Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze

Samuel Beckett in Company, vol. 5

ibidem

Llewellyn Brown

Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze

Samuel Beckett in Company

Edited by Paul Stewart

ISSN 2365-3809

1 *Llewellyn Brown*
Beckett, Lacan and the Voice
With a foreword by Jean-Michel Rabaté
ISBN 978-3-8382-0869-5 (Paperback edition)
ISBN 978-3-8382-0889-3 (Hardcover edition)

2 *Robert Reginio, David Houston Jones, and Katherine Weiss (eds.)*
Samuel Beckett and Contemporary Art
ISBN 978-3-8382-1079-7

3 *Charlotta P. Einarsson*
A Theatre of Affect
The Corporeal Turn in Samuel Beckett's Drama
ISBN 978-3-8382-1118-3

4 *Rhys Tranter*
Beckett's Late Stage
Trauma, Language, and Subjectivity
ISBN 978-3-8382-1135-0

5 *Llewellyn Brown*
Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze
ISBN 978-3-8382-1239-5

Llewellyn Brown

BECKETT, LACAN AND THE GAZE

ibidem
Verlag

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Cover Picture: 'Self-portrait as a phantom', Papeterie de la Seine (Nanterre), 27 February 2014. © LB.

ISSN: 2365-3809

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7239-9

© *ibidem*-Verlag / *ibidem* Press
Stuttgart, Germany 2019

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form,
or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the publisher.
Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to
criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

À Corinne,

encore

Table of contents

List of Illustrations ..... **IX**

Abbreviations and editions used for works by Beckett ..... **XI**

Acknowledgements ..... **XV**

Introduction **17**

1 — The collapse of Collective Reality **51**

2 — Mirrors and Frames **81**

3 — Light and Darkness **193**

4 — Doubles and Spectres **279**

5 — Variants of an Ideal **313**

6 — The Monad **357**

7 — Seeing and Unseeing **417**

8 — Technology and the Gaze **451**

Conclusion **567**

Bibliography **581**

Index **611**

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Bouasse's Inverted Bouquet 32

Illustration 2: Lacan's Optical Schema 33

Illustration 3: Optical projection 59

Illustration 4: The 'window' of the fantasy 139

Illustration 5: From a perspective schema to a projective plane 321

Illustration 6: Image from Descartes' *Dioptrique* 523

Illustration 7: Permutations in 'What Where' 554

Abbreviations and editions used for works by Beckett

Abbreviations are given, followed by the page number, upon the reference's first occurrence in the paragraph.

Abbreviations for works in English

AF	*All That Fall* in *CDW*.
BC	'…but the clouds…' in *CDW*.
Cas	'Cascando' in *CDW*.
CDW	*The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006).
Co	*Company* in *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, Stirring Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
CPo	*Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (eds.) (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).
CSPr	*The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995).
DF	*Dream of Fair to middling Women* (Dublin: The Black Cat Press, 1992).
Dsj	*Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983).
E	'Embers' in *CDW*.
EB	*Echo's Bones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).
Eg	*Endgame* in *CDW*.
EJ	'Eh Joe' in *CDW*.
F	*Film* in *CDW*.
Ff	*Footfalls* in *CDW*.
FL	*First Love* in *CSPr*.
G	*Waiting for Godot* in *CDW*.
GT	'Ghost Trio' in *CDW*.
HD	*Happy Days* in *CDW*.
HI	*How it Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).
IS	*Ill Seen Ill Said* in *Co*.

K *Krapp's Last Tape* in *CDW*.

L1 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, t. 1, *'1929–1940'*, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck (eds.). (Cambridge UP, 2009).

L2 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, t. 2, *'1941–1956'*, George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (eds.). (Cambridge UP, 2011).

L3 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, t. 3, *'1957–1965'*, George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (eds.). (Cambridge UP, 2014).

L4 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, t. 4, *'1966-1989'*, George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (eds.). Cambridge UP, 2016.

LO *The Lost Ones* in *CSPr.*

MC *Mercier and Camier* (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

MD *Malone Dies* in *TN.*

Mo *Molloy* in *TN.*

Mu *Murphy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

NI *Not I* in *CDW*.

NT 'Nacht und Träume' in *CDW*.

OI 'Ohio Impromptu' in *CDW*.

Pl. 'Play' in *CDW*.

PM 'A Piece of Monologue' in *CDW*.

Pr. *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999).

Q 'Quad' in *CDW*.

R 'Rockaby' in *CDW*.

RR 'Rough for Radio' (I & II) in *CDW*.

SS *Stirrings Still* in *CSPr.*

TFN *Texts for Nothing* in *CSPr.*

TN *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

TT *That Time* in *CDW*.

U *The Unnamable* in *TN.*

W *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1953).

WH *Worstward Ho*, in *Co.*

WM	‘Words and Music’ in *CDW*.
WW	‘What Where’ in *CDW*.

Abbreviations for works in French

Cie	*Compagnie* (Paris: Minuit, 1995).
D	*Le Dépeupleur* (Paris: Minuit, 1993).
I	*L’Innommable* (Paris: Minuit, 1992).
MC	*Mercier et Camier* (Paris: Minuit, 1998).
MM	*Malone meurt* (Paris: Minuit, 1995).
Mo	*Molloy* (Paris: Minuit, 1989).
MP	*Le Monde et le pantalon* suivi de *Peintres de l’empêchement* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).
MV	*Mal vu mal dit* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).
OBJ	*Oh les beaux jours* suivi de *Pas moi* (Paris: Minuit, 1996).
PF	*Pour finir encore et autres foirades* (Paris: Minuit, 2013).
Q	*Quad* […] suivi de ‘L’Épuisé’ par Gilles Deleuze (Paris: Minuit, 1992).
TM	*Têtes-mortes* (Paris: Minuit, 2004).
TPR	*Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Paris: Minuit, 1991).

Nota

Translations from French sources are our own, unless a specific bibliographic reference indicates otherwise. Published translations cited may be adapted.

Acknowledgements

Research for and writing of this book were undertaken during a sabbatical year. I am extremely grateful to Florence Godeau and Éric Dayre, who were most helpful and accommodating in making this possible on the institution level.

Paul Stewart has my heartfelt thanks for accepting to publish this my second book in his collection. I am also most obliged to Jean-Michel Rabaté, Shane Weller and David Lloyd, who generously contributed their endorsement.

Valerie Lange, Michaela Nickel, Malisa Mahler and Christian Schoen, of Ibidem, have been most kind and cooperative, accepting to publish this work, and being constantly available for advice, throughout the publication process.

I renew the expression of my gratitude to publisher Michel Minard (1928–2013), who entrusted me with founding the 'Samuel Beckett' series, thus inciting me to further my research. The following pages have benefited from enriching exchanges with scholars, some of whom have contributed to the aforesaid series, others having offered the possibility of participating in collective publications. I wish to thank Bruno Geneste, Arka Chattopadhyay, Franz Kaltenbeck, Matthieu Protin, Chris Ackerley, Myriam Jeantroux, Anne-Cécile Guilbard, Nadia Louar, Mariko Hori Tanaka, Nicholas Johnson, Laurens de Vos, Claire Lozier, Pim Verhulst, Anita Rákóczy, Thomas Hunkeler, German Arce Ross, Alexis Lussier and Éric Wessler.

I also thank Tricia Bevan – with the intervention of Cynthia Benrey – for having kindly accepted to proofread part of this work.

Finally, I thank Jean-Luc Baffet, who authorised the project of extensively photographing the historic Papeterie de la Seine (Nanterre)—presently being demolished—from which, once again, the cover picture is taken.

Introduction

Beckett: Visibility and the Gaze

Although a writer whose medium is, by definition, centred on language and words, Samuel Beckett's entire work is permeated with the visual dimension. Painting was the object of the author's intense scrutiny during his visits to the art galleries in Dublin—as of 1926 (Knowlson, 1997, 57)—and London (Nixon, 2011, 147–61), and as he travelled around Germany in 1936–1937 (Nixon, 2010). Some fruits of his reflection are developed in his letters—particularly to art critic Georges Duthuit, leading to *Three Dialogues*—and in his texts on Jack Yeats, Henri Hayden and the van Velde brothers. The scope of his interest for this field has been explored by various scholars such as Rémi Labrusse, Pierre Vilar (2011), David Lloyd (2016, 2018) and Guillaume Gesvret (2011, 2019), not forgetting the exhibition catalogue edited in 2006 by Fionnuala Croke. The stage set of *Waiting for Godot* was conceived in reference to a painting by Caspar David Friedrich (Nixon, 2011, 142), and Beckett's later '*dramaticules*' develop the visual construction further, offering striking and stylised visual constructions that justify the association with the other-worldly atmosphere produced by Friedrich's painting. In a remarkable recent study, Lloyd states quite rightly, of 'Beckett's dramatic work in any medium that one can arrest the action at almost any point and be rewarded with a tableau that is a virtual painting' (2016, 7). Mark Nixon (2011, 145) notes that as of 1936, Beckett started to place painting and literature on a par with each other, rather than privileging the latter. Lois Oppenheim asserts that Beckett's verbal art 'reveals the visible in its purest state', claiming that this is a result of 'a pre-rational or antepredicative apperception' which 'serves as a paradigm for his entire narrative and dramatic work' (2000, 126). Billie Whitelaw reports significantly:

> I remember once he said to me in my home, 'I don't know whether the theater is the right place for me anymore.' He was getting further and further away from writing conventional plays. And I know what he meant. I thought, well perhaps he should be in an art gallery or something. Perhaps I should be pacing up and down in the Tate Gallery, I don't know, because the way the thing looks and the way he paints with light is just as important as what comes out of my mouth. (in Kalb, 1989, 235)

The question of the circumscribed image runs through his work in its entirety (Guilbard, 2011a, 505–8), as highlighted in the text *L'Image*; and the act of seeing remains a constant motif, as Stéphanie Ravez has shown (2011). Mirrors, window frames and seeing devices are regularly present, and his creations for audio-visual media—film and television, as studied notably by Graley Herren (2007)—testify to a deep reflection on the conditions of seeing and the nature of the agent who is watching. The Beckettian eye is often 'savage', devouring, predatory, and yet, behind this lies the repeated evocation of the human eye which, famished, seeks in vain to see, or remains sightless (Bertrand). Opening and closing their eyelids, characters paradoxically capture renewed visions once the outside world is shut out. In turn, some like Winnie (*HD*, 155) or the male character in 'Play' (317) wonder if they are seen by others, and Berkeley's axiom *esse est percipi* is regularly cited by critics as being of crucial importance for Beckett's work. Remarkably however, this insistence on eyes and seeing rarely involves the active presence of an expressive gaze: many characters scrutinise the eyes of others, without discerning a presence. And yet, there is often a real dynamic of the gaze passing between two pairs of eyes, and which includes the spectator in the theatre, as Anne-Cécile Guilbard alone seems to have brought to our attention.

Light (Gontarski, 2011) and darkness (Knowlson, 1972) determine the scope of vision, maintaining a constant and unstable alternation rather than a hierarchical organisation: darkness seeps into the diurnal world of *Molloy*, and *The Unnamable*, with its acceler-

ating flow of speech, only allows for selective moments of visual evocation. Darkness is the fundamental setting of *Texts for Nothing*, while *How It Is* unfolds in irremediable obscurity. This echoes the division between what can be seen, on the one hand, and speech belonging to the unseen, on the other (*infra*, 254), as is manifest in *Company*, where a voice comes to one lying in the dark and composes vignettes representing events presumably having occurred to the subject. The figures in the plays appear in a field of light and then disappear into darkness so that the fixity of the image is undermined, by contrast with the 'closed place' prose texts, where visibility appears to be unremitting. And yet, the visible is the site of instability (Gesvret, 2011), where outward calm is countered by immense tension and anxiety, so that many figures take the form of spectral apparitions. The question arises as to what part of being is captured in the light and where a figure goes when it disappears. This doubtless follows an initial interrogation regarding the cause of this instability that radically compromises any referential representation of a 'world' in Beckett's work.

The domain of seeing and the visible thus covers Beckett's entire work and raises numerous issues concerning the way his creation builds on matters developed in the larger cultural field.

The Gaze: Modern and Post-modern

It is well known that questions surrounding the gaze have a long history, going back to Greek Antiquity, with the motif of the unbearable gaze of the Medusa, to cite one emblematic example.[1] In what is often called 'ocularcentrism', many eminent thinkers have asserted the correlation of seeing and truth. For Plato, in *The Republic* (Book VII), the absolute being is considered as all-seeing (Lacan, 1973, 71), by contrast with the creatures confined in the cavern, who can only contemplate shadows. Descartes states: '[…] I considered

---

1 See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, 'Figures du masque en Grèce ancienne' (Vernant, 25–43).

that I could take as a general rule that the things that we conceive most clearly and most distinctly are all true' (1996, 55).[2] Pursuing a debate dating from Parmenides and Plato (*The Sophist*), he asserts that some ideas are false because they 'contain something confused and obscure' (1996, 59), which causes them to 'participate in nothingness'.

While such debates remain perfectly relevant today, the gaze has assumed increasing importance in our age as a result of changes affecting its very structure, and which warrant outlining in order to situate Beckett's originality. Gérard Wajcman points to the Renaissance as the moment when the 'eye took precedence […] over the ear as a means of transmitting and a privileged instrument for knowing the world' (2004, 16). He adds: 'The promotion of painting, then elevated as the "flower of all art", was both the index and the agent of this.' At this time, direct personal observation—autopsy—replaced the reading of texts and the discourse of a master, which was the prevalent means of transmission in the Middle Ages (2010, 238). Wajcman's remarkable work, *Fenêtre: chroniques du regard et de l'intime* is devoted entirely to the study of the way the modern subject emerged as a result of a mutation that can be traced back to Leon Battista Alberti's treatise *De pictura*. Following this event, the gaze became 'an arm of conquest' (*idem*, 57), whereby man stole from God—formerly sole master and possessor of the world—a portion of the visible. At the same time, the subject was dispatched to darkness, hidden from other gazes, a position that left him free to contemplate the expanse laid out before him. The window *cum* picture frame—Alberti's invention—thus engenders representations in terms of 'limited wholes' (Brown, 2016, 68–9), a logical category analysed by Jean-Claude Milner: borders, frontiers—as opposed to the unstable and shifting *marches* of the Middle Ages (Wajcman, 2010,

---

[2] Cf. 'I call clear [knowledge] that which is present and manifest for an attentive mind; in the same way as we say we see objects clearly when, being present, they act with sufficient strength and our eyes are disposed to look at them' (*Principes de la Philosophie*, I, article 45).

157–8)—upon which the laws of perspective confer their unity, centred on the seeing subject.

Such a disposition belongs to classical modernity, as exemplified in cultural elaborations of the 17th and 18th Centuries. However, our postmodern era has radically overthrown this construction, bringing to the fore a demand for absolute visibility, rooted in the belief that 'all the real is visible' (Wajcman, 2010, 20) and, conversely, that 'all that is visible is real'. While the Renaissance invented the window as a framing device to produce the world as a tableau, such a separation has been abolished, so that 'to be a spectator today means passing continually from one side of the screen to the other' (44; cf. 78). Technology has caused the gaze to replace the voice, which was the first global technological object to appear (170). Medical technology penetrates the envelope of the skin, babies are seen before they are born, and neurotechnology claims to render the workings of the mind visible.

The question therefore arises: is it possible to escape this universal gaze? Vision without a frame means the suppression of any distance, endangering personal liberty (Wajcman, 2010, 70). Pushing further the logic analysed by Michel Foucault in relation to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, the postmodern conception of vision abolishes any privileged point of view, and surveillance is completely integrated into society as a whole, thus abolishing any possibility of exteriority (*idem*, 100): it is, as Milner develops the idea, *unlimited*. Surveillance and spectacle are thus complementary facets of our existence today. While formerly it was forbidden to see what was hidden—leaving the possibility of transgression—total transparency has become a right, or even mandatory (*idem*, 149).

It is in this light that we can approach the question of Beckett's 'modernity' or 'postmodernity'. If the later—as an effect of science and capitalism (*infra*, 451–7)—aspires to total visibility under an all-invading and anonymous gaze, Beckett's work with technology maintains the rigorous separation inherent in modern constructions, as defined by the separating function of the frame. Far from rendering everything visible, Beckett works with the breaking down of the

seen, revealing its fundamental failure to include the whole of existence. The oft-cited 'weakening' effect he sought to attain in language—the 'rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness' (*L3*, 211)—is developed in relation to the gaze so that the subject is irremediably separated from what he observes. To refer to the middle period fictions, Molloy is hidden from the figures A and C who also remain inaccessible to him (*Mo*, 4 *sqq*.). The exposed faces of the figures in 'Play' remain isolated as a result of the spotlight's inability to blend them into a unified tableau or narrative (Brown, 2016, 282 *sqq*.). This is one development given to the breakdown of referential reality, which leaves only fragmented images of scenes (*Texts for Nothing*, *Company*) or bodies (*Not I*, *Worstward Ho*). Beckett's use of technology in no way fills in the insuperable breach inherent in existence since the image is always separated from the viewer, remaining inaccessible to him. In the same way as the listener of the radio plays strains (Connor, 2014, 69) to capture the *silence* at the heart of the audible voices (Brown, 2019a), the viewer of the television plays can in no way penetrate the obscurity into which the death masks of 'What Where' melt away. This means that while postmodernity aims to suture and fill in any breach, Beckett's modernity explores the radical division of the subject who, as a creator or viewer, remains radically separated from any visual representation. This leaves the delicate question of the nature of the 'closed places'—from *Endgame* to *The Lost Ones*—which, on the surface, seem to be completely given over to light and the gaze, allowing for no escape.

The Gaze: a Problematic Field

While Beckett's creation puts into action a radical form of the breach brought to light by modernity since the Renaissance, we can also see various implications of the latter for the conception of the gaze in philosophical developments. Without attempting to offer an exhaustive panorama, we can survey a few philosophers who were of considerable importance for Beckett and/or Lacan. To start with, in Descartes' thinking, seeing was a matter of abstraction and geome-

try, such as a blind person could reconstruct it, as shown by Diderot (see Lacan, 1973, 81). In his treatise *La Dioptrique*, he uses the example of a blind person perceiving obstacles by means of a stick as an image to explain the functioning of light as it strikes our eyes after travelling through the air (1996, 99–100). This operation of abstraction reveals the space-time continuum to be infinite, continuous and homogeneous. The senses and perceptible reality are banished: 'I suppose, accordingly, that all the things which I see are false (fictitious)' (1901: II, 2). The viewer is elided as a corporeal being, and reduced to a geometrical point (Damisch, 172–3): the human mind 'is a thinking thing, and not extended in length, breadth, and depth, and participating in none of the properties of body' (Descartes, 1901: IV, 1). Descartes thus introduces the conception of the purely symbolic register, which excludes the specific nature of the visual.

In an attempt to elaborate a more concrete conception of seeing, Berkeley considered the visible to be entirely dependent for its existence on the viewer. It is notable that in Beckett's use of the axiom *esse est percipi*, it is primarily a question of the subject being seen, not necessarily the world around him (although its status too may be uncertain). The act of seeing means that an object is 'nothing distinct from those things which are termed its modes or accidents' (Berkeley, 70). At the same time, the universe becomes strictly humanised, equated with the subject's view-point: there is no such thing as '*inert senseless matter*' (79), and 'the noise that I hear is not the effect of this or that motion or collision of the ambient bodies, but the sign thereof' (77). Anything material becomes pure sign, devoid of alterity or opacity (85). In this way, ideas and matter are melded together. Both Descartes and Berkeley resort to the divinity[3] as alone capable of ensuring the continuation of existence at moments when it threatens to break down: Descartes, when he ceases to say '*I am, I exist*' (1901: II, 3), and Berkeley, when the world is not seen.

---

[3] Berkeley, 93. See Roger Woolhouse (in Berkeley, 10, 22). Descartes, *Méditations* V.

Jean-Paul Sartre—who confided having consulted Lacan after leaving the École Normale Supérieure (Leguil, 18)—operates a decisive reversal of this conception in *L'Être et le Néant*, where he considers that 'the Other [*autrui*] is on principle *the one who looks at* [*regarde*] *me*' (Sartre, 1991, 303, 319, 329). This goes beyond what can be deduced 'either from the essence of the Other-as-object, or from my being-as-subject'. Clotilde Leguil explains that 'the elision of the gaze is articulated with the primacy of the being who is seen over the one that sees' (280). This state of being seen can be experienced even in the absence of any specific person or pair of eyes seeing: it suffices for something to manifest its presence (Sartre, 303). A disjunction occurs between the eyes and the gaze (Leguil, 282), so that the latter 'touches me in such a way that my being becomes entirely this *being-seen*' (283). It is therefore impossible to detach oneself from it.

The apologue Sartre uses to illustrate this evokes one who, 'moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice' (Sartre, 305–6), starts peering through a keyhole. Here, 'I *am* this jealousy, I do not *know* it', and 'there is a spectacle to be seen behind the door only because I am jealous'. Leguil comments: 'There is indeed elision of the gaze, to the benefit of the *spectacle to be seen* behind the door. There is no consciousness of watching, but simply absorption of consciousness by the act of watching' (284). The situation is then suddenly reversed: 'But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure' (Sartre, 306–8). The subject understands: 'This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself […]. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other.' Finally, the feeling of shame points to this alienation since it 'is shame of *self*, it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object'. At this moment, the subject has the weight of his being—through the alterity of the opaque gaze—returned to him, as Lacan states later, referring to Sartre (1973, 166).

Of Berkeley, Lacan observes that his argument 'would have more bite if he admitted that what is at stake is jouissance' (2011a, 113), whereby the subject is manipulated by his unconscious. Progress is made in this respect in *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty (see Addyman) makes of the visible 'the paradigm of an immediate [*brute*] relationship to the world prior to any rational ordering of this world by consciousness' (Leguil, 276–7), so that seeing is no longer abstract but embodied, experienced emotionally. Clotilde Leguil notes that Merleau-Ponty 'operates a rectification by reintroducing in his analysis of the gaze the primacy of the visible that Sartre had not fully measured' (285). He thus sees the gaze as something that 'envelopes, palpates [*palpe*], espouses visible things' (Merleau-Ponty, 173). This means that the subject is not the unilateral possessor of the world: he enters into an uncontrollable reciprocity with objects, 'so that one cannot say finally if it is he or they that command'. Thus: 'My body as a visible thing is contained in the great spectacle. My seeing body underlies this visible body, and all the visible with it. There is a reciprocal insertion and interlacing [*entrelacs*] from one to the other' (Merleau-Ponty, 180). A remarkable reversal occurs—one that will be developed by Lacan—when he speaks of the 'fundamental narcissism of all seeing' (181), whereby, 'as many painters have said, I feel myself being watched by things'. The subject cannot extract himself from the world contemplated since the viewer is intimately part of the spectacle he contemplates so that 'we no longer know who sees and who is seen'. Seer and seen 'are caught in the same "element" ' (182), which Merleau-Ponty calls a flesh that is not matter: 'It is the enfolding [*enroulement*] of the visible over the seeing body, of the tangible over the touching body' (189).

Michel Foucault—who read Lacan's first Seminars (Foucault, 1994b, 204–5)—has frequently been cited in relation to Beckett, with reference to his analysis in *Surveiller et Punir* of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, which reveals a scission between seer and seen (Connor, 1992; Ravez, 2009; Miyawaki; Guest), showing, in a utilitarian perspective, how the incarcerated internalise their own surveillance. This would seem to find an echo in Beckett's images of the

'closed place'. However, another major reference for the theory of the gaze is Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), which includes a famous analysis of the 1656 painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, presenting it as a remarkable example of the classical *cogito*. In this work, the painter is seen, standing back from the canvas, of which only the reverse side, on the left, is visible to the spectator. The *Infanta* is in the middle, surrounded by her suite, bathing in light coming from a window on the right. At the back of the room, in the centre, two motifs can be seen: the image of the royal couple in a mirror and the painter's brother, a silhouette in an open door. What is particularly enigmatic is the fact that the figures seem to be gazing at the spectator who, aligned with the mirror, is apparently the subject of the painting.

For Foucault, the mirror with the royal couple is a reflection of the hidden side of the canvas (1976, 25). The mirror thus runs through the field of representation and restores the visibility of the part that remains hidden from sight (23). It is at this point that 'are exactly superimposed the gaze of the model at the moment when he is being painted, that of the spectator who contemplates the scene, and that of the painter at the moment he is composing his picture' (30). Thus for Foucault, the subject is in the position purported to be occupied by the royal couple as a model for the painter. He is divided by the divergent social identities assigned to him: painter, king, spectator. This reveals the structure of the *cogito* since 'an essential void is imperiously indicated on all sides: the necessary disappearance of that which founds it […]. This very subject—who is the same—has been elided. And free at last from this relationship that fettered it, the representation can offer itself as pure representation' (31). In this construction, the royal couple appear to be neglected, but 'they organise the entire representation around themselves' (29).

Lacan comments on this text at length in his *Seminar XIII*, notably in Foucault's presence on 18 May 1966. For him, what is at stake is not the negative, empty subject of classical thinking, but the very active and positive quality of the gaze. He points out: 'The world as representation and the subject as a support of this world

that is represented is "the subject transparent for himself" in the classical conception'.[4] However, an apparent void is at the centre of the picture since the figures represented do not observe the spectator: their gazes 'are lost on some invisible point'.[5]

While for Foucault, the hidden side of the canvas represents the royal couple, for Lacan there is nothing, and this blank—the word is also crucial for Beckett—operates as a 'trap for the gaze'.[6] That means that it is not a question of signifiers that identify, but of the spectator's unconscious that is captured: '[…] we are caught like a fly in the glue, we lower our eyes […] and for the painter, it is a matter, if I may say so, of having us enter into the picture'.[7] An echo can be heard of such an idea in one of Beckett's polemical texts about painting, when he states of the latter that it is a 'non-sens' (*MP*, 12) and that the spectator is impervious to any social inscription: 'Il ne veut pas s'instruire, le cochon, ni devenir meilleur. Il ne pense qu'à son plaisir' ('He does not want to educate himself, the pig, nor improve himself. He is only thinking of his pleasure'; *MP*, 14). The spectator is denuded since in reference to the blank canvas, Velázquez's *infanta* seems to command imperiously: 'Show us'[8] ('*Fais voir*'). Bernard Nominé (102) points out that the blank reverse side of the canvas has the value of a psychoanalytical interpretation: it attracts our gaze, acting as a screen that creates an enigma—the promise of meaning—when fundamentally, it is a matter of the non-representable.

As for the royal couple, Hubert Damisch points out that their reflection only occupies the '*imaginary* centre' (448), while the

---

4 Lacan, 1965–66, 25 May 1966.

5 Lacan, 1965–66, 11 May 1966.

6 '*piège à regards*' (1965–66, 25 May 1966). Hubert Damisch associates it with Brunelleschi's inaugural experiment of observing his painting from the rear side of the canvas, looking through a hole, to see the image in a mirror (Damisch, 454).

7 Lacan, 1965–66, 18 May 1966.

8 Lacan, 1965–66, 11 May 1966. Lacan had already spoken of traditional painting as having the Apollonian function of a '*gaze-tamer*' (1973, 100).

vanishing point—on the geometrical level—is situated in the arm of the painter's brother (445). The mirror is thus the equivalent of the classical divinity—that of Descartes and Berkeley—leaving the question open as to his ability to guarantee representations: 'That God, does he know that he is God?'[9] Consequently, what the very structure inscribes 'is this vision of an Other who is this empty Other, a pure vision, a pure reflection […] of this Other who is the complement of the Cartesian "I think" '. This empty Other is 'castration', the reverse side of the 'girl phallus' represented by the radiant dress of the *infanta*.

Lacan notes that as represented, the painter is set at a large remove from the canvas,[10] so that according to the *cogito*, 'to think "I am" is not the same thing as being that which thinks'.[11] Rather: ' "I paint therefore I am" says Velázquez'. What is operative of subjective division is the very act of painting: the question of what *causes* the painter's action. In Beckett's words, evoking Avigdor Arikha, in the light of a radical undoing of identification: 'Eye and hand fevering after the unself. By the hand it unceasingly changes the eye unceasingly changed' (*Dsj*, 152).

Lacan and the Gaze as an Object

These philosophical elaborations reveal, each in their own way, the eminently problematic nature of the gaze: its significance for the subject, the latter being excluded in the postmodern consumerist development of the image. As we have seen, Lacan responded to these philosophical views, putting them to use and developing them in the perspective opened up by psychoanalysis, which reveals that the gaze is not limited to the visible/invisible binary, but also involves a question of desire or *jouissance*. The latter term, which replaces the former in Lacan's later teachings, belongs to the part that

[9] Lacan, 1965–66, 25 May 1966.

[10] Lacan, 1965–66, 18 May 1966.

[11] Lacan, 1965–66, 11 May 1966.

cannot be evacuated by the signifier—the killer word (*TFN* 4, 125)—to produce lack, but remains positive, constituting the inexhaustible part of the speaking-being. As one of its judicial meanings—*usufruct*—suggests, it is the most intimate part of each subject, but it remains anchored outside, in the Other, inspiring the neologism *extimate* (*extime*).

Lacanian psychoanalysis situates the gaze as one of the four lost 'objects', which include fæces, the breast and the voice. These form two pairs representing the demand addressed *to* the Other[12] (oral: need), the demand coming *from* the Other (anal: educative[13]), the desire addressed *to* the Other (scopic; Lacan, 1973, 96), and the desire coming *from* the Other (voice).[14] In this context, it is not a matter of a worldly object—one that can be seen, quantified, qualified—but one that precisely cannot be apprehended with the senses: the voice is thus fundamentally silence; the gaze is the invisibility one strives to grasp behind the screen of the visible. What Lacan drew from Merleau-Ponty was also the conception that the subject is not simply faced with a visible world which he can master, but is, originally, totally subjected to and enveloped by the gaze of an inscrutable Other. Like the voice, the gaze belongs to a dimension of alterity and exteriority that a child, for example, cannot defend himself from, the instant he is exposed to it (Leader, 157). Consequently, it is necessary to evacuate this gaze, to strike one's Other with blindness in order to conquer one's own personal vision: what constitutes one's 'worldview' or fundamental fantasy (*fantasme*). The latter structures desire, enabling one to seek out substitutive—metonymical—objects, all of which point to the lost one that, as fundamentally unknowable and irretrievable, *causes* desire.

It is striking that the gaze is much more largely treated by Lacan—and by other thinkers—than the voice. This is possibly because the latter is more directly bound up with the symbolic and the

---

12 '[…] need *in* the Other, on the level of the Other' (Lacan, 2004, 337).

13 '[…] demand *in* the Other' (Lacan, 2004, 337).

14 Lacan, 1965–66, 27 April 1966.

signifier, while the gaze is specifically related to the imaginary register and the fantasy: the voice is present even when it is not explicitly mentioned. The question of the gaze spans Lacan's entire teachings, and while his theoretical developments undergo immense changes, earlier elements were not discarded as obsolete, but were reintegrated, refined, read in a different light, as we can see in the following survey.

Lacan's Mirrors

Lacan's first treatment of the gaze goes back to the oft-cited 'Looking-glass Phase' (Gorog, 17), which he refers to up to his Seminar of 1964. The first presentation of this theorem was given on 3 August 1936, at the International Psychoanalyical Congress at Marienbad, the last one during Freud's lifetime (Assoun, 2010, 31): Lacan's talk only lasted ten minutes, being interrupted by Ernest Jones (Lacan, 1966, 184). The text itself was lost, but we can find a reformulation of it, for example, in 1949, in 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je' (Lacan, 1966, 93–100). Lacan called it the 'brush [*balayette*]' that he 'entered psychoanalysis with'.[15] This means that it was a tool to start cleaning up the psychoanalytical household (Assoun, 2010, 31): to give it a logical grounding, and distinguish it from Anna Freud's 'ego-psychology': a theory which, as such, excludes the unconscious.

Far from being a phase of development, the importance of the Mirror stage resides in its theoretical potential as a structure, whereby the specular replaces Freudian narcissism (Lacan, 1966, 53). In its simplest form, this apologue describes the young child at around six months who, unable as yet to master his movements, recognises his image in the mirror as anticipating his own bodily unity to come. This perception is 'authenticated by the Other' (Lacan, 2004, 52), thus offering a moment of specular identification, which—as it also involves a mechanism of alienation (the subject

---

15 Lacan, 1967–68, 10 January 1968.

remaining distinct from his image)—opens up to the question of the double, and the resulting aggressiveness.

This sets the ground for Lacan's later *imaginary* register, which is explicitly formulated in the 'L Schema', in his 1955 text on Edgar A. Poe's 'Purloined Letter'. This schema, in the form of an *x*[16], shows the symbolic (fundamentally unconscious) axis forming the subject's relationship to his Other as traversed and rendered opaque by the imaginary one linking the two poles of the ego and the other (*a–a′*), considered as one's fellow, in a specular relationship or a 'line of fiction' (Lacan, 1966, 94). This imaginary or 'little other' (*petit autre*) is exemplified by the image of Saint Augustine, evoking the infant 'pale with envy' (28) with regards to his foster-brother at the breast, showing the deadly alternative involved, whereby either one or the other must be eliminated in order to restore an imaginary unity with regards to the object of their rivalry. Lacan refers frequently to this episode from 1938 through to 1978 (Assoun, 2010, 36). It is important to insist that the imaginary register remains grounded in the symbolic in so far as the subject is not identical to the ego: he remains a *speaking-being*.

Lacan gives further complexity to the Mirror stage[17] in his use—in a metaphorical capacity, he insists[18]—of the optical schema he adapts from the work of Henri Bouasse (Illustration 1). The original version shows a concave mirror, opposite which is placed a box containing an inverted bouquet of flowers and, on top of the latter, a vase. The rays reflected from the mirror converge to form a cone, giving the illusion of the flowers being lodged upright, in the vase. The specificity of this version is that the spectator has to be placed in a precise position, in order to see what is called the 'real image'. Lacan gives the key to this construction: 'The box means your own body. The bouquet is roaming instincts and desires' (1998a, 129). They are objects that escape any notion of having or not having

---

16 Lacan, 1966, 53. See our adapted version (Brown, 2016, 85).

17 The link is explicitly made (Lacan, 1998a, 199).

18 Lacan, 25 May 1966, 237. He calls it an apologue (1998a, 127).

them (2004, 140): the fantasy of the body as fragmented (*morcelé*). The image of the unified body is thus represented by the vase (1998a, 129). However, this model requires further elaboration since the image perceived testifies to an *alienation*—'primary narcissism' (199)—as the subject cannot abandon the point where the rays converge, without losing sight of the image.

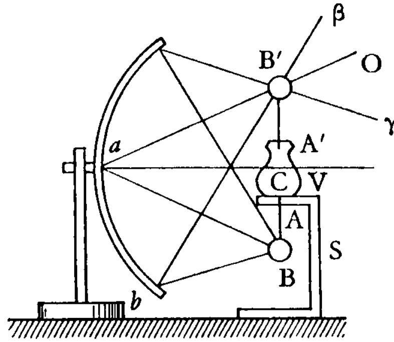

Illustration 1: Bouasse's Inverted Bouquet[19]

Lacan elaborates a second schema (Illustration 2), adding a flat mirror opposite the concave one. Suggesting the oval form of an eye—the concave mirror representing the cortex—it recalls somewhat Beckett's use of similar shapes (*infra*, 107 *sqq.*). The additional element makes it possible to see objects as if they were situated at an equivalent point behind the surface of the mirror since an axis crosses it perpendicularly. This 'virtual image' corresponds to 'second narcissism' (Lacan, 1998a, 200) or identification, and involves a left/right reversal. Lacan states that 'the inclination of the flat mirror is commanded by the voice of the other' (222), enabling it to present a coherent image: that is to say that its nature is *symbolic*. It has the advantage of presenting an image of the objects of desire and enabling the subject to freely depart from the position assigned to him by the real image.

---

19 Bouasse, 87; Lacan, 1998a, 126; 1966, 673.

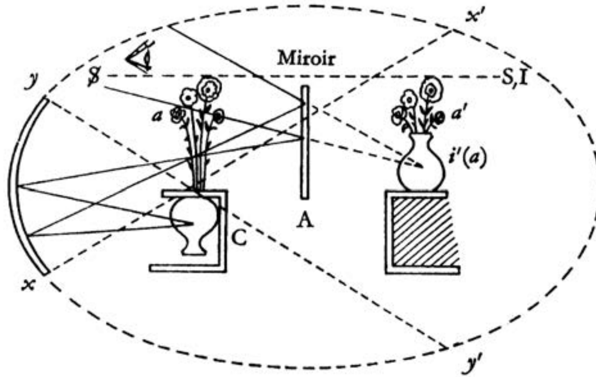

Illustration 2: Lacan's Optical Schema[20]

Lacan's mirror schemas prove useful to elaborate the structuring of identification—that is to say, the subject's relationship to the symbolic register. Further developments go beyond these limits, and testify to the importance of the notion of *jouissance*. This term weakens in translation as 'enjoyment'. The juridical connotation of 'usufruct' points to the way it is bound up in the Other, from whom the subject endures his irremediable separation: faced with the incommensurable hole created in existence as an effect of speech, anything of absolute alterity that is circumscribed becomes a sign of one's essential existence, which can never be absorbed within names and representations. Such is the virtue of the simple letter *a*—in the '*a* object'—which is not a signifier but marks a place at the heart of the personal fantasy. It is precisely in its status as ungraspable—and, as *das Ding*, having never known any existence in the signifier—that it *causes* desire.

The Gaze and Anxiety

In his *Seminar X* (1962–63) on anxiety, Lacan distinguishes between specular ('concrete', visible or representable) objects, and *a* objects (Lacan, 2004, 107), which escape physical apprehension: the

20 Lacan, 1998a, 198, 220; 1966, 674.

former are objects of exchange, while the second are 'anterior to the constitution of the status of the common, communicable, socialised object' (108): they are incommensurable and belong to the absolute singularity of each subject. This distinction detaches the *a* object from its status as a simple image or partial object (Assoun, 2010, 72). If Kierkegaard stated that anxiety, contrary to fear, is devoid of any object (Leguil, 171), Lacan asserts the *positive* nature of the *a* object that causes anxiety, in so far as it belongs to an outside that is the most intimate part of our existence. He thus returns to the optical schema to emphasise the importance of the object as preceding and escaping any representation in the mirror of the Other. Anxiety is caused by that which does not appear in the mirror; it is not a lack, but a positivity: where the 'lack is lacking' (Lacan, 2004, 53). And yet, this terrible presence is paradoxically a 'protection' with regards to 'the experience of absolute distress [*désarroi*]' to be encountered in psychoanalysis (1986, 351). Lacan uses the topological figures of the torus and the cross-cap (2004, 157–8) to show how it is possible to conceive a circle that will not be reduced to a point: the *a* object as impossible for the symbolic to assimilate (161; and 115). He also uses the figure of the Möbius strip, which cannot be rotated since it remains identical (114): the example of Maupassant who could not see himself in the mirror (recounted in the novella 'Le Horla') points to the intrusion of this *a* object (116). This is followed by Lacan's 1965 homage to Marguerite Duras, whose novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is centred on the intense moment when the heroine is 'ravished' by the gaze (Brown, 2018e, 22–31), which reduces her body to utter nudity (Lacan, 2001, 193), to an envelope devoid of any inside or outside (194).

The Tableau and Anamorphosis

The conception of the fantasy as a picture or 'tableau' is developed at length in *Seminar XIII* (1965–66), in what Lacan presents

as a follow-up to his *Seminar XI*,[21] with the notion of the screen.[22] Lacan works from conceptions of projective geometry and perspective, showing how the plane of the visible requires the creation of a distance, involving the loss of the gaze object. The lines projected at various points on the canvas pass through the spectator and meet up at infinity, showing the subject to be enveloped in the gaze which, as such, remains invisible. The plane of the visible is, like a painting, necessarily inscribed within a 'frame', which structures the fundamental fantasy or personal world-view. The subject's frame is the 'prototype'[23] of the painting itself.[24] Velázquez' famous work *Las Meninas* serves to illustrate these ideas, showing how the spectator is captured within the tableau as a result of his distance from it.

Lacan conducts a consistent elaboration around the visual motif of the anamorphosis in relation to the optical schema, where the tilting of the flat mirror at a 90° angle (Lacan, 1966, 680) distorts the image, somewhat as occurs in pre-classical mannerism (Lacan, 1966, 681). He pursues this question in *Seminar VII* (1959–60), noting that what we seek to find in an illusion 'is something where the illusion itself is transcended, so to speak, [where it] destroys itself' (Lacan, 1986, 163), so that the artist makes his creation a foundation for 'the Thing' (*das Ding*; 169): the impossible primæval object. Here the mirror serves to define an absolute limit (181). In speaking of Antigone, he describes how in the mirror of tragedy 'a marvellous illusion, a very beautiful image of passion, appears in the mirror's beyond' (318), by contrast with 'something rather dissolved and disgusting' that is strewn around it. This reveals the position of Antigone as situated beyond human limits in the realm of the Other (Gr. *atè*; 323), suspended in the impossible zone beyond life, and before

21 Lacan, 1965–66, 29 April 1966.

22 Lacan, 1965–66, 4 May 1966..

23 Lacan, 1965–66, 25 May 1966.

24 Lacan calls this tableau not a 'representation', but the 'representative of representation' ('*représentant de la représentation*'; Freud's *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*).

the second, absolute death (326). Beauty is seen as the 'true barrier that stops the subject before the unnameable field of radical desire in so far as it is the field of absolute destruction' (Lacan, 1986, 256; 1991a, 15). It indicates 'the place of the relationship of man to his own death' (Lacan, 1986, 342) in a dazzling or blinding moment (*éblouissement*). In his *Seminar XI*, of 1964, studying the anamorphosis in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), Lacan points out the distorted skull, which can only be identified—in its original setting—as one leaves the room (Baltrušaitis, 147). The skull points to the lost gaze object and castration; it is the part that captivates the subject at the point where he is annihilated (Lacan, 1973, 83).

In this same Seminar, Lacan devotes a large part to the gaze, which is to be understood in the light of his definition of the drive as accomplishing an incessant back-and-forth movement around the erogenous zones—slits—circumscribing the hole of the lost *a* object (Lacan, 1973, 163). Here, in a detailed analysis of Merleau-Ponty, he sees the subject as being enveloped by the gaze: as being not in front of the picture but inescapably situated within it (86, 89). In this way, the subject is confronted by the enigmatic desire of the Other since he has no idea what he might represent for the latter. What is primordial is the uncontrollable and all-pervasive presence of light, which destroys any imagined pre-eminence of geometry (100). The painting—destined to tame the voracious gaze of the Other (105)—thus appears as a screen and a veil, and the *trompe-l'œil*, denounced by Plato, is interpreted as competing not with appearances but with the Idea, or the *a* object (103) since it is 'mere' deceptive appearance.

Voyeurism and Exhibitionism

Voyeurism and exhibitionism engage the gaze. The voyeur seeks to detect a sign revealing that his victim has been capable of offering himself up to an Other who remains invisible but constantly present (Lacan, 2013, 495). He aims to have himself detected as pure gaze but when surprised in the act by another, the experience of shame restores this object to him: 'The gaze is this lost object, and

suddenly found again, in the conflagration of shame, by the introduction of the other' (Lacan, 1973, 166). In exhibitionism, the victim's desire is surprised beyond the protective veil of his modesty (Lacan, 2013, 494). What is revealed is not the visible organ but the invisible object pointed to by the open/close pulsation of the slit (*ibid.*). In both voyeurism and exhibitionism, the Other remains unconscious, cut off from the act accomplished: in voyeurism, he does not know that he can be seen; in exhibitionism, that he can be stirred by what he sees (496). Thus what is aimed at is, in relation to the Other, situated beyond the visible. In their act, neither knows what they see or show (Lacan, 1991a, 360). Finally, rather than being strictly complementary, voyeur and exhibitionist reveal the back and forth beating of the drive, which circumscribes the incommensurable hole of the Other: the impossibility of a complete circuit in the binary movement.

The Borromean Mutation

Lacan introduced his 'Borromean knot'—taken from the coat of arms of the house of Borromeo (Lacan, 2011a, 91)—in his *Seminar XIX* (1971–72). If the *imaginary* was initially conceived of as a captivating form, dissimulating the true relationship of the subject to his symbolic other (Lacan, 1981, 17), here it is bound up in the indissoluble knot of three rings (including *symbolic* and *real*) of equal importance—plus a hole in the middle—so that one cannot be removed without destroying the entire construction. This enables Lacan to go beyond various limits of his previous teaching—or even to overturn them—to show up the multiple ways of dealing with *jouissance* and the real, removed from any normative context. Rather than working with meaning, he makes the real visible (Rabinovitch): the gaze as an object is no longer in question; rather it is a matter of physically manipulating the knots and, rallying Wittgenstein, of showing (Milner, 1995, 167–171). In echo to his study of president Schreber (*Seminar III*) and his optical schema, Lacan shows Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, after being beaten, seeing this

whole episode evacuated as a '*pelure*' (Lacan, 2005a, 148–9). He sloughed his bodily image with disgust, like a dead skin or 'offal' (*CPo*, 5), feeling no anger or shame: the imaginary was thus severed from the other Borromean rings. The act of writing then allowed Joyce to bind the three rings together, by means of his artist's ego (constituting a fourth circle, as a '*sinthome*'). In a remarkable study, Arka Chattopadhyay (2018b) has recently analysed many implications of Lacan's Borromean knots for Beckett's writing. Our concern here will be somewhat different, in an effort to discern the specific qualities and structuring of the imaginary register in Beckett's work; following an approach which, however, will necessarily lead to certain topological considerations.

This over-view of the place of the gaze in Lacan's teachings gives some idea of the complexities involved and justifies the necessity of putting them to work in order to ascertain how they can shed light on the singularity of a work of creation. Indeed, Beckett's work schools us in rigorous thinking since it confronts us with constructions, formulations and motifs, that remain opaque and impervious to attempts to integrate them within pre-established frameworks: his work offers no purchase for identification by means of characters, plots, or a world-view. At the same time, it clearly touches on a fundamental part of our personal experience. Consequently, Beckett's creation requires adequate conceptual tools enabling us to discern the specific dimension of existence that is involved. It is not a matter of reducing the part belonging to creation, but of opening it up in order to define what will never cease to escape our comprehension.

Psychoanalysis makes it possible to relate what seems (and remains) strange in Beckett's work to other experiences that can shed light on it, while also revealing what defies any comparison: rather than applying categories, psychoanalysis fundamentally demands of us to distinguish and differentiate, to grasp what does not fit in with pre-conceived notions. For this reason, while it offers a corpus of doctrine, it requires to be viewed and practised from a point of view that does not reduce it to a metalanguage. The use of its vocabulary

and concepts in no way demonstrates a superior perspicacity or a hegemonic aim since it remains subservient to a singular enunciation.

Another quality of psychoanalysis is that it allows us to shed light—owing to a theoretical framework that is in constant development, in relation to the unexpected that arises in clinical work—on what is at stake in existence, and the dimensions of life which we often pass over, in an attempt to exclude experiences that may resist reassuring explanations.

Melancholia

Certain traits apparent in Beckett's writing suggest affinities with the question of melancholia. The latter has a long history and, in the context of modern psychiatry, includes Cotard's syndrome—which has been associated with Beckett (Fifield, 2008)—and reveals the problematic issues involving a subject's relationship to his body. It is distinct from paranoia since 'Cotard insists on the absence of any delirium of influence, of any imputation to others of phenomena that the patient experiences in his body' (Starobinski, 2015, 542). This is because the melancholic is acutely aware of the inexistence of any Other—Descartes' and Berkeley's divinity—capable of guaranteeing his existence, a fact that presents an interest beyond the strict clinical category—as Lacan shows in his study of *Hamlet*—for the question of desire. Jean Starobinski also notes that such experiences as the impossibility of dying,[25] are a '*general anthropological given*' (2015, 559), but were also a historical revelation for Western consciousness, both in the realm of science and in literature (560) after 1850, as an echo of the cry 'God is dead'.

Marie-Claude Lambotte sees melancholia as a specific clinical structure or discourse which, like Marie-Jean Sauret, she distinguishes from psychosis. She notes that if, according to Freud and Lacan, the subject is caught up in the symbolic by means of an imposed acceptance or affirmation (*Bejahung*), psychosis testifies to a

[25] Starobinski (2015, 558) cites Blanchot's *De Kafka à Kafka*.

rejection (*Verwerfung*) at this point, causing the foreclosure whereby it is as if the signifiers concerned had never existed (Lambotte, 2012, 685). Consequently, '*what has not come to light in the symbolic, appears in the real*' (Lacan, 1966, 388) as absolutely unbearable. Lacan notes that the melancholic, however, in his self-accusations, 'is entirely in the domain of the symbolic' (1991a, 458–9). He manifests the affirmation that precedes negation, 'and which allows the latter to make the subject come to being in an ever more marked independence with regards to the pleasure principle' (Lambotte, 2012, 685). It is thus that the signifier *nothing*—crucial in Beckett's writing—constitutes a true form of symbolic identification. In other words, *nothing* is a name which, as such, offers a means of defence representing the only consistency the subject could find in his original Other: '[…] the nothing belongs both to the movement of the disappearance of desire in the other, and to the only mark of recognition that the latter could allow to subsist' (679). Borromean theory shows that this, however, leaves the symbolic and the real in a situation of dangerous proximity owing to a deficit of the imaginary, which could have afforded a form of mediation (679–80).

If the imaginary register thus proves to be particularly fragile, it also means that its attendant veil of illusions has less weight so that melancholia has a specific relation to the truth of the speaking-being. Michel Bousseyroux observes that just as 'in schizophrenia, all the symbolic is real and in paranoia all the imaginary freezes desire, we could say that in melancholia, at least in its negationistic form, *all the imaginary*, that is to say both the body and ideas, *is real*, that is to say *impossible*'.[26] This situation is what Lambotte calls generalised castration (2012, 448) or inhibition, which can lead to an exclamation like that of the Unnamable: 'That the impossible should be asked of me, good, what else could be asked of me?' (*U*, 331).

[26] 'All the symbolic is real' is a quotation from Lacan (1966, 392).

Symptom or Work of Art?

Melancholia would seem to offer one possible approach to what is at stake in Beckett's work. However, it can never be a question of reducing creation to a clinical structure. For a start, any clinical category is necessarily a 'paradoxical class' in so far as it denotes an absolute singularity, as evidenced by creation: '[…] the property that seems to be its principle and its bond is the name that detaches it from properties and bonds' (Milner, 1983, 120). Secondly, creation reveals how a subject has succeeded in breaking the closed circle of the pathology inherent in his psychic structure so that, as Jean Starobinski points out, Cotard's conception of negation goes beyond pathology: 'The "delirium of negations" according to Cotard circumscribes the delirious vanishing point behind what is experienced and written about the negativity of language and the "musician hollow nothing" [*creux néant musicien*] of poetry' (2015, 556).

Marie-Claude Lambotte evokes melancholic patients who elaborate a '*symptom-production*' (2012, 414): one that 'only concerns the subject and "adheres" to him to the point of being unable to bear the intervention of an external gaze other that of the analyst' (414). These productions are 'marked by the repetitive and compulsive character of their elaboration, this imaginary space inside which the traits of a face and the lines of a body seek to be fixed' (415). Lambotte thus states that while 'the work of art testifies to the signifier of the artist's *jouissance* in an original demarcation [*découpe*] of effective reality, the "symptom-work" testifies to punctual vacillations of ego references in an effort to reaffirm the marks of love of immerged images, and to palliate its eventual failures' (416). In the work of creation however, the form is crucial not as signification or conformity with canonical genres, but as what opens up, *ex nihilo*, a new field, determined by its own logic, while preserving its reference to a common cultural and historical corpus. It creates a part that is absolutely new and that, for this reason, leaves an indelible mark in the cultural field: what is decisive is the fact that the artist succeeds in

creating a totally original and irreplaceable encounter with a public of readers or spectators.

Psychoanalysis and Academia

Beckett's extremely rigorous approach to creation, as well as his appropriation—or even 'innutrition', to use the Renaissance term—and remoulding of diverse domains of thought require us to examine his work in the light of other references, as the 'Beckett in Company' series invites us to. In harmony with this conception, the following study will undertake a regular back-and-forth movement between the exposition of theoretical concepts and the close study of Beckett's work. However, certain recognised excesses of psychoanalytical approaches require us to take certain precautions in order to understand how this field and artistic creation may offer the grounds for a fruitful encounter.

The use of psychoanalysis to approach works of creation remains problematic, even without supposing that one would aim to 'psychoanalyse' an artist who is not a patient in order to produce some superior truth about the work of art. In his 'four discourses', which set out the conditions presiding over speech, Lacan shows the discourse of the University to be distinct from that of the Psychoanalyst (the other two being that of the Master and that of the Hysteric). On the manifest level of this *matheme* (above the bar), Lacan places knowledge (*savoir*: S_2) as the *agent*, which is applied to an *object* (here *a*, in a subordinate position):

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow // \frac{a}{\$}$$

What remains decisive however, in the place of *truth* (under the bar), is the master signifier (S_1) ordaining the imperative of a unified field of knowledge. As for the *product*, it is the divided subject ($\$$) appearing as a remainder. Reversing the discourse of the Master (who alone takes authority for his declarations), the 'slave' (as S_2) takes the dom-

inant place, liberating knowledge from its subordination. Dogmatically, the newly promoted 'slave' believes that knowledge is totally self-sufficient, impersonal, objective, and is destined to achieve universal domination. The academic and the student appear as being purely impersonal and replaceable, while their discourse tends towards abstraction. In the absence of embodied first-person speech, what is excluded is *desire*: what drives one to study.

Jean-Claude Milner places the University alongside the Church and the Army, analysed by Freud (1989, 153–60) as organised forms of the crowd or the mass. The University covers the entire globe, and as the term *universitas* signifies the movement towards (*versus*) the One, the University promotes the ideology of the 'facile universal' (2011, 102). Contrary to the ancient schools, dominated by the personal master/disciple relationship, there are no masters, only professors belonging to an impersonal institution, which ensures the over-arching relationship. The University promotes the ideal of Absolute knowledge, deleting object and subject (106), which both become indifferent in quality. As a result: 'The group that aims to become more and more numerous is none other than the group of actors of the market which has at last become global. Merchants, buyers, producers, consumers: that is the natural crowd that dedicates itself to constant growth, at the risk of destroying itself, and which is henceforth coextensive with the whole of humanity' (111). That means that the globalised market is *unlimited*, and that the University 'trains academics to help multiply the actors of the market'. Milner contrasts this with the *difficult universal*, grounded in the divided subject as absolutely singular, marked by his desire: this represents an irreducible obstacle to the impersonal discourse that claims to unite the whole of humanity.

It is not difficult to see the way the University—and the school which, notably in France's Third Republic, was conceived as a sanctuary for intellectual development—has placed itself at the service of the market. Examining the devaluation of literature since the 18th Century, William Marx notes the parallel whereby literary criticism engaged itself in the path of extreme formalism, where 'close

reading' gave way to deconstruction, voiding literary texts of any relevance (see the question of 'gender' *infra*, 531–2). In a spectacular reversal—going back to the British New Left in the 1950s—literature is seen as a simple reflection of society (163–6). Traditional fields of knowledge have thus given way to 'cultural studies'—star, queer, gender, minority, postcolonial, disabled, green…, composing a limitless series—breaking up traditional disciplinary branches, adapting them to life in society, as determined by the demands of capitalism and consumption[27]. They turn away from a rigorous and universal theoretical framework—whose transcendent status operated as a rigorous benchmark for exactitude—making intellectual elaboration an auxiliary to products of consumption. Æsthetic form—as absolutely singular and impossible to reduce to conceptual or utilitarian language—is downgraded with regards to the signified. Whatever the astute analyses of their proponents may be, they call for application in the social sphere: rather than using language, manipulating it; rather than analysing reality, fabricating it; rather than the universality of reason, the narcissism of segregation (the generalisation of Lacan's Mirror stage, where each one is the specular image of all others); rather than disinterested thinking, utilitarian exploitation of slogans.

Psychoanalysis necessarily has links to universal thought. Not only does Lacan lean on thinkers such as Plato, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein but—following his 'excommunication' from the International Psychoanalytical Association, causing him to continue his Seminar at the École normale supérieure (ENS)—he had to address philosophers, and thus find common ground with them (Leguil, 269). Milner developed the implications of this in his book *L'Œuvre claire*, which aims to show that 'there is thinking [*pensée*] in Lacan' (1995, 8). That is to say that in Lacan's teachings there are 'propositions sufficiently robust to be extracted from their specific field, to

27 Milner notes: 'Far from weakening [*ébranler*] the facile universal, non-indifferent [*non-quelconques*] names were called to reinforce it' (2006, 213). These names were those of traditionally excluded social categories.

bear changes of position and modifications of their discursive space': in other words, they can be displaced from the strict realm of psychoanalysis.

With regards to literature, this means that it is not simply a matter of the binary opposition between pure form, on the one hand, and transitivity with regards to reality, on the other, as developed by William Marx in the context of literary history. The question is the way a subject elaborates his own singular position in relation to the tools provided by literary form, or even distinctly different vehicles of creation. It will then be a matter of the radical (and extra-literary) singularity that is at stake in this creation, and what literature and 'reality' (yet to be defined in this context) mean.

However, the fundamental question for psychoanalysis is the dimension of existence that presents an insuperable obstacle—what Beckett would call *empêchement*—to any aspiration to harmony. This means that clinical work is of fundamental importance: there can be no psychoanalysis without theory to produce a body of knowledge, and measure progress or necessary adjustments; but there can also be no psychoanalysis without clinical practice, whereby the unforeseen and the untameable arises in the specificity of each case. It is here that the antinomy of the University and psychoanalysis is patent, and is exemplified in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who enjoys global renown as a Lacanian 'psychoanalytical philosopher'. Indeed, one practitioner, Nina Krajnic, has recently revealed his problematic relationship to psychoanalysis, explaining that on the breaking up of Yugoslavia, the university departments and publishing houses were privatised, while the financial élite assumed power. Žižek seized this opportunity to secure his dominant position in relation to the corrupt political establishment, receiving finance from public ministries. He then forbad collaboration between his 'school' and Lacanian psychoanalysts in Slovenia, as Mladen Dolar admitted (Krajnic, 2017a). According to Krajnic, this was accompanied by wholesale plagiarism. By opposing any publication on clinical work, 'Žižek introduced psychoanalysis without psychoanalysis', the latter becoming simply a corpus of dead knowledge to be endlessly repeated (Krajnic, 2017b). As Lacan stat-

ed: 'I speak of publications; that has absolutely nothing to do with analysis; you can heap up as many of these conferences, of these piles of diversely literary productions as you like, it is elsewhere that the work is done, it is done in analytical practice…' (Lacan, 1974, 8). The latter works to give the patient the possibility of producing changes in his manner of being and finding an access to his own absolutely singular language.

This example shows the political implications of a metalanguage: refuted by Lacan, such discourse claims to speak of an object from an external, objective point of view, eliminating any disruption by subjectivity. It supposes the existence of a guarantee to judgments and utterances. However, Lacan states: 'Any authoritative utterance has [in the Other] no guarantee other than its very enunciation' (1966, 813). This is because 'there is no Other of the Other'. In other words, 'no language can say the truth about truth [*le vrai sur le vrai*] since truth is grounded in the fact that it speaks, and that it has no other means to become grounded' (Lacan, 1966, 867–8). Any assertion of truth is thus irremediably undermined by the subjectivity of the one who utters it: it is fraught with equivocation that is its only ground for authority. The University, by contrast, founded on the belief in 'communication' and the 'facile universal'—Alain Badiou's 'generic humanity'—is diametrically opposed to what Beckett so pointedly reveals as 'weakness' and the impossible.

Art and psychoanalytical clinical work are different. The former is the creation of one who has found the means to deal with his own problematic condition: by definition, it is always complete. As Lacan stated, following Freud, when the psychoanalyst encounters the artist, the latter leads the way (2001, 192–3): the psychoanalyst has everything to learn from him. In clinical practice, whatever knowledge the patient may ascribe to the practitioner, the latter in no way knows in advance what the subject is going to say, what realms he is going to bring to light. Rather than a completed work, it is an on-going process where interpretation—whose effects cannot be calculated—demands the real implication of the analyst.

If it is the artist who teaches the analyst, this requires the latter to 'listen' closely to what is said, to the construction that the artist elaborates as his utterly singular response to the real; the result being put to the test in the impact it produces on the spectator. As Gérard Wajcman states, the work of art is situated in the triple encounter including the artist and the spectator where a central hole embodies a part—the *a* object—that can never be absorbed. This is a Borromean structure: '[…] artist and spectator arise together from their pure encounter. Artist, spectator and work discover each other and themselves at the same meeting-point [*rendez-vous*], they are in sum three functions each one bound to the two others and where none of the three can be removed without detaching the two others in turn' (Wajcman, 1998, 68). What founds the encounter is therefore the object as a *cause*: the part that is absolutely new, and has been circumscribed by the work of art, which only becomes such in its encounter with the spectator.

Thus if there can a fruitful exchange between psychoanalysis and academic discourse, it is not in the appropriation of a consecrated vocabulary but in the form of an *orientation* that recognises the full scope of this *cause of desire*: the latter remaining impenetrable for artist and spectator alike. If psychoanalysis is to be of use, it is above all in maintaining this exigency.

Organisation of this Study

The first of the following chapters explores the way the register of the visible in Beckett's creation diverges from conventional perspective representations. The latter are concomitant with the constitution of the modern subject, endowed with his personal 'point of view'. However, the Beckettian subject will prove to be cut off from the world of his fellows and painfully aware of sharing no common ground with them.

Since a 'frame' is central to the structuring of unified representations, the second chapter deals with the numerous material devices that enhance clear sight: mirrors, eyes and window-frames.

Their regular evocation will be seen as intended to compensate for the absence of a grounding of the imaginary register or conventional reality. As a result of the failure to confirm the subject's identity, mirrors do not necessarily return a recognisable reflection of one who has no internalised image of himself. For want of an exchange of gazes with his original Other, the subject's eyes appear as physical attributes—often enduring physical suffering—rather than communicating emotion or seeking to penetrate appearances. The insistence on frames obeys the same logic, so that windows do not necessarily open up to an outer world but rather are often blank surfaces.

The following chapter turns away from the notion of a representational image, to analyse light and darkness as qualities independent of their enclosure within a specific form. Light will be seen first of all as a persecuting glare, then as manifestly devoid of any origin in a particular source, precisely in the absence of any structuring frame. The motif of white surfaces prolongs the question of light, functioning as a blank screen: it can be persecuting, but may also represent a state that the characters aspire to attain. Darkness is equally important, composing an unstable, binary alternation with light. This is a state some characters seek to take refuge in, and it also appears as a fundamental condition for creation. Darkness serves as a setting for a luminous 'icon', whose function seems to be to capture the gaze of an Other.

The identity of the others comes to the fore in the chapter devoted to 'spectres and doubles'. In works of the middle period, doubles raise the problematic alternative between being represented in the mirror of the Other or radically excluded. The fleeting but insistent presence of 'spectres' testifies to the presence of a hole in representations: one that cannot be assimilated. This will be analysed in relation to *Ill Seen Ill Said*, where calm appearances betray the presence of unstillable anxiety.

The instability of doubles and spectres contrasts with impassive images testifying to the ideal represented by the Beckettian Other who, originally, did not engage in an exchange of gazes. Thus the clear azure sky represents a realm set at an incalculable distance. Its

human equivalent is the human face reduced to its status as an inexpressive mask, devoid of any vivifying gaze. It is from this mortifying point of view that the Beckettian subject is contemplated.

The next chapter examines the visible sphere of the 'closed place' or 'monad', and which, because it appears to be uniform and devoid of any opening, marks a complete contrast with perspective space. Such places are interpreted as offering an imaginary representation of the speaking-being's radical solitude. Despite appearances, they are grounded in a vital cut or breach, leading to an unimaginable—but structurally indispensible—outside, which can sometimes be a source of hallucinations. This opening reveals the grounding of the speaking-being in language, as distinct from the trap of the oppressive imaginary register, as can be seen in the contrast between *The Lost Ones* and *Worstward Ho*.

Paradoxically, the 'monad' is a place of blindness. And yet the Beckettian being creates a new space by opening and closing his eyes. The act of excluding the common, visible environment—of which no adequate sight is possible—offers release, enabling the subject to enter a space that is not dependent on the structure of the window frame: where the images do not force themselves on the subject, but can be scrutinised in darkness.

The final chapter is less strictly thematic than the preceding ones, and is devoted to the study of seeing and the gaze in the context of technology. While the forces of science and capitalism combine to abolish subjectivity, Beckett's creation offers a response, notably by the use of the 'savage eye' of the camera, which intensifies the impact of the gaze object. *Film* offers a manifest allegory of the persecuting camera gaze, while leaning on a narrative structure, an orientation that distinguishes it from the subsequent works for the television. The plays will be studied chronologically, as being, for the first two ('Eh Joe' and 'Ghost Trio'), concerned with the space of the closed 'monad'; then with darkness and the idea of 'poetry as prayer' ('…but the clouds…' and 'Nacht und Träume'); finally 'What Where', adapted from the stage for the television, pushes to extreme limits the visible presence of the beings shown on the screen.

1 — The collapse of Collective Reality

The nature of seeing and the visual in Beckett's work proves to be of great complexity once we attempt to examine it closely. In order to approach this question, we shall start with what would appear to be more conventional conceptions, to show their structure, what dimensions of experience they involve, and thus discern the necessity Beckett felt to go beyond them. The notion of perspective will thus be a central point of our study here, as it has been promoted since the Renaissance, reputed to provide a faithful means of representing reality.

In spite of the verbal nature of narration, the creation of believable reality in a work of fiction is often spontaneously conceived of in terms of a transparent correlation between the represented and its representation (*adequatio rei et intellectus*). Generally, a certain use of point of view is considered to be at work, but the notion of visual perspective doubtless reaches its paroxysm in the supposed objectivity of naturalist descriptions, such as Zola's rendition of Saint-Lazare train station at the beginning of *La Bête humaine* (1890). In this passage, all elements composing a unified reality are meticulously situated in relation to each other. The reader is thus invited to believe he is in the presence of an irrefutable truth governing the destiny of the novel's characters. Of course, the falsification at work here has been pointed out by Maupassant, in his preface to *Pierre et Jean* (1887), as well as by Roland Barthes (1972, 25–32): the impression of immediate reality proves to be the result of supreme artifice. Thus visual laws or conventions are at work in the written text as a result of the fundamental structuring effect of language.

As regards Beckett's work, the early period of *Dream of Fair to middling Women* or *Watt* makes no claim to realism, leaning rather on brilliant word-play. However, a marked evolution occurs later, and we can see an abrupt change from a somewhat believable reality—diversely in *Murphy* and *Molloy*—to its collapse through *Malone Dies* to *The Unnamable*, and its subsequent eviction.

John Pilling has pointed out Beckett's recourse to realistic visual codes in *Malone Dies*. He notes that some of the devices used by writers consist in creating a relationship between figure and ground (Pilling, 2014, 124), between the individual and his social context (125), as well as relationships across time. These means combine to produce a dialectical whole, where interweaving strands are ordered in a hierarchical manner, aiming to convince the reader that he is contemplating a faithful representation of reality. What is operative here—both on the visual and the linguistic levels—is the assignation of the reader/spectator to a single position, and a certain effacing of the narrator as enunciator. In his narration, Malone—who regularly intervenes—does exploit these devices when describing Sapo. However, he also undoes this construction so that 'the narrated events focused on Sapo are presented as routinely continuous and potentially horizonless, as if Sapo were not […] orientated towards any specific goal' (126). Pilling thus considers the character of Sapo as marking Beckett's farewell to realism.

Perspective: Theoretical Basis and Function

As the devices outlined by John Pilling suggest, the notion of 'perspective' is much more diverse than one may think. Indeed, multiple forms of 'perspective' can be noted in the course of art history: frontal perspective, obliging the spectator to place himself in front of a sculpture (Flocon and Taton, 15–9); aerial perspective in the 1300–1450 period, where blue tones create an impression of distance and depth (34). As for geometrical composition, in the late Middle Ages, some examples use perspective—separating right from left, high from low—without resorting to a single vanishing point (36). Karel Vereycken shows how Mediæval perspective often involves lines intersecting in a 'vanishing region' rather than in a single point (*infra*, 194). Flocon and Taton emphasise that 'painters tended to rely more on their feeling rather than imperative rules' (38–9), adding that they 'are rarely geometers'. When speaking of perspective and its deconstruction, Hubert Damisch points out that even in 20th

Century avant-garde movements perspective remains a reference, constituting an inevitable component of visual representation. Thus the 'depraved perspectives' (Baltrušaitis) of the Baroque era play with breaches in unified perspectives; and El Lissitzky (1890–1941) challenged perspective, on the pretext that it confined reality within Euclidian space, while exploiting it in his own practice (Flocon and Taton, 43). Even at the end of the 15th Century, Damisch explains, 'painters were obliged to reckon with it: any question regarding the geometry of the painting required […] *showing* the work of perspective. Artists therefore had the choice of outdoing rules of perspective, or adopting the opposing position—while being incapable of feigning to ignore it' (437–8).

What is commonly termed 'perspective' today is in fact '*costruzione legittima*' (Flocon and Taton, 43). Obeying the laws of Euclidian geometry, it goes back to Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) but was clearly formulated for the first time by Piero della Francesca in his treatise *De prospectiva pingendi* (*ca.* 1470). Throughout the 16th Century, this was considered as the sole 'scientific' way of painting, thus testifying to a rupture with the Middle Ages, as Hubert Damisch explains:

> Where perspectiva naturalis demonstrated the why and wherefore of the apparent diminution of objects as an effect of distance, perspectiva artificialis appears as a development […] that claims to constrain representation to laws that are those of optics, or […] of clear and distinct vision as the Ancients understood it and accounted for it in terms of geometry […]. (Damisch, 92)

The common pictorial references in this domain are paintings of the Renaissance—such as the anonymous *La Città ideale*—showing architectural visions devoid of human presence. Damisch underscores that perspective painting cannot be separated from architecture since there can only be perspective of *something* (289), and architecture provides such a geometrical basis (119).

Thus if there are as many 'perspectives' as there are civilisations and cultural movements, what comes to the fore in the modern period as *prospettiva legittima*—based on the pre-eminence of geometry—is a consequence of the emergence of the discourse of science, with the consequent elision that founds the modern subject. The latter comes into being as a result of the signifier as universal, so that, as Lacan reads Descartes' *cogito*, 'I think' is dissociated from 'I am', unless one relies on a divinity to ensure their appropriate coordination. Geulincx's occasionalist thinking pushes this dissociation even further, seeing the subject as helpless to act of his own volition.

In the field of visual art, Damisch follows Erwin Panofsky's evaluation, according to which perspective painting paved the way for the subject of modern science (Damisch, 439): it gave 'the *Systemraum*, the modern, and systematic, concept of space, in a concrete artistic sphere [...], even before abstract mathematical science gave form and force to its postulate' (106). What results, however, is a dissociation between vision and geometry, which perspective ideology and idealist philosophy attempt to suture. Lacan points out in his *Seminar I*:

> The whole of science rests on the reduction of the subject to an eye, and that is why it is projected before you, that is to say objectified [...]. To reduce us an instant to being only an eye, we had to be placed in the position of the scholar who can decree that he is only an eye, and hang a sign on the door—*Do not disturb the experimenter*. In life, things are quite different, because we are not an eye. (Lacan, 1998a, 130)

Explaining, in his *Seminar XI*, that the Cartesian subject 'is also a sort of geometrical point, a perspective point' (Lacan, 1973, 81), Lacan underscores that Diderot's *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those who can See* shows how the question of vision is bypassed since geometrical

space 'is perfectly recontructible, imaginable, by a blind person' (*ibid.*).[1]

At the same time, this production of the autonomous subject succeeds in engendering a visible reality that appears as a tableau offered up to the subject's gaze, detached from any divinity (*infra*, 143). In the following analyses, the term *tableau* will often be used as synonymous with *picture*, in order to underscore the two-dimensional construction concerned. Hubert Damisch notes that the perspectival paradigm 'introduced the third [term], hitherto excluded by an art (as [in] the Middle Ages) that was essentially contemplative, and that forestalled any possibility of passing from one position to another, as well as of entering the tableau as on a "stage" ' (459). Indeed, working from Leon Battista Alberti's 1435 treatise *De pictura*, Gérard Wajcman shows how the signifier produces the subject by means of a separation, with the consequence that reality appears to be laid out at his disposal. Descartes expounds that man thus becomes possessor and master of nature, and Wajcman develops: 'Perspective space becomes the "place of the human" whom the divine eludes, and who in part escapes the divine' (2004, 395). That is to say: 'If seeing man is assigned to a point of view, God is henceforth assigned to heaven, in an invisible and blind point situated at infinity.'

There is thus a scission between the geometrical and the visual, so that perspective can never be reduced to the first of the two terms. Hubert Damisch underscores the fact that perspective in painting does not imitate vision, and cannot be reduced to geometry, since 'the image of painting is itself given up *to be seen*, in the same way as any other object of the visible world, and is thus subject to the jurisdiction of vision' (67–8).

This very scission undercuts philosophical idealism and the ocularcentric structure of thinking. Steven Connor explains this orientation, which extends at least from Descartes to Kant:

1 See also: Damisch, 67; Wajcman, 2004, 166.

> The privileging of vision over other senses, of hearing, smell, touch and taste, has certain striking consequences. […] The association of reason with the faculty of vision derives from, and no doubt perpetuates, the idea that reason must maintain an absolute separation from the objects that it surveys. This separation extends to the self and its perceptions, which in Cartesian philosophy must be inspected with the same rigour, exactitude and objectivity as the external world. (Connor, 1992, 91)

Lacan offers a constant critique of this rationalist conception: 'Observe that this pure subject, this subject whose unitary reference the theoreticians of philosophy have pushed to the extreme, this subject, say I, we do not really believe him, and for cause. We cannot believe that on him—in the world—everything is suspended, and that is exactly what the accusation of idealism consists of.'[2] Thus while *perspectiva artificialis* attempts to assert the existence of the autonomous subject, it also inevitably raises suspicion, appearing not as a natural and unshakeable reality, but as a pure construct.

The elision of the subject assumes a very concrete dimension in the legendary birth of perspective, which can in turn lend itself to comparisons with forms of the visual in Beckett's work. Indeed, the latter consistently highlights the apparatus of seeing—as it does of hearing and the voice—breaking it up into its various components which fail to compose an organic whole. This characteristic of perspectival representation was exemplified by the experiment undertaken by architect Filippo Brunelleschi (†1446), as recounted by his biographer Antonio Manetti. This undertaking was aimed at demonstrating the conformity of perspective painting with the real viewpoint. Brunelleschi's setup consisted of placing a painting of the Florentine Baptistery facing its model. The spectator took position behind the painting—on its blank side—and looked through a peephole. In order to superimpose the view of the paint-

---

2 Lacan, 1965–66, 4 May 1966, 191.

ing on the original, a mirror was placed between the two: the picture was contemplated in the mirror.

The spectator thus occupied the position of a voyeur since his presence was elided. However, as Hubert Damisch points out, his existence is also impossible to efface because he finds that he is subjected to his own gaze in the mirror emanating from the small hole bored into the surface of the painting:

> But a rather singular voyeur, and who discovers that he himself is being looked at, and from the very place where he is looking, subjected as he is, from the start, to this seeing that elides him as a body to reduce him to an eye, and rapidly to a point. For the image that the mirror returns to him is not his own, but that of the painting that acts as a screen to his body, replacing it with its own, of which however the eye only grasps the reflection. […] the eye, in the mirror, does not see itself seeing, nor seeing what it sees: someone is there looking at him, and that he cannot see. (Damisch, 150)

What results is a closed system, except for this eye which, making a breach in the redundant duplication of the Baptistery and its image, is somewhat like the one peering into the 'pads' in the asylum of Murphy (*Mu*, 148) or the one seeking to grasp Worm, in *The Unnamable* (*U*, 350; see *infra*, 199–200). Such a closure is congruent with the precepts of science, where the subject is elided, reduced to a simple point or dot, thus enabling the idea of 'a totality of a rational and infinite being, that a science itself systematically rational would master' (Damisch, 177), in an echo of Husserl.

However, the very existence of this peephole opens up a very disturbing perspective, which the coherent image is unable to enclose: it raises the question of infinity. What is seen in the dark point in the centre of the tableau is not the subject as he might grasp himself but 'the gaze by which the panel was pierced and which preexisted any aim' (Damisch, 147). Thus Brunelleschi's device demonstrates not simply the exactness of his perspective painting but also

the split between the imaginary and the symbolic (*ibid.*), in the fact that the point of view can only be posited retroactively, by means of the mirror. The spectator/subject finds himself excluded from the setup—which functions as a self-contained system—and implicated in the system—at its origin—but at an 'insurmountable distance' (392). Indeed, the spectator's eye cannot be absorbed within the tableau: it remains extraneous, heterogeneous, appearing as a 'blot' or hole in the unified surface. This dimension remains radically excluded by mathematical conceptions, as Damisch observes: 'Geometry does not, as such, need to know the function of the blot [*tache*], which is—precisely—to make a blot in the picture, to introduce in the system a foreign element, irreducible to its norm, and—first of all—to resist naming' (376).

Lacan and Perspective

Lacan introduces such a scission into the theory of perspective, in order to take into account the existence of the unconscious subject. As Philippe Comar explains: 'If perspective is allied to geometry, it is distinct from it on this essential point: it introduces us as a gazing subject' (in Nominé, 98). It is no longer a matter of the Supreme Being who 'perpetually *geometricises* in the universe', as Diderot imagined in his *Lettre sur les aveugles*, but of the speaking-being who is excluded by the discourse of science.

Thus, in his *Seminar XIII* (1965–66), Lacan works from the use of central projection, whereby a spatial figure is combined with another one, obtained by means of a point by point transposition with reference to a centre of projection (O). One plane contains the latter and, opposite, a second parallel plane (P) acts as a screen, so that a point situated at an infinite distance behind it (M_2), or one situated between the two (M1), will nonetheless be inscribed on this surface (m_2 and m_1). However, a point situated on the same plane as the centre of projection will remain undefined (M4) since it can only coincide with the second plane at infinity. As for the centre of projection itself, it cannot be represented because there is no OO line: it

cannot contain or represent itself, and therefore cannot be inscribed on the projective plane (Nominé, 99). In short, for a point to be visible, a separation is necessary. As a structuring factor, it entails a loss: that of the invisible gaze object (one of Lacan's '*a* objects').

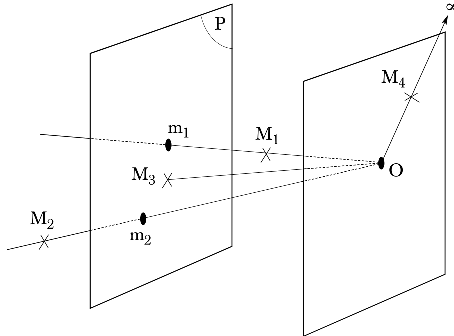

Illustration 3: Optical projection[3]

In Lacanian terms, this can be understood as the *subject*—S: a letter which also serves to designate the *signifier* that produces the subject as mortified—definitively elided from any representation. Bernard Nominé evokes the master signifier (S_1) which commands a subject's existence, and is situated in O, so that 'S_1 can represent S in relation to the vanishing point' (100). This echoes Lacan's axiom: '[…] a signifier is what represents a subject to another signifier' (1966, 819). The subject himself is elided, while also being represented by the master signifier, which finds its visible representation in the vanishing point in the tableau. As Lacan states: '[…] perspective is the mode […] by which the painter as a subject places himself in the picture […].'[4] The visible is therefore the result of a separation. However: 'If we bring S_1 closer, to the point of placing it on S, then S_1 is identical to S, and there is therefore no longer a projective image' (Nominé, 100). Such perfect merging would appear an ideal prospect, as Magritte provocatively shows by superimposing a painting on the window supposedly opening onto the very scene repro-

3 Nominé, 99.

4 Lacan, 1965–66, 18 May 1966.

duced in the painting. In reality, however, that would only plunge the room into darkness.[5] Thus: 'Everything takes place in this minimal gap between the planes S and S_1. It is this gap which allows the construction of an image on the plane of the tableau' (*ibid.*). This gap can be understood as the 'window' of the subject's fundamental fantasy (*fantasme*): the device that enables the latter to be projected onto the surface of the tableau: it is 'like a frame parallel to that of the picture, in so far as it gives to this point S its place, which it frames' (*ibid.*).

As for the picture itself, it is 'the place of the S_2, it is the image we have of the world' (Nominé, 101). The tableau, the painting, contains reality, what Alberti calls 'historia', the endless anecdotal content, the stories and images that compose life: what Beckett calls the 'excipient' (*L4*, 424), as opposed to the 'essence' of a dramatic creation such as *Footfalls*. To define things further, we can add that the organising force behind the content of the tableau is the subject's fundamental fantasy which, however, does not appear in the tableau. Following the work of André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986), Lacan takes the example of Palæolithic paintings, where the images at the cave entrance function as signifiers representing the subject for the signifiers in the depths of the cave which, therefore, do not require to be seen.[6] As Lacan states: 'The artist, like every single one of us, renounces the window to have the tableau […].'[7] That is to say that what frames or conditions the images that appear before our eyes is occluded, so that these images only compose the content of our reality at the price of an illusion. And this occluded part is where the subject is an object of the gaze of his Other.

Lacan states that 'perspective is the mode […] by which the painter as a subject places himself in the picture',[8] that is to say, at 'any given point on the line of the horizon' or vanishing point, since

5 Lacan, 1965–66, 25 May 1966.
6 Lacan, 1965–66, 4 May 1966.
7 Lacan, 1965–66, 25 May 1966.
8 Lacan, 1965–66, 18 May 1966.

the height of the latter is determined by the position from which the painter contemplates the scene. Blaise Pascal made a similar observation concerning this position, showing how it opens up to an infinite dimension: 'So with pictures seen from too far or too near. There is but one undividable point which is the true place, the others are too near, too far, too high or too low. Perspective determines that point in the art of painting. But in truth and morality, who will determine it?' (frag. 19). That is to say, there is a breach opening up to infinity, where one's whole being is dependant on 'this imperceptible point': 'It is thus up to God, *madness which comes from God*, to assign this *mad* point' (in Damisch, 77).

Faced with this limitless dimension involved in the gaze, perspective painting exerts a captivating effect—acting as a *gaze-tamer* (Lacan, 1973, 100)—since by scrutinising the forms it presents, we seek to grasp the invisible *a* object:

> […] the *a* object is what we can never grasp and especially not in the mirror […]. All the painting's effort to grasp this evanescent plane that is strictly what we contribute, all us ambling spectators […] we are caught like a fly in the glue, we drop our gaze as one drops one's trousers for the painter, it is a matter, if I may say so, of making us enter into the picture. (Lacan, 1965–66, 18 May 1966)

Beckett's remarks on painting very much echo this perception when he provocatively states of the spectator: 'Il ne veut pas s'instruire, le cochon, ni devenir meilleur. Il ne pense qu'à son plaisir' ('He does not want to educate himself, the pig, nor become better. He only thinks of his pleasure'; *MP*, 14). This accompanies the idea of paintings as being neither good nor bad, but simply translating 'd'absurdes et mystérieuses poussées vers l'image' ('absurd and mysterious urges towards the image'; 21–2). This emotional and sensorial dimension is thus diametrically opposed to the notion of perspective as being purely a question of geometry and optics, as it is to the reproduction of reality.

Beckett and Reality Organised by Perspective

Many of Beckett's first novels display a certain affinity with perspective representation, as John Pilling has described it, with *Dream of Fair to middling Women* and *Watt* being the notable exceptions. In *Murphy*, while Neary describes amorous attraction and life in *Gestalt* terms—'Murphy, life is all figure and ground' (*Mu*, 4)—the characters evolve in a rather referentially ordered space: Murphy lives in a mew in West Brompton (3), the characters move around various well-known streets in London, a space that is also related to Murphy's rejection of finding employment there. The MMM asylum is also laid out according to geometrical coordinates (102, 104), particularly since it is intended to provide an extremely orderly environment. *Molloy* presents two different pictures, according to its two parts: the first, centred on Molloy, is more dream-like, unfolding the protagonist's quest for his mother. The landscape at the beginning—and which, as such, gives the idea of an all-enveloping reality—is in fact centred on the emotional relationship Molloy displays with regards to the two strangers, called A and C. The second part, centred on Moran, offers a more 'realistic' representation. The character describes himself in his garden when Gaber arrives to deliver his orders; he is surrounded by a micro-society composed of his son, his housekeeper, and Father Ambrose. This orderly reality progressively breaks down, and yet, towards the end of the novel, a passage appears where Moran surveys his surroundings: '[…] the land from where I was, and even the clouds in the sky, were so disposed as to lead the eyes gently to the camp, as in a painting by an old master' (*Mo*, 147). The question is therefore to understand why Beckett's writing presents this conception of reality as problematic and then radically evacuates it.

As regards any 'old master' landscape, Beckett proves to be particularly sceptical. Indeed, if the use of perspective in painting aims to capture the spectator's unconscious gaze and to reduce it to submission, Beckett, by contrast, expressed early on his interest for Cézanne for precisely the opposite reasons: