the changing profession

Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett

PEGGY PHELAN

READING SAMUEL BECKETT MADE ME WANT TO LINK LITERARY AND VISUAL STUDIES, ALTHOUGH WHEN I FIRST BEGAN TO love his work, I did not understand that these were different disciplines. A graduate student in the English department at Rutgers University, I read *Waiting for Godot* while sitting on the floor of my dorm room. I remember really squinting at the pages, trying both to read every word of the play and to see it on a stage in my mind. When I finished, I was convinced I had read the dialogue to a painting. What confused me was whether the painting existed before the play or whether Beckett was trying to create it in the play's performance.

I was in graduate school in the early 1980s, when "both/and" was the common response to many lingering questions. I realized I could conclude *both* that there was a real painting behind Beckett's play *and* that each performance painted a new one. But even as I tried to console myself with this plenitude, I found it an annoying solution. While I was not then aware of a particular painting that corresponded to what I saw while reading, I nonetheless believed the playwright was referring to something specific, material, and real. I began to read the critical literature on Beckett (of which I was totally ignorant when I read *Godot* on the floor of my dorm) and was happy to learn that many others thought that he had a painting in mind when writing the play. These critics nominated several paintings, and I dutifully went off to explore each contender. But none came close to the one I saw when reading. I vowed to keep looking and not to write about Beckett until I found the painting.

And so it went for almost twenty years. (I am leaving out a few details.)

Yet my love for Beckett was always there before me, as was my promise not to write about him until I had found the painting I had seen. As critical interest in Beckett grew after his death in 1989, the nominations of specific paintings as the source for *Godot* increased. I learned that he included a copy of Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* in his production notebook for *Godot* and that he told Ruby Cohn in 1975 that a slightly different Friedrich painting, *Man and Woman Observing the Moon*, "was the source for *Waiting for*

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Godot" (qtd. in Knowlson 342). He had seen both paintings in Dresden in 1937. In his notebook entry about that trip, he admitted that he had a "pleasant predilection for 2 tiny languid men in [Friedrich's] landscapes, as in the little moonscape, that is the only kind of romantic still tolerable, the bémolisé" (qtd. in Knowlson 236). But neither one of Friedrich's paintings corresponded to the image of a painting I had seen that day when I read the play. Friedrich's figures were far too somber, not at all funny in that awful way *Godot*'s tramps are.

Beckett was a fairly serious art collector; he purchased his first painting, a canvas by Jack Butler Yeats, when he was thirty. Later paintings by Yeats evoke the spirit and style of *Waiting for Godot*. James Knowlson, Beckett's authorized biographer, argues that Yeats's *The Two Travellers* (1942) might have been an unconscious influence on Beckett when he was writing, remarking that he "probably saw it in the artist's studio on his return to Ireland in 1945" (342).[1] Marilyn Gaddis Rose, a Yeats scholar, nominates his *Men of the Plain* (1947) as a source for *Godot*. But neither of these paintings conveyed what I thought was Beckett's most important achievement in *Godot*. Beckett dramatized the rhythm of looking, a rhythm with which many painters are intimate. It oscillates between seeing and blindness, between figuration and abstraction, between the void at the center of sight and the contour of the slender ridge that brooks it. As I learned more about the history of painting, my conviction that Beckett had a particular painting in mind grew, although I started to suspect that I had played some kind of trick on myself. Perhaps I had conjured up a painting I could not find anywhere as an overdetermined maneuver to remain alive to the drama of the play. My elusive but palpable painting was all too much like Godot, a presence that kept me looking and waiting but never actually appeared.

As my frustration over not finding the painting and thus not writing about Beckett increased, I decided I should follow other trails and look at the problem the other way around: instead of trying to find a painting that Beckett was inspired by, I decided to investigate how painters responded to him. This project was going along in pretty interesting ways when, as in that terrible cliché about how love finds you as soon as you stop looking, I finally found the painting for which I had been searching.

In the summer of 1999, an exhibition entitled When Time Began to Rant and Rave: Figurative Painting from Twentieth Century Ireland was held at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. In the basement, various catalogs and other material were on display, but all the printed matter was nailed to tables. In a catalog from a small gallery in Sligo, Ireland, I saw the painting that I had imagined when I read the play. I ran upstairs to beg the young woman at the reception desk to let me remove the catalog for ten minutes so I could make a copy of the print. She was firm and refused to let it go. She claimed (quite reasonably) that she was not authorized to unfasten catalogs or let any material leave the building, despite my impassioned entreaties.

Dejected, but also amused to find myself caught once more in a Beckettian drama where something seems at once completely close and absolutely remote, I went back down to the basement thinking that I might be able to draw the painting or at least find contact information for the gallery that had published the small catalog. To my amazement, on the back of the catalog in a very tiny font was an e-mail address. I ran home, sent off an e-mail message, and so began a most illuminating correspondence about the painting and its history. I was able to get a slide from the gallery but not permission to print it, a nice variation on the Beckettian theme.

The painting is Yeats's *The Graveyard Wall* (1945).[2] A tramp leans toward a graveyard wall, lighting his pipe, while his companion walks along (as if talking), oblivious to his friend's delay. Set against the background of the graveyard, the two tramps in bowler hats evoke the spirits of Didi and Gogo, if not quite Pozzo and

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Lucky. But I can almost hear Pozzo's cry "They give birth astride a grave" as a kind of voice-over when I see the painting (57; act 2). Since we know that Beckett visited Yeats in his studio in 1945, the year in which *The Graveyard Wall* was painted, it's likely that Beckett saw the painting then.[3] But I am no longer interested in trying to prove that this is the painting Beckett had in mind when he was writing *Godot*. When I saw the painting, I saw as well what I had not seen in my initial reading of the play. I was affected primarily by Beckett's effort to find a language for drama that resonated with painting's expressive power. It is impossible for me now to see Yeats's painting without also hearing Beckett's lines. The two texts have become flesh and skeleton to me, body and bone. I now think the effort of this intermingling is what I felt as specific, material, and real when I was reading. In *Godot*, Beckett brings the expressive possibilities of painting and writing to life, if only to park them at the lip of the graveyard wall until the moon sinks and the curtain falls once more.

At the center of Beckett's project is a question about how to see and how to be seen. As his work moved from the page to the stage to the screen, its visual sensibility became heightened and more focused. What is startling about the account of seeing that his work offers us is how deeply it touches the consequences of not seeing. Writing about the paintings of Geer van Velde and Bram van Velde, two abstract expressionists whose work Beckett frequently praised, he put their project this way: "To force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things till the very invisibility itself becomes a thing" (qtd. in Oppenheim 75).

A number of Beckett's most riveting characters are blind or nearly so, and they don't seem to be seers in any obvious way. Many visual artists long for a kind of cessation from the demands of seeing, and Beckett understood the longing for less insight more clearly than did any other twentieth-century artist. Like many artists who came of age after World War II, he was deeply affected by the scandal of ethical blindness underlying the catastrophe of the Holocaust. But he was the boldest in exploring 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 theater of mordant spectacle. We see them not seeing, and in that insight we are made aware of what we cannot and do not see in the scene. Seeing the unsighted, we see as well the drama of sight. This drama has had a particular optical, political, and psychological force for painters of the postwar period.

Scene Change

In April 1956, *Waiting for Godot* opened in New York. Directed by Herbert Berghof and starring Bert Lahr as Estragon, the play was a success, running for over one hundred performances. But one spectator, try as he might, could not endure the performance. The "greatest living painter"—if we adopt the appellation that *Life* magazine dangled in front of Jackson Pollock in 1949 (Seiberling)—made three approaches to the play: first he went to an evening performance alone; then he went to another evening performance in the company of Ruth Kligman, a twenty-six-year-old aspiring painter, with whom he was having an affair; and then he attended a matinee by himself (Potter 229–30). But he was unable to see the whole work on any of these occasions. In her memoir, *Love Affair*, Kligman creates a vivid portrait of their encounter with *Godot*:

> Jackson had tickets to a play. "I've seen this play before, but it's so good I want you to see it. It's by a very important Irishman named Beckett. *Waiting for Godot* is the most important play I've seen. It's abstract."
>
> We had dinner in a place close to the theater and found our seats about middle orchestra. The theater was not full. It was a great thrill to see Bert Lahr, his voice gravelly, scratchy, and E. G. Marshall a great foil for his wit. I didn't get the point of the play but Jackson did. Every line made him cringe, he got more and more into the play, and by the time Alvin Epstein came out as Lucky

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> in the most thrilling performance, Jackson was beside himself. He started to cry.
>
> People around us were shushing him, turning around. It was a quiet play, only two characters on stage, and every sound was noticed. He started to cry, really cry, and then the crying turned to sobs and then it went into heartbreaking moans. He was out of control. I grabbed his arm, pulled him up out of his seat. His eyes were closed. He was lost, not realizing we were in the theater. "Jackson, come, let's go home," I said. I somehow got him out of the theater and into a taxi, and as we walked out of the theater his crying was so loud it was as though his heart was breaking. . . .
>
> Nothing would make him stop. I tried to think about the play and what had set him off, the futility of no one coming. "I'm here. I'll be there when you need me. Don't be sad please." "It's not that. It's something else. I can't explain." (68–69)

When Beckett's play opened in New York, Pollock had not painted for almost eighteen months. Unable to watch the whole performance with his eyes open and equally unable to stop trying to see it, he returned again and again to the scene of his failed seeing. Interviewed by the art historian Selden Rodman that June, the same month Pollock tried to see Beckett's "abstract" play with Kligman, he expressed frustration with increasingly narrow definitions of abstract expressionism and tried to call attention to the figurative elements in his work. "My art is certainly not 'nonobjective' and not 'nonrepresentational,' either. I'm very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time. But when you're painting out of your unconscious, figures are bound to emerge" (qtd. in Rodman 77–78). Painting, whatever else it might be, is a drama of appearance. Looking for a way to create an appearance he could endure, Pollock encountered Didi and Gogo's struggles as versions of his own. Insofar as Beckett's play relies on actors, if not quite on characters, it responds to the comforting familiarity of the figurative, but insofar as the play ponders existence as a repetitious tragicomedy, it insists on the value of abstraction. Neither fully abstract nor fully figurative, Beckett's play exposes the vast space between these two expressive modes, a space Pollock was desperately trying to find in his late paintings.

The same year that Beckett translated *Godot* into English, Pollock painted *Portrait and a Dream* (1953) and *The Deep* (1953). In these paintings, Pollock attempted to visualize painting after the breakdown of the line, and perhaps too after the breakdown of the artist. While art historians have tended to deride *The Deep*, it is an extraordinary painting. Kirk Varnedoe puts the case against it concisely: "Compared to the poetry of the indefinite spaces created by the drip paintings, [the effect of *The Deep*] . . . is melodrama, and the language of the brush doesn't hold a charge that makes up for the slackness of the pouring; but Freudians have found much to admire in the vaginal connotations of this one-time experiment" (66). Having been praised by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried for his insistence on exposing painting's flatness and opticality, Pollock here makes a different point, about painting's dependence on perspective as orientation and ground. Clambering into the role of a guilty god gazing on the world he wrecked, Pollock creates a gaze that is inescapably erotic, even while it is full of despair. More than an autobiographical rumination about the lure of alcohol and the pleasures of clouded vision—Varnedoe's "melodrama"—the painting asks what is buried deep in the eye, deep in the history of painting, and Pollock answers: the slit, the split, the hole that is the ground of perspective. To get some of the weight of that hole onto the canvas seems to me an incredible accomplishment, even while it also represents a significant departure from the drip paintings. A departure does not necessarily entail a betrayal, although in the bruising occlusions of the present tense, it often feels like one.

In April 1956, Pollock was intensely aware that he had become trapped by critical and commercial expectations that he would continue to produce drip paintings and by his disinclina-

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tion or inability to do so. Extraordinarily conscious of being perceived as a failure, Pollock may have found *Godot* so powerful because Beckett is matter-of-fact about the inevitability of failure. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have charged Beckett with "failing to fail," but their claim can be countenanced only if one thinks of failure as something to be achieved (22). For Beckett, failure preceded and exceeded achievement; failure was guaranteed.

Beckett's relation to failure is closer to Kligman's than to Bersani and Dutoit's. Her response to Pollock's pain, expressed as her desire to "be there" for the suffering painter, manages to be at once perfectly pure and perfectly useless. Her confessed inability to understand Beckett's play does not diminish her desire to transform what she takes to be its message. She, unlike the absent Godot, is there. She is willing to be the manifestation of presence for Pollock, if that is what he needs. But Kligman does not have what he wants; neither she nor anyone else can make visible for him what he needs to see. She presses on anyway, unwittingly replicating the confusions and misunderstandings that constitute the conversation of all Beckett's couples. As Beckett put it a few years later in the dialogue between Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*:

> CLOV. What is there to keep me here?
> HAMM. The dialogue.[4] (58)

Trying to be there for Pollock, Kligman stumbles on the core of Beckett's drama. The main activity of couples tends to be call and response, and the response more often than not refers to something unknown to the caller. This enigmatic structure of the couple's dialogue so overtakes Kligman's recollection of *Godot* that she insists that the production has "only two characters on stage," despite praising three actors' performances in the previous paragraph. Didi and Gogo spend their time waiting for Godot's appearance, for the materialization of a singular presence that can be seen. Beckett's play exposes us to the disconcerting fact that in the act of waiting we can sometimes begin to see what makes our usual not seeing such a vital failure. And since he is creating theater, Beckett figures our propensity for this dangerous blindness in the character of sightless, but still blustering, Pozzo.

Back to Sam

In 1933, when Beckett was in analysis with Wilfred Bion, he applied for a job as an assistant curator at London's National Gallery. He was rejected for the job, but he remained interested in visual art, especially painting, and when he went to Germany for the first time in 1936–37, he spent almost all his time looking at art. Quoting extensively from the then newly discovered diaries Beckett kept while living in Germany, Knowlson demonstrates that Beckett's disciplined pursuit of the history of painting coincided with his increasingly ambitious project to transform writing. This coincidence achieved its most explicit and public manifestation in "Three Dialogues," which was published in *Transition* in 1949. Although composed in the form of dialogues between Beckett and Georges Duthuit, the editor of *Transition*, the text was written by Beckett alone. The essay might profitably be seen as part of his effort to learn to write dramatic dialogue and as an opportunity for him to move away from his work as a translator, critic, and novelist.[5] The structure of the dialogues, two voices distinguished by the letters B and D, in which D is formal and polite and B worries repeatedly about how to end the conversation and get off the stage, also represents a contribution to the history of performative criticism, by which I mean that the dialogues enact, rather than merely describe, the critical argument. This sense of writing as action had enormous implications for Beckett's subsequent work, especially as he moved from prose to drama.

In her brilliant study of Beckett's "dialogue with art," Lois Oppenheim carefully traces the composition of "Three Dialogues." In these scripts of composite conversations, Beckett outlines

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a project for painting that has obvious parallels with the ambitions he had for his writing, especially the writing he began to compose the following year in *Godot*. B claims that the abstract expressionist Bram van Velde is the first painter "to accept a certain situation and to consent to a certain act." D asks him to define that situation and that act. B replies, "The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint" (142).

Written three years before Harold Rosenberg's classic essay "The American Action Painters" appeared in *Artnews*, Beckett's proposition has important implications for both the history of painting and the history of theater and performance.[6] In his celebrated essay, Rosenberg declared, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (22). Rosenberg's essay, while never mentioning Beckett or Pollock, has been central to discussions of the overlapping histories of performance and painting after the war. Indeed, in Paul Schimmel's introduction to the important catalog assembled for the exhibition Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979, Pollock is positioned as one of the four fathers of contemporary international performance art. (In a pattern we know well, no women are present at this birth.)

The conjunction of painting and performance in Pollock's art threw into relief the notion that painting is a trace of an action that has ceased. In this sense, painting's intersection with performance lends painting a quality of belatedness. This lateness has led many to posit (repeatedly) the death of painting in the postwar period. But history, fortunately, is less neat than this narrative suggests, for if a performative conception of painting risks rendering painting belated, it does so to frame the urgent ethical questions of the postwar period: What remains after an act has ended? What are the obligations of a witness to an act that is over? These questions are thoroughly theatrical and performative, but they are also intimate and ethical. In *Waiting for Godot*, they underlie the dialogue of Didi and Gogo, who try to see what remains of seeing in a landscape of ash and leaves. Didi and Gogo combine their inner and external landscapes in one of Beckett's most musical passages:

> ESTRAGON. All the dead voices.
> VLADIMIR. They make a noise like wings.
> ESTRAGON. Like leaves.
> VLADIMIR. Like sand.
> ESTRAGON. Like leaves. (40; act 2)

Then, in the peculiarly punishing economy of *Godot*, the dialogue is repeated and darkened a few minutes later:

> VLADIMIR. Where are all these corpses from?
> ESTRAGON. These skeletons. . . .
> ESTRAGON. You don't have to look.
> VLADIMIR. You can't stop looking.
> ESTRAGON. True. (41)

What Didi and Gogo find in the death-strewn landscape is the impossibility of seeing and the impossibility of not looking. This situation ties them to Godot and to each other. *Godot* is a drama about the intractability of the social relation, the peculiarly specific and endlessly abstract drama of the couple's attempt to see and to make of their insight some kind of meaning.

Both Beckett and Rosenberg recognized that considering painting to be an act, indeed an action or a performance, also transformed language and the possibilities of writing in general. Beckett grasped earlier than most that while art commentary before the war had tended to tell a story about the line, where it went and what it did once it arrived, the art of the postwar abstractionists made the critic's usual performance impossible. As soon as the painter rejected the idea of the static object to be copied, the critic

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lost the illusion that criticism was a matter of describing the painting as itself a static object. Beckett's exuberance about the destruction of this illusion stemmed from his recognition that the new painters were assailing the same kinds of conventions he wanted to abandon in writing. Beckett caught the excitement and energy that spring from giving up one hopeless thing, if only for the brief second before the new thing emerges as hopeless in its own way.

While color and line remained the central characters in the drama of painting for the abstract expressionists, the critical script that narrated the plot of their interactions became outmoded. Thus, the transformation in painting necessitated a transformation in the critical literature about painting, a transformation that allowed Beckett to mingle the art of the critical act and the art of the dramatic act in "Three Dialogues," before abandoning criticism in favor of art. Insofar as Pollock and the van Veldes abandoned the pursuit of capturing a preexisting object or scene in favor of the event of painting, they also summoned a viewer capable of seeing and articulating the force of that event and its traces in other words.

One way of articulating art in other words is by translating it. Beckett's skill as a translator has been much remarked, but so far that discussion has been confined to how Beckett translated between French and English. His work of translation was transformative, and his decision to write drama in French gave us the austere wit of *En attendant Godot*.[7] Moreover, his bilingual habit of mind as a translator allowed him to apprehend the duality of the expressive registers of the visual and the verbal with astonishing fluidity. He was both bilingual and biocular, as it were: he saw the visual as worded and he understood that the act of speaking inevitably created a pictorial image.

Beckett spent his adult life moving not only between French and English, not only between painting and writing. He viewed himself as suspended in a world composed of both images and words—a world everywhere overrun by memory and dream; speech and silence; visible and invisible feelings, thoughts, histories. This sense of suspension led him to wonder if he had an image at all. Unable to locate himself precisely in an intellectual, artistic, erotic, spiritual, or linguistic monotheism, he was not entirely certain he registered in the enclosure of anyone's eyes, including his own.[8] Seeing was always already a way of saying for Beckett, and so too was saying a way of seeing. In *Fizzles*, Beckett uses short sentences to tackle writing's dream and struggle to be seen: "I had come to bear everything bar being seen. . . . It was five or six years since anyone had seen me, to begin with myself. I mean the face I had pored over so, all down the years. . . . I'll let myself be seen before I'm done" (19–20). But this job of letting himself be seen required a looker more reliable than the one his own two eyes could produce. Responding to one of Beckett's letters, Duthuit writes, "You reassure me in saying that we can at least say of a painting that it translates, with greater or fewer losses, some absurd and mysterious thrusts toward the image" (qtd. in Oppenheim 84). Beckett translated most of his writing, but he wanted to discover translations across media, especially the complex medium of sight.

X Marks the Spot with a Dot and a Dot, or a Line and a Line

Notoriously strict about allowing directors or actors any freedom to diverge from his stage directions, Beckett took almost the opposite approach with the artists who illustrated his writing.[9] The range of artists who answered the challenge is extraordinary: I cite only four to suggest the diversity of sensibility attracted to Beckett's work: Edward Gorey, Avigdor Arikha, Robert Ryman, and Jasper Johns. Johns, whose work with lettering, stenciling, and encaustic made him especially alert to writing as a visual art, collaborated with Beckett on an extraordinary project published in a limited edition of 250 under the title *Foirades/Fizzles* in 1976.[10] Although they worked separately on the project,

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they met several times in Paris in 1972–73 to discuss its shape. Johns wanted the text to be bilingual; Beckett, attached firmly to the less-is-more aesthetic, voiced mild objections but in the end told Johns the book was his to design. Johns had originally hoped that the writer might part with some fragments of unpublished, incomplete texts. "I was thinking I would use the words inside the image, phrases included within the picture" (152). When Beckett offered him five "Fizzles," however, Johns decided to work with a finished piece of his own. He made a series of thirty-three etchings from his earlier piece, *Untitled*, a six-by-sixteen-foot four-paneled painting completed in 1972. The painting includes a panel of cross-hatching in a diagonal pattern, two panels of a flagstone wall, one in oil and one in encaustic, and a final panel of wood beams on which are attached casts of body parts.

Foirades/Fizzles is a beautiful and dizzying performance, one that recalls Beckett's sense of space and time. When he saw Johns's etchings, Beckett approved, telling the artist, "Here you try all these different directions but no matter which way you turn you always come up against a stone wall" (qtd. in Johns 153). Besides the wall and the diagonal cross-hatching, Johns did etchings of the numbers 1–5, to set off each of the "Fizzles." Additionally, in a tour de force, he stenciled the letters of a list of words in French and English (*buttocks*, *fesses*, *knee*, *genou*, *foot*, *pied*, *hand*, *main*, *floor*, *plancher*, *face*, *visage*, *torso*, *torse*, *leg*, *jambe*, *feet*, *pieds*) on separate copper sheets. When printed, the letters were reversed. Then he printed the French sheet over the English sheet. As Richard Field points out, "Johns had mimicked the process of translation in a way that suggested a lingering presence of the original language" (103). Looking at the published etchings, one sees the blur of print and the struggle to create a single graphic language from a bilingual code.



Jasper Johns, from *Foirades/Fizzles*, 1976, etching, $10^{3}/_{8}'' \times 7^{7}/_{8}''$ (26.4 × 20.0 cm). © Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Johns's engravings show what it is to be up against the wall of two languages, a bilingualism that invokes what I earlier called Beckett's binocularity, his continuous translation between word and image—what it means to be up against the walls of the body, up against the border of the face, up against the screen of vision, and up against the call of death. Beckett's text reads, "there will be no more I, he'll never say I any more" (27). Johns's facing illustration for the French text, "il n'y aura plus de je, il ne dira plus jamais je," shows a blotted-out face smeared in the upper left with vertical lines that look like four gray tears (or even Pollock-like drips) and accompanied, in the lower right corner, near the jawbone, by an X that reads like a signature of the unnamable (see illus. at left).

Taken together, the works of Beckett and Johns enact the dazzling potential of expressive art to bring something of boundless space and endless time briefly, precariously, into view. Trying to express it all one more time, Beckett happened on this way of saying how he understood seeing: "For it is not at all about a sudden aware-

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ness, but a sudden visual grasp, a sudden shot of the eye. Just that" (qtd. in Oppenheim 75).

My reading of *Godot* on the floor of my dorm room was a sudden visual grasp, a shot of the eye that kept me looking for what I thought I saw. When I did finally see the painting, it showed me all I had not seen in my initial reading. This experience of looking and not finding and then finding and seeing only what I had not seen reenacts the essential rhythm of Beckett's dramas. His plays remind us that seeing (that rare and ephemeral thing) is a shot across the eye's dark orbit. His dramatic characters circle around that circumference, alternating flashes of insight with stumbles and falls in blinding alleys. Blink, and we miss it. And since we must blink, we do.

Notes

[1] *The Two Travellers* is owned by the Tate Gallery, in London.

[2] The painting, now housed in the Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland, is not in either of the catalogues raisonnés of Yeats's work (see Rosenthal; Pyle).

[3] It seems more likely that he saw this painting than one from 1942, as Knowlson suggests. Also, in 1945 Beckett wrote a review, in the *Irish Times*, of Thomas MacGreevy's book on Yeats ("MacGreevy").

[4] The French *Fin de partie* is perhaps even closer to Kligman's understanding of the offering crucial to companionship: "CLOV. A quoi est-ce que je sers? HAMM. A me donner la réplique" (79–80).

[5] Oppenheim carefully distinguishes Duthuit's intellectual position from Beckett's and illuminates the importance of these critical formulations for Beckett's subsequent creative writing.

[6] The themes of abstraction, action, and narrative at work in Rosenberg, Beckett, and Pollock are discussed in Phelan.

[7] Bersani and Dutoit have written perceptively about Beckett's decision to write in French in relation to his desire to break with tradition and history more generally. They also point out the effect of this move on his translations of his French into English: "Beckett's translations of his works from his own original French versions of them could be thought of as a strategy for divesting English of its privileged relation to his past and to his being. In his translations, Beckett's English is constrained to be expressive of nothing more than another text inherently foreign to that past and that being" (20–21).

[8] In several unpublished lectures, I have analyzed the importance of Avigdor Arikha's portraits of Beckett. The literature on these stunning works is just beginning to be written. In addition to Oppenheim, see Thomson; Ben-Zvi. The last two have generous reproductions of these portraits.

[9] Beckett is among the most widely illustrated of writers. There are at least twenty-eight artist's editions—fifteen produced in the 1970s, five in the 1980s, and one in 1990. See Oppenheim for a full discussion. Recently, the Emory Museum in Atlanta made a catalog of some of the illustrations for Beckett texts that have not been collected in book form (Mitchel and Overbeck).

[10] The 1976 price was $10,000. For fuller discussions of this uncanny collaboration, see Schloss; Prinz; Field; and Perloff.

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