Samuel Beckett's *Quad*: Pacing to Byzantium

Graley Herren

In his immensely useful study, *Beckett in Performance*, Jonathan Kalb makes an intriguing comparison between Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp. He asserts,

> . . . Beckett's relationship to language has always been quasi-Duchampian, if one accepts the idea that Duchamp's greatness lies not so much in the fact that he stopped painting as in his managing to have that act recognized as significant. You have to be quite a writer before your refusal to write can be received as a statement in itself.[1]

Kalb's point is well taken, especially with regard to Beckett's teleplays. From the "eviction" of language in Part III of *Ghost Trio* to the concentration on dissolving images in *. . . but the clouds . . .*, the teleplays follow an unmistakable trajectory away from language toward alternative modes of expression. In fact, Beckett's entire career can be plotted along this trajectory away from language. As early as 1937, in his oft-quoted letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett had already become exasperated with language's limitations as a vehicle for artistic expression. He complained,

> . . . As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.[2]

Of course, it is unfair to judge a man in his seventies by the brash statements he made in his twenties, and it is presumptuous to assume a complete aesthetic system from the sardonic observations of a private letter. Nevertheless, this passage is recycled so often precisely because of its remarkable prescience in anticipating

Graley Herren is an Assistant Professor of English at Xavier University in Cincinnati, where he teaches modern drama and modern British & Irish literature. His articles on Samuel Beckett appear in *Modern Drama, Journal of Beckett Studies, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujhourd'hui, Midwest Quarterly*, and *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*. He has recently completed a book-length study of Samuel Beckett's television plays.

Beckett's late work. He *does* seem to be boring one hole after another into language in the teleplays until, by the time he produces *Quadrat I & II* in 1982, he is left with all hole and no language. Difficulties arise, however, if the spectator or critic regards *Quad*[3] simply in terms of absence and negation. The absence of language clears a space in which image and sound can exert preeminent presence—or at least this is what *should* happen. *Quad*'s success in offering a viable alternative to linguistic expression is in fact a matter for serious debate. On the one hand, *Quad* represents a logical progression from Beckett's previous teleplays, depicting an "endgame" to earlier language/image power struggles in which image now reigns supreme. On the other hand, *Quad* suffers by comparison to his more successful late dramas because it lacks their animating tensions, between characters and between rival means of expression. Beckett does exploit the interaction of *mise en scène* and sound in original ways in *Quadrat I & II*. Nevertheless, without an identifiable dramatic conflict, *Quad* ultimately proves to be—despite its frantic motion— Beckett's most static teleplay.

The basic idea for *Quad* gestated for nearly two decades. As S.E. Gontarski first observed in *The Intent of Undoing*, Beckett had developed the prototype for a pacing mime as early as 1963. In that year he jotted down diagrams and notes for "J.M. Mime," a piece designed for Jack MacGowran. Gontarski provides a succinct description of this mime:

> Beckett outlined a maze of possible correct paths and errors for
> two players, either a son and father or a son and mother, to
> describe all the permutations of possible paths along a square
> bisected at first from corners to corners.[4]

Beckett then complicated the permutations further by bisecting the bisections. However, he quickly abandoned "J.M. Mime" and apparently did not return to the idea until about 1980.[5] Beckett had experimented with mime pieces in the past, most notably in *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II* (both 1956). And his subsequent directorial work for stage and screen certainly exhibited a mimic sensitivity for precise figural movement. Still, he had not explicitly designed a mime piece for almost twenty years before *Quad*. His return to this form is perfectly appropriate, however, when viewed within the context of his work for television. By 1982, Beckett had earned a television apprenticeship on seven teleplay productions,[6] where he tested the technical and receptive possibilities of the medium on a number of fronts. If the teleplays from the 1970s mark a growing estrangement

from language, then *Quad* announces a divorce. *Quad* picks up where *Ghost Trio*
and. . .*but the clouds*. . . left off, pushing the expressive potentials of *mise en scène*
and sound to their limits by requiring them to "act without words."

A description of *Quad* communicates very little of the piece's effect. As
Patrice Pavis concedes in *Languages of the Stage*, "To speak of mime—or, worse
still, to write on mime—is to dwell awkwardly on a few moments of gesture."[7]
Though the linguistic transcription of a mime must surely prove inadequate, it is
nevertheless necessary to trace *Quad*'s rudimentary structure, its "what" and "how,"
before treading into the vexatious territory of "why." The piece involves four
players, "As alike in build as possible . . . Sex indifferent."[8] Despite the anonymity
implied by this description, the players are distinguishable from one another. Each
wears a different colored gown (white, yellow, blue, and red) with a cowl to cover
his or her face. Each is also assigned a particular percussion sound which plays
whenever he or she is moving within the playing space.[9] At different times each of
the four players enters, exits, and re-enters a well-lit square area, always pacing at
a steady rhythm, always tracing a regular, geometrically precise pattern. The only
obstacle threatening the successful execution of these patterns is the square's center.
Whenever a player's prescribed course leads him or her to the center, he or she
abruptly turns sinistrally (like Dante's damned), steps around the center, and
resumes the regular pattern. The players may seem to perform this evasive move
in order to avoid collision with one another. But the script suggests that they avoid
the center because it is "supposed a danger zone."[10] In his script for *Quad*, which
is less a conventional play text than a blueprint for the enactment of a performance,
Beckett uses diagrams to describe the "action":

> The players (1, 2, 3, 4) pace the given area, each following his
> particular course.
>
> Area: square. Length of side: 6 paces.
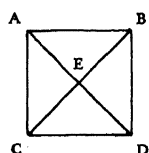
Course 1: AC, CB, BA, AD, DB, BC, CD, DA

Course 2: BA, AD, DB, BC, CD, DA, AC, CB

Course 3: CD, DA, AC, CB, BA, AD, DB, BC

Course 4: DB, BC, CD, DA, AC, CB, BA, AD

> 1 enters at A, completes his course and is joined by 3. Together
> they complete their courses and are joined by 4. Together all
> three complete their courses and are joined by 2. Together all

four complete their courses. Exit 1. 2, 3 and 4 continue and
complete their courses. Exit 3. 2 and 4 continue and complete
their courses. Exit 4. End of 1st series. 2 continues, opening
2nd series, completes his course and is joined by 1. Etc.
Unbroken movement.[11]

And so on for four series. In Beckett's only production of the work, *Quadrat I & II*
(Süddeutscher Rundfunk, 1982), he was so pleased with the pacing routine as
viewed through a monochrome monitor that he decided to append a "sequel," said
to take place "a hundred-thousand years later." The duration of the sequel is shorter
(only one series is performed), the pace is slowed, lighting is dimmed, color is
reduced (all four figures wear white), and individual percussion sounds are
eliminated so that only the droning shuffle of feet is heard. An entire production
of *Quad*, including Beckett's impromptu sequel, lasts about fifteen minutes.

Even from the perspective of minimalist performance art, *Quad* is
strikingly—even audaciously—sparse. The conceptual evolution of the mime reads
like an instruction manual on how to reduce and condense a script. In its first
incarnation as "J.M. Mime," the piece retained a discernible humanistic grounding.
The manuscript defines the players as either father and son or mother and son,
establishing specific character relationships. Though the absence of dialogue would
have precluded positive identification on the part of the spectator, the adult/child
casting, especially with "one carrying other,"[12] would have communicated the
dependency of the child upon the adult—a perceptible psychological reality. In
the script for *Quad,* Beckett removes most of the players' identifiably human traits.
The father or mother and son are replaced with four figures, "As alike in build as
possible. . .Sex indifferent."[13] The hats, coats, and boots of the original characters[14]
are replaced by cowls which obscure the faces and bodies beneath. As they are
conceived in the script, *Quad*'s players function less as individual subjects with
human appeal and more as objective components, working in conjunction with
other components, to achieve a desired aesthetic effect. In fact, Beckett defines
Quad in the script as "A piece for four players, light and percussion,"[15] giving
equal billing to each element, and suggesting that no one element is more important—
let alone more "human"—than the other.

What little individuality which does remain in *Quad*'s script is eroded by
the *Quadrat I & II* performance. In the studio, Beckett and his crew rejected as
impractical his scripted notion that "Each player has his particular light, to be
turned on when he enters, kept on while he paces, turned off when he exits."[16]
They opted instead for constant, neutral lighting directed at the square itself. Also

abandoned was the idea that "Each player has his particular sound" with regard to footsteps.[17] The footsteps are indecipherable over the percussion instruments in *Quadrat I*, and they are indistinguishable from one another in *Quadrat II*. The subtractions in performance of special lighting and footsteps work to subdue individuality even further than the script had, culminating in *Quadrat II*'s virtual erasure of personality.

This issue of depersonalization is a thorny one. Much of the backlash against Beckett in theatrical circles centers upon this problem. The official charge is that, especially in his late drama for stage and screen, Beckett depicts characters who are little more than automatons or puppets—humans whose humanity has been erased. Furthermore, the charge continues, in depicting lifeless characters who function merely as aesthetic functions, he robs performers and directors of the traditional tools of their trade: human identification, mimetic translation, emotional appeal. No Beckett work restricts the psychological output and creative input of its directors and performers more ruthlessly than *Quad*.[18] As such, the teleplay serves as an ideal lightning rod for concerns over depersonalization. Those who mount defenses on Beckett's behalf usually adopt a strategy of reversal. That is, they argue that his depiction of dehumanized figures on stage actually serves as a protest against the dehumanized treatment/behavior he observes off stage. For instance, Hans Hiebel interprets *Quad* as an *exposé* of debased human existence. He argues that the teleplay

> is built on the view that life consists of continuous repetitions of
> the same compulsive activities, and that we deceive ourselves if
> we believe in freedom of will, individuality, spontaneity, etc.
> All human beings are alike, all human activities resemble one
> another, everything is done "un-consciously"—for generations,
> for centuries.[19]

Hiebel reads the depersonalized portrait on screen as a mirror for the meaningless monotony of the world off screen. In a similar vein, Phyllis Carey sees the mime as a commentary on institutionalized conformity:

> The ritual of movement circumscribing patterns around an
> unknown centre implies a controlling fear, an erratic but rigid
> dance to appease the gods; the monk-like cowls and the repetition
> of processions constitute a wordless prayer.

This reading leads her to conclude:

> Both reason and imagination create the figments that in turn
> become controlled determiners of human behaviour. The ritual
> of *Quad* dramatizes the rational and imaginative constructs
> humans have projected, which, in turn, have enslaved them.[20]

Hiebel and Carey's sweeping critiques of contemporary society may have some validity, but it is difficult to prove that *Quad* shares any of their grandiloquence. Beckett's warning at the end of *Watt* seems especially fitting here: "no symbols where none intended."[21] Both Hiebel and Carey seem to rationalize the teleplay's depersonalization by offering narratives of "overpersonalization" in its place.

In any case, such counter-narratives do not reduce the charges of depersonalization lodged by *Quad*'s performers and directors—the former bound by a gag order, the latter by a restraining order. Accusations that Beckett uses his performers like tools or instruments have been unwittingly confirmed by his most ardent supporters. In a piece for the *Village Voice*, Billie Whitelaw described her acting technique to David Edelstein: "Beckett blows the notes. I want them to come out of me and create feeling in whoever's sitting out front."[22] In a later interview with Jonathan Kalb, she expanded her metaphor:

> I place myself totally at his disposal, and I can be a tube of paint
> or a musical instrument or whatever. I won't argue, I won't
> argue, because I trust him totally, and have absolute respect for
> his integrity and artistic vision. So really I just do as I'm told.[23]

Few would argue with the success of Whitelaw's results, but many have taken umbrage with the self-effacement required to achieve those results. And this erasure of personality is not limited to Beckett's working relationship with Whitelaw. One need look no further than his two previous teleplays, *Ghost Trio* and *. . . but the clouds . . .*, in which Beckett directed his actors to Kleist's essay, "On the Marionette Theater," as a model for mannequin-like performances. Even Pierre Chabert, one of the premier performers and directors of Beckett's work, acknowledges the potential danger in such a depersonalized vision of the actor's role. In an interview with Thomas Cousineau for the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Chabert insisted:

> An actor is never a puppet; if he allows himself to be turned into
> one, by Beckett or by anyone else, he is no longer a good actor.

> This is a serious problem. I do, indeed, find that Beckett, in his
> desire for precision and musicality, and in his resistance to
> sentimentality, tended to transform the actor into a machine.[24]

Yet Chabert's misgivings about Beckett's depersonalizing tendencies have not dissuaded him from directing the playwright's work. Rather, Chabert attempts to strike a balance between Beckett's "desire for precision and musicality" and the legitimate creative needs of the performer. As he goes on to explain:

> In my own productions, I follow Beckett's directions with regard
> to musicality, rhythm, and tempo very closely. But it is equally
> important that the actor be able to interiorize this system in such
> a way as to sublimate and transcend it . . . The actor must reinvent
> from within himself the inner necessity of this precision and this
> music. If he doesn't experience this within his own depths, they
> become arbitrary and mechanical.[25]

One finds in Chabert's comments a more suitable "defense" for Beckett's alleged depersonalization, at least with regard to performers and directors. The plea is *nolo contendere*. A work like *Quad* does not exclude creative input from performers and directors. But, it does require a kind of creative input that is ill served by psychologically-centered or personality-driven approaches. David Warrilow, another veteran of the Beckett stage, puts it best when he concedes:

> I barely deal with psychological reality. I don't have to. I mean,
> I can have ideas about that but it isn't what works. What works
> is finding what musicians have called the "right tone." By "right"
> I mean what works for me. I then have to trust that it'll work for
> somebody else—that if I get it right, if I sing it "on key," "in
> tune," it's going to vibrate properly for somebody else.[26]

Warrilow's "musical" approach is consistent with Beckett's own approach in composing and directing his late works for stage and screen. This is not to bestow exclusive superiority to Warrilow's approach, but merely to acknowledge it as one viable alternative for expressing creative input without directly evoking or invoking personality. Beckett's own preference for this kind of depersonalized creative output (and input) situates him squarely within the Modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues that

> the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular
> medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which
> impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected
> ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the
> man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become
> important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the
> man, the personality.[27]

Gontarski makes essentially the same argument in the *Intent of Undoing* by tracing
Beckett's systematic removal of autobiographical details from his dramatic texts.[28]
In the late dramas, however, the effacement of personality extends even further to
encompass character, performer, and director. Eliot proclaims, "The progress of
an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[29] In a
work like *Quad*, Beckett not only makes that sacrifice himself, but he also requires
corresponding sacrifices from his collaborators.

Chabert and Warrilow are right to emphasize the fundamentally musical
nature of Beckett's approach. He seems determined, particularly in the teleplays,
to move his work closer to the ideal of music, producing not shadows of things but
the things themselves. His musical inspiration is announced most explicitly in
Ghost Trio with the appropriation of Beethoven's haunting largo from the Piano
Trio in D. But a musical sensibility informs his other work as well, especially
those productions under his own direction. In the late '70s James Knowlson
observed:

> If one thing is clear about Beckett's recent work as a playwright
> *and* as a director . . . , it is that he conceives movements as
> 'visible music' and choreographs an entire production so as to
> blend sound and silence, movement and stillness into a tight,
> musical structure.[30]

Knowlson's observations antedate *Quad*, yet one can scarcely imagine a work
more illustrative of "visible music." Like a composer or musician, Beckett begins
by introducing a "motif." The first motif is established by the player in white,
describing a pattern which he/she will repeat throughout the performance. That
motif is soon followed by a second (blue), a third (red), and a fourth (yellow), each
offering variations on the first pattern, each complicating the developing fugue.

In the script Beckett goes so far as to describe the players's performances in terms of "solos," "duos," and "trios."[31]

This "visible" music is accompanied by an aural component as well, with each player pacing to the syncopated rhythm of a different percussion instrument. The music in *Quadrat I* functions as more than background noise. As in Beckett's radio plays, *Words and Music* and *Cascando*, music plays a role just as important as any filled by an actor. The visual and aural scores serve as mirror images of one another, to use an optical metaphor, or as contrapuntal strains, to invoke the musical. Words and music are never able to achieve a balance in *Words and Music*; image and music fare much better in *Quadrat I*. Of course, the musical score here is not nearly as complex as the ones featured in *Words and Music* and *Cascando*, not to mention *Ghost Trio*. Nonetheless, *Quadrat I*'s "music" does function as an appropriate complement for the minimalist players, and vice versa. Just as the players have been reduced and condensed to their "mere-most minimum" functions,[32] so too has the music been stripped of its grandeur and reduced to a primal, percussive core. Hans Hiebel describes *Quad* at one point as "Godot reduced to a skeleton."[33] Given the present discussion of visible and audible music, one might alter the equation and identify the skeleton as Beethoven's.

This "skeleton" of music is put through a process of further "de-composition" in *Quadrat II*. The erasure of personality in *Quadrat II* is accompanied by the near silencing of music. Percussion rhythms are removed so that only the echoes of scuffling feet remain. These sounds do retain a discernible rhythm, and perhaps they remain appropriate accompaniment for the diminished players. Still, this scraping noise can no more be considered "music" by the end than the players can be considered "human." If the players are finally reduced to depersonalized functions, then the music is reduced to fundamental sounds. Beckett once wrote Alan Schneider:

> My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.[34]

These comments were directed specifically at *Endgame*, but they seem more relevant to *Quad* than to any other Beckett work. In *Quad*, Beckett begins by voluntarily denying himself language. Then, through systematic reduction and condensation in both the composition and production stages, he tests the expressive limits of image and sound. Both are reduced to nearly nothing, yet both retain

some bare essence, some faint traces of signification.

What do the complementary, fundamental elements of image and sound signify in *Quad*? Critics differ widely in their interpretations. Hans Hiebel and Phyllis Carey read the teleplay in terms of universal social critique. S.E. Gontarski considers *Quad* "Beckett's most vivid image of postmodern literary theory and literal decentering."[35] Herta Schmid invokes theories of the plastic arts, arguing that *Quad* illustrates Wassily Kandinsky's theories of the "'dematerialization' of the plane" by locating the work of art "not in the outer world, but in the inner mind of the spectator."[36] Mary Bryden peers at *Quad* through the lens of Hélène Cixous's gender theories. According to Bryden, the enigmatic indeterminacy of *Quad* qualifies it as a special example of *écriture féminine*.[37]

Though *Quad* contains no verbal utterances, it does accumulate a good deal of meaning by association with verbal texts. Indeed, the mime seems pregnant with intertextual reference, even in the absence of a conventional text. Among Beckett's own works, *Waiting for Godot*, *Words and Music*, *Cascando*, *Footfalls*, *Ghost Trio*, and *. . . but the clouds . . .* all loom especially large, "speaking" for the mime which declines to speak for itself. Dante also exerts his allusive presence. Mary Bryden offers these lines from Canto X of *The Inferno* as evidence:

> Then to the left he turned. Leaving the walls,
> he headed toward the center by a path
> that strikes into a vale, whose stench arose,
> disgusting us as high up as we were.[38]

Dante's inferno-dwellers are not the only pacers implicated in *Quad*. The wandering players may also be drawn from Shakespeare.[39] Macbeth's famous soliloquy seems especially relevant:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[40]

"Petty pace," "the last syllable of *recorded* time," "walking shadow," "heard no more," "Signifying nothing"—all have their visual and aural analogues in *Quad*. Beckett essentially eliminates the "sound and fury" of his own tale by insuring that both players and music are "heard no more."

It is a testament to *Quad*'s openness that it can accommodate so many diverse interpretations. Each of these readings runs the risk, however, of imposing a strict referential narrative "where none intended." Granted, intention should not be considered the final criterion in judging the merits of a work. The bulk of literary theory since the New Critics advises us that it is far more useful to examine what a work does than to dwell on what it tries to do or claims to do. Reflecting on trends in literary theory, Umberto Eco asserts that the basic underlying assumption:

> is that the functioning of a text can be explained by taking into
> account not only its generative process but also (or, for the most
> radical theories, exclusively) the role performed by the addressee
> and the way in which the text foresees and directs this kind of
> interpretive cooperation.[41]

The whole of Beckett's work for television testifies to his awareness of the interpretive cooperation to be performed by the spectator. On the one hand, *Quad* exemplifies Beckett's ultimate achievement in reception-centered performance. If one thinks of the teleplay in terms of Iser's interpretive "gaps,"[42] then *Quad* consists almost entirely of gaps, of opportunities for the spectator to participate in the meaning-making process of the production. Spectators and critics have made the most of these interpretive opportunities, filling *Quad*'s gaps with everything from Blakean social criticism to Kandinsky's plastic-art theories to Dante's conception of Hell. *Quad*'s greatest achievement may be its ability to provoke— even to demand—such eclectic hermeneutics.

Ironically, *Quad*'s radical openness may also be its greatest liability. The unusual amount of interpretive cooperation required for the spectator to fill *Quad*'s cavernous gaps insures that it will never appeal to an audience outside a small Beckettian coterie. Marco De Marinis addresses this kind of interpretive dilemma in *The Semiotics of Performance* when he asserts:

> there is actually nothing more closed than an 'open' work.
> Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, one of the most open works that could
> be named, by virtue of the great amount of work that its very
> numerous *Leerstellen* ["gaps"] imposes on the reader, limits the

number and kind of readers capable of successfully cooperating
in its interpretation. (170)[43]

Beckett consciously fashioned his work in diametric opposition to the Joycean
aesthetic, as he explained in his well-known 1956 interview with Israel Shenker:

> Joyce was a superb manipulator of material, perhaps the greatest.
> He was making words do the absolute maximum of work ... The
> kind of work I do is one in which I am not master of my material.
> The more Joyce knew the more he could. His tendency is toward
> omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with
> impotence, ignorance.[44]

Beckett was still working with impotence and ignorance into the 1980s.
Nevertheless, *Quad*, more than any of his other late dramas, proves strangely
vulnerable to the semiotic pitfalls De Marinis identifies in Joyce. *Quad* is so
radically open that it threatens to close access to all but the most pedantic spectators.
Beckett always insisted that his texts be allowed to speak for themselves. In the
case of *Quad*, however, his "text" remains essentially cold, mechanical, obscure,
and silent, refusing to speak for itself. The viewer is given both the freedom and
the burden of providing *Quad*'s first and last words. Perhaps *Quad* is Beckett's
equivalent to Marcel Duchamp's autographed urinal, *Fountain*: a complete
abdication of genius, an unconditional surrender to the spectator's authority in
determining meaning. Yet admirers of Beckett's more engaging televisual
experiments cannot help but lament *Quad*'s mute mathematical distance, as well
as Beckett's failure (or refusal) to hold up his end of the artistic transaction.

This failure/refusal is not merely a matter of linguistic negligence. After
all, the guiding force behind Beckett's work in television was his conviction that
other elements of performance (lighting, sound, figural movement, *mise en scène*,
camerawork, editing, special effects) were collectively capable of conveying
meaning even more effectively than language could. At his best, Beckett thoroughly
exploited the raw materials available to him, transforming a lethargic, convention-
bound medium into a laboratory for artistic experimentation. In the process, he
provided experiences for the attentive television spectator which remain ripe with
semiotic challenges. *Quad* does not diverge from this project in aim but in
execution. When Beckett arrived in Stuttgart to begin filming *Quadrat I & II*, he
confided to cameraman Jim Lewis his growing inability to write without feeling

his words would inevitably be lies.[45] He successfully removes all verbal lies from *Quadrat I & II*, but in their place he offers a void more vague than enigmatic. The key distinction between *Quad* and its predecessors is not the absence of language; it is *the absence of conflict.* Drama is generated by conflict, and even Beckett, the great rulebreaker of modern stage and screen, never fully abandoned this basic principle. As minimalist and transgressive as his previous teleplays had been, each was animated by some central dramatic conflict. *Eh Joe's* conflict is direct and flagrant, an open battle of wills between Joe and his inner Voice. The conflict in *Ghost Trio* is more subtle, its weapons more formal, as V and F struggle for territorial control of room and screen.[46] The obstacle facing M in . . . *but the clouds* . . . borders on the inane: he simply wants W to speak to him. Nonetheless, this simple conflict between M and W, together with the more complex conflict between Yeats and Beckett which underlies it, animates the teleplay.[47]

No such conflict sustains *Quad.* The only obstacles which face the players are: 1) not running into one another, and 2) not touching the center. These are obstacles for traffic control, not for dramatic action. Without some kind of compelling conflict, *Quad* amounts to little more than a colorful curiosity, less a dramatic problem and more a mathematical solution. Furthermore, the technical experimentation which had animated Beckett's previous teleplays is all but missing from *Quad*. From the single, stalking dolly shot of *Eh Joe*, to the defamiliarizing close-ups and shifting point-of-view shots of *Ghost Trio*, to the transubstantial dissolve editing of . . . *but the clouds* . . . , technical innovation had been Beckett's signature in the teleplays of the '60s and '70s. Though *Quad* is far from "conventional" in the pejorative sense, its stationary camera and unmanipulated screen image do less to interrogate the technical possibilities of its medium than any of his teleplay before or after. Without dramatic conflict or substantial technical interrogation, the intricate formal patterns of *Quad* fail to accommodate the mess. All conflict, all human pain and mourning, all forms of disorder have been banished. Banished, too, is the quickening spirit of Beckett's best television work. Like the wheel fixed atop the stool in Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, *Quad* revolves round and round but is deprived of any real means for dramatic locomotion. So it spins in a fixed spot, going nowhere.

Martin Esslin closes his article, "A Poetry of Moving Images" with an anecdote from his early acquaintance with Beckett. He reminisces:

> When I first met Beckett twenty-five years ago, he mentioned,
> half jokingly, that he was trying to become ever more concise,

> ever more to the point in his writing—so that perhaps at the end
> he would merely produce a blank page. The visual poetry of
> incarnated metaphors, like *Quad*, in some ways, it seems to me, is
> in fact that blank page—a poem without words.[48]

"A poem without words" sounds wonderfully cryptic and paradoxical, like a Buddhist koan. But what does the term *mean* exactly? What kind of value is communicated, what insight inspired, by the inexpressive gesture of this poem without words? One can hardly conceive of a more "open" text than a blank page; the interpretive possibilities are limitless! But what can be gained by interpreting a blank page which cannot be gained just as well without the blank page? The point here is not to endorse Esslin's term blindly. *Quad* is far more than a blank page. The teleplay is notable for its contrapuntal arrangement of audio-visual elements into a multi-media fugue. Furthermore, *Quad* does serve as an intriguing model for reducing and condensing personality, music, and all the elements of *mise en scène*. Perhaps this is accomplishment enough for any work, especially in the notoriously unambitious terrain of television. And perhaps it is as unfair to criticize *Quad* for not being *Ghost Trio* as it is unfair to criticize *Timon of Athens* for not being *King Lear*. Nonetheless, just as Shakespeare's lesser plays can tell us something about the greater, so, too, can Beckett's least effective teleplay cast his more successful endeavors in sharper relief. *Quad* surpasses its precursors in geometric precision, but it lacks their dramatic complication. *Quad* is *too* pristine, *too* correct, *too* well-ordered to rank with the greatest of Beckett's impotent, ignorant drama.

In his previous teleplay, *. . . but the clouds . . .* , Beckett offered a critique of Yeats's perfect vision of artistic synthesis. In "The Tower" Yeats hails the transformative power of art. The artist can use his imaginative power to redeem suffering by transforming it into the "superhuman / Mirror-resembling dream" of art.[49] Through this process, the artist can make life's painful conflicts

> Seem but the clouds of the sky
> When the horizon fades,
> Or a bird's sleepy cry
> Among the deepening shades.[50]

As Beckett's title suggests, however, his focus is directed more on the dark clouds of pain than on the beautiful landscape an artist might make from them. Beckett's

drama is not built on Yeatsian synthesis, whereby the artist molds painful experience into:

> ... such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enameling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.[51]

Beckett's most innovative work is not hammered in gold, nor does it spring from the idealized union of art with artist described above in "Sailing to Byzantium." Rather, at its best, it is forged from antithesis and tension. In ... *but the clouds* .. .(and, for that matter, in nearly all his work) Beckett foregrounds conflict. That conflict is waged sometimes between characters, more often between the "I" and the "Not I," and almost always between language and the "unnamable." Such conflicts are conspicuously missing from *Quad*. The pacing players of this tele-mime are surprisingly in step with Yeats's on the journey to idealized artistic synthesis. *Quad* displays Beckett's own gilt Byzantine bird in all its unruffled splendor, sans conflict, sans pain—sans drama. The resulting mime may be enough to keep the drowsy spectator awake, but it communicates very little of what was past, or passing, or to come in Beckett's late work for stage, page, and screen.

Notes

1. Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 160.

2. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1983) 172.

3. The nomenclature of this teleplay is unusually problematic. Beckett's pre-production notes refer to the work as "Quad." The title is translated as "Quadrat" in his Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) production. But the SDR version departs from the pre-production notes in a number of ways, particularly with the inclusion of a "sequel" added during filming (see the present chapter for a fuller discussion). Beckett's final version for SDR is titled *Quadrat I & II. The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) reproduces Beckett's pre-production notes and adds endnotes explaining the revisions made during filming, but it retains the original title *Quad* (289-94). Subsequent productions of the teleplay have alternated between the titles *Quad* (Homan) and *Quad 1 & 2* (BBC and Global Village). In the present study I will adopt the nebulous title "*Quad*" to refer to

the work as a single entity with multiple incarnations. I will only use *Quadrat I & II* when referring exclusively to Beckett's German production, and I will only refer to *Quadrat II* as a part of that single production, not as a separate piece.

4. S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1985) 159. Gontarski reproduces the single holograph version of "J.M. Mime" in Appendix C (199-208).

5. The first mention made of *Quad* comes in Beckett's reference to a "crazy invention for TV" in letter to SDR director Dr. Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, 30 January 1980 *(Damned* 740n73).

6. By 1981 Beckett had directed or co-directed three productions of *Eh Joe* and two productions each of *Ghost Trio* and . . . *but the clouds* . . .

7. Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theater* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 53.

8. *Quad* 293.

9. See Martin Esslin, "A Poetry of Moving Images," *Beckett Translating / Translating Beckett*, eds. Alan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman and Dina Sherzer (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1987) 72. Esslin identifies the instruments used in Beckett's SDR production as a Javanese gong, an African woodblock, an African talking drum, and a wastebasket (which Beckett played himself). Beckett originally specified, "Percussionists barely visible in shadow on raised podium at back of set" *(Quad* 292). But this idea was abandoned during the actual filming.

10. *Quad* 293.

11. 291.

12. From the first page of the "J.M.Mime" holograph (Gontarski 201).

13. *Quad* 293.

14. Gontarski 201.

15. *Quad* 293.

16. 292.

17. 292.

18. A possible exception here is *Breath* (1969). But since it involves only recorded sounds instead of live performances, I am bracketing it from consideration in this context.

19. Hans H. Hiebel, *"Quadrat I & II* as a Television Play," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 2 (1993): 341.

20. Phyllis Carey, "The *Quad* Pieces: A Screen for the Unseeable," *"Make Sense Who May": Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Work*, eds. Robin J. Davis and Lance St. John Butler (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1989) 146.

21. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) 254.

22. Quoted in David Edelstein, "Rockaby Billie" *Village Voice* (20 March 1984) 86.

23. Billie Whitelaw, interview, Kalb 235.

24. Pierre Chabert, interview with Thomas Cousineau, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 4.1 (1994): 123.

25. 123.

26. David Warrilow, interview, Kalb 224.

27. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 43.

28. See especially Chapter One, "The Intent of Undoing," Gontarski 1-21.

29. Eliot 41.

30. James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Recent Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1979) 283.

31. *Quad* 291-92.

32. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho, Nohow On*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995) 91.

33. Hiebel 336.

34. Excerpts from Beckett's letters to Schneider on *Endgame* appeared in the *Village Voice* (19 March 1958) 8, 15. The excerpts are reproduced in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, Ruby Cohn, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1983) 106-10.

35. Gontarski 179.

36. Herta Schmid, "Samuel Beckett's Play, *Quad*: An Abstract Synthesis of the Theater," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 22 (1988): 281. Uncited by Schmidt is a comparison Beckett himself makes between his work and Kandinsky's in an interview with John Gruen in *Vogue* (December 1969) 210.

37. Mary Bryden, "*Quad*: Dancing Genders," *The Savage Eye / L'Œil Fauve: New Essays on Samuel Beckett's Television Plays*, ed. Catharina Wulf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 113-20.

38. Dante Aligheri, *The Inferno*, trans. M. Musa (New York: Penguin, 1984) lines 133-36; quoted in Bryden 112.

39. Beckett's *sottisier* from this period (Reading University Library manuscript 2901) confirms that he was re-reading Shakespeare in the late '70s and early '80s. Passages he jotted down from *King Lear* served as direct inspiration for *Worstward Ho*, begun immediately after *Quadrat I & II* (Renton 100n5).

40. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, The Yale Shakespeare Revised Edition (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1954) V.v.19-28.

41. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 45.

42. For a detailed discussion of Iser's theory of reading "gaps," see Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" in *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1971) 1-45.

43. Marco De Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance*, trans. Áine O'Healy (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 170. De Marinis's comments are written in response to Eco's analysis of *Finnegans Wake* in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) 54-55, 67-89.

44. Israel Shenker, "A Portrait of Samuel Beckett, Author of the Puzzling *Waiting for Godot*," *New York Times* (6 May 1956) sec 2, p 3.

45. Jim Lewis, "Beckett et la caméra," *Revue d'esthétique* (1990): 376-77.

46. See Graley Herren, "Unfamiliar Chambers: Power and Pattern in Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio*," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8.1 (1998): 73-100.

47. See Graley Herren, "Ruptures and Rituals: Beckett's Re-Vision of Yeats in . . . *but the clouds* . . . ," *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing* 1.2 (1998): 29-45.

48. Esslin 76.

49. W.B. Yeats, "The Tower," *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1956) 195, lines 165-66.

50. *Ibid* 197, lines 193-96.

51. W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1956) 191, line 27-32.