Pig Vomit

Beckett’s Art Historical Necessities

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Abstract and Keywords

Towards the end of his life Samuel Beckett reflected that ‘[l]iterature and painting are like oil and water’—two substances that can never be mixed together. Yet in spite of this—or perhaps because of it—Beckett repeatedly used writing about art as a means to reflect on his own practice as a novelist: in letters, diaries, and in his published art criticism. This chapter traces Beckett’s engagement with art during the 1930s and 1940s, the period when he wrote his most significant novels: *Molloy, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. It argues that Beckett saw modernist painting as offering an example of formal necessity that could stand against the demands for political commitment circulating in postwar French critical debates, and it draws on detailed archival and manuscript research to show how Beckett’s art criticism informed the style and composition of his postwar trilogy.

*Keywords:* Samuel Beckett, modernism, postwar fiction, The Unnamable, Molloy, Malone Dies
In a 1981 conversation with the artist Avigdor Arikha, Samuel Beckett claimed that ‘[l]iterature and painting are like oil and water ... like fire and water they are separated by a zone of evaporation’.¹ These two similes condense into material terms the core assumptions underlying Beckett’s lifelong reflections on the relationship of visual art to his work. The first expresses the belief that in spite of repeated attempts to explain his writing in terms of painting, the two media are irreconcilably different, and it is this failure of one medium to translate into another that makes the attempt part of Beckett’s art of failing and going on. The zone the second simile posits as separating literature and painting harks back to an allusion in Beckett’s first work of fiction, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), to ‘the profound antagonism latent in the neutral space that between victims of real needs is as irreducible as the zone of evaporation between damp and incandescence (We stole that one. Guess where)’.² The answer? Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), and its description of what comes between consciousness and an external object as a ‘zone d’évaporation ... qui m’empêchait de jamais toucher directement sa matière’ ‘(a zone of evaporation ... that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly)’.³ Proust’s ‘empêchement’, which Beckett elsewhere equated with a ‘rupture of the lines of communication’ that has left a ‘no man’s land’ between subject and object, became a key concept in Beckett’s postwar writings on art.⁴ In 1949 he wrote that Bram van Velde’s attempted refusal of figurative painting paralleled his turn in the *Trilogy* into ‘the only terrain accessible to the poet ... the no man’s land he projects (p.24) round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation’.⁵ Across decades, Beckett equated the zone between literature and painting with the zone between subject and object, with the resistance between artistic media replaying the resistance of the world to our consciousness.
Beckett’s hostility towards the adaptation of his works from one medium to another, and his use of titles like *Words and Music* (1961), *Film* (1963), and *Play* (1965), suggest that the commitment to medium specificity underlying these reflections was central to his work. Philosophical interpretations of Beckett’s work have emphasized its tendency to focus on the distinct features of artistic media: Gilles Deleuze’s view that it exhausts the *langues* of the name, the voice, and the image; Alain Badiou’s argument that it aims to show ‘those functions to which writing can and should restrict itself’; Theodor Adorno’s claim that it exemplifies ‘the tendency of modern art to make its own categories thematic through self-reflection’.

Each of these thinkers saw Beckett’s thematizing of the medium as expressing one of modernism’s defining features. It was also, as we have seen in the Introduction, central to the historicist modernism theorized by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Like these critics, Beckett saw visual modernism as driven by a logic of internal formal evolution. In 1948 he wrote that ‘[t]he history of painting is the history of its relation to its object, a relation evolving, necessarily, first in terms of extension, then of penetration’, a history wherein ‘the instinctive shudder of painting from its limits is a shudder towards the confines of those limits’. In Beckett’s art criticism of the 1940s, this view of modernist form as determined by a necessary search for the limits of its medium was opposed to a different kind of necessity: Marxist humanism’s claim that all artistic forms were necessarily determined by a historical process ending in the ‘recognition of man by man’.

Beckett’s encounter with Nazism in 1937 left him allergic to claims for historical necessity. As Mark Nixon notes, he recorded in his diary that the expressions ‘“historical necessity” and “Germanic destiny” start the vomit moving upwards’. But a vomit, like a shudder, is also a necessary (p.25) process: necessary but involuntary, purposeful yet without intention. It is one of the many reflexes, tics, and spasms that animate Beckett’s bodies, and which this chapter aims to show come to replace painting as a figure for a formal act expressive only ‘of its impossibility, of its obligation’. But it was only through an engagement with what Beckett saw as modernist painting’s foregrounding of medium specificity, the separation of the senses, and the problem of anthropomorphism that the compulsive body could come to occupy this position in his work.
However, unlike Greenberg and Fried, Beckett did not see modernism’s evolution culminating in abstraction, since that made painting’s ‘lack of all relation’ to self and world the foundation of a new certainty. Instead, when asked why painting should refuse both figuration and abstraction and attempt to depict the ‘empêchement’ between subject and object, Beckett replied that the form of expression he was seeking could only be the product of an ‘unintelligible, unchallengeable need to splash colour on it [a canvas], even if that means vomiting one’s whole being’. Beckett’s writings on art thus oppose two kinds of art historical necessity: form’s necessary determination by history, and the necessity of form’s exhaustion of the limits of its medium in order to express a failed relation between subject and object, self and world. This wriggling between historical determinism and formal autonomy articulates what Steven Connor calls Beckett’s ‘finitive modernism’, one which recognizes that if ‘the assertion of a given historical essence is one evasion of this finite (because indefinite) freedom from determination, the identification with an absolute freedom, or illimitability, is another’. Beckett’s engagement with art was crucial for developing his sense of how the novel, as well as art, could manifest this ‘finitive modernism’ and the tensions it involves between the necessities of history and the necessities of form.
Peter Boxall has written that Beckett’s work can seem ‘difficult to place historically … to be sealed into an historical and geographic cylinder’, a tendency cemented by his reception first as an existentialist humanist and second as a harbinger of the timeless aporias of deconstruction. In contrast, this chapter argues that Beckett’s art criticism of the 1940s engages and responds to specific postwar debates about Marxist humanism and the politics of aesthetics, and to the extent that this criticism explains the trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953), the same can be said of his fiction. Beckett’s study of the history of art during (p.26) the 1930s and 1940s also enabled him to situate his work in relationship to a broader history of Renaissance humanism, a worldview Beckett saw as manifested in the symbolic form of single-point perspective. Tracing Beckett’s engagement with art provides us with a double lens on the relationship between his fiction and history. First, it enables us to precisely historicize his fiction in relation to debates about the politics of aesthetics in the 1940s. Second, because those debates were dominated by the demand that form should be determined by historical necessity, we can see in Beckett’s figuring of form as the product of necessary yet involuntary bodily acts an attempt to oppose the necessities of history with the necessity of form. The turn to the body was also a rejection of criticism, since it substituted theoretical explanations of form’s relationship to history with a figuring of form as the debased product of corporeal compulsions. By following Beckett’s mutating concerns with art historical necessities, we can see the *Trilogy*, especially *The Unnamable*, as thematizing in fiction what Beckett saw to be the key concerns of modernist painting. And we can see how his writings on art were a failure necessary for the writing of his *Trilogy*—but what could be a more Beckettian form of art criticism than that?

The Act of an Obsessional Neurotic: Beckett’s Study of Art
In the diary Beckett kept on a six-month tour of Germany in 1936 and 1937, his notes on art became so extensive that towards the end of his travels he dismissed what he called his absurd diary with its lists of pictures as the act of an obsessional neurotic. As Mark Nixon has written, '[a]ny reader glancing at the German diaries could be forgiven for thinking that they were written by an art critic, and not a creative writer'. This is equally true for Beckett's correspondence of the 1930s, especially with the poet and art historian Thomas MacGreevy. This neurotic listing of pictures was not wholly without motivation. Beckett had applied for a position at the National Gallery in London in 1933 and his aspirations towards a career as an art historian are recorded in 'Lightning Calculation', a fragment written in London around September 1934. One Quigley, sharing Beckett's address in S.W. 10, is working on an art historical monograph on *The Pathetic Fallacy from Avercamp to Campendonk*; unable to bring himself to enter the National Gallery to carry out his research, like many a scholar since he prevaricates instead with tea and biscuits.
Neither Quigley nor Beckett completed this survey of the emotional expressivity of landscape from sixteenth-century Holland to *Blaue Reiter* modernism. Yet the notes Beckett took on his countless visits to museums across Europe and the views expressed in his correspondence enable us to piece together the distinctive set of judgements and interpretations that characterized Beckett’s view of the history of art. Beckett rejected the primacy accorded to the narrative painting of the Italian humanist tradition and its formal and philosophical centring of humankind in a world of coherent and knowable time and space. Instead he largely focused on Dutch landscape and genre, paintings he defined as still and unsaid because they could not be translated into narrative through ekphrasis, or because they presented the natural landscape as alien to and independent of humanity. This was the argument about the pathetic fallacy latent in Quigley’s monograph, and it continued into Beckett’s equally selective judgement of modernist painting, where Cézanne’s work was seen as realizing painting’s capacity as medium to express the independence of the natural world from the human subject. Over and against what he called in his diary the impeccable tedium of French painting between 1900 and 1910—Fauvism and Cubism—Beckett turned to German Expressionism for the way in which, as he saw it, painters like Franz Marc raised the possibility of a visual form that would express (or fail to express) the no-man’s land between subject that object that would become the focus of his postwar art criticism. 18
As James Knowlson has written, Beckett’s study of art history began in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, where ‘he was weaned on the Gallery’s eclectic collection of Old Masters and developed an abiding passion for seventeenth-century Dutch painting’. This preference can be seen in the names that appear most frequently in his obessional lists: Hendrick Avercamp, Adriaen Brouwer, Aelbert Cuyp, Adam Elsheimer, Dirck Hals, Frans Hals, Meindert Hobbema, Salomon van Ruysdael, Jacob van Ruysdael, Hercules Seghers, Gerard ter Borch, Jan van Goyen, and Jan Vermeer. His knowledge of their lives and works was drawn in part from R. H. Wilenski’s *An Introduction to Dutch Art* (1929), which he read in 1933. Beckett’s notes were mostly directed to these painters’ landscape and genre pieces, and although often brief, they reveal something of what (p.28) Beckett saw in these paintings. In a visit to the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1936, Beckett pinpointed the historical novelty of how fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Flemish and Dutch artists treated landscape. Comparing the work of Albrecht Altdorfer and Adam Elsheimer, he wrote in his diary that Altdorfer was a revelation since the sacred subjects were a pretext for landscape, unlike in Elsheimer’s work. In Altdorfer’s religious paintings, literary narratives like the Flight into Egypt are the pretext for the presenting landscape as a setting for a story, unlike in Elsheimer’s night landscapes, which merely show, as Beckett noted, water, moon, shepherds, fire, and a glade. Instead of drawing out the narrative Altdorfer presents, Beckett lists the elements in Elsheimer’s static scene. The merely generic and descriptive titles of the paintings recorded by Beckett on other visits to the Hamburger Kunsthalle give a sense of these paintings’ lack of narrative incident: *Hugellandschaft*, *Winterlandschaft*, *Hirtenlandschaft*, or simply *Landschaft*. This emancipation from narrative defined sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch landscape. In the words of Wolfgang Stechow, once landscape painting ‘had shed—with what after all are few exceptions—its bonds with religion, mythology, and allegory, it was landscape and little else’. These were part of the larger category of genre pieces, first defined by Denis Diderot: ‘One calls genre painters, without distinction, those who busy themselves with flowers, fruits, animals, woods, forests, mountains, as well as those who borrow their scenes from common and domestic life’.
Depictions of common people and objects made such paintings resistant to discursive narrativization and the communication of a moral—what flower ever undertook the biblical flight into Egypt?—and therefore they occupied the lowest place in the neoclassical hierarchy of genres. Beckett described other works in similar terms. In his diary he praised Giorgione’s *Self-Portrait* (c.1510) in Brunswick for its profound reticence, and its quality of what he called the unsaid. He also used the concepts of stillness and the unsaid to praise the more modern work of Willem Grimm and Karl Ballmer, an equation which associated the lack of narrative in a still image with its inability to be translated into words or speech. That the representation of movement in a visual image is the condition for its translation into verbal narrative through ekphrasis has been central to European art theory since Vasari’s *Lives* (1550–68), which Beckett owned, and was further emphasized in Lessing’s *Laocöon*, which Beckett referenced in a discussion of Joyce in Munich around this time. In Beckett’s own time, both Aby Warburg’s theory of the *Pathosformel* and Freud’s interpretation of ‘The Moses of Michelangelo’ (1914) were based on the association between the portrayal of frozen movement and the capacity of an image to be translated into a verbal narrative. Beckett’s interpretations work within these longstanding frameworks whilst reversing their terms of value: what is praised is the still image, the unsaid that resists translation through ekphrasis. These oppositions were made clear in a note on the optical relations in Vermeer’s *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657–9) in Dresden. This painting presents an asymmetry between optical relations and verbal narrative: the letter the woman reads is hidden, leaving the viewer with nothing to do other than to trace the relations of seeing and invisibility around which the painting is constructed. What Beckett’s interest in Dutch genre shows is an interest in visual images that resist translation into words, that emphasize the difference between painting and literature, and thus generate different ways of writing about the visual than narrative ekphrasis. As Beckett wrote to MacGreevy after his trip to Germany: ‘I used never to be happy with a picture till it was literature, but now that need is gone’.

Only being happy with a picture if we can turn it into literature, Svetlana Alpers has argued, is a legacy of the fact that the interpretative practices of academic art history were
developed in response to Italian humanist painting, a mode of picturing defined by ‘its susceptibility to such narrative evocations—to the rhetorical device known by the name of ekphrasis’. \(^{31}\) Although more recent discussions of ekphrasis have attempted to expand its meaning to include ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’, or even ‘a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression’, Alpers has argued that ekphrasis has always meant a specifically narrative translation (p.30) of a visual image into verbal representation.\(^ {32}\) The contrast between narrative pictures susceptible to ekphrasis and the ‘descriptive’ art of Dutch genre, with its detailed rendering of individual objects without an implied narrative or central perspective, brings out deep-seated assumptions about how we think pictures should mean: ‘Time and again the hierarchy of mind over sense and of educated viewers over ignorant ones has been summoned to round out the argument for narration with a blast at an art that delights the eyes’.\(^ {33}\) Beckett had little interest in the narrative art influenced by the Italian Renaissance, writing to MacGreevy of his ‘impatience with the immensely competent bullies and browbeaters and highwaymen and naggars, the Rembrandts & Halses and Titians and Rubenses, the Tarquins of art’, wondering if it is ‘a pettiness to move away from the art that takes me by the scruff of the neck’, suggesting an aversion to the demands of a narrative that controls the viewer’s interpretation. He was just as dismissive of Panofsky’s narrative-based approach to pictorial interpretation, dismissing it as ‘notre iconographie de quatre sous’ (‘our three-penny iconography’).\(^ {34}\) Beckett’s preference for genre over narrative painting again saw him reversing the values of academic art history, privileging in his responses to art sense over mind, ignorance over education, and direct appeal to the fleshy eye over the unfolding of a narrative. This was a distinctively modernist reading of art history. Wilenski—and indeed Proust—saw Dutch painting, especially Vermeer, as the ‘heralds of the Modern Movement of our day’, and Roland Barthes explains why: ‘To paint so lovingly these meaningless surfaces, and to paint nothing else—that is already a “modern” esthetic of silence [sic]’.\(^ {35}\) This preference for genre painting’s aesthetic of silence shows that Beckett’s judgements on the history of art were part of his own modernist aesthetic of the ‘unsaid’.
If a painting is to narrate a story, it needs a space in which to narrate that story, and as Michael Baxandall has shown, the development of Albertian perspective was driven by the need for a coherent space in which to present Christian narratives. Reciprocally, pictures structured according to single-point perspective relate their objects in potential narratives. As Rosalind E. Krauss has written:

(p.31)

Perspective is the visual correlate of causality—that one thing follows the next in space according to a rule. In that sense, despite differences in historical development, it can be likened to the literary tradition of the omniscient narrator and conventional plot ... perspectival space carries with it the meaning of narrative: a succession of events leading up to and away from this moment; and within that temporal succession—given as a spatial analogue—[is] secreted the ‘meaning’ of both that space and those events.
It was precisely because of the way single-point perspective organized time and space into rational relationships of cause and effect, independent of yet always in theory knowable to a disembodied spectator, that Panofsky saw it as the symbolic form of modernity and the humanist subject, or what Foucault called the regime of ‘Classical representation’.  

Beckett’s view of perspectival space, and his view of its associations with narrative and humanism, is best shown by a letter written some ten years after viewing Antonello da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian* (1477–9) in Germany. Recalling the painting’s ‘[p]ure space by dint of mathematics, tiling, flagstones rather, black and white, with long Mantegna style foreshortenings’—a technique emphasizing single-point perspective—Beckett saw ‘the whole thing invaded, eaten into by the human [mangé par le humain]. In front of such a work, such a victory over the reality of disorder, over the pettiness of heart and mind, it is hard not to go and hang yourself’. The bleeding and eroticized body of Saint Sebastian is realized within the ordered space of perspective; yet if this is what realizes the humanist subject, it shows ‘the illusion of the human and the fully realized’.  

This is an illusion as absurd as the compatibility of ‘distinguished conation and utilitarian splendour’, of will and reason, that characterized for Beckett a rumoured reconciliation of André Breton and Jean-Paul Sartre in 1948, evidence of how, as is common in his postwar criticism, his engagement with art enabled him to place his critique of humanist politics in a longer historical and aesthetic context.

Beckett’s study of modern art in the 1930s was shaped by many of the same ‘neurotic obsessions’. Cézanne was the central figure in his historicist modernism. He completed a process of formal evolution in the medium of painting where its inability to represent the passing of time, which for Beckett defined human subjectivity, became the source of a new ability to provide a non-anthropomorphic view of the world, and Cézanne’s work also showed how these changes in visual form were related to technological modernity. In 1934 Beckett wrote of the ‘relief [of] the Mont Ste. Victoire (...) after all the anthropomorphised landscape—van Goyen, Avercamp, the Ruysdaels, Hobbema, even Claude, Wilson & Chrome Yellow Esq., or paranthropomorphised by Watteau ... after all the landscape “promoted” to the emotions of the hiker, postulated as concerned with the hiker (what an impertinence, worse than Aesop & the animals)’. ‘Cézanne’, he declared, ‘seems to
have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a
strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human
expressions whatsoever’. He did so because he understood
‘the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to be
something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible
arrangement of atoms, not so much ruffled by the kind
attentions of the Reliability Joneses’. The definition of
subjectivity as a ‘dynamic intrusion’ into the material world
shows how, as in his interpretation of Old Masters, Beckett’s
criticism focused on time and movement, what he called the
‘discrepancy between that which cannot stay still for its
phases & that which can’: subject and object, self and world.
This was overcome by Cézanne working with what was
specific to painting in contrast to photography and cinema,
unlike the ‘Impressionists darting about & whining that the
scene wouldn’t rest easy!’ and the ‘snapshot puerilities of
Manet & Cie’. By presenting a static landscape rendered in
atomistic dabs of paint that was in no way a vehicle for the
emotions of a human subject living in time, Cézanne showed
there was no ‘possibility of relationship, friendly or unfriendly,
with the unintelligible ... precisely the absence of a rapport
that was all right for Rosa or Ruysdael’, artists of the past.
This seemingly paradoxical expression of the absence of
relation—the task Beckett set himself and which became the
rock on which his postwar attempts at theorizing foundered—
was through Cézanne historicized as a departure from the art
and techniques of previous centuries. His work was ‘the one
bright spot in a mechanistic age—the deanthropomophizations
of the artist’. If visual forms expressed the historicity of our
understanding of nature, they also expressed the historicity of
our understanding of ourselves, and the fact that Cézanne had
begun to dehumanize the self is one reason why the revival of
humanism after the war would be the target of Beckett’s
intense criticism.
Beckett’s interest in German Expressionism during the 1930s was also driven by what he saw as its attempts to depict the lack of relation between subject and object, rather than what he later described as the absurd idea of a painting liberated from the object as in the abstraction of Kandinsky. That shirks the more difficult task of representing the conditions because of which the object evades representation, those concerning time and the human body Cézanne was grappling with. While viewing extensive examples of work by Karl Schmitt-Rotluff, Oskar Kokoschka, Emil Nolde, and Edvard Munch, Beckett acquired a copy of Franz Marc’s *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen* (1920) and took a page of notes on Marc’s attempt to outline a theory of a non-anthropomorphic aesthetics. Marc saw animals and objects as infused with their own vital attributes which painters like Picasso obscured by projecting their own subjective ideas onto the world. Beckett had little time for the ‘velleities of vitalism’, seeing it as just another form of anthropomorphism, but what he recognized was that this was Marc’s attempt to articulate the task of painting how objects relate to one another independent of the perceiving subject. As Matthew Feldman notes, Beckett identified Marc’s attempt to paint the alienation between subject and object with the ‘no man’s land’ of his 1934 essay on ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ that had opened up because of a modernist ‘rupture of the lines of communication’. If these notes on Expressionism relate to Beckett’s literary criticism, they also relate to his readings in philosophy during the 1930s, which as Feldman has shown were also focused on subject–object relations, and the relationship between perception, movement, and time. If these “years of learning” during the 1930s culminate with philosophically complex recriminations against the utility of knowledge, as Feldman argues, this engagement with Expressionism shows that Beckett was increasingly seeing modern art as realizing these concerns in forms closer to his own writing. Beckett’s postwar art criticism attempted to explain more fully his historicist theory of visual modernism; his correspondence attempted to relate this theory to this fiction. But both criticism and fiction would occur in a very different historical situation than the 1930s, one whose difference Beckett used his criticism to directly address.

‘Un Amateur (ÉclairÉ)’: Beckett the Art Critic
Beckett wrote three pieces of art criticism in the 1940s, his only significant contributions to the genre: ‘La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon’ (1946), ‘The New Object/Peintres de l’empêchement’, (1948), and the co-authored ‘Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit’ (1949). This is page 34. They were part of a wider move towards publishing in French periodicals, with Beckett’s writing and translations appearing in in Les Temps Modernes and Fontaine as well as the briefly revived Transition. While these publications were in part driven by financial hardship, they were also a strategic and ultimately successful entry into what Anna Boschetti has analysed as the field of intellectual journals in post-Liberation France, journals which were conduits for the literary politics that Andrew Gibson has argued are a necessary context for interpreting Beckett’s postwar writing. The period between 1945 and 1949 saw many of Beckett’s major works written in what he later called a ‘frenzy of writing’, and his art criticism has rightly been seen as offering a critical accompaniment to those works. Situating this criticism within the field of French periodicals shows the extent to which Beckett’s criticism participated in debates surrounding the politics of aesthetics and attacked with particular vehemence the resurgence of a Marxist humanism, and the ways in which his established concerns with temporality, anthropomorphism, and the historicity of modernism were related to these new political positions. It also shows Beckett’s criticism embroiled in debates beyond France, his interpretation of visual modernism now swept up in transatlantic Cold War cultural politics, so that Beckett’s critique of Marxism left him awkwardly positioned in French debates in relation to the American recoding of abstract painting as the antithesis of socialist politics. It is difficult to say which position Beckett disagreed with more. His dismissal of the practice of art criticism in ‘Three Dialogues’ should be seen as motivated by a rejection of this political and aesthetic polarization—a move which itself is a significant form of self-historicization—as well as by the realization that modernist painting was never going to provide an instance of ‘the expression that there is nothing to express … together with the obligation to express’. Although the turn away from art that ends the ‘Three Dialogues’ might seem an admission that The Unnamable realized what couldn’t be theorized, ‘Three Dialogues’ was written simultaneously with its opening
section, with the reasons for Beckett’s rejection of art directly part of the genesis of that novel.

(p.35) What kind of an art critic was Beckett? ‘Les peinture de van Veldes ou le monde et le pantalon’, written in January 1945, opens with an inordinate amount of anxiety about this question. His essay is not ‘criticism, strictly speaking’ (‘la critique proprement dite’), the best of which is as subtle as ‘hysterectomies with a trowel’ (‘hystérectomies à la truelle’), nor does it invoke the art historical authority once sought by Quigley—that profession is excoriated for its botched restorations and attributions. His is the position of an ‘(enlightened) amateur’ (‘amateur (éclairé)’); or rather a ‘pig’ who doesn’t seek improvement, who ‘only thinks of his pleasure’, who ‘demands nothing but his pleasure’ (or to ejaculate), but for whom ‘the impossible is there to prevent it’. (‘Il ne veut pas s’instruire, le cochon, ni devenir meilleur. Il ne pense qu’à son plaisir ... Il ne demande qu’à jouir. L’impossible est fait pour l’en empêcher’) (120). Jean Michel-Rabaté has perceptively pointed out that this desire to think like a pig, to transvalue enlightened aesthetic experience to debased sexual pleasure (to move from Kant to de Sade), and the figuration of the impossible as the limit of aesthetic experience bears close comparison with Georges Bataille’s concept of sovereignty, where ‘the act of thinking turns into bodily production whether by laughter or excretion’.

Yet the presence of Beckett’s key concept of ‘empêchment’ as the reason why art can only solicit base pleasure shows how this impossibility develops out of Beckett’s own sense that the resistance of painting to language figures the resistance between subject and object. The modernist genealogy of Beckett’s ‘empêchment’ can illuminate in turn why the transgressive informe (formlessness) of Bataille’s base materialism, its endless production of difference and heteronomy, can end up looking like the necessary underside of modernist autonomy.

In the context of what Beckett called the ‘2nd post-liberation number’ of the Cahiers d’Art, this wallowing in the pig-like pleasure of art and claiming the impossibility of extracting a lesson from painting contrasts sharply with the presentation by the editor, Christian Zevros, of a selection of texts from Lenin and Stalin, which he promises will reveal a vision of ‘the future human condition’ (‘la future condition humaine’). This vision of a human condition is what Beckett’s critical pig attacks.
According to Beckett, Bram and Geer van Velde’s painting reveals the impossibility of any concept of a human condition. For every painter, ‘the thing is impossible’ (‘la chose est impossible’), and ‘it is from the representation of this impossibility that modern painting has drawn a fair proportion of its best effects’ (‘C’est d’ailleurs de la représentations de cette impossibilité que la peinture moderne a tiré une bonne partie de ses meilleurs effets’) (129). The particular impossibility the van Veldes try to represent is time. Building on his claims about Cézanne, Beckett defines the entire history of visual representation in terms of a problematic of time: ‘For what have the representative arts always thirsted? To want to stop time by representing it’ (‘A quoi les arts représentatifs se sont-ils acharnés, depuis toujours? A vouloir arrêter le temps, en le représentant’) (126). It is impossible to perceive and thus represent any object due to the inescapable condition of time, and the two painters bifurcate in their attempt to represent either ‘the thing immobile in the void’ (‘[l]a chose immobile dans le vide’), on the one hand, or the passing of time, on the other. In failing to do so they reveal the dilemma facing painting: ‘How to represent change?’ (‘Comment représenter le changement?’) (129). Unsurprisingly, Beckett pronounces they fail to do so, but just as in Paulus Potter’s painting of urinating sheep, their failure reminds us that our inability to represent our condition of being in time is a revelation less of a human condition than a reminder of our base animality. Thus the turn Beckett makes in conclusion: ‘To finish, let us speak of something else, let us speak of the “human”’ (‘Pour finir parlons d’autre chose, parlons de l’”humain”’) (131). This is a word, Beckett notes, that has suddenly reappeared in postwar aesthetic debates—exemplified by the journal in which his essay was published—and he is excoriatingly cynical about its presence, calling it ‘a word, and no doubt a concept also, that is reserved for the time of great massacres’ (‘un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu’on réserve pour les temps des grand massacres’) (131). For Beckett, this return of humanism threatens to destroy all art and thought for the next fifty years; that either should have anything to do with the human is ‘appalling’ (‘épouvantable’).
Beckett was entirely correct in his diagnosis that humanism had returned with a vengeance to postwar French criticism. Yet as early as October 1945, the Surrealist Pierre Naville was complaining of the term’s nebulosity: ‘Today, unfortunately, the term humanism is used to designate philosophical schools of thought, not according to two meanings, but according to three, four, five, or six. Nowadays, everybody is a humanist’.\(^{55}\) Stefanos Geroulanos describes this postwar period as witnessing a ‘short-lived humanist reconciliation’, prompting a sequence of critiques by Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Hyppolite, culminating in the theoretical \(p.37\) anti-humanism of Althusser and Lacan in the 1960s.\(^{56}\) One motivation for Althusser’s re-reading of Marx was the fact that, as Naville also perceived, in the immediate post-Liberation era, ‘even certain Marxists, who pride themselves on being classical rationalists, are [now] humanists in a diluted sort of way, stripped of the liberal ideas of the previous century’.\(^{57}\) This stemmed from the overwhelming prestige and moral authority that the Parti Communiste Français enjoyed as a result of its leading role in the Resistance, with the P.C.F. winning the largest share of votes in the Assembly elections on 21 October 1945 and 10 November 1946, a dominance lasting until the Communists were expelled from government on 5 May 1947.\(^{58}\) This new Marxist humanism was also prompted by a resurgence of interest in Marx’s early writings, especially the ‘1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, which claimed: ‘Communism as completed naturalism is humanism and as completed humanism is naturalism’.\(^{59}\) As Mark Poster has pointed out, French editions of this text ‘did not appear until 1937 and even then it was ignored until after the Liberation … [thus] for political and textual reasons, which were interconnected, no real reading of Marx was possible in France until after the Second World War’.\(^{60}\)
Another significant philosophical influence on thinkers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty was what Vincent Descombes has called the humanist interpretation of Hegel developed by Alexandre Kojève during the 1930s. Kojève’s replacement of the Spirit with Man in his ‘anthropological version’ of Hegelian philosophy [italics original] ultimately requires ‘[t]he identity of subject and object ... [and that] man (subject) would encounter nothing outside of himself (in the object) to impede the realisation of his projects’. This was an inverted theology: ‘Humanist atheism reclaims them [divine attributes] for the human subject, who in this way becomes the true God. It is precisely this substitution, whereby everywhere the word “Man” is written to replace the word “God”, which defines humanism [italics original]’.61 Judith Butler has argued that the ‘effort at anthropogenesis elaborated by Kojève finds existential transcription in the Sartrian contention that all human desire is a function of the desire to become God. But for Sartre, (p.38) this desire is bound to fail’.62 At the time, however, Sartre stressed that this refusal ‘to grant man an eternally established nature’ did not result in the quietism decried by his critics on the left; rather, ‘existentialism is no mournful delectation but a humanist philosophy of action, effort, combat, and solidarity [italics original]’.63 In his October 1945 lecture ‘Existentialism Is a Humanism’, Sartre stressed the transcendental subjectivity of the universal human condition: ‘[s]ince man is this transcendence, and grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence, he himself is the core and focus of this transcendence’.64 Subject and object were reconciled by the former’s engaged projects within a teleological historical process.
Beckett encountered Sartre’s humanist philosophy of art in the criticism of Francis Ponge, which he translated for an issue of Transition Forty-Nine in 1949. In his ‘Existentialism is a Humanism’ lecture and elsewhere, Sartre had praised Ponge’s ‘Notes Premières de l’Homme’, publishing it in the inaugural issue of Les Temps Modernes in 1945, in which Ponge prophesied a humanized deification of man: ‘We must return the idea of God to the idea of man. And simply live’ (‘Il faut réintégrer l’idée de Dieu à l’idée de l’homme. Et simplement vivre’). In a phrase quoted by Sartre in his lecture, Ponge declared: ‘Man is the future of man’ (‘L’homme est l’avenir de l’homme’). In the article translated by Beckett, ‘Braque ou l’art moderne comme événement et plaisir’, originally published in Action in January 1947, Ponge drew on Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ to define the role of the artist as (in Beckett’s first and only translation of Marx) ‘one who in no wise explains the world, but changes it [italics original]’. For Ponge, by not simply representing objects in the world but by creating new forms of viewing them, Braque ‘presents you with the future. The future of nature, the future of man’. Braque’s objects ‘draw us forth from our night, forth from obsolete man (and its so-called humanism), to reveal to us, Man, the order to come’. Ponge was clear on the politics of his aesthetics, and of the positions defining the critical field in which Beckett was writing, declaring himself the ‘disciple and friend’ of the ‘political realists’ of the P.C.F.

Beckett’s comments on translating Ponge are revealing.

(p.39)

Ponge on Braque It is revolting. ‘Braque is now over 60 and the world is beginning to fit into his groove’!! What oft was thought. For someone who is a pupil of the realists in politics he is pretty unsteady on his feet. He has a struggle to get out of that groove of his, making great play with ‘muffled’ verbs and parentheses. What a relief to know that we are back for good and all from the fête galante, and pitched, naked once more, in front of the dead fish (and the lumps of coal).
The difference between the two writers is clear, as is Beckett’s understanding of Ponge’s politics. This is underlined by the contemptuous reference to the ‘dead fish’, an allusion to André Fougeron’s *Parisiennes aux Marché* (1948), the scandal surrounding which was reported in the ‘Documents’ section of *Transition Forty-Nine* that Beckett was also translating. According to Serge Guilbaut, the rotting fish that Fougeron used to symbolize the food shortages affecting postwar Paris became a reference point in what became known as ‘La Bataille réalisme-abstraction’ in the immediate postwar years. These are the debates Beckett’s criticism is participating in, contrasting his anti-humanist art of failure against Ponge and Fougeron’s demand for a committed Marxist realism. In his fiction Beckett had already contrasted unsteady feet with triumphalist Marxism. In ‘The End’, written in early 1946, as the narrator lies begging on a street corner, pissing, shitting, and scratching himself, he witnesses a ‘strange scene’, a man bellowing: ‘Union … brothers … Marx … capital … bread and butter … love’. He is dismissed with a quip that parodies the Marxist humanism of Ponge: ‘He must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. He had a nice face, a little on the red side’.

Beckett’s second essay on the van Veldes saw his argument for modern art’s necessary representation of its own impossibility, rather than art’s necessary determination by the historical emergence of the true human subject after capitalism, caught up in a more international battle about the politics of aesthetics. ‘Peintres de l’empêchement’, written in French and translated by Beckett himself, was commissioned to accompany an exhibition of the van Veldes’ paintings in Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York in March 1948, where it appeared titled ‘The New Object’. The French version appeared the following June in *Derrière le miroir*, the house journal of Galerie Maeght. Galerie Maeght had arranged the New York exhibition as part of an exchange with Kootz, who in return provided paintings for the first exhibition of Abstract Expressionism in France at Galerie Maeght, proudly supported, as the catalogue declared, by the ‘United States Information Services’. Guilbaut has written how this exchange programme, coming in the wake of France’s controversial acceptance of the Marshall Plan, was widely perceived by French art critics as ‘part of a wide-ranging and all but
unstoppable cultural offensive against France’, with Galerie Maeght being an especially prominent advocate for the embrace of American cultural sponsorship. Harold Rosenberg wrote the essay corresponding to Beckett’s in which he declared that the work of Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, and others was the ‘fruit of an individual’ (‘le fruit d’individus’) who aspires to ease the ‘future of exchange among men’ (‘future d’échange entre hommes’); an art that did not make modern painting ‘a tributary of a philosophical conscience or a social ideal’ (‘tributaire d’une conscience philosophique ou d’un idéal social’), and which did so in ‘the international language of twentieth-century painting, a language which does not belong to one country, race, or cultivated spirit (although associated above all with Paris)’ (‘le langage international de la peinture du XXe siècle, langage qui n’est pas celui d’un pays, d’une race ou d’un esprit cultivé (bien qu’associé par dessus tout avec Paris)’). Rosenberg’s recruitment of modernist abstraction as an expression of individuality in opposition to ideology, a universal language rather than a vehicle of national interests, partook in a pervasive strategy of Cold War cultural politics, where previously established claims for aesthetic autonomy, which were often complex strategies for negotiating heteronomy, were pressed into the service of a genuine belief in liberalism, and a more disingenuous policy of covert cultural intervention.

Beckett’s essay opens as if directly rebutting Rosenberg: ‘We are now freely informed ... that the Paris school, whatever that means, is finished, whatever that means’. In contrast, he proposes with no small irony that the van Veldes show that the Paris School has a ‘promising future before it’ because ‘the same mourning carries them away from each other, the mourning of the object’ (‘le même deuil les mène loin l’un de l’autre, le deuil de l’objet’). Peter Fifield has observed that in the English typescript Beckett had called this a ‘search’ (‘recherche’) for the object, only to change it to ‘mourning’ (‘deuil’) when translating it back to French, giving the term a particular significance. Declaring that the task of painting is to carry out an endless work of mourning for an impossible object undercutts with equal bite both Rosenberg’s claim that abstraction could be the foundation for a future art of individual expression (and free exchange), and Ponge’s claims that a Communist future would see the reconciliation of subject and object. Beckett’s argument as to
why the object of painting could only be mourned was supported by his version of a historicist modernism: an argument that there was a necessity to the forms of modern painting that could be placed against the necessity that form be determined by a teleology of political history, whether liberal or Marxist. Taking up his key concept of ‘empêchment’, Beckett argued that ‘the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation’. ‘The history of painting is the history of its relation to its object’, and it has been an ‘evolving’ process leading to the discovery of this resistance and a new task for the medium of painting: ‘to represent the conditions of that elusion’. 75 Beckett’s historicist modernism ends here, rather than in abstraction, because it is not based on the discovery of medium specificity. The conditions because of which the object is in resistance to representation lie in the subject and object, the ‘eye mist’ and the ‘object mist’; however, because Beckett’s ‘empêchment’ aligns this difference with modernist painting’s development towards forms wherein the object does not speak ‘for itself’, exploring differences between media is a means to explore the resistance of the object to the subject. 76 The historical determinism of Beckett’s account of modernist painting was what struck a reviewer in the New York Sun, who in comparing it to Heine’s similarly lamenting review of the Salon of 1831 also showed up its lack of originality. Beckett was a poor ‘historian’, the reviewer wrote, since his tendentious pronouncements on the discovery of the essence of modern painting were made ‘before the breath had left it’. As the review points out, Beckett was offering a historicist argument of his own: ‘claiming the rights of the succession and the perquisites that go with it for his two young friends’—and, implicitly, himself. 77

Beckett’s imbrication in the transatlantic Cold War cultural politics of modernism was a consequence of diplomatic machinations over which he had little control; his attack on the necessities demanded by a specifically French Marxist humanism was much more intentional. Too intentional and too obvious in the case of Beckett’s first effort at writing for the stage, Eleutheria, written in 1948. In the play, Dr Piouk is so effusive in his love for humanity that Madame Krapp wonders: ‘You wouldn’t be a Communist?’ In contrast, the play ends with Victor Krapp ‘turning his emaciated back on humanity [italics original]’, enacting what the Spectator
calls Victor’s ‘negative anthropology’. The stakes of the positions taken in this play, where characters named after shitting and vomiting mock the demands of Marxist humanism, can be illustrated by comparison with the art criticism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In 1948 Beckett had only encountered Merleau-Ponty’s political writings, commenting on the publication of the second part of Humanism and Terror’s attack on Koestler’s Darkness at Noon that ‘the boys are very cross with Koestler’. Yet Humanism and Terror (1947) can be seen as developing a politics out of the claim in Phenomenology of Perception (1945) that the perceiving subject exists ‘only in so far as he is historically situated’. That historical situation was the unfolding ‘recognition of man by man’, a process truly experienced only by the proletariat, which is ‘the sole authentic intersubjectivity because it alone lives simultaneously the separation and unity of individuals’. In Phenomenology of Perception, Cézanne’s painting expresses this unfolding historical process of recognition by showing the unity of sense perception with its environment, its depiction of a ‘subject-object dialogue’ between self and world. In ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ (1945), Merleau-Ponty admits that at first glance, ‘the inhuman character of his paintings’ could be seen to ‘only represent a flight from the human world, the alienation of his humanity’. But this doubt was overcome because Cézanne revived ‘the classical definition of art: man added to nature’, with Merleau-Ponty approvingly citing Cézanne’s claim that ‘landscape thinks itself in me ... and I am its consciousness’. Against this explanation of Cézanne’s style of painting in terms of a historical process of reconciliation between self and world, Beckett’s Cézanne, as we have seen, discovered a subject ‘more hermetic & more alone & his neighbour a coagulum as alien as a protoplast or God’, the body becoming an unformed coagulum rather than the ground for a new form of physiognomic perception, as for Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne was a prophet of the future reconciliation of subject and object, his revolutionary forms determined by an underlying historical process essential to Marxist humanism. Beckett’s Cézanne was a prophet of a different modernity, one in which the formal development of modernist painting had revealed an irrevocable breakdown in the lines of communication between subject and object. If this had a politics, it could only be negative in the Spectator’s sense of defining ‘the human race’ by ‘what it isn’t’, or as Molloy puts it, the ‘relentless definition
of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not’. But it was also negative in the sense that the politics of Beckett’s 1940s work were a conscious negation of a specific inflection of Marxist humanism as encountered in visual art and its criticism; this politics of negation being one of Beckett’s art historical necessities.

The ‘Three Dialogues’ between Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit that saw Beckett speak less about Bram van Velde than ‘what I am pleased to fancy he is, fancy he does’ also took part in this negation of humanist politics. Beckett’s quip that ‘the realization that art has always been bourgeois, though it may dull our pain before the achievements of the socially progressive, is finally of little interest’ might not seem especially targeted or original (144). There is more continuity with Beckett’s previous criticism in the claim that an art of failure would depart from an association between expressive form and humanity in all previous art: ‘[a]mong those whom we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominately with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity. The assumption underlying all painting is that the domain of the maker is the domain of the feasible’ (142). The claim that van Velde’s art moves beyond the ‘misapprehension … that its function was to express’ is also a claim for moving beyond a humanism of a subject ultimately aiming at the reconciliation of self and world (143). The beginning of this project was shown not by a political treatise, but by visual form: the single-point perspective of ‘the Italian painters’ who ‘never stirred from the field of possible, however much they enlarged it’ (139). One ‘domain of the feasible’ was perspectival space because it orders all space and time in relation to a disembodied viewer, and attacks on this domain, which is also the domain of narrative, provide one way in which the concerns of Beckett’s criticism appeared in the forms of the fictions he was writing. Another domain appeared elsewhere in the same issue of Transition in which ‘Three Dialogues’ appeared: the socialist realism of André Fougeron’s Parisiennes aux Marché, the debates launched by its ‘dead fish’, already noted by Beckett in March 1949 being the subject of the issue’s survey of the French political scene for its English-speaking readers. Or more specifically, as (p. the advertisements for The Hudson Review and Partisan Review make clear; its American audience, a fact recognized by Beckett when he predicted that a 1949 issue of the
magazine would ‘impress the better informed Yanks’. Like Beckett’s essay for Kootz Gallery, ‘Three Dialogues’ was aimed at the New York visual avant-garde, a world Duthuit had become familiar with through his participation in a Life ‘Roundtable on Modern Art’ with critics such as Greenberg in October 1948. Duthuit and Beckett’s American readers were presented with a Paris divided into two opposed camps: Ponge, Fougeron, and the P.C.F. on the one hand, and Beckett, the van Veldes, and anti-humanist failure on the other.

Yet just as it would be wrong to over-interpret Beckett’s intention to get caught up in transatlantic cultural politics, it would be wrong to over-interpret the ‘Three Dialogues’ as a conclusive statement on the preoccupations driving Beckett’s postwar trilogy. Chronology provides one caution. ‘Three Dialogues’ was composed through an exchange of letters with Duthuit in June 1949: after Molloy and Malone Dies were completed, but during the composition of The Unnamable, the first draft of which was only completed in January 1950. Beckett did not originally intended to follow Molloy and Malone Dies with a concluding novel. Before beginning his exchange with Duthuit, Beckett wrote to George Reavey that Malone Dies was ‘the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles and Eleuthéria.’ As Shane Weller points out, the unanticipated nature of The Unnamable is shown by a revision made by Beckett when translating Molloy with Patrick Bowles. The second paragraph of the published French text reads: ‘Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c’en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi. C’est le sens de l’avant dernier’. In the published English translation, this expands to include The Unnamable: ‘This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it’ll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one’ [emphasis added to indicate addition]. ‘Three Dialogues’ is a reflection upon a series of works in progress, not the ‘acceptable conclusion’ Beckett worries he might have made (145). It has a prospective rather than retrospective relationship to The Unnamable. Close study of Beckett’s correspondence and manuscripts shows that the impetus provided by Duthuit to write a dialogue on painting was crucial to Beckett’s decision to begin writing The Unnamable; it might not be too strong to say it was the impetus to write Beckett’s most important work of fiction.
Beckett began writing *The Unnamable* on 29 March 1949, three weeks after two long responses to letters from Duthuit, which ‘[push] me out into too many currents for me to worry about how I swim’, and which prompted Beckett to think again about the question of relation that had been central to his postwar criticism. As we have seen, Beckett’s attempt in ‘Three Dialogues’ to theorize a form of art which expressed only its own obligation to express—its own necessity—was in part a reaction against the claims of contemporaries from Sartre to Ponge that art should provide forms effecting the unity between subject and object that would be produced by history as a process of human self-realization. But it was also part of Beckett’s sense that the forms of modernist painting posed their own questions about the relationships between media, the senses, and between consciousness and the world. In order to show the relationship between ‘Three Dialogues’ and Beckett’s fiction, we need to view it as part of the composition process of *The Unnamable* as well as a critical commentary upon it. Closely attending to the genesis of *The Unnamable* shows that for all that thinking about the necessity of form in relation to painting prompted the novel’s composition, giving up on art brought about its conclusion.

‘The Horror-Worn Eyes Linger Abject’: Art in the *Trilogy*

The creatures of Beckett’s *Trilogy* are condemned to tell stories. Whether scrawling on a page or murmuring in the dark, Molloy, Moran, Malone, Mahood, and the unnameable are tormented by their inability to write or speak without a fiction coming into being; it is being, after all, that they want to escape. They also want to escape from seeing: the *Trilogy* is one long journey towards a voice speaking in the dark. But as Malone writes: ‘it is hard to leave everything. The horror-worn eyes linger abject on all they have beseeched so long, in a last prayer; the true prayer at last, the one that asks for nothing’. These horror-worn eyes seem to exist in a world without history; or it may seem, as Adorno argued about *Endgame* (1957), that this absence is how history is registered. But as Beckett’s criticism shows, the search for an eye that asks for nothing was situated within a long history of modernity and a short history of postwar anti-humanist politics, where the refusal of subject–object reconciliation (a refusal that could nevertheless only fail) took in part the form of a resistance of image to text: the failure to say what you see standing in for a larger breakdown of communication. As well
as repeatedly staging the resistance between sight and sound, the novels of the *Trilogy* turn away from space organized by Albertian perspective into a closed spaced of rooms, and they frustrate the structures of linear and causal narrative produced by such a space. Yet *The Unnamable* goes beyond the impasse of ‘Three Dialogues’, which recognizes the contradiction in making ‘of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation’ (145). The form of this self-contradictory art of failure, which in 1945 Beckett claimed to see in the work of the van Veldes only to rescind his own judgement by 1949, is that of an act which expresses only its own necessity, an act given metaphorical expression as acts of involuntary bodily production like vomiting, ejaculating, and crying. The *Trilogy* turns to bodily compulsions to get beyond the impasse of ‘Three Dialogues’, but the composition of *The Unnamable* shows that Beckett’s fantasy of separating sight from sound risked being an inflection of the same rationality that placed the incorporeal spectator at the centre of the world. The corporeal nature of sight binds it to the body, yet this is a prison rather than the source of any future reconciliation of the self with the world. If composing *The Unnamable* saw Beckett turn from art historical to bodily necessities, and to turn to theorizing speech rather than painting as a compulsive corporeal act that only expresses ‘its own impossibility, its own obligation’, he retained from his engagement with art a refusal to make the voice a new source of determination or freedom, with the compulsive voice unable to rid itself of the ‘tears’ and ‘gleams’ of the images it no longer sees.

*Watt* shows that Beckett’s ‘neurotic obsessions’ with space and perspective in painting were shaping the concerns and structure of his fiction well before his encounter with Duthuit’s thoughts on perspective in the 1940s through partially translating his book *The Fauvist Painters* (1949). One of the more abstract references to these obsessions is the painting *Watt* encounters in Erskine’s room:
A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white.\textsuperscript{96}

\textbf{(p.47)} Watt’s pondering shows that the painting might not be so abstract after all: ‘How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained. By what means the illusion of movement in space, and it almost seemed in time, was given, Watt could not say’ (109). Even these non-figurative shapes resolve into an illusionary relationship in space and time because of the difference between figure and ground, and thus these objects related through perspective become subject to ‘some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance’ (110). But perspective’s laws of ‘mechanism’ and ‘chance’, seemingly opposed, are two sides of the same coin—either everything is determined, or nothing is—a paradox elsewhere associated for Beckett with Geulincx’s Occasionalist mechanism and Pascal’s probability.\textsuperscript{97} The space and time produced by single-point perspective is equated with the epistemic regime of Cartesian modernity and the religious regime of Pascalian doubt, transforming it into a synecdoche for modernity as a whole. At the thought that the circle and its centre are ordered in perspective’s ‘boundless space, in endless time’, Watt’s ‘eyes filled with tears he could not stem, and they flowed down his fluted cheeks unchecked, in a steady flow, refreshing him greatly’ (110). Faced with the prospect of infinite space and endless time, Watt reacts with tears, a corporeal act neither automatic nor willed, and which reminds us of the embodied nature of the vision encountering the painting.
Watt’s understanding of perspective as a form of representation that articulates causal relationships in boundless space and endless time links Beckett’s interrogation of perspective in art to the narrative structures of his novels and their setting within enclosed rooms. Watt concludes his meditations on Erskine’s painting by pondering its relation to the room it is in: whether it is ‘a fixed and stable member of the edifice ... or was it simply a manner of paradigm ... [or] a term in a series’ (111). The painting could be part of the room, a representation of the room, or part of Watt’s narrative of serial permutations. Or it could be all three, a way of relating what is narrated to how it is narrated. This relationship between perspective, rooms, and narrative can be illuminated by comparison with Maurice Blanchot’s *Aminadab* (1942), written around the same time as *Watt* and part of Blanchot’s investigation into the nature of the novel.\(^9\) *Aminadab* follows a character called Thomas moving through a series of rooms in a house, with one initial room containing paintings of rooms later available for Thomas to enter, and a later room containing the studio where these paintings were produced. The novel figures narrative as a journey through a sequence of closed rooms, and as Michel Foucault has argued, the pictures show that the visual image is the negative of the ‘space of literature’ Blanchot theorized as the essence of writing, in the same way the myth of Orpheus was a myth of how the demand of writing is to turn away from appearance.\(^9\)

For Foucault, *Aminadab* shows that fiction consists not in showing the invisible, but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible. Thus it bears a profound relation to space; understood in this way, space is to fiction what the negative is to reflection (whereas dialectical negation is always tied to the fable of time). No doubt this is the role that houses, hallways, doors, and rooms play in almost all of Blanchot’s narratives: placeless places, beckoning thresholds, forbidden spaces that are nevertheless exposed to the winds ...\(^1\)
The enclosed space of literature is the negative of the infinite space of visual perspective, and its form of logical, causal relations: it shows us how little we can know about what we see. The relationship between Beckett’s rooms and narrative can be understood in the same way. Perspective, point-of-view, and focalization are metaphors used by theorists of narrative precisely because of the kinds of relation they imply: they describe the relation of aspects of the discourse (who is narrating) to events in the story (when and where the narrator is situated). Understanding that Beckett’s closed rooms are attempts to subvert perspective’s infinite space as well as its logic of cause and effect accounts for the long-recognized ways in which Beckett’s work subverts the conventions of fictional narrative. Concepts of aporia and indeterminacy have been marshalled for arguments concluding that in Beckett’s trilogy, in Wolfgang Iser’s succinct formulation, we are presented with ‘narration narrating its own invalidation’.101
While there is little need to descend once more into the ‘verbal labyrinth’ of Beckett’s *Trilogy* so patiently mapped out by Leslie Hill, there is a need to show that some of the discontinuities of this labyrinth are produced by the opposition between closed rooms and open landscape, between writing in the dark and seeing in space. Molloy opens with Molloy stating: ‘I am in my mother’s room’. The association between writing in a closed room, rather than in the boundless space and endless time of Watt’s painted *space*, is established from the outset. Writing for Molloy threatens the loss of visibility: ‘A little more and you’ll go blind’ (4). At the same time, he can only relate the story of A and C because he has seen them from an ‘observation post’: visibility is the condition for his narrative authority (10). But what, he asks himself, ‘do I mean by seeing and seeing again?’ What are the logics of time and space according to which he can say: ‘A and C I never saw again?’ (12). What they are not, at least, is the narrative logic set up by Molloy opening with Molloy writing in a room. This opening scene of writing, narrated in the first person, takes place at an unspecified time in the future as regards the events narrated. But the discourse ends with Molloy stranded in the forest, an event narrated in the third person. There is no resolvable temporal relationship between beginning and end, and Molloy’s first-person narration cannot be related in time to what he relates. In this, as Steven Connor observes, *Molloy* ‘disobeys the principal rule of first person narration, which is that the life of the narrated character can be projected forward until it joins with the life of the narrator’; that is, projected forward to the moment where Molloy is writing in his mother’s room. Indeed, *Molloy* cannot be ‘projected’ into a coherent space and time—coherent in the sense of being able to be visually diagrammed—a failure that shows how writing can figure a resistance between text and image by short-circuiting the optical metaphors through which we conceptualize narrative form.
Moran’s story also begins with writing in a dark room, and what is written in that room undermines the causal relationships of open space as ‘disposed to lead the eyes gently to the camp, as in a painting by an old master’ (160). Like Molloy, Moran also claims to eschew vision: ‘Some apply the eye, I the ear, to key holes’ (128–9). The only visual image he obtains of Molloy is an inner vision, where he obscurely appears ‘without being black, of a dark colour’ (118). Yet Moran shares what Molloy calls his ‘visual needs’ (84). Molloy can only see with one eye, but with it he sees the world ‘in a way inordinately formal, though I was far from being an aesthete, or an artist’ (49). Vision can only grasp the world through mistakenly formalizing it, as in Antonello’s imprisoning of Saint Sebastian in a world of pure space, but this is not the world produced by the writers Molloy and Moran. After journeying through space and failing to find Molloy, Moran returns to write in his room and break the frame narrative convention of the latter half of the novel. The discourse ends with Moran claiming to write: ‘It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining’ (184). The first two sentences are those which opened his story. Once again, beginning and end cannot be connected in a spatio-temporal relationship of cause and effect. Instead of writing being the representation of logical cause and effect relationships related to a narrator through a ‘perspective’, Molloy presents writing as that which cannot be expressed in terms of relationships it exposes to be essentially visual modes of thinking.
If Molloy refused to be an ‘aesthete, or an artist’, for the eponymous writer of *Malone Dies*, ‘[a]esthetics are therefore on my side, at least a certain kind of aesthetics’. One element of Malone’s aesthetics, John Bolin has argued, is his use of diary writing to create ‘multiple fictional frames’ and to deploy the technique of ‘composition en abyme’ drawn from that master of *mise-en-abyme* narratives, André Gide. The narrative setting of Malone in his room frames those he writes about, the Lamberts and Saposcat. Malone’s room contains a different kind of frame: the window frame out of which he gazes, his ‘porthole’ (64). He uses the metaphor of the window to express his relationship to the world of the story he is telling about Macmann: ‘the others are there too, or at their windows, like me, but on their feet’ (104). His window is a frame looking onto a world and a frame shared with a world; it is ‘whatever I want it to be, up to a point’ (64). But it is also a ‘window that sometimes looks as if it were painted on a wall, like Tiepolo’s ceiling at Würzburg, what a tourist I must have been’ (62–3). Malone here borrows one of Beckett’s own memories from his time in Germany in the 1930s, but this allusion has its own significance for Malone’s aesthetics of framing. Tiepolo’s ceiling was a work of *trompe l’oeil* giving the illusion of infinitely receding height: Malone’s frame, and its use as a metaphor to express the relationship between different narrative worlds, is likened to an illusion, a mere trick of the eye. One optical metaphor serves to disprove another, or at least emphasize its mere metaphoricity: that different levels of narrative can be conceptualized as framing one another. At the conclusion of the novel, the difference between the worlds of framed narratives is disproved in the most violent way, with Lemeul raising his hatchet, hammer, and stick in attack, causing Malone’s writing to peter out: ‘never anything / there / any more’ (119).
Malone’s analogy between looking out of his porthole and looking into a world he has created recalls another metaphorical use of the frame: that of Dürer’s window. Dürer’s theoretical writings, about which Beckett had taken notes in the 1930s, included an infamous representation of single-point perspective as analogous to looking through a window frame onto a naked female body. If this unwittingly (or perhaps all too wittingly) figured the perspectival gaze in sexual terms, it can also serve to highlight Malone’s peculiar fantasy of a gaze preceding sexualization and the object relations it requires. Malone longs for the grey of his room, ‘a grey going murky and dim, thickening is perhaps the word, until all things are blotted out except the window which seems in a manner of speaking to be my umbilicus, so that I say to myself, When it too goes out I shall know more or less where I am’ (50).

Malone wants to regress to an embryonic stage before vision structures a sexual relation between male subject and female object, where sight is in contrast what conjoins subject and object. Vision is imagined as a corporeal connection that is ambiguously nourishing and necessary, a prelude to Malone actually being born and discovering where he is. But Malone ‘shall never get born and therefore never get dead’; he is an ‘old foetus’ who will drop right into the ‘charnel-house’ (52). In a perversion of reproduction he will self-generate his own ‘little creature’ and ‘eat it’ (53). Malone attempts to rethink sight as a corporeally nourishing relationship between self and other as a prelude to a form of rebirth, and thinking in terms of vision as not instituting a sexualized subject–object separation takes him back to a pre-Oedipal body. But this body is not to be the site of a new form of relation: it is a body that has never been properly born, which cannot found a new cycle of procreation. Returning vision to the body does not lead to the birth of a new way of seeing or relation. Instead, in a connection that shows how turning away from painting involves turning towards the body, it leads to a body described to Duthuit in 1949 as what both realist and abstract painting avoid: the body of ‘the impossible that we are, impossible living creatures, impossibly alive, of whom neither the time of the body, nor the investment by space are … to be retained’.107

The first draft of Malone Dies was completed on 30 May 1948.108 With his planned series complete, Beckett turned to drama, first writing Eleutheria and then Waiting for Godot, completed in January 1949. It was during this time that he
began a correspondence with Duthuit that by August 1948 was already groping towards the conceptualization of necessity that would appear in ‘Three Dialogues’: ‘Not to have to express oneself, nor to get involved with whatever kind of maximum, in one’s numberless, valueless, achievementless world; that is a game worth trying, all the same, a necessity worth trying and one which will never work, if that works’.109 However, when in March 1949 Duthuit wrote to prompt Beckett into writing for a third time about Bram van Velde’s work, Beckett’s view of his (p.52) work had changed. He now admitted they were ‘a long way apart from each other’; his painting did not share the ‘one and the same stuckness’ with Beckett’s writing; it did not show ‘fidelity to the prison-house’ as Beckett claimed it did in ‘Peintres de l’empêchement’.110 Now Beckett wrote that although van Velde shows awareness of the ‘criterion of worthwhile modern poetry, awareness of the vanished object’ that explores ‘the only terrain accessible to the point … the no man’s land that he projects round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation’, his painting, with its periodic emergences of hands, eyes, and body parts, depicts the struggle to escape this zone rather than the exhaustion caused by embracing its resistance. This refusal to give up object relations is described as ‘the artist rubbing himself, more and more wheedlingly as you say, against his furniture, out of terror of being abandoned by it. To which, as an alternative, we find ourselves faced with the pure manstuprations [masturbations] of Orphic and abstract art. What if we simply stopped altogether having erections? As in life. Enough sperm about the place’.111 As in *Malone Dies*, whose narrator suffers an obsession with touching his ‘chattels personal’ and ‘furniture’ (21–2), visual representation is described here in terms of sexualized bodily acts. Realism’s attachment to its furniture and abstraction’s imagined self-sufficiency both stem from the compulsions of an erection that can only produce art as a waster bodily discharge. An erection is nothing if not an act expressive only of ‘its own impossibility, its own obligation’, and Beckett’s question is rhetorical since he sees no escape from this impossible compulsion. A poem Beckett writes in which Demosthenes buggers Cicero might seem like scatological doggerel, but according to the logic of the erection as a metaphor for the obligation to express, we can see it suggesting that this necessity might at least lead to a project of intellectual exhaustion: ‘The intellectual stock /
From his most heroic cock / Flowed soupily out / (Flowed soupily out)'.

Beckett thus turns to compulsive bodily acts as exemplifying a form of expression that expresses nothing but its necessity, a form he now admits to Duthuit cannot be realized in painting. In doing so, he concludes by admitting he has begun to ‘write about me’. His letter ends with Beckett describing himself ‘in front of a blank page’ where he can ‘see a little better what has to be done, and by what means. It will be a boundary work, a passage work, in which as a result the old rubbish can still be some use, while the dying is going on. A long slow fading’. From a rejection of (p.53) painting and a turn to corporeal metaphors for describing the art he is trying to achieve, Beckett suddenly shifts to proposing a new ‘work’ of his own, a ‘long slow fading’ drawing on his old ‘rubbish’—a proposal that sounds like what would come to be the opening of *The Unnamable*. 
Duthuit’s reply was to try once more to get Beckett ‘to write something about Bram’, but Beckett again fell into describing a possible work of his own.114 After tortuously attempting to offer a theoretical definition of ‘expression in the absence of relations of whatever kind’, Beckett admits the paradox that to do so would be to make a new form of ‘relation with this impossibility, this lack’. Here Beckett moves beyond his earlier claim that in painting ‘the thing is impossible’, that modernist painting involves probing the limits of its medium to represent this impossibility, and beyond seeing this process as an explanation for his writing.115 In ‘Three Dialogues’, modernist painting is paradoxically described as that which represents its own impossibility; the definition of an act which can express a lack of relation being an ‘act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation’ (145). If in ‘Three Dialogues’ the inability to get beyond this paradox is compared to a scene of muteness before an abstract image — ‘what is the coloured plane, that was not here before’ (145) — in this letter Beckett comes up with a different scene. Asking himself ‘why the canvas does not stay blank’ — why and how such an art takes any form at all — he can only ‘invoke this unintelligible, unchallengeable need to splash colour on it, even if that means vomiting one’s whole being’.116 This description of an art which refuses to make its own failure a new term of occasion as a compulsive act of vomiting, rather than a coloured plane that cannot be described in language and which ‘seems to have nothing to do with art’ (145) — a rather conventional description of abstraction — does something different than ‘Three Dialogues’: it suggests that the appropriate analogies for the necessity of Beckett’s literary form might be found in the body, rather than in modernist painting’s mute images. That these are Beckett’s own concerns are admitted at the end of this letter: ‘bear in mind I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else’.117
Two weeks after this letter, on 29 March 1949, Beckett began composing *The Unnamable* across two notebooks that make up the first autograph draft. The first draft of the opening paragraph, although longer than the published version, contains both the opening questions 'Où maintenant, Qui maintenant?', added on the inside flyleaf of the first notebook, and the closing declaration: ‘Cependant je suis obligé de parler. Je ne me tairai jamais. Jamais’. Aside from the opening, the first draft is remarkably close to the published French text, with only minor revisions in a second draft. Therefore the early months of composition can be accurately dated and quite closely correlated with the composition of ‘Three Dialogues’ and Beckett’s correspondence with Duthuit. The opening sections of *The Unnamable* composed in April and May 1949 show questions about the separation of seeing and saying, and the corporealization of vision, informing the novel’s themes. *The Unnamable* opens with a speaker sitting in the dark where ‘tears stream down my cheeks from my unblinking eyes’. He is compelled to see, just as he suffers the ‘compulsion’ to speak (12), but he only knows ‘my eyes are open because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly’ (14): the compulsion of embodied sight is revealed by the discharges that make it possible. This is a circumscribed seeing: ‘I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I only see what appears close beside me, what I best see I see ill’ (7). This ill seeing is embodied seeing, the opposite of sight driven by what Beckett in ‘Three Dialogues’ calls the ‘possessiveness’ of abstraction and representation alike, yet embodied sight is to be suffered: his eyes ‘must be as red as live coals’ (11).
While *The Unnamable* opens with at least some certainties about what its titular creature sees, it is less certain about what he says: his voice ‘issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine’ (18). In the manuscript, this continues ‘[comment?] je ne peux pas l’arrêter, [comment?] je ne peux pas l’empêcher, de me déchirer, de me secouer, de m’assiéger’ (‘Notebook 1’, 36). This was translated as: ‘I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me’ (18). Slightly lost in translation is the significance of ‘empêcher’, a key concept in Beckett’s thinking on visual art since Proust—the van Veldes were, in Beckett’s fantasy, ‘peintres de l’empêchment’. This passage was written before 20 May 1949 (‘Notebook 1’, 41) and Beckett’s correspondence shows he was thinking about the concept of ‘empêchment’ at this time. On 26 May 1949, Beckett responded to a letter from Duthuit discussing Beckett’s previous art criticism saying that the only thing ‘worth keeping’ from them was ‘the painting/preventedness motif [le motif peinture empêchment] immediately retracted, smartened up, its hair parted as neatly as a young arse [italics (p.55) original]’. If Beckett was reaffirming that visual art could not escape the necessity of painting what prevented sight from actually seeing, the voice in *The Unnamable* was being figured as something that could not be prevented. By virtue of the voice being ‘not mine’, unlike the sight which is assuredly his due to the tears it causes, the voice has a necessity which opens up a different mode of relation in the novel.
That voice, rather than sight, was to assume prominence in *The Unnamable* at this early stage is suggested by Beckett’s next letter to Duthuit on 1 June 1949, where he informed him: ‘I wrote the last page of the book I am working on, whereas I am only on my 30th. I am not proud of myself. But the outcome is already so little in doubt, whatever the writhings that lie between me and it, of which I have only the vaguest ideas’. This ‘ending’ is pasted into the back of the draft’s first notebook, a passage opening ‘Ma voix, la voix, mais voilà ce que je l’entends avoir bien’, and ending ‘pour bien d’entendre, avant de mourir d’être mort.’ (*Notebook 1*, inserted flyleaf 1v; inside back cover). This recalls Beckett’s statement that this book would be about a ‘dying going on’, but the confidence expressed about this ending vanished the next day, as it was crossed out and a new section continuing the main draft in the notebook dated ‘2.6.49’ opens with the discovery of a new task for the voice: ‘Curieuse idée, d’ailleurs, et fort sujette à caution, que celle d’une tâche à accomplir, pour avant de pouvoir être tranquille. Curieuse tâche que d’avoir parler de moi soi’ (*Notebook 1*, 44). In English, this reads: ‘Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists of speaking of oneself’ (22). The grammatical slip in the manuscript, using ‘moi’ instead of ‘soi’, suggests the significance of the discovery of ‘ma voix’, and the passage continues: ‘N’ayant que ma voix, que la voix, il peut sembler naturel, une fois avalée l’idée d’obligation, que j’y voie une chose quelconque à dire’ (*Notebook 1*, 44); ‘Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something. But is it possible?’ (22). Ambiguity as to the source of voice—it ‘issues from me’ but it is ‘not mine’; it is ‘my voice, the voice’—makes speaking of oneself always speaking not about oneself. This question asks whether the voice, rather than painting, might better be able to carry out the obligation Beckett declares in ‘Three Dialogues’ that Bram van Velde avoids: ‘the obligation to express’.
The shared terms in which painting and the voice are described in ‘Three Dialogues’ and the drafts for *The Unnamable* compound the sense that reflection upon the former was being abandoned in favour of writing (p.56) about the latter. When writing to Duthuit a week later on 9 June 1949 to finalize the text of ‘Three Dialogues’, Beckett admitted that he now believed there could never exist ‘a painting that is poor, undisguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever, a painting whose necessity does not seek to justify itself’. A painting whose necessity seeks to justify itself is the opposite of the kind of art demanded at the end of ‘Three Dialogues’: art as an act which expresses only ‘its own impossibility, its own obligation’. What such an act might be like was figured by acts of bodily compulsion. In response to Duthuit’s suggestion that painting could offer a ‘window on the future’—expressing some form of historical necessity—Beckett wrote he almost responded by vomiting ‘bile mixed with leucocytes’. In response to Duthuit’s argument that abstract painting provided a truth about time and space evaded in realism, Beckett argued both are united in the search for some form of a ‘maximum’, and that faced with having to choose, he would rather ‘die of starvation’. Alys Moody has argued that in ‘Three Dialogues’ Beckett uses ‘the figure of starvation in the promotion of a new art without an object’; it also figures the kind of necessity that such an art as an act would have—impossible and obligatory. As Moody argues of Beckett’s work more broadly, the compulsions of an impossible body now come to figure a certain kind of autonomy for aesthetic form, and they develop out of a conviction of the historical necessity of modernist visual form.
The attempt to starve the unnameable creature of sight, however, would not be so simple, and the relationship between the eye and the voice becomes, after these opening sections, one of the main themes of the novel. When Worm appears, he is a creature of sound, breath, and movement, in contrast to a still gaze. His head grows out of his ear, while ‘they’ observe him through their ‘little hole’ (70). But Worm grows a ‘great black and white eye, moist, it’s to weep with’ (74–5), an eye which is ‘hard of hearing’ (76). A remarkable drawing in the manuscript during this section about Worm illustrates the novel’s understanding of embodied sight, separated from sound. Page 40 of the second manuscript notebook opens ‘toujours été le cachot’, corresponding to the passage in English where Worm contemplates his imprisonment: ‘They’ll clap me in a dungeon, I’m in a dungeon, I’ve always been in a dungeon’. In the dungeon, his ‘open eyes’ return, and his voice fails: ‘it’s the voice stopping, it’s the voice failing to carry me, what can it matter, perhaps it’s important, the result is the same’. At this point in the manuscript, four (p.57) crossed-out lines indicate an impasse in composition, the scored-through lines ending in a little drawing of a body in a circle. On the facing page appears the only major drawing in the manuscript, a drawing of a homunculus trapped inside the head of a creature whose face only has eyes and whose body ends in long tentacles. The failing of the voice, leading to an impasse in composition, leads to a visual image of sight as a form of imprisonment, sight itself as an art of confinement, rather than the painting of artists like the van Veldes. The text after the drawing describes this confinement: ‘They shut me up here, now they’re trying to get me out, to shut me up somewhere else, or to let me go, they are capable of putting me out just to see what I’d do’ (85). And Worm is indeed released from his prison, with the voice restoring the text’s compositional flow—for now.
The homunculus drawing connects the figuring of autonomous sight not only with the concerns of Beckett’s art criticism, but also with a representative of the longer history of modernity in which this art criticism is situated: René Descartes. The allusion is not textual, but pictorial. (p.58) Descartes’s mind–body dualism notoriously led to the positing of a homunculus inside the brain, located at the pineal gland. Beckett owned an illustrated anthology of Descartes’s writings entitled *Descartes: choix de textes*. It contained a drawing which showed the physiology produced by Cartesian dualism: the eyes receive rays from an object through the cornea that are refracted onto the retina, which then transports and emits them to the pineal gland sitting inside the brain (Fig. 1.2).
That Descartes is a presence behind this image of embodied vision as a form of confinement is further suggested by a note on the inside cover of the first notebook drawn from Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764): ‘A man that disbelieves his own existence, is surely as unfit to be reasoned with, as a man that believes he is made of glass’ (‘Notebook 1’, back inside cover).127 This image was used in the first of Descartes’s *Meditations* (1641), where he worries his founding doubt about his own existence likens him to ‘madmen’ who believe ‘their heads are made from earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass’.128 Reid uses this image to dismiss Cartesian scepticism and the dualism it involves, and it seems Beckett was drawn to it for the same reasons while writing *The Unnamable*. The man made of glass is both the subject of modern rational scepticism...
an incorporeal creature of light and vision—and the irrational, transparent, and therefore imprisoned object of that vision. Beckett’s remark that another representative of rational optimism, Leibniz, is ‘a great cod, but full of splendid little pictures’, and his diagram of Freud’s map of the mind in his notes on the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), suggest that such acts of pictorialization were part of Beckett’s response to psychological and philosophical thought. Following Anthony Uhlmann’s tracing of Beckett’s use of the ‘philosophical image’, this might be called Beckett’s use of the ‘philosophical picture’. Philosophy could be pictured just like pictures could be philosophized, the way that Renaissance perspective and Cézanne’s landscapes revealed a historical change in understandings of the relationship between body, space, and time. However, Beckett’s homunculus and *The Unnamable* (p.59) (p.60) more broadly revise Beckett’s version of the history of art that previously privileged the ‘still’ image that could not be translated into words, and that saw the fidgeting body as an intrusion into an ideally static world. But this assumes that sight and sound can be separated. However, as Beckett’s pictorial allusions show, this is just one final mutated form of a modern mind–body dualism. The manuscript of *The Unnamable* shows the novel works through the impasse reached in ‘Three Dialogues’ by recognizing that the impossibility of Beckett’s ideas about visual art and the paradoxes about the body and the senses produced by his art historical necessities could become the subject matter of his fiction.
Once Worm disappears, sight is once more opposed to sound: ‘Perhaps it would be better to be blind, the blind hear better’; though on the other hand, ‘there’s great fun to be had with an eye’ (89). This oscillation between pure sound and pure sight continues throughout the rest of the text. It is ‘curious how this eye invites inspection, demands sympathy, solicits attention, implores assistance’, yet at the same time this is ‘[b]alls, all balls, I don’t believe in the eye either’. It would be a ‘merciful coincidence, when you think what it would be, a world without spectator, and vice versa, brr! No spectator then, and better still no spectacle, good riddance’ (91–2). Towards the end of the text, there is a marked change in the form of the prose. After a sequence of extended sentences, the last almost six pages long, wherein the voice is ‘in words, made of words, others’ words’ (104), there follows a marked change of rhythm, where ‘[s]omething has changed nevertheless’ (108). Sprawling sentences are replaced by short imperative resolutions: ‘Assume ... Situate ... Carry ... Evoke ... Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness’ (107–8). If these sentences feature something that has changed to avoid expressiveness, that would express, in ‘B’s’ words, that there is nothing to express; it is a change manifested in the sonic realm of rhythm, and this in turn suggests that vision too might be restored: ‘Open up, open up, you’ll be alright, you’ll see’ (109). But this escape from expression is not to be: ‘nothing, I see nothing, well that is a disappointment, I was hoping for something better than that, is that what it is to be unable to lose yourself’ (110).
The Unnamable does not end its attempt to free the ear from the eye in a banal ‘aporia, pure and simple’ (1). The visual cannot be expelled because it is ‘thinking, it’s vision, shreds of old visions, that’s all you can see’ (124). One of the voice’s final recollections is a memory of ‘all the words they taught me’: ‘they were on lists, with images opposite, I must have forgotten them, I must have mixed them up, these nameless images, these imageless names’ (127). As the novel winds to a close, connections and separations between images and names are something learned, rather than given; historical, rather than a timeless condition. The voice has one final image (p. 61) of this separation and mixture in a ‘rock’: ‘it’s an image, those are words, it’s a body, it’s not I’ (130). The paratactic syntax of the phrase lists what is to come in Beckett’s future writing, and like in much of that future work, the form of the prose is doing the expressive work. Image, words, body, and self are related in parataxis, a form of relation which presents concepts as necessarily related whilst refusing to state the terms of those relations. If one culmination of Beckett’s engagement with art was the conclusion that seeing and saying can neither be united nor separated, and that this was not an absolute truth but a finitely historical condition, these insights are present in the turn to the voice at the end of The Unnamable. Or as the voice ruefully admits: it turns out, after all, that ‘we must have eyeballs’ (124).
The Unnamable was not the end of Beckett’s expression of the relationship between sight and sound in prose which increasingly turns, as Daniel Albright has written, into ‘image pieces that don’t assemble into anything intelligible’.¹³¹ But it did mark the end of Beckett’s need to situate this process in relation to the history of art and the formal necessities he saw it governed by. Instead, technological media like film and television would be used to explore questions of medium specificity and the changing historicity of the body. The way in which Beckett’s engagement with visual art never quite escaped from modernism’s impossible attempt to separate seeing and saying is shown by an edition of Fizzles/Foirades produced by Jasper Johns in 1976, an artist’s book for which Beckett only supplied the text, taking no further part in its production.¹³² The engravings chosen by Johns bear little illustrative relationship to Beckett’s work. They are almost all drawn from one earlier painting, Untitled (1972), itself part of a series of works that ironically refer back to earlier phases of visual modernism that turn to pure vision alone: Monet’s Water Lilies and Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism. A second group of prints show separated body parts accompanied by the different names for each body part in French and English. The prints draw on some of Johns’s main themes: the limitation of vision in never being able to obtain a full image of ourselves without reflection; the way in which we divide our senses into disparate body parts yet experience a unity of the senses; and the relationship of these understandings of the body to visual modernism’s separation of text and image. Johns’s illustrations are a reading of the Fizzles which show the same themes in Beckett’s text, themes which are quoted from earlier works: the first fizzle mourns the impossibility of the voice The Unnamable fails to find; the second remembers Murphy’s legs; the third recalls the ravenous eye that roamed across the Trilogy. Johns’s work turns to strategies of (p.62) quotation and parody to point towards, but never quite move beyond, the impasse of a historicist modernism that equated autonomy of media and the senses with interpretative and social autonomy. If the latter half of this equation only received attention during the 1940s in Beckett’s engagement with art, it was central throughout the work of a very different writer who nevertheless saw in the consequences of the same analogy a lesson for the social autonomy of the novel in the age of the Cold War: William Gaddis.
Notes:


(4) Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London, 1983), 70


(10) *Disjecta*, 145.


(14) Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London, 2009), 3
(15) 2 February 1937, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.


(18) 22 November 1936, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.


(21) 18 December 1936, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.

(22) 13 November 1936, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.


(25) 6 December 1936, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.

(26) 26 November 1936, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.


(29) 5 February 1937, Beckett, ‘German Diaries’.


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