

The Ethics of an Expressionless Gaze: Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*

Thomas Butler

In her contribution to a recent collection of Beckett criticism, Luce Irigaray seeks to clarify what might be meant by the pervasive and murky term of ethical parlance: “the other.” She wants to preserve its ethical force from a popular, desiccated meaning common in everyday speech that promotes something like interpersonal respect. Too often, Irigaray says, discussions invoking “the other” bypass the sheer difference of another human being and try to shape it into a palatable sameness. This tendency is not simply a bad habit perpetuated for the sake of convenience; rather, it has deep (and not necessarily bad) roots in Western cultures. Irigaray explains that Western cultures, for example, teach that we ought to meet visitors with hospitality, as demonstrated whenever we open our homes to them and even, if need be, offer them a bed in a “guest room.” This offering, Irigaray claims, is entirely on our own terms, and, as magnanimous as it may be, it has little to do with encountering the other: “It corresponds to a kind of space for hospitality, in fact neutral or indifferent with respect to whoever is coming toward us. We are not yet available to the call of the other.”¹ If opening my home to a stranger does not constitute a meeting with the other, then what, if anything, does?

Irigaray suspects that we have domesticated otherness in order to avoid risking our secure sense of self. If I, for example, make a point to befriend people whose attitudes differ from my own, they may broaden my own perspective on things (again, not necessarily a bad thing, as such), but I remain entrenched in my own—somewhat enlarged—subjective position. “To recognize the existence of another subjectivity implies recognizing that it belongs to, and constitutes, a proper world, which cannot be substituted for mine, that the subjectivity of the other is irreducible to my subjectivity.” To what extent can there be contact between self and other if our subjectivities are “irreducible”? This is the fundamental question of Irigaray’s essay nominally about Beckett entitled “The Path toward the Other,” and, as a response, she proposes that such contact is a future possibility that will take place outside of one’s own subjective world:

In fact, proximity to the other, with the other, closeness between us can be reached when engendering a common world together, a world that will not destroy the world that is proper to each one.

Thomas Butler is an assistant professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University where he teaches courses on modern drama and twentieth-century British literature.

Here nihilism finds a positive fulfillment. Calling into question one's own world, so as to preserve the existence and the access to the world of the other, allows and needs to bring about a nothing that will permit the articulation between the two worlds. This nothing implies both a "no longer anything of one's own" and a "nothing yet in common."²

Rather than slipping into an amorphous commonality, Irigaray's ethical subject maintains its own subjectivity in meeting the other and at the same time cultivates a "nothing" that preserves the space between self and other. Ethical contact, Irigaray asserts, happens between two subjectivities in a space called "nothing."³

In Irigaray's essay, "nothing" is the space where one can meet the other in such a way that privileges neither party. If this space were originally invested with something (rather than nothing), it would no longer be neutral and would tip the encounter toward one subjectivity or the other. Importantly, as Irigaray presents it, nothing is not devoid of meaning or potentiality: "In order to meet with the other, I must first let this nothing, which separates us, be, and even restore it."⁴ Irigaray unfortunately does not fully develop her idea of nothing here, but she suggests that it overlaps with a "call" that prompts us to open ourselves to the other.⁵ Her major claim is that my awareness of the limits of my own world can create a threshold for meeting the other. This meeting takes the form of an uncertain intimacy that jeopardizes my former understanding of myself and my world:

We cannot be with him, or her, without risking everything that we are, that we have been, that we are in the present, that which we will become. The other cannot be confined to a room of guests—in our country, our home, our selves. The other asks us to expose our existence, our being, our world to the test of being with him, or her. That we open our world, our dwelling, our being, in order really to meet with him or her.⁶

This conception of ethics shifts the emphasis of ethical experience from the much-discussed "other" onto oneself and the space between the two. One must acknowledge one's own limited horizon before an encounter with the other in all of its alterity is even possible. Irigaray upends the popular calls for respecting the other by drawing attention to the foundations of ethical experience, which center on self-awareness. By the end of "The Path toward the Other," however, the specific relation of such an ethics to Beckett's work remains largely unexplored. How does Beckett's work endorse an ethics rooted in an experience of "nothing" that allows for the mutual recognition of self and other?⁷

In this essay, I want to offer one possible answer to this question. I think it

is clear that Beckett does not give us much in terms of an ethical system, but his writing thoroughly investigates a productive space we can, following Irigaray, call “nothing” that underlies human relations. This space, I claim, is particularly evident in the final moments of Beckett’s play *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) when the play’s two characters acknowledge each other for the first time. The characters arrive at this moment of acknowledgment through an act of reading, which in this case serves as a model for ethical experience. In the end, I show how Irigaray’s space of nothing is restored in an ethical encounter with another human being, and that *Ohio Impromptu* suggests that reading and, by extension, performance can offer experiences analogous to such an ethical encounter.

I.

Like many of his late dramatic pieces, Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu* runs less than fifteen minutes and creates a striking visual image, which, in this case, features two figures, Reader and Listener, who both sit largely motionless at a white table in white chairs. Beckett’s stage direction calls for the two characters to be “[a]s alike in appearance as possible” and dressed identically with their long white hair hanging over their long black coats.⁸ Between Reader and Listener one black hat sits on the table, and in front of Reader a book is opened to its last pages. The primary action and the only words of the play consist of Reader’s reading from this book, only to be interrupted by Listener’s six intermittent knocks, each of which compels Reader to reread the passage he just read.

After beginning the play with the words “Little is left to tell,” Reader reads a story about a man who moves to a “single room on the far bank” “in a last attempt to obtain relief” from, presumably, the grief he has endured since the death of his beloved, who is later referred to as only “the dear name” and “the dear face.” The man feels no relief and some guilt because in his dreams the dear face had previously warned him not to move from where they lived together and where, she promised, her shade would continue to comfort him. In turn, since his move, his “old terror of night [has] laid hold on him again,” and he has been left sleepless and disconsolate.⁹

Then one night an unknown man visits him, saying that he was sent by the dear name to comfort him, and then begins reading till dawn from a worn volume. He disappears at dawn and then reappears from “time to time” at night to read once again a “sad tale” from this volume. Reader tells us, “With never a word exchanged they grew to be as one.”¹⁰ Eventually, however, the visitor says that he “[s]aw the dear face and heard the unspoken words,” namely that he should not visit the man again. Reader describes the scene: “So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone.” Then Reader says, “Nothing is left to tell,” Listener knocks, Reader repeats the same words, and he then closes the book.¹¹ The play ends with Reader and Listener raising their heads and looking at each other

“expressionless” for ten seconds.

As the play proceeds, we are led to suspect that the man in Reader’s story is in fact Listener and that this story is the same sad tale the visitor read to the man. But just as much as we are inclined to see connections between what is happening on stage and what Reader reads, important differences persist between the two. First, we are given no indication of the content of the “sad tale” the visitor reads to the man. Also, in addition to the striking coincidence of a ghostly figure reading a story on stage about a ghostly figure reading a story in the past, the only evidence that suggests that the man in Reader’s story could in fact be Listener is their mutual sartorial preference for a “long black coat.” The relation between text and stage action then parallels the relation between the characters on stage: as alike in appearance as possible but clearly not the same.

II.

Ohio Impromptu has in recent years gained more attention due to a first-ever film production as a part of the *Beckett on Film* series, which in 2001 released film versions of Beckett’s 19 theatre pieces. Charles Sturridge’s ten minute adaptation of *Ohio Impromptu* stars Jeremy Irons and impressively highlights the contrast between the white of the table, chairs, and characters’ hair and the black of their coats and the background. This film, however, swerves from Beckett’s text in two important ways: first, one actor plays the two roles and, second, Reader vanishes like an apparition at the end. Addressing the first point, Sturridge claims that his use of one actor enhances the limited script for the stage: “Obviously, on the stage you do your best—you can get two actors who are vaguely alike. But shooting a film I can have two actors completely alike—Jeremy Irons playing both parts.”¹² Difference, however, between the characters is essential to freeing the play from the solipsistic view that Jeremy Irons voices in an interview: “I’m playing two parts of one person, if you like, the intellect and the heart as they come together in a time of grief, face up to loss.” Irons’s perspective here helps explain the thinking behind Sturridge’s decision to dispense with Reader at the film’s end. After Reader closes the book and emphatically repeats, “Nothing is left to tell,” he and Listener look at each other “expressionless.” Then street noise and birds’ chirping increase in volume as Reader gradually fades without ever moving from his seat. Reader, then, quite clearly, is not another human being; he is something like a literary-minded angel or perhaps Listener’s unsettled conscience. Sturridge suggests the latter is closer to his aim: “I wanted to both draw the audience into the film and create this extraordinary image of a man talking to himself. I particularly wanted to literally encircle the action—to wholly convince the eye that there were two palpable beings, who were separate entities, who at the end of the piece become the same.” That is, Reader and Listener are one person and their presence as two is in fact illusory until the end when their one, single identity is confirmed.¹³

In a critical assessment of the film, Garin Dowd maintains that Sturridge's interest in presenting Reader and Listener as "the same" undermines Beckett's fundamental concern with "spliced, disjunctive openness."¹⁴ Dowd argues that in performance Reader and Listener enact Deleuze's concept of "counteractualization," which creates a productive distance between act and event. For Dowd, the play is concerned with the space between actualization and counteractualization or rather with the breach between "same" and "other," on which rests the ethics of difference that Irigaray puts forth. In short, Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu* derives its dramatic energy from its resistance to claims for unity and resolution. The film, for all of its visual achievement, eradicates the possibility of the play's enactment of an encounter of ethical experience. In fusing Reader and Listener, the film runs roughshod over the productive space between self and other that Beckett's text creates.

This space, in my reading, emerges most clearly in the contrast Beckett creates in the play's final movement between the characters in Reader's story and those on stage. First, in Reader's account, after the visitor's last night of reading the sad tale to the man, their interaction ceases altogether:

So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone. Through the single window dawn shed no light. From the street no sound of reawakening. Or was it that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no heed? To light of day. To sound of reawakening. What thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind. Buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No sound. So sat on as though turned to stone. The sad tale a last time told.¹⁵

In response to the final reading of the sad tale, both the man and his visitor close themselves off from their surroundings. They have figuratively "turned to stone" and lost themselves so thoroughly in "profounds of mind" that neither the light of day nor the sounds from the street could affect them. Adam Seelig has commented that at this point these characters "are passive victims of their own text, unable to stop the inevitable conclusion that recites their eulogy while they become their own tombstones."¹⁶ Their brooding silences them, cuts them off from their senses, fosters mindlessness, and petrifies them. Among other things, the characters in Reader's tale demonstrate a strikingly unresponsive act of reading. In effect, their response to reading isolates them and drains them of their humanity.¹⁷

In his professorial days at Trinity College, Beckett wrote in his study of Proust that habit counters the strangeness of life. Habit, he says, works to unify perceptions under a familiar umbrella and, therefore, gives us a sense of security.

On this point Wolfgang Iser comments, “If this need for security gives rise to our projecting a meaning onto the objects before us, then we automatically shut ourselves off from those experiences that can arise if we allow the objects to work their effect on us without sheltering behind our preconceptions of their meaning.” When readers refuse to carry their response from the depths of the text to what Iser calls “the experience of contingency,” then reading is a limiting—or even a petrifying—experience. Reading demands an active response; Iser writes, “We can only talk of experiences if our preconceptions have been modified or transformed by them.”¹⁸ From this perspective, the characters’ response to the sad tale is devoid of experience.

The alternative to the “buried” response to reading is opaque but makes for the striking climax that concludes *Ohio Impromptu*. Throughout the play, Reader is steady and conscientious of his task of reading. The only diversion from Reader’s text is an exclamation reflecting his careful reading: “In this extremity his old terror of night laid hold on him again. After so long a lapse that as if never been. [*Pause. Looks closer.*] Yes, after so long a lapse that as if never been.”¹⁹ In the next line, Listener reins in Reader’s scrupulousness as the former begins to track down a reference noted in his book. Beckett emphasizes the deliberate nature of the reading he envisions when he suggests in a letter to David Warrilow, the first actor to play Reader, that he read “calmly, soothingly, like a bedtime story.”²⁰ The effect of such careful reading comes forcefully in the play’s final moments. After recounting how the man and the visitor responded to the last telling of the sad tale, Reader makes two attempts to close the book and says, “Nothing is left to tell.” Listener knocks a final time, but since Reader has already closed the book, he remains silent. The stage direction then indicates that after five seconds, “*Simultaneously they lower their right hands to table, raise their heads and look at each other. Unblinking. Expressionless.*”²¹ As similar as Reader’s story has been to what we see on stage, this closing action makes for a pointed contrast. Instead of figuratively turning to stone and solipsistically entering “profounds of mind,” here Reader and Listener look at each other. In his review of the first production at Ohio State University, S. E. Gontarski says that the characters at this moment “suggest more mindfulness than mindlessness.”²² Similarly, Anna McMullan claims that this ending “tends to emphasize the persistence of consciousness, rather than unconsciousness.”²³ A response to reading that effects mindfulness and consciousness signals the kind of ethical experience that Irigaray describes, which resists the domestication of the other in the service of identity. In short, through their silent, expressionless stares at the end of the play, the characters open themselves to the presence of an other. They acknowledge difference and risk losing the security of their own stable identities.

III.

I want to argue that this closing mutual gaze in response to reading effectively restores the nothing that Irigaray identifies at the center of ethical experience. First, however, I must acknowledge the sparseness of this play; indeed, all the audience sees at the play's end is two characters staring at each other, and, moreover, there is no clear indication that this is a positive development. Their intent, expressionless gaze lasting ten seconds reveals nothing. Yet this revealed nothing, I claim, is just that space that places a subject at the threshold of ethical experience.

Beckett, of course, is known perhaps more than any other writer for paring away at representation as far as possible in order to present in writing something very close to nothing. In his famous letter to Axel Kaun in 1937, he asserts,

more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. . . . [L]anguage is most efficiently used where it is being most effectively misused. 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.²⁴

Nothing is not privation here; it has a positive value, albeit one that eludes definition. The goal to somehow express nothing drives Beckett for most of his writing life. Twelve years after writing this letter to Kaun, he similarly describes the artist's dilemma in a dialogue with Georges Duthuit: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."²⁵ Or more basically: how does a writer express nothing when his only materials are something—namely, language?

Eric P. Levy claims that Beckett succeeds on this point by creating what Levy calls a "mimesis of seeing nothing," in which a subject sees nothing, but this seeing reverses itself so that the subject reveals nothing in his or her own self-image. Nothing is not merely a description of an outer world; instead, it impinges on the subject's own identity: "That is, the recurrent motif of seeing nothing or 'staring out at nothing' not only signifies perception of the outer void, and, by extension, perception of inner emptiness, but also assimilates the staring subject to the status of a reflection, 'staring back sightlessly' from the mirror it inhabits." Levy traces this movement as it takes a variety of forms throughout Beckett's work. Drawing on *Malone Dies*, Levy concludes that "'nothingness' now refers to an inward state enabling communication with a region of identity which paradoxically negates

the very notion of identity.” Nothing in Beckett, then, undoes the subject: “seeing nothing,” says Levy, “has become no more than a metaphor for an interiority so recessed that it has withdrawn even from its own content.”²⁶ In this interpretation, the external world is an instrument used for self-discovery (though, it must be said, a discovery unlikely to foster any sort of positive growth).

Perhaps this description of nothing could satisfy the interaction between the man and the visitor in the read tale in *Ohio Impromptu*, but it does not fit Reader and Listener’s mutual openness at the end of the play. Nothing is the space between these characters, and it is apart from either character’s subjectivity. Besides the mimetic interiority that Levy describes, there is also in Beckett’s work, as *Ohio Impromptu* demonstrates, a nothing that resists all subjective appropriation, even when such appropriation dissolves the self. This other version of nothing has much in common with the ethical space that Irigaray claims has been overlooked by the philosophical tradition that has associated men with fullness and women with absence.²⁷ Much of Irigaray’s work is devoted to recasting this negative space of femininity as the space of ethical relations. For example, in her critical reading of Emmanuel Levinas in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray retrieves the act of the caress from what she sees as Levinas’s metaphysical, masculinist grasp.²⁸ The caress, she claims, takes place between two distinct individuals, neither of whom is privileged over it. It is a “nocturnal experience of touching” because it can see only nothing and so stays squarely outside of either subjectivity.²⁹ For Irigaray, the nothing with which Freud identified women serves as the wellspring of ethics because it exists as a nondominative space between unified subjectivities.

I am not claiming that Beckett’s work actualizes an ethics of sexual difference but rather that Irigaray provides a way of understanding the negative space outside of individual subjectivities that Beckett’s work repeatedly presents. In addition to *Ohio Impromptu*, an example of this sort of space comes through in Beckett’s short poetic prose piece (and, indeed, libretto) entitled “neither,” which Beckett wrote for the composer Morton Feldman in 1976.³⁰ It begins by describing a nonrepresentational space outside of all subjectivity:

To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither.

The entire text, only half a page in all, focuses on this space whose only sound is “unheard footfalls”:

till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
then no sound
then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
unspeakable home[.]³¹

The silent space of “neither” is nothing, yet it is an “unspeakable home” that exists outside of both self and other. It is unspeakable because it must exist apart from any representation that would make it something. For Beckett, nothing is always there, ever resistant to attempts to conceptualize it or bring it under one’s subjective control.

The final lines of “neither” suggest the proximity of nothing to death, “at last halt for good.” “neither” stops short of indicating a negative space between self and other apart from death. In 1981, before writing *Ohio Impromptu*, Beckett wrote a short play entitled *Rockaby*, which, like “neither,” discounts a productive space between self and other and, accordingly, adumbrates death. In *Rockaby*, a woman (W) sits on a rocking chair that rocks mechanically, as she listens to a recorded voice (V) that relates the tale of a woman’s (presumably W’s) descent toward death. Through it all, W’s face is “white [and] expressionless,” and her “unblinking gaze” gradually subsides as her eyes close near the end of the play. Over the course of the play, W calls for “More” three times after V’s long pauses, creating four sections to the narrative, which consistently echoes its own words and speech rhythms. In V’s story, the main character, a certain “she,” is never definitively pegged as the character rocking on stage, but their commonalities are even greater than those of the characters of *Ohio Impromptu*. The play’s opening section introduces the woman as someone in search of another person:

going to and fro
 all eyes
 all sides
 high and low
 for another
 another like herself
 another creature like herself.

This effort fails, and, at the end of the day, “time she stopped,” a line both W and V speak together. In the next section, the woman (“she”) again looks “for another,” but this time she is “back in” and seated at her window. She continues her search at the window in the third part of the narrative, and at this point she redefines her desire so that now simply seeing the eyes of another would be adequate:

never mind a face
 behind the pane
 famished eyes
 like hers
 to see
 be seen.

In the final section, she lets down the blind, settles herself in her mother's rocker, and slowly closes her eyes. In the end, as W continues to rock with her eyes now entirely closed, the voice says that she "was her own other / own other living soul" and that finally she was "saying to the rocker":

rock her off
 stop her eyes
 fuck life
 stop her eyes
 rock her off
 rock her off.³²

The harsh assessment, "fuck life," is particularly acid here as it contrasts so sharply with V's otherwise soft, rhythmic tone and as W seems to be close to death. In the end, the woman's attempt to meet another person falls short, and her only recourse is to turn inward. Reflecting on this play, Ruby Cohn says, "From cradle to grave, we seek another, and sometimes, for a while, the blinds are up, but like Everyman in the medieval morality play, we die alone, when the bough breaks."³³

In *Rockaby*, the woman fails to encounter an other. She fabricates an other in herself (indeed, it is possible that V is a manifestation of that other), but such a turn is ultimately claustrophobic and deadly. In the absence of encounters with other human beings, she lacks access to a negative space outside of herself that can provide the grounds for ethical experience. In the absence of such a space, death is the only possibility outside of oneself. *Ohio Impromptu*, written shortly after *Rockaby*, examines what might happen if a person actually encountered "another like herself." What if W's "[h]uge eyes in white expressionless face" met the gaze of another human being and resisted the steady pull to close?³⁴ In *Ohio Impromptu*, Beckett presents the possibility for an encounter between two individuals in a space that is outside of both subjects and yet provides an intimacy that, like death, defies logical conceptualization.

IV.

In his study *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, Simon Critchley maintains that Beckett's language steadily distances itself from a speaking subject and opens readers to an impersonal void resembling Levinas's *il y a*. Levinas explains his idea of the *il y a* ("there is") by imagining what would happen if "all beings, things, and persons revert[ed] to nothingness." "Levinas," Critchley says, "claims that this very nothingness of all existents would itself be experienced as a kind of presence: an impersonal, neutral and indeterminate feeling that '*quelque chose se passe*,' what he calls in *Le temps et l'autre*, "An atmospheric density, a plentitude of the void, or the murmur of silence."³⁵ *Il y a* is a rustling of being that precedes all being and

manifests itself in the ethical call of the other. For Levinas, the face of the other communicates the radical exteriority of the *il y a* (it is irreducible to conceptual understanding) and at the same time commands one to respond (“To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give”).³⁶ Like Irigaray, Levinas understands an encounter with the other as a rupture of subjective identity: “Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain.”³⁷ For Levinas, the *il y a* emerges in the face of a human being, which is bare, vulnerable, and entirely other than myself. The other commands me to respond to him or her, indeed, to substitute myself for him or her, which effectively breaks my cognitive grasp of the world. In Critchley’s account, Beckett does not derive ethics from the *il y a*, but he does in his own unsystematic and distinctively literary way acknowledge something like the *il y a* at the root of human existence.

As different as their literary and/or philosophical projects are, Levinas, Beckett, and Irigaray are all interested in addressing the negative space that exists between people but withdraws from claims of logic and definition. At the end of Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*, the characters’ silent acknowledgment of each other is an ethical relation born out of the negative space between them, which, as Irigaray describes, is an affirmative inflection of difference. For Irigaray, difference alone, however, is unable to support the ethics she envisions because it is rooted in an economy of difference, which is the inverse of and so bound to an economy of the same. Even Levinas’s formulation of the *il y a*, which attends to the sheer alterity of the other, is weighed down by the masculine pronoun *il*, thus inscribing it in a limiting gendered scheme. Irigaray focuses on sexual difference as the locus of ethical thinking that can exist outside the logic of sameness and difference. As Krzysztof Ziarek writes, “Sexual difference becomes the difference that crosses all other differences, tracing across the differential play of meaning according to an other economy of proximity.”³⁸ Proximity is Irigaray’s term for an ethical relation outside of the stagnant relation of sameness and difference. It is marked by “being two” in contrast to conceptions of being that privilege unity and identity. Proximity, in eschewing the logic of identity that governs definition, gains its force from the unspoken, from everything that eludes the strictures of propositional language. In other words, proximity describes a relation between two individuals that takes place in virtue of the restored nothing, the negative and nonappropriated space between them.

In her essay “The Intimate Requires Separate Dwellings,” Irigaray describes what a proximate relation might look like between people. Echoing her thinking in her Beckett essay on relegating the other to “a room of guests,” she writes, “To include the other in my universe prevents meeting with the other, whereas safeguarding the obscurity and the silence that the other remains for me aids in discovering proximity.” Proximity is the threshold between self and other; it is

what one experiences when one acknowledges the limits of oneself in an encounter with the other. That there is an irreducible difference between self and other “gives access to a path from the one to the other and to the sharing of a still free energy and space. Only in what is still independent of the influence of someone, may proximity take place as event and advent. Something comes to pass which does not belong as one’s own to the one or to the other.”³⁹ Proximity is nothing because it escapes the logic of identity that defines things; it happens as an event that cannot be pinned down by any concept. The proximity between self and other defeats language, which leads Irigaray in “The Path toward the Other” to assert: “This nothing first wants a silence. Silence is not only a privation of words, not only that which has not yet come to language; silence is the word, or the speaking, of the threshold—a space of possible meeting, of possible hospitality to one another.”⁴⁰ The space of the ethical encounter is proximity and, therefore, since it resists conceptual thought, nothing. One meets the other in silence because the other is irreducibly other and, as far as we know, outside of all categories of discourse. Silence is an opening; it marks the point of contact between self and other in the space of proximity where nothing emerges.

When Reader and Listener look at each other silently at the end of *Ohio Impromptu*, they enact the threshold of ethical experience. They maintain a distance and do not attempt to appropriate the other into one’s own world. The experience of reading that they perform contrasts with the reading described in Reader’s tale in which the man and the visitor “grew to be as one.”⁴¹ On stage, contrary to Sturridge’s film adaptation, the characters are different and distant. That, however, does not mean that they are indifferent to one another even as they silently hold each other’s gaze and refuse to appropriate each other. In the space between Reader and Listener, in the silence and in the aftermath of the reading, a tension emerges that can only be described as nothing, a disruptive event irreducible to conceptual thought. In *I Love to You*, Irigaray writes of intersubjective recognition, “I recognize you means that I cannot know you in thought or in flesh. The power of a negative remains between us.”⁴²

Finally, as a way of merely raising and hardly exhausting the fruitful issue of how the negative space might carry over in performance, I would like to acknowledge a seemingly minor bit of stagecraft that concretely insists throughout the play on the difference between Reader and Listener. Beckett added the direction “*Black wide-brimmed hat at centre of table*” in his third draft, penciled in above the typescript.⁴³ The only other major staging change in this late draft gives the characters white hair rather than gray, which suggests that Beckett was at this point very conscious of maximizing the play’s contrasts. Apart from Reader’s book, the hat is the only prop in this play, and from the audience’s perspective it serves as a physical boundary between the two visually similar characters. As the hat is placed in the middle of the table, it also serves as a boundary between the actors

and the audience. Thus, the audience finds itself caught up in the ethical experience unfolding before its eyes: just as Reader and Listener silently look at each other, the audience has for the past fifteen minutes been silently looking at Reader and Listener. What might it mean for the audience to acknowledge the actors through the space between it and them?

In his study of phenomenology and performance, *Bodied Spaces*, Stanton B. Garner, Jr. maintains that Beckett consistently reserves a place for human beings amid things—like a discarded hat—of the world: “As Beckett pares away at scenic and characterological naturalism through his theatrical *via negativa*, in other words, it is the human presence—what Molloy calls ‘that unstable fugitive thing, still living flesh’—that limits objectification and formal reduction.” In performance, the actors must to some extent hide their ordinary selves, but, at the same time, the characters are embodied only in virtue of the human beings who step on stage as actors. “Thus,” Garner writes, “the performing body occupies a paradoxical role as both the activating agent of such dualities as presentation/representation, sign/referent, reality/illusion and that which most dramatically threatens to collapse them.”⁴⁴ In Beckett, the human that the audience seeks to acknowledge is not fully present; instead, it evades its own presentation as part of the complex dynamic of theatrical performance.⁴⁵ On stage, the ethical recognition of human presence, as I have shown, demands proximity, which maintains a difference and distance between self and other. This relation, however, is not limited to the action between characters on stage. In attending to and demarcating the space between audience and actors, *Ohio Impromptu* anticipates *Catastrophe* (1982), Beckett’s next play, which ends with its central character, Protagonist, raising his head and staring straight into the audience to the sound of loud, artificial, recorded applause. In so doing, he, in James Knowlson’s words, resists domination and “reasserts his humanity and his individuality in a single vestigial, yet compelling movement.”⁴⁶ In this concluding action, the audience recognizes the human presence in the character. This recognition, however, can only ever be partial, as the distancing frame of a rehearsal within a play serves to ensure. A partial rather than a total recognition is not a failure but instead the hallmark of an ethical encounter, given the prohibition against reducing the other to one’s own way of thinking. The final action of *Catastrophe* insists on the distance between the human presence in the character playing a character and the audience as it meets his gaze. Distance here between audience and actor parallels the distance between the characters in *Ohio Impromptu* as they exchange an expressionless gaze. In both cases, ethical acknowledgment of the other demands a respect of the other’s difference from oneself that could very possibly upend one’s view of the world. For this reason, Irigaray insists that meeting the other and, indeed, ethics are invariably risky pursuits.

Notes

¹ Irigaray's essay, "The Path toward the Other," is a chapter in *Beckett after Beckett*, ed. S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2006) 41. All subsequent references to this essay refer to this version. Irigaray significantly modified this essay in a more recent version, which appears under the same title in her book *Sharing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

² 40, 44.

³ For Irigaray, subjectivity does not result from a subject's relation to an object. To the contrary, subjectivity gains ethical force in virtue of the space between oneself and another person. In approaching without objectifying the other, one partakes in intersubjectivity, which, for Irigaray, is the site of transcendence. Transcendence is, Irigaray writes, "respect for the other whom I will never be, who is transcendent to me and to whom I am transcendent." She explains further, "The other is the one whom I shall never reach, and for that very reason, *he/she* forces me to remain in my self in order to be faithful to *him/her* and *us*, retaining our difference." "You Who Will Never Be Mine" in *Key Writings*, ed. Luce Irigaray (New York: Continuum, 2004) 9. Ethical subjectivity for Irigaray comes about through the nonappropriate respect one shows for another person.

⁴ Irigaray, "The Path toward the Other" 44.

⁵ Irigaray's thought, particularly in her early work, is steeped in psychoanalysis; therefore, "nothing" resonates of the Freudian lack assigned to women. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, for example, she highlights the tradition that has defined "woman" as a complement to male unity: "Woman remains this nothing at all [*ce rien du tout*], this whole of nothing yet [*ce tout de rien encore*] where each (male) *one* comes to seek the means to replenish resemblance to self (as) to same." Irigaray, "Volume without Contours" in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 53.

⁶ Irigaray, "The Path toward the Other" 49.

⁷ Like Irigaray, Alain Badiou has explored the rich intersection of ethics, subjectivity, and Samuel Beckett. Badiou maintains that a person becomes a subject in making a decision at a moment of an "event" that exceeds his or her previous way of thinking. Ethics then is an ethics of a truth revealed through one's fidelity to the decision made according to the event. Badiou highlights the ethical courage he sees in much of Beckett's work expressed in the decision to continue living in spite of the suffocating void of being. See *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, tr. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2002) and *On Beckett*, ed. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003). See also Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, ed. Paul Auster, vol. 3 (New York: Grove, 2006) 473.

⁹ 473, 474, 475.

¹⁰ 475.

¹¹ 476.

¹² Sturridge's and Irons's comments derive from interviews presented in a documentary film entitled *Check the Gate—Putting Beckett on Film*, part of the *Beckett on Film* series (dir. Pearse Lehane, Blue Angel Films, 2001). In a thorough review of the *Beckett on Film* project, Everett C. Frost and Anna McMullan conclude that the films' reliance on stars panders to a broad commercial audience:

The desire to introduce others to Beckett's work is of course generous and laudable, yet this desire may well not have been best served by packaging Beckett in the visual language and star vehicles appropriate to more mainstream filmic genres. Indeed, in our opinion, it was this alienation and the inherent commodification of the artist's work . . . and not the nature of film itself, that made Beckett wary of filmic adaptations of his work.

"The Blue Angel *Beckett on Film* Project: Questions of Adaptation, Aesthetics, and Audience in Filming Samuel Beckett's Theatrical Canon" *Assaph* 17-18 (2003): 235.

Sturridge's "visual language" at the end of *Ohio Impromptu* is a good example of the project's tendency to sensationalize and commercialize Beckett's plays.

¹³ In *Beckett in Performance*, Jonathan Kalb contrasts the interpretations of two of the first actors to perform *Ohio Impromptu*, David Warrilow and Alvin Epstein. Kalb finds that Warrilow's performance is more open to the play's ambiguity and is therefore more effective. In contrast, Epstein in an interview with Kalb reveals his desire to resolve the uncertain relation between Reader and Listener in a manner similar to that of Irons and Sturridge: "The possibility that's awakened in my

imagination is that, out of extreme loneliness, the man who is alone and bereaved invents a companion who is himself, a sort of alter ego who comes and reads the sad tale over, to have company, and to have someone share the grief." *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 57. Kalb's insightful analysis also seems pertinent to the Sturridge/Irons interpretation: "And in the end [Epstein] admits that he must abandon the indeterminate and ground his performance in naturalistic motivations, such as the psychological identification of one man with another. In other words, he retains at least the fundamental framework of the Stanislavsky system by, in [Michael] Goldman's words, treating one subtext as privileged, thus implying the existence of 'a truth in terms of which the text can be located' and encouraging the audience to interpret the play advertently, to try to decode it logically as if seeking the answer to a riddle." Kalb 59.

¹⁴ Garin Dowd, "Karaoke Beckett, or Jeremy Irons, Mimicry and Travesty in *Ohio Impromptu*," *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13 (2003): 173.

¹⁵ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 3: 476.

¹⁶ Adam Seelig, "Beckett's Dying Remains: The Process of Playwriting in the *Ohio Impromptu* Manuscripts," *Modern Drama* 43 (2000): 389.

¹⁷ It makes sense that Beckett may have wanted to address the question of reading in this play since he wrote it specifically for a gathering of Beckett scholars at an academic conference. In 1980, S. E. Gontarski asked Beckett if he would write a dramatic piece for a conference in honor of Beckett's 75th birthday to be held in May 1981 at Ohio State University. Beckett told Gontarski not to get his hopes up, but after a few false starts he successfully completed the play by the end of 1980. Writing for a special occasion and a group of academics certainly did not make for propitious conditions for Beckett. A draft reveals his playful dismay at the prospect of writing for such an occasion:

Proceed straight to [Lima] the nearest campus, they said, and address them.
[Address] whom? I said.
The students, they said, and professors.
Oh my God, I said, not that.

Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski, and Pierre Astier, ed, *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 191.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser, "When Is the End Not the End? The Idea of Fiction in Beckett," in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1986) 50, 51.

¹⁹ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 3: 475. The play does not reveal very much about the visitor's style of reading to the man in Reader's tale. The relevant passages suggest a perfunctory performance: "Some time later he appeared again at the same hour with the same volume and this time without preamble sat and read it through again the long night through. Then disappeared without a word" (475). The emphasis on "through" here, in contrast to Reader's care, suggests to me the visitor's desire to get through the text to its underlying meaning, a practice Beckett famously criticizes in "*Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce*." That the man may be guilty of separating form from content receives support from the layered meanings of his departure "without a word." Thus, it is likely he left with only an abstract idea of the text quite removed from the language of the text.

²⁰ Qtd. in Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 125.

²¹ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 3: 476.

²² S. E. Gontarski, "Review: The world premiere of *Ohio Impromptu*, directed by Alan Schneider at Columbus, Ohio" *Journal of Beckett Studies* 7 (1982): 135.

²³ Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 121.

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove, 1984) 172-3.

²⁵ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 4: 556

²⁶ Eric P. Levy, "The Beckettian Mimesis of Seeing Nothing," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70 (2001): 622, 630-1.

²⁷ "The feminine," she asserts, "is in fact defined in [the whole history of philosophy] as nothing other than the complement, the other side, or the negative side, of the masculine; thus, the female sex is described as a lack, a 'hole.'" Irigaray, "Women's Exile: Interview with Luce Irigaray," tr. Couze Venn, in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990) 81.

²⁸ Irigaray's disagreement with Levinas in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is difficult to pin down

because in that work she recasts Levinas's phenomenology of the caress in the service of her attempt to describe a "creation of love that does not abandon respect of the ethical." Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, tr. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 207. In a later essay, however, she is unambiguous in her criticism:

So the phenomenology of the caress in Levinas falls back within the boundaries staked out by the philosophical constitution of the masculine subject. It does not lead either to the other, or to God, or to a new spiritual or rational level. It is submerged in animality, perversity, childhood (which/whose?), of which the feminine other is the condition of representation. After having been so far—or so close—in the approach to the other sex, in my view to the other, to the mystery of the other, Levinas clings on once more to this rock of patriarchy in the very place of carnal love.

Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," tr. Margaret Whitford, in *The Irigaray Reader*. ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 183.

²⁹ *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 191.

³⁰ The genre of "neither" is a complex issue. In his notes to *The Complete Short Prose*, S. E. Gontarski reveals that Beckett opposed John Calder's proposed inclusion of the piece in his edition of *Collected Poems* because Beckett considered it prose. For accounts of Beckett and Feldman's collaboration, see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 556-7 and Allen Ruch's essay at *Apnomia: A Site for Samuel Beckett* <http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_feldman_neither.html>.

³¹ Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 4: 425.

³² Vol. 3: 461-4, 466, 470.

³³ Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 361.

³⁴ Vol. 3: 463, 461.

³⁵ Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) 206, 66.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969) 75.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998) 114.

³⁸ Krzysztof Ziarek, "Proximities: Irigaray and Heidegger on Difference," *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000): 145.

³⁹ Luce Irigaray, "The Intimate Requires Separate Dwellings," *Key Writings*, ed. Luce Irigaray (New York: Continuum, 2004) 29, 30.

⁴⁰ Irigaray, "Path" 45.

⁴¹ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett* Vol. 3: 475.

⁴² Luce Irigaray, "You Who Will Never Be Mine," *Key Writings* 8.

⁴³ Vol. 3: 473. A copy of the *Ohio Impromptu* holograph is included as an appendix to the volume of criticism that emerged from the conference at which *Ohio Impromptu* premiered. For the hat notation, see Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski, and Pierre Astier, ed., *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 199.

⁴⁴ Stanton B. Garner, Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 80, 44.

⁴⁵ "When we speak of what Stanislavski called Presence in acting, we must also speak of its Absence, the dimensionality of time through the actor, the fact that he who is performing can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so. Of all the performing arts, the theater stinks most of mortality." Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982) 83.

⁴⁶ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 597.