

The Commodius Vicus of Beckett: Vicissitudes of the Arts in the Science of Affliction*

Herbert Blau

“To think perhaps it won’t all have been for nothing!”

Hamm, in *Endgame*¹

When the theater becomes conscious of itself as theater, it is not so much studying itself as an object but realizing that theatricality, if too elusive for objectification, materializes in thought, like representation for the human sciences, as a condition of possibility, which as always remains to be *seen*. Once that is realized, there is no alternative but for the theater to become more and more self-conscious, even beyond Brecht, reflexively critical, with the dispelling of illusion, however, as another order of illusion in which there will inevitably be a succession of demystifications and unveilings, but as if the teasers and tormentors that frame the stage (even in a thrust, or presumably open stage) were revealing nothing so much as the future of illusion. This might be thought of, too, in its materialization, and especially in Beckett, as the nothing that comes of nothing or, in despite of nothing—as he says of sounds, in “Variations on a ‘Still’ Point”—“mostly not for nothing never quite for nothing,”² the inexhaustible stirrings still, at “the very heart of which no limit of any kind was to be discovered but always in some quarter or another some end in sight such as a fence or some manner of bourne from which to return” (“Stirrings Still” 263). Even if the return were guaranteed by the “preordained cyclicism” that Beckett perceived in Vico,³ this could, of course, “all

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eyes”—in the more scopophilic Beckett—proceed “from bad to worse till in the end he ceased if not to see to look (about him or more closely) and set out to take thought,” where what goes up must come down, transcendently deflated, “So on unknowing and no end in sight” (“Stirrings Still” 263).

It is to this no-end that Beckett points when at the quasi-beginning of *Endgame*—in the gray light, there at the outset, the depleted limit of the scopic field—the room is exposed, the forms are differentiated, and in a series of unveilings, with the parents in the ashbins, still stirring, the memory of the Oedipal pattern is played out. It’s as if consciousness itself is referred back to its real conditions: its contents litter the scene, both as dissociated objects and fragments of desire and longing, the old words, the old questions, the return of the Same as an old compulsion, with something taking its course that, whatever’s happening now, may or may not have happened before, and in any case we wouldn’t know it as it somehow passes us by, as it does in the prose of “The Calmative,” sometimes with “shrill laughter” or “cries of joy toward the comic vast,” the something that has to happen, “to my body as in myth and metamorphosis, the old body to which nothing ever happened, or so little, which never met with anything, loved anything, wished for anything, in its tarnished universe, except for the mirrors to shatter, the plane, the curved, the magnifying, the minifying, and to vanish in the havoc of images” (63). As we try, amidst the havoc, to put the untellable story together, it becomes quite possible that the myriad of indeterminacies in the virtually non-conscious, receding with every stirring into the problematic of the unconscious, becomes thus coextensive with the drama, all that the drama is left to be.

It is with this in mind that I must confess to feeling about the notion of “after Beckett” as I’ve always felt when I hear talk—for all that’s warranted in critique—of “after Freud,” as if there were a sequel, not only to civilization and its discontents, but to the existential datum of the reality principle itself, what I come back to invariably through ground zero in Beckett: “Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” If there’s no cure for it, alas, we still have to use our heads—“he having been dreamt away [letting] himself be dreamt away” (“‘Still’ Point” 267)—as in the “talking cure” of Freud, which he tells us is interminable, or in the *mise en scène* of the unconscious, our oldest mental faculty, active in sleep, deeply there, “But deep in what sleep, deep in what sleep already?” (*Endgame* 53), as Hamm asks insidiously, in his scornful rehearsal of undying desire around the unfinishable story of the dubious child. As for the future of illusion, it would seem, for all the demystifications still going on in theory, to be through the stirrings the only foreseeable future, unless in “the poisonous ingenuity of Time,”⁴ which the young Beckett discerned in Proust, as in the toneless “fixed gaze” of Clov’s grievous wish-fulfillment, “it’s finished, nearly finished” (1). If grain upon grain, it’s nevertheless not quite, whatever it is—“It all. (*Pause*.) It all.”⁵—taking its measure is another matter, since if there’s any reality there, it

“can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis,” which is what Beckett says of the Proustian subject in the depredations of Time, its “constant process of decantation” (*Proust* 4), with the hypothetical retrospection like the interpretation of a dream.

Thus, what I think of as Beckettian is that which, whatever there was before, in the “commodius vicus of recirculation”⁶ of the something taking its course, imperceptibly *is*, as at the “dream’s navel” (Freud’s term), unnamably there, where in a collapse of temporality it passes out of sight—*it?* no? nothing?—the deciphering of the dream, which Beckett might insist was not a dream at all, but in the disremembered remnants of what was or may be, the materiality of an absence forever becoming itself. So, before we come to after, let me turn to before, “Another trait its repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if,” as Beckett wrote in *Company*, “willingly by this dint to make it his.”⁷ Which is perhaps to think of after—though there will be other variants—as a habit of apprehension, mainly a state of mind, “Saying,” as in “Faux Départs,” “Now where is he, no,” even with nothing there, “Now he is here” (272).

To be sure, there was considerable talk about nothing before Beckett came on the scene, with his nothing to be done, which became the anomalous grounds of a political activism that—around our first attempt to *do* it, there in San Francisco nearly half a century ago—I’ve written about before: the apparently purposeless waiting that, before the Days of Rage, became the model of passive resistance. “Because I do not hope to turn again/ Because I do not hope/ Because I do not hope to turn”⁸—here the voice, as you may know, is neither mine nor Beckett’s, but T. S. Eliot’s, not quite at the still point, but just before he entered the church, declaring himself a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics. If the variants of the repetitiveness in their equivocating momentum are not exactly a form of activism, what we tend to forget is that Eliot had been much admired by those on the political left, even the radicals of *The New Masses*, when he gave us a devastating critique of modernity, as in *The Waste Land*, which they read as bourgeois reality. If he was, even then, seeking the peace that passeth understanding, “Shantih shantih shantih” (*SP* 67), a transcendental form of nothingness, he came to that by way of the nothing that with hysteria in the bygone keeps repeating itself:

Nothing again nothing.

‘Do

‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
‘Nothing?’

The autistic intensity of that obsessional nothing, its self-punishing iteration, would seem to be the exacerbated condition of what Beckett later called, in his essay on Proust, “the science of affliction” (*Proust* 4), about which you could also

say—whether “in rats’ alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones” (*SP* 55) or in the “thousand small deliberations” protracting “the profit of their chilled delirium” (“Gerontion,” *SP* 33)—that nothing came of nothing *in* the nothing to be done.

As for the efficacy of art in that delirium, as in the non sequiturs of the tramps in *Godot*, the thousand small deliberations in the vicissitudes of waiting, where “Thinking is not the worst” or even “to *have* thought,” if you could somehow remember, having forgotten the very beginning, “The very beginning of WHAT?”⁹ what you were saying when, Wittgenstein remarked—with reservations about the causal when the problem is conceptual—“In art it is hard to say anything as good as: saying nothing.”¹⁰ But if that raises the question of whether saying is doing—as in the “Closed place” of Beckett’s *Fizzle 5*, where “There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing,” while, with its alienated millions, “What goes on in the arena is not said”¹¹—it was W. H. Auden who might have been speaking for Beckett when he said, backing away from the arena, or the early politics in his poetics, that art changes nothing, but it at least changes that. He might have added, however, that, in the changing of nothing there might also be changes in art, as there certainly were after the incursion of Beckett, not only upon the theater—as in Peter Brook’s *King Lear* or, about the same time, my own—but on other modes of performance and performance sites, as well as the emergence of hybrids in the visual arts and music, and now in digitality, where the absences and the nothingness may be of another order. So it is with *That Brainwave Chick*, Paras Kaul, sitting in a chair, like Hamm, something dripping in her head, not from the veins, or arteries, but from digital-system electrodes for neural audio imaging of what’s not there when it is, that is, another virtual world. Or there’s the cyborgian dystopia of *Remote Host*, a recent computer animation by Katya Davar, with its giddy balloon over a Beckettian landscape which, impeccably rendered by the intuitive graphic interface that inspired Microsoft’s Windows, needs only Didi and Gogo to attend to the whisper, the rustle, the voices all speaking at once, in the bleakly alluring nowhere with its woefully leafless tree.

As for the emergence of Conceptual Art, back in the 1960s, that too was of another order, where everything seemed to be absent, no figures, no tree, no nothing, except the deliberations, what it is to have thought, about what it is to be art, which turned out to be not object or image but context, as if thinking made it so. If art only exists conceptually, it was given definition by Joseph Kosuth’s *Art as Idea as Idea*, which, in white print on a black field, consists of the dictionary definitions of “Idea,” beginning with the Greek “*idein* . . . , to see” and ending with “the Phil n *ideatum*, a thing that, in fact, answers to the idea of it, whence ‘to ideate’, to form in, or as an, idea,” and during the course of ideation through permutations in other languages: ideal, idealism, *idée fixe*. Or as if the *fixe* were seeking a site, as with another “work” by Kosuth, *Matter in General*, it turns up with block-lettered words on a billboard (in a gamut of abstraction from RESINS to UNIVERSE) out in an

open field, translating from the Conceptual or placing it, thus, as Site-Specific Art.¹² In the closed places or arenas of such art—"Place consisting [maybe] of an arena and a ditch," as Beckett says in the fifth "Fizzle," with an ominous impassivity: "No interest. Not for imagining," the millions there, "six times smaller than life" (236)—it's as if the idea doesn't materialize until it determines *where* it is, putting in abeyance for the moment the dimensions of the site, which might be considerably larger than the mound of *Happy Days* in which Winnie is up to her diddies; or even than the flattened cylinder of "The Lost Ones," if not its "omnipresence as though every separate square centimeter were a gleam of the some twelve million of total surface" (207). Which is what—that prospect of "a gleam"—keeps the auratic alive, as if from the lower depths, in the age of deconstruction. "For in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery" (216). As for deconstruction, it might also be remembered that it also came after Beckett, but as if he had predicated the Derridean writing before the letter that, somehow *avant la lettre*, would surely reverse itself, while the critique of representation with its scourge of the scopophilic—and thus what we think of as theater—would not deter the "unceasing eyes" (212) or "questing eyes" (220) that "without nothing but mystery" approached in the bed of the cylinder "clear-cut mental or imaginary frontiers invisible to the eye of flesh" (216).

Whatever those ubiquitous eyes, all eyes, find there, in the dire vast of the cylinder, the charting of location here, entangled as there with language, is a matter of reading signs, which is to say—as if repeating another bygone, the structuralism of Saussure—situating the signifier within the semiotic system. Manifold, tautological, interminable, it is a system of multiple discourses, from the political to the aesthetic, all informing "what 'it' can be said to *be*,"¹³ as one critic wrote about what, like the zones of the cylinder, "if this notion is maintained" (223), is presumably site-specific. Say what you will about it, in Beckett that "it," caught up as it is in discourse, seems not merely conceptual but also ontological, and for the metonymic moment can almost drive you out of your mind: not that, *this*, not this, *that*, or in block letters call it IT, WHAT it? (damn all pronouns!) before it disappears, like—though it seems on another scale entirely, far beyond the scope of a fizzle—Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, with its commodious Viconian shape, a major site (or is it arena?), which in the Great Salt Lake of Utah is underwater now. And for those who have been there, having seen the photographs, looking for it, it's as if space itself extended through the long solemnity of time, "All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir." If the vanishing occurred, shockingly, before Smithson had anticipated, there was also—as he thought in archeological rather than historical time—the expectation of attrition over aeons, as if Beckett had written the scenario at the very beginning of "Lessness": "Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time out of mind" (197).

It's no accident, then, that in the "ultramundane margins" around the "four blocks of print" in the visual layout of Smithson's essay, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," he quotes the passage from Beckett's essay on Proust about the constant process of decantation, after speaking of "actuality" as a sort of Beckettian *pause* when, as a void between events, nothing is happening. "In art," he says in one of the blocks, "action is always becoming inertia, but this inertia has no ground to settle on except the mind, which is as empty as actual time."¹⁴ There is a quotation from Cage's *Silence* on one side and images of de Kooning and Pollock paintings on the other, but in what Smithson says of action becoming inertia in its movement through empty time, it's as if he were describing (with one omission I will come to) the dramaturgy of Beckett, which, whatever the drama was left to be, seemed inclined to make it less, and at its most reductive nothing more than (a) *Breath*. Again, this is far from the magnitudes associated with Smithson, who eventually thought of the monumental and, even through the ineluctability of entropic waste, was always imagining more. He started smaller, of course, but elsewhere he refers to his early *Cryosphere*, in which mirrors were built into a hexagonal lattice containing ice crystals, magnifying, minifying, moving through multiplication in an "ambiguous flux," like a version of *Endgame* I saw the inmates rehearsing at Tegel Prison in Berlin, with seven Hamms and seven Clovs reflected through reflections around a wading pool. The *Cryosphere* was a sort of prototype of the expanded site or "self-canceling" system that Smithson calls "a *surd area*," which, though it seems to fold tautologically back upon itself, is nevertheless, he says, "beyond tautology . . . not really beyond, there's no beyond," and with logic suspended too, the *surd* defeats "any idea of any kind of system"¹⁵—the idea for which, however, we later learn in a footnote, was mainly derived from *The Unnamable*.

Putting aside playwrights, from Pinter and Mamet to Sarah Kane or the Egyptian Tawfik al-Hakim, whose *Fate of a Cockroach* is a dialogue of inconsequence with metaphysical intimations, about the struggle of a cockroach to get out of a bathtub, to Chinese Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian, whose plays bring to the politics of exile, through a version of lessness, the scruple of Zen, Smithson was hardly the only artist to have specifically picked up on Beckett. This was apparent in my own experience with artists in San Francisco, who almost never went to the theater, or pretty much disdained it as a form that was retarded, all the more because of the drama, which even if subject to the Brechtian A-effect, was still predictably mimetic and not sufficiently *surd*, never mind *absurd*, "quaquaquaqua," where "for reasons unknown no matter what matter the facts are there and considering what is more much more grave," there seems no system to cancel, and if also no beyond, the matter still "unfinished," as at the end of Lucky's speech (*Godot* 29). We were already doing work that was considered *avant-garde*, but it wasn't really until *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* that an array of visual

artists became engaged with other productions, quite explicitly then because they began to design for our theater. As for myself, paradoxically, it was during this period that I was thinking of leaving the theater, because—through inclinations partially nurtured by directing Beckett, and images, objects, aspects of the work: the silences, pauses, the meticulous mathematics of an antiaesthetic, the timings down to the second or “(*Smooth grey rectangle 0.70m. x 2m.*)” and then, as if painted by Brice Marden or inflected by Robert Ryman, “No shadow. Colour: none. All grey. Shades of grey”; in short, “Forgive my stating the obvious” (*Ghost Trio* 248), with correlatives in the other arts—I was far more interested in what was happening there, and in alternative modes of performance.

If what was emerging in the art world, particularly visual culture, but in the newer music too—from the “noise” in Cage’s silence to the longing in Feldman’s durations to the sustained repetitiveness of Terry Riley’s middle C, its preordained cyclicism—corresponded in strategies to what we see on stage in Beckett, it included the “energy-drain” in the action of inertia, which caused Smithson to write elsewhere of “the flat surface, the banal, the empty, the cool, blank after blank,” in short, the blank planes of an art “going nowhere,”¹⁶ and which, in its “lugubrious complexity,” is enlivened by “a new consciousness of the vapid and the dull” (*CW* 13). These were qualities, of course, invoked by those who were puzzled or even outraged by the earliest productions of Beckett. What may have been missing, however, in the conceptual substance of the artists referred to by Smithson in “Entropy and the New Monuments” (Flavin, Judd, Lichtenstein, LeWitt, Morris, Thek) was, along with the poignancy of an unpurgeable nostalgia, the residual metaphysics in the diminuendo of being, the mourning in the entropic, so endemic to Beckett, or what even in the dominion of nothing always inclined toward lessness—“Blank planes touch close sheer white all gone from mind” (“Lessness” 197)—but was somehow quite enough, whatever it may have been. And so it is, even silence: “Too much silence is too much. Or it’s my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft” (“Enough” 186).

But what we have in the art and craft, suffused as it is with nostalgia—“More and more. All was,” as at the end of “Enough” (192)—is what might be considered, through the facet-planes of the impasse that, oxymoronically, makes Beckett postmodern, the last of the modernists, for whom what can never be anymore, maybe, when remembered, really couldn’t have been. In the visual arts, modernism was in the 1950s—when at The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco we turned to Beckett’s plays—still the historical and critical matrix of the major forms of art, as with the Abstract Expressionists, whose erasure of the figure, or non-objectivity, took place in “an arena,” as Harold Rosenberg called it, where “action painting,” was in its performativity “not a picture but an event,”¹⁷ yet still an assertion of valued identity rather than a testament to nothing. Things were moving in that direction, however, when the painters and sculptors sponsored by Clemen-

Greenberg, and later by Michael Fried—whose “Art and Objecthood” was an obdurate resistance to the theatricality taking over painting and sculpture¹⁸—were challenged by artists as diverse as Jasper Johns, Richard Hamilton, and Joseph Beuys, as well as the Pop Art which, in restoring the figure, enlivened emptiness, or brought the notion of nothing, as in exchange value, into the image of commodification. If there was a certain equivocation in such art about being commodified itself, the equivocation disappeared into the phenomenon of Andy Warhol, who seemed to be painting next to nothing when he did his Campbell Soups, as if willingly by this dint the repetitiveness was no longer a bygone, but the marketable immediacy of the evacuated thing itself.

Meanwhile, the sophistication of advertising is such today that it can even deploy with ambiguity a sort of Beckettian nostalgia, as designers manage to bring, through fantasized images of duration and loss, a sense of dispossession to fashion models on the runway, while endowing certain objects with a patina of cryptic time, even now in the tearing of jeans, making a sales pitch out of the memory of what never really was, or was it? in a maybe guarded recall of the dubiously recoverable, the loss of which is a question better not to ask. (Especially at those prices.) Or there may be with a certain jaundice, confessing that “all is false,” as if drawing on *Texts for Nothing*, a sense of “no way out,” and in a reality that’s factitious with plaintiveness aside, letting ourselves “be dupes,” as Beckett wrote of the nothing to understand, except no more denial, “dupes of every tone and tense, until it’s done, all past and done, and the voices cease,” superficial or profound, “it’s only voices, only lies” (*Texts* 3:109). As for the market or the shopping mall, if they hardly exist in Beckett—unless in the “tattered syntaxes of Jolly and Draeger Praeger Draeger” of “All Strange Away” (169)—when we encounter objects, their melancholy might be ascribed to their never being so desirable as to achieve, shabby or makeshift as they are, the ignominy of commodification. This was not a problem, however, to artists who, in 1986, were part of an exhibition on reference and simulation in painting and sculpture, the title of which was *Endgame*, the reference there, no question, precisely to Beckett. For Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, and Philip Taaffe, the commodified world is not only the context but the ceaselessly reproductive source of their art, abstraction itself or simulation a thriving commodity, which is the absence of longing, even as they iconicize emptiness, for anything like an existential void. As can also be seen in the installations of Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons—his vacuum cleaners, for instance, encased in plexiglass boxes—emptiness can be glamorized and even the void sold.¹⁹

It wasn’t so much the void, but the recursiveness of the language and the extremes of human behavior that excited the video artist Bruce Nauman in the work of Beckett. What attracted him first of all, like others to this day, were the clownish types or gestures, from the Chaplinesque of the tramps to Buster Keaton in *Film*, along with the incapacity in the ashcans or the urns or up to its neck in the

sand. Thus, in *Clown Torture* (1987), there's a figure stressed out on one leg, and then—as if with the carafe and cubes in *Act without Words*—forced to balance two fish bowls and a bucket of water, while shouting “No, no, no” and “I’m sorry” to the nobody listening there. Even before that, in *Slow Angle Walk* (1968), which was subtitled *Beckett Walk*, Nauman himself performed a series of impaired or spastic Clov-like movements, including a stiff leg up in the air, with his body swivelling around to get the leg back on the floor. Nauman has also done environmental videos in which the spectator is made wary of what's not (yet) there or otherwise demoralized by a babble of disjunct words, as in the *Deep Sleep* of John Jesurun (1985), where a sea of associations (“deep in what sleep already?”) going on incessantly suggests the elliptical stream of words from Beckett's disembodied Mouth.

But to go back to when happenings and installation art were first making the scene, in the work of Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg: their influence was such, eventually, that there seemed to be a virtual moratorium on painting. Or you might see the virtual equivalent of the picture in Beckett's *Endgame* that—though looked at bitterly, sardonically, by Clov, without letting us see it—is otherwise turned to the wall, as it might very well be in the send-up gallery of Ben Vauthier or the rubbish-strewn cellar of Terry Fox, which might have been swept up by Beuys and, in an impeccably minimalist glass-enclosed case, which might have been done by Koons, exhibited with the broom. This was the period when Yoko Ono did her *Painting to Be Stepped On* (which, with loose fabric on the surface, is actually an assemblage) and Robert Rauschenberg exhibited, in *Trophy III (for Jean Tinguely)*, a see-through picture frame in which the picture was replaced by a miniature piece of bedspring, a swag of knotted cloth, and up one side of the chipped and abraded frame, with small objects protruding in, a thin ladder which if larger might have been used in the cylinder by the lost ones struggling to climb—the art object rather elegant, like some stagings of Beckett, in its impoverishment. Nor was Beckett alone in denying us a look at what, perhaps, was not really there to see, though if it was, its visual status was like that of the mechanically drawn lines of Piero Manzoni, rolled up in a tube, stored, and for those all eyes, unavailable to be seen.

At the same time, in Italy, there was the *arte povera* of Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Their constructions from any material whatever (animal, vegetable, mineral) conveyed, like Gogo's boots, the pathetic tree, the three-legged toy dog in *Endgame*, Krapp's spool or banana, a tailor's scissors out of the flies or the littered stage of *Breath*, the dull and vapid absurdity of a reality that—dissolving in 5 seconds, 2 seconds, 2 seconds, 5 seconds, or—in . . . *but the clouds* . . .—was replenished or augmented by “something else, more . . . rewarding, such as . . . such as . . . cube roots, for example”—seemed increasingly, nonetheless, to amount to nothing, “that MINE,” undermined, yet

issuing forth again (261), a view that sustained itself even as prices went up on this impoverished art, as Beckett's stock rose into canonization with his Nobel Prize.

If there are artists, like Steinbach and Koons, who've created a quite consciously superficial aesthetic of commodity culture, there are those like Christian Boltanski who have with layers of impacted history aestheticized waste and impoverishment, even as Beckett has done with decrepitude, but with affects exceeding any aesthetic, or perhaps compounded by it. In *Reserve* (1989), Boltanski littered half a ton of ragged and smelly clothes on a gallery floor. The mute shamble of a presence created by the cheap material, showing signs of long use, was due to its having been worn by now-anonymous poor children. What was conveyed by the massive heap—this, too, an “impossible heap” (*Endgame* 1), the muteness only disturbed when gallery viewers shuffled through—was a certain eeriness, a deadliness, like that of a mass grave, which, through the evasive (now-commonplace) laughter, might be in the wings of *Godot*. Or never mind the wings, but as if it were reeking somehow from their own smelly clothes, Didi and Gogo sense it, right there on the stage—“Where are all these corpses from?”—or maybe out in the audience, the maw of absence there: “A charnel-house! A charnel-house!” At which you don't have to look, but “You can't help looking” (*Godot* 41). If there is voyeurism in Boltanski, compulsively solicited, as with the tearings at caecal walls, the slow killings in the skull, “the fornications with corpses” (“Calmativè” 61), all eyed in Beckett's prose, it's with the remembrance of what at some unseeable limit makes those questing eyes go still, as after a rare erection in the cylinder, “the spectacle . . . remembered of frenzies prolonged in pain,” which, when “desisting and deathly still,” verges on the obscene. Whereupon, “Stranger still at such times, [the eyes] fix their stare on the void or on some old abomination as for instance other eyes and then the looks exchanged by those fain to look away” (220). As for the logorrheic rehearsal of the egregious comedy of the plays—like the scene where, if the tree is up for a hanging, the tramp might get an erection—the void is there still to be stared at, and the abomination, prolonged as it was in pain, the unspeakably obscene. So it is when, sitting there in the dark, staring at the stage, no looks exchanged in the audience, there is the whisper, the murmur, the rustle, and those voices all speaking at once.

Meanwhile, if you didn't look away, there was surely an affinity between the flea-market compositions of certain artists, or wasteland installations, and the bleak, forlorn, or found-object landscapes of Beckett: aside from the boots and radishes, or Lucky's empty bag, the mound, the mouth, the urns, the nine-step passage of *Footfalls*, the standard lamp with its skull-sized globe, zero out the window or behind the hollow wall, or “facing other windows,” the old rocker, mother rocker, “other only windows” (*Rockaby* 277, 280) looking out on an empty quad. “Area: square. Length of side: 6 paces”—that might have been the space in which Marina Abramovic and her former partner Ulay, when they were still together, paced (a

duo instead of four), “On the basis of one pace per second and allowing for time lost at angles and centre approximately 25 minutes,” at first crossing paths “without rupture of rhythm, [but] if rupture accepted” (Beckett asks in stage directions: “how best exploit?”)—they’d exploit by increasing the pace, two bodies repeatedly passing (but without the gowns and cowls, naked as not in *Quad*), gradually touching each other, then colliding at high speed, perhaps at quad’s E, “supposed a danger zone,” and then they’d pace, collide, pace, collide—no instruments necessary, “All possible percussion combinations given,” until they “complete their courses” (*Quad* 291-93), as they did in utter exhaustion, in 1976 at the Venice Biennale, “Time 58 minutes.”²⁰ In their work, as in Beckett, duration was also an issue, and when Abramovic and Ulay stared at each across a table for 16 hours—with “Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind” or in that commodius vicus, as desideratum, “mindlessness”—not only the table (“say 8' x 4'”) might have been borrowed, but the profounds too, from *Ohio Impromptu* (285, 288).

Yet these performance events, transmuted as they were into rituals of high risk, were also meant to give access to otherwise forbidden consciousness or, without self-jeopardy, consciousness unattainable. But for Abramovic particularly, there is also in the danger zone, as if she were listening to Hamm when he insisted we use our heads, a residuum of the reality principle: thus, on this earth, there might be a sense of the sacred, but *without* transformative powers. With a despair almost beyond Beckett’s, who didn’t bother much with the sacred, except at the furious thought of it, with the most disdainful humor, Abramovic said mournfully. “It is too late, the destruction is already such that the world can no longer be ‘cured’ . . . Its destruction will continue, inevitably. I only want to prepare people for the fact that we are all on a dying planet and that we will all be destroyed. I see a chance or a possibility of at least dying in union with the earth, at last grasping reality one single time.”²¹ Grasping the possibility if not the reality, there was, in her *Relation Works* with Ulay, an impetus toward the dissolution of boundaries, psychic and sexual, with such intensity as to exhaust or exceed the body, its capacity to withstand the ceaselessness of a singularity entailed by two, as in the seeming binary of the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, one of whom would seem to exist only in the pulse of the other, the waiting itself an endurance. Thus, in *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977) Abramovic and Ulay relinquished autonomy, as they’d done of course before, but this time by sharing a single breath. Nostrils blocked, they pressed mouths together and synchronized their breathing, she inhaling air exhaled by him, he breathing the air exhaled by her. With ever-increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide, they breathed to the point of asphyxiation. Time: 19 minutes.

If there is in its sadomasochism an intimate theater of cruelty, the same might be said of Beckett’s. For all the compassion there, or, in the inconsolably deep

structure of ungrounded dispossession, the pain of unnoticeability—like the tramp with the boy, or the figure in the urn: “Am I as much as . . . being seen?” (*Play* 157)—there is with fastidious understatement, or aphasic compulsion, a Nietzschean side of Beckett, drawn like Artaud to cruelty, and the discomfiting pleasures of pain. Sometimes the unnoticeability can give that pleasure too, as in the unpublicized disappearances performed by Jochem Gerz and, having announced he would disappear, which he proceeded to do with no one seeing, Chris Burden, whose body art was otherwise known, like Gina Pane, Stuart Brisley, or Rudolf Schwarzkogler, for self-inflicted cruelties, sometimes excruciating. As Nietzsche remarked, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, “pleasure in cruelty is not really extinct today; only, given our greater delicacy, that pleasure has had to undergo a certain sublimation and sublization, to be translated into imaginative and psychological terms in order to pass muster before even the tenderest hypocritical conscience.”²²

If the sublimation, translated, is nowhere more imaginative than in the plays and prose of Beckett, with subtleties unforeseen, in Schwarzkogler’s case the sublization was, in the extremity of its cruelty, next to suicidal—which turned out to be a preface to what he actually did, after the long rumor that he’d done it before, actually in performance, by methodically slicing his penis. Here the implacability is what, about certain mutilations, we may also remember in Beckett, both in physical images and as damage to the psyche, in the crisis of identity going back to *Molloy*.²³

“And to tell the truth,” says the Molloy who speaks at the end of the novel, “I not only knew who I was, but I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered. And from this point of view I was less fortunate than my other acquaintances. I am sorry if this last phrase is not so happy as it might be. It deserved, who knows, to be without ambiguity” (233). As it turns out, though they were not acquaintances of Beckett, there were certain artists in the period following on what we call the 60s (which was mostly the 1970s) who were only too ready to do without the ambiguity. In that regard, with not even wounded vanity, they appropriated or cancelled the iconic figures of high modernism by outright replication, thus undoing, presumably, the claims of the modern to posing serious ontological and epistemological questions. In this, they were taking a bypath from the practice of Beckett, where self-reflexivity and a relentless self-cancelling was a way out, by going compulsively in, of the mortifying trap of identity—no less complicity with hierarchy, power, and the ideology of essence. In the act of replication, as in the painting of Peter Halley, who negated the factitious content of geometric abstraction, there was something like a secular conversion, a purgation of the modernist sin of a valorized self-indulgence, the vainglory of an identity celebrated in art, as the prerogative of genius: *a* Pollock, *a* Rothko, *a* Reinhardt, and—particularly unnerving, if haunting to Halley—the auratic zip in *a* Barnett Newman.

If formalists could argue that abstraction and non-objectivity, the absence of narrative image, focused in the visual arts what is intrinsic, the sort of replicated abstraction practiced by Halley turned the modernist argument on its head: "art survives now," wrote Thomas Crow in 1986, "by virtue of being weak,"²⁴ a conviction linked in its way to the dismissal of authorial presence by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. It is that art which was featured in the exhibition *Endgame*, though Beckett's weakness and the manic obsession of its reflexivity is something else again, and again, and again, aphasically so, restoring essence despite him, no mistaking identity, even when he says, especially when he says, as he did in "First Love," "it is painful to be no longer oneself, even more painful if possible than when one is" (31). No doubt, the weakness is weakened even more by "the saturated, unending longing"²⁵ that Morton Feldman admired and, with the vanity of remembrance, like the failing memory of a self, tried to bring to his music. As he remarked in a book of his own, "we do not hear what we hear . . . , only what we remember,"²⁶ the question being—as Clark Lunberry, a student of mine wrote, in a just-completed dissertation—"how we might hear *that*, as if, once-removed, the remembered sounds, decayed," as in *The Unnamable*, "might somehow be made to return (in some ghostly manner) to sound, perhaps inaudibly, in their own resounding absence."²⁷ Which is what Feldman tried to achieve in his *String Quartet II*, through what seemed in performance the bodily fatigue of the musicians, as if it were, indeed, the orchestration of the unending, or as Beckett said of "the way out" in *Texts for Nothing 9*: "isn't it like a duo, or a trio, yes," not quite a quartet, true, but what variety, what monotony, "what vicissitudes within what changelessness" (137). And given the nature of the vicissitudes, while there are plenty of analogues to Beckett, and imitators too, as well as revisionist productions that—unbecomingly to his modesty, he also tried to stop—who can mistake a Beckett, even when deconstructed.

There is much more one could say about art after Beckett, its genres and speciation, or that which is more or less explicitly in its image. But about the unmistakable endurance of that which, in the before or after, remains inarguably his, one may say, as the narrator does of himself in the early story "Assumption" (published in 1929), that for all of Beckett's recurrent talk of dying—not even a slow death, but no sooner one is born, the (actual) death of the author, that "timeless parenthesis," there is in everything he wrote "the unreasonable tenacity with which he shrank from dissolution" (6). And if we were (as is customary in cultural studies today) to historicize this predilection, it might be said that what Beckett pushes to its extreme—or with the body, no body, to its extremities, "of so exquisite a quality as to exclude all thought of succour," as in the story "The End" (97)—is not exactly the end, but the beginning of the end which is our history, which is another way of defining modernism, among its vicissitudes being recurring announcements of its death.

Thus, the primary emotion of the modern, even when making it new and always subject to change, is *mourning*, which would seem to have reached its nadir or apotheosis in the lamentations of Beckett, though one hears much about it now in theory, as one does still in the arts, if mixed with degrees of indifference, or even exultation, about modern being the name for what's not possible anymore. When appropriation art appeared on the scene, as in the *Endgame* exhibition, there were those, like Yves Alain-Bois, who took to task the "manic mourning," or "pathological mourning," of such art, reminding us in a Freudian way that mourning has to be *worked through*; and so the end, endlessly so, without, however, elaborate mechanisms of defense, so that—in what seems like a paradox of endlessness—there would be a final "settling [of] our historical task: the difficult task of mourning" (*Endgame* catalogue 47). Difficult, no doubt, even absurd or appalling, but the notion of a non-pathological mourning might be incomprehensible to Beckett, who was for a time in psychoanalysis, but as if, in his obsessional case, to alleviate the working through. No sooner does he say, as in "Faux Départs," "Never ask another question," than imagination dead imagines "a place, then someone in it, that again," and the talking cure seems to consist of his "talking to himself the last person" (272). As for mourning as pathology, if he couldn't quite absorb that, "never see, never find, no end, no matter" (273), that's because it's not only a matter of modernity but closer to the human condition, so long as one is sufficiently moved by the immitigable impasse of the human itself, which can neither be painted, sculptured, installed, caught on a videodisc, nor, in or out of the theater—no less with "performativity," the going thing in theory, the solace of "bodies that matter" (it used to be "bodies without organs")—somehow performed away. "No future in this. Alas, yes."²⁸ Which, if the annulment of every no, leaves us with nothing yet.

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958) 33.
2. Samuel Beckett, "Appendix I: Variations on a 'Still' Point," *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. and intro. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995) 267; unless otherwise specified, all references in the text to Beckett's prose will be from this volume.
3. Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce," *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. and fwd. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983) 21.
4. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York: Grove, n.d.) 4.
5. Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls, Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984) 240; all references to Beckett's shorter plays are from this volume.
6. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1955) 3.
7. Samuel Beckett, *Company, Nohow On*, intro. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1992) 10.
8. T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday, Selected Poems* (New York: Harvest/HAJ, 1964) 83; the volume to be abbreviated in text as *SP*.

9. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove, 1954) 41-42.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 3.
11. "Fizzles 5," *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. and intro. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995) 236; all references to the shorter prose will be from this volume.
12. These examples of Joseph Kosuth's conceptualism are in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972) 153-54.
13. Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000) 1.
14. Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1996) 35; the volume to be abbreviated as *CW*.
15. "Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson (1969-70), *CW* 198-99.
16. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), *CW* 11.
17. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959) 25.
18. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968) 116-47.
19. See David Joselit, "Modern Leisure," *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) 71-89. The exhibition was at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.
20. Paul Schimmel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object," *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-79* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998) 101.
21. Marina Abramovic, quoted by Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s-1990s*, with essays by Arthur Danto and Thomas McEvilly (Litchfield, Conn.: Art Insights, 1996) 64.
22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1956) 200.
23. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy: A Novel*, trans. Patrick Bowles, in collaboration with Beckett (New York: Grove, 1955) 233.
24. Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron," *Endgame: Reference and Simulation* 16; italics mine.
25. Morton Feldman, quoted by Everett C. Frost, "The Note Man and the Word Man," *Samuel Beckett and Music*, ed. Mary Bryden (London: Oxford UP, 1998) 51.
26. Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, Mass: Exact Change, 2000) 209.
27. Clark Lunberry, *Situating Silence, Articulating Absence: Sites of Time and the Object (Lessons of Art)*, unpublished diss., Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2002, ch. 4, n.p.
28. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho, Nohow On* 91.

