Listen. Before I go I will tell you this. I am your soul and all your souls. When I am gone you are dead... When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what you are—I take your significance and importance and all the accumulations of human instinct and appetite and wisdom and dignity. You will be left with nothing behind you and nothing to give the waiting ones. Woe to you when they find you out! Good-bye!

Although I thought this speech was rather far-fetched and ridiculous, he was gone and I was dead.

Flann O’Brien, The Third Policeman

I waited for my image to come back, I watched it as it trembled towards an ever increasing likeness. Now and then a drop, falling from my face, shattered it again. I did not see a soul all day.

Samuel Beckett, Molloy

From the "[s]tupid obsession with depth" of The Unnamable to "flatness endless" in Lessness, Samuel Beckett rejects a speculative theory of human interiority that characterizes the work of key modernist authors, dramatists, artists, and critics. This essay situates Beckett’s exploration of flatness in several contexts: Romantic theories of perception and a related pictorial dramaturgy, the twentieth-century phenomenological tradition and postwar art criticism, media relationships Beckett chose as sites of investigation (written text, painting, theater, film, and television), and Protestant iconoclasm. In describing both physical and metaphysical flatness, I develop the relationship iden-
tified in the title between flatness and spectres. The latter are introduced in Beckett’s art criticism, but his work is pervaded by the words spirit, soul, and ghost. Flatness and ghosts, the two central tropes of this essay, are crucial not only metaphorically but also formally in painting and other arts that make use of surfaces. That is why the medium of film and Beckett’s art criticism are central. In Film, Beckett literalizes flatness.

Film clearly bears important relationships both to dramatic enactment in theater and to the pictorial realism of photography. In achieving a partial synthesis of the two forms, film also extends fundamental debates about representation that are endemic to each. The metaphysics of human interiority is one of the oldest and most vital concerns shared by theater and the visual arts. Consider a classic moment in Buster Keaton’s Steamboat Bill, Jr. Buster, standing before a mirror in a hat store, seems to stare at his reflection while various hats are placed upon his head, spoofing the theatrical notion that character inheres in costume or, as Hamlet would have it, in trappings. But the image is also a subtle variation on the “mirror held up to nature,” for the camera and, ultimately, the audience members have taken the place of the mirror. Describing this famous scene, Gilberto Perez detects in the image on-screen a “quality of introspective monologue, an apprehensive meditation on [the character’s] own condition” (120). Because the audience imagines Buster to be looking at his own image, not out at them, the effect is of looking into him. “It is Keaton’s genius as an actor,” Perez writes, “to keep a face so nearly deadpan and yet render it, by subtle inflections, so vividly expressive of inner life. His large deep eyes are the most eloquent feature; with merely a stare he can convey a wide range of emotions, from longing to mistrust, from puzzlement to sorrow. . . . At the haberdashery, without the trappings of a Boston collegian, he stares into the mirror and sees for the first time the hopeless discrepancy between his inner being and any of the roles he may have to assume in his dealings with the external world” (118, 120). The movie screen itself, however, being more like a canvas than a stage, can offer only the illusion of depth or inwardness.¹ The screen itself is literally flat.

1. Keaton’s use of the medium may evoke what Michael Fried has called the “faciness” of Manet’s paintings, the provocative frontal gaze they direct, through a single figure, at the beholder. In the development of pictorial modernism, Fried says, Manet
In *Film*, Beckett pushes the figurative and literal flatness of the image to a breaking point. The tearing of a print, the “destruction of God’s image” (167), is followed by an even more radical iconoclasm, the tearing of photographs of people, an antipoetics or unmaking not only of the theophanic but also ultimately of the autophanic image. In exposing the vulnerability of the pictorial surface, destroying the support upon which an image appears, Beckett’s figures radically critique the modernist paradox of flatness as a desideratum, a positive limitation, constitutive even of the negative. O’s tearing of photographs is anticipated in *Malone Dies*: “In the end Macmann tore up this photograph [of his lover Moll] and threw the bits in the air, one windy day. Then they scattered, though all subjected to the same conditions, as though with alacrity” (280). The “conditions” are uniformly physical, the paper animated by wind, not spirit.

*Film*, in its combination of text (philosophical slogans, drawing, directions), light, and celluloid, is a work that cannot be reduced to the movie alone and so also raises questions about relationships between the flatness of the projected image and the flatness of the page. Elaine Scarry comments that in the verbal arts, images “acquire the vivacity of perceptual objects,” though unlike painting, music, sculpture, theater, and film, they “are almost wholly devoid of actual sensory content... That imaginary vivacity comes about by reproducing the deep structure of perception” (5). It is precisely the deep structure of perception that Beckett persistently questions in a wide range of writings. In *Film*, as in *A Piece of Monologue*, another text that figures the tearing of photographic images, Beckett rejects the sustaining assumptions of a still prevalent Protestant poetics: discourse does not give way to vision. What the text discloses can be described, at best, in two dimensions, like the page itself, as “Dark shapeless blot on surface elsewhere white” (267). In the face of a blank universe, in which one can know “nothing more than a surface,” Molloy remarks, “you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat” (*Molloy* 26, 13).

reconfigures the relation between painting and observer in paintings that face the beholder as never before. This acknowledgment of the beholder is the “key to Manet’s pictures’ notorious ‘flatness.’” The tableau is simultaneously “antitheatrical and theatrical” (*Manet’s Modernism* 265–70).
In literalizing flatness, explicitly reacting against a speculative metaphysics and sacralization of art, Beckett questions the very being of art. The importance of painting and the capacity of surfaces (of mirrors, walls, the human body) to signify had been the subject of Beckett’s earliest critical essays and fiction. This essay will establish both the richness and the specificity of Beckett’s manipulation of the trope of surfaces and of the analogy between painting and theater in his work. That analogy has been a crucial component of dramatic theory from the Greeks, though it is in the eighteenth century, in the critical writings of Diderot, that a modern pictorial dramaturgy and related problems of absorption and theatricality are first and most influentially articulated. Formal similarities between painting and theater, especially in the iconography of character and the representation of interior experience, continue to inform the critical discourse that Beckett adopts and to which he offers a persistently radical and self-conscious revision. The “[s]tupid obsession with depth” of the nameless narrator in The Unnamable (293) suggests not only an obsession but also the ambivalence at play from Beckett’s earliest writing to the latest. “I conceived Molloy and what followed,” Beckett is reported to have said, “the day I realized my own stupidity” (qtd. in Fletcher and Spurling 25). In nearly every work, he draws our attention to the media of art, the surface of paintings, the frame of the stage, the flatness of film, the television box, and language itself, yet his characters also seem continually tor-

2. Aristotle had instructed the poet to follow the example of good portrait painters (82), but Diderot has been the seminal thinker for modern theories of painting and theater, as several major studies have shown, including Fried, Absorption, Meisel, and Roach. Michael Fried’s influence on more recent works in theater studies can be seen, for instance, in W. B. Worthen’s claim that modern dramatists’ imagining the stage in pictorial terms has enabled the theater to assume a “double shape” as simultaneously a “theater of disclosure and also a theater of concealment” (27–28). Among numerous late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century instances of this pictorial dramaturgy in English, key articulations include that of Brander Matthews, who argued that the stage had undergone a transformation in the mid-nineteenth century so that “the curtain rose and fell in a picture-frame. The characters of the play were thereafter elements in a picture . . . The drama immediately became more pictorial” (236–37). William Archer had employed a similar analogy to make an explicitly antitheatrical argument: thinking of the stage in “pictorial terms,” the playwright can guard against “theatricality” (13). “The stage now aims at presenting a complete picture” (64). The picture has depth, and characters are set “completely in it.”
mented by the possibility of pure apperception. The human figures that appear in these media paradoxically present themselves and resist representation. They persistently seem to claim that the truth of being is discoverable within themselves but then withdraw the claim as unverifiable: “Ping elsewhere always there but that known not” (First Love 70, 71). In Beckett, ontological problems are always agonizingly epistemological.

The problem of exteriorizing or making visible discrete and cognizable aspects of human experience has, to put it mildly, a vexed position in modern drama. The image of an actor with his back turned to the audience, privileged in the 1880s by André Antoine and August Strindberg and achieving iconic status later in the film performances of Marlon Brando, may stand as a symbol of protest against previous theatrical conventions. For many, the persistent enactment of self-absorption is a sign of the drama’s decline. In Theory of the Modern Drama, Peter Szondi laments that for Henrik Ibsen, “truth is that of interiority” (16). Characters who lack a core self, inner truth, like the extraordinarily theatrical Peer Gynt, are doomed. On the other hand, at the stunning climax of Ghosts, the diseased Oswald harps on a sun that he alone can see, an ironic reference, one assumes, to Oedipus humbled before the god of appearances. “La beauté intérieure” and “la vie profonde,” advocated by Maurice Maeterlinck, are represented, if at all, through silence and stillness. “Il m’est arrivé de croire,” writes Maeterlinck, “qu’un vieillard assis dans son fauteuil, attendent simplement sous la lampe . . . vivait en réalité d’une vie plus profonde, plus humaine et plus générale que l’amant qui étrangle sa maîtresse, le capitaine qui ramporse une victoire ou ‘l’époux qui venge son honneur.’ [I have come to believe . . . that an old man, seated in an armchair, waiting simply beneath his lamp . . . lives in reality a deeper, more human and more universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who conquers in battle, or ‘the husband who avenges his honor’]” (187–88).3

3. Translations from the French throughout this essay are mine unless otherwise noted.
A widespread reimagining of the dramatic significance of interiority in the early decades of the nineteenth century is fundamental to what we think of today as the "modern" drama. Hamlet, in the interpretations of Goethe and Coleridge, becomes more radically introspective (Ackerman 119–21). And this development is deeply related to the phenomenology of Hegel, who writes in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*: “Now, this whole sphere of the empirical and outer world is just what is not the world of genuine reality, but is to be entitled a mere appearance more strictly than is true of art . . . Genuine reality is only to be found beyond the immediacy of feeling and of external objects. Nothing is genuinely real but that which is . . . the substance of nature and of mind” (10). The metaphor of mind as lamp, an essentialist, quasi-theological and speculative (that is, anti-empirical or intuitive) metaphysics, in which the subject literally informs the external world, is, as many have shown before, a crucial aspect of Romantic thought. And that subject-object dialectic pervades the works of key modernist and proto-modernist writers, as well as many of their most important critics.

The popular theater continues to structure itself upon assumptions of inner life and expression; aspects of the internal are made external, synthesizing images, thoughts, and feelings. The working title of Arthur Miller’s ghostly play *Death of a Salesman*, for example, was “The Inside of His Head.” Yet deeply related to expressive theory is a corresponding assumption that the essence or core of the self passes show. As Martin Meisel remarks, “Only recently in the Western tradition have we accepted the convention that true feeling is always inarticulate and ultimately inexpressible” (7). That ghostliness of the inner self has been, therefore, the principal subject of countless theoretical and practical discussions of theater. “I . . . am well aware of the fact that everyone has his own interior life which he would like to bring out into the open,” says the *capo-comico*, or director, in Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. “But the difficulty is precisely this: to bring out into the open only what is important in reference to others; and at the same

---

4. See especially M. H. Abrams’s seminal studies, *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*. I am also indebted to Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s critique of that tradition in *Art of the Modern Age* and Rodolphe Gasché’s *The Tain of the Mirror*. }
time reveal through that little bit all of that unrevealed interior life!” (49). The director's mechanistic approach to performance is based upon the same ontological, if not practical, assumptions as Konstantin Stanislavsky's still highly influential theory that acting must reach a "spiritual" or "inner" life. The common quality shared by great actors, Stanislavsky writes, is that “[t]heir bodies were at the call and beck of the inner demands of their wills” (My Life 463). “[T]he bond between body and soul is indivisible” (Actor 136). Fantasy, he writes, calls up “from its secret depths, beyond reach of consciousness, elements of already experienced emotions, and regroups them to correspond with the images which arise within us” (Building a Character 37–38).

Stanislavsky, like Arthur Miller, reflects an aesthetic that permits spectators to experience action, as it were, from the inside, to empathize. Pirandello, too, preoccupied though he is with the ambiguity of reality and fiction, assumes nonetheless the importance of the concepts of interior and exterior. Their structural relationship is central to his art. The climax of his greatest play, Henry IV, occurs when “real” characters, posing as portraits, step forth from the frames where the canvases have been cut away and terrify the watching Henry. The action suggests that the illusion inside the picture frames was of flatness, not of depth, but Pirandello has inverted the spectator’s assumptions, not obviated them. Interiority remains a crucial determinant; the play concludes, like Ghosts, with characters desperate to fathom the image (Henry) at their center.

In 1868, Alexandre Dumas fils had written in his preface to Un pere prodigue, “C’est une science d’optique et de perspective qui permet de dessiner un personnage, un caractère, une passion, une action de l’âme d’un seul trait de plume [It is the science of optics and of perspective that allows [the playwright] to depict a human being, a character, a passion, an action of the soul with just the stroke of the pen]” (208). In Dumas’s view, the successful playwright must be a manipulator of the “purely external actions of human beings,” making frescoes to be seen from a distance and lit from below. Yet the greatest playwright will combine this technical, superficial gift with the ability to write “avec son coeur et son âme pour l’âme et pour le cœur de l’humanité [with his heart and soul for the soul and the heart of humanity]” (209). The successful play, like a successful
fresco, will be infused with a soul that is consumed by its beholders, and it is precisely the complicity between the work and the audience, in this view, that constitutes theater.5

The idea that material flatness is the essential feature of pictorial art and that audience is the essential feature of theater recurs frequently among modern theorists. It is central to the theory of the great French drama critic Francisque Sarcey, in his 1876 “Essai d’une esthétique de théâtre”:

[D]ans la peinture, il s’agit de représenter sur une surface plane des objets qui ont tous leurs côtés, et des scènes de la vie humaine, qui, dans la réalité, ont exigé pour se mouvoir un vaste espace de profondeur. . . . [R]egardons de même pour l’art dramatique, s’il n’y a pas un fait aussi certain que peut l’être celui-là dans la peinture et qui soit également pour lui une condition absolue d’existence et de développement. . . . Il y a, quand on parle de théâtre, un fait qui ne saurait manquer de frapper les yeux les moins attentifs: c’est la présence d’un public.

Painting is about representing, on a plane surface, objects which have all their dimensions, and scenes from life, which, in reality, would require for their existence a vast depth of background. . . . In the same way let us inquire concerning dramatic art if there is not also a fact which corresponds to this fact in painting and which is in like manner the indispensable condition of its existence and development. . . . There is, in speaking of theater, one fact that cannot fail to strike the eyes of the least attentive; it is the presence of a public.

(125–27)

Sarcey’s analogy is especially important for being so patently imperfect, since the “means of expression” of painting is in itself, and that of theater is in the spectator. He goes on to say explicitly, “[C]ette foule joue en quelque sorte en art dramatique l’office de la surface plane en peinture [This crowd plays in some sort for dramatic art the function of the flat surface in painting]” (129). At least as striking as the lack of logic is the insistence on establishing

5. Michael Fried responds directly to this way of thinking in his famous polemic “Art and Objecthood,” when he writes of a war going on (in the 1960s) between the theatrical and the pictorial: “The success, even survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than within theater itself, where the need to defeat what I have been calling theater has chiefly made itself felt as the need to establish a drastically different relation to its audience” (153).
relationships between the forms of painting and theater. Sarcey assumes that the flat surface in painting may contribute valuably to ways of understanding a dramatic realization on a three-dimensional stage, especially in the theoretical or visual permeability of the frame. Although picture frames behind the curtain were used throughout the century for tableaux vivants, it was not until 1880, claims Meisel, that "anyone thought to put a picture frame entirely around the stage" (44). Experiencing that final elimination of the forestage and framing of scenic tableaux led one contemporary to observe that "the whole has the air of a picture projected on a surface" (qtd. in Meisel), leading to a new "dreamy" relationship between spectators and the stage.

Contemporary theorists continue to imagine theater, as Heidegger would describe painting, as a "place of disclosure." Like Pirandello, Bert States imagines the essence of art as art's description of itself:

[T]he term action seems to want to refer to something inside the play, an "indwelling form," a "soul," an "order of events," etc., and so the term imitation takes on a second character as the medium in which the work presents its representation. Could we have it both ways, prior to and concurrent with, inside and outside? I do not see why not.

(5–6)

State's discussion of the body and soul of the theater, a version of what Joseph Roach calls the "complex interplay of the organic and the mechanical" (216), is an extension of the position articulated by Dumas. Marvin Carlson, arguing that theater always performs and is informed by the work of memory, goes so far as to say that "[a]ll theatrical cultures have recognized, in some form or other, this sense of something coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex" (2). The deep and complex "ghosting" (Carlson's term) is, in his own account, speculative, depending largely upon "the mind of the spectator" (13). In short, permeating the discourse of the modern theater is a notion of spirit, mind, or essence that largely disables the opposition between the mind and material reality.

Yet overcoming that opposition, which characterizes a degraded or alienated reality, implies, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer remarks, "cognitive pretensions" and an evaluative judgment (284). Art, as the
realization of spirit in form, is implicitly linked to knowledge, to power, to redemption, and, for Hegel, only in that realization is a "true" or "successful" work of art achieved. But what is excluded by this confusion of the evaluative and the descriptive? "The history of painting," remarks Samuel Beckett, "is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure" (Disjecta 145). What does it mean to say, as Beckett does, that "to be an artist is to fail"? Beckett offers not only a vital exception to the speculative theory but also a protest against it. "For others the time-abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation," says the Unnamable. "[I]n my head, which I am beginning to locate to my satisfaction, above and a little to the right, the sparks spirt [sic] and dash themselves out against the walls. And sometimes I say to myself I am in a head, it's terror makes me say it, and the longing to be in safety, surrounded on all sides by massive bone" (350). The subversion of the structure of inside and outside, noumena and phenomena, in Beckett leads not to a rejection of surface for depth but to a rejection of art's capacity to signify anything, including itself.

Beckett will recognize flatness and audience as necessary (if not essential) to both painting and drama, but if the importance of these two elements is confused in his work, it is self-consciously so. Contrary to the "deep eyes" that Perez attributed to Keaton, eyes in Beckett are without dimension, conflated with a flat universe: "Blank planes sheer white eye calm long last all gone from mind" (Lessness 8). Not only have both surfaces and eyes lost integrity, but also the "successful" overcoming of the subject-object opposition is regarded, at best, with withering irony. As we are told in How It Is, "suddenly another image the last there in the mud I say it as I hear it I see me" (28). In Beckett's drama, perhaps extending Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the world can only be perceived as always already radically indeterminate. Hugh Kenner writes that Beckett opposes overinterpretation and describes Beckett's universe as "permeated by mystery" (10). I object to the metaphor of permeation. Beckett gives us many figures that seem to epitomize what Michael Fried has called an absorptive tradition. Like the nameless character in Act without Words, they sit motionless in the center of a stage, staring at their hands, at their own navels, or, like the figure in the painterly prose piece Still,
into space. Krapp’s Last Tape concludes with a paradigmatic image: “Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.” Have these characters achieved the self-perception that Hegel calls the knowing of self-knowing? Are they seeing themselves for the first time, inwardly? That is the epistemological puzzle that Beckett seems to ask us to engage. And the conventional wisdom of critics writing very much in the Hegelian tradition is that Beckett’s work is significant because he has so brilliantly combined form and content. Such an understanding is misguided. At the very least, it is difficult to reconcile with Beckett’s famous comment that the modern artist must recognize that there is “nothing to express.”

6. Still is illustrated with three engravings and three preliminary studies by Stanley William Hayter.

7. There have been important studies in which critics have argued that Beckett achieves what Richard Begam calls “a fully perfected act of nonrepresentation or anti-expression” (8). For an excellent account of the antiexpressive aims that Beckett describes in Three Dialogues, see Daniel Albright’s Representation and Imagination. Yet Albright treats Three Dialogues as “the culmination of a long tradition of denunciations of self-expression, including Matthew Arnold’s 1853 preface” (160), a position that, in my view, Beckett would contest, especially insofar as his work is seen to extend the Romantic form-content dialectic. Moreover, Albright’s argument, like some other outstanding examples of Beckett criticism, focuses principally on a problem of language (in this case, specifically on writing) and does not adequately address the fact that Beckett is writing about painting and that important homologies exist between painting and theater. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, in their brilliant Arts of Impoverishment, read Beckett in conjunction with painter Mark Rothko and filmmaker Alain Resnais. In different forms, these three renounce art’s authority by challenging boundaries between art and the world, between subject and object, as well as those between what Beckett calls, in Three Dialogues, “representor and representee.” Beckett, Rothko, and Resnais “refuse to serve the complacency of a culture that expects art to reinforce its moral and epistemological authority” (8). However, also focusing on Beckett’s nontheatrical prose, Bersani and Dutoit practice a kind of speculative or Hegelian metaphysics. In Company, they argue, “What cannot be thought, and what thought flees from, is the identity of consciousness with itself” (68). Stanley Cavell reads Beckett as a paragon of antitheatricality, a kind of positivist who presents a literalness that subverts the tendency of his audience to read between the lines. Cavell too focuses on “the language Beckett has discovered or invented; not now its use in dialogue, but its grammar, its particular way of making sense, especially the quality it has of what I will call hidden literality. The words strew obscurities across our path and seem willfully to thwart comprehension; and then time after time we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare—totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view. Such a discovery has the effect of showing us that it is we who had been willfully uncomprehending, misleading ourselves in demanding further, or other, meaning where the meaning was nearest” (“Ending” 119–20). It must be acknowledged that Cavell proceeds, ironically perhaps, to deliver an extraordinary, midrashic
In the early novel *Murphy* the protagonist plays chess with the solipsistic Mr. Endon (*on* is Greek for “being”). Endon’s very being, the end of being, mocks the idea of depth. His eyes are “both deep-set and protuberant, one of Nature’s jokes” (248). He seems to play a game of chess (vibrates to Murphy’s “chessy eye”) but is, like the board on which he manipulates “the black,” entirely two-dimensional; the pieces have no intrinsic value but simply make patterns on the surface. Only when Murphy realizes that the patterns have no significance is he able “to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat” (246). Beckett’s fiction and drama manifest what Hayden White has called the “tendency of modernist literature to dissolve the event,” and Beckett is vitally concerned with the problem of representing history—in particular, a history that cannot be adequately remembered and whose meaning cannot be unambiguously identified. The most famous instance of that failure in both structural and characterological terms is *Waiting for Godot* (1948). “It is the anomalous nature of modernist events,” White writes, “that undermines not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of the event in general” (70).

The Holocaust has been described as the paradigmatic modernist event, the epitome of the unrepresentable. According to the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, the Holocaust resists historical explanations that seek causes and “the theological kind that seeks meaning and purpose.” In short, “one cannot comprehend [the Holocaust] but only confront and object.” Beckett is centrally concerned with

---

interpretation of *Endgame*. Citing Cavell, among others, Bersani and Dutoit remark on the “agreement among critics of quite different interests and levels of insights, of how expressive Beckett’s work is” (13). The present essay is indebted to many that have come before, but especially to Bersani, Dutoit, and Cavell.

8. Later, Murphy’s imagining of the disturbing nonflatness of Endon’s eyeballs explicitly evokes Luis Buñuel slitting the eyeball of a young woman with a razor blade in his film *Un chien andalou* (1928). Just before his death, Murphy “lay down in a tuft of soaking tuffets . . . He saw eyeballs being scraped, first any eyeballs, then Mr. Endon’s” (251). The reader may recognize the allusion, but for Murphy himself, it is only one of many fragmented images, “evoking nothing.”

9. Fackenheim is quoted in Rosenberg and Myers (41). Also recall George Steiner’s well-known remark, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason”
this problem of artistic-historical representation, the paradox that “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Disjecta 139). That problem tends to be figured, if at all, as ghostly or phantasmagoric. “The effect of the representation,” remarks White, “is to endow all events with spectral qualities. . . . The outside of events, their phenomenal aspects, and their insides, their possible meanings or significances, have been collapsed and fused. The meaning of events remains indistinguishable from their occurrence, but their occurrence is unstable, fluid, phantasmagoric” (79).

Paradoxically, the years immediately following World War II were among Beckett’s most prolific; he completed his trilogy of novels, Waiting for Godot, and several important works of art criticism between 1946 and 1950. At the same time, postwar Paris proved remarkably fruitful ground for phenomenological studies of art and the image. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre are the most famous of postwar French phenomenologists, both seeking to elide the division between body and spirit, Sartre in the concept of l’être-en-soi (the being-in-itself) and Merleau-Ponty in a theory of the subjectivity of the body. Yet virtually all thinkers in this field, in a crucial historical-rhetorical shift, directly or indirectly, departed from Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art” (1936), in which art had been understood as an expressive, indeed revelatory, site. Beckett himself refers to current attacks on Hei-

(qtd. in Lang 151). In “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” (1951), Adorno famously commented, “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.” (“Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch.”) John Felstiner provides a detailed history of this statement (242).

10. In L’Imaginaire, Sartre distinguishes between perception and imagining or imaging consciousness: “The image is an act that aims at an absent or nonexistent object in its corporeality by means of a physical or psychical content that is given not for its own sake but only as an ‘analogical representative’ of the intended object” (45). The imaging consciousness has an important moral and historical dimension in Sartre (see Flynn). For the discussion of l’être-en-soi, see Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (lxii–lxvii). In aiming to put “essences back into existence,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, “Truth does not inhabit only the ‘inner man,’ or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (xi). Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were editors of Les temps modernes (in which the article by Levinas that I’ll turn to shortly was published) in the years following the war.

11. For Heidegger’s influence on Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, see Moran 412.
Heidegger asked how we arrive at the essence of the work. His answer:

... only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting. This painting spoke. In the nearness of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be.

The artwork lets us know what shoes are in truth. ... What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. The being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being.

In 1948, responding in part to Heidegger's theory that art presents spiritual truth, Emmanuel Levinas, in "La réalité et son ombre" (Reality and Its Shadow), makes the ethical-ontological argument that art is radically *dégagé* or detached from reality and, hence, from responsibility. It occupies a dimension of evasion. And he seems to criticize Heidegger's nonempirical evaluation of the work of art. He challenges "un dogme que la fonction de l’Art consiste à exprimer et que l’expression artistique repose sur une connaissance. L’artiste dit: même le peintre, même le musicien. ... l’ineffable. ... Là où le langage commun abdique, le poème ou le tableau parle [a dogma that the function of art is to express, and that artistic expression rests on a kind of knowledge. The artist tells: the painter the same as the musician ... of the ineffable. ... Where common language abdicates, a poem or painting speaks]" (771).

On the contrary, Levinas argues, art does not *know* a particular type of reality. Art is the opposite of knowledge. The essay is clearly shaped by postwar malaise, lack of confidence in images to signify, and an almost reflexive association of images with death. In his view, art obscures, like a falling of night, an invasion of shadow (773). Heidegger sought to discover the essence of art, the spiritual truth within art’s thingly nature. His essay demonstrates the con-
tinued influence of the expressive theory of the Romantics: “It is due to art’s poetic essence that, in the midst of beings, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual” (197). Levinas explicitly disagrees that art casts itself toward us as what he calls “l’être au monde’ heideggerien” (the Heideggerian “being-in-the-world”), arguing that the subject is in the world of things as a thing itself; it is, in short, flattened: “Extériorité de l’intime” (“an exteriority of the inmost”).

But as his title alone makes clear, Levinas retains a dualistic structure, though inner and outer may be collapsed, the former, la vie intérieure, represented in phantasmatic imagery (“cette essence fantomatique”). Reality and its shadow are to be mediated ultimately by the philosopher and critic. The problem, from Beckett’s point of view, would be not only the idea that art can express anything at all but also the notion that if art and reality are disengaged, there is a space between (inter-esse) that criticism can occupy. And it is some measure of Beckett’s impact on what has become a largely agnostic cultural imaginary that those theories no longer seem tenable. Derrida would later describe Heidegger’s notion of truth in painting as an “imaginary projection.” And the rhetoric of Derrida’s critique of Heidegger marks the distance traveled by aesthetic theorists since 1936. “Why always say of a painting that it renders, that it restitutes?” Derrida asks: “to discharge a more or less ghostly debt, restitute the shoes” (Truth 258). But such rendering, such restitution is now impossible:

[An army of ghosts are demanding their shoes. Ghosts up in arms, an immense tide of deportees searching for their names. If you want to go to this theatre, here’s the road of affect: the bottomless memory of a dis-possession, an expropriation, a despoilment. And there are tons of shoes piled up there, pairs mixed up and lost.

(329–31)

The piles of shoes at Auschwitz, an image made famous in photographs and newsreels, are, of course, evoked. One thinks too of

12. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when piles of shoes became an iconic image of the Holocaust. Photographs of piles of shoes, among other remains, were taken upon liberation of the camps by different Allied forces. These liberation photographs were shown at the Nuremberg trials, as well as appearing in newsreel footage shown in Europe.
the pair of boots onstage as the curtain rises on the second act of Waiting for Godot: "Estragon's boots front center, heels together, toes splayed" (37)—but are they Estragon's? Depth in Derrida's passage is bottomless and, so, unknowable; it is not possible to be sure of internal and external coherence or intelligibility. The problem of defining a frame (or a stage set) is radical; experience cannot be comprehended.13

In Endgame, Clov ridicules Hamm for thinking that he "saw inside [his] breast," leading to what in another age would have been called a spiritual crisis. "What's happening?" Hamm cries. But Hamm's now absurd tendency to fetishize events, to theatricalize, and, beneath it all, his desire to recognize in order to mourn is continually subverted. "We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?" he asks, wishfully (32). "Mean something!" Clov famously replies. "You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!" (33). In "Modern Theater Does Not Take (a) Place," Julia Kristeva eloquently captures this sense of postwar debility: "Since no set or interplay of sets is able to hold up any longer faced with the crises of State, religion and family, it is impossible to prefer a discourse—to play out a discourse—on the basis of a scene, sign of recognition, which would provide for the actor's and audience's recognition of themselves in the same Author" (131). My aim, in citing Levinas, Derrida, and Kristeva, is to historicize the rhetoric

and the United States. At the war's end, makeshift memorials were set up at camps in Poland (for instance, at Majdanek and Auschwitz); shoes and other material objects (prison uniforms, luggage, eyeglasses, etcetera) were left in place to serve as the first memorials to those who perished. See Young 124, 132. Shoes were also a popular symbol among Jewish writers during the war. Abraham Sutzkever, the great Yiddish poet, wrote a poem entitled "A Wagon of Shoes" in the Vilna ghetto in 1943: "I must not ask you whose, / My heart, it skips a beat: / Tell me the truth, oh, shoes, / Where disappeared the feet?" (151). Ellen Carol Jones's "Empty Shoes" chronicles the image of the "empty" shoes of Holocaust victims as presented in post-Holocaust art, literature, and memorials. Ziva Amishai-Maisels discusses the use of "relics" such as shoes in Holocaust-related art, citing in particular a 1962 painting by Marc Klionsky entitled "Pile of Shoes." I am deeply indebted to Rona Sheramy for sharing with me her wide-ranging knowledge of Holocaust history.

13. Responding to what he calls the "duel" between Meyer Shapiro and Heidegger, Derrida notes: "All of you seem too sure of what you call internal description. And the external never remains outside. What's at stake here is a decision about the frame, about what separates the internal from the external, with a border which is itself double in its trait, and joins together what it splits" (Truth 331).
of surface, depth, frame, specter, recognition, even of meaning, and
to suggest, at least in some fields of discourse, a paradigm shift in
the use of those terms. For Beckett, to discuss the importance of
the frame itself, the boundary by which an entity may be defined, is
both pretentious and dishonest. For the frame implies a bracketed
situation, a subject-object relation, and the validity of a perspective
that conceals and reveals. But, as Beckett writes, “All that should
concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself,
as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalid-
ity” (Disjecta 145). The flatness of the canvas, itself a supposed
frame between the viewer and what is within the picture, cannot
be overcome: “For what is this coloured plane, that was not there
before.” It is not simply that interior and exterior, subject and ob-
ject, have lost their integrity, or that the frame has become radically
ambiguous, but further, Beckett shows, it becomes absurd to dis-
cuss that which is within.

One modernist reaction to the theory that art has an essence to
disclose, most famously articulated by Clement Greenberg, de-
clares that depth is an illusion and that the being of art is in the
thing itself. Greenberg argues that modernist painting uniquely ori-
ents itself to the “ineluctable flatness of the surface” (87). A distin-
guishing feature of such painting is its insistence on the artifice of
its own undertaking. Despite advancing such a definition, how-
ever, Greenberg acknowledges the limits of a painting’s capacity
to refer exclusively to its own flatness. Thus he discovers a new
sort of perspective: a “kind of third dimension” that is no longer a
function of space but is purely optical. “The flatness toward which
Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness,” he
writes. “The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no
longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l’oeil, but it does and
must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface de-
stroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations of a Mondrian still
suggest a kind of third dimension” (90). Greenberg claims that the
surface of painting takes the viewer into an illusion of depth but
that depth is not there. In short, painting lies, unless what it refers
to is itself. Beckett ultimately says, yes, art lies, but the claim is
not radical enough because art itself is a lie. You cannot deny art
referentiality and then say that art refers to itself. Beckett challenges
the very being of art, yet his drama has been interpreted as assuming what amounts to Greenberg's nonrepresentational, objectivist goal, although this position amounts to little more than an extension of the Romantic form-content dialectic. Maurice Valency, for instance, says, "Beckett represents a very advanced stage of nineteenth-century symbolism, perhaps its terminal aspect, the point at which the symbol symbolizes only itself, and poetry ceases to convey anything" (389).14

If being is not in the art itself, then it is in the eye of the beholder. Beckett recognizes this position as an inevitable consequence of the human desire for meaning. As Michael Fried would later write in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," "The universal power of any mark to suggest something like depth belongs not so much to the art of painting as to the eye itself" (Art 78). In Film, Beckett depicts an object fleeing from such an eye. Beginning with George Berkeley's esse est percipi, Beckett will show that, if the artist is honest, he will strive to avoid not just percipi but also esse. "[C]easing to be, I ceased to see," says the Unnamable. "Delicious instant truly" (340).

In his 1948 essay "Peintres de l'empêchement" Beckett had named and admired the two positions I have attributed to Greenberg and Fried. He called them "l'empêchement-objet" (object obstacle) and "l'empêchement-œil" (eye obstacle):

> Car que reste-t-il de représentable si l'essence de l'objet est de se dérober à la représentation?

> Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade. Elles prendront l'une ou l'autre de deux dormes, selon le sujet.

> L'un [sorte d'artiste] dira: Je ne peux voir l'objet, pour le représenter, parce qu'il est ce qu'il est. L'autre: Je ne peux voir l'objet, pour le représenter, parce que je suis ce que je suis.

[For what remains to represent if the essence of the object evades representation?]

14. Daniel Albright also links Beckett to nineteenth-century symbolism, invoking Beckett's own essay on Proust, in which Beckett uses the term "autosymbolism" (169). It is problematic, however, to use Beckett's early essay on another writer to define the aims of his own, mature work, unless one were to say, following Harold Bloom, that Beckett misreads Proust "so as to clear imaginative space for [himself]" (5). Beckett had written: "For Proust the object may be a living symbol, but a symbol of itself. The symbolism of Baudelaire has become the autosymbolism of Proust" (Proust 60).
Beckett both denies art the ability to represent anything, including itself, and exposes the perceiver dramatizing himself in the act of perception. The paintings of Geer and Bram van Velde (the subjects of the essay) analyze nullity ("un état de privation"). The first kind of artist approaches privation from the outside ("du dehors"), the second from the inside ("du dedans"). Richard Begam argues that, for Beckett, the van Veldes "illustrate the coming asunder of this [object-subject] dialectic" (110), and a turning away from conventional subject-object categories is characteristic of much of Beckett’s art criticism. Yet an unmistakable ambivalence in the piece, a layering of contradictions, makes it difficult to assign a philosophically consistent position to Beckett:

La résolution s’obtient chez l’un par l’abandon du poids, de la densité, de la solidité, par un déchirement de tout ce qui gâche l’espace, arrête la lumière, par l’engloutissement du dehors sous les conditions du dehors.
Chez l’autre parmi les masses inébranlables d’un être écarté, enfermé et rentré pour toujours en lui-même, sans traces, sans air, cyclopéen, aux bref éclairs, aux couleurs du spectre du noir.

[The resolution is obtained, on the one hand, by abandoning (the object as a thing of) weight, density, solidity, by casting aside all that wastes or takes up space, stops or blocks the light, by the swallowing up of the outside under the conditions of the outside. On the other, by admitting that the object is relegated to a hermit’s stash, locked up and buried for always in itself, without traces, without air, cyclopean, in short flashes, in the colors of the shade of blackness.]

If we blame res extensa (Descartes’s term for extended space) for objects’ nonrepresentability, we accuse the outside of swallowing up those things that are external to us under conditions of externality. Thus Beckett reverses Heidegger’s epiphanic notion of unconcealment, rendering those things inaccessible to representation which,
presumably, would corrupt their externality by bringing them into res cogitans and thus effacing them in their true nature, losing them instead of representing them. On the other hand, the fault for objects’ nonrepresentability might lie within res cogitans itself.\footnote{I am indebted to Jonathan Warren for helping me to translate and to understand Beckett’s essay.}

Yet form and content collapse upon one another in the passage, and Beckett’s position, refracted through metaphor upon metaphor, is characteristically indeterminate. His en lui-même ought to evoke but is not equivalent to Sartre’s l’en soi, for though it leaves no trace, being appears as the spectre du noir, a haunting yet purposely indefinite image (indeed, a nonimage). The very notion of résolution that drives the passage is contradicted in the following paragraph by the sense of “un dévoilement sans fin” (an unveiling without end). Unveiled (in another mixed metaphor) is the hard flatness of art itself, “cellule peinte sur la pierre de la cellule,” a cell-colored paint on the stone of the cell. In a similar, overtly purgatorial image, penned around the same time, Molloy would imagine himself “flattened. . . . against a rock the same colour as myself, that is grey. . . . the rock in the shadow of which I crouched like Belaqua” (Molloy 10). Art does not draw attention to itself, though its medium (the paint) may be said to represent flatness of the support (the cyclopean stones of the prison wall). The paradoxical noncolor of color, the shades of black, indicates the radical indeterminacy not only of essence but also of existence. But the overdetermined metaphor (cellule), the wretched sense of imprisonment by this art d’incarcération, asserts again the notion that interiority is the basis for the cognition of being, if not for being itself.

In his final monologue in Endgame, Clov seems to imagine himself as the painter-engraver whom Hamm had earlier described dragging to the window in the asylum (“I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter— and engraver” [44]). As such, Clov tellingly returns to Beckett’s metaphor of the cell: “I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust” (81). In the action that follows, Clov does not, in fact, open the door and go outside. Perhaps “the earth is extinguished, though I never
saw it lit.” The sense of frustration that pervades Beckett’s art indicates a combination of bitterness and resignation. “How little one is at one with oneself, good God,” complains Molloy. “I who prided myself on being a sensible man, cold as crystal and as free from spurious depth” (113). The nonintegral one cannot think entirely outside of the Cartesian paradigm or avoid altogether a spiritual sense of selves but imagines instead a world of contradictions: dead images, spectres du noir, a flat reality, a nonreflective surface that subverts or evades the specular nature of philosophical reflection. Derrida has called this surface “the tain of the mirror,” an image with which Beckett was familiar even in 1948, when he contributed “Peintres de l’empêchement” to the journal Derrière le miroir.16 It is to the actual surfaces, the media themselves, that I now turn, to consider if, in the absence of reflection, there remains nothing to be done.

Endgame represents the first key figuration of the flatness of a picture in Beckett’s dramatic work. The play begins with the stage directions “Bare interior. . . . Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture.” The apparent emphasis, in fact, priority, given to interiority has encouraged readings of the play as a dramatization of human consciousness. The theatrical space is the inside of a skull, and Hamm, who is located in precisely the center of that space, frequently gives voice to the illusion of human interiority: “There’s something dripping in my head” (18); “Last night I saw inside my breast” (32). The windows are read as eyes that implicitly draw the spectators deeper into the stage space and tempt the viewer with a seeming promise of even further interiority. But the painting immediately contradicts such a reading. The one overt ref-

16. “La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon,” also from 1948, is a more developed version of “Peintres de l’empêchement”; both reject conventional understandings of subject-object relations. The former also supplies a crucial anecdote on the theme of artistic making to Endgame. As for the rejection of philosophical reflection, Derrida is careful to explain that dissemination is written on the back of the mirror, “Not on its inverted specter.” I do not want simply to conflate Beckett’s and Derrida’s images, yet it must be stressed that Beckett’s spectre is also importantly not a specter in any spiritual or reflective sense. Again, my aim is, at least in part, to historicize the trope of ghosts that haunts the oeuvres of both Beckett and Derrida. See Derrida, Dissemination 33.
erence in the play to the painter is to a man incapable of seeing in the way the windows seem to encourage. "I used to go and see him, in the asylum," says Hamm. "I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! . . . He'd snatch his hand away and go back to his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes" (44). The story may be inconclusive on the subject of visibility, perspective, and illusion. But there are few ways better to insist upon the utter flatness of the picture surface than by hanging it picture side to the wall.

In short, Beckett moves beyond a simple schematization of windows signifying depth and the reversed painting signifying the impossibility of insight and here ironizes the painting as a metaphor itself for art. It is, of course, still recognizably a picture when it faces the wall, but the image denies what Stanton Garner sees as implicit in the visual field of Beckett's plays, namely the animation of the creative eye, a "modern dynamism" and a consequent "visual poetics" ("Visual Field" 350-51). One might note too that when the painting is replaced in the end by the alarm clock, Beckett teaches us to think in terms of another kind of flatness, denying, in effect, temporal perspective or dimension. In Endgame, time has no depth, no sense of now / here, then / there. The only use made of the clock before it is hung in place of the painting has been not to tell time but to set off its deafening alarm. Hamm and Clov listen appreciatively: "The end is terrific!" says Clov. Hamm replies, "I prefer the middle." To use the spatial metaphor, Endgame flattens time through the conjunction of clock and painting.  

17. Garner effectively calls attention to "the aesthetic surface of visual abstraction" in Beckett and the way Beckett "undermines the effect of depth, rendering the third dimension of his performance images unstable" (Bodied Spaces 63, 74). However, Garner is not primarily interested in the fact of flatness or in flatness as a motif but, following Merleau-Ponty and art historians such as Rudolf Arnheim, in the interaction of the image and the intelligent eye. To my mind, the project of reading Beckett through the lens of individual philosophers is always in danger of oversimplifying. Though both Garner and, more recently, Lois Oppenheim note striking parallels in the works of Beckett and Merleau-Ponty, Beckett's complexity as an artist seems reduced in the process.

18. Beckett is responding here to an old theoretical debate about the temporality of "nonkinetic" arts. Like Joyce, in both Stephen's aesthetic theory in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and the "Proteus" chapter of Ulysses, Beckett can be read against G. E.
In *Proust*, a work organized around the binary opposition of surface and depth, Beckett had explicitly described moments of temporal flatness:

The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. . . . What is common to present and past is more essential than either taken separately. Reality, whether approached imaginatively or empirically, remains a surface, hermetic. Imagination, applied—a priori—to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real. . . . the experience is at once imaginative and empirical.

(55–56)

In Proust, faced with a flat reality, the imagination applies to or conjures, a priori, what is absent, in effect giving depth to flatness. Such recognition of flatness marks exceptional, indeed mystical, moments in Proust, whose world, Beckett writes, is hoisted from a “deep source,” by the “diver” called “involuntary memory” (19). “The artist,” claimed the young Beckett, “does not deal in surfaces. . . . Because the only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth. The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction” (46–47). Beckett’s art will tend toward contraction, but his aim, in contrast to what he takes to be that of Proust, will be to situate the self, as Neary, in *Murphy*, says of Miss Dwyer, at “one with the ground against which she so prettily figured.” Although “Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without” (107; emphasis added), we are told by Neary in the novel’s opening pages that, in fact, “all life is figure and ground” (4).

There is another way to reject the illusion of perspective and to stress the flatness of a painting even more effective than turning its face to the wall. In *Film*, O [object], disturbed by a print of God the Father pinned to the wall of his room, “tears print from wall, tears it in four, throws down the pieces and grinds them under-

---

foot” (167). Three features of this action are crucial. First, the negation of an idea of art whose content is divine is an obvious response to a theological ontology that connects a sensuous to a spiritual experience of art, linking the sacred and the secular, or man-made. O tears God’s picture to pieces. Second, material tearing of the print implies that the being of the painting is negated with the destruction not of what the print represents but of the very flatness of the support, the paper itself. The print is also a mechanical reproduction of a painting and, itself, lacking the textured surface that is slightly less flat in the “original” painting. And this point leads to Beckett’s brilliance in what I take to be a third crucial point, namely that if the tearing of the print provokes questions about the medium or the physical reality of art, then the spectator in the cinema must wonder, What is film? Walter Benjamin argues that the mechanical reproduction effaces the possibility of the original, and similarly in Beckett the tearing up of the reproduction with its concomitant implication of a destruction of God iterates in action the only thing that reproduction can ever accomplish in principle—the annihilation of the original.

In the case of the print in Film, the original may be not only painting but godhead itself. Well, we can’t get to the original of God through print or painting because the bastard doesn’t exist. Beckett seems to indicate by analogy that we can’t get to the original of O either, for the same reason. But in the case of the latter the viewer can only sit, like O (perhaps also zero), and impotently contemplate flatness, in the play of light upon the screen, that is ultimate and non-representational.19 The flatness of Film denies not only the presentness of a reality beyond or even in the surface of the silver screen but also our presentness to it. “The screen is not a support, not like a canvas,”

19. Stanley Cavell writes: “[I]t is the nature of hearing that what is heard comes from someplace, whereas what you can see you can look at. It is why sounds are warnings, or calls; it is why our access to another world is normally through voices from it; and why a man can be spoken to by God and survive, but not if he sees God, in which case he is no longer in this world. Whereas we are not accustomed to seeing things that are invisible, or not present to us, not present with us; or we are not accustomed to acknowledging that we do (except for dreams). Yet this seems, ontologically, to be what is happening when we look at a photograph: we see things that are not present” (Cavell, World 18). Beckett’s Film, of course, is silent, and he seems to have realized precisely the point that Cavell is making and to be responding to it.
observes Stanley Cavell. "[T]here is nothing to support, that way. It holds a projection, as light as light. A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds—that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me" (World 24). An obvious feature of all movies is that audiences are never present to the performance of the actors. In this case the explicit and radical isolation of O does not lead to the Cartesian affirmation of cogito but to the nothing which is that rare postnatal treat.

Set in 1929, Film refers to and inverts the iconography of Charles Chaplin’s Modern Times (Chaplin was Beckett’s first choice for the role of O). The flatness of Film precludes the spiritual dimension of Modern Times that Chaplin described in Bergsonian rhetoric, when in a note he characterized the Tramp and the Waif as “The only two live spirits in a world of automatons. They really live. Both have an eternal spirit of youth... We are spiritually free” (qtd. in Robinson 459). The conclusion of Film rejects the illusion of depth epitomized by the gamine and Little Tramp’s walking away from the camera down a limitless road into a sunset, substituting O rocking back and forth—moving but going nowhere. The undermining of the myth of perspective makes strange not only significant relations between objects within the work but also between the work of art and the spectator. O [object] and E [eye] are ultimately shown to be identical.

In representing the experience of perception, Beckett claims to encounter “a problem of images which [he] cannot solve without technical help” (Film 163). The problem itself is that of the mobility of the perceiving eye or consciousness. He seeks to convey the fundamental nature of the problem of self-perception. The opening directions read:

Esse est percipi.

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception.

No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.

The problem of self-perception is conveyed through the structure of the action. Film is divided into three parts, like many earlier...
plays dealing with the problem of subjectivity (Strindberg’s *Ghost Sonata*, for instance, which Roger Blin directed and Beckett saw at the Gaîté-Montparnasse in 1949), taking the central character and the viewer from (1) the street, to (2) the stairs, to (3) the room. O [object] moves, like Strindberg’s Student or like Hamlet, progressively into deeper architectural spaces. He avoids all eyes—from God’s in the print to his own in a mirror—that might confirm his own being. He covers a mirror with a rug to avoid the reflection. But if self-perception (being) will come, even if unsought, in the nonvisible interior of the body, Beckett attaches no truth value to it. O falls into a doze: “E’s gaze pierces the sleep, O starts awake, stares up at E. Patch over O’s left eye now seen for the first time.” Has O been dreaming? Beckett has emphasized the “unreal quality” of the film already. Can one achieve self-perception in the midst of a dream? Descartes was troubled by just such dreams. Does the patch on his eye signify that he has been imagining vision insufficiently, as merely physical, and that, like Oedipus, he recognizes, though partially blind, that he can really see at last? The final image of O is dark and unsatisfying: “He sits, bowed forward, his head in his hands, gently rocking. Hold it as the rocking dies down.” The teleological structure that *Film* explicitly sets out in the beginning comes to rest with the rocking chair, though it does not completely rest, for this is a *motion* picture.

If the Romantics replaced the mirror with the lamp, Beckett denies the lamp’s efficacy. “A dim lamp was all I had been given,” complains Molloy, “and patience without end to shine it on the empty shadows. I was a solid in the midst of other solids” (108). In his later work, Beckett effectively moves beyond the absorption/theatricality opposition because he does not just pretend to reject the audience. He does reject it. And he rejects the Romantic theory of organic form that remains central to so much modernist art and critical theory. As Frank Kermode put it, “Forms are the food of Faith; they are symbols of another order of truth that can never be wholly private because . . . they are the prime example of that complete fusion of form and meaning, spirit and body, which also characterizes the image of art” (47). Beckett is largely bored by the Romantic optimism of modern artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, who proclaims, “That is beautiful which is produced by internal necessity, which springs from the soul” (75). In *Three Dialogues*, Beckett
mocks “the artist obsessed with his expressive vocation . . . and the
every man his own wife experiments of the spiritual Kandinsky”
(144). Such experiments are just another instance of the same old
history of painting, “the history of its attempts to escape from this
sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclu-
sive relations between representer and representee” (145). To
Hamm’s brutal “Neither gone nor dead?” Clav replies for all of
Beckett’s characters: “In spirit only.”

The absence or death of the spirit is an epistemological and, spe-
cifically, a visual problem for Beckett. It may seem paradoxical, there-
fore, that ghosts figure so prominently in his oeuvre, for ghosts imply
not the transcendence but the immanence of the spirit. The body dies.
The spirit lives. Yet Beckett’s ghostly work resists imputation of life
to the Hegelian mind (geist) as the desperate last gasp of the imagin-
ing (and the imaginary) subject. Beckett’s being has reached a dead-
end (End-on). In “Imagination Dead Imagine,” the second-person
subject is told, “Go back out, a plain rotunda, all white in the white-
ness, go back in, rap, solid throughout . . . The light that makes all
so white no visible source, all shines with the same white shine,
ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow” (First Love 63). The images
of biologically living woman and man lying back to back on the
ground are discovered: “The bodies seem whole and in fairly good
condition, to judge by the surfaces exposed to view” (66). But like
the image, life itself has no clear source and is indistinguishable from
the multiple surfaces on which it can scarcely be said to appear: “No,
life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere.” Nothing is more real
than nothing. Their breaths mist the surface of a mirror, but there is
no reflection of them in it. The mirror suggests not consciousness but
the absence of any being other than the biological, the dead image.

Soon after making Film, Beckett was in Stuttgart to direct Eh Joe
(1966) for television. Nancy Illig reports, “Beckett came in one morn-
ing and said, ‘Now we’ll make it all dead,’ and this is how by pro-
gressive reduction we ended up with the hammering staccato of a
ghost’s voice” (26). The flattening (hammering) of the voice is, she
implies, what makes it dead. Yet the drama draws upon the old
trope, the inside of a man’s head. It appears to be another Cartesian
drama: alone in his room, Joe eliminates all external stimuli and lis-
tens to the voice in his head. However, the voice is not his own, and
in this way Beckett subverts the paradigmatic inside-outside struc-
tured. Woman’s voice: “You know that penny farthing hell you call your mind. . . . That’s where you think this is coming from, don’t you?” (Collected Shorter Plays 202). The question (like the refrain, “Eh Joe?”) is more than rhetorical, but no answer is given. “Behind the eyes,” over the years, Joe has been committing murder, “[t]hrottling the dead in his head” (203). What will happen when “[a]ll your dead [are] dead” (204) and there is “[n]ot another soul to still” (203)? The play does not simply replace the cogito with cogitas or cogita. Thinking itself, it becomes increasingly clear, is associated with the illusions generated by the television set and the television viewer’s helpless exclusion from and by the medium. The play concludes with the voice dropping to a whisper, “[. . . almost inaudible except words in italics.] All right. . . . You’ve had the best. . . . Now imagine . . . .”

Once again, Beckett employs three movements to suggest progressively deeper states of interiority or absorption. Joe is first seen by the camera, from behind, sitting on the edge of a bed. He gets up, opens the window, and looks out. Then he closes the window. He repeats the action with a cupboard. He closes the cupboard. Then he closes his eyes, and the camera moves in toward his face. The following “interior” monologue is interrupted briefly nine times; during each interruption the camera moves a few inches closer to Joe’s face. The voice is that of a female ghost, and like the ghosts of Renaissance tragedy, she is a figure of revenge. But the play does not represent the action of a revenge drama. The play does not even represent, as does Ibsen’s Ghosts, which has an analogous final tableau, a frustrated intersubjectivity or the progressive deterioration of subjectivity. Instead, by the manipulation of camera, voiceless face, and faceless voice, Eh Joe depicts the fact of impenetrability figured in the fundamentally visual imperative “imagine.”

The association of flatness with death is a crucial feature of Beckett’s short prose of the 1960s, when his own vision was seriously deteriorating. James Knowlson argues that texts such as “Imagination Dead Imagine” and The Lost Ones “owe a lot to [Beckett’s] recent work in film and television”: “A determined effort is made to

20. The television is conventionally figured as a box in which viewers are “absorbed.” A popular fantasy is that scenario in which ghosts in the machine draw the viewer into the television itself, as in Steven Spielberg’s Poltergeist (1982).
‘see’ the entire structure and organization of the cylinder and to
describe the workings of the ‘abode’ as precisely as the ‘eye of the
mind’ (or as the lens of a camera) will allow” (476). But the lost
ones exist “inside a flattened cylinder” (7; emphasis added). The
problem of vision is paradoxically both overly metaphysical and
overly physical. For instance, “None looks within himself where
none can be. . . . They may stray unseeing through the throng indis-
tinguishable to the eye of flesh from the still unrelenting. . . . They
crawl blindly in the tunnels in search of nothing” (30). Those who
are sedentary “devouring with their eyes in heads dead still each
body as it passes by. Standing or sitting they cleave to the wall all
but one in the arena stricken in the midst of the fevering. . . . Some
come to rest from time to time all but the unceasing eyes” (30–33).

In his German Diaries (notebook 5, 14 Feb. 1937), Beckett com-
mented on Caspar David Friedrich’s painting Two Men Observing
the Moon: “pleasant predilection for 2 tiny languid men in his land-
scape, that is the only kind of romantic still tolerable, the bémolisé.”
In a typically brilliant double entendre, Beckett employs the French
musical term bémol (flat) to describe Friedrichs’s painting. One
could read the remark as a mixed metaphor by which the subject of
the painting is transposed to a minor key. However, such a reading
would miss the synesthetic importance of the pun—the emphasis
on pictorial flatness—and Beckett’s ambivalence in regard to the
Romantic subject. The flatness denoted by bémolisé applied to Ro-
mantic painting indicates some measure of the complexity and im-
portance of Beckett’s late “play for television,” Ghost Trio (1975).
In a letter written in 1937, Beckett had imagined that a new literary
genre could realize the “tonal surface” of the “large black pauses”
in Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, “connecting unfathomable
abysses of silence” (qtd. in Harvey 433–34). The title of the televi-
sion play, forty years later, explicitly refers to Beethoven’s piano
trio in three movements, only the second of which (the Largo) is
flattened, or in a minor key; it is that movement which gives the
trio its ghostly name. The music for Beckett’s Ghost Trio is drawn
solely from the Largo.

Ghost Trio seemed to Beckett a recapitulation, in short, of all his
major work. In a letter to Con Leventhal he wrote that he had “got
down first corpse of TV piece. All the old ghosts. Godot and Eh Joe
over infinity. Only remains to bring it to life” (qtd. in Knowlson 548). Even in a note, the notion of framing, here through quantita-
tive analysis (“over infinity”), is exploded. *Ghost Trio* may be a
culmination or an extension of the ghost motif, but it is not a re-
presentation. Beckett places his oeuvre in the context of ghost watch-
ing, and it is possible to understand ghost watching better in the
context of his oeuvre. (With . . . *but the clouds . . .* and *Not I*, *Ghost
Trio* was later featured in a three-part program organized by the
BBC called “Shades.”) In this television drama, the “figure” (F),
another man in a room, or, as we are told by a voice, “the familiar
chamber,” appears torn between the inner and the outer world. He
seems drawn to thresholds, creaking open the window or the door,
between the unknown without and the incommensurable privacy
of his own interior. At the end of the third movement a boy comes
to him, perhaps the same as came to Vladimir at the end of *Waiting
for Godot*, with the same bad news.

*Cut to near shot of small boy full length in corridor before open door. Dressed
in black oilskin with hood glistening with rain. White face raised to invisible F.
5 seconds. Boy shakes head faintly. Face still, raised. 5 seconds. Boy shakes head
again. Face still, raised. 5 seconds. Boy turns and goes. Sound of receding steps.
Register from the same position his slow recession till he vanishes in dark at end
of corridor. 5 seconds on empty corridor.*

The ghost, it appears, like Godot before her, will not appear to-
night, except as depicted renunciation, postponement, or denial.
The rain on the boy’s oilskin suggests a distinct outside with a dif-
fferent environment from that of the inside. The slow recession and
long view of the corridor obviously represent depth and perspec-
tive. But, to quote the female voice (V), which, like that in *Eh Joe*,
radically complicates the Cartesian *me cogitare*, “Forgive my stating
the obvious. [Pause.] Now look closer. [Pause.] Floor” (*Collected
Shorter Plays* 248).

*Contained in a box smaller than a stage, indeed closer in size to
the head of an individual spectator, the television drama gives the
illusion of a more private space than that of any theater. The “small
box,” Enoch Brater remarks, “is a more congenial metaphor [than
the movie screen] for being inside someone’s head.” The specta-
tor's vision is entirely shaped by both the limitations and the mobility of a camera that, as Beckett made explicit in Film, is not just a prosthetic but a pretend eye. Here too the camera has three positions (labeled A, B, C) that mark a progression inward. Brater argues that in the television dramas, "Beckett poeticizes the story of a mind turned inward upon itself" (86); "The great emphasis placed on repeated images allows us to discover the hidden poetry in the poorest objects . . . the human quality located in the images themselves" (87). But Beckett again challenges the notion that an object or event can have an observable meaning, that the selection of important details can be anything but arbitrary, and, consequently, that the framing or structuring of an action can indicate anything but its own evanescence. This television drama, in 1975, is an astonishingly subtle treatment of, among other things, the problematic status of the medium itself. Despite the precision and repetition made possible by the technology, the television camera cannot, as Michael Turits wrote of media coverage of the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster, "reconstruct the too brief event as a visually intelligible accident" (34). Beckett had anticipated this problem in Murphy fifty years earlier, when Neary had pictured Miss Dwyer, "The face . . . or system of faces, against the big blooming buzzing confusion" (4). Ghost Trio does not present the viewer with the realism that one expects of the conventional television drama, though it has elements of the living-room set, with its exterior door stage right. And the technological innovation of television's capacity to replay from different camera angles does not clarify or define the action. The drama presents us not with the essence of the object or event but with the conditions of evasion.

Returning to concepts articulated in "Peintres de l'empêchement," Ghost Trio evokes both the outside swallowed up under conditions of the outside and the inside, "locked up and buried for always in itself, without traces, without air, cyclopean, in short flashes, in the colors of the shade of blackness." The spectator is not simply given the "familiar chamber" but is instructed in a mode of looking. After the initial fade up to a general view of the room, which lasts ten seconds, the invisible V delivers the following flat monologue:

This opening (and only) monologue is both disconnected from the embodied figure who is seen and concerned centrally with defining the space of the action and its boundaries, the conditions of vision, and the ghostly indeterminacy of lighting and shade. Yet each close-up—of floor, wall, door, window ("an opaque sheet of glass"), pallet—is the same: "Smooth grey rectangle 0.70 m. x 1.50 m. [or, in one slight variation, 2 m.]." V insists on the identity not only of every surface but also of every image: "Having seen that specimen of floor you have seen it all. Wall." Thus the "obvious" is only obviously ironic if we fail to recognize the tendency to see what is not there, the impulse to imagine. Shades that admit no distinction give way to images of flatness. And every surface provokes the radical problem of what it means to know: "Knowing this, the kind of wall . . . The kind of floor . . . Look again. . . . Door. . . . Window." These instructions, with the instant replay enabled by the television camera, are repeated until the movement ends with an evocation of so many of Beckett's figures, but specifically of Krapp; the camera moves in on the seated figure, "head bowed," clutching a cassette.

The figure is apparently waiting for a ghost, but he also has ghostly qualities himself. If the outer world, from which visual and aural images may come, is radically uncertain, so is the inner world, the mental tableau. Both the room and F are composed of opaque, nonreflective surfaces. To suggest an analogy between the room and the self, the drama compels the spectator to change perspectives. The second movement opens with the voice's indeterminate instruction: "He will now think he hears her." The voice has shifted from the second person (in the first act) to the third, indicating a further
degree of alienation from F. It is impossible for the spectator to verify that F, in fact, hears anything. V's indeterminacy undermines the metaphor of interiority, just as Molloy had commented: “Every time I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others more or less articulate sounds, I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace” (88).

Richard Begam makes a Derridean argument about Molloy that may contribute valuably to our reading of Ghost Trio. Self-reflection or self-mirroring, he suggests, implies an identity between subject and object, but pure consciousness eludes our cognitive grasp. There is no “original”; the object is always already a mirrored image. Thus in Molloy (which is structured on dual narratives) inside becomes outside. Begam notes Beckett’s frequent interest in the “dark glass” motif of 1 Corinthians (“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known”), a glass in which “we observe ourselves to be identical yet different” (103). The “dark glass” epitomizes différence, in Begam’s view, a “principle of opposition and identity” (103), or what he elsewhere calls a “radical liminality” (83). Yet the Derridean reading may be overextended. Does Molloy, or does F, exist inter-esse? Is F, on the other hand, like Endon, a solipsist? I wish to propose what may be a simpler reading of the mirror image in Molloy and Ghost Trio, one that denies any space-between and, instead, undermines subjectivity by asserting a kind of radical positivism, if not Protestantism. The second narrator in Molloy, Moran, tells us: “I lay down and looked at my reflection, then I washed my face and hands. I waited for my image to come back, I watched it as it trembled towards an ever increasing likeness. Now and then a drop, falling from my face, shattered it again. I did not see a soul all day” (145). Here the tenuous, unstable image appears on the surface of the water; the face is on the water and the water is on the face. Yet in a playful insertion of the idiom (“I did not see a soul all day”), depth and the self are simultaneously denied; here we recognize what Stanley Cavell calls Beckett’s “hidden literality.” What is presented is not the end of a dialectic but a rejection of the dialectical imagination altogether.
F seems torn between static self-absorption and the exterior, if no less imaginary world of interpersonal action (for example, when he thinks he hears her, F “raises head sharply”). Knowlson claims that the figure is “poised midway between two worlds.” The insufficiency of this reading is indicated by the mirror that appears in the second and third movements of Ghost Trio, a “[s]mall grey rectangle . . . against larger rectangle of wall.” The stage directions instruct, “close-up of mirror reflecting nothing” (253). The repeated trips to the margins of the visible space, to the door and window, with the dramatic enhancement of dynamic shifts in the Beethoven sonata that is playing all the while, are increasingly indeterminate and frustrating:

III.8. [a refrain of the action from II.10] Crescendo creak of door opening. Near shot . . . of stool, cassette, F with right ear to door. 5 seconds.
III.9. Cut to view of corridor seen from door. . . . Far end in darkness. 5 seconds.
III.10. Cut back to near shot . . . of stool, cassette, F standing irresolute, door. 5 seconds.

(252)

Finally the knock comes faintly, and a boy appears whose black oilskin glistens with rain, vividly evoking the exterior but invisible world. He faintly shakes his head and departs, and the camera pans back to the figure. Has he achieved some recognition? Is he resigned? Or will he, like Vladimir, perform the same fruitless actions again tomorrow?

It is crucial to guard against totalizing claims about Beckett. As Beckett himself had written of Joyce, “His position is in no way a philosophical one,” though it may be better understood in relation to the writings of philosophers (Disjecta 22). After all, if Beckett rejects key aspects of Romantic philosophy, he is also deeply indebted to Romantic philosophers, painters, and composers. A radical ambivalence pervades his œuvre, built, as it is, upon the quicksand of constant epistemological anxiety and disappointment. Confronted by an unforgivingly flat world, we persist in imagining important depths: “Seen from below the wall presents an unbroken surface all the way round and up to the ceiling. And yet its upper half is riddled with niches. This paradox is explained by the levelling effect of the dim omnipresent light” (Lost Ones 55). The key
words in this passage are “riddled,” “paradox,” and “levelling.” The first returns us to Oedipus, the great riddle-solver, who goes blind but learns to know himself. The “paradox” is not apparent but, in being asserted by the eerily objective (even scientific) narrator, comes into being as a problem of perception. And “levelling” is again a visual reality, caused by the grey half-light. Figures are “aghast at such depths of opacity” (Malone Dies 282), to capture the paradox most succinctly. Impelled to imagine but tormented by imagination, Beckett’s characters, like O in Film, cleave to the surfaces of buildings and of rooms; the lost ones “flatten themselves as best they can with their backs to the wall” (28).

Finally, in the briefest possible terms, I will expand the historical scope of this discussion to describe Beckett’s interest in flatness and in ghosts not only in relation to the postwar period or to modernism but also to modernity, a context that Beckett himself establishes in his first nonjuvenile published work, “Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce” (1929). The metaphor of the mirror, the ghost as a figure for the theater, and the problem of representing interiority naturally suggest a wide range of intellectual indebtedness, from Hamlet to Ghosts and from Descartes to Bergson. But in Beckett, their prevalence indicates the limits of the possible, the murder of poetry by its own past strength, in short, the “anxiety of influence.” Further, a peculiar vehemence in Beckett about God’s nonbeing (“The bastard! He doesn’t exist” [Endgame 55]) must be related to a near obsession, inspired by a lifelong love of Dante, with the trope of Purgatory.

Having grown up in what, for the twentieth century, has been a uniquely contested zone of Catholic and Protestant imaginaries, the world of modern Ireland, Beckett clearly responds, like other Irish writers, to his experience of what Seamus Deane calls “a phantasmal place, inhabited by the swirling souls of the dead” (95). His-

21. Identifying ghosts as a key motif in modern literature, Jean-Michel Rabaté seeks to extend Bloom’s model, in Beckett’s case, with a Freudian analysis of the “positivity of ‘nothing.’” Yet in claiming that “Beckett staunchly identifies art with truth,” and that in Beckett (the author and the works), the heart “represents the point of connection between the body and soul” (154–55), Rabaté betrays a Hegelian optimism that so much of Beckett’s work appears to reject.
torically, Ireland has had a special, and specifically a self-reflexively poetic, relationship to Purgatory. The haunting of Ireland in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is defamiliarized through the eyes of the Jew, Bloom, who nonetheless recognizes, implicitly, a connection between modern Dublin and Purgatory, reflecting at the funeral of Paddy Dignam: “We are praying now for the repose of his soul. Hoping you’re well and not in hell. Nice change of air. Out of the fryingpan of life into the fire of purgatory” (91). The entrance to Purgatory is said to have been discovered in Ireland by Saint Patrick, who is patron saint of both Ireland and Purgatory. Citing “Shades of the Sabine farm / On the beds of St Patrick’s Purgatory” in *Station Island*, Seamus Heaney, like Yeats in his short play *Purgatory* (1939), also imagines temporal Ireland in terms of spiritual purgation and passage. In contrast to writers of both faiths, Beckett, although disillusioned with his mother’s fierce Protestantism, ultimately presents a remarkable apogee of what must be called a Protestant skepticism about the image.

Beckett’s discussion of the anthropologist and philosopher of history Giambattista Vico draws a genealogy from the *Scienza Nuova* (new science), a rational-empirical treatment of the functions of poetry and myth (indeed, “all things ultimately identified with God”), to what he calls the “purgatorial” work of Joyce. Vico, Beckett argues, rejected the “poetic spirit. . . . Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual.” In Joyce’s work, the argument continues, form is content, and, in this sense, Joyce’s work is purgatorial:

In the absolute absence of the Absolute. Hell is lifelessness of unrelied viciousness. Paradise the static lifelessness of unrelied immaculation. Purgatory a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements. There is a continuous purgatorial process at work, in the sense that the vicious cycle of humanity is being achieved.

(33)

In this immature, if brilliant, essay, Beckett articulates the central problem that his later work will not exactly strive to overcome but, rather, to undo. After imagining the perfect union of form and content in Joyce, Beckett will despair. Joyce’s “writing is not *about*
something; it is that something itself" (27); Beckett's work aims to be, like the shredded picture, nothing. That is, not to be.

As Stephen Greenblatt has recently argued of early modern Protestants in his astonishing work *Hamlet in Purgatory*:

Protestants struggled . . . to undo the purgatorial imagination. Only by taking the great fable apart, piece by piece, could they hope to liberate people from it. . . . The easiest part of the task was to destroy the images: manuscripts were torn up, altarpieces were disassembled and burned, sculpted images of souls praying in the flames were smashed. Or if the images were not destroyed, they were detached gently or violently from their original meaning. . . .

Images are vivid but vulnerable. The harder part of the zealots' task was to chisel away a set of powerful stories, for it was in narrative even more than in pictures that the purgatorial poem was created and maintained.

An extreme version of this radical Protestant strategy informs Beckett's earliest work. The central figure of his first short story, the quasi-theological "Assumption" (1929), alone in his room, "died and was God, each night revived and was torn, torn" (6). For the student of Beckett, it is impossible to read Protestant polemics of the Renaissance and not think of O, in *Film*, tearing to pieces the print of God the Father or, for that matter, the photographs of individuals each of whom, according to conventional wisdom, has inherent worth. In *A Piece of Monologue* there is a similar tearing; the "piece" itself is an instance of that tearing. A ghostly speaker, barely visible upon the stage, describes the reality of yet another man in a room:

Backs away to edge of light and stands facing blank wall. Covered with pictures once. Pictures of . . . he all but said of loved ones. Unframed. Unglazed. Pinned to wall with drawing pins. All shapes and sizes. Down one after another. Gone. Torn to shreds and scattered. Strewn all over the floor. . . . Nothing on the wall now but the pins. . . . Nothing to be seen anywhere.

(61)

Language, like the image, is a surface that mocks the expression of ghosts. To be dead is to be gone: "Ghost . . . he all but said ghost loved ones. Waiting on the rip word. . . . Never but the one matter.
The dead and gone” (269). Beckett undoes what may be taken as a blindness of Protestant poetics and theology, specifically of the metaphysical poets, which restores the Word of God to the central place in Christian worship but fails to recognize in the word a danger of idolatry no less than that in the image. The word, like the image, is flat, a thing of nothing that can be torn as easily as the page.

For that matter, in *Molloy*, Moran’s shattering of his own image in the pool of water, with the remark, “didn’t see a soul all day,” represents Beckett’s rejection not only of a theologically inflected metaphor in Corinthians but also of Joyce’s purgatorial prose. In *Ulysses*, Bloom had contemplated the rock on which Nausicaa revealed herself to him: “Tide comes here. Saw a pool near her foot. Bend, see my face there, dark mirror, breathe on it, stirs. All these rocks with lines and scars and letters. O, those transparent! . . . What is the meaning of that other world” (312). In *Molloy*, Beckett evokes this passage ironically. Opacity, not transparency, and meaninglessness compel skepticism about the very status of spirituality, of interior monologue, in short, of consciousness itself. *Molloy* ironizes a symbolic mode that assumes spiritual movement through (or between) states of being, as in Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1949), in which the dead pass through watery mirrors. Protestants, of course, did not disbelieve in a theologically ordered universe or, for that matter, in the life of the spirit. What they sought to undo was a poetics that supported, in their view, an insidious institutional structure. Beckett’s protest is far more extreme. Purgatory is a middle space, between Heaven and Hell, between life and final rest, but in Beckett’s flattened universe, liminality is a cruel joke. There can be neither overcoming (*aufheben*) nor *differance* in this *état de privation*. In *Malone Dies*, Macmann remarks, “I have pinned my faith to appearances, believing them to be vain” (210).

When the Bible is mentioned in *En attendant Godot*, it is remembered by Estragon, who admits to having been a poet, as a picture book with vivid colors, not as the revelatory text Vladimir would have it be. Did Gogo see it at “l’école sans Dieu [the school without God]?” He replies, “Sais pas si elle était sans ou avec [I don’t know if it was with or without]” (16). But it is in *Endgame* that Christian pictorialism is most brilliantly acknowledged and renounced in terms of the stage, again in the juxtaposition of the painting that
faces the wall and the two curtained windows. When Beckett was writing *Fin de Partie* in 1956 he was also rereading the complete plays of Jean Racine, plays that he had taught at Trinity College years earlier. Racine was going through a major revival in the 1950s, culminating in a new edition of his plays published in 1960. In his own contribution to that revival, Roland Barthes commented on Racine’s contemporaneity, remarking, “the French author most frequently associated with the idea of a classical *transparence* is the only one to have made all the new languages of the century converge upon himself.” Barthes goes on to acknowledge, “transparence is an ambiguous value; it is both what cannot be discussed and what there is most to say about” (viii). It is just such a paradoxical transparency to which Beckett’s opacity so powerfully responds.

Of all the past literature to which Beckett’s play speaks, none is as directly relevant in the present context as Racine’s final play, *Athalie*, in which a high priest and his stepson inhabit the inner sanctum of the Temple of Jerusalem. It is yet another play (as Barthes also notes) built on the tripartite architectural structure of ever deeper interiors (exterior, antechamber, chamber). Like *Endgame*, *Athalie* involves both heightened rhetorical performance and brutality. The context is a world steeped in blood, a race extinguished (“éteindre la race” [1.1.95]); as in *Fin de Partie*, the lights of those who once lived outside the shelter have been “éteint[e,s] extinguished” (60). Racine’s play about the Kingdom of Israel, however, is written in praise of God. It builds to a climactic image, a revelatory tableau, when Joad, the high priest, pulls the curtain (“**Le rideau se tire**” [5.5.1718]) to disclose the young boy, Joas, descendant of David and ancestor of Jesus. Beckett’s play about ending begins as Clov “tire le rideau.” But here pulling the curtain does not reveal a pentacostal vision. To the audience, as to Hamm, the window reveals nothing. At the end of the play, apparently gazing through the window at an invisible perspective, Clov claims to see “a small... boy,” “a potential procreator” (78). But why should we place our faith in such a vision? It is only when Hamm has a pee that Clov has been able to say with any conviction, “Ah that’s the spirit, that’s the spirit!” (34). Beckett disparages, or at least teases, the common impulse to see *depth* in art, to project or even speculate
about the invisible. For not only is the visual world flat, but so is the eye and the "I." There is nothing to express yet the obligation to express. Beckett sees nothing at all, yet all that is he sees.

University of Toronto

WORKS CITED

———. Film. Collected Shorter Plays 161–74.
———. Molloy. Three Novels 7–176.


