

## Introducing the 'Hyper' Theatrical Subject: The *Mise en Abyme* of Empty Space

Les Essif

Perhaps the greatest contribution of twentieth-century dramatists to the historical evolution of theatre art has been the development of a new poetics of space for the text. In their determination to rid themselves of the straightjackets of naturalism and bourgeois psychology, dramatists from Chekhov to Beckett realized that they would have to create a new "spatial language" for the text, and that to accomplish this they faced two major challenges. The first was the emptying of stage space, the "progression toward vacuity,"<sup>1</sup> as French theorist Anne Ubersfeld put it, that accompanied our century's pronounced move from realism to metadiscourse. Stage sets, as well as the objects and characters occupying the sets, were no longer supposed to recreate exterior reality, but to suggest the possibility of an alternative, truly fictional realm where the naturalistic concern for detail would be of little consequence. The second challenge was the portrayal of inner life on the stage. As even a performance-oriented theorist like Richard Schechner has admitted, since the advent of modern psychology, dramatists such as Chekhov, Pirandello, Genet, Ionesco, and Beckett actually set the pace for theatre practitioners by meeting the challenge "to exteriorize the inner life transforming it into a mode of action."<sup>2</sup> Thus it is that, in the postwar avant-garde theatre of France, two revolutionary concepts—one concerning empty space, the other, inner space—became inextricably connected, as the written text focused on the mind of the dramatic character and on how best to represent it on the three-dimensional stage. Emptiness has taken on a new meaning in this century, primarily because we equate it with both epistemological and ontological openness. Today, after all, when we speak of inner space we do not refer to our stomach or even to our chest cavity; the only valid reference for inner space is the subject's mind, a mind located in the head, the "container" of a space whose

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inner emptiness is no more fathomable than that of the twentieth-century conception of the outer cosmos.

By and large, this "anti-mimetic" progression toward vacuity in the theatre was preceded by an "anti-rationalist" intellectual movement to purge the mind of the materialist clutter of rationalism. But the trend away from realism and toward metadiscourse is more complex than this suggests. We need, in particular, to take a closer look at unrealistic empty space with the aim of re-evaluating theatrical concepts conventionally linked to rationalist illusion—concepts such as the subjective status of the dramatic character. Not surprisingly, since the bulk of theatrical theory has concentrated on the psychological and psychoanalytic nature of the theatrical space and character, it has neglected to make the analogic and iconic connection between the empty stage on the one hand and the empty mind on the other. This connection is significant for two reasons: more obviously, that, by identifying mind more closely with stage, it greatly enhances the metatheatrical dimension of the work; less obviously, that it helps to salvage the theatrical subject from a rather vague and ignoble death.

Most scholars would have us believe that when empty space comes in, the subject goes out, that there is no place for the subject within the empty theatrical spaces created by such dramatists as Beckett and Ionesco. Yet I do not believe that the obsolescence of nineteenth-century psychology necessarily entails a loss of subjectivity altogether, but merely a change in subjective form. Consider some of Beckett's most memorable post-*Godot* protagonists—Hamm of *Endgame*, Winnie of *Happy Days*, and "W" of *Rockaby*. For any critic who has read these plays or seen them performed, the most powerful and haunting image is that of the dramatic character isolated at the center of an empty stage. Do these characters experience loss of subjectivity? Or could one more accurately argue the contrary: that, turned inward into the empty space of their mind, these hyperconscious protagonists have become a more essential and inextricable part of the work as a whole—a microcosmic empty space representing an alternative, more "hyper," form of subjectivity?

What I call "hypersubjectivity" in Beckett's theatre is a direct function of empty space, which is itself an outgrowth of the dramatist's essentialist perspective on space. Certainly Robert Langbaum has effectively argued that the "identity" of Beckett's dramatic character "approaches zero," that Beckett is haunted by the Cartesian image of a disembodied mind as the center of life and identity, of "mind surrounded by void" of "self isolated in the head."<sup>3</sup> Yet, like many other theorists, Langbaum does not give due consideration to the essentialist perspective on space that operates this image. Despite his excellent account of the aesthetic relevance of Beckett's existential world view, Langbaum does not consider that, metatheatrically as well as existentially, the void that *surrounds* the

mind is duplicated *within* the mind, producing a double referent that invokes metatheatricality in a profound way. When Beckett brings the concepts of stage and mind closer together—when he makes the connection between outside and inside—the head of the dramatic character becomes the central self-referential icon or *mise en abyme*<sup>4</sup> of theatrical empty space. Theatre scholars have largely ignored this double referent of empty space and particularly the idea of inner empty space.

Only when we fully understand the aesthetic impact of mind as empty space can we fully appreciate the metatheatrical dimension of a new generation of "absurdist," "nouveau théâtre" dramatists of which Beckett has been the most successful representative. In what follows I will first trace the origins of mental and theatrical empty space to surrealist doctrine of this century while drawing a parallel between Beckett's theatre and Artaud's theory; second, I will examine the utility of the French concept of *mise en abyme* as a semiotic tool that can assist our understanding of the character's head as the central iconic metaphor of theatrical space; third, I will propose a spatially-oriented theory of "hypersubjectivity" for the theatre wherein the body of the dramatic character, understood as a form for the subject, becomes a cerebral, acutely focused, theatrical "hyperspace." I will follow up this theoretical part with an analysis of Beckett's *Endgame* to elucidate the processes by which the text configures the hypersubjective dramatic character (*void* surrounded by void). Finally, I will show the influence of this hypersubjective model on other plays by Beckett as well as on works by other dramatists of the same tradition.

### Theatrical Empty Space and the Surrealist Psyche

The anti-illusionist "progression toward vacuity" in twentieth-century drama leads to the rediscovery of a primitive, essential form of metatheatricality. Dramatists as well as theatre practitioners, refusing to create the (naturalistic) illusion of some place in the world, begin to radically reduce the material that fills the stage space. Symbolist-surrealist visionaries, such as Alfred Jarry in France and Gordon Craig in England, express in their theories the need to remove the veil of ideological rhetoric from the aesthetic base of theatre and let the theatre speak *for itself* and *as itself*—as a more pristine signifier rather than a dictatorial signified. Clearing out the naturalist clutter, they believed, would help to redirect all referential force inward to the theatrical medium itself and to reestablish theatre as an imaginary fiction rather than a materialist illusion. Thus the symbolic substance of the stage comes to depend on the theatre's unique potential for emptiness.

Yet, for all the discussion of theatrical empty space since mid-century, I do not think we have come to appreciate fully empty space *qua* empty space. Like Keir Elam, most critics understand Peter Brook's definition of the stage as "empty space" solely in the sense that it is a "potentially fillable" space<sup>5</sup> while ignoring the other—less naturalistic and infinitely more metatheatrical—sense in which the stage is seen as a potential vacuum in the midst of an irreverent world encumbered by the furnishings of rationalism. Jacques Copeau, the revolutionary theatre director primarily known for his advocacy of the "naked stage" (*tréteau nu*), remarked that the stage "is never so beautiful as in its natural state, primitive and vacant, when nothing is happening there."<sup>6</sup> To a large degree, we are expected to see in the imaginary potential of the empty stage what the contemporary novelist sees in the blank page; but the material space of the stage—as envisioned first by the dramatist—has the unique capacity to concretize self-representation through spatialization. Gazing upon the kind of stage space that Copeau and others sought to create, we would somehow remain conscious that what we see has been created out of nothing, that this space is essentially and ultimately backgrounded by its potential for vacuity. Like other modernists and postmodernists, Copeau understood that you cannot empty the theatrical stage of meaning, that the more empty you make it, the more essential, concrete, and primitively self-conscious it becomes—the more it is *about* itself. Correspondingly, on the modern stage, the limited materials—decor, objects, and human bodies—that would fill the void would surely gain in aesthetic value if they were carefully selected for their ability to enhance or reflect the void.

In this respect, the history of the stage runs parallel with theories of surrealism, wherein the "emptier" the mind, the more it can resist the contamination of psychological realism and concentrate on itself. The most celebrated theorist of surrealism, André Breton, merges the notions of spatial vacuity and self-consciousness insofar as he perceives the mind less as a potentially fillable stage than as a stage backgrounded by its essential emptiness:

. . . let us not lose sight of the fact that the idea of Surrealism aims quite simply at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the [vertiginous] descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory . . .<sup>7</sup>

Conceived primarily as an anti-mimetic, anti-intellectual campaign against the blight of symbolic language in Western culture, this surrealist "inward turn" becomes increasingly focused on the signifying potential of a vacuous mental

space that duplicates the aesthetic prowess of Jacques Copeau's *tréteau nu*. The surrealists want to remind us that the rational systems of the intellectual mind are always "staged" within—and therefore backgrounded by—the primordial, virtual emptiness of psychic space. An isomorphic structural relationship—based more on conceptions of empty space than on any psychoanalytical system—develops between surrealist metaphors of the personal psyche and theories of the stage.

Because of his teatro-metaphysical vision, Antonin Artaud does more than any other surrealist thinker to establish the parallel between the emptiness of theatrical space and that of the psyche. With Artaud, the space of the dramatic representation constitutes an especially "imaginary"—in the full sense of the word—kind of space closely related in form and content to the conceptualization of psychic space as a material void. Monique Borie impresses upon us both the fundamental and highly structured (*mise en abyme*-like) nature of Artaud's conception of the void: "All this materialization of the void ad infinitum has the value of creation" and "The space of the theatre is space of creation, but it is also the space of perpetual return to the void."<sup>8</sup> One must understand, moreover, that, with Artaud, what is fundamental for the theatre is equally fundamental for the thinking subject, so a notion of vacuity underlies all (metaphysically) meaningful space including that of the personal psyche: "When there is agreement in the thoughts of men, where can we say that this agreement is reached, if not within the dead void of space?"<sup>9</sup> Like Beckett, Artaud transcends the Cartesian image of mind surrounded by a void, by anchoring theatrical space to a central focal point, the vacuous mind at the center of that void: "Always the void, always the point around which matter thickens."<sup>10</sup> This dualistic concept of the void would link the metatheatrical to the metaphysical by ultimately referring to an internal world, a psychic space, like that of the metaphysical Balinese central dancer so prominent in Artaud's theory. Artaud was particularly fascinated by the "absolute" gesture of this central character who "always touches his head at the same place, as if wishing to indicate the position and existence of some unimaginable central eye, some intellectual egg."<sup>11</sup> As we shall see in our examination of Beckett's character Hamm, this "intellectual egg" becomes the *central sign* of theatrical space in certain kinds of non-psychological theatre.

The final point I want to make here is that we can only understand Artaud's conceptualization of an internal world in terms of a surrealist notion of empty space which itself must be understood in terms of *spatial extension*: "The language of the theatre aims then at encompassing and utilizing extension, that is to say space, and by utilizing it, to make it speak."<sup>12</sup> His primary dramaturgical goal was to rediscover a spatial language—image, gesture—that could resist epistemological and intellectual constraints of "construction" by signifying in terms of extension.<sup>13</sup> When he speaks of "space" he is really

speaking of an extensive form of space or formless extension of "hyperspace." So the extension of empty space into the uncharted depths of the human psyche mirrors its extension outward into the cosmos, making the connection between inside and outside in the surrealist mind. This mirroring has a profound effect on the dramatist's use of metatheatricality and on the spectator's reception of the dramatic character surrounded by a void.

### **The *Mise en Abyeme* of Empty Space: The Hypersubjective Dramatic Character**

The extensive hyperspace of the cosmos turns inward in this century. Artaud's theory endows the concept of empty space with a new aesthetico-ontological dimension that helps to merge Copeau's outer stage with Breton's inner stage in two essential ways: not only does it "theatricalize" the representation of the inner psyche, but it also signals the psyche's function as an intermediate (meta)theatrical image that "extends" empty space by "placing it into abyme." The concept of "abyme" is crucial to any theory of metadiscourse that intends on the one hand to explain theatrical self-consciousness in terms of space and, on the other, to establish a direct link between character and space. In the nineteenth century, the concept of "abyme" (abyss) was very popular with symbolist poets, most notably Baudelaire, searching for an expression of existential nothingness (*néant*). When twentieth-century surrealism takes hold of the concept, it becomes even more prominently associated with the personal psyche, which is visualized as a kind of "personal abyme."<sup>14</sup> Still more interesting, however, is that, since André Gide, the concept of *mise en abyme*, "placing into abyme," has served as a spatially oriented rendering of what the Anglo-Saxon critical tradition has referred to as aesthetic self-consciousness. Taking Lucien Dällenbach's full-scale study of *mise en abyme* into account, Mieke Bal has emphasized the iconic aspect of the reflective "fragment" or "enclave," defining it as "any *sign* having for *referent* a pertinent and continuous aspect of the text . . . which it *signifies*, by means of resemblance, once or several times."<sup>15</sup> Bal, who was only considering the use of the concept in the more symbolic rather than iconic art of narrative literature, argues that, while not all icons are cases of *mise en abyme*, all cases of *mise en abyme* are icons.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the iconic link between this semiotic concept and the art of theatre, Maria Voda Capusan argues for the increased acceptance of the concept in theatre studies: "Unlike literature where any *mise en abyme* can exist only in terms of language, the theatre is capable of preserving the specific code . . . iconicity in the graphic sense of the term."<sup>17</sup> The kind of concrete iconic resemblance identified in a "play within a play," on a textual as well as a performative level,

is the most conventional example of theatrical *mise en abyme*. But Beckett and his contemporaries take this kind of mirror reflection a step further by making the connection between aesthetic self-consciousness and ontological self-consciousness, between theatre space and psychic space. On an aesthetic level, the "emptiness" of the outer (visible) stage requires the kind of self-referral that could resist the closure of rational meaning precisely by virtue of its capacity to suggest an internal, infinite "abyeme"—or infinite extension—of self-reflection. On an ontological level, Breton's notion of the "vertiginous descent" into our own consciousness suggests a psychic *mise en abyme* where each successive "illumination of a hidden place" reveals the essential emptiness surrounding the preceding non-rational image.

With Artaud and Beckett, then, avant-garde theatre reveals itself as a spatial "abyeme" analogous to the metaphorical imaginary space of the psyche. Thus the spatial aspect of *mise en abyme* is emphasized and more evident. Whether we speak of a psychic, theatrical, or textual *mise en abyme*, like the surrealists, we think in terms of space. The "absolute gesture" of the Balinese central dancer points to the metaphysical and imaginary realm of a human psyche that plays a major role in the creation of theatrical space. Artaud's revolutionary "theatre of cruelty" could only realize its metaphysical and (meta)theatrical potential by identifying and focusing on its own "central eye" or central sign. Mind is spatialized at the dead center of theatre where it constitutes the *raison d'être* of "organic culture":

There is in this [organic] culture an idea of space, and I say that true culture can only be learned within space, and that it is an oriented culture, oriented as is theatre.

Culture within space means the culture of a mind which does not cease to breathe and to feel itself living within space, and which calls to itself the substance [*les corps*] of space as the very object of its thought, but which, as a mind, situates itself in the middle of space, that is, at its dead center.

This is perhaps a metaphysical idea, this idea of the dead center of space through which the mind must pass.

But without the metaphysical there is no culture.<sup>18</sup>

And we remember that without the essential void—the only kind of space that allows extension—there is no (metaphysical) space.

Where is the thinking subject in this metaphysical system? Or rather, what becomes of the subject once it is transformed into an empty mind centered in void? The idea of mind takes on a new kind of subjectivity which is at the same time based on space (located at the center of space) and unconstructed by the

Cogito. Space constitutes a precondition for the very existence of mind, for which the "substance of space" is "the very object of its thought." From this spatial ontology there evolves a theatrical world-view wherein the "dead center of space through which mind must pass" is not simply the theatre, but the *mise en abyme* of theatre as represented by the psychic space of a uniquely prominent dramatic character, the hypersubject of hypersubjective theatre. As space becomes hyperspace, the inner space of mind defines the hypersubject.

In Beckett's works not only does space become more concentrated and acutely defined, but this spatial concentration indicates an intensification of subjectivity. In fact, much has been written about the "destructive" quality of Beckett's works, which have been said not only to signal the disappearance or "weakening of the subject" and the "abandonment of place" in particular, but also to testify to an "obliteration of time and space" in general.<sup>19</sup> Suppositions of the rejection of space seem to coincide with the rejection of the subject. But as French theorist Michel Corvin rightly points out, unlike classical forms of theatre where one "acts *in* space and constructs dramatic action *on* space," since the advent of nouveau théâtre one "acts *with* space": "Modern [theatrical] space possesses individuality and personality, in other words, a unique and complex character."<sup>20</sup> The suggestion that modern theatrical space achieves a new "individual" and "personal" dimension could be construed as according this space a more subject-like or subjective status; and as space becomes more "personal," the "person" becomes more spatial. Critics who have downplayed both space and subjectivity in nouveau théâtre are right in one sense: the dramatic character is not really "alive and well" in Beckett's theatre. But he (or she) is still more dramatically significant—and dramatically subjective—than ever before. If, as we shall see, Beckett's focus on a unique central character such as Hamm is spatially determined, then we are dealing more with a concentrative effort than with a destructive one. Hamm is more theatrical in the sense that he constitutes a more densely compacted theatrical sign; his apparent loss of personality and psychology have given way to the elaboration of a simultaneously personal and theatrical empty space that extends the bounds and the force of the work's theatricality.

Rather than any weakening of the subject or the obliteration of theatrical space, we should speak of a "hyperconscious," "hyperimaginative," theatrical *hypersubject* that serves as the center of gravity of a theatrical *hyperspace* constituting a *hypersubjective* theatre, which has been justly labeled as "hypertheatrical."<sup>21</sup> Hypersubjective plays are those in which one solitary and introspective dramatic character becomes the overdetermined focal point (*mise en abyme*) of a theatrical metadiscourse based on an image of empty space. The



head of this hypersubject constitutes the definitive material frame for an "empty" psychic space that equals the central theatrical metaphor.

### The Hypersubject in the Text

At this point I would like to demonstrate the hypersubjective spatial economy of Beckett's metadramatic *Endgame*, and then suggest variations on this economy in other works by Beckett and other authors of nouveau théâtre. Applying some basic methodology from recent semiotic theories of the theatre text I will examine dramatic space—space as depicted (encoded) by the dramatist and imagined (decoded) by the reader of the text with or without the intent to produce the play—as a semiotic system of a given play.<sup>22</sup> The kind of space emerging from the text has the double referent of 1) the stage itself and 2) a personal, inner psychic space. Hamm's body, reduced to a "thinking skull," delimits two primary contiguous and contingent spatial fields, one of outer and the other of inner theatrical space. Finally, to complete fully the *mise en abyme*, the text communicates an impression of focalization on the inner theatrical space of Hamm's head through the creation of a series of Chinese-box-like intermediate frames between the outermost borders of the stage frame and Hamm's head, the ultimate interior frame.

I will concentrate primarily on those spatial indications that suggest—and therefore *virtually* create—the image of a hypersubject by contributing to a discourse on the general concept of empty space on the one hand, or, on the other, the spatial embedding ("emboîtement") or *mise en abyme* of this empty space. These two important paradigms of the dramatic space in *Endgame*, empty space and spatial embedding, have close corollaries in the form of "blindness" and "multiple framing." While the first constitutes a preliminary, simple *mise en abyme* by reflecting an image of emptiness, the second spatially reinforces (and overdetermines) the "abyeme"; the multiple framing works to focus (embed) the head of the protagonist within a spatial continuum that suggests the extension of empty space into an infinite, interior "abyeme."

Both of these spatial paradigms are present in the "explicit" didascalial (what Anne Ubersfeld refers to as the stage directions proper, set apart from the dialogue) as well as the "internal" (implicit) didascalial (the reference to space contained in the verbal dialogue of the dramatic characters).<sup>23</sup> Michael Issacarov too has proposed a useful semiotic tool for the analysis of our textual space: the dichotomy of mimetic space versus diegetic space, a dichotomy that does not directly correspond to one of explicit versus internal didascalial. According to Issacarov, within the global semiotic system of dramatic space, the mimetic space is "that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage."<sup>24</sup>

Mimetic space is "not conveyed by verbal language"<sup>25</sup> per se, since it is visible on stage, that is, its referent is visible. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is merely "described . . . referred to by the characters . . . mediated through the discourse of the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually."<sup>26</sup> Still, I hasten to caution that, at the level of the theatre text, "visualization" is a very complex process. The opposition between the visualization of mimetic space and that of diegetic space becomes a matter of degree, since it depends on the extent to which the reader (decoder) of the text allows the diegetic references to influence his or her imaginary construction of the theatrical space. As we shall see, in the case of Beckett's theatre the distinction between the diegetic and the mimetic tends to blur. Beckett exteriorizes inner life, he makes the "outside inside" as Schechner puts it,<sup>27</sup> by bringing the inside outside, i.e., by spatializing discourse. So when Issacharoff tells us that diegetic space works to focus and anchor mimetic space,<sup>28</sup> I would add that, in the case of Beckett's hypersubjective theatre, it also works to actually create a kind of mimetic space.

What is the most basic configuration of the mimetic (visible) empty space of *Endgame*? At the primary level of the explicit didascalía Beckett describes the stage space as a "bare interior."<sup>29</sup> At this same level of explicit didascalía, scholars have been impressed by the resemblance of the bare stage—with its two rear windows or "high peepholes," as Hugh Kenner calls them—to the inside of an immense skull.<sup>30</sup> The bareness of the stage transfers to the skull of the character. The didascalía also describes Hamm as wearing dark glasses, an indexical feature that serves not only to *indicate* his blindness,<sup>31</sup> but also to emphasize the depiction of his head as a framelike skull. By virtue of this iconic relationship between stage and head, Hamm's head acquires a unique status as a spatial entity, and the emptiness of the stage space tends to transfer analogically to the psychic space inside the skull, a space which here qualifies as a special kind of mimetic space since it is essentially a visible, iconic construct fashioned out of the didascalía. Furthermore, the paradigm of "blindness" associated with Hamm reinforces the virtual image of inner emptiness. Hamm's blindness evokes not just inner space, as Shimon Levy claims,<sup>32</sup> but also the imaginary emptiness of this space.

Despite the importance of the material, mimetic references (like the dark sunglasses) to Hamm's blindness, only at the diegetic level (through the verbal reference of the dialogue) does the emptiness of his blindness become fully "extended" into the realm of the personal psyche. Hamm can "see" no more than the void of his own bitter consciousness, an inner world to which he often refers in terms that accentuate the spatiality of his "empty" world vision. In warning Clov of his own future blindness, Hamm portrays this malediction as some sort of ontological contagion:

In my house. (*Pause. With prophetic relish.*) One day you'll be blind like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. (*Pause.*) . . . Infinite emptiness will be all around you. . . .(36)

Hamm's head, centered within an "infinite emptiness," recalls Artaud's "dead center of space through which mind must pass," a mind that fully reflects the emptiness in which it is embedded.<sup>33</sup> Hamm is not simply "centered" within the theatrical space of the stage—the "house" to which he refers in the above quote; rather, his head is the embedded core of a spatial continuum involved in a metadramatic mission. Michel Corvin makes an important, "theatrical," contribution to the notion of embedding implied by the concept of *mise en abyme*. In applying this concept to contemporary theatre, Corvin links the spatial aspect of the "embedding" of the fragment (or enclave or frame) to the syntagmatic chain of meaning:

the embedding [*emboîtement*] entails a hierarchical relationship and it almost automatically clears the path to the domain of signification, since the embedded thing constitutes a syntagma destined, not to become the part of a whole . . . but the *raison d'être* of this whole.<sup>34</sup>

In the three-dimensional, multilayered space of the theatre, where notions of "framing" or "layering" exceed the one-dimensional or purely conceptual "framing" found in the other arts, spatial embedding can have a more direct and determinant relation to meaning. The "embedded thing" constitutes a central sign, which Corvin sees as the "*raison d'être*" of the work, or more precisely, the "first cause" of all the other—exterior and convergent—frames or layers of meaning.<sup>35</sup>

How is the spectator supposed to perceive Hamm's head as embedded (the second of our primary paradigms) within the theatrical space of the stage? How has Beckett inscribed this "intellectual egg" into the dramatic space of the text? I will first consider the mimetic (visual) embedding before discussing how this is enhanced and anchored by the diegetic spatial indications. We remember, of course, that Hamm's individual, center-stage, physical presence is at the outset visually more framelike within a "bare interior" than it would be on a more furnished stage. Considering that the centering of his body is called for in the explicit didascalía and is the recurrent subject of Hamm's verbal language (the internal didascalía),<sup>36</sup> the mimetic space can be schematically described as a body centered in empty space. And the delimiting aspect of the walls enclosing the stage space (Hamm's house) is greatly enhanced when Hamm has Clov take him

for "a little turn. . . . Right round the world," insisting that he "hug the walls" before bringing him back to the center again (25).

Yet, between the definitive *mise en abyme* of Hamm's skull and the outermost stage frame his "little turn" has described at the borders of the stage, there is a class of intermediate frames that assist the overall effect of embedding by bringing Hamm's head into a more acute focus. To this end, Hamm's infirm and useless body is "framed" not only by the wheelchair in which he is seated upright, but also by an old sheet that provides additional cover, and again by the dressing gown he wears, constituting the most immediate of frames for his more or less inactive body. His head is, in turn, covered by a "stiff toque" and a "large blood-stained handkerchief" (1), the most immediate of frames for this active "talking skull." This "Chinese-box" tableau of layers of meaning converges on a central core that, in turn, signifies a progression of "deep" metatheatrical and metaphysical meaning in the reflective empty space of his skull. Thus, in a strict sense, the mimetic space stops at the physical surface of Hamm's head, a form that provides the border between two contiguous and contingent spatial fields that are simultaneously evoked from the very beginning of the play when, on awakening, Hamm removes the handkerchief serving as the "curtain" to his inner theatrical space. While the metatheatrical aspect of the handkerchief has not escaped the critical eye of Beckett scholars, its function as an intermediate frame between the two fields of empty space has, to my knowledge, not been considered. Hamm's psychic stage lies behind the sightless facade of his blind eyes, covered by black glasses that function more as "peepholes"—reminiscent of Hugh Kenner's reference to the windows of the skull-like stage—than as "peepers." Significantly, the very last gesture of the play, described in the explicit didascalia, is for Hamm to replace the curtain-like handkerchief over his face just as the (exterior) stage curtain falls. The inner stage closes to the gaze of the audience, clearly demonstrating the correspondence between the inner and the outer theatrical spaces. As a theatrical object, the handkerchief effectively transforms the image of "centered body" to one of "centered mind," where the metatheatrical mind becomes an "inner theatre" centered in space.

Working in conjunction with these visual cues, the diegetic spatial references of the text reinforce the mimetic focalization on the space of the inner stage as they concretize the representation of its virtual emptiness. Here, I will diverge considerably from Issacharoff's idea of diegetic space, which he defines as more of a conventional kind of unseen space, usually referenced to offstage ("outside space"). With Beckett's "inward-turning" theatre, however, one must look inside as well as outside the stage for diegetic spatial references.<sup>37</sup> For the most part, Hamm verbally engenders a poetics of space that closely coincides with Artaud's

theory of inner space. We remember the absolute gesture—the central sign—of the touching of his head by the Balinese central dancer:

And always this confrontation of the head, this  
Cyclop's eye, the inner eye of the mind which the  
right hand gropes for.<sup>38</sup>

Beckett has introduced the diegetic equivalent of this mimetic confrontation with the space of the "inner eye," in the form of Hamm's recurrent reference to a "dripping" in his head. Early in the work, when Hamm entreats Clov to let him sleep—i.e., to let him turn inward into the space of his consciousness—he adds a seemingly irrelevant remark: "There's something dripping in my head. (*Pause.*) A heart, a heart in my head" (18). And much later, he refers again to this obscure dripping: "Something dripping in my head, ever since the fontanelles. . . . Splash, splash, always on the same spot. (*Pause.*) Perhaps it's a vein. (*Pause.*) A little artery" (50). Hamm is signalling with language what the central dancer signals with gesture: the "intellectual egg" or central sign of empty space. First, dripping implies emptiness, for water can only "drip" through space that is empty.<sup>39</sup> Second, the dripping gives an impression of focalization. Hamm's self-conscious cerebral confrontation is expressed as physical cerebral penetration through the force of successive dripping. And third, the central core that is metaphorically engraved into the space of the head by the constant dripping becomes, in effect, the "heart" (core) of the psyche. By evoking the displacement of the heart into the head ("A heart, a heart in my head") Hamm effectively places the paradigm of focalization "in abyme." With a heart in his empty skull, the "dripping" Hamm senses contrasts with the cerebral "throbbing" one might expect of a fully "furnished" mind within the furnished space of what Artaud has beratedly dubbed psychological theatre. Consistent with postmodern resistance to epistemological closure, the core of meaning is continuously displaced. Psychic depth, here sounded and penetrated by the metaphysical drop of water, corresponds to metatheatrical depth.

### Variations on the Hypersubjective Model

Hamm is not Beckett's only hypersubjective protagonist, and Beckett is not the only author of hypersubjective plays. The mimetic spaces of *Happy Days* and *Rockaby*, for instance, are equally bare and equally marked by the spatial embedding of empty space. Winnie of *Happy Days*, engulfed in her mound of dirt, and "W" (sic) of *Rockaby*, entrenched in her rocking chair, are representations of the centered empty mind. If not physically blind like Hamm,

they still focus their vision within and are therefore essentially blind to all exterior space. Though they may be conscious of the "eyes of the Other," in the words of Winnie, they use their own eyes only to seek out the inner depths. Indeed, the extreme structural economy of *Rockaby* reveals a particularly striking focal point. The framing around "W" is materially (mimetically) manifest from the beginning in the explicit didascalia referring to the configuration of her rocking chair and of her costume. She wears a "black lacy high-necked evening gown . . . long sleeves . . . with an incongruous head-dress"<sup>40</sup> that draws attention to the head as it assists a visual depiction of psychic strata. Furthermore, according to the stage directions, the rocking chair must be outfitted with a footrest and a vertical back, and it will have "rounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace" (22). Beckett specifies, moreover, that the recurrent movement of the rocking chair will be controlled mechanically without any assistance from "W." He evidently wants to avoid any gesture indicating exteriority. Finally, Beckett's notes on the stage lighting of this work focalize very obviously "W"'s head as the first and last element to be illuminated: "Opening fade-up: first spot on face alone. Long pause. Then light on chair. Final fade-out: first chair, Long pause with spot on face alone. Head slowly sinks, comes to rest. Fade out spot" (21). No handkerchief here to function as an internal stage-curtain, just the poetic sinking of the head.

Surely, *Rockaby* creatively evokes an abundance of different themes common to contemporary theatre, such as loneliness, death, and the abstraction of time. Nevertheless, at the "heart" of it all lies the fundamental structure of an empty mind in a void. Self-centered "W" does not consistently touch her head, nor does she verbalize cerebral "dripping"; she simply, methodically, rocks herself into the abyss ("abyeme") of empty space.

While Beckett's plays are the clearest, most striking examples of hypersubjectivity in modern drama, if we approach the theatre text through the dynamics of deep spatial structure and character-space relationship, we can locate evidence of nascent or latent hypersubjective spatial economies in a very wide range of works belonging to French nouveau théâtre. So, with an aim to better understanding the complexity, the pervasiveness, and the power of the *mise en abyme* of empty space, I ask the reader to reconsider two works which have hitherto been treated as kinds of "absurdist" theatre not only very different from works by Beckett, but also from each other.

In Eugene Ionesco's *Le roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*) and Boris Vian's *Les Bâtisseurs d'empire* (*The Empire Builders*), at the outset of the action, the theatrical space is abundantly furnished and populated and one cannot readily detect a precisely centered, framed and focused, protagonist of the Beckettian variety. Yet the spaces become emptier as the action progresses and both plays

conclude with the image of an isolated and radically introspective character embedded in empty space. In *Le Roi se meurt*<sup>41</sup> the play's theatricality is centered around the King's death, a death that is clearly the spatial rendering of a well-structured "inward turn." The French critic Jean Claude rightly concludes that the death of the King is a very interior and very spatial process: "Death is fusion to an undifferentiated reality which is space. . . . Man retreats within himself."<sup>42</sup> And he describes a kind of semiotic conjunction between death and space in the following terms: "[the] shrinking of the kingdom . . . suggests the shrinking of the individual's field of consciousness, or the progressive capitulation of thought."<sup>43</sup> Outer space equals inner space. To accomplish death, the King must blind himself to the exterior world; as thought effaces (empties) itself from the King's mind, the furnishings of the theatrical space (including the other characters) literally disappear, until all that remains is the King on his (framelike) throne. Significantly, the play ends as king and throne embed themselves into deep theatrical space and "sink into a sort of fog."<sup>44</sup>

A similar "deathly process" takes place in Vian's *Bâtisseurs*, a play about a family subjected to a progressive restriction of living space. The impression of spatial embedding is clearly elaborated as, from one act to the next, the family executes a vertically ascendant retreat within an apartment building, occupying quarters that are successively more squalid, empty, and smaller. The individual characters themselves virtually disappear with the space until all that remains is the Father whose entire attention turns to the "huis clos" of his personal consciousness, the final spatial field of retreat. "I've always felt I was alone," he says, as he comments on his existence *as space in space*:

The world has no reason to extend itself much beyond the walls that surround me. One thing's for sure: I am its center.<sup>45</sup>

Only in this third and final act does the Father attain the kind of solitary, hypersubjective centering into which Beckett's protagonists seem to be born. Significantly, as the stage goes black, the Father's final act is to leap out the window into the metaphorical abyss of his introspective consciousness, a "death" not unlike that of the King.<sup>46</sup> These two protagonists differ from the other characters of the respective works in that they do not simply disappear or abandon space; rather, they penetrate it actively and mimetically, sending it into "abyeme," an act that Beckett's theatre suggests primarily through (diegetic) discourse. The final tableau—in one play, the enthroned King sinking into a fog, in the other, the Father's vertical plunge into empty space—retrospectively reveals a dynamic character-space core that carries the play to an open and

paradoxical conclusion: the inward focus of the hypersubject reflects outward and away from its empty psyche to the exterior emptiness of the stage.

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, we are not witnessing the "death" of the subject in any of these plays by Beckett, Ionesco, and Vian. On the contrary, the works signal the birth of a new kind of subject that forms the crux of tragedy in contemporary theatre. In his seminal work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claimed that the "state of individuation," the aberrant resistance of the individual to the "oneness" of all living things, was perceived by the Greeks to be the "origin and primal cause of all suffering," and consequently, it became the very *raison d'être* of classical Greek theatre.<sup>47</sup> The theatrical hypersubject, a modern-day Dionysus, demonstrates a new metatheatrical form for individuation in a world where art and artist give the impression that they have nowhere to turn but "in." As we have seen, the inward turn does not constitute any loss of space, but rather a radical change in the configuration and status of the emptiness of theatrical space. Theatrical space, which has historically represented a microcosmic focus of the world (*theatrum mundi*), adopts a more concrete, precisely focused, center of gravity within the virtual, imaginary psychic space of the theatrical hypersubject—the last in a series of converging spatial configurations, from world, through stage, to personal psychic space.

Subject and space actually become more closely related, more directly aligned. Inspired by Beckett's *Rockaby*, Charles Lyons addresses the problem of the character-space relationship in theatre, remarking:

that the dramatic image of character within space and time is irreducible and that it is impossible to separate the image of theatrical space from the image of character.<sup>48</sup>

One cannot help but think how concretely the hypersubjective work delivers this metadramatic message. What closer relationship can the character have to space than to actually become the *mise en abyme* of that space? At the beginning of this essay I expressed the regret that because contemporary theorists have concentrated so heavily on the psychological structures of certain theatre texts, they have consequently underestimated the importance of spatial relationships. Yet, once the spatial work begins, one finds that contemporary psychoanalytical theories are not entirely incompatible with theatrical hypersubjectivity. In Jacques Lacan's theory, for instance, Nietzsche's "state of individuation" would translate into more of a signifying *process*: an alienated postmodern subject whose



identity is characterized (and ravaged) by the perpetual yielding of the signified to a (renewable) signifier.<sup>49</sup> In the case of hypersubjective theatre, the hypersubject becomes a kind of signified, a given "stage" of character-space identity, that must yield to subsequent, deeper levels of identity of the character with space. One cannot observe Hamm center-stage without imagining the course of the drop of water through the darkness of his inner world. Yet, in hypersubjective theatre at least, there is no actual "decentering" of the subject. Intricately tied to space, oriented and focused by the outer (visible) framework of the stage, the line of displacement of the signified is actually quite linear and centered. The body-skull of the protagonist provides an acute and privileged point of intermediary signification as the border between outer and inner emptiness.

Never before has one dramatic character been so singularly and comprehensively representative of theatrical space; never before has he (or she) been so determined by and determinant for this space. The hypersubjective protagonist carries the gene of Artaud's cycloptic hieroglyphic framework for theatrical space: his personal psychic space represents the "central eye"—or, to borrow Corvin's term, the "isotopy of concentration"<sup>50</sup>—of the structured empty space he inhabits. By creatively elaborating the new-found correspondence between the depths of metatheatre and the depths of the self-conscious "mind centered in void," the hypersubjective work encourages us to rethink contemporary notions of theatricality, subjectivity, self-consciousness, and death.

## Notes

1. Anne Ubersfeld, *L'École du spectateur: Lire le théâtre 2* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1982) 116. This and all further translations of French text are mine, unless otherwise noted.

2. Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre* (New York: Hawthorne, 1973) 194.

3. Robert Langbaum, *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 137, 142.

4. The French term *mise en abyme* refers to a fragment or analogical enclave within a work of art (pictorial, literary, theatrical) which contains the essential elements of the work and therefore reflects the work as a whole.

5. Keir Elam states the following: "The stage is, in the first instance, an 'empty' space, to use Peter Brook's phrase (Brook 1968), distinguished from its surroundings by visible markers . . . and potentially 'fillable' visually and acoustically" (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* [London: Methuen, 1980] 56).

6. Jacques Copeau, "La Scène et l'acteur," unpublished essay, in *Le théâtre en France 2*, ed. Jacqueline Jomaron (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989) 219.

7. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Anne Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969) 136-37. I prefer to translate the "descente vertigineuse" of the original

French text (*Manifestes du surréalisme* [Paris: Gallimard, 1971] 41) as "vertiginous descent" rather than the "dizzying" descent of the translation at hand.

8. Monique Borie, *Antonin Artaud: Le Théâtre et le retour aux sources* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) 249, 254.

9. Artaud, "Le Théâtre et les dieux" in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1956-71) 202.

10. 204.

11. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 63.

12. 110-11.

13. Philosophically, only the concept of extension (the continuous) can assume metaphysical proportions and so it has stood in binary opposition to the more limited concept of space (the discontinuous). "All knowledge of the world," argues the semiotician A. J. Greimas, "begins with a projection of the discontinuous onto the continuous," i.e., a projection of space onto extension (étendue). Space is a "construction" and "any construction is an impoverishment . . . the emergence of space erases the greater part of the richness of extension" ("Pour une sémiotique topologique," in *Sémiotique de l'espace*, ed. Jean Zeitoun [Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1979] 11-12).

14. See Roger Caillois, *Obliques* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1975) 237-38.

15. Mieke Bal, "Mise en abyme et iconicité," *Littérature* 29 (1978) 122. The emphasis is Bal's.

16. 128.

17. Maria Voda Capusan, "Theatre and Reflexivity," *Poetics* 13 (1984) 107.

18. Artaud, "Le théâtre et les dieux" 201-02.

19. See, for example, Anne Ubersfeld's explanation of the "weakening of the subject" in contemporary theatre (*Lire le théâtre*, 2nd edition [Paris: Editions sociales, 1982] 93-94). And elsewhere, in her work on contemporary theatrical "myths," Monique Borie concludes that Beckettian theatre "tends toward the obliteration of both space and time" (*Mythe et théâtre aujourd'hui: une quête impossible?* [Paris: Nizet, 1981] 67). Similarly, Elizabeth Burns suggests that the theatrical space of authors belonging to the tradition of nouveau théâtre (Artaud, Genet, Beckett) signifies a "rejection of specific space" and consequently evokes an idea of "placelessness" because it represents more a "condition of the spirit than a physical area." Consequently, Burns finds that "place is irrelevant to Beckett's apparently existential view of the human condition" (*Theatricality: A study of convention in the theatre and in social life* [London: Langman Group, 1972] 87).

20. Michel Corvin, "Contribution à l'analyse scénique," *Travail théâtral* 22 (1976) 63, my emphasis.

21. Sidney Homan refers to Hamm as "hyperimaginative" and "hyperconscious" ("*Endgame*: The Playwright completes himself," in *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, ed. Harold Bloom [New Haven: Chelsea House, 1988] 131, 142). And this "hyper" terminology is also analogically consistent with Robert Abarached's idea of "hypertheatricality" (*l'hyperthéâtralité*) in French nouveau théâtre (*La crise du personnage dans le théâtre moderne* [Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978] 417-19).

22. There are, of course, many different categories of space for the theatre. Strictly speaking, we are primarily interested here in the *dramatic space* as opposed to the *theatrical space*, which is said to be realized only at the level of the concrete stage production. According to Patrice Pavis, the dramatic space "belongs to the dramatic text and can only be visualized by the spectator as a purely imaginary construction." As a "spatial image of the dramatic universe" motivated solely by a reading of the text, dramatic space is constructed from two sources: the stage directions of the author constituting a sort of "pre-mise-en-scène" and the spatio-temporal indications within the dialogue (*Dictionnaire du théâtre: termes et concepts de l'analyse théâtrale*, 2nd edition [Paris: Messidor/Éditions sociales, 1987] 144-145). Despite the theoretical opposition between the concepts

of dramatic space and theatrical space, however, I will follow the tradition of a great many theatre scholars by freely referring to dramatic space as theatrical space.

23. Anne Ubersfeld, "Pedagogics of theatre," in *Approaching Theatre*, ed. André Helbo (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 139-40.

24. Michael Issacharoff, "Space and Reference in Drama," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 2:3 (1981) 215. See also Issacharoff's "Space in Drama" in *Discourse of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) 55-67.

25. 220.

26. 215.

27. Schechner 194.

28. Issacharoff 220.

29. *Endgame*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 1. Unless otherwise stated, all references are to this edition.

30. See Hugh Kenner, "Life in a Box," in *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, ed. Harold Bloom (New Haven: Chelsea House, 1988) 41. Before Kenner, Ruby Cohn argued that "The interior of a skull, owner unknown, is a recurrent locale in Beckett's fiction" (*Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* [New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1962] 237, 325 n.9). Cohn's remark, however, does move beyond the text. She refers to the "vaguely oval" stage set in Roger Blin's French production of *Endgame*, which was supervised by Beckett. The text does not explicitly suggest this oval quality.

31. Blindness is a trait which, curiously, is not directly expressed in the didascalia.

32. "Ultimately, the stage in *Endgame* is a self-reflective metaphor of internal or inner space. Because Hamm is blind, his perception of space is already interior. . ." (Shimon Levy, *Samuel Beckett's Self-Referential Drama* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990] 24).

33. Shimon Levy gives a good account of another "empty" spatial field evoked by Beckett's text: the "extramural" stage space, the offstage. According to Levy, "Offstage is the black aura of stage, it is the specific emptiness that hovers around the stage, sometimes serving as the padding between outer reality and inner theatrical reality, or illusion. . . Offstage—dramatically and theatrically—sucks us all in" (48-49). While I would evidently prefer to argue that it is the innermost stage that "sucks us all in," one might judiciously remark that the *mise en abyme* generated by the head-space radiates outwardly as well as inwardly.

34. Michel Corvin, "Espace, temps, mise en abyme: le jeu du même et de l'autre" in *Mélanges pour Jacques Schérer: Dramaturgies: langages dramatiques* (Paris: Nizet, 1986) 144-45.

35. This perspective on framing coincides with Artaud's spatial approach to metaphysical meaning in theatre. Monique Borie, for instance, argues that Artaud's mythico-theatrical space, which is "totalizing," "oriented," and "organized around a center," takes on the structure of a "universe of layers operating on a principle of verticality": ". . . it is also a layered space in which the different spatial planes are brought into play with one another, the center being, par excellence, the point where the planes begin to communicate [where the *mise en communication des plans* is realized] (*Antonin Artaud* 244).

We could, of course, make the distinction between what Borie perceives in Artaud's theory to be the *site* of meaning and Corvin's idea that the *mise en abyme* is the actual *source* of meaning. Whether site or source, we should recognize that it is not just the idea of exact center that is meaningful in either Artaud or Beckett, but the "embedded" aspect of the central core.

36. "I was right in the center, wasn't I? . . . Am I right in the center? . . . Put me right in the center!" (25-27).

37. Still, the diegetic space is not exclusively referenced to the inner space. One excellent example of how diegetic space helps to create the impression of the exterior frame is that when Hamm takes his "little turn" around the outer walls, he makes it clear that the enclosing frame itself reflects the emptiness of the space it delimits: "Do you hear? (*He strikes the wall with his knuckles.*)

Hollow bricks! (*He strikes again.*) All that's hollow!" (26). There is, of course, no mention of the hollowness of the bricks in the external didascalia, so we might consider this either an internal or implicit stage direction.

38. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* 66.

39. Beckett's English translation of this work has led some commentators to interpret this dripping as blood rather than water. But the original, French version of this work, *Fin de partie*, is more instructive in this regard. The line "There's something dripping in my head" reads "Il y a une goutte d'eau dans ma tête" (*Fin de partie* [Paris: Minuit, 1957] 33). A literal translation of this would be: "There's a drop of water in my head." The idea of an independent drop of liquid is more clearly analogical to a gesture of touching the head; and certainly, because of its transparency, water seems more "empty."

40. *Rockaby and Other Short Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1981) 22.

41. Ionesco, we remember, is another one of those contemporary dramatists praised by Richard Schechner for their (written) contribution to making "the outside inside" (194).

42. Jean Claude, "La mort au théâtre: l'exemple du *Roi se meurt* de Ionesco" in *La Mort en toutes lettres*, ed. G. Ernst (Nancy, France: PU de Nancy, 1983) 248.

43. Claude 247.

44. Eugene Ionesco, *Le Roi se meurt* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 137.

45. Boris Vian, *Les Bâtisseurs d'empire* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1965) 83.

46. For a more thorough treatment of the hypersubjective nature of this work, see my "L'Espace surréaliste et la mort hypersubjective dans *Les Bâtisseurs d'Empire* de Boris Vian" in *Trois fous du langage: Vian-Queneau-Prévert* (Nancy, France: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993).

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 73-74.

48. "Character and theatrical space" in *The Theatrical Space*, James Redmond, ed. (Cambridge UP, 1987) 27-28.

49. See, for instance, Jacques Lacan, "L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient" in *Ecrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) esp. pp. 260-261. As Malcolm Bowie so aptly puts it, in Lacan's theory, "the 'vertical dependencies' of the signifying chain extend as far downwards into the hidden worlds of mental processes as it is possible for the speculative imagination to descend. Beyond the last outpost of signification there is nothing at all—or rather there is that boundless and inexpressible vacuity . . ." (*Lacan* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991] 72). We remember, of course, that this bent toward psychoanalytical theory was intuitively prefigured by the surrealists. Breton's notion of the perpetual, vertiginous descent (the successive "illumination of hidden places") suggests displacement along a signifying chain submerged in the inexpressible vacuity of psyche.

50. Michel Corvin, "Espace, temps, mise en abyme" 144-45.