is a counterpoint to what they are saying, or what is being said about them. Somewhere in the gap between the two, Beckett seems to suggest, is the human condition.

The condition is underlined in *Footfalls* where the half told story of May pacing through her nine step routine audibly reassures her of her own existence, in counterpoint to the repeated question:

Will you never have done? [Pause.] Will you never have done ...
revolving it all? [Pause.] It? [Pause.] It all. [Pause.] in your poor mind.
[Pause.] It all. [Pause.] it all. (Beckett 403)

Similarly, the bullying of the physically incapable Hamm with his claims of lofty misery or the two companions, Vladimir and Estragon, in their uncompleted determination break the unity between words and action, refracting, the meaning of both:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go

Estragon: Yes, let's go

They do not move. (Godot 357)

In poetry, this kind of disjoint can be created with the misalliance of rhythm and tone, in novels with interior monologue and description of actual situations or events, but there is something so direct in putting the different stimuli together in a staged moment – the determination of the words and the image of the impossibility of the appropriate action – that can give the tension of an over tightened violin string. The end of the life seen on stage in *Rockabye* is one of diminution, winding down into defeat and isolation. It is possible to see in this individual ending something of the end Eliot ascribed to the whole world in “The Hollow Men”, and much of his choice of form in representing it:

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper (Eliot 92)

Frameworks of memories

*Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountains hare has lain.
("Memory" Yeats 125)*

In life, memory is rarely a smooth recollection of actions and thoughts that come to us in chronological order. However, it is from memory that we construct our self-image and so that interior self, if examined closely, never feels quite complete. The tension inherent in this schism is particularly troubling to those living in a society without the comforting structure of "God's plan," whether framed by reward and punishment or a controlling destiny, and so is a tension central to human experience in the modern world. For readers at the beginning of the modern era, coming to terms with this tension was not well served by a literature that presents life, and memory, as a rational, consecutive and complete narrative. In this section I will look at the way that memory is treated in Beckett's plays and by the Modernists, especially the ways in which the structures of the works question the validity of what is remembered. I hope to show these writers not as replaying histories strung together by a rationalizing logic out of snapshots of remembered incidents and emotions, but rather as exploring what is revealed when that narrative logic is undermined by circumstance.

Neuroscience believes that we actually remember most of what we experience but only have access to snippets. If the scientists are correct, then they have discovered what the Modernists seemed to be addressing in their writing: memories are subjective glimpses of our lives and need to be represented in a way that reflects both their

subjectivity and their lack of discernable structure. More importantly, for literature at least, these fragments are the building blocks from which human beings construct their internal idea of themselves so they are key to any depiction of interiority. Like trying to build something that stands up when half of the Lego bricks are missing, the process is frustrating and the results can be unstable.

The twentieth century also questioned ideas of time: scientifically with the quantum physicists, especially Einstein and Heisenberg, and sociologically as an increasingly urban population lived lives unconnected to a natural clock. Our self-image adjusts as we move through life but nearly always in retrospect through memory, so the approach taken to representing this development is an important part of serious literature. In this period the value of looking at that process in a purely linear way needed to be questioned both in terms of timeframe and of the fragmentation of memory.

In the Freudian view of the human psyche the importance of recognizable and suppressed memories is key to the understanding of any individual. Modernist writers, especially Eliot and Woolf who had different but traumatic dealings with mental illness, portrayed the way in which slivers of memory jumble and mutate in a mind struggling for a peaceful sense of self. Beckett uses the repetition and fragmentation of ideas and events in his dramas in the way that a number of characters, especially those in distress, interact with their memories. In some cases the process of remembering is abstracted by separating the voice that retells the stories from the figure remembering them. The clearest and most concrete example of this is *Krapp's Last Tape* where Krapp, the only person on stage, interacts with a tangible record of his feelings in the past. This representation of memory replaces the "old things" (Beckett 140) that serve to trigger the memories that help Winnie survive her days, or the vague recollection of a lost

respectability that haunts Vladimir and Estragon. The recordings, which both the character and the audience listen to, are ostensibly a record of life as Krapp understood it at the time. This is the unedited record of what the character felt was important when the spools were recorded, what had mattered at the end of the particular period of his life, when he was thirty nine for example and at the "... crest of the wave – or thereabouts" (Beckett 216). However, even the recordings describe only a few fragments of experience and the playing and stopping of the tape fractures their narrative, and the timeframe, even further.

The play is set, the stage directions say, in the future, and Krapp engages with "the stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago." The audience is hearing both voices, the younger Krapp and the future, older Krapp reminiscing. The disconnected state of the voice on the tape recording, mechanically transmitted, and the man on stage listening and commenting, but nevertheless acting, are separated from the audience both by the proscenium and the contrast of his specifically lit, lonely world and the dark, shared place from which they watch. This separation prevents the piece from just being the story told by the younger Krapp or by the one eating bananas in front of them: it combines those narratives to make a more complete picture of the man as he sees himself. The breaking down of the medium, and the separation of reflections, like a fairground hall of mirrors, allows the audience to confront questions about what is true in the story of a life and what is the lens of the moment. No answer is provided; instead the voice on the tape suggests that even by box three spool five, "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now." And Krapp is sitting on stage, in the present of the audience and

the theatrical future “*motionless staring before him*”) as (“*The tapes runs on in silence*”)(Beckett 223).

Here Beckett places a piece of stagecraft, the tape recorder, at the centre of an important idea: the distance between time, rolling on at a uninterrupted pace, and the human experience of time, especially in the remembered past. The juxtaposition of memory with images of the immutable passage of time is familiar in the works of the Modernists too: the “Sweet Thames” that will “run softly” (Eliot 70) while Eliot creates his multilayered portrait of post war London or the endless “Messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore” in *To the Lighthouse* (193). The same sea starts and ends *The Waves* “with thick stokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other perpetually (*The Waves* 5)” until they “broke on the shore” (*The Waves* 200). In Virginia Woolf’s novels these images place the protagonists, who have communicated so much of their internal reality directly to the reader, firmly in the context of a disinterested and unhalting world. Eliot’s rivers, including the “strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable” of “The Dry Salvages” (Eliot 205) speak to a similar view of a human being in a world which carries on with or without them – whether that understanding of what it is like to be living as part of this continuum is the recognition of being inconsequential, caught in the light that “gleams an instant” (*Godot* 333), or of being part of a longer story.

The contextualizing of Beckett’s on-stage figures in situations of diminishing resources (carrots, lipstick or painkillers) or rocking slowly to a standstill forces them to revisit the events of their lives, but they do not do so in neat, historically consecutive stories. These characters snatch details from their memories to shore up an idea of themselves as their reality crumbles around them. Winnie refuses to let go of her

cheerful self-image as she “used to say, Winnie, you are changeless,” (Beckett 165) or remembers “That day. [Pause.] The pink fizz. [Pause.] The flute glasses” (Beckett 166). She then verbalizes the question, which is being asked by the stage picture as a whole: “why bring that up again? [Pause.] There is so little one can bring up, one brings up all. [Pause.] All one can.” (Beckett 165) Even though the audience can see only her sun-savaged head, the memories that Winnie can “bring up” confirm her existence as a human being. The Memories of Vladimir and Estragon and of Hamm and Clov are questioned in the dialogue though it is not established which version is true. Indeed in *Waiting For Godot* everything about the timeframe shifts, including the understanding of what happened “yesterday.” In *Krapp’s Last Tape* the events that make up a recent memory for the recorded voice and the distant one of the figure on stage differ, and the discord between them, as one interrupts the other, questions the external reality of all memories, but also the validity of the personal identities constructed from them.

The idea of an individual as an unreliable witness in their own story is an established one in literature. David Copperfield, Richard II, Timon of Athens among many, many others are presented by their authors as engaging with their own imperfections through the lens of altering experiences. The Modernists, particularly Yeats, Eliot and Virginia Woolf, did, however, move the representation of how humans view themselves forward by finding new ways of representing the way those self-defining images present themselves to us. *The Waves* is a delicately interlaced picture of how remembered events and interactions form and affect their participants. Each voice gives a different view of the moments these characters have shared and of the way in which the speaker has been shaped by those experiences. Virginia Woolf has Mrs. Dalloway and the people she encounters during the day of her party look back separately at

pivotal events in their lives, and the ways that these different versions do and do not coincide shape the picture that is created of each character. She allows these stories to slide over each other, never quite lining up, but does not suggest that there is ultimately a true version against which they can be judged: the reality only exists as it is in the recall of each character.

Yeats, at the end of his life, wrote a good deal that questioned the obsessions and the beliefs of his youth. In these late poems he is both searching and objective in his appraisal of his actions:

Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
That broad noon has never lit,
And shout a secret to the stone.
All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right. ("Man and the Echo" Yeats 298)

There are many poets, and politicians, who have expressed their regrets in old age, but significant here is the image Yeats chooses: that of the "pit" that his memories have led him to. There is a rather candid recognition about what we generally allow ourselves to acknowledge about our lives in retrospect. Critics, and ordinary readers, have found Modernists, and Samuel Beckett, to be too wrapped up in their own metaphors and literary experiments, but in the best of the work the reader, or audience, is drawn back to the emotion that those devices were chosen to express. The rather squalid image Yeats

uses to ends his poem “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” evokes the misery of facing one’s memories and the self-image they comprise:

Now that my ladder’s gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. (Yeats 297)

Sitting in his miserable, dark room facing the immutable evidence of how life once appeared, Krapp could be seen as a figure embodying the same experience of self-examination.

Disembodied voices summarizing a life appear again later in Beckett’s work, notably in *Rockabye*, where he also examines the end of a life, this time from the perspective of being closer to the end of his own. Each time, the disconnect between the present voice, or figure, and the past one distorts the relationship of the character to the glimpsed fragment of the story being told. The figure rocking is separated from the voice describing, in a slowly accumulated repetition, the life that has brought her to the chair. Winnie arranging her hat as if to go out is at odds with the figure immobilized on stage. The space that is represented on stage in these pieces embodies the idea expressed by T. S. Eliot in “The Hollow Men”

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
....

Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow (Eliot 92)

In Eliot's poem the dichotomy of the interior experience and the externally discernable reality is represented by a shadow, but not one that vaguely obscures parts of the picture if looked at from the wrong angle. Here is a Shadow with a capital letter. This is a physical presence that can't be dodged around by moving your head or shifting the reading light, but is rather a genuine void between interior and exterior worlds. On stage Beckett's characters generally speak in broken, though rather colloquial ways about their expectations or aspirations while real physical confinements in heaps of earth or urns, physical disabilities or psychological stasis prevents any ordinary, external, "real life" realization.

By shifting the perspectives from which his characters are looking at their own stories Beckett unseats the comfortable, linear relationship of the narrative being presented for the teller, the other characters on stage, and the reader or audience. The presentation of many perspectives at once was already familiar in the visual art of the Cubists and here the familiar, uni-dimensional self-image is broken up because the memories on which it is based are inconsistent as well as fragmentary. In literature the same multifaceted view had been achieved by characters being described as they are seen by a number of others within the story as well as in their own interior monologue. With the beginnings of literary Modernism these perspectives were heightened and provided more than a well-balanced view of a character, tipping over into contradictions that underlined the schism the writer saw between an interior self-image and the assumptions of the world at large. The discords are often made in terms of time, events

that don't follow sequentially or that contradict what has been said before. This is especially true in Eliot's work and he describes the relationship of time to human experience in words that could easily be applied to the lives of May, pacing her round, or Vladimir and Estragon, waiting indefinitely by their tree:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation. ("Burnt Norton" Eliot 189)

In his dramas Beckett gave the fault line between interior and external realities a simple, physical manifestation that denies the audience the opportunity to slide along with "outside world" assumptions about the lives of those on stage. It is difficult to make quick assumptions about the nature of a bullying master and abused slave when one is blind and the other mute and both are decrepit, but each is still acting out his part. It is impossible to assume the social conditions of a woman, speaking for the first time, in late life, about her miserable and traumatic experience of living alone and mute when you can only see her mouth moving in a dark void. However, that stage image is mesmerizing and somehow transfers her fractured recollections directly into the consciousness of the watcher. No allowance needs to be made here for the views of the writer reporting the story because a stream of words, in which the speaker denies her

own right to tell her own story, hits the audience with the physicality of a train passing very fast and too closely in front of them.

The direct prose and poetry of Modernist writers seems to work towards a similarly immediate connection. Particularly in Woolf's *The Waves* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, the points of view that build up our portraits of the protagonists are not immediately pointed up by an authorial voice, but by the words and actions of the characters. As a result, the thoughts of others about each character slide, with less ostensible prejudice, into the reader's understanding of that individual. The tone and language of the observations holds the clues: the careful choice of lexicon or phrase given to each character reveals both their own personality and that of the watched. There are no convenient signposts from an authorial comment to direct the subtlety of the portrait: the reader is drawn more deeply into the piece by the process of constructing the characters for themselves. As the scenes of childhood are described at the beginning of *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf presents direct speech, very plainly identified – nearly always using “said” and then the character's first name – just as children report speech in the stories they write. There are no clearly delineated or directly identified “thoughts”; rather what is said drifts away from what a child might actually say out loud into an internal perspective. Louis describes Rhoda, for example:

“There Rhoda sits staring at the blackboard,” said Louis, “in the schoolroom, while we ramble off, picking here a bit of thyme, inching here a leaf of southernwood while Bernard tells a story. Her shoulder-blades meet across her back like the wings of a small butterfly. And as she stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles, it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone...” (*The Waves* 15)

The time and place of Louis's initial observation, Rhoda in the schoolroom, is ostensibly fixed and real. The walk the others take has a real time framework, measured at least by

the story Bernard tells. But his exploration of her thoughts, and his relation to her – “I, who speak with an Australian accent, whose father is a banker in Brisbane, do not fear her as I fear the others” (*The Waves* 15)– inhabits a much wider, non-specific time.

The subjectivity of memory is not an exclusively Modernist subject, but there is a perceptible shift from the recognition that a person is shaped and formed by their experiences, even their folly, like Dorothea Brooke or David Copperfield, to an examination of how the brain might experience the process of that shaping. The way in which Clarissa Dalloway or Bernard, Stephen Daldus or the nebulous Hollow Men share the process of assessing their experience in their fragmented, illogical, subjectively-skewed thoughts points to a new concern with the mutability of the mind. These portraits have the candor, and subjectivity, of a Shakespearean soliloquy. As Winnie tries to hang on to her belief in herself in the torment of her physical situation or the speaker behind *Mouth* both collects and denies its identity from the half-arranged fragments of an incomplete life, the audience witnesses, perhaps more savagely than in any previous literary representation, that process of continual self-construction at work.

Representing Present Reality

*“Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter”
 (“East Coker” Eliot 203).*

In the most prosaic terms one’s reality could be seen as the “here and now.” This is a world-view, freed from inherited values and also from the promise of divine reward or retribution, that is associated with the twentieth century. After each of the pan-European wars, social change was rapid, or at least focused, and ideas of an inherited place in the world were inevitably shaken for many. In this context the Modernists, for the most part, sought to look for a new, or at least a deeper, identity in terms of inner experience. They used their new and confusing social environment to inform their portraits of interiority, rather than extrapolating the significance of emotions from the course of events. I have looked a little at how those internal experiences called for, and were offered, new forms of expression by the Modernists. These forms were later taken to a more extreme incarnation in the works of Samuel Beckett. The “quarrel with mimesis” which Peter Nicholls states “is often taken to define a pivotal moment of modernism’s inception” created a way of working in literature that rejected the “fondness for representational art” and “dependence on ‘tradition’” evident in “bourgeois modernity” (Nicholls 13). The resulting non-traditional poetic forms and the novels that redefined the role of narrative placed the reader outside perceived social reality. In many cases, though, it seems that the focus of the work is not to question the society as much as it is to examine how it impinges on the personal reality of individuals. By isolating characters

from a recognizable social context Beckett pulls even closer. It is not that his figures are unshaped by the external lives they have led but that the focus of the audience is on the human shape which has emerged.

Even Modernist writers did not work in isolation and conventional narrative continued to drive much of literature during that turbulent period. Just as D.H. Lawrence had demanded a place for the working class in the English literary world of his day, and Zola and Flaubert had championed broader subjects in French work somewhat earlier, a pressure for greater social realism and a more direct engagement with lives lived outside the middleclass, rattled through English, and Irish, drama after the wars. Nevertheless, the literary exploration of social identity, while important in any self-image, requires some engagement with the sociological conditions, and the readers who identify directly with those conditions are always going to be a small group among the whole. When a piece of literature abstracts the conditions away from any particular “reality,” everyone is equally alienated and, potentially, equally drawn out of their own enclave to engage with the work on a truly human level. This is not to say that socially critical work doesn’t have an important role or that that role needs a medium other than a linear narrative to make its point. However, there are other possibilities in examining human experience and, I would suggest, some such are offered by much Modernist work and in many of the plays of Samuel Beckett.

The earlier prose work of Samuel Beckett, while not conventional, is apparently sequential and often following a journey (there is even a timetable for the perambulations in *Mercier et Camier*), but each piece contains increasingly less of a “story” than the last. What is described, at length and often very movingly, is the physical detail surrounding the main characters – Murphy’s suit or Malone’s bedroom –

but they do less and less in the outside, social world. Beckett's characters are portrayed in activities of spellbinding mundanity – the rotation of a small group of smooth pebbles from one pocket to another after each had been sucked for a time. The image of a desperate effort to be in control of one's life and physical wants is moving in its simplicity. However, in prose the significance of the process is dependent of the language of the description. The process Malloy devises takes many paragraphs to layout and, in doing so, Beckett inhabits the man's concentrated mental journey. It is agonizing and fascinating to share the experience codified in the detail of the writing and the idiom of the character's voice:

I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally between my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it But this was only a makeshift that could not long content a man like me. So I began to look for something else ... (Three Novels 63)

Personal rituals mark out the parameters of the characters' lives in Beckett's drama too. The pacing, rocking, counting, boot changing routines are a clock that defies the clock of any exterior reality. They construct, instead, enough of an internal framework for life to continue however terrifyingly until some stimulus, even a final decision like that of the woman in her rocking chair, brings it all to a merciful end.

While Beckett took the Modernist challenge of portraying an inner reality from his late prose into his plays, there were plenty of writers who chose social realism as a way of representing the post war world as they saw it. Playwrights such as Emlyn Williams and John Osborne endeavored to put on stage a vision of the crumbling social order and the possibilities for a new world championed by the young and, often, underprivileged. *Look Back in Anger* was seen, when first produced at The Royal Court in 1956, as every bit as controversial as the works by Beckett, Sartre and Ionesco that followed the next year. With hindsight, the language of Jimmy Porter seems dated and his anger self-serving and misogynist. The run-down bedsit where he shouts at his long suffering wife was an unfamiliar one for most traditional theatre-goers to find on stage, but it was probably just like home for many of the younger, newly enfranchised members of that audience. The attempt to make theatre more “real” may have been less than wholly successful precisely because the theatre, indeed any art form, isn’t “real.” Also, “real” conversations don’t flow with well formed sentences and well argued opinion; they falter and get lost and double back and avoid addressing what is most difficult in a genuinely honest way. Also, listeners edit what they hear. In the time the brain spends dealing with one idea the faltering transition to the next has past. As the essayist Clive James, who worked in television for many years, wrote in the postscript to his essay *Saying Famous Things*,

Most conversation is babble. A tape-recording of all the conversations at a book launch, with all the cleverest authors in town duly present and striving to impress, would sound not much better than Christmas Eve in a mental hospital. Every year, some aspiring young television producer gets the idea of shooting a dinner party. It never works, not because the dinner party in a studio doesn’t sound like a real dinner party, but because it does. [James 104]

The social realists changed the location of the family arguments and domestic debates they portrayed from dinner parties and drawing rooms to slums and bedsits, but they kept the drama firmly within a familiar, linear, narrative framework. The resulting representation of social conditions was empowering for those who saw a familiar picture and, perhaps, allowed a slight trill of self-righteous disgust among the better healed in the audience. However, neither group connected very much more deeply with the human condition. Arguably they were never intended to do so; but audiences attending Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* and Beckett's *Endgame* in the same season in 1958 must have had dramatically different, though equally innovative, experiences in the theatre.

The gap between the kind of realism of the "kitchen sink" school and the absurd, deliberately unreal pieces of Beckett and the other Absurdists was soon to be bridged by Harold Pinter, who admired Beckett enormously, and who managed to combine the quasi-naturalistic settings of his own work with an almost poetic, rhythmical use of dialogue. Pinter adds the sort of rhythm and imagery that make Beckett's plays so human to often sordid or tense naturalistic circumstances to create a sense of underlying threat and uncertainty that says much about the, often misremembered, social freedoms of that era.

In his work Beckett maintains an even closer sense of poetry, the words are fewer, the speakers further from any recognizable reality, but in the fragmented speech there is a craving for a sense of place, or security or comfort that is universal. Beckett, like T.S. Eliot, Joyce and, a little later, Sean O'Casey, recognized and embraced the way in which real speech is halting and repetitive and marked by idiomatic phrases and grammatical inconsistencies. He emphasized and explored that demonstrable quality of

real speech not only to reproduce a kind of real life in his dialogue, but to underline how uncertain and lacking in sure foundation and conviction that life can be.

Like other Modernists Beckett, (writing in French and later in English) used a conversational style to break down the barrier between the consciousness of the audience and the loneliness and confusion, even terror, that his characters are experiencing. Vladimir sums up their risks when encountering Pozzo and his man for the second time: “That Lucky might get going all of a sudden. Then we’d be ballocksed” (*Godot* 285). The expletive is particularly Irish here, but its colloquial register makes Vladimir’s earlier, expansively formal question that “we should subordinate our good offices to certain conditions?” (in this case the demanding of a bone up-front before offering help to the writhing Pozzo) keenly ironic. The contrast of spoken styles adds humor (without undermining the memory of Lucky’s violence in Act 1). Interestingly the French original “nous serions baisés” has a slightly harder edge (and is used again in *Endgame*). The inclusion of occasional expletives is something that recalls some of the war poets, as well as Joyce, in each case adding an edge and contemporary resonance to the writing. Swearing, sometimes to the exclusion of all else, was something Pinter was to develop into a language all its own. The result, though actually very carefully crafted and rhythmically sophisticated, has a spontaneous, street-real quality that influenced many later dramatists, David Mamet for example. The effect can be moderated or intensified when spoken by an actor; though the final, attributed, comment “Fuck life” is still jarring in the extreme as it cuts across the repetition of the rhythmical, rocking voice at the end of *Rockabye*. As in a poem, the dramatic impact of the expletives in these moments is heightened by the rhythm and by the spare language in which they are set.

In Beckett's plays, as in the scraps of dialogues that make up poems like *The Waste Land* or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the colloquial language breaks our expectations of realism because it is at odds with a very non-real situation. The language calls listeners closer because it is familiar and human, but they are being called into a fractured or absurd situation. The once cutting-edge language of Wesker or Osborne might sound as dated to a twenty-first century audience as that of Rattigan or Galsworthy, but these scraps are so carefully chosen and so isolated from social clutter that they still have a heart rending immediacy. It is by isolating the words from their context that Beckett, or Eliot, acknowledges the rather un-real sound of real conversation. Jimmy Porter or Ronnie Kahn made their search for a social identity with passion and in the idiom of their time, but their narrative context is so specific that their search, however revolutionary, is one that the audience must watch with a distanced interest.

No audience is filled with princes of Denmark any more than it is with abusive, disaffected young men in an unhappy relationships or the sons of a zealous leftwing Jewish matriarchs, but the distance from the mythical setting and the poetry of the language allows everyone to be Hamlet more easily than they can see themselves reflected in the young men created by Wesker and Osborne. Eliot finished his poem "Whispers of Immortality" which contains an amusing and exotic portrait of a woman, Grishkin, with the following observation:

And even the Abstract Entities
Circumambulate her charms;
But our lot crawls between dry ribs
To keep our metaphysics warm. (Eliot 56)

In the personae he creates, Beckett seems too to be crawling between dry ribs. The portraits are so stark, and so separate from social norms, that they are almost just a stage image, a part of the mise-en-scene (except that there is so little on stage). However, the tiny pieces of language, often repeated or jumbled, are so real and so human and talk about such personal details and such suffering, often rather cheerfully, that the inner reality of those figures is inescapable. Beckett's compositions of fractured thoughts create a broader portrait of a the search for self-identity and a position in the world than even the most elaborate social drama. In *Not I* the snatched words and memories burst out into the completely dark theatre where only a dot of light focused on a human mouth seven feet above the stage focuses the audience attention on a desperate voice, denying her own identity for twelve minutes:

... tiny little thing ... out before its time ... godforsaken hole ... no love ... spared that ... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... even to herself ... never out loud ... but not completely ... sometimes sudden urge ... once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason ... the long evenings ... hours of darkness ... sudden urge to ... tell ... then rush out stop the first she saw ... (...) not knowing what ... what she was— ... what? .. who?.. no!.. she! SHE! .. [*Pause.*] (Beckett 382).

Death

“Birth was the death of him” (A Piece for Monologue, Beckett 425)

The more or less conscious quest for personal identity undertaken by many of the characters in the novels and the plays of Samuel Beckett is sharpened because they are close to death. In some cases, it has been suggested, in *Play* for example, that they are already dead. Oedipus, Lear, Aschenbach and Joe the crossing sweeper all face death in the arms of the reader or audience and share the fears and insights of their creators in their last moments. Deaths in modernist literature are addressed more as a part of being alive. Damien Hirst called one of his animal works *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The piece is a stuffed shark and has little to bring to mind the crafted words of T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf or even of Beckett, but the title does say something about the way they all write about death, or perhaps, don't quite write about dying. There is little in Eliot's poems or Beckett's plays (though Eliot was a believer and Beckett not) of “the day of judgment” and not much about eternal rest either. The deaths they depict are very much a consideration of life. Yeats too, though given to ghostly presences, posited “Man has created death” (Yeats 198). It is interesting that, in this poem entitled “Death,” Yeats does not capitalize the word “death.”.

As medical science succeeded in diminishing the threat of untimely death from a number of indiscriminate diseases, while simultaneously the industrialization of warfare increased that lethal impact, the twentieth century demanded a reassessment of the

relationship of death and living. This is something Eliot, Woolf, Beckett and even Yeats sought to include in their work. Conventional narrative structures with a “beginning, middle and an end” most frequently put death at the end (with a caveat to allow for heaven and hell). In the new and confusing world of modernity, the contemplation of death in everyday life, stripped of some of the passive acceptance of previous centuries, must have taken on a different significance and required a different literary approach.

In Woolf’s novels death is an absence, made arresting by the brevity of description given to the dying. Mrs Ramsay, Jacob and even Percival die offstage and the work continues, as Bernard remarks: “This then is the world that Percival sees no longer. Let me look” (*Waves* 103). In *Orlando* death is evaded altogether with interesting effect. Only in *Mrs Dalloway* is the moment of death, Septimus Warren Smith’s suicide, made explicit and framed in his own, disordered, thoughts:

He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun was hot. Only human beings? Coming down the stairs opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. ‘I’ll give it to you!’ he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs Filmer’s area railings. (*Mrs Dalloway* 134)

The suicide is presented in the context of Septimus’ mental trauma and the reactions to it depict the attitudes of the time, but the moment has a strangely slight feeling. The same feeling can be seen in the murder in Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger* where the action is almost involuntary and unplaceable, even in memory.

The moments of death on stage in Beckett’s work are not always clear in this sudden, rather abstract way; rather death is a fuzzy line, possibly crossed in the general fog of a wretched life. Does Winnie die? Or Krapp, staring motionless before him as the tape spins? Is Nell really dead in her bin as Clov reports? Even the final words of the

figure in *Rockabye* are not conclusive. The endings are, at the very least, squalid, undramatic and a kind of ultimate diminution of life. In *Rockabye* the poetic structure of the language, its repetition and rhythm so redolent of Eliot, is underlined by the motion of the chair. Familiar, timeless images of blindness, watching in vain for “another living soul” (Beckett 439), are brought together to show a human being at the point where there is nothing more to let her know she is alive. The description of the figure slowly diminishing her life as “she went down,” abandoning the window that might connect her to something outside herself, draws the audience into the hopelessness of this person whose face is finally all that can be seen in the darkness of the theatre. However there is still some defiance in her resignation; the decision to “stop her eyes” (Beckett 442) is an active one: “fuck life” (Beckett 442) might be seen as something that develops Modernist views of death as an inevitability lacking any religious context. There is no sense of renewal or natural change in this end, or really in any of Beckett’s dramatic work. There are cycles, as with diminished repetition of events in *Waiting for Godot*, and certainly old age handing on to the young, the uncertain balance between mother and daughter in *Footfalls*, but there is no sense of renewal at the end of the lives in Beckett’s work.

Eliot, whose work could be very cerebral, still connected with a more traditional view of an earth-bound cycle in “East Coker” where a visceral pattern of “living in the living seasons” ends in “Dung and death” (Eliot 197). Elsewhere in his work death shares a place in the everyday –in “Marina,” for example, where Death hovers in incantations which become “unsubstantial” (Eliot 115) or in “The Hollow Men.” In this poem the hollow men occupy a place only defined in terms of being not “death’s other kingdom” (Eliot 90) and therefore, perhaps, it is implied that they live in a daytime kingdom of death: “this last of meeting places” (“The Hollow Men,” Eliot 91). The “dead

land” (Eliot 90) echoes other landscapes in Eliot’s work, but it also frames a similar world of deathly life to that portrayed on stage in some of Beckett’s plays. The boundary between recognizable life and feared death is not a clear one in these pieces, and the snatches of detail glimpsed in the poems and the plays creates a sensation of life always on one side or the other of the very edge of death.

The relationship of external context to that death-bound decline is critical in Beckett’s novels too, most obviously, perhaps, in *Malone Dies* where the character is confined in decreasing spaces –the room, then the bed and the loss of his few possessions as he declines to a point where he is unsure if he is still alive:

But have I not perhaps just passed away? Malone, Malone, no more of that. Perhaps I should call in all my possessions such as they are and take them to bed with me. Would it be any use? I suppose not. But I may. I have always that resource. (*Three Novels* 244)

Peter Fifield, in his essay for the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, identifies this questioning of the difference between being alive and being, in fact, dead as part of a medical condition called Cotard’s syndrome in which the patient sees life and death as a continuum. He cites Malone’s contemplation that “It’s vague, life and death” (*Three Novels* 225) and that “There is naturally another possibility that does not escape me, though it would be a great disappointment to have it confirmed, and that is that I am dead” (*Three Novels* 225). Beckett’s is not an isolated exploration of being dead in French theatre of the twentieth century – Sartre had set *Huis Clos* in a room in Hell – but while this afterlife is as wretched as anything lived in the air, the boundary is clear. In *Happy Days* and *Rockabye*, as well as *Play* and other pieces, the purgatory of the characters, as well as their physical circumstances, can leave the audience questioning if the name of this

place is hell. There is, however, in Beckett's sufferers a resilience that seems to deny death or, at least, offers a Dante-like possibility of very distant redemption.

Being Blind and Being Watched

“The observed of all observers” (Hamlet III.1.153)

No one in Beckett’s plays seems to die quite alone, even if only narrated by their own abstracted voice. It could be argued that no one in literature ever does because the writer is there, and then the reader too. At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, Firs dies alone on stage, watched by hundreds of audience members (and the Stage Manager waiting to bring the curtain down). The idea of an observed life must, by definition, be part of any literature: the reader accepts the lens that the writer offers on characters and events, but in drama the addition of actors, with their real names listed in the programme, adds another layer to the accepted artifice. That layer could put another barrier in the way of properly seeing any interiority that the writer chose to explore, but something in the shared humanity of the situation created can, instead, make it clearer. This connection to the audience is crucial. I believe that by sculpting such a precise environment for his words to be spoken, then giving the actors so few words to work with, Beckett clears a most carefully aligned path for the consciousness he is creating to touch the consciousness of the audience. To co-opt Eliot’s words: this is the “face, less clear and clearer” (“Marina” Eliot 115).

The absence of distraction in the stark, acutely focused stage picture specified in Beckett’s stage directions underlines the fact of being in a theatre. The absence of “story,” or recognizable circumstances to get swept up in, hones expectations in the same way as the irregular stanzas of a Modernist poem on the printed page alert the

reader that they are not about to enter the world of Longfellow or Browning. The images, verbal and on stage, “creep in at (the) eyes” (*Twelfth Night* Act1 Sc5) and can't be forgotten. They have a similar directness as the images in the poems of Eliot or Pound. Those poems use perfectly fashioned images to speak about, and directly to, an inner consciousness, uncompromised by the conventions of form or narrative. I contend that Beckett's plays continue, and extend, that new tradition and do so not just as an experiment in form but in order to convey something vital about personal truth in the modern age.

T.S. Eliot defined “The hope only/ Of empty men” as a place where “There are no eyes” where they can “grope together/ And avoid speech” (“The Hollow Men” Eliot 91). The never quite hopeless figures on Beckett's stages can often only connect either with each other or with the, somehow acknowledged, audience with their eyes (Winnie in Act II of *Happy Days* is an obvious example). Against this background, the inclusion of characters who are blind, or prevented from seeing something, resonates differently with the audience and within the structure of the piece.

The examination of what can be seen has, throughout literature, exploited the condition of blindness – Gloucester or Tiresias for example. When representations of the blind are made in the theatre the imagery is heightened: some characters on stage can see more than others in a literary sense, but the audience can see the whole scene. In *King Lear* we see that there is no cliff for the blinded Gloucester to throw himself off. However, except in our imagination conjured by the power of Shakespeare's language and our acceptance of the tradition, there is no heath either – just a stage in a large dark room and whatever the designer has placed on it to suggest the outdoors.

In *Endgame* the audience only sees the “bare interior” where the curtains are drawn across the windows and the picture has “its face to the wall” (Beckett 92). Hamm apparently sees nothing at all, being blind (as is Pozzo, another tyrannical figure, in his second appearance), so that he, and the audience, have only Clov’s account of a post-apocalyptic exterior into which he may be venturing at the end of the play. Peggy Phelan points to the blindness of Pozzo and Hamm in the context of

the relation between this blindness and the imperative to see that serves as the aesthetic orthodoxy of modernist art. Pozzo in *Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame* dramatize blindness in a theatre of mordant spectacle. We see them both seeing, and in that insight we are made aware of what we cannot and do not see in the scene. (qtd in McMullen 169)

Beckett sometimes made mention of finding inspiration for his work in paintings, Casper David Friedrich’s for *Waiting for Godot* for example. Though the exact work is debated, at one time Beckett cited “Man and Woman contemplating the Moon” (1824, Nationalgalerie, Berlin) and at others “Two Men Looking at the Moon” (1819, Gemäldegalerie Dresden) (Knowlson 378). In the pictures the figures look away into the distance with their backs to the viewer who sees what they see, the moon, as well as the trees that surround the two people, but not the details of their faces. This interest in viewpoint is informative when approaching Beckett’s work but also recalls the collage of interior monologue in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* or Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Perhaps the question of what is seen, in life or in art, is best explained in the much later play *Copenhagen* by Micheal Frayn in which three characters attempt to reconstruct a controversial moment in their history together:

| | |
|------------|---|
| Margrethe | I watch the two smiles in the room, one awkward and ingratiating There's also a third smile in the room, I know, unchangingly courteous, I hope, and unchangingly guarded. |
| Heisenberg | You've managed to get some skiing? |

- Bohr I glance at Margrethe, and for a moment I see what she can see and I can't – myself, and the smile vanishing from my face as poor Heisenberg blunders on.
- Heisenberg I look at the two of them looking at me, and for a moment I see the third person in the room as clearly as I see them: their importunate guest
- Bohr I look at him looking at me, anxiously, pleadingly, urging me back to the old days, and I see what he sees. And yes – now it comes, now it comes – there's someone missing from the room. He sees me. He sees Margrethe. He doesn't see himself.
- Heisenberg Two thousand million people in the world, and the one who has to decide their fate is the only one who's always hidden from me. (Frayn 87)

Frayn is framing a dramatic exploration of isolation from which we make crucial decisions. Similarly, it is only seeing ourselves reflected in art that allows a glimpse of our own interior truth.

The audience take their seats in a theatre in the reasonable expectation of seeing something, the French term “spectacle” is telling here, but by seeing almost nothing, particularly in later pieces such *Not I*, they are forced to engage with the words they hear in a differently searching way. In *Rockabye* the woman is described, in her own disembodied voice and in the third person as having moved away from the

Only window
 facing other windows
 other only window
 all blinds down

 all eyes
 all sides
 high and low

for a blind up
no more
never mind a face
behind the pane
famished eyes
like hers
to see
be seen (Beckett 438-9)

The old adage that eyes are the windows of the soul is hinted at in this image of the “facing windows” and the suggestion of “a face / behind the pane.” Thus the suggestion of clinging to the hope of some shared experience is haunting in its simplicity. The fundamental need to see and be seen speaks to human relations at their most basic; the negation of this need takes the examination of blindness and, by extension, invisibility, to a stark extreme. Beckett’s use of the term “blind” as opposed to curtain or drape humanizes the metaphor and encompasses a whole failing social reality in this one image of isolation and ultimately of surrender as the woman stopped, “let down the blind” (Beckett 440) and retreated to the rocker. It is an image developed from the recollections of Krapp as he waits for the tacit announcement of a death:

The blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, ... I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with at last.
(Beckett 220)

Again, in *Catastrophe* where, alone on stage with just his head lit, “P *raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies*” (Beckett 461), the final image of the play is one of seeing and being seen. The figure has been manipulated throughout the piece to make him into a piece of “art,” but his surviving humanity engages directly with

both the imagined audience of the play and the real people in the auditorium through his eyes. As with the “inspiring prospects” of Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett underlines the participation of his audience in what they are watching. The playing space of the theatre in Beckett’s work, so much a part of the comment that he is making on the interior reality of the characters in the plays, always includes the audience, and sometimes he reminds them very directly of their complicity. In *Catastrophe* the reminder of our involvement is non-verbal while the assault on the Protagonist by the Director is violently verbal (he is reminiscent of Pozzo or Hamm in this way). The figure of the nameless Protagonist is stripped, at the shouted instructions of the Director, by the compliant but empowering Assistant. She even notes his devastating instruction to “Whiten all flesh” (a chilling, three word encapsulation of so much ethnic cleansing in recent European history). The piece offers a picture of society as condemnatory as Genet or Brecht, but much of the comment is contained in the stage image while the play unwraps the making of just such an image. When the Protagonist lifts his head in the final moment he is staring directly at the audience and including them among his oppressors.

Conclusion

*“or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.”*

In his explanation of *Comment C'est* given to Tom Diver in 1961, Beckett summarized:

there will be new form this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. The find a form that accommodated the mess, that is the task of the artist now. (Beckett, qtd in Bair 555)

He could have been speaking about the struggle to express what it is to be human in modern times. Having fought for much of his writing life to find that form in prose (a fight he returned to with *Comment C'est*), Beckett frequently chose the exterior confines of theatrical form in which to work in later life. He said it was easier. Perhaps, if Eliot is correct and “Human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality” (“Burnt Norton” Eliot 190) then the obvious artifice of theatre might be the best place to try to encapsulate being human.

There is something in Beckett’s novels that seems to distrust the very process of describing thought. At the end of *Malloy* Beckett details the difficulties inherent in the process of documenting experience, and in Malloy’s enigma is, perhaps, a hint at the element in writing prose which seems to impede Beckett in his portrayal of characters’ internal experience:

It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then I went back into the house and wrote. It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining. (*Three Novels* 170)

The last words of a piece are often a place for Beckett to leave a challenge for the reader to find at the otherwise inconclusive ending of his work; here the fictive in Malloy's journaling, and its relation to a physical, external reality, is questioned by the stated contradictions in the text.

This disconnect between the mental reality of anyone, especially a creative person, and the mechanized, godless, war-savaged uncertainty of the twentieth century seems to be at the heart of Modernist writing. The elite, educated, thoughtful people who faced the challenge of trying to find a place in that world, and then the unimaginable struggle to find a way of expressing that search, produced revolutionary forms of poetry, prose and drama, not least because the old forms were inadequate to the task. When Samuel Beckett faced the same dilemma and – having tried for a very long time and in more than one language to make a novel sufficiently free from the confines of a recognizable narrative – placed his ideas on the stage, a new kind of theatre was made. This small space where characters could speak directly, unsentimentally and without any attempt to minimize the terror and isolation that living might comprise, and where the audience had made a tacit agreement to allow the words and images to envelop them, might represent the furthest point of that Modernist quest to cut through literary convention and tell an interior truth.

Throughout his writing for the theatre, Beckett tests the tolerance of his audience incrementally further in the pursuit of a single stage image that, perhaps, encompasses human life. Some of his late work strips away almost all visual context to rely on a single

image on a dark stage. These pieces seem so close in form to Imagist poetry. They also take up the Modernist challenge that “Forms have to be broken and remade” (Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* 37). In *Breath and Not I* in particular, Beckett takes his remodeling of stage image to such a pure, minimal extreme that it becomes absurd. The pieces have the economy of poetry. However, when moved from the interaction of words on a page with a reader’s imagination or recall and represented by a living actor in a room full of silent watchers, the words take on a new form: as Eliot says “The poem comes before the form” (Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* 37).

Beckett simplified his language, to the extent that he wrote in his second language to avoid the “romance” of his native Irish idiom, and pared the words down, especially in later work, until there were so few, though repeated, that it is difficult to imagine that they could convey anything at all. Nevertheless, by capturing all of the external context in the stage picture, which in itself can represent a terrifying or disconcerting reality, the words remain unburdened with conveying extraneous external information. Finally, by giving his words life in the voice of and movements of an actor, even a recording of an actor, the possibility of cutting out any barrier between what these very simple, uncompromising words and the consciousness of the audience is as complete as it can be. Beckett’s message is often described as bleak or depressing. Perhaps it is just so undiluted that it triggers the same protective reaction of avoidance that often manifests in depression. Actually, even in the bleakest pieces there is a human connection and a kind of hope.

In Aeschylus’ play *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus gives mankind ignorance of when his moment of death will come. Humankind, whom he says he found as “Mindless”

beings who “dragged through their long lives and muddled all,/ Haphazardly” (Aeschylus 155) are offered two gifts by Prometheus in Aeschylus’ version of the story

Prometheus: I stopped mortals from foreseeing doom.

Chorus: What cure did you discover for that sickness?

Prometheus: I sowed in them blind hopes”. (Aeschylus 148)

Using the immediacy of theatre to examine this state of humanity, in Ancient Greece or modern Europe, gives such a disturbing subject a safe, while still challenging, environment in which to be contemplated. Theatre can be one of the most complete forms of art. It engages the audience through many senses simultaneously and breaks down their emotional and intellectual guard through genuine human interaction with actors and creators. It can leave one feeling vulnerable in the face of frighteningly fundamental ideas, but it is still a shared experience undertaken in the dark – but not alone.

For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed towards a region where that guide can avail us no further. (Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* 87).

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