

**Perception, Attention, Imagery: Samuel Beckett and the Psychological  
Experiment**

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## Abstract

Samuel Beckett is often thought of as an experimental writer but little critical attention has been paid to the question of what the term 'experimental' means when applied to Beckett's work (and arguably literature in general). One might suggest that to call Beckett an experimental writer is to identify him as a member of the avant-garde, placing his writing in opposition to more commercially-orientated, 'mainstream' works of literature. Alternatively, the term might be taken to highlight Beckett's formal innovations – his capacity to change conceptions of what literature is and does. This study, though, will specify another way in which we might understand Beckett's writing to be experimental. Drawing on Beckett's engagement with experimental and therapeutic psychology, the study suggests that Beckett's works might be seen as experiments in a more scientific sense. Through readings of his later works for page, stage and screen, the chapters of this study suggest that Beckett's writing can contribute to our knowledge of psychological concepts such as perception, attention and mental imagery. Beckett's works, I argue, might be defined as experimental insofar as they position and stimulate human bodies in ways that allow us to better understand our complex, but partial, experiences of the world.

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## Introduction

### Literary Experiments and the Work of Samuel Beckett

In the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), the literary experiment is defined as largely separate from the scientific experiment. In their introduction, the editors suggest that in the volume ‘the modifier *experimental* is used more or less interchangeably with *avant-garde* and sometimes *innovative*’ (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012, 1, emphasis in original). The difference in these modifiers, for the editors, is a matter of connotations. The term ‘avant-garde’, for example, has been ‘allied with political radicalism’, whereas ‘experimental has scientific connotations’ (1-2). The authors argue that ‘the language of *experiment* is a relative novelty in literary discourse’, suggesting that the term was first adopted as a descriptor of literary innovation at the end of the nineteenth century, but was embraced more fully in the early twentieth (2, emphasis in original). It is due to use of the term in this period, they argue, that ‘we continue to regard unconventional, cutting-edge literature as “experimental”’ (2). From this perspective, literary experiments were going on long before the ‘experimental’ tag was applied to them; a new modifier was merely applied to an old process. The editors cite the eighteenth-century novel as a literary innovation that, in hindsight, ‘we would surely be disposed to call “experimental”’, though the term was not available at the time (2). The reason for this new modifier, the editors speculate, was cultural. It was a reaction to the growth of science:

To call literature *experimental* is in some sense to aspire to compete with science, challenging science’s privileged status in modernity and reclaiming some of the prestige ceded by literature to science since the nineteenth century (2, emphasis in original).

The identification between literary and scientific experiments, the editors suppose, works on a basis of analogy. The modifier, by this account, demonstrates how literature, like science, can fit into a narrative of cultural progress: ‘experiment promises to extend the boundaries of knowledge, or in this case, of artistic practice. Strongly associated with modernity, it implies rejection of hide-bound traditions, values and forms’ (2). The analogy, then, goes something like this: where the experimental scientist extends the

boundaries of knowledge, the experimental writer extends the boundaries of artistic practice. Both, in this sense, are able to overthrow the old and embrace the new. What remains questionable, however, is whether this analogy offers any real insight into how challenging literature is written and received.

One problem many have with the term 'experimental' is its older connotations of artistic failure. The earliest example of the term being used to describe aesthetic productions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to a comment made by John Ruskin, in 1857.<sup>1</sup> Here it is used to describe the necessary failures in the work of a developing artist:

It stands to reason that a young man's work cannot be perfect. It *must* be more or less ignorant; it must be more or less feeble; it is likely that it may be more or less experimental, and if experimental, here and there mistaken (Ruskin 1868, 35, emphasis in original).

In Ruskin's sense, an experimental work is one that is not quite the finished article. There is the suggestion that experimentation will inevitably produce flawed art but these flaws must be tolerated by the public if a young artist is to mature. This early sense of the descriptor continues to colour the idea of experimental literature into the late twentieth century and beyond. The editors of the *Routledge Companion* cite the writer B. S. Johnson's objection to the term: 'I object to the term *experimental* being applied to my own work. Certainly, I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my own terms successful' (Johnson 1973, 19). In Ruskin and Johnson's sense we get a slightly different analogy. Here, experimentation (artistic, literary or scientific) is the trialling process that comes before the finished product. It is a process that is necessary to – but should not be confused with – artistic achievement, or the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Thus, the concept of aesthetic experimentation is caught between two analogies. In one sense to call a work experimental is to say that it extends the boundaries of artistic practice, and is thereby valuable in itself. In another, to call a work experimental is to say that it is only valuable insofar as it later leads to a successful finished work. The editors of the *Routledge Companion* find that, in the latter sense, 'experimental' has become a 'term of dismissal and

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. 'experimental', accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66532?redirectedFrom=experimental#eid>

condescension' (3). Their volume aims to 'rescue' the term from this context by emphasising the sense in which the literary experiment is unconventional and cutting-edge (3). In the sense that they use it, literary experiments name the process 'of change and renewal' by which literature re-invents itself (1). The terms avant-garde,<sup>2</sup> experimental and innovative are amalgamated into the single term 'experimental'. This term, it is hoped, will be instilled with 'connotations of edginess, renovation and aesthetic adventure' (3). In this context, experimental literature can be 'irreducibly diverse' (1). A literary experiment merely has to ask the ontological questions that mainstream literature is 'dedicated to repressing': 'What is literature and what could it be? What are its functions its limitations its possibilities' (1)?

This thesis will set itself up in opposition to this broad definition of experimental literature. Some very interesting insights may come from the amalgamation of the terms avant-garde, innovative and experimental within a broad volume such as the *Routledge Companion*. But I think it is important that the terms do not lose their particularity. The editors point out that 'aesthetic avant-gardism continues to be allied with political radicalism in a number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic and literary movements' (1-2). If these movements are allied more with 'political radicalism' than with scientific experimentation, why label them 'experimental' and not avant-garde? Similarly, it will be my contention that twentieth-century literature had a relationship with scientific experimentation that went beyond the contest for cultural privilege. Rather than the all-encompassing version of experimental literature put forward in the *Routledge Companion*, I will identify a more limited tradition of literary experimentation. The editors of the *Routledge Companion* make a distinction between the scientific experiment's promise to 'extend the boundaries of knowledge' and the literary experiment's promise to extend the boundaries of 'artistic practice'. This thesis will scrutinise this distinction and suggest that the experimentation of a literary work lies not only in its capacity to extend the

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<sup>2</sup> The term avant-garde stands out here insofar as it seems to contextualise the work it describes to a much greater degree. Innovative is a term we might apply to an isolated work but avant-garde seems to associate the work it describes with a collection of contemporaneous works that are thought of as innovative or "ahead of their time". This can be seen in the way in which we use avant-garde as a collective noun to denominate 'the pioneers or innovators in any art in a particular period' (OED Online, s.v. 'avant-garde', accessed 22 November, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13610?redirectedFrom=avant-garde#eid>)

boundaries of artistic practice, but also in its potential to produce knowledge. The literary experiment, as I frame it here, should conduct a sustained investigation of a particular phenomenon or topic in a way that enhances our understandings of it. A literary experiment, by this account, could not only change our understanding of what literature is and does but might also change the way we think about a range of other topics from perception to political agency.

This conception of the literary experiment is not altogether new. The editors of the *Routledge Companion* cite Émile Zola's essay 'The Experimental Novel' (1880) as the point at which 'the model of the scientific experiment becomes available to describe literary innovation' (2). Zola certainly used the term experimental to describe literature. However, it is misleading to suggest that his use of the term is merely describing literary innovation. Zola's 'experimental literature' is not merely concerned with challenging literary conventions. For Zola, the literary experiment did not just aim to extend the boundaries of artistic practice; it aimed to produce knowledge. Zola's fundamental concern was with the distinction between observation and experiment. He did not like the notion that the naturalist novel was a product of pure observation – that it was 'satisfied with photographing' (Zola 1893, 9). Instead, he argued that the naturalist novelist performed experiments. The process of the novelist, for Zola, consists firstly in observing 'facts in nature' (9). What comes next, however, is a process of experimentation: taking the observed facts and 'acting upon them by the modification of circumstances and surroundings without deviation from the laws of nature' (9). Thus anyone might observe the day-to-day behaviour of a friend, but the novelist's experiment would be in imaginatively changing this friend's circumstances and surroundings in order to see what happens. If this process is carried out, for Zola, the novelist has produced knowledge: 'Finally, you possess knowledge of the man, scientific knowledge of him in both his individual and social relations' (9).

For Zola, then, the naturalist novel is not just comparable to the scientific experiment; it is itself a branch of experimental science. This was, I think, a new idea in literature but as early as 1836 the landscape painter John Constable had asked why painting 'may not be considered as a branch of natural philosophy,



of which pictures are but the experiments' (Thornes 1999, 51). In the nineteenth century, then, writers and artists were not just drawing loose analogies between artistic and scientific experimentation on the grounds of a common interest in innovation. Rather, they were questioning the distinction between the two. Now, I find it hard to accept that the versions of artistic creativity described by Zola and Constable are acts of scientific experimentation exactly. Zola's experimental novelist, for example, imagines how individuals would react given the modification of their 'circumstances and surroundings'. What an individual does in these modified circumstances is merely what the novelist thinks would happen – not what happens in practice. It is hard to see how Zola's experimental novelist can get beyond the prediction stage. Moreover, there is still a defensible argument to suggest that the analogy between artistic practice and scientific experimentation was produced by the artists themselves with a view to claiming some of the prestige that science has acquired through the course of modernity. Nevertheless, in the sense that Zola and Constable use it, 'experimental' is not interchangeable with innovative and nor does its use imply that the work described is not quite the finished product. Instead it implies the capacity to produce knowledge.

### **Literature and Experimental Psychology**

The late nineteenth century also saw a development in experimental science that is crucial for the idea of a literary experiment: the emergence of experimental psychology.<sup>3</sup> This development was of such importance because, with it, science began to study the topics that had long been of concern to literary writers. Scientists began to look for means by which to investigate how the human experiences, and performs in, the world. Furthermore, there came a surge of interest in the linguistic processes that make the production and reception of literature possible. Tim Armstrong writes: 'psychological experimenters considered the possibility of forcing conscious process in writing to its limits. Moments of linguistic breakdown or systematic overload and the

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<sup>3</sup> This inception was punctuated in 1879 with Wilhelm Wundt's establishment of the world's first psychological laboratory at the University of Leipzig. At this time William James also founded a psychological laboratory at Harvard (Barry, Maude and Salisbury 2016, 2).

linguistic pathologies which mark the limits of language production became crucial' (Armstrong 1998, 194). This new type of scientific experimentation brought with it a great potential for overlap with literature. Not only did early psychologists draw on works of literature when developing their theories, but the production and reception of literary works became a topic of psychological study in its own right. The experimental psychologist June E. Downey, for example, published books on 'imaginal reactions to poetry' (1911) and the 'psychology of literature' (1929). This influence worked both ways. Literary writers had long been covering the scientific experiment thematically – Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1725) being particularly good proof of this. But at this point the practice of psychology began to influence the way in which literature was written. A number of critics have recognised this trend. Judith Ryan, for example, has argued that the years 1880-1940 saw the development of a 'certain kind of modernist literature which responded creatively to the new psychologies of the time' (Ryan 1991, 4-5).<sup>4</sup> This literature, Ryan continues, is never 'a mere container for empiricist thought. Rather, it engages with psychological empiricism through 'formal innovations' (4). The very fabric of the literary text is seen to be influenced by the methods of experimental psychology.

Ryan finds a particularly strong example of this trend in the modernist writer Gertrude Stein. As is fairly well known, Stein spent a portion of her early life working at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory. Here she was under the tutelage of some of the key figures in early experimental psychology, namely Hugo Münsterberg and William James. Her time in the lab manifests in some experiments – partly carried out with partner Leon Solomons – on 'human automatism'. These experiments (the findings of which were published in early volumes of the *Psychological Review*) were what we might now call tests of selective and divided attention.<sup>5</sup> By this I mean that Stein and Solomons

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<sup>4</sup> Ryan, here, is not referring exclusively to experimental psychology but psychological experimentation does feature in her argument.

<sup>5</sup> At the time, the experiments had a very specific stated purpose. They set out to test the nineteenth-century notion that the automatic and 'subconscious' behaviour of hysterical patients could be attributed to a 'second personality' (Solomons and Stein 1896, 492). In their investigation, Stein and Solomons used methods of distraction in order to bring out involuntary movements in normal patients. These movements, Solomons and Stein hoped, would definitely resemble the exhibitions of the 'second personality' described in hysterical patients. They wanted to eliminate the distinction being made at the time between the hysteric's performance of a 'second personality' and the 'automatic movements' of the ordinary person: essentially disproving the 'second personality' thesis.

attempted to find out whether a subject could perform one task automatically while their attention was 'occupied as fully as possible' by another' (497).<sup>6</sup> For example, in one experiment the subject is asked to listen for and write down certain dictated words while attention is 'occupied as fully as possible in reading' a novel (497). The subject is also asked to keep his pencil moving when no words are being dictated. At first, it is observed, the subject is too 'painfully conscious' of the writing task to comprehend what he is reading. Through training, though, the subject acquires a facility for 'rapidly shifting attention from reading to writing and back' (497). This is said to involve 'the formation of a motor impulse' and a 'feeling of effort' (497). But, as the task goes on, both the motor impulse and the feeling of effort are described to go away and, for Solomons at least, the act of writing becomes 'real automatism' (497). This usually occurs, it is observed, at points when the novel becomes particularly engrossing: 'Every once in a while the story grows interesting and we return to ourselves with a start to find that we have been going on writing just the same' (499-500). It is concluded that, under certain conditions, writing can be produced automatically. It should be stressed that these conclusions were largely those of Solomons. Stein's role in the first set of experiments was mainly that of an assistant. She was, it seems, more sceptical about the the notion of automatic writing. Stein would, a few years later, carry out some experiments on her own which are described in the article 'Cultivated Human Automatism' (1898). In these experiments 'automatic writing' has a more limited definition. It does not consist in the production of words and sentences. Instead a planchette is used for the production of 'circles, the figure eight, a long curve or an m-figure' (Stein 1898, 296). In her experiments, Stein's definition of automatic writing was more akin to automatic movement. Indeed, as Steven Meyer points out, Stein more or less consistently held the view that 'if movements were automatic they would not produce writing and if, on the other hand, they did produce writing they were not automatic' (Meyer 2001, 226). The experiments Stein produced, though, open up some crucial questions. To what extent, they ask, do the practices of reading and writing occupy attention? And,

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<sup>6</sup> The research of Solomons and Stein would inspire later experiments on divided attention. Spelke, Hirst and Neisser, for example, draw on the methods of Solomons and Stein in a series of experiments which test whether, through practice, subjects can acquire the ability to simultaneously perform two tasks that are initially very hard to combine (Spelke, Hirst and Neisser 1976, 216).

how far are these practices distinct from other types of bodily movement and expression?

There are numerous ways in which Stein's encounters with scientific method might be interpreted to have informed her later literary practice. An illuminating, if slightly blunt, interpretation was made by the prominent behaviourist psychologist B. F. Skinner. In an article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Skinner suggested that in her work *Tender Buttons* (1914) Stein merely reproduced the 'automatic' writing of her earlier psychological experiments (Skinner 1934, 55). Skinner notes that Stein described the writing she produced in the lab as 'ordinarily unintelligible' (55). From this he asserts that Stein 'could not have failed to notice' the resemblances between this writing and the 'unintelligible product' that is *Tender Buttons* (55). Puzzling Skinner, though, is the question of why Stein would choose to publish this product 'as a serious artistic experiment' (55). Skinner's article gives a sense of the potential for convergence between literary and scientific experimentation in the early twentieth century. He recognises *Tender Buttons* as the product of a scientific experiment but his concern is that it will not be recognised as such by all readers. Thus the article betrays an anxiety that the experiment of the scientist can be confused with the experiment of the writer. Here, Skinner invokes Stein's association with Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, suggesting that her engagement with these artists prompted her to confuse her earlier scientific experiments with art: 'with such an experience behind one, it is not difficult to accept as art what one has hitherto dismissed as the interesting and rather surprising result of an experiment' (55). In Skinner's version of events, Stein made a definite methodological break when she left the science lab and started a literary career. However, developments within the artistic world led her – mistakenly in Skinner's opinion – to see artistic value in the products of her scientific experimentation. An alternative account would suggest that Stein did not make such a stark move away from scientific experimentation. This would be to suggest that the practices of science and literature were not mutually exclusive – that writing offered Stein ample opportunity for scientific experimentation. Steven Meyer gives a detailed account of this:

Instead of being modelled on scientific experimentation, her [Stein's] writing turns out to be a form of experimental science itself. It is not just

that her ideas about writing were influenced by science; she reconfigured science as writing and performed scientific experiments *in* writing (Meyer 2001, xxi, emphasis in original).

For Meyer, Stein's move to literature should not be seen as a complete methodological break. Rather writing is seen, by Meyer, as a new form in which Stein could continue to perform 'experimental science'.

### **Samuel Beckett and the Psychological Experiment**

Stein's literary experiments came to the attention of Samuel Beckett, and what Beckett recognised in Stein's writing was the way in which it brought language down to earth, making it material and permeable. In a much-discussed 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett contrasted James Joyce's 'apotheosis of the word' with Stein's 'Logographs' in which 'the texture of the language has at least become porous' (Beckett 1983, 172). What I think Beckett apprehends in Stein are, in Armstrong's phrase, 'moments of linguistic breakdown or systematic overload' – moments in which the capacity of language to make sense is stretched. Stein's writing, for Beckett, is notable for its capacity to change understandings of what language is and does. It does not extend the boundaries of artistic practice so much as it interrogates our conception of a particular topic: language. In this way Beckett's understanding of Stein's writing is close to my understanding of a literary experiment. Stein though, Beckett speculates, produced this effect 'quite by chance' and retained a fairly naive view of language: 'the unfortunate lady (is she still alive?) is doubtlessly still in love with her vehicle' (172).

For his own part, Beckett suggests that he wants to bring the word into disrepute 'with full knowledge and intent' (172-3). In the same letter, he suggests that language appears to him 'like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the Nothingness) lying behind it' (171). There are a number of directions in which this idea could be taken and I would argue that these directions correspond to significant developments in the history of Beckett criticism. In the Kaun letter Beckett states that language is material and questions what lies behind this 'terrible materiality' (172). But what does Beckett

think lies behind language? In one phase of Beckett criticism, it might have been thought an immaterial space of the mind. This phase is what Ulrika Maude calls ‘the first wave of Beckett scholarship’, which ‘read Beckett as a transcendental writer who subscribed to a Cartesian dualism’ (Maude 2009, 1).<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, one might accentuate Beckett’s speculation that there is nothing behind language and adopt the more poststructuralist view exemplified in studies such as Steven Connor’s *Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988), and Leslie Hill’s *Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words* (1990). This would be to argue that Beckett (aporetically) apprehends the absence of a transcendent meaning, and is concerned with the interminable play of language and signs – the instability of verbal meaning. In this study, though, I want to follow a more recent trend in Beckett scholarship. This trend, represented by critics such as Anthony Uhlmann (2006) Ulrika Maude (2009), Laura Salisbury (2012) and Dirk Van Hulle (2014) might be thought of as less word-centric insofar as it thinks beyond readings of Beckett that portray him as a kind of nominalist. In these studies, Beckett’s work does not pursue some metaphysical essence behind the veil of language, and neither does it wholly accept that there is nothing beyond language and discourse. Instead, Beckett’s interest in language forms one part of a wider investigation of human experience. In this line of thought, Beckett is concerned with the failure of linguistic meaning, but also with other kinds of meaning that might exist alongside, or emerge out of, this failure. Beckett’s concern with speech and writing, here, can co-exist with interests in other kinds of human activity.<sup>8</sup>

This interest in human activity, I contend, is where we might find a close relationship between Beckett’s work and the practices of experimental psychology. Armstrong is right to point out that experimental psychology has always been interested in the ‘limits of language’ (how language is, or is not, understood, produced or learned) but much psychological research has obviously also been carried out on a variety of non-verbal aspects of human

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<sup>7</sup> Here, we might look to works by critics such as Hugh Kenner (1959), John Fletcher (1967), and Lawrence Harvey (1970).

<sup>8</sup> Another approach that has been taken, here, is the consideration of Beckett’s relationship with phenomenology. This is a concern that I will touch on in this study. For a more detailed account, though, one can look to Maude and Feldman’s 2009 collection *Beckett and Phenomenology*. Alternatively, for an approach that is more focused on Beckett’s drama, see Stanton B. Garner Jr.’s discussion of Beckett in *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Garner Jr. 1994, 18-38); or Anna McMullan’s *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (2012).

experience. In this study, for instance, I will assay the ways in which psychologists have gone about studying processes such as visual and auditory perception, selective attention and mental imagery. Though I will point out some differences, it is my contention that there are striking similarities between experimental psychology's investigation of these processes and the practices of Beckett. But if this is the case, one might ask, from where did this commonality derive? Certainly Beckett's personal engagement with early psychology was not as substantial as Stein's. The evidence for Beckett's interest in experimental psychology is limited to some notes taken from R. S. Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (1931) and Jean Paul Sartre's *L'Imagination* (1936) (Feldman 2006, 102-113; Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 210-11). Woodworth offers a broad summary of early psychological theories and methods, while Sartre's study briefly outlines early psychological approaches to the image. Thus, especially during his later life, Beckett's knowledge of experimental psychology was presumably both minimal and outdated. Nevertheless, engagements with experimental psychology have been recognised throughout the oeuvre. Matthew Feldman has argued that 'the entire opening exchange in *Murphy* is an artistic rendering' of Beckett's 1930s notes on Gestalt psychology' (Feldman 2009, 103). And Laura Salisbury has suggested that, in later works such as *Watt* (largely written during the Second World War but first published in 1953) and *Molloy* (1951), Beckett challenges Gestaltists by 'drawing attention to the sheer fatiguing work involved in sifting figure from ground' (Salisbury 2010, 357). Similarly, as we will see momentarily, Ulrika Maude has argued that Beckett's late drama consistently draws on the behaviourist psychology pioneered by John Broadus Watson (Maude 2014, 85-87). To say that Beckett's work engages with experimental psychology, then, would not be novel or controversial.

However, my interest lies in the extent to which the psychological experiment comes to inform Beckett's own experimental methods, and ultimately what these methods can be seen to achieve. One school of thought on the subject would suggest that, for Beckett, psychology merely acted as 'fodder for the writing process' (Feldman 2006, 102). This is the view put forward by Rubin Rabinovitz who highlights a tension between Beckett's introspective methods and those used by psychologists:

Modern psychologists seldom use introspection when gathering data for analysis. Given that individuals have direct access only to their own minds, introspection does not provide the intersubjectively verifiable data necessary for scientific generalizations. Hence psychologists prefer to observe others. (Rabinovitz 1992, 184).

Thus, for Rabinovitz, the modern psychologist observes others and analyses their behaviour in order to make 'scientific generalizations'. For Beckett though, Rabinovitz continues, this method was unsuitable. This is because Beckett's literature is concerned with 'the most profound levels of mental reality' and in these levels there 'are issues that can no longer be dealt with logically':

The mind deals with flurries of fleeting images confused, distorted, and disorganized. Consequently, there comes a time when Beckett turns away from rational methods and employs a more subjective approach (185).

Rabinovitz suggests that, in Beckett's oeuvre, there is a preference for the observation of inner self over the observation of others. Psychological concepts, from this perspective, might have served as inspiration but they could not give Beckett the insight into the 'profound levels of mental reality' that his art required. Rabinovitz concludes: 'though Beckett sometimes touches on a wide range of psychological concepts, he is also ready to abandon them when they become superfluous' (186).<sup>9</sup>

I agree with some aspects of Rabinovitz's argument. I will not be arguing, for example, that Beckett's work is concerned with producing 'physical models to describe mental reality' (184). Nevertheless, there are a number of points that this thesis will take issue with. First, Rabinovitz seems to make the assumption that Beckett is exclusively concerned with 'the most profound levels of mental reality'. I am not sure this is the case. I agree that some of Beckett's 'characters are engaged in solitary quests that represent journeys of self-discovery', and that some 'of the disputes between shadowy figures can be interpreted as inner arguments within a single mind' (185). But I don't think this means Beckett's

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<sup>9</sup> Other critics have argued that Beckett's work is openly hostile to certain aspects of experimental psychology. Horst Breuer, for example, has argued that Beckett 'irreverently avails himself' of the mechanical approach of the scientist and 'satirizes the academic earnest' of psychological experiments (Breuer 2006, 316).



work completely eschews an interest in how subjects interact with the external world.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, I will argue that this process becomes a central theme in Beckett's work. More simply, if Beckett is purely interested in introspection and uninterested in the external world, why produce work *for* others? To some extent, Beckett's putting his work *out there* must imply a need to find out how particular stimuli affect the external world. To take one example (which I discuss in chapter 1), Beckett's stipulation that the speech in *Not I* should be 'addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience' suggests an engagement with the audience's physiological and psychological response to the given stimulus (Harmon 1998, 283). Thus, I do not think Beckett's process is so far removed from that of Rabinovitz's 'modern psychologist'. Second, partly because of the time at which he was writing, I think Rabinovitz gives a problematically limited account of 'the modern psychologist'. He seems to define the psychologist by the attitude taken towards introspection, suggesting that, by definition, the modern psychologist is largely uninterested in introspection. This may be true for a behaviourist such as John Broadus Watson but it certainly does not hold for psychology as a whole. Methods of introspection were practiced by early psychologists such as William James, Wilhelm Wundt and Edward Titchener, all of whom Beckett read about in Woodworth (Trinity College Dublin MS 10971/7; TCD MS 10971/8). Though, as I will discuss, the advent of behaviourism saw these methods fall out of fashion in the early to mid-twentieth century, they are now recognised to have made an important contribution to modern psychology. In a recent survey of the practices of scientific psychology, for example, Tim Shallice and Richard Cooper call the phenomenological work carried out by early psychologists: 'islands of progress in a sea of ignorance' (Shallice and Cooper 2011, 3). Shallice and Cooper go on to bemoan the fact that the 'ideology of behaviourism' meant that these advances were ignored for a large part of the twentieth century (3). Rabinovitz's notion of 'modern' psychology probably reflects mid twentieth-century psychology's discounting of introspection. But, for psychology as it stands today, introspection is not such a dirty word. As we will see, particularly with regards to the topic of mental imagery, introspection has been an important, if not central, part of experimental psychology throughout its history. More

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<sup>10</sup> Chapter 6 will cover this question in more detail. I will discuss, for example, Dirk Van Hulle's (2014) view that Beckett's work anticipates ideas relating to 'the extended mind'.

fundamentally, for both the aesthetic and the psychological experimenter, introspection is a source of ideas. In the genesis of their experiments, each necessarily draws on their own experience for inspiration and then envisions how a particular experiment would work in the laboratory, or on page, stage or screen. Thus, I do not think Beckett can be distanced from psychology on the grounds that Rabinovitz uses. This thesis will be a re-assessment of the relationship between Beckett's process and the process of the experimental psychologist. I hope that it also contributes to a wider discussion of twentieth-century literature's relation to the scientific experiment.

### **Beckett, Experimental Psychology and Psychoanalysis**

It is important to note that Beckett's reading of experimental psychology ran closely alongside his study and experience of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Indeed, in Beckett's reading, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were nowhere near so far removed from experimental psychology as they are often thought to be.<sup>11</sup> In Woodworth's book, for example, psychoanalysis is defined as a school of psychology along with behaviourism and Gestalt. Like behaviourism, Beckett noted, psychoanalysis was a 'reaction against "consciousness" psychology of 19<sup>th</sup> century' and, he continues, both approaches sought to 'humanise psychology' (TCD MS 10971/7/7). It is my contention, then, that Beckett did not read psychoanalysis and experimental psychology as distinct disciplines but as different ways of investigating human experience, each having particular strengths and weaknesses. In this way, he did not have to decide between behaviourism, psychoanalysis, and any other school, but could merely pick out the bits that he found interesting from each. Furthermore, as Matthew Feldman points out, 'Beckett's notes on psychology must be viewed in terms of a larger self-education process during the interwar years', which took in philosophy, theology

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<sup>11</sup> It is commonly recognised that there was a split between therapeutic and experimental psychology at the end of the nineteenth century (Rylance 2000, 5-6). As well as the establishment of psychological laboratories across the world, the period saw what Rylance terms the 'growth of therapeutic sub-specialization' (5-6). In effect, the practice of treating those with psychological ailments or pathologies, and that of attaining psychological knowledge through experimentation grew apart and became different professions.

and other branches of science (Feldman 2006, 78). 'No inflexible barrier', Feldman argues, 'should be erected to separate the "Philosophy-" from "Psychology Notes"'; and neither set of notes should be severed from the 'vital period in which they were transcribed' (80). Beckett's study of psychology, then, may well be seen as one part of a broad intellectual survey which enabled him to eventually find his own methods of experimentation. But with this being said, I want to argue that psychology offered Beckett a particularly important set of ideas. Psychology introduced Beckett, not only to a collection of methods with which to explore conscious experience, but also to the idea that human activity extended beyond consciousness. This is evident at the beginning of the Woodworth notes. Psychoanalysis, Beckett writes, practices the 'apotheosis of unconscious', while behaviourism moves towards the 'rejection of consciousness altogether' (TCD MS 10971/7/7). Beckett knew that psychology was, historically, interested in consciousness. He would go on to note the methods by which introspectionist psychologists such as Edward Titchener had sought to explore conscious experience empirically. However, it is crucial to note that psychology showed Beckett a number of methods by which one could study human activity without focusing on consciousness.

Of course, different schools of psychology sought to do this in very different ways. Psychoanalysis, Beckett learned, worked with the view that much of one's psychic material is repressed and so ordinarily unavailable to conscious experience. Thus, in the analytic situation, through methods such as relaxation and 'talking out', one aimed to 'repeat as a current experience that which has been repressed' (10971/7/13). Behaviourist psychology, by contrast, took its cues from physiology and sought to study human performance without reference to conscious experience. As Beckett noted, this approach was given great impetus by Ivan Pavlov's finding of the 'conditioned reflex' in his famous experiments with dogs (10971/7/8). In Pavlov's experiments, dogs were exposed to a certain sound every time they were given food and eventually the sound alone was enough to make the dogs salivate. Consequently, the sound became an instrument with which to exert control over the dogs (Woodworth 2013, 56-58). Watson's behaviourism, Beckett noted, applied the 'conditioned reflex concept to all human habit formation' (TCD MS 10971/7/8). The crucial point here is that the individual (human or animal) responds to many stimuli

without having to think about it. Thus, as Watson put it, human activity can be studied, not in terms of consciousness, but ‘in terms of stimulus and response, in terms of habit formation, in terms of habit integration and the like’ (Watson 1913, 166-7).

Of these approaches, Beckett criticism has evidently tended to acknowledge the influence of the former over the latter. There is an expansive body of commentary that considers Beckett’s relationship with psychoanalysis,<sup>12</sup> but considerably fewer critics have addressed the significance of behaviourism and other branches of experimental psychology. There are two main reasons for this. First, historically, literary critics have been more interested in literature’s relationship with psychoanalysis than with other branches of psychology. Judith Ryan writes: ‘when we think of the relation between psychology and literature most of us think of Freudian psychology or one of its more recent modifications, such as that of [Jacques] Lacan’ (Ryan 1991, 1).<sup>13</sup> Second, in the case of Beckett, there is good biographical evidence to highlight the author’s interest in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. It has long been known, for example, that Beckett undertook psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion at the recommendation of his friend Geoffrey Thompson (Feldman 2006, 88). Moreover, Beckett’s ‘Psychology Notes’ were compiled during the time of these sessions, and the overall weighting of the notes shows a clear bias towards psychoanalysis. As Feldman observes, it is only the presence of notes taken from Woodworth’s book that allows us to call this ‘corpus of material the “Psychology Notes” rather than the “Psychoanalysis Notes”’ (102). In spite of this imbalance, I argue that it would be unwise to discount the importance of other forms of psychology to Beckett’s work. To be clear, I do not see this as a matter of either/or. The practices of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were undoubtedly influential for Beckett, and they continue to help us come to an understanding of Beckett’s texts (as well as literature more generally). This, though, should not lead us to

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<sup>12</sup> To give a few examples: Barbara Shapiro (1969); Didier Anzieu (1994); Phil Baker (1997), J.D. O’Hara (1997) Ciaran Ross (2011). Also, we might look to a special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* entitled *Beckett & La Psychanalyse & Psychoanalyse* (Houppermans Buning and Butler 1996).

<sup>13</sup> On a similar note, Rylance observes: ‘for many cultural historians and literary critics, psychoanalysis has long been considered the branch of psychology most suited to humanistic enquiry. In part, this is a reaction to the ascendancy of experimentalism, because psychoanalysis has been seen to have a more “personalist” orientation, next to the steely science’ (Rylance 2000, 8). Though, as books such as Ryan’s and Rylance’s exemplify, the relationship between literature and other branches of psychology has received more attention from the 1990s onwards.

ignore the relationship between literary writers such as Beckett and experimental psychology. In the context of Beckett's work, it is my argument that the approaches were frequently drawn together by a common interest. In psychoanalysis, as in experimental psychology, there is a concern with positioning and stimulating the human body in ways that facilitate new understandings of experience and performance. In psychoanalysis, as I discuss in chapters 1, 2 and 3, this manifested in particular stipulations regarding the therapeutic setting. Here the aim was to induce experience which might bring to the level of consciousness that which had been repressed. In experimental psychology, though, the idea was taken further. Experimenters have continually found new and innovative ways of testing and manipulating the human body, with the ultimate aim of finding out what the human can do and how this performance is experienced. Through experimentation, the psychologist aims to bring to light hitherto unknown capacities, effects and affective responses. This is the tradition in which I want to place Beckett's work and, in the final part of this introduction, I will begin to demonstrate this through a reading of the television play *Ghost Trio* (1976).

### **Stimulus-Response and the Influence of Psychoanalysis in *Ghost Trio***

*Ghost Trio*, I argue, incorporates Beckett's interest in both the inter-personal investigation of subjectivity that proceeds within psychotherapy, and the more objective approach of the behaviourist stimulus-response experiment. There is some critical precedence for this reading. Critics such as Catherine Russell (1989) have recognised the play's resonances with psychoanalytic theory (particularly that of Lacan), while more recent critics have noticed the influence of behaviourism throughout Beckett's later drama. Ulrika Maude, for example, recognises the influence of behaviourism in the way that Beckett subjects 'his characters to stimulus-response experiments' (Maude 2013, 85). Maude, here, points to 1963's *Play* in which the three protagonists appear to be 'trained to spew out language at the instigation of the beam of a spotlight, conditioned to speak when the light hits' the giant urns in which they reside (86). I find the link with behaviourism convincing here but one might also recognise elements from Beckett's study of psychoanalysis. As Beckett noted, the 'free association' or

'talking-out' method was fundamental to psychoanalytic practice and this undoubtedly resonates with the verbal expulsions of *Play* (TCD MS 10971/7/13). Similarly, in *Ghost Trio*, Beckett's protagonist seems to be subjected to a kind of stimulus-response experiment but one can still see the influence of psychoanalysis. In the play, a female voice (V) observes and commentates on the behaviour of a male figure (F). In part 1 of the play, the 'Pre-action', V introduces the 'familiar chamber' and the few things within it: a window, a door, a pallet, the floor (Beckett 2006, 409). She seems to have complete control over this space. Critics such as Graley Herren (2007) and Colin Gardner (2012) have compared this controlled environment to that of the television studio. I would add to this the setting of a scientific laboratory. In a description of Pavlov's conditioning experiments, Woodworth describes Pavlov's use of 'a special conditioned reflex laboratory' for his experiments (Woodworth 2013 58). The conditioned response, it was observed, could be 'inhibited by any distracting stimulus such as disturbs the dog or makes him investigate' (58, emphasis in original). With this in mind, Pavlov made 'elaborate provisions for excluding extraneous sights, sounds, odors, gusts of air, etc. (58). The environment in *Ghost Trio* also seems set up to exclude extraneous distractions. More generally, the defining of the environment is also important in the context of an experiment because it allows for the study to be repeated and the results verified. There is emphasis on the idea that the action to follow is not limited to one geographical position but can be repeated anywhere if the same elements are put in place. I am not trying to argue, here, that the scene of *Ghost Trio* is a Pavlovian laboratory (there are numerous interpretations one could make) but I would suggest that elements within the 'Pre-action' recall the approaches taken by Pavlov and Watson.

What one might also question with regards to the Pre-action, is whether the audience are themselves subjects in a stimulus-response experiment. At the beginning of the play, V seems to address a television audience directly:

Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. (*Pause.*)  
 Good evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. (*Pause.*) It  
 will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens (Beckett 2006, 408).

The behaviour of the television audience is brought into question here. When asked to 'kindly tune accordingly' it is implied that there is the possibility that the

addressee could be unkind and not tune accordingly. If the addressee is assumed to be a television viewer, Beckett seems to be drawing attention to the viewer's freedom to adjust the settings on the television set. Colin Gardner suggests something of this when he argues that *Ghost Trio* 'introduces the idea of the televisual *mise en scène* as a pure abstract object, something which may in principle be manipulated by the viewer through controlling volume, colour, hue and brightness' (Gardner 2012, 126). But the possibility for manipulation works both ways. There is also a sense in which V's request speaks to the television's capacity to control the human subject. When V states that her voice is faint and asks her addressee to 'tune accordingly' there is the implication that her voice can only remain faint if the volume is not increased. If the voice is going to be faint, the addressee must co-operate. However, as Steven Connor suggests the 'optimum' volume demanded is 'slightly uncomfortable' (Connor 2014, 79). In the usual way, one uses the volume so as not to strain to hear what is being said on the television. V is asking her addressee to set the volume to a level at which they will have to strain. The voice is asking the addressee to do something quite unintuitive and giving no reason for her demand. She does not explain why her voice is faint, only emphasises that it should be so. The atmosphere of the opening of the play is experimental in a sense that goes beyond formal innovation. Beckett is experimenting with the television's capacity to manipulate its audience.<sup>14</sup> Here, Beckett seems to explore a tension identified by Jonathan Crary between two attitudes towards the television viewer. On the one hand, the conviction that 'television viewers constitute a hypothetical community of rational and volitional subjects' (Crary 1999, 72). On the other, the position 'that human subjects have determinate psychophysiological capacities and functions that might be susceptible to technological management' (72).

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<sup>14</sup> The concern with manipulating behaviour raises a question of observation and measurement. As Jonathan Bignell notes Beckett's work for television addresses 'the dynamics of viewership' but Beckett himself does not seem to have been interested in the detail of how actual viewers responded to his plays (Bignell 2009, 176). However, Bignell's work shows the extent to which the responses of viewers to Beckett's works for television were being observed and measured by the institutions that screened them (176-87). At this point, the concern was largely with the audience's impressions of the play (whether they liked it or not). Works such as *Ghost Trio*, though, point to a different type of viewer research which seeks to observe responses more exactly and directly (measuring, for example whether the sound is turned up or down).

The link with the stimulus-response experiment becomes even more salient in the second part of the play. The 'Action', presents V's attempt to fulfil Watson's stated aim of predicting responses to certain stimuli. Through stimulus-response experiments, Watson argued, psychologists could 'learn general and particular methods by which behaviour may be controlled' (Watson 1913, 166-7). In this account, learning how to control human behaviour must be carried out through a process of observation. The individual is exposed to certain stimuli with responses being monitored. If this is done enough, the school will eventually ascertain: 'such data and laws that, given the stimulus psychology can predict the response; or, on the other hand, given the response, it can specify the nature of the effective stimulus' (167). This process of predicting responses to certain stimuli is played out in *Ghost Trio*. V is able to predict the behaviour of F when he is exposed to a certain sound. V tells us that F 'will now think he hears her' (Beckett 2006, 410). A sound has been introduced but the audience is not exposed to the sound that F hears. It is clear only that it is a sound which F associates with an anonymous 'her'. V has control over the application of this sound and also knows that it is not 'her' in reality. There is an element of conditioning in this. V has identified a sound that F associates with 'her'. The use of this sound alone now prompts F to exhibit the behaviour appropriate to hearing her. This behaviour takes the form of a movement: F 'raises head sharply, turns still crouched to door, fleeting face, tense pose. 5 seconds' (410). Importantly, the prompting of this behaviour is repeatable. V gives the stimulus twice and both times it gets the same response. After the second response, V is able to predict a series of movements that F will make around the chamber: 'Now to door' (F goes to door), 'Open' (F pushes door open), 'Now to window' (F goes to window), 'Open' (F pushes window open) (410). This is Watson's ideal. V seems to have acquired the knowledge of F's behaviour to be able to predict his responses to a certain situation. So much is this the case that it might appear as though V has total control over F. However, this level of prediction and control does not persist. After going to the pallet, as V predicted, F goes to a mirror and looks at his face in it. V gives a '[surprised] Ah!' She has not predicted this (410-11). Now, within the experimental environment, the fact that V has not been able to predict F's behaviour completely is not a major problem. V, it seems, is still ascertaining empirical data about the habits of F through continued observation.



Thus, the change in behaviour may be seen to aid the establishment of more thorough models of prediction and control.

Things become more complicated, though, when one considers the mirror to which F is drawn. First it should be noted that V did not introduce the mirror when she was outlining the environment in the Pre-action. Unlike Pavlov, who made sure that any 'distracting stimulus' was removed from his laboratory, V has allowed an alien object to interfere with her controlled environment. We do not know how the mirror has got into the chamber and its mysterious presence gives the space an uncontrollable specificity. But of course F's interest in the mirror also hints at his own self-reflection.<sup>15</sup> There is the sense that we are moving from the objective approach of behaviourism towards the more inter-personal investigations of psychoanalysis. This coincides with an increased focus on F. At the beginning of the play, we are invited to speak of F largely in terms of behaviour. F is presented mainly through a long shot and the emphasis is on what he does:

*F is seated upon a stool, bowed forward, face hidden, clutching with both hands a small cassette (Beckett 2006, 409).*

However, in the second part of the play we see a close-up of F's face in the mirror, and at the end of the play the face becomes the focal point:

*With growing music move in slowly to close up of head bowed right down over cassette now held in arms and invisible. Hold till end of Largo.*

*Silence. F Raises head. Face seen clearly for second time. 10 seconds (413-4).*

In the published text Beckett gives no direction to illuminate F's expression. However, in the German production he breaks into a smile, of sorts. I will address the question of facial expression in Beckett's drama more thoroughly in chapter two but here I merely want to suggest that the increasing focus on the face in *Ghost Trio* indicates a move away from the stimulus-response experiment towards the psychoanalytic case history. We move away from V's concern with F's behaviour and are instead given a more intimate perspective on F. Key here, is the question of who the 'her' that F thinks he hears might be

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<sup>15</sup> Russell, here, discusses Beckett's use of the mirror in light of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage (Russell 1989, 25).

– a lost love perhaps – and how he feels as he waits for her. But the link with psychoanalysis is stronger than this. As Friedrich Kittler observes, the case histories of psychoanalysis were distinguished from literary productions by the fact that they interrogated the ‘depths of the soul’ without portraying ‘the identities of the persons described to readers’ (Kittler 1990, 287). They sought to reveal psychic realities while, for mainly practical reasons, concealing biographical detail. *Ghost Trio* works in this tradition. F is an anonymous figure and we know nothing of his background, but we do observe him as he awaits a lost other and, by the end of the play, his face is presented in intimate detail.<sup>16</sup> In Beckett’s literary experiment, elements of the behaviourist stimulus-response experiment are interwoven with elements of the psychoanalytic case study.

### The Scope of the Study

*Ghost Trio* is positioned at the heart of this study’s period of focus and it encapsulates many of the concerns that will run through this thesis. To some extent it can be seen as an experiment on how we perceive and attend to sensory information. We have seen the extent to which the play is concerned with the ways in which both F and the audience see and hear. The first section of the study will consider this element of Beckett’s work further through the reading of three theatrical works of the 1970s: *Not I* (1972), *That Time* (1976) and *Footfalls* (1976). In chapter 1, I will consider the case of *Not I*, focusing on speech perception and comprehension. Chapter 2 discusses face reading and selective attention in the context of *That Time*. Finally, chapter 3 looks carefully at the concept of inattention in twentieth-century culture and argues that *Footfalls* contributes to the study of this concept. All of these works, I will argue, show perception and attention as effortful, straining, and partial processes. In this way, Beckett helps us understand the fallible labour involved in apprehending and comprehending the world. But, as was the case with *Ghost Trio*, it will also be my argument that these plays engage with a tradition

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<sup>16</sup> A complication arises here when one considers how the face is conceived in Freudian psychoanalytic practice. I will consider this problem in more detail in chapter 2.

concerned with the representation of an individual's life.<sup>17</sup> Thus the section will consider how two aspects of modernity interact within Beckett's plays: the modernity of information processing (how we perceive, attend to and perform in the world), and the modernity of self-authorship (how we construct ourselves as unified – and marketable – individuals).

If the first section considers the ways in which we form impressions of the world in real time, the second focuses on how these impressions stay with us when the original sensory stimuli have been extinguished. These chapters all focus on the topic of mental imagery. In *Ghost Trio*, as we have seen, F thinks he hears a mysterious 'her'. However, because this 'her' never materialises, there is a question of whether F is perceiving a sound which he thinks is 'her', or whether he is imagining or recalling the sound. It is this problematizing of the distinction between the percept and the mental image that animates the chapters of the second section. Chapter 4 assesses the ways in which the mental image has been defined in Beckett criticism, placing Beckett's image between the aesthetic ideas of the Romantics, and more scientific attitudes towards mental imagery. This is punctuated by a reading of the 1982 television play *Nacht und Träume*. The approach defined in chapter 4 is then developed in chapter 5 in which I argue that the late prose texts *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) and *Worstward Ho* (1982) represent attempts to find a vocabulary with which to discuss the mental image. The study closes with a discussion of imagery and isolation in chapter 6. Focusing on *Company* (1979), I will suggest that Beckettian isolation functions as a site of both phenomenological exploration and psychophysiological manipulation. Again, the chapter will consider the link between individuality and psychological investigation. I will question how Beckett's concern with the process of mental imagery interacts with his interest in conceptions of the modern, isolated individual.

A final point to make in this introduction is one of period and medium. Though this thesis will take in the entirety of Beckett's oeuvre, I will concentrate mainly on a series of texts that begins with 1972's *Not I* and runs through to Beckett's very late works in the 1980s. I have chosen this late period of Beckett's life because, by this time, he had produced work for a wide variety of

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<sup>17</sup> As Anna McMullan (2010) writes, 'the need to be seen, or to tell or listen to the story of a life drives these plays' (McMullan 2010, 108).

media. In addition to his famous works for page and stage,<sup>18</sup> Beckett had, by the beginning of the period in question, worked with film (1965's *Film*), radio (for example, 1959's *Embers*) and television (*Eh Joe* in 1966). Thus, as well as using words as a vehicle with which to 'get to those things (or the Nothingness) lying behind' them, Beckett had long been working with the aesthetics of sound and vision. If these developments did not exactly allow Beckett to move beyond the 'terrible materiality' of words, they certainly presented him with alternatives. As we have seen, *Ghost Trio* employs words but it also uses the medium of television to experiment on topics such as sound, body movement, and facial expression. It will be my argument that Beckett's adaptation to a variety of media in this period allowed him to experiment in a sense that goes beyond aesthetic innovation. Beckett's aesthetic experiments, I suggest, have the potential to enrich our understanding of how the human perceives, attends to, and imagines the world.

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<sup>18</sup> Most famously on page, *The Unnamable* (1953) and on stage *Waiting for Godot* (1953).

## Chapter 1

### Attention and Speech Perception in *Not I*

In *Suspensions of Perception* (1999) Jonathan Crary argues that there was ‘an explosion of research and debate’ on the topic of attention in the late nineteenth century (Crary 1999, 23). This, for Crary, was crucial to the development of experimental psychology. Crary suggests that ‘attention is not just one of many topics examined experimentally by late nineteenth-century psychology’ (25). Instead, ‘a subject whose attentiveness was the site of observation, classification and measurement’ was presupposed in most of the discipline’s key areas of research (25). For Crary, this emphasis on attention marks a fundamental cultural shift. He argues that, in Western society, ‘new imperatives of attentiveness’ were emerging which aimed to make the perceiving body ‘productive and orderly, whether as a student, worker or consumer’ (22-3). It is no coincidence, by Crary’s account, that psychological research on attention emerged alongside an economic system that demanded the ‘attentiveness of a subject in a wide range of new productive and spectacular tasks’ (29). ‘Inattention’, Crary argues, ‘within a context of new forms of large scale industrialized production began to be treated as a danger and a serious problem’ (13). The ‘nascent field of scientific psychology’ worked within a culture where the human subject was asked to attend to ‘an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information’ (13-14).

Moving into the twentieth century and beyond, Crary suggests, that ‘the problem of attention has remained more or less within the center of institutional empirical research’ since the 1880s (33). However, the empirical study of attention has undergone significant changes in the period between the end of the nineteenth century and today. First, the rise of behaviourism undoubtedly lessened the degree to which psychologists studied the concept of attention in the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Attention was problematic for behaviourists

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<sup>19</sup> Crary does rehearse the argument that the hegemony of behaviourism’ in the early twentieth century marginalized attention ‘as an explicit object of research’ (33-34). However, for Crary this was more a matter of ‘terminological polemics’, than methodological substance. He insists that concepts of attention were important to the methods of behaviourism as ‘the entire regime of stimulus-response research was founded on the attentive capacities of a human (or even animal) subject’ (34).

because, unlike overt responses, attentional processes are not directly observable. One cannot measure a drop in attentiveness to an object in the same way as, say, a drop in body temperature. Instead, the experimenter has to make inferences from behaviour, or ask for introspective reports. Thus, the concept of attention did not fit easily into the early twentieth-century behaviourist paradigm. The concept, however, becomes important again in the period after the Second World War. Cray glosses the suggestion that 'problems related to the efficient human use of new technology during World War II were in part responsible for a new wave of research into attention' (34). For example, there were practical needs for finding out how long human operators could remain attentive when scanning radar screens (34). Similarly, Shallice and Cooper point to 'a modern approach to the area' of selective attention that begins after the Second World War (Shallice and Cooper 2011, 29). The World Wars had seen the advent of aviation as a mode of war and it was desirable that the pilots operating planes kept contact with those on the ground. But, it was asked: 'how many channels of contact can be maintained with a pilot' (29)? As we will see, this question triggered a wave of research attempting to tackle questions of how we are able to focus on one particular task for an extended period of time, or attend to multiple tasks simultaneously.

For a variety of theoretical and practical reasons, then, the concept of attention has been prominent in the history of experimental psychology. In the next three chapters, I want to consider the extent to which it has influenced twentieth-century aesthetic experimentation, particularly that of Samuel Beckett. Focusing on three of Beckett's plays from the 1970s – *Not I*, *That Time* and *Footfalls* – this section will compare the way in which attention is approached in experimental psychology to the way in which it operates in Beckett's work. The current chapter will begin by suggesting that Beckett's approaches to attention and those of experimental psychology (as well as more psychoanalytic approaches) are rooted in the ideas of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. It will then move on to an extended discussion of *Not I* in which I consider the play both as a theatrical performance that makes certain attentional demands of its actors and audience, and as a narrative which attends to the life story of a protagonist in a particular way. The chapters that follow will then consider *That Time* and *Footfalls* alongside some more specific

aspects of attention: how we attend to faces and manage competing channels of stimuli in *That Time*, and inattention (how we miss things that are right in front of us) in *Footfalls*. At the heart of the section are two main concerns. First, the way in which both aesthetic and scientific interests in attentional processes fit into a wider modernity. Second, how Beckett's concern with attention works alongside his other aesthetic, political and philosophical concerns.

### **Schopenhauer, Attention and the Limits of Consciousness**

As well as emphasising the degree to which the rise of attention coincided with the advance of capitalism, Crary suggests that developments in philosophy over the course of the nineteenth century played a significant role in inspiring interest in the concept. A key protagonist in this, Crary suggests, was the German philosopher (and favourite of Beckett) Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>20</sup> Schopenhauer, Crary writes, was one of the first to emphasise 'the unstable and specifically *temporal* nature of perception' (Crary 1999, 55, emphasis in original). What Schopenhauer brought to nineteenth-century thought, then, was an increased awareness of the limitations of the human capacity to attend to the world. In the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation* (1844), he stressed the extent to which the human was only capable of concentrating on one thing at a time, and also that the human could only concentrate on one thing for a limited amount of time. 'The intellect', Schopenhauer writes, 'apprehends only successively, and to grasp one thing it must give up another' (Schopenhauer 1966, 137). But even the one thing that is grasped cannot be held for very long:

Just as the eye, when it gazes for a long time at one object is soon not able to see it distinctly any longer because the outlines run into one another, become confused, and finally everything becomes obscure, so also through long continued rumination on *one* thing, our thinking gradually becomes confused and dull, and ends in complete stupor (137-8).

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<sup>20</sup> For an account of Beckett's discursive engagement with Schopenhauer, see Pothast (2008) and Weller (2008). Or for more detail on Beckett's reading of the philosopher, Van Hulle and Nixon (2013, 143-54).

These observations register what Crary calls, ‘the *physiological* conditions of knowledge’ – the idea that perception, thought and knowledge are subject to the materiality of the human body (Crary 1999, 56, emphasis in original). In contrast to Kantian theory, which posits a unifying mechanism that gives coherence to successive perceptions and reflections, Schopenhauer’s line of thought suggests that any semblance of intellectual coherence is contingent upon the workings of a will that is closely linked to the body, and of unstable character (Schopenhauer 1966, 140). Instead of a set of a priori principles, human experience is unified by, what Beckett calls in his ‘Philosophy Notes’, ‘the absolute unreason of objectless will’ (TCD MS 10967/252.1, emphasis in original).

For Crary, the ideas of Schopenhauer not only worked towards ‘the overturning of a Kantian model of synthesis’ but also prompted an interrogation of the primacy of consciousness in human subjectivity (57). By emphasising, distraction, forgetfulness and the stupor, Schopenhauer pointed to the limits of conscious experience, opening up a line of thought which questioned the hitherto inevitable ‘congruence between subjectivity and a thinking “I”’ (58). In effect, Crary is making the argument that Schopenhauer’s work anticipates psychological movements such as psychoanalysis and behaviourism which emphasised non-conscious forms of human activity. But if Schopenhauer’s work gave impetus to the study of a non-conscious subjectivity, it was left for later psychologists, clinicians and artists to put this study into practice. For example, Schopenhauer writes: ‘the idea that is now vividly engrossing my attention is *bound* after a while to have slipped entirely from my memory’ (Schopenhauer 1966, 137). This statement raises a number of questions: to what extent does his being engrossed by the idea imply obliviousness to other matters? For exactly how long does the idea engross attention? And when an idea has slipped from memory can it be retrieved in the future? These were the kinds of questions that would animate both experimental and therapeutic psychology, and also the aesthetic experiments of Samuel Beckett.

Experimental psychology has done much to address the questions raised in the Schopenhauer quotation. In terms of the failures of memory there is a psychological literature that goes back to the work of Herman Ebbinghaus (1885) which investigates the temporalities of forgetting. There also exists an



expansive body of work on vigilance which tests the way in which attention waivers over extended periods of time.<sup>21</sup> Both of these approaches work under the paradigm that the human capacity to acquire, respond to, or store information is temporally-grounded and, in this respect, they can be seen to work in the tradition of Schopenhauer. But the influence of Schopenhauer is most noticeable in studies of selective, or divided attention. Since the end of the nineteenth century, experimenters have investigated the extent to which a subject's attending to one task or stimulus implies the failure to register anything else. For early evidence of this, we only have to look back to the experiment of Stein and Solomons (discussed in the introduction) in which the subject was asked to listen for certain dictated words while their attention was occupied in reading. And for more recent examples one can look to influential experiments by Donald Broadbent (1958) and Neisser and Becklen (1975) which tested whether subjects could select one perceptual channel and inhibit others. All of these experiments questioned whether the human 'apprehends only successively' or is able to pay attention to multiple things at once, but they also consider what humans perform without conscious attention: what tasks or stimuli can be carried out, or responded to, without the subject's thinking about them.

Schopenhauer's anticipation of psychoanalytic thinking is perhaps more commonly recognised. Much critical discussion has evaluated the continuities between Schopenhauer's will and the Freudian unconscious.<sup>22</sup> The resemblance between the two thinkers is most obvious in the degree to which each stresses what Sebastian Gardner calls the 'superficiality of consciousness' (Gardner 1999, 376). In a particularly evocative passage, Schopenhauer compares consciousness to a surface of water, suggesting that the most substantial workings of the mind occur beneath this surface but on occasion 'rise from those depths unexpectedly and to our own astonishment' (Schopenhauer 1966, 135-6). But more than this, the unconscious part of the mind in Schopenhauer's conception is given an agency that is, in some respects, analogous with the Freudian unconscious. For Schopenhauer, the unconscious part of the mind does not consist exclusively of inactive mental

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<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Mackworth (1948).

<sup>22</sup>For example, Gupta (1975); Hamlyn (1988); Henry (1993); Janaway (2010).

contents, but also a will which has the role of 'prohibiting the intellect from having certain representations, by absolutely preventing certain trains of thought from arising' (208). As Gardner points out, this account comes very close to a Freudian model of repression,<sup>23</sup> and it is not hard to see why the link between Schopenhauer and Freud has been made so frequently. One has to be careful, though, not to overstate the connection. While acknowledging the points of contact between his own thought and Schopenhauer's, Freud never suggested that Schopenhauer's work had a major influence on psychoanalysis (Gupta 1975, 721; Hamlyn 1988, 5; Gardner 1999, 379). Indeed, though both emphasised the prevalence of the unconscious in human subjectivity, Freud's work is more systematic, explanatory and, in a sense, scientific. As D. W. Hamlyn points out, Schopenhauer's work has a particular but limited aim: it might be thought of as a 'notable attempt to bring a great number of facets of experience under a unifying conception' (Hamlyn 1988, 10). Schopenhauer, Hamlyn continues, presents 'a way of seeing things' which may or may not ring true, 'but he does not seek to explain particular phenomena' in the manner of a scientist (10-11). Freud, by contrast, produced hypotheses regarding the laws and nature of the unconscious and worked with the assumption that these hypotheses could be evidenced and refined in the analytic situation. One might doubt Freud's methodology but (along with the experimental psychologists) he is addressing questions of systematic detail in a way that Schopenhauer is not. Schopenhauer's philosophy raises questions about the unconscious which Freud's work attempts to answer through practice.

Beckett's literary experimentation, I suggest, might usefully be placed in this tradition of practically investigating Schopenhauer's 'way of seeing things'. As was the case with experimental psychology, and psychoanalysis, Beckett's aesthetic productions seem to explore the way in which the human apprehends only successively and is prone to missing things. But Beckett's investigation was, of course, distinct from those of experimental psychology and psychoanalysis. Rather than seeking to establish exactly what the human subject is capable of doing (with or without conscious attention) in the manner of a behavioural psychologist, or attempting to define the structure of the unconscious with Freud, Beckett worked to enrich our understanding of the

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<sup>23</sup> I will return to this question of repression in chapter 3.

temporal nature of conscious experience. This interest can be traced back to the 'Psychology Notes'. As well as engagements with psychoanalysis and behaviourism, Beckett's notes evidence an interest in 'Existential' or 'Introspectionist' psychology which was primarily concerned with the study of conscious experience. In this approach: 'the essence of psychology is the description of the individual experience. Experience equals existence. Individual is an experiencer, not a performer' (TCD MS 10971/7/8). Matthew Feldman argues that this approach was more 'favourably received' by Beckett than behaviourism, and what I think Beckett saw in the methods of introspective psychology was a way of exploring the unstable and temporally-defined experience that Schopenhauer conceptualised (Feldman 2006, 104). This manifests in Beckett's note on the 'impression method':

Impression Method for defining operation of sense organs by means of subject reactions to stimuli of various kinds. E.g. the "negative after-image": if you steadily look at a coloured spot for 20 or 30 seconds, & then turn your eyes upon a plain grey background, you see a spot of colour complementary to that of original spot - purple for green, blue for yellow, etc. (TCD MS 10971/7/7).

A subject is required to steadily look at a spot for an extended period of time and this process of sustained viewing creates fluctuations and confusions in the subject's vision. This, to some extent, enacts Schopenhauer's account of vision. As in Schopenhauer's account, an extended period of gazing results in things seeming to 'run into one another'.

Beckett's interest, though, goes beyond questions of perception. Like Schopenhauer who pointed out the analogy between sustained perception and rumination, Beckett's writing is interested in the analogy between strains of perception and strains of thought. This can be seen in the unpublished prose fragment 'Long Observation of the Ray' (1975-6). As the title of the piece suggests, the text is concerned with the sustained observation of a mysterious ray of light. The ray is notable for 'its saltatoriality or erratic transfer from one point to another' (University of Reading MS 2909/6). As the subject continuously stares at the ray, it appears to move or jump around. This recalls Beckett's note about the 'Impression Method' insofar as concern lies with the effects of extended visual fixation. We are brought to question whether the ray is

objectively moving from one point to another, or whether this is an illusion produced by prolonged viewing. The eye, one might speculate, is strained because it has nowhere else to look. There are no 'changes of scene' so the eye is unable to re-focus, and this causes the ray's 'erratic transfer' (UoR MS 2909/6). However, this straining of the eye is mirrored in the thinking of the narrating subject, who is drawn to ruminate continually on the movements of the ray. As Steven Connor puts it, the 'eye must "strain" as the mind "struggles"' (Connor 1992, 93). Beckett's experimentation, I want to suggest, would consistently interrogate these struggles and strains of perception and consciousness. If introspective psychology aimed at the 'description' of conscious experience, and psychoanalysis and behaviourism focused on what goes missing from this description, Beckett's writing falls between these approaches. It investigates the conscious experience of missing something – the moments in which one becomes conscious that consciousness is straining to keep up with, or make sense of, the world. Thus, Beckett's aesthetic experiments might be seen to follow Schopenhauer in investigating the subject's capacity to attend to the limitations of conscious experience.

### ***Not I* and the Problem of Attention**

Connor links 'Long Observation of the Ray' to the 'ghostly experiments' that Beckett produced for theatre (86-7). For Connor, 'it is as though Beckett were observing the movements of the spotlight in *Play* at some post-theatrical point long after the three characters which it interrogates have vanished' (86). This experimental treatment of the theatre goes beyond *Play*. Time and again, the theatre of the 1970s demands sustained observation of a single stimulus. One thinks of Listener's face in *That Time*, May's pacing in *Footfalls*, and particularly the speaking mouth in *Not I*. In the original version of *Not I*, of course, the mouth was accompanied by the hooded figure of the Auditor. In later versions, though, with Beckett's approval, the figure was removed leaving an elevated mouth alone on stage. Beckett manipulated lighting conditions in an attempt, one might assume, to fix the audience's eyes on this mouth. In the auditorium, as James Knowlson puts it, 'everything is blacked out except for the illuminous mouth' (Knowlson 1996, 592). Famously, Beckett and other directors of the play have

even requested that the exit signs be turned off (Oppenheim 1994, 111). If the theatrical production is successful, the only source of light should come from the mouth.

In this stipulation of darkness, Beckett's work engages with an aesthetic tradition that stretches back to, at least, the nineteenth century. Crary suggests that Richard Wagner was the first to use darkness as a way of exercising 'control over the attentiveness of an audience' (Crary 1999, 251). For Crary, 'Wagner initiated the idea of near complete darkness as a way of heightening the intensity of lighting effects on stage and preventing peripheral distraction' (251). Experimental psychology, though, gives a new perspective on this use of lighting. This can be seen in an experiment carried out in 1912 by Henry Foster Adams on an illusion known as the 'autokinetic' effect. The illusion works as follows: when only one source of light is available to the eyes, this source of light will appear to move around even though it is objectively still. Adams attempted to capture and measure this effect in an experimental environment. In the experiment, a stationary light was projected on the centre of a wall in a light-tight box at a distance of 200cm from the observer (Adams 1912, 3). The head of the observer was then secured 'firmly in a mouth-bit head rest' and all the lights were turned off (3). 'After a sufficient interval had elapsed for him to get rid of the bright after-glow and after-images', the subject focused on the light on the wall and pressed a key every time a "noteworthy" thing happened to it' (3). The (objectively stationary) light, it was found, moved around significantly for all observers (7).<sup>24</sup>

Though there is no evidence that he knew of this particular experiment, Beckett's reading of early twentieth-century psychology gave him some grounding in the method that Adams is using. Whatever the extent of Beckett's knowledge, though, *Not I* certainly produces the same illusion. Countless audience members have observed that the mouth seems to move around in the darkness.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Beckett's means of producing this effect bear a striking resemblance to those of Adams. Like Adams, Beckett was keen that his stimulus should be presented in darkness at a fixed position. The stage

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<sup>24</sup> This method was also used in a landmark study in social psychology. Sherif (1935) found that the perception of the autokinetic movement was heavily susceptible to social influences.

<sup>25</sup> Accounts of this experience can be found in a number of reviews. For example, Lyn Gardner (2013) recalls how the mouth appears to 'hover and move'.

descriptions, for example, state that Mouth should be positioned '8 feet above stage level' (Beckett 2006, 376). Also, Beckett was sure to leave a gap – 10 seconds in this case – between the lights going off and the observer's attention to the visual stimulus (376). Time is given for the audience to adjust to the darkness and get rid of any after-glows, and after-images. Finally, James Knowlson describes a key problem for any production of *Not I*. This is 'ensuring that the actress playing Mouth does not move her mouth even a few centimetres out of a very tightly focussed spotlight' (Knowlson 1996, 592). Both Beckett and Adams aim for objective stillness in the stimulus so as to emphasise the illusion of movement. However, there is nothing in the script to tell the audience that the mouth's movement is an illusion. The audience is left to decide whether the mouth is objectively moving, or whether it is a trick of the eye. The effect Beckett produces and the methods he uses, then, recall the research of Adams. There is however, a major difference between Beckett's play and Adams's experiment. Adams is keen to measure the illusions – documenting exactly how far the light appears to move and how long one has to be in darkness before the illusion takes effect (5-6). Beckett, by contrast, is not interested in measuring the effect; he merely controls conditions so that an audience is exposed to it. This brings to mind the notes Beckett took on psychological existentialism. In works such as *Not I* and 'Long Observation of the Ray', Beckett is producing descriptions of subjective experience and theatrical spaces in which to investigate these experiences. In *Not I* Beckett produces a visual illusion that tells us something about human performance, namely what happens to vision when one, in Schopenhauer's words, 'gazes for a long time at one object'. The primary concern of Beckett's play, however, is not with the effect of sustained observation on the observer's performance. Instead, Beckett is interested in an experience in which the individual feels the strains of sustained focus and may begin to doubt their eyes – an experience in which one feels the partiality and materiality of their subjective impression of the world.

Another point to make, here, concerns the nature of the work that darkness performs in *Not I*. Up to this point, I have tended to assume that darkness necessarily draws attention to an illuminated stimulus – that the darkness in *Not I* simply fixes attention on the illuminated mouth. This

assumption has also been seen in Crary's account of Wagner's use of darkness and it is observable in accounts of cinematic experience. For example, Steven Shaviro writes:

The darkness of the movie theatre isolates me from the rest of the audience, and cuts off any possibility of "normal" perception. I cannot wilfully focus my attention on this or that. Instead, my gaze is arrested by the sole area of light, a flux of moving images (Shaviro 1993, 47).

Time and again, darkness is assumed to fix attention and the gaze on the 'moving images' that are illuminated. But can darkness also compete for attention? Put another way, rather than serving to focus attention on the illuminated stimulus, can darkness, in fact, draw attention away from that stimulus? I would suggest that the intensity of the darkness that Beckett stipulates for the auditorium is so effective that it can pull against the audience's attention to the speaking mouth. Darkness here might be seen to function as what Stephen Kern has called 'positive negative space', a supposed background that threatens to overshadow the nominal foreground (Kern 2003, 153).

This effect of darkness can work in a number of ways. One can simply be taken in by the degree of darkness and become engaged in exploring the way in which darkness engulfs the body. For example, many observers report the inability to see their hands when put in front of their faces during the performance. Charles Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph* tells us that, in the performance, 'you can't see the hand in front of your face, just the moving lips as the speaker gabbles' (Spencer 2014). Attention, here, seems to be divided between the speech itself and the effects of the darkness. Thus, even as Beckett seems to rid the theatrical environment of distractions by producing complete darkness, a problem of selective attention arises because the darkness itself becomes a channel that one might attend to. The darkness can also be a more chronic distraction. It can be terrifying and produce an impulse to get away from the performance. Indeed, it has been reported that conditions in the auditorium during *Not I* have induced panic attacks in members of contemporary audiences – presumably accustomed to the more partial darkness of the cinema (Lane 2014). In this way, the darkness in *Not I* does not necessarily serve to fix or control the audience's attention. It does not, as Crary

puts it in reference to Wagner's work, 'impose a uniform mode of perception' so as to produce 'social unity' (Crary 1999, 248). Rather, I think the darkness serves to splinter the audience. The potential for darkness to distract from the performance will depend on the individual audience member's capacity to adapt to it. For some, the surrounding darkness will heighten the attention paid to the speaking mouth, but for others it will serve as a significant distraction from events on stage. Any appreciation of the play depends on the nature of an individual's capacity (or incapacity) for sustained gazing and adaptation to darkness. Beckett is emphasising the physiological conditions of aesthetic experience and staging Schopenhauerian problems of attention.

### **Strains of Speech**

In *Not I*, of course, Beckett does not just investigate the situation in which one tries to focus on an immobile, illuminated stimulus for an extended period of time. Rather we are presented with a mouth that speaks at a rapid pace. Thus the play is not only concerned with problems of attention but, more particularly, with our perception of, and attention to, speech. In what follows I will look at *Not I* as an experiment, firstly, on how speakers attends to their own speech and, secondly, the way in which this speech is encountered by others. Twentieth-century experimental psychology would have much to say on these topics and experimenters were particularly inventive in devising methods with which to study the processes by which we produce, hear, see, and comprehend the spoken word. One such method is the experimental task known as speech shadowing, which has been prominent in psychological research since the 1950s. The experimental psychologist William Marslen-Wilson describes his use of the task in the following way:

Speech shadowing is an experimental task in which the subject is required to repeat (shadow) speech as he hears it. When the shadower is presented with a sentence, he will start to repeat it before he has heard all of it. The response latency to each word of a sentence can therefore be measured (Marslen-Wilson 1973, 522).



Shadowing, then, is a way of making the subject's perception of speech observable and measurable. If a subject is merely asked to listen to speech silently, it is difficult to monitor the extent to which the speech is being focused on, or how it is being processed. Shadowing is a way of externalising the process of listening with the aim of studying it. But what is particularly interesting for our purposes is the way in which the shadower is both a perceiver and a producer of speech – they must perceive words and then say them. In his experiment, Marslen-Wilson wanted to measure the proximity at which it was possible to shadow continuous speech, and also test whether close-shadowing subjects understood what they were saying. The experiment asked whether 'very close shadowing' made use of 'normal speech perceptual processes' or activated 'some minimal mode of speech processing' (523). Put another way: were close shadowers simply parroting what they heard, as they heard it? Or, was the speech being processed on semantic and syntactic levels? In the experiment, 'normal prose' was presented binaurally through headphones at a 'normal conversational rate' of 160 words per minute (522). The results showed some variation between individuals. However, seven subjects were found capable of shadowing speech intelligibly at a mean delay of 350 milliseconds with an error rate of less than 7% (522). Marslen-Wilson calculates that these close shadowers were less than a syllable behind the original material.

Next, subjects were given a different passage to shadow but this time the shadowing task was followed by a memory test. Through the memory test, Marslen-Wilson sought to find out the level at which these close shadowers were processing their speech: 'if the close shadower is not using syntactic and/or semantic structure', Marslen-Wilson states, then 'he should not have available to him information that could only derive from these levels of analysis' (522). As it happened, the memory test showed that syntactic/semantic information is 'available to the shadower irrespective of his shadowing latency' (523). Now, Marslen-Wilson recognises that shadowers could produce their output – repeat what they hear – on the basis of low-level, phonetic analysis and perform higher-level analysis of what had been spoken later. If this is the case, he reasons, their shadowing errors 'should be constrained by the syllabic character of the material, but not by its semantic or syntactic character' (523). In

fact, Marslen-Wilson argues, the errors suggested that, no matter how closely the passage was being shadowed, the shadower was processing the content on semantic and syntactic levels. He concludes that 'the errors in general show that the subject's output can be constrained by the preceding context up to and including the word immediately before the error' (523). He goes on: 'all the subjects analyse the material up to semantic level as they repeat it' and this analysis 'helps to determine the ongoing series of perceptual decisions' underlying their shadowing performance – how one perceives the next word will depend on the way in which the previous words have been understood (523).

The first point to make about Marslen-Wilson's experiment is that he is less interested in the experiences of subjects than in what can be inferred from their performances. For example, we are not told whether the subjects *felt themselves* to be comprehending the words as they shadowed; Marslen-Wilson merely suggests that they showed evidence of comprehension when tested. In this way, Marslen-Wilson can be seen to work in a behavioural tradition that focuses on what processes the human can perform, with or without conscious awareness. We might contrast this approach to the one which seems dominant in the text of *Not I*. In *Not I* the protagonist of the text, we are told, speaks without being able to consciously follow what her words are saying. She is in a field on an April morning when all of a sudden things go dark and she starts to lose sentience. After a period in this state, she realizes: 'words were coming... a voice she did not recognize... at first... so long since it had sounded... then finally had to admit... could be none other... than her own... certain vowel sounds... she had never heard elsewhere' (Beckett 2006, 379). Here, the focus is not on the individual's performance but her experience. Words come to the protagonist and she speaks them but she is not aware of comprehending the words on semantic or syntactic levels: we are told that she had 'no idea... what she was saying' (379). Though she can process sounds into words, the protagonist is not aware of the meanings that these words are forming. However, she is aware of the phonetic character of the speech: she can hear 'certain vowels sounds' that distinguish her voice from the voices of others. Thus, as far as the protagonist is aware, she is analysing the speech phonetically but not semantically or syntactically. It is possible that the words the protagonist hears are being processed at higher levels without the

individual's awareness. The text, though, focuses on the peculiar, immediate experience of a protagonist who can hear the sound of her own speech but has 'no idea' what that speech is saying. Beckett's protagonist is primarily an experiencer, not a performer.

But beyond those of performance and experience, Marslen-Wilson's shadowing experiment opens up questions of how we attend to different aspects of our own speech. In experimental psychology this question has been tackled most thoroughly by Willem Levelt (1983; 1989) and more recently Hartsuiker and Kolk (2001). Drawing on the phenomenological observation that humans frequently seek to correct or modify the words they have just spoken, psychological research has frequently emphasised that 'speakers attend to what they are saying and how they say it' (Levelt 1989, 497). Speakers, it is argued, are capable of monitoring every part of their speech from 'the appropriateness of a given word or phrase in the current context', to 'semantic, syntactic, phonological, and prosodic aspects' (Hartsuiker and Kolk 2001, 113-4). However, they do not seem capable of attending to all of these aspects simultaneously. Rather the particular aspect of speech that one attends to seems to fluctuate depending on the context in which one is speaking (Levelt 1989, 498). The context of the protagonist's speech in *Not I* raises some interesting questions here. Rather than moving between levels, the protagonist's attention seems to be stuck on phonological and tactile aspects of speech. The protagonist knows the voice is hers, we are told, because she can feel the words coming out of her:

Suddenly she felt...gradually she felt...her lips moving...imagine!..her lips moving!..as of course till then she had not...and not alone the lips...the cheeks...the jaws...the whole face...all those contortions without which...no speech possible...and yet in the ordinary way...not felt at all...so intent one is...on what one is saying (Beckett 2006, 379).

The protagonist can feel her own speech but not understand it. She is able to hear the sounds and feel where they are coming from, but not take in what is being said. Speech, here, is not heard as pure noise – the protagonist still recognises it as her own speech. Nevertheless, it is not understood in terms of grammatical meaning, but in terms of its sensory content. The protagonist has not decided to focus her attention purely on the feel of speech – she is trying to

'make something of it' – but her focus repeatedly goes back to the 'mouth...lips...cheeks...jaws' (379-80). The narrator contrasts the protagonist's speech in this situation with the 'ordinary way' of speaking in which one is 'so intent' on what is being said that speech is 'not felt at all'. Beckett's text, here, does not dispute the 'ordinary way' of speech monitoring proposed by Levelt, in which one's attention switches between sensation and meaning, form and content.<sup>26</sup> But it does present an extraordinary experience, in which a speaker's attention is fixed on the sensations of speech, rather than the grammatical meaning.

The text's concern with how we attend to our own speech carries into the narration of the protagonist's story, and also the way in which Beckett wanted the text to be spoken on stage. With regards to the first concern, the narrator of the text, Mouth, frequently seems to modify the words that she speaks. Levelt notes that this tendency is quite common: when speakers 'make a mistake, or express something in a less felicitous way', he argues, they frequently 'interrupt themselves and make a repair' (Levelt 1989, 458). This seems to be one of the defining characteristics of Mouth's narration. For example, at first the protagonist is termed a 'tiny little thing', but a few phrases later this is modified to 'tiny little girl': 'in a godfor-...what?...girl?...yes...tiny little girl' (Beckett 2006, 376). What one might question, here, is whether Mouth is modifying her own words, or, alternatively, there is some kind of editorial presence off stage working to make sure that the words Mouth uses are appropriate. The answer to this remains an enigma throughout the play. On one hand, use of the term 'what' seems to suggest someone else is speaking to Mouth but, given that this supposed editorial presence never makes itself observable, one may also conclude that it is internal – *a voice in the head*. If one makes the latter interpretation, a contrast emerges between narrator and protagonist. Where the protagonist cannot attend to the content of her words, the narrator does so to the point of near-constant modification.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of this contrast, however,

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<sup>26</sup> This aspect of the text might bring to mind Beckett's famous observation about Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939): 'Here from *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to' (Beckett 1983, 27, emphasis in original). In this early aesthetic discussion, Beckett seems interested in the different ways in which we can attend to the written word. I would argue that this interest is developed with regards to speech in *Not I*.

<sup>27</sup> A good example of this modification can be found when the narrator attempts to describe the buzzing noise: 'the buzzing...yes...all the time the buzzing...so-called... in the ears...though not in the ears at

the experience of speaking undoubtedly puts a strain on the attentional capacities of narrator and protagonist alike. As the narrator monitors the content of her speech continuously and struggles to find appropriate words, the protagonist that she describes can only attend to her speech on a sensory, phonological level – though she is ‘straining to hear...make something of it’ (Beckett 2006, 380). Beckett’s text presents two different ways of attending to speech but, in both, consciousness is struggling to keep up with the words that are being spoken.<sup>28</sup>

In the text of *Not I*, then, Beckett seems heavily concerned with the strenuous processes by which protagonist and narrator attend to their own speech. But what of the actors playing the role of Mouth? How do they attend to their own words and to what extent do their experiences of speaking mirror those of narrator or protagonist? From the evidence surrounding productions of the play, it seems to have been Beckett’s opinion that the actors should not think about the meaning of what they say. For example, speaking of the advice Beckett gave her on playing Mouth in the play’s premiere, Jessica Tandy states: ‘what it meant was, I found, you must not think what you are saying. It just has to come out’ (Knowlson 1997, 591). Tandy’s emphasis on *not* thinking about the content of the script seems to have carried through to contemporary performances. Lisa Dwan, who has performed the role numerous times in the last few years, states that as she performs: ‘the only way I’m conscious of the script is as a visual aid.. A road map.. All the rest is music, my family, my landscape..me’ [sic] (Dwan, e-mail message to author, 28 March 2015). Because she has rote learned the script, Dwan needs to apply little mental resource to what she is saying, meaning that she can mentally attend to other matters. Of course, just because the actors are not aware of thinking about what they say does not mean that they are not processing their words syntactically and semantically. Higher level analysis of speech could be going on without the actor’s awareness.<sup>29</sup> Beckett, though, seems particularly

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all...in the skull...dull roar in the skull...’ (Beckett 2006, 378). There is the sense that Mouth is constantly reflecting upon the content of the words she uses and modifying them accordingly.

<sup>28</sup> This relationship between the speeches of narrator and protagonist, of course, feeds into the text’s concern with the degree to which Mouth can be identified with the protagonist of whom she speaks. I will return to this question later in the chapter.

<sup>29</sup> Another option, here, may be to look at what is going on at the neural level. Laura Salisbury and Chris Code have taken this approach in reading Beckett’s work alongside the work of neurologist John Hughlings Jackson. In this view, the actor’s speech in *Not I* might be seen as a rote learnt activity that is

interested in creating a disconnect between the actor's thoughts and their speech. In a 1972 letter to the play's first director, Alan Schneider, Beckett speaks of the distinction between 'mind & voice' in the context of the play, suggesting that the speech should be delivered 'without mental control or understanding' (Harmon 1998, 283). Like the protagonist of the text, we are supposed to get the impression that the speaker on stage has no idea what she is saying. This feeling manifests in Douglas Watt's observation that, in the premiere performance of the play, the voice seemed to have been 'torn from its owner' (Watt 1972). Beckett uses the theatrical environment to consider how one might speak without thinking about it and, in doing so, furthers the idea of a non-conscious subjectivity.

But if the actor playing Mouth does not think about what the words of the play mean, what of how those words are spoken? This question was raised by Schneider who asked Beckett for advice on a 'proper tone and, and also a proper tempo for the play' (Harmon 1998, 280). Beckett's response, here, emphasised a particular aspect of the speech over others, namely speed:

I hear it breathless, urgent, feverish rhythmic, panting along without undue concern with intelligibility. Addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience which should, in a sense *share her bewilderment* (283, emphasis in original).

This stipulation of breathless urgency in the monologue's delivery seems to have been reiterated when Beckett directed the London production in 1973, working with Billie Whitelaw in the role of Mouth. In her biography, Whitelaw writes of herself and Beckett's mutual feeling that the delivery should be very fast. This was in opposition to the producer Anthony Page who wanted the play to be performed at a speed that the audience could easily understand: 'it seems that Tony wanted *Not I* to go slower. I had known from the start that I would have to go at the rate of knots, ideally at the speed of thought' (Whitelaw 1995, 127). Speed, then, seems to have been a crucial component in Beckett's conception of performances but what exactly is its function in *Not I*?

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performed at a level of the brain below that which produces propositional language. Salisbury and Code observe Beckett's 'extraordinarily persistent desire to invoke forms of language that seem both phylogenically and ontogenically to precede the propositional language' that we associate with 'the functioning of an intentional consciousness (Salisbury and Code 2014, 113).

Now, the quickening of speech is something that the speaker might do with or without conscious awareness. Drawing on some 1984 experiments by James Deese, Levelt argues that a speaker might accelerate their speech in order to prevent an interlocutor from interrupting them, or to 'express something in a modest, non-assertive way' (Levelt 1989, 306). Also, in public speaking, it is frequently reported that the pressure of being watched prompts an (often unconscious) acceleration of speech. Of course, in the case of actors, the capacity to moderate one's speech rate is highly prized and actors are frequently asked to vary the tempo of their speech based on character and situation.<sup>30</sup> Attentional resources are frequently stretched here. Speech rate has to be monitored, along with other aspects of speech such as volume and prosody, in order for the actor to give a convincing impression of a particular person in a particular situation.<sup>31</sup> In *Not I*, one might think that the actor's attentional process is more straightforward. Unlike more naturalistic works, Beckett's play emphasises the actor's performance of a theatrical task above the attempt to play a character. As Beckett put it to Schneider, Mouth is 'purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is [Henrik] Ibsen' (Harmon 1998, 283). There is the sense that, in contrast to actors in naturalistic works such as Ibsen's, the actors playing Mouth do not have to vary speech rate according to character and situation. They merely have to concentrate on getting the words out with the required urgency. Such an idea can lead to a view of Beckett's play as a simple trial of human performance, and this perception might be re-enforced by the way in which performances continue to speed up. Jessica Tandy's premiere performance clocked in at around twenty minutes, Whitelaw's was around fifteen, and the contemporary performance by Lisa Dwan is performed in around eight. Reservations about this development can be seen in Jane Shilling's 2013 review of Dwan's performance for the *Daily Telegraph*. For Shilling, Dwan's is 'a dazzling technical performance' but, the emphasis on speed means that the play lacks the 'eloquence and emotional range' of earlier versions. 'If she

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<sup>30</sup> For example, in *To the Actor* (1953), theatre practitioner Michael Chekhov draws a distinction between inner tempo and outer tempo and suggests that the actor should be able to manage both (Chekhov 2002, 75-6). The actor, here, should be able to play a character who seems to think fast but speak, or gesture, slowly (and *vice versa*).

<sup>31</sup> Of course actors may rehearse a role to the point that they no longer have to consciously attend to these aspects.

[Dwan] were a racehorse or a sprinter', Shilling continues, the performance could be met 'with unqualified admiration'. For Shilling though, 'there is more to art' than pure 'virtuosity', so the play feels 'brilliantly empty' (Shilling 2013).

Whether or not one agrees with Shilling's impression of Dwan's performance, her critique hints at a tension that, I would argue, is crucial to *Not I*'s dramatic power, as well as its investigation of speech. The play does not merely require the actor to concentrate on speaking as fast as possible. Rather, the aspect of speech rate has to compete with a pressure for the speech to exude a certain musicality. The actor's speech does not have to be *in character* but this does not mean that the actor can ignore what their speech sounds like.<sup>32</sup> Whitelaw famously recalls that in *Not I* she felt like an 'athlete crashing through barriers, but also like a musical instrument playing notes' (Knowlson 1978, 89). She also speaks of how each 'each gradation of the voice' was meticulously choreographed by Beckett and the degree of concentration that is required of the actor when working within this framework (89-90). There is, then, a sense of multi-tasking embedded in performances of the play. The speech of *Not I* has to sprint and dance simultaneously, and I would argue that the play finds an aesthetic power in the sense of strain that derives from this. For Shilling, Dwan seems to attend to speed at the expense of prosody, and in doing so strips the play of some of its dramatic power. I would argue, however, that one can find dramatic power in the very tension that Shilling identifies. What we see in *Not I* is an actor straining to deliver both fast speech and music, and this can be very effective. Even if one cannot follow what is being said, the speech communicates an attentional strain that is able (in Beckett's words) to work on the nerves of the audience. As Lyn Gardner puts it in a review of Dwan's performance, 'sense and storytelling' may be absent but 'the torrent is somehow completely and appallingly understandable' (Gardner 2013). In this way, the play might be looked upon as both a study of the human subject's capacity to attend to different aspects of their own speech, and an aesthetic exploration of the strains that derive from these attentional processes.

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<sup>32</sup> One might also suggest that the actor has to think about how their mouth looks when enunciating words, though Whitelaw notes that she felt detached from the visuals of the scene when performing the play: 'Because I couldn't see, I have no idea what *Not I* looked like [...] once the blindfold had gone around my eyes and the hood over the top, I could be in the middle of Ilkley Moor' (Knowlson 1978, 87).



## The Performing Audience

Thus far in our consideration of *Not I* we have focused on the ways in which the protagonist, narrator and actors perform and experience their own speech. We have only considered the audience insofar as they observe Mouth and reflect on their own responses to her verbal expulsions. It is clear, though, that the audience has a more active role. Put simply, there is a question over the extent to which the audience comprehends the words of the play. Beckett may have stated that Mouth's speech should be 'addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience' but this is unlikely to prevent an audience from attempting to grasp what she is talking about. Evidently Beckett felt that the rapid tempo of the play would make this process difficult, but what is the nature of this difficulty?<sup>33</sup> Is there a sense in which the play uses fast speech to investigate the audience's capacity to make sense of words? There is no doubt that it goes fast. Psychologists calculate that, on average, conversational speech' proceeds at around 160 words per minute. The television production of *Not I* performed by Billie Whitelaw goes at around 200wpm and Lisa Dwan's performance even quicker. Thus, *Not I* does, on some level, test how quickly the human can comprehend speech that is delivered at a rate that is higher than usual. But we might better define the nature of this test by comparing Beckett's work with some psychological experiments on the topic.

Experimental psychology has certainly devoted a lot of time to the study of rapid speech comprehension. The discipline, however, has had problems finding a method with which to tackle the question of how well we comprehend rapid speech. In a discussion of an experiment on these matters, Wingfield, Peelle and Grossman observe that 'even trained speakers attempting to speak rapidly introduce subtle and uncontrollable changes in articulatory clarity and in the pattern of linguistically based pauses and intonation contour' (Wingfield, Peelle and Grossman 2003, 311). Thus, it is methodologically problematic to present increasingly hurried human speech and measure levels of comprehension because one cannot say whether comprehension is being

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<sup>33</sup> Beckett had evidently experimented with high speech rate in earlier dramatic works such as *Play*. This can be seen in a letter to Siegfried Unseld in which Beckett reasons that a 'broken and rushed speech' would produce a 'necessarily imperfect understanding' on the part of the audience (Craig et al. 2014, 598). In light of this he suggests that the action of the play might be repeated twice in one performance.

affected by the speed of delivery, or merely the distortions that come with the hurry.<sup>34</sup> In light of this problem, experimental psychology has recently made use of computer algorithms that remove pitch periods from vowel sounds and produce high speech rate without a great deal of distortion (312-13). Here it has been found that humans show capacity for some comprehension when speech is delivered at well over 400 words per minute (318-19).<sup>35</sup> If *Not I* was merely an experiment on the human's capacity to comprehend rapid speech, it would be slightly redundant. We know that humans can comprehend speech that is delivered at a much higher speech rate than *Not I*'s.

Something quite different, however, is going on in Beckett's play. Beckett does not aim to remove the distortions and interferences that come with fast speech. In fact, the distortions are central to Beckett's project. He hears the speech of *Not I* 'panting along', 'feverish' and 'rhythmic'. Beckett, then, was not after pure speed but also desired the interferences that inevitably come with the strains of speaking rapidly. Beckett wanted a speech that was fast, but also hurried. This method has two main effects. First, the high speech rate means that it is very difficult to consciously follow the words. As the above-discussed experiments show, humans are capable of processing speech that is presented much faster than *Not I*'s. However, the faster the speech arrives, the less the individual is able to consciously keep up with it – the speed of thought struggles to keep up with the speed of processing. We might be able to answer questions on the content of the speech later but that does not necessarily mean that we feel ourselves to be comprehending the speech in real time. Of course, different individuals are more or less capable of consciously keeping up with a high speech rate and there is an extent to which one gets accustomed to faster speech. Nevertheless, the speed of the speech undoubtedly makes conscious understanding more strenuous and one feels as though large parts of the story are being missed. In the words of Ella Walker in her review of the play for *The Cambridge News*: 'by the time I'd adjusted and was capable of deciphering words and the tale, it was over' (Walker 2014). Second, the interferences that come with the fast speech (the actor's 'panting along', for example) create a

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<sup>34</sup> One can just play recorded speech at a higher rate, but this creates distortions insofar as it raises the pitch as well.

<sup>35</sup> Additionally, in studies of reading, there has been the development of Rapid Serial Visual Presentation (RSVP). Here experimenters have presented words visually to subjects one at a time, finding that subjects show the ability for some comprehension at 10 words per second (Potter 1984, 91).

feeling of hurry, panic and fear. As the same reviewer puts it, 'it was so brutal and so fast that I felt sick. It was like being chased down with no escape' (Walker 2014). Instead of attempting to measure the speed at which speech can be processed, Beckett's play allows one to experience the strains that come with attempting to comprehend rapid speech. Again Beckett is emphasising the physiological conditions of aesthetic experience. The narrative – what Walker calls the 'tale' – is obscured by the difficulties of comprehending words that are delivered with hurry.

When considering *Not I* as a production that investigates the nature of speech perception and comprehension, it is also important to remember that the speech is not purely an auditory stimulus. An elevated mouth is presented in the darkness producing the speech. The early reviews certainly take cognizance of the visual power of this presentation. In his review of the 1973 staging at the Royal Court, this visual stimulus jumped out at Michael Billington and led him to rank the performance of *Not I* ahead of the performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) on the same bill:

"Not I" (Beckett's latest work) is the more compelling because it leaves behind an ineradicable image: an endlessly mobile mouth, rimmed by white clown-like makeup pouring out words of agony (Billington 1973).

What Billington perhaps undersells here, is the degree to which the visuals of an 'endlessly mobile mouth' can influence one's perception of the words themselves. The degree to which the visuals of the mouth – and the speaker's face – influence the reception of speech was a question being investigated in the experimental psychology of the period. Research in this area can be seen to take off in the latter half of the twentieth century. As early as 1954, Sumby and Pollack were testing the extent to which seeing 'the speaker's lips and facial movements' helped one to understand their words in a noisy environment' (Sumby and Pollack 1954, 212). In his survey of the subject, Quentin Summerfield argues that these experiments showed that 'seeing the face of the talker can be equivalent to an effective improvement in the signal-to-noise ratio of about 15 decibels (Summerfield 1987, 6). From this he argues that in noisy situations visual hearing can 'transform failure to understand into near-perfect comprehension' (6). However, the impact of visual stimuli on speech perception was not fully appreciated in psychological circles until later. Writing in 1976,

McGurk and MacDonald suggest that 'speech perception is normally regarded as a purely auditory process', and describe some experimental results that challenge this assumption (McGurk and MacDonald 1976, 746). Subjects were shown 'a film of a young woman's talking head, in which repeated utterances of the syllable [ba] had been dubbed on to lip movements for [ga]' (746). On seeing this video, most people 'reported hearing [da]' (746). Information 'from the two modalities' – aural and visual – was 'transformed into something new with an element not presented in either modality' (747). This is what McGurk and MacDonald call a 'fused response' and has come to be known as 'the McGurk effect' (747). The effect, McGurk and MacDonald continue, is very powerful and does not 'habituate over time despite objective knowledge of the illusion involved' (747). The experiment, then, suggests that visual information from the speaking mouth combines (unconsciously and automatically) with the auditory information to specify the speech sounds that are heard.

Ordinarily, the fact that vision and hearing are working together during speech perception should not be a problem. It is not very often that a mouth's movement contradicts the sound it makes, so most of the time eye and ear should really just be helping each other out. Indeed, as my grandmother might testify, the eyes' ability to help out with speech perception can be very useful. Summerfield writes:

As people get older and their hearing deteriorates, they rely on lip reading to an increasing degree. For those with profound or total losses of hearing, vision may be the major route by which speech is perceived (Summerfield 1987, 3-4).

Similarly, Sumbly and Pollack's experiment showed how useful visual hearing can be in noisy environments. Thus, there are many cases in which visual hearing can act to compensate for difficulties in perceiving speech aurally. In this way, experimental psychology is drawing attention to a capacity that might help the human adapt to the new noises of modernity. In situations where it is difficult to comprehend speech, the experiments suggest, we can use the capacity to read lips as a supplement to auditory speech perception. It may be expected that Beckett's play would be one such situation. The words pour out so quickly, it might be suggested, that the audience needs to make use of both the aural and visual modalities of speech perception. However, this does not

always play out in the accounts of the audience. When I first watched *Not I* at the theatre, I recall a member of the audience reflecting on the urge to shut his eyes in order better comprehend what was being said. The visuals were perceived as a barrier to comprehension, not an aid. Why might this be? It should be noted here that there are a number of different versions of *Not I* and each one holds different implications for visual speech perception. As mentioned, the original performance had the Auditor but this element was removed in later stage productions. The Auditor was also omitted when the play was translated to television. Thus, as performances of the play have proliferated, more and more focus has been put on the mouth. Also, the visibility of the mouth depends on which version of the play is being viewed. In stage productions the mouth can be quite small, particularly if you are seated at the back of a large theatre. In this case, one might question whether the mouth would be close enough to the audience for the lips to be read. In television productions, by contrast, the mouth is up close on the screen, so dominates the production. It is difficult, then, to make any definite statement about the role of lip reading in *Not I*. That said, there are couple of statements that can apply to the majority of versions.

One obvious difference between the speech presented in Beckett's play and the speech presented in many of the scientific experiments is in what is taken away. Recall that, in their discussion of visual speech perception, Sumbly and Pollack state that seeing 'the speaker's lips and facial movements' can help us comprehend speech. In *Not I* we only get access to the former. In no version of *Not I*, do we get access to the speaker's face. In this respect Beckett's play asks a question as to whether, in perceiving speech visually, one makes use of the entire face, or just the lips. Experimental psychology has, to some extent, investigated this question. Experiments following on from McGurk and MacDonald's have shown that 'seeing only the mouth area [of the speaker] is sufficient for speech reading and for eliciting the McGurk illusion' (Eskelund, MacDonald and Anderson 2015, 49). An example of this research that is particularly striking for its resemblance with *Not I* is Summerfield's 1979 experiment in which a speaker was presented in darkness and the lips were painted with decreasing amounts of 'luminous make-up' (Summerfield 1979, 317). In this scenario, speech recognition was better when a mouth was

presented in darkness than when the viewer was given no visual information (318). However, the removal of other facial features did impair speech perception substantially (318-19). Thus the research has tended to indicate that facial expressions, as well as lip movements, can aid the recognition of words. The visuals of Beckett's play may well make speech recognition measurably more difficult than in face-to-face contact.

Additionally, the specific mouth movements that occur in *Not I* pose their own difficulties for the audience member that is attempting to make out what Mouth is saying. For example, the speed of delivery means that the speaker's drawing of breath comes to the fore. Lisa Dwan, in particular, produces very distinct gasps in her version. Here, the double function of the mouth as an organ of speech and breath is emphasised. The words that the mouth shapes are frequently interrupted by the shapes of gasps. Beckett's play, then, foregrounds the way in which the mouth takes in air and gives an output of words. However, the need for input continually interferes with the output. We might compare this phenomenon to the way in which the noisy buzz of electricity sometimes interferes with the music that is played through speakers. One is no longer able to focus purely on the content but becomes conscious of the means by which it is produced. The mouth is no longer merely a means of communication but also a distracting object. Recent psychological research (for example, Tiippana, Andersen and Sams 2004) has indicated that the presence of salient objects in the subject's line of vision tends to weaken the capacity for visual speech perception. In *Not I* the mouth itself may be seen as such an object. When the audience member at Dwan's production spoke of his desire to shut his eyes during the performance, it is my contention that his urge was rooted in the distracting power of – in Billington's words – an 'endlessly mobile mouth, rimmed by white clown-like makeup'. The visual element of the mouth may have been a potential line of communication – it might have helped him comprehend the words – but it was also a flickering, gasping, distracting object.

In *Not I*, then, Beckett makes processes such as selective attention and speech perception noisy and, in doing so, draws attention to the physiological conditions of dramatic experience. At the theatre, we are, more often than not, able to attend selectively to events on stage without thinking about it. In *Not I*, though, by presenting only the single figure of a mouth and intensifying the

surrounding darkness, Beckett makes our attempts to focus on the action of his play strenuous. Similarly, naturalistic theatrical productions are ordinarily delivered in such a way that we can perceive and comprehend the words of the speakers without thinking about it. This allows us to focus on more traditionally dramatic aspects of the production (for example, the intricacies of personal narratives). Beckett's play by contrast, to quote Laura Salisbury, produces interferences that disarticulate 'the idea of language as a clear reflection of a pristine world of ideas where meaning noiselessly resides' (Salisbury 2010, 368). The pace of the speech makes one strain to follow the words, and the mouth becomes a distracting object. Through making us strain, then, Beckett raises our performances of selective attention and speech perception to the level of experience and explores the aesthetic power of these processes.

### **Strains of Interpretation**

In the context of theatrical performances of *Not I*, then, I have suggested that the physiological and temporal conditions of aesthetic experience are emphasised at the expense of other aspects which might be expected to draw our attention in a theatrical setting. The strains of focusing on the mouth or comprehending rapid speech draw attention away from things like plot and character. There is, however, no doubt that *Not I* contains these elements; it is concerned with the telling of a personal story. The way in which the play is delivered might lead us to think that the text is a disordered, chaotic, randomly-generated stream from which no order and sequence can be gleamed. But when one spends time with the printed text it is not nearly so disordered and chaotic as it may appear on stage or screen. Particularly in the opening section, there is the sense that a life story is being fashioned – that we are tracking the development of a particular protagonist. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on the process by which we attend to, and interpret, this personal information. In doing this I will, to some extent, move away from experimental psychology and towards more clinical and psychotherapeutic approaches. This is because of a particular aspect of clinical, therapeutic and analytic practice: the assembling of a case history. In everyday practice, the clinician must efficiently register a large amount of information about a patient and structure

that information according to a particular set of principles. It will be my argument that Beckett is concerned with the attentional process by which this is carried out and how it translates into an aesthetic or dramatic context.

Perhaps more than anything else the story of *Not I*'s protagonist is characterised by hurry and unevenness. This begins at birth. At the beginning of the text, we are told that the protagonist is cast out into a world that is jealous of its time: 'out...into this world...this world...tiny little thing...before its time' (Beckett 2006, 376). In the description that 'it' comes out 'before its time' there is the implication that the time at which the protagonist was born was not legitimately hers. Not only this, but the elliptical style gives the sense that there is no time to spare in the telling. There is also the sense that the protagonist was produced at the expense of as little time as possible: 'parents unknown...unheard of...he having vanished...thin air...no sooner buttoned up his breeches...she similarly...eight months later...almost to the tick' (376). The parents are marked by their punctuality. They are present until they have performed their reproductive duties, then vanish. The world that is narrated is characterised by time pressure and so is the narration. This is highlighted as the story of the protagonist's life continues. The story starts at the very beginning of the protagonist's life and gives some account of the early years, but then sixty or seventy years are passed over on the grounds that they were 'a typical affair', which produced 'nothing of any note' (376). The life story goes from birth to old age in twelve lines. The story does not lack order – it goes in a familiarly linear sequence from birth to old age – it just goes through this order in a very hurried fashion.

Working with this hurried atmosphere is a sense of unevenness. This can be seen in the attitude held towards parenting. The protagonist's parents are not present for long enough to show any love or affection but, even for those infants whose parents stay around longer, parental affection is seen as an uneven matter: 'so no love...spared that...no love such as normally vented on the...speechless infant...in the home...no...nor indeed...for that matter...any of any kind...no love of any kind...at any subsequent stage' (376). The notion, here, that the protagonist has been spared having love 'vented' on her gives the sense that love is a kind of by-product: a matter that builds up gradually and is then released in one big rush. There is the implication that, in the normal way,



love is a kind of waste that emerges out of the reproductive process and is then unevenly – almost violently – discharged on the infant. This unevenness is, again, reflected in the narration. The first seventy (or sixty) years of the protagonist's life go through in a hurry but then a particular morning is focused on in heavy detail. The protagonist's inner experience on this morning is the subject of the remainder of the text. Thus the story begins by surveying the life from a distance but then puts an ever increasing focus on the experience of a protagonist at one particular moment in time. The life story fixates on one event that has been deemed noteworthy. The text, then, presents a double drama of attention. On one hand, we are presented directly with the protagonist's pattern of attention. For example, we get an account of what material the protagonist is focusing on: 'she fixing with her eye... a distant bell... as she hastened towards it... fixing it with her eye... lest it elude her' (378). On the other, there is the question of why this particular moment is the object of attention, as opposed to the rest of the protagonist's life. A phenomenological concern with how one attends to a plethora of stimuli runs alongside a question of how one attends to a body of personal information and makes something of it. In each case, there is a hurried move to focus in on one particular aspect at the expense of others.

This approach is not uncommon in Beckett's writing. In Beckett's work, the personal story frequently loses its status as an aesthetic object that is produced to absorb or intrigue and becomes a mass of material to be moved through quickly and selectively. A particularly apposite example of this can be found in *Rough for Theatre 2* (1956). In the play, two men, A and B, examine a case of documents relating to the life of a motionless third man, C, in order (it seems) to establish whether C's life is worth carrying on with, or whether he should be allowed to jump from a building. In a way, this operation seems professional. C is defined by A and B as a 'client' who needs their 'services' – though it is also noted that they give out these services for free' (Beckett 2006, 237-46). What is clear, though, is the sense that attending to C's personal information is a laborious process – not something that engrosses A or B but something they must work through. This is clear from the outset when A announces that they are beginning to pay attention: 'We attend' (238). There is the sense that the two men are *on the clock* as they work through the details of C's life and decide whether it should continue. This sense becomes stronger

when B fastens onto the ‘vital’ detail that C has described himself as ‘morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others’ (242). Exactly why this detail is deemed so important never becomes clear but it prompts B to ‘read the whole passage’ in which the detail is embedded. However, the way in which B carries out this act of reading is very revealing. He begins reading the entire passage but soon loses patience with its wordy style (‘What kind of Chinese is that?’) and decides to skip the parts that follow the vital phrase until he gets to the ‘main verb’: “...Morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others at the time...” – drivel drivel drivel – “...I was unfortunately incapable – ” (243). As in *Not I*, there is a sense of hurry and unevenness in the way in which personal information is approached. A and B’s attention to the life of C is a laborious process that is moved through with haste and involves fishing out ‘vital’ details from a glut of material. In *Rough for Theatre 2*, as in *Not I*, it is clear that the interpretation of personal information is conditioned by limitations of time and mental resource.

The production of the personal story in Beckett’s work, then, often seems less of an aesthetic exercise and more of a professional one – less about producing something gripping or beautiful than moving through material efficiently and organising it in a way that fulfils an often mysterious set of obligations. This sense of a professional approach to the personal, I think, is part of the reason that Beckett has so frequently been linked with professions such as psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Of course, there is an extent to which this link simply derives from Beckett’s pre-occupation with unhappiness and mental pathology, but works like, *Rough for Theatre 2* and *Not I* evidence a further interest in clinical practice. In the case of *Not I*, Angela Moorjani writes: ‘for many, *Not I*’s disembodied mouth spewing words at a silent, shadowy auditor came to evoke an analytic session’ (Moorjani 2004, 176). And, more recently, Jonathan Heron and psychiatrist Matthew Broome have drawn a link between *Rough for Theatre 2* and the psychiatric encounter. The point of connection, here, lies in the psychiatrist or analyst’s task of taking in a large body of personal information and organising it according to certain principles. In psychoanalysis, the mental strains involved in this procedure were recognised by Freud. In ‘Recommendations for Physicians on the Psychoanalytic Method of Treatment’ (1912), for example, Freud recognises the difficulties of ‘keeping in mind all the innumerable, names, dates, detailed

reminiscences, associations' of each patient when one is treating 'six, eight, or even more patients daily' (Freud 1933, 323). In this way, as Jonathan Crary notes, Freud is 'concerned with the physiological and mental limits of a sustained attentiveness' (Crary 1999, 367). But in psychoanalytic theory, Crary continues, Freud is also producing 'a technique for dealing with a stream of information that has no evident structure or coherence' (368). Freud, Crary concludes, 'sought to fashion himself (the analyst) into an apparatus capable of engaging a seemingly random sequence of signs (whether language, gestures, intonations, silences) and yet extracting from that disjunct texture some interpretive clarity' (368). This is a concern that extends beyond psychoanalysis. Speaking of his experience in contemporary psychiatry, Broome writes:

One of the problems we have in teaching medical students is that they find taking a full psychiatric history a huge leap from the briefer history-taking that they learn for medicine and surgery. They feel that the amount of information they are requested to take is almost endless, and further how they order it, divide it up and present it back to a consultant or an examiner as difficult not only due to time constraints in the relaying of information but also in the genuine heterogeneity in clinicians' models of mental illness, which in turn structures the clinical data (Heron and Broome 2016, 175).

Models of mental illness might offer a structuring principle with which to organise large amounts of personal information but this leads to the further question of what theory to use. Broome suggests that the action of *Rough for Theatre 2* resonates with psychiatric practice in the sense that A and B 'order and marshal' information in a particular but slightly enigmatic way (175). There may be a guiding principle in A and B's practice but it is never imparted. I would argue that this analysis extends to the case of *Not I*. The play presents a life story but focuses on a particular set of events. What, we are left to wonder, is the structuring principle that has led to this set of events being deemed noteworthy?

### **Even Attention and the Clinical Encounter**

We might trace Beckett's interest in clinical practice back to events in his own life. As we have seen, Beckett engaged with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy extensively in the 1930s, and it is here that the concerns of *Rough for Theatre 2* and *Not I* may be seen to develop. During his reading around psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, Beckett himself seems to have become a little frustrated with the clinician's tendency to focus on a single detail. In a 1935 letter to Thomas MacGreevy, for example, he describes psychotherapist Alfred Adler as 'another one trackmind' (Feldman 2006, 101). As Matthew Feldman observes, Adler was the fifth academic psychoanalyst Beckett encountered during his engagement with the subject and one can sense Beckett becoming fatigued at a proliferation of explanatory theories (Feldman 2006, 79). But Beckett's engagement with psychotherapy and psychoanalysis was not purely one of resistance to theory. He undoubtedly wanted to get certain things out of it. As Laura Salisbury has highlighted, Beckett's interaction with therapy was not detached from practical pressures. Certain psycho-somatic symptoms drove him to therapy with Bion and he undoubtedly wanted a return from his input of time and – his mother's input of – money (Salisbury 2011, 64). Feldman points out that Beckett's psychology notes 'constitute a significant outlay of effort in their own right' and he is right to suggest that this effort can be viewed as part of Beckett's 'larger self-education process' (Feldman 2006, 115). At the same time, though, Feldman recognises that Beckett was evidently looking to psychotherapeutic theory for further insight into his own maladies. Beckett seems to have felt a desire for the illuminating light of theory. Feldman observes that in Beckett's notes on psychoanalysis 'the overriding impulse is one of attempted self-diagnosis' (100). There is a sense that Beckett read the templates of psychoanalytic theory against his own symptoms in order to see what fit.

Beckett, then, may have experienced a frustration with the one-track nature of the theoretical approach but he had also looked to psychoanalytic theory for explanations of his own experience. This tension can be seen in Beckett's transcription of this line from Karin Stephen's *The Wish to Fall III* (1933):

If he [the patient] is dominated by unconscious starvation, so that he needs in all relationships to get as much as possible, he will try & get the most out of his hour, irritably demanding explanations (TCD MS 10971/7/5).

Here the desire to 'get the most' from time in therapy is seen as symptomatic of 'unconscious starvation', an observation that can be looked at in two ways. In one sense, the patient is demanding that the theoretical searchlight works upon him in order to give the best possible view of his problems. But, in another, this observation can be seen as a product of the therapist's one-track mind, in which all behaviour is seen in the light of a theoretical insight: if the patient demands explanations, the therapist thinks, it must be because of 'unconscious starvation'. From his engagement with psychotherapy, then, Beckett had some understanding of the desire for efficient insights but also of the unbalanced attentiveness of the clinician.

Many clinicians, of course, have themselves warned against uneven attentiveness, or the one-track mind. In psychoanalysis, in particular, a tradition can be traced back to Freud's privileging of suspended or diffuse attention – as opposed to critical or deliberate attention – in therapeutic practice. In 'Recommendations for Physicians', Freud argues that the therapist should not make effort 'to concentrate attention on anything in particular' (Freud 1933, 324). Rather, the same 'evenly distributed attention' should be maintained in regard to 'all that one hears' (324). For Freud, the need for the adoption of an 'evenly distributed attention' is partly a method by which to reserve mental resources when dealing with large amounts of personal information. However, he also argues that overly concentrated attention works against the acquisition of psychoanalytic knowledge. For Freud, when 'attention is deliberately concentrated', one aspect of the material 'will be fixed in the mind with particular clearness and some other consequently disregarded' (Freud 1933, 324). This is unlikely to be productive because 'one's expectations or one's inclinations will be followed' and, if this is the case, 'there is the danger of never finding anything but what is already known' (324).

Freud's approach to attention became influential in twentieth-century British psychoanalysis, and particularly the work of D.W. Winnicott and Wilfred Bion. Winnicott's approach to this topic manifests in the essay 'Child

Department Consultations' (1942). The paper is a report 'on the cases that came through the Child Department of the Institute of Psycho-Analysis in London over a period of one year' (Winnicott 1958, 70). Not all of the cases documented go into formal analysis. Winnicott is describing the initial procedure in which he decides on the best course of treatment for a new case: assembling a history of the patient and assessing whether sustained analysis will be appropriate and practical. To some extent this is a process in which information must be efficiently processed. The paper covers each case very briefly (fourteen cases in around ten pages) and there is a consistent emphasis on time considerations. Winnicott specifies, for example, how long it took to 'get a good history' of each case (71). But within this scenario, where efficiency is undoubtedly important, Winnicott emphasises a form of attentiveness that goes beyond the efficient extracting of information. For example, Winnicott describes one satisfactory case. In the case of three-year-old Queenie, there was no time for formal daily analysis. However, with some difficulty, the mother was able to bring the girl to Winnicott personally for treatment 'two or three times a week over a period of six months' (75). For Winnicott, it was always clear that time constraints would make daily visits impossible and cut the analysis short. Nevertheless, 'not wanting to send the child away with nothing but a useless consultation', he went ahead treating Queenie as if doing formal analysis (75). This brings results: 'quite important work was done, for the material brought by the child enabled me to show sequence and order in it, and I obtained specific results from interpretations, just as in real analysis' (75). This success, for Winnicott, could only have been achieved 'by an analyst, experienced in long, unhurried analysis in which material can be allowed to force itself on the analyst's attention while he gradually learns to understand it' (76). For Winnicott, the analyst's attention should not be easily acted on. The presentation of the material alone does not mean that the analyst can attend to it and instil it with 'sequence and order'. Rather material has to 'force itself' on attention. This is where the experience of the analyst comes in. The 'experienced' analyst is able to recognise that material does not work on attention instantaneously or easily and so, in spite of time pressures, is in no hurry to 'understand' it. There is recognition that the analyst's role is to make something of the material but the skilled analyst is distinguished by a lack of hurry in going through the process.

Now, one might argue that in finding ‘sequence and order’ Winnicott is attempting to instil the material with a familiar shape. This is always a danger in the interpretive process. This danger, though, has to be weighed against the dangers of another form of practice in which time and material simply pass through with nothing coming of it. This is invoked in Winnicott’s desire not to reduce therapy to the ‘useless consultation’ in which the patient simply comes and goes. Also important in Winnicott’s account is the idea that this treatment was ‘enabled’ by the particular ‘material brought by the child’. There is the implication, here, that, if different material had been brought by a different child, this method of treatment may not have produced satisfactory results. Indeed, the other cases covered in Winnicott’s paper require very different courses of treatment. The sequence and order Winnicott finds is dependent on the particular material that the patient brings. There is no assumption that the therapist can simply find this shape in any material just by attending to it in a certain way.

In his *Brazilian Lectures* (1973-4),<sup>36</sup> Bion also advocates a patient attentiveness in which one does not look for a ‘vital’ detail but waits for material to work on the analyst’s attention:

Instead of trying to bring a brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light to bear on obscure problems, I suggest we bring to bear a diminution of the “light” – a penetrating beam of darkness; a reciprocal of the searchlight [...]. The darkness would be so absolute that it would achieve a luminous absolute vacuum. So that, if any object existed, however faint, it would show up very clearly. Thus a very faint light would become visible in maximum conditions of darkness (Bion 1990, 20-1).

In a literal sense, of course, this extract speaks to the staging of *Not I*. The observer of *Not I*, and many of Beckett’s late plays, might feel as though the auditorium has been thrown under Bion’s beam of darkness, in which any faint light becomes visible. But Bion is obviously speaking in a more metaphorical

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<sup>36</sup> As Matthew Feldman has suggested, this late Bion is likely very different to the one Beckett encountered in the 1930s (Feldman 2006, 93). At the time of his sessions with Beckett, Bion had yet to undergo formal psychoanalytic training and, Feldman notes, his early outlook was likely ‘too positivistic’ to show ‘any great harmony with Beckett’s concerns in the 1930s’ (93). Here I am not concerned with showing influence either way. I would suggest, however, that the accounts of therapeutic attentiveness that Bion developed in his later life are useful in outlining the problems of attention that Beckett’s plays present.

sense about the therapist's manner of attending to the 'obscure problems' of a patient – how one registers the material presented by the patient and makes something of it. The crucial difference between the beam of darkness invoked by Bion and the searchlight is one of activity and passivity. In the latter, one knows what one is looking for and attention is shifted around until it is found. In the former, by contrast, one attends to the general area and it is the object that makes itself visible. Bion is advocating the latter: a mode in which the analyst does not illuminate the patient's problems but merely attends to a dark space in which the problems can illuminate themselves. The analyst's skill, then, is in shutting out his own insights so that they do not interfere with the insights coming from the patient. The metaphor invokes two related points of difficulty within psychotherapy. The first is the extent to which theoretical knowledge should guide the therapist and outline the objects that are to be looked for. The second is the temporal pressure for something to be found over the course of therapy. The searchlight mode is informed by theory and temporally more efficient. Theory endows the operator of the searchlight with a template of what is to be looked for and objects can be found that resemble this template more or less. Thus something is likely to be found even if it does not exactly resemble what one is looking for. When using the beam of darkness, on the other hand, one has to play a waiting game and there is no guarantee that any object will show up. The approach is not necessarily productive and the therapist becomes less 'brilliant'. Rather than producing insights, the therapist's role is to create conditions in which insights can (but may not) emerge.

Bion's ideas on clinical practice were, to some extent, drawn from aesthetics and literature. He repeatedly referenced John Keats's idea of negative capability – the capacity, exhibited by writers such as Shakespeare, to tolerate uncertainties and doubts without reaching for fact and reason (Rollins 1958, 193-4). Bion notes:

If psycho-analysts are to be able to interpret what the analysand says, they must have a great capacity for tolerating their analysand's statements without rushing to the conclusion that they know the interpretations. This is what I think Keats meant when he said that Shakespeare must have been able to tolerate "negative capability" (Bion 1990, 45).



Bion seems to suggest that in everyday life we find it difficult to tolerate the statements of others without attempting to interpret whether those statements are factually true, or why that particular person is making that particular statement. The skill of the analyst, or a literary writer such as Shakespeare, however, lies in being able to tolerate 'mysteries', 'half-truths' and 'evasions'; allowing a statement to stand rather than seeking to explain it away (46). In effect, Bion is suggesting that a particular aesthetic mode of attending to personal information can inform clinical practice. This view relates interestingly with Beckett's aesthetic. As we have seen, Beckett's writing is frequently concerned with the imperfect conditions in which limits of time and attentional capacity pressure us into making hurried interpretations. In *Rough for Theatre 2* we are presented with a professional environment in which A and B attempt to structure information efficiently and fish out 'vital' details. In *Not I*, this is taken further. The personal story of *Not I* is presented to the audience in such a way that one feels the physiological and temporal pressures that force uneven attentiveness. The process of following the words of Mouth is so strenuous that it becomes tempting to adopt a one-track mind – to structure one's conception of what is going on around a particular accessible detail. Here, we might look to an approach that has been taken to language comprehension within experimental psychology. There is a body of psychological thought which emphasises the extent to which one's understanding of a statement is structured, not only by the statement itself, but also the knowledge that the listener/reader already possesses (Anderson 1978; Ferreira, Bailey and Ferraro 2002). Thus, in situations where the information that we receive is degraded, it is argued, the listener is likely to draw on theoretical knowledge and long-term memory (what the psychologists call a 'schema'), in order to produce an understanding that is 'good enough' to serve a particular purpose (Ferreira, Bailey and Ferraro 2002, 13-14). Following Freud, and drawing on literary ideas, Bion seems to advocate a mode of attention that eschews this schematic approach to interpretation. Beckett, though, produces an environment in which we are under pressure to take shortcuts. Where Bion is interested in bringing an aesthetic mode of attention into a professional environment, Beckett seems to do the opposite: in *Not I* an aesthetic environment is perforated by the psychophysiological pressures that make us rush to interpretation.

The difficulties of attending to *Not I*'s personal story, however, go beyond physiological and temporal pressures. We are also faced with the absence (or incomplete presence) of the person. This contrasts with the approaches of Winnicott and Bion in which the patient's presence and state of emotion, is paramount to the construction of the personal story. In Winnicott's paper, for example, we are told of how the patient interacted with the therapist through play:

The play with toys and by drawing and cutting enabled me to interpret and to show that I could tolerate penis envy and ideas of violent attacks on the mother's body and on the father's penis and on babies unborn (75).

Winnicott is evidently working with a particular psychoanalytic theory here, but for our purposes it is merely important to note that he is looking to the immediate presence of the child (her activity and emotional state) when making interpretations. Broome suggests that this is also crucial in psychiatric examination: 'in psychiatry it is good practice to review written records alongside the clinical encounter with an individual' (Heron and Broome 2016, 177). It is desirable that verbal histories are encountered in conjunction with a face-to-face examination in which the psychiatrist can register 'things like the person remaining in one place over a period time, levels of motor activity, as well as particular abnormal physical movements' (174). The psychiatrist's sense of a personal story, then, is structured by a theoretical approach but also interpersonal contact. In *Rough for Theatre 2*, Broome argues, C is almost completely absent and so the interpersonal way of understanding a life story is marginalised: 'we see one mode of understanding as being prioritized at the total exclusion of another and a seeming bureaucratization of practice' (177).

In *Rough for Theatre 2*, then, we see personal information being interpreted purely through the analysis of documents. In *Not I*, though, Beckett complicates this idea slightly. We are constantly teased with the notion that the protagonist is telling her own story. Mouth, we are told, is recovering 'from a vehement refusal to relinquish third person' (Beckett 2006, 375). There is the suggestion that we are not being told about the protagonist's life by an anonymous narrator, but rather the protagonist is telling us about her own life. If this was the case, the audience might feel as though they are encountering the

person as well as the report. Beckett, though, never quite allows this to happen: we are confronted with nothing but a mouth and that mouth never says I. Thus we are not confronted with a case history but neither are we allowed to appreciate a personal encounter. Part of the play's aesthetic power, I would suggest, lies in its refusal to fit neatly into either of these categories. In this way, Beckett's play might be seen as an experiment on the audience's capacity to tolerate uncertainties and doubts. Do the psychophysiological conditions of Beckett's theatre pressure us into a schematic interpretation of what is going on? Or, do we exhibit the 'negative capability' of Keats and Bion, and allow the enigmas of the play to stand unresolved?

### **Conclusion**

There are three main concerns that I want to draw from this discussion of *Not I*. First, I have suggested that Beckett's play fleshes out Schopenhauerian conceptions of human experience. Beckett's work can be placed in a tradition that explores, through practical investigation, Schopenhauer's ideas about the limitations of human experience and performance. In particular, here, I noted that Beckett's writing is interested in attending to the limitations of consciousness. Beckett's aesthetic experiments investigate the fragility and partiality of conscious attention.

Second, I have argued that in *Not I* Beckett manipulates theatrical conditions in order to raise questions about the human capacity for attention and speech perception. He produces conditions in which aesthetic experience depends on one's capacity to adapt to darkness, and gaze at one thing for an extended period of time. He also explores the different ways in which speakers attend to their own speech, emphasising the strains that come with the attempt to monitor multiple aspects of speech. And, with regards to how we perceive the speech of others, he makes it strenuous for the audience to comprehend speech by (1) insisting on a high speech rate; (2) removing most of the speaker's facial features; and (3) emphasising the mouth's potential to distract from visual speech perception. In all these ways, Beckett draws attention away from more traditionally dramatic aspects of theatrical experience, such as plot

and character, and shifts focus to the means by which we make sense of the word and the world.

Third, I have argued that the play experiments on our capacity to interpret a body of personal information: pitting a mode of attention in which one attempts to shut out theoretical insight and tolerate enigmas, against a more professional, time-pressured mode in which we use the knowledge that we already possess in order to make efficient interpretations about what is going on. *Not I*, then, might be seen as an aesthetic experiment in a sense that goes beyond its formal innovations or opposition to the 'mainstream'; it works towards an understanding of how the human attends to, comprehends, and interprets the spoken word.

## Chapter 2

### Face Reading and Attentional Management in *That Time*<sup>37</sup>

During his reading of psychology in the 1930s, Beckett's interest was captured by a debate between the associationist and Gestaltist schools. The question, here, was one of whether the individual learns to recognise distinct objects, or does so intuitively. Beckett took down these details:

Associationists rejected innate ideas & all native knowledge of objects. Only by experience can we interpret raw material of sense data (e.g. elicit an organised scene from a manifold of coloured spots). Gestaltists admit that we know the properties of objects by experience but deny that we ever had to learn their shapes (TCD MS 10971/7/7).

The debate, then, centres on the process by which 'raw' sensory material is interpreted. The associationists saw this process as an acquired skill and, as Beckett continued to note, the Gestaltists saw it as a matter of the brain's 'primary response' to stimulation (10971/7/7). Beckett's transcription goes on to sketch out the Gestaltist view in terms of face recognition: 'a baby does not open its eyes on [William] James's "big blooming buzzing confusion", but singles out a face or other compact visual unit' (10971/7/7). The face is taken by the Gestaltists to be a pattern which the baby is pre-disposed to single out – a 'compact visual unit' to which humans are intuitively drawn. Beckett also notes the Gestalt school's experiments with the face. He copies down the Gestalt observation that the subject's interpretation of the same facial movement changes depending on how much of the face is made visible: 'Apparent change in a feature does not mean objective change in that feature. The eyes, when only the upper part of the face is exposed, have a different expression than [sic] when the whole face is exposed' (10971/7/7). Beckett's interest is piqued by an experiment in which the observer's reading of a particular part of the face can be seen to change depending on the way in which the whole face is presented. Here, it should be remembered that Beckett is merely taking notes from Woodworth's summary. He is not necessarily endorsing Gestalt notions of

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<sup>37</sup> Parts of this chapter have previously appeared in *Critical Survey* (Volume 27 [1], Spring 2015).

perception. Indeed, as Jean-Michel Rabaté (1984) and Matthew Feldman (2006) have suggested, these notes were incorporated into Beckett's next novel *Murphy* (1938), in which the Gestalt approach comes under severe scrutiny. Nevertheless, the transcription certainly shows Beckett's awareness of psychological debates around face perception in the early part of the twentieth century. This chapter will argue that, later in his career, Beckett would develop these ideas in his own theatrical experiments with the face.

### **Attending to the Face**

Beckett's facial experiments occur at a time when the human face was the subject of a large amount of scientific investigation. The scientific study of facial expression goes back at least as far as Charles Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).<sup>38</sup> But in their summary of the subject, Dacher Keltner and Paul Ekman suggest that 'two developments in the late 1960s and 1970s galvanized the study of facial expression' (Keltner and Ekman 2000, 236-7). First, experimental psychology produced 'objective measures of facial expression', in the form of the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) developed by Ekman and Wallace Friesen in the late seventies (237). Second, experimenters began to suggest 'universality in interpreting facial expressions' (237). Until the late 1960s, Keltner and Ekman argue, interpretation of facial expression was thought to be 'a noisy, unreliable system with little reliable communicative value' (240). Since then, however, Ekman and others have continually built the case that humans are intuitively very skilled and efficient readers of facial expression. Debates around the universality of facial expressions are ongoing and I am not looking for a resolution to the overall debate here. Instead, I will look specifically at the effort and concentration required in the processes of making and reading facial expressions. There is a body of experimental evidence suggesting that facial expressions can be produced and interpreted without a great deal of concentrated effort. However, through a reading of *That Time*, I want to investigate how this effortless mode

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<sup>38</sup> Nineteenth-century culture's interest in physiognomy (the idea that facial features or expressions were representative of character or ethnic origin) should also be pointed out. For discussions of this, see Hartley (2001) and Pearl (2010).

might interact with a more effortful way of reading faces, as well as how the two modes combine in an aesthetic or dramatic context.

From the nineteenth century onwards, experimental psychology has continually investigated face perception in babies and young children, as well as adults. Contemporary psychology has, by and large, upheld the Gestalt notion that, 'immediately after their birth, infants attend preferentially to faces and face-like configurations' (Frank, Amso and Johnson 2014, 13).<sup>39</sup> This preference for the face in childhood is seen to translate into an adult's ability to navigate facial expressions without a great deal of concentrated attention. In their survey of experimental findings on the subject, Vuilleumier and Righart argue that much psychological research has suggested that 'facial displays of emotions are produced involuntarily and perceived effortlessly' (Vuilleumier and Righart 2011, 449). They point to a number of experiments in which subliminally presented faces have been seen to affect behaviour. For example, Winkielman, Berridge and Wibarger (2005) tested 'the impact of subliminal presentations of happy and sad faces on the actions of pouring and consuming a [unfamiliar] beverage' (Winkielman, Berridge and Wibarger 2005, 122). The study found that subjects who had rated themselves 'thirsty' before the experiment 'poured more and drank more of a beverage after exposure to happy faces' than after exposure to neutral faces (128). They also poured and drank less after exposure to angry faces. The other notable finding, here, was that participants did not report any change 'in their subjective state, even when their mood was assessed immediately after the subliminal primes' (128). This suggests that face reading can be carried out and acted upon, even when the individual has no awareness of being affected. So it would follow that the individual can process a face emotionally without making any effort to attend to it. Experimenters have also suggested that some facial expressions may be 'detected better, or faster' than others (Vuilleumier and Righart 2011, 453). This has particularly been the case when the face presented can be interpreted as angry or hostile. For example, a

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<sup>39</sup> There is, though, evidence to suggest that the 'the amount that infants look at faces increases considerably during the first year' (Frank, Amso and Johnson 2014, 13). This was seen when Frank, Amso and Johnson showed a video of *Sesame Street* and monitored the degree to which infants aged 3, 6, and 9 months attended to the face. They found no difference between ages when the video showed large 'static faces talking to one another' (19). However, there was a 'developmental increase' in attention to the face when the video 'featured small faces and considerable motion of both the camera and the people in the film' (19). For the experimenters, neo-natal infants may be drawn to the face, but the tendency and capacity for attention to the face does become stronger with age.

common experimental task presents subjects with a series of stimuli: first an expressive face, then – on another part of the screen – a dot. Measured here is the time it takes for the subject to disengage from the face and move onto the dot; the common finding being that it takes longer for subjects to ‘disengage attention from threat-related faces, as compared with positive or neutral faces’ (454). This has been taken to suggest that ‘the processing of facial expression [...] may be unintentional and arise before the face has received full attention’ (455). In other words, one has scanned a face for signs of emotion, before making a concentrated effort to do so. Vuilleumier and Righart conclude that these experiments exemplify a body of behavioural research which indicates ‘that facial expressions can be processed in a range of situations that imply automatic abilities, in the sense that these involve a lack of intention, focused attention, or even awareness’ (456).

This focus on the effortless nature of face reading in experimental psychology might lead one to overlook a more deliberate mode of interpreting the face. When inspecting a painted face in a portrait gallery, for example, is the attention one pays limited to the effortless kind described in these experiments? It seems to me that this situation would also call for a more concentrated attentiveness. Here, the face can become an enigma and one might spend hours puzzling over it. This is particularly the case when looking at the unresponsive face; the face that stares blankly into the distance and eludes its context. Jonathan Crary finds an example of this kind of expression in Edouard Manet’s *In the Conservatory* (1879). In this painting, Crary sees Manet’s portrayal of the woman’s face in terms of the questions it provokes:

We are allowed by Manet, who painted this face with uncharacteristic definition, to ask such specific questions. Is she engaged in thought, or vacuous absorption, or that form of arrested (or diverted) attentiveness that borders on a trance (Crary 1999, 99-100).

The artist’s technique, here, is perceived to prompt a sustained reading of the face. Rather than involuntarily, scanning the face, the observer is asking questions: what could this woman possibly be experiencing that would give her this face? In the field of experimental psychology there is a concern with proving the existence of a mode of face reading that is not necessarily available to introspective experience or conscious recall. Thus, much less emphasis is



placed on this slower, more effortful mode of face reading. The existence of a conscious, effortful mode may be seen as self-evident and therefore not something that needs to be proved through experiment. However, when discussing the face in wider culture it is important to ask the question of how the two modes might interact. A theory supporting this deriving from the psychology of perception would be Daniel Kahneman's two-system thesis. Kahneman characterises the decision-making process as an 'uneasy interaction' between two systems: the 'automatic' system 1 and the 'effortful' system 2 (Kahneman 2011, 415). For Kahneman, system 2 'articulates judgements and makes choices, but it often endorses or rationalizes ideas that were generated by system 1' (415). Applied to face reading, this idea would suggest that certain interpretations could be generated rapidly and effortlessly by system 1. But this would still leave room for system 2 to make slower more effortful judgments about the face. System 1 might scan the whole face and pick up an overall affect, where system 2 can study each feature sequentially and contextualise the face to a greater degree. However, for Kahneman, it is likely that the effortful judgements deriving from system 2 will be heavily influenced by the initial impression taken from system 1.

Beckett's reading of the Gestalt-associationist debate would have given him some grounding on these questions of the temporality of face reading. The debate seems to mark a distinction between two modes of encountering the face. On the one hand there is a skilled, effortful 'associationist' process in which one interprets the face in a deliberate, almost systematic way. But on the other there is the Gestalt encounter in which the face simply appears and provokes a response. In the text of *That Time* Beckett seems to play these two encounters off against each other. This can be seen in the recollection of 'that time in the portrait gallery' (Beckett 2006, 388). The protagonist goes to the gallery 'to rest and dry off' before getting 'on to hell out of there' (388). The gallery is almost empty: 'not a living soul in the place only yourself and the odd attendant drowsing around in his felt shufflers' (389). It is seemingly an ideal place for a rest. But, as the protagonist dozes amongst the paintings, he undergoes a peculiar experience:

You hoisted your head and there before you when they opened a vast oil black with age and dirt someone famous in his time some famous man or

woman or even child such as a young prince or princess of the blood black with age behind the glass where gradually as you peered trying to make it out gradually of all things a face appeared had you swivel on the slab to see who it was there at your elbow (388).

The passage describes two modes of face reading. The first is the steady deliberate attentiveness exhibited by Crary's reading of Manet's painting. The protagonist appreciates the painting's materiality (the size, the materials used, and its condition) and gradually starts to investigate the features of the individual represented (status, age, gender). However, this process is interrupted by the appearance of a face. So begins the second mode of face reading. The text's presentation of this second face leaves a lot of room for interpretation. It could be the protagonist's own face reflected in the glass of the painting, or it could be a ghostly apparition. It could be that a face represented within the painting gradually becomes apparent to the protagonist – having been initially overlooked. Or, it could be that someone has snuck up from behind and the protagonist sees this person's face reflected in the glass.<sup>40</sup> What is clear, though, is that the protagonist interprets the face as a presence at his elbow. This mode of face reading is dramatically different from the first. In the first mode, the protagonist's relationship with the figure remains visual. He peers at it and the figure's face is only implicit as he consciously tries to 'make it out'. In the second mode, by contrast, a face simply appears. There is no effort to make it out. Also, the protagonist has more than a visual relationship with the face. It triggers action, making him 'swivel'. The text of Beckett's play, then, engages with the idea that face reading is a process that can be either effortful or involuntary. One might go through the attentive process of making the face out, or it could simply appear and trigger a response. However, there seems to be the suggestion that the latter process can interrupt the former. The affective perception of the whole face seems to interfere with the slower, more deliberate process of making a face out.

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<sup>40</sup> This would link to the passage in *Molloy* (1951) where Moran washes his face in the stream and sees in the water 'little by little a face with holes for the eyes and mouth and other wounds, and nothing to show that it was a man's face or a woman's face, a young face or an old face' (Beckett 2009d, 143). John Bolin has recognised 'the conjoining of a radical self-estrangement with a hovering sense of revelation' in this passage, and argued that this invokes the work of Jean Paul Sartre (Bolin 2013, 149). In *That Time*, though, there is more ambiguity. The protagonist may be seeing himself *as another* or, in fact, seeing the face of another.

## Staging Faces

On a textual level, then, Beckett's play certainly speaks to the attitudes towards face reading that were developing in twentieth-century experimental psychology. It is particularly interested in how a steady, aesthetic mode of face reading can be interrupted by a more automatic encounter with the face. In *That Time*, though, Beckett moves beyond textual representation and attempts to stage a live face alone in the dark. Beckett undoubtedly took a great deal of trouble over this staging and, as is the case with the text, he seems to have been concerned with the interaction between deliberate and automatic face reading. We have seen that the painted face features heavily in Beckett's text, and painting also seems to have been a major influence on the staging of his plays. Billie Whitelaw famously compared Beckett's plays of this period to 'moving, musical' Edvard Munch paintings and the link between Beckett's theatrical scenes and particular paintings (or styles of painting) is commonly drawn (Knowlson 1978, 89). Conor Carville, for example, suggests that the use of lightness and darkness that characterises much of Beckett's theatrical practice derives from seventeenth-century Dutch painting (Carville 2015, 76). What I want to emphasise here, though, is the degree to which Beckett recognised that his appreciation of painting was conditioned by temporality and attentional capacity.

Beckett was a well-known lover of the visual arts. James Knowlson states that Beckett began visiting the National Gallery in Dublin regularly as a student and the 'deep love of painting' acquired there 'remained with him for the rest of his life' (Knowlson 1996, 57-8). This appreciation of painting flourished on his trip to Germany in the 1930s. Mark Nixon notes that a reader glancing at the diaries Beckett kept there 'could be forgiven for thinking that they were written by an art critic' (Nixon 2011, 132). The 'German Diaries' are particularly interesting for the insights they give into Beckett's process of attending to paintings. For example, Nixon discusses Beckett's appreciation of Antonello da Messina's depiction of *St. Sebastian* (1475-6): 'the painting inspired Beckett to such a degree that while looking at it he "felt a poem beginning" but was disturbed by "a noisy guide with a party screaming about Raphael"' (146). The

poem, here, is recognised as the product of a steady, effortful attentiveness. However, like the protagonist in *That Time*, Beckett's patient, aesthetic attentiveness is disturbed by a reflex response to the guide's 'screaming'. Beckett clearly recognises that his appreciation of painting is grounded by attentional limits. Another painting Beckett inspected in Germany was Mathias Grünewald's *Sts. Erasmus and Mauritius* (1520-4). Beckett suggests that the painting 'immediately says very little' but it is 'gradually full of psychologies & derisions. Remoteness, contempt, suspicion of Erasmus, social & devout prepossessions in conflict' (148). Here, Beckett very clearly identifies the extent to which his interpretations of the painted scene are temporally-grounded. Beckett is not aware of getting anything from the painting instantaneously – though it is of course possible that he is sensing more than he knows. As time passes, however, the painting gets filled with 'psychologies & derisions'. Beckett not only reads the face of Erasmus and finds certain emotions, but also interprets hesitations within Erasmus. Erasmus becomes the object of empathy as Beckett ponders the situation and what it would mean for someone of Erasmus's background.

Beckett's concern with the temporality of face reading and the possibility of distraction can also be observed in the live face that is staged in *That Time*. In one sense, it is a painterly construction that is designed to provoke a patient aesthetic attentiveness. Like the protagonist in the portrait gallery, the audience are invited to go through the slow, effortful process of trying to 'make out' the face and appreciate its particular qualities. But at the same time it is a noisy stimulus that is likely to trigger automatic reactions. For evidence of the extent to which Beckett thought about the psychophysiological impact of the face we might turn to the genesis of the play. Beckett's primary concern during this process seems to have been a question of whether the listening face alone was enough of a visual element. He states in a manuscript note: 'to the objection visual component too small, out of all proportion with aural, answer: make it smaller on the principle that less is more' (Knowlson 1996, 602). The extent of Beckett's deliberation over this aspect of the play becomes apparent in his letters to director Alan Schneider. He stated that there was 'not much' to be done to the play in September 1974, but was deliberating on the problems of imbalance between aural and visual components up until August 1975:

The delay in parting with it [*That Time's* manuscript] is due to misgivings over disproportion between image (listening face) and speech and much time lost in trying to devise ways of amplifying former. I have now come to accept its remoteness and stillness (Harmon 1998, 320-28).

Beckett's deliberation over whether or not the face needed to be amplified, and how this might be done, implies a question of the extent to which face reading occupies attention. Beckett's conclusion in the manuscripts that 'less is more', suggests he came to think that the less the face does, the more it will occupy the audience. But he was obviously not always entirely sure about this. He spent some time thinking about how a face might be made to arouse attention. S. E. Gontarski gives one example of this. In the opening holograph, Beckett mooted two potential movements for Listener:

The first, which no doubt would have caused an unbearable burden for the actor was: "No blinking. Eyes staring wide open as long as possible. Then closed as or longer." In revision, Beckett noted an alternative "eyes open only in silence." And it is the alternative that Beckett retained in the second holograph version and essentially maintained throughout composition (Gontarski 1985, 155).

Note that Beckett did not set a maximum duration for the stare. Instead, the eyes were to 'stay wide open' for 'as long as possible'. Beckett had used this kind of instruction before. In the 1971 Berlin production of *Happy Days* (1961), he had asked the actress playing Winnie, Eva-Katharina Schultz, to stare out to the audience 'unblinkingly for as long as possible' (Knowlson 1996, 584). She was, Knowlson states, 'almost blinded' and needed eye-drops (584). This method evidently puts certain somatic strains on the actor and one can see how these strains might produce a noisy affective stimulus. However, the alternative that Beckett settled on in the case of *That Time* brings up a different set of concerns. Rather than amplifying the visual stimulus and arousing the audience with a bodily spectacle, Beckett produced a play that tests the capacity of the face to command attention. In the final version, the audience is presented with a face that does almost nothing. The eyes are closed and Listener is inactive for nearly all of the play. His activity amounts to a few ten second blocks of silence in which the breath becomes 'audible' and the eyes open for three seconds (Beckett 2006, 388-95). Then a final flourish in which there is a five second

'smile, toothless for preference' (395). The face is live but it is not particularly lively. What demands does this live but almost inactive face make on audience and actor?

In terms of the requirements put on the actor, the facial movements of *That Time* give the actor temporal, as opposed to interpretive tasks. Beckett is not asking the actor playing Listener to be consciously expressive with his face. In fact, he is distracting the actor from expressiveness. First, there is the deceptively arduous task of keeping the eyes closed for long periods. Ruby Cohn observed the 'strain within repose' in Patrick Magee's face when he performed the role at the Royal Court (Cohn 1980, 268). But there is also the task of opening the eyes at precisely the right moment and for precisely the right duration. There is no necessity for the actor to react to the meaning of the text. Instead the demands of the role are largely temporal and somatic – doing the right thing at the right moment. Cohn's recollection of Magee's statements around the time of the Royal Court performance is telling in this respect. She remembers Magee mocking 'earnest academics who dig through Beckett's texts for buried gold', and maintaining that Beckett's directions were 'so simple and specific that any idiot could follow them' (267-8). As Magee saw it, his role was not to engage with the text and make emotional interpretation through his face, but to simply follow specific instructions. In a sense, then, Beckett is discouraging a naturalistic mode of face reading in which the actor deliberately produces facial expressions for the audience to interpret. Instead, he is asking the actor's face to work in an almost mechanical way. However, regardless of intention or attention, the actor simply cannot present a blank face. As Bernard Waldenfals states in relation to Emmanuelle Levinas (of whom we will hear more momentarily), 'we cannot close our face as we close our eyes' (Waldenfals 2002, 64). Each performance will bring with it a particular set of unscripted facial movements: the lips might quiver; the eyebrows might raise or lower and there may be tensions and relaxations of the jaw. From his experience directing *Not I*, Beckett would have been very aware that the human face finds it difficult to stay still. *That Time* experiments with this difficulty by leaving room for unscripted expressions. The actor's face is bound to present some involuntary movement and, by presenting the face as the sole visual stimulus, Beckett emphasises these flickers. The live stimulus of the actor's

face always threatens to disturb the scripted face. Beckett's play can be seen as an experiment that draws attention to the face's status as both a site of aesthetic interpretation and an affective psychophysiological stimulus.

### Face Culture

If Beckett's play can be thought of as an experiment on face reading, it might be useful to place this experiment in a broader historical context. In the modern period the face has increasingly become a point of contention. This is noted by Crary in his discussion of Manet's painting. Crary suggests that Manet's portrayal of the woman's face in the conservatory can be placed within the context of cultural developments in the later part of the nineteenth century. The period, for Crary, saw 'a new regime of faciality' take shape after a long historical period in which 'the meanings of the human face were explained in terms of rhetoric and language' (Crary 1999, 99). In this 'new regime', the face could belong to a human being that was both a 'physiological organism' and 'a privatized, socialized individual subject' (99). Crary suggests that Darwin's work on the expression of emotions can be seen as a manifestation of this change. In this context, the ability to control one's own facial expression becomes a key marker of social normativity. Conversely, the uncontrolled face begins to be seen as a window to pathology. Crary suggests that it is in the field of mental pathology, 'with its analyses of hysterias, obsessions, manias and anxieties, that the face with all its intrinsic motility becomes a sign of a disquieting continuum between the somatic and the social' (99). The woman's expression in Manet's painting is significant because it simultaneously evokes 'public presentation' and involuntary behaviour. Crary argues that the woman could be recomposing herself in response to a suggestion from the man next to her in the picture, but she could also be in a trance. The expression is concurrently somatic and social, involuntary and effortful (99-100). Thus, for Crary, Manet's painting embodies the novel and 'precarious' position of the nineteenth-century face (99).

The central question in Crary's discussion seems to be one of whether the face can be managed. Crary suggests that, within nineteenth-century

culture, there was an assumption that the inability to manage one's face was a sign of insanity or inhumanity. This assumption, though, came into conflict with developing evolutionary and physiological conceptions of facial expression. The face, I would argue, has continued to occupy this precarious position through the twentieth century and beyond. This is evidenced in the work carried out by Ekman and others into 'micro-expressions' – 'very brief facial expressions' that 'occur when a person either deliberately or unconsciously conceals a feeling' (Ekman 2015). There is the idea that, as socialised beings, humans will inevitably try to mask certain spontaneous expressions of emotion (the teacher, for example, might try to hide anger from students). But these spontaneous expressions will still manifest as flickers on the face. The face, Ekman's psychology suggests, will betray even the most socialised of individuals – it can never quite be controlled. Western culture is still seduced and disquieted by the idea that facial expressions can mark us out as both physiological organisms and socialized individual subjects. Ekman's research is interested in showing that faces cannot be completely mastered, but the dissemination of his work plays on a need for mastery. For between \$40.00 and \$200.00 (US), one can purchase Ekman's training tools, which promise to teach you how to 'read micro-expressions', 'spot concealed emotions', and 'manage the expression of your own emotions' (Ekman 2015). There is ongoing tension between the recognition that facial expressions are frequently produced involuntarily and uncontrollably, and the individual's desire to attain some level of control over them.

This interest in face management can be found throughout twentieth-century culture. Within twentieth-century psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, there was a continuous interest in the face, and particularly the potential dangers and benefits of face-to-face interaction. As Crary suggests, nineteenth-century psychiatry commonly treated facial expressions as markers of mental pathology. The most prominent example of this can be found in the images of patients produced in case studies of hysteria. These images often highlight the facial expression as a key symptom of the condition. Sander Gilman notes that the case studies of the period make some effort to obscure the identity of their subjects through the 'use of initials or masked names' (Gilman 1993, 349). However, the face itself is still usually presented – often emphatically – because



it is deemed to give crucial insight into the condition: 'there is the assumption that the face (its structure or its expression) is so important that it does not need to be masked' (349). In *The Invention of Hysteria* (1983) Georges Didi-Huberman notes that photography was used for its potential to capture aspects of the face that the naked eye might miss. Speaking particularly of the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, he argues that it is 'on the basis of photography's capacity for (diagnostic, pedagogical) certification and (prognostic scientific) "foresight" that Charcot's *iconographic impulse*, as it has been called, must be understood' (Didi-Huberman 2003, 33, emphasis in original). Representations of the face, then, were an integral part of nineteenth-century psychiatry's diagnostic procedure. In twentieth-century psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, however, the face is not only looked to for diagnostic purposes. There is also a growing sense that facial interaction between patient and therapist/analyst might function as a more or less useful part of treatment.

Discourse on this topic might be seen to begin with Freud who evidently recognised the potential significance of face-to-face interaction to psychoanalysis, but wanted to manage interaction in a particular way. In 1913, Freud recommended that face-to-face contact between analyst and patient be avoided. He stipulated a therapeutic environment in which the patient reclines 'on the sofa while one sits behind him out of his sight' (Freud 1933, 354). This situation is preferable, he reasons, because, when listening to the patient, the analyst resigns their self to the control of 'unconscious thought' (354). Freud thinks that this unconscious thought will be expressed on the therapist's face, and that these unconscious expressions might affect the patient. This state of affairs is undesirable: 'I do not wish my expression to give the patient indications which he may interpret or which may influence him in his communications' (354). Freud undoubtedly recognises that much can be gleaned from the face (and stipulates an environment in which analyst might look to the face of the analysand) but he is not interested in making use of facial interactions within the therapeutic environment.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In *Discourse Networks* (1985), Friedrich Kittler sees this as symptomatic of Freud's tendency towards 'exclusion of the optical realm' (Kittler 1990, 284). For Kittler, this tendency sits uncomfortably with the concept of 'free floating' (or evenly divided) attention. Like the phonograph, Kittler continues, Freud's method fishes 'in the wide stream of perception, but only among acoustical data' (284).

However, as the century goes on – and non-Freudian methods of psychotherapy become more prominent – there is a growing interest in the way in which facial interaction might affect therapeutic relations. Micro-expressions were, in fact, first observed in a study by Haggard and Isaacs (1966), which focused on facial expressions within psychotherapeutic sessions (Haggard and Isaacs 1966, 154-65). Also, psychoanalytic therapists such as H. F. Searles began to incorporate face-to-face interaction and suggest that the ‘analyst’s facial expressions are a highly, and often centrally, significant dimension of both psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapy’ (Searles 1984-5, 47). Describing the case of a forty-year-old female patient, Searles recognises that the patient’s ‘attunement’ to his face proved to be a ‘far more significant emotional avenue for the unfolding of the transference, than did the realm of words’ (64). In other cases, Searles finds that when paraphrasing things that he had said in previous sessions, patients would ‘largely unconsciously’ iterate his facial expressions (52). Thus, ‘in the core phase of the work with any one patient, each of the two participants’ facial expressions “belong,” in a sense, as much to the other as oneself’ (60). The facial expression, here, is seen not only as a window to pathology, but as the primary medium through which patient and therapist communicate.<sup>42</sup> Thus, whether in Freudian practice or face-to-face psychotherapy, the face was of high importance in twentieth-century therapy. Freud took the analyst’s face out of the equation (perhaps because of an awareness that his face would make expressions that he could not control). Later therapists, on the other hand, have tried to incorporate the spontaneity of facial interaction into their approach. As in the work of Ekman, there is the recognition that facial expressions will be produced and interpreted involuntarily but also a desire to filter out, identify, modify or make use of this unmanageability.

This concern with the face in psychology spilled into twentieth-century philosophy. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss facial culture.<sup>43</sup> They note that ‘the face has been a major concern of

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<sup>42</sup> A very important aspect of this interest lies in the analogy between the patient-therapist relationship and the parent-child. Patrick Casement invokes this in *Learning from the Patient* (1985): ‘like a child who watches the mother’s face for signs of pleasure or indications of mood, patients listen for similar signs from the therapist and there are many available’ (Casement 2002, 58).

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari draw on Beckett’s work extensively. Indeed, Beckett’s novels are cited in their discussion of faciality in the novel in *A Thousand Plateaus* (191-3). For a critical discussion that relates

American psychology, in particular the relation between the mother and the child through eye-to-eye contact' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 188).<sup>44</sup> However, their discussion opens out into a wider discussion of 'faciality'. The face, they argue, comes into being when the head 'ceases to be part of the body' and becomes a 'screen with holes' – a 'white wall' punctuated by black holes (188-9). Here, Deleuze and Guattari argue, an 'abstract machine' produces 'faciality' (189). This operation begins with the head being 'decoded' and 'overcoded' by the face and, eventually, 'the entire body' also 'comes to be facialized as part of an inevitable process':

When the mouth and nose, but first the eyes, become a holey surface, all the other volumes and cavities of the body follow. An operation worthy of Doctor Moreau: horrible and magnificent. Hand, breast, stomach, penis and vagina, thigh, leg and foot, all come to be facialized (188-189).

Deleuze and Guattari are keen to distinguish this process from one in which parts of the body are simply seen to resemble the face. They are interested, instead, in 'a much more unconscious and machinic operation that draws the entire body across the holey surface' (189). In this process, instead of experiencing the body as a proprioceptive, volume-cavity system, one begins to scan it in terms of the way in which holes are presented on a wall. Is this hole too big? Is that hole the wrong shape? Should the other hole even be there? Deleuze and Guattari, then, do not take the face as a given. It is not, they argue, related to 'evolution or genetic stages' and nor is it 'universal' (190-6). 'Certain social formations' they suggest 'need face' and 'there is a whole history behind it' (200, emphasis in original). In 'primitive societies', Deleuze and Guattari argue, 'there is very little that operates through the face' but in modernity the face has become an entrenched, habitual, often violent way of perceiving otherness and endowing it with degrees of sameness (195).

We might relate Deleuze and Guattari's idea of an 'unconscious and machinic' operation of faciality to the study of face reading in experimental

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the concept of faciality to Beckett's drama, see Colin Gardner's work on Beckett and Deleuze (2012, 90-5).

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that, in his own psychoanalytic (or post-psychoanalytic) practice, Guattari moved away from one-to-one, face-to-face contact and began using a form of group therapy. As Gary Genosko puts it, Guattari 'called into question the analytic relationship of analyst-analysand, the so-called face-to-face, dual relation, for the sake of the analysis of groups in a clinical setting' (Genosko 2002, 68).

psychology, though there are obvious differences. Experimental psychology tends to discuss the face in terms of universals and evolution whereas Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the face as a culturally determined phenomenon. Experimental psychology studies the face in order to better define the human, where Deleuze and Guattari see the face as an essentially 'inhuman' symptom of modernity (189). Nevertheless, in both there is the idea that the reading of faces goes on outside of the individual's control. Rather than consciously interpreting a face and drawing conclusions about it, both suggest that certain processes work on human beings and lead them to recognise, and respond to faces in a certain way. Deleuze and Guattari also speculate on how human beings might escape or 'dismantle the face and facializations' (188). They are searching for ways of working against or overcoming the unconscious operations of the abstract machine of faciality. In this way, their ideas might be related to those of Ekman, Freud and Searles. In each there is the recognition that faces are produced and read involuntarily, and – in very different ways – all make moves towards managing this process.

Deleuze and Guattari's account has been influential but perhaps the twentieth-century philosopher best known for his emphasis on the face is Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>45</sup> As was the case with Deleuze and Guattari, the face to which Levinas refers is not merely the collection of features situated at the front of the head. Rather it seems to refer to a way of encountering the other's presence more generally. For Levinas, 'the face is a living presence; it is expression' (66). The face, then, is not cut off at the neck. The facial encounter may be an encounter with any living, expressing presence. As Bernard Waldenfals notes, Levinas is not suggesting that there is some aspect of the other that is 'condensed in the face' (Waldenfals 2002, 65). Instead, 'the whole body expresses, our hands and shoulders do it as well as our face taken in its narrow sense' (65). Thus, both Deleuze and Guattari and Levinas describe the facial encounter as a general mode of experiencing the other. However, there is certainly a distinction to be made between the ways in which this encounter is described in the respective works. For Deleuze and Guattari, the facial encounter occurs through the medium of a 'machinic' system. In the view of

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<sup>45</sup> There is a significant body of criticism which considers Beckett's relationship with Levinas. For example, see Fifield 2013.

Levinas, by contrast, the encounter is much more direct. For Levinas, one can decide to play a particular role when in contact with others, but this role-playing does not preclude a more direct facial encounter. An existent can lie 'without being able to dissimulate his frankness as interlocutor':

The eye breaks through the mask – the language of the eyes impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks. The alternative of truth and lying, of sincerity and dissimulation, is the prerogative of him who abides in the relation of absolute frankness, in the absolute frankness which cannot hide itself (66).

For Levinas, then, the eyes have a language but this language is not coded in the way that it is for Deleuze and Guattari. The features of the face are not holes to be processed by an abstract machine. Instead, they have their own language which communicates with frankness and cannot be overcoded. Thus, even as one puts on a mask and 'disposes a theme', the eyes are able to break through and express in a manner that is unquestionable (66). Again the face is seen as a site of unmanageability – it does not dutifully express what the individual consciously wants it to express. But, for Levinas, this unmanageability is not pathological and nor is it merely seen to interrupt a verbal encounter. Rather, it is the site at which meaning might emerge. Meaning, as Levinas describes it, is not 'produced as an ideal essence; it is said and taught by presence' (66). Thus, in the facial encounter with the other, one is changed: the other's presence 'dominates him who welcomes it, comes from the heights unforeseen and consequently teaches its very novelty' (66). If the encounter with the other's facial presence is welcomed, Levinas suggests, the self is destabilised and becomes receptive to meaning.

Twentieth-century psychology, psychotherapy and philosophy, then, offer a wide range of approaches to the face. There are differences between disciplines. For instance, Ekman's Facial Action Coding System would likely be anathema to a philosopher such as Levinas, for whom giving meaning to one's presence is 'irreducible to evidence' (66). But there are also differences within disciplines. Freud filtered facial interaction out of the analytic session where Searles made it the focal point of his psychoanalytic method. There are also disagreements on whether the face is a cultural construct or a matter that humans are innately drawn to. Wherever one looks, though, there is a growing

emphasis on the idea that the movements of the face (and our interpretations of these movements) frequently occur outside of the individual's conscious control. For some, such as Levinas and Searles, this offered the hope of ethical, or therapeutic, insight. For others, the face was the product of cultural homogenization and one needed to escape it. Some, such as Ekman, attempted the rational study of the face, and others – like Freud – tried to put facial interaction to one side. All, however, posit a face that is beyond the conscious control of the human individual and question what might be done with it.

### **Managed Spontaneity**

Whether in experimental psychology, psychotherapy or philosophy, then, twentieth-century culture was heavily concerned with questions of the face's manageability. But how does this concern manifest in Beckett's theatrical experimentation? I want to argue that Beckett's writing can be seen to engage with one aspect of twentieth-century facial culture in particular. It registers and, I propose, resists an attitude that seeks to use the face's perceived unmanageability in order to produce a choreographed sense of spontaneity. This technique of manufacturing spontaneity can be traced back to the theatrical practices of the nineteenth century, particularly the act of flinching. Tiffany Watt-Smith notes how, in this period, flinching 'hardened into a "stage-effect", a piece of "business" in which jerking, twitching and staggering backwards, shielding the face, shrieking and gasping were carefully choreographed in order, paradoxically, to suggest a body involuntarily betraying itself' (Watt-Smith 2014, 63). The twentieth century, though, would see the rise to ubiquity of another movement in which the body seems to betray itself, the smile. Colin Jones argues that the twentieth century saw a great increase in cultural esteem for the toothy smile, in contrast to the nineteenth century's idealisation of 'thoughtfulness, character and demureness' (Jones 2014, 180). This, Jones suggests, was triggered by new photographic and dental technologies. Dentistry became accessible *en masse* and the photographic snapshot allowed one to capture the spontaneous, pearly-toothed smile in a way that was not possible with paint (180-1). But, with this cultural preference,

the smile also became a skill to be mastered. It became a way of making friends, getting jobs and selling products; not only a spontaneous expression of happiness, but a culturally ubiquitous expectation (182). Appreciation for the smile, here, extends beyond the aesthetic practices of theatre or painting. In a wider culture, and particularly in commercial situations, the smile acquired value. The mere act of smiling (curving the mouth upwards and showing the teeth), though, was not enough: what people were deemed likely to pay for, it seems, was the evocation of spontaneity. This development is recognised most extensively by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her study of the practices of air hostesses working for Delta Airlines. These workers carry out, what Hochschild calls, 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983, 8-9). Smiling is part of their work but the required smiles are not merely professional; they must seem spontaneous. This attitude, Hochschild notes, is evidenced in a jingle used by Pacific Southwest Airlines: '[On PSA] our smiles are not just painted on' (4).

In order to produce this sense of spontaneity, Hochschild continues, hostesses adopt an 'artificially created elation' (4). Their labour does not lie in making themselves look happy but in working themselves into a happiness from which a smile can easily slip. Drawing on Constantin Stanislavski's theatrical theory, she calls this emotional labour 'deep acting' (38). In order to evoke an emotion convincingly, Stanislavski argues, an actor must feel that emotion, perhaps by recalling or imagining an experience that has provoked/would provoke it (Stanislavski 1965, 57). For Hochschild, the air hostess (and many other participants in modern life) must work in a very similar way (37-43). The individual's facial work, then, lies in looking as though they are not working to produce facial expression. When the work becomes perceptible, though, we begin to move into the realm of what Sianne Ngai terms, 'the zany'. Drawing on Hochschild's study, Ngai argues that in the later part of the twentieth century there was a move in the 'capitalist organization of production' from 'scientific management' to 'performance management' – from a mode of production in which one merely had to carry out particular tasks, to one in which one had to exude a particular personality or emotion (Ngai 2012, 201). An aesthetic of zaniness, for Ngai, registers this by emphasising the ways in which 'affect, subjectivity, and sociability' are being put to work (203). This aesthetic, for Ngai, is largely comedic. Ngai suggests that if the earlier capitalist system 'made

people laugh at characters incapable of adjusting to new roles and social situations quickly', the later system draws comedic potential from characters that 'seem almost too good at doing so' (174). To exemplify this, she points to a selection of figures that might seem far-removed from Beckett's aesthetic, particularly Lucille Ball's character (Lucy) in the mid twentieth-century situation comedy *I Love Lucy*, and Jim Carrey's character in the 1996 comedy *The Cable Guy* (175-202). Unlike these characters, it is difficult to argue that Beckett's protagonists are 'too good' at adjusting to new roles and social situations'. Rather, Beckett's writing tends to focus on figures that fail (or refuse) to adapt. The paradigmatic Beckettian figure, it may be thought, is not one that continually moves between social roles. Rather Beckett's characters prefer, paraphrasing *Molloy*, to stay where they happen to be (Beckett 2009d, 85). Nevertheless, Ngai's conception of the zany aesthetic evidently encompasses Beckett's writing (or certain aspects of it). Beckett, Ngai states in passing, works in the zany tradition by exploring 'themes of laborious or compulsive doing' (13-14). How, then, can Beckett's – seemingly rather rigid – figures fit into a comedic aesthetic that focuses on subjects that are, in Ngai's words, 'absolutely elastic' (Ngai 2012, 174)?

Ngai seems to perceive Beckettian zaniness in moments where characters perform ostensibly pointless tasks indefatigably, and with great relish – one thinks particularly of the sucking-stones episode in *Molloy* (Beckett 2009d, 63-9). But these moments seem to differ from the instances of zaniness that Ngai recognises elsewhere insofar as characters such as Molloy are not, in any straightforward sense, adapting to new roles or social situations. Rather they are described to be fulfilling their own needs and desires. Molloy, for example, professes a 'bodily need' to 'suck the stones in the way I have described, not haphazard, but with method' (68). There is not the sense of social or professional obligation that characterises Ngai's other examples of zaniness. However, I want to argue that, in his use of the smile, Beckett explores questions of social performance in a way that resonates strongly with Ngai's idea of the zany.

Now, Beckett's writing frequently considers the smile, and different types of smile can be found across the oeuvre. In some instances, the smile is described as a private phenomenon that affects the mind but may not be



perceptible on the face. For example, in a review of Jack B. Yeats's novel *The Amaranthers* (1936), Beckett writes of how, when confronted with Yeats's irony, 'the face remains grave, but the mind has smiled' (Beckett 1983, 89). Another instant in which the smile is portrayed as kind of mental affect can be found in *The Capital of Ruins* (1946), a short prose piece written for radio in the aftermath of the Second World War which reflects on Beckett's time as a hospital volunteer in war-shattered Saint-Lô. Here Beckett points to a number of moments in which the 'therapeutic relation' between patients and staff faded and there was:

the occasional glimpse obtained by us in them, and who knows them in us (for they are an imaginative people) of that smile at the human conditions as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Burroughes and Welcome – the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health (Beckett 1995, 277).

Again, the smile seems to function primarily as the mind's response to a social situation, it can only be glimpsed occasionally on the face. Crucial, here, is the point that no conscious emotional labour goes into the production of these smiles. They are, it seems, reflex, emotional responses to certain situations which occasionally leave external traces.

In other works, however, these seemingly effortless (often purely mental) smiles are superseded by smiles that show a large amount of facial (though not necessarily emotional) labour. An early example of this can be found in the smile of the character Watt. Watt, we are told, 'had watched people smile and thought he understood how it was done' (Beckett 2009e, 19). The protagonist's smile is not an involuntary show of emotion, but the product of a deliberate process of studying others in order to master the smile. This process of study has worked to an extent: 'Watt's smile, when he smiled, resembled more a smile than a sneer' (19). But, the narrator suggests, 'there was something wanting to Watt's smile, some little thing was lacking' (19). This lack makes the smile something of an enigma: those seeing it for the first time 'were sometimes in doubt as to what expression was exactly intended. To many it seemed a simple sucking of teeth' (19). Also, Watt's smiles have a tendency to linger:

Watt's smile was further peculiar in this, that it seldom came singly but was followed after a short time by another, less pronounced it is true. In this it resembled the fart. And it even sometimes happened that a third, very weak and fleeting, was found necessary before the face could be at rest again (21).<sup>46</sup>

This comparison is interesting as the smile gets caught between the somatic and the social. A fart is bodily and involuntary to an extent. It can, on occasion, break out from nowhere without one's having the chance to think about it. But at the same time the individual usually has a modicum of control over the process – one can usually pick socially opportune moments. In *Watt* the sense of spontaneity is degraded as the smile is extended through time. The third movement, we are told, was 'found necessary', which gives the sense of a cognitive debate over how long to extend the process. There is the implication that, in the normal way, the smile slips out one time before the face rests. But in Watt's 'peculiar' way, the face is seen to think about its smiling – cognition is seen to override affect. Importantly, here, Watt is not deep acting. He has not worked himself into a state of emotion from which a smile can easily slip. He is managing his facial features in order to produce a particular shape rather than doing the emotional labour that would enable a spontaneous smile. Watt's facial effort is perceptible and so he produces a slightly enigmatic smile which exudes a peculiarly Beckettian zaniness. One sees a subject labouring to adjust to a social situation, but it is the wrong type of labour. In a world in which the subject is expected to manage their emotions in order to produce a spectacle of spontaneity, Watt is only able to manage the machinery of his face.

In *That Time* the audience is presented with a descendant of Watt's smile. The play closes with a five-second smile 'toothless for preference', but what are we to make of it (Beckett 2006, 395)? It is important to recognise a difference in medium here. In contrast to that of Watt, there is an actor's face behind Listener's smile and we might question the nature of the relationship between actor and smile. Given that Listener's smile is situated at the end of the performance, it may be seen as the moment at which *the mask comes off* and the actor relaxes, producing a spontaneous show of emotion. However, as was

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<sup>46</sup> For another reading that considers the relationship between affect and facial expression in Beckett's work see David Houston Jones's (forthcoming) work on trauma, face and figure in Beckett's writing.

the case in *Watt*, the smile lingers. It is extended for five seconds ‘till fade out and curtain’, which signifies that the script is still playing out (Beckett 2006, 395). This extension through time gives the sense that the smile is being forced and because of this, I do not see it as a show of happiness, relaxation or relief. As Shane Weller puts it, the smile provokes a ‘labour of interpretation’ (Weller 2006, 131). There may be a hint of spontaneity in the actor’s smile. He may spontaneously show relief at the end of the play. But the extension of this smile over time lends doubt as to what it is expressing, and the primary sense evoked is that of a ‘zany’ effort. As suggested by the above comments of Patrick Magee, Beckett does not ask the actor playing Listener to perform emotional labour (Stanislavskian ‘deep acting’) during performances, but to follow simple and specific instructions. In *That Time*, though, he seems to script the moment at the end of a performance where the actor is supposed to stop acting and engage in face-to-face contact with his customers, the audience. In the late twentieth century, the individual was under increasing pressure to make moments of labour look spontaneous. In Beckett’s play, though, the moment in which the actor is supposed to look spontaneous begins to look like work. Beckett is writing against a Stanislavskian culture of deep acting<sup>47</sup> and a broader culture of managed spontaneity.

### **Selective Attention and the ‘Cocktail Party’ Problem**

In the presentation of a flickering and often inactive face, Beckett has so far been seen to experiment on the process of face reading and engage with contemporary attitudes towards the face. One should not forget, however, that the face is not the only element of the play. The low-level visual stimulus is accompanied by a stream of aural stimuli. Listener may not speak to the audience, but the audience does listen in on his being spoken to. The action of the play sees three recorded voices, ‘A’ ‘B’ and ‘C’, come to Listener ‘from both sides and above’ (Beckett 2006, 388). The three voices give out three different memories, which we might assume are from different periods of Listener’s life:

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<sup>47</sup> Numerous critics have pointed out the degree to which Beckett’s writing breaks with Stanislavskian method. See, for example, Uhlmann 2013, 173-5.

'A' of old age, 'B' of middle age and 'C' of youth. They give out a huge amount of detailed information about what Listener has experienced and how he has experienced it. For example, voice 'C' begins:

when you went in out of the rain always winter then always raining that time in the Portrait Gallery in off the street out of the cold and rain slipped in when no one was looking through the rooms shivering and dripping till you found a seat at a marble slab (388).

This is not just the gist of a memory but a detailed recollection of lived experience. Without pause, we are given a flurry of particulars; the weather ('winter then always raining'); where the protagonist goes ('the Portrait Gallery'); how his body feels ('shivering and dripping'); what he sits on ('a marble slab'). As in *Not I*, these words were intended to be delivered quickly. In an early note, Beckett states that the play should last '15 min' and go at 200wds/min' (Gontarski 1985, 156). Thus, as the visual stimulus gives out very little scripted information, the aural stimulus gives out an abundance of it. This wealth of aural information is also presented in a fragmented manner. The memories are not presented one-by-one in chronological order. Instead, 'they modulate back and forth without any break in general flow' (388). Thus the first part of a memory is given by A. Then, without break, C takes over and starts to give out a different memory. Next, C stops and B starts to give out a different memory, and so on. In addition to this fragmentation, there is a problem of chronology. The play does not start with the memory of youth and move through to old age, but starts with old age and moves back to youth, only to go back to old age again in a loop. Furthermore, the order shifts as the play goes on. If the face provokes 'a labour of interpretation' by giving out a dearth of information, the voices provoke equal labour by presenting a torrent of seemingly disordered detail. In what follows, I will be concerned with the way in which these two sensory channels work together. James Knowlson has observed that in Beckett's drama of this period sight is played off against sound (Knowlson 1996, 624). In a sense, *That Time* is a perfect example of this conflict between ear and eye. As mentioned above, when studying da Messina's depiction of *St. Sebastian* in Germany, Beckett complained of being disturbed by a 'noisy guide'. It may be suggested that in *That Time*, voices A B and C take the role of this noisy guide and interfere with the audience's study of the face. Conversely, one might argue that

the 'labour of interpretation' provoked by the face distracts from the content being voiced by A, B and C. However, the visual and aural stimuli may also be seen to supplement each other. Put crudely, the material presented by the three voices might be seen to represent what is going on in Listener's mind. Thus the voices might help us interpret the face's expression and the face's movements might also help us to interpret the voices. Two sensory channels are, in one sense, competing for attention but, in another, combining to give the audience a sense of what is going on.

The aural stimulus in *That Time* was not intended as one continuous stream. It is broken up into different channels and these channels also have the potential to come into conflict with each other. This potential for conflict is evident in the manuscripts. As with the presentation of the face, Beckett toyed with various ideas as to how he would present the aural stimulus. Gontarski recognises that, in early drafts, there was a large focus on processes of 'interruption' and 'conflict' between the three channels (Gontarski 1985, 156). In the initial draft, Gontarski continues, Beckett considered a set-up in which there were moments where two of the voices would speak together: 'A beginning stops B or C, but for a moment 2 together. A may persist. B or C yield' (156). Beckett's mooted method bears a striking resemblance to a series of experiments that took place in twentieth-century experimental psychology. In presenting two recorded voices simultaneously, Beckett would have produced his own experiment on a psychological effect known as the 'cocktail party' problem. This is the question of how, when presented with multiple voices, the human is able to attend to a certain voice and inhibit others. In his review of the field of selective attention Jon Driver outlines this problem as such:

In many situations (e.g. a noisy room full of people), many sounds enter our ears at once. How are we able to pick out just those sounds that are relevant to us (e.g. the conversation we are taking part in)? Moreover, what is the difference in processing for such attended sounds vs. unattended sounds (e.g. the other conversations taking place in the room) (Driver 2001, 54)?

There are two questions to tackle here. First there is a question of separating signal from noise in any situation: for example, how I manage to attend to the music coming from my speakers and ignore the sounds of cars on the street, or

the buzzing of my fridge. This is a question that Beckett had come across in his reading of Gestalt psychology. In his interwar notes Beckett informed himself of the Gestalt idea of 'figure and ground'. At the same time as he read about the baby's tendency to single 'out a face or other compact visual unit' in the visual sphere, he also noted how this process translated when one is presented with aural or tactile stimuli. A 'noise figure', Beckett notes, will be recognised against a 'noise background' and a 'movement on skin' will be recognised against a 'general mass of cutaneous sensation' (TCD MS 10971/7/12). Thus, as Laura Salisbury (2010) has noted, the process by which signal is separated from noise, figure from ground, had captured Beckett's interest.

However, in the presentation of the aural stimulus in *That Time*, Beckett is negotiating a slightly different question. In presenting two voices simultaneously, Beckett would not have been asking an audience to separate figure from ground. Instead he would have asked them to choose between two aural figures, a process that became important in the study of attention in experimental psychology. Experiments by Broadbent (1958) and Moray (1959) studied this process through 'selective shadowing' tasks. Here 'two different spoken messages were played at the same time' (Driver 2001, 54). One message was played to each ear through headphones and listeners were required to concentrate on one message rather than the other. Driver isolates two fundamental empirical questions that experiments on this subject investigated: first, 'what differences between two messages are needed' for successful selective attention? Second, if one is able to selectively attend to one message, how much does one know about the unattended channel (54)? With regards to the first question, Beckett's method poses some problems for selective attention. In *That Time*, the three channels presented are very similar in content so it would have been difficult to attend to one over the others. Voices A, B and C have the same voice and, as Gontarski notes all are apparently 'memories belonging to the visible head' (Gontarski 1985, 150). The three channels share certain phrases – the titular 'that time', for example; they are presented at similar speeds; in a similar tone; and there is nothing in the text to suggest that one is any more significant than the others (Beckett 2006, 388-90). There is, however, one difference that might enable selective attention. Psychological experimentation suggested that, for efficient selective attention,

'there needs to be a clear physical difference between the messages, such as their coming from different locations' (Driver 2001, 54). As he explains in a letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett went down this route:

The chief difficulty of A B & C being the same voice will be to make clear the modulation from one to another, as between attendant keys, without breaking the flow continuous except where silences indicated. I feel that dissimilar contexts and dislocation in space – one coming to him from left, a second from above, third from right – should be enough to do it (Harmon 1998, 329).

Beckett's method, then, gives just enough of a physical difference to give a sense of 'modulation' but he also wanted to keep the voices in a continuous flow. In this sense he would have made selective attention possible but effortful. With regards to Driver's second question, it was found that, when one is able to select a particular channel for attention, little is picked up from the other channel. The experimenters found that, given a physical difference between the channels, 'people appear to know surprisingly little about the non-shadowed message' (Driver 2001, 54). They had little idea about the topic of the unattended channel, and in many cases could not detect a change in language or the repetition of a single word (54). In these experiments, the only changes reported were 'unsubtle' changes in physical properties, such as changes in pitch, or the sudden insertion of a loud tone (54). Thus, if Beckett had gone down the route of presenting simultaneous speech it would have likely resulted in chunks of A, B, or C becoming inaccessible. Performance would have probably seen random parts of the text undone.

Gontarski suggests that Beckett's deciding against the presentation of simultaneous voices was part of a wider move towards formalism in the genetic process. For Gontarski, Beckett moved from 'a pattern of simple hostility among the voices' to a 'harmonious relationship' (Gontarski 1985, 156). Beckett's labour in the writing process, Gontarski suggests, was primarily devoted to 'orchestrating the fragments into increasingly complicated patterns' (157). Here, he continues, 'the analogy with music is particularly apposite' (157). In Gontarski's account, Beckett went away from the idea of presenting a dramatic conflict between three voices, towards one of presenting the voices as three elements of a single musical pattern. He goes on to suggest that Listener's

closing smile can be explained in terms of an appreciation of form, rather than content:

What Listener appears to be responding to at the end of the play is not the content of the voices but their pattern. In the play's first section, Listener hears the ACB pattern broken by the final CAB. In the second section, the CBA pattern is broken by the ending BCA. But in the third section Listener can take some pleasure in the restoration of order, or at least a formal harmony, as the BAC pattern is retained throughout the third part (158).

Now, the notion that Beckett was occupied by formal concerns during the writing of *That Time* is beyond question. However, I think Gontarski may overstate the case a little. With regards to the smile, as Shane Weller points out, Gontarski assumes that it is 'rooted in pleasure' – downplaying its enigmatic nature (Weller 2006, 130). Furthermore, in Gontarski's reading, Beckett seems to overestimate a theatrical audience's capacity to apprehend the pattern that he presents. As an audience member, I would have little chance of locating where each voice is coming from, let alone keeping track of the pattern that unfolds. Though it is possible that Beckett might overestimate his audience in such a way, I wish to advance another theory. Rather, than simply moving from a version of the play which focuses on conflict between voices, to one which focuses on pattern, I would argue that Beckett is interested in playing these two versions against each other. Beckett, I suggest, is not producing patterns for their own sake. Rather, the play investigates how we move between attending to three distinct elements, and apprehending that those elements are a single continuous whole. Here, we might go back to Beckett's study of Gestalt psychology. The major point Beckett took from his notes on the Gestaltists was their insistence 'that every act or experience should be studied as a whole & in its setting, rather than analysed into its elements' (TCD MS 10971/7/7). Beckett's presentation of the aural stimulus in *That Time*, though, does not allow us to do one or the other. In a stage note Beckett stipulated that the aural stimulus should produce a particular 'effect' in which the switch between voices is 'clearly faintly perceptible' (Beckett 2006, 387). He did not want the aural stimulus to be experienced as a continuous whole, but neither did he want the distinction between elements to be completely definite. Instead, he brings two



modes of attention into conflict. On the one hand, we might appreciate *That Time's* aural stimulus as a single musical piece that moves through a series of formal progressions. But on the other we are presented with three voices that tell different stories and compete for attention. Beckett, I suggest, was interested in exploring the psychological strains that reside between these two modes of attention.

### **Aesthetic Labours of Attention**

In *That Time*, then, reading faces and selectively attending to voices become psychologically strenuous tasks. Beckett brings an audience to question the way in which they are to attend to the sensory material that is presented. But what is the purpose of all this labour? Put another way, how does the psychological labour transition into aesthetic experience or theatrical entertainment? There seems always to have been a question in Beckett's mind over *That Time's* aesthetic credentials. Before it was performed, James Knowlson remembers Beckett telling him that the play would be working 'on the very edge of what was possible in the theatre' (Knowlson 1996, 602). In a sense, here, Beckett seems to understand his work as an attempt to extend the boundaries of artistic practice, and the play might be viewed as an experiment in this sense. But, if this is the case, in what ways are the boundaries being extended? I would argue that Beckett is extending the boundaries of aesthetic experience – working on the edge of what is possible in the theatre – by incorporating traditionally non-aesthetic modes of attention into an aesthetic environment. In one traditional aesthetic mode of attention (exemplified earlier by Beckett's inspection of Mathias Grünewald's painting) the subject devotes attention to a particular object and patiently tries to make out what that object is saying to them. This mode, though, is atypical in a modernity in which novel objects (or new channels of stimuli) frequently emerge to compete for the subject's attention. As we have begun to see (and we will consider this more thoroughly in the next chapter), experimental psychology is heavily concerned with the subject's capacity to deal with these competing stimuli – the ways in

which the modern subject manages their attentional load in everyday life.<sup>48</sup> Beckett's experiment, I suggest, is characterised by the introduction of these modes of attention into an aesthetic environment.

Of course, in modernity aesthetic experience is also increasingly characterized by a kind of divided attention. In the contemporary world, where a room is frequently populated by numerous devices capable of transmitting aesthetic products (books, televisions, smartphones, tablets, laptops, radios etc.), there is always the possibility that one aesthetic product might compete for attention with another. The last time I read one of Beckett's works,<sup>49</sup> for instance, I was intermittently aware of the television drama that was playing on my partner's laptop across the room. The question here, though, becomes one of whether this type of experience can still be labelled aesthetic. *That Time*, I argue, can be seen to anticipate this question. It presents sensory information in a way that requires the subject to manage or divide their attention and questions whether this process can be aesthetic, or even entertaining. For a response to the play that seems to register this question, we might look to John Pilling's review of Alan Schneider's 1977 production in New York. Unconvinced by the play's aesthetic, Pilling notes that the work often feels 'too languid to be dramatic' and 'nearly always seems too long' (Pilling 1978, 128). From this, one might infer that Beckett's play does not offer enough content to fill out the time it takes to perform. Pilling, though, is raising a slightly different concern. He suggests that the work might be 'more compelling as a radio play or short prose text' (128). The play, then, is seen to give out too much content. Pilling suggests that it may be more 'compelling' if the visual element was removed and the play became a purely aural or textual matter. There is the indication that less would have been more: the aural stimulus alone would have been enough to occupy Pilling, but when the visual and aural stimuli combine the play becomes a little boring. Here, Pilling is imaginatively separating the play out into discrete elements (what the speech would sound like without the visual stimuli; how the words would read if they were not being spoken). The play is perceived as a selection of stimuli competing against each other and Pilling does not feel that

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<sup>48</sup> For example, in the last two decades, there has been extensive research on the question of how the subject drives a car while speaking on a mobile telephone, see, for example Strayer and Johnston 2001; Treffner and Barrett 2004; Charlton 2009.

<sup>49</sup> *Rough for Theatre 2*, to be specific.

this competition is dramatically compelling. Instead, he reckons the play would be better if this competition was extinguished through the removal of certain channels. Rather than an aesthetic experience in which one concentrates on a single channel, the play produces a more laborious, everyday environment in which content comes from multiple sources and attention has to be managed and divided. By Pilling's account, then, psychological labour fails to translate into aesthetic pleasure.

However, this reading ignores a key aspect of the play's aesthetic practice: the telling of a personal story. Beckett's play is ultimately the story of a particular individual, and we might question why Beckett has chosen to tell the story in this particular way. For an answer to this, we might look to the text in a little more detail. The text narrates a series of episodes from a protagonist's life but (as was the case with *Not I*) it consistently raises the question of why these episodes are particularly worthy of our attention. The title of the plays gives an indication that there is one crucial time at the heart of the story, and the text hints that certain moments being described hold significance for the protagonist. At the same time, though, (to paraphrase Patrick Magee) Beckett's text frequently resists the view that one can dig through it to find buried gold. For instance, when voice C describes the (above discussed) time in the portrait gallery, the passage ends with the question of whose face it was that appeared (Beckett 2006, 389). When C begins again it states that the protagonist was 'never the same after that', hinting that a transformative moment ensued after the appearance of the face (390). However, this potential for insight is almost instantly refuted: 'but that was nothing new if it wasn't this it was that common occurrence something you could never be the same after crawling about year after year in your lifelong mess' (390). The play prompts us to focus in on the episode before insisting that it actually recounts a single 'mess' in which no moment can necessarily be distinguished from the 'blooming, buzzing confusion'. The text, then, seems to disqualify itself as a source that is likely to offer any keys to the protagonist's story.

In light of this, we might look in search of insight to the presence in front of us, namely Listener's face. As mentioned, the play's presentation may be interpreted to suggest that if one monitors the face for expression and listens to what the voices are saying an overall sense of the protagonist's situation can be

gleamed. However, textual detail and embodied presence do not combine neatly. The face does not respond to the words of the text straightforwardly and the fragmentation of the play disrupts the sense that one is examining a protagonist in any holistic way. The face is live while the voices are recorded, and the voices themselves are dislocated in space. Furthermore, we are frequently reminded of the distinction between Listener and the actor playing him. Listener, for example, seems to be lying down – he is given ‘long flaring hair as if seen from above’ – but the actor playing him is presented facing the audience in an upright position (Beckett 2006, 388). Although *That Time* is ostensibly concerned with the life story of a single individual, the performance of the play gives the impression that many different things are going on simultaneously. In an effort to make out the personal story, one has to divide attention between numerous distinct figures. Thus, *That Time* offers insights on the experience of attentional management, and ultimately investigates how one produces (or fails to produce) meaning amid the competing channels of modernity.

### Conclusion

Beckett’s experimentation in *That Time*, then, works in a variety of ways. First, along with many psychological experiments, it investigates the way in which we attend to faces, questioning how a deliberate, effortful mode of attending to the face interacts with a more automatic, affective mode. Second, it engages with twentieth-century cultural attitudes towards the face which highlighted the unmanageability of the face, but also sought to manage this unmanageability. Here, Beckett’s work seems particularly interested in the ways in which a culture of managed spontaneity might be disturbed in a theatrical context – how an actor’s scripted facial movements might be made to look mechanical or zany, rather than spontaneously expressive. In these ways, the play might be seen as an experiment that is primarily concerned with the face. But beyond, questions of the face and facial culture, we have also seen that Beckett’s play employs a particular combination of stimuli in order to interrogate the boundary between two modes of attention: a mode in which one apprehends a continuous whole and a mode in which different elements compete with one another for

attention. As well as a face, *That Time* presents three voices which might be seen to compete for attention (with one another and with the face). But at the same time these elements have the potential to form a continuous whole and Beckett never privileges one interpretation over the other. Thus, seeming to draw on Gestalt psychology, Beckett's play traverses the psychological strains that reside in between the whole and its elements.

*That Time*, then, is a work that demands an appreciable amount of psychological labour from its audience and part of its aesthetic experimentation, I have argued, lies in an attempt to extend the boundaries of artistic practice by incorporating problems of selective and divided attention into a theatrical environment. The play questions whether psychological labour can transition into aesthetic pleasure, and I would argue that this question is still open for debate. In many ways, this is a question that has framed the entire modernist corpus. From the exacting literary projects of Proust, Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Woolf, to the systematic music of Terry Riley, Philip Glass and Steve Reich, prominent modernists all seem to work with the assumption that aesthetic pleasure can be derived from psychological labour. But Beckett's work, with its emphasis on human incapacity and attentional strain, seems to interrogate the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and psychological labour in a much more open-ended way. It is often said that Beckett's writing is *hard work* (and it would be difficult to argue that Beckett intended otherwise) but the works themselves frequently ask us to consider whether this psychological labour is worth it – whether focusing our mind on this novel, text or play for an extended period of time is likely to deliver an aesthetic pay-off. This question is particularly important in a society in which a single stimulus (aesthetic or otherwise) rarely obtains our undivided attention but competes with a variety of other channels of stimuli. Beckett, then, might be seen to work with many experimental psychologists in exploring the ways in which the modern individual manages attentional loads. Much psychological experimentation questions whether the human can perform multiple, unrelated tasks simultaneously, and analyses different modes of attention. Beckett's play, though, might be distinguished from these experiments insofar as the tasks it asks us to perform are all linked to a single personal story. The attentional labour the play requires is geared towards an attempt to construct a more or less coherent life story.

And it is in this sense, I think, that we might most properly call *That Time* an aesthetic, or literary experiment.

## Chapter 3

### Inattention in *Footfalls*

Jonathan Crary suggests that in the late nineteenth century, a normative observer began to be conceptualized:

Not only in terms of the isolated objects of attention, but equally in terms of what is not perceived, or only dimly perceived, of the distractions, the fringes and peripheries that are excluded or shut out of a perceptual field (Crary 1999, 40).

Crary links this development to the 'physiological discovery of the nonhomogeneous nature of the eye itself', but this new model of vision, he argues, had a metaphorical impact that would transcend any particular empirical finding (40). Here Crary cites the Freudian model of 'an unconscious actively denying certain contents to attentive awareness', but he also suggests that Freud's theory was one of many in the period to show a concern with themes of 'inhibition, exclusion, and periphery' (40). Crary points to the development of a number of theories which suggested that sensory content is generally left inaccessible to consciousness, not in order to prevent psychic rupture, but because it is not task-relevant. In particular, he outlines Hermann von Helmholtz's notion that sensory information which is 'unlikely to be useful or necessary is involuntarily unattended to' (40). To become aware of this inhibited information, Helmholtz suggested, one must make a 'special effort' to reorient attention (40). Thus one is not – as in Freud's theory – repressing material with the potential to cause psychic rupture. Rather, attention becomes a matter of usefulness and necessity. One registers the material that is likely to be meaningful or useful and remains oblivious of that which is not.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The question here becomes one of the procedure by which these perceptual decisions are made. Who (or what) decides what is potentially meaningful or useful? In experimental psychology, there has been the suggestion that certain stimuli (the sound of one's own name, a smiling face or a stick figure, for example) are particularly likely to capture the attention of humans (Mack and Rock 1998, 155). This might be interpreted to suggest that certain biological mechanisms trigger humans to notice some stimuli over others. This, though, does not explain differences between individuals. Why do some individuals fail to register objects or events that are highly salient to others? This is a question to which I will return later in the chapter.

There are two aspects of Crary's discussion that I want to bring into the context of the twentieth century, and Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls*. First, Crary detects an opposition between theories that emphasise repression (such as Freud's), and those that look at involuntary, task-oriented inattention. Debates around this opposition have undoubtedly continued through the twentieth century, and these debates will inevitably enter into my discussion. The opposition, though, will be a secondary concern in this chapter. I am primarily interested in the other concern that comes up in Crary's discussion: the 'special effort' that is required to reorient attention so as to become aware of, or retrieve, inhibited information. Whether working with theories of repression or involuntary inattention, the twentieth century saw a sustained investigation into the experience of inattention. In the psychological laboratory, researchers used new technologies in order to manufacture attentional overload and produce observable moments of inattention. In psychotherapy, there was continued investigation into repression and dissociative states. Here questions of attention spill into questions of memory. With the development of trauma theory in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, there was debate around the question of whether it was possible to retrieve memories of experiences that had been inhibited or repressed. Therapists also worked with patients in order to explore the qualitative experience of dissociative states. It is my contention that this is an important context in which to read Beckett's work. Beckett, I will argue, was very interested in capturing 'what is not perceived, or only dimly perceived' – in 'the distractions, the fringes and peripheries that are excluded or shut out'. However, Beckett's method should be distinguished from those of the psychologists or psychotherapists. He is not working to reorient attention so as to enable the retrieval of repressed or inhibited information. Nor is he working to decide between those theories that assume repression and those that emphasise involuntary, task-oriented inattention. Instead, in works such as *Footfalls*, I argue in this chapter, he manipulates the theatrical environment so as to capture a particular affective state: the experience of perceiving things dimly and feeling as though a large amount of material is being shut out. *Footfalls* offers one the chance to attend to the experience of inattention.



### Experiencing Nothing: The Case of Amy

Towards the end of the text of *Footfalls* there is a moment in which Beckett's interest in the experience of inattention is particularly evident. In the final part of the play, the protagonist, May, tells the story of Old Mrs Winter and her daughter, Amy. There are a couple of things that might be deemed peculiar about this story. For the sake of clarity, I will give my interpretation of these peculiarities before going any further. First, there is a close link between May and Amy. Besides the obvious typographical similarities between the two names, Amy is described to pace up and down in a manner that has been characteristic of May (Beckett 2006, 402). Second, Old Mrs Winter is linked to the voice of May's mother with whom May has spoken earlier. Each, for example, wonder whether their daughter will ever 'have done... revolving it all' (400-3). Thus, May's story seems to be a refraction of her life. The story may be deemed a fiction within a fiction but elements of the host fiction seep into the fiction that is being hosted. The strangeness of this situation is enhanced by the way in which it is presented to the audience. May does not tell her story from the beginning but describes it as a 'sequel' (402). The audience, it seems, has missed part of the story. This becomes apparent when May states that 'the reader will remember' Old Mrs Winter (402). Old Mrs Winter has not been introduced to the audience of *Footfalls* previously and nor is the theatrical audience, in any straightforward sense, a 'reader'. Thus it emerges that May's story is not addressed to the theatrical audience. Rather, the audience is overhearing May creating a semi-autobiographical story for a reader. The audience, then, is informed that it has missed something. However, the fact that May's story recalls earlier events in the play so closely means that it is tempting to use the one as a means of shedding light on the other.

Within this slightly unusual set-up, May narrates an exchange between Mrs Winter and Amy which, for its significance to what follows in this chapter, I quote at length. As they sit down to supper on a Sunday evening after church, Mrs Winter asks Amy whether she observed anything strange at the ceremony:

Amy: No, mother I did not. Mrs W[inter]: Perhaps it was just my fancy.

Amy: Just what exactly Mother, did you perhaps fancy it was? (*Pause.*)

Just what exactly, Mother, did you perhaps fancy this...strange thing you

observed? (*Pause.*) Mrs W: You yourself observed nothing strange?  
 Amy: No, Mother, I myself did not, to put it mildly. Mrs W: What do you mean, Amy, to put it mildly, what can you possibly mean, Amy, to put it mildly? Amy: I mean, Mother, that to say I observed nothing... strange is indeed to put it mildly. For I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing of any kind. I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there. Mrs W: But I heard you respond. (*Pause.*) I heard you say Amen. (*Pause.*) How could you have responded if you were not there (*Pause*) How could you possibly have said Amen if, as you claim, you were not there? (*Pause*) The love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all, now, and for evermore. Amen, (*Pause*) I heard you distinctly (402-403).

Again, the distinction made in the 'Psychology Notes' between experience and performance is at the core of the passage. For Mrs W, Amy is a performer. She has 'distinctly' heard Amy make the appropriate responses at church and Amy's being there resides in this performance. Amy, by contrast sees herself as an experiencer. She has not been there because she has not experienced being there. But what, then, was the nature of her experience? Of course, we could take Amy at her word and assume she was physically absent from church – that she did not make the performance that Mrs W describes. Perhaps Mrs W's report is the product of 'fancy' or hallucination. The text leaves this possibility open. When she is setting the scene, the authorial voice of May states that Mrs W is 'sitting down to supper with her daughter after worship' (403). She does not affirm that both attended worship, merely that both are sitting down to supper after worship. There is, then, some doubt about the reliability of Mrs W's observation of Amy's performance. It should be noted here, however, that Amy does not specify where she was, if not at church. She does not say: 'I could not have been at X because I was at Y all the time'. Thus, Amy does not put herself anywhere else at the time of the sermon – she does not offer an alibi.

The text, then, leaves an open question as to whether Amy was physically absent from church. Beckett, as ever, does not present events transparently. But let us assume that Mrs W was not hallucinating and Amy was responding at the church. How could she have made these responses without being there? One might suggest that Amy is subject to some kind of amnesia. It

may be that she was completely present and active at church, but has since, for reasons unspecified, forgotten the experience. However, this doesn't seem quite right. There is a certainty to Amy's statement that she 'observed nothing of any kind' at Evensong that denies it. Amy does not have a spot in her memory that is completely blank. She is certain of not being at church, which implies that she has some sense of memory. Rather than not remembering where she was at all, she remembers not being 'there'. The church, for Amy, is a place in which she positively recalls performing an action of not-being. She is not failing to remember. Rather, she remembers failing to hear or see anything of any kind. Amy, then, seems to be recalling a negative experience. This idea of negative experience had long been familiar to Beckett. In his reading of the 1930s, Beckett took notes on Democritus's statement that "'Naught is more real than nothing". Non-Being is as real as Being' (TCD MS 10967/75). These notes pop up frequently in Beckett's work. Shane Weller finds their influence in this passage from *Murphy*: 'Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*' (Beckett 2009c, 154). As Weller observes, for Murphy, "'the Nothing" becomes an object of experience' (Weller 2006, 70). Amy's account of her own experience may be an example of this phenomenon in which the 'somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing' (Beckett 2009c, 154). However, there are differences in the way in which these experiences are presented in the respective works. In *Murphy* we are presented with a narrator's report of Murphy's negative experience but in *Footfalls* something slightly different is going on. Amy's account of her own experience is placed next to Mrs W's account of her performance. In his use of the Latin terms *percipere* and *percipi* in *Murphy* Beckett seems to hint at this opposition. There is a sense that Murphy is able to perceive without detecting his own perceptions. The possibility is left open that he may be able to perform without experiencing his own performance. In *Footfalls* Beckett seems to develop this idea: Amy is observed to perform something (which suggests she is able to perceive) while experiencing nothing. This suggests that she is unable to attend to her own perceptions. A positive experience of nothing is occupying Amy so that she is unable to experience her own performance at church.

There is also a question of what, if anything, the nothing that Amy experiences is made of. In *Murphy* the narrator wonders whether 'the Nothing' is experienced because the 'somethings' have given way to it, or added up to it (154). It could be that 'the Nothing' has overridden the somethings, but it could also be that the Nothing is composed of somethings. In *Footfalls* Beckett also seems to develop this idea. Amy claims to have 'observed nothing of any kind' but Mrs W opens up another possibility. She asks Amy: 'Will you never have done... revolving it all [...] in your poor mind' (403)? This might suggest that Amy's nothing is composed of many somethings – 'it all'. Ultimately, we cannot tell whether Amy is experiencing too much or too little. Either way, though, her experience amounts to 'nothing'. The focus of the passage is not on the particular matters that are occupying Amy at church, but in her experience of not being there, or anywhere else. We are left with the question of how this experience of non-being can be reconciled with a performance that suggests a degree of attentiveness to the ceremony. Here we can see Beckett's study of philosophy tying in with his study of experimental method. Amy undergoes an experience of non-being that recalls Democritus, but this experience is weighed against her responsive performance. The individual, then, is portrayed as both performer and experiencer, and one is left with the question of which constitutes the individual's being 'there'.

### **Missing Something: Inattention in the Laboratory**

In *Footfalls*, then, Beckett seems to become interested in the individual's capacity to remain oblivious to 'strange' events that occur right in front of their eyes. This was a phenomenon that was also being investigated in the twentieth-century psychological laboratory. Recall Mrs W's inquiry as to whether Amy noticed 'anything strange' at church. A similar question became crucial to the psychological study of inattention. A foundational experiment of this nature was carried out by Neisser and Becklen (1975). Neisser and Becklen essentially took the selective listening experiments discussed in the last chapter into the realm of vision. Subjects were presented with two optically superimposed video screens, 'on which two different kinds of things were happening' (Neisser and Becklen 1975, 480). The experiment investigated whether 'subjects would

easily be able to follow one episode and ignore the other' (482). As the episodes were presented on top of each other, both episodes were to be looked at, but only one attended to. The question, then, was whether subjects could – quite literally – overlook one episode in favour of another. This 'binocular' viewing task was compared with a 'dichoptic' task in which one episode was played to the left eye and one to the right (482). The experimenters made attention observable and measurable by asking subjects to press 'a button when a significant event occurred' in the selected episode (480). Each episode showed a kind of game being played. One showed two sets of hands playing a hand slapping game, the other showed three men passing a basketball and moving around 'as irregularly as possible in the camera's field of view' (483-4). It was found that subjects were generally very good at selecting one event to attend to and inhibiting the other: they 'had little difficulty in following a given episode even when another was superimposed on it' (490).

But in addition to the video showing standard actions being performed, Neisser and Becklen also videotaped 'a number of "odd" episodes to determine whether unusual events in an unattended episode would be noticed' (484). To give some examples of these unusual events: handshakes were introduced into both the basketball and hand slapping episodes; a ball was introduced into the hand slapping game; a ball was taken away from the basketball game; the three men in the basketball game exited one by one to be replaced with women, who were then replaced by the original men (484-5). At the end of the trials, subjects were asked if they had seen anything odd in these events (in progressively more leading ways). It was found that these 'odd' events were 'rarely noticed and then only in a fragmentary way' (490). Out of twenty-four subjects, for instance, only one 'spontaneously reported seeing a handshake in the handgame', and 'only three others mentioned it in the postexperimental inquiry' (491). In the episode where the men were replaced by women, some subjects noticed something strange but could not describe it exactly and questioned their own perception (490-1). One subject, for instance, reported: 'I thought I saw a different person, but I thought it was my imagination' (491). There was little difference between the performances in which viewing was dichoptic and those in which it was binocular – though subjects were slightly better at following the attended episode with binocular presentation (490). All in all, half of the subjects

gave no indication that they had observed or responded to the odd events and, according to the experimenters, the 'most common response to the inquiry was incredulity' (491). Subjects not only missed the strange events, but were reluctant to believe that the events happened. This incredulity implies a feeling of there-ness, or at least the absence of not-there-ness. The subjects evidently felt as though they were, on some level, experiencing both episodes. If they had recognised the extent of their own inattention to the unattended episode they would not have been surprised when told of the events that they had missed. Alternatively, their incredulity could be a retrospective phenomenon – a reluctance to believe that they could have missed something that was right in front of them. In any case, the experiment suggests a gap between performance and experience. In half the subjects' performances, there is no indication that the unattended episode was being registered in any way. However, it seems they did not experience their own inattentiveness. This is the direct opposite of Amy's experience in *Footfalls*. Asked about her experience at church, Amy suggests that she was 'not there', and so 'observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise', but, for Mrs W at least, her performance has suggested some kind of attention. There is a mutual interest, on the part of Beckett and the experimenters, in how an observer can be experientially 'there' without anything in the viewing performance suggesting it; or, how one can be experientially 'not there' even when one's viewing performance suggests an attentive presence.

The method of Neisser and Becklen was later incorporated into a slightly more striking experiment by Simons and Chabris (1999). In this experiment, subjects were again shown a video of a group playing basketball and asked to monitor the number of passes (Simons and Chabris 1999, 1066). There were two teams playing basketball: a team wearing black shirts and a team wearing white. Subjects were either asked to monitor the passes of the white team or the black team. This time there was no second event presented, subjects merely had to attend to the one team and ignore the other (1066). However, two 'unexpected' events were placed into the midst of two separate versions of the basketball episode (1066). In one, a tall woman with an umbrella walked through the scene and, in the other, a shorter woman wearing a gorilla costume did the same (1067). In total, it was found that 54% of 192 observers noticed

the unexpected event (1068). Thus attention to a counting task was found to make 46% of observers blind even to very peculiar, unrelated events. Also, different subjects were shown different videos with the counting task being more difficult in some videos than others. It was found that, as the counting task grew more difficult, subjects became less likely to notice the gorilla, or the figure with the umbrella (1069). Finally, similar results were found in new subjects, even when the gorilla stopped in the middle of the walk through the basketball players, looked to the camera, and thumped its chest (1070). Again, it is crucial that strange events in the unattended channel will be missed even when this channel is on the same visual field as the one that is being attended to: 'strange events can pass through the spatial extent of attentional focus (and the fovea) and still not be "seen" if they are not specifically being attended to' (1070). These results have become the most famous proof of an effect known as 'inattention blindness': the idea that without attention many subjects have no awareness at all of a stimulus object (Mack and Rock 1998, 13-14). There is no evidence to suggest that Beckett had any familiarity with this branch of scientific study, but his work can certainly be seen to interrogate a related concern. In *Footfalls*, Beckett is not investigating the phenomenon of inattention blindness exactly. Instead, he is interested in what one might call an attention to blindness: a capacity to experience one's inattention and recognise that one is 'not there'.

### **Staging Inattention**

The experiments into inattention blindness I have discussed are, in many ways, dramatic. They present observers with recordings of scripted performances and these performances make use of a number of dramatic conventions: performers wear costumes and move in and out of shot. However, the experiments all aim at a kind of mimesis – they are trying to simulate real-life experience. The episodes that Neisser and Becklen produced were, for example, supposed to be 'naturalistic', though they note that the 'unrelated and optically superimposed displays' they use 'do not occur in ordinary vision' (Neisser and Becklen 1975, 482). Simons and Chabris pick up on this. They observe that video superimposition gives the displays 'an odd appearance', and

(without endorsing it) rehearse the opinion that this 'unnatural' presentation might cause inattentive blindness (Simons and Chabris, 1999 1064). There is, though, a frequent insistence within the experimental literature that the phenomenon of inattentive blindness is not limited to the artificial conditions of the laboratory. The literature on the subject is characterised by a tendency to draw 'real-world' analogies. Simons and Chabris describe missing friends waving at a crowded theatre because attention is occupied by the pursuit of a seat (Simons and Chabris 1999, 1059). Jeremy Wolfe describes the failure to notice a change in interlocutor when one is concentrating on giving directions (Wolfe 1999, 1). Cathleen M. Moore describes missing someone doing a back-flip in a crowd because of an attempt to pick out a close friend or, more seriously, 'missing a child in the path of your car because you are carefully focussing your attention on other cars' (Moore 2001, 178). Obviously there is nothing unusual in a psychologist's wanting an experiment to be applicable to the 'real world', but the study of inattentive blindness seems particularly concerned with naturalistic simulation.

This tendency towards mimesis manifests most clearly in an experiment carried out by Chabris et al. (2011). The experiment was based on a specific event. In January 1995, Kenny Conley, a Boston police officer, was chasing the suspect of a shooting (Chabris et al. 2011, 150). Also engaged in this chase was a plain-clothes police officer, Michael Cox (150). Cox was mistaken by other police officers for the suspect, assaulted from behind and brutally beaten (150). In his pursuit of the suspect, Conley ran right past this beating and eventually apprehended his original target (150). He was later convicted for perjury and obstruction of justice because he maintained that he had not seen the assault on Cox, while admitting that he ran right past it (150). This was not accepted as possible: 'the investigators, prosecutors, and jurors in the case all assumed that because Conley could have seen the beating, Conley must have seen the beating, and therefore must have been lying to protect his comrades' (150). In the experiment, conditions that amounted to a similar event were created. Subjects were asked to pursue 'a male confederate' for 400 metres. In doing this, they were asked to maintain 'a distance of 30 feet (9.1 meters) while counting the number of times the runner touched his head' (151). But an unexpected event was also produced:



At approximately 125 meters into the route, in a driveway 8 meters off the path, three other male confederates staged a fight in which two of them pretended to beat up the third. These confederates shouted, grunted, and coughed during the fight, which was visible to subjects for at least 15 seconds before they passed by it (151).

Conditions such as the light and the difficulty of the task were varied and it was found that as the pursuing task got easier subjects had more chance of noticing the fight. Overall, though, 'a substantial number of subjects failed to notice a three-person fight as they ran past it' (153). Thus the conclusion is drawn that Conley may have been truthful in his assertion that he did not see the fight (153).

Again this experiment involves numerous dramatic performances. The confederates are being asked to play certain roles: the role of a suspected criminal on the run, or that of a man engaged in a fight. As was the case in the experiments discussed above, though, the observer (the chasing participant) of these performances is being artificially manipulated. Their attention is directed towards the confederate being chased and away from the fight, so that a substantial number of subjects do not notice the latter performance. Thus, the dramatic performance of the fight is only experienced in retrospect. The point of the experiment, then, is not the performances *per se* but the fact that they can be missed. The experiment produces, in the observer, a retrospective feeling of having missed something. Beckett's play is also concerned with producing a feeling of inattention in observers but the inattention that Beckett attempts to stage is more present than that of Chabris and colleagues. In *Footfalls*, I contend, Beckett is working to capture the qualitative experience of inattention – a feeling of not-quite-there-ness. In the text, the sense of not being 'there' has been seen to arise in Amy's consciousness. But Beckett also attempts to raise this sense in his theatrical audience. This attempt manifests in a number of methods used in the staging of the play. The material that is accessible to the audience in *Footfalls* is presented at a low, flickering level and one is frequently confronted with the feeling of missing something. The play equips its audience with a slow, fuzzy and narrow field of awareness. The visuals are presented in a light that doesn't exceed dimness; the voices of the characters are 'low and slow throughout'; and there is the 'faint single chime' of a bell (Beckett 2006,

399). There is the sense, here, that background events are being foregrounded without any amplification. These effects manifest in the reviews of Lisa Dwan's recent production of the play. Writing for *The Independent*, Paul Taylor (2014) describes how 'the spectral lighting [...] keeps tapering into an almost uncanny faintness', and numerous reviewers describe the sounds of the play as echoes (Martin 2014; Billington 2015). The reviewers can attend to the not-quite-there-ness of the play's sensory material. Here we might compare the experiences produced by Beckett's play with the introspective accounts of Neisser and Becklen when taking part in their own viewing experiments. They suggest that, in the dichoptic presentation task, 'the unwanted episode really does disappear (or parts of it do), and we can *attend to its disappearance*' (Neisser and Becklen 1975, 493, emphasis in original). The experimenters are attending to their own inattention. They know exactly what they should see – they produced the episodes – but can feel themselves not seeing it. However, in Beckett's play there is no primary episode layered on top of the flickering episode. The primary scene is presented as though it were secondary. One hears the faintness of the echo without there being a primary sound.

At the same time, though, attention is drawn to certain bits of this faint scene. For example, the only element that is 'clearly audible' (and not faint) is the 'rhythmic tread' of the feet (399). Similarly, in the visual field May's faint, pacing figure is surrounded by darkness. Billie Whitelaw, who first played the role, describes May as 'caged by one little strip' of light (Whitelaw 1995, 109). This does, to some extent, make May's figure stand out but the figure is not a continuous whole. Rather, the lower part of her body is highlighted: the lighting is 'strongest at floor level, less on body, least on head' (Beckett 2006, 399). This presentation narrows attention and encourages a focus on the feet. This narrowing gets across the feeling that one is missing something. What insight, we are left to wonder, can be gleaned from the material in the darkness that surrounds May, or from her barely visible face? This feeling of missing something is mirrored in the play's appeal to the intellect. As mentioned above, May presents the story of Amy as a 'sequel' but we are not presented with the original (402). Thus, 'old Mrs Winter' is presented as a character that 'the reader will remember' (402). This brings into question whether something has gone amiss in the previous exchange, or what one is supposed to have read. The

audience's confidence in their own attentiveness is interrogated. There is the sense that one is twice removed from events. The scene is not quite there and one is not quite able to attend to it. As Lyn Gardner puts it in her review, 'it feels like being trapped in somebody else's nightmare' (Gardner 2014). What I'm arguing, then, is that both Beckett's work and experiments on 'inattentional blindness' are concerned with staging experiences in which one fails to attend to an event, or attends to it partially. Again, both experimental psychology and the literary experiments of Beckett seem to put into practice a Schopenhauerian conception of the human. Both the aesthetic and the scientific experiment emphasise the degree to which the human apprehends only partially and successively. But why was this conception of the human observer deemed so enticing at this point in time? In what follows, I will attempt to place the interest in historical context. Why, I will ask, has the experience of inattention been explored so extensively since the second half of the twentieth century?

### **Holding Something Back: Inattention and the Failure to Witness**

In the remainder of this chapter I want to put forward three contexts with which we might frame the late twentieth century's experiments on inattention: the politics of non-seeing that characterised post-war discourse, the rise of trauma theory, and the demands of capitalist modernity. We might begin this discussion by taking another look at the experiment conducted by Chabris and colleagues. The experiment addresses a particular historical event. A brutal beating has occurred in the vicinity of a police officer and he purports not to have noticed it. The experiment takes his non-noticing as an issue of attentional capacity – questioning whether his occupation with other events might have caused him to miss the fight. However, a number of complications arise when one applies the study of inattentional blindness to a specific, divisive historical situation. The experimenters essentially marginalise the particular political context in which the Conley case took place and proceed from the assumption that Kenny Conley could have been anyone and Boston could have been anywhere. They are not interested in why Kenny Conley would not *want* to see but in the theoretical question of whether he *could* have not seen.

Debates around the Conley case, however, were not only concerned with the empirical question of human capacity. The plain-clothes police officer that fell victim to the brutal beating – Michael Cox – was black, and Conley was white. In the context of late twentieth-century America this fact was hard to ignore. Boston, in particular, was recovering from a period of severe racial turmoil. From 1974 until 1988, the city had been subject to a hugely controversial court-ordered de-segregation plan, in which children from mostly white neighbourhoods were bussed to schools in mostly black neighbourhoods, and vice versa (Lehr 2009, 56-7). The implementation of de-segregation sparked a wave of violent protest and the legacy of these protests affected public perceptions of the Conley case substantially. Kenny Conley was from the Southie area of Boston, a mainly white district which had seen particularly unpleasant protests in the 1970s. Even in 1995, according to journalist Dick Lehr, the effects of these protests remained and the area retained a largely negative public image (56). The neighbourhood in which Conley grew up, then, was deemed severely xenophobic and, for Lehr, this affected the way in which Conley's act of not-seeing was judged. Furthermore, in Boston and other parts of America, there had been numerous violent incidents involving white police officers and black victims. Most infamously, in 1991, a video emerged showing an African-American, Rodney King, being attacked by a gang of white police officers. Police brutality was (and still is) a national problem but Boston's police department was undoubtedly afflicted heavily at this point in time. For example, 1992 had seen the trial of the 'Brighton 13'; a group of Boston police officers who had been seen savagely beating a suspect named John L. Smith (74-7). These officers all refused to testify against each other, one going so far as to claim that 'in all his years he had yet to see another officer commit so much as an infraction of the department's regulations' (75). This was true to form. In Lehr's words, when it came to reporting the wrongdoings of other officers, Boston police were known to adhere to one code: 'see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil' (75). In the wake of cases such as this, the Boston police force was increasingly perceived as racist, violent and dishonest. Thus, when a black police officer was found brutally beaten on a street occupied solely by police officers, and those officers claimed he had 'slipped on a patch of ice', there was more at issue than the question of human capacity (3-4). In failing to witness, Kenny Conley was not only seen as a police officer protecting violent police

officers but also a white man protecting violent white men.<sup>51</sup> In short, Conley's claim not to have seen the beating was taken to be racially motivated. He was, as some saw it, part of a blue wall of silence and a white one.

This context makes little infringement on the experimenters' discussion of the Conley case. Race, in fact, goes completely unmentioned in the paper (though the authors do acknowledge Lehr's book which emphasises the political context). What are the implications of this omission? The first thing to stress is that the experiment did not exert any influence on Conley's case. By the time of the experiment, Conley had been cleared on other grounds (Chabris et al. 2011, 153). Another important point is that the authors are not claiming that their study has provided any definitive answers as to what Kenny Conley saw. They note that 'no scientific study can prove or disprove a particular cause of a specific historical event' (153). Their aim, then, is not to close down the possibilities. They conclude that Conley *could* have missed the fight because of inattentive blindness, not that he definitely did so. The text leaves open the possibility that Conley saw the beating and wilfully denied it. The psychologists, then, do not play judge. They merely assert the physical possibility of the inattentive-blindness explanation based on the performances of a collection of subjects. This physical possibility, though, is not weighed up against an assessment of Conley's identity, motives and testimony. The possibility of wilful denial is not refuted but marginalised. In this way, the experiment concurrently moves towards politics and away from it. A failure to witness is de-politicised insofar as we are prompted to put aside the political context and ask whether Conley's missing the assault was a physical possibility. Kenny Conley, a white police officer from Boston chasing a murder suspect, becomes a man 'running outdoors at night chasing a moving target at some distance' (151). Identity, here, is a kind of background noise that is filtered out in order to establish the mechanics of the situation.

But at the same time, there is a kind of politics at work here. The experimenters have chosen to de-contextualise, but also draw attention to, an event that is politically and ethically atrocious. The details of the beating that Conley seems to have missed are in themselves sickening. Lehr gives Michael

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<sup>51</sup> Though, in fact, some of the police officers that are believed to have been involved in the beating were black.

Cox's account of how, as he climbed a fence in pursuit of the assailant he was pulled down and struck in the head repeatedly (Lehr 2009, 134). Then, as he was 'down on all fours wobbly like a dog on its last legs' he saw 'a cop, a white cop' (134). He raised his head to get a better look only for a boot to come down 'flush into his face' and this was followed by a series of blows from all directions (134). The beaters subsequently ran away on discovering that Cox was a police officer, leaving him, in Cox's words, 'like an animal to die, you know on the side of the highway' (195). Not only this, but there was a deliberate effort to cover up the event. As mentioned, there was an initial claim that Cox had slipped on the ice but, even after the nature of the beating became clear, potential witnesses refused to co-operate and Cox experienced intimidation (slashed tyres, threatening phone calls) when he sought justice (194). Cox, himself, was certain that his treatment was racially motivated. Speaking of why he was left for dead after the beating he states: 'They were able to leave me because they thought less of me because of what I am [...] It wouldn't have happened if I were white' (195). By choosing to base their experiment on this particular event, the psychologists seem to be gesturing towards this context but they do not address it directly. One is forced to look beyond the text in order to find it and this leaves the question of whether the atrocity is being invoked and memorialised, or whether it has been omitted because it does not fit in with the theoretical interests of the researchers. I think that we might confront this question through Samuel Beckett's writing.

Beckett's work, particularly that which came after the Second World War has frequently been looked upon as de-contextualising and apolitical. Mark Nixon observes that 'up until the 1990s, Beckett in the eyes of most critics and commentators was a homeless, stateless writer who shunned geo-political problems and specificity, creating fictional worlds in order to examine the universal nature of human existence' (Nixon 2009, 31). This perception emerged from the tendency in Beckett's writing to dislocate, or vagen the places and events that are invoked in his work. As Seán Kennedy puts it, 'the major works that secured Beckett's reputation give the distinct impression that they are set "both anywhere and nowhere"' (Kennedy 2009, 1). The perception that these major works were apolitical saw Beckett attacked in some circles.

Most famously, in reviewing Beckett's work for television in 1977, the dramatist Dennis Potter asked:

Is this the art which is the response to the despair and pity of our age, or is it made of the same kind of futility which helped such desecrations of the spirit, such filth of ideologies come into being (Knowlson 1996, 636)?

There is the sense, here, that Beckett's methods of dislocation and vagueness fail to respond to particular historical atrocities and, furthermore, might facilitate these atrocities. In effect there is the accusation that Beckett is turning a blind eye, wilfully denying the atrocities of his age. Now, this notion of Beckett's writing is peculiar because, as an individual, Beckett did a great deal to bear witness to, and fight against, the 'filth of ideologies' to which Potter surely alludes. Most obviously, he served in the resistance cell 'Gloria SMH' during the Second World War and risked his life in the fight against Fascism, later explaining that 'you simply couldn't stand by with your arms folded' (Knowlson 1996, 303-4). In life, then, Beckett did not turn a blind eye to the atrocities that surrounded him, but what of his writing?

As Nixon's statement implies, the last three decades have seen attempts to re-situate Beckett's work in relation to the historical contexts from which it emerged. There has been a critical move to read Beckett's work as a series of responses to particular historical events, many of which the author experienced at close hand. But – if taken as responses – Beckett's responses are rarely direct. They are veiled, oblique and inscrutable in tone. In a discussion of the allusions to the Second World War that are found in *Watt*, James McNaughton outlines the key questions that are raised by this technique:

First, had Beckett wanted us to consider contemporary history, would he not have written about his, or others' experience in the war directly?

Second, is it reasonable to assume that all readers know Beckett's biographical involvement in history, or are willing to take textual hints to the archive to figure out their importance (McNaughton 2009, 55)?

The key critical task that emerges from these questions is one of explaining why, if Beckett's work is a response to the particular historical events that he encountered, it responds to these events in such an oblique way. This is where the critical work that's been done on Beckett's writing can be used to elucidate

the experiment of Chabris and colleagues. Beckett's writing seems to invoke particular atrocities that happened in his lifetime. McNaughton, for example, takes the discussion of high barbed wire fences in *Watt* as an allusion to the holding camps that Beckett would have been detained in, had the Gestapo caught him after 'Gloria SMH' was betrayed (53). Beckett, McNaughton points out, does not reference the camps directly but 'trusts that they will re-appear as the elephant in the room, as a guilty and mirthless laugh that obviously relies on the reader's awareness of contemporary history' (53). Beckett, McNaughton suggests, does not represent the atrocity but leaves its effect to be felt by those with the means to feel it.

Thus, as in the Chabris et al. experiment, details of a specific historical atrocity are invoked but the text occludes key elements. McNaughton sees the methods of *Watt* as an interrogation of the reader's attention. In the novel, he suggests, 'the formal gymnastics distract us from darker interpretations' (52). 'Beckett's experimental style', McNaughton continues, presents the reader, 'in the form of literary and aesthetic conundrums, similar interpretive challenges to those propaganda presents' (66). We are distracted from the atrocity so we do not believe it is there. In this line of thought, Beckett's concern is not with representing 'what happened'<sup>52</sup> but 'the more important questions of why it happens' (55). Beckett is seen to rehearse the distracting processes of propaganda in an aesthetic context so as to bring into focus the ways in which such processes 'affect us well beyond the literary text' (67). On a similar note, Laura Salisbury draws on the intelligence work Beckett performed during the Second World War and observes that works such as *Watt* arise out of a historical moment in which language is being manipulated in novel ways. At this time, Salisbury suggests, it came be recognised that language is 'plastic enough to be broken down into bits, the information it carries to be condensed and displaced or submitted to encryption' (Salisbury 2014, 157). In the same way that propaganda seeks to draw attention away from certain unpalatable facts, the coding practices of the twentieth century sought to hide crucial information behind banal appearances. In this environment, Salisbury argues, 'one is forced to submit to very close, very attentive forms of speaking, writing,

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<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as critics such as Robert Eaglestone have convincingly argued, the events of the twentieth-century (most particularly the Holocaust) problematized the notion of representing 'what happened' through conventional historical narrative (Eaglestone 2004, 137-246).



reading and listening' in order to discern the latent content behind the façade (157). For Salisbury, *Watt* is not a code to be cracked; one cannot access hidden meanings in the text by reading it in a particular way. Rather Beckett is interested in 'materialising doubt' – producing a mind-set of multiple channels in which one is aware that something important always has the potential to pass by unregistered (166). The experiment of Chabris and colleagues can be seen to work in a similar way. They are less interested in what happened than in why these things happen. The point is not merely that we can be distracted from atrocities, but also that we are not sufficiently aware of how easily it happens. They speak, for example, 'of the common but mistaken belief that people pay attention to, and notice, more of their visual world than they actually do' (Chabris et al. 2011, 150). These explorations of inattention may not document atrocities fully, but they respond to the atrocities of modernity by allowing us to understand how easily they can be missed.

### **Inattention and Trauma**

The notion of inattention I have put forward so far leans heavily on an idea of attentional capacity. One is seen to miss an event because of being occupied by something else. In the case of Beckett's reader, 'formal gymnastics' have been seen to distract from 'darker interpretations', and in the case of Kenny Conley the demands of a police chase have been seen to distract from a violent beating. However, it is important to note that the late twentieth century saw the rise of another theory which seeks to explain the failure to witness: trauma. Though the concept of trauma was part of nineteenth-century psychological and medical discourse, it reached popular consciousness more fully in the period after the Second World War. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for example, was recognised as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Luckhurst 2008, 1). As Roger Luckhurst observes, PTSD covers a large cluster of symptoms, many of which fit together in odd ways, but there are two aspects of trauma theory that are relevant to my discussion of inattention. First, there is the question of the subject's capacity to experience, process, or recall traumatic, 'stresser', events. It is commonly observed that the individual's inability to bear witness to an event is a sign of trauma. As trauma theorist,

Cathy Caruth has put it, 'the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an inability to know it' (Caruth 1996, 91-2). Second there is the question of how the traumatic event affects the subject's attentional capacities in the medium to long term. In what follows, I will outline how these questions of trauma are working in the background of both the experiment and the play. But I will also suggest that, in *Footfalls*, Beckett becomes particularly interested in the second of these questions. The play, I will argue, is ultimately not an investigation of the potentially traumatic, missed event but may be seen to capture the qualitative nature of the post-traumatic experience.

With regards to the first question, trauma may be put forward as an alternative lens with which to look at the Kenny Conley case. Given the violence of the event that occurred in Conley's vicinity, one might put forward the idea that, rather than completely missing the event through inattentional blindness, Conley – to paraphrase Caruth – saw the event directly but was unable to know it. This alternative explanation is not brought up by Chabris and colleagues. Here, we can see the opposition between theories that emphasise inattention through repression (Caruth's idea of trauma) and theories that emphasise a task-oriented inattention (the theory of inattentional blindness). I will not attempt to choose between the theories in this space; one could defend either interpretation.<sup>53</sup> What I do want to show, though, is the extent to which the events of the Conley case were permeated by questions of repression – questions of the extent to which we know the atrocities that we have seen, or been exposed to.

The case unfolded at a time when these questions were hotly debated. The early 1990s saw bitter disputes around the question of whether therapeutic techniques could be used to access repressed memories (Luckhurst 2008, 73). Some asserted that techniques such as hypnosis could be used to 'retrieve memories in their pure, objective form', while others countered that 'traumatic events are likely to be the most malleable memories' and are 'particularly open to therapeutic suggestion' (73). These debates spilled into the courtroom as

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<sup>53</sup> Conley's account of his experience seems to link him more closely with the inattentional blindness theory. He repeatedly spoke of 'tunnel vision' and being 'locked in' on the suspect he was chasing' even before he knew about 'inattentional blindness' research (Lehr 2009, 183). He also does not seem to have shown any symptoms of PTSD (132). However, given that the signs of PTSD can 'appear belatedly, months or years after the precipitating event' the possibility of a traumatic inability to know the event cannot be completely ruled out (Luckhurst 2008, 1).

psychologists on both sides of the debate were called up as expert witnesses (73). The relevance of this controversy to the Conley case might be seen in two main ways. First, one might speculate that therapeutic techniques such as hypnosis could be used to unlock Conley's memory of the event. But there would still be the serious question of whether these memories were truly retrieved, or merely moulded by the technique. Second, and more concretely, the cultural salience of these questions at the time is highlighted when one looks to the reason for Conley's eventual reprieve. Conley was cleared because the testimony of the witness who placed him in a position to see the beating was brought under question. Richard Walker, a fellow police officer, gave a variety of different accounts of what he saw that night and when questioned about the inconsistencies 'proposed his own truth-seeking exercise: hypnosis' (Lehr 2009, 264). Writing in 2009, Lehr calls this a 'zany, almost circus-sounding idea' (and it is possible that Walker was simply being evasive), but Walker's invocation of hypnosis shows the influence of contemporaneous debates around trauma, the failure to witness and memory retrieval. The core difficulty, here, lies in a tension between the aporetic nature of trauma theory, on the one hand, and a cultural need for certainty on the other. Roger Luckhurst notes (paraphrasing Bruno Latour) that the debates of the 1990s 'emphasized the extent to which trauma was not "a matter of fact"' but an 'enigmatic thing that prompts perplexity, debate and contested opinion' (Luckhurst 2008, 33). This, Luckhurst continues, led to the assertion that 'the authority of psychology, particularly in relation to the natural sciences, is not always secure' (34). The theory of 'inattentional blindness' might be seen as a response to this perceived loss of authority. It offers a framework with which to explain the failure to witness without producing the aporias that come with trauma theory. The idea that Conley *never saw the event* is more culturally digestible than the interpretation that *he saw the event but does not know that he saw it*. This is evident when one compares Lehr's view that hypnosis was a 'zany, almost circus-sounding idea' with the credence he gives the theory of inattentional blindness (Lehr 2009, 183). Again it should be emphasised that Chabris et al. are not claiming that inattentional blindness is a definite explanation for Conley's non-noticing, and their research was not used as legal evidence. What the theory does seem to reach for, though, is a more clear-cut way in which psychology might intervene in debates around the failure to witness.

The association between trauma and the failure to witness was, of course, nothing new. The link goes back to the nineteenth century and the advance of industrialisation. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has suggested that the railway accident was ‘the site of the first attempt to explain industrial traumata’ (Schivelbusch 1986, 14). Luckhurst picks up on this. He cites an article in *The Lancet* in 1862 which suggests that ‘the violent jarring of the body in an accident might induce permanent but invisible damage’ (21). There is the idea that a ‘jarring’ event such as a railway accident might not leave obvious traces on the individual but is likely to affect them in detrimental ways. In nineteenth-century psychology, this notion developed to incorporate the idea that details of the jarring event might not be accessible to the individual’s consciousness. In the 1880s, psychologists such as Pierre Janet began to suggest that particularly shocking events might be held out of conscious recall (42). This line of thought did not escape the notice of Samuel Beckett. Beckett may have had some awareness of Janet’s ideas,<sup>54</sup> but he seems to have attained the mainstay of his knowledge of repression-based inattention through his reading of later psychoanalytic works. This is most evident in his notes on Ernest Jones’s *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (1913). Beckett, for example took this note on repression:

Repression & Memory: “There exist in the mind certain inhibiting forces which tend to exclude (& keep excluded) from consciousness all mental processes the presence of which would evoke there, either directly or through association, a feeling of Unlust. Forces of repression (censors) act at 2 points of junction between unconscious & preconscious & (less important) between preconscious & conscious” (TCD MS 10971/8/7).

Beckett, then, was familiar with the idea that ‘inhibiting forces’ in the mind exclude material that is likely to evoke ‘a feeling of Unlust’. However, this idea of ‘hedonic repression’ is balanced against an idea that one represses material that is not task-relevant:

Likelihood of primarily hedonic mechanism of repression being appropriated for further purpose of excluding material that is merely

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<sup>54</sup> Janet is name-checked in Beckett’s notes from Woodworth (TCD MS 10971/7/13).

irrelevant, without necessarily being disturbing. “Hedonic repression” & “utilitarian repression” - latter derived from former (10971/8/8).

In Jones’s account, task-based inattention (or ‘utilitarian repression’) is seen to be derived from the ‘Hedonic’ realm. The process of missing what one would rather not see is privileged over that of missing what is merely irrelevant. Beckett, though, I want to argue, would go on to investigate the boundary between *not seeing* and *not wanting to see* – between wilfully denying that one has seen something, repressing it, and simply being occupied by another matter.

This investigation manifests at the at the end of the radio play, *All That Fall* (1957), when we hear that a little child has fallen ‘under the wheels’ of Mr Rooney’s train (Beckett 2006, 199). Even though Mrs Rooney has repeatedly inquired about the journey, Mr Rooney has not mentioned this accident to her in earlier discussions. Instead, when giving an account of his train journey he suggests that his mind has been occupied by financial matters:

Alone in the compartment my mind began to work as so often after office hours, on the way home in the train, to the lit of the bogeys. Your season-ticket, I said, costs you six a day, that is to say barely enough to keep you alive and twitching with the help of food, drink tobacco and periodicals until you finally reach home and fall into bed (193).

Mr Rooney’s mind, it seems, has been working on calculating the economies of his working life and so we are left to question whether this task might have occupied him to the extent that he simply failed to notice the train accident. Alternatively, one might speculate that Mr Rooney’s silence on the topic of the child’s death can be put down to ‘hedonic repression’. Finally, it might be suggested that Mr Rooney wilfully refuses to bear witness to the accident – that he noticed it but does not want to dwell on it, or talk about it. The text ultimately privileges neither interpretation and the audience is left to question the distinction between wilful denial and ‘hedonic’ or ‘utilitarian’ non-seeing. This question is again evoked in *That Time* as the protagonist sits in the post office fearing that his ‘loathsome’ appearance will mean that he is ejected (394). It dawns on the protagonist, however, ‘that for all the loathing you were getting you might as well have not been there at all the eyes passing over you and through you like so much thin air’ (394). Again there is the question of whether

the people in the post office are occupied with other tasks; repressing the protagonist's 'loathsome appearance', or consciously avoiding interaction (393). Beckett's writing is interrogating the boundary between *can't see* and *won't see*.

In *Footfalls*, this question is again raised. Adam Piette has recognised the parallels between the character of May and a 'traumatized hysteric' of one of Janet's case studies, Irene (Piette 1993, 47). In this reading, the mother's death becomes the traumatic event at the centre of *Footfalls* and May has been unable to witness, or know, this event. Hints of 'hedonic' or traumatic repression can also be seen when May first introduces the pacing Amy. Some nights, when walking up and down the church we are told that Amy 'would halt as one frozen by some shudder of the mind' (Beckett 2006, 402). Her halting, here, might hint that there is a moment in her past that periodically resurfaces to jolt her mind and trigger a kind of systemic shutdown but this moment is never identified. Mrs W's suggestion that Amy is continually 'revolving it all' in her poor mind is interesting in this regard. It creates the image of Amy's mind as a kind of wheel in which the same matter constantly rotates – one might draw an analogy with the stones that Molloy rotates between pockets and sucks 'turn and turn about' (Beckett, 2009d, 63-9). The shudder, though, suggests that the matter does not always rotate smoothly. Rather, there is the occasional jolt. The physicality of this image might recall the child who has fallen 'under the wheels' of Mr Rooney's train in *All That Fall*. But in *Footfalls* there is no original event. Instead, we are merely presented with suggestive imagery. Amy's mind is conceptualised as a jolting wheel but we don't know what, if anything, is causing the jolts. Laura Salisbury has argued that rumination is 'part of the formal signature' in works such as *Watt* as 'the novel becomes entangled in evocations of permutation that force a hiatus in its forward movement' (Salisbury 2011, 75). One can also see the kind of ruminative hiatuses that Salisbury finds in *Watt* in the characters of Amy and ultimately May. For May and Amy, the idea of forward movement is taken away. They are condemned to circularity, revolving it all over and over (embodied in their pacing up and down). But this perpetual process of rumination is punctuated by jolts, which suggests that some unspecified mental matter is forcing a hiatus in their circular movements.

However, Beckett again juxtaposes the hints of traumatic inattention with a more utilitarian idea. This can be seen in the portrayal of May's attempt to care for her mother:

M: Would you like me to inject you again?

V: Yes, but it is too soon

(Pause.)

M: Would you like me to change your position again?

V: Yes, but it is too soon

(Pause.)

M: Straighten your pillows? (Pause.) Change your drawsheet? (Pause.)  
Pass you the bedpan? (Pause.) The warming pan? (Pause.) Dress your  
sores? (Pause.) Sponge you down? (Pause.) Moisten your poor lips?  
(Pause.) Pray with you? (Pause.) For you? (Pause.) Again.

(Pause)

V: Yes, but it is too soon (Beckett 2006, 400).

In a sense, May's performance seems compassionate and attentive. She is continually offering to perform acts of care for her mother. However, there is something in her performance that raises a question about her experience: is she quite there? The acts of care, which May has presumably performed for her mother 'again' and 'again', are absorbed into a list of proposals which she can reel off. May does not wait for a response to one proposal before going to the next but recites them mechanically. There is the sense that neither May, nor her mother, need to be wholly 'there' in order for May to produce her performance. The words are at once compassionate and inattentive. When questioned about the nature of this exchange, Beckett suggested that May is 'occupied with her story' (Asmus 1977, 87). Beckett is suggesting that May's conversation seems inattentive because, as the exchange goes on, her attention is shifting towards the attempt to re-narrate her life. May's ruminating is seen to distract from immediate experience and give the impression that she is not wholly there. The mother's voice seems to recognise May's state of distraction when she asks the question: 'Will you never have done ...revolving it all' (Beckett 2006, 400)?

Though her performance is dutiful, May is deemed too busy ‘revolving it all’ to be attentive.

Ultimately, in *Footfalls*, the notion of utilitarian inattention cannot be separated from trauma. If May is ‘occupied with her story’ it may be argued that this pre-occupation is post-traumatic. Her rumination, it is hinted, is triggered by a traumatic event. As is often the case with Beckett’s characters, the traumatic event in May’s life – assuming there is one – seems to be birth itself. This is gestured towards in the exchange between May and her mother which opens the play.

V: I had you late. (Pause.) In life. (Pause.) Forgive me again. (Pause. No louder.) Forgive me again.

(M resumes pacing. After one length halts facing front at L. Pause.)  
(Beckett 2006, 400).

It seems hard to deny that the Beckett is working with ideas of birth trauma here. Beckett had read about the topic in Otto Rank’s *The Trauma of Birth* (1924), noting that: ‘all anxiety goes back to anxiety at birth’ (TCD MS 10971/8/34). What should be noted, though, is that the details of the traumatic moment itself were removed as Beckett went through drafts of the play. S. E. Gontarski notes that Beckett’s manuscripts show him going back and forth on how much detail to reveal about May’s birth. In an early draft, for example, Beckett included a passage revealing that the doctor delivering May had ‘made a mess of it’ but this detail was later omitted (Gontarski 1985, 165). Beckett hints at the traumatic event but the play, it seems is ultimately concerned with May’s attentional patterns – with whether she is quite there.

Beckett’s portrayal of May’s not-quite-there-ness certainly seems to echo many accounts of the post-traumatic subject. Evidence of this might be found in the aftermath of the assault on Michael Cox. Post-traumatic stress was a well-established phenomenon in mainstream medicine by the time of the incident and Cox was, in fact, diagnosed with chronic PTSD (Lehr 2009, 279). Lehr summarises an account of the effect of the event on Cox, given by his wife in a police hearing:

Now Mike seemed only partly there. “If we’re having a conversation he’ll walk out of the room in the middle of the conversation. I’m talking about



one thing and he'll leave that subject and go to something else, or he'll pick up the phone and he'll, you know, start dialling, calling someone on the phone and, like, Hey, we're talking" (Lehr 2009, 284).

One can see in this account the kind of jolting attentional pattern that Beckett portrays in *Footfalls*. We do not know that the traumatic event is necessarily revolving around Cox's mind any more than we know what is revolving in the minds of May or Amy. Rather, Cox's wife observes him moving between there-ness and not-there-ness. She also states that they 'argue every day about sitting in a semi-dark house because the lights hurt his eyes' (285). The traumatic event is in the background but foregrounded is a low level, inattentive atmosphere. Cox's wife draws a clear distinction between the man she knew before the trauma and after the trauma. Her account offers a clear cause and effect. Beckett's text is slightly different in that we are never offered a 'before' moment. The lives of Amy and May cannot be divided so neatly into a pre-traumatic and a post-traumatic period. But in *Footfalls* Beckett is interested in the day-to-day not-quite-there-ness that characterises the account of the post-traumatic Cox. Again, Beckett is reluctant to represent events directly and in their entirety; this is not a before-and-after trauma narrative. Instead he focuses on the qualities of an experience in which the subject is not wholly attentive to their own life. However, in the conception of the mind as a jolting wheel, there is more than a hint of the post-traumatic in Beckett's presentation of this experience. Both Beckett and Chabris et al., then, can be seen to negotiate ideas of trauma in their investigations of inattention. In the psychological experiment, trauma theory is excised and the experimenters put forward a more clear-cut utilitarian theory, but in Beckett utilitarian inattention is always interwoven with the traumatic.

### **Inattention and the Modern Self**

When discussing the idea of post-traumatic inattention in *Footfalls* one begins to move away from the type of inattention that is investigated in experimental psychology and towards psychotherapeutic approaches. In his discussion of *Footfalls*, Beckett himself linked the play to his encounters with psychotherapy,

particularly the analytical psychology of Carl Jung. James Knowlson recalls that the character of May was 'specifically linked by Beckett with the young female patient of Jung, of whom Beckett heard him speak in 1935' (Knowlson 1996, 616). Asmus recalls Beckett suggesting to a cast member the 'connection' between May's character and 'the Jung story' of a girl who 'existed but didn't actually live' (Asmus 1977, 87-8). From this, Knowlson suggests that May is 'Beckett's own poignant recreation of the girl who had never really been born' (Knowlson 1996, 616). Beckett had made more overt links to this lecture in earlier works. In *All That Fall* Mrs Rooney describes attending a lecture of 'one of these new mind doctors' whose name she cannot remember (Beckett 2006, 195). She recalls this unnamed doctor giving the opinion that a patient of his 'had never really been born' (195-6). Now, critics have disagreed on the significance of Beckett's repeated invocation of Jung's lecture. David Melnyk notes that Beckett adapted and re-contextualised Jung's words and points out that Beckett never simply repeated Jung's phrase (which was 'never been born entirely') but continually modified it in different situations (Melnyk 2005, 355). He also notes that the particular patient Beckett references was only discussed briefly by Jung in the post-lecture discussion (359). It was a small detail in a lecture that served as a broad introduction to Jung's approach. Thus, for Melnyk, Beckett found Jung's discussion evocative but this should not be taken as evidence of a close relationship between Beckett's work and Jung's theories. Julie Campbell takes a markedly different line, making an argument for a congruence of aim. Both Beckett and Jung, Campbell argues, are interested in unconscious personalities and complexes. She notes that, in the lecture Beckett attended, Jung discussed his notion of a complex: 'an agglomeration of associations ... sometimes of traumatic character, sometimes simply of a painful or highly toned character' (Jung 1968, 79). Campbell makes the case that this notion of the complex might help us understand Beckett's dramatic technique. Jung spoke of how, in dreams, novels, dramas and poems an individual's complexes often appear in personified form, an observation that Campbell argues was important for Beckett's writing (81). For Campbell, Beckett uses art to 'personify his dream images [...] by accessing the personages or bodies within his own unconscious' (164). In his drama, Campbell continues, Beckett is not only attempting to access his own

unconscious personalities but also 'encouraging the audience to recognise the image' (165).

Now, I hesitate to accept the link Campbell draws between Jung's specific theory and Beckett's dramatic technique. Melnyk is right to point out the way in which Beckett twisted Jung's phrase to suit his own purposes and I sympathise with the argument that, for Beckett, Jung's idea was more evocative than foundational. However, when one reads Jung's phrase in the context of his discussion, there is a definite relevance to *Footfalls*. Jung's invocation of the girl who (he thinks) has 'never been born entirely' comes in response to a question from an audience member. The audience member has a five-year-old daughter and he effectively asks Jung to interpret her dreams (Jung 1968, 105-6). The girl has had two peculiar dreams: one in which 'a wheel is rolling down a road and it burns me', and one in which the girl is being pinched by a beetle (105). Jung suggests that these are examples of the 'strange archetypal dreams children occasionally have' (106). These archetypal dreams, Jung suggests, can be explained 'by the fact that when consciousness begins to dawn', the child is still close to 'the original psychological world from which he has just emerged: a condition of deep unconsciousness' (106). This closeness is seen to give children 'an awareness of the contents of the collective unconscious' (106).<sup>55</sup> If this awareness of the mythological content of the collective unconscious remains for too long, Jung continues, 'the individual is threatened by an incapacity for adaptation; he is haunted by a constant yearning to return to the original vision' (106). This incapacity produces 'ethereal children' who live their life in 'archetypal dreams' and cannot adapt (107). The patient that had never been born entirely, for Jung, was one such child.

Now, one might debate the extent to which Beckett was interested in Jung's overall theory of the collective unconscious.<sup>56</sup> But regardless of Beckett's theoretical interest, he certainly seems to have picked up on the content of Jung's discussion. Two aspects of Jung's discussion surface in *Footfalls*. First, it is peculiar that the motif of the rolling wheel emerges in both of the texts in

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<sup>55</sup> For Jung the 'collective unconscious' is made up of contents that are characterised by mythological motifs –for example 'the Hero, the Redeemer, the Dragon' (Jung 1968, 40-1). They are not peculiar to any particular mind or person but are peculiar to *mankind in general*' (40-1).

<sup>56</sup> He did note down Woodworth's summary of Jung's theory in the "Psychology Notes". Here the term used is the 'racial' – rather than collective – unconscious (TCD MS 10971/7/15).

which Beckett alludes to Jung. Recall that in *All That Fall* a little child has fallen ‘under the wheels’ of Mr Rooney’s train and that, in *Footfalls*, Amy and May are seen to be ‘revolving it all’. Beckett seems to incorporate into his work the archetypal dream content that Jung interprets (‘a wheel is rolling down a road and it burns me’). More importantly, though, I think Beckett is interested in the incapacity for adaptation that Jung discusses. Beyond the archetypal contents themselves, I would argue, Beckett is interested in how these contents (images from an individual’s past) produce a kind of not-quite-there-ness – a failure to adapt and attend to the world. As Campbell notes, ‘not quite there’ was, a term Beckett used to describe the character of May and, in what follows, I want to further interrogate and historicise this idea of not-quite-there-ness (Campbell 2005, 164). I will suggest that the concept is linked with the need to adapt to a capitalist modernity in which the individual’s attentiveness is not just founded on their capacity to perform particular tasks, but also produce a story of self. In this period, there is the emergence of a consumer economy of personality in which the individual is required to construct a self out of their past and make decisions on their future, while giving the impression that they are present and engaged.<sup>57</sup> It is telling that Mr Rooney’s failure to witness in *All That Fall* occurs as he is deliberating on the profitability of his job, and that the people in the post office in *That Time* fail to notice the protagonist in the bustle of Christmas preparations. In each case, questions of the future are seen to distract from present experience. Beckett, I will argue, along with therapists such as D. W. Winnicott, can be seen to respond to the challenge of witnessing the present in the context of a modernity in which one is continually pulled from tense to tense.

Of course the question of how present experience is affected by the pressure to negotiate or construct a past or future plays a crucial role in twentieth-century psychotherapy. The psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, for example, emphasises the ways in which subjects negotiate their past, particularly the ‘losing of caring or cared for people’ (Segal 2004, 46-7). When a subject feels as though a caring/cared for object has been lost, Kleinian theory argues, the goodness of that object may come under attack (46).<sup>58</sup> Put another

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<sup>57</sup> For discussions of this we might look back to the ideas of Hochschild and Ngai discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>58</sup> By loss, here, one might mean the death of a loved one but also any experience in which the subject feels a loss of care e.g. when an elder child feels that a parent cares less for them upon the birth of a younger sibling.

way, in order to minimise the pain caused by loss, the subject might come to think that the lost object was never that good in the first place. This denigration of the lost object, for Kleinians, is potentially damaging and (for good psychic health) one needs to go through a process in which the denigrated object undergoes reparation. This reparation, however, requires a large amount of psychic labour; one is forced to re-narrate one's past. Rina Kim has argued that this labour is crucial to much of Beckett's later work including *Footfalls*. Kim's observation derives from two aspects of Beckett's biography: his relationship with his mother and his feeling for Ireland. For Kim, where Beckett's earlier work is characterised by the drive to denigrate his mother and Ireland, later works such as *Footfalls* evidence a drive towards reparation (Kim 2012, 22-3). In *Footfalls*, Kim suggests, Beckett can be seen to represent and perform this act of reparation. If May is occupied by her story in the first part of the text, Kim argues, it is a story in which the mother figure is represented as the attentive Mrs Winter (157). May, it seems, is so consumed by the labours of re-narrating the mother figure that she seems removed from a present in which she performs an act of care. This representation, Kim goes on, served a particular purpose for Beckett. Along with the character of May, in Kim's reading, Beckett is attempting to reconstruct his feelings towards the mother figure (158). There is, though, always the sense that the re-construction of a past can draw one's attention from present experience.

Kim's reading is persuasive in many ways but, again, I think there is danger of being overly specific when discussing Beckett's approach to not-quite-there-ness. Beckett's investigation of inattention, I would suggest, does not hinge on Kleinian ideas of the mother-child relationship, Jungian notions of a collective unconscious, or any trauma-based theory. Nor is Beckett purely interested in a utilitarian account of inattention. Rather, Beckett's interest seems to reside in the phenomenology of inattention – how one experiences oneself as inattentive and perceives it in others. To help study this further we might look to one of Winnicott's later case studies. The study is interesting for its analogues with the cases of May and Amy, and as a comparison with Jung's patient. But more than this there is a certain theoretical approach that ties the study to Beckett and to Jung. It is less interested in going back and finding a cause for the patient's not-quite-there-ness, than in investigating the qualitative

experience itself. In his 'Psychology Notes' Beckett quoted Jung's statement that: 'I no longer find the cause of the neurosis in the past, but in the present. What is the necessary task which the patient will not accomplish?' (TCD MS 10971/7/15). It is this looking to present experience that I think is crucial for Beckett and for Winnicott. In 'Dreaming, Fantasying and Living' (1971) Winnicott gives the case history of a patient who 'swings from well to ill and back again to well' (Winnicott 2005, 37). This is because she is caught between fantasying and imagination.<sup>59</sup> Imagination, for Winnicott, is a healthy process. It 'enriches life' and becomes accessible to the individual either consciously or in dreams. The patient's life, though, has been dominated by the unhealthy process of fantasying. Fantasying, in Winnicott's construction, is an 'isolated phenomenon', which absorbs energy but does not contribute to dreaming or living (36). The key difficulty with fantasying, here, lies in its 'inaccessibility' (36). It takes up the individual's mental resources but cannot be used practically or emotionally. The two processes are very difficult to tell apart qualitatively. Their differences, Winnicott suggests, 'can be subtle and difficult to describe' and are not necessarily discernible from verbal reports 'of what goes on in the patient's mind' (36-7). For example, 'the patient may sit in her room and while doing nothing at all except breathe she has (in her fantasy) painted a picture, or she has done an interesting piece of work in her job' (37). In this state she is presently doing something in her fantasy and her activity in this dissociative state competes against lived activity. By contrast, while still sitting in a room doing nothing observable, she may be 'thinking of tomorrow's job and making plans, or thinking about her holiday and this may be an imaginative exploration of the world' (37) These acts of imagination do not compete against life but hold, supplement and enrich it. In both scenarios the patient is inactive in terms of performance, but there is a difference in experience. Imagination can be held by the individual and put to use where fantasy cannot. Put another way, the patient experiences the act of imagining but not that of fantasying.

Winnicott goes on to give a description of the patient's life story, though he does not claim that the details are exactly true. He finds it useful to describe

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<sup>59</sup> Winnicott's distinction derives from Melanie Klein's separation of fantasy from phantasy but his discussion is something of a departure from Klein's. For Klein fantasying is something akin to conscious daydreaming and phantasying is quite a broad term that covers most unconscious thought (Spillius 2001, 364). Winnicott's distinction is slightly different as both fantasy and imagination can be either conscious or unconscious. The two processes are instead distinguished by their utility for the individual.

the type of fantasizing partaken in by the patient as rooted in the nursery. She had older siblings who had worked out ways of playing together before her arrival, so 'found herself in a world that was already organized before she came into the nursery' (380). Being 'intelligent' she managed to 'fit in' with the way things were organized but could only do so 'on a compliance basis' (38-9). Thus she could play whichever role was 'assigned to her' but this play was 'unsatisfactory to her' because she did not really have any say in it (39). Others also 'felt something was lacking in the sense that she was not actively contributing' to the play (39). This lack of contribution is put down to a state of dissociation. When she was functioning as a part of 'other people's games' she was 'essentially absent' as the most part of her was '*all the time engaged in fantasizing*' (39, emphasis in original). For Winnicott, this childhood habit became the basis for the patient's life. Her life became constructed in such a way that 'nothing that was really happening was significant to her' and 'the main part of her existence was taking place when she was doing nothing whatever' (39-40). She also disguised this 'doing nothing' with certain 'futile' activities – originally thumb-sucking but also 'compulsive smoking' and a series of 'boring and obsessive games' (40). The patient has 'health enough' to give promise, but this promise cannot be fulfilled because fantasy has consistently overcome imagination and she has been unable to attend to lived experience (40). For this reason, she is described to be 'missing the boat' (37).

There are certainly some points of comparison between Winnicott's case and Beckett's presentation of May and Amy. In all there is a sense of absence, pre-occupation or inattention. We might also detect the 'compliance' of Winnicott's patient in the way that May plays the role of carer to her mother and the way that Amy responds to the sermon at church. May's repetitive pacing might also recall the 'futile' activities that Winnicott's patient uses to disguise her fantasizing. At the core of these apparent similarities, though, Beckett and Winnicott seem to be addressing a common concern. At issue in each of the texts is not a failure of performance but a failure to attend to performance. Winnicott's patient is able to 'fit in' with the way things are organized and is more or less able to function from day-to-day but there is the feeling that something is 'lacking' and that she is 'missing the boat'. She is performing certain tasks but there seems to be the lack of a self being actively engaged in

these tasks. Similarly, in *Footfalls* the problem is not what May or Amy do; May seems to perform the duties of caring for her mother and Amy seems to have been responsive in church. Again, though, there is the sense that each is otherwise occupied. Winnicott suggests that his patient is engaged in fantasising and the mothers in *Footfalls* suggest that their daughters are 'revolving it all'. In both cases, there is the sense that a (sometimes unconscious) pre-occupation with producing a story-of-self distracts from immediate experience. This story-of-self, though, is by no means optional in capitalist modernity. In *The Experience of Modernity* (1983), Marshall Berman observes the degree to which capitalism 'fosters, indeed forces, self-development for everybody' (Berman 1983 96). In the world of the C.V., the interview and the retirement plan there is a continual need to develop a story of past and future, and this inevitably distracts from present experience. One might argue that Beckett's characters are often far removed from the competitive world of employment, but I would contest this. As mentioned above, Mr Rooney is contemplating retirement on the train, and even the text of *Footfalls* draws May in competition with her peers. As May paces we are told that 'when other girls of her age were out at...lacrosse she was already here' (Beckett 2006, 401).<sup>60</sup>

Winnicott and Beckett, then, articulate the pressure that is placed on the individual to be self-present while all the time producing a story of past and future. For practical purposes, the study of inattention that we have seen in experimental psychology tends to be structured around two definite perceptual tasks. Reading these studies alongside the texts of Beckett and Winnicott, though, can broaden our view of inattention. Inattentive blindness is not merely a matter of one terminable task distracting from another – of, say, listening to the radio's distracting one from reading a newspaper article. There is another sense in which the interminable story of life distracts from the events that unfold in front of the subject. Beckett and Winnicott's concern with inattention, I contend, is rooted in the desire to raise awareness about this tendency. This is evident in the case of Winnicott for whom success with his patient comes in the form of her being able to recognise her own

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<sup>60</sup> On a similar note, one should not forget the degree to which Beckett himself was subject to the modern individual's need for a career. Before he became a successful literary writer Beckett had, for example, sent job applications to work as a trainee for Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, and as a lecturer in Italian at the University of Cape Town (Knowlson 1996, 226; Knowlson and Knowlson 2006, 76).



inattentiveness. For example, as she discusses her symptoms with him, she interrupts herself to tell him she is slipping into fantasy:

She said: “We need another word, which is neither dream nor fantasy”.  
At this moment she reported that she had already “gone off to her job and to things that had happened at work” and so here again while talking to me she had already left me (Winnicott 2005, 44).

The crucial point, here, is that therapy has enabled the patient to become aware that she is not attending to the conversation wholly. She can recognise and report the experience of inattention. This increased awareness, Winnicott hopes, will give the patient some choice about her way of living. In a modernity in which there is a continual pressure to construct a past and a future, there will always be moments when the individual is not quite in the present. In different ways, though, Beckett, Winnicott and the experimental psychologists can help us attend to and (perhaps) manage a penchant for not-quite-there-ness.

### **Conclusion**

I want to conclude this section with some remarks on the nature of Beckett's experimentation in *Not I*, *That Time* and *Footfalls*. In a recent review of Lisa Dwan's Perth Festival performance of *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, Van Badham opined that, though 'impressive', the production was 'not quite entertaining' (Badham 2015). She compared the experience to 'watching the re-enactment of a once bold experiment whose conclusions have long been accepted as fact' (Badham 2015). One might take this criticism in a couple of ways depending on how the term 'experiment' is understood. In one sense, Beckett's plays are experiments insofar as they are innovative and cutting-edge. In this line of thought, they extend the boundaries of artistic practice and prove that one can produce successful theatre when presenting nothing but a mouth, a face, or a pacing figure on stage. If the term 'experiment' is understood in this way, then, it may be fair to argue that the plays were 'once bold' but there is little at stake when they are staged today. We know that these set-ups can work as theatre and so, while we might be impressed with their technique, we cannot be thrilled by their discoveries. They have already extended the boundaries of

artistic practice and cannot be expected to extend them any further. It is my argument, however, that we might understand the term 'experiment' in another sense. Rather than focusing on how Beckett's plays extend artistic practice, this section has treated them as more direct experiments on the nature of modern experience. In this way, I have argued that these plays investigate the processes by which the individual adapts to a modernity in which one is required to attend to, in Crary's words, 'an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information' (Crary 1999, 13-14). Crucially, the plays do not just test the individual's capacity to perform perceptual tasks, though they certainly do this. Rather, the novel streams of stimuli that Beckett presents are always accompanied by a concern with the production of a story of self. In *Not I* the rapid speech and striking darkness is accompanied by a focus on the production of an I. In *That Time* one needs to read faces and isolate voices in order to get at a story of Listener's life. And in *Footfalls* we are presented with May whose occupation with her story – her 'revolving it all' – distracts her from present experience. Beckett's plays, I argue, can be deemed experimental in the sense that they investigate the ways in which the modern individual strains to process a given body of material while endlessly developing a sense of self.

## Chapter 4

### Beckett and the Mental Image

In the first section of this study, the material that Beckett presented in his theatre of the 1970s (the frenetic mouth of *Not I*, the inactive face of *That Time* and the pacing figure in *Footfalls*) was largely discussed in terms of perception and attention. To take the example of *Not I*, the mouth was treated as a projector of sensory stimuli, and the actors and audience were discussed in terms of their capacity to process, attend to, experience and interpret these stimuli. In this respect, I argued that, like many psychological experiments, Beckett's works are spaces in which we can study the responses of human subjects when they are exposed to novel sensory environments. But of course there is a distinction to be made here insofar as Beckett's experimentation works to produce a different, more experiential knowledge to that which is frequently sought in experimental psychology. The psychological experiments I have looked at so far are primarily interested in the human subject's capacity for performance. They are interested, to give some examples, in how quickly speech can be processed; how many voices can be comprehended at once; or how attentional loads affect the subject's ability to notice an event. Beckett's experiments are also interested in the performance of tasks such as speech perception and selective attention but the concern in the context of Beckett's work is more consistently with the experience of the performing subject – the ways in which the subject becomes conscious of that which they perform. This section will continue to understand Beckett's works as experiments on subjective experience but I will focus less on perceptual experience than on what is left behind in the wake of perception: the images that the subject is able to apprehend or recall without direct sensory stimulation. Put simply, I will treat Beckett's works less as experiments on perceptual experience and more as experiments on mental imagery.

What one might question here is the degree to which the percept can be separated from the mental image in the context of Beckett's work. Recent criticism has frequently argued that a large part of the power of Beckett's works resides in their resistance to this categorisation of experience. Ulrika Maude, for

example, has argued that Beckett's works see 'categories such as perception, memory and imagination lose their differentiating characteristics' (Maude 2009, 37). This is an important point and the distinction that will be drawn between perception and mental imagery in this section is most certainly not a sharp one. I will talk about the mental image and the percept as two areas insofar as I hold that there are differences in the extents to which the two phenomena are capable of affecting the sensory world. Here I use William James's observation that the properties of 'real' or perceptual phenomena 'always accrue' consequences on the sensory world, where the properties of mental imagery do not (James 2008, 15). As James puts it, 'mental triangles are pointed, but their points won't wound' (15). However, my argument will be that Beckett is interested in the moments at which these two areas blur into one another and it becomes difficult to sift perceptual experience from the experience of mental imagery. The section, then, aims to extend, rather than contradict, Maude's argument. To illustrate this, we might look to the context of Maude's statement. It comes in the midst of a discussion of vision in Beckett's work and Maude is making the suggestion that imaginative experience frequently interferes with the perceptions of Beckett's subjects. In a discussion of the short story *The End* (1946), for example, Maude notes that 'the narrator's observations vacillate between vision and imagination, making the certainty of what is seen precarious and erratic' (Maude 2009, 38). Maude, here, is arguing that percept and image blur into one another in Beckett's work but her focus is on how this blurring affects our understanding of perception. The possibility that images of imagination blur with the narrator's visual perception of the outside world is seen to shed doubt on the reliability of his vision. In this way, Beckett's work is seen to counter the tendency in the Western philosophical tradition to privilege the objectivity and reliability of sight in comparison to other senses such as hearing and touch (24-5). I find this argument convincing but it does leave an important question unaddressed. In suggesting that Beckett's troubling of distinctions between perception and imagination might affect attitudes towards perception, Maude opens up a question of how this strategy might also alter conceptions of the imagination and imagery. If the work of Beckett allows us to see elements of the image in the percept, is the opposite true in the case of the mental image? Does Beckett's work allow us to understand the mental image

as an entity that, like the percept, needs to be processed, attended to and interpreted? This is the concern that animates this section.

### Beckettian Imagery

To begin to confront this question we might return to the reception of *Not I* and specifically Michael Billington's observation that the play is 'compelling' because it 'leaves behind an ineradicable image' (Billington 1973). In this account, the artistic value of *Not I* lies not just in the perceptual process in which the figure on stage is observed. Rather, the play is adjudged successful because the sensory experience that it presents stays with the observer in imagistic form long after the performance has finished. This contention has also been made in more recent criticism. Drawing on approaches to the image taken by Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, Anthony Uhlmann has advanced the argument that, while all Beckett's works (and presumably the works of other authors) 'make use of images of various kinds', there is a 'true Beckettian image' which possesses a singular aesthetic power (Uhlmann 2008, 62). This 'true' image, for Uhlmann, 'is something which appears, or is created, and vanishes, but in vanishing leaves a strong impression, an impression which lingers or even transforms the one it affects' (62). As in Billington's account, the image is seen as something that is left behind in the wake of perception. For Uhlmann, Beckett's images 'are impressed upon us as we watch and more or less burnt into our retinas, leaving afterimages which linger' (62).<sup>61</sup> The observations of Billington and Uhlmann are useful in helping us distinguish between the object of perception and the mental image in Beckett's work because they help us to identify two separate stages in the reception of a given stimuli. There is a perceptual stage in which we are concerned with what is objectively presented and the observer's capacity to process, attend to and interpret this material in real time. But there is also an imagistic stage in which our concerns are with the quasi-sensory impressions that linger in the observer's consciousness. For

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<sup>61</sup> The idea of the afterimage is of course drawn from scientific experimentation and, as we saw in chapter 1, Beckett had read about this body of scientific research in Woodworth (TCD MS 10971/7/7).

Billington and Uhlmann it seems that Beckett's works are distinguished by the emphasis they place on this imagistic stage.

Works such as *Not I*, then, seem to have a peculiar power to leave behind mental images but what are the nature of these images? Here it might be useful to compare Billington and Uhlmann's accounts of the image left behind by Beckett's work with some other types of mental imagery. Uhlmann, for example, implies a link between the lingering Beckettian image and retinal afterimages, suggesting that the image left behind by Beckett's work is a static entity that is stamped down on our minds. This, though, does not account for the 'endless' mobility described by Billington. In Billington's account, the image of the mouth does not seem to be a static representation. Instead, Billington gives the sense that he is involuntarily re-experiencing the visuals of *Not I* as a kind of replay. This might suggest that the imagery he describes is similar to that of the traumatic 'flashback' memory in which individuals frequently report 'a vivid perceptual content' and a sense that this imaginal content is 'happening in the "here and now"' (Speckens et al. 2007, 250). On further inspection, however, it is difficult to argue for a strong link between Beckett's lingering imagery and the imagery of traumatic memory. Neither Uhlmann nor Billington, for example, report the 'feeling of travelling in time' that is common with traumatic memory (250). As Billington and Uhlmann describe it, the subject of the Beckettian image does not have the impression of returning to an original event. Rather, there is the idea that certain sensory elements are lingering as definite but decontextualized impressions. Also, the Beckettian image does not seem to cause personal distress in the manner of a traumatic image. It may be experienced as significant but this significance is not necessarily negative. Uhlmann, for instance, suggests that the Beckettian image might transform 'the one it affects', but the transformation envisioned by Uhlmann is not necessarily damaging. The Beckettian mental image, then, might be characterised as a concrete and affective presence but there remains something faint or vague about its nature insofar as it is difficult to locate this concrete presence in space, or define the affect that it produces.

In 'The Exhausted' (1995), Gilles Deleuze also observes these characteristics in the Beckettian image. For Deleuze, Beckett's work is frequently occupied by the attempt to produce 'something seen or heard' which

is 'called Image' (Deleuze 1995, 8). He identifies three *languages* (*I*, *II*, and *III*) in Beckett's work and the 'Image' forms the basis of '*language III*' (8). In Deleuze's schema, *language I* is concerned with the enumeration and combination of objects, *language II* with 'inventing stories or making inventories of memory', but *language III* is distinguished by its capacity to escape these projects (8). For Deleuze, *languages I* and *II* make use of images (or the imagination) but the images of both of these languages are bound by reason and/or memory. The image of *language III*, by contrast, is 'liberated from the chains it was kept in by the other two languages' and becomes 'the Image' (8). This entity, Deleuze goes on, 'appears in all its singularity, retaining nothing of the personal, nor of the rational, and ascending into the indefinite as into a celestial state. A woman, a hand, a mouth some eyes' (9, emphasis in original). The 'Image' then, for Deleuze, is a concrete, apprehensible form but – because it is decontextualized (torn away from reason and memory) there is something 'indefinite' and distant about it. Again there is a sense that the Beckettian image is vivid and immediate but also somehow faint and faraway.

But how is this vivid faintness produced? Deleuze's account, gives two insights that might help us begin to answer the question. First, he highlights Beckett's use of space, arguing that *language III* 'proceeds not only with images but with spaces' (10). Beckett's singular but indefinite image, by this account, can only emerge from a space that shares its singular but indefinite nature; a space which Deleuze calls 'any-space-whatever' (10). This space is 'disused' and 'unassigned', but 'entirely geometrically determined' (10). Like 'the Image', then, the 'any-space-whatever' is a definite form but one that is not assigned to anyone, or associated with a particular practice. The de-contextualised image can only exist in a decontextualized space. Thus, Deleuze outlines a kind of recipe in which one has to produce space and image in sequence. In his readings of *Ghost Trio* (1976) and *...but the clouds...* (1976), for example, Deleuze identifies a two stage process, in which the concern is, firstly, with the creation of 'any-space-whatever' and, secondly, with 'the mental image to which it leads' (19).

Deleuze's second insight lies in the animation of the image. In Deleuze's argument, the image is defined in terms of motion. He argues that the image of *language III* is 'not a representation of an object, but a movement' in any-space-

whatever (19).<sup>62</sup> Thus, the image is seen to be embedded in the any-space-whatever but it is distinguished from that space by its motion. However, the motion of the image is of a flickering, precarious kind. Deleuze continues:

And insofar as it is a spiritual movement, it is not separated from its own disappearance, of its dissipation, premature or not. The image is a pant, a breath, but expelled on the way to extinction. The image is what dies away, wastes away, a fall. It is a pure intensity, which defines itself as such through its height – its level above zero, which is only described in falling (19).

For Deleuze, the Beckettian image acquires its power through the manipulation of context and motion, a manipulation which is made possible by the precision of television. The Beckettian image, according to Deleuze, must be embedded in a particular decontextualized space and presented at a particular flickering intensity, and ‘only television [...] is able to satisfy these demands’ (20). These demands, however, are deemed to come from more than a desire to create compelling aesthetic objects. Instead Deleuze seems to suggest that Beckett has a mimetic project in mind: that of producing a perceptual form with the qualities of a mental image. He argues, for example, that Beckett’s works refuse ‘artificial techniques, which are not suited to the movements of the mind’ (20). For Deleuze, then, Beckett’s television plays, are not concerned with representing perceptual objects but with expressing (or perhaps even imitating) particular mental ‘movements’. This insight is one way of explaining Beckett’s work’s tendency to leave behind ‘ineradicable’ images. Beckett’s works, one might suggest, stay with us as mental images because they are presented to us in the language of a particular type of mental image.

Deleuze’s reading certainly opens up some interesting possibilities but what it perhaps lacks is a detailed account of how Beckett developed this method. For this, we might turn back to Uhlmann who traces a movement from an aesthetic of relation to one of non-relation in Beckett’s writing. He argues that, in early works such as – the posthumously published first novel – *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992) and *Murphy* (1938), Beckett makes heavy use of relational techniques such as allusion and metaphor, seeming to ‘prize

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<sup>62</sup> Drawing on *Murphy*, Deleuze defines this any-space-whatever as a ‘world of the spirit’ or mind. This space is contrasted with the space of the physical or bodily world (Deleuze 1995, 19-20).



the process of skilfully drawing links' between image, context and meaning (42). However, Uhlmann suggests that these early works also exhibit a 'growing sense of distrust' of this process which reflects an interest in how the image might be allowed to stand alone (42). For Uhlmann, even as Beckett made heavy use of allusion and metaphor in his early novels, 'he was also already very much aware of the idea of the image itself as that which can carry affective power' (54). This interest, Uhlmann argues, pervaded later works as Beckett began to 'find a form' which eschewed the aesthetic of relation and accommodated non-relation. Thus Beckett began to draw attention to images that 'offer themselves as meaningful, but [...] exceed straightforward interpretation' and demand interpretive work (64).

Uhlmann places this aspect of Beckett's work within a long (though intermittent) philosophical tradition which is concerned with the idea 'that the apprehension of the image [...] is fundamental both to our understanding of what the world is and how we know that world' (Uhlmann 2008, 5). Thus the image is adjudged to set the tone for all thoughts about what has been sensed. For Uhlmann, this idea might be seen to begin with the Ancient Greek Stoics, before continuing in modern philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Henri Bergson, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and Deleuze (5-6). In his study, Uhlmann focuses particularly on the philosophers of the late nineteenth century, arguing that the approaches to the image taken by these authors were 'developed and transformed by an army of modernist writers and artists' – ranging from the imagist poets to the painter Francis Bacon and Beckett (Uhlmann 2008, 6). The ideas of the philosophers, then, are seen to trigger a major change in aesthetic attitudes to the image.

To Uhlmann's argument, I want to add the idea that this philosophy also influenced scientific approaches to the image. For evidence of this, we might look to one particular name on Uhlmann's list, William James. Though James's ideas have undoubtedly had a lasting impact on both philosophy and aesthetics, it should be stressed that his primary concern when discussing images was, more often than not, the practice of psychology. For example, the famous discussion of the 'stream of thought' in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) specifically targeted the way in which the image had been approached in 'traditional psychology':

What must be admitted is that the definite images of traditional psychology form but the very smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it (James 1890, 255).

James, here, is addressing the discipline of psychology. He is defining a 'traditional psychology'<sup>63</sup> in opposition to what he sees as his own non-traditional form of psychology. This is important because the way in which the term 'image' is used in psychology is slightly different from its use in Uhlmann and Deleuze's discussions of philosophy and aesthetics. In Uhlmann and Deleuze, the term is used very broadly to refer to something that may be presented to the mind but might also be presented on page, stage, or screen. In this sense, the image is both the thing that we see on the television screen and the mental impression that we recall after the television has been switched off. Though psychologists may sometimes use the term in this broad way, the image of psychology is more commonly understood in its narrower sense as something we recall or imagine. In the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'a mental representation of something [...] created not by direct perception but by memory or imagination'.<sup>64</sup> The images James describes are located 'in the mind', not on page, stage, or screen, and he is making a point about the way in which psychology should conceive of these mental images. The 'traditional psychology', for James, conceives of the mind as a collection of 'definite' images. James's problem with this conception is not exactly that these images do not exist but that psychology tends to reduce thought and experience to a series of static, definite images. For James, images may be apprehended in the mind as definite entities but the images exist within a stream of thought and so

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<sup>63</sup> Here James is targeting the 'ridiculous theory of Hume and Berkeley that we can have no images but of perfectly definite things' (254).

<sup>64</sup> *OED* Online s.v. 'image', accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91618?rskey=2F2EBK&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

are never as definite, or permanent, as they appear. As was the case in Deleuze's account of the Beckettian image, James's mental images are defined by their mobility and impermanence. As James puts it, apprehension of the image is escorted by 'the dying echo of whence it came to us', and 'the dawning sense of whither it is to lead' (255). The mental image is defined as an impression of something but one that is always on the cusp of modification or dissipation.

James applies this model to the reception of aesthetic productions. 'What', he questions, 'is that shadowy scheme of the "form" of an opera, play, or book, which remains in our minds and on which we pass judgment when the actual thing is done?' (255). It may be tempting, here, to suggest that the 'shadowy' form to which James alludes is simply our consciousness of an aesthetic piece – what we *think* of it. But James seems to have in mind a kind of double process of interpretation in which we, firstly, form a 'shadowy' version of the – now absent – 'thing' and, secondly, pass judgement on this shadowy version. Here we seem to be getting very close to Bergson's formulation of the image as, in Uhlmann's words, 'a bridge between those objectively existing things and our thoughts' (Uhlmann 2008, 8). In the wake of sensation, by this account, a shadowy version of the experience undergone is constructed and evaluated in the mind. The presence of this form allows us to re-experience and think about a version of the thing that has been sensed. The image of the thing, then, seems to mould our thoughts about that thing. Thus, through James, the ideas of the image that emerge in late nineteenth-century philosophy seem to cross over into psychology.

### **The Image in Twentieth-Century Experimental Psychology**

The understanding of the image as a shadowy version of sensory experience remains crucial to experimental psychology's approach to mental imagery today. In a recent summary of imagery research, Pearson et al. define the term 'mental imagery' as follows:

Representations and the accompanying experience of sensory information without a direct external stimulus. Such representations are

recalled from memory and lead one to re-experience a version of the original stimulus or some novel combination of stimuli' (Pearson et al. 2015, 590).

Again, there is the idea that the image is a version of an original stimulus (or set of stimuli) which gives the subject 'the experience of sensory information'. The image might affect the subject in a manner that is similar to 'a direct external stimulus', even though it is only in the mind. As Waller et al. point out in another summary, this contemporary understanding of the image is based on a body of fairly recent behavioural and neuroscientific research which has been taken to show that that mental imagery 'engages many' – though not all – 'of the psychological structures and processes used in perception' (Waller et al. 2012, 295). Thus, though mental imagery is understood to be encountered 'without a direct external stimulus', research suggests that its apprehension requires many of the psychological mechanisms that one would use to apprehend an external stimulus. Not only this, but mental imagery is seen to give the 'experience of sensory information' which suggests that it may not always be possible for the subject to distinguish the mental image from the object of perception.

Though advances in technology have allowed the case to be made with more rigour, this assertion is nothing new. Experimental psychology has long been scrutinising the distinction between imagery and perception. For an early investigation of this, we might look to 1896 and E. W. Scripture's paper on 'Measuring Hallucinations'. Scripture's experiments found that subjects who had been trained for several trials to detect a very faint sound, began to report the presence of that sound even when it was absent (Scripture 1896, 762-3). Though Scripture does not make the case explicitly, there is the hint that the subject experiences a version of a perceived stimulus even when that stimulus is no longer present. By the turn of the twentieth century, then, experimental psychology was beginning to illustrate the continuities between imagery and perception. For a more explicit investigation, though, we must cross over to the early twentieth century and, in particular Chevez Perky's 1910 article: 'An Experimental Study of Imagination'. This article – which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter – documented numerous experiments on the relationship between perception, imagery and the imagination, but the most famous of these sought to compare the object of perception with 'the image of

imagination' (Perky 1910, 428). Here Perky and her co-investigators attempted to 'build up a perceptual consciousness under conditions which should seem to the observer to be those of the formation of an imaginative consciousness' (428). In other words, they attempted to make an object from the perceptual world look like an image of imagination, to the extent that an unknowing observer would confuse the two (428). They did this by presenting perceptual objects – cardboard cut-outs of bananas for example – to observers at a very low (dim, blurry, and flickering) level of illumination and then asking them to imagine those particular objects (429-30). It was found that these low-level perceptual stimuli were almost always mistaken for images of the observers' imagination – observers could perceive the cardboard cut-out of the banana but thought they were imagining it (433). The results, then, gave cause for questioning the boundaries between percept and image. As Waller et al. put it, 'the fact that highly degraded, nearly subliminal sensory information can be mistaken for a mental image seems to suggest that perception and imagery draw on the same mental systems, processes, or resources' (Waller et al. 2012, 292-3). These findings remain influential in contemporary psychology and cognitive science but it should be stressed that two developments in early twentieth-century psychology would limit the immediate impact of Perky's study: first the imageless thought controversy and then behaviourism.

Of these two developments, the imageless thought controversy is perhaps less crucial. Debate on the subject pre-dates Perky's experiment and, in itself, the notion of imageless thought does not oppose the idea that there is a link between perception and imagery. As R. S. Woodworth notes, those advocating imageless thought tended to assert that 'an act might be thought of without any representative or symbolic image' but this assertion does not deny that some – if not most – thoughts are accompanied by images (Woodworth 1915, 1).<sup>65</sup> Woodworth gives an account of how this might work by detailing his own introspective experiment. He attempted to recall a series of events from his past and evaluate what elements of the recall were image-based and which were rooted in other 'imageless' forms of thought (Woodworth 1915, 12). His

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<sup>65</sup> I use Woodworth, here, not only because he was the source of the majority of Beckett's knowledge of experimental psychology, but also because he is still considered a key authority on the subject of imageless thought. Waller et al., for example, cite Woodworth's summary of the imageless thought controversy in their review of image research.

analysis seems to suggest that while his thought does, to some extent, depend on images, there are imageless aspects. In the attempt to recall a colleague's speaking in a faculty meeting, for example, Woodworth notes:

What I got was a certain quality of voice and precise manner of enunciating, rather different from the conversational tone of this individual. There were no words nor particular vowel or consonantal sounds present in recall, but simply the quality of the voice and enunciation (13).

Here Woodworth seems to apprehend a shadowy, incomplete form of the colleague's speech and he recognises that his thoughts are, in this respect, image-based. This, though, is not the only part of Woodworth's recall:

I got also the fact that the speaker was speaking as chairman of a committee, and something of the rather critical attitude of the faculty towards him, these facts being recalled in the "imageless" way (13).

Thus, for Woodworth, there is a relational, or factual way of recalling past events that does not depend on one's analysing images of this event.<sup>66</sup> This statement is compatible with my own experience. If I try to recall my experience of watching *Not I* at the theatre, for example, I get a vivid visual image of the mouth in darkness, an image of the texture of the voice, as well as the first few words of the play being spoken. But I also recall who I attended the theatre with and their opinion of the play in a factual way without getting an image of those people. There seems to be a mixture of image-based and imageless recollection. This, however, might not satisfy a critic of imageless thought who could say that, when I recall the people sat next to me, I do in fact form images but simply do not have the introspective skill to apprehend them. This is a viewpoint that was espoused by psychologists such as Edward Titchener<sup>67</sup> who argued that all thoughts 'had imaginal cores but some of these cores were so faint as to be imperceptible to all but the most highly skilled introspectors'

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<sup>66</sup> Psychological research has also emphasised variations between individuals in this respect. There is an overall consensus that some individuals are more able to recall events by means of imagery, while others make use of different means. Indeed, recent research has found that there are individuals who cannot produce visual imagery at all (a condition that has been termed 'aphantasia'. These individuals are still seen to function normatively through other means of thought. For a summary of this research see Zeman, Dewar and Della Salla, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Perky's experiments were, in fact, performed at Titchener's laboratory at Cornell University (Perky 1910, 429).

(Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel 2007, 278). As we will see, this debate depends heavily on the degree to which the subject is deemed capable of analysing their own experience and so is not easily resolved. However, on either side, there seems to be an acceptance that some thoughts are image-based and these images are shadowy versions of things that have been perceived. In this way, it is accepted that images shape many people's understanding of the world to a certain degree; the debate is merely one of the extent to which this is the case.

The imageless thought controversy did, however, have a more indirect impact on the psychological study of the image. It caused, as Beckett himself noted, a 'parting of the ways in modern psychological theory', and this parting had a severe impact on twentieth-century psychology's approach to mental imagery (TCD MS 10971/7/7). The debate around imageless thought went on over a long period and psychology's failure to attain any kind of consensus on the topic caused many to doubt whether the experimental models at work were capable of producing valid scientific data. The most prominent critic in this regard was John Broadus Watson. Woodworth describes Watson's critique:

Watson pointed an accusing finger at the "imageless thought" controversy and other recent examples of divergent results obtained in different laboratories by presumably well-trained introspectionists. If even your best observers cannot agree on matters of fact, he said, how can you ever make psychology a science instead of a debating society (Woodworth 2013, 74)?

From Watson's point of view, if one has discovered scientific facts then these facts should be demonstrable in any setting. They should not depend on an individual's being trained in a particular introspective technique at a particular laboratory. Watson's resolution to this problem was drastic. As Woodworth notes, Watson's behaviourist psychology would take words such as 'imagery' and 'consciousness' out of psychological parlance. (74). Thus, rather than merely reducing experimental psychology's dependence on trained individuals, the rise of behaviourism saw the experimental study of imagery completely marginalised. The popularity of behaviourism in the early part of the twentieth century meant little research was carried out on the subjects of imagery or the imagination until the 1960s. This was not only because behaviourism took terms such as 'imagery' out of mainstream psychological discourse. Watson argued

that it was a delusion to think that mental states could be made into the objects of observation, and so marginalised the methods of introspective observation that are crucial to the study of the topic – namely asking subjects for accounts of their imagistic experience (70-1). Waller et al. suggest that these ‘methodological prohibitions’ were largely ‘responsible for the absence of research on imagery throughout the first half of the twentieth century’ (Waller et al. 2012, 300).<sup>68</sup>

For a variety of reasons, which I will discuss in the next chapter, the psychological study of mental imagery did become theoretically viable again in the second half of the century. But in these later experiments one can still see the imprint of behaviourism. In this period, there is increased emphasis on the physiology and performance of the imagining observer. This is exemplified in a 1967 study carried out by Segal and Glicksman, which questions whether ‘lowered levels of arousal’ would affect the individual’s imaginative experience and diminish their ability to discriminate ‘between imagery and veridical perception’ (Segal and Glicksman 1967, 258). The study was a repeat of Perky’s experiment on the relationship between the percept and the image but it also took into account the more recent findings of ‘sensory isolation experiments’ (258). The findings of these experiments, the researchers note, suggested that depriving the human subject of sensory stimulation might result in a ‘diminution of logic, attention and inhibitory control and the weakening of these factors leads to poor reality testing, hallucinatory, dream-like and simple optic imagery’ (258). The experiment, then, is concerned with how manipulating the subject’s sensory environment might affect their capacity to distinguish between perceptual experience and imagery. In the later part of the century, psychologists also made much more attempt to quantify imaginative experience. Stephen Kosslyn, for example, asked subjects to ‘construct an image of a cat’ upon hearing the word cat ‘and then inspect this image for claws, indicating when he “sees” them as quickly as possible’ (Kosslyn 1975, 344). Here, the experimenter can measure the time it takes subjects to apprehend the claws of the imagined cat in order to give an idea of how a mental image is scanned for information. The image is treated as a constructed

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<sup>68</sup> On a similar note, Pearson et al. note that the ‘theoretical orientation’ of behaviourism ‘rejected the study of internal representations, including mental imagery’ (Pearson et al. 2015, 590).



entity that, when perused by the observer, yields something similar to the experience of sensory information. Because the image is being treated like a percept, the observer's process of acquiring information from it can be measured using methods derived from the study of perception.

There are, of course, some objections that might be raised to this understanding of the mental image. In the next chapter, I will address the concerns that were voiced by a number of twentieth-century philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Gilbert Ryle and Zenon Pylyshyn. For now, though, I want to stress that from the mid-twentieth century onwards experimental psychology has continued to blur the distinction between perception and mental imagery. Practitioners of twentieth-century experimental psychology, then, seem to develop some of the ideas that emerged in the work of Bergson and James. The image, in these examples, is treated as something that is left over from sensory experience but has its own particular qualities that need to be interpreted, described or analysed. Thus, if the ideas of Bergson and James were, as Uhlmann argues, 'developed and transformed by an army of modernist writers and artists', it might also be asserted that a comparable process was occurring in twentieth-century experimental psychology.

### **The Romantic Image**

In many ways the idea that a writer such as Beckett would be interested in the materiality of the image is unsurprising. After all, at least since Romanticism, the writer or artist has frequently been portrayed as a specialist in the practice of translating mental imagery into tangible material. However, there are obviously important ways in which the Romantic literary tradition differs from the experimental studies of mental imagery that we have so far encountered. We have seen that in twentieth-century experimental psychology the image was often treated as a shadowy version of sensory experience which the subject might apprehend and describe. But, for the Romantics, this procedure is very far from the vocation of the creative artist. Rather than merely apprehending an image in the mind, the Romantic artist is endowed with the capacity to rejuvenate this image by giving it a transcendent meaning. For an illustration of

this, we might look to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notion of the poet in *Biographia Literaria* (1817).<sup>69</sup> 'The poet', Coleridge suggests, uses 'the synthetic and magical power' of the imagination to diffuse 'a tone, and spirit of unity' on his experience (Coleridge 1927, 166). Through the imagination, then, the poet is able (among other things) to balance 'the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative' (166). The imagination, by this account, is not just the means by which images are produced; it is a faculty that transforms, and gives meaning to imagery. It does not just allow one to re-experience a version of a sensory object but makes that object represent something else. The presentation of an image, here, is not an end in itself. Instead, the poet's imagination draws out the significance of the image by relating it to the idea.

This contention might be supported by Percy Bysshe Shelley's comparison of the creative mind with a fading coal: 'the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness' (Shelley 2009, 696). There is the sense, here, that in the wake of the fire of sensory experience, one can only apprehend a dull, fading version of what has been sensed. To apprehend and describe this, for Shelley, is not to create poetry. Instead 'some invisible influence' has to stir the coal and, however fleetingly, alight it. Apprehension of the mental image is not enough; the poet has to bring the image to life through artistic expression. 'A poem' Shelley writes, 'is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth' (693). The poet, then, not only apprehends the image of lived experience but also expresses this image in a form that transcends the particular and reaches for the universal. Where the capacity to do this comes from, however, remains undetermined. Poets, for Shelley, are subject to 'some invisible influence' which enables the transitory illumination of fading images. Many critics have noted the influence that ideas such as Shelley's would exert on later artists and writers. Dirk Van Hulle, for example, has observed that Shelley's formulation would go on to capture the interest of two twentieth-century writers, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett (Van Hulle 2007, 22-3). Van Hulle points out that Joyce would

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<sup>69</sup> Beckett evidently knew Coleridge's work, though it is difficult to know how thoroughly he engaged with it. In a 1962 letter to Mary Hutchinson, for example, Beckett stated that he had recently read *Biographia Literaria* 'without much pleasure' (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 35).

refer to Shelley in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) when Stephen Dedalus is describing the moment of artistic inspiration:

The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony (Joyce 2000,179).

In distinguishing Joyce's use of Shelley from Beckett's, Van Hulle makes the important point that where the 'overconfident young Dedalus' stresses the radiance of the coal, Beckett's works seem to have more affinity with the "fading" aspect' (Van Hulle 2007, 22). Van Hulle's observation comes in the context of a wider discussion of Beckett's relationship with Romanticism, and he does not analyse the significance of the 'fading coal' image in any detail. Nevertheless, his observation might be adapted to illustrate the relationship between the Romantic approach to the mental image and that of Beckett. It seems that Beckett can be distinguished from the Romantics in terms of the approach taken to the fading image. Where the Romantic tradition is interested in the poet's capacity to illuminate it, Beckett is working to get across the experience of apprehending the image in its fading state. In view of this, it is tempting to assert that the Beckettian image has more in common with the 'shadowy' mental images of experimental psychology, than with the radiant, aesthetic image that is produced by the Romantic imagination. This, though, would be an oversimplification.<sup>70</sup> There are certainly points of contrast between the aesthetic approach to the image advocated by Coleridge and Shelley and that of Beckett, but I would also argue that there are crucial similarities.

The key contrast between Beckett's image and that of the Romantics seems to lie in the degree of meaning that is attached to the aesthetic image. Neither Coleridge, nor Shelley, seem to deny that images exist in the mind as

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<sup>70</sup> The existing critical literature shows divergent opinion on Beckett's relationship with the Romantic imagination. In the earlier criticism – Knowlson and Pilling (1979); Kearney (1988) – there was a tendency to stress the degree to which Beckett was writing against Romantic conceptions of the imagination. Later critics such as Michael Rodriguez (2007), on the other hand, have aligned Beckett's approach to the imagination with that of the Romantics. What we might say with some certainty is that Beckett had a conflicted relationship with the Romantic imagination and Romanticism in general. He may not have necessarily liked the Romantics but he was undoubtedly influenced by them. As Mark Nixon puts it, 'whether he wanted to or not, Beckett's own temperament opened his work up to Romantic influences' (Nixon 2007, 73).

fading versions of sensory experience. In this sense, the Romantic conception of the mental image does not differ drastically from that of twentieth-century experimental psychology. What distinguishes the Romantics, though, is the belief in a creative imagination which elevates the material image and transforms it into the aesthetic image. The imagination, here, seems to uproot the image from the psychophysiological world and introduce it to the lofty world of ideas. The image, in light of this process, is no longer a mere shadowy form; it is endowed with meaning – made to stand for something beyond itself. In Coleridge's terms, the image is balanced with the idea. This aesthetic approach seems at odds with the accounts of the Beckettian image given by Uhlmann and Deleuze in which it was suggested that the 'true' Beckettian image is not balanced with ideas but detached from them. Here we might return to Uhlmann's contention that Beckett's images do not come to us 'more or less completely interpreted by being drawn into a stable relation', but need to be 'actively interpreted'. Perhaps this distinction can best be drawn by reference to two of the examples I have mentioned above. If we look, firstly, at Shelley's image of the 'fading coal' it is clear that the image is a representation of something, namely the 'mind in creation'. The image is, in Uhlmann's words, 'being drawn into a stable relation' with something else. This representative image contrasts with Beckett's portrayal of the mouth in *Not I* which left Michael Billington with an 'ineradicable image: an endlessly mobile mouth, rimmed by white clown-like makeup pouring out words of agony'. Here the mouth is not drawn into a stable relation with anything else but stands on its own for the observer to interpret. Where the Romantics are interested in the poetic imagination's balancing of image and idea, Beckett's image has a being in its own right.

This point of departure, however, does not mean that Beckett's approach to the image is completely estranged from Romanticism. Points of contact remain. Like the Romantics, for example, Beckett is concerned with the potency of the image. The significance of Beckett's images may not come ready-interpreted like Shelley's fading coal but Beckett's works do seem to make the claim that the images presented have a significance. As Uhlmann puts it, Beckettian presentations of images 'still involve resonance (the sense that a meaningful link exists), even as they refuse relations' (Uhlmann 2006, 108). To

illustrate this, we might contrast Beckett's approach to the image with those of the experimental psychologists discussed above. When Perky asks subjects to envision a banana or Kosslyn requests that they scan their image of a cat for claws, there is no suggestion that the content of these images has any particular significance. The images that are being produced are only a means by which to study the process of generating images. Beckett's images seem to have more to them than this. Beckett, I would argue, is frequently concerned with the significance that particular images hold for particular subjects and the circumstances that inspire these images. This concern is particularly apparent in Beckett's earliest writing. In the critical work *Proust* (1931), for example, Beckett discusses Proust's portrayal of voluntary and involuntary memory, suggesting that, while the former reproduces 'impressions of the past that were consciously and intelligently formed', the latter restores 'not merely the past object but the Lazarus that it charmed or tortured' (Beckett 1999, 33). Put another way, while voluntary memory allows us to re-experience shadowy versions of sensed objects, involuntary memory reconnects us with the past self that originally experienced these sensations. The impressions which, Beckett suggests, are brought about by voluntary memory seem to resemble the images of bananas and cats that are produced in the experiments of Perky and Kosslyn. They do not restore past objects themselves (only shadowy versions of them) and neither do they hold any significance for the subject producing them. Beckett says of voluntary memory: 'the images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination, and are equally remote from reality' (32). Beckett, here, is not denying that we can, through imagination and memory, summon up shadowy versions of sensory experience. He is, however, suggesting that the role of the artist goes beyond this voluntary process. He is interested in the moment of inspiration in which Proust's narrator is confronted with his past through involuntary memory, 'an unruly magician' that 'chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle' (33-4). This, for Beckett, is observable when 'the long-forgotten taste of a madeleine steeped in an infusion of tea' stimulates the narrator's involuntary memory and brings his childhood back to him (34). It is this process, Beckett suggests, which enabled Proust to produce something of artistic value: his [Proust's] entire book is a monument to involuntary memory' (34). Beckett is stressing that Proust's artistic creation is more than the voluntary apprehension and description of imagery.

The images communicated by Proust's narrator, it seems, are artistically valuable because there is a mysterious process of inspiration behind them and they can be seen to hold a personal significance.

It is possible to overstate the importance of Beckett's early discussion of voluntary and involuntary memory. After all, it comes in a reading of Proust and, as many critics have noted, Beckett's later work would go on to complicate the Proustian models of memory that Beckett outlines in his early critical work.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that artistic creation might be brought about by 'an unruly magician' that 'chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle' seems to have much in common with the ideas of Romanticism. It resonates, for instance, with Shelley's idea that 'some invisible influence' might awaken the fading coal of the mind and endow it with a 'transitory brightness'. In both cases, there is a concern with an involuntary moment of artistic inspiration which re-invigorates past experience. One might suggest that this point of contact between Beckett and Romanticism would serve to distance Beckett's work from the materialistic understandings of mental imagery that were emerging in twentieth-century experimental psychology. Again, though, this would be an oversimplification. Of course, the statements that art is inspired by 'an unruly magician [Beckett's term]', 'some invisible influence [Shelley's]' or 'a synthetic and magical power [Coleridge]' hint at a metaphysical understanding of artistic creation which might seem difficult to reconcile with scientific psychology. But I would suggest that the attitudes of these authors towards artistic inspiration was not so far removed from materialistic understandings of the mind as one might initially think. In the cases of Shelley and Coleridge, Alan Richardson (2001) has shown that the separation between British Romanticism and scientific conceptions of the mind was never total. Rather the attitudes of the poets often developed in dialogue with contemporaneous science, producing significant – though often fractious – points of relation.<sup>72</sup> The complexity of this relationship can be seen in the attitudes of Shelley and

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<sup>71</sup> The extent to which later works such as the Trilogy depart from Proustian ideas about memory has been debated. Nicholas Zurbrugg (1987), for example, has argued that Beckett departs from Proustian ideas in later works while James H. Reid (2003) has argued for a close relationship.

<sup>72</sup> Richardson states that 'no account of Romantic subjectivity can be complete without noting how contemporary understandings of psychology were either grounded in, deeply marked by, or tacitly (when not explicitly) opposed to the brain-based models of mind being developed concurrently in the medical sciences' (Richardson 2001, 2).

Coleridge to artistic inspiration. In Shelley's image, for example, the force that stirs the fading coal of the mind does not remain completely ineffable but is likened to 'an inconstant wind'. Though the influence is invisible, Shelley does locate it in the physical world. He gestures towards the immaterial without ever leaving the material. Perhaps more striking, though, is the case of Coleridge and particularly his preface to 'Kubla Khan' (1816). Here we get an account of a moment of creative inspiration but one that is described in peculiarly physiological terms. As Richardson puts it, 'what Coleridge describes in the introductory notice to 'Kubla Khan' might be seen as the most spectacular psychophysiological experiment of his career' (Richardson 2001, 47). The preface describes Coleridge falling asleep while reading, having taken a painkiller (thought to be opium) for a 'slight indisposition' (Hill 1978, 147). This 'profound sleep', the passage goes on, lasted for about three hours:

During which time he [Coleridge] has the most vivid confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines [...] in which all the images rose up before him as *things* with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort' (147-8, emphasis in original).

As Richardson observes, this account questions 'the relationship between mental events and the organic body' (Richardson 2001, 48). It suggests that imaginative composition might be stimulated by particular physical events (in this case, a chemically induced sleep). Thus, rather than 'a synthetic and magical power' (as in *Biographia Literaria*), poetic composition, here, is seen to be inspired by a particular set of psychophysiological circumstances.

Beckett, I would suggest, inherited from Romanticism a tendency to alternate between understandings of artistic inspiration as a magical and mysterious phenomenon on the one hand, and a psychophysiological reaction on the other. To return to *Proust*, this can be seen in the way in which he describes the madeleine steeped in tea. For Beckett, as we have seen, Proust's narrator's story was inspired by involuntary memory but, Beckett continues, involuntary memory was itself 'stimulated or charmed by' the forgotten taste of the madeleine (Beckett 1999, 34). In his description of the madeleine, Beckett seems to move between the language of science and that of magic. The madeleine becomes both a psychophysiological stimulus and a mysterious

charm. This oscillation between the material and the ethereal, the physical and the metaphysical, I contend, would continue into Beckett's later writing, particularly when he came to tackle questions of the mental image. Beckett frequently makes clear that his images are material entities rooted in particular sets of psychophysiological circumstances but, at the same time, the images he presents seem to carry with them a mysterious significance. Though Beckett's images seldom hold a self-explanatory meaning, they are rarely portrayed as arbitrary or neutral. Rather, particularly in the later work, they seem to hold a transfixing power over the protagonists that apprehend them. In light of this, we might situate the Beckettian image somewhere between Romanticism and experimental psychology. This is a view that has been touched upon in recent critical discourse. Steven Connor, for example, has argued that in Beckett's work, the imagination is a faculty that 'alternates between the visionary inheritance of Romanticism and a much more limited, often almost mechanical faculty conceived as the power of forming images' (Connor 2014, 7). 'For Beckett', Connor continues, 'imagination is not a spontaneously indwelling and upwelling power, but a strenuous and exhausting labour that comes close to the ideas of staging, seeing through or putting into practice' (7). The suggestion that Beckett's work conceives of the imagination 'as the power of forming images' seems to identify Beckett with the study of imagery that I have described in experimental psychology. There is the suggestion, here, that the Beckettian subject might 'stage' an image in the same way as Kosslyn's subjects stage images of cats. But, as Connor seems to recognise, this is not quite the case. The Beckettian imagination is, for Connor, at least intermittently influenced by Romanticism. This, though, is where Connor's argument provokes a question. If, as Connor notes, the Beckettian imagination does not have the 'spontaneously indwelling and upwelling power' of the Romantic imagination, where can the influence be seen? I argue that it is observable in the emphasis Beckett places on the circumstances that inspire mental imagery and the mysterious significance of this imagery to the subjects that apprehend it.



### The (Im)material Image in *Nacht und Träume*

Beckett's particular approach to the mental image shows up clearly in the late teleplay *Nacht und Träume*. As Uhlmann observes, the play describes a process of 'image production' (Uhlmann 2006, 2). It presents a Dreamer (A) producing an image of his dreamt self (B) as he sits at a table with his head resting on his hands (Beckett 2006, 465). The image, in turn, seems to produce images of two hands – L and R – that offer him comfort: mopping his brow, offering a cup to his lips and caressing him (465-6). Thus we are presented with the peculiar televisual image of a man producing a mental image of a man producing mental images.<sup>73</sup> In this set-up, Beckett enables the viewer to tell the mental images apart from the man that is apprehending them, partly through positioning (the images hover above and to the right of A), and more importantly through the kindness of the light in which each is presented (465). The dreamer is presented, first, in a faint 'evening light' that comes from behind him, and then (as the images appear) in a 'minimal' light (465). The images he produces, on the other hand, appear in a 'kinder', almost hazy light (465). The difference between the lights in which man and image are presented, then, is not one of intensity but tone. Both are presented faintly but where A's light is 'minimal', that of the images is 'kind'. Crucial, here, is the point that both dreamer and image are made of the same material (they are both – faintly – perceived as images on a TV screen) but each is presented in a different way. A is seated at floor level in a harsh gloom while A, L, and R hover above him in soft focus.

This *mise-en-scène* neatly encapsulates the nuances of Beckett's approach to the image. On the one hand, the portrayal of the image in *Nacht und Träume* resonates with the scientific understandings of imagery that developed in the twentieth century. The play invites us to compare the experience of perception with that of imagery by presenting a percept (A) and an image (B) side-by-side. Both figures are, of course, perceived as part of a televisual image but, in the fiction of the play, A is supposed to exist in the physical world and B is supposed to exist as mental imagery. However, though Beckett marks this distinction by illuminating image and creator in different

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<sup>73</sup> It should be remembered, here, that the image is being produced in a particular way, through dreaming. This is an important point and one I will return to momentarily.

types of light, both are presented at a level that makes one strain to apprehend them. It is as difficult to make out the figure that is (within the fiction) located in the physical world as it is to apprehend the image that is generated by this figure. Neither the image nor the percept can be fully made out without a straining of the eyes and it is difficult to be sure that one is apprehending either fully. Indeed, when I look closely at the figure of A it becomes difficult to adjudge what is actually perceptible and what I am filling in with imagery. When I look at A's hand, for example, I see fingers but it is difficult to tell whether those fingers are actually visible or whether I am producing images of fingers – and thus giving artificial definition to a white blur. To paraphrase Enoch Brater, the more I study the images on screen, 'the more ambiguous they become' (Brater 1980, 50). In this way, Beckett follows psychologists such as Perky in scrutinising the boundaries between the faintly lit percept and the mental image. Both Beckett and Perky are interested in vaguening the material that they present to the extent that the image starts to blur with the percept.

There also seems to be a link between A's sensory environment and the emergence of the image, and this resonates with scientific approaches to mental imagery. A's production of B, it seems, requires minimal lighting and the resting of the head on the hands. One might question whether this is really surprising – in a sense there is nothing unusual about a man starting to dream when he takes a position of rest – but there is something very schematic, almost mechanical, about Beckett's presentation of this moment. The image appears almost as soon as A's head sinks into his hands. And, when the image vanishes and the evening light re-appears, the head rises up almost immediately. Not only this, but the process is repeated. When the light disappears again, A's head sinks back into the hands, prompting the image to return 'as before' (466). James Knowlson notes that this repetition seems 'almost ritualistic', but there is, I think, also an element of the stimulus-response experiment at work here (Knowlson 1996, 683). As we have seen, Beckett came across the behaviourist idea of stimulus-response in his reading of Woodworth and the influence of these ideas on Beckett's work has been observed throughout this study. It is also my contention that the influence of behaviourism is observable in Beckett's approach to the mental image. This becomes particularly apparent when one places *Nacht und Träume* alongside

the late prose. As we will see in the next chapter, the images that are produced in *Worstward Ho* appear in the stare of a 'head sunk on crippled hands' and, in *Stirrings Still* (1989), the protagonist sees 'himself rise and go' one night as he sits 'at his table head on hands' (Beckett 2009a, 84; 107). In Beckett's work from this period, there certainly seems to be a correlation between this particular position (in the darkness with head on hands) and the production of images. Here we might compare Beckett's work with the experiments carried out by researchers such as Segal and Glicksman, which tested whether manipulating an observer's sensory environment might make them less able to distinguish perception from imagery. Beckett, like the experimenters, I would suggest, is interested in the 'hallucinatory, dream-like and simple optic imagery' that ensues when subjects are placed in particular positions. The images that are produced by Beckett's protagonists may have, what James Knowlson calls, 'a mysterious quality' but they are usually seen to be stimulated by, or grounded in, the sensory environment (Knowlson 1996, 683).

There are, then, ways in which we might relate Beckett's late portrayals of image production to the experimental study of mental imagery that developed in the twentieth century. However, to read works such as *Nacht und Träume* purely as investigations into the psychophysiological process of image production would be slightly reductive. Surely more is going on here. Of course, if one is looking for significance in the images that appear, it is easy to find. B is, after all, explicitly described as a version of A so it would be difficult to argue that the content of the image has no significance for the figure that apprehends it. A reading which takes the action of the play at face value, then, might conclude that the ritualistic caresses that L and R perform on B fulfil the wishes of the lonely A, who sits at a table in darkness. In this way the images might be seen, in the words of Ulrika Maude, to present A with 'a release from physical discomfort and suffering' (Maude 2009, 130). However, as commentators such as James Knowlson have pointed out, if this personal story was the focal point of the play, the work might seem a little thin and sentimental (Knowlson 1996, 683). In light of this, many scholars have argued that the play's power is rooted in its formal experimentation. Here, we come back to the argument that Beckett was more interested in the psychophysiological process of image production than the content of the images. Enoch Brater, for instance, argues that the

'visualization' of the images 'not their meaning, were the dramatist's true subject' (Brater 1985, 51). In a similar fashion, Ulrika Maude reads the play as a drama of 'virtuality', focusing on the process by which the work 'reproduces or doubles the dreamer's body' (Maude 2009, 128-9).<sup>74</sup> Thus there has been a tendency for critics to see the play as a study of process rather than content.

I would suggest, though, that the content of the play is far from arbitrary. The images produced in the action certainly seem to have held personal significance for Beckett himself. For example, as James Knowlson notes, the presentation of the dreamt hands, was deliberated on extensively:

Hands had always fascinated Beckett in painting. As a young man he had a reproduction of Dürer's wonderful etching of praying hands hanging on the wall of his room at Cooldrinagh. Beckett insisted to Dr Müller-Freienfels that "the sex of the hands must remain uncertain. One of our numerous teasers". To me, he said that these "sexless hands" "might perhaps be a boy's hands". But in the end he concluded: "I think no choice but female for the helping hands. Large but female. As more conceivably male than male conceivably female" (Knowlson 1996, 682-3).<sup>75</sup>

Knowlson's account does not suggest that Beckett was purely interested in processes of visualisation in *Nacht und Träume*. Rather, the content of the images that are produced in the action of the play seems to have been a major concern. It is important to point out, though, that Beckett wanted to endow this content with an ill-defined significance. Here we might, once more, use Uhlmann's terms and suggest that the dreamt hands in *Nacht und Träume* are presentations rather than representations (Uhlmann 2008, 53). They do not come to us ready-interpreted as the hands of a particular person or even a particular gender, but instead are 'teasers': concrete entities with particular qualities that demand interpretation. The sense that they are not neatly representative, then, should not lead to the conclusion that they are arbitrary.

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<sup>74</sup> Here, Maude reads the play in the context of the late twentieth century and relates Beckett's interest in virtualisation to the development of emerging 'visualising devices' such as the electrocardiograph, which 'seemed to reduce the body to a diagram' (Maude 2009, 128).

<sup>75</sup> Beckett also seems to have been keen to point out the religious significance of the images that are produced in the play, telling cameraman Jim Lewis, for example, that the cloth used to mop the head of B 'alluded to the veil that Veronica used to wipe the brow of Jesus on the Way of the Cross' (Knowlson 1996, 682).

Rather, Beckett presents concrete images that seem to hold a significance without defining what this significance is.

What we might also question, here, are the implications of the fact that B, L, and R appear to a dreaming protagonist. Does this heighten, or reduce the degree to which the imagery in question is understood to be significant? In my view, the dreamt status of the mental images in *Nacht und Träume* detaches them from the mundane and the everyday, and furthers their ill-defined significance. One might respond to this with the assertion that dream imagery is not necessarily significant – that it is quite capable of being mundane and occurring frequently. To this, though, I would argue that Beckett is concerned with a particular type of dream. The sense in which the term dream is used in the play has been considered by numerous critics and it is frequently argued that the dream in question is not of the kind that one might passively experience during a good night's sleep. Instead, a more active, compositional process is often mooted. In his reading of the play, for example, Deleuze questions whether 'we are supposed to think that he [A] is asleep' and answers in the negative (Deleuze 1995, 20). Instead, Deleuze argues that the dream in *Nacht und Träume* is that of 'the exhausted, of the insomniac, of the aboulic' (21). This dream, Deleuze contends, 'is not like the sleeping dream that fashions itself all alone in the depths of desire and the body, it is a dream of the mind that has to be made, manufactured' (21). A similar sentiment is voiced by Franz Michael Maier and Angela Moorjani who focus on Beckett's use of Franz Schubert's 1825 Lied (also called *Nacht und Träume*). In the works of both Beckett and Schubert, for Maier and Moorjani, the dream 'describes a state of vision and activity, not a state of passivity and rest' (Maier and Moorjani 2007, 96). The authors also locate this attitude to the dream in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer, Maier and Moorjani argue:

Distinguished dreams that are engendered by the physiology of the dreamer and do not enlarge his knowledge of the outer world (Hallucinationen) from dreams that are perceptions of a special kind (Wahrträdume). The latter provide additional objective knowledge to the dreaming subject (95).

For Maier and Moorjani, Beckett is working with Schopenhauer's conception of the dream. They assert that the dream portrayed in *Nacht und Träume* should

be placed in the latter category as ‘a special kind’ of perception. These arguments might be supported with reference to the passage in *Murphy* in which the protagonist’s body is described to be in a ‘less precarious abeyance than that of sleep, for its own convenience and so that the mind might move’ (Beckett 2009c, 71). Beckett, then, showed an interest in a type of bodily inactivity that is more stable than that of sleep and enables the subject to experience, and partake in, the movements of their own mind. ‘As he lapsed in the body’, we are told that Murphy ‘felt himself coming alive in the mind, set free to move among its treasures’ (71).

However, if *Nacht und Träume*’s mental images are consciously experienced, or even manufactured, by the subject, how do they differ from the arbitrary images of bananas and cats that subjects were asked to produce in the experiments of Perky and Kosslyn? The answer to this question, I would argue, lies in the degree to which we can access the intentions of the subjects. We know why the subjects of Perky and Kosslyn produce those particular mental images; it is because an experimenter has told them to do so. In Beckett’s play, by contrast, A exists in the isolation of his dream. We have no way of knowing the reasons behind the production of B, L and R, and so the images acquire a mysterious significance. There is a sense that A is composing mental imagery but we are left with the ineradicable question of why he is composing *this* imagery. In light of this, as well as emerging scientific understandings of imagery, I would relate Beckett’s portrayal of image production in *Nacht und Träume* to a Romantic tradition that is perhaps best exemplified by Coleridge’s introduction to ‘Kubla Khan’. Both Beckett and Coleridge are concerned with a moment of semi-conscious<sup>76</sup> inspiration in which images rise up before the protagonist in a manner that seems to hold a revelatory significance.<sup>77</sup> In neither case, though, is it clear why these particular images are experienced as significant. Of course there remain crucial differences between the two examples. In the preface to ‘Kubla Khan’, for

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<sup>76</sup> In the case of Coleridge, there is also a question of whether the subject is asleep. The 1816 preface to the poem mentions a ‘profound sleep’ but in the “Crewe” manuscript, Coleridge is described to be in ‘a sort of Reverie’ (Hill 1978, 150).

<sup>77</sup> Repetition is an important indicator of significance here. In Beckett’s play the dream is repeated ‘in close-up and slower motion’ and Coleridge is described as having an impulse to repeat the content of his vision. ‘On awaking’, we are told, ‘he [Coleridge] appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole and, taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly’ wrote it down (Beckett 2006, 466; Hill, 1978, 148).

example, the images that rise up are linked to 'correspondent expressions' and both the images and the expressions are linked to the book that Coleridge has been reading (Hill 1978, 147-8). The images encountered by Beckett's dreamer, on the other hand, are not contextualised in such a manner and so their significance is much more ambiguous. Nevertheless, Beckett seems to inherit from the Romantic period an interest in how the subject experiences imagery as significant and, in this way, I think we might well place the Beckettian image in between the scientific study of image production and, what Connor calls, 'the visionary inheritance of Romanticism'.

The chapters of this section seek to develop the lines of thinking set out above. They will proceed with the understanding that Beckett's work is concerned both with the processes by which mental imagery is apprehended and the significance of its content. Through readings of *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, the first chapter will address the question of process, positioning Beckett's approach to the mental image in relation to experimental psychology's identification of image and percept. Taking as its starting point Waller et al.'s statement that mental imagery 'engages many' – though not all – 'of the psychological structures and processes used in perception', the chapter will address the question of how, in light of this understanding, it should be discussed. Can one use the language of perception unproblematically when referring to mental imagery, or does it need its own particular vocabulary? By bringing Beckett's work to bear on this question, the chapter hopes to both nuance our readings of the Beckettian image and find ways in which Beckett's work might inform ongoing debates around the topic of mental imagery. The second chapter will focus more on the revelatory possibilities of the mental image, and the conditions by which this revelation might occur. Here I will read Beckett's *Company* alongside the psychological research on sensory isolation that emerged after the Second World War. My central concern, here, is with the role that physical isolation played in Beckett's writing and how this use of isolation might be interpreted when one comes to position Beckett's writing in relation to a wider culture. With these chapters, then, I hope to build on the conclusions of the first section and, ultimately, find a position from which to answer three questions: how Beckett's work relates to twentieth-century experimental psychology; how Beckett's interest in experimental psychology

relates to his other aesthetic and ethical concerns; and how the experimentation of Beckett, and that of the experimental psychologist, fit into the larger story of modernity.



## Chapter 5

### Percept and Image in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*

We have so far seen that the blurring of boundaries between perception and mental imagery has been a major concern in the history of experimental psychology. It is important to remember, though, that Western civilization had been drawing links between that which is sensed in the external world and that which is apprehended in the mind long before the advent of the psychological laboratory. This is evident in the common expression in which one claims to have seen or heard something in the ‘mind’s eye’ or ear. In English, the visual version of this expression goes back as far as Chaucer and, looking back even further, one can see the analogy at work in the post-classical Latin phrase *oculus mentis*, which is found in British sources from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>78</sup> Earlier writers can also be seen playing with this analogy, drawing attention to those vague moments in which the distinction between the percept and the image becomes difficult to draw. Perhaps the most famous example of this can be found in the second scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) when Hamlet and Horatio describe their sightings of Hamlet’s (recently deceased) father:

HAMLET:

Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven

Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!

My father! – methinks I see my father.

HORATIO:

Where, my lord?

HAMLET:

In my mind's eye, Horatio.

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<sup>78</sup> The auditory version of this expression, the *mind’s ear*, has a shorter history, the earliest known use being in the early eighteenth century (*OED* Online s.v. ‘mind’, accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/118732?rskey=ItR8Yj&result=1&isAdvanced=true#eid36945177>)

HORATIO:

I saw him once; he was a goodly king.

HAMLET:

He was a man, take him for all in all,

I shall not look upon his like again.

HORATIO:

My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

HAMLET:

Saw? who?

HORATIO:

My lord, the king your father.

HAMLET:

The king my father! (Shakespeare 2015, 33)

One of the many striking things about this passage is the sheer variety of ways in which Hamlet's father, is said to be seen or looked upon. Not only are there descriptions of both imagistic and perceptual sightings in the past and present (Hamlet's seeing the king in his 'mind's eye' and Horatio's seeing him 'once' in the distant past as 'a goodly king'), but there are also variations in the certainty with which the sightings are described. Horatio can say with certainty that he saw the king 'once' but only *thinks* that he 'saw him yesternight'. Similarly, Hamlet seems to move from certainty to doubt in a single line as he looks upon the image of his father: 'My father! – methinks I see my father'. More salient, of course, is the point that, while both Horatio and Hamlet claim to have seen the king after his death, only Hamlet can locate the sighting in the mind's eye. Horatio thinks he has seen Hamlet's father (who he knows to be dead) out in the physical world. Horatio, though, does not quite believe his own eyes.<sup>79</sup> Thus, when he describes the movements of the king he uses the pronoun 'it' rather than 'he', suggesting that he was not looking at the king himself but some shadowy version:

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<sup>79</sup> The ghost has been explicitly referred to as an image earlier in the play when Horatio initially sees the ghost with Marcellus and Bernardo (13).

HORATIO:

It lifted up its head and did address  
 Itself to motion, like as it would speak;  
 But even then the morning cock crew loud,  
 And at the sound it shrunk in haste away  
 And vanish'd from our sight (33).

The overall effect of this exchange is one of flux and uncertainty. The king is continually being seen but there is a constant fluctuation, both with regards to what he is seen as – now an image, now a percept, now a supernatural being – and the certainty with which this classification is made. Shakespeare is allowing apprehensions of the king to flicker between the material and the immaterial and, in doing so, interrogating the distinction between perceptual, imagistic and supernatural experience.

There is a danger, here, in overemphasising Shakespeare's interest in the classification of experience. It seems likely that Shakespeare's interest in the possibility of confusing percept and image lay in its dramatic potential (and in the phenomenon's relevance to contemporaneous debates around the supernatural).<sup>80</sup> The uncertainty surrounding Horatio and Hamlet's sightings of the ghost, I would argue, is an example of Shakespeare's penchant for what Stephen Greenblatt has called 'strategic opacity' (Greenblatt 2004, 324). For Greenblatt, by creating a sense of uncertainty around the action of his later plays, Shakespeare found that he could release 'an enormous energy' in his audience 'that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations' (323-4). Shakespeare, then, might be seen to use the occasional continuities between perceptual and imagistic experience for his own aesthetic purposes. As an artist, Shakespeare is not alone in this respect. In a mid-twentieth-century survey of approaches to mental imagery, the psychologist Alan Richardson observes that artists have 'usually been particularly sensitive to the fragile and fluctuating boundary between fantasy and reality' (Richardson

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<sup>80</sup> Some recent criticism has argued that *Hamlet* shows Shakespeare's interest in the process of perception. Raphael Lyne, for example, reads 'the second ghost scene in Hamlet as an experiment in social cognition' (Lyne 2014, 79). However, as Lyne acknowledges, much more criticism has focused on the element of the supernatural and how Shakespeare is working within a tradition in which the 'theatre is a medium for explicit questioning about the existence of ghosts' (91).

1969, 1). 'The rest of us' Richardson continues, 'have muddled through and felt that our personal survival was proof enough that we could make the distinction when it really counted' (1). There is the sense, here, that humanity's occasional difficulty in telling the image apart from the percept has, historically, been viewed as a slightly lofty topic, suitable for the stage, page or ivory tower but of little practical interest to the majority.

However, as the tense of Richardson's statement seems to imply, this begins to change in the nineteenth century, and the change becomes particularly noticeable in the mid-twentieth century. In this period, the human subject's capacity to tell fantasy from reality, percept from image, becomes a much more pressing concern. We might return to Jonathan Crary's observation that, from the late nineteenth century, the concept of inattention 'began to be treated as a danger and a serious problem' (Crary 1999, 23). A similar process occurs from the early nineteenth century with regards to the mistaking of image for percept. This is particularly evident in medical discourse. In 1817, for example, the psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol introduced the term 'hallucination' – the sense of perceiving something which is not observable in the external world (McCarthy-Jones 2012, 61). And going forward to 1911, Eugen Bleuler placed hallucinations in the symptom cluster we still call 'schizophrenia' (Heinrichs 2001, 53). Nineteenth century psychiatry undoubtedly placed a huge emphasis on the physiology of the brain,<sup>81</sup> but there was also an interest in the role of personal circumstance. Here, the influence of psychoanalysis undoubtedly changed attitudes. Bleuler, for example was an admirer of Freud and partly through this influence, came to emphasise the psychological underpinnings of hallucinations. Bleuler argued, for example, that the voices heard by schizophrenics commonly express the 'thoughts, fears and drives' of the individual hearing them and the symptom is likely 'precipitated by psychic occurrences' (Bleuler 1950, 388-9). Furthermore, Bleuler suggested that a voice might come to one by way of some kind of personal crisis: the symptoms of schizophrenia, he argued, were likely 'the expression of a more or less unsuccessful attempt to find a way out of an intolerable situation' (460). The failure to distinguish percept and image was viewed as a pathological

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<sup>81</sup> The Italian psychiatrist Augusto Tamburini, for example, identified particular parts of the brain that he thought were responsible for hallucinations (McCarthy-Jones 2012, 69).

symptom and numerous psychiatrists and psychotherapists strove to find the underlying causes.

Beyond models of pathology, though, certain sociological developments seemed to draw increased attention to the fluctuating boundaries between image and percept. For a reflection on this idea, we might look to a 1964 article by the American psychologist Robert R. Holt, which questioned why the mid-twentieth century had seen a revival of interest in mental imagery within psychology. For Holt, in spite of the doctrines of behaviourism (which, as discussed in previous chapters, made the topic of mental imagery something of a taboo), twentieth-century psychologists had been forced to return to the topic of mental imagery for a variety of theoretical and socio-economic reasons. For example, Holt suggests that the mistaking of image for reality had long been treated as an 'exclusively pathological manifestation' (Holt 1964, 263). But at the moment in which he writes, Holt argues, 'it is being rediscovered that normal, prosaic folk, and not just psychotics, can hallucinate, given the right circumstances' (263) This, he argues, can partly be attributed to the commencement of new kinds of occupation:

Radar operators who have to monitor a scope for long periods; long-distance truck drivers in night runs over turnpikes, but also other victims of "highway hypnosis"; jet pilots flying straight and level at high altitudes; operators of snowcats and other such vehicles of polar exploration, when surrounded by snowstorms—all of these persons have been troubled by the emergence into consciousness of vivid imagery, largely visual but often kinesthetic or auditory, which they may take momentarily for reality (Holt 1964, 257).

Developments in society, for Holt, have created scenarios in which an increasing number of people are asked to operate technology for long periods of time. These scenarios require subjects to perceive or respond to minimal sensory material and this lack of sensory input causes them to produce imagery in a way that has the potential to cause 'serious accidents' (257). Thus, for Holt, one of the reasons that psychology is required to investigate mental imagery lies in an economic need for humans to be able to perform these duties without losing their grip on reality.

Additionally, Holt points to the political atrocities of the twentieth century and the emergence of ‘a series of first-hand accounts of persons who have been imprisoned in concentration camps and interrogated by the secret police of totalitarian regimes’ (257):

A recurrent theme in such stories is what one former captive called “the famous cinema of prisoners”: pseudohallucinatory imagery brought on by prolonged isolation, sleep deprivation, and the multiple regressive pressures of forcible indoctrination or thought reform (257).<sup>82</sup>

What seems to be at issue, here, is a combination of the material and the personal. On the one hand, there is the sense that particular physiological situations produce moments in which one fails to distinguish between image and percept. Here we might point to the reduced levels of sensory stimulation experienced by the long-distance truck driver or the prisoner. On the other, looking again to the prisoner but also to Bleuler’s idea that the hallucination might derive from an ‘intolerable situation’, there is the sense that personal duress is a major trigger. Thus it is Holt’s argument that the twentieth century is producing more of these situations – more experiences in which the boundaries between perception and imagery seem to blur – and so there is a greater number of ‘customers looking for psychological help’ on these topics (263).

This seems to me a reasonable hypothesis but there are a couple of aspects of Holt’s argument that need to be made clear. First it is important to mark the distinction between the experiences themselves and their penetration into public discourse. Imprisonment and solitary confinement are, of course, by no means exclusive to the twentieth century. Criminologist Peter Scharff Smith suggests that use of solitary confinement may be traced back to the middle ages and the inquisitional mode of imprisonment known as *muris strictus* (Smith 2006, 441).<sup>83</sup> And modern use dates back to the popularisation of the Pennsylvania model of incarceration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, isolation was supposed to prompt inmates to ‘turn their thoughts inward, to meet God, to repent of their crimes, and eventually to return

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<sup>82</sup> Holt also relates the upsurge in interest in mental imagery to popular interest in hallucinogenic drugs and the ‘great to-do about flying saucers or Unidentified Flying Objects’ (257-8).

<sup>83</sup> Here, penitent heretics were confined to narrow single-person cells and frequently chained to the walls (Haskins 1902, 647; Peters 1998, 26).

to society as morally cleansed Christian citizens' (Smith 2008, 1049).<sup>84</sup> Earlier centuries, then, produced environments in which one might expect 'the famous cinema of prisoners' to emerge. Indeed, Smith notes that numerous nineteenth-century scientific studies investigated the effects of the Pennsylvania model on prisoners, and hallucinations were commonly reported (Smith 2006, 466). However, within the discourses of earlier periods there was less focus on the idea that the material circumstances of isolation could cause hallucinations. In the religious environment of the middle ages metaphysical explanations were, unsurprisingly, common, and in the nineteenth century the effects of isolation were frequently explained through racial theory or ideas of degeneration (Kroll and Bachrach 1982, 41; Smith 2006, 458; Smith 2008, 1060). Crucial, then, were the decline of metaphysical and degenerative theories and an increased acceptance that a set of psychophysiological circumstances could trigger a blurring of percept and image, fantasy and reality. Equally, I would suggest that the advance of technological stimulation from the late nineteenth century onwards made the concept of under-stimulation a much more pressing concern. It is unlikely that more people were being exposed to darkness and silence in a modern world of increased mechanical noise and artificial light. Rather, I would suggest that the advance of modernity made the effects of darkness and silence seem novel and worth researching. Finally, it should be noted that among Holt's 'customers' looking for 'psychological help' with regards to the effects of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation seem to have been a number of Western governments. In the Cold-War and post-911 eras, a military demand for 'potentially effective interrogation techniques' prompted a large amount of research on techniques such as hypnosis, isolation and extreme sensory deprivation (Soldz 2008, 593-5). Indeed, much of the research carried out on sensory deprivation was funded, indirectly, by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Raz, 2013, 382-3).<sup>85</sup> Thus, new understandings of

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<sup>84</sup> The influence of the Pennsylvania system can still be seen in contemporary penal systems. For example, the 'supermax' prisons that are now found across the world employ many of the same methods (Jewkes 2015, 20).

<sup>85</sup> This relationship between experimental psychology and psychological torture is deeply troubling and the American Psychological Association's role in the acts of 'enhanced interrogation' performed at Guantanamo Bay remains the subject of much controversy and anger (see, for example, Kory 2016). I will consider experimental psychology's investigation of isolation and sensory deprivation in more detail in the next chapter. Here, though, I merely want to advance the historical argument that military demands are likely to have shaped twentieth-century psychology's approach to mental imagery.

the relationship between imagery and perception are likely to have been shaped, in part, by post-Second World War military policy. Overall, though, I think Holt's point stands. The social developments of the twentieth century did seem to intensify Western civilization's long standing interest in the 'difference between the nature of images and imaging on the one hand, and the nature of percepts and perceiving on the other' (Richardson 1969, 2).

This chapter will argue that, for a variety of reasons, the work of Samuel Beckett (and in particular his post-war prose) should be seen in this context. In one sense, it will view Beckett as an artist in the tradition of Shakespeare, interested in the aesthetic effects that can be derived from drawing attention to (in Richardson's words) the 'fragile and fluctuating boundary between fantasy and reality'. Anthony Uhlmann has picked up on this. Drawing on Greenblatt's reading of Shakespeare, he suggests that Beckett is part of a long artistic tradition that presents objects which resist classification. This tradition, for Uhlmann, is concerned with the powerful affects that can be derived when one occludes key details about an object, 'rather than attempting to represent the essential components' (Uhlmann 2008, 105). Thus, Beckett's interest in the continuities between perception and mental imagery can, in one way, be seen as part of an aesthetic strategy. Particularly in the later works, Beckett frequently refuses to define particular figures and objects as either perceptual or imagistic. Instead he seems interested in the powerful affects that are located in between the two categories.

However, there is also a sense in which the chapter will view Beckett as a citizen of the twentieth century, suggesting that he was very much embedded in the period's changing attitude towards mental imagery. Evidence for this can be found in the books that Beckett read and the books that he wrote. With regards to his reading, Beckett showed an interest in twentieth-century theoretical debates around the distinction between the percept and the image. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, for example, note that Beckett possessed a copy of Jean Paul Sartre's *L'Imagination* (1936) in which Sartre addresses psychology's tendency to undermine the distinction between image and percept (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 167). Sartre himself was highly dubious about this tendency. He writes: 'If I examine myself without prejudice, I will realize that I spontaneously make the distinction between existence as thing and existence



as image' (Sartre 2012, 5). 'Whether or not their evocations are voluntary', Sartre continues, 'images give themselves, at the very moment they appear as something other than presences. I am never mistaken about this' (5). Indeed, Sartre suggests that psychology has created a confusion on this matter where none should exist, arguing that 'someone who had never studied psychology' would be 'greatly surprised' if asked: 'do you sometimes confuse the image of your brother with his real presence (5)?' Sartre, then, argued for the integrity of the boundary between image and percept. Regardless of the position it takes, though, *L'Imagination* offers a summary of how the relationship between image and percept had been theorised in Western philosophy and psychology up until the 1930s (covering a wide range of writers from Descartes to Edward Titchener). The work, then, would have given Beckett an early grounding in the theoretical approaches that had been taken to the image.

In terms of his own writing, Beckett's literary work betrays an interest in the 'pseudohallucinatory imagery' that, as Holt notes, is frequently 'brought on by prolonged isolation or inactivity'. In the novella *The End*, for example, Beckett produces what Ulrika Maude calls an 'experiment into detached and autonomous forms of subjectivity through a form of sensory deprivation' (Maude 2009, 39). Here, the narrator lies flat on his back in a disused boat covered by a lid, seeing 'nothing except, dimly, just above my head, through the tiny chinks, the grey light of the shed' (Beckett 2000, 28). This state seems to bring on a peculiar experience of imagery:

Enough, enough, the next thing I was having visions, I who never did, except sometimes in my sleep, who never had real visions, I'd remember except perhaps as a child, my myth will have it so. I knew they were visions because it was night and I was alone in my boat. What else could they have been (30)?

The narrator, here, is able to maintain the distinction between 'real visions' and reality, reasoning that he knew the things he was experiencing 'were visions' because he still felt his self to be alone in his boat. Nevertheless, in the final question ('what else could they have been?'), there is the sense of a cognitive debate over how the experience should be classified. The narrator also questions why, at this point in time, he was having 'real visions' when he does not remember having done so before. Beckett, here, seems to hint that a recent

occurrence in the narrator's life has caused him to have 'real visions' but this hint, is invalidated as soon as uttered. The novelty of the visions is brought into question even as the narrator suggests that the visions are novel: 'I was having visions, I who never did, except sometimes in my sleep, who never had real visions'. It is, of course, tempting to read this passage biographically and suggest that, like his narrator, Beckett was wrestling with the question of how to categorise and evaluate personal experiences of 'real visions'. However, rather than arguing for an identification between Beckett's own experience and that of his narrator, I merely want to point out that two concerns begin to emerge in Beckett's post-war writing. First, there is a growing interest in moments in which the boundaries between perception and imagery seem to blur and, second, there is an engagement with the question of how to categorize or denominate these experiences.

From all this, it seems reasonable to conclude that, by the late twentieth century, Beckett had a fairly well established interest in the ways in which the boundaries between perception and imagery might be blurred. His early reading shows an interest how the relationship between image and percept had been theorised and this interest can be seen to carry into his aesthetic experiments. It is my contention that, in his late prose, Beckett would develop these interests further, conducting a sustained investigation into the nature of mental imagery while using the questionable status of the mental image to produce powerful moments of opacity in his creative writing. There are definite points of contact between Beckett's work and the psychological discipline – even though Beckett is working to slightly different ends. To demonstrate these points of comparison and contrast, we might read the opening of Holt's article on mental imagery alongside the opening of Beckett's late prose work, *Company*. Holt:

Consider the situation of a man whom I shall call "S". He is lying on a bed alone, in almost complete darkness and silence. There is nothing to see, hear, taste, smell, or do. But as he lies with eyes closed, he sees a good deal more than darkness. He begins to notice vague luminous patterns appearing before him, in intricate geometrical design, fading, brightening, coming, and going. Suddenly, a face emerges from this background with startling clarity, only to be replaced an instant later by an animal's head. Dreamily, S watches the succession of pictures that emerge before him,

growing gradually more vivid, complex, and thematic. Soon he has lost touch with external reality, being instead completely involved with these illusory phantoms of the dark (Holt 1964, 254).

Beckett:

A voice comes to one in the dark, Imagine.

To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts and by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As, for example, when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified (Beckett 2009a, 3).

In both of these passages, a narrator gives us the imperative to construct a scene in which a man lies in the dark, seeing and hearing things that might be perceptual or imagistic. Each passage, then, can be seen as a kind of prose experiment investigating the capacity to imagine an experience in which the boundaries between perceptual and imagistic material is troubled. This, though, is where points of contrast start to emerge. Holt's narrator tells us that the apprehended material is definitely imagistic – that the man 'has lost touch with external reality, being instead completely involved with these illusory phantoms of the dark'. Thus we are given an objective picture of what has occurred and asked to make a judgement on it: 'You are a psychologist; here are your data; what do you make of this kind of report' (Holt 1964, 254)? Beckett, by contrast, never gives us this full a picture. Instead we are left with an account of the protagonist's perspective. Moreover, the protagonist is concerned not with the question of whether the voice is a percept or an image, but whether the statements it makes are factual. We are told to imagine the voice, but the voice is never classified as an image or a percept. Thus, where the psychologist gives out the data, Beckett leaves us to imagine the experience in its full opacity. However, in spite of these differences, the passages are comparable insofar as they investigate the questions of how far the image is distinct from the percept, and the ways in which this distinction might be conceived and expressed. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with this investigation. First, through readings of psychological experiments conducted by Chevez Perky and Stephen Kosslyn (as well as philosophical critiques by Sartre, Gilbert Ryle and

Zenon Pylyshyn), it will outline the scientific and theoretical debates that occurred on this topic in the twentieth century. Then, through readings of */// Seen /// Said* and *Worstward Ho*, it will position Beckett's work in relation to these debates: considering how the debates around imagery might nuance our understanding of Beckett's work, and how Beckett's work strives to produce a vocabulary with which to discuss mental imagery.

### **Wording the Image: Theoretical Debates**

When, in the above-discussed passage, Hamlet tells Horatio that he thinks he sees his father, some confusion ensues. Having recently seen the 'image' of Hamlet's deceased father out in the world, Horatio initially presumes Hamlet to be having the same experience. But Hamlet's words have misled Horatio. The father that Hamlet sees is not out in the world but in his 'mind's eye'. Hamlet is able to say that he sees his father while, at the same time, holding that 'I shall not look upon his like again' (Shakespeare 2015, 33). He can say that he sees his father without *really* seeing him and this creates a misunderstanding. There are a number of ways in which we might analyse this situation. We might take the passage to exemplify a flaw in language, pointing, for instance, to the fact that the same signifier – 'methinks I see my father' – can be used to signify two distinct experiences. Or, we might suggest that Hamlet's failure to verbally distinguish the two experiences is rooted in the nature of the experiences themselves – that the distinction between perceptual and imagistic experience is not always pronounced. In one analysis we are concerned with the nature of Hamlet's experience, and in the other we are concerned with the words that he uses to describe it. Though I will move away from the case of Hamlet, the remainder of this chapter will be concerned with both of these analyses. All the authors I will look at in what follows are concerned both with what is happening when one sees something in the 'mind's eye' and with the words that we use to talk about it. In this way, they can all be seen as part of a sustained reconceptualization of the image in twentieth-century Western culture.

Though (as was noted in the last chapter) the concepts of imagination and imagery were of concern to many writers in the 1800s, there was a feeling

in early twentieth-century psychology that these terms had been defined with insufficient rigour. This can be seen at the beginning of Chevez Perky's experimental study of the imagination. Perky acknowledges that 'the word imagination and its cognate forms are familiar both in everyday speech and the technical language of psychology' but suggests that there is little agreement in what 'experiences' are 'denominated' when these terms are used (Perky 1910, 422-3). For example, it is noted that within psychology there is a general consensus that the imagination must be concerned with images 'but opinion differs on what constitutes an image' (426). Perky's problem, here, is not so much that there have not been important findings regarding the nature of imagination and imagery, but that this study has not been ordered in a way that gives the topic a 'distinctive mark or marks of a reliable kind' (427). Psychology, for Perky, is lacking a vocabulary with which to discuss the topics of imagery and the imagination. Perky's experimental study, then, aimed to produce more concrete understandings of imagination and imagery by defining these concepts in relation to other psychological phenomena.

Though unable to give a satisfactory account of what was meant by the word 'image', Perky certainly seems to have had a pretty clear idea of the nature of the image and how it was experienced. The first experiment of her study – 'A Comparison of Perception with the Image of Imagination' – showed that, for Perky, the mental image (or image of imagination) is distinguished by a number of qualities. In this experiment (as already mentioned) Perky attempted to 'build up a perceptual consciousness under conditions which should seem to the observer to be those of the formation of an imaginative consciousness' (428). There is the implication, here, that the experimenters know what an 'imaginative consciousness' is like and can replicate it by manipulating the perceptual world. Though I discussed the findings of Perky's experiment in the last chapter, it might be useful here to give a more thorough account of her method. The way in which Perky attempted to produce the required effect showed a creativity that borders on the artistic. She attempted to imitate images by making use of a dark room that was helpfully placed at the centre of the Cornell Laboratory (428). This dark room had a window that looked out onto the main laboratory room and it is in this window that Perky would present the objects that participants were being told to imagine (429). This window was

dressed in such a way as to give the object (what Perky adjudged to be) imagistic qualities. For example, she put tissue paper in the window and shone a faint light of a colour matching the colour of the object that was to be imagined (428-9). Thus, when an observer was to imagine a banana, the window would be endowed with a slight yellow colour. It was important to Perky that this would not be suggestive of light: 'the open square should appear just noticeably colored, without there being any such glow or shine upon the glass as could suggest the presence of a source of light behind it' (429). Also, she attempted to 'soften' the edges of the forms and worked to produce an effect in which the forms would 'oscillate or flicker into view' (430). Thus, in the experiment, subjects were asked to imagine: a tomato, a book, a banana, an orange, a leaf, and a lemon (429). But, as they were asked to imagine each object, a faintly coloured, flickering, blurry version of this object would appear in front of them. The experiment's question was whether these shadowy perceived forms would be mistaken for images of imagination. In Perky's hypothesis, then, the image is a faintly coloured, flickering and blurry thing but, apart from these qualities, it is essentially experienced in the same way as a percept.

The results, to some extent, validated this hypothesis. Perky drew the conclusion that the perceived forms were passing as imagined forms: 'we find, in brief, that a visual perception of distinctly supraliminal value may, and under our conditions does, pass – even with specially trained observers – for an image of imagination' (433). However, this overarching conclusion is perhaps less informative than the specific accounts that were given by the observers. From the reactions described by Perky, it does not seem that the observers identified the objects as images with any certainty. Instead, more often than not, the experiences described seemed to be novel and difficult to categorise. There was a tendency to indicate that the images were somehow different from those of the imagination, but this was often put down to the novelty of the conscious attempt to imagine. When asked whether they had ever had a similar imaginative experience, a subject would 'usually reply that he could not remember that he had; but then, he had never tried' (431). On a similar note, one subject with 'extended practice in the observation of images is described to have been 'confused': 'at first he thought the figures imaginary; then he speculated whether they might not be after-images of some sort, or akin to

after-images' (432-3). Finally, the passage goes on, he defined the images as such:

It seems like a perception, though the attention is more active than in perception; yet I feel sure that it is there, and that I did not make it; it is more permanent and distinct than an image (433).

Perky suggests that this observer's eventual detection of 'permanence and distinctness' in the form was 'unluckily, due to faulty technique' in the presentation, but I would argue that this observer's comments are indicative of a general trend in the responses. The objects, it seems, were often experienced as a novel form somewhere between the percept and the image. This has been observed by Segal and Nathan (1964) in their replications of the Perky experiment. The experiments show, they argue, that 'there is a region of experience where the distinction between self-initiated imagery and the perception of an external event is uncertain' (Segal and Nathan 1964, 385). Perky's experiment, then, effects a blurring of the boundaries between image and percept but does not permit us to identify the former with the latter.

Via Edward Titchener's *Text-book of Psychology* (1910), the findings of Perky's experiment came to the attention of a very sceptical Jean Paul Sartre. In *The Imaginary* (1940), Sartre alludes to Perky's experiment when stating that several 'absurd experiments have been conducted to show that the image has a sensory content' (Sartre 2010, 52).<sup>86</sup> These experiments, Sartre argues, 'would make sense only if the image were a weak perception. But it is given as *image*' (52, emphasis in original). Sartre's critique seems to oscillate between tackling the questions of what the mental image *is* and how it is *experienced*. For Sartre, the idea that a mental image 'has a sensory content' is absurd because the content of a mental image 'has no externality' (52). By this he seems to mean that a mental image cannot have a sensory content as it does not produce effects on the outside world. Thus, when one claims to see a mental image, one is not truly seeing it because it is not *out there* to be seen. For Sartre, 'one sees a portrait, a caricature, a spot: one does not see a mental image' (51, emphasis in original). He draws a clear ontological distinction between the image and the percept. However, Perky's experiment itself never argues that the mental image

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<sup>86</sup> Sartre never directly refers to Perky but quotes Titchener's account of her experiment.

is a perception but merely concludes that, given particular conditions, an object of perception can *pass for* an image of imagination. She is not denying that there is an ontological distinction between image and percept. Instead her argument is phenomenological; she is arguing that, on occasion, both image and percept can produce a similar experience.

Sartre, though, does not accept this phenomenological contention. He has held from the beginning of *The Imaginary* that mental images ‘present themselves to reflection with certain marks, certain characteristics that immediately determine the judgement: “I have an image”’ (4). In this line of thought, the image has a fixed ‘essence’ which means it cannot be mistaken for a percept (4, emphasis in original). A large part of this ‘essence’ is linked to the image’s apparent detachment from the sensory world. ‘To see an object’, Sartre argues, ‘is to localize it in space, between this table and that carpet, at a certain height on my right or on my left’ (52). This process of localization, he goes on, does not apply when one is apprehending an image: ‘my mental images do not mix with the objects that surround me’ (52). This process of localization is crucial because Sartre grants that, in certain cases, the image can begin to resemble the percept. For example, Sartre notes that hypnagogic images<sup>87</sup> can take on the ‘features of objectivity, clarity, independence, richness, externality, which are never possessed by the mental image and which are ordinarily characteristic of perception’ (37). But even in this case Sartre maintains that the image is not mistaken for a percept because ‘it is not localized, it is not anywhere, does not occupy any place among other objects, it simply stands out on a vague ground’ (37). A large part of the ‘essence’ of Sartre’s image, then, can be found in the ‘vague ground’ on which it is seen to reside. What is notable about Perky’s experiment, though, is the degree to which it sought to present the image on this ‘vague ground’. Like the images that Deleuze recognises in Beckett’s work, the objects of Perky experiments were presented in a kind of ‘any-space-whatever’; a faintly lit window, dressed with tissue paper in the centre of a laboratory (Deleuze 1995, 10). Perky’s perceptual objects, then, seem to capture a large part of what Sartre calls the ‘essence’ of the image, so it is not absurd to think that they might be

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<sup>87</sup> The imagery experienced just before one goes to sleep.



experienced as images. An ontological distinction does not preclude a phenomenological overlap.

This, combination of ontological distinction and phenomenological overlap raises a question of language that has troubled numerous philosophers. One might understand the percept and the image to be distinct entities but still speak of them using the same terms. We have already noted, for example, that the term 'see' in *Hamlet* is used to refer to both perceptions and images of Hamlet's father. Gilbert Ryle takes up this point in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Ryle argues that 'to see is one thing' and to 'picture or visualise is another', but questions how this difference is articulated (Ryle 2009, 223). For Ryle, the linguistic problem is not so much the one that plays out in *Hamlet* in which we are momentarily not sure whether Hamlet is claiming to see his father in the world or his mind's eye. Instead, Ryle's concern is with the very notion of a 'mind's eye' – the notion of a place in which mental images are said to exist:

The crucial problem is that of describing what is "seen in the mind's eye" and what is "heard in one's head". What are spoken of as "visual images", "mental pictures", "auditory images" and, in one use, "ideas" are commonly taken to be entities which are genuinely found existing and found existing elsewhere than in the external world. So minds are nominated for their theatres (222).

Ryle's, here, is not denying that the perceptual language that is commonly used to describe imagery reflects a phenomenological overlap. Nor is he suggesting that the concept of visualising or picturing is not 'a proper and useful concept' (225). He is, however, concerned that this way of using language has created a 'tendency among theorists and laymen alike to ascribe some sort of an otherworldly reality to the imaginary and then to treat minds as the clandestine habitats of such fleshless beings' (222). The linguistic problem then, for Ryle, lies in acknowledging the phenomenological overlap between perception and imagery without implying that the image exists in a private world that parallels that of the perceptible.<sup>88</sup> This problem, for Ryle, produces a kind of linguistic

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<sup>88</sup> Ryle's critique reads interestingly alongside the passage from *Murphy* in which Beckett's protagonist is seen to explore the 'private world' of his mind (Beckett 2009c, 71-2). Though this space is defined as a 'world', there is an attempt in *Murphy* to distinguish it from the physical world. The passage may be seen to represent the type of Cartesian dualism that Ryle rails against. But, as Dirk Van Hulle argues, it may also be seen as a parody of Descartes' distinction between mind and body (Van Hulle 2014, 207).

strain. He observes that people express both the phenomenological overlap and the ontological difference between perceiving and imaging 'by writing that, whereas they see trees and hear music, they only "see" in inverted commas, and "hear" the objects of recollection and imagination' (223). Thus, in order to describe a process in which one seems to see without really seeing, one has to seem to say one has seen without really saying it.

Both Ryle and Sartre, then, warn against treating mental images like pictures in the head. Ryle, for example, notes that if a person says that he is 'picturing his nursery, we are tempted to construe his remark to mean that he is somehow contemplating' a 'paperless picture' of that nursery in the private 'gallery' of his mind (224). This, Ryle implies, is to take a metaphor too far, creating a false understanding of what the image is. However, in spite of Ryle's concerns, the analogy between pictures and mental imagery continued to form the basis for a significant body of empirical research. In a well-known evaluation of this empirical approach, Zenon Pylyshyn suggests that most psychologists who write on the subject of imagery lean heavily on a 'picture metaphor' (Pylyshyn 1973, 8). The whole vocabulary of imagery', Pylyshyn continues, 'uses a language appropriate for describing pictures and the process of perceiving pictures. We speak of clarity and vividness of images, of scanning images, of seeing new patterns in images, and of naming objects or properties depicted in images' (8). This tendency, Pylyshyn suggests, may harm understandings of the topic 'by discouraging certain kinds of fundamental issues being raised and by carrying too many misleading implications' (8). He points to the way in which 'using the imagery vocabulary' has led to the assumption that 'what we retrieve from memory when we image, like what we receive from our sensory systems, is some sort of undifferentiated (or at least not fully interpreted) signal or pattern' (8). Using perceptual language is seen to draw psychologists into the assumption that we use processes like those of perception when apprehending imagery. For Pylyshyn, this is an inaccurate assumption. He argues that the mental image comes to us ready interpreted and can contain 'only as much information as can be described by a finite number of propositions' (10-11). Thus, '*it is much closer to being a description of the scene than a, picture of it*' (11, emphasis in original).

Pylyshyn's argument was taken up by Stephen Kosslyn who, in a discussion of a series of experiments on the representation of information in visual images, accepts the point that 'it is not very reasonable to treat images like photographs in the head' (Kosslyn 1975, 342). Kosslyn has a slightly different metaphor in mind. He moves towards a '*computer graphics metaphor*' in which the visual image is understood to 'bear the same relationship to its underlying structure as a pictorial display on a cathode ray tube does to the computer program that generates it' (342, emphasis in original). In this line of thought, the products of perception 'are stored in long-term memory in an abstract format, and must be acted on by processes that serve to generate or to produce an experience of an image' (342). Here, the 'underlying structure' is not experienced; one merely apprehends the 'pictures' that this structure generates. Kosslyn, though, maintains the metaphor that draws imagery alongside perception. For example, he invokes the concept of a 'mind's eye' but considers it as a kind of processor that analyses 'the material arrayed in mental images' (342). The processes performed by the mind's eye, in this account, are experienced similarly to the experiences encountered during perceptual processes. For example, according to Kosslyn, a mental image needs to be classified (e.g. identified as big/small, 2 legged/4 legged) and the mind's eye does this through use of the same procedures that one would use to classify a perceptual object: 'the same procedures may be appropriately applied to classify both internal representations arising during perception which are experienced as a visual percept, and internal representations experienced as a visual mental image' (342). Kosslyn, then, not only acknowledges the phenomenological overlap between perception and mental imagery but scrutinises the ontological distinction. He argues that both the 'visual percept' and the 'visual mental image' are 'internal representations' which may be classified in similar ways.

I hope this summary has shown the degree to which the mental image was reconceptualised over the course of the twentieth century. The century saw a prolonged attempt to identify the kinds of experiences that are denominated when the term mental image is used, and also an investigation into the kinds of psychophysiological processes that underlie these experiences. Not only this, but we have seen a continual dissatisfaction with the language that is being

used to describe mental imagery and the search for new metaphors with which to discuss the topic. In the next part of this chapter, it will be my argument that Samuel Beckett's work should be seen as part of this movement. Texts such as *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, I will argue, may well be read as an attempt both to investigate what the mental image is, and find a way of wording it.

### **Beckett's Eye of the Mind**

Earlier in the chapter I suggested that Beckett's engagement with the imagery-perception debates should be seen in a theoretical but also an aesthetic context. I noted that Beckett was part of a Shakespearian tradition that is interested in the aesthetic potential that exists in between the categories of perception and imagery. But I also cited Beckett's reading of Sartre to suggest that he took an interest in twentieth-century theoretical debates on the relationship between imagery and perception. This position might be outlined more clearly with reference to a passage from the second act of the 1961 play *Happy Days* in which Beckett alludes to an 'eye of the mind':

Winnie: That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains of one's classics, to help one through the day. (*Pause.*) Oh yes, many mercies, many mercies (*Pause.*) And now (*Pause.*) And now, Willie? (*Long pause.*) I call to the eye of the mind... Mr Shower – Or Cooker. (*She closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens her eyes. Pause.*) Hand in hand, in the other hands bags (Beckett 2006, 164-5, emphasis in original).

Winnie, here, seems to be picturing, in her mind's eye, a couple named Shower, or Cooker, who stand, hand in hand, 'gaping' at her (165). Thus, the passage might be seen to dramatize a performance of image production and so engage with the theoretical debates outlined above. However, there is something else going on here. Winnie's performance of image production is situated amid a discussion of her 'classics'. The gap between Winnie's concern with 'one's classics' and her production of visual images, here, is bridged by the phrase: 'I call to the eye of the mind'. This phrase, as various critics have noted, is drawn from the beginning of W. B. Yeats's play *At the Hawks Well* (1916) which, Van Hulle and Nixon note, Beckett 'clearly admired' (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 37).

In addition to this, S. E. Gontarski notes that the phrase suggests Hamlet's vision of his father (Gontarski 2014, 237). Although the passage might be used to exemplify Beckett's interest in the process of image production, it also alludes to an aesthetic canon. The theoretical discussion cannot be severed from the aesthetic tradition in which Beckett is writing.

However, the fact that Winnie's performance of image production is bound up in an aesthetic tradition should not lead to the conclusion that Beckett was not interested in imagistic processes themselves. It has been all too tempting for literary critics, I would argue, to focus on the fact that Beckett alludes to Yeats or Shakespeare when writing on the mind's eye and ignore his evident interest in what 'the eye of the mind' does. Indeed, Beckett's use of Yeats in *Happy Days* might be used to augment the contention that Beckett was heavily concerned with imagistic processes. When James Knowlson wrote to Beckett in 1972 questioning why he alluded to Yeats, Beckett responded:

The "eye of the mind" in *Happy Days* does not refer to Yeats any more than the "revels" in *Endgame* [refer] to *The Tempest*. They are just bits of pipe I happen to have with me. I suppose all is reminiscence from womb to tomb. All I can say is I have scant information concerning mine – alas (Knowlson 1983, 16).

As James Olney observes, 'there is much more going on in this passage than mere acting out by an author reluctant to comment on his work for an academic critic' (Olney 1998, 241). Beckett, I would argue, is not only giving an account of his creative process but also conceptualising the processes behind mental imagery. Indeed, I would link Beckett's conceptualisation with Kosslyn's account of the way in which mental imagery is apprehended. By conceiving of the phrase 'the eye of the mind' as a bit of pipe 'I happen to have with me' Beckett seems to be indicating that the phrase had been perceived and was being stored somewhere in the back of his mind – Kosslyn might say in long term memory. In this way it is understood, not as an embedded part of Yeats's play, but as an isolated chunk of language – a verbal image. During writing, it seems, the phrase came to the fore of Beckett's mind (his conscious experience) and was used to connect two sections of the text. However, Beckett's statement suggests that his recollection of the phrase does not imply a pristine recollection of the context from which it came. The auditory image is seen to come to the

mind's ear as a decontextualized entity. This works in parallel with Winnie's performance of image production in the play. For Winnie, the image of Mr and Mrs Shower, or Cooker, 'floats up – into my thoughts' but she cannot contextualise the image and so asks Willie if the names 'evoke any reality' for him (Beckett 2006, 156). For Beckett, as for Winnie, imagery is felt to float up into consciousness without having been wholly contextualised or categorised.

In *Happy Days* the images that Winnie calls to the eye of her mind are eventually fleshed out and contextualised. They are said to stand 'hand in hand' gaping at her and eventually become recognisable as a kind of commentating theatrical audience, asking each other what the action is 'meant to mean' and whether Winnie has 'anything on underneath' (165). Here, I would argue, the imagistic blurs into the perceptual. Though the Showers (or Cookers) are, of course, always being imagined by Winnie, there is a movement in which they go from being imagined as images to being imagined as autonomous entities. To paraphrase Sartre, they are endowed with a kind of externality. There is a movement between the understanding that what one calls to the 'eye of the mind' only exists as imaged, and the temptation to endow it with a fleshly presence (albeit an imagined one). This becomes a major concern in Beckett's late prose. At the beginning of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, for example, the eye of the mind is invoked when the figure of a deceased woman is said to appear for an eye that has 'no need of light to see' (Beckett 2009a, 45).<sup>89</sup> From this it seems easy to conclude that the woman is being apprehended as an image by the mind's eye. However, the text does not allow us this stable view of the figure. Later in the text, a perceiving eye is invoked ('the eye of flesh') and this requires us to imagine the figure as both image and percept. For example, we are told that she intermittently disappears and is 'no longer anywhere to be seen. Nor by the eye of the flesh, not by the other' (51). The figure cannot remain a pure image and this creates a blurring:

Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else (53).

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<sup>89</sup> Critics such as Adam Piette have also equated this eye with the mind's eye (Piette 2011, 283-5)

As in *Hamlet*, confusion has arisen out of the different senses in which one can use the verb 'see'. The narrator suggests an understanding that the woman only exists in 'the madhouse of the skull' but, 'despite precautions', percept and image, 'things and imaginings' cannot be kept distinct. The notion of 'precautions', here, may bring to mind the anxieties that we have seen articulated by Ryle and Sartre. However, in the context of *Ill Seen Ill Said* there is the sense that the blurring of image and percept is inevitable. Here we might return to Ulrika Maude's discussion of vision in Beckett's work and particularly her analysis of the way in which Beckett's approach relates to the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault. Along with these philosophers, Maude argues, Beckett is interested in the way in which the visible and invisible, real and imaginary can interrupt – or mix with – one another. Drawing on Foucault's idea of the heterotopia, she suggests that within Beckett's work 'different categories that cannot occupy the same space seem nonetheless to coexist' (Maude 2009, 40). In *Ill Seen Ill Said* the projections of the eye of the mind, and the eye of flesh, seem to coexist with one another creating a heterotopia in which the percept and the image intertwine.<sup>90</sup> This idea is also present in Perky's experiment when one of the observers is described to perceive the object in front to him, but also endow it with imaginary qualities. Perky presented blank cardboard cut-outs but one observer embellished them through imagination: 'the tomato was seen painted on a can, the book was a particular book whose title could be read, the lemon was lying on a table, the leaf was a pressed leaf with red markings on it' (Perky 1910, 432). The observer is seeing both image and percept in the same space and time. In this way, *Ill Seen Ill Said* may be profitably seen as part of a broad twentieth-century investigation into the way in which image and percept might be adjudged to overlap.

The image production of *Happy Days* is developed along a slightly different path in *Worstward Ho*. Here another hand-holding pair appears in a mind's eye – or, in this case the 'staring eyes' of a 'head sunk on crippled hands' (81-2). The narrator of *Worstward Ho*, however, moves to differentiate this image from the one that Winnie describes in *Happy Days*. Recall that Winnie's images are seen 'hand in hand, in the other hands bags'. Contrast this

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<sup>90</sup> For another discussion of this, which also takes in 'Long Observation of the Ray', see Connor 1992).

with a description of the hand-holding pair in *Worstward Ho*: 'Hand in hand with equal plod they go. In the free hands – no. Free empty hands' (Beckett 2009a, 84). There is a resistance, here, to the process of fleshing out that happens in Winnie's imagination. But this does not mean that the images (or 'shades' as they are described in the text) are left un-interpreted. On the contrary, the next time the image of the hand-holding pair emerges it is interpreted in great detail:

Backs turned. Heads sunk. Dim hair. Dim white and hair so fair that in that dim light white. Black greatcoats to heels. Dim black. Bootheels. Now the two right. Now the two left. As one with equal plod they go. No ground. Plod as on void (86).

This process, I would argue, exemplifies the kind of procedure of classification that Kosslyn attributes to the mind's eye. Certain attributes of the image are identified and information is produced, we are told how the figures are positioned and coloured. The 'shade' is being processed in a way that one might process a percept. However, the text resists the temptation to place these imagistic figures in a mental world. The shade does not plod on the ground but 'as on void'. The figure is interpreted by a mind's eye but the space it inhabits, it is made clear, is not a perceptual world but a space of the mind. The phenomenological overlap between perception and imagery is acknowledged here, but the text resists fleshing out the image.

At issue in *Worstward Ho*, then, is a kind of mental space which appears for the mind's eye but is not wholly there. I contend that a major concern in the text is with finding a vocabulary with which to discuss the apprehension of this space. In this way, Beckett seems to develop Ryle's observation that people express the difference between the mind's eye and the senses of perception 'by writing that, they see trees and hear music', but only 'see' and 'hear' images. To repeat the dilemma that was encountered in Ryle: in order to describe a process in which one seems to see without really seeing, one has to seem to say one has seen without really saying it. Beckett, I would argue, goes further than Ryle in attempting to construct a vocabulary with which to negotiate this dilemma. This begins with the assertion that the bodies and places that are invoked in the text are not wholly there: 'Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in' (Beckett 2009a, 81). We are given the image of a body but this body is no



sooner evoked than negated. We are required, almost simultaneously, to both construct it and be aware that it is not really there. It might be argued, that this procedure does something similar to the inverted commas that Ryle observes in common language. In Ryle, as in Beckett, there is a concern with the process of saying that something is being seen while also saying that it is not there.

But *Worstward Ho* goes a step further than this. There is an attempt to re-appropriate the word 'see' itself so that, when one encounters it within the text, it is clear that a particular type of seeing is being described. We are in effect told how to read the verb 'to see': 'See for be seen. Misseen. From now see for be misseen' (84). I want to finish this chapter with an attempt to unpack this fairly difficult concept. By this point in the text, it has been made clear that all the shades are being seen but this seeing is not an act of perception. Instead the shades are apprehended in the stare of a head sunk on crippled hands. However, because the things that this entity sees exist within its own stare, when it sees it is also always seeing itself; being seen. The things that it 'sees' do not exist as external entities, but merely as internal shades. It is seeing things that are not there. As Sartre puts it in *The Imagination*, the scene in question 'does not exist *in fact*; it exists *as imaged*' (Sartre 2012, 4, emphasis in original). The text effectively tries to create a system in which a mental image cannot be read as a percept, even though the two phenomena may share many qualities. *Worstward Ho*, then, may well be read as an attempt to find a vocabulary that acknowledges the phenomenological overlap between imagery and perception while maintaining the ontological distinction. Thus, we might characterise *III Seen III Said* and *Worstward Ho* as differing approaches to a similar topic. Each I would argue investigates the distinction between the eye of the mind and the eye of the flesh, seeing and 'seeing'. However, where *III Seen III Said* investigates a movement in which these entities blur into one another, *Worstward Ho* pursues a language that would serve to maintain the distinction between the percept and the image.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have placed Beckett's interest in the relationship between percept and image within a theoretical and also an aesthetic tradition. Beckett, I have argued, is interested in finding a vocabulary with which to differentiate things that are imagined from things that are perceived, but he is also interested in how a representation that is portrayed as 'percept' affects us differently to one that is portrayed as 'image'. This is perhaps best exemplified in the description of the second shade:

Hand in hand with equal plod they go. In the free hands – no. Free empty hands. Backs turned both bowed with equal plod they go. The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held. Plod on and never recede. Backs turned. Both bowed. Joined by held holding hands. Plod on as one. One shade. Another shade (Beckett 2009a, 84).

I have read this as a description of an image but it also, of course, seems to represent a moment of intersubjective intimacy. The child expresses the need for the other by holding the old man's hand and this is reciprocated by the old man's holding onto the child's hand. This makes it hard to disagree with Alain Badiou's observation that there is a 'muted emotion' and 'a powerful and abstract tenderness' in the passage (Badiou 2003, 104). Crucial here is the point that the emotion perceived by Badiou is 'muted' and the powerful tenderness is 'abstract'. What is apprehended makes Badiou feel strongly but the thing he feels is not wholly there. This, I would argue, is down to the notion that what is being seen is, in fact, being misseen as an image, or shade. The intimacy is an image occurring in the stare of a skull (whose 'crippled hands' may be deemed to indicate an incapacity for this intimacy). The scene is described to be both there and not there, and so are the feelings that are derived from it. Beyond the theoretical difference between percept and image, Beckett is interested in a realm of affective indeterminacy: the vivid but faint feelings that exist in between imagery and perception.

## Chapter 6

### Isolation and Imagery in *Company*

A common myth to accrue around the life of Samuel Beckett, James Knowlson writes, is ‘that he was a latter-day hermit living a reclusive life in his seventh floor apartment on the boulevard Saint-Jacques in Paris’ (Knowlson 2003, 1). This myth, by Knowlson’s account, has an element of truth to it. He notes that Beckett ‘certainly loved silence, solitude and peace’, and ‘detested intrusions into his private life’ (1-3). On the whole, however, Knowlson portrays Beckett as a fairly outward-facing character with many close friends, a strong interest in the politics of his time, and a tendency to become ‘totally engrossed’ in sports broadcasting (1-35). What does seem clear from Knowlson’s portrait, though, is the extent which Beckett recognised ‘silence and solitude’ to be ‘vital for his writing’ (1). But exactly how did Beckett’s writing make use of solitude? Was it simply the case that Beckett, like many of us, needed peace and quiet in order to work productively? Or, was there something in the nature of Beckett’s work which made ‘silence, solitude and peace’ particularly important? In this chapter, I want to approach this question through a consideration of the concept of isolation and, in particular, how isolation is linked to mental imagery, hallucinatory experience and the creative imagination.

Over the last two chapters, we have frequently seen the extent to which Beckett’s later work is populated by moments where mental images seem to arise for individuals as they rest alone in darkness or gloom. In chapter 4, through a reading of *Nacht und Träume*, I suggested that this motif might be seen in a Romantic, but also a scientific context. On the one hand, I argued that these instances could be seen as moments of revelation or aesthetic inspiration, but, on the other, there was often the sense of a stimulus-response experiment – a sense that Beckett’s protagonists were simply responding to a particular set of psychophysiological conditions. This chapter will develop this observation by arguing that Beckett’s work operates in between two approaches to the concept of isolation that became prominent in twentieth-century culture: an empirical approach in which isolation is conceived as a stimulus, or instrument, that is likely to affect the human in certain, measurable ways; and a

phenomenological approach in which isolation is a condition that might facilitate unpredictable and extraordinary experiences and states of being. Focusing on the 1964 novel *How It Is* and *Company*, I will suggest that Beckett produced prose experiments that challenge readers to hold both approaches simultaneously. In Beckett's writing, I will suggest, isolation is both a site of inspiration and an affective, often distressing psychophysiological environment. The chapter will begin with a summary of the existing critical discourse on the role of isolation in Beckett's work. Then, reading Beckett's prose alongside the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a range of scientific investigations of isolation, I will put forward my own view of Beckett's aesthetics of isolation. Finally, I will consider the wider ethical and political implications of Beckett's use of isolation, questioning what kind of knowledge might be drawn from Beckett's experiments, and how this knowledge might be put to use.

### **The Isolated Artist**

It would be difficult to overstate the prominence of isolation in Beckett's writing. One encounters in Beckett's work both examples of physical isolation – a succession of figures positioned alone in rooms or cells – and a rhetoric of spiritual isolation or solitude in which it is commonly pronounced that intersubjective communication is illusory and every human is ultimately alone.<sup>91</sup> As Shane Weller puts it, 'Beckett's oeuvre is arguably governed from first to last by a belief in the radical isolation of the individual' (Weller 2009, 34). This concern with isolation seems closely linked to Beckett's view of the artist. Art, Beckett argues in *Proust*, 'is the apotheosis of solitude' and the 'artistic tendency is not expansive but a contraction' (Beckett 1999, 64). The artist, in much of Beckett's writing seems defined by a capacity to embrace isolation and explore what he calls, in his 1954 homage to the painter Jack B. Yeats, 'this inner real where phantoms quick and dead, nature and void, all that ever and never will be, join in a single evidence for a single testimony' (Beckett 1983, 149). Beckett, then, certainly seemed to value the artist's attempt to explore

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<sup>91</sup> A view put forward most overtly in Beckett's interpretation of Proust: 'We are alone. We cannot know. We cannot be known' (Beckett 1999, 66)

'inner' realities over the capacity to communicate with clarity, or analyse social relations. But, at the same time, radical isolation is often seen as an affliction in Beckett's work. In *Proust*, for example, he speaks of an 'irremediable solitude to which every human being is condemned' (63). And in *The Unnamable* solitude is described as something that the narrator did not choose but has been given and has 'to make the best of' (Beckett 2009d, 389). For Beckett, then, isolation seems to function as an undesirable condition 'to which we are condemned', but also a situation which the artist must accept and explore.

This complex attitude towards solitude and isolation has prompted a significant amount of critical debate. For some, Beckett's emphasis on radical isolation has been taken to support the view that he was an individualistic – even solipsistic – writer. Here, Beckett is easily incorporated into a literary-historical narrative that emphasises the unsociable, inward-looking nature of literary modernism. As Dirk Van Hulle recognises, there is a common account of literary history which opposes the 'inward-facing' modernism of writers such as Beckett, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf with the observational realist writers of the nineteenth century. In Van Hulle's terms, 'whereas the realist writers were said to concentrate on the external world, the modernist project was often presented as an attempt to "enter" the characters' minds' through artistic techniques such as the interior monologue or the stream of consciousness (Van Hulle 2014, 1-2). Though – as Van Hulle does – we might challenge this version of literary history, it certainly manifests in the critical history of Beckett's work. George Lukács, for example, draws a distinction between modernist or avant-garde writers such as Joyce and Beckett, for whom isolation is a universal condition, and a 'realistic literature' in which man is a social animal and 'solitariness is a specific social fare' (Lukács 1963, 17-26). Furthermore, beyond the version of humanity that modernist writers represent, there is a question of modernism's relationship to the reading audience and the literary market place. There is a familiar (though again frequently disputed)<sup>92</sup> argument that the nineteenth-century novelists were much more embedded in the business of literature than the modernists. As Lawrence Rainey suggests, for

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<sup>92</sup> Rainey argues, for example, that 'Anglo-American literary modernism was unusual in the degree to which its principal protagonists interacted with one another through shared institutional structures', and that the movement's 'interchanges with the emerging world of consumerism, fashion, and display were far more complicated than often assumed' (Rainey 1998, 7).

some 'hostility to mass culture' is the 'salient characteristic' of modernism, whereas nineteenth-century writers such as Dickens are seen to have held a degree of confidence 'about the beneficent effects of literature's dependency on "the people"' (Rainey 1998, 1-2). To adapt a distinction made by Pierre Bourdieu, modernism is frequently associated with the 'charismatic image of artistic activity as pure, disinterested creation by an isolated artist', where the writing of the naturalist novelists is seen to be more heavily concerned with audience (Bourdieu 1993, 34).

But even arguments that draw a distinction between Beckett's writing and that of earlier modernists seem to emphasise the solipsistic nature of Beckett's work. This is observable in Martha Nussbaum's critique. In Nussbaum's account, Beckett projects voices that 'express isolation and despair', and are 'intolerant of society and of shared forms of thought and feeling' (Nussbaum 1988, 226; 252). The solipsism of Beckett's literary voice, Nussbaum argues:

is so total that we get no sense of the distinctive shape of any other lives in this world. An implicit claim is made by these voices to be the whole world, to be telling the way the world is as they tell about themselves' (250).

For Nussbaum, though, this characteristic of Beckett's work is not typically modernist; she contrasts the solipsism of Beckett's work with other writers that are often thought of as modernist (or proto-modernist) such as Henry James or Virginia Woolf' (250). These novelists, she suggests, may present voices that express the same sentiments as Beckett's narrators but their works cannot be reduced to these voices, as Beckett's can. For Nussbaum, 'not all persuasive voices speak Moran's [a narrator of *Molloy*] language' and Beckett's work is deficient for its incapacity to find other persuasive voices (250). Beckett's artistic explorations of the 'inner real' are seen to lose touch with the fact that other realities exist.

Nussbaum seems to suggest that Beckett's emphasis on solitariness is rooted in a desire to escape worldly activity and the influence of society. Here, as Russell Smith points out, Nussbaum's critique of Beckett 'seems constrained by her demand for straightforwardly realistic treatment of ethical material' (Smith 2009, 1). She suggests, for example, that Beckett's works present 'an absence of human activity that seems foreign to our experience of emotional

development' (Nussbaum 1988, 250). For Nussbaum, the seeming inactivity and isolation of Beckett's protagonists – the fact that they are rarely seen to partake in recognisable social situations – gives the sense that all worldly activity is unimportant.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, she argues that Beckett's work shows a loathing of 'social construction' and 'the whole idea that a group can tell me who and what I am to be and to feel' (Nussbaum 1988, 251). This loathing, she contends, is rooted 'in a longing for the pure soul, hard as a diamond, individual and indivisible, coming forth from its maker's hand with its identity already stamped upon it' (252).<sup>94</sup> In this account, Beckett's use of isolation is rooted in a desire to endow his voices with pure individuality by detaching them from the pollutants of social construction.

Now, as commentators such as James Knowlson (1996), James McNaughton (2009) and Mark Nixon (2011) have noted, Beckett undoubtedly showed a strong distaste for the rigid social systems and propaganda that he encountered in Nazi-occupied Europe (and to some extent the Ireland of his youth). In light of this, it would not be surprising if his work showed a degree of wariness regarding 'social construction'. However, Nussbaum's jump from recognising this wariness to the contention that Beckett's work longs for the 'pure', 'indivisible' isolated soul is a large one. Obviously, Nussbaum's critique was written before the publication of Knowlson's biography (and then Beckett's own correspondence), and so fails to address the discrepancy between the unsociability of Beckett's protagonists and the author's own substantial engagement in society. But Nussbaum also seems to ignore the element in Beckett's work which portrays isolation, not as a condition to be strived for, but one 'to which we are condemned'. Another body of criticism, though, has registered the degree to which isolation is an affliction in Beckett's work and argued that this aspect reveals a more sociable and political Beckett. This line of criticism arguably begins with Theodor Adorno (1991), but has continued in

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<sup>93</sup> This absence of activity affirms Nussbaum's idea that there is a 'deeply religious sensibility' in Beckett's work 'for we have at all times the sense that mere human beings are powerless to make, on account of the fact that there is something very much more powerful in this universe that does all the making' (251). This view is hard to accept. It seems to suggest that Beckett's failure to represent social activity in a novel implies the belief that all worldly activity is pre-determined by a higher being and therefore unimportant.

<sup>94</sup> Another important point, here, is the influence of James Joyce who, Beckett said, made him 'realize artistic integrity' (Bair 1990, 73). In a sense Nussbaum seems to adjudge Beckett's unsociable narrators to work in the tradition of the Joycean artist – the classic example being Stephen Dedalus, who tries to 'fly by' the nets that the society of Ireland flings at 'the soul of a man' (Joyce 2000, 171).

more recent discussions by Terry Eagleton (2006) and David Lloyd (2011). For these critics, the isolation that we find in Beckett is historically particular; it is a symptom of modernity rather than a necessary condition of human existence. In Lloyd's reading, for example, Beckett's erosion of human relations does not reflect a timeless "'human condition" in the face of which ironic resignation is enough', but instead registers and castigates a modernity which has reduced the human subject to the extremes of deprivation (Lloyd 2011, 215). Weller finds in this line of criticism 'an attempt to deliver up a Beckett whose politics might be endorsed by those on the Left and, in particular, those who consider not only totalitarianism but also capitalism to be responsible' for suffering which might have been avoided (Weller 2009, 33). Here, he also glosses the argument (made by critics such as H. Porter Abbott) that the 'political charge' of Beckett's work is countered by a metaphysical or ontological one – that Beckett's protests against the wrongs of society are overridden by the sense that there is something wrong with the universe as a whole (34). What we might infer from this critical debate, then, is an idea of the ambivalent role that isolation plays in Beckett's work. As Mark Nixon recognises, a question Beckett frequently asked himself when travelling was that of whether he was making a journey from or a journey to – an escape or a pursuit (Nixon 2011, 223). With regards to isolation, he seems to have been interested in both the inward and the outward journey. On the one hand, Beckett seems interested in exploring the isolated condition but, on the other, Beckett's use of isolation might betray a desire to escape a more-or-less unsatisfactory society.

What one might also detect in the critical debate surrounding Beckett's use of isolation is a distinction between physical or phenomenological, and social or spiritual isolation – that is between being unable to sense and register others and the outside world, and being unable to truly relate to, or *be with*, them/it. But I would suggest that Beckett is interested in the overlap between these different types of isolation. So much is evident in *Molloy* as the protagonist questions how he reached old age:

Thanks to moral qualities? Hygienic habits? Fresh air? Starvation? Lack of sleep? Solitude? Persecution? The long silent screams (dangerous to scream)? The daily longing for the earth to swallow me up? Come, come. Fate is rancorous but not to that extent (Beckett 2009d, 75).



'Solitude', here, seems to connect what we might call physical deprivation ('starvation'; 'lack of sleep') and social and metaphysical 'persecution'. Like starvation, the narrator seems to speculate, solitude might have a (positive?) physiological affect, but it is also linked to existence in a world in which 'fate is rancorous' and it is 'dangerous to scream'. Alys Moody picks up on this theme in her discussion of hunger in Beckett's post-war work. For Moody, these works present starving characters that are 'in the process of moving into themselves and out of history' (Moody 2012, 272). In this way, hunger is seen as part of a move towards physical isolation (272). However, Moody continues, 'insofar as the character's isolation springs from their starvation, it is already inscribed with unavoidable historical echoes' of rationing in war-time France and the famines and hunger strikes of Irish history (272). Beckett's characters are seen to move towards starvation and physical isolation but, for Moody, this move is always a 'nod to history' and sociability. Thus, within Beckett's texts, a particular protagonist's physical isolation is never proof of an inward turn on the part of the writer. Instead, there is a constant twist of orientation. Moody summarises: 'starvation in Beckett promises hermeticism but feeds back into history, only to deny its own historicity' (272). Isolation, then, seemed to offer artistic and phenomenological possibilities for Beckett, but his interest in isolation should not be detached from social and metaphysical dissatisfaction.

### **The Phenomenology of Isolation**

From his homage to Jack B. Yeats (discussed above) it seems that Beckett valued isolation insofar as it enabled the artist to occupy a realm in which a series of seeming opposites ('quick and dead, nature and void, all that ever and never will be') combine in a 'single testimony'. There is the sense that, in isolation, one does not have to categorise experience and make clear distinctions between what is alive and what is dead; what is outside and what is inside; what is real and unreal. Isolation seems to enable a study of the nature of conscious experience that resists falling into a dualistic pattern of thought. Dirk Van Hulle picks up on this in his discussion of Beckett's relationship with Cartesian and post-Cartesian models of mind. In early works such as *Murphy*, Van Hulle argues, Beckett can be seen to critically engage with – and parody –

'a Cartesian model of the mind as an interior space' (Van Hulle 2014, 188-9). However, it is Van Hulle's contention that, from the 1940s onwards, Beckett began to explore 'an alternative model of the mind in terms of a mingling of "inside" and "outside"' (203). In this respect he reads Beckett within a wider post-Cartesian movement that takes in Daniel Dennett's 'multiple drafts' theory and the more recent notion of an 'extended mind' (198-206). This process, he argues, can be seen to develop through the genesis of *The Unnamable* but is more fully incorporated into the structure of the later texts (206). To exemplify this, he cites the late prose text 'Ceiling' (1981) which, in Van Hulle's reading, describes: 'a *gradual* transition from an unconscious condition to a state of consciousness through a series of paragraphs that differ slightly from each other, but also show several corresponding elements' (206, emphasis in original). What is crucial about this text, for Van Hulle, is the way in which Beckett "extends" the mind by making neural processes interact with an external element' (206). Beckett is able to produce a 'patient study of the dimly conscious mind', Van Hulle argues, by showing the way in which the environment of a white ceiling plays an 'active role in driving the cognitive process of coming to' (207). In this process, he suggests, 'the mind is not some "inside" separated from an "outside" but an interaction between – for instance – a bed ridden organism and the ceiling above' (207). Consciousness is portrayed as a 'constant process' which is stably located in neither neural processes nor external elements, but formed out of an interaction between both (207).

Van Hulle's reading is, to my mind, very persuasive but it does raise a question. He notes that the external environment in 'Ceiling' plays an active role in driving cognition in spite of the fact that it is 'deliberately reduced to just a ceiling' (207). But if Beckett is so interested in the external environment's capacity to drive cognition, why does he make this deliberate reduction? Why is he concerned with the interaction between a bed-ridden organism and a white ceiling and not, for example, a lawyer and a busy courtroom? This returns us to my original question of why 'silence, solitude and peace' were so fundamental to Beckett's work. In the case of 'Ceiling', Van Hulle seems to suggest that the choice of a dull white ceiling may be related to Beckett's vocation as a writer, on account of the impression that it is 'easily translated into the dull white of the paper' (207). This explanation opens up some interesting possibilities – which

Van Hulle explores in the context of Beckett's final piece of writing 'what is the word' (1989) – but it does not account for the prominence of physical isolation across the oeuvre. For my part, I would suggest that the isolated setting of works such as 'Ceiling' is crucial because it does not demand an active response from the 'bed ridden organism'. If the ceiling were replaced by, for example, the angry face of another, or a scream, this patient study of consciousness would not be possible as one would be forced to classify the stimulus and act accordingly. As it is though, the narrator is able to make a kind of phenomenological reduction in which the ceiling is allowed to remain a 'dull white' which hovers between void and nature, the internal and the external.

However, though he often presents environments in which the human individual is exposed to minimal sensory input, Beckett's protagonists frequently encounter phenomena that are more lively than the dull white of a ceiling. For an example of this, we might return to the voice that 'comes to one in the dark' in *Company* (Beckett 2009a, 3). As discussed in the last chapter, this voice may be deemed internal or external, image or percept, and in this way it can be seen to explore the questions of internality and externality that we have seen in 'Ceiling'. But the voice is, of course, distinct from the 'dull white' in that its externality seems to imply the presence of another subject in the dark with the protagonist. In *Company*, though, the protagonist does not simply judge that the voice belongs to someone else – that he is being spoken to by another. Instead, he speculates, the voice might be speaking to another that is in his vicinity:

He cannot but sometimes wonder if it is indeed to and of him that the voice is speaking. May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking? Is he not perhaps overhearing a communication not intended for him (4)?

Crucial, here, is the idea that the voice does not simply belong to another individual. Rather it has its own particular 'traits', and its own motives for speaking. The voice, to give some examples, comes to the protagonist 'now from one quarter and now from another'; 'another trait' is its 'repetitiousness'; and it also sheds a 'faint light' when it speaks (8-11). Furthermore, in terms of motive, the protagonist speculates that the voice might be trying to 'kindle in his mind' a faint uncertainty, or 'plague' him with 'mere sound' (4-5). The voice,

then, is not simply the expression of another's presence; it is itself experienced as a presence out in the world.

Given that the protagonist's encounter with the voice does not follow what one might call the ordinary rules of perception, it is tempting to suggest that *Company* portrays a kind of hallucinatory experience. Making this assessment, though, requires us to further define the phenomenology of hallucination. Now, a number of twentieth-century phenomenological philosophers would consider hallucinatory experience. As we saw in the last chapter, Sartre considers hallucinations and hypnagogic images in *The Imaginary*. But for a fuller account we might turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). With regards to hallucinatory experience, 'the all-important point', Merleau-Ponty suggests, 'is that the patients, most of the time, discriminate between their hallucinations and their perceptions' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 389). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, it is too simplistic to say that to hallucinate is to mistake image for percept, fantasy for reality. Rather, one needs to study the hallucination as an experience that has its own particular traits or qualities. The hallucination, then, might be seen to exist on a level that is distinct from the image or the percept. 'Hallucinations', Merleau-Ponty argues, 'are played out on a stage different from that of the perceived world, and are in a way superimposed' (395). Thus the hallucination can follow its own rules. Merleau-Ponty cites instances in which individuals have the impression of constantly 'being seen naked from behind', or 'seeing simultaneously in all directions' (396). These observations certainly resonate with the extraordinary 'traits' that are attributed to the voice encountered in *Company*: for instance, the voice's mysterious capacity to 'change place and tone' in the 'course of a single sentence' (Beckett 2009a, 9). As in Merleau-Ponty's account of the hallucination, *Company*'s voice might be seen to play out on a stage different from that of the perceived world'. But what Beckett seems to be interrogating in *Company* is our capacity to tolerate the voice as an existent on this stage. The opening line of the work gives out the imperative to 'imagine' the voice as it comes to one in the dark; the text seems to require its reader to imaginatively experience this voice (3). Rather than dwelling on the ways in which the voice *is not* a perception, the text asks us to focus on what it *is*.

Beckett, then, often seems to use isolated environments in order to explore realms of experience that do not fit neatly into either the perceptual or the imagistic. Because of this I want to suggest that his work might be seen within a line of twentieth-century thought that includes phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, but also – slightly unconventional – experimental scientists such as John C. Lilly. Though perhaps best known for his research on human-dolphin communication, Lilly is notable for his development of the ‘tank isolation’ technique (TI) in the 1950s. This technique (now commonly used for both therapeutic and recreational purposes) saw individuals inhabit a darkened, sound-proof tank which was filled with a solution of Epsom salts and water, allowing ‘the body to float supine, with head, arms, legs and trunk at the surface’ (Lilly 1977, 17). Put simply, the method attempted to isolate the individual’s body, as far as possible, from the stimulations of external reality. The aim of this bodily relaxation, for Lilly, was a kind of mental exploration. To paraphrase *Murphy*, the body was brought into an abeyant state, ‘so that the mind might move’ (Beckett 2009c, 71). In this state of physical isolation, or relaxation, individuals commonly report unusual pseudo-sensory experience. In the case of vision, Lilly states that one might go ‘into a completely blacked out space’ in order ‘to be free of all light stimulation’, but this does not completely isolate ‘the observer from “the light”’ (Lilly 1977, 34). One is still likely to see light even when it is not there. This, he reasons, is because:

There are persisting central process visual activities all one has to do is open one’s eyes in the dark and look. Immediately one sees peculiar cloudlike phenomena, or one may see points of light, flashes of lightning etcetera, depending on one’s present state (34).

This phenomenon can be very vivid. Lilly notes that ‘in special states of being [...] one can begin to see light levels comparable to a well-lighted room’ (35). This type of experience, he continues, ‘is commonly called “hallucination”’ but Lilly is wary of this term. By Lilly’s account, ‘visual displays’ such as these ‘are what one actually sees when in a well-lighted room’; it is merely that most individuals are ‘not used to’ the ‘natural process’ by which ‘one’s biocomputer’<sup>95</sup> produces these displays in complete darkness (35). For Lilly, then, one never

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<sup>95</sup> The ‘biocomputer’ is the name Lilly gives to the network of systems and processes that give rise to one’s experience.

sees an unmediated external reality but merely a 'visual display' which is derived from external and internal sources. Thus, the illuminated scene one sees in the darkness of the isolation tank may be derived from mainly internal sources but that does not make the visual experience any less real.

Sound, for Lilly, works in a very similar way. Even in isolation, he argues, 'the acoustic sphere is found to be filled with information from one's own biocomputer' (37). In Lilly's view, then, sounds and voices can derive not only from external sources, but also central processes. This idea that one still gets the experience of sensory stimulation, even when objectively deprived of it, resonates with Beckett's portrayals of physical isolation. Ulrika Maude observes that, even as Beckett's characters 'endeavour to cut themselves off from sensory experience', they continue to 'interact with their surroundings, or to create phantom landscapes with which to interact' (Maude 2009, 46). It might be suggested that this process plays out in *Company* as the narrator speculates about the emergence of sounds:

The odd sound. What a mercy to have that to turn to. Now and then. In dark and silence to close as if to light the eyes and hear a sound. Some object moving from its place to its last place. Some soft thing softly stirring soon to stir no more (Beckett 2009a, 11).

The protagonist, then, seems to hear vague sounds in his state of isolation and this phenomenon is also noted in Lilly's experiments. Lilly argues that, 'in isolation, some people hear very high-pitched whistles, others hear popping sounds like bacon frying or rumblings, hissings, and so on' (Lilly 1977, 37). Again, Lilly does not say that these sounds are not really heard, but merely that they inhabit an individual's '*sonic display*' (Lilly 1977, 37, emphasis in original). For Lilly, though, the fullest experience of the isolation tank comes when one ceases to question what is (or is not) *out there* and begins to focus purely on the phenomena itself (279-80). Again, isolation is seen to enable a kind of phenomenological reduction in which one moves beyond questions of internality and externality.

Crucial about the sounds that are described in the text of *Company*, though, is the sense that they are not quite heard. They seem to exist between presence and absence. This is evident in the fabric of the text. The clipped style of the prose means that one has to fill in words in order to determine what tense

is being used. When talking about the sounds, the narrator might be interpreted to use a clipped version of the future unreal conditional. One might read it as follows: 'What a mercy *it would be* to have the odd sound to turn to'. In this reading the sounds are not (and have never been) heard but the narrator is speculating about what their effect on the hearer would be. Alternatively, one might interpret the sentence as being written in the present or past tense, which would imply that the sounds are being (or have been) heard: 'What a mercy *it is/was* to have the odd sound to turn to'. This flickering between presence and absence is also observable in the description of the sounds themselves – 'softly stirring soon to stir no more'. The sounds described in the text become difficult for the reader to categorise.

Here, then, the peculiarly textual nature of Beckett's experiment with isolation becomes apparent. As a work of fiction, *Company* never presents us directly with sounds and voices, only 'sounds' and 'voices' – words on a page that have to be read, interpreted, and represented in the reader's consciousness. Beckett's experiment, I would argue, is not only concerned with the protagonist's experience of isolation, but also the process by which the reader represents it: the way in which the words of the text are 'heard' in the reader's inner real and how the phenomena described in the text are imagined. Thus a distinction must be drawn between Beckett's experiments and those of Lilly. For Lilly, the crucial moments of experimentation occur within the isolation tank. These situations, he suggests, allow one to enter new 'domains of feeling/thinking/emoting' (Lilly 1977, 70). Acts of writing, in this account, can only attempt to represent the experiences; they are not, themselves, a part of the experiment. Writing, though, is much more crucial to the Beckettian experiment on isolation. In *Company*, the protagonist's experience of physical isolation is formed through an interaction between text and reader. The character is only isolated insofar as one imagines this state of isolation. Thus, even as Beckett's text enacts a kind of isolation experiment, his experimentation is fundamentally sociable. It depends on a text and a reader combining to produce a particular type of imaginative experience. Beckett's prose, then, is a medium through which we might explore the novel phenomena that derive from physical isolation, but we do not experience isolation in Beckett's text. Rather,

isolated experience in *Company* is something that needs to be explored imaginatively.

Another point of contrast between Beckett's literary experiments and the experiments of Lilly seems to reside in the extent to which each author embraces isolation, and endows it with the potential to bring about self-revelation. In the case of Lilly, isolation seems to be a state of being that, if fully embraced, offers up stark self-revelatory potential. For Lilly, isolation allows one to move past the 'dichotomized situations', in which one is occupied with questions of internality and externality, and penetrate into 'deeper levels' of consciousness (279). In these deep states of isolation, Lilly argues, 'thought and feeling take over the spaces formerly occupied by external reality' and 'one's basic needs and one's assumptions about self become evident' (280). To an extent, this idea of an isolation in which one penetrates 'deeper levels' of the self resonates with the rhetoric of the early Beckett, for whom 'the only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth' (Beckett 1999, 64). However, there is a distinction to be made between the early and the later Beckett here. Where Lilly is – in an almost Romantic way – continually interested in the possibility that isolation might allow 'further penetration' to deeper levels of consciousness, the isolation of *Company* is, in Steven Connor's terms, much more 'material or finite' (Connor 2014, 8). The seemingly isolated figures of Beckett's writing (and any other aesthetic work) are ultimately never alone; they have to be continually imagined, perceived or observed by authors, readers and viewers. Where Lilly writes of isolation as a 'special mental state' which, 'to be appreciated must be experienced directly', Beckett's isolation is always grounded by questions of what can be imagined and communicated (Lilly 1977, 280). Though an aesthetic of isolation may have held self-revelatory potential for Beckett,<sup>96</sup> self-revelation was clearly not the only aim of Beckett's writing. To paraphrase Bordieu, Lilly's experiments with isolation are closely connected to the charismatic image of disinterested exploration, whereas Beckett's are always working with conceptions of an imagining audience.

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<sup>96</sup> An idea supported by the semi-autobiographical detail that is included in *Company*. James Knowlson writes: '*Company* comes closer to autobiography than anything Beckett had written since *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*' (Knowlson 1996, 651).



## The Isolation Instrument

There is, however, another side to Beckett's experiments with isolation. The solitary figures in Beckett's writing are rarely just phenomenological explorers; they are often also portrayed as vulnerable bodies being exposed to the psychophysiological effects of isolation. Perhaps the most striking example of isolation playing this double-headed role can be found in part one of *How It Is*. The opening of the novel presents us with an individual, the narrator, who recalls inhabiting a dark, muddy environment with nothing for company but a coal sack which holds some tins. The narrator summarises this environment as follows: 'the sack the tins the mud the dark the silence the solitude' (Beckett 2009b, 4). In this isolated environment, we are told, a few 'images' of another life flicker 'on an off' (4). These images, the narrator suggests, are somehow linked to the life he led before entering the mud and the dark, but he tends to describe them as images rather than memories: 'I haven't been given memories this time it was an image' (7). These images are described to give a kind of aesthetic pleasure. One, for example, is described as 'a fine image fine I mean in movement and colour blue and white of clouds in the wind' (21). And another seems to portray an idyllic scene in which a teenage figure (who the narrator perceives to be his younger self) walks hand in hand with a girl and a dog in 'glorious weather' (23). These images tend to appear suddenly without the narrator's intending to produce them and, in this sense, Beckett seems to be presenting mysterious moments of aesthetic inspiration. However, as was the case in *Nacht und Träume*, the materiality of this process of image production is consistently emphasised. First, apprehension of the 'fine image' is linked to the position of the narrator's body: the image is seen to be triggered by the narrator's lying face down in the mud with his tongue lolling out (21). Second, the narrator sometimes describes pissing and shitting images out (5). And, third, the images seem to appear and disappear in a way that frequently recalls lighting technology: one of the images, for example 'goes out like a lamp blown out' (11). Again, the Beckettian image may be linked to a kind of Romantic inspiration, but it is also represented as a fundamentally material response to a particular set of conditions.

In *How It Is*, though, things are complicated further. The structure of the work means that it is difficult to read the drama of image production that is described in part one without reference to the events of parts two and three. At the beginning of the text, we are told that the narrator will describe three states – ‘before Pim with Pim after Pim’ – and *How It is* forms around these three states of being (3). The narrator is isolated in the first part but in the second part he will have the company of Pim – though in the final part of the novel the narrator recants his story and states that he has always been alone.<sup>97</sup> Thus the story of solitude described in part one is influenced by what was to come after it: the narrator’s encounter with Pim. Much critical discussion of the text has focused on what the narrator does with Pim, and what he does is administer a kind of ‘training’ that aims at making Pim ‘speak’ and ‘sing’ (59). When the narrator finds Pim he is lying ‘dumb limp lump flat’ in the mud but the narrator makes it his aim to ‘quicken him’ by teaching Pim to perform certain tasks when exposed to a selection of painful stimuli (44):

Table of basic stimuli one sing nails in armpit two speak blade in arse  
three stop thump on skull four louder pestle on kidney

five softer index in anus six bravo clap athwart arse seven lousy same  
as three eight encore same as one or two as may be (59).

Various commentators have recognised the link between this process of training and the systematic methods of interrogation and torture that were deployed by a number of countries in the twentieth century and after. David Lloyd suggests that Beckett would have heard about many instances of violent interrogation during his lifetime and, for Lloyd, this context partly accounts for the ‘prominent place assumed by scenarios of interrogation, incarceration and even of torture’ in Beckett’s oeuvre (Lloyd 2011, 198). More particularly, Adam Piette has recently shown the degree to which stories of French soldiers administering torture during the Algerian war are likely to have framed the genesis of *How It Is* (Piette 2016b, 151-3). Here, Beckett’s writing is seen to confront a wide range of political and ethical questions but it seems hard to deny that the narrator’s training of Pim is also informed by certain methods of psychological experimentation. The narrator seems to be interrogating Pim – trying to get

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<sup>97</sup>‘only me in any case yes in the mud yes the dark yes that hold yes’ (Beckett 2009b, 128)

words out of him – but he is also mapping his responses to a ‘table of basic stimuli’.

Given the events of the late twentieth and early twenty first century the link Beckett seems to draw between violent interrogation and psychological experimentation is very suggestive. As I touched upon in the last chapter, there was a strong connection between post-Second World War methods of interrogation and certain branches of psychology. Various interrogation programmes are known to have drawn on a body of psychological research which studied how the human being might be broken down and made compliant by specific sets of psychophysiological conditions. This body of research is frequently traced back to the, now infamous, sensory deprivation experiments carried out by Donald Hebb at McGill University in the 1950s and 60s. Typically, these experiments involved participants ‘donning goggles, earmuffs, and mittens’, and spending ‘hours and even days in isolation’ with the effects of these conditions being constantly monitored (Raz 2013, 380). As Mical Raz notes, Hebb’s work was closely tied to Cold War security interests and the findings of sensory-deprivation research were incorporated into the CIA’s 1963 KUBARK Counter Intelligence Interrogation manual (382). Furthermore, it has been concluded that the methods laid out in the manual were put to use across the world, perhaps most infamously by the British government when interrogating suspected members of the Irish Republican Army in Ulster in 1971 (Shallice 1972, 385; Raz 2013, 387-8).<sup>98</sup> Now, I know of no evidence to suggest that Beckett was aware of the historical links between certain types of psychological experimentation and violent interrogational techniques, but for some insight we might return to Beckett’s notes on behaviourism. From his reading of Woodworth, Beckett would have been familiar with the idea (put forward most forcefully by John Broadus Watson) that, through programmatic manipulations of a human subject’s environment, the psychologist might be able to exert fundamental control over that subject. Watson, Beckett notes, made the assertion ‘that, given control of a healthy child’s environment, he could turn him into anything he chose’ (TCD MS 10971/7/10). The crucial point about this claim

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<sup>98</sup> These methods were also deployed very recently by the United States military at Guantanamo Bay (Koenig 2015).

is that Watson asserts that the psychologist can not only manipulate human action, but also determine identity – what that human *is*.

Beckett, then, was familiar with the idea that the manipulation of a subject's sensory environment could work to alter them in fundamental ways and I suggest that this way of thinking is crucial to Beckett's portrayals of subjectivity in *How It Is*. In particular it is crucial to the drama of image production that the narrator describes in part one. As noted above, the narration of the text comes in the aftermath of the narrator's training of Pim and this fact alters the status of the images that are encountered in the first part of the novel. This is because, as David Lloyd puts it, the images described in part one, 'or ones akin to them' are elicited from Pim in part two (Lloyd 2011, 201). Thus, the images of part one 'are explicitly not subjective images' but seem to be shared between subjects through a process of 'training' or sensory manipulation (201). The images, for Lloyd, 'represent not the depth of the narrator's subjective world' but fragments of another's story (205). One might question how and why these images have been shared, and the text does not map this out in any systematic way.<sup>99</sup> However, while acknowledging these ambiguities, I would argue that the text evidences Beckett's interest in the ways in which a human subject's image of their own life can be manipulated or brought into question. *How It Is* might be seen to explore the process by which a subject is broken down to the point that they have no inner reality, only 'bits and scraps' of a life that may or may not be their own (Beckett 2009b, 3).

If *How It Is* shows a slightly abstracted interest in the processes by which external phenomena or beliefs might be imposed on the human subject's sense of inner reality, a much more concrete interest was developing in other contemporaneous settings. As Raz notes, from the 1950s onwards there was a growing cultural concern (in the United States and elsewhere) with the idea that certain techniques could be used to manipulate human subjectivity. Within the Cold War context, for Raz:

Communist trials, prisoners' false confessions, and the fear of secretly turning citizens against their own country, epitomized in the 1959 classic

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<sup>99</sup> Though in part three the narrator speculates about a large system of 'nameless solitaries' who endlessly engage in the processes of torment and suffering that he has described. And posits a scribe named Kram who documents and enables this system (Beckett 2009b, 100-126).

novel, *The Manchurian Candidate*, quickly established “mind control” as a topic of public fascination. Thus, the newly coined term “brainwashing” emerged as a significant concern for military officials and the lay public as newspapers, books, and movies depicted the psychological dangers American prisoners of war faced (Raz 2013, 380-1).

Within experimental science, this cultural fascination with ideas of ‘mind control’ and ‘brainwashing’ is most clearly evidenced in Ewan Cameron’s research on ‘psychic driving’ – a technique in which a ‘therapist’ attempts to bring about changes in a ‘patient’ through the ‘continued replaying, under controlled conditions, of a cue communication’ (Cameron 1956, 703).<sup>100</sup> In effect, a human subject is exposed to a single stimulus until the message carried by that stimulus is seen to be internalised and govern their behaviour. As Cameron puts it: ‘by driving a cue statement one can, without exception, set up in the patient a persisting tendency for the cue statement’ (703). Thus the technique attempts to displace internal thoughts with external messages. Here then, in contrast to Lilly’s TI technique, the aim is not sensory isolation exactly; the subjects are exposed to a stimulus. However, Cameron theorises that, when all other stimulation is taken away, the selected stimulus will penetrate subjects and, in effect, become a part of them. This is evident when he stipulates that the cue communication should be played through headphones:

This causes the patient to experience the driving with much greater impact, the more particularly since he frequently describes it as being like a voice within his head. For instance, one patient said: “I’ve heard enough. It goes right through my head.” Another reported: “It’s too close; it’s horrible; I hear all the stuttering” (706).

There is a belief that, if presented in a certain way, a set of sensory stimuli can be used to make a human subject accept that certain external beliefs and experiences are their own.

Without suggesting that Beckett was familiar with experiments such as Cameron’s, I propose – following critics such as Adam Piette (2016a) – that we might read a number of Beckett’s prose experiments on isolation within this

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<sup>100</sup> The work was funded by the CIA through a cover organization named the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology (Raz 2013, 383).

Cold War context. Certainly the narrator's voice in *How It Is* (first 'without quaqu on all side then in me') seems to resonate with Cameron's notion of a penetrating 'cue communication' (Beckett 2009a, 3). But perhaps a more focused investigation of the penetrating, manipulative voice might be found in *Company*. As we have seen the protagonist of *Company* recognises that the voice has its own traits and intentions. There is the sense that it somehow exists *out there* and is trying, through 'repetitiousness', to penetrate the protagonist's inner reality – it wants the protagonist to accept it as his own:

Another trait its repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember (Beckett 2009a, 9).

The obvious question here is one of whether the voice is ever internalised, and the text seems to hint that it is. In the final passage of the novel, the voice seems to cease to be company and the protagonist is back in solitude. The words spoken by the voice, it seems, were not those of another but his own:

Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone (Beckett, 2009a, 42).

There is obviously a degree of equivocality here. Taking a literal reading, one might suggest that the voice is simply in the process of coming to an end. And one might also interpret this as a metafictional moment in which the events described in the text are revealed to be an author's 'fable'. But one might also suggest that the protagonist has internalised the voice. It seems hard to deny that *Company* is interested in how a voice might cease to exist as an external stimulus, and move into what the early Beckett calls the protagonist's 'inner real'.

But beyond questions of what exactly happens to a particular protagonist, Beckett's interest in *Company* seems to reside in the reader's imaginative perspective: how we encounter the events that are described in the

text. Returning to the distinction made in the 'Psychology Notes', Beckett's text produces a situation in which one is caught between a perspective that focuses on experience and a perspective that focuses on performance – what one might call a first-person and a third-person perspective. On the one hand, we are encouraged to make a phenomenological reduction and imaginatively experience a repetitious voice buzzing around us as we lie in the dark. But on the other, there is a pressure to produce a theory about what is *really* happening, analyse the protagonist's performance, and perhaps make inferences about the effects of isolation and darkness on the human organism. From the outset, the text draws attention to its use (or lack thereof) of the second, third and first person: 'Use of the second person marks the voice, That of the third that cankerous other. Could he [the protagonist] speak to and of whom there would be a first' (4). Here, we are not only given a set of rules by which to make sense of the text. Beckett is also asking a question of how we respond to the situation we read about, and experimenting on our perception of the human subject. On the one hand, readers are required to survey the situation that is described objectively, but on the other they are encouraged to imaginatively inhabit the vacant first-person perspective. Is 'he' an individual perspective encountering a specific set of phenomena, or a psychophysiological entity responding to an isolated environment?

### **Conclusion: Isolated Knowledge**

This chapter has argued that, through his prose, Beckett performs experiments on the nature of human isolation. Beckett's writing, I have suggested, is interested in how states of isolation produce moments in which internality and externality, percept and image, fantasy and reality, are seen to collapse into each other. But if Beckett's prose can be seen to work towards knowledge of isolation, how might we define this knowledge and how might it be put to use? As we have seen much of the research carried out on states of isolation in the latter part of the twentieth century was adapted for acts of violent interrogation (if not produced with these uses in mind). And from the 1970s onwards this has been a grave concern for many psychologists. Perhaps the first article to address this concern was Tim Shallice's 1972 work on the relationship between

the interrogation techniques that were used by the British government in Ulster and sensory-deprivation research. Concluding that the interrogation techniques were strongly linked to psychological research, Shallice suggests that the scientific community must evaluate sensory-deprivation research and 'see what its positive contribution has been and is likely to be' (Shallice 1972, 400).

Sensory deprivation, Shallice notes, is 'an intuitively interesting method which allows endless possibilities for variation because of its complexity', and so he can see why many would want to carry out research in the field (400). However, he questions whether methods of sensory deprivation are ever likely to produce significant theoretical gains for the wider scientific community and, given these doubts, argues that any research on the topic should be discouraged or strictly monitored (400-3). A mere interest in how the human responds to states of isolation and sensory deprivation, Shallice suggests, does not justify research that enhances the effectiveness of torture. Citing the case of the atomic bomb, Shallice argues that in some cases the 'failure to discover' is preferable to a scenario in which a discovery causes major harm (402).

Given this context, how might we frame Beckett's experiments on isolation? It seems absurd to imagine members of the CIA studying *How It Is* or *Company* and adapting the events that are described into a set of interrogation techniques.<sup>101</sup> This, one might suggest, is partly because of the overt sense of impenetrability that colours Beckett's texts (the lack of punctuation in *How It is*, for example), and partly because there is always a hint of allegory around Beckett's portrayal of isolation. Additionally, though, it is difficult to imagine Beckett's texts being put to use because of the way in which they refuse to sever the third-person from the first-person perspective. It is difficult, in Beckett's texts, to imagine the effects of isolation on a human subject without inhabiting the perspective of that subject.

Here we are faced with two ethical concerns that are frequently raised with regards to scientific experimentation. First, there is the idea that a scientist should not expose subjects to conditions that they would not be willing to experience themselves. Many of the scientists that founded methods of sensory

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<sup>101</sup> This is not to say that the CIA did not perceive a political power in literary culture. As Frances Stonor Saunders's landmark work on the 'cultural cold war' shows, the CIA funded literary culture in the hope of nudging the intelligentsia of Western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of "the American way" (Saunders 1999, 1)



deprivation and physical isolation defended the integrity of their work by pointing to their own first-hand experiences. John C. Lilly, for example, contrasts his experience-based research on 'physical isolation' with the work of those interested in 'sensory deprivation' (Lilly 1977, 65). The latter term, he argues, 'was invented by those psychologists who did not do self-investigation and who did experiments on subjects, expecting a "deprivation state" in the isolated circumstances' (65). Similarly, John Zubek, one of the most prolific researchers in the field, distanced his research from psychological torture by emphasising that he himself had spent significant amounts of time in the isolation chamber (Raz 2013, 390). The ethical defence seems to reside in a collapsing of the distinction between experimenter and subject. Zubek and Lilly encourage us to identify them not only as experimenters/torturers but also experimental subjects/victims, a notion that brings to mind Beckett's emphasis on what Adam Piette terms the 'inseparability of torturer and tortured' in works such as *How It Is* and 1983's play *What Where* (Piette 2016b, 152).<sup>102</sup> Beckett's experiments on isolation, I would argue, find an ethics in their refusal to detach the perspective of experimenter from that of the subject – the measurable effects of isolation from the question of how it feels to be alone.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is the question of how far experimenters want the knowledge produced by their experiments to be applied to other situations. Regardless of their own first-hand experiences, the experiments of Lilly and Zubek produced tangible results (techniques and data) that could be used to benefit, but also torture, human subjects. For instance, though Lilly's experiments were carried out with an emphasis on phenomenological exploration, Shallice recognises that 'if used as an interrogation technique' Lilly's method 'would be a really potent stressor' (Shallice 1972, 399). Beckett's textual experiments on isolation, by contrast, cling to a degree of intangibility. They might produce knowledge but it is a knowledge that is tightly bound to experience and one that resists being put to use. The knowledge that we might obtain from Beckett's experiments on isolation cannot be reduced to the instrumental kind; we cannot simply gather it from Beckett's texts and apply it to other situations. Rather, Beckett is producing

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<sup>102</sup> For other perspective on Beckett's refusal of the split between torturer and tortured, see Miller (2000) and Salisbury (forthcoming).

an experimental, textual environment in which an instrumental perspective is pitted against a more phenomenological one. This characteristic, I would argue, betrays Beckett's mistrust of the way in which society uses knowledge – a sense, most clearly evident in *How It Is*, that if knowledge is tangible then it will inevitably be used for harm. Shallice sees the failure to discover certain facts about the human response to isolation as ethically preferable to a scenario in which these discoveries are used to harm. Beckett, by contrast, continually investigates the effects of isolation on human subjects, but his experiments, I argue, are made ethically defensible by their intangibility – the strains they place on the imagination. Beckett's texts, then, might be seen to produce knowledge of isolation, but it is always an isolated knowledge.

## Conclusion

### Experimental Beckett

This study has sought to specify a way in which Samuel Beckett might be thought of as a scientifically experimental writer, rather than solely as a writer of the avant-garde, or one who is simply innovative. I have suggested that Beckett produced aesthetic experiments that combine with a great deal of psychological experimentation in working towards an understanding of what it is to experience and perform in the world. Here, I do not aim to exclude other accounts of Beckett's writing. In arguing for the existence of an experimental Beckett, I do not deny the existence of an innovative or avant-garde Beckett, any more than a study of Beckett the novelist denies the existence of Beckett the poet. But I do hope that this study will help to nuance critical discussions of the nature of Beckett's contribution to literature and a wider culture. The ever expanding body of criticism that surrounds Beckett's work frequently recognises that Beckett's method is 'experimental' but all too often one wonders what is meant by the term. I hope that this study will prompt more thoroughgoing definitions of what Beckett's writing does. Surely, there are times when Beckett seems to be challenging mainstream culture in a way that corresponds with the term avant-garde. And he undoubtedly produced many formal innovations that prompted re-assessments of what a play, novel or poem can look like. This study, though, has called for a distinction to be drawn between these senses of 'experimentation', and the more scientific sense in which Beckett is seen to produce meticulous studies of certain processes or phenomena.

It should also be stressed that the type of experimentation I perceive in Beckett's writing is very different from earlier versions of the literary experiment. The experimental Beckett is clearly distinct from Zola's notion of an experimental novelist, who observes social facts and imaginatively acts upon them, with the aim of obtaining scientific knowledge of an individual or society. Rather than what we might call a social-realist experimentation which seeks to represent individuals and their communities, Beckett's experiments focus on the means by which humans attempt to make sense of the world – the ruptured 'lines of communication' that he identifies in his 1934 review article 'Recent Irish

Poetry' (Beckett 1983, 70). In *Not I*, as we saw in chapter 1, this takes the form of an experiment on speech perception which interrogates the strenuous process by which we attend to, comprehend and interpret the spoken word. But Beckett's experimentation goes beyond the question of verbal communication. *That Time*, for instance, investigates how the face functions (or fails to function) as a medium through which meaning is transmitted. Crucial, here, are the concepts of attention and inattention. Working in a tradition that includes Arthur Schopenhauer, Sigmund Freud and a wide range of other experimental and therapeutic psychologists, Beckett's experiments are concerned with the human's limited capacity to perceive, register and recall sensory stimuli. Beckett draws particular attention to the spatio-temporal limits that underpin the human's capacity to attend to the world. As well as these questions of attention, Beckett also produces experiments that bring into question the human subject's capacity to distinguish between image and percept, fantasy and reality. In his later work, and particularly late prose works such as *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, Beckett can be seen to reach for a language that registers a phenomenological overlap, but also an ontological distinction, between that which is perceived in the world and that which is apprehended in the mind's eye or ear. I do not doubt that Beckett's work is consistently concerned with more traditionally literary questions regarding the construction of narratives and the production of self. But in his later work, I have argued, he takes up another related concern: the processes by which the human subject attempts to register, categorize and denominate sensory and pseudo-sensory phenomena.

This study has also repeatedly emphasised the degree to which Beckett's aesthetic experiments were grounded in the historical circumstances and discourses that surrounded him. Beckett's experiments on attention, for example, along with those of many psychologists, are closely bound up in a modernity that increasingly emphasises the human subject's capacity to efficiently perform perceptual, interpretive and emotional labour. In *That Time*, for example, we saw Beckett writing against a Stanislavskian tradition in which the human subject is expected to 'deep act' in order to manufacture a sense of spontaneity. And in chapter 3's discussion of *Footfalls* I argued that Beckett questions how the pressure to produce a story of self can distract from present experience. Similarly, the second section of this study sought to contextualise

Beckett's study of mental imagery. Chapter 5 placed Beckett's late prose within a twentieth-century context in which there was continual debate (in psychological and philosophical circles) around the relationship between perception and mental imagery. Moreover, in chapter 6, I traced a link between Beckett's interest in the disorientating psychophysiological effects of isolation, and a Cold War culture that became engrossed by ideas of manipulation and brainwashing. As well as these socio-economic and theoretical discourses, this study has also suggested that Beckett's experiments register the ethical concerns of the period in which they were produced. The concern with instances of non-seeing in *Footfalls*, for example, is closely linked to a post-Second World War culture in which there was significant concern with the failure to witness. What, it was questioned, causes human subjects to miss atrocities that one would expect them to perceive and act upon? Distraction? Traumatic Repression? Wilful denial? I argued that Beckett's experimentation wrestles with this question.

In contextualising Beckett's experiments in such a way I hope this study has offered up a new way in which to discuss the relationship between Beckett's work and works from other disciplines. Studies of Beckett's work often lean heavily on an empirical approach which places emphasis on finding out exactly what Beckett read, or a comparative perspective which merely points out resemblances between Beckett's work and that of certain philosophers or scientists. This study has made use of a great deal of the empirical work, and it has undoubtedly pointed to a number of formal resemblances. But I hope I have also shown how Beckett contributed to, and drew from, the intellectual and ethical environment of his period.

Of course Beckett's experiments are not merely concerned with a theoretical or ethical view of the human. They are, it should not be forgotten, works of art which seek to effect certain types of aesthetic pleasure. What this study's comparison between Beckett's aesthetic experiments and the discipline of experimental psychology has shown, however, is the degree to which Beckett questions whether psychological labour can produce aesthetic pleasure. As I argued in chapter 2, this question undergirds much modernist art, but the strains involved in comprehending *Not I*'s fast speech or managing one's attention in *That Time* bring it to the fore. Similarly, the later prose seems to

derive much of its power from the reader's struggle to adjudge what in the text to imagine as 'real' and what to imagine as 'imagined'. It is not merely that one has to work hard to obtain aesthetic pleasure from Beckett's aesthetic experiments; the aesthetic potency of Beckett's writing seems to reside in the human's capacity to perceive their own psychological labour and question whether it is worth, to paraphrase *The Unnamable's* frequently-quoted resolution, going on with.

In making this argument, I seem to produce a Beckett that is heavily concerned with the responses of his audience and some would dispute this account. There are, of course, many stories to suggest that Beckett was uninterested in the experiences of his audience. One thinks of Walter Asmus's recollection that, during the production of the television play *What Where*, Beckett wanted the action recorded so faintly that it would only be registered by the recording studio's advanced technology – the audience would not have been able to see anything on their television screens. Here Beckett claimed not to care what the audience would see so long as he himself felt the required effect (Asmus, Uhlmann and Denham 2013). But in spite of these sentiments, Beckett continued to put his experiments *out there* long after there was any financial necessity for him to do so – and long after he had won enough social esteem to last a lifetime. This suggests he was interested in producing experiences for others, even if he did not show any major interest in investigating these experiences. Here, it might be useful to define the level on which Beckett was interested in audience responses, and the type of knowledge that he sought to obtain from his experiments. It is clear that, through experimentation, Beckett sought to discover his own personal responses to particular sets of stimuli. And it also seems that Beckett wanted to know what kinds of psychological processes and experiences could work in an aesthetic context. But what Beckett does not do, at least in any programmatic way, is collect data from his audiences in order to make generalised conclusions about the processes and experiences with which he is evidently concerned. Beckett, then, produced a large number of aesthetic experiments but their interpretation is left largely, as he wrote in a letter to Alan Schneider: 'for those bastards of critics' (Harmon 1998, 24).

In a recent discussion of the relationship between scientific and poetic experimentation conducted with neuroscientist Sophie Scott, the poet James Wilkes argues that, in poetic experimentation, the experiment and the data 'are joined together' (Wilkes and Scott 2016, 333). Where in science one performs an experiment and obtains results which then have to be interpreted, the poet's results, in Wilkes's view, 'are the experiment': 'anything that people find out about the possibilities for literature or for lived experience is known in the performance, or the hearing, or the reading of the poetry' (333). This view of aesthetic experimentation is persuasive insofar as it emphasises the degree to which the knowledge acquired through the aesthetic experiment is 'an experiential one' (333). However, it does seem to ignore the fact that poems, plays, and works of fiction are, themselves, psychophysiological stimuli that affect us in certain ways, and are thereby always capable of producing data. The extent to which this data is collected and interpreted (and by whom) is another question, and different writers and artists are likely to hold more or less interest in the data that their experiments produce. Beckett devised experiments that investigate processes such as perception, attention and mental imagery, but he did not collect data from these experiments in any systematic way. It is not so much that experiment and data are joined together in Beckett's work. Rather, Beckett carefully designs experiments but does not systematically collect and interpret the data that these experiments produce. In summary, then, I argue that Beckett performs scientifically-informed aesthetic experimentation, but not fully-fledged scientific research. His works can be defined as experimental insofar as they position and stimulate human bodies in ways that might allow us to better understand our complex, but partial, experiences of the world.

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