

Verona, April 12 2010.

THE SEATED FIGURE ON BECKETT'S STAGE

Enoch Brater

i.

Within the vast and varied repertory of late twentieth-century European drama, Beckett's work would surely be noticed for placing actors in odd, eccentric and otherwise uncompromising stage positions. And that is, as *Footfalls* states things, "indeed to put it mildly."¹ Planted in urns or standing stock still on a cold plinth, dumped summarily into trash bins or buried up to the waist, then the neck, in a mound of unforgiving earth, that "old extinguisher,"² the figures in this dramaturgy are more often than not subjected to a highly abbreviated form of physicality, one that demands the *doing* of more and more with less and less--even and especially so in those places where less did not seem possible before. In *That Time*, for example, the actor "plays" only a disembodied head; and in *Not I*, a *reductio ad hominem*, if not absurdum, the lead part is a mouth (as the author said, "just a moving mouth"), "*rest of face in shadow.*"³ Little wonder that Jessica Tandy, who starred in the world premiere of *Not I* under Alan Schneider's disciplined direction at Lincoln Center in New York in 1972, demurred, "I'd like to do a musical next."⁴

Beckett is of course much more than a mere provocateur, though his role as such should not be discounted in the making of such a heady theatrical mix. Yet here the pinpoint precision of his stagecraft has been designed to precede, if not entirely overwhelm, the seductive allure of metaphor and meaning. This playwright can surprise us by revealing his formalist credentials, and most particularly his grounding in theatrical convention, precisely at those moments when the work seems most suspect and most alarmingly avant-garde. What results is a far cry from the sturdy machinery of an Ibsen or a Chekhov, but make no mistake: it is not quite Robert Wilson or Pina Bausch either. Beckett's scenography looks both backward and forward at the same time, celebrating his theatrical inheritance in the very process of transforming it, a method that involves stripping his seemingly minimalist sets of every extraneous detail *plus one*.⁵

Nowhere is this technique more evident than in the uncanny use Beckett makes of the seated figure on stage. The performance history here is huge. Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* is only one of many plays that revel in the dramatic potential of

restricted and limited mobility, though in Beckett's case this particular cross-reference can be illuminating. The image of the Old Man confined to a wheelchair had a profound effect on him when, on Suzanne Dumesnil's urging, he saw Roger Blin's 1949 production at the Gaité Montparnasse on the left bank in Paris, an interpretation the playwright later said was true to both "the letter and the spirit" of the drama⁶ (*Endgame*, 1957, was only eight years away). Tennessee Williams exploits the same theatrical trope in the highly atmospheric *Suddenly Last Summer*; though his female incarnation of the device, the gothic horror that is Mrs. Venable, appears on stage to inhabit the full force of a sexually-charged *drame bourgeois*. Beckett, like O'Neill before him, eschews any such holding of "the old family Kodak up to ill-nature,"⁷ and will pursue the seated figure for very different purposes and effects. The Western theatrical canon gave him a great deal to choose from.

Shakespeare's seated figures, those that are scripted, are most often discovered in public surroundings: banquet scenes, throne rooms and senate chambers abound. The emphasis would appear to be on spectacle rather than intimacy. As early as *Titus Andronicus* two noble families who have not previously consumed what remains of one another are prepared to go at it again, seated as they are, fatally, at this last of all suppers. And in a much later drama the irony cuts deep: Macbeth reminds Banquo not to "fail" his feast. A famous ghost obliges. The large interior spaces where characters are likely to sit in *King Lear*, *Hamlet* or *King Richard III* are similarly ceremonial, just as they are when they turn legalistic in *Othello* or jury-rigged in *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet Shakespeare's hyperactive heroes rarely sit for long, reluctant as they are to forfeit their empowering vertical positions. No director would allow his stunned Macbeth to remain calmly seated when a ghost materializes on stage so sensationally; nor could the actress playing Lady Macbeth--no "little chuck" she--resist the opportunity to assert her control over the scene by the simple act of *rising*, as though the text itself were telling her what to do. "Sit, worthy friends," she urges Rosse and Lennox and the other nobles gathered at her table, "my lord is often thus." Later in the same scene a newly confident Macbeth attempts to reclaim his authority over his wife in much the same way: "I am a man again. Pray you *sit* still"⁸ (emphasis mine). All of this may be nothing, of course, compared to *King Lear*, where the Duke of Cornwall demands that a chair be brought on stage for the blinding of Gloucester. The captive Earl, his hands bound, is in most modern productions thrown backwards as Cornwall plugs his heels into the "vile jelly." And then he does it again—because, according to Regan, "one eye will mock the other"—before this seated figure, as sightless as Milton's Samson Agonistes at Gaza, will be returned to his upright position. Only then is Gloucester set free to "smell his way" to Dover.

Kings, too, may willingly and literally abandon their thrones when the dramatic occasion encourages them to do so: think of Claudius delivering his highly polished speech before the assembled courtiers as the second scene begins in *Hamlet*, or Lear pointing to the redrawn map of the peaceful kingdom he plans to divide among three troubled sisters. And just what is Horatio supposed to do with Hamlet's body at the end of the play when, for this protagonist at least, "the rest is silence"? Chairs, especially ornamental ones, come in handy.

It might be difficult to appreciate Beckett's fascination with the seated figure on stage without a glance at his ardor for Racine, the subject of a series of lectures he gave at Trinity College, Dublin soon after his return from Paris as *lecture d'anglais* at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (the playwright quickly abandoned his academic career because, as he said at the time, "I could no longer bear the absurdity of teaching to others what I did not fully understand myself"). In plays like *Phedre* and *Berenice* haunting female figures are always suspended on stage halfway between the statue and the statuesque as Racine allows his gorgeous alexandrines do all the work. But when physical action occurs on this platform it is always arresting. Phedre never sits. When the seated confidante who is also her alter-ego demands to know the details of the dramatic situation soon to unfold, Phedre cries out: "You want to know what's going on? Stand up!" (translation mine).

Writing in the second half of the nineteenth century for the quite different dimensions of a box set, Ibsen had the opportunity to explore the potential of the seated figure in an entirely new perspective, one that allowed for a far more focused display of psychological texturing. Shaw was quite right in his observation that modern drama began when Nora sat her husband down in the final act of *A Doll's House* to discuss the nature of their marriage.⁹ Ibsen is terrific at this sort of thing, efficiently arranging the scenic space to accommodate his characters' need to communicate their innermost thoughts and emotions (it's his substitute for the no-no of soliloquy, realism's *bete noir*). Nora sits on a love-seat with Mrs. Linde, her could-be confidante, first communicating too little, then in a subsequent scene perhaps revealing too much. The same tableau works for her encounter with the love-sick Dr. Rank; she flirts, then recoils from the clumsy declaration that follows. Movement constitutes meaning here, and how the furniture is used speaks volumes. Nora re-establishes the boundaries of their relationship when she turns away, abandons the love-seat and stands, rigid, elsewhere. The same blocking on the same sort of settee accumulates additional resonances when Ibsen further explores its dynamics in *Hedda Gabler*. Eilert Lovborg joins Hedda on the drawing-room sofa as she invites

him to do so, on the pretense of sharing her honeymoon photographs. The tension is palpable; intimate glance and innermost gaze make the most of it. Much of what happens next lies in everything that is *not* said, except for Lovborg's trenchant murmur, ". . . Hedda Gabler. . . ." married name very conspicuously omitted. The predatory Judge Brack, a Hedda Gabler in drag, insinuates his presence at her side, too, and on the same divan, at first appearing to have greater success in penetrating the shell she has so elaborately constructed around herself. "I never jump," she confides, though she may be forced to do so, and soon, under the threat, albeit unstated, of blackmail. "Life is not tragic," Ibsen wrote in the notebook he kept about this play and its lead character's motivation, "Life is absurd--And that is what I cannot bear."¹⁰ Defeated, but also a little triumphant, this female figure removes herself from the set and the set-up, sits down at the piano and shoots herself. Brack, startled, thrown off-guard, even shocked into recognition, falls into an armchair, prostrated, and delivers the play's refrain which also serves as its bitter curtain line: "But good God! People don't *do* such things!"¹¹ He's right: people don't, but dramatic characters do.

Ibsen's contemporary Chekhov seems to have been equally astute in recognizing the enormous range of possibility for the seated figure on stage. One could even argue that sitting is what Chekhov's characters do best. *Uncle Vanya* opens on a quiet scene like so many others in this canon: Astrov sitting and chatting with the old Nurse, but really talking to himself. Vanya awakes from his nap and soon joins him in the garden, as do other members of the cast. They drink tea and in one case perhaps a drop of vodka. Yelena passes by with the Professor, she "too indolent to move."¹² Scenes from a country life--in four acts no less--indeed. Yet not every Chekhov set-to is quite so laid back. The provincial tranquility has been deceptive. Bedlam will erupt following a busy afternoon of revelatory *tete-a-tetes*. Serebryakov, the family members gathered all around him, announces a bizarre plan to sell the estate, invest in securities and purchase a small villa in Finland. Vanya, his chronic lassitude for once upstaged, runs into the house to look for a gun. It misfires. "I missed!" he cries out in dismay and despair (this is, among other things, hilarious), "I missed twice!" The curtain falls on act three before he has a chance to sit back down.

There's so much going on in the first act of *Three Sisters*-- preparations are in order for the big event marking Irina's name day while Olga is transfixed in monologue, remembering and inventing--that we sometimes forget that the third sister, Masha, is sitting there in full view, reading, detached and bored. She whistles, then gets up to leave, but not before Vershinin, recently arrived from Moscow, makes a gallant entry into the Prozorov sitting room. "I'll stay. . . for lunch," she says,

tellingly, joining “the lovesick major” at the table and foreshadowing everything that will take place between them as time in this drama runs its steady course. Another play, *The Seagull* even borrows a famous theatrical device from *Hamlet*. Arkadina and Trigorin, not exactly “guilty creatures sitting at a play,”¹³ take their assigned places as part of the makeshift audience for Konstantin’s literally dumb show, in which poor Nina is forced to play the underwritten lead. “There are no real people in your work,” she tells the crestfallen young author, who yearns so much to be the writer he will never be. As in Shakespeare, the scene, both the play and the play-within-the-play, devolves into chaos, with everyone soon on their feet. Chekhov’s drama ends, by contrast, on a far more somber note, and with a far greater density of dramatic overtones. With characters concentrated around a card table, a fateful game of lotto is in full progress. But so is something else. “Get Irina

out of here somehow,” Dorn tells Trigorin, leading him downstage and away from his seat at the table. “Konstantin just shot himself.” *Curtain*.

Beckett is by no means the only beneficiary of such a rich and all-inclusive theatrical vocabulary. Playwrights of his generation, as well as those before and after, have embraced the same legacy, retooling and refining it in a series of strategies for “making it new” and discovering their own voices. Caryl Churchill updates the banquet scene in her feminist drama, *Top Girls*; Edward Albee carefully choreographs Peter and Jerry on a fateful Central Park bench in *The Zoo Story*; Sam Shepard finds a surprising locus for a benched father-figure in *Fool for Love*; and Harold Pinter, in a cycle of remarkable plays that runs the gamut from *The Hothouse* and *The Birthday Party* to *Old Times* and the “icy and cold” *No Man’s Land*, invests his sedentary characters with blood-curdling, almost demonic, power. “If you take the glass,” the seated Ruth taunts Lenny in *The Homecoming*, “I’ll take you.”¹⁴ Through a glass darkly indeed; passive aggression like this may never have been quite so dramatically potent before. Less successful, perhaps, is Arthur Miller’s attempt to use the image to explore the multidimensionality of paralysis, physical, psychological and political, in an ambitious work like *Broken Glass*. What distinguishes Beckett from his peers, however, is that his solution to the problem is not only practical from a theatrical point of view, but simultaneously analytical. It involves nothing less than a reconsideration of how this device might be used within the entire dramatic enterprise itself.

ii.

One of the things that makes Beckett an exceptional figure in the development of modern

drama is his ability to think outside the box—and especially outside of the box set, the theater space he was familiar with and the one he was generally writing for. Beckett said he turned to the stage as an escape from the “awful prose” he was writing at the time. “I needed a habitual space,” he reflected, “and I found it on the stage.”¹⁵ But this was also a license to look elsewhere for the foundation and formulation of his image-making. His longtime interest in landscape painting and the representation of interior spaces on a canvas,¹⁶ light emanating from a source outside the frame (as in Caravaggio and Vermeer), would have enormous repercussions as he quickly adapted such values to the demands of the stage. Yet it is perhaps in the portrait of the seated figure in its many variations, from Raphael to Rembrandt to Van Gogh, and to contemporary painters like Francis Bacon and Louis LeBroquy (or Picasso for that matter), where Beckett finds a grammar and an idiom that he can truly call his own. This is less a question of the one-to-one correspondences of the sort we might be able to locate between a provincial Chekhov scene and the evocative landscapes of his good friend, the Russian painter Isaac Levitan (or between Munch, say, and the late Ibsen), as it is an appraisal of the specific ways in which form gives latitude to meaning.

As early as those gold-leafed Madonnas in Giotto, Cimabue and Duccio, seated as they are so serenely on their earthly or celestial thrones, we already sense the profound mystery of inwardness and the dislocation caused by private thought—not yet “a voice dripping in [the head]” of the sort Beckett will pursue in *Endgame*, but certainly pointing us in that direction. And such magnificent Marias, flat and elongated though they may be (their chairs come off a whole lot better), are already equipped with distinct personalities. In the embrace of single-point perspective that follows, the characterological basis of such figures will be defined even further in a steady preoccupation with three-dimensionality, sometimes in the fullness of looking out, sometimes through the pensive mediation of searching even deeper within. The seated figure, painted, repainted and represented yet again, was well on its way toward becoming the sine qua non of that endless and elusive drama known as human consciousness.

Such implications were not lost by the cautious playwright who became in the 1950s Samuel Beckett. “*In a dressing gown, a stiff toque on his head, a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face, a whistle hanging from his neck, a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet,*” the blinded Hamm, “*in an armchair on castors*”—a gender-bending Madonna on wheels--would seem to epitomize the playwright’s fascination with the seated figure on stage.¹⁷ Never neglecting “the little things in life,” *Endgame* allows us to study the image in redacted form: a brief tableau

punctuates the mime Clov performs in the drama's opening moments, while it is still "covered with an old sheet." But it is really in the famous earlier play, *Waiting for Godot*, where this stylization can be seen to be most firmly rooted. Pozzo even goes so far as to make a fetish of this recurring motif:

But how am I to sit down now, without affectation, now that I have risen? Without appearing to—how shall I say—without appearing to falter.¹⁸

Pozzo, like his author, recognizes a good thing when he has it going, and a few minutes later, eyeing the stool, he seizes the opportunity to advance its richly performative momentum:

POZZO: I'd very much like to sit down, but I don't know how to go about it.
 ESTRAGON: Could I be of any help?
 POZZO: If you asked me perhaps.
 ESTRAGON: What?
 POZZO: If you asked me to sit down.
 ESTRAGON: Would that help?
 POZZO: I fancy so.
 ESTRAGON: Here we go. Be seated, Sir, I beg you.
 POZZO: No, no, I wouldn't think of it! (*Pause. Aside.*) Ask me again.
 ESTRAGON: Come, come, take a seat I beseech you, you'll get pneumonia.
 POZZO: You really think so?
 ESTRAGON: Why it's absolutely certain.
 POZZO: No doubt you are right. (*He sits down.*) Done it again! (*Pause.*) Thank you, dear fellow.

In *Godot*, however, the seated figure is assigned a much more primary role than this, and a far more vital one: nothing less than the opening image of the play itself. As the curtain rises (the playwright was certainly thinking of one), we first meet Estragon "sitting on a low mound" trying to take off his boot and failing to do so, followed by the quintessential Beckett line, "Nothing to be done."

Without calling undue attention to itself, the insistent figure of a man sitting by himself on a stone, Gogo's initial situation in *Waiting for Godot*, has a long provenance in the Beckett repertory. As a semblance of isolation, cosmic and otherwise, it appears not only in the short story "The Calmative," but also in the second movement of *Stirrings Still*. Beckett seems to have derived this image from the Middle High German poet he much admired, Walther von der Vogelweide, though this is the first time he uses it, albeit ironized, in a play:

I sat upon a stone,
 Leg over leg was throne,
 Upon my knee an elbow rested
 And in my open hand was nested
 My chin and half my cheek.

My thoughts were dark and bleak:
 I wondered how a man should live,
 To this no answer could I give.¹⁹

“Ich saz uf eime steine,” Walther’s self-description in the first line of the medieval lyric, inspired the well-known painting of him in the Manesse manuscript; the poet is said to be buried in the cathedral at Wurzburg, where Malone recalls having seen “Tiepolo’s ceiling” (“what I tourist I must have been, I even remember the diaeresis, if it is one”).²⁰

Sitting--and waiting--is Hamm’s celebrated “speciality” in *Endgame*, though Beckett’s bums already exploit most of the latter’s potential in *Godot*. Thinking on his feet to pass the time that would have passed anyway, but “not so fast,” Vladimir in fact rarely sits down, but he will do so, and poignantly, on those few occasions when he tenderly comforts his partner. Poor Lucky, of course, is never permitted the same luxury, even though “he carries like a pig” and falls down in an ever-maddening sequence of verticals and horizontals, culminating in a dance variously called “The Hard Stool” and, more significantly, “the Net.” Much comes together for Beckett, however, in the work that explores the dark underside of *Godot*; and it will be *Endgame*, as “dark as ink,”²¹ that finally allows him to write his own signature on the seated figure stranded on a lonely set: “Outside of here it’s death.”

iii.

Even as a student at Trinity, Beckett saw Belacqua, the Florentine lute maker who appears early in his fiction by way of Dante (and who reemerges in various guises throughout the prose writings), as the seated figure par excellence. In *Purgatory* his role is both tantalizing and suggestive. Chided for his negligence, he responds with the words Aristotle assigns to him, and which provide Beckett with the title of a short story published in 1932: *Sedendo et quiescendo anima efficitur sapiens*. The Poet’s riposte in *The Divine Comedy* could not be more stinging: “Certainly, if to be seated is wise, then no one can be wiser than you.”²² In his fiction Beckett transforms such habitual laziness

and such exquisite verbal sparring—for that is what it is--into his own version of some dematerialized “Belacqua bliss.”²³ But in theater indolence has to be animated; there’s sitting, and then there’s sitting, squared.

For the actor playing Hamm, planted so magisterially on his own throne, *Endgame* can be daunting in just how much it asks him to act, to do and to perform.²⁴ Sloth does not enter into the equation. Clov, who has “work to do” and cannot sit down, is a whole lot more than stage manager, caretaker or mere retainer here; he’s also the engineer for rapid transportation as he wheels his master from place to place around the circumscribed “world” of this interior set, placing him, one more time, smack “in the center”—or thereabouts. Hamm, too, is called upon to play any number of roles: he is (or has been) at various times a storyteller, a master jokester, a consumer of sugarplums, a dispenser of biscuits and pap, a vengeful son, a drug user, a sentimentalist, a tyrant, a dog lover and an enviable appreciator of stage terminology. He may also be a father. *Endgame* requires a remarkable series of gestures from this seated figure in order to develop a complete character and take full charge of the stage.

Oddly enough, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, a work for only one player, presents a view of the seated figure that offers the audience both more and less. Krapp seems at first reluctant to play this part. Jangling keys, uncorking a bottle, or retrieving a dusty old dictionary, he shuffles back and forth into the darkness of the set before settling down into the dimness that reluctantly illuminates his small table. Preparatory rituals completed, the “play,” so to speak, is now ready to begin for this “wearish” figure, face mostly forward as he confronts that perilous point where time remembered becomes the consciousness of time remaining. The past, transformed on tape, alternately startles and plagues him with its steadfastness, and it is his misbegotten “vision” that even at this late date still tampers with it. “Play” as it will be defined on this platform therefore involves mostly playback, this one from the resources of memory stored in “box three. . . spool five.”²⁵ Reaction constitutes the action here—so much so that the actor must carefully calibrate his every move to accommodate the dictates of Beckett’s multifaceted and highly literary script. Face and upper body are of crucial importance in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, for, as light fades downward, it obscures all that might otherwise be revealed. On tape the recorded voice of Krapp-at-39 says he will “feel” a black ball in his grip until his “dying day,” a cue for the most nuanced of hand gestures. And when, after a pregnant pause, the voice from the same past comments on the “new light” above the desk as “a great improvement,” weary eyes grudgingly veer upward. As previously noted in the case of *Macbeth*, this text, too, goes a long way in stimulating the seated figure’s animation. But not every suggestion of movement in this drama will evoke a similarly kinetic response, however discreet it may be meant to be. Some can only be taken at *face value*: the image of the lovers together on a punt before ardor compels a much younger Krapp

to lie “down across her,” his “face in her breasts” and his “hand on her,” or the more recent and quite different memory Krapp records in the present, that time he went to Vespers “once,” fell asleep and rolled off a pew.

In a fourth major play, *Happy Days*, Beckett emerges once again as “a great leg-puller and an enemy of obviousness.”²⁶ Winnie’s physical situation, planted as she is in the earth, the playwright’s update of some Mesolithic burial site from the Boyne Valley due north of Dublin (the scale more reminiscent of Loughcrew than Newgrange or Knowth), will be difficult to determine. It is hard to tell—“imagine” really, as Mouth says in *Not I*—“what position she is in,” “whether standing or seating or kneeling” (in production, the solution is best left to the techies). Seated behind the mound, and barely within our sightline, is the ever-patient Willie--“ever,” that is, until the play’s stunningly ambiguous conclusion. And it is the blocking for this enigmatic figure that will be of most interest to us here. In the first act Winnie “sits,” to speak strictly metaphorically “in the old style,” in the privileged position; for it is she—and she alone—who can twist her neck back in order to receive a better view of this less than demure seated male figure. As she shifts her observational position for greater visibility, we must take her word for it when she reports that he picks his nose, looks at pornographic postcards, or spreads sunscreen over the various parts of his body best left unmentioned. By contrast, we can just about see a snippet from the local newspaper when Willie turns a page to read from the obituaries: “His Grace and Most Reverend Father in God Dr Carolus Hunter dead in a tub.” Winnie reacts to this alarming news with an exclamatory “Charlie Hunter!” in what the script calls a “*tone of fervent reminiscence.*”

Two short works first produced in 1981, *Rockaby* and *Ohio Impromptu*, as well as the earlier *Come and Go* (written in 1965), offer us compelling variations of the same motif. These are highly compressed dramas that start with a specific image, ignite a complex emotion, then open up a universe of feelings and ideas.²⁷ “When did we three last meet?”²⁸ Vi recites at the opening of *Come and Go*, inverting a line of inquiry we may well recall as having been previously assigned to one of the three “weird sisters” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Vi sits in the center side by side with Flo and Ru as Beckett’s three female figures are stationed stage right, motionless and very erect, facing front, hands clasped in laps. Each gets up, turn and turn about, then returns to the place of origin, re-inscribing the initial static tableau, isolated and illuminated as it is by a single ingot of unforgiving light. “Does she not know?” / “Does she not realize?” is this text’s ominous take on the old vaudeville game of who’s-on-first; but in this case the consequences, unstated though everywhere implied, are likely to turn lethal. Closure is achieved when the seated figures are

arranged somewhat differently, but only just so: resuming the same positions in which they were first discovered, they now have their hands clasped, resting on three laps to signal end of play. Flo delivers the curtain line, “I can feel the rings,” followed by the palpable silence that finally engulfs them all.

Rockaby will be similarly attuned to the mysterious, even mystical quality of inwardness portraitists have often found so seductive in the features assigned to their own seated figures. Beckett recycles the rocking chair from his novel *Murphy*, but in the play he elevates its status to that of a character in its own right. A “prematurely old” female figure sits “subdued” in *Rockaby* on a chair that is “controlled mechanically,” without her assistance. The playwright was clear about one thing: the Voice of memory, recorded, initiates the rock, not the other way around, and certainly not the woman dressed in black who yearns to hear so much “More.”²⁹ Beckett preserves the enigma as well as the integrity of this dramatic moment by insisting on “the absolute absence of the Absolute,”³⁰ relying instead on the image and the modesty of its scale to insinuate presence through a fusion of light, sound and movement rather than narration. His dialogue is poetic, not surprisingly so in this case, as it is there to complement and elevate the stage’s searing visual lyricism. Rarely has a seated figure on stage, “mother rocker” notwithstanding, been asked to carry the weight of so many competing discourses, one in which theater technology wears such a disarming human face. “La Berceuse,” the title Van Gogh gives to his well-known portrait of the seated Mme. Augustin Roulin (*Berceuse* is also the title Beckett uses for the French translation of his play), is therefore much more than a cross-reference or a convenient painterly analogue. French *berceuse*, moreover, means cradle, lullaby *and* rocking chair; but it also can refer, as it does in Van Gogh, to the seated figure herself. Beckett’s drama in performance will be, experientially, all of these things at once.

The affective nature of such formal restraint achieves additional resonance in *Ohio Impromptu*, where the figures seated at a plain deal table are both singular and doubled, “*As alike in appearance as possible.*”³¹ Reader and Listener are each other’s Other; and each is each other’s “—Hypocrite lecteur, —mon semblable, —mon frere!” (see Baudelaire).³² Perilously, as in Dante, “Simile qui con simile e sepolto,” like with like is buried here.³³ But are we really seeing double, or merely some liminal fantasy of a replication hysteria, an uptake of the riveting stage dynamics called for by Goldoni in *I due gemmelli veneziani*? Or are Beckett’s spellbinding seated figures only two aspects of one man for, inevitably, as you read you also in some sense profoundly listen? Stage left one figure intones the cherished lines from an old volume, monopolizing the soundscape and complicating its

strangeness with the suggestion of narrative. Stage right the other “other” carefully weighs every word; his “knock” is opened wide when it signals an unexpectedly sudden interruption to the couple’s tacit interaction, only to magnify it further when L compels R to retrace his steps. Only the re-reading counts, as Nabokov said.³⁴ Then, when we least expect it, stage imagery is quietly redrawn as the seated figures achieve unprecedented momentum. The “story,” such as it is, being done, Reader very slowly and very deliberately closes the book on us:

Knock.

Silence. Five seconds.

Simultaneously they lower their right hands to the table, raise their heads and look at each other. Unblinking. Expressionless.

Ten seconds.

Fade out.

iv.

While Beckett’s work for the mechanical media might be best discussed in another forum, it could be argued here that his depiction of the seated figure is offered much greater amplitude and precision in the plays written for television. Subject to sharp definition by the camera lens, the images we see delineated in complex pieces like *Eh Joe*, *Ghost Trio*, and *Nacht und Traume*, as in Beckett’s “comic and unreal” *Film*, come to us both scrupulously edited and pre-recorded, like fleshly eruptions in an otherwise spectral world. But that is their limitation as well as their considerable strength, the fact that they are frozen, so to speak, in time and on digitalized tape. The illusion of spontaneity and of spontaneous gesture, so crucial to the impact of Beckett’s seated bodies in live performance, as when Reader and Listener synchronize their movement at the conclusion of *Ohio Impromptu*, or when the actress suddenly utters “Fuck life” seemingly out of nowhere just before she bows her head in *Rockaby*, empowers such figures to command the space they inhabit with emphasis and authority. What may be lost in exactitude is made up for in fineness; and as the light slowly fades on the set for each play, it provides the theater audience with another kind of permanence: a fixed after-image that lasts forever.

Beckett’s stage, as this discussion of his innovative use of the seated figure attempts to show, is always full of “high-class nuts to crack.”³⁵ But that is not to say that the solutions he finds so appealing are without precedent. Beckett draws upon a rich vocabulary of theatrical convention, analyzes his inheritance, then takes it several steps forward. The hardest nut to crack for Beckett, as for Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov and so many other playwrights before him, will always be found, after all, in that delirious and probably delusional seeing-place he knows and we know as

“theater.” *See better. Fail better.* Followed in his case by that agonizing—but also inspirational—one word, “On.”

What Beckett so impressively adds to this ongoing discussion of the seated figure on stage is how he seems to know from the start that in theater, as in life, you’re sometimes a lot better off “on your arse than on your feet.”

And on that final note, I think I’ll take my seat.

Endnotes

¹Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 243.

²Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 37.

³See Enoch Brater, *The Essential Samuel Beckett* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 107; and Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, in *Collected Shorter Plays*, p. 216.

⁴Jessica Tandy quoted by Enoch Brater in *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett’s Late Style in the Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 4.

⁵See Louis Menard, “The Aesthete,” *The New Yorker* (June 4, 2007), pp. 92-94.

⁶See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 348; and Brater, *The Essential Samuel Beckett*, pp. 59-60.

⁷Eugene O’Neill, “Strindberg and Our Theatre,” in *American Playwrights on Drama*, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), pp. 1-2.

⁸Citations from *Macbeth* are from the second edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁹See Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957).

¹⁰“From Ibsen’s Notes,” in Randolph Goodman, ed., *From Script to Stage: Eight Modern Plays* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971), p. 43.

¹¹Citations from *Hedda Gabler* are taken from *Ibsen: Four Major Plays*, vol. 1, trans. Rolf Fjelde (New York: Signet, 1992).

¹²All citations from *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Seagull* are from *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

¹³*Hamlet II, 2*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

¹⁴Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 34.

¹⁵Beckett quoted by Brater in *The Essential Samuel Beckett*, p. 55.

¹⁶For Beckett’s interest in the visual arts, especially painting, see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*; and Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹⁷Citations in my text from *Endgame* are from the Grove Press edition (New York, 1958).

¹⁸Citations in my text from *Waiting for Godot* are from the Grove Press edition (New York: 1954).

¹⁹Ian G. Colvin, trans., *'I Saw the World': Sixty Poems from Walther von der Vogelweide, 1170-1228* (London: Edward Arnold, 1938), p. 49. See also Knowlson, pp. 147, 613.

²⁰Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), p. 62.

²¹Beckett quoted by Brater in *The Essential Samuel Beckett*, p. 78.

²²On the figure of Belacqua as he appears in Beckett's work, see C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, eds., *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 46-48.

²³Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 111.

²⁴See Alice Raynor, *To Act, to Do, to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Stanton B. Garner, Jr., *Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

²⁵All citations from *Krapp's Last Tape* are from *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, pp. 55-63.

²⁶Dylan Thomas writing about Beckett in the *New English Weekly* (March 17, 1938). See Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, eds., *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 46.

²⁷See Holland Cotter, "Sonnets in Marble," *The New York Times* (August 10, 1977), B25, 30.

²⁸Citations from *Come and Go* are taken from *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, 194-95.

²⁹Citations from *Rockaby* are from *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, pp. 275-82. For the playwright's comments on this piece, see Brater, *Beyond Minimalism*, pp. 173-74.

³⁰Samuel Beckett, "Dante. . .Bruno. Vico. .Joyce," in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 22.

³¹Citations from *Ohio Impromptu* are from *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, pp. 285-88.

³²Charles Baudelaire, "Au Lecture," in *Poetes francais du dix-neuvieme siecle*, ed. Maurice Z. Shroder (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 92.

³³*The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, trans. J.A. Carlyle, rev. by H. Oelsner (London: J. M. Dent, 1932), canto IX, 1, 130, pp. 98-99. For a detailed study of the Dante-Beckett connection, see Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

³⁴Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 136.

³⁵Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 33.