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Title	The beauty of failure: Errancy as a methodology in the works of Samuel Beckett, Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats
Author(s)	Jones, Kristin
Publication Date	2017-11-29
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7067">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7067</a>

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**The Beauty of Failure:  
Errancy as a Methodology in the Works of Samuel Beckett,  
Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats**

**By Kristin Jones**

BA, MA in English

A Research Dissertation submitted in fulfilment for the Degree of PhD through the  
National University of Ireland, Galway

**Primary Research Supervisor:** Professor Lionel Pilkington

**Submitted to:** Discipline of English  
The College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies  
National University of Ireland, Galway

**Date:** November 2017

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**Declaration:**

I, Kristin Jones, certify that the Thesis is all my own work and that I have not obtained a degree in this University or elsewhere on the basis of any of this work.

### **Abstract/ Summary of Contents:**

This thesis argues that Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) creates not only an aesthetic of failure but also a methodology of failure that permeates his works and intensifies as he matures as a writer. I contend that the impetus for this methodology is nurtured by Beckett's life-long engagement with the visual arts, painting in particular. In turn, his commitment to and valorisation of purposeful failure by worsening and distorting images and structures of syntax and performance enable Beckett to interrogate representation and abstraction, and manipulate the role and effect his works have on spectators and actors. Finally, this dissertation argues that Beckett's methodology of failure can be applied to the works of two major Mary Swanzy (1882-1978) and Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957), in order to examine how image and the materiality of the paint and the canvas are in constant competition for the spectator's gaze.

Chapter one offers a detailed analysis of Beckettian failure, as something someone does, not something one is, in order to show how errancy propels his works towards abstraction without becoming fully abstract. Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats act as visual counterpoints as they demonstrate how 'vaguening' images in a remarkably similar way allows the materiality of medium to take on elevated importance. All three artists purposefully engage with and then fail the technical requirements of both abstraction and realism. Chapter two advances a detailed account of Beckett's engagement with painting and painters. It argues that this engagement reflects his preoccupation with failure and technically incompetent works, which reveals how both his audience and his performers should be affected by works of art (his included).

Chapter three argues that Jack B. Yeats uses purposeful failure, or what Beckett later calls an effort to “fail better,” as he puts it in *Worstward Ho*, to highlight the materiality of paint and canvas. The competition between the materiality of paint and canvas and the image portrayed reveals a violent argument or battle that takes place on the canvas itself. The images created by Yeats fail to fully emerge, showing the inherent failure of expression in painting, which is, as Beckett explains to Georges Duthuit, a failure to be able to express the relation between the sensory world and the world of the artist’s mind. Chapter four provides background on the often overlooked Irish painter Mary Swanzy. I examine the Dublin public’s resistance to modernist painting and argue that she contributed significantly to Irish modernist painting. This chapter also contends that utilising Beckett’s methodology of failure as a guiding principle in analysing Swanzy’s work demonstrates the similarities between the two artists, especially in their post-World War II works.

## Editorial Note

All letters from Beckett come from the following [volumes](#) unless otherwise noted in the footnotes:

Fehsenfeld, Martha Dow and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1: 1929-1989*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Craig, George, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2: 1941-1956*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Craig, George, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 3: 1957-1965*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Craig, George, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 4: 1966-1989*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

This thesis uses the following abbreviations in the footnotes:

*CDW* *The Complete Dramatic Works* by Samuel Beckett. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

*DTF* *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* by James Knowlson. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

*SB* Samuel Beckett

*TM* Thomas MacGreevy

This thesis uses 7<sup>th</sup> Edition MLA Style referencing system, which includes Author page number or Title page number where author is unknown or where there are multiple works by a single author. The abbreviations of the works above as well the format of in-text citation for correspondence (which includes correspondents, dates, and volume and page number from the letters), and the in-text citations for Beckett's German Diary manuscripts from the University of Reading Beckett Archive, are the only deviations from this style.

### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Lionel Pilkington, for all of his guidance throughout the demanding PhD process. Our discussions, the feedback he gave me, and his positivity and support throughout kept me going, even when times were difficult. His experience and expertise were vital throughout the research and writing process, and I am very grateful that he took on my project.

I would also like to thank Dr. Julian Campbell for his insight on Mary Swanzy, and for taking the time to answer my questions. In addition, I would like to thank Liz Cullinane for sharing her research and interest in Swanzy. I am also grateful to Dr. Róisín Kennedy for introducing me to Dr. Campbell and Ms. Cullinane and for her work on Swanzy. Without their knowledge and support, this thesis would not have been possible.

A very special thanks is given to the National University of Ireland, Galway for allowing me the opportunity to carry out my research. The funding during the last year of my PhD and funding to travel for research and to conferences internationally was of great help. I would also like to thank the University, and especially the English Department, for the teaching appointments throughout my time as a PhD student, and for the EXPLORE grant that allowed me to create a website for first-year university English students. Additional thanks goes to Dr. Dermot Burns for his continued support and mentorship.

I am also grateful for my internal and external examiners, Professor Daniel Carey and Dr. Derval Tubridy. Their suggestions, insights and feedback made this dissertation much stronger. I would like to extend a very special thanks to Professor Carey for working with me through the final stages before submission. I can say that I am very proud to hand in this dissertation, because of their expertise.

Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband, David. I would not have made it to the end of this, at many times, arduous process without him. He was always there to offer whatever I needed, whether that was a shoulder cry on, another pair of eyes to read a draft, or someone to clean the apartment or pick up groceries. Thank you, and you are the best.

Kristin Jones

*National University of Ireland, Galway*

2017

## Introduction

“[R]ight to the end there will only be beauty of attempt and failure.”  
- *Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 2 March 1949*

The central argument of this thesis is that Beckett creates not only an aesthetic of failure but also a methodology of failure that permeates his oeuvre from his earliest works, but becomes more and more pronounced after 1945. My thesis contends that the impetus for this methodology of failure comes from Beckett’s engagement with the visual arts, painting in particular. This valorisation of purposeful failure enables Beckett to interrogate representation and abstraction and manipulate the role and effect his works have on spectators and actors. Finally, this dissertation argues that Beckett’s methodology can be used as a tool and guiding principle in understanding the works of two of the most innovative Irish artists: Mary Swanzy (1882-1978) and Jack B. Yeats (1882-1978).

### **Painting as a More Progressive Form than Literature**

Beckett, in a letter to Axel Kaun of 9 July 1937, stated that the purpose of the written word was to try to see what exists beneath or beyond language by boring holes in it. Beckett wrote that “To drill one hole after another into [language], until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through—I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.”<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of drilling holes in language suggests not merely the destruction of the medium, but the slow dismantling and torture of language until it

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<sup>1</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

bleeds or oozes out whatever foul substance that keeps it alive. This is also echoed in his statement that “language is best used where it is most efficiently abused.”<sup>2</sup>

Beckett saw language and its conventions, grammar and style, as a hindrance to expression. He realised the problems and constrictions of language, and spent the whole of his career grappling with the currency of words. Beckett described many of his complex aesthetic misgivings about language by comparing literature to other art forms that have abandoned the written word:

[I]s literature alone to remain behind on that old foul, road long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically sacred contained within the unnature of the word that does not belong to the elements of the other arts?<sup>3</sup>

His concern with the unnatural characteristics of the word highlights the impossibility, for him, of any kind of naturalism or expression in literature. To Beckett, language and words are unnatural in a way that the visual and the sonic are not. He explained his frustration with words and the forms and structures that they inherently imply and embody: grammar, style, meaning, semantics and expression. One of the most striking aspects of Beckett’s letter to Kaun is its suggestion that, relatively early<sup>4</sup> in Beckett’s career, he realised that painting is ahead of the literary arts in terms of getting to what hides beneath language. He also, significantly, wrote this letter towards the end of his travels through Germany in 1936-37. The primary focus of his journey through Germany,

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<sup>2</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

<sup>3</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol 1, 518.

<sup>4</sup> At the time that this letter was written, Beckett was 31 and not yet author of the works for which he became well known.

a little over two years prior to the outbreak of World War II, was to view works of art that were housed there. Luckily, he was able to view many works before they were confiscated and/or destroyed by the Nazis. Mark Nixon's book-length study of Beckett's German diaries, points out that these diaries "illuminate the creative influence this exposure had on his writing."<sup>5</sup> Beckett's German diaries are composed of six notebooks written during his travels in Germany in 1936-37. As Nixon notes, these diaries are testament that the writer took a keen and in-depth interest in visual art, which is shown by the sheer depth and breadth of his writing about art, especially painting, that the diaries showcase. Beckett wrote intensely about art during this period; he even considered creating visual art himself.<sup>6</sup> But in the end, as Nixon points out, these encounters with art "enabled Beckett to clarify, shape and formulate his aesthetic preoccupations, and thus find new approaches to his writing."<sup>7</sup> This dissertation argues that a visual medium would aid Beckett in, as he wrote to Kaun, "somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words"<sup>8</sup> to create a "literature of the unword"<sup>9</sup> that Beckett deemed as "so desirable."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nixon 133.

<sup>6</sup> Nixon 132.

<sup>7</sup> Nixon 132.

<sup>8</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

<sup>9</sup> The Ruby Cohn translation of this letter in *Disjecta* uses "unword" and the *Letters* uses "nonword." They mean essentially the same thing, but for Beckett unword is more fitting, because it has the connotations of undoing something. Beckett's relationship with undoing is explored in S.E. Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (1985).

<sup>10</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

As stated earlier, Beckett recognised that painting and music are more progressive vehicles in the effort to unword art forms.<sup>11</sup> Beckett echoed these sentiments later in a 1960s interview with Lawrence Harvey. Beckett asked rhetorically, “What do you do when ‘I can’t’ meets ‘I must’? ... Painting and Music have so much better a chance.”<sup>12</sup> These feelings also resonate in Beckett’s claim to French art critic and confidant Georges Duthuit in “Three Dialogues” (1949).<sup>13</sup> Beckett stated, “that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”<sup>14</sup> This attitude is also evident in the final lines of *The Unnamable*: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”<sup>15</sup> The artist faces the dilemma of the impossibility of meaningful creative expression alongside the need to create whenever he tries to produce a piece of art. The fact that painting has “better a chance” of existing in a world where expression and relation are impossible suggests Beckett’s inclination toward the visual arts over the literary. For Beckett, the freedom from the rules and rigid technique of grammar and style is liberating for a

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Butler’s monograph *Early Modernism, Literature, Music and Painting in Europe* explores the interconnected nature of literature, music and the visual arts. His book highlights the interaction between the arts during the early modernist period. He traces the fundamental and interlinked re-examination of the language of the arts brought about by Matisse, Picasso, Schoenberg, and many others, which led to radically new techniques, such as atonality, cubism, and collage. Butler, like Beckett before him, breaks away from an overtly literary focus when considering art.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey 248-249.

<sup>13</sup> Originally titled “Three Dialogues: Tal Coat—Masson—Van Velde”, *Transition Forty-Nine*, No. 5 (December 1949): 97-103 (University of Reading MS 3107). This was republished in 1965 by John Calder as “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit” and accompanies Beckett’s monograph *Proust*. It was reprinted in *Disjecta* 1983 as “Three Dialogues.”

<sup>14</sup> “Three Dialogues” 148.

<sup>15</sup> *The Unnamable* 414.

painter. The Irish painters Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats agreed. Yeats stated in a rare interview that

There's no book of words, no direction by which you or anyone else can understand all about painting [...] There is no alphabet, no grammar, no rules whatever. Many hopeful sportsmen have tried to invent rules and have always failed.<sup>16</sup>

Painting can break conventions more freely, because it is liberated from words and is not bound by the prison-like constraints of language along with the mechanics that go along with a word-based art form. Likewise, Swanzy created her best work when she resisted technical artistic practice. Art critic for the *Irish Times* Brian Fallon points out that “the original Swanzy's seem to be late, when she deliberately “loosened up” and “threw strict drawing out the French windows.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, once Swanzy stopped trying to create art within the technical constraints of strict drawing rules (much like grammatical rules), she was able to create stronger works of art.

But Beckett did not give up on language and start painting, he realised that “we cannot dismiss [language all at once].”<sup>18</sup> This would be an easy way out. Instead, I argue, Beckett took on the challenge to make his words on the page and bodies on the stage act more like paint on a canvas. By creating works that act like or can be better understood alongside painting, Beckett was able to replace the “paralysingly sacred” word with a more fluid, natural, and changeable form. In his late works, his answer to whether literature must “remain behind” is a firm, “No.” The conclusion that Beckett came to

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Jack Yeats by Eamonn Andrews, 1947.

<sup>17</sup> “Mary, Quite Contrary” 10.

<sup>18</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

from 1945 onward was that only when artists create works that revel in failure, technical and/or thematic, are they doing something that is worthwhile. This viewpoint increasingly makes an impact on Beckett's own work from the mid-1950s onwards.

Beckett's preoccupation with failure in its various manifestations is a strand that runs throughout his works from the start, but becomes more and more concentrated in his post World War II works. His pursuit of failure in his own work parallels a shift in Beckett's personal correspondence about art. Beckett's letters detailing his aesthetic concerns about failure and art begin to dwindle in the 1950s. As his letters become shorter and less revealing, his preoccupation with failure and errancy becomes increasingly resolute in his creative works, both his drama and his prose.<sup>19</sup> The texts that I have chosen for this dissertation are Beckett's later works from the 1970s and 1980s, because both the drama and prose works from this time period are exemplars of Beckett's revalorisation of failure and errancy and his desire to worsen the language and images that he presents. I have chosen to look at the prose work *Worstward Ho* (1983) in detail because it deals with failure and worsening of the image the most directly of all of Beckett's prose texts. The goal and main theme of *Worstward Ho* is to cause the text and images within the text to worsen or to "fail better."<sup>20</sup> This purposeful worsening of the image and technique is congruent with the techniques and themes with which Yeats and Swanny were concerned. His other prose works from this period, such as *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), and *Stirrings Still* (1988), also deal with the theme of failure and are referenced in this thesis to a lesser extent. Beckett's dramatic works from

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<sup>19</sup> See pp. 175-178 of this thesis for a detailed description of this.

<sup>20</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

this period are also paradigms of his increasing concern with errancy and worsening of the image.

The fact that a play incorporates various visual elements and techniques, such as tableaux, set design, lighting, and costume, make works for theatre especially apt for comparison with painting due to the congruous visual nature of both mediums. What is significant to note is the way the images in Beckett's plays affect the spectator in an analogous way to the way Yeats and Swanzy's images do. These works are increasingly difficult to interpret and comment upon, and they frustrate the spectator with both technique and theme. This difficulty is often cultivated by an errancy of technique and a purposeful vagueness and obscuring of the image. I have also used some examples from Beckett's forays into television for this reason. I have chosen the works that connect most clearly with the chosen paintings and that also show Beckett's cultivation of failure most directly. Because Beckett exhibits an interest in failure throughout his oeuvre, the textual and dramatic examples are not exhaustive. His fixation on failure and the image is represented in other works from this period as well as earlier works to lesser degree.

#### **Literature Review:**

Failure is something that Beckett was intensely interested in, and it has received some attention from literary critics. Existing studies often focus on the failure of words to create meaning as well as the idea of human failure in general. In "Postmodernism and Beckett's Aesthetics of Failure," Laura Cerrato argues that Beckett's affinity with failure is what makes Beckett a postmodernist. She writes, "Human effort to create is doomed to failure. Most of Beckett's work deals with this impossibility [...] It is mainly this

aesthetics of failure that links him with postmodernism.”<sup>21</sup> Critics C.J Ackerly and S.E. Gontarski refer to the failure of “body-mind synchronization” as well as the failure of language and memory that abound in the Beckett canon.<sup>22</sup> Failure certainly became a precondition of worthwhile art as Beckett matured as a writer. As Peggy Phelan points out, “For Beckett, failure preceded and exceeded achievement; failure was guaranteed.”<sup>23</sup> In many of these critical pieces, failure is pointed out in relation to thematic devices, such as Godot’s failure to arrive, the bodily failures of Clov and Hamm and countless other Beckettian characters, Mouth’s failure to stop the “steady stream,”<sup>24</sup> Winnie’s failure to remember and so on. These studies often situate Beckettian failure as a negative outcome in that it is something that Beckett was forced into. While Beckett saw failure in the creative process as inevitable, the main function of failure in his works is an exciting and ironically positive concept. He succinctly revealed this in a letter to aspiring writer Matti Megged. Beckett wrote, “life in failure can be anything but dismal at the best, whereas there is nothing more exciting for the writer, or richer in unexploited expressive possibilities, than the failure to express.”<sup>25</sup> Failure becomes a fruitful outcome, something that one strives for and something that can offer rich and unexploited possibilities in the creative process.

There have been two full-length works on the subject of failure in the arts on a more general scale that can prove helpful in situating Beckett’s view on failure as something that is productive. These studies concentrate on the role and value of failure in

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<sup>21</sup> Cerrato 22.

<sup>22</sup> *The Grove Companion* 64.

<sup>23</sup> “Lessons in Blindness” 1283.

<sup>24</sup> *CDW* 476.

<sup>25</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

artistic endeavours, society and everyday life. Jack (Judith) Halberstam looks at failure as a productive source for change by examining art that might be considered “lowbrow.” He uses examples such as films like *Chicken Run* or *Dude Where’s My Car?* in order to create or engage with failure through “low theory”<sup>26</sup> in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).

Halberstam reframes failure

as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, in her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2010), Sarah Jane Bailes sets out to create a poetics of failure because of the multiplicity of alternatives and different outcomes that failure provides. She argues that correctly remembering and stating a line of dialogue only offers a singular version of the text, but forgetting that line offers many choices and possible versions, including silence, paraphrasing, gesture and improvisation. In other words, Bailes concludes that “failure works.”<sup>28</sup> The nearly endless possibilities that failure provides are what is important to Beckett’s methodology of errancy and are nurtured by his ongoing relationship with painting. He saw failure as an alternative to going down the same “dreary road” of trying to express or to create a new mode of expression. Beckett recognised and emulated the flaws and imperfect nature of the art he most admired, and he appreciated the way

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<sup>26</sup> Halberstam 15.

<sup>27</sup> Halberstam 88.

<sup>28</sup> Bailes 2.

imperfection and distortion of image and technique recognise and revel in the failure of artistic expression instead of trying to create a more perfected or authentic technique or image. A productive failure is not to be confused with improvement through failure. Beckett and the painters in question strived to purposely worsen and deform their images in order to engage with and acknowledge the inevitable failure of expression.

There have also been several full-length interdisciplinary studies on the subject of Beckett and art. American critic, Gordon Armstrong has written a comparative study of Beckett, the Irish painter Jack B. Yeats and his more internationally famous brother W.B. Yeats. Armstrong argues that Beckett rejects the symbology of W.B. Yeats and instead is much more influenced by Jack B. Yeats. Armstrong highlights the importance of ‘vaguening’ in the works of Beckett. He describes vaguening as Beckett’s deliberate efforts to obscure the structural and thematic concerns of his plays in order to “create a kind of absence, whiteness, and transparent silence.”<sup>29</sup> Armstrong argues that Beckett adopted the technique of vaguening from Jack B. Yeats. Armstrong points out that behind almost all Beckett’s work “was the figure of Jack Yeats softening, obscuring, vaguening the images.”<sup>30</sup> Armstrong notes that on a manuscript of *Happy Days* Beckett writes “vaguening it”<sup>31</sup> beside several passages of text. In other words, Beckett wanted to obscure the language and image in the text as he drafted to make it less detailed and specific. He sought to make the text more difficult for the spectator to place in space or time. I draw on Armstrong’s idea of vaguening as a key technique that Beckett, Yeats and Swanzy used in order to worsen the images that they created. Worsening an image is a result of

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<sup>29</sup> Armstrong 50.

<sup>30</sup> Armstrong 65.

<sup>31</sup> Gontarski, *Beckett’s Happy Days: A Manuscript Study* 44.

vaguening, distorting, and deforming an image to make it less complete and coherent, without completely obliterating the image altogether. While Armstrong focuses specifically on how Beckett's obscuring of images correlates with Jack B. Yeats' abandonment and obscuring of the line, this thesis argues that Beckett's vaguening of image and technique worsens his text in an effort to abstract without giving up figuration altogether and also as a way for these artists to make their works difficult for the spectator to respond to. For Yeats and Swanzy, the technique of vaguening allowed them to highlight the materiality of the paint and canvas itself.

Armstrong exchanged several letters with Beckett in the 1980s. Of special note are several letters that Beckett wrote about the significance of a meeting with Jack B. Yeats in the summer of 1945, the first meeting between the two artists after World War II. According to Armstrong, in this meeting, Jack B. Yeats told Beckett that his works have become "less conscious."<sup>32</sup> Soon after this talk with the Yeats, Beckett began his epistolary dialogue with French art critic Georges Duthuit. At this point, Beckett was increasingly concerned with his aesthetic of failure and inexpression, and this aesthetic was very much formed by the way that he considered painters that he admired. The war and the things that he would have seen would certainly have affected his aesthetic and worldview. Armstrong argues that this encounter between Yeats and Beckett influenced his future work. "Less conscious" works would inherently be more accepting or actually driven towards failure, because the less conscious a work, the more room for deviation and alternative outcomes. Beckett himself admitted that 1945 was a pivotal year for him aesthetically. He wrote in the same letter to Megged cited above that "It was some

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<sup>32</sup> Armstrong 43.

realisation of all this and what it involves that enabled me to go on (about 15 years ago.)” This letter reveals that Beckett’s realisation of the “unexploited expressive possibilities” of failure happened around 1945. While the importance of 1945 may in part be because of his discussion with Yeats, it would also have been an influential year as it was directly after the war in which he was deeply involved.<sup>33</sup> He lost many friends and saw many horrors during the war years. Because of the inexplicable events of war, it is no wonder that Beckett became obsessive about the impossibility of expressing the relation between the inner world of the artist and the outer world of the senses. The endless tug of war of modernity has within it an essence of failure, but as Sarah Jane Bailes has pointed out, failure offers so many more options. It offers an improvisational and changeable platform that increasingly accepts the *both...and*, rather than the *either...or*. The atrocities of war both at home and abroad could offer another reason Beckett, Yeats and Swanzy were driven toward an aesthetic of errancy and failure. The paintings that Beckett encountered during the 1930s and 1940s greatly influence and shape his methodology of failure.

James Knowlson has also written about the profound impact that painting had on Beckett. Knowlson focuses on how certain painters and paintings influenced or inspired Beckett’s stage image. He argues that particular visual images in Beckett’s dramas were most likely inspired by or, as Knowlson points out, were recognitions of specific works of art that Beckett was familiar with. For example, the inspiration for the set of *Waiting for Godot* has been attributed to Jack Yeats’ *Two Travellers* as well as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*.<sup>34</sup> Knowlson argues that the stage image

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<sup>33</sup> Beckett was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* in 1945 by Charles De Gaulle for his service to the French Resistance during the war (*DTF* xxii).

<sup>34</sup> Vaughan 85.

for *Godot* was most likely formed by a combination of two or more paintings, because to attribute one painting as sole inspiration would be an oversimplification.<sup>35</sup> Knowlson, instead, uses the word recognition as a way to discuss Beckett's interaction with art. He notes,

Yet with a creative mind like Beckett, influence is simply too straightforward and too deterministic a concept to be very helpful. Instead *recognition*—of affinities and resemblances—is more appropriate to the ambiguity, subtlety and suggestiveness of his artistic world.<sup>36</sup>

Looking at Beckett's texts alongside painting can lead us to new recognitions of Beckett's works. Beckett's knowledge of art is vast and multi-dimensional. The layered visual images in Beckett's texts and stage images begin to strip away some of language's artifice to see what lies beneath. According to Beckett in a letter postmarked 29 April 1973, the visual image of the mouth was suggested by *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* by Caravaggio in the Valetta Cathedral in Malta.<sup>37</sup> As Beckett's knowledge of art increased, many of these images compound and coalesce. Knowlson notes that Jack B. Yeats "exercised a powerful impact on Beckett's own imagination and inspired him to think about relations between the artist and the world."<sup>38</sup> In other words, the way Beckett thought and wrote about painting helped him to develop his own aesthetic.

Lois Oppenheim has done in depth critical studies into Beckett's relation with art and music. In her monograph *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (2000), Oppenheim resituates the debate between whether Beckett is a modernist or

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<sup>35</sup> DTF 234.

<sup>36</sup> "Beckett's first encounters with modern German (and Irish) art" 70.

<sup>37</sup> SB to James Knowlson 29 April 1973. Vol. 4, 332.

<sup>38</sup> DTF 164.

postmodernist in conjunction with philosopher Merleau-Ponty's writings on painting. She reveals that the unifying force of all Beckett's work resides in a play of visibility. Oppenheim shows that the classic Beckettian themes of language, identity, and the subject-object dichotomy are all modeled on the sensory perspective of the eye. She argues that it is the verbal figuration of reality as vision that constitutes, whatever the genre, the Beckettian drama. In Oppenheim's edited collection *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media* (1998), the authors of the collected essays set out to look at Beckett's work in an interdisciplinary context. In this collection, Jessica Prinz examines the influence of German Expressionism on Beckett's works, especially that of Munch's scream; Breon Mitchell examines the significance of Beckett's *livre d'artiste* collaborations with visual artists such as Jasper Johns, and David Hyman explores Beckett's doodles and illustrations in the *Watt* notebooks. Tyrus Miller has also devoted a chapter to Beckett in his book *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (1999). In it, Miller details Beckett's affinities with Giacometti's surrealist sculptures and the Bolshevik clowns Bim-Bom. In Mark Nixon's monograph *Beckett's German Diaries 1936-37*, he details how these notebooks and other unpublished writings and notes from the 1930s reflect Beckett's creative evolution prior to 1936 and how his writing changes after his return to Dublin from Germany. Nixon shows how the pared-down style of writing, the significance of self-examination and the importance of the visual arts in Beckett's post-war works trace back to the pages of these notebooks. Nixon, Knowlson, Oppenheim and her collaborators focus mostly on Beckett's aesthetic and how his engagement with visual art influenced particular stage images or ideas and how vision or visibility functions in Beckett's texts. These works

also tend to focus on particular artists that Beckett admired or moments in history where Beckett was especially interested in art. These texts refrain from in depth analysis of visual art, and none of these texts refer to the influence that painting had on Beckett's preoccupation with failure. They also stop short of offering an inquiry into how we might use Beckettian aesthetics to analyse painting. This thesis casts a wider net in order to look at Beckett's many interventions into the visual arts, and what affect this has on Beckett's methodology and aesthetic of failure.

More recently, Derval Tubridy has explored Beckett's works within the context of Performance Art in her article "Samuel Beckett and Performance Art" (2014). She examines the relations between Beckett's prose and drama and performance artists such as Franz Erhard Walther, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, Alastair MacLennan and Amanda Coogan.<sup>39</sup> Her study demonstrates that analysing Beckett in the context of Performance Art allows us to reconsider primary elements of his theatre, such language and the body, repetition and reiteration and how the body moves in space in nuanced ways. In her study, we are also able to see that Performance Art owes much to Beckett's legacy. Tubridy shows Beckett's relevance in the consideration of more recent and contemporary art forms. Most if not all experimental art owes something to Beckett's legacy, and Tubridy very aptly taps into that, while also demonstrating how these works can also help us to read Beckett's texts and performances. This thesis also draws on this idea that Beckett's aesthetics and methodologies can be used to comment on visual art works.

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<sup>39</sup> Tubridy 34-53.

The most recent book-length study on Beckett and visual art is David Lloyd's *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* published late in 2016. In it, Lloyd discusses Beckett's relationship with three painters crucial to his life long dialogue with the visual arts. He examines the paintings that Beckett would have known and on which he based his critical remarks. Lloyd accounts for the increasing visuality of Beckett's theatre in relation to his evolving appreciation of painting and the formal questions posed by that medium. He explores these aspects within the context of Beckett's anticipation of European phenomenology and psychoanalysis in relation to Heidegger and Lacan. Like this thesis, Lloyd moves away from looking at how images inspire Beckett's theatre, and instead concentrates on how or why certain images are so arresting to Beckett. Lloyd argues that Beckett was more concerned with what the processes of the paintings he admired can offer the writer in relation to Beckett's own problems and procedures. Lloyd argues that the processes and procedures used by painters helped Beckett to create tableaux that become so important in his later plays. They, as Lloyd argues, assisted Beckett in destroying theatre in the same way that Caravaggio was said to have destroyed painting. Lloyd's work is compelling, but not exhaustive as it focuses only on how these processes and procedures translate in Beckett's stage images. It also mainly only accounts for how Arikha, Yeats and Van Velde affected Beckett's creative inquiries. I argue that Beckett's prose as well as theatrical works must be taken into account when considering the subject of Beckett and painting. Painting was such an important component to understanding Beckett's concerns with writing as a whole, and this thesis argues that Beckett's prose works must also be considered. The references to specific painters and painting throughout his early texts and his worsening of images in a later

text like *Worstward Ho* cannot be ignored when considering Beckett's engagement and passion for painting.

While all these critics cover fascinating connections between Beckett and the visual arts, none look at the way the visual arts nurtured his aesthetic of failure and his preoccupation with how art, his especially, should be viewed. These works also do not go into detail of how we can use Beckett's aesthetic of failure, which was nurtured by painting, to analyse other paintings or works of art. This thesis rigorously engages with Beckett's letters and critical pieces on a plethora of artists in order to understand how painting acted as a catalyst to Beckett's realisation that purposeful failure results in not only an obscured and visual text, but also inexhaustible creative possibility.

In addition to filling lacunae in Beckett studies, this thesis also argues that Irish painting contributed a great deal to modernism. Irish painters are often left out of the modernist debate as Ireland is mostly recognized for the literary accomplishments of such literary giants as Beckett and Joyce. One reason for this could be that there were two distinct groups of visual artists: those that belonged to the British tradition, which was inculcated in the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin and was fostered by the Royal Hibernian Academy versus those that studied on the continent, learning and borrowing from more avant-garde trends. Dublin museum-goers and art collectors preferred the former. Visual art is something that has been overlooked and undervalued in the critical dialogue of Irish modernism.<sup>40</sup> Emer Nolan writes that Ireland's modernism was

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<sup>40</sup> In his monograph *Untwisting the Serpent*, Daniel Albright argues that part of the frustration of modernist art is that it is often looked at in isolation or as an isolated occurrence, which is limiting. He asserts that looking at the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of modernist art, in particular, should be central when considering modernist art that continually mixed media. I argue that in addition to the importance of

“precocious by comparison with development elsewhere” and curiously, “almost entirely confined to literature.”<sup>41</sup> She continues, “Its influence on later developments in the visual arts [...] was mediated by an intense and protracted anti-modernism, sometimes indistinguishable from anti-revivalism, which was itself pre-eminently literary.”<sup>42</sup> One aim of this thesis is to expand on Irish modernism beyond the literary and consider it in an interdisciplinary context.

One critic that has taken on the subject of modernism in visual art in Ireland is Fiona Barber. Her monograph, *Art in Ireland Since 1910* (2013), engages specifically with Irish modernism and abstract art. She examines how even abstract paintings that resist or deny socio-political interactions have “a more deeply embedded set of relationships between painted surface, the viewers response and cultural experience than are at first apparent.”<sup>43</sup> She sees abstraction as having socio-political ties. She writes that shifting artistic practice such as the creation of abstract art can “register changes in the visual construction of the nation” even if the nation is not reproduced or suggested in the iconography.<sup>44</sup> She argues that a nation’s art is shaped by the interaction between art

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considering collaboration and the mixing of media, the works of modernist artists such as Beckett, Yeats and Swazy are best considered in a comparative context that considers a multiplicity of techniques and aesthetics across mediums. In *Reconfiguring Modernisms: Explorations in the Relationship Between Modern Art and Modern Literature*, Daniel Schwarz also argues that the relationship between literature and modern art is quintessential to understanding modernism in its various forms. By looking at various connections between painters and writers such as Gauguin and Joseph Conrad, Manet and Henry James, and Cezanne and T. S. Eliot, as well as a triptych consisting of Picasso, Stevens, and Joyce, Schwarz examines how we read paintings as narrative. This thesis also considers what can be gained from reading a disjunctive “narrative” such as Beckett’s late text as a painting or imagistic occurrence.

<sup>41</sup> Nolan 167.

<sup>42</sup> Nolan 167.

<sup>43</sup> Barber 12.

<sup>44</sup> Barber 12.

production and wider forces in society. She believes that nation and modernity were definitive factors in shaping Irish art since 1910. She looks at the impact of colonisation, rebellion, independence, partition, and changing cultural and economic influences on the creation of Irish Art over the last century.

There was also a recent exhibition and companion publication focusing on Irish modern art, curated by Seán Kissane, entitled *Analysing Cubism* (2013). The exhibition was shown at both the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork. The exhibition focused especially on the continental milieu in which some Irish artists worked in the 1920s and 1930s, learning from and contributing to the development of European Modernism. The exhibition included such Irish artists May Guinness, Jack Hanlon, Evie Hone, Mainie Jellett, Norah McGuinness and Mary Swanzy, and their English counterparts Paul Egestorff and Elizabeth Rivers in recognition of the extensive influence that these artists had on modern Irish abstract painting. It also included work by European painters such as Georges Braque, Albert Gleizes, Juan Gris, Henri Hayden, André Lhote and Pablo Picasso. Placing these painters beside European painters can help to show that Ireland's impact on modernism goes beyond the literary.

One main reason for focusing closely on Yeats and Swanzy is that they are two of the most **innovative** Irish artists. While they borrowed from continental trends, they also made these trends their own and contributed an individualistic style that certainly added significantly to painting. Brian Fallon writes that “when [Swanzy] is at her most personal and dreamlike she was probably the most original Irish artist of the time, after Jack Yeats.”<sup>45</sup> One connection or avenue of inquiry that has not as of yet been explored by art

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<sup>45</sup> “Private View” n.p.

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or cultural critics in detail is how or why these painters are so original. This thesis argues that much of their impact and originality comes from tendencies that are analogous to Samuel Beckett's errancy or demonstrative failure. What is interesting as well about looking at these two painters in the same study is that they were the only two painters whose works were avant-garde in style and technique, but who were simultaneously accepted into academic exhibitions at the RHA. Brian Fallon points out that:

The only painter genuinely able to bridge the two epochs and styles was Jack Yeats, who was acceptable on the one hand to the more enlightened academics (he regularly showed at the RHA exhibitions) and the other was regarded by avant-gardists as a man who followed his own idiosyncratic line of development and was a daring original colourist.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to her exhibitions in Paris, London and with the avant-garde Society of Dublin Painters, Swanzy also exhibited regularly at the RHA up until her death.

Criticism on Jack B. Yeats lies mostly in the realm of art history. Hilary Pyle is the foremost Yeats scholar, and she is responsible for extensive biographies of Yeats' life and work as well as the first complete catalogue of all of his art works. Pyle pointed out in an interview in 2009 that until recently in Ireland "If you mentioned Yeats, it was assumed you were talking about W.B. Oh yes, he had a brother."<sup>47</sup> American critic Calvin Bedient has written a comparative study of Jack B. Yeats and W.B. Yeats, entitled *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion* (2009). Bedient concurs with Pyle stating, "outside Ireland, Jack is often confused with his more famous but less gifted

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<sup>46</sup> *Irish Art* 115.

<sup>47</sup> Cullinane 57.

father, the nonetheless excellent portraitist, John Butler Yeats.”<sup>48</sup> Bedient also points out that “what I recognize is deeper, wilder, and more metaphysical than the depictions of Ireland found in standard views of Jack Yeats’ work.”<sup>49</sup> Bedient believes a strictly Irish reading of Jack B. Yeats limits interpretation and keeps him sequestered in Ireland. Bedient wishes to remove Yeats from “his cramping, obscuring niche of regional painter.”<sup>50</sup> David Lloyd takes issue with Hilary Pyle, pointing out that her investigations of Yeats’ paintings remain “essentially descriptive rather than analytical and are marked by the impressionistic, tonal vocabulary that has been the hallmark of Yeats criticism to date: ‘exuberant’, ‘ruminative’, ‘elated’, ‘sombre’, even ‘Wordsworthian.’”<sup>51</sup> This makes sense, as Pyle is primarily an art historian whose main goal was to catalogue the work of Yeats. In his essay “Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett,” Lloyd explores why Beckett saw Yeats’ paintings so differently than Thomas MacGreevy did. Yeats’ most recent biographer, Bruce Arnold, raises the question of whether Yeats is a great Irish painter or a great painter in a wider global category. Frank Kermode points out in a review of the Arnold biography in the *London Review of Books*, “It raises with urgency the question whether Jack Yeats does not deserve, like his brother, to be hailed, even by the non-Irish, as great in the more absolute sense.”<sup>52</sup>

In comparison with the richness of criticism and consideration that Yeats and Beckett have garnered, Swanzy has been given very little attention. There is no book-length study or complete catalogue of her works. She is often overshadowed by her

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<sup>48</sup> Bedient 9.

<sup>49</sup> Bedient 59.

<sup>50</sup> Bedient 60.

<sup>51</sup> “Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett” 43.

<sup>52</sup> Kermode 19-20.

contemporaries Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone, who were more vocal and driven to market their art. Although not achieving much recognition outside Ireland (even here it has been minimal), she is one of the most important Irish painters of the twentieth century. One of the crucial aspects of this study is to bring more attention to her as an important Irish artist that deserves to stand in the same ranks as a painter like Jack B. Yeats and a writer like Beckett, because of her talent, originality, unique vision and the way she changed the landscape of Irish art. She and Jack B. Yeats were the first modern Irish visual artists, creating their own unique styles and breaking away from representational English forms without totally devoting themselves to a continental style. Art historian Julian Campbell knew Swanzy and has written about her in *The Irish Impressionists: Irish Artists in France and Belgium 1850–1914* (1984) as well as in a 1986 catalogue for Pym’s Gallery. Campbell covers an overview of where Swanzy grew up, where she trained and where she travelled. The main sources of published information of Swanzy’s work are three illustrated catalogues for the Pym’s Gallery London, all titled *An Exhibition of Paintings by Mary Swanzy 1182-1978 HRHA*. The first was in 1986 written by Julian Campbell, the second in 1989 by Fionnuala Brennan, and the third by Alan and Mary Hobart of Pym’s Gallery in 1998. Kenneth McConkey’s *A Free Spirit, Irish Art 1860-1960* (1990) and S.B. Kennedy’s *Irish Art and Modernism* (1991) give overviews of Irish art that include Swanzy. There are a few newspaper interviews with her by P.J. Murphy and Terence de Vere White that were done when she was in her mid to late nineties. There are two interviews that she did for RTÉ Radio, one with Liam Nolan in 1973 and another in 1977 (a year before her death) with Andy O’Mahony. Art critic Brian Fallon met Swanzy in her later years, and he has written several articles about her both as a person and an artist.

The most in depth chronological study of her life and work was done by Liz Cullinane in her MA thesis titled *Mary Swanzy 1882-1978: An Evaluation of Her Career: "This Is Our Gift, Our Portion Apart"* (2010) for the Crawford School of Art and Design. Cullinane's thesis adds a much needed in depth timeline of Swanzy's career. Fionnuala Brennan wrote a less detailed BA thesis titled *Mary Swanzy 1882-1978* (TCD, 1983). Swanzy's niece and nephew (her sister Muriel Swanzy-Tullo's children) are her last remaining family. These sources in addition to the several art reviews and historical documents provide much of the background details for Mary Swanzy's life and exhibition history and reception in this thesis. Swanzy did not date her works, she did not exhibit for a number of years, and she was increasingly reclusive. There are no known existing journals or letters. The fact that many of her paintings exist in private collections also causes difficulty when trying to trace Swanzy's career. She did not marry, have children or serve in the war effort while in England, which means there are few public records to fully piece together a precise biography. Many of her catalogues from exhibitions in her lifetime no longer exist.<sup>53</sup> Picture research is conducted through online auction catalogues of Whyte's, Adam's and Christie's as well as paintings owned by various galleries in Ireland such as IMMA, the National Gallery of Ireland, The RHA, The Hugh Lane Gallery and The Pepper Canister Gallery as well as the Pym's Gallery in London. Her better know works are her Cubist and landscape paintings, and these are the works mostly housed in galleries. No galleries in London hold any of her works in their permanent collection despite the fact that she lived there for many years. After her death, there was a centenary exhibition in 1982 at the Taylor Gallery Dublin and the first Pym's

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<sup>53</sup> These do not exist in the Victorian and Albert Archive nor the Courthauld Archive.

Gallery London show was in 1986. The Model Gallery in Sligo held a large exhibition of Swanzy's works in 1987. Other than the Pym's Gallery, none of these Irish exhibitions produced illustrated catalogues. A major contribution of this thesis is to present an in depth analysis of Swanzy's works in the context of two creative Irish heavyweights, for the first time. There is very little detailed analysis of Swanzy's paintings, especially her later works from the 1940s onwards, and this thesis fills this fissure in scholarship.

Although it is Jack B. Yeats with whom Beckett is most affiliated when it comes to Irish artists, Beckett kept up with the Irish art scene even while he was abroad. He was friends or acquaintances with many Irish painters, and he always visited exhibitions during his trips home to Ireland. He kept up with artistic gossip, such as the fact that Irish artist Rose Brigid O'Brien was studying in Florence perhaps to prepare for a job as director of the National Gallery of Ireland, because her father was Dermot O'Brien, who was on the board of Governors and Guardians of the National Gallery of Ireland.<sup>54</sup>

In 1935, he went to an exhibition in London that featured the artists Estella Solomon, Louise Jacobs and Mary Duncan at the Arlington Gallery. He was not impressed with Solomon's painting of Jack Yeats, but he did admire Jacobs's work: "on whose work alone the eye could rest."<sup>55</sup> He saw Sarah Purser (1848-1943), a well-known portrait painter and regular exhibitor in the RHA, in Dublin often in the places he visited. On a visit to Jack B. Yeats' home in February of 1936 he described her as "scuttling along the treetops," and he saw her at a concert at the R.D.S. the following week.<sup>56</sup> Sarah Purser was a friend and mentor to Mary Swanzy, and Purser held several exhibitions of

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<sup>54</sup> SB to TM 20 February 1935. Vol. 1, 253.

<sup>55</sup> SB to TM, 10 March 1935. Vol. 1, 259.

<sup>56</sup> SB to TM, 5 March 1936. Vol. 1, 319.

Swanzy's work at her home in Mespil House. Beckett was also an acquaintance of Nora McGuinness, an acquaintance of Swanzy's. Beckett wrote to MacGreevy, "While I was in Ireland, Nora McGuinness gave me a pound to buy her an art publication here."<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, Beckett was unable to find this publication at the time of the letter, but promised to "send her back her pound,"<sup>58</sup> if he was not able to find it. He attended the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1948. Late in Beckett's life, Irish artist Louis Le Brocquy illustrated *Stirrings Still* at Beckett's request in 1988. Even though Beckett settled mostly in France from 1938 onward, one interest that he maintained in Ireland is that of painting. In this way, it makes sense to look at Beckett's work in the context of Irish painting and vice versa. While there is no documentation or record that he saw Swanzy's paintings first hand, it is likely that he would have at least heard of her. His close friend Thomas MacGreevy was familiar with her work, and Beckett's Uncle "Boss" Sinclair was involved with the Society of Dublin Painters, of which Swanzy was a founding committee member. She was also exhibiting in several galleries in Dublin in the 1920s and 1930s, when Beckett would have been in Dublin.

The lacunae in scholarship that this thesis fills lies in the detailed record of Beckett's engagement with painting, and argues that his engagement with visual arts reveals how failure functions in Beckett's work. This reveals that Beckett's engagement with the spectator relies on his worsening and failing images in order to coerce the spectator into viewing his texts and perhaps art in general the way that he does. He tried to do this early on in his career through his critical pieces on art, and he accomplished this through his own art as he matures as an artist. Through worsening, imperfections and

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<sup>57</sup> SB to TM 4 January 1948. Vol. 2, 72.

<sup>58</sup> SB to TM 4 January 1948. Vol. 2, 72.

failure Beckett was able to create art that interrogates representation and abstraction and that also resists commentary or mastery from the spectator. This thesis offers documentation and analysis of Beckett in relation to Irish art and painting. This thesis also provides in depth detail and analysis of the artist Mary Swanzy, an artist on whom very little critical or biographical scholarship has been done. It also places Yeats' and Beckett's similarities within the context of how these artists use purposeful failure to worsen the images that they produce in order to highlight the materiality of medium in which they work. It argues that failure can act as a deliberate action that produces a multitude of avenues of inquiry. This thesis also offers an interdisciplinary approach to Beckett's texts as well to the Irish artists in question.

Chapter one gives a detailed analysis of Beckettian failure, as something someone does, not something one is. It argues that this purposeful failure, or what I refer to as errancy, propels his works towards abstraction without them becoming fully abstract. Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats act as visual counterpoints to demonstrate how vagueness in images in a remarkably similar way allows the materiality of medium to take on elevated importance. All three artists purposefully engage with and then fail the technical requirements of both abstraction and realism. Chapter two advances a detailed account of Beckett's engagement with painting and painters. It argues that this engagement reflects his preoccupation with failure and technically incompetent works, which reveals how both his audience and his performers should be affected by works of art (his included). Chapter three argues that Jack B. Yeats used purposeful failure, or what Beckett later called an effort to "fail better,"<sup>59</sup> to highlight the materiality of paint

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<sup>59</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

and canvas. The competition between the materiality of paint and canvas and the image portrayed reveal a violent argument or battle that takes place on the canvas itself. The images created by Yeats fail to fully emerge showing the inherent failure of expression in painting, which is, as Beckett explained to Duthuit, a failure to be able to express the relation between the sensory world and the world of the inner world of the artist's mind. Chapter four provides background on the often overlooked Irish painter Mary Swanzy and examines the Dublin public's resistance to modernist painting. It argues that she contributed significantly to Irish modernist painting. This chapter also contends that utilising Beckett's methodology of failure as a guiding principle in analysing Swanzy's work demonstrates the similarities between the two artists, especially in their post-World War II works.

## Chapter 1

### **“The Refuge of All Failures”<sup>1</sup>: Painting and Beckett’s Methodology of Errancy**

“[T]o be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world”—  
Samuel Beckett, “Three Dialogues”<sup>2</sup>

“Painting that distorts is the refuge of all failures.”<sup>3</sup>  
Samuel Beckett, “La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon”<sup>4</sup>

There is much to be considered concerning Beckett and his engagement with the visual arts, from his relationships with and veneration of painters to the visual quality of his works to the references to painting in his drama, prose and correspondence.<sup>5</sup> This chapter argues that Beckett developed a methodology of errancy and failure throughout his works that originated from and was sustained by his life long engagement with the visual arts and his views on painting. For Beckett, paintings that he admired act as an origin and a catalyst that continually demonstrate the inexhaustible creative possibilities that failure and errancy can offer to an artist that must express, while knowing that expression is doomed to fail. For Beckett, failure became something one does, not something one is or something one creates. The fact that Beckett disdained perfection and

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<sup>1</sup> “La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon” 121.

<sup>2</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

<sup>3</sup> My translation of: “La peinture à déformation est le refuge de tous les ratés.”

<sup>4</sup> “La peinture” 121.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed account of Beckett’s engagement with painting and painters and the way in which this engagement is demonstrative of how failure and errancy influence how Beckett wanted his works interpreted by spectators, directors and actors is covered in Chapter two of this thesis.

technically proficient painting is evidenced in his letters, his art criticism, the artists he admired as well as the ones he disliked. The term ‘errancy’ refers to the purposeful and demonstrative act of erring, especially erring against expectations of a canon, the spectator and the critic. This chapter first examines Beckett’s aesthetic and methodology of failure and argues that painting is one of the primary stimuli of this aesthetic. It moves on to the critical debate surrounding modern paintings’ move toward abstraction, before finally concluding with the ways in which Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats can illuminate Beckett’s use of errancy as a method in order to perform and interrogate representation. The lacuna that this chapter fills is that it offers a detailed analysis of Beckettian failure, as something someone does, not something one is, and painting’s influence on Beckett’s valorisation of failure as a technical and a thematic aesthetic. Swanzy and Yeats act as visual counterpoints as they demonstrate a remarkably similar tendency in that they purposefully engage with and then fail the technical requirements of both abstraction and realism. While the late prose and drama is highlighted in this chapter, these tendencies can shed light on how failure functions in the broader Beckett oeuvre.

### **Beckettian Failure**

Beckett both appreciated and attributed technical and thematic failure to the visual artists that he most admired. This becomes very clear in many of his letters to art critic and confidant Georges Duthuit in the 1940s and 1950s as well as in “Three Dialogues,” a short piece originally written for *Transition* magazine in 1949. In “Three Dialogues,” two characters, B. and D. (Beckett and Duthuit) discuss aesthetics. The text is formatted like a

play or perhaps a parody of a Platonic dialogue on aesthetics. In it, Beckett attempts to explain his views on art to Georges Duthuit through the discussion of the French painters Pierre Tal Coat (1905-1985) and André Masson (1896-1987) and Dutch painter Bram van Velde (1895-1981). This “performed” dialogue or critique mirrors Beckett’s epistolary exchanges with Duthuit on the topic of painting in the 1940s and 1950s. In these oft-cited dialogues, Beckett proposes his views on worthwhile art. Arguably, he discusses his aesthetic of failure more clearly in these dialogues than in any other text. As Nicholas Johnson states in his article “Performative Criticism: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit,” “Beckett advocates for a poetics of ‘indigence’ and revalorization of ‘failure’ in ‘Three Dialogues.’”<sup>6</sup> In “Three Dialogues” Beckett criticises the painting of Tal Coat and Masson for trying to express something new, which is impossible. Beckett instead favours Bram van Velde’s ability to accept the inherent failure in the act of painting. Beckett states that Masson and Tal Coat have value, but it is “a value cognate with those already accumulated.”<sup>7</sup> He elaborates stating that they were:

B.— [...]pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better of the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

D.— And preferring what?

B.— The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson 5.

<sup>7</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.<sup>8</sup>

To Beckett, the only thing Masson and Tal Coat's paintings do is create a certain disturbance on the "plane of the feasible,"<sup>9</sup> while Van Velde's paintings realise the impossibility of expression coupled with the twin obligation to express. In this dialogue, Beckett shows his frustration that many painters, Tal Coat and Masson included, refuse to admit the inherent failure in the act of expression and the action of creation. Thinking that one can be successful in this act just forces the artist down the same path, the same "dreary road" as his predecessors. For Beckett, Tal Coat and Masson's work represented what painting has always done, which is to try to express the artist's vision through paint in a more true or authentic way than his predecessors. This is a fruitless act, as expression of this kind is an impossibility in Beckett's view. Bram van Velde avoided going down this familiar path by acknowledging and participating in a method that sets out to fail inherently. For Beckett, Van Velde's paintings acknowledge that expression is impossible, but he still continues to paint in the face of failure. He was still obliged to attempt and fail. The admission to this failure is something that Beckett praises.

In "Three Dialogues," Beckett points out that throughout history, painters, including the abstract expressionists, try to escape from the sense of failure that occurs when trying to represent an object or a feeling. He reiterated this in "Three Dialogues" by

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<sup>8</sup> "Three Dialogues" 139.

<sup>9</sup> "Three Dialogues" 139.

stating, “the history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee.”<sup>10</sup> Trying to divorce oneself completely from this inherent failure of the art form merely “enlarges the repertory” of paintings doing the same thing they have always done. Just because an image has no concrete reference point does not mean that it is doing something that is new or more authentic. The relationship between representer and representee will always be mutually exclusive and will fail to be authentic in Beckett’s eyes. He states,

All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, or inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all it excludes, all that it blinds to.<sup>11</sup>

The “acute and increasing anxiety” of relation between subject and object was what Van Velde brought to the fore, and this was what Beckett found so enticing in Van Velde’s works. This increasing anxiety, caused by the need to create in the face of failure, was what Beckett recognises first in painting. This realisation formed the bedrock for his own creative forays and experiments. Beckett was heavily critical of artists that strived to “escape from this sense of failure” in representation, whether that representation be a bowl of fruit or an architectural phenomenon. He instead preferred painters that not only admit the inevitability of failure, but also revel in it. It becomes something they do, not something they or their works are. For Beckett, Bram van Velde’s paintings were the first

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<sup>10</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

<sup>11</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

to admit that “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world.”<sup>12</sup>

The failures, evident in a work of art by a painter like Van Velde, revel in the failure of inexpression, but they also exhibit technical failures. Beckett’s ever increasing interest and critique of painting furthers his inquiry into the aesthetic value of failure of expression and relation.

Through Beckett’s highly personalised art criticism within “Three Dialogues,” Beckett admitted his artistic mission:

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make 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.<sup>13</sup>

Here Beckett pledged his “fidelity to failure” that he first recognised in Bram van Velde’s painting. This is the only acceptable conclusion for an artist that is obliged to act in the face of the fact that he will never succeed in representing, reflecting or expressing anything. Beckett also recognised this admission of failure in the distortion of images of German Expressionism, which will be looked at in more detail in Chapter Two. A devotion to failure and recognising that all attempts to express will only fail is the only satisfactory outcome for Beckett. The acknowledgement of this failure is the only way an

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<sup>12</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

<sup>13</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

artist can deal with the ambivalence and ambiguity of modern life. Beckett's consideration of painting led him to this conclusion.

For Beckett, art would still have a form, but it would embrace the troubled and chaotic inner and outer worlds of the artist and the failure to convey relations between these worlds. It would embrace the chaotic problems of relation itself. In a 1961 interview with critic Tom F. Driver, Beckett gave a rare glimpse into his views on the goals of the writer/artist in an uncertain world,

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits chaos and does not try to say that it is something else.<sup>14</sup>

In this interview, he refers to “the mess” and the “buzzing confusion” of the modern world, where one only needs to get into a taxicab in order to be reminded of atrocities such as blindness, orphaned children, and refugees of war. Beckett refers to a recent taxi trip where there are advertisements for charitable collections for such causes were displayed on the glass partition of the cab.<sup>15</sup> Beckett explains that if there were only darkness then the world would be clear, but because there is light the situation becomes “inexplicable.”<sup>16</sup> For Beckett, one way to deal with the confusion and messiness of reality is to worsen artistic practices and views, to embrace and revel in failure and chaos and the multiplicity of questions and answers that such things propose. This can at least

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<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Driver 23.

<sup>15</sup> Qtd. in Driver 24.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in Driver 24.

begin to “accommodate the mess”<sup>17</sup> instead of wallowing “untroubled”<sup>18</sup> in a false sense of creating relation or translating the mess.

For Beckett, only when the act of expression becomes an act that acknowledges, exists within and strives for failure can a new occasion and/or term of relation take place. Beckett ended his dialogue with Duthuit with another admission of his own failure, a practical demonstration of what he has just explained in detail. For Beckett, the goal and fate of the artist is to always be mistaken:

B.— (Remembering, warmly) Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken.<sup>19</sup>

Purposeful mistakes and the realisation of the possibilities that failure offers is an “acceptable conclusion” to the creative process.

### **Errancy as Methodology**

Before moving on, the meaning of errancy and the significance of failure in Beckett’s works must be clarified. Errancy points to a state, instance or tendency toward erring. The word err embodies an error, a fault or an erroneous belief; it is also to be incorrect, to stray or wander, to fail or make a mistake, to go astray, or to sin.<sup>20</sup> The word errancy is commonly used to describe errors and discrepancies in the definitive canonical text, the Bible. When I use the word errancy, I am referring to purposeful and

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Driver 24.

<sup>18</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>19</sup> “Three Dialogues” 146.

<sup>20</sup> “Err, v. 1” *OED Online*.

demonstrative act of erring, especially erring against expectations of a canon, genre, the spectator and the critic. What emerges from this is a state of structured confusion that continuously interrogates representation and then either dissolves or obliterates it. This results in an uncanny and unreliable piece of art. Errancy is a methodology in the works of Beckett that is used to interrogate expression, representation and abstraction revealing the questions and places in between.

In her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2010), Sara Jane Bailes also recognises the importance of failure when art forms interrogate representation. Bailes uses Beckettian drama as a way to explain the origins of a “poetic of failure” for performance. She writes,

My early discovery of this canny Beckettian move in mind, whereby the theatre artist (director, writer, performer, maker) greets the dilemma of representational failure with an eye to confronting it and restructuring that most provisional of exchanges in order that its innate precariousness will not so much haunt it as be consciously deployed in the production of the event.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of consciously deploying failure and its “innate precariousness” becomes an increasingly central focus in Beckett’s works as he forms and then abstracts images. Errancy is a purposeful and conscious deployment of failure. It does not haunt the works;

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<sup>21</sup> Bailes 10.

it exists in plain sight, and it is meant to be fully acknowledged. In this way, Beckett not only addresses failure as a topic or theme but also as a mode of creation. Beckett “remembering warmly”<sup>22</sup> as he goes on to say that he mistaken in “Three Dialogues” is a cleverly performed admission of his approval of mistakes in the creative process. One of the most significant and exciting aspects of consciously deploying failure for Beckett was the multiplicity of creative avenues and outcomes it provided for an artist. Beckett realised this and seized the opportunity. Bailes states that “Failure *works*.”<sup>23</sup> She argues that a correctly or perfectly stated line of dialogue only offers a singular outcome, but forgetting or mistating that line offers many choices including silence, paraphrasing, gesture and improvisation. Bailes is also interested in the social and political implications that “the condition of accident and failure evidences.”<sup>24</sup> Failure certainly *works* for Beckett. Throughout Beckett’s life, failure was a preoccupation that was evident in his creative output as well as in letters to friends and acquaintances. He wrote to Israeli author Mattie Megged,

I understand—I think no one better—the flight from experience to expression and I understand the necessary failure of both. But it is the flight from one order to disorder to an order or disorder of a different nature and the two failures are essentially dissimilar in kind. Thus life in failure can be anything but dismal at the best, whereas there is nothing more exciting for the writer, or richer in

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<sup>22</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

<sup>23</sup> Bailes 10.

<sup>24</sup> Bailes 16.

unexploited expressive possibilities, than the failure to express.”<sup>25</sup>

Like Bailes, Beckett saw the possibilities rather than the limitations that failure offers. It’s what enabled him to go on. Beckett admitted in this letter that his realisation of the unexploited expressive possibilities that failure warrants occurred to him “about 15 years ago”<sup>26</sup> and that this discovery made it possible for him to “go on.”<sup>27</sup> Since he wrote this letter to Megged in 1960, this would mean that his revelation occurred around 1945. This is a significant year as World War II had recently ended, and it also marks the time he starts corresponding with Duthuit. This was also the beginning of a very fruitful period in his own writing career where he began to rigorously challenge representation. The work from the 1940s and 1950s onwards was even more committed to worsening and failing expression and representation than his previous work. Beckett’s role in the war effort as well as the destruction of both people and cultural artefacts justified by war bolster Beckett’s commitment to failing relation. Likewise, Bailes points out that experimental theatre companies of recent theatre history have something fundamental in common:

the desire to interrogate not only representation itself but specifically the ways in which it failed the theatre-maker and the commodity, that is, the performance as object; but also the way in which it seemed to fail to express the very times we

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<sup>25</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

<sup>26</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

<sup>27</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

lived in.<sup>28</sup>

Beckett's experiences viewing art in Nazi Germany, and his involvement in World War II, certainly make representation problematic. She argues that "the difficulty of acknowledging the failure of representation"<sup>29</sup> is what brought many of these artists together. The realisation of the inherent failure of the creative expression allows Beckett to keep writing. Beckett is not writing to express, but instead, to revel in the possibilities that failure to express offers. It creates a space of subjectivity that offers many creative outcomes and choices.

Technical failure was just as important to Beckett as thematic. He was not trying to succeed at a task; he was already inclined to the impending and inherent deteriorating nature of the act itself, as he had written in the letter to Megged there is nothing more exciting "than the failure to express"<sup>30</sup> because of its richness of new and uncharted possibilities. Distortion or worsening of image and technique that he first notes in the critical piece about the paintings of Greer and Bram van Velde entitled "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon" was published in the same year that he tells Megged that he realises the possibilities of failure. In "La Peinture," he states that, "Painting that distorts is the refuge of all failures."<sup>31</sup> The distortion of image, technique and relation in painting offers a sanctuary or safe place of failure, thus more possibilities.

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<sup>28</sup> Bailes 16.

<sup>29</sup> Bailes 15.

<sup>30</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

<sup>31</sup> "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon" 121.

Accepting that Beckett's aim is to worsen and fail can also shed more light on the incessantly negative comments that he made about his own work. In 1959, he wrote to artist Avigdor Arikha about his own current writing situation, "It's not brilliant. The rhythm and the syntax of weakness and penury: not easy to catch."<sup>32</sup> Here he is stating that he wishes that the rhythm and the syntax of his writing should be weak and poor, but this is indeed a difficult feat—"not easy to catch." He says again and again in his letters and the rare interview that his writing is no good. He often reiterates that he makes no headway and that his translations are rubbish.<sup>33</sup> He says that he will show Arikha his writing unless he uses it to "wipe himself between now and then."<sup>34</sup> His judgemental statements acquiesce with his methodology of errancy. He, at times, wished his words would decompose or evaporate or, like dust, just blow away. He writes to Jacoba van Velde, sister of Bram and Greer and Dutch translator of his work, explaining the difficulty he has whilst trying to write: "the writing is stuck [...] I hammer and hammer. Hard as iron, the words. I'd like them in dust."<sup>35</sup> He also writes to Irish author and filmmaker Leslie Daiken, "Struggling to get on with new work, but with scant success. Like trying to make a shape with dust & not much of it."<sup>36</sup> Trying to make a shape out of dust is pointless as it will always fail to hold together or make a form, much like the way words and language will always fail to express.

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<sup>32</sup> SB to Arikha, 12 March 1959. Vol. 3, 213.

<sup>33</sup> This is made evident repeated in his many letters to friends and publishers throughout his life.

<sup>34</sup> SB to Arikha, 12 March 1959. Vol. 3, 213.

<sup>35</sup> SB to Jacoba van Velde, 9 May 1960. Vol. 3, 335.

<sup>36</sup> SB to Daiken, 12 March 1959. Vol. 3, 212.

His affinity and fidelity to failure that is discussed and realised in his art criticism and commentary, led to the purposeful desire to fail more, or as the narrator in *Worstward Ho* puts it, “Fail Better.”<sup>37</sup> The “fail better” mantra, and it has become a mantra, is one of Beckett’s most popularly used phrases and indeed one of the most misunderstood and decontextualized. It comes from *Worstward Ho*, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better.”<sup>38</sup> Conveniently this phrase is repeated twice on the first page of the work. Most likely, many that evoke the phrase have not read past these first pages as this quotation is often misinterpreted. This type of Beckettian failure and its meanings are often taken out of context, and this is especially true when it comes to interpretations of Beckett in popular culture. A recent exhibition at the Science Gallery in Dublin entitled “Fail Better” (2014) dubs Beckett as “the poster boy of failure.”<sup>39</sup> This popular phrase is misread (or perhaps missaid) as a refrain for inspirational failures that continue to improve, each time coming closer to success. English novelist Zadie Smith’s essay “Fail Better” discusses lack of success as a positive or motivational approach, as she terms it “honourable failure.”<sup>40</sup> This phrase has served as inspiration for athletes and winning as can be demonstrated by Stanislas Wawrinka’s forearm tattoo [Fig. 1]. It has also been used in an advertisement for the Irish conservative Republican political party Fianna Fáil, a political party that Beckett was not sympathetic to. The party used one of John Minihan’s iconic black-and-white images of

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<sup>37</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81

<sup>38</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

<sup>39</sup> This was written in one of the descriptions of the exhibitions on the wall of the Science Gallery. This exhibit ran from 07.02.2014- 24/04/2014.

<sup>40</sup> Smith 489.

Beckett when it launched a poster campaign in 2012 aimed at third-level students [Fig 2]. Minihan took the image in the 1980s as part of his “Beckett portfolio” from London and Paris. The poster read, “Ever Tried. Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fianna Fáil Again. Fianna Fáil Better.” In addition, this phrase from *Worstward Ho* has been utilised for encouraging memes for those who fail at home gardening [Fig. 3]. It has also been evoked as a mantra by Silicon Valley venture capitalists.<sup>41</sup> They use variations of Beckett’s words for inspiration, such as “Fail Fast, Fail Early, Fail Often,” “Fail Better” or “Fail Forward.”<sup>42</sup> Variations of this phrase are referenced at conferences and other events in Silicon Valley. Virgin’s Sir Richard Branson cites the quotation on his website followed by, “from the playwright Samuel Beckett, but just as easily could have come from the mouth of yours truly.”<sup>43</sup> Branson cites the quotation as occurring on the last page of the text, but in reality it occurs twice on the first page and then throughout, but is found nowhere on the last page, which again demonstrates that many that use this phrase are not aware of its context. It is also noteworthy that Branson refers to Beckett as a playwright when the quotation he refers to occurs in a prose text. Beckett does not valorise failure as a means to improve the possibility of expression. Errancy is the answer for Beckett because his works set out to fail, in a multiplicity of ways, and stand in direct contrast with improvement. *In Worstward Ho*, Beckett sets out to fail at the beginning; it is not what happens in the end. Beckett wants to “fail better” each image he creates in order to make the text worse. The idea of failure is, ironically, Beckett’s most

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<sup>41</sup> Donohue n.p.

<sup>42</sup> Donohue n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Branson n.p.

successfully commercialised attributes, despite being very misunderstood.



Figure 1: Stanislas Wawrinka's tattoo. *Photo: Getty Images*



Figure 2: Used for Fianna Fail's campaign for the third level college students, 2012.



Figure 3: From mybitof earth.com. A personal blog. This entry was about home gardening and entitled "Fail Better" and included the above meme.

The images above are not what Beckett meant by failure, and certainly is not what is meant by the productive or methodological use of failure.

Taken in context in *Worstward Ho*, to “fail better”<sup>44</sup> is to strive to fail more and to continually worsen. To “fail better” is pushing toward the superlative of worst. As C.J. Ackerly and S.E. Gontarski write, “SB’s aesthetics of failure coalesce in pursuit of the worst.”<sup>45</sup> But, to get to the worst is an impossibility as Edgar from *King Lear* states, “The worst is not as long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’”<sup>46</sup> Beckett echoed this quotation in the 1950s when he wrote to Jacoba van Velde of Dublin while he was home with his brother who was very ill: “Here things are as bad as they could be. We say that even though we know we’ve seen nothing yet.”<sup>47</sup> Edgar’s line from *Lear* was an inspiration for *Worstward Ho* according to James Knowlson.<sup>48</sup> When applied to Beckett’s text, this demonstrates that no matter how hard one tries she will still be unsuccessful at reaching the worst. As long as one is still alive and able to speak, he or she has not reached the worst, yet. Beckett wrote to Barbara Bray of Port Santo, Portugal, “This would be a place to come and die [...] when the worst comes to the worst.”<sup>49</sup> The worst comes to the worst only in death, when finally one cannot continue to try and fail at expressing.

The title *Worstward Ho* in itself declares a desired progression towards failure.

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<sup>44</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

<sup>45</sup> *The Grove Companion* 652.

<sup>46</sup> Shakespeare Act IV Scene I.

<sup>47</sup> SB to Jacoba van Velde, 20 August 1954. Vol. 2, 525.

<sup>48</sup> *DTF* 565.

<sup>49</sup> SB to Barbara Bray, 28 January 1969. Vol. 4, 150.

*Worstward Ho* alludes to and perhaps mocks or parodies Charles Kingsley's (1819-1875) *Westward Ho!* (1855) and also John Webster (1580-1634) and Thomas Dekker's (1572-1632) Jacobean play *Westward Hoe* (1607). Dekker and Webster's title was borrowed from the cries of the river taxi drivers on the Thames. *Westward Hoe* is a satire of the modernisation of London from a walled medieval city to a city pushing westward and expanding with more capitalistic and competitive aims. Kingsley's version focuses on England's expansion westward into the Caribbean. The novel praises England's victories over Spain in the Elizabethan era. It is as much anti-Catholic as it is pro-English imperialism. If the characters in Kingsley's novel are declaring their movement west to the Caribbean to battle the Spanish for colonial control and Webster and Dekker are mocking the declaration of England pushing westward for capitalist gain, Beckett's images and words are emphatically declaring a movement toward the worst.

The preference for distortion, deformation and worsening can be traced to Beckett's encounters with visual art. The worsening and imperfection of image, colour and line are what makes art captivating for Beckett. A distorted, incoherent or worsening image causes the spectator to pause in order to consider and question the image in front of him. These types of works force the eye to rest on the work in order to absorb and observe it. Beckett's preference for failures is reflected when Beckett was delighted to report to MacGreevy about their mutual friend Nuala Costello's views on Beckett's inclinations and opinions on painting. She told him, "You haven't a good word to say for

anyone but the failures.”<sup>50</sup> Beckett continued, “I thought that was quite the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a long time.”<sup>51</sup> He wrote that works that are straightforward and technically proficient, such as T.F. Powy’s writing, are “a fabricated darkness and painfully organised unified tragic completeness.”<sup>52</sup> We can see this same fabrication, organisation and unified completeness in a painting that Beckett despised: Orazio Gentileschi’s (1563-1639) *David Slaying Goliath* (c. 1605-1607), acquired by the National Gallery of Ireland on 7 May 1936. Beckett referred to it as “the appalling new Gentileschi.”<sup>53</sup> The extreme realism and technical prowess, down to the detail of dirt beneath David’s toenails, was uninteresting to Beckett. The painting tries, realistically, to depict a well-known biblical scene. This type of realism can be looked at quickly and understood, leaving little for the spectator to consider. For Beckett, the interest of a work of art does not lie in its technical achievements, but instead in the alarming use and variation of a colour, the distortion and worsening of image, and the recalcitrance of fixed meaning or understanding. What results is a continued exertion on the part of the spectator, who must repeatedly run her eyes over the work. In a painting like Gentileschi’s, the spectator is instead given the full picture. The story of David and Goliath is well known, and with this Gentileschi we are presented with the image as we would expect it, to use Beckett’s words, in all of its “tragic completeness.”<sup>54</sup> Beckett had a severe dislike for the Gentileschi painting as if it embodied all that was distasteful and

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<sup>50</sup> SB to TM, 8 September 1935. Vol. 1, 275.

<sup>51</sup> SB to TM, 8 Septmeber 1935. Vol. 1, 275.

<sup>52</sup> SB to TM, 8 November 1931. Vol. 1, 94.

<sup>53</sup> SB to TM, 27 June 1936. Vol. 1, 346.

<sup>54</sup> SB to TM, 8 November 1931. Vol. 1, 94.

boring about realistic painting, and it stood as a guide to rate how bad other paintings are. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy, he criticises some of the gallery's new acquisitions stating they are "not quite perhaps so bad as the Gentileschi."<sup>55</sup> The grit of artwork makes it captivating, as he states, "The Perugino has gone to London to be cleaned. It was overcleaned long ago I thought."<sup>56</sup> He did not appreciate a "clean" and perfect creation of an image. This is perhaps another reason for his life long appreciation of Jack B. Yeats.<sup>57</sup> Beckett's penchant for worsening images derived from his animus towards technically proficient painters.

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<sup>55</sup> SB to TM 17 July 1936. Vol. 1, 358-359. He criticizes the purchases of *Lord Meets His Mother* (c. 1750) and the *Decent from the Cross* (c. 1742) by Giuseppe Bazzani (1690-1769) and *The Vision of St. Jerome* (1627) by Johann Lys (c. 1595-1631). Beckett states in this letter, "2 Bazzani & a Jan Lys, are really appalling."

<sup>56</sup> SB to TM, 17 July 1936. Vol. 1, 358-359. He is referring to Perugino's (c.1446-1523) *Pieta* (c. 1483-1493). Sebastian Isepp, Restorer to the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna concurs with Beckett in his report on 6 June 1936. This evaluation indicates that this painting was "spoiled though early restoration—particularly through unnecessary overpainting, darkened retouching, cracks in the paint and dangerous blisters" (NGI Archives).

<sup>57</sup> Yeats' tendency to preclude perfection is looked at in detail in Chapter three of this thesis.



Orazaio Gentileschi, *David and Goliath* (c.1605-1607). The Nation Gallery of Ireland.

Movement towards the worst allowed Beckett to abstract and interrogate the relation between words and images. Beckett wanted each word and image to disappoint more and more, and he devised different ways to do this throughout the text. He creates an image in order to worsen it by failing to produce full images of characters, clear plotlines or connections and correct grammar. He creates three images to worsen in *Worstward Ho*: a standing body, a head in hands and two figures plodding. The first image in *Worstward Ho* is a deteriorating body that he returns to multiple times throughout the text in order to worsen it: “First try fail better one. Something there not badly wrong.”<sup>58</sup> Then he goes through a sort of checklist of how to worsen the image. The narrator states, “The no hands bad. The no—.”<sup>59</sup> The narrator then even rejects “bad” in favour of “worse.” He states, “A

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<sup>58</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>59</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

pox on bad. Mere bad. Way for worse. Pending worse still.”<sup>60</sup> Worse connotes a continued deterioration; bad is merely bad. The other two images he presents, a head in hands—“germ of all”<sup>61</sup>—and two figures plodding do not fair any better; they only worsen more and more throughout the text. The two figures “Plod on never recede,”<sup>62</sup> much like the unmoving as figures in a painting like Yeats’ *Two Travellers* (1942). The images are in a constant state of pending worse. Always propelling toward wrongness, failure, or lessness. They do not measure up; they never become more. Destroying the images that he creates results in better failures.

The short stilted incomplete sentences go beyond thematic failure as Beckett is failing and worsening the technical aspects of writing: grammar and style. As he writes to Kaun nearly fifty years prior to *Worstward Ho*,

Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit [...] A mask [...] Language is best used when most efficiently abused [...] To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through.<sup>63</sup>

In *Worstward Ho*, the reader is able to see Beckett boring holes in grammar, style, plot character and image, worsening these components little by little without fully demolishing them. The most common error in grammar utilised repeatedly in *Worstward Ho* is the fragmented sentence. The grammatical error of fragmentation mirrors the fragmentation and

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<sup>60</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>61</sup> *Worstward Ho* 85.

<sup>62</sup> *Worstward Ho* 84.

<sup>63</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

worsening of the bodies or figures that he describes. Just as the figure that was once “astand” becomes a “topless baseless trunk,”<sup>64</sup> his sentences lessen and deteriorate. He relentlessly reminds the reader that the worst is yet to come. Beckett’s continual worsening and methodology of errancy in *Worstward Ho* and many of his other texts is a way for Beckett to engage with modernist painting’s move towards abstraction. Through worsening, Beckett begins to abstract and vaguen his images without fully destroying them. In order to look at this move in more detail, we must take into account a brief history of abstraction versus realism and consider the debate around abstract painting.

### **Evolution of Modern Painting and the Rise of Abstraction**

The evolution of painting first tries to conceal the limitations of the paint through technique to create realism. We see this first in the Renaissance painters’ interest in linear perspective. Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) took linear perspective a step further by developing the technique of aerial or atmospheric perspective, which creates a sense of depth in painting by imitating the way the atmosphere makes distant objects appear less distinct and more bluish than they would be if nearby. In *The Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1483-1486), the background becomes bluer and hazier imitating the way the atmosphere becomes more hazy and blue when one looks off into the distance. Beckett stated that the Italians, like Da Vinci, “surveyed the world like building contractors,”<sup>65</sup> trying to precisely depict their vision. This desire for naturalism continues and culminates with the extreme realism of Neo-Classicism demonstrated in a painter like Jacques-Louis David

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<sup>64</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>65</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

(1748-1845). In these ultra-realistic paintings, it seems as if the viewer can actually walk among and touch the objects inside the painting. The shadows in David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) suggest the solidness of the bodies in the painting as well as a known source of light, coming from the upper left hand corner of the painting. Academic painters in Dublin as well as London, like William Orpen (1878-1931) and his student Seán Keating (1889-1977), continued to mostly paint in the mimetic technique of classical realism well into the twentieth century. In Orpen's *Reflections: China and Japan* (1902), it looks as though one could run one's fingers along the glossy glassware. The solidness created in such works is merely optical illusion. Ultimately the canvas is a flat surface that is incompatible with actual depth. Nineteenth-century literature does much the same thing. This style of literature tries to hide the limitations of words, creating stories that the reader can get lost in, such as the bourgeois worlds of Jane Austen and George Eliot. Modern and post-modern painting distinctly recognises the limitation of the form by blatantly pointing out the flatness of the canvas, or in Beckett's case, the flatness of the text and the impossibility of expression through language, both on the page and the stage.



Leonardo Da Vinci. *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1486). Musée du Louvre.



Jacques Louis David. *The Oath of Horatii* (1789). Musée du Louvre.



William Orpen. *Reflections: China and Japan 1902* (1902). Hugh Lane Gallery.

Impressionist painters first acknowledge these limitations of the canvas by thickening the paint and making the brush strokes very visible. They focus more on the impression of an image rather than creating a realistic scene. In Claude Monet's (1840-1926) classic *Haystacks* series (1890-1891), the spectator notices the impression of light and the texture of the canvas rather than solidness of forms. Cézanne, in response to the Impressionists, flattens his canvases through simultaneous perspective and thin layers of paint. Both of these moves increase the importance of the eye and the optical over the illusion of depth. As Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg states,

Where old masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can

only look, can travel through only with the eye.<sup>66</sup>

Before Greenberg, the rejection of the line used in realism to recreate the illusion of solid forms on the canvas is explored by Heinrich Wölfflin in his monograph *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* first published in 1915 with an update in 1932. Wölfflin points out that the line starts to be questioned as far back as Rembrandt. In this text, Wölfflin points out the difference between the linear and the painterly when it comes to artistic style. In linear style, “background is background; figure is figure.”<sup>67</sup> The linear is “things as they are;” the painterly is “things how they seem to be.”<sup>68</sup> The linear is distinctiveness plastically felt. There are “clear boundaries of solid objects” that “give the spectator a feeling of security, as if he would move along them with his fingers.”<sup>69</sup> The linear is solid, and it has an enduring form that is measurable and finite. It seeks to correctly represent the thing itself.<sup>70</sup> The painterly relies on “figure and space, corporeal and incorporeal, can unite in the impression of independent tonal movement.”<sup>71</sup> It trades in masses rather than lines. The painterly relies on changing appearance and movement (form in function), the thing in relation and the “skin of different things.”<sup>72</sup> The painterly relies on and revels in chaos and movement and defies solid boundaries. Art historian Arnold Hauser also notes the changes modern art

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<sup>66</sup> Greenberg 195.

<sup>67</sup> Wölfflin 21.

<sup>68</sup> Wölfflin 21.

<sup>69</sup> Wölfflin 21.

<sup>70</sup> Wölfflin 27.

<sup>71</sup> Wölfflin 27.

<sup>72</sup> Wölfflin 27.

undergoes as it shifts away from representational, “Everything stable and coherent is dissolved into metamorphoses and assumes the character of the unfinished and fragmentary.”<sup>73</sup>



Claude Monet. *Haystacks, End of Summer, Morning* (1891). Musée d’Orsay.

After Impressionism and Expressionism, abstract painting takes the demolition of the form one step further by denying depth or tactility of objects completely. For example, the random drippings of paint by Jackson Pollock, Mondrian’s primary colours in strict geometric shapes or the simplicity of Rothko’s colour blocks do not refer to anything concrete. To imagine walking through one of these paintings would be more like walking inward through the synapses of the brain than through a landscape. Because of its lack of outer reference, the “meaning” or “purpose” of abstract art is a matter of great contention for critics and the general public from its genesis onwards.

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<sup>73</sup> Hauser 169.



Jackson Pollock. *Number 8 1949* (detail). Nueberger Museum of Art.

A key focus of the debate around modernism in the visual arts centres on the advent of abstraction and its significance to modernism. Clement Greenberg, T.J. Clark, and Michael Fried are the foremost critics involved in this debate. Greenberg believed that abstraction achieves the modernist desire to create a pure art form, and that abstract art is pure media or pure form; it has no reference that goes beyond itself.<sup>74</sup> Greenberg concluded that abstraction is the purest form of art because the abstract image is self-explanatory; it exists on its own merits and contains no hidden meaning.<sup>75</sup> Greenberg believed that any analysis that searches for a deeper meaning of context or subject matter in abstract art goes against the ethos of formal art theory:

It has been in the search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at

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<sup>74</sup> Greenberg 194.

<sup>75</sup> Greenberg 194.

‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art [...] Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, to a formalist like Greenberg, art should be analysed solely on the elemental truths of the artwork. A line is a line and a square is a square; the only important truth when considering these elements is the visual impact they have on the viewer.<sup>77</sup>

T.J. Clark disagrees. Clark sees the move toward abstraction in the Modernist dialogue as an articulation of the socio-political conditions of modern life. In the essay “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” Clark intends to “interpret and extrapolate”<sup>78</sup> from Greenberg’s writing on Modernism and abstraction to form an in-depth Marxist reading of the definitions and characteristics that Greenberg proposes concerning modern art. Clark disagrees with the fact that modern art can stand on its own, or as he puts it, “the very notion of art itself becoming an independent source of value.”<sup>79</sup> He contends that modern art is all negation, and he states that “the medium has appeared most characteristically as the site of negation and estrangement. The very way that modernist art has insisted on its medium has been by negating that medium’s ordinary consistency.”<sup>80</sup> For Clark, this negation signals a “wider decomposition.”<sup>81</sup> Abstract art is a sign of modern times because it conveys the lack of representative meanings in a society or culture. As Clark states, abstract art attempts “to

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<sup>76</sup> Greenberg 194.

<sup>77</sup> Greenberg 194.

<sup>78</sup> Clark 141.

<sup>79</sup> Clark 149.

<sup>80</sup> Clark 152.

<sup>81</sup> Clark 154.

capture the lack and make it over into form.”<sup>82</sup> He argues,

Surely that dance of negation has to do with social facts [...]— the decline of ruling class elites, the absence of a ‘social base’ for artistic production, the paradox involved in making bourgeois art in the absence of a bourgeois.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, abstract art is representing something, even if that something is a lack. Clark does not believe that the ultimate goal of art is “its own singular and perfect disembodiment.”<sup>84</sup> He does not believe this is the best way to view modern art, and he takes issue with Greenberg, as well as abstract artists, who propose that this pure art can exist and have value of its own. Michael Fried answers back in defence of Greenberg, in “How Modernism Works: A Response to T.J. Clark,” stating that Clark misses key points, and that it is an over simplification to state that modern art is merely negation and that this negation carries with it socio-political meaning. Beckett’s errancy and failure to produce solid or representational forms that are not wholly abstract, but not mimetic either, interrogates the debate around negation and abstraction. For Beckett, abstract art thinks that it is possible to do something new, rather than recognising the inherent failure in this attempt.

One reason Beckett utilised a methodology of failure in his works is to both demonstrate and contradict modernist painting’s move toward the non-representational. Later prose works such as *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), and *Worstward Ho* (1983) as well as selected dramatic works analysed alongside chosen paintings of Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy highlight a move toward the non-representational through the

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<sup>82</sup> Clark 154.

<sup>83</sup> Clark 154.

<sup>84</sup> Clark 156.

failure of visual formalistic elements, such as texture, line, colour, and composition. Both technical and thematic errancy propel Beckett's late works towards abstraction without the images becoming fully abstract. Beckett's images, like those of Swanzy and Yeats, dissolve, question and confuse the creation of solid or representational images in order to perform the process of abstraction before the reader or viewer's eyes. This results in an effort to interrogate the process of abstraction itself.

In a letter to Duthuit in March 1949, Beckett elaborates why Bram's fidelity to failure also shows a fidelity to failing to be either abstract or figurative, while containing elements of both.

[The artist] can therefore turn away from the immediate visible without that having particular importance, yet still ceasing to be a term of relation. No point in naming the painting, hysterical or reasoned, that comes out of those fall-back miradors which, called upon to have to give substance to the expression, begin to resemble strangely that of the easel shaken by the mistral, before the hurly-burly of irreplaceable moments.<sup>85</sup>

Whether the painting is "hysterical or reasoned," if it claims to give substance to expression then it is of no importance in Beckett's eyes. Beckett saw Bram van Velde as refusing relations between the artist and the outside world as well as the relations that exist within the artist himself. He wrote in this same letter, "I shall tend irresistibly to pull Bram's case over towards my own, since that is the condition of being in it and talking

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<sup>85</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

about it.”<sup>86</sup> The “being in it” and “talking about it” refer to the relation that occurs within the self/subject. He explains in this letter that painters that give themselves over to complete abstraction believe that have been “tattered,”<sup>87</sup> meaning pierced or perforated, and that the relations that happen within the self are allowed to leak out through their brushes allowing them to “wallow untroubled in what is called non-figurative painting”<sup>88</sup> because they will never be short of themes. He saw the folly in abstract painting that claims to express inner conflicts. Art should not be created in an untroubled space. Art should instead convey the troubles and problems of expression. He points out that the fully abstract artists have it all wrong. He writes, “instead of being in front of the precipitants [the cause of the action or event] he is in front of the precipitates [causes an undesirable event to happen suddenly or prematurely]. Talk about a rest cure.”<sup>89</sup> He saw purely abstract painting as an easy way out. It was too forced and too comfortable, in Beckett’s view, to just resort to painting non-figurative images. On the other hand, a painting that acknowledges the abstract and the figure also acknowledges the problems with relation between the subject and the object. It acknowledges the failure in being able express the artist’s inner and outer relations. To Beckett, a painter like Bram van Velde does this, resulting in the fact that his “painting owes nothing to these feeble consolations”<sup>90</sup> that the purely abstract artist is able to enjoy. In a Van Velde painting the figurative and the abstract exist on the same canvas. Elements of abstraction and

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<sup>86</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>87</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>88</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>89</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>90</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

figuration become interchangeable on areas of the canvas, depending on how the painting is viewed. Two paintings that exemplify Beckett's points concerning Van Velde are pictured below.



Bram van Velde, *Untitled (Montrouge)* (1947). Courtesy of Artists Rights Agency.



Bram van Velde. *Untitled* (1948). Courtesy of Christie's.

Beckett purposefully engages and then errs against the technical formalistic components of painterly abstraction described by Greenberg as well as the idea that abstract art can express something, even if that something is a lack as described by Clarke. Beckett's errancy and failure to produce solid or representational forms that are not wholly abstract, but not mimetic either, interrogates the debate around representation and abstraction. Beckett contravenes the medium of literature's ordinary consistencies, words, in order to question form and content itself.

An exponential part of the obscurity achieved in Beckett's late prose works lies in

this fact that the longer the eye dwells on the text or the mind's eye dwells on the image, the more indistinct and incomprehensible these images become. The narrator of *Company* points out, "This at first sight seems clear [...] the longer the eye dwells the obscurer it grows."<sup>91</sup> The lines and boundaries of the solid figure and methods of representation continually fail before the reader's eyes, creating and then abstracting an image. This may be what the French critic Pascale Casanova means when she states that for Beckett "to proceed in the direction of 'nothing' and persevere on the path of failure is the only possible access to literary abstraction."<sup>92</sup> The perseverance of failure was something very familiar to Beckett, and it was something that he believed was absolutely necessary for an artist. As previously mentioned, "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare to fail, that failure is his world."<sup>93</sup> While Casanova suggests that literary abstraction is achieved, Peggy Phelan aptly writes, that Beckett's works are "neither fully abstract nor fully figurative,"<sup>94</sup> but instead these works expose "the vast space between these two expressive modes."<sup>95</sup> Pure abstraction is not the answer, and does not provide a "pure form" any more than realism can recreate reality. Beckett's works "oscillate between seeing and blindness, between figuration and abstraction, between the void at the centre of sight and the contour of the slender ridge that brooks it."<sup>96</sup> This oscillation between seeing and blindness and figuration and abstraction is achieved in the way Beckett manipulates his images and purposefully contravenes

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<sup>91</sup> *Company* 13-14.

<sup>92</sup> Casanova 91.

<sup>93</sup> "Three Dialogues" 145.

<sup>94</sup> "Lessons in Blindness" 1282.

<sup>95</sup> "Lessons in Blindness" 1282.

<sup>96</sup> "Lessons in Blindness" 1280.

technique.

Beckett's interest in and proclivity for oscillating between the abstract and the figurative is reflected in the painters he admired and the artistic choices they made. The painters with whom Beckett had friendships tried their hands at abstraction without fully committing to it. Dutch painter Bram van Velde, whom Beckett was very close to from the 1940s until Van Velde's death in 1981, painted in a semi-representation style with intense colours related to Lyrical Abstraction. Avigdor Arikha,<sup>97</sup> one of Beckett's closest friends from the 1950s onward, produced abstract paintings from 1957-1965, but from 1966-1973 he stopped painting as he felt it impossible to continue in the same vein. He froze in the face of the inherent failure of the creative act. When Arikha did start painting again in 1973, a year after the first productions of *Not I* (1972), he worked exclusively from life, quickly finishing a painting in one sitting.<sup>98</sup> Complete abstraction does not do what either Clark or Greenberg's camp claims—it does not create pure form nor is it really able to express the chaos of the social and political implications of the modern world, though it hints at both of these.<sup>99</sup> Beckett revealed in an interview that “the key word in my plays is ‘perhaps.’”<sup>100</sup> At its essence, complete abstraction breaks down the form of an object into an utterly chaotic, random or formless object. There are few things more chaotic in painting than Jackson Pollock's random splattering of paint. Figurative

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<sup>97</sup> Further detail relating to Beckett's relationship with van Velde and Arikha is covered in Chapter two of this thesis.

<sup>98</sup> “Arikha, Avigdor” n.p.

<sup>99</sup> Driver 23.

<sup>100</sup> Driver 23.

representation tries to represent orderly reality and to make order out of this chaos. Commitment to either would be easier than admitting that one cannot express, with obligation to express. Only through the simultaneous existence of both the abstract and the figurative—one threatening to take over the other on the same canvas or on the same page—can the artist produce a form that admits the confusion and messiness of the world. In this way Beckett, like several artists he admired, was not content with full abstraction. He realised its narrow-mindedness and its complications. By worsening his images, Beckett throws proverbial paint into the faces of artists and writers that think they are making progress in the realm of expression.

### **Errancy as a Method to Perform and Interrogate Abstraction**

For the purpose of furthering our understanding of errancy as a method in which to perform and interrogate abstraction, let us turn to the paintings of Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats. Their purposeful technical failings as well as the recurring theme of failure within the materiality of their works can further illuminate Beckettian failure and errancy as a methodology.

Yeats and Swanzy both erred in the use of formalistic artistic elements as a way to perform abstraction before the viewer's eyes. But, Yeats and Swanzy neither completely abandon nor recreate mimetic figures or objects. Instead they show us the disintegrating solidity of the three-dimensional form in the context of figuration. The rejection of three-dimensional solidity is a territory that was unique to the modernist visual arts and a central component of abstract art. Greenberg points out that “flatness, two

dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.”<sup>101</sup> The thick impasto in a Yeats painting flattens the image as the lines dissolve on the canvas. Simultaneously, the thickness of paint highlights the three-dimensional quality of the paint itself. His images fail to fully abstract but continually threaten to do so.

One way that the disintegration of the solid object is made manifest is by the repudiation of the most basic tenets of representation—the line. In a Yeats painting, lines continually fail and his images vaguen. The word *vaguen* is borrowed from American critic Gordon S. Armstrong in *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words* (1990). He points out that Jack Yeats was continually “softening, obscuring, vaguening images.”<sup>102</sup> Armstrong introduces the idea of *vaguening* in the works of Beckett. He describes *vaguening* as Beckett’s deliberate efforts to obscure the structural and thematic concerns of his plays in order to “create a kind of absence, whiteness, and transparent silence.” Armstrong argues that Beckett adopts the technique of *vaguening* from Jack B. Yeats. Armstrong notes that on a manuscript of *Happy Days* Beckett writes “*vaguen* it” beside several passages of text. Armstrong points out that behind almost all Beckett’s work “was the figure of Jack Yeats softening, obscuring, *vaguening* the images.”<sup>103</sup> *Vaguening* is used to engage Yeats and Swanzy in the process of worsening the image. The idea of *vaguening* is parallel to Beckett’s worsening of images in

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<sup>101</sup> Greenberg 193.

<sup>102</sup> Armstrong 65.

<sup>103</sup> Armstrong 65.

*Worstward Ho* and other works. In a painting like Jack B. Yeats' *The Basin in which Pilot Washed His Hands* (1951), solidity of figures is constantly confused and dissolved on the canvas by the lack of lines and clear boundaries. Yeats often used a palette knife to apply paint. Because using a knife to apply paint would be a much less controlled act than applying paint with a brush, this technique accentuated the absence and breakdown of lines. Since he applied paint directly to the canvas, no mixing or thinning agents were used making the paint so thick that it stands up in little peaks in some areas of the canvas. In *Basin*, the absence of lines also emphasises the liquidity of the paint. It looks like the paint is melting and about to drip off of the canvas. The horizontal brushstrokes in the centre of the painting have been executed by using in a downward motion also suggesting dripping or running paint. The figures are half formed and hard to distinguish. The image continuously blurs and vaguens itself without becoming completely abstract. The middle and sides of the painting fade into abstraction, while the figures in the centre can still be made out. Yeats believed that lines, where they do exist, were there to be dismantled. As he told British Art Historian John Rothenstein,

I believe that the painter always begins by expressing himself with line— that is, by the most obvious means; then he becomes aware that line, once so necessary, is in fact hemming him in, and as soon as he feels strong enough, he breaks out of its confines.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Qtd. in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 127.

The figure in the middle of *Basin* is abstracted into the background. In the corner, sides and background the figures continue to vaguen into non-figurative forms. What emerges is the performance or movement toward the abstract. The spectator is forced to become aware of the image and the figures emerging as the paint on the canvas and the technique used to apply it. The focal point is divided between image/narrative and medium, making a focused gaze or a clear intent difficult to decipher.



Jack B. Yeats. *The Basin in which Pilot Washed His Hands* (1951). Courtesy of Waddington Galleries London.

Swanzy's technique does not abandon or breakdown lines as dramatically as Yeats does. She often remained quite precise with her paintbrush. She instead utilised

lines in inconsistent and unclear ways. One way she did this was by layering images over one another. The layering results in many of the images present on the canvas failing to fully materialise. Each layer of images instead obscures the other, increasing the abstract nature of the painting. For example, in *Canal* (undated c. 1950s-60s), images are layered over one another. On the surface, there is a canal with buildings and a pole in the centre, but Swanzy has layered this over several other images. On closer inspection of the walls, there are animal and human figures threatening to emerge. Irish art historian Julian Campbell points out that there is yet another level in *Canal* where “transparent dancing figures and horseman are about to emerge from the pink plaster walls and swirling green waters.”<sup>105</sup> The canvas becomes a palimpsest; each layer is superimposed upon the next. The result is that the new layer obscures what is underneath. The paint looks smudged onto the surface, and the unusual colour palette of maroons, viridians and violets merge together creating an effect similar to stained glass. She shows the flatness of the canvas by the smoothness of her paint and brushstrokes. In many of her paintings, the viewer can see the actual texture and fibre of the canvas rather than the texture of the paint or application of it. The canvas, at times, seems unpainted, but more like it was dipped into paint or dyed. It looks as if some of the colours had merely run onto the canvas in the same way colours run in a mixed load of laundry. In *Canal*, the colours are fluid and swirling, which, while not painted in impasto, suggest a fluidity comparable to some of Yeats’ works. The dissolution of lines creates an unfinished and unending nature to both painters’ works. She fails to let an image emerge or take precedence over another image.

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<sup>105</sup> “South Kensington” 299.

The failure of fixed meaning or image results in a distorted and deteriorating image that is fluid and multiplicitous.



Mary Swanzy. *Canal* (undated c. 1950s-60s). Private Collection. Courtesy of Christie's.

Similarly, Beckett disrupts and fragments lines in order to dissolve, obliterate or worsen his images. He slowly worsens his images by fragmenting them. Fragmentation of bodies, images and language is evident in *Worstward Ho*. For example, a three-

dimensional image is produced: “I’ll say there’s a body (where there isn’t one),”<sup>106</sup> and later, he urges, “Say bones. No bones but say bones.”<sup>107</sup> The three-dimensional image of a body that has bones and stands on the ground is only said and then it is broken up with short unfinished sentences and a plethora of full stops. This fragmenting destroys and flattens the image into something we clearly know is not a solid object, a body or otherwise. When the narrator says or writes down that a body exists; it is an illusion, as no body actually exists, just words. The bones can only be said and not realistically created on the page. The sentences are staccato and often incomplete. He does not write there are no bones; he writes merely, “No bones.”<sup>108</sup> There is also an acute indecisiveness which results in a fracturing of lines of narrative from the beginning of the text: “First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of it back sick of the either.”<sup>109</sup> The images are brought forth and then “They fade.”<sup>110</sup> This is reminiscent in the layered fading images in *Canal*. The variations of repeated phrases also suggest a lost or trailing line of thought: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”<sup>111</sup> And shortly after on the same page, “Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or Better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good.”<sup>112</sup> Instead of moving forward the narrator continually goes

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<sup>106</sup> *Worstward Ho* 82.

<sup>107</sup> *Worstward Ho* 84.

<sup>108</sup> *Worstward Ho* 84.

<sup>109</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

<sup>110</sup> *Worstward Ho* 84.

<sup>111</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

<sup>112</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

back in order to worsen his images, “Back try worsen twain preying since last worse”<sup>113</sup> and “somehow again on back to the bowed back alone.”<sup>114</sup> His continual inclination to go backwards instead of progressing forwards further demonstrate a worsening of the text and indignation towards progress or success. The sentences that are not incomplete do not have an explicit subject. Instead, he uses implied second person. In a statement like “Fail again” the “you” is implied rather than directly stated, which lessens the amount of words used.

A main component of worsening these images is Beckett’s idea of “lessness.” Beckett first investigates a theory of negation and reduction in *Lessness* (1970), a short prose piece that consists of a permutation of 60 sentences and 769 words. Beckett further develops his idea of “Lessness” in *Worstward Ho*. As the narrator states,

With what one word convey its change? Careful. Less. Ah the sweet one word.  
Less. It is less. The same but less. Whencesoever the glare. True that light. See  
how now words too. A few drops mishaphazard. Then strangury. To say the least.  
Less. It will end by being no more. By never having been. Divine prospect. True  
that light.<sup>115</sup>

The shortness of his words and sentences strives to say the least. He continues to make everything less. He berates the idea of adding to the text, “Add a—. Add? Never. Bow it

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<sup>113</sup> *Worstward Ho* 100.

<sup>114</sup> *Worstward Ho* 97.

<sup>115</sup> *Worstward Ho* 73.

down.”<sup>116</sup> He literally dissolves and flattens the image here. The one first “astand” then on his knees becomes finally a “Topless baseless hind trunk.”<sup>117</sup> Beckett then moves on to worsen the second figure, “Next try fail better two.”<sup>118</sup> The narrator in *Worstward Ho* also becomes frustrated at the thought that his words may hold or claim any truth. “The words too whosoever. What room for worse! How almost true they sometimes ring! How wanting in inanity!”<sup>119</sup> and “No more [...]. Resume the—what is the word? What the wrong word?”<sup>120</sup> The goal of the artist is to be as wrong as possible. As he wrote to Duthuit nearly thirty-five years earlier, “Yes, to be sought in the impossibility of ever being wrong enough, ever being ridiculous and defenceless enough.”<sup>121</sup> The worsening flattens any attempt at narrative, and the reader instead is left with a blurred or abstract occurrence that is hyper-aware of its medium, much like the intense awareness of the painting as painted object in Yeats and Swanzey’s paintings. He relays his penchant for worsening and lessness in a letter Duthuit,

One must shout, murmur, and exult, madly until one can find the no doubt calm language of the no, unqualified, or as little qualified as possible. One must, no that’s all there is, apparently, for some of us.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>117</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>118</sup> *Worstward Ho* 89.

<sup>119</sup> *Worstward Ho* 88.

<sup>120</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said* 51.

<sup>121</sup> SB to Duthuit, 12 August 1948. Vol. 2, 102.

<sup>122</sup> SB to Duthuit, 11 August 1948. Vol. 2, 98.

This “language of the no” is all there is for Beckett. This type of language acknowledges the failure of these mad exultations and is what Beckett strived for, which is similar to the “unword” or “nonword”<sup>123</sup> that Beckett referred to in his letter to Kaun in 1937.

Furthermore Yeats and Swanzy can illuminate this idea of worsening images in order to “fail better.” Swanzy illustrates this worsening of visual elements such as line and colour to dissolve the image in many of her works. Art critic for the *Irish Times* Stephen Gwynne criticises Swanzy for doing just that, as he writes in 1921, “I can neither recognise shape or colour [...] nor can I see any beauty in this vision of hers.”<sup>124</sup> In *Peasant Woman on Pathway* (c. 1930) the solid images become more and more abstract as the viewer’s eye travels from the outside of the canvas to the centre. The solid images bend towards the centre causing the viewer’s gaze to travel from the edges of the canvas inward. The centre of the canvas is crowded with colours and abstract lines and shapes. The suggestion of solid images is most convincing at the edges of the canvas and then is plunged into the non-representational as lines and boundaries continually worsen. Not being able to recognise shape or colour or even beauty, as Gwynne puts it, disrupts the spectator’s expectations of art and forces him to reconsider such basic tenets of painting such as shape and colour.

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<sup>123</sup> SB to Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

<sup>124</sup> Gwynne 8.



Mary Swanzy. *Peasant Woman on Pathway* (c. 1930). Merrion Hotel, Dublin, Ireland.

The muddling of paint in Yeats' *About to Write a Letter* (1935) also repeatedly vitiates the images presented. This painting draws the spectator's eyes to the centre of the painting and then outward, with the solid objects in the centre and the abstract images in the periphery. The figure in the centre is reasonably distinct, while the walls and images around him become less and less clear as the viewer's eyes wonder around the edges of the painting. The walls bend unnaturally and there is a figure in the left hand corner that is little more than a brown blob of paint. In these paintings we can see Swanzy and Yeats continue

to exacerbate their failure by rejecting the academic style of painting favoured in Dublin at the time as well as the different schools of modernism in the visual arts, such as Cubism and Expressionism. The solidity of objects, colours, lines and styles decompose throughout the paintings the same way the images in *Worstward Ho* continue to worsen.



Jack B. Yeats. *About to Write a Letter* (1935). National Gallery of Ireland.

The blurring and vagueness of images is at times directly referenced in Beckett's texts. For example, objects are not seen correctly by the eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The obscure narrator states that "the curtain. Seen closer thanks to this hiatus it reveals itself

at last for what it is. A great coat.”<sup>125</sup> But this too is not necessarily true. As it is stated, “Long this image till suddenly it blurs.”<sup>126</sup> The fact that the eye may play tricks is further referenced in *Ill Seen Ill Said* when the grass described as remaining still and drooping, “how motionless it droops” until “under the relentless eye it shivers.”<sup>127</sup> Similarly, in *Company* the images presented “cannot be verified.”<sup>128</sup> This lack of verification obscures meaning and intent much in the same way that Yeats’ paintings do.

Another way that Beckett worsens his images is by flattening them, which again suggests their likeness with the two-dimensional space of a canvas. In *Company* the solidity of figures is consistently confused, interrogated and worsened. The only character, if he can be called that, lies flat “on his back in the dark.”<sup>129</sup> The reader only knows this not because the character can see himself, but because of “the pressure” the narrator feels “on his hind parts.”<sup>130</sup> In *Ill Seen, Ill Said* we are unsure if the figure is alive, is a ghost, or is a figment of the imagination, and the location is described as “inexistent centre of a formless place. [...] Flat to be sure.”<sup>131</sup> In *Worstward Ho*, the two or twain (old man and child) plod as one, never receding, much like figures on a canvas. The reader is constantly made aware of the flatness of the images and the page, just as the abstraction taking place within the paintings makes the viewer acutely aware of the two dimensionality of the canvas.

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<sup>125</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said* 70.

<sup>126</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said* 52.

<sup>127</sup> *CDW* 59.

<sup>128</sup> *Company* 3.

<sup>129</sup> *Company* 3.

<sup>130</sup> *Company* 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said* 46.

Sickness, vomit, secretion and ooze are often related to the process of creation and perception in the works of Beckett, and such things demonstrate the sick and fallible nature of artistic creation. The implication of sickness suggests deterioration, and images certainly deteriorate in the paintings and texts mentioned. Although Beckett struggled with a failing body and what he saw as a declining mental and verbal function as he aged, these failures allow him to get closer to that space of the unword or the non-word that he had written about to Kaun.<sup>132</sup> This is apparent in his letters during the time before and during the writing of *Worstward Ho*. As he writes to Franz Wurm (1926-2010), a Swiss-Jewish poet and translator, “I try to think with what mind remains [...] though think is not the word, at last not the word.”<sup>133</sup> To the American book-dealer Herbert Myron, he also writes, “I work on, with failing mind, in other words, improved possibilities.”<sup>134</sup> Beckett again acknowledges that failure leads to more possibilities than technical perfection. As Beckett’s mind began to fail, the creative possibilities broadened. The natural failings of old age and the continual worsening of body and mind offer Beckett myriad possibilities to develop his methodology of errancy. Beckett does not write, “Feel Better;” he writes, “Fail better.” As the narrator in *Worstward Ho* states, “Something not wrong with one. Meaning—meaning!—meaning the kneeling one.”<sup>135</sup> In addition to the deterioration of old age, bodily fluids and excretions are a common motif in *Worstward Ho*. The narrator refers to “Throwing up for good” as well as oozing and secreting.

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<sup>132</sup> SB to Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518. See introduction of this thesis for further explanation of this letter.

<sup>133</sup> SB to Franz Wurm, 27 April 1980. Vol. 4, 528.

<sup>134</sup> SB to Herbert Myron, 26 April 1980. Vol. 4, 527.

<sup>135</sup> *Worstward Ho* 88.

Throw up or vomit was something Beckett associated with painting, as he writes in his letter to Duthuit in relation to Bram van Velde, “If you ask me why the canvas does not stay blank, I can only invoke this unintelligible, unchallengeable need to splash colour on it, even if it means vomiting one’s whole being.”<sup>136</sup> Paint itself also oozes and secretes from the tube and then is mixed either on a palette or on a canvas as Yeats often did. The viewer is confronted with the oozianness of paint in a Jack B. Yeats painting. The mixing of paints on canvas many times resulted in brownish vomit-like colours in certain points where paint is the thickest, and this can be seen in the detail of the lower left corner of *About to Write a Letter* pictured below. It is almost as if some of these works are vomited onto the canvas. The narrator in *Worstward Ho* states, “ooze on back not to unsay but say again the vasts apart.”<sup>137</sup> In *Worstward Ho* the authorial narrator threatens to give up on the first page, “To throw up and go.”<sup>138</sup> The narrator is sick of the narrative from the first page, and repeatedly threatens to throw up for good.



(Detail of *About to Write a Letter*)

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<sup>136</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 141.

<sup>137</sup> *Worstward Ho* 97.

<sup>138</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

In his letters, Beckett criticises pure realism and pure abstraction through metaphors of bodily fluid in the form of masturbation. The artist that still tries to create in a realistic way is merely “rubbing himself [...] against his furniture, out of the terror of being abandoned by it.”<sup>139</sup> Realism becomes a masturbatory act of rubbing oneself off the furniture. The realistic artist takes pleasure in recreating the solid objects, such as furniture that are right in front of him. Abstract art does not fare much better in Beckett’s view. He states, “to which, as only alternative, we find ourselves being faced with the pure manustupration of Orphic and abstract art.”<sup>140</sup> Abstract art represents a more direct form of masturbation, in which one’s own hand can be used to climax rather than rubbing against objects. The conclusion and best remedy for unfruitful self-satisfying act, for Beckett, is impotence, recognising the inherent failure in the lack of ejaculation/creation/expression on the canvas: “What if we simply stopped altogether having erections? As in life, enough sperm floating about the place.”<sup>141</sup> He preferred a canvas that instead shows the stuckness, the prison-house of the need to create, and claims no more pleasure or substance than this. There was enough realistic and abstract art already in Beckett’s opinion. He writes to Duthuit in 1951 describing Bram’s latest paintings, “I think continually of his last paintings, miracles of frenzied impotence, streaming with beauties and splendours like a shipwreck of phosphorescences.”<sup>142</sup> Reveling in the impotence of expression is more desirable than repeated climaxes that reproduce nothing.

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<sup>139</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 131.

<sup>140</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 131.

<sup>141</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 131.

<sup>142</sup> SB to Duhuit, 10 September 1951. Vol. 2, 294.

Wölfflin argues that the painterly does not appeal to touch, because there are not hard surfaces that the spectator could run their fingers over—no clear boundaries. The painterly has roots that are “only in the eye and appeals only to the eye.”<sup>143</sup> Beckett, Yeats and Swanzy do not recreate the texture of something like a fine garment or a tabletop. Actual boundaries and the representation of the object come secondary. Beckett, Yeats and Swanzy’s obliteration of lines and worsening of form and composition bridge the gap and visually demonstrates the movement toward non-representational through the unsuccessful use of lines and links. In a Swanzy or a Yeats painting, a line fails to be a line concurrently on the canvas, just as Beckett puts forth an image, a line of dialogue or a narrative line only to destroy it by refusing connection and failing to finish it. This move to abstraction further accentuates the anti-hermeneutic trend in the work of Beckett, and the ways in which he attempts to unword language by emphasizing the visual and the disconnect between what is seen and what is said. Errancy and confusion in the works maintain a momentum that propels the works toward abstraction. The last page of *Worstward Ho* states, “Enough. Sudden enough. No move and sudden all far.”<sup>144</sup> In this line, we see not a finish, just a sudden stop. It may not be “the worst” but it has progressed toward the worst as far as possible for now. To fully abstract would merely replace chaotic “mess” with something else, instead of accommodating this mess.<sup>145</sup> Full abstraction claims to express something, even if that something represents a lack.

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<sup>143</sup> Wölfflin 23.

<sup>144</sup> *Worstward Ho* 101.

<sup>145</sup> Driver 23.

Creating an image to abstract it recognises and interrogates this messiness and chaos of modernity. Yeats, Swamy and Beckett worsen their images as much as possible, and then simply step away from the canvas.

## Chapter 2

### Literature of the Unword: Beckett, Painting, and the Spectator

“At moments I rather feel the tyranny of the image [...] with my weakness for the limping and my fear of the achieving.”<sup>1</sup>

This chapter scrutinizes Beckett’s relationship with the visual arts and artists, especially painters and painting. Beckett’s knowledge and expertise in the medium of painting, and his relationships with artists, art critics and art collectors call attention to his ever increasing interest in how one sees, especially how one sees and considers a work of art. The process and limitation of how the spectator and/or the actor or character sees or watches becomes more and more prominent in Beckett’s works. This prominence originates from Beckett’s interest in and deep engagement with visual arts and his increasing failure of being able to speak or write critically about visual art.<sup>2</sup> Inspiration or influence-based critiques of Beckett’s engagement with painting, which focus on how particular artists influence Beckett’s work or, conversely, on how he has influenced other artists, tend to dominate the field when it comes to exploring Beckett and the visual arts.<sup>3</sup> This chapter, instead, argues that Beckett’s views on painting and the spectatorship of

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<sup>1</sup> SB to Georges Belmont, 8 August 1951. Vol. 2, 279.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett expresses his increasing dislike of writing about art. He writes to MacGreevy about one of his final critical pieces on art “Homage to Jack B. Yeats”: MacGreevy, “it is nothing more than an obeisance, and a clumsy one. I cannot write that kind of thing and I hope JBY will not be too disappointed” (TCD, MS 10402/192).

<sup>3</sup> See introduction of this thesis for details. Such critics as James Knowlson, Jessica Prinz, Lois Oppenheim, David Lloyd and Mark Nixon have written about Beckett in this respect.

painting are indicative of the reaction that he himself wanted to elicit from the spectator. Chapter one argued that his methodology of failure both originated from and was sustained by his life long engagement with the visual arts. This methodology extends into his views on spectatorship, and the characteristics and techniques of imperfection and decomposition that he valued in art and artists are what he strived for in his own work. In turn, he wanted the spectator to be moved by and linger in front of his own works in much the same way Beckett did in front of a painting. As Knowlson states, “crucially, painting helped Beckett to think deeply about the relationship between the artist, his work and the outside world.”<sup>4</sup> Beckett’s life long reverence and engagement with the visual arts shows the earnestness with which he considered and emulated such forms. In order to further ascertain how Beckett himself viewed works of art, and how these opinions shaped Beckett’s creation and establishment of an aesthetic of failure in his own work, Beckett’s relationship with and views on painting and painters must be established in some detail. Through a rigorous study of Beckett’s engagement with art, his remarkable preoccupation with how spectators and actors should view and respond to his works, and perhaps all works of art, is revealed. This chapter establishes in detail Beckett’s deep engagement with painting, painters, art critics and his self-education in painting and art criticism in order to ascertain what Beckett most valued in art. Finally, this chapter substantiates that the way Beckett viewed the art that he admired is indicative of the way he would like his work viewed by spectators and interpreted by actors.<sup>5</sup> Modernist

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<sup>4</sup> *DTF* 196.

<sup>5</sup> Formalist literary scholar Hugh Kenner has argued that at the centre of the Modernist movement lies a cultivation of difficulty and also a revolt against class, ethnicity, and nationality. The technique of cultivated difficulty and failure as well as well the revolt against national identity and class further show the similarities between Beckett and

Literary Critic Hugh Kenner points out Beckett suggested that “over interpretation” was more troubling than erroneous interpretation, because it arises from two assumptions: “that the writer is necessarily presenting some experience which he has had and that he necessarily writes in order to affirm some general truth.”<sup>6</sup> Beckett wants his spectators and actors to reject both of these assumptions.

### **Imperfection, Decomposition and Deformation: Beckett’s Self-Education in Painting and the Art He Admired**

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Beckett’s opinions and critical writing on the subject of painting is that these views inevitably focus much more on his own aesthetics and creative drive than on the piece of art or artist in question. Beckett’s confidants, such as Thomas MacGreevy and Georges Duthuit, as well as Beckett himself, point out this fact repeatedly. One of Duthuit’s responses to Beckett’s point of view about art and his view on expression<sup>7</sup> is that it “is violently extreme and personal”<sup>8</sup> and of “no help to us in the matter of *Tal Coat*.”<sup>9</sup> Duthuit must further remind Beckett during their discussion of art to “Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself.”<sup>10</sup> When Beckett speaks or writes about art, he expresses mostly his own preoccupations. He even admitted this himself, as he writes to Duthuit that he is unlikely

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Yeats’ modernist tendencies. Majorie Perloff has pointed out that Kenner’s understanding of modernism is still relevant and revolutionary to the understanding of modernist literature and art in her article “Modernism Under Review: Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*.”

<sup>6</sup> *Samuel Beckett* 10.

<sup>7</sup> Beckett had pointed out that “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (“Three Dialogues” 139).

<sup>8</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

<sup>9</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

<sup>10</sup> “Three Dialogues” 144.

“to utter anything than my own obsessive concerns.”<sup>11</sup> He again acknowledges his tendency to discuss his own preoccupations when he writes, “I will not talk about myself—I have done that often enough.”<sup>12</sup> Beckett confessed this repeatedly in his letters, and this becomes a major factor as to why he loathed writing art criticism. His critical writing about paintings also conveys similar sentiments concerning Beckett’s own aesthetic. We can learn much about what Beckett valued in art through his correspondences, critical pieces and diaries.

Because Beckett’s statements on art, especially painting, focus mainly on his own aesthetic values, Beckett’s views on art, artists and spectatorship can shed light on how he wishes his own works to be viewed by the spectator. In his own writing, he strived to create a response from the spectator similar to his own response to the paintings that he admired. Equally important to understanding Beckett’s desired effect on the spectator are Beckett’s critical and personal observations on painting. Although Beckett loved art, he did not enjoy writing about it, despite the fact that he did publish several pieces of art criticism and reviews. He wrote these reviews mostly for artists that he wanted to promote or defend against criticism or, worse yet, disregard. During his “frenzy of writing,”<sup>13</sup> he writes reviews of artists he admired. These recurring concerns in Beckett’s criticism and letters suggest that great art, to Beckett, was anti-interpretive, distorted or deformed and inexpressive, and often lacking in technical prowess.

Beckett had a long and passionate relationship with art, especially painting, that spans throughout his lifetime. The importance that painting had for Beckett is clear in the

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<sup>11</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

<sup>12</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

<sup>13</sup> This is the period 1946-1953. The amount that Beckett writes is the most prolific of his career. This is detailed in Chapter 15 of Knowlson’s *Damned to Fame*.

amount of time he spent writing, considering and actually looking at works of art. Beckett's biographer and friend, Knowlson, points out, "He was passionately involved in painting, not just that he loved to be with painters, but he was a real expert on 17th Century Dutch painting."<sup>14</sup> Beckett did not set out to be merely a casual museum-goer, and he did not narrow his attention to modern artistic movements. He was serious about learning the history and intricacies of not one, but many painterly movements that spanned different time periods and locales. His interest in painting, classical and otherwise, was cultivated at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin while he was a student at Trinity. The National Gallery of Ireland "nurtured an appreciation of the visual arts, which later encouraged him to visit and engage with collections elsewhere."<sup>15</sup> His visits to the National Gallery of Ireland during his tenure as a student and lecturer at Trinity took the form of self-education in artistic movements. In the 1930s, he took particular interest in the Dutch Masters and German Expressionism. Knowlson writes that at the National Gallery Beckett "was weaned on the Gallery's eclectic collection of Old Masters and developed an abiding passion for seventeenth century Dutch painting."<sup>16</sup> Beckett continued to mention the National Gallery of Ireland letters to his close friend, confidant, and fellow Irishman Thomas MacGreevy (1893-1967) until the early 1960s.<sup>17</sup> In addition, his relationship with MacGreevy clearly cultivated Beckett's interest in and engagement with painting. Beckett's letters to MacGreevy include many of Beckett's beliefs and opinions about art. MacGreevy acts as mentor to Beckett's artistic passion for much of the 1930s, and MacGreevy later became the director of the National Gallery of

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<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Coughlan n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Keaveney 7.

<sup>16</sup> *DTF* 57.

<sup>17</sup> Vol 1-4 of *Beckett's Letters* 2009-2016.

Ireland (1950-1963) and was a member of the first Irish Arts Council. Beckett first met MacGreevy in Paris in August of 1928 at the École Normale Supérieure, when Beckett arrived as his replacement as lecturer in English Literature. MacGreevy played the role of intellectual confidante and aesthetic sounding board for Beckett in the 1930s, as Beckett developed and honed his knowledge of artists and artistic movements. Although they stay in correspondence until MacGreevy's death, the tone and candour of the early letters changes as Beckett learned more about painting and became more confident in his own opinions on art. The changing tone of the letters has much to do with their increasingly different view on art, especially art in Ireland. In Beckett's copious letters to MacGreevy throughout the 1930s, we see an extreme curiosity displayed. He writes candidly to MacGreevy:

I'm not ashamed to stutter like this with you who are used to my wild way of failing to say what I imagine I want to say and who understand that until the gag is chewed fit to swallow or spit out the mouth must stutter or rest. And it needs a more stoical mouth than mine to rest.<sup>18</sup>

He says of MacGreevy, "I value your opinion more than anybody's."<sup>19</sup> He admired his expertise, especially in art appreciation and knowledge. During this time, Beckett was honest with MacGreevy in seeking his approval and expertise on the subject of painting.

His friendship and correspondence with MacGreevy shows his interest in and commentary on the artworks housed in the National Gallery of Ireland. This commentary often includes critique of the choices of the Gallery's director prior to MacGreevy himself, George Furlong (director 1935-1950). Beckett writes, "there is no top light and

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<sup>18</sup> SB to TM, 18 October 1932. Vol. 1, 134.

<sup>19</sup> SB to TM, 7 July 1936. Vol. 1, 350

the pictures, all boldly hung in a simple line, are worse than invisible”<sup>20</sup> and to further criticise Furlong in the same letter, “It is time someone put him in mind of the purpose of a picture gallery, to provide pictures worth looking at and the possibility of seeing them.”<sup>21</sup> His anger at the arrangement of works in the National Gallery in the 1930s is made clear in this letter. Beckett also makes it obvious that precise and technically advanced academic painters like William Orpen and his student Seán Keating were not his preference, “I thought Orpen’s *Ptarmigan & Wash House* nearly as bad as Keating.”<sup>22</sup> In September of 1932, he writes to MacGreevy, from Cooldrinagh, stating,

I seem to spend a lot of time at the National Gallery, looking at the Poussin Entombment and coming stealthily down the stairs into the charming toy brightness of the German room to the Brueghels and the Masters of Tired Eyes and Silver Windows.<sup>23</sup>

The seeds of his interest in Dutch painting are also relevant in this letter as he asks MacGreevy, “Can you recommend me an informative book on Dutch painting?”<sup>24</sup> He asks this, even though he knows that MacGreevy was not as enamoured of Dutch painters as Beckett was: “I know you don’t like talking much of the Dutchmen.”<sup>25</sup>

Beckett experienced the artworks from the continent through the paintings he saw in Dublin. He encountered paintings by artists such as Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), El Greco (1541-1614), and Diego Velázquez (1599-1660). The National Gallery of Ireland also boasts a rich collection of Dutch and early Flemish painting, which exceedingly

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<sup>20</sup> SB to TM, 14 May 1937. Vol. 1, 496.

<sup>21</sup> SB to TM, 14 May 1937. Vol. 1, 497.

<sup>22</sup> SB to TM, 20 December 1931. Vol. 1, 100.

<sup>23</sup> SB to TM 13 September 1932. Vol. 1, 121.

<sup>24</sup> SB to TM 13 September 1932. Vol. 1, 122.

<sup>25</sup> SB to TM, 8 February 1935. Vol. 1, 246.

interested Beckett in the 1930s. In relation to the Dutch Masters, Knowlson states, “He knew these pictures so well. He was so engrossed in these scenes.”<sup>26</sup> He especially admired the way these painters used light and dark to spotlight certain areas of the canvas, and he also admired the Dutch painters that painted genre scenes. Genre scenes appealed to him, as there was so much to observe in the paintings that Beckett could linger in front of the painting for hours, taking in the minute details. These scenes focused on the settings from everyday life, and many times concentrated on scenes from the lower class in raucous environs like the tavern, and featured spectacles of drinking, gambling and thinly veiled sexual references. These works are lively and unsentimental, and more often than not have an element of the grotesque. Genre scenes provide a gaze into the private lives of others. These paintings were especially interesting to Beckett, because they contain psychological depth and complexity as well as distortion and imperfection in both theme and technique.

Being “engrossed,”<sup>27</sup> as Knowlson puts it, was how Beckett defined a good piece of art. A painting that captivates one’s attention to the point that he can stand in front of it for hours is what Beckett believed a piece of art should do, and paintings that evoked this response were to be admired. As Mark Nixon has also noted in *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries: 1936-1937*, it was most likely during 1933 or at the latest 1934 that Beckett also read and took extensive notes on *An Introduction to Dutch Art* by R.H. Wilenski. Beckett transcribed lengthy passages from the work as is documented in his notebook from this time.<sup>28</sup> In the notebook, Beckett traces the development of Dutch art, taking note of the

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<sup>26</sup> DTF 57. Knowlson is referring to those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Masters.

<sup>27</sup> DTF 57.

<sup>28</sup> “Notes on the Visual Arts (Wilenski)” UofR MS5001.

biography and craft of all major Dutch painters. His special interest in spotlight painters<sup>29</sup> such as the German Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610) is also noted in this notebook.

The National Gallery of Ireland acquired *A Singing Man by Candlelight* (1625-1635) by Flemish painter Adam de Coster (c. 1586-1643) in 1938, which Beckett would have seen in one of his many visits to the National Gallery. De Coster was known as a *Pictor Noctium* or “painter of the night.” He specialised in candlelit scenes in dark interiors. The effect of the minimal light on the canvas completely obscures large parts of the canvas while spotlighting very specific areas, such as the face and the stark white collar. The songbook held in front of the candle focuses the light more directly onto the singer’s face. The candlelight illuminates the pink-red lips that shine as if they are actually wet or covered in gloss. The painting has a striking resemblance to the stage image of *A Piece of Monologue* (1980); the stage directions read, “*Faint diffuse light [...] White hair, white night gown, white socks.*”<sup>30</sup> Similar effects are created in the stage directions of several of Beckett’s plays including *Rockaby* (1981), which includes the directive “*Light: Rest of stage dark. Subdued spot on face, constant throughout,*”<sup>31</sup> and *Not I* (1972), which demands “*Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, [...] faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow.*”<sup>32</sup> The dramatic pinkish wet lips in De Coster’s painting act as a focal point much like Mouth’s lips in *Not I*, spewing words and, by default, saliva. The control of the light, whether on the stage or the canvas, controls

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<sup>29</sup> Spotlight painting was inspired by the subtle lighting created by emulating moonlight, candlelight, torchlight or the light of a bonfire. Knowlson points out that Beckett’s letters from London and his personal notebooks demonstrate that he was fascinated by the development of spotlight painting as a genre (*DTF* 741).

<sup>30</sup> *CDW* 423.

<sup>31</sup> *CDW* 433.

<sup>32</sup> *CDW* 376.

and focuses the spectator's vision. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the light, but the eyes must also fight to see what might be hiding in the dark. Failing to light everything means that the spectator must struggle to take in every detail that is offered. This control means taking a long look and looking very closely to absorb every detail, most likely noticing something new each time.



Adam de Coster. *Singing Man by Candlelight* (c. 1625-1635). National Gallery of Ireland.

The use of light by De Coster and other spotlight painters, which is mirrored more severely in Beckett's dramatic works like *Not I* and *A Piece of Monologue*, disallows the spectator to absorb the "big picture" quickly and/or coherently. In fact, these paintings and Beckett's work lack a big picture. They are instead divided into a kaleidoscopic

fragmentation of images through the manipulation of light and, in Beckett's case, words and sound. The lack of light portrayed forces one's eyes to first adjust to the darkness and then strain to see the details. The spectator's eyes must run over the work again and again to ascertain the details, just as the repetitive words spoken by mouth and speaker must be repeated, while the audience also struggles to see the figure and props presented to them on stage. This results in extended consideration by the spectator of such works.

The Dutch painter that Beckett admired the most was Adriaen Brouwers (1605-1638). He was able to view many of Brouwers' works both in London and in Germany during his travels. He often praised Brouwers for his subtle psychologically dense scenes, and this is evident in his correspondence to Thomas MacGreevy after Beckett has viewed some of Brouwers' paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Museum in London.<sup>33</sup> He refers specifically to the one where there is "a man playing a lute" and another "with a woman pulling a man's hair."<sup>34</sup> Brouwers utilised a free sketchy manner of painting, and he applied paint thinly to the canvas. The images and subject matter that he depicted are rough and have an unfinished quality. In *The Bitter Draught* (c. 1636-1638), the colour yellow shows through the darker colours, revealing the sketchiness of the artist's brush strokes. The facial expression is unflattering and has an aura of haziness created by the imperfect brush strokes. Brouwers' subject matter consisted of peasants and soldiers, often those who were considered part of the "lower class," and the setting was often in taverns or rural locations. The figures in his paintings are often involved in such uncouth activities as drinking, smoking, gambling and fighting. His facial studies are often grotesque and show the figures in awkward or

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<sup>33</sup> SB to TM, 8 February 1935. Vol. 1, 246.

<sup>34</sup> SB to TM, 8 February 1935. Vol. 1, 246.

contorted gestures. The aspects that impressed Beckett about Brouwers and other Flemish painters were, as Nixon states,

The 'minor key' depiction of landscapes and the minute details that implied distinct narratives; it is often the figure in the background that catches his attention rather than the main theme in the painting.<sup>35</sup>

In a painting like *The Smokers* (1636), the multiplicity of characters and the dichotomy of the indoor and outdoor space provide much for the eye to rest on. The rowdy and volatile moment that is captured coupled with the contorted faces and imperfect image creates a space of play for interpretation. The imprecise brush strokes and proportion are in contrast with the competent or technically proficient artists of the Italian Renaissance. The background becomes foreground to Beckett and as a result privileges the failures and the fringes of society. Beckett emphasized artistic ignorance and incompetence, and this method informed Beckett's evaluation of paintings.



Adriaen Brouwers. *The Bitter Draught* (c. 1636-1638). Image courtesy of The Google Art Project.

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<sup>35</sup> Nixon 143.



Adriaen Brouwers. *The Smokers* (1636). Image Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art Online.

To Beckett, those paintings that are “perfect” in technique are bland and presupposed. He writes to MacGreevy in reference to Rubens, “I take him for granted, like wonders of modern science.”<sup>36</sup> Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was known as the most famous and influential artist of the Flemish Baroque tradition. He mostly painted subjects from classical and Christian history, and he was a great admirer of Leonardo da

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<sup>36</sup> SB to TM, 25 March 1937. Vol. 1, 469.

Vinci. Rubens' works were highly stylised and technically executed. Beckett recognised Rubens' contribution to painting but remains mostly unimpressed. He admitted that the technique that a painter such as Rubens developed is necessary in the history of art to move practices forward, but he did not care to dwell on it or understand it in the way that he did with a less technically perfect artist, like Brouwers. While he realised that Rubens has his place in the progression of art and art technique, much like Newton has a place in the progression of modern science, he did not need to fully understand or look at Rubens paintings in order to enjoy the artists that he did admire. Paintings that are imperfect and incompetent and the painters that misuse and abuse technique are what garner Beckett's support and admiration. His cultivation and appreciation of imperfect and distorted art were further developed in his travels through Germany in 1936, which will be detailed later in this chapter.

During the early nineteen-thirties, paintings from the National Gallery of Ireland were very much on his mind as Beckett writes creatively. In his earliest novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), this influence is evident. Beckett's deep involvement and pronounced preoccupation with painting and artists is further evidenced through the imagery and allusions throughout his creative oeuvre. S.E. Gontarski and C.J. Ackerly draw attention to this in their very thorough *Grove Companion to Beckett* (2004). Gontarski and Ackerly point out that in Beckett's early poems as well as his first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Woman*, "character portrayal is analyzed [...] in terms of a work of art and the dubious deceptions of the artisan."<sup>37</sup> For example, in *Dream*, Beckett

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<sup>37</sup> *The Grove Companion* 464.

describes Alba's eyes as being as "big and black as El Greco painted."<sup>38</sup> He would have been familiar with El Greco from the holdings at the National Gallery of Ireland. He writes to MacGreevy in 1931,

I went to the Gallery yesterday and looked at the Spanish room and the Poissons. El Greco's St. Francis looks very flashy when you can turn your head and see Rubens version in the next room.<sup>39</sup>

In this casual sentence, Beckett is able to succinctly contrast two very different artistic approaches (the Flemish Baroque style of Rubens and the more individualistic Mannerist style of El Greco). This contrast is particularly effective as Beckett chose to mention two very different works based on the identical subject of St. Francis.

The statement about El Greco also reveals much about Beckett's eye for painting and his aesthetic views. While Beckett recognised that El Greco (1541-1614) is flashier than Rubens, he did admire him enough to compare Belacqua's beloved Alba to one of El Greco's figures. Noteworthy connections between El Greco and other painters that Beckett admired can be made. For example, El Greco was an individualist that refused fitting in with specific styles and artistic movements, much like the painters that Beckett admired, such as Jack B. Yeats, Bram van Velde and Avigdor Arikha. El Greco has been recognised as a precursor to the expressionist movement, another movement that Beckett proceeds to greatly appreciate. In 1920, English artist and critic Roger Fry considered El Greco to be the archetypal genius, who did as he thought best "with complete indifference to what effect the right expression might have on the public."<sup>40</sup> Fry described

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<sup>38</sup> *Dream* 174.

<sup>39</sup> SB to TM, 12 September 1931. Vol. 1, 88.

<sup>40</sup> Fry 205.

El Greco as “an old master who is not merely modern, but actually appears a good many steps ahead of us, turning back to show us the way.”<sup>41</sup> El Greco was criticised by his contemporaries for failing to follow the accepted conventions of painting of his time, such as proportion and perspective. We can see this “indifference” in *St. Francis*. He elongates the face and hands, making them out of proportion. The eyes are exceedingly large and shiny and are exaggeratedly upturned. His use of colour is irreverent and could be considered “flashy.”



El Greco. *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (c.1590-95). National Gallery of Ireland

The “dubious deceptions of the artisan,”<sup>42</sup> as Ackerly and Gontaski put it, are also often presented as problems in perspective in Beckett’s early poetry and prose. The Smeraldina-Rima in *Dream* “is not demonstrable.”<sup>43</sup> The narrator in *Dream* points out that he will not go into typical literary description of background, race, family or temperament when discussing the Smeraldina, but instead he invokes Franciabigio’s

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<sup>41</sup> Fry 205.

<sup>42</sup> *The Grove Companion* 464.

<sup>43</sup> *Dream* 13.

(1482-1525) *Portrait of a Young Man [Florentine]*. The narrator states that “the only perspective worth stating is the site of the unknotting that could be, [...] that of Franciabigio’s young Florentine in the Louvre, into which [...] he may [...] recede, from which he has not necessarily emerged.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the only description worth giving is not a linguistic one but a visual one. The Smeraldina is a problem in perspective in which she concurrently recedes and emerges from a visual landscape. Scholar John Wall points out that Beckett utilises this painting to “show what he takes to be the limitations of the causal logic that dominated the nineteenth-century novel.”<sup>45</sup> But Beckett’s need to describe the Smeraldina in this way goes beyond a negation of nineteenth-century novelistic conventions; it is an attempt to situate linguistic art into the visual realm. In these early works, Beckett was not attempting to “paint with words” in the tradition of literary realism, but instead to use the conventions of painting, like perspective, in place of conventional description and details.

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<sup>44</sup> *Dream* 13.

<sup>45</sup> Wall 535.



Franciabigio *Portrait of a Young Man [Florentine]* (1509). Musée du Louvre.

Beckett continued to reference art beyond the 1930s in his works. Just as Beckett chose modes from the visual arts to describe characters in his earliest novel, the painting that Watt comes across in an upstairs room at Mr Knott's also presents a problem in perspective,

A picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of the picture. Was it receding? [...] how the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. [...] And was it not rather the circle in the background and the point that was in the foreground.<sup>46</sup>

Again, there is a question of whether the image is emerging or receding. The problematics of emerging or receding is one that would apply more to the visual arts, as the canvas is static. It is also something that would make one consider and reconsider perspective.

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<sup>46</sup> *Watt* 126-127.

Beckett continued to study art in the 1930s in London (Hampton Court, Wallace Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum) and France (Louvre and Musée Condé) in addition to Dublin. His notes on the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin as well as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London focus solely on their Dutch and Flemish holdings, especially from the seventeenth-century, supporting Knowlson's claim<sup>47</sup> that these are the artists that he was mostly interested in. In one of his notebooks, he also lists major works and collections of Hieronymus Bosch taken from a German book.<sup>48</sup> While living in London, Beckett continued to write to MacGreevy about art, and he wished that MacGreevy would "talk pictures"<sup>49</sup> in his letters. His letters in 1935 to MacGreevy often refer to paintings he had seen in London, such as the paintings exhibited in the German room like Elsheimer's *St Paul on Malta* (c.1600), *Tobias and the Archangel Raphael*<sup>50</sup> (c. 1650), *The Baptism of Christ* and *St. Lawrence Being Prepared for Martyrdom* (c.1600-1601) as well as Geertgen tot Sint Jans' (1465-1495) *Nativity* (1490). While mentioning these pieces to MacGreevy in a letter, Beckett further exhibited his artistic knowledge and interest by comparing a work like Geertgen's *Nativity* to earlier works by Raphael<sup>51</sup> and Uccello.<sup>52</sup> These paintings so weigh on his mind that he later recalled these paintings in a letter to MacGreevy from Ireland writing, "I keep seeing the water & woods of

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<sup>47</sup> DTF 57.

<sup>48</sup> "Notes on Visual Art (National Gallery of Ireland and Victoria and Albert Museum)" UofR MS 5001 22r-22v.

<sup>49</sup> SB to TM, 8 February 1935. Vol. 1, 246.

<sup>50</sup> This painting was attributed to Elsheimer at the time that Beckett viewed it. It is now considered as being created after Elsheimer's time.

<sup>51</sup> Specifically Raphael's *Liberation of St. Peter from Prison* (c. 1513-1514) and Uccello's *Hunt in the Forrest* (1470).

<sup>52</sup> SB to TM, 20 February 1935. Vol. 1, 253.

Elsheimer & the round backs of sheep of Geertgen.”<sup>53</sup> Longing to see these visually represented, he comments that “Bryan’s Dictionary of Painters published at £7.17.6 is going in Green’s for £4.17.6. If I had the money, I would buy it.”<sup>54</sup> In the Victoria and Albert Museum, he saw nineteenth-century plaster casts, which included several works by Peter Vischer the Elder (c. 1460-1529), such as casts of *The Tomb of St. Sebaldus* (orig. 1508-1519, repro. 1869) and the *Monument of Count Otto IV of Henneberg* (orig. 1488, repro. 1873) and some works by the German Sculptor Adam Kraft (c.1455-1509), such as the *Schreyer-Landuer Monument* (orig. 1490-1492, repro 1872).<sup>55</sup> He writes to MacGreevy of another visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum in which he saw “a lot” of Hercules Seghers’ (c. 1589 – c. 1638) work and Carel Fabritius’ (1622-1654) *A View of Delft with Musical Instrument Seller’s Stall* (1652), both Dutch painters.<sup>56</sup> In addition to the Flemish and Dutch painters, the notebook also makes reference to Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Adam Kraft and Peter Vischer (1455-1529). Allusions to Dürer and Kraft also make their way in to *Dream*, when a visit to a Nuremburg brothel is signposted by the town’s artistic legacy of being the home of Dürer and Kraft.<sup>57</sup> Beckett’s increasing interest in visual art in the 1930’s is also demonstrated by the fact that he applied for a job as an assistant curator to the National Gallery in London as he noted in a letter to MacGreevy in 1933.<sup>58</sup> He did realise this is a position that he probably will not get, “In a moment of gush I applied for a job of assistant at the National Gallery, Trafalger square

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<sup>53</sup> SB to TM, 23 May 1936. Vol. 1, 338.

<sup>54</sup> SB to TM, 23 May 1936. Vol. 1, 338.

<sup>55</sup> SB to TM, 20 February 1935. Vol. 1, 253.

<sup>56</sup> SB to TM, 8 October 1935. Vol. 1, 283. He does not comment further on these works in this letter.

<sup>57</sup> *Dream* 72.

<sup>58</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1933. Vol. 1, 166-167.

[...] But it won't come off and I do not expect it to.”<sup>59</sup> He stated in this same letter that Jack B. Yeats acted as a referee. His copious notes and catalogues as well as the referenced job application demonstrate the level of earnestness of his artistic endeavours.

It was not only the National Gallery of Ireland and galleries in London that fuelled Beckett's passion for painting early on but also his relatives, the Sinclairs. It was through Beckett's uncle William Sinclair, or “Boss Sinclair” as he was known, a well know antiques and art dealer in Dublin, that Beckett encountered modern German painting. In the early 1920s, the Sinclairs moved from Dublin to Kassel, Germany, in hopes of dealing art there. “Boss” already had a wide array of modern German art that he collected while in Dublin, which greatly increased when he moved to Kassel. Beckett frequently visited his Uncle, Aunt Cissie and cousin Peggy Sinclair, with whom Beckett was in love, in Kassel several times between the years of 1928 and 1932. Kassel also serves as the setting for *Dream*. These trips allowed Beckett to engage with contemporary art that went beyond the limiting and mostly representational art scene in Dublin. His visits to Kassel provided the opportunity for some of his first direct contact with Modernist artistic trends. Boss Sinclair was passionate about German Expressionism, and in a letter to Seamus O'Sullivan, he conveys his convictions:

I do not think I can write about modern German art. It is too big for me [;] it's too close to life. The German artist today tries to achieve not what the eye, the camera or the kino [does] but what he imagines God sees. He has not the peace of the Pre-Raphaelites or the Ivy of the Renaissance, the poetry of the Impressionists or the logic of the post-Impressionists. He is lost in lingering horror and wonder at the

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<sup>59</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1933. Vol. 1, 167.

world he finds himself in. The breasts of women are still wonderful and the birth of a baby as miraculous as the stars. But he has had years of horror and starvation. He questions the whole sorry stupendous scheme. His hands, which were made for shaping hymns have been torn with barbed wire and maimed, shattered in every conceivable way. His soul has been more tortured and so his painting is a plaint.<sup>60</sup>

In Sinclair's letter, he points out that the substantial contribution of German expressionist painters is the way that their paintings and their sensibility question and call to attention the senseless violence and confusion of modernity. These painters could not ignore the terror and the torture that engulfed them, and so they questioned accepted or conventional beliefs and forms. Their paintings become a lamentation against such atrocities. The paintings that the Sinclairs own etched themselves deeply into Beckett's mind. Even in old age, Beckett recalled paintings he viewed at the Sinclairs' home in Kassel. In a letter to Gottfried Büttner in 1986, Beckett comments that the Sinclairs "had a very good Feininger painting."<sup>61</sup> He also conveys to his biographer, James Knowlson, in the last year of his life that "he could still remember this picture [Feininger] hanging over the Ibach piano in the Sinclairs' apartment."<sup>62</sup> He was also exposed to the painting of Heinrich Campendonk and Umberto Boccioni while in Kassel.<sup>63</sup> The paintings that Beckett encountered at the Sinclairs would inspire Beckett's six-month journey through galleries in Germany in 1936-1937.

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<sup>60</sup> William Sinclair to Seamus O'Sullivan, 9 October 1924, TCD MS 4632.

<sup>61</sup> SB to Gottfried Büttner, 1 July 1986. Vol. 4, 676.

<sup>62</sup> "Beckett's First Encounters" 65.

<sup>63</sup> "Beckett's First Encounters" 65.

### **“Museum to Museum”: Beckett’s Journey through Germany (1936-1937)**

After his intense engagement with art in Dublin and London, Beckett was inspired to increase his knowledge of German art, before it was too late. Because of the political climate in Germany, art was beginning to be destroyed, and Beckett was able to see many modern artworks before the final eradication put into effect by Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for The Third Reich, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1937. On this date, Goebbels gave the final decree for a commission to confiscate art works of art from 1910 onwards that “offend the German national sentiment, destroy or distort the natural form, or are characterised by a lack of manual or artistic skills” to be shown in an exhibition of “degenerate” art before being destroyed.<sup>64</sup> This description included nearly all twentieth-century art whether abstract or representational. Interestingly, this sentiment also smacks of Daniel Corkery’s “alien” art that he described during the creation of the Irish Free State. Corkery’s aesthetic saw Ireland as insular, Catholic, agrarian and Irish speaking, and rejected art of the ascendancy, which he described as being created “for their motherland, England”<sup>65</sup> and as being “no more than a province of English art.”<sup>66</sup> He promoted an aesthetic for the “Ireland that counts.”<sup>67</sup> These similarities perhaps offers another reason why categorising Jack B. Yeats as Ireland’s artist infuriated Beckett to such a large degree.<sup>68</sup> By the end of the 1930s, Beckett had witnessed the negative effects of extreme nationalism both at home and abroad. In a letter to MacGreevy in January of 1937, Beckett refers to a trip to Sanssouci in Potsdam. He conveys his sadness and

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<sup>64</sup> Qtd. in Barron and Dube 19.

<sup>65</sup> *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* 8.

<sup>66</sup> *The Hidden Ireland*. 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*. 8.

<sup>68</sup> This will be covered in detail later in the chapter.

awareness that the changes due to Nazi Germany will destroy much of the art and beauty. He writes that he “was very sad to leave it, feeling that I would not see it again.”<sup>69</sup>

Beckett’s German diaries, which are composed of six notebooks written during his travels in Germany in 1936-37, “stage a confrontation with daily life through an immediacy of notation, as well as perform the onward movement of a journey.”<sup>70</sup> They are a mix of personal as well as creative material. Edward Beckett, following his uncle’s death in 1989, found these notebooks in a trunk. Written mainly in English, with some French and German words interwoven, the diaries comprise roughly 120,000 words. James Knowlson made great use of these diaries while composing the 1996 biography *Damned to Fame*. Nixon has pointed out that during Beckett’s travels in 1936-1937, he was “mentally shaping the aesthetic and creative direction his work is to take.”<sup>71</sup> These diaries catalogue many of the works he viewed and further establishes his intense passion for painting. He described his trip through Germany in 1936-1937 to Lawrence Harvey as going from “museum to museum,”<sup>72</sup> and his German Diaries primarily reflect his thoughts on the music and art that he encountered. This trip would have allowed him to become closely acquainted with German Modernism, especially German Expressionism. As Nixon has also noted, his trip to Germany was an educational one. In addition to art that he admired, he also studies works of art that he did not like, such as some of the German Romantic painting of the nineteenth-century as well as the many Titians that he saw.<sup>73</sup> At this point in his life, the purpose of educating himself might be for future

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<sup>69</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 431.

<sup>70</sup> Nixon 1.

<sup>71</sup> Nixon 2.

<sup>72</sup> Harvey 248.

<sup>73</sup> German Diaries, 28 Dec. 1936. Vol. 2.

employment as a curator or art dealer, but he also was aware that because of the growing political tension, he might not be able to see these works of art again. In addition to twentieth century German art, his trip to Germany also allowed him to further enrich his already in depth knowledge of art in terms of the Italian Renaissance, the Dutch Masters as well as French modern art. He went into great detail about the art he sees in letters to MacGreevy and other close friends as well as the copious notes he takes in his German diaries. Beckett departed for Dublin from Germany on 28 September 1936, and he returned to Dublin in April 1937.

The politics of Nazi Germany and their cleansing of “degenerate” contemporary art and artists, such as Klee, Kandinsky and Schwitters, often thwarted Beckett’s study of modern art during his trip. The decree detailed what art should be named as degenerate and destroyed. The characteristics of degenerate art as declared by the Nazis could conversely act as a statement to define the art that Beckett valued and as a guide to Beckettian failure. He continually rejects art that shows great technical proficiency in favour of art that is deformed or distorted, which the Nazis reviled. His trip through Germany certainly helped to shape and formulate his aesthetic of failure and errancy, and it also shaped how he believed his works should act on the spectator.

The darkening political climate constantly made itself known to Beckett as he went from gallery to gallery. As he writes to Mary Manning Howe, “The trip is being a failure [...] all the modern pictures are in the cellars.”<sup>74</sup> He writes in this letter about trying to see the art that he wants to,

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<sup>74</sup> SB to Mary Manning Howe, 13 Dec. 1936. Vol. 1, 397.

Beauty is a blank wall with Post No Bills. I am tired of dashing my skull against it. I run the gauntlets of galleries, up and down the highly waxed cavalries, a cockshy and an Aunt Sally of art.<sup>75</sup>

He felt stupid and duped by his mission and realised that he was an easy target for those in opposition to the art that he sought to view.

Despite his complaints and some thwarted attempts, he did gain access to many of these cellars through friends and acquaintances throughout his travels. He made contact with a wide range of artists and art historians. Through such contacts, he was able to view modern art and books in private collections that were banned publicly. Rosa Schapire (1874-1954), a Polish born Jewish art historian, was one such person. He saw some Karl Schmidt-Rottluffs at Schapire's home. One of which he declared was "a painting on Picasso's level"<sup>76</sup> as well as other German Expressionists. He was introduced to the underground of painters, including Willem Grimm (1904-1986), Karl Ballmer (1891-1958), Eduard Bargheer (1901-1979), and Karl Kluth (1898-1972).<sup>77</sup> He writes to MacGreevy, "It is an interesting group [...] They are all more or less suppressed i.e. cannot exhibit publicly and dare sell only with precaution."<sup>78</sup> Beckett very much admired the German Expressionists that he encountered in public and private collections. He declared Kirchner to be "the most important artist"<sup>79</sup> of the early expressionist group called Die Brücke ("The Bridge"), which included Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner, and Heckel. Beckett described Kirchner as presenting simplified yet distorted forms.

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<sup>75</sup> SB to Mary Manning, 14 November 1936. Vol. 1, 383.

<sup>76</sup> SB to Mary Manning, 14 November 1936. Vol. 1, 383.

<sup>77</sup> SB to TM, 28 November 1936. Vol. 1, 387.

<sup>78</sup> SB to TM, 28 November 1936. Vol. 1, 387.

<sup>79</sup> German Diaries, 2 Feb. 1937. Vol. 2.

Members of Die Brücke often used high-key colour and employed a crude drawing technique and had an antipathy towards complete abstraction. Subject matter often focused on city streets and sexually charged events. In this letter to MacGreevy in November of 1936, Beckett discusses museum cellars in Hamberg that he was let into in order to view more modern German art from the “The Bridge” group as well as Hudtwalcker, Munch, Nolde and “60 pictures of the German impressionist Lieberman.”<sup>80</sup>

Beckett very much admired Ballmer, and a comparison that he made between the painting of Ballmer and Bargheer reveals this. He writes in one of his diaries,

His [Bargheer’s] painting of enormous competence and earnestness, yet he and his paintings say nothing to me. It is the bull by the horns. Prefer the stillness and unsaid in Ballmer.<sup>81</sup>

Beckett again confirmed his boredom and lack of interest in competent painters, instead favouring a lack unity and perfection. Bargheer’s decisiveness and clarity in tackling an issue in his work, or as Beckett says, “It is the bull by the horns,” do nothing to rouse Beckett’s interest. Looking at one of Ballmer’s paintings such as *Three Ghosts*, we can see a crude drawing technique of imprecise application of paint through rough horizontal brushstrokes. Three figures simultaneously threaten to both emerge and fade into the background. Ballmer exhibits several tenets of German Expressionism that will influence Beckett’s latter works, such as stark, direct and shocking imagery. The faces in German Expressionist paintings often face forward and were very often grouped in threes. In *Three Ghosts*, the faces and background fade into one another. The viewer lingers not only on the image, but also on the brushstroke and the unsettling use of peachy pink

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<sup>80</sup> SB to TM, 28 Novemeber 1936. Vol. 1, 387.

<sup>81</sup> German Diaries, 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

against deeper blue hues. The three heads are very reminiscent of the three heads in the urns in Beckett's *Play* (1963). He also greatly admired Ballmer's *Head in Red* (1930-31), which he saw when he visited Ballmer studio in November of 1936. He writes the following in his diary concerning this painting:

Wonderful red Frauenkopf [woman's head], skull earth sea & sky, I think of  
Monadologie & my Vulture. Would not occur to me to call this painting abstract.  
[...] Object not exploited to illustrate an idea [...] The communication exhausted  
by the optical experience that is its motive & content. [...] Extraordinary  
stillness.<sup>82</sup>

Here Beckett once again draws his views on paintings that he admired back to his own works. He links this painting directly to his short poem "The Vulture" (1935):

dragging his hunger through the sky  
of my skull shell of sky and earth  
  
stooping to the prone who must  
soon take up their life and walk  
  
mocked by a tissue that may not serve  
till hunger earth and sky be offal

Ballmer's image, like the imagery in Beckett's poem, blends the singular monadic skull with the earth and sky. In Ballmer's painting the sky blue background on the right hand side of the painting overflows into the pink-red out line of the skull, pictorially depicting "a tissue" that does not serve it's purpose. One of the most important aspects of the painting is that the "object is not exploited to illustrate an idea."<sup>83</sup> This is where Beckett saw the connection with his own work. There is much left unsaid. Ballmer's painting and

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<sup>82</sup> German Diaries, 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

<sup>83</sup> German Diaries, 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

Beckett's poem exemplify a work of art that does not illustrate an idea, but yet is not fully abstract. After all, we have faint details of a woman's head in the painting and a vulture in the poem. Leaving much unsaid allows the works to revel in the inherent failure of expression between the artist's inner world and the outer world of the senses.



Karl Ballmer, *Head in Red*, 1930-31. Image Courtesy of Aargauer Kunsthau.



*Three Ghosts* (c. 1930s) Karl Ballmer, Private Collection, Image courtesy of Auktionshaus Stahl.

Beckett, as ever, wrote to MacGreevy about art while he is in Germany. In addition to notes he made in his diaries, his letters to MacGreevy reveal his thoughts on the art that he viewed while in Germany. Because his German diaries were meant for Beckett's own personal use and consideration, they often include his visceral reaction to the works that he viewed. His letters to MacGreevy have an audience, so they often take up some of his visceral feelings in a more matter of fact tone. After his arrival in Hamburg on 22 of October 1936, he writes to MacGreevy that the main gallery in Hamburg, the Hamburger Kunsthalle, was disappointing. He acknowledged that there are some admirable pictures, "but there is an appalling quantity of rubbish, worse than unimportant locals. Meister Bertram Franke don't say much to me either."<sup>84</sup> He found a "so called Brouwers landscape that might conceivably be a potboiler"<sup>85</sup> and "another

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<sup>84</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1936. Vol. 1, 375.

<sup>85</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1936. Vol. 1, 375.

hardly up to standard Lautrec” and “a sentimental Picasso *Femme à l’Absinthe*.”<sup>86</sup> The works on display are not the best examples of the painters that he would otherwise admire. He also asserts his expertise in Flemish art by recognizing a possible fake Brouwers landscape. In this letter, we can see a more confident Beckett asserting his opinions to MacGreevy and supporting these opinions with details and examples. Sentimentalism was certainly a characteristic that has no place in painting for Beckett. He did find some art in Hamburg interesting, such as “a lot of lovely Van Goyens” and a “lovely Degas *Portrait de Femme*.”<sup>87</sup> He preferred modern Germans such as Leibl, Corinth, and Nolde. “There is a lot of Munch also, & and I found an excellent portrait of a woman by one Jaekel.”<sup>88</sup> He was most moved in Hamburg by his visit to Ballmer’s studio.

In the way Beckett writes about German art, we are again presented with his highly personalized reaction to how he felt in front of a piece of art. His reactions act as a way for him to declare that this is how he would like spectators to view the paintings in question as well as his own art. He writes of Emile Nolde’s (1867-1956) *Christ and the Children* (1910), “I feel at once on terms with the picture, & that I want to spend a long time before it, & play it over & over like the record of a quartet.”<sup>89</sup> This painting exhibits elements that he admired in other painters, such as the imprecise brushstrokes, thick application of paint, the crowding of figures, the unsettling use of colour and the combination of abstraction and figuration. His desire to linger before the painting mirrors his thoughts later on of lingering in front of Yeats paintings like *Morning* and *Evening*: “I

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<sup>86</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1936. Vol. 1, 375.

<sup>87</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1936. Vol. 1, 375.

<sup>88</sup> SB to TM, 9 October 1936. Vol. 1, 375.

<sup>89</sup> German Diaries, 19 Nov. 1936. Vol. 2.

have his Morning and his Evening and long thoughts of him and his work.”<sup>90</sup> Beckett wanted to spend long periods of time in front of works that he admired. Standing before a piece of art for prolonged increments of time and taking in the works quietly are common reactions from Beckett in terms of the works of art that he venerated.



Emile Nolde. *Christ and Children* (1910). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Beckett also encountered Edvard Munch’s artwork in Germany and was especially enamoured with the painting *The Women Standing on a Bridge*, also known as *Girls on the Bridge* (c. 1901). He was able to see this painting as part of a private collection of Heinrich C. Hudtwalcker in Hamburg. Munch painted several versions of this painting, but Beckett was referring to the one painted in 1901 that now hangs in the Hamburg Kunsthalle. Beckett described this painting as “a superb Munch, three women on a bridge over dark water, apparently a frequent motif. Best Munch I have seen.”<sup>91</sup> One cannot help but see Flo, Ru and Vi from Beckett’s *Come and Go* (1966) when

<sup>90</sup> SB to TM, 4 January 1948. Vol. 2, 73.

<sup>91</sup> German Diaries, 22 Nov. 1936. Vol. 2.

looking at these colourfully dressed women that are engrossed in a secretive conversation. The multicoloured dresses and hats are also reminiscent of those of Ru, Vi, and Flo. The stage directions prescribe the following costumes:

Full-length coats, buttoned high, dull violet (Ru), dull red (Vi) and dull yellow (Flo). Drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces. Apart from colour differentiation three figures as alike as possible.<sup>92</sup>

The two women in the painting are possibly speaking about the third woman who faces us. This is much the same as the two other women in *Come and Go*, alternately discussing the third. Like in the painting, the audience does not know what is said between the women. The importance of these similarities lies not merely in the influence or inspiration of such pieces on images in Beckett's work, but also in the way that such images influence Beckett as a spectator, motivating him to create works that affect the spectator in a similar way.



Edward Munch. *Girls on the Bridge* (c. 1901). Hamburg Kunsthalle.

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<sup>92</sup> CDW 356.



Still from *Come and Go*, *Beckett on Film Project* (2007).

Beckett was also impressed by a Munch painting that Beckett called “Einsamkeit.”<sup>93</sup> He comments on the painting in his diary, writing, “pale unlimited motionless emptiness of sea.”<sup>94</sup> The painting he refers to is most likely Munch’s painting *Two Human Beings* (1896), also translated as *The Lonely Ones* or an earlier version of this work that was lost in World War II. The two isolated figures also suggest Beckett’s description of what he finds terrifyingly beautiful in Yeats’ work, “I find something terrifying,” Beckett writes to MacGreevy, “in the way Yeats puts down a man’s head & a

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<sup>93</sup> German Diaries, 22 Nov. 1936. Vol. 2.

<sup>94</sup> German Diaries, 15 March 1937. Vol. 3.

woman's head side by side, or face to face, the awful acceptance of 2 entities that will never mingle."<sup>95</sup> He writes similarly to Cissie Sinclair on the same day,

The way he puts down a man's head & woman's head side by side or face to face, is terrifying, two irreducible singlenesses & the impassible immensity between. I suppose this is what gives the stillness to his pictures, as though the convention were suddenly suspended.<sup>96</sup>

What Beckett reiterates in both of these letters was what Beckett thinks Yeats does so well, and that is that he, dispassionately conveys

the heterogeneity of nature & the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena, the 2 solitudes, or the solitude & the loneliness, the loneliness in the solitude, the impassible immensity between the solitude that cannot quicken to loneliness & the loneliness that cannot lapse into solitude.<sup>97</sup>

The immensity between two figures that are close together creates tension and emotional and psychological interest for Beckett. To Beckett, the essential quality of a Yeats painting is the "sense of the ultimate inorganicism of everything."<sup>98</sup> Beckett argued that a Yeats painting is "A painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be taken or given & there is no possibility of change or exchange."<sup>99</sup> Beckett sets this up as a way to differentiate Yeats from other painters like the Romantics such as Watteau and Constable. When we look at the two figures in the Munch painting, the distance between them is made tangible by the expansiveness of the sea in front of them. The translation of

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<sup>95</sup> SB to TM, 14 August 1937. Vol. 1, 540.

<sup>96</sup> SB to Cissie Sinclair, 14 August 1937. Vol. 1, 535-536.

<sup>97</sup> SB to TM, 14 August 1937. Vol. 1, 540.

<sup>98</sup> SB to TM, 14 August 1937. Vol. 1, 540.

<sup>99</sup> SB to TM, 14 August 1937. Vol. 1, 540.

the title as *The Lonely Ones* enhances the terrifying inevitability that these two figures will never “mingle,” despite the fact that they stand side by side.



Edvard Munch. *Two Human Beings (The Lonely Ones)* 1896. The National Gallery of Norway (Nasjonalmuseet).

Beckett moved on from Hamburg to Berlin. He writes to MacGreevy, saying of Berlin, “The collections are stupendous.”<sup>100</sup> He does mention in this letter that the modern German painting exhibitions are closed from Nolde on, but he was able to see some “wonderful Munchs and Van Goghs.”<sup>101</sup> The Munchs he would have seen are *The Snow Shoveler* (destroyed in 1945); *Embrace* (1904) also known as *Summer Day, Music on the Karl-Johan Street in Oslo* (1889), *Summer Night* (1893), *The Lonely People* (1907) and *Melancholy* (1907). The set design for Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1882) was also on display at the time.<sup>102</sup> The paintings on display by Van Gogh were *Garden of Daubigny* (1890), *Le Moulin de la Galette* (1886), *Two Lovers* (1888) and *Painter in a Cornfield* (1889). He also mentions he will spending Christmas day alone with a “bottle of wine &

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<sup>100</sup> SB to TM, 22 December 1936. Vol. 1, 401.

<sup>101</sup> SB to TM, 22 December 1936. Vol. 1, 401.

<sup>102</sup> SB to TM, 20 December 1936. Vol. 1, 399.

the Kaiser Friedrich catalogue.”<sup>103</sup> His desire to catalogue the art that he has seen and also to plan future museum visits (to the Kaiser Friedrich in this instance) also demonstrate his intense interest in educating himself on painting.

In January of 1937, Beckett met Axel Kaun, an acquaintance to whom Beckett stated perhaps the most clearly why he saw painting, and music on a lesser scale, as the ideal to which literature needs to become equal. He only kept in touch with Kaun for a few years, but some of his most interesting statements regarding language and the comparison of literature and painting can be found in letter from 9 July 1937.<sup>104</sup> In a letter to MacGreevy on 18 January 1937, he refers to Kaun as “the bookseller” suggesting that he was an acquaintance rather than a close friend. In this same letter, Beckett writes extensively of the art he has seen in Berlin. He writes, “The Kaiser Friedrich is terrific.”<sup>105</sup> He also encountered “an exquisite Masaccio” and “wonderful Signorellis.”<sup>106</sup> He thinks again of El Greco, comparing Luca Signorelli’s (1445-1523) *Pan and God of Nature* (c. 1474) and *Master of Music* (c.1474) (both destroyed by bombs in WWII) to El Greco’s *Laocoön and His Sons* (c. 1610-1614). He also saw two paintings by the Florentine Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530) that “are the best I have seen.”<sup>107</sup>

While Beckett catalogued his artistic encounters during his German travels, he also made his judgments about pieces he liked and those that he did not. One recurring theme was that technical proficiency does not necessarily make a painting interesting enough to linger in front of it. He refers to “roomfuls of Botticellis and Bellinis, including

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<sup>103</sup> SB to TM, 22 December 1936. Vol. 1, 402.

<sup>104</sup> See thesis introduction for a more in depth discussion of this letter.

<sup>105</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 428.

<sup>106</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 429.

<sup>107</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 429. The two paintings he refers to are *Portrait of a Woman* (1514) and *Virgin and Child* (1509-1510) by Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530).

a wonderful Pieta”<sup>108</sup> and the “usual acres of Titian at his best, if you like that kind of thing, I haven’t been able to look at his for very long this trip.”<sup>109</sup> Again, he reveals his opinion that Titian may be good technically “if you like that kind of thing.” Beckett clearly did not. He was bored or uninterested in front of works such as Titian’s. What Beckett is saying here is that this type of painting lacks the urgency and interest that warrants extended contemplation. He echoed this sentiment again in the same letter to MacGreevy: “The Rembrandts and Halses must be the best outside of Holland, if you like that kind of thing.”<sup>110</sup> Again, he suggests that he does not like that kind of thing. Instead, he preferred the less polished and refined Brouwers. He points out that there were “6 or 7 Brouwers in the dark corner that is always reserved for him.”<sup>111</sup> He directs his attention instead to Brouwers, the less successful and less prolific painter, and he shows his disdain that a painter like Brouwers is always quarantined to dark corners. While there are only six or seven Brouwers, there are “the usual acres” of Titians. He expresses his disappointment that Brouwers’ *Dune Landscape in Moonlight* (1637) was on loan to Paris at the time of his visit. He also saw some “very good Terborchs”<sup>112</sup> but the “two Vermeers and De Hooch looking very trivial.”<sup>113</sup> He admired some of Elsheimer’s drawings and miniatures and was not too impressed by the two Velasquez paintings on display, but “the Flemish collection is amazing, a roomful of Van Eyck, 3 Flémalle, 3 Hugo van der Goes, 6 van der Weyden , a lovely Geertgen.”<sup>114</sup> There were some French

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<sup>108</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>109</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>110</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>111</sup> SB to TM 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>112</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>113</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>114</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

artists as well, such as “Marmion, Foucquet & Daret”<sup>115</sup> on whom Beckett does not specifically comment, but he points out that the “Mabuses are sublime.”<sup>116</sup> He took special interest in the Mabuse (1478-1532) with a “big beveled penis, I forget whether Adam’s or Neptune’s.”<sup>117</sup> He ends this rather matter of fact catalogue and comparison about what he has seen with an insightful statement, pointing back to the fact that Beckett valued subtle art and art that is more prone to failure instead of direct, realistic and perfect art that takes the viewer by the scruff of the neck, forcing them to see a clear and precise image:

But the gallery is not the names in its catalogue and perhaps it would have been better simply to say that I shall leave Berlin clearer in my impatience with the immensely competent bullies and browbeaters and highwaymen and naggers, the Rembrandts & Halses and Titians and Rubenses, the Tarquins of art.

Or is it pettiness to move away from the art that takes me by the scruff of the neck?

After seeing all these so-called Old Masters, Beckett can only be sure that his impatience with these “immensely competent bullies” that again and again show their perfect skill and precision of message and image. Beckett preferred paintings that include unclear or imperfect images that are psychologically ambiguous or harrowing, such works entice the spectator to linger in front of the work. For Beckett, the “immensely competent” artists that he mentioned beat the spectator over the head with their values and ideas, bullying the viewer into seeing a precise and technically perfect image. By calling them “the

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<sup>115</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>116</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>117</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

Tarquins of art” he refers to legendary Roman kings Lucius Tarquinius Priscus (616-578 BC) and Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (534-510 BC), the last King of Rome. The Tarquins usurped power by overthrowing another family. Here, Beckett shows that each technically masterful painter usurped power from the predecessor by trying to do something new through the perfection of mastery of form and technique, which was of little interest to Beckett. He did acknowledge that this is very much his personal opinion: “is it my pettiness to move away from art that takes me by the scruff of the neck?”<sup>118</sup> These opinions lead him to appreciate art that is imperfect and leaves elements unsaid. He later writes that Bram van Velde’s painting technique “insinuates more than it asserts.”<sup>119</sup> Like Ballmer’s that does not exploit the object to illustrate a specific idea. Insinuation, suggestion and the failure to assert or clarify always takes precedence for Beckett as a spectator and in turn for spectators of Beckett’s works.

Beckett moved onto Dresden, but was disappointed in the Zwinger Gallery there. It was even more awful in comparison with the wonderful Kaiser Friedrich museum in Berlin. He writes to MacGreevy that the Dresden gallery

must have more defects than merits. There is a terrible lot of late Italian rubbish, no primitives, practically no Flemish of the great period and rooms full of Mengs & Rosalba pastels and Bellotto views of Dresden.<sup>120</sup>

Similar to the letter from Berlin, he details the art he sees, making comparisons with other art that he has seen elsewhere. He was not too impressed with Giorgione or Raphael, even though he admits that Raphael’s painting *Madonna Sistina* (1512), which

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<sup>118</sup> SB to TM, 18 January 1937. Vol. 1, 430.

<sup>119</sup> Armstrong 43.

<sup>120</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 444.

features the virgin Mary standing on clouds between Pope Sixtus II and St. Barbara, one of the better paintings by Raphael that he has seen. Raphael was one of the paramount Renaissance painters. These painters sought to perfectly and accurately depict the representation of perspective and the human form. Beckett writes, “The Raphael is very good indeed though one doesn’t want to look at her twice.”<sup>121</sup> While it is technically “good,” the fact that one does not need to see it again, reiterates his preference for less perfect and more distorted art that one can come back to again and again, always noticing something different. Beckett’s dislike or indifference for Raphael and the other Italians that “survey the world like building contractors”<sup>122</sup> reiterates his disdain of perfection, completeness and technical competence in favour of movement of the paint, the distortion of figures and the juxtaposition of violence and calm. As he writes of Ballmer, there are “violent painters and calm painters. Better painters of violence and calm.”<sup>123</sup> He liked Vermeer’s *Kupplerin (The Procuress, 1956)* but complained of the way it is hung in a “dark dirty room with dark dirty green patterned paper full of dark Rembrandts.”<sup>124</sup> After several paragraphs of detailed art analysis in this letter to MacGreevy, Beckett states, “There is really not much point writing like this about pictures. But I can’t stop mentioning the Poussin Venus. Beyond praise & appraisalment.”<sup>125</sup> On his journey from Berlin to Dresden, he stopped in Halle and saw “lovely modern pictures still actually on view.”<sup>126</sup> He refers to friends and “interesting people” that he has met from the art world, such as art historian Will Grohmann who “knows them all, from Picasso to Salkeld, and

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<sup>121</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 444.

<sup>122</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

<sup>123</sup> German Diaries, 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

<sup>124</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 444-445.

<sup>125</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 445.

<sup>126</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 445.

has done big catalogues of Klee, Kandinsky, Kirchner & Baumeister.”<sup>127</sup> Through Grohmann, he was able to see more modern art out of Grohmann’s collection as well the best private collections, including the Ida Bienert collection, of modern art in Germany.<sup>128</sup>

He visited the Zwinger museum for a final time on the 17 February 1936 and was able to see the Vermeer’s *Kupplerin* in better light, commenting, “See it, in the good light, [...] gives it substance & immediacy, an immediacy of the everlasting transitory, situates it in eternity.”<sup>129</sup> The immediacy for the “everlasting transitory” fits in with an aesthetic that values a painting or piece of art that is always changing and in motion. The fact that Beckett came back to this painting a second time shows his interest. While the Raphael did not garner a second look, the Vermeer was worth returning to. The Vermeer picture does not fall in line with the balance, symmetry and perfection of form of the Renaissance; instead the figures crowd heavily on the left side of the painting. It portrays sexually explicit material rather than idealistic or religious imagery. Because of these imperfections, this painting proved to be more much visually captivating to Beckett. This type of consideration and reconsideration is evident in the reaction that Judith Schmidt, Barney Rosset’s assistant and a personal friend of Beckett, describes when seeing Beckett’s *Play* two times: “It wasn’t of course a question of not ‘liking’ it [...] it had the least compassion. And I was not deeply touched.” But, after seeing it a third time, she states “last night something broke [...] something came through that I had not felt before.

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<sup>127</sup> SB to TM, 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 446.

<sup>128</sup> He is exposed to Picassos, Klees, Kandinskys, Mondrians, Cézanne, Léger, Chagall, Archipenko, Marc, Munch, a Kokoschka portrait of Nancy Cunard among others that Beckett does not name in his letter to MacGreevy on 16 February 1937. Vol. 1, 446.

<sup>129</sup> German Diaries, 17 February 1937. Vol. 2.

I cannot say what it was [...] which struck me as a miracle—I do not know what the miracle was.”<sup>130</sup> Because *Play* repeats itself in its entirety, she has actually seen the play six times before her breakthrough. This is much like Beckett’s reaction when he looked at a painting like Vermeer’s *Procuress* a second time, because one might not have the “right light”<sup>131</sup> the first time around. Even when Beckett considered his own works, he goes back over them again and again, often eliciting variable responses. He refers to his initial viewings of the nearly final cut of *Film*, “After the first I was not too happy, after the second I thought it was really something.”<sup>132</sup>



Johannes Vermeer. *The Procuress* (1656). Photo Courtesy of the Google Art Project.

When Beckett moved on to Munich on 7 March 1937, he offered his usual critiques of art to MacGreevy. At this time, he has not yet visited the Alte Pinakothek, one of the oldest galleries in the world and one that also boasts one of the most

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<sup>130</sup> Judith Schmidt to SB, 22 January 1964. The letter is published in *New Theatre Magazine: Samuel Beckett Issue*, XI (1971), 16-17.

<sup>131</sup> Beckett describes his amazement at seeing this painting a second time and realising its value. He cites poor light for the reason he was not taken with it the first time (German Diaries, 17 February 1937. Vol. 2).

<sup>132</sup> SB to Alan Schneider, 20 September 1964. Vol. 3, 627.

impressive collections of Old Dutch Masters. On 20 of March 1937, Beckett sent a postcard with an image of *Apollo and Daphne* (1625) by Poussin to Thomas MacGreevy. On the back of this postcard, he aptly comments about Poussin, “This is perhaps not the best of the 3 Poussins here but it is very good. The best for me is Bacchus Midas, with superb female nude very like the Venus in Dresden.”<sup>133</sup> This postcard was Beckett’s way of letting MacGreevy know that he has now in fact visited the Alte Pinakothek. His final letter to McGreevy from Munich states, “I don’t like Munich [...] Of course the pictures are wonderful.”<sup>134</sup> He refers to Cézanne, Van Gogh, as well as Dürer, Engelbrechtsen, which MacGreevy liked but that Beckett didn’t find interesting. He also points out that “the Dirk Bouts are wonderful & the Davids. The Rubens I haven’t looked at. [...] Then there are the 17 Brouwers.”<sup>135</sup> He also saw private collections of modern art while in Munich and meets German Surrealist painter Edgar Ende (1901-1965).<sup>136</sup> His details of the art in Munich reads very much like a catalogue rather than a commentary. It’s as though he was taking in all of these “pictures” because they must be seen in order to appreciate the other paintings that he was more fond of.

Beckett returned to Dublin more convinced than ever that distortion, deformity and imperfection of image were more interesting and worthwhile than technically proficient art. Mark Nixon notes that “commenting on literally hundreds of paintings, the German diaries offer a unique insight into Beckett’s aesthetics, revealing his attraction to specific themes as much as individual painters.”<sup>137</sup> Beckett’s admiration of failure and

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<sup>133</sup> SB to TM, 20 March 1937, postcard from Munich. Vol. 1, 466.

<sup>134</sup> SB to TM, 25 March 1937. Vol. 1, 469.

<sup>135</sup> SB to TM, 25 March 1937. Vol. 1, 470.

<sup>136</sup> SB to TM, 25 March 1937. Vol. 1, 469.

<sup>137</sup> Nixon 141.

misuse is illustrated in views of technically competent and pedantic painters. He placed a growing emphasis on artistic ignorance or disregard over competence, accuracy and technique. In his German diaries, Beckett states his growing aesthetic belief that words cannot convey the visual experience. There are multiple moments that Beckett stresses to MacGreevy that writing about “pictures,” as he repeatedly called them, is impossible and ineffective. Beckett saw art as having to admit elements of failure and uncertainty rather than set out to simplify complexities. He writes, “how can anyone see anything ‘simple & whole.’”<sup>138</sup> In these diaries and his letters, Beckett often closely reads the facial expressions and gestures of the characters represented in the paintings. He admired the less technically proficient work even when looking at the oeuvre of the same artist. As he writes of Vermeer’s *Herr and dame bein Wein (Lady and Gentleman Drinking Wine, 1658)*, pointing out that it is “better painted than the Brunswick picture (*The Procuress, 1656*) but less interesting psychologically.”<sup>139</sup> Again, stating the fact that the more perfect the painting is, the less interesting it becomes. There is a greater weight put on psychological interest and emotional content than on mastery of technique and image. Perfection and technical prowess were not what Beckett deems the ultimate goal of art. In fact, in many ways, Beckett strived to undo the technical accuracy of his work. He worsens images, makes grammatical constructs obsolete, and hides the extreme technical difficulties that his actors endure. One of the goals of his errancy is to make sure that the spectator dwells on his texts and stage images, and it is also a way to demonstrate to the spectator how art should be viewed.

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<sup>138</sup> German Diaries, 26 March 37. Vol. 3.

<sup>139</sup> German Diaries, 5 Jan. 1937. Vol. 2.

Beckett was impatient with artistic competence that sacrifices emotional and interpretive depth. He was attracted to the disturbed vision of Hieronymus Bosch, stating that Bosch's figures were "half idiot, half cunning."<sup>140</sup> Nixon notes his further description of Bosch as having a "remoteness almost of schizophrenia."<sup>141</sup> Nixon continues "Time and time again Beckett's comments favour honest pictorial expression, even at the expense of technical mastery."<sup>142</sup> While it may be difficult to define whether Beckett saw a more honest or authentic pictorial expression, he did think that technical perfection is tiresome and does not require a second look. Being a spectator in front of a great work of art always involves wanting to stand in front of it for long periods of time—"stock still staring out."<sup>143</sup> He writes to Bram and his companion Marthe Arnaud about what Beckett refers to as Bram's "tremendous exhibition."<sup>144</sup> He comments, "I was there for a long, long time last week."<sup>145</sup> He stood there taking in the art and enjoying that there were not many others there.

When Beckett returned to Cooldrinagh in April of 1937 following his German travels, he again writes long letters to MacGreevy detailing paintings he saw in Germany. Beckett reminisces to MacGreevy about his favourite paintings in the Library of Deutsches Museum in Germany. He once again reveals his intensely visual memory by conveying not only the paintings he saw there, but also precisely where these paintings were located, "To get to the French pictures you walk through from the entrance door as

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<sup>140</sup> German Diaries, 9 March 1937. Vol. 3.

<sup>141</sup> Nixon 145.

<sup>142</sup> Nixon 147.

<sup>143</sup> *CDW* 425.

<sup>144</sup> SB to Marthe Arnaud-Kuntz and Bram van Velde, 22 May 1957. Vol. 3, 48. The exhibition he is referring to was at the Galerie Michel Warren, running from 7 May-1 June 1957.

<sup>145</sup> SB to Marthe Arnaud- Kuntz and Bram van Velde, 22 May 1957. Vol. 3, 48.

far as you can go. They begin on the back wall with, I think, the Van Goghs.”<sup>146</sup> The location and placement of paintings in a gallery were immensely important to Beckett. Since he was back in Dublin, he also writes of new Jack B. Yeats paintings that he has viewed, such as *Little Waves of Breffny* (1936) and *Low Tide* (1935).<sup>147</sup> Beckett also noted the fact that Yeats is showing five pictures in the Academy. Beckett seemed very happy and surprised that Yeats is making good money off of his paintings (“280 in a fortnight and another 380 pounds in a week!”)<sup>148</sup> Beckett kept up with the National Gallery of Ireland. He comments on the paintings that are on loan, “some of the Poussins have gone on loan to Paris, the Cranach to the Kaiser Friedrich and the awful Franz Hals somewhere else.”<sup>149</sup> His animosity towards Furlong was still intact as he further criticises his choices as Director of the National Gallery. Beckett states, “I was really shocked to see what he had done to the Gallery [...] No matter how one addresses oneself to the picture one has the light in one’s eyes. And they are all hung about a level with the pubic bone.”<sup>150</sup> He goes on to criticize the movements of certain pieces such as the Dutch paintings being put in the print room. He also comments in this letter that “The academy was incredibly awful.”<sup>151</sup> This again supports the fact that Beckett did not see worth in technical prowess, which the Royal Hibernian Academy would be known for. He confirms this again over ten years later writing to Duthuit, “Does there exist, can there

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<sup>146</sup> SB to TM, 19 August 1937. Vol. 1, 543.

<sup>147</sup> He views this in what is now the Hugh Lane Gallery and was “derided by three ladies the day I was there.” SB to TM, 19 August 1937. Vol. 1, 543.

<sup>148</sup> SB to TM, 14 May 1937 and 5 June 1937. Vol. 1, 497 and 502.

<sup>149</sup> SB to TM, 26 April 1937. Vol. 1, 488.

<sup>150</sup> SB to TM, 14 May 1937. Vol. 1, 496.

<sup>151</sup> SB to TM, 14 May 1937. Vol. 1, 497.

exist, or not, a painting that is poor, undisguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever, a painting whose necessity does not see to justify itself?”<sup>152</sup>

Beckett’s letters to MacGreevy over the years include much praise for Jack B. Yeats. MacGreevy introduced Beckett to Jack B. Yeats and continued to be a close friend to the painter until Yeats’ death. MacGreevy would visit Yeats often in the nursing home where he spent his final days. Despite the fact that both MacGreevy and Beckett revered Yeats, by the late 1930’s, Beckett and MacGreevy’s opinions of what made Yeats a venerable artist were in strong contrast. The differing of opinions can further aid in solidifying what Beckett saw as great art. When Beckett first heard that MacGreevy was composing an essay on Jack B. Yeats, he was happy. He writes, “I was very glad to hear from JBY of the proposed work.”<sup>153</sup> From the beginning of January 1938, Beckett was unwell and did not write letters about paintings, except for imploring MacGreevy to send on his piece about Yeats: “Do send along your Yeats, I am in a hurry to see it!”<sup>154</sup> Beckett was sorely disappointed with the Yeats essay when he does receive it. His response to MacGreevy after he has read this essay took on a much different tone than his previous correspondence throughout the 1930s. In this letter, he sets out his differences of opinion, stating that MacGreevy develops ideas “very differently from the way it was in my [Beckett’s] mind.”<sup>155</sup> This explicitly points out a large difference in the way that Beckett and MacGreevy view and digest art. While MacGreevy saw Yeats as Ireland’s national painter, and concluded that Yeats understood the Irish people like no other, Beckett saw Yeats’s paintings as having an “unparalleled strangeness, which renders

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<sup>152</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 June 1949. Vol. 2, 166.

<sup>153</sup> SB to TM, 23 May 1936. Vol. 1, 337.

<sup>154</sup> SB to TM, 27 January 1938. Vol. 1, 595.

<sup>155</sup> SB to TM, 31 January 1938. Vol. 1, 598.

irrelevant the usual tracings of heritage, whether national or other.”<sup>156</sup> MacGreevy asserts that Jack B. Yeats,

So identified himself with the people of Ireland as to be able to give a true and good and beautiful artistic expression to the life they lived, and to that sense of themselves as the Irish nation [...] the painter who in his work was the consummate expression of the spirit of his own nation at one of the supreme points in its evolution.<sup>157</sup>

Beckett’s response was that “one of the criticisms that I should like to make [...] is that for an essay of such brevity the political and social analysis is a little on the long side.”<sup>158</sup> Again, we see this affinity to not only remove himself, but also Yeats from the collectivity and completeness that MacGreevy wished to conjoin to Yeats’ work. In his “Homage to Jack B. Yeats”, which was written to promote Yeats’ exhibition in Paris, Beckett goes so far as to state that Yeats is “an artist who comes from nowhere, he has no brothers.”<sup>159</sup> This denies Yeats’ affiliation with his actual brother, the poet W.B. Yeats, as well as with the Irish brotherhood that MacGreevy so wanted to place Yeats into. Beckett goes on, “Perhaps it is the fault or my mood or my chronic inability to understand as a member of any proposition a phrase like ‘the Irish people.’<sup>160</sup> Beckett realised the fool’s errand of trying to collectively group a nation of people, who experienced the pain and violence of colonialism and civil war on a very personal level. This would hold especially true in Ireland, where there was a widening divide between the Protestant and Catholic

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<sup>156</sup> “Homage to Jack B. Yeats” 149.

<sup>157</sup> *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and Interpretation* 10.

<sup>158</sup> SB to TM, 31 January 1938. Vol. 1, 599.

<sup>159</sup> “Homage to Jack B. Yeats” 149.

<sup>160</sup> *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and Interpretation* 17.

Irish and a simultaneous drive to succinctly define what “Irishness” means. Beckett did not see the Irish people as a homologous unit that was agrarian, Catholic and Gaelic; after all, Beckett himself does not fit into this category. Ascribing such characteristic to Yeats assigns a completeness or unity to his work that Beckett strongly believed the works of Yeats lack. Seán Kennedy’s article “ ‘The Artist Who Stakes His Being from Nowhere’: Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B. Yeats” argues that the disagreement between Beckett and MacGreevy highlights the disjunction between Beckett’s Protestantism versus MacGreevy’s Catholicism, but more than anything this disagreement reveals Beckett’s views on how the spectator should view an artwork as well as how great art should lack definitive unity and completeness. MacGreevy was clearly wrong in Beckett’s eyes. For Beckett, trying to describe what makes a work of art good or great is extremely difficult, if not impossible: “It is difficult to formulate what it is one likes in Mr Yeats’ painting, or indeed what it is one likes in anything.”<sup>161</sup>

The divergence of opinions took Beckett by surprise. Up until this point, MacGreevy had been a mentor and great influence on Beckett’s self-education of art history. He had taken for granted that he and MacGreevy must surely view Yeats in the same way, as both men had so much respect and admiration for the painter. Beckett’s letter to MacGreevy takes on a defensive tone of someone that has been offended or hurt. He comments that MacGreevy has provided clues and meaning that will be of great help to people that “can’t be happy till they have ‘solidified the flowing’<sup>162</sup> i.e. most

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<sup>161</sup> SB to TM, 31 January 1938. Vol. 1, 599.

<sup>162</sup> Solidifying the ‘flow’ could also allude to Henri Bergson’s description of “intuition” Intuition could be described as a method of “thinking in duration” which reflects the continuous flow of reality.

people.”<sup>163</sup> In other words, MacGreevy has given his audience a concrete way to interpret the meaning of Yeats’ paintings. One of Beckett’s main contentions with MacGreevy was that solidifying such meanings goes firmly against what Beckett found most admirable in Yeats’ paintings and other paintings that he admired. Beckett opines that Yeats’s painting further muddies meaning in order to create a fluidity of image, meaning and intention. Meaning or understanding of paintings, such as Yeats’, are continually in flux. Resisting definition, they produce a “steady stream”<sup>164</sup> that the eye can rest on for prolonged periods. The fluidity of object, transitory nature of paint and canvas and the incomplete and irreverent are paramount in a Yeats’ painting. Before MacGreevy’s text on Yeats, Beckett seemed to think MacGreevy understood Yeats the same way he did. This is reflected in his excitement and impatience to read MacGreevy’s essay. One of the reasons Beckett might have written such a pointed response to MacGreevy was the fact that providing such meanings limits art rather than opening multiplicitous avenues for interpretation and consideration. Part of Yeats’ greatness is the continual failure of the spectator to be able to describe it or pin it down. Beckett ends his letter with a peace offering, “God love thee, Tom, don’t be minding me. I can’t think of Ireland the way you do.”<sup>165</sup> He does not mention the Yeats essay in the next letter to MacGreevy, instead offering a compliment, “I like when you write about pictures as much as I do when you talk about them,”<sup>166</sup> although one can assume that discussion of a Yeats’ picture is an exception to this statement. This comment refers to two letters MacGreevy sent to Beckett that have never been found. We can only imagine that he replied to Beckett’s

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<sup>163</sup> SB to TM, 31 January 1938. Vol. 1, 599.

<sup>164</sup> *Not I*, CDW 380.

<sup>165</sup> SB to TM, 31 January 1938. Vol. 1, 599.

<sup>166</sup> SB to TM, 21 February 1938. Vol. 1, 607.

criticism in some way. In August, he writes to MacGreevy again about a visit with Jack B. Yeats, while Beckett was back for a short time in Ireland. While there, he saw a “magnificent new picture,”<sup>167</sup> entitled *Helen* (1938). He points out the “depth and courage more than of conviction, or certainty, absolutely natural and unrhetorical.”<sup>168</sup> Beckett is reiterating his view on Yeats in a more roundabout way. He emphasises the depth and courage of the natural and unrhetorical image. He is also explicitly stating that these images do not convey conviction or certainty. Beckett conveys the impact of this painting in the same letter writing that “I was really knocked all of a heap.”<sup>169</sup> Beckett appreciated paintings that evoke this type of emotional response. In typical Beckettian fashion, as a concession or peace offering to MacGreevy, Beckett writes that Yeats spoke “warmly” of MacGreevy’s essay, but one can be quite certain that Beckett did not do the same.

Despite the light and friendly correspondence between Beckett and MacGreevy, the issues that he criticised MacGreevy for were not far from his mind. When MacGreevy’s text on Yeats, *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation*, was finally published in 1945 to accompany the June 11<sup>th</sup> 1945 Jack B. Yeats National Loan Exhibition at the National College of Art, Dublin, Beckett published his own review of “MacGreevy on Yeats” in the *Irish Times* shortly after. In his review, Beckett, again contests MacGreevy’s insistence that Yeats is Ireland’s national painter. In this review, Beckett writes,

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<sup>167</sup> SB to TM, 4 August 1938. Vol. 1, 636.

<sup>168</sup> SB to TM, 4 August 1938. Vol. 1, 636.

<sup>169</sup> SB to TM, 4 August 1938. Vol. 1, 636.

Mr MacGreevy sees Mr Yeats the first great painter, the first great Irish painter, that Ireland produced [...] the first to fix plastically, with completeness and for his time finality, what is peculiar to the Irish scene and to the Irish people. This is the essence of his interpretation, and it permeates the essay in all its parts.<sup>170</sup>

Beckett criticised MacGreevy for assigning Yeats a fixed meaning, and again, the word “completeness” and finality receive harsh judgement from Beckett. To Beckett this was not at all what these works are about, and he saw MacGreevy as very wrong-headed.

Beckett goes on to write in the *Irish Times* article that

The national aspects of Mr Yeats’ genius have, I think, been over-stated, and for motives not always remarkable for their aesthetic purity. To admire painting on other than aesthetic grounds, *qua* painter, for any other reason than that he is a good painter, may seem uncalled for.<sup>171</sup>

In this public declaration, Beckett asserts that Yeats is not merely the Irish national painter. Instead, Yeats stands with the artists that Beckett saw as the “great of our time, Kandinsky and Klee, Ballmer and Bram van Velde, Rouault and Braque” not because of national sentiment but because “he brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence.”<sup>172</sup> He ends his diatribe against MacGreevy’s views on Yeats with a series of esoteric allusions to places in Dublin and Greek and biblical mythology that again downplay and assert the invalidity of nationalistic reading of Yeats. Nationalism connotes a completeness of understanding of what characteristics are specifically unique to a national collective, which, to Beckett, is not desirable. In the

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<sup>170</sup> “MacGreevy on Yeats” 96.

<sup>171</sup> “MacGreevy on Yeats” 96.

<sup>172</sup> “MacGreevy on Yeats” 96-97.

*Irish Times* article, he writes, “It is difficult to formulate what it is one likes in Mr Yeats’ painting, or indeed what it is one likes in anything.”<sup>173</sup> This is further echoed in Beckett’s “Homage to Jack B. Yeats” written ten years later.<sup>174</sup> The fact that Beckett wrote this for the Irish public shows the weight that Beckett put on painting and how it should be interpreted. It reveals aspects of his aesthetic of failure that repudiate complete meaning, understanding and technical proficiency. This argument created a fissure in Beckett and MacGreevy’s relationship. While they remained friends, there was a clear cooling off, and Beckett never quite writes to him about art in the same open way as he did in the 1930s. The tone of mentee dissipates from Beckett’s letters to MacGreevy. The differing views on an artist that Beckett highly revered hurts Beckett deeply. We see a similar break happen between Georges Duthuit and Beckett later in the 1950s.<sup>175</sup>

After his short letter to MacGreevy on 4 August 1938, he does not write to MacGreevy for over eight months. He begins a letter on 11 April 1939 stating, “I am sorry that we seem to have lost touch with one another & ceased to correspond.” This letter seeks to re-establish a connection, and he writes, “I do not think there is any reason for estrangement [...] I may have done something to alienate you without my knowing what it is. If I have I ask your forgiveness.”<sup>176</sup> Beckett’s pointed letter criticising MacGreevy’s essay as well as his public review for the *Irish Times* is the elephant in the room in terms of what Beckett has done to perhaps offend McGreevy, and also what MacGreevy has done to offend Beckett. This estrangement and decrease in correspondence was not solely based on Catholic vs. Protestant ideals as argued by Seán

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<sup>173</sup> “MacGreevy on Yeats” 95.

<sup>174</sup> This will be detailed later in the chapter.

<sup>175</sup> This will be detailed later in the chapter.

<sup>176</sup> SB to TM, 18 April 1939. Vol. 1, 656.

Kennedy,<sup>177</sup> but by the intensity of Beckett's response and the anger it aroused in him about how art should be viewed. Having someone so close to Beckett believe such things exacerbated Beckett's pain. He continued to write to MacGreevy for the remainder of MacGreevy's life, but Beckett's letters were never written in quite the same tone. The discussion of art is never quite so open, and the letters often describe topical facts about things such as plays, music, art and mutual acquaintances. Beckett wished that MacGreevy would write more for himself and less for Ireland. Beckett writes to MacGreevy in reference to a recent article that he has written on Dante, "I feel you constrained as in all of your work for *The Record*, and found myself wishing you were writing more for yourself and less for Ireland. I know you are doing what you want to do, in a sense. But it must leave you with a starved feeling."<sup>178</sup> None the less, he did continue to have some affection for MacGreevy, writing to him on Christmas Day 1965, "I feel tired and speechless. But I don't want to end a year without telling you how often there is a thought of you and simply being with you in mind wondering how you are."<sup>179</sup>

After MacGreevy, one of Beckett's most significant relationships was with French art critic and son-in-law to Henri Matisse, Georges Duthuit. Despite the fact that this relationship was fleeting compared to Beckett's longer lasting friendships, his association with Duthuit was highly influential in relation to not only the art that Beckett was exposed to, but also to Beckett's aesthetic of failure and spectatorship. Beckett's correspondence with Duthuit often focused on the aesthetics of painting and spectatorship in terms of what a painting should *do*, and it also reveals a great deal about Beckett's own

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<sup>177</sup> "The Artist Who Stakes His Being from Nowhere": Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B. Yeats."

<sup>178</sup> SB to TM, 18 April 1939. Vol. 1, 656.

<sup>179</sup> SB to TM, 25 December 1965. Vol. 3, 686.

aesthetics and preoccupations. Namely, Beckett concerned himself with how writing about or trying to express the experience of standing in front of a work of art ruins not only the piece of art, but also the experience of viewing a piece of art.

Duthuit was fifteen years Beckett's senior, and he based his life on central beliefs taught to him by British enigmatic art cognoscenti Matthew Pritchard (1865-1936), which were based on the philosophy and aesthetics of Henri Bergson. Pritchard believed that mimetic representational Western art was "falling-off from the idea of process and oneness."<sup>180</sup> Pritchard adopted Henri Bergson's disparagement of verisimilitude in favour of decoration, and Pritchard argued this could be rediscovered in Byzantine art and rectified in the work of some contemporary painters such as Matisse. Duthuit's rejection of mimesis was more radical than Beckett's in that he did not like the Greeks through Giotto, down through the Italian Renaissance. Pritchard and, therefore, Duthuit believed that the purest principles of art were to be found in Byzantine art and the art of Matisse. Duthuit defended these principles throughout his life. S.E. Gontarski has noted the influence of Bergsonian intuition and paradox on Beckett's work.<sup>181</sup> Duthuit revived the magazine *Transition* in 1947 to which Beckett often contributed translations as well as his own highly personalised pieces of art criticism.<sup>182</sup> Correspondence with Duthuit began in 1947 and continued through the mid-1950s, with the richest exchanges taking place between 1948-1951. During this period, Beckett wrote profusely to Duthuit in an effort to solidify Beckett's own aesthetic in terms of the way he viewed painting and in turn his own writing. The mid-1940s and 1950s are concurrently an extremely prolific

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<sup>180</sup> Sorenson n.p.

<sup>181</sup> *Creative Involution: Beckett, Bergson, and Deleuze*.

<sup>182</sup> Labrusse 88-89.

period in Beckett's own creative writing and innovation in the French language. During this time, he wrote *Mercier and Camier* (1946), *Eluetheria* (1947) *Molloy* (1951), and *Malone Muert* (1951). *En attendant Godot* (1953) and *L'Innommable* (1953) were also being conceived. Several of these works end up becoming some of Beckett's most successful pieces. Beckett would naturally be considering creative impetus and the role and reaction of the spectator during his frenzy of writing. Beckett used his personal experience as a spectator of painting to shape his own works and to determine how these will hopefully affect his viewers and readers.

Duthuit opened Beckett up to the Parisian art world, allowing him to dine at the home of Matisse and associate with other artists, such as Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966).<sup>183</sup> Dan Gunn, one of the editors of Beckett's collected letters, has noted that Beckett valued his correspondence with Duthuit above others in the period from 1945-1956. Beckett opened up to Duthuit, even going so far as to write, "I am spilling my guts out."<sup>184</sup> Beckett often writes that he longs for Duthuit's reply, stating, "Write to me, dear old friend. That is the only post I have any wish for."<sup>185</sup> He writes to Bram van Velde of Duthuit, "He sees things as they are,"<sup>186</sup> or perhaps at least how Beckett did. This suggests that Duthuit could be a replacement for MacGreevy in the role of creative mentor. Because Beckett's views on art were so important to him and are inextricably intertwined with his own aesthetics, Beckett placed great importance on having similar artistic views in those that he sought advice or knowledge from.

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<sup>183</sup> Labrusse 89.

<sup>184</sup> SB to Duthuit, 3 January 1951. Vol. 2, 219.

<sup>185</sup> SB to Duthuit, c. 9-14 April 1951. Vol. 2, 232.

<sup>186</sup> SB to Bram van Velde, 14 January 1949. Vol. 2, 114.

The intimacy between Beckett's views on painting and his own aesthetics of creation is revealed in comparisons that Beckett makes between himself and painters. In a letter to Duthuit, Beckett discusses and makes a comparison between himself and Bram van Velde. Beckett believed that both he and Bram were having a difficulty with what Beckett refers to as "stuckness." He writes, "Bram and I are a long way apart from each other, if I have sensed us right, although at one moment, that is at any moment, close together in one and the same stuckness."<sup>187</sup> He goes on to write that Bram makes no more headway than him but he tries to make "the best of a bad job."<sup>188</sup> Beckett, and he speaks for Bram as well in this letter, did not see this stuckness as something to be dominated or conquered, but instead he saw it as being stuck, as if in a box. It is the attempt and failure of "getting out" or "emerging" from this box that is significant, rather than the stuckness itself. Beckett describes Bram's process,

You can see him emerging five or six times a year, unwanted, a hand, a shoulder, an eye, reaching imploringly towards the grasp that he has not been able to secure.

I thought at one point he would end up giving up, and painting the stuckness, if only from exhaustion.<sup>189</sup>

He continues on about Bram: "I felt as if I was seeing the beginnings of that great adventure in certain paintings [...] There will be those tremendous attempts at getting back up towards a peak furiously dreamed of, and which in actual fact he holds in his own arms [...] [R]ight to the end there will only be beauty of attempt and failure."<sup>190</sup> For

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<sup>187</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 129.

<sup>188</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 129.

<sup>189</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

<sup>190</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

Bram and for Beckett himself, the beauty and interest in a piece of art arises from attempt and failure. Realising and celebrating this failure is vital when expression is impossible.

One aspect that brought Beckett and Duthuit together was their mutual belief in “a kind of weakening of the image.”<sup>191</sup> Continuing to discuss Bram’s painting, Beckett writes, “[F]or me, a painting without precedent, in which as in no other I find what I am seeking precisely because of this fidelity to the prison-house, this refusal of any probationary freedom.”<sup>192</sup> There is no escape from this prison-house of failure “other than partial, and even then towards mutilation.”<sup>193</sup> Beckett envisaged Duthuit’s response to his thoughts on failure,

I can hear you saying that these are highly successful failures, and indeed, as painting, that must be true, although I have absolutely no idea. I thought I could see in it a great many ‘blemishes and defects’, as Ponge says, without wanting for a moment to convert them into qualities.<sup>194</sup>

The quotation by French essayist, poet and critic Francis Ponge points out the blemishes and defects in modern painting like those of Georges Braque, but Ponge argues in this essay that the “defects will be deemed qualities, eventually.”<sup>195</sup> Beckett, like Ponge, appreciated the defects and blemishes of painting, but he found no need to convert them into qualities or try to define them. This was what sets the paintings that he admired apart from other painters. For Beckett, trying to do this as a spectator takes away from the value of recognising the defects for what they are: failures. By the end of this letter,

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<sup>191</sup> Labrusse 90.

<sup>192</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

<sup>193</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

<sup>194</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 130.

<sup>195</sup> Ponge 44.

Beckett did indeed bring the topic and analysis back to himself, which he cannot help but do, “But I know that you have all the same felt what I meant. And there I was, thinking I did not have to talk about me.”<sup>196</sup>

Because of what Beckett saw as a mutual vision or understanding of art, it became important to Beckett that Duthuit see Bram van Velde’s art. Beckett took Duthuit to see Bram’s artwork on 21 May 1948. This is telling, as Bram was one of Beckett’s favourite artists and one that he held very close, similar to the way he saw Jack B. Yeats. This must have been quite worrying for him after his let down with MacGreevy’s comments on Yeats, and he was elated that Duthuit appreciates Bram’s work. He writes to Bram van Velde of Duthuit, “Georges Duthuit, of whom I am very fond, and who really knows what painting is [...] was very much impressed by your two pictures.”<sup>197</sup> Beckett was referring to the two untitled paintings that he owned, *Sans Titre* (1937) oil and *Sans Titre* (1939-1940) gouache. Duthuit also gave a positive critique of Bram’s work in an interview for the *New York Times*, saying that Bram captures “the initial sensation.”<sup>198</sup> Duthuit goes on to say that Bram as well as other painters that Duthuit admired, such as Matisse, “keep in touch with the object at the same time that they indulge in the greatest possible freedom of interpretation.”<sup>199</sup> In other words, Bram’s paintings fail to be completely abstract, but the failure and distortion of the image and the object provides freedom of interpretation and multiple possible avenues of inquiry for the spectator. Duthuit despised classical or Renaissance Italian art because he was hostile toward the

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<sup>196</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 131-132.

<sup>197</sup> SB to Bram van Velde, 18 May 1948. Vol. 2, 77.

<sup>198</sup> Loucheim 6.

<sup>199</sup> Loucheim 6.

Western mimetic tradition in art, much in the same way that Beckett rejects technical proficiency.

Beckett did not only want Duthuit to see Bram van Velde's art, but also longed for him to see Jack B. Yeats' new work. Writing to Duthuit from Dublin, Beckett conveys, "I wish you could be here to see, among other things, Yeats' latest paintings."<sup>200</sup> "Among other things" suggests that it is also not just the painting of Yeats that he wished for Duthuit to see in Ireland. Beckett was not impressed with the Exhibition of Living Art that he attended a private viewing of on 11 August 1948. It contained several French paintings, such as a "dud Manet, unthinkable Derain" and a "pukeworthy Renior."<sup>201</sup>

Beckett's translations for Duthuit for *Transition* also helped him to come to grips with his some of his aesthetic preoccupations, which he again often makes his own. He writes to Duthuit about a translation he has completed of Mallarmé's *Manet*. As Beckett puts it, Mallarmé sees Manet as "sacrificial victim, on account of a few picturesque stammerings about the eye and hand."<sup>202</sup> Beckett's translation reads,

The eye, a hand [...] This eye—Manet—this child eye of old urban stock, new set on things, on persons, virgin and abstract, preserved only yesterday, the immediate freshness of meeting [...] His hand—the pressure felt clear and prompt affirming in what mystery the limpid vision coursed within it.<sup>203</sup>

The relationship between the eye and the hand become a point of interest for Beckett. The eye is closely connected with the creative vision of the brain, while the hand attempts,

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<sup>200</sup> SB to Duthuit, 27 July 1948. Vol. 2, 84. It is not clear which paintings precisely Beckett would have liked him to see as Yeats painted 113 paintings from 1947-1948 according to Pyle's *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Painting of Jack B. Yeats* (1992).

<sup>201</sup> SB to Duthuit, 11 August 1948. Vol. 2, 97.

<sup>202</sup> SB to Duthuit, 1 March 1949. Vol. 2, 122.

<sup>203</sup> Mallarmé 88.

and fails, to translate such visions outwardly. In Beckett's work, eyes are continually shifting, changing and pointing to the act of seeing and being seen. This changing position of the eye can also be seen in Beckett's short creative piece for the Romanian born Israeli-French artist "For Avigdor Arikha" (1967), "Eye and hand fevering after the unself. By the hand it unceasingly changes the eye unceasingly changed. Back and forth the gaze beating against unseeable and unmakeable."<sup>204</sup> This short poem reveals Beckett's interest in the relation between subject and object. The primary form of relation is that between the artist and the outside world, but Beckett believed that there are also relations that take place within the artist himself that allow him "changes of tensions" and "lines of flight and retreat" as well as the feeling of being both "plural" and "unique."<sup>205</sup> From 1965 onwards, Arikha painted subjects from life rapidly in one sitting.<sup>206</sup> This poem by Beckett describes this process, but although the eye and hand pursue the "unself" feverishly, the relation between hand and eye is forever shifting and changing, so in the end the act inherently fails. The gaze beats back against what is finally "unseeable" and "unmakable," and it is this action and this failure to recreate the way one sees that so interested Beckett.

The subject of relation is something that Beckett discussed with Duthuit in detail. He begins a letter in March of 1949, "Let us start out this time from relation. That is where we seem to be the closest."<sup>207</sup> Bram's painting is new

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<sup>204</sup> "For Avigdor Arikha" 152.

<sup>205</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>206</sup> *Letters Vol. 2* "Profiles" 696.

<sup>207</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 138.

because it is the first to repudiate relation in all these forms. It is not the relation with this or that order of opposite that it refuses, but the state of being in relation as such, the state of being in front of.<sup>208</sup>

Van Velde's refusal to agree that painting is able to show or give insight into relations is what makes his painting great and new. His paintings do not claim to represent the outer world (realism) or the inner world (abstraction); they are stuck in between the two states. Beckett writes,

We have waited a long time for an artist who is brave enough, is at ease enough with the great tornadoes of intuition, to grasp the break with the outside world entails the break with the inside world, that there are no replacement relations for naïve relations, that what are called outside and inside are one and the same.<sup>209</sup>

Bram's art does not claim to provide a replacement or an answer for how relation might be possible in the way that an abstract painter replaces mimesis and figuration with abstraction, claiming that images without concrete reference are better or more authentically able to convey relation between thought or emotion and canvas than realistic depictions. To Beckett, Bram's paintings show the failure of trying to make any of these connections at all: "I am not saying that he does not try to reconnect. What matters is that he does not succeed."<sup>210</sup> He continues, "His painting is, if you will, the impossibility of reconnecting. There is, if you like, refusal and refusal to accept refusal."<sup>211</sup> Bram's paintings deny the relations and the distinction between inner and outer relations. This is accomplished through depicted figuration and abstraction on the

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<sup>208</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>209</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 139.

<sup>210</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>211</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

same canvas. The multiplicity of refusals and Bram's fidelity to fail technically in the act of expressing relation make this possible. For Beckett,

That perhaps is what makes this painting possible. For my part, it is the *gran rifiuto*<sup>212</sup> that interests me, not the heroic wriggings to which we owe this splendid thing. [...] What interests me is what lies beyond the outside-inside where he does this striving, not the scale of the striving itself. The visionary exile does not live in Montrouge.<sup>213</sup>

Beckett was not interested in how or why Bram gets to this point, but, to invoke Dante's *Inferno*, he was interested in the "great refusal" (*gran rifiuto*) itself. In Dante's text, the person<sup>214</sup> who committed the great refusal was part of the "neutrals" bound to the River Styx before entering Hell proper. They were those that in life made no commitment to a cause, and are destined to follow a standard-bearer while being stung by flies and wasps. Beckett saw the non-commitment to a cause or genre as more desirable than forcing a cause or pretending to completely answer questions through solid immobile ideology or technique. The "visionary exile" from relations does not exist in the man Van Velde—his studio was in Montrouge—but in where he does his striving and how these paintings come to be; it exists in his refusal of relation.

After this explanation in the above letter, Beckett vents his frustration at having to try to justify why and what Bram paints. He declares, "What then does he paint?"<sup>215</sup> He was frustrated because whatever answer Beckett tries to give will lock Van Velde back

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<sup>212</sup> "l'ombra di colui/ che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto" (the shade of him who from cowardice made the great refusal; *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 59-60).

<sup>213</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>214</sup> Possibly Pope Celestine V, who abdicated his papacy in 1294.

<sup>215</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 141.

into the world of relations, to which Beckett thinks he does not belong. Beckett has “no wish to prove anything, and watertight theories are no dearer to me than those that allow dear Truth to slip through.”<sup>216</sup> The only explanation that he will give is “if you ask me why the canvas does not stay blank, I can only invoke this unintelligible, unchallengeable need to splash colour on it, even it means vomiting one’s whole being.”<sup>217</sup> The need of the artist to create even in the face of failure is something that Beckett cannot and will not fully explain. It is the drive and the striving that must be done, even if that means giving up part of the self. To Beckett, his need to create in the face of failure cannot be reasoned or challenged.

Beckett repudiated Duthuit’s idea that paintings such as Bram’s “bring in considerations of space and time.”<sup>218</sup> For Beckett, again, this merely brings in relations in Bram’s painting that he does not think exist. He says of Bram,

I have always thought he had not the faintest idea of what he was doing, and neither had I. But preference will be to hold on to this last appreciation, until the day comes when I shall not need another hand to hold in my wrongness.<sup>219</sup>

In this letter, he admits here that he uses painters, such as Bram, as a crutch or safety blanket in order to feel better in the “wrongness,” failure and worsening that Beckett’s writing presents. Beckett’s own wrongness and refusal of relation is evident in his answer to French journalist Michel Polac’s questions about what *En Attendant Godot* is about: “I have no ideas about theatre. I know nothing about it [...] I know no more about this play

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<sup>216</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>217</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>218</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 140.

<sup>219</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 141.

than anyone who manages to read it attentively.”<sup>220</sup> He reiterates that he will not clarify his works in a letter to Arland Ussher in 1962,

My unique relation with my work—and it is a tenuous one—is the making relation. I am with it a little in the dark and fumbling making as long as that lasts, then no more. I have no light to throw on it myself and it seems a stranger light that others throw.<sup>221</sup>

Like a painting hanging on a wall, what is in front of the viewer should be enough, or as Beckett writes, “it is enough, and more than enough for me. I shall even say that I could have made do with less.”<sup>222</sup> Beckett was ever interested in saying less. He ends this letter with the statement, “But bear in mind that I who hardly ever talk about myself talk of little else.”<sup>223</sup>

His letters to Duthuit in 1949 are fodder for the ideas that are explored in “Three Dialogues.” The favouring of originality, imperfection and forward thinking is expressed in Beckett’s rejection of the paintings of Tal Coat and Masson in favour of a painter like Bram van Velde. Beckett says of Tal Coat, to Duthuit’s chagrin, “the tendency and accomplishment of this painting are fundamentally those of previous painting, straining to enlarge the statement of a compromise.”<sup>224</sup> Tal Coat is only continuing along the course of art history trying to improve the relationship between subject and object and accomplish a little more than those that came before him. In the same way Raphael improves and deepens perspective after studying Da Vinci, modern painters continue

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<sup>220</sup> SB to Polac, after 23 January 1952. Vol. 2, 315-316.

<sup>221</sup> SB to Arland Ussher, 6 November 1962. Vol. 3, 511.

<sup>222</sup> SB to Polac, after 23 January 1952. Vol. 2, 315.

<sup>223</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 141.

<sup>224</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

only to “enlarge the statement of compromise.”<sup>225</sup> Beckett states that art should be, instead,

Turning away from [the plane of the feasible] in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.<sup>226</sup>

This very much echoes his statement several years earlier to Kaun in which he asks if literature is continue to create the same old thing, “Or is literature to be left behind on that old foul road long ago abandoned by music and painting?”<sup>227</sup> For Beckett, modern art can no longer progress in a linear path, down a dreary road like the “country road” in *Waiting for Godot* (1955). The fact that Vladimir and Estragon simply wait on this road instead of moving on in a clear direction could act as an allegory for what Beckett thought that art should do, and this is what Bram does. He is not trying to progress to the next stage of painting in order to produce a more authentic or genuine relation. Instead, he waits on the dreary road. He reproduces the failure to progress, the failure to go down that country road. This idea is further mirrored in *Godot*. Every time one of the characters threatens to go, there is complete stillness:

Estragon: I’m going  
[*He does not move*]<sup>228</sup>

The last lines of the play suggest this desire to go, but instead show that this is not possible:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

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<sup>225</sup> “Three Dialogues” 139.

<sup>226</sup> “Three Dialogues” 146.

<sup>227</sup> SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937. Vol. 1, 518.

<sup>228</sup> *CDW* 14.

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.  
[*They do not move.*]<sup>229</sup>

Progression forward ignores the fact that relation and expression are impossible. There can only be an attempt and then a failure to actually move forward or express.

Beckett admitted that other painters have felt that art does not necessarily express. He states, "others have felt that art is not necessarily expression. But the numerous attempts made to make painting independent of its occasion have only succeeded in enlarging its repertory."<sup>230</sup> These attempts have claimed to do something, of progressing of moving forward, but instead the result is merely enlarging repertory of art that thinks it can solve or fix the problem of representation and relation. This type of art thinks it is heading in the "correct" direction rather than revelling in the failure and "wrongness" of trying but not being able to move. To Beckett, Bram van Velde's paintings are "inexpressive." He writes:

I suggest that Van Velde is the first whose painting is bereft, rid if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material, and the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act.<sup>231</sup>

The certitude that expression is an impossible act emphasises the inevitable failure of the artist. To Beckett, Bram was able to paint while revelling in the inherent failure of the action. Like Didi and Gogo, he does not move down the road, but, instead, his images stay "stock still staring out" at the spectator and admitting there is "nothing to be done."<sup>232</sup> They wait. They lessen. They worsen.

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<sup>229</sup> *CDW* 52.

<sup>230</sup> "Three Dialogues" 143.

<sup>231</sup> "Three Dialogues" 143.

<sup>232</sup> *CDW* 14.

In the next letter of May of 1949, Beckett turns down Duthuit's proposal of a collaborative piece about Greer and Bram van Velde. He instead attacks his own past articles on the painters.<sup>233</sup> He says in reference to the first piece, "L'Peinture des van Velde ou e monde et le pantalon" writing, "All I can remember is that I indulged, in order to have done with the thing."<sup>234</sup> This letter also contains a permutation of his oft-cited phrase about expression that appears in "Three Dialogues":

which is to paint, where there is nothing to paint, nothing to paint with, and without knowing how to paint, and without wanting to paint, and all this in such a way that something comes from it.<sup>235</sup>

It is interesting that Beckett replaced "paint" with expression in the published version of "Three Dialogues." This exposes the fact that Beckett's thoughts on painting heavily influenced his own aesthetic as well as his beliefs on how the spectator should experience the creative expression of the artist. Beckett did realise that his suggestions/observations about spectatorship and expression are extreme. He writes to Duthuit, "I am going too far, I shall always go too far, and never far enough."<sup>236</sup>

In another letter to Duthuit, Beckett set out to show their differences in aesthetic opinion in terms of the visual arts. He expressed that one of the main aspects of this difference is that Beckett sees several of the painters that Duthuit favours, notably Tal-Coat and Masson, as not doing anything extraordinary, but instead reusing forms that have already been used. As Beckett puts it,

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<sup>233</sup> "L'Peinture des van Velde ou e monde et le pantalon" and "Peintres de l'empêchement."

<sup>234</sup> SB to Duthuit, 26 May 1949. Vol. 2, 155.

<sup>235</sup> SB to Duthuit, 26 May 1949. Vol. 2, 155.

<sup>236</sup> SB to Duthuit, 26 May 1949. Vol. 2, 156.

What all that amounts to us the wishes to save a form of expression which is not viable. To want it to be, to work at making it be, so give it the appearance of being, is to fall back into the same old plethora, the same play acting. Apoplectic, bursting at the arteries, like Cezanne, like van Gogh, that is what he is about, the pale Tal-Coat, and what Masson would be about, if he could.<sup>237</sup>

Beckett would prefer paintings that do not seek to justify themselves. He continues to stress in these letters that his musing about paintings ultimately come down to Beckett's own musing and beliefs about himself and about his own art, "I cannot replace your voice; the voice that reminds me that it's not all about me."<sup>238</sup> He ends a letter to Duthuit with, "Still do not understand in what way art can help us to wait patiently."<sup>239</sup> This sentence is set off in a paragraph of its own within the letter. This letter shows that Beckett saw his views and the views of Duthuit diverging, and he began to sever ties with him. Later in 1950, Beckett's letters to Duthuit become shorter and less philosophical. From April to July of 1951, there was no correspondence at all between Duthuit and Beckett. The letters begin to deal more with work and critiques of articles and books, with brief mentions of Bram.

He wrote to Duthuit less and less after 1952. His final letter to Duthuit is on 2 March 1954, in which they have a falling out over opinion, much like the earlier conflict between Beckett and MacGreevy, although Beckett is much less acerbic to Duthuit. While Beckett does keep in touch with MacGreevy until his death, Beckett cuts off connection with Duthuit completely and abruptly. It is not known why exactly their

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<sup>237</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 June 1949. Vol. 2, 165.

<sup>238</sup> SB to Duthuit, 28 June 1949. Vol. 2, 169.

<sup>239</sup> SB to Duthuit, 1 March 1950. Vol. 2, 187.

correspondence and friendship ends, but it could very well be because of their diverging point of view on modern painting. In his final letter to Duthuit, he laments their differing points of view in a response to a letter from Duthuit.<sup>240</sup> Beckett responds,

There is no serious dispute between us [...] I think our preoccupations are of two very different orders as if separated by a zone of shadow. Where, exiled from each other, we vainly seek a meeting point. Having thought I had detected in Yeats the only value that remains at all real for me—a value which I no longer want to pin down closely, and which cannot be accounted for by the so very respectable considerations of country and workmanship—I become literally blind to the rest.<sup>241</sup>

He uses his example of the short homage that he wrote for Jack B. Yeats to show his difficulty and disdain for writing about art or “pinning down” what he values in art. Beckett realised that they have had their differences since “Three Dialogues” and other correspondence about Bram; Beckett points out this is “how it was already when we were talking about Bram.”<sup>242</sup> He has had these opinions that differ from Duthuit for years, and he will not change them. He has been arguing this point with Duthuit since their first discussions of Bram, and they still cannot find a meeting point. Beckett’s remarks that trying to find this common ground is futile, even though their opinions are only delineated by a “zone of shadow.”<sup>243</sup>

Soon after his falling out with Duthuit, Beckett wrote his last critical piece on art for the public. Significantly, this takes the form of an “Homage to Jack B. Yeats.” He will

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<sup>240</sup> This letter has not been found.

<sup>241</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

<sup>242</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

<sup>243</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

have his say on Yeats, before shying away from writing about art altogether, even though he was not happy with what he has written. He writes to MacGreevy, “it is nothing more than an obeisance, and a clumsy one. I cannot write that kind of thing and I hope JBY will not be too disappointed.”<sup>244</sup>

Beckett pursued and cultivated friendships with artists and art historians more so than he did with other writers. Knowlson points out that despite Beckett’s reserved personality, he had developed his own circle of friends early on in Paris, and “many of these were painters and engravers.”<sup>245</sup> These included such characters as Jankel Adler, Stanley William Hayter, John Buckland White and his wife, Otto Freundlich and a German Surrealist, Wolfgang Paalen.<sup>246</sup> Beckett continued to be attracted to and attract the friendship of visual artists especially painters throughout his life.

Beckett was always delighted to meet up with Jack B. Yeats and shares this with MacGreevy. He writes, “Yesterday afternoon I had Jack Yeats all to myself.”<sup>247</sup> He was able to view some “quite new pictures” and comments that Yeats is moving into a “freer period.”<sup>248</sup> Beckett comments specifically on the painting *Low Tide* (1935) remarking that it “is overwhelming.”<sup>249</sup> For Beckett, experiencing the overwhelming and awe-inspiring qualities of a painting is indivisible from the act of the eyes resting on a piece of art in silence, digesting and re-digesting every minute detail. Beckett ends these remarks to MacGreevy by commenting that he hopes to see Yeats again before leaving Dublin,

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<sup>244</sup> TCD, MS 10402/192.

<sup>245</sup> *DTF* 289.

<sup>246</sup> *DTF* 289.

<sup>247</sup> SB to TM, 5 May 1935. Vol. 1, 265.

<sup>248</sup> SB to TM, 5 May 1935. Vol. 1, 265.

<sup>249</sup> SB to TM, 5 May 1935. Vol. 1, 265.

but that he does not expect to “ever have him like that again.”<sup>250</sup> Beckett very much appreciated his one-on-one time with Yeats, which was rare as he often had visitors at his home in Fitzwilliam Square. He visited Yeats again in January of 1936, commenting that he was able to see some small pictures that Yeats would be exhibiting at the Dunthorne Gallery in London, opening on 19 March 1936. It included such paintings as, *The Eye of Affection*, *Boy and Horse*, *Below the Golden Falls*, and *The Falls of Sheen*.<sup>251</sup> In this letter, Beckett also expresses his wish to buy *Morning* (1936), a Sligo Sky skyscape, from Yeats, but he cannot yet afford it. He asks MacGreevy if Yeats might be amenable to a payment plan. Regarding this painting, Beckett writes, “it has been a long time since I saw a picture I wanted so much.”<sup>252</sup> He refers to going to see Yeats again in February and again focuses on the fact that he cannot afford the painting as his family is setting out “to keep me tight so that I may be goaded into salaried employment.”<sup>253</sup> He finally was able to attain *Morning* from Yeats on an instalment plan in which he has put down a payment of £10, while “the remaining £20 to follow God knows when.”<sup>254</sup> He comments on the painting, “It is nice to have Morning on one’s wall that is always morning, and a setting out without coming home.”<sup>255</sup> The idea that one is always setting out for the day was pleasing to Beckett, and we can gather that he wanted to buy this painting so badly even when he could not afford, because he wanted to let his eyes rest on it over and over again. The blurred brushstrokes and thick impasto of paint create a tension between the medium of paint and the image being portrayed. This tension further mirrors the light and

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<sup>250</sup> SB to TM, 5 May 1935. Vol. 1, 265.

<sup>251</sup> Pyle, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Painting of Jack. B. Yeats* 478-479.

<sup>252</sup> SB to TM, 29 January 1936. Vol. 1, 303-304.

<sup>253</sup> SB to TM, 6 February 1936. Vol. 1, 312.

<sup>254</sup> SB to TM, 7 May 1936. Vol. 1, 333-334.

<sup>255</sup> SB to TM, 7 May 1936. Vol. 1, 333-334.

darkness that is portrayed concurrently on the canvas. The solitary figure sits on horse facing the rising sun in the west, but staying immobile on the boundary between the lightness and the darkness, failing to move toward one or the other.



Jack B. Yeats. *A Morning* (1936). The National Gallery of Ireland.

He saw Jack B. Yeats again in August and saw “the man in the fuchsia picture again & liked it much better than the first time.”<sup>256</sup> Again, Beckett shows that the most fascinating art cannot be processed in one viewing. Beckett also refers to Yeats’ *Shelling Green Peas, Moore Street* (1936) as “an excellent new small picture.”<sup>257</sup> He also saw Yeats’ series of rose pictures in September. Writing to MacGreevy,

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<sup>256</sup> SB to TM, 7 August 1936. Vol. 1, 365. He referring to Yeats’ painting *Tír na nÓg*, which he had written to MacGreevy on 17 July 1936 (Vol. 1, 358) that painting had, “Lovely passages but unsatisfactory I found generally. Something almost like artificial excitement.”

<sup>257</sup> SB to TM, 7 August 1936. Vol. 1, 365.

He had extended his rose picture 2 stages further 1. Tyranny of the Rose 2. Rose dying 3. Duty Rose. The first two are exquisite. The third less so. The refusal of the rose to crumble, its embalming itself instead, compelled him to take it off the mantel piece & and on to a table with the room all round. So that 3 is less of a flower than of an interior.<sup>258</sup>

The fact that the third painting is more of a typical interior makes this painting less interesting to Beckett. The rose is a very important symbol for Yeats. As Hillary Pyle has noted, Yeats “always painted with a rose pinned to his easel, or placed on the table beside him.”<sup>259</sup> He insisted on painting *sub rosa*.

When Jack B. Yeats died in March of 1957, Beckett was very disappointed that he was not able to attend his funeral. Beckett’s final correspondence with Yeats is a simple Christmas greeting on December 21, 1956. As per usual, his reverence for Yeats appears in his letters to MacGreevy. Beckett first met Yeats in November of 1930, at the behest of MacGreevy, and Yeats was to remain a favourite of Beckett’s. Yeats remained one of the few that Beckett always visits on his returns to Ireland. He also expresses to H.O. White after Yeats’ death, “The light of Jack Yeats will always burn with me.”<sup>260</sup> His discussion of his work and his letters to Yeats clearly convey a tone of respect and reverence. MacGreevy remained a connection and conduit for Beckett and Yeats’ relation throughout his life. MacGreevy had spent every evening with Yeats in his later years even after he was moved from his home on Fitzwilliam Square to the Portobello Nursing

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<sup>258</sup> SB to TM, 19 September 1936. Vol. 1, 70. *Tyranny of a Rose* is now called *A Rose*. The rose series is held in private collections.

<sup>259</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 133.

<sup>260</sup> SB to H.O. White, 15 April 1957. TCD, MS 3777/15.

Home.<sup>261</sup> Beckett writes to MacGreevy about missing Yeats' funeral, "I made a serious effort to get Dublin for the funeral [...] No seat on an Aer Lingus flight."<sup>262</sup> Another close friend of Beckett's was the Paris-based Polish-Jewish painter Henri Hayden.

His friendship with Hayden and his wife Josette is not well documented due to the fact that his letters are held in a sealed private collection. The editors of the Beckett letters were in contact through a broker with the unknown owner who refused to give them access. We do know that Beckett was close with Hayden and his wife for many years. He writes to MacGreevy in 1958 that Victor Waddington has bought Fr 300,000 worth of his pictures to exhibit in London.<sup>263</sup> Beckett continues in his letter to MacGreevy, "Hayden has been doing magnificent work and is getting some appreciation—at age 73 or 74, though of course the work of his Cubist period still fetches high prices."<sup>264</sup> In this letter to MacGreevy, Beckett also refers to the posthumous exhibition of *Later Works* by Jack B. Yeats. This exhibit ran from 6 March to 3 April and marked the move of Waddington Galleries from Dublin to 2 Cork Street, London, W1. Beckett also wrote a piece of criticism, "Henri Hayden, home peintre" for a private collector of Hayden's works who was compiling an illustrated catalogue of the works in his collection. Beckett describes the piece in a letter to London book dealer Alan Clodd,

This text was written many years ago, in the early fifties I think, at my friend Hayden's request, not for a gallery, but for a private collector [...] The understanding was that none of these texts were for publication, as it was this that

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<sup>261</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 170.

<sup>262</sup> SB to TM, 5 April 1957. Vol. 3, 35.

<sup>263</sup> This exhibition took place from 12 February- 7 March 1959 at the Waddington Galleries in London.

<sup>264</sup> SB to TM, 18 February 1958. Vol. 3, 107.

induced me to oblige. I have no qualification to write about painting and greatly dislike doing so.<sup>265</sup>

It is very interesting how he iterates how much he loathes discussing painting. At Hayden's request again, Beckett allows this piece to be published in the catalogue for his exhibition in the Waddington Galleries in London.<sup>266</sup> Beckett describes the reprint in the Waddington catalogue as an "ancient foolish text of mine" in a letter to Ethna McCarthy.<sup>267</sup>

In addition to Yeats, one of Beckett's favourite painters, and one that he developed a close relationship with, was Bram van Velde, whom he met through Bram's brother Geer van Velde in 1937. One of Bram's paintings, entitled *Composition 1937*, hung facing Beckett's desk so that he could see it while he worked. Beckett wrote two major critical pieces about Bram and Greer van Velde, "La Peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon" (1946) for *Cahiers d'arts* and "Peintres de l'empêchement" (1948) which introduced the paintings of Greer and Bram Van Velde at the Galerie Maeght, Paris, in June of 1948. The first piece roughly translates to "The Painting of the van Veldes or The World and the Trousers," which references the joke Nagg tells to Nell in *Endgame*. The joke features a tailor that is taking months to finish making a pair of trousers for a customer. The customer becomes agitated and says "God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months." The tailor replies, "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir,

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<sup>265</sup> SB to Clodd, 21 Nov 1961 (NLI, Clodd, MS 35/293/1).

<sup>266</sup> "Henry Hayden Homme-Peintre" 146-147.

<sup>267</sup> SB to Ethna McCarthy 4 February 1959. Vol. 3, 197.

look at the world and look at my TROUSERS!”<sup>268</sup> The title of the second piece roughly translates to “Painters of Impediment/Failure.” It tentatively sketches an aesthetic agenda for the Van Veldes. It could be summed up as follows: since the essence of the object is to evade representation, what a painter is then left to do is to represent the conditions of this evasion. In 1975, Beckett published the poem “La Falaise” (“The Cliff”) dedicated “pour Bram.” Bram told Patrick Waldberg that Beckett “spoke of my painting as no one had ever spoken before; his presence was so stimulating to me.”<sup>269</sup> His veneration for Bram confirms Beckett’s view on how art works should be viewed and also how painting surpasses literature in accepting and revelling in the failure to express. While he remained an acquaintance of Greer, it is Bram that Beckett felt a closeness with. Beckett writes of his difficulty in expression and how what Bram does with paint, Beckett struggles to do, while still using language. He writes,

I am searching for a way of capitulating without giving up utterance-entirely. But when I go around to your studio to look at what you’ve been doing, the subject of me ought not to come up.<sup>270</sup>

He refers, in this letter, to an enclosure that has not been recovered, as “Enclosed is the last failed silence.”<sup>271</sup> The fact that Beckett continued to write demonstrates that each one of his texts or dramas are another “failed silence.” He writes to Duthuit about this last meeting with Bram, saying, “I let out my usual string of embarrassing rubbish with no

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<sup>268</sup> *Endgame* 50.

<sup>269</sup> Waldberg 131.

<sup>270</sup> SB to Bram van Velde, 14 January 1949. Vol. 2, 114.

<sup>271</sup> SB to Bram van Velde, 14 January 1949. Vol. 2, 114.

bearing on the matter at hand.”<sup>272</sup> He felt he shared a great affinity with Bram; he writes directly to Bram and his partner Marthe the following admission:

[O]ur ventures come together, in the unthought and the harrowing. And if there has to be for me a soul-mate, I make bold to say that it would be his soul and no other [...] Bram is my great familiar. In work and in the impossibility of working. That’s how it always will be.<sup>273</sup>

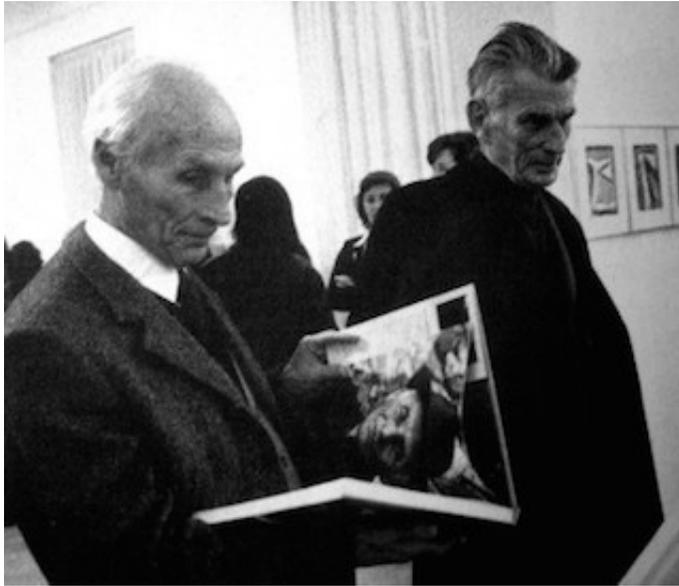
He declares an affinity to Bram’s difficulty with creating, and the impossibility of working successfully. These similarities are especially clear in the acutely distressing aspects of the work and the resistance to thinking and relation. If to think, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is to “direct one’s mind towards someone or something; use one’s mind actively to form connected ideas”<sup>274</sup> unthinking and unthought would be the antonym, the opposite of thinking, where one’s mind is being directed involuntarily toward someone or something, and in effect, the ideas refuse connection or concatenation.

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<sup>272</sup> SB to Georges Duthuit, 17 January 1949. Vol. 2, 115.

<sup>273</sup> Beckett to Bram van Velde and Marthe Arnaud-Kuntz, 3 December 1951. Vol. 2, 305.

<sup>274</sup> “Think, v. 1.”



Bram van Velde and Samuel Beckett, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1975.

At Bram's request, Beckett writes the invitation to Bram's exhibition at the Gallerie Maeght.<sup>275</sup> It is short and succinct and shows the increased difficulty Beckett was having in writing publicly about art:

Happily there are others, more serious.

Those of which the living lava traces are here on show.

Conitron swept away.

Painting of life and death.

Those who like their natron should keep away.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> This ran from 15 February to 10 March 1952.

<sup>276</sup> Text for the invitation to Bram's exhibition that is was enclosed in a letter in January 1952. Exact date of letter is unknown, possibly enclosed with 18 January 1952 letter.

His description here is purposely vague and obtuse. He uses esoteric references such as natron, which is a sodium carbonate used in ancient embalming procedures in Egypt as well as a cleansing agent. This “invitation” fails to be inviting or to encourage people to see this exhibit.

Another one of Beckett’s most lasting and profound relationships was with the Romanian born French-Israeli painter Avigdor Arikha (1929-2010). He made the acquaintance of Arikha on 25<sup>th</sup> of June in 1956 at a dinner at the home of French poet Alain Bosquet days after attending the performance of *En Attendant Godot* at the Théâtre Hébertot. After the play, Arikha had spoken enthusiastically to the man seated next to him at a café about a play he had seen entitled *En attendant Godot*. Only later did he realise his listener was Beckett.<sup>277</sup> The painter was 27 and the writer was 50 at the time. Beckett writes to Bosquet on 2 July 1956 that he was “happy to have met Avigdor Arikha, whom I greatly took to.”<sup>278</sup> Arikha has even suggested that the reason that he made his permanent home in Paris was because of the admiration that he felt for Beckett. Beckett’s connection with Arikha went beyond a mutual respect for each other’s creative endeavours, and extends to the harrowing nature of war that both he and Arikha experienced. In 1941, Arikha and his family, like other Jewish families from Czernowitz, Bukovina, were deported to a labour camp in the Western Ukraine. Arikha’s father died in one of these camps. Arikha himself was put to heavy work in an iron foundry, but he was able to save himself and his sister through his artistic talent. He produced a series of sketches that portrayed the appalling condition in the ghetto, which were sent to the Red Cross. In effect, the Red Cross were able to remove him and his sister from the ghetto

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<sup>277</sup> SB to Arikha, 4 September 1956. Vol. 2, 650.

<sup>278</sup> This letter was sold by G. Norseen Paris. The current owner is unknown.

transferring them to Palestine. He studied art in Jerusalem and was seriously wounded in the Israeli War of Independence (1948). After recuperating, he visited Paris, before settling there permanently in 1954.

Arikha's art goes through a remarkable evolution. From the 1950s up until 1965, Arikha's painting is abstract. After 1965, he loses faith in such works and for eight years, focuses on subjects that are exclusively from life and in black and white only—drawings, etchings, and lithographs. From 1973, colour re-enters his work, but he continues to paint rapidly in one sitting, and his subjects continue to be from life.<sup>279</sup> Arikha did a series of drawings and engravings of Beckett, most of which were made between the years of 1965-1983. Art critic Robert Hughes has described these pieces as “the most significant set of portraits we have of any 20<sup>th</sup> century artist.”<sup>280</sup> In Arikha's case, we can see how Beckett's methodology of errancy in order to vaguen perhaps affected Arikha's works. Arikha drew quickly and never revised or worked from an outline, which suited Beckett very well as he did not like to sit for long. As Peggy Phelan has pointed out, “for Both Arikha and Beckett, the question became not so much ‘abstraction *or* figuration’ but rather how to make vivid the space between these two modes of expressions.”<sup>281</sup> Arikha inhabits this “space between” by drawing quickly in one sitting with limited revision. While Beckett revises heavily, he works and reworks the material in order to worsen it and vaguen it. Beckett owned three of Arikha's paintings: *Composition* (1959), *Composition* (1961) and *Noir et blancheur* (1965).<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> “Profiles” *Letters Vol. 2*, 696.

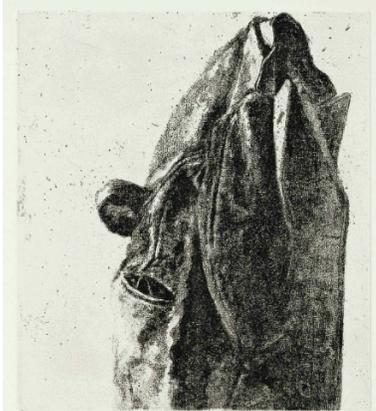
<sup>280</sup> *Arikha* 36.

<sup>281</sup> “Beckett and Avigdor Arikha” 100.

<sup>282</sup> The last of which is pictured in *Arikha* 36.



Avigdor Arikha. *Samuel Beckett in Profile* (1970). Image courtesy of Christie's.



Avigdor Arikha. Illustration for Samuel Beckett "Au loin un oiseau" (Afar a Bird) (1973) published by The Double Elephant Press, New York. Image courtesy of Christie's.

Arikha was one of the few friends that attended Beckett's funeral in 1989. Arikha is the one that drew Knowlson's attention to Beckett's interest in the Old Masters that Knowlson focuses on so closely in the biography, *Damned to Fame*. Arikha recalls Beckett's interest in paintings to James Knowlson, saying Beckett could spend as much as an hour in front of a painting, looking at it with intense concentration, "reading it, absorbing its minutest detail. Often it was the tiny narrative or human aspects that he picked out and, later could remember seeing in a canvas."<sup>283</sup> A single canvas could take hours for Beckett, as spectator, to devour. His writings on art continually return to this intense devotion to considering and absorbing the image and taking the time to do so. This can offer insight to the shortening of Beckett's works compared to the time that can be spent considering them. One could spend hours, days (or years!) considering a certain piece, and the works beg the spectator to return to the text and image presented multiple times. His preference for shortening his works is reflected in the one hour and thirty-minute running time of *Happy Days* as reported by Alan Schneider.<sup>284</sup> Beckett writes to Schneider on 10 September 1961, "I am surprised by length of running time. Probably I have made it a bit too long."<sup>285</sup> From the 1960s onwards, his works become shorter and shorter in length. For example, *Not I* is performed at the astounding speed of fourteen minutes in London by Billie Whitelaw.

His wish to control the spectator is represented in the way he obsesses over details in his plays. As he writes to Jacoba van Velde,

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<sup>283</sup> *DTF* 195.

<sup>284</sup> Schneider 106-107.

<sup>285</sup> SB to Schneider, 6 October 1961. Vol. 3, 435.

For me what matters more and more is knowing at every moment *exactly* what is happening on stage, seeing and hearing *exactly*, from the auditorium. But I am obsessional and have no call to recommend my needs.<sup>286</sup>

He was constantly putting himself in the role of the spectator, seeing and hearing “*exactly*” as a spectator rather than a director or even an actor would. He was obsessional over “exactly what is happening on stage.” He writes to Arikha of the production of *Happy Days* starring Brenda Bruce, “Here everything is wrong. Failing a miracle this week it will be a disaster. I had got it all wrong.”<sup>287</sup> He had upset Bruce with his “metronomically strict rhythm” and his “microscopically detailed notes.”<sup>288</sup> He was exercising precise control to elicit a desired effect: sonically and visually. He writes to Schneider that he will no longer read critical reviews of his works, “Friendly or not it’s all misunderstanding.”<sup>289</sup> The repetition that takes place within the plays, literally forces the audience to look again, to linger in front of a piece, considering and reconsidering.

The difficulty of Beckett’s texts and his resistance to narrative and grammatical conventions, force the reader to continuously slow down, reread and reconsider the text. Luc Estang’s essay “Comment C’est de Samuel Beckett” reflects the difficulty Beckett’s text present for the reader.<sup>290</sup> After quoting three passages from Beckett’s *Comment C’est* (1961), Estang writes,

And on and on like this for another one hundred and seventy five pages. But the lack of punctuation the logorrhoea is the least of the impending headaches! [...]

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<sup>286</sup> SB to Jacoba van Velde, 12 May 1962. Vol. 3, 480.

<sup>287</sup> SB to Arikha, 21 October 1962. Vol. 3, 509.

<sup>288</sup> *DTF* 447-448.

<sup>289</sup> SB to Schneider, 7 November 1962. Vol. 3, 513.

<sup>290</sup> Estang 15.

This flood of words which outruns conscious formulation demands to be “spoken” and not just “read” [...] This isn’t literature: it can’t be.<sup>291</sup>

This indeed is “how it is” in Beckett’s work. His failures of convention produce something that is not quite literature, not quite drama, and not quite painting, but informed by all of these. He writes to Barbara Bray that he has improved the *Comment C’est* translation into English, “but it still remains unreadable which is a great beauty.”<sup>292</sup> He sees beauty in the unreadable, unliterary and perhaps unbearable quality of the piece, much like the way his affinity to Bram van Velde lies in the “unthought and the harrowing.”<sup>293</sup> He aimed to keep this quality in both French and English.

Throughout his life, Beckett was almost always against talking or writing about his work directly. He very succinctly writes to Duthuit in reference to an interview he has been pressured to give, “I can hear my bleatings from here, more and more nasal as the nonsense accumulates: exile? don’t know; cunning? not my style; silence? gladly.”<sup>294</sup> He also expressed how much he loathes writing about art and artists. When he writes to MacGreevy, he refers to these types of pieces as being “dragged out of him.”<sup>295</sup> He continues, “Each time I say never again and each time I am told it is for the sake of Bram. But what I write on him will do him more harm than good, as I have told him.”<sup>296</sup> As a result of his struggles to discuss paintings, Beckett, from the 1960s onward, works to set out to create the visual experience of standing in front of a piece of art rather than trying to recreate this experience with words. By the 1950s, Beckett mistrusted any attempt “to

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<sup>291</sup> Estang 15.

<sup>292</sup> SB to Barbara Bray, 16 January 1963. Vol. 3, 484.

<sup>293</sup> Beckett to Bram van Velde and Marthe Arnaud-Kuntz, 3 December 1951.

<sup>294</sup> SB to Duthuit, 26 July 1951. Vol. 2, 271.

<sup>295</sup> SB to TM, 27 March 1949. Vol. 2, 146.

<sup>296</sup> SB to TM, 27 March 1949. Vol. 2, 146.

transcribe the visual experience before a work of art.”<sup>297</sup> He mentions in a letter to Duthuit that

I have been reading about painting, with your notes, but I have not been able to add anything. I think it is the descriptive side that paralysed me, or rather that did not unparalyse me.<sup>298</sup>

He refers to the difficulty of describing painting and the experience of “being in front of”<sup>299</sup> the art object. This theme occurs again and again in his drama and prose. Beckett conveys his own feelings of “helplessness, finally and of speechlessness, and of restlessness also I think, before works of art”<sup>300</sup> in a letter to MacGreevy. The speechlessness and restlessness that he refers to when standing in front of a work of art manifests itself in his refusal to write publicly about art after his 1954 “Homage to Jack B. Yeats.” In-depth criticism and thoughts on art in his letters also dwindle from the 1960s onward. He refused requests even from those close to him. For example, he refused to write a few words in promotion of the Van Veldes, whose art he loved dearly. In response to a request by Jacoba van Velde to write a few words about her artist brothers, Beckett writes, “I am not a critic [...] I am being asked on all sides to do this” and finally, “I am sorry. I can’t.”<sup>301</sup>

As his critical writing and personal views about visual art recede from his letters, his preoccupation with the visual image and seeing (what can be seen and what fails to be

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<sup>297</sup> Keaveney 7.

<sup>298</sup> SB to Duthuit, 1 March 1949. Vol. 2, 123.

<sup>299</sup> SB to Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Vol. 2, 138-141.

<sup>300</sup> SB to MacGreevy, 26 September 1948. Vol. 2, 105.

<sup>301</sup> SB to Jacoba van Velde, 26 January 1960. Vol. 3, 286.

seen) becomes even more exaggerated in his creative works. Images take precedence over action and language play, although of course these still exist. As American critic Gordon Armstrong points out, “immediacy and gesture were primary constituents and language was always servant to the image.”<sup>302</sup> His stage becomes a canvas on which to present flattened images. He removes the three-dimensional from the stage by creating fragmented bodies and disembodied voices. For example, in *Not I*, the only thing the audience can see is a Mouth spewing a succession of words that describe events that the audience must visualise. In addition to the canvas like flattening of the stage, the eye, looking and seeing become a central theme to the point of exaggeration. For example, in *Rockaby* (1980), eyes warrant their own beginning stage descriptor alongside light, the sole character simply referred to as *W*, costume, attitude, chair, rock, and voice. “*Eyes*: Now closed, now open in unblinking gaze. About equal proportions section 1, increasingly closed 2 and 3, closed for good halfway through 4.”<sup>303</sup> The phrase “all eyes/all sides” is repeated nine times throughout the play. The emphasis on the visual image continues to grow in almost all of Beckett’s late works for stage as well as the prose pieces.

The importance of the image and of visual art to Beckett’s aesthetic end is further emphasised as Beckett agreed to collaborate with visual artists in the tradition of *livre d’artiste* or “artist’s book” in the 1970s and 1980s. Jasper Johns illustrated Beckett’s short prose fragments *The Fizzles* (1976). Cynthia Berlingham, associate curator of the Wight Art Gallery’s Grunwald Centre, who organised an exhibit of John’s illustrations

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<sup>302</sup> Armstrong 65.

<sup>303</sup> *CDW* 433.

for *Fizzles* in 1987, states, “Johns’ images were not made in response to Beckett’s text, unlike some illustrated books created as a true collaboration between artist and writer.”<sup>304</sup> What she means is that Beckett and Johns worked independently of one another. In fact, Johns had not read the five fizzes when he started making his prints. Instead Johns includes permutations of an earlier work that consisted of four panels referred to as *Untitled 1972*. Beckett was not concerned with having an image illustrate his words, but instead with how the words can act as part of the visual landscape. Other examples of this sort of engagement include: Louis le Brocquy’s images for *Stirrings Still* (1988), and Charles Klabunde’s illustrations for parts of *The Lost Ones* in 1984, and Georg Baselitz’s image of *Bing* in 1981. His choice of collaborators also illuminates his attraction to and respect for visual artists that are enigmatic, resist classification and deny singularity and definition. These artists do not make art to simply visualise Beckett’s words. Instead, they incorporate the text, and the language becomes part of the visual piece instead of the other way around. As Lois Oppenheim puts it, these artists “have all created art that emanates from, as opposed to describes, Beckett’s writings.”<sup>305</sup> These artists works are not, as Klabunde puts it, a “burden to the story.”<sup>306</sup> These illustrations coupled with Beckett’s text insinuate more than assert. The pictures do not clarify the texts; if anything, they complicate them further. Berlingham points out, in relation to the illustrated *Fizzles*, that “the literary subject of the text is really very hard to explain. There is not a clear-cut narrative running through each chapter, nor is there any cohesive

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<sup>304</sup> Dubin n.p.

<sup>305</sup> “The ‘beyonds of vision’: Beckett on art and artists” 80.

<sup>306</sup> Klabunde 160.

unit to each chapter.”<sup>307</sup> The illustrations purposefully make his works more intricate and more difficult to decipher, which in turn make it difficult for the spectator to comment on. These illustrated texts continue to suggest that there is an intrinsic link between Beckett’s writing and the painting and art that he admires.

### **Response of the Spectator and Actor**

In the introduction to Beckett’s first volume of letters, Martha Fehsenfeld points out that “Beckett writes as he hopes, and increasingly trusts, he will be heard.”<sup>308</sup> He is continually aware of the listener and/or the spectator both in his creative works and in his letters. The letters and articles that address MacGreevy’s essay on Yeats, and how Beckett quite pointedly thinks it is wrong, reveal Beckett’s desire for his confidants as well as the public to view Yeats as he does. The way Beckett views Yeats’ work is further solidified and detailed in his “Homage to Jack B. Yeats,” which is Beckett’s final critical piece on painting.

“Homage to Jack B. Yeats” is a valuable example of Beckett’s views of spectatorship and the qualities of worthwhile art. It is for *Les Lettres Nouvelles* in April 1954 to garner support for Jack B. Yeats’ first and only solo exhibition in Paris. This piece primarily describes how Beckett thought Yeats’ art should be viewed. The paragraphs are formed more like stanzas in a poem than standard paragraphs. The first paragraph reads, “High solitary art self-pervaded, one with its wellhead in a hiddenmost spirit, not to be clarified in any other light.”<sup>309</sup> Here he describes the great value of unique, solitary art that permeates and springs forth, not only from the self, but from the

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<sup>307</sup> Dubin n.p.

<sup>308</sup> “Homage” 149.

<sup>309</sup> “Homage” 149.

concealed part of the self, the essence or spirit. He is definitive that Yeats' work, and his own work as well, cannot be explained or clarified in any other way than these vague self-pervading guidelines. He goes on to state, "Strangeness so entire as even to withstand the stock assimilations to holy patrimony, national or other."<sup>310</sup> Beckett addresses and emphasises the importance of utter strangeness in art that is essential in order to avoid being assimilated into specific genres, movements and canons. This includes analysing or ascribing meaning to an artwork by placing, what Beckett saw as undue emphasis on the artist's background: nationality, religion, family, class and so on. In "Homage," he is expressing the view that effective art resists these connections and correlations through its peculiarity. Such strangeness and abnormality resists connections to "patrimony" that the spectator might suggest. Beckett saw this in Yeats' art and pursued this ideal in his own. This statement also negates MacGreevy's views on Yeats, yet again.

The next two paragraphs of "Homage" go on to specifically negate the credibility of spectators and critics that have unsuccessfully tried to read into Yeats's background or compare him with other more well known continental painters: "What less celt than this incomparable hand shaken by the aim it sets itself or by its own urgency?"<sup>311</sup> This is most clearly aimed at Thomas MacGreevy's claims that Yeats is the national painter of Ireland. Beckett rejects the argument that Yeats' works show any insight into Celtic Ireland or the Irish people. He is a bit kinder to other spectators or critics who have compared Yeats to other worthy painters, "As for the sureties kindly unearthed in his favour, Ensor and

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<sup>310</sup> "Homage" 149.

<sup>311</sup> "Homage" 149.

Munch to the fore, the least one can say that they are no great help.”<sup>312</sup> Comparison to other artists cannot offer a greater or more authentic insight into an artist’s work either. The next line stands in a paragraph of its own in the centre of the page, “The artist who stakes his being from nowhere, has no kith.”<sup>313</sup> This line is central, both literally on the page and is also central to the theme of this piece. Worthwhile art comes from nowhere specific. To Beckett, Yeats’ painting acknowledges that relation fails, and one result of this is that the origins of image and inspiration cannot be pinpointed. This artist has “no kith,” or in other words, he has no relations, and the spectator should give up trying to relate the art and artist to outside occurrences. This mirrors his statements about relation and Bram van Velde that he made to Duthuit previously. The longest paragraph of the text follows and it reads as an intense rant:

Gloss? In images of such breathless immediacy as these there is no occasion, no time given, no room left, for the lenitive of comment. None in this impetus of need that scatters them loose to the beyond of vision. None in this great inner real where phantoms quick and dead, nature and void, all that ever and that never will be, join in a single evidence for a single testimony. None in this final mastery which submits in trembling to the unmasterable. No.<sup>314</sup>

There is no room for comments, which, for Beckett, are lenitives or laxatives. In other words, comments and comparisons of a work of art by Yeats are just vehicles that enable spectators the easy evacuation of faeces. To put Beckett’s point more bluntly, such comments are nothing but crap and the commentators are full of crap. This echoes

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<sup>312</sup> “Homage” 149.

<sup>313</sup> “Homage” 149.

<sup>314</sup> “Homage” 149.

Beckett's own desire to shake off influences and resist discussion of his own art. There can be no single evidence or testimony to describe Yeats' art. It cannot be mastered, and so the spectator must "submit in trembling to the unmasterable." So what then is the spectator to do if the work of art is so strange, unique and ubiquitous that an attempt at comparison, connection or explanation fails? Beckett states the answer very clearly and concisely in the final line of "Homage": "Merely bow in wonder."<sup>315</sup> The action, or more accurately, inaction, of standing before a work of art is something that Beckett came back to again and again in letters and commentary on painting. The work of art that forces the spectator to stand still and contemplate the psychological and/or emotional complexity of the piece is a worthwhile work of art.

Beckett's own commentary on the process of writing "Homage" further supports the fact that Beckett is not discussing Yeats' work exclusively, but his own as well. He writes to Duthuit, "Even for the great old man whom I love and venerate I could not damned well manage to forget myself a little."<sup>316</sup> He references the rather short "Homage," which is little over 150 words, in typically Beckettian hyperbole, "On Yeats, after hours and days of literal torture, I provided one little page of the most wretched kind, irritated and weary, the very opposite if what I would have liked to say."<sup>317</sup> This is because of his great admiration for Yeats.

Beckett writes to MacGreevy with enthusiasm about the exhibition in Paris at the Gallerie Beaux-Arts:

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<sup>315</sup> "Homage" 149.

<sup>316</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

<sup>317</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1954. Vol. 2, 473.

Though the attendance was not so big and the reactions of critics not so important as we had hoped, nevertheless the word has got round, the work being talked about and in my own small circle all those whose opinions I value are enormously impressed.<sup>318</sup>

These valued opinions in his own small circle are what excited and impressed Beckett. Bram van Velde had gone to see the Yeats exhibit “at least 10 times” which is remarkable as Beckett states he is “the most difficult and critical of painters.”<sup>319</sup> Duthuit was equally as enthusiastic. Beckett wanted those close to him to appreciate art in the same way that he did.

One way that Beckett hoped to create a piece of art that is “unmasterable” is through disembodied voices and fragmented bodies. He isolates his stage images through disembodied voices and fragmented bodies in order to limit and frustrate the audience’s field of vision, thus causing them to linger over the words and images presented in his dramatic works as well as his prose. The technique of limiting the audience’s field of vision is echoed by critic of American literature and art, Jessica Prinz. She writes, “Beckett produces a single image or picture that captivates the audience and moves them.”<sup>320</sup> In *Not I* the “stage is in darkness but for MOUTH.”<sup>321</sup> Again in *That Time* (1975), the “stage is in darkness” except for Listener’s face, which is old and white with “long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread.”<sup>322</sup> *A Piece of Monologue* begins with “faint diffuse light” and ends with Speaker and the objects on stage being

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<sup>318</sup> SB to TM, 1 March 1954. Vol. 2, 470.

<sup>319</sup> SB to TM, 1 March 1954. Vol. 2, 470.

<sup>320</sup> Prinz 153.

<sup>321</sup> *CDW* 376.

<sup>322</sup> *CDW* 388.

“barely visible in diffuse light.”<sup>323</sup> These stark images leave the spectator oscillating between looking again, looking longer and even looking away. The attention is drawn to small details of the body, like the mouth or the head, but the unseen and the unseeable also become palpable through the exaggerated darkness of the theatre. Choosing to light very limited parts of the stage frustrates the viewer’s sight as she is not allowed to see very much at all. These works tightly control the amount of agency a spectator actual possesses over her sense of sight. What results is that sight continually fails members of the audience. As Enoch Brater writes, “the audience’s vision of the play is as controllable as the lens of a camera.”<sup>324</sup> Beckett did not have sympathy for the visual ease of the audience. He writes to Duthuit,

I do not believe in collaboration in the arts, I want a theatre reduced to its own means, speech and acting, without painting, without music, without embellishments. As for the visual convenience of the audience, you can guess where I put that.<sup>325</sup>

As Beckett’s theatrical works get shorter in the 1970s and 1980s, the images become starker, more disjointed and more disturbing—a single grotesque mouth spewing words and sounds, a head suspended above stage accosted by words, a woman pacing, a woman rocking, a man knocking and so on. The restricted view leaves the spectator with a feeling of not knowing what happened to the figure on stage, leaving the spectator at a loss for words to discuss or recap the event they have witnessed.

The performance of his plays creates a difficulty for the spectator to comment on

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<sup>323</sup> *CDW* 426.

<sup>324</sup> *Beyond Minimalism* 37.

<sup>325</sup> SB to Duthuit, 3 January 1951. Vol. 2, 218.

them, because they occlude, resist, and destabilise the coherence of the image and a stable viewpoint from which the image can be viewed. A production of *Not I*, directed by Walter Asmus and starring Lisa Dwan, was performed in Los Angeles in 2016 at the Broad Stage theatre in Santa Monica. This particular production begins with a theatre representative making an announcement before the play begins. The representative informs the audience that they will be plunged into complete darkness. This is how Beckett wanted it: no lighting for exit signs or aisles, just complete and utter darkness. These audience members were offered a safety blanket that audience members in Ireland, and I suspect many other venues, were not. If anyone found the darkness too overwhelming, they merely had to utter the word “usher” and help would be swiftly on its way. In a society where mass shootings are becoming regular occurrences, there is an oddness in giving such direct credence to being afraid of the dark. The only source of light in *Not I* comes from the pinprick of light that illuminates the mouth eight feet above the stage. Every other light in the house is off. The stage is in “darkness [...] House lights out.”<sup>326</sup> As Antoni Libera, director of several acclaimed performances of *Not I*, points out in an interview with Lois Oppenheim: “the play must be performed in complete darkness.”<sup>327</sup> Once the lights are extinguished, audience members cannot see the stage, the curtain, the walls, or other audience members. They cannot even see their own hands or body. The audience is left alone in the dark with a grotesque mouth vomiting words at them. It is the only thing that they are permitted to focus their attention on. This creates the desired effect of making the audience feel ill at ease. The audience’s “eyes search for

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<sup>326</sup> *CDW* 376.

<sup>327</sup> *Directing Beckett* 111.

something to ‘rest’ on,<sup>328</sup> and the only thing they have to rest their eyes on is Mouth. A fear of complete darkness is understandable as one might be confronted with one’s own buzzing of the brain, much in the same way that Beckett was forced to confront himself in front of a Bram van Velde painting. When confronted with an arresting piece of artwork, Beckett writes to Bram’s partner, Marthe Arnaud, “it is always yourself you choose; a self that you did not know, if you are lucky.”<sup>329</sup> The paintings are as resistant to direct interpretation as Mouth is resistant to say “I.” The difficulty in distinguishing exactly what one is looking at results in an increased awareness of the action of looking. By severely isolating an image or progression of images, Beckett forces the viewer’s gaze to focus. The eye is held at attention, because if the viewer blinks, she might miss something. Like the character in *Company* (1980), viewers are alone in the dark with a voice. The only aspect that the reader or spectator can be sure of is that they are presented with isolated images that are always in flux. As Martin Esslin argues, the visual takes precedence over the verbal as the audience remembers the images more than the language—a mouth, a face with white hair, an old woman rocking and so on.<sup>330</sup>

Isolation and anxiety increases, as the audience members have no visual distraction from the mouth and, perhaps, their own thoughts. This causes the boundary between stage and audience to become imperceptible in the blanket of darkness that encompasses the theatre. As Libera also points out, “vision craves light.”<sup>331</sup> Without distraction, the audience is focused on a tiny mouth that they cannot clearly see because

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<sup>328</sup> *Directing Beckett* 111.

<sup>329</sup> SB to Marthe Arnaud 10 June 1940. Vol. 1, 683-684.

<sup>330</sup> Esslin 35.

<sup>331</sup> *Directing Beckett* 112.

of the distance and height at which the mouth is positioned, speaking words that they can't quite understand because of the incoherent narrative and the speed at which the dialogue must be delivered. The piece is spoken at such speed it would be impossible to catch every statement and even more difficult to try to piece together a narrative. This experience, in effect, elicits a feeling much like the speechlessness and restlessness that Beckett describes in his critical texts and letters on painting.

To Beckett, the spectator should be at a loss for words while simultaneously restless or, in other words, anxious. Beckett writes to MacGreevy in response to his statement about the relation between the critic and the artist that MacGreevy has published for *Father Matthew Record* entitled "Art Criticism, and a Visit to Paris." In it, MacGreevy states that "the thinker—which is to say the critic—and the artist, are most properly regarded as twin servants of something that is greater than either of them, which is truth."<sup>332</sup> Beckett responded with his own feelings of "helplessness, finally and of speechlessness, and of restlessness also I think, before works of art."<sup>333</sup> The role of the spectator, for Beckett, was not to be a critic in search of truth. Instead, he or she should be paralysed and silent, while simultaneously restless, when witnessing an artistic work. Truth in relation, representation, and expression of the artistic experience was impossible for Beckett. The spectator is anxious for a definition of an artefact that is impossible to define. The unfeasibility of critiquing the artistic works is reflected in Beckett's own views of his critical work on painting. He often felt himself to be an inadequate critic of painting and was self-deprecating when discussing art that he truly admired. He writes to Thomas MacGreevy on 1 March 1954 about the "Homage," stating, "I have dreadful

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<sup>332</sup> "Art Criticism and a Visit to Paris" 6.

<sup>333</sup> SB to TM, 26 September 1948. Vol. 2, 105.

difficulty with this form of writing, it is real torture, spent days before the blank sheet before I could write anything, and the result is no more than the most clumsy of obeisances.”<sup>334</sup>

### **Beckett’s Canvas: The Performer as Spectator**

The experiences of Beckett’s principle muse, Billie Whitelaw, and her successor, Lisa Dwan, can further reveal Beckett’s painterly aesthetic and his preoccupation with how art should be viewed. Actors, such as Whitelaw and Dwan, become both participants and spectators as they prepare and perform his works. This can further reveal the extent to which Beckett was affected by painting as well as his continued concern with spectatorship and how art should be viewed. After Beckett passed away, Whitelaw even goes so far as to say that “I am like a canvas who has lost the paintbrush.”<sup>335</sup> Beckett was the paintbrush that was able to manipulate the paint, if the actor was malleable and amenable to his techniques. Whitelaw was such an actor. She was also aware of herself as pictorial material. She even described herself as a kinetic painting. Whitelaw says of *Footfalls*,

I felt like a moving, musical, Edvard Munch painting [...] I almost felt that he did have the paintbrush out and was painting, and, of course, what he always has in the other pocket is the rubber, because as fast as he draws a line in, he gets out that enormous India-rubber and rubs it all out until it is only faintly there.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> SB to TM, 1 March 1954. Vol. 2, 470.

<sup>335</sup> “A Canvas Who Has Lost her Painter” 20.

<sup>336</sup> Interview with Billie Whitelaw, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 89.

The faintness of Beckett's lines further supports the fact that Beckett wanted to make his works so that they evaded clear commentary and comprehension by the spectator. The spectator is less able to see and less able to make connections. This denies relation and forces the spectator to look again and again. It makes his pieces more enigmatic and difficult to discuss. He constantly has his rubber out, vaguening the images and connections that he produces. This mirrors what he had previously written about Ballmer's work in that the "object not exploited to illustrate an idea"<sup>337</sup> and Van Velde's that "insinuates more than it asserts."<sup>338</sup> In drafts of his works, we can also see images that suggest specific places in Dublin, such as Croker's acres, which might refer to Boss Croker's land in Leopardstown near Beckett's family home, and even the National Gallery of Ireland.<sup>339</sup> These specific places are vaguened and made unclear in his text rather than being directly referred to, as Seán Kennedy points out, "the Beckett country seems capable of being both there and not there in Beckett's works."<sup>340</sup> The suggestion of Irish tropes and landscapes deteriorates throughout Beckett's drafts as well as in the published works themselves. For example, in his drafting process, he purposely removed place-centred specifics that might suggest particularly Irish landscapes or phenomena. For example, in his early drafts of *Not I*, Beckett has written, "in a godforsaken hole... in the bog [...] godforsaken hole in the downs?...no...no! the bog...godforsaken hole in the bog..."<sup>341</sup> In the final draft, this becomes, "godforsaken hole called... called...no

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<sup>337</sup> German Diaries, vol. 2. 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

<sup>338</sup> Armstrong 43.

<sup>339</sup> Croker's Acres is referred to in *Not I*. The National Gallery is alluded to in *That Time*.

<sup>340</sup> "The Artist who stakes his being from 'Nowhere'" 61.

<sup>341</sup> *Not I* Draft UofR MS 1227/7/12/2.

matter...parents unknown.”<sup>342</sup> The fact that these tropes are suggested and then rendered nebulous or omitted from final drafts acknowledges the inevitable act of failure of relation and expression and the desire to pursue it.

The obscuring and vagueness is especially poignant in a work like *Not I*. This work is iconic in both Dwan’s and Whitelaw’s career. A common theme that both actors emphasise is that the performance of *Not I* and other short dramas, such as *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, forced Dwan and Whitelaw to become spectators to themselves and their own anxious minds. Irish writer Belinda McKeon states that when Dwan was first faced with the script of *Not I*,<sup>343</sup> “what she found in it was the sound of her own anxious mind.”<sup>344</sup> Dwan elaborates, stating, “I was wrapping my own real wounds and things I know in my cells, around Beckett’s taut tempo.”<sup>345</sup> This sentiment is mirrored in the affect and effects that performing Beckett’s plays have on the actors themselves. The role “gets under your skin” as Whitelaw pointed out about *Not I*, “Somewhere in there were my entrails under a microscope.”<sup>346</sup> Whitelaw has described that at times during the performance she “felt like an astronaut tumbling into space...I swore to God I was falling, falling.”<sup>347</sup> Dwan re-reads *Not I* right before every performance in order to “visualize the page” because, as she states, “it’s all I have in the darkness.”<sup>348</sup> Like the audience of *Not I*, the actor is plunged into darkness, but the actor’s darkness is more acute, as she does not have the solace of seeing her lips moving.

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<sup>342</sup> CDW 376.

<sup>343</sup> She first performed the play in 2005 at London’s Battersea Arts Centre.

<sup>344</sup> “Lisa Dwan: Beckett made these wounds universal” n.p.

<sup>345</sup> “Lisa Dwan: Beckett made these wounds universal” n.p.

<sup>346</sup> Whitelaw, *Who He?* 211-212.

<sup>347</sup> DTF 597.

<sup>348</sup> Masters n.p.

Speechlessness, restlessness and restraint are all part and parcel of a Beckettian performer. In his dramatic works, Beckett asks his actors to “renounce the resources of drama: natural speech, character motivation and coherent narrative, as well as a fully visible and mobile body with which to communicate.”<sup>349</sup> The actor is not asked to simply remember lines, but also pauses and precise silences that go beyond the traditional *beat* or *pause*. The seemingly endless repetition makes the performer go back over the script even during performance. His insistence of speed in a piece like *Not I*, forces the actor to continually go back over her words time and time again. Dwan states that “every muscle is being used to push the words out at the speed of thought.”<sup>350</sup> The actor must linger over the work in order to digest it, before vomiting it all out on stage. Whitelaw once likened the role of Mouth to an inner scream. She states, “What happened for me was a terrible inner scream, like falling backwards into hell.”<sup>351</sup> She also describes the experience in an interview for 1977 filmed version of *Not I* as an “inner scream, and there is no escaping it.”<sup>352</sup> *Footfalls*, which Beckett referred to as the “pacing play,” mimics an entranced or bewildered viewer pacing in front of a piece of artwork. During rehearsals for the 1976 *Footfalls* at the Royal Court in London, Whitelaw recalls Beckett often repeating the phrase “Too much colour, Billie, too much colour.” That was his way of saying ‘Don’t act.’<sup>353</sup> The phrase links his thinking about his own works in terms of the components of painting. Instead of saying “too much emotion” or “too dramatic,” he refers to colour instead, the tool of drama and emotion in painting.

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<sup>349</sup> McTighe n.p.

<sup>350</sup> Masters n.p.

<sup>351</sup> Gussow 85.

<sup>352</sup> “A Wake for Sam” n.p.

<sup>353</sup> “A Canvas Who Has Lost her Painter” 20. Whitelaw also develops this idea in her autobiography, *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?* 144-146.

Forcing an actor not to “act” is similar to asking a spectator to watch without comment. Dwan states, “I’m fucked if I start to try to entertain the audience.”<sup>354</sup> The resistance to entertain is another way in which Beckett erred against the modes of drama and showed his revulsion of a piece art that is full, complete or even easily entertaining. The audience is also “fucked” if they come to the Beckettian performance to be entertained in a more traditional sense, as Beckett stated to Duthuit in the fifties, “As for the visual convenience of the audience, you can guess where I put that.”<sup>355</sup> From Beckett’s experience with painting, art should not be perfected, complete or virtuosic. Instead the artist, and we could extend this to the performer there is only failure: “failure is his world.”<sup>356</sup> The spectator should linger over a piece, quietly head bowed in wonder, feeling as helpless and inadequate to comment as Beckett did in front of a great piece of art.

One of the reasons that Beckett had such extreme admiration for Whitelaw is the fact she never questioned the meaning of the texts or tried to get inside the character’s head. She says in an interview, “The meaning of the plays never came up, because they were all about me.”<sup>357</sup> This very much mirrors Beckett’s own feelings about the art that he admired and educated himself on. His comments on paintings were always all about him. He points out in letter to Marthe Arnaud, Bram van Velde’s partner, that Bram’s

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<sup>354</sup> “Lisa Dwan: ‘Beckett made these wounds universal.’”

<sup>355</sup> SB to Duthuit, 3 January 1951. Vol. 2, 218.

<sup>356</sup> “Three Dialogues” 145.

<sup>357</sup> “A Canvas Who Has Lost her Painter” 20.

painting *Sans Titre* (Untitled 1939-40),<sup>358</sup> which Beckett owned, always looks different each day he sees it:

Yesterday evening I could see in it Neary at the Chinese restaurant, 'huddled in the tod of his troubles like an owl in ivy.'<sup>359</sup> Today it will be something different.

You think you are choosing something and it is always yourself you choose; a self that you did not know, if you are lucky."<sup>360</sup>

The fact that Beckett could see himself and his own creative endeavours in another's work also has much to do with how Beckett feels in front of a work of art, stating that "if you [the viewer] are lucky" you will be confronted with a self you did not know. Similar to Whitelaw, Beckett's artistic education was not about learning what paintings mean, but it was more about seeing and learning from the artworks that he admired and lingering in front of them for hours, taking in the most minute details of the piece.

When Billie Whitelaw asked if May in *Footfalls* is alive or dead. Beckett responded, "Let's just say you're not all there."<sup>361</sup> The characters that Beckett writes and the actors that play them cannot be "all there," because if they were more distinct, more direct, more fully concrete, they would less seize the gaze of the spectator for a longer duration of time. Similarly the figures in the Bram van Velde painting are not fully formed and are on the verge of not quite being there. This is what allows Beckett to see not a particular face or static face or object, but instead Neary one day and something completely different the next day and on and on. The painting by Bram that Beckett

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<sup>358</sup> Beckett mentions this purchase in a letter to George Reavey, 21 May 1940. This painting is now in the Musée d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, AM1982-244.

<sup>359</sup> *Murphy* 115-116.

<sup>360</sup> SB to Marthe Arnaud, 10 June 1940. Vol. 1, 684.

<sup>361</sup> Kalb 235.

owned, as well as many others by Bram, is characterised by uncertain shapes and colours, loose compositional arrangements, unfinished passages, uncontrolled brushstrokes, and wobbly lines. Van Velde's work forces the formal vocabulary and structure of abstraction and figuration and Fauvism and Cubism into crisis.



Bram van Velde. *Sans Titre* (Untitled 1939-40). Musee d'Art Modern, Centre Georges Pompidou.

There is an unsettled relationship between the nature of seeing and of being seen, which aids in further eliciting the response from the spectator that Beckett desired. This relationship can be further explained by Beckett's experience in front of a Caravaggio painting. From the mid-1960s onwards, he began to send more picture postcards, many with reproductions of paintings. In October of 1971, he writes from Malta to Arikha and his partner Anne Atik on a postcard with Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (1608) on the front. On that postcard, he writes that it is a "tremendous painting."<sup>362</sup> It was not merely convenience either that inspired Beckett to send Arikha a card with this specific print, as he writes, "[v]ery hard to find a reproduction even as awful as this one dug out in Mosta."<sup>363</sup> Caravaggio's painting hangs in the Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valetta; Mosta is a town inland from Valetta. This shows that Beckett went through the trouble to find this reproduction, so that Arikha would know that he had seen and appreciated this particular painting. Arikha was the one that suggested the importance of this painting,<sup>364</sup> and it is important that Arikha knows that Beckett saw this piece. He writes that he also saw Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome* writing. This acts as an additional reminder that whenever Beckett writes, paintings are not far from his mind, even if he does not offer in depth commentary on them.

The use of dark interiors with dim lighting in Caravaggio's paintings would clearly have influenced the Dutch Masters that Beckett was infatuated with in the 1930s. Beckett was particularly struck by *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608). According to a letter to James Knowlson postmarked 29 April 1973, Beckett admitted

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<sup>362</sup> SB to Arikha, 25 October 1971. Vol. 4, 271.

<sup>363</sup> SB to Arikha, 25 October 1971. Vol. 4, 271.

<sup>364</sup> Arikha to the editors of *Beckett's Letters*, November 2009 xxix.

that the visual image of the mouth was suggested by *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* by Caravaggio in the Valetta Cathedral: “Image of *Not I* in part suggested by Caravaggio’s Decollation of St. John in Valetta Cathedral.”<sup>365</sup> Caravaggio’s painting depicts the moment of John the Baptist’s beheading. It captures a singular and disturbing moment when the head is nearly off, but not completely as it hangs only from a ligament attached to the spinal cord. The executioner is in the act of drawing back his dagger to finish the job; Salome waits with the empty golden platter ready to plate the head, while the jailor orchestrates the act. A prisoner looks on, while an older woman, possibly Herodias or an anonymous bystander, looks on in horror. She is the only one that realises the grotesque and inhuman nature of this event. Apart from the figures and the golden platter, the painting is very sparse, especially since it is so large (361cm x 520 cm). The precise moment that this painting captures is crucial, because John the Baptist’s head is only partially severed from the body, which means the head is still connected to the nervous system. Unconsciousness does not occur until roughly 10 seconds after decapitation when the brain is no longer receiving oxygenated blood, which makes this a very interesting moment to capture in terms of what John the Baptist might have experienced at this precise moment. Perhaps, his brain was still buzzing.

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<sup>365</sup> SB to James Knowlson, 29 April 1973. Vol. 4, 332.



Michelangelo Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608), St. John's Co-Cathedral, Malta.

This painting remains in Beckett's mind for years after his visit to Malta in the 1970s. He writes to Edith Kern, a teacher at the New School for Social Research, in 1986:

The Caravaggio painting in Valetta shows, outside and beyond the main area, at a safe distance from it, a group of watchers intent on the happening. Before the painting from another outsidersness, I behold both the horror & its being beheld.

This experience had some part in the conception of the Auditor in *Not I*.<sup>366</sup>

The painting's subject focuses on a group of people beholding the horror of a decapitation. As a viewer of this painting, one is not only witnessing an execution, but

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<sup>366</sup> SB to Edith Kern, 15 March 1986. Vol. 4, 671.

also witnessing the reactions that others have of this occurrence. The only figure in the painting that exhibits an emotional response to this horror is the old woman, who raises her hands to her face in hopeless compassion, much like the Auditor raises his arms in *Not I*. Observing this work takes on an even further layer of depth as Beckett recalls, in an interview with Gordon Armstrong on 16 September 1985, his experience within the Valetta Cathedral,

I stood there a long time in front of the painting. Gradually, I noticed that I was not alone, that behind the screen at the side of the church was a face of a man watching me observe the scene of the beheading.<sup>367</sup>

The revelation that Beckett was being watched while he was also watching and observing led him to the conclusion that “not I but he, was watching me watch a visceral assault on another individual.”<sup>368</sup> The words “not I but he” clearly mirror Mouth’s exclamations of “No!...SHE!” The extra onlooker who observed not the painting directly, but instead, observed Beckett seeing the painting, which depicts a visceral assault, complicates the relationship of looking, seeing and being seen. This highlights the very process of painting, which could be defined as what Lois Oppenheim interprets as “an unveiling of *how* individuals see and *how* they make public the intimacy of their seeing.”<sup>369</sup>

In *Rockaby* (1981), there is also an emphasis on seeing and being seen that is similar to the experience that Beckett recalled in front of the Caravaggio painting. The disembodied voice repeats the following phrases several times throughout the play, “all

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<sup>367</sup> Armstrong 69-70.

<sup>368</sup> SB as told to Gordon Armstrong, 16 September 1985, 69-70.

<sup>369</sup> “The ‘Beyonds of Vision’: Beckett on Art and Artists” 80.

eyes/all sides” and “to see/ be seen.”<sup>370</sup> The refrain in each of the four sections focuses on the eyes. As is common in Beckett’s late plays, we are faced with a solitary image, a woman (w) rocking in a chair. Her voice speaks to her through a recording; the only words she utters throughout the play are “more” as a way to keep the voice going. The only agency she has is the opening and closing of her eyes as the rocking of the chair is “controlled mechanically without assistance from w.”<sup>371</sup> Her eyes are described in the stage directions as “now closed, now open in unblinking gaze. About equal proportions section 1, increasingly closed 2 and 3, closed for good halfway through 4.” With her eyes closed for good the closing lines of the play reiterate the importance of the seeing or not seeing, “fuck life/ stop her eyes/ rock her off/ rock her off.”<sup>372</sup> The eyes opening and closing are not only evidence of the eye’s relevance in life and death but also to a liminal place in between. There is a continual element of being caught in the crossroads of seeing and being seen.

Each of the three voices in *That Time* (1975) refers to seeing in their first piece of dialogue. The references to seeing and looking point to the differing nature of looking at something, A: “that last time to look was the ruin still there” and B: “as far as the eye can see” and “no looks just there [...] eyes closed,”<sup>373</sup> and trying not to be seen, C: “slipped in when no one was looking.”<sup>374</sup> *That Time* also accentuates the opening and closing of Listener’s eyes throughout the play as a way to question the relationship between beholding and being beheld. Listener’s eyes, which begin the play, open and then close

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<sup>370</sup> CDW 441.

<sup>371</sup> CDW 436.

<sup>372</sup> CDW 442.

<sup>373</sup> CDW 388.

<sup>374</sup> CDW 389.

after the first line is spoken. They open again after C, B, and A have spoken four times and then close when C's voice comes again. Finally, three seconds after the play is over, "eyes open. After 5 seconds smile, toothless for preference. Hold 5 seconds till fade out and curtain."<sup>375</sup> In the closing lines C states, "when you opened your eyes from floor to ceiling nothing only dust."<sup>376</sup> The opening and closing of his eyes suggest that the eyes are in some way engaged with the voices. The viewer gets the feeling that, as the voices speak, Listener is envisaging these scenes in his mind's eye. His voices and memories come from outside of himself: "from both sides and above."<sup>377</sup> His submissiveness in seeing also points to the limited control he has concerning what he sees as well as who sees him.

In addition, seeing and spectatorship becomes more important for Beckett when it comes to actually writing his scripts in the 1970s and 1980s. He begins *Not I* on 20 March 1972 and cannot create a final draft until he sees a rehearsal.<sup>378</sup> The visual performance influenced the writing in this instance. Beckett needs to *see* a performance. This is further echoed when, on 3 November 1972, he tells Barney Rosset that he hopes that his work on *Not I* in London the following month will help to "find out then whether it works for theatre or not."<sup>379</sup> He echoes this in a letter to Ruby Cohn in October of 1972 saying, "Hope to make it for rehearsals in December—find out if *Not I* is theatre in spite of it all."<sup>380</sup> Beckett also confirms the visual importance of his stage images when writing to two young American directors in 1986 in reference to a staging of the play. He writes,

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<sup>375</sup> CDW 395.

<sup>376</sup> CDW 395.

<sup>377</sup> CDW 388.

<sup>378</sup> Pilling 189.

<sup>379</sup> Pilling 191.

<sup>380</sup> Reading Archive "Ruby Cohn Collection."

“simply to omit the Auditor. He is very difficult to stage (light—position) and may well be of more harm than good. For me the play needs him but I can do without him. I have never seen him function effectively.”<sup>381</sup>

Seeing and visual conception are also made evident in the texts for Beckett’s late dramas. The light and the darkness become the contrast between a white blank page and the black typescript applied to the page, in the same way that Beckett manipulates this lightness and darkness on the stage. The abundance of ellipsis in *Not I*, the diagrams published as stage directions in *Footfalls*, *Ghost Trio* (1975) and *...but the clouds...* (1976) present the reader with a visual artefact even before engaging with the words on the page. His final play, *What Where* (1983), also includes a diagram detailing the movement of the actors on stage. The diagrams and visual description and instruction help Beckett to further ascertain his vision. The visual nature of the characters’ appearance on the stage is brought to the audience’s attention, “In the end Bom appears. Reappears”<sup>382</sup> and “In the end Bim appears. Reappears.”<sup>383</sup> Other examples of the visual arrangement and conception of the text itself include the manner in which the text is laid out, whether it be in distinct chunks in a piece like *That Time* or a single chunk in *A Piece of Monologue*, or in short phrases on the left hand side of the page, like a poem in *Rockaby*. Beckett’s notebooks for these late pieces are also written in an increasingly visual manner. For example, a draft of *That Time* is handwritten in a visually staggered format in that the chunks of texts from Voices A, B, and C are staggered at the top of the

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<sup>381</sup> Gontarski, “Revising Himself” 131.

<sup>382</sup> *CDW* 472.

<sup>383</sup> *CDW* 474.

page and both sides.<sup>384</sup> As the catalogue for the Beckett Manuscripts at the University of Reading points out, there is “diagrammatic representation and analysis of the sound and shape of the play.”<sup>385</sup> The way the chunks of text are arranged mimics the way the voices flow from “all sides and above.”<sup>386</sup>

Beckett’s notebooks include pages and pages of diagrams for his television plays, and this confirms how visual their conception was.<sup>387</sup> As Ruby Cohn points out, “in his television plays, Beckett comes as close to painting still lives in movement so visually are the works conceived.”<sup>388</sup> In *Ghost Trio* (1975), the gothic and grotesque imagery takes precedence over the few words spoken from an unknown woman’s voice who describes herself, as “Mine is a faint voice.”<sup>389</sup> Instead the viewer is presented repeatedly with images in tableau: a pallet, a mirror, a floor, a door, a window, a man with a cassette player, a boy, and a final tableau of a man called F with an ambiguous faint smile. The zooming in and out of the camera disturbs, but also highlights the visual experience for the viewer by reminding her that she is in fact watching. The viewer has witnessed something ghostly, something not meant to be seen, again reminiscent of Beckett’s experience before the Caravaggio. The camera techniques accentuate the eye-like seeing quality of the camera itself. Similarly ...*but the clouds*... has no dialogue between characters, just a source-less voice. *Quad* (1982) becomes almost completely visual with the only sound being percussion. In *Quad II* (1982), a variation of *Quad*, Beckett did away with the sound altogether and made the image starker by reverting to black and

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<sup>384</sup> “*That Time*. Draft Manuscript.” UofR MS1477/1.

<sup>385</sup> Bryden 89.

<sup>386</sup> *CDW* 388.

<sup>387</sup> “*Quad* Notebook.” UofR MS/ 2198, 2199.

<sup>388</sup> Cohn 31.

<sup>389</sup> *CDW* 408.

white rather than colour, much like Arikha does when he abandons purely abstract painting.

Beckett desired to create an anti-hermeneutic experience for spectators and views of his work. He wanted to create an experience where spectators continually fail to interpret in the same way that he failed at writing about and interpreting art he loved. He writes in relation to painting,

These, not being sausages, are neither good nor bad. All we can say about them is that they translate, to a greater or lesser degree, absurd and mysterious thrusts toward the image that are more or less equivalent to obscure inner tensions.<sup>390</sup>

Beckett accepted the incidence of failure within works of art, exactly because these works should not be judged in terms of persisting ideologies of the academic and artistic institutions or of being either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’

This echoes his thoughts that the spectator can “merely bow in wonder,”<sup>391</sup> before a great work of art. Making the spectator aware of her voyeuristic role and impairing her ability to interpret creates discomfort and anxiety, as the spectator feels as if she has entered a space where she is not welcome. Through self-awareness, the spectator is forced back into her own thoughts. Simultaneously, many of Beckett’s works also give the spectator a look into the inner workings of the characters’ and figures’ minds. In effect, the spectator becomes both a voyeur and an accomplice to the artwork in front of her. Many of Beckett’s late works highlight the fact that the viewer’s perception and interpretation is from the perspective of voyeurism juxtaposed with close glimpses into the psyche. He does this by putting the viewer in the position of both an extremely close

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<sup>390</sup> “La Peintures” 119.

<sup>391</sup> “Homage” 149.

observer privy to the characters' thoughts directly, and as an interloper that is acutely aware of the fact that he or she is an intruder, a persistent observer of misery or scandal.

One way that he does this is through a disembodied voice that is, at many times, unintelligible. This voice conveys the characters' disjointed rambling thoughts. For example, the spectator seems to be a direct witness to the brain's "buzzing" in *Not I*. The voices that recall disjointed memories in *That Time* come to Listener and the spectator from "*both sides and above*" giving the audience the feeling that the thoughts coming could perhaps even be their own. In these examples, the words trickle over the spectator, rather than being heard directly. Because Beckett's stage directions specify, "*Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow.*"<sup>392</sup> A mouth, faintly lit, suspended eight feet and surrounded by complete darkness is going to prove very difficult for a theatre-goer to see, no matter where one sits. This proves frustrating, not only because the visual stimuli on the stage is so restricted, but also because Beckett demanded that the monologue be spoken at break-neck pace. As Ruby Cohn has pointed out, "'Faster! Faster!'" was the watchword for *Not I*.<sup>393</sup> One reviewer complains of Lisa Dwan's pace in *Not I*, criticising her for going too fast. The reviewer points out that Whitelaw's version was fast enough,

Most of the words are unintelligible. I had reread the text and watched Whitelaw's version before the show and the only utterances I could decipher were those cries of refusal and rejection that Dwan italicizes in screams.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> CDW 366.

<sup>393</sup> Cohn 201.

<sup>394</sup> McNulty 9.

He also criticises that it is hard to see the mouth as opposed to the recording of Whitelaw available on YouTube. He writes,

*Not I*, which works exceedingly well on YouTube, requires a more intimate space than the Broad Stage. The mouth looked like a pinprick at points, as the lighting supervisor occasionally appeared to miss the target.<sup>395</sup>

The reviewer misses the point, because the viewer is not meant to catch every word. In performance, Beckett makes it extremely difficult to piece together a narrative. Also, the lighting supervisor in this particular production of *Not I* does not miss the target, but actually manipulates the light to create a special effect. The audience actually participates in what Dwan and the director Walter Asmus call “a group hallucination.”<sup>396</sup> Some tricks with the lighting make it appear as if mouth is moving across the stage mid-air, while all the while spewing memories of a past event or events. Editor of *The Student’s Guide to Samuel Beckett*, Beryl Fletcher, points out that in *Not I*, “We are plunged into the situation ourselves. As audience members, we mirror the same anguish as Mouth and pass through the same stages that she is describing.”<sup>397</sup> Beckett takes this even a step further; not only does the audience mirror Mouth’s anguish, but we also are plunged into a kind of verbal stupor when trying to describe the play. They are plunged back into the darkness, much like Whitelaw and Dwan. The audience, like Mouth, is alone in the dark, “trying to make sense of it...or make it stop.”<sup>398</sup>

Klaus Herm, cast as the Listener in the German version of *That Time*, states that Beckett aimed not to tell a coherent story or memory, but to

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<sup>395</sup> McNulty 9.

<sup>396</sup> Dwan, “Beckett Trilogy: Not I/Footfalls/Rockaby, theatre review.”

<sup>397</sup> Fletcher 197.

<sup>398</sup> *CDW* 380.

have a stream of words, he doesn't care whether people get the story or not. What matters to him is the flow of words. And strangely, some spectators to whom I spoke said that at the beginning, one starts to listen and tries to attend to the sense. Then one loses oneself, hears only this trickle of words, and thinks suddenly, 'God, those are my thoughts being spoken.'<sup>399</sup>

This is similar to Beckett's desire for *Not I* to work on the nerves of the audience rather than the intellect. The distance between the spectator and the figure on stage is collapsed to the point that the spectator imagines these thoughts as her own.

When voice A states in *That Time* states, "That time when you went back to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child," forces the spectator to both remember a time similar to what the voice states and also imagine a happening that they were never apart of, a happening created by Beckett, delivered by a disembodied voice to a mostly immobile listener (both 'Listener' on stage and the listeners that make up the audience). The viewer is both faced with her own thoughts and is pushed out of the experience through isolation.

The way the image is manipulated to affect the spectator reveals that Beckett's views on painting and the spectatorship of painting are suggestive of the reaction that he himself wanted to elicit from the spectator, continually making her aware of her position as a spectator and trying to inhibit a logical response to the work presented. Through Beckett's thorough engagement with art, we can come to a few conclusions that can offer a further understanding of Beckett's late works and how they affect the spectator. As he

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<sup>399</sup> Qtd. in Kalb 202.

wrote about paintings he loved and the painters, often friends, that created them, Beckett reveals a great deal about what he values in art and his own aesthetic. He also divulges how he believes the spectator should view art. The recurring motifs in Beckett's critical writing and in his letters are that to view art is an experience ruined or muddled by speaking or writing about it. He refers continuously to his lack of skill and inability to say anything worthwhile on this topic. Again and again, we see references to standing in awe in front of a work for prolonged periods, as well as the repeated and lengthy viewings that Beckett found necessary for a piece of art that he finds interesting. This reveals insights into how Beckett would like his own artwork to be viewed. The main thing we can take away from Beckett's direct relationship with art critics, art criticism and artists themselves is his inability to reconcile the visual with written or spoken expression, his interest in weakening the image and weakening the relation between subject and object, the fact that to be an artist is to fail, and his persistent belief that viewing a painting is something best done in silence, slowly and repetitively. We can see these motifs recurring again and again in Beckett's creative works and in the way he sets out to work on the nerves of the spectator rather than the intellect.

The increasing importance of failure as a means of creation, something that one does rather something that one is, can also be used as a new tool to interpret the works of Irish visual artists Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy. This will be looked at in more detail respectively in Chapters three and four of this thesis.

**Chapter 3:**  
**“[Painting] is carried out in the face of the enemy”<sup>1</sup>:**  
**Jack B. Yeats and Failure**

American critic Gordon Armstrong states that “to know the art of Jack Yeats is to understand the art of Samuel Beckett.”<sup>2</sup> But the converse is also true, to know the work of Samuel Beckett is to know and better understand the work of Jack B. Yeats. The Beckettian aesthetic of failure and errancy articulates the Yeatsian failure to adhere to technical conventions of painting. This methodology of errancy can help us to understand how Yeats worked, and also how failure works for Yeats. Yeats purposefully disengages with proper artistic technique, realism and representation in his paintings in order to create, as Sarah Jane Bailes has pointed out about performance, more creative possibilities and outcomes. As Yeats put it, “If ten people look at my painting and it works for them all in different ways, then it’s a good painting.”<sup>3</sup> This echoes the way Jack B. Yeats would confront viewers of his paintings and ask, “What does this mean to you?”<sup>4</sup> This chapter argues that Jack B. Yeats uses purposeful failure, or what Beckett later calls an effort to “fail better,” to highlight the materiality of paint and canvas. The competition between the materiality of paint and canvas and the image portrayed reveal a violent argument or battle that takes place on the canvas itself. The images created by Yeats fail to fully emerge showing the inherent failure of expression in painting, which is, as Beckett explains to Duthuit, a failure to be able to express the relation between the sensory world and the world of the artist’s mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Eammon Andrews.

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong 10.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Yeats in conversation with Victor Waddington, qtd. in Rose 11.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A Biography* 25.

Jack B. Yeats believed in the spontaneity and unpredictability of painting. He tells John Berger: “You can plan events, but if they go according to your plan they are not events.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, he believed that

a picture does not need translation. *A creative work happens*. It does not need documentary evidence, dates, photographs of the artist or what he says about his pictures.<sup>6</sup>

American art and literature critic, Calvin Bedient points out that “[Yeats’] method was less guarded against producing a high incidence of failures.”<sup>7</sup> Art critic Tim Hilton points out “even when full of wrongness [Yeats’ paintings] have a psychological weight.”<sup>8</sup> One cannot help but think of Beckett’s interest in imperfect paintings that are psychologically or emotionally dense over the immensely competent painters. Although some reviewers clearly see a selection of Yeats’ paintings as being successful, there is not a concise agreement as to what the best pictures are. Tim Hilton points out, “in this show (Whitechapel 1991) even the unsuccessful canvases are so insistent that one succumbs to them.”<sup>9</sup> While many art critics might see these failures in colour or composition as unintentional or misinformed, I contend that these so called failures are in fact intentional and a sign of the artist’s originality and purpose. Bedient also suggests that this failure is not accidental: “[Yeats’] vision precluded a classical perfection of finish.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Yeats’ artistic vision prevented and/or prohibited perfection of refinement, or as

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<sup>5</sup> Berger, “Jack Yeats.”

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in the catalogue *Jack B. Yeats* 11 February -13 March 1965 London, Waddington Galleries.

<sup>7</sup> Bedient 20.

<sup>8</sup> Hilton 36.

<sup>9</sup> Hilton 36.

<sup>10</sup> Bedient 21.

Beckett would have put it, “painfully organised unified tragic completeness.”<sup>11</sup> This recalcitrance is further echoed in Yeats’ criticism of some of the masters of the painterly canon. Of Velázquez, he tells Terence de Vere White, “a good painter but a journalist.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Rembrandt was a “journalist, painting the same thing over and over again.”<sup>13</sup> And Tintoretto produced “The best journalism, but journalism just the same.”<sup>14</sup> These artists merely regurgitate events rather than creating events themselves. This is very reminiscent of Beckett’s dislike for technically proficient and “complete” works of art. This aversion to perfection or finish is two-fold and can be seen in his deliberate technical failures as well as Yeats’ errancy against mimicry. Yeats does not think much of those that try to pin his art down to an exacting or precise image. Beckett recalled the following encounter between Yeats and Dermot O’Brien to Thomas MacGreevy: O’Brien, pointing to an indistinct portion of a Yeats canvas, comments, “That’s a lovely waterfall.” Beckett continues in his letter, “Yeats had the answer pat: ‘If all waterfalls looked like nothing but waterfalls & planes of light like nothing but planes of light, etc.’”<sup>15</sup> Beckett here is recalling Yeats deflecting such a constricting comment by pointing out the multiplicity of interpretations and the harm done by nailing down singularity in a painting or even defining a painting as lovely. This is an especially poignant jab as O’Brien was the President of the Royal Hibernian Academy at the time, known for its appreciation of academic art and the rejection of modern art trends from the continent.

Yeats was determined to make sure that his techniques not only disregarded, but

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<sup>11</sup> SB to TM, 8 November 1931. Vol. 1, 94.

<sup>12</sup> De Vere White, *A Fretful Midge* 119.

<sup>13</sup> De Vere White, *A Fretful Midge* 119.

<sup>14</sup> De Vere White, *A Fretful Midge* 119.

<sup>15</sup> SB to TM, 27 June 1936. Vol. 1, 345-346.

also went against accepted painterly techniques for basics such as mixing paint and choosing colours. From the 1930s onward, he began to neglect conventional technique for the mixing of paint, he “abandoned the use of linseed oil and turpentine. His oils therefore, may at times have had no binding medium to help them adhere to the canvas.”<sup>16</sup> He applied paint directly to the canvas and employed a dry brush technique in many of his oil paintings from the 1930s onwards. Like the “action painters” the canvas becomes “an arena to act—rather than a space to reproduce, redesign, analyse or express ‘an object,’ actual or imagined.”<sup>17</sup> This arena to act is also reflected in Beckett’s later commentary on his drama. He writes to Christian Ludvigsen, “I dream of going into a theatre with no text, or hardly any and getting together with all concerned before really setting out to write.”<sup>18</sup> The dream of having the writing take place within the theatre space develops this sense of acting and action within the theatre and within Beckett’s aesthetic.

In addition to creating a painting that is full of action and motion, another effect of using a dry brush to paint is that it leaves the surface of the canvas visible at times. Yeats often incorporated the visibility of canvas into the image, forming backgrounds or even parts of faces as he does in *Above the Fair* (1946) and *Closing Time, St. Stephen’s Green* (1950). In addition, he did not always cover the entirety of the canvas with paint, leaving large areas of blank canvas giving many of his works an unfinished quality. Like in Swanzy’s paintings, the viewer is made aware of the coarse threading of a pre-primed canvas.

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<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, B.P. “The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats” 115.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg 22.

<sup>18</sup> SB to Christian Ludvigsen, 8 December 1966. Vol. 4, 54-55.



*Above the Fair* (1946) Jack B. Yeats, The National Gallery of Ireland.



Face Detail in *Above the Fair*



Jack B. Yeats. *St. Stephen's Green, Closing Time* (1950), IMMA Collection.

Yeats used “brushes sparingly, employing the palette knife instead, and by squeezing his oils directly onto the canvas from tubes.”<sup>19</sup> Brian P. Kennedy points out that “The reason for his casual approach to technique was due to Yeats’ desire to proceed directly to the creative act of picture making.”<sup>20</sup> This technique is evident in almost all of his later canvases and even in some of his sketchbooks from the 1940s. He also becomes fatigued after painting. Basil Rákóczi, a founding member of the avant-garde White Stag group based in Dublin in the 1930s and 40s, noted that “He grows extremely fatigued when working on [his] palette knife pictures which ... are so explosive.”<sup>21</sup> Explosive is a very apt term. A violent battle takes place on the Yeatsian canvas, a battle without clear meaning or purpose. A painter and fellow member of the United Arts Club states that Yeats’ painting of this period: “In his violence he tore down all convention, ripped apart form and colour, and produced a tremendous blaze.”<sup>22</sup> In his late works, form competes with and at times becomes subservient to the power of colour and the plasticity of paint. The plasticity and the three-dimensional quality of paint were so important to Yeats that he forbade reproductions of works in catalogues as they diminished this effect. He required that “no photographs or reproductions of any kind be made of any of my paintings or drawings, and that [of] photographs or other reproductions of any of my paintings or drawings already made there shall be no publication and no further copies shall be made.”<sup>23</sup> These works are not only incoherent or hard to understand in terms of methods of traditional spectatorship; they are antagonistic, daring the spectator to see what lurks beneath, while the impossibility of this mocks her effort. The way Yeats

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<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, B.P. “The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats” 115.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, B.P. “The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats” 118.

<sup>21</sup> Rákóczi, *Journal*, 31 May 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Qtd. in Arnold 311.

<sup>23</sup> Radio Eireann interview with Jack Yeats 1947.

speaks about his paintings also suggests the mode of battle. As he says in a rare interview with Eamonn Andrews: “[Painters and critics] forget that painting is tactics and not strategy. It is carried out in the face of the enemy.” The plasticity of the paint and the battle happening on the canvas also reflects the battle and resolution that Jack B. Yeats felt in his creative process, “When I begin painting, I think I am in control” he tells his art dealer Victor Waddington, “but after a while the paint controls me, and as I go on, we work together.”<sup>24</sup>

Another technical norm that Yeats purposefully ignored was that he painted body colours with glazing pigments that were meant to be used as “thin, transparent layers of paint over already laid colours.”<sup>25</sup> For example, to make a red more translucent a glaze of alizarin crimson could be added. A similar effect could be achieved by glazing yellow with aureolin. Yeats instead painted large areas of the canvas with the glazing pigment alone. This makes his paint layer weak and less likely to adhere to the canvas over time. He also insisted that glass be used rather than a varnish to protect his pictures.<sup>26</sup> His haphazard application of paint and the dissolution of the line contribute to an unfinished or “messy” quality in his work. Yeats was satirised in the *Dublin Opinion* in 1930 for these choices,<sup>27</sup> “in the way Pollock was to be some years later as the artists who hurled a bucket of paint at the canvas and stamped on it with his boots.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, what could be classified as failures become a trademark and driving force of Yeats’ artistic vision.

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<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Rose 11.

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Rose 11.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in Rose 11.

<sup>27</sup> “The Man Who Tried to Get the Hang of a Yeats Painting” 73.

<sup>28</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 127.

His choice to not adhere to techniques that would make his paintings last also means that his images will literally worsen over time and fail to endure. He has set his paint up to fail its purpose. The materiality of the paint will inevitably begin to weaken and in result worsen the image through deteriorating: the lack of turpentine and linseed oil in his paints meant they would not properly adhere to canvas; the nonexistence of varnish leads to the paint cracking and flaking off of the canvas, using glazing pigments as base colours would produce a much duller colour over time. As a result, his works decompose or worsen much more quickly than that of his contemporaries. For example, the National Gallery refuses to lend out his late works for international shows, because they “are too fragile to endure the movement” that international touring would entail.<sup>29</sup> Because of the lack of varnish, paint is often found flaked at the bottom of his portraits around the glass. This lack of varnish and placement under glass has even damaged his signature impasto. B.P. Kennedy has pointed out, “One large, important late painting had bits of painting stuck to the glass where the canvas at some stage had come in contact with it, irretrievably damaging some areas of impasto.”<sup>30</sup> Kennedy notes that this damage correlates not to mishandling by museum employees, but instead, the techniques that Yeats used, or failed to use, make these paintings more fragile. His images worsen like those in *Worstward Ho*, deteriorating before the viewer’s eyes. The fact that Yeats purposefully made decisions that would cause his paintings to worsen permanently does not stop restorers from doing their best to “fix” Yeats’ decaying works. As a result paintings from the mid-twentieth century have had to undergo restoration in order try to undo his failures, in order to make the paintings last. Yeats’ heaving impasto, store-

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<sup>29</sup> “The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats” 115.

<sup>30</sup> “The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats” 115.

bought primed canvases and the lack of varnish hinder this process. *Men of Destiny* (1946) was lined in 1986, because it was bulging and had a hole in it. Two areas of lifted impasto in *About to Write a Letter* (1935) were injected with Polyvinyl Acetate resin and the entire painting was varnished using ketone resin. Similar work was done on *Morning in a City* (1937) to correct and prevent flaking and cracking. The figures in Yeats' images are not just fleeting and transitory, but the actual way that Yeats manipulates his medium and materials makes the physical paint itself fleeting.

### **Under the Rose**

Yeats, much like Beckett, refused to discuss his work, and became more and more elusive in terms of meaning or reference point. After being offended by critics trying to pin down the meaning of his work at a United Arts Club Dinner, Jack B. Yeats states, "All my work would be sub rosa, I would never again discuss the meaning of my pictures."<sup>31</sup> Sub rosa translates from Latin to "under the rose." While Yeats is referring figuratively to the rose symbolising secrecy and confidentiality, he also literally tied a pink paper rose to the top of his easel. He literally painted under the rose. This rose is the only object that would bear witness to his paintings, because from then on he would paint in complete privacy. Anne Yeats describes Yeats' studio after his vow to confidentiality of meaning and method to his paintings:

It was always a great mystery to people where and how he painted his pictures.

There weren't ever any visible traces of work on hand in his studio; there were no palettes or brushes lying around, no paint tubes, no paint rags or overalls, no smell of turpentine, no half-finished sketches or paintings. There was indeed an easel to

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<sup>31</sup> De Vere White, *A Fretful Midge* 14. Also noted in *Jack B. Yeats* by Hillary Pyle.

be seen, but nothing else, and his hands were always clean and well kept. He had a kind of painting cupboard with drawers at the top that opened out like an old-fashioned washstand with places for materials. Also in his studio was a large turf basket for the waste paper he used to clean his palette, which was cleared out each day, leaving no trace.<sup>32</sup>

Even his beloved wife Cottie was not allowed to see him paint. Rákóczi recounted a visit to the Yeats' in 1942, "[Cottie] showed us Jack Yeats' only portrait—one of herself. The only time she had seen him work. He never allows anyone to watch him."<sup>33</sup> What happens under the rose stays under the rose.



Jack B. Yeats. *This Grand Conversation Was under the Rose* (1943)

The painting, *This Grand Conversation Was under the Rose* (1943), elicits a visualisation of Yeats' insistence that the artistic conversation must be conducted in secrecy and confidence in order to create as many creative outcomes and interpretations as possible. The viewer looks in on the brightness of the ring from the dark outside, where a melancholy clown and moody classically dressed rider commune as they either

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<sup>32</sup>Yeats, Ann 2.

<sup>33</sup>Rákóczi, Journal, 31 May 1942.

wait to go on stage or perhaps they have finished their act. Their body language is ambivalent, and their facial expressions are obscured, leaving the spectator to only guess what this “grand conversation” might entail. Because his paintings take on the meaning that what happens on the canvas is a private conversation between artist and canvas/ subject and object, we can better understand Yeats’ pictures through their failure of relation, their vagueness of image and the increasing importance of the materiality of the paint.

We can see a similar remoteness between image and the spectator in Beckett’s penultimate prose piece *Stirrings Still* (1989). This piece is divided into three vague sections that focus on different images: 1) a man at his table 2) a man standing 3) this same man listening to his own thoughts, deciding whether he will “press on” or “stir no more.”<sup>34</sup> Uncertainty defines the tone of the text. In this text, the effects of seeing and being seen manipulate both the spectator’s and the narrator’s viewpoint. The narrator continually sees himself from the outside. In this way, the narrator becomes spectator to himself, much like the Beckettian performer as described in chapter two of this thesis. Because of this, the reader becomes even more isolated from the scene. The first line of *Stirrings Still* is: “One night as he sat at his table he saw himself rise and go.”<sup>35</sup> The narrator is describing a visual occurrence rather than a physical action. In other words, the narrator of the piece does not “rise and go;” he sees himself rise and go. This line is repeated two more times in the text. The narrator also concerns himself with what he sees and does not see. He looks out the window to see the sky, but he “did not crane out to see

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<sup>34</sup> *The Complete Short Prose* 272.

<sup>35</sup> *The Complete Short Prose* 259.

what lay beneath.”<sup>36</sup> When the character moves, he moves “On unseen feet [...] As when he disappeared only to reappear later in another place.”<sup>37</sup> He is “seen always from behind.”<sup>38</sup> This manipulation of viewpoint and the acknowledgment of the unseen destabilises the spectator’s position. Trying to master the correct position to interpret these works would drive the spectator or reader to the asylum, much like the earlier illustration from the *Dublin Opinion*. By forcing the spectator into a more remote or isolated position, the process of obscuring and vagueness becomes the focus.

Yeats tells Basil Rákóczi, “There came a time in my life when I decided I would no longer satisfy anyone else but would start to please myself in paint.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Beckett remarks in an interview to Knowlson regarding Yeats, “His paintings were wonderful. He used to say that he was completely impervious to influence. I think he thought he was the only painter.”<sup>40</sup> Rákóczi reiterated a similar thought that “Of his painting as a whole, it is uniquely Jack B. Yeats and no one else.” Monk Gibbons in “The Painting of Jack Yeats” 9 June 1945 states,

I have come to see many of the pictures (what)<sup>41</sup> appear to owe nothing to any forerunner. It is as though Yeats desiring to create a new cosmos, had elected to accept chaos first. Out of this chaos emerges presently significance.<sup>42</sup>

Like Swanzy, Yeats’ individuality emanates from his failure to adhere to technique and composition of the image and his disregard for critics and outside influence.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Complete Short Prose* 259.

<sup>37</sup> *The Complete Short Prose* 259.

<sup>38</sup> *The Complete Short Prose* 260.

<sup>39</sup> Rákóczi, *Journal*, 31 May 1942.

<sup>40</sup> Knowlson Interview with SB 10 Nov. 1989 qtd. in *DTF* 165.

<sup>41</sup> Wording and parentheses are Rákóczi’s.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in *Bedient* 21.

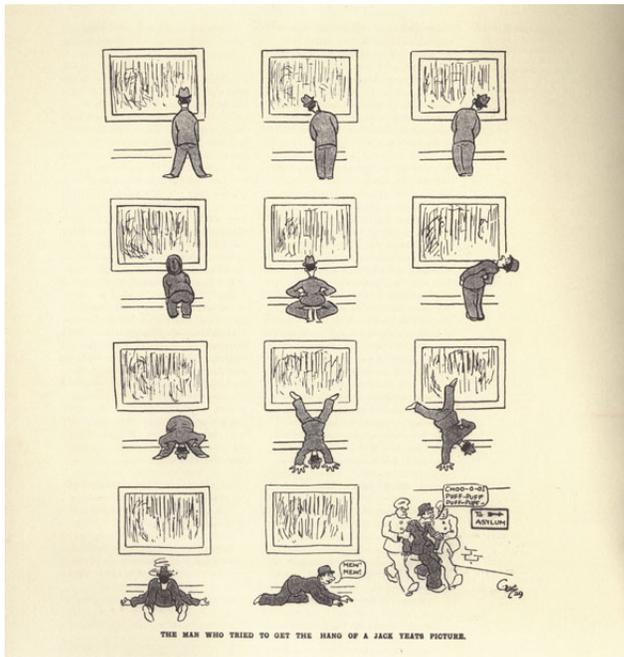
### **Thematic Failure**

Yeats' images fail to emerge and also fail to be mimetic. A destabilised image is created through his thick application of paint and the muddling of lines and colours. The destabilisation of the images that he created disorients the viewpoint of the spectator. David Lloyd has noted a similar tendency in his essay, "The Gaze is a Thing: Beckett's *Film* and Bram van Velde," written for the 2010 exhibition *The Moderns* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In relation to Bram van Velde's paintings, Lloyd writes, "the viewer finds it impossible to stabilize a position in relation to pictorial space, to identify any perspectival foreground or background."<sup>43</sup> This can probably be best illustrated in a satirical cartoon printed in 1929 *The Dublin Opinion*.<sup>44</sup> Within this cartoon, the spectator drives himself mad trying to understand the correct angle in which to understand a Jack B. Yeats painting. Yeats' paintings suggest a likeness of a solid image, but as the spectator approaches the canvas, the image breaks up. It becomes fragmented in the colours, the brushstrokes, the daubs of paint from which it was constructed. Only by withdrawing can the image be reconstituted again. It is impossible to find a correct vantage point in which to view the works, because the thickness and fluidity of the material of oil paint, and the colours he uses, impedes this.

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<sup>43</sup> "The Gaze is a Thing: Beckett's *Film* and Bram van Velde" 121.

<sup>44</sup> "The Man Who Tried to Get the Hang of a Yeats Painting" 73.



*The Dublin Opinion*. 8 May 1929. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.

A good example of a painting that would frustrate a viewer to this extent is Yeats' *Grief* (1951). In an effort to confuse and dissolve the image, Yeats presents figures and imagery in such a way that the eye struggles to make any sense of it. The National Gallery of Ireland catalogue states that *Grief* "can be read then as an anti-war statement, akin to Picasso's *Guernica*." The painting consists of many figures, including what are perhaps rows of soldiers with rifles and bayonets surrounding a rider on horseback who raises one arm in the air as if to lead a charge. In the foreground, a woman dressed in blue comforts a blond baby. To the left of that pair, an old man, bent double, reaches out his hands in despair. This image is far from being that clear or concise, and unlike *Guernica*, Yeats does not explicitly make his political views known, and to read this only as an anti-

war statement is limiting. This painting instead unravels and confuses clear meaning and image by confusing the eye with muddled paint alongside sections of un-primed blank canvas. He continually vaguens any specific reference points. His sketches, even his late ones, are more site specific, but when he paints them, the muddling and swirling of oil paint render the locale and the details indiscernible, for example the sketch *Let There Be No More War* (Yeats' last sketchbook, late 1940s) might be a sketch for the painting *Grief*. For Yeats, sketches act as more of a diary than as a blueprint or plan for future works. This is especially true as he matures as an artist. As art historian Brian P. Kennedy points out, "Yeats did not keep conventional diaries because he believed that a man's private life was his own business. His sketchbooks and notebooks are, in a real sense, his personal diaries."<sup>45</sup> In 1943, Rupert Strong wrote perceptively, "He does not paint what he sees, but what his imagination does to what he sees."<sup>46</sup> As Brian O'Doherty puts it, "the eyewitness is gradually replaced by the visionary. Facts and historical events are slowly subsumed in the poetry of imaginative generalities."<sup>47</sup> *Grief* instead reveals more vagueness and generalities in the uneven application of paint and the juxtaposition of bright yellows and reds alongside midnight blues and a significant amount of blank canvas. The theme and the place are of, to use Beckett's words, "no matter," in both senses of the phrase. It does not matter where the painting is set, and also the way the paint seems to dematerialise on the canvas makes the figures look as if they are melting or dissolving. They are literally made of no matter, but instead bursting into atoms or particles. The volatility of the image further disassociates these works from any specific narrative or message. The paint is applied haphazardly, and the colours are garish.

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<sup>45</sup> "The Oil Painting Technique of Jack B. Yeats." *Irish Arts Review*. p. 118

<sup>46</sup> Strong 33.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd in Dunne 8.

Because of the extreme use of impasto the colours become muddy and any figuration (of a person, a horse, building) dissolves onto and into the paint and the canvas.



Jack B. Yeats. *Grief* (1951). The National Gallery of Ireland.

When Yeats paints images of water, the fluidity of the paint itself is in constant competition with the actual image of water. The paint and the image coalesce but cannot fully join or relate. The spectator is always reminded that it is indeed paint that he or she is looking at. When we look at a painting like *Low Tide* (1935), it is very unclear where the focal point of the painting lies or what image the painting is even trying to convey. Beckett accurately describes this painting, after visiting the artist, as “overwhelming” in a

letter to MacGreevy in May 1935.<sup>48</sup> The lack of lines and overabundance of colour destabilise the image that is presented. While this could be the River Lee in Cork City as Hilary Pyle has inferred, the coherence of this image is not immediately apparent. The water blends with the land and the figures of boats and people. The paint appears to overflow the canvas, and the colours and paint blot out the structures. Because the tide is indeed low, the spectator's eyes are drawn downward. Because of this low position, the sky is almost completely blocked out by the buildings. The crowding of paint and images and the contrast between pastel and dark images impairs that spectator's sight as it becomes difficult if not impossible to differentiate between structures, figures, land and water. Everything flows into each other, creating an illusory dreamlike image. The brushstrokes are rough and loose; coupled with the thick application of paint, they deform and worsen the image.



Jack B. Yeats. *Low Tide* (1935). Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin.

A similar effect is created in other later tidal paintings such as *Where Fresh Water Meets Salt Water* (1947) as well as *The Water Steps* (1947). In *Where Fresh Water Meets*

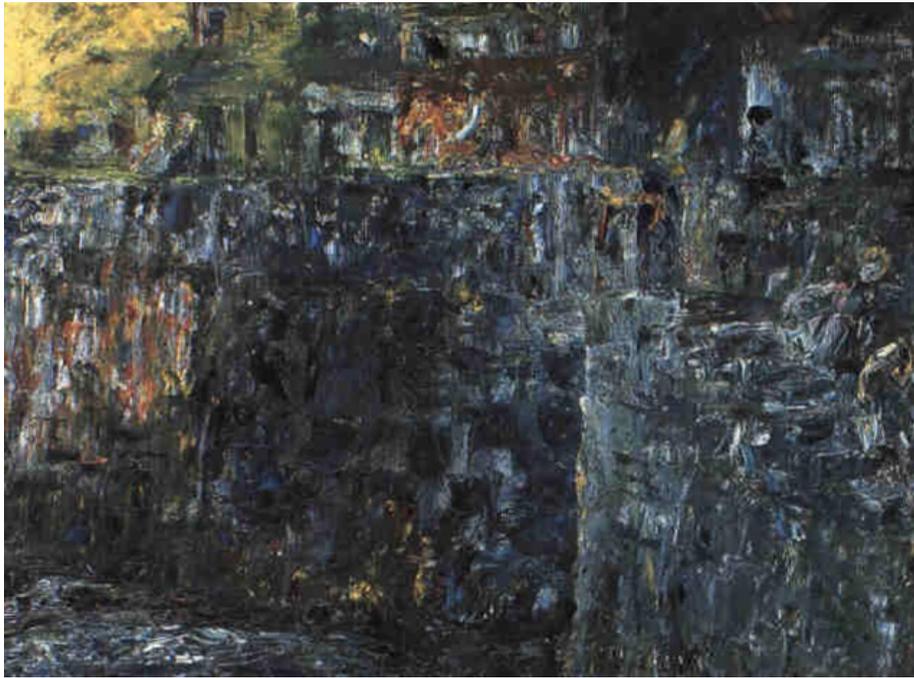
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<sup>48</sup> SB to TM, 5 May 1935.

*Salt Water*, the spectator is positioned at an extremely low viewpoint where the water flows over into the sea. The spectator's sight is restricted as they are forced to look up at the figure and buildings from a place at or below sea level. The darkening and obscuring of images in *The Water Steps* disallows the spectator to make out the whole image. As one can view below, it is very difficult to obtain a good reproduction of the piece, as the colours are dark and muddled. Instead, much like in Beckett's work, the spectator is left in the dark with extremely restrictive and impaired sight. In *The Water Steps*, there are vague figures that emerge slightly on the right hand side of the canvas. But like Speaker and the objects on stage in *A Piece of Monologue*, the figures in the painting, and even what appear to be buildings in the background, are "barely visible in diffuse light."<sup>49</sup> The image worsens the more one looks at the painting. Form threatens to become content and content threatens to become form, but they never fully coalesce.

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<sup>49</sup> CDW 425.

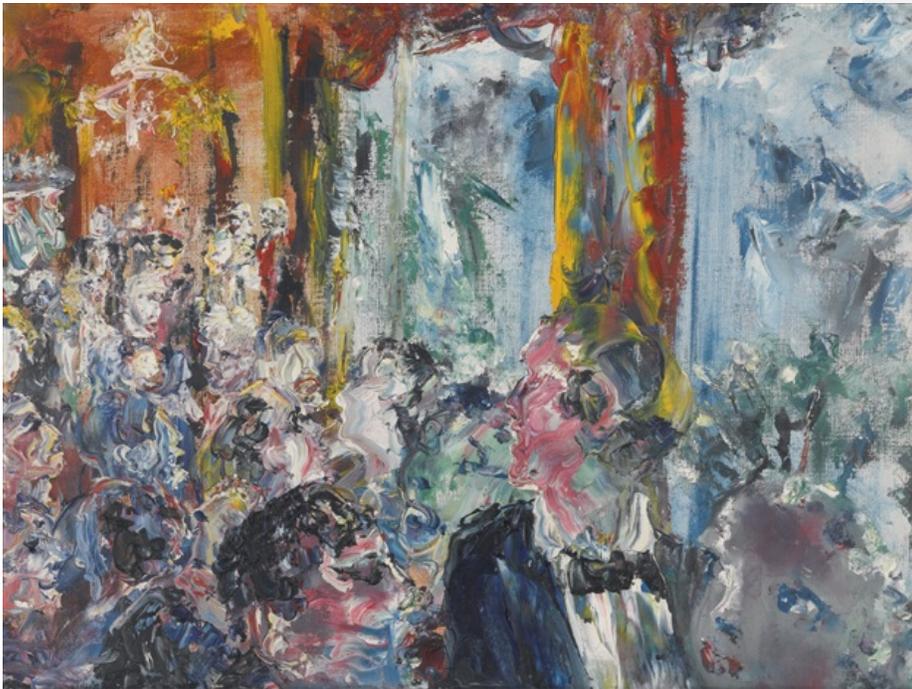


Jack B. Yeats, *The Water Steps* (1947). Private Collection. Courtesy of Christies.



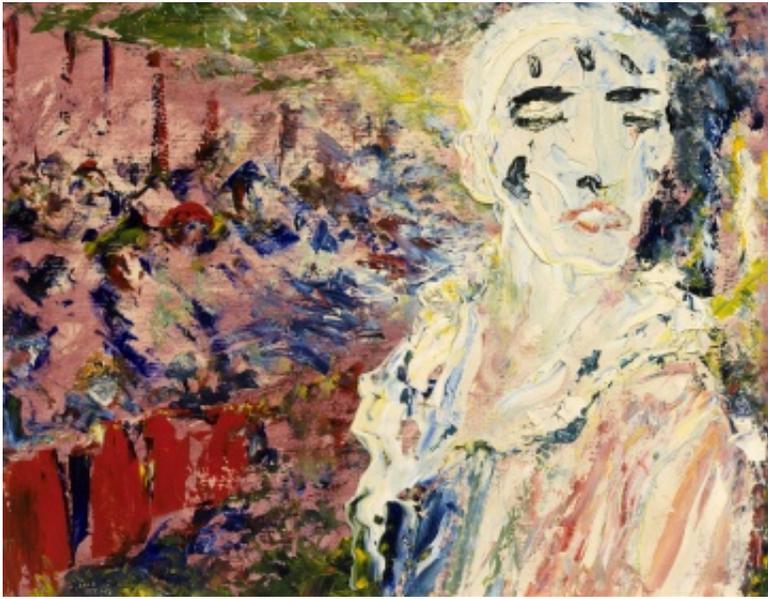
Jack B. Yeats. *Where Fresh Water Meets Salt Water* (1947). Private Collection.  
Courtesy of Christies.

Yeats also crowds his figures together, and in contrast to Swanzy's deft control of the paintbrush, he uses wild and violent brushstrokes to blur and isolate parts of his images. The faces, colours, and composition of many of Yeats' paintings envisage the theme of anguish, in all of its livid, restless and shrieking anxiousness. For example, in *The Talkers* (1951), the spectator is thrown into a claustrophobic crowd in which he is forced to acknowledge his awkward position. As he stands in front of the canvas, he realises that he is remote from the crowd, while simultaneously being forced into it. The spectator obliged to stand among the figures without ever having a clue what they are "talking" about.



*The Talkers* (1951). Jack B. Yeats. Private Collection. Courtesy of Whyte's.

In a Yeats painting like *They Love Me* (1950), we are presented with an intimate view of the face of a clown. In this instance, the central figure has closed eyes and a sullen facial expression. He turns his face away from the audience depicted in the painting and toward the actual spectator or audience that stands in front of the painting. This creates an extreme tension. The audience in the painting is looking at the clown, while the spectator of the painting is viewing not only the clown but the audience watching him as we look at him. This is all taking place as the clown closes his eyes to look inward or perhaps to ignore or shut out the gazes that are coming at him from the audience. This type of experience mirrors Beckett's description of being watched, while he witnesses a beheading taking a place in Caravaggio's painting *Beheading of John the Baptist*. Within this painting, there are also bystanders observing the beheading. The layers of observing and being observed demonstrate the failure of relation between subject and object. There is a constant questioning of who is watching whom. This tension is exacerbated in Yeats' by the seemingly contradictory title of the painting. The clown looks sullen and withdrawn despite the positive reaction from the audience. The painting also suggests psychological tensions of performance and the artistic process of expression itself.



Jack B. Yeats. *They Love Me* (1950). Private Collection. Courtesy of Karen Reihill Fine Art.

Yet, in other paintings like *Men of Destiny* (1946) the eyes and other facial features blend together creating a fluidity of form that suggests the subjective nature of sight and seeing. In other words, through wild semi-abstract brushwork and bright colours, it questions and amalgamates the different areas of the head that contribute to sight (the eyes and their components such as the lids, cornea, and iris and the brain, which makes sense of the data our eyes gather). He does this by creating heads that through their abstract appearance present, not the features that are usually associated with a face, but a representation of also of what might exist inside the head. The fact that the eyes and face are indistinct also makes the spectator strain to recreate something that resembles a face out of the blobs of paint on the canvas, in effect engaging and impairing the spectator's ability to see clearly. The colours and loose formation of figures and

landscape make it appear that the figures have formed out of and exist within the atmosphere that surrounds them rather than standing as separate figures distinct from their surroundings. Because of this, the spectator is forced to question what exactly it is she is looking at.



Jack B. Yeats. *Men of Destiny* (1946). Hugh Lane Gallery.

Yeats casts shadows with extreme impasto and dramatic colour choice. The thickness of paint muddies the colours and images and makes the viewer deeply aware of the paint itself. A particularly interesting use of shadow and light can be seen in Yeats' *Morning in a City* (1937). In this painting, the dark burgundy buildings cast a shadow over the figures on the street. The eye is drawn upward to the bright early morning sky that is created with blank white canvas and hints of pink, yellow and light blue. The heaviness of paint that covers the majority of the canvas acts as literal darkening or

shadowing of the canvas itself as well as for the figures in the scene. Dark reds, blues and yellows are layered over one another making the figures hard to distinguish. One figure that sticks out is the woman in the distant background in the blue dress. She is the only one that the light shines upon; she looks spectral. She is oddly small in comparison to the middle figure (which could possibly be a rendering of Yeats himself), suggesting her distance from the dark character in the suit and hat in the centre of the painting. The way the light hits her makes her one of the focal points of the canvas drawing the viewer's attention away from the central figure, despite the fact that the figures in the foreground are much larger.



Jack B. Yeats. *Morning in a City* (1937). The National Gallery of Ireland.

The method of application of paint onto the canvas in Swanzy and Yeats' paintings becomes just as important as the images presented to the spectator. This forces

the spectator's gaze to oscillate between form and content of the work of art. Yeats' painting *Grief* (1951) is a clear illustration of this point as the paint is applied with thick impasto in some places juxtaposed against large sections of blank canvas. The resistance between form and content presented by Beckett, Yeats and Swanzy goes beyond the traditional modernist ethos of "testing the limits of aesthetic construction."<sup>50</sup> It does not merely test the limits, but points back to the fact that such limits exist. This compels the spectator to acknowledge the competing aspects of form and content. The spectator's gaze and position is continually forced to oscillate between the medium itself and that which is being represented. This is similar to what David Lloyd notices in Van Velde's painting, "we are obliged to turn to the significance of the actual mode of representation rather than to the objects represented [...] the way in which they seize and work on the viewer's gaze."<sup>51</sup>

Yeats has long been identified as a nationalistic Irish painter, in many ways thanks to Thomas MacGreevy as was discussed in Chapter two of this dissertation. S.B. Kennedy points out that "Despite what some critics have argued, there is nothing didactic in [Jack B. Yeats'] work."<sup>52</sup> His paintings may have caught the mood of the times and evoke pathos, but that is not to say that they are statements of a political view, and while Yeats certainly sympathised with various

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<sup>50</sup> This is how Daniel Albright sets out to define a broad all-encompassing theory of modernism in *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Peter Nicholls also argues that modernism is not a monolithic and reactionary movement as it has been perceived in comparison with the postmodern. In his book *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, he instead asserts that modernism's distinctive feature is diversity, and he explores the central modernist movements connecting these diverse styles with the shifting politics of authority.

<sup>51</sup> "The Gaze Is a Thing: Beckett's *Film* and Bram van Velde" 123.

<sup>52</sup> Kennedy, S.B. *Irish Art* 27.

factions, political and otherwise, none of their causes, *per se*, was the subject matter of his art.<sup>53</sup>

S.B. Kennedy states that Yeats “did not concern himself with aesthetics of medium, materials or theory.”<sup>54</sup> Irish tropes are yet another technique or expectation that deteriorate on the canvas through his vagueness and worsening of images. Jack B. Yeats might suggest an Irish trope or theme only to dismantle or vagueness it. As *Guardian* art critic Tim Hilton writes,

The best pictures are on a level with Munch and Kokoschka, with whom he is often compared. And yet Yeats’ appeals don’t make sense. The keening, proclaiming and weeping are all over the place. He was as much a painter of nowhere as of O’Connell Street and Mayo. You can never say why any of his paintings should be as they are, not otherwise.<sup>55</sup>

One striking aspect of Hilton’s point is the inability to be able to say why any of Yeats’ paintings look the way that they do. Familiar Irish landmarks like O’Connell Street and landscapes such as Mayo and more broadly the West of Ireland are in the pictures, but so are vague desolate and sometimes apocalyptic landscapes with no reference to specific places in the real world. Several of his late works refuse to subscribe to stylistic schools or groupings just as much as they refuse to acquiesce to traditional symbols or nationalistic schools of thought. This is especially evident in a painting such as *The Great Tent Has Collapsed* (1947). As pointed out by a correspondent for London-based newspaper *The Observer* in 1948, a picture such as this surely does not evoke “a

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<sup>53</sup> Kennedy, S.B. *Irish Art* 27.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy, S.B. *Irish Art* 28.

<sup>55</sup> Hilton 36.

nostalgia for Old Ireland,”<sup>56</sup> Yet there is a suggestion of one of Yeats’ favourite images from his childhood, the circus, but the locale of the circus fails to fully materialise on the canvas as it has, as the title suggests, collapsed. The correspondent goes on to write that “With Yeats, the recognizably Irish vanishes, as he matures, in a blaze of supra-natural thought.”<sup>57</sup> He goes on to state that Yeats has that “Irish capacity for flooding a trivial occurrence with disturbing significance [...] but the total effect of the exhibition makes one feel momentarily in touch with experience well outside even the common Irish run.”<sup>58</sup> In a painting such as this, Pyle has pointed out that “in the final works emotion itself, rather than event becomes the subject of the paintings.”<sup>59</sup> There is an element of irrational violence of the action of a tent collapsing, and there is an empathy toward the onlookers and bystanders that is apparent in this painting in the melancholy colours of the painting and the gathering of onlookers. Yeats suggested Irish tropes only to fail them. What emerges is an argument on the canvas where the materiality of the paint and the unconventional way that it is applied compete with the image that is trying to emerge. His paintings themselves demonstrate this constant struggle of representation and relation.

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<sup>56</sup> “The World of J.B. Yeats” 2.

<sup>57</sup> “The World of J.B. Yeats” 2.

<sup>58</sup> “The World of J.B. Yeats” 2.

<sup>59</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 133.



Jack B. Yeats. *The Great Tent Has Collapsed* (1947)

Similarly, Beckett also interrogates performance and the creative act by making the spectator intensely aware of the stage in the same way that Yeats causes the spectator to become conscious of the medium of paint. The spectator's attention is particularly drawn to the act of performance through the vulnerability of the figures presented and the voyeuristic and uncomfortable position the spectator is forced to be in. The spectator becomes an accomplice to a dangerous performance. One way Beckett does this is by mentioning the stage itself. For example in *Not I*, Mouth mentions the stage directly in phrases that have a double meaning, for example, "no love of any kind... at any subsequent stage,"<sup>60</sup> "found herself in the dark" and "at this stage."<sup>61</sup> In *A Piece of Monologue*, Speaker continually refers to the act of "stock still staring out,"<sup>62</sup> which is

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<sup>60</sup> *CDW* 376.

<sup>61</sup> *CDW* 378.

<sup>62</sup> *CDW* 425.

exactly what an actor giving a monologue must do, literally. Speaker continues to stress the act of looking out into the darkness that is the audience, “Gropes to window and stares out. Stands there staring out. Stock still staring out”<sup>63</sup> and “Stare beyond through rift in dark to other dark. Further dark.”<sup>64</sup>

The dialogue and action of *Catastrophe* (1984 in English), dedicated to imprisoned Czech reformer and playwright Vaclav Havel, centres on the stage and production of a play more directly. One effect of this is, again, to make the spectators linger over the work and to become more aware of the action and components of production. The characters consist of Director, Assistant, Protagonist and Luke, who is in charge of lighting but never seen on stage. The fact that the only character in the play that has a proper name is one that appears off stage makes the audience aware of the unseen labourers that are involved in a theatre production. The technical elements like lighting, sound and set design are instrumental in a production, yet often seem to magically appear for the audience during a performance. This magic is taken away in Beckett’s production. The play focuses on sight seeing and the physical work of preproduction as it centres around how the director wants the actor to look on the stage. Attention is drawn to the way that the spectator is in the position of looking and judging. The element of judgment by the audience is especially evident in the first line of the play. The Director asks referring to the Protagonist (actor), “Like the look of him?”<sup>65</sup> The actor or Protagonist in *Catastrophe* is speechless throughout the play. Instead the Director and his Assistant poke and prod at him demanding different bodily positions. This emphasises how those that actually labour in the theatre (Director, Assistant, Lighting Guy, Protagonist) see the

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<sup>63</sup> *CDW* 425.

<sup>64</sup> *CDW* 428.

<sup>65</sup> *CDW* 457.

stage, and also forces the spectator to take responsibility for the harsh and at times unfair judgment that theatrical spectatorship assumes. As a spectator, at times, Beckett's plays are hard to look at. Director orders Protagonist to not have his hands in his pockets, then goes on to scrutinise Protagonist's make-up, hair, clothes, and skull. Yet the director claims to forget what he has seen, so the assistant makes notes as the director spouts orders.

D: How's the skull?

A: You've seen it.

D: I forget.

The continual reminders of being in the theatre and the process of theatre additionally burden the spectator, as she is made aware of this process. The contrast between the visual image on stage and the dialogue further draw the spectator out of the "magic" of the theatre to highlight the process of theatre and the physicality of the stage itself, while all the while asking, "Like the look of him?"<sup>66</sup>

The Yeats painting *In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi* (1937) suggests Irish tropes in order to dismantle them and also asks provocative questions about theatre and ethics much like *Catastrophe*. This painting suggests figures from Yeats' youth in Sligo. Dion Boucicault's (1820-1890) *The Shaughraun* (1874) was the first play that Yeats ever saw, and the Bianconi Longear was the first coach he had ever ridden.<sup>67</sup> These coaches would have been common in Sligo when he was growing up. Boucicault held an important place in the Irish imagination of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His plays were increasingly nationalistic in trajectory culminating in *The*

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<sup>66</sup> CDW 457.

<sup>67</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* 131.

*Shaughraun*.<sup>68</sup> Another of his plays, *The Colleen Bawn*, was claimed by Dubliners as “a long awaited, national drama of Ireland.”<sup>69</sup> By taking on this subject matter, Yeats suggests and then dismantles this quintessential Irish trope. The melodrama becomes grotesque as can be seen in the violent application of paint, which suggests the vicious rather than the joyous nature of this encounter. The player on the left centre of the painting with his arms outstretched echoes the man in front of the firing squad in Francisco Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* (1814). Goya is one of the few painters that that Yeats admits that he admires. The question arises as to whether we take pity on these players or not. The likeness with Goya could suggest that these players, in the Yeats painting, could be viewed as martyrs performing on demand as if they are held at gunpoint. While several critics, like Pyle, have read Yeats’ painting as a playful encounter with actors striking poses, a closer examination alongside Goya’s painting could suggest otherwise darker undertones. The colours are bright, like Goya’s—bright yellow pants, glistening shirt, and the scarlet red of the newly spilled blood. The players are caught in action much like the martyrs in *The Third of May*. This reveals the foolishness and insignificance of the performance of nationalistic ideas, and shows empathy for the underdog embodied by these players. The two sets of characters portray a confrontational rather than a friendly meeting. This is evidenced in the large judging character featured on the right side of the canvas that faces off with the character on the left hand side of the canvas whose outstretched arms imply innocent surrender. Questions of power and ethics are touched upon in a comparable way in Beckett’s play *Catastrophe*.

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<sup>68</sup> McFeely 3.

<sup>69</sup> McFeely 4.

If we also contextualise the play *Catastrophe*, the audience is forced to consider more than what is immediately in front of them, much like the paintings described above. The play is more than an awareness of the stage and the theatre, but it is also an allegory of cruelty and imprisonment. The protagonist is dressed in pajamas similar to those of the internment camps in WWII, and the director is tyrannical with his right hand “yes man” in the form of the assistant. The “protagonist,” P, is at the mercy of the tyrannical director and his assistant. He is continuously poked and prodded at. He is barefoot in only a black dressing gown and hat. Throughout the play, he is powerless to the whims of the director and his assistant, who eventually removes the dressing gown and hat to reveal P’s “old grey pajamas”<sup>70</sup> and clenched fists. After this, the assistant points out twice that, “he is shivering.”<sup>71</sup> But like the characters in both Goya’s and Yeats paintings, not much thought is given to the bodily needs and strain of the position the figures are in, or whether this is a performance or an actual violent act. The paintings coerce the spectator to consider the ethics of what they are witnessing and to question where their sympathy may lie. At the end of *Catastrophe*, the audience is faced with an ethical dilemma. Recorded applause is heard seconds before the play ends, and the audience is left with the predicament as to whether or not they should clap after what they have witnessed. It forces them to reconsider what clapping means, and what exactly is it that they are condoning if they offer their applause. The audience is pulled into the ethical circumstance as the stage direction describes, “*Distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters and, dies.*”<sup>72</sup> In the end the audience in the theatre (as opposed to the virtual audience that is evoked in Beckett’s play) is asked the

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<sup>70</sup> CDW 458.

<sup>71</sup> CDW 459.

<sup>72</sup> CDW 461.

ethical question as to whether or not they should actually applaud this piece that features the abuse of the players and implies an allegory of the violence of tyranny and war, nationalist and otherwise.



*In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi*, 1937. The National Gallery of Ireland.



Francisco Goya. *The Third of May 1808* (1814). Museo Nacional del Prado.

Yeats's *Queen Maeve Walks along the Shore* (1950) and a similar painting, *Unforgetting Background* (1949), show Yeats' deteriorating and worsening Irish narratives. In *Unforgetting*, the female figure exhibits stereotypical characteristics such as red ringlets and pale skin and looks like it is set somewhere in the west of Ireland, perhaps Sligo with Ben Bulbin rising rather weakly in the background. She turns away from these natural surroundings as if to separate herself and block them out. Her eyes are closed and her hands are raised in a dramatic gesture to cover her ears. She is spectral, blending into the background that she turns away from showing the lessening importance of these typically Irish tropes. In *Queen Maeve*, figure and background melt together even more drastically. It is as if he is blotting her out into the background. There is hardly any demarcation between earth and sky; everything dissolves into a swirl of colour. What is strongly evoked by this painterly deliquescence is that Yeats is not propagating these tropes; he is actively working to dissolve and subdue them.



Jack B. Yeats. *Unforgetting Background* (1949). Courtesy of Adam's.



Jack B. Yeats. *Queen Maeve Walked along the Shore* (1950).

The canvas becomes a stage for Yeats in order to emphasise the spectator's role as voyeur. Yeats continually paints musicians, circus performers and troubadours. In *Alone* (1944), both the content and the composition of the painting force the viewer to acknowledge the act of painting as well as performance. The painting is of a clown in the backstage area of a circus performance. His downturned head and eyes suggest sadness, regret and isolation. The painting is titled *Alone*, which emphasises the lonely space of being off stage, despite the crowds that are mere feet away. The division between on and off stage emphasises the realities of performance. The viewer is made aware that she is experiencing a private and vulnerable moment for the performer, one that a spectator would not usually be privy to. It is unsettling. The composition of this piece also shows that it is in fact painted. This is made especially apparent when examining the hands of the central figure. He appears to be clasping or wringing his hands, but his palms are clumps of peachy pink paint. His fingers are not fingers but rough lines carved into thick paint with a palette knife. While elements of the scene can be made out, it is clear that the canvas, not a palette, was used for the mixing and manipulating of paint. A painting such as this also suggests the "behind the scenes" action that takes place in creating artwork. Again, the spectator is offered insight into something that she will always be removed from, and that perhaps she should not be seeing in the first place.



Jack B. Yeats. *Alone* (1944). The Model, Sligo.

The paint, the canvas and the figures threatening to emerge set up an antagonism between one another. On one layer we have the flat, two-dimensional canvas, on another the thick gloopy impasto that creates a three dimensional quality not of the figures, but of the canvas itself. The thick three-dimensional quality of the paint is difficult to control; this is made more apparent by the application by pallet knife rather than paintbrush. The struggle with paint results in figures being present, but failing to actually emerge. Instead we realise that there is some solidity to the paint, but the figures lack a three-dimensional solidity. The antagonistic nature of the paint fights against this, worsening the image and figure.

## Chapter 4:

### **“Old Forms Must Become Outworn”<sup>1</sup>: Mary Swanzy and Innovation through Failure**

“I have had an absorbing passion—painting. I’m glad it wasn’t a young man. The young ladies I have observed whose absorbing passion was a young man, rarely seem very happy. I had control over my absorbing passion. They had none over theirs.”<sup>2</sup>

—Una Lehane Interview with Mary Swanzy, 1974.

Despite the fact that the Irish painter Mary Swanzy’s career spanned over seven decades and that she was one of the first artists to introduce Ireland to modern artistic techniques such as Cubism, she has largely been ignored in Ireland and abroad. There are several possible reasons for why she may have been overlooked up until this point: she failed to commit to a single or defined artistic style or take part in a particular artistic movement, she failed to date her works, she was a woman from a well-to-do family in which painting would have been considered a hobby, she became more and more reclusive in later life, and she stopped exhibiting her works for seventeen years. This chapter provides background on Mary Swanzy and the resistance of the Dublin public to modernist painting and argues that she contributed significantly to Irish modernist painting. This chapter also contends that utilising Beckett’s methodology of failure as a guiding principle in analysing Swanzy’s work demonstrates remarkable similarities between the two artists, especially in their post-World War II works. Swanzy’s purposeful technical and thematic failures can also help us to analyse the significance of the materiality of paint and canvas in her paintings, the play between the abstract and the figurative and how she controls the gaze of the spectator. Because there is little biographical and critical material on Swanzy, this chapter will begin with her background

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan 164.

<sup>2</sup> Lehane 12.

and a consideration of critical material that does exist. It will then move on to the effects of war on her painting, before concluding with other ways that the demonstrative use of failure and errancy can lead to a deeper understanding of her works.

### **Biographical and Critical Background:**

Swanzy is considered to be the first Irish Cubist, preceding the better-known Irish painters Evie Hone (1894-1955) and Mainie Jellett (1897-1944). Even though the more vocal artists Hone and Jellett often receive accolades for being the first to bring continental painting to Ireland, Swanzy saw and experimented with modern art forms as early as 1912. Unlike Swanzy who mistrusted art dealers and refused to “push” her work,<sup>3</sup> Jellett and, to a lesser extent, Hone were very good at marketing themselves and were devoted to spreading modernism in Ireland. An artist like Jellett absorbed and tried to redefine a nationalist aesthetic after the Irish public first rejected her paintings. Jellett was determined to show Ireland the significance of Modern Art, and more importantly, how it connected with ancient Celtic art. Through lectures, articles, radio broadcasts, and exhibitions, she gradually broke down the initial barriers against her style. For Jellett, Celtic art was the national “primitive” art form, and by modernising it through abstraction, she could revive a lost style and return its significance to Ireland.<sup>4</sup> The painting *The Virgin Eire* (1943) is a good example of Jellett’s mission to marry modern technique with Celtic and religious imagery. Swanzy on the other hand, respected the work of Hone but considered Jellett’s art to be too rigid and liked it less.<sup>5</sup> The strict nature of Jellett’s style and agenda were too inflexible for Swanzy who preferred a

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<sup>3</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>4</sup> Kissane 107.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy 10.

fluidity of style and colour that continually failed to fulfil stylistic or technical expectations.



Mainie Jellett. *The Virgin Eire* (1943). Private Collection.

Because of the lack of dated paintings and uneven body of evidential exhibition material or biographical material such as journals or letters, thoroughly examining and establishing a chronology of Swanzy's life is important in documenting and understanding her career. She exhibited around the world in many hard to reach places. The majority of her exhibitions in Ireland or England were not catalogued. To date, there is no complete catalogue of her works. Dates are invariably problematic with Swanzy. In addition to failing to date her works, she lived to such an old age that in the few interviews that do exist she cannot properly remember exact dates. For example, of her first time in Paris, she states that "it must have been the Edwardian decade."<sup>6</sup> The following biographical information of Swanzy is pieced together from the two most complete chronologies of Swanzy's life: Julian Campbell's catalogue for the Pym's Gallery, London in 1986 and the more updated chronology found in Liz Cullinane's thoroughly researched MA thesis, and from interviews with those that knew Swanzy.

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<sup>6</sup> De Vere White, "Mary Swanzy" 12.

Mary Swanzy was born in her parents' home at 23 N. Merrion Square, in South Dublin, Ireland in 1882 to renowned oculist Sir Henry Swanzy of the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital on Adelaide Road and his wife Mary Denham Swanzy. The Swanzy family had lived in Dublin for a number of generations. She was the second daughter after her sister St. Clair and two brothers. Both of the male Swanzy children died within their first year of life. Mary was frail as a child, and the label of frailty followed her into young adulthood. She expressed to Andy O'Mahoney, in a radio interview later in her life, that she would have liked to aid in the war effort of World War I, but because she was a fragile child, she was told to live "within her margin."<sup>7</sup> Regardless, she went on to live into her late 90's. She attended the prestigious Alexandra College under Dr Mulvaney and later under Miss White. She was then sent abroad to France and Germany for a period to study when she was 15. She, like Beckett, was interested in languages, becoming fluent in both French and German. She loved drawing, which she had done from the time she was young continuing up until her death. She first studied with May Manning in 1900, where she also received lessons from visiting teacher John B. Yeats, whom she admired. As her friend and owner of the Pepper Canister Gallery in Dublin, PJ Murphy, remarks, "She was quick to praise old John Butler Yeats, who, she says, had genius, but never quite got it all together and who passed on all the talents to his great sons."<sup>8</sup> Manning also sent her to learn to properly draw under the sculptor John Hughes. Living so close to the National Gallery of Ireland, she went there often to observe and learn from the Old Masters, similar to Beckett's self-prescribed education in the National Gallery. She gave up a social life in favour of Hughes' evening classes at the

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<sup>7</sup> RTÉ Interview 5 May 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Murphy 10.

Metropolitan School of Art. Seeking constantly to expand her artistic scope, Swanzy once again left for Paris to study in 1905, this time with painter and etcher Eugène Delécluse, who had a studio for women at Atelier Colarossi. 1905 also marks her first accepted piece, *Portrait of Child* (1905), at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA). She was primarily painting portraits at this time. By then in her mid-twenties, she was a disciplined student who drew and painted all-day and attended sketching classes at night. She returned to Paris again in the summer of 1906, and she studied in various ateliers including that of portrait painter De La Gandara (1862- 1917), a fashionable but now forgotten portrait painter, at La Grand Chaumière and Lucien Simon (1861-1945). Following her formal course of study, Swanzy at Rue Val de Grace, under bohemian painter and poster designer, Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939). She arrived in Paris when the cubist style was developing, which was a shift from impressionism. She visited Gertrude Stein's salon, where she saw recent works by Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Derain, Laurencin, Cézanne, and Gauguin.<sup>9</sup> These works were highly influential on her development as a painter. She later reluctantly met James Joyce through Gertrude Stein, while in Paris. Noting her reticence when meeting him, Joyce inquired why. She said she had been told in Dublin that James Joyce was a "thorough ruffian."<sup>10</sup> She recalls that he greeted this statement with a sad resigned air.<sup>11</sup> She may very well have thought the same of Beckett, but because of Swanzy and Beckett's similar upbringing and social class, she may not have looked at him as unfavourably.

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<sup>9</sup> Cullinane and Campbell.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace n.p.

When she was in Paris in 1906, Swanzy appreciated Renoir, and she was taught to appreciate Cézanne and Giotto and earlier Italians for their structure. She very much liked Velázquez at time and continued to admire him throughout her life. She refers to herself as being “dotty about Velazquez,”<sup>12</sup> later in life she also confesses that “the greats” such as Manet and Monet inspired her to paint.<sup>13</sup> In her work she wanted to “pitch a little tent in the outermost court of the temple where the great ones dwell.”<sup>14</sup> Still struggling to establish herself later in 1906, she returned to Dublin. This is most likely the result of the expectations of her class and gender. Swanzy has been quoted as stating, “If I had born a Henry and not a Mary, my life would have been very different.”<sup>15</sup> In the early 1900s, she painted mostly portraits to satisfy her father’s desire for her to get work after her training. In Dublin, there were three things for an artist (especially a female artist) to do: “illustration, portrait painting and teaching. Miss Swanzy attempted all three.”<sup>16</sup> She found each one limiting. She said of teaching, “I didn’t like it. You can’t teach painting, you can only learn by doing it.”<sup>17</sup> Her father wanted her to have a lucrative career in painting, and therefore, thought that she should be a portrait painter, like the successful Sarah Purser in Dublin. To appease her family and adhere to social norms, she pursued portrait painting, despite the fact that the modernist spirit of experimentation weighed heavily on her mind. The Royal Hibernian Academy exhibited portraits that she painted of her family and friends. She continued to exhibit each year at the RHA until 1910. In 1909, Swanzy’s mother died, and the year after her younger sister Muriel was married

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<sup>12</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>13</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>14</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>15</sup> Brennan 32.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, *The Irish Impressionists* 108.

<sup>17</sup> Hartrick 134.

leaving Swanzy and her father in the family home on Merrion Square (St. Clair had already left for Europe at the time). In 1911, there was an important exhibition in Dublin by Ellen Duncan, art historian and founder of the United Arts Club, showing the work of Andre Derain, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. This was Dublin's first taste of modernist art. In 1912, Duncan held a second exhibition of cubist works in the United Arts Club, Dublin. This exhibition included works by Picasso, Juan Gris and Jean Marchand. This was very different than the academic art that was fashionable in England and thus, in Dublin well into the middle of the twentieth-century. The Dublin art critics and public were hostile towards these exhibits. The trends that were so unfavourable in Dublin (and London as well) inspire Swanzy's style as well as her interest in creating a venue for avant-garde art in Ireland.

Swanzy's father passed away in April 1913; his effects were auctioned in June. 23 Merrion Square North, a rented property, was no longer the family home, and Swanzy was finally free to explore her own artistic inclinations. In December 1913, she had her first solo exhibition at Mill's Hall, Dublin 8, Merrion Row.<sup>18</sup> Some of the earliest reviews of Swanzy's one-woman show at Mills' Hall Dublin reflect her free spirit and disregard for critics. A critic for the *Irish Times* comments,

While not wishing to criticise unduly [...], it would be a mistaken kindness to fail to point out that there are several instances where too much dependence has been placed upon the probable effect of a picture, and not enough upon careful drawing and due proportion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Miss Swanzy's Pictures" 5.

<sup>19</sup> "Miss Swanzy's Pictures" 5.

He or she criticised Swanzy's paintings for being of an "impressionist character."<sup>20</sup> It is hard to tell exactly which paintings this reviewer saw, but he references Italian landscapes and a painting referred to as *The Links*, which includes imagery of sand dunes and the ocean. She also exhibited a few portraits described as *Japanese Lanterns* and *Lady with a Parrot*. Unfortunately, there is no documentation as to where or with whom these paintings ended up, and no photographic evidence on record.

With the death of her parents and the inheritance that came along with this, Swanzy was financially independent and could finally pursue more drastic and experimental artistic techniques outside of portrait painting. Desirous of a change in atmosphere, she left for Italy in 1914 and took up a studio in Florence. Paintings produced during her stay in Italy were exhibited in 1914 at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, together with those of a Cubist group and of Robert Delaunay, whose Orphic-Cubist work *Homage to Blériot* (1914) influenced her development. The Bergsonian idea of "simultaneity" states that the world impresses itself upon consciousness as fleeting intuitively understood sensations<sup>21</sup> influenced her individualistic style of cubism that combined Futurism, Vorticism and Orphism.<sup>22</sup> We can see the similarities between Delaunay's *Homage* and Mary Swanzy's painting *Woman in a White Bonnet* (c.1920s). Judging from a photo of Mary Swanzy taken during her stay in France after World War I, *Woman in a White Bonnet* is very likely a self-portrait. But it seems certain that Swanzy executed this painting only after her exposure to the Italian Futurists and to the work of

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<sup>20</sup> "Miss Swanzy's Pictures" 5.

<sup>21</sup> Bergson.

<sup>22</sup> Orphism was an offshoot of cubism that focused on pure abstraction and bright colours, influenced by Fauvism. The term was coined by French poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1912 ("Orphism," *Grove Art Online*).

Delaunay. She employs the Cubist-Futurist fragmentation of form to create a non-perspective sense of space combined with motion. The interplay of colours with the repetition of curves creates a lyrical composition within the interplay of light and shadow. Her colour combinations are unsettling and clashing. Subdued pastel colours are placed right up against brighter colours like turquoise, aubergine, and magenta. There is a small bit of bright Yeatsian blue in the lower right-hand corner and a bit of orange. The image is full of curves, circles and spheres layered over one another like a Venn diagram. The circular images create a swirling movement in the painting that contrasts and contradicts the static characteristic of a portrait. A bright flower-like image is layered over darker, cooler colours. She does not merely copy the style of Delaunay, but instead uses some of these tenets to her own ends, in order to vaguen and distort the image, highlighting the materiality of paint and canvas. She fails to become completely abstract. The paint is smoothly applied to the canvas. The brushstrokes are nearly invisible focusing the viewer's attention to the movement of lines and curves. The dull colour and lighting of the painting also bring a sense of motion to the fore as the colours and the slightly abstract rendering of the woman are secondary to the curving lines that dissect the canvas. The actual image of the woman in the white bonnet is obscured. The setting in the painting is also vague, so we are left with an abstracted image of a woman cut off from time and place.



Robert Delaunay. *Homage to Blériot* (1914). Kunstmuseum Basel.



Mary Swanzy. *Woman with White Bonnet* (c. 1920s). Private Collection. Image courtesy of Pym's Gallery, London.

Because of the outbreak of World War I, Swanzy was forced to return home to Dublin in 1915. She, like Beckett and Yeats, was in Dublin during the 1916 Easter

Rising. Swanzy continued to exhibit her paintings. In 1916, she showed several works at the 21st Exhibition of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Engravers at the Grosvenor Gallery in London. In 1918, following the end of the war, Swanzy exhibited again at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris. She lived for part of the year in St. Tropez. She became a committee member of the Salon des Indépendants in 1920. She returns to Dublin later that year and begins sharing a studio on South Anne Street with Clare Marsh.

Swanzy exhibited in Mills Hall for second time in 1919, and again the critics have difficulty with her works. *The Freeman's Journal* commented that some of the paintings “inevitably recall the ‘flinging a pot of paint in the face of the public.’”<sup>23</sup> Here, the journal evokes the infamous lawsuit between Whistler and John Ruskin in which Whistler sues Ruskin for a derogatory comment in *Fors Clavigera* No 79 written in June 1877. *The Journal* continues that Swanzy’s works have a “breadth and baldness that challenge comment.”<sup>24</sup> Despite her many changes in style, her artwork continually tests the spectator. *The Evening Mail* comments on this exhibit positively, stating that Swanzy’s works are “feasts of colour and of exquisitely handled effects of light.”<sup>25</sup> The works exhibited in March 1919 included still-lives, interiors, landscapes and figures in oil, watercolour and drawing. While the reviewer for *The Irish Times* is more complimentary of Swanzy’s “essentially modern” and “quite personal point of view,”<sup>26</sup> her works are mostly praised for the fact that they are removed “from the freaks of the

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<sup>23</sup> “Miss Swanzy’s Pictures: Arresting Paintings that Challenge the Critic.”

<sup>24</sup> “Miss Swanzy’s Pictures: Arresting Paintings that Challenge the Critic.”

<sup>25</sup> “Exhibition of Pictures by Mary Swanzy.”

<sup>26</sup> “Miss Swanzy’s Pictures” 4.

futurists.”<sup>27</sup> Ironically, this is a style that Swanzy will dabble in, purposefully, to the chagrin of critics.

Compared with Paris and Italy, the artistic milieu at home in Dublin seemed to her quite conservative; modern art did not have much, if any impact on Ireland in the early to mid-twentieth century. This is clearly reflected in the early reviews of her work. The Dublin painting scene was painfully exclusive in the early twentieth century. It was dominated by the academic mimetic style that was imported from England. In hindsight, Irish painter Paul Henry noted that the Dublin he found when he moved there in 1919 “deeply rooted”<sup>28</sup> with “ignorance and prejudice which existed at that time against any form of art which savoured, even remotely, Modernism.”<sup>29</sup> He continued,

The French Impressionist movement, which had left such a mark upon the whole of European painting, had passed without leaving a ripple, apparently upon the complacent self-satisfaction of this country.<sup>30</sup>

The problematic nature of the Dublin art scene is reflected in the fact that, at this time, it was nearly impossible for a young artist with an interest in avant-garde painting to have his or her work accepted in the established institutions such as the RHA or the Water Colour Society of Ireland. Irish artists interested in this kind of painting had to make their careers abroad. To rectify this, Paul Henry founded the Society of Dublin Painters in order to provide a place for young and/or avant-garde artists to display their works. His wife, Grace Henry, as well as a group of other painters that included Mary Swanzy and Jack B. Yeats, supported him. The founding committee was headed by Paul Henry and

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<sup>27</sup> “Miss Swanzy’s Pictures” 4.

<sup>28</sup> Henry 65.

<sup>29</sup> Henry 65.

<sup>30</sup> Henry 68.

included E.M.O. Rourke-Dickey, Clare Marsh, Grace Henry, Letitia Hamilton and Mary Swanzy. From its creation in 1920 until the mid 1940s, when the “Irish Exhibition of Living Art” was established, the members were at the fore of new developments in Irish art, with Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy being among the most progressive members. The exhibition took place in the spring and autumn of each year at No. 7 St. Stephen’s Green. Beckett’s Uncle “Boss” Sinclair was a regular attendee at these exhibitions and even gave a talk there. “Boss” was against the academic style embodied at the RHA, going so far as to publicly criticise them in a 1918 article prior to the formation of the Society of Painters:

The post-impressionists and the futurists are to be welcomed if not for their importance at least for what they affirm, that it is the right of the individual to assert his own expression in his own age and out of his own environment, a right which has long been denied by the aristocrats of the past, who still persist in viewing the present in the eyes of the past. Not that one has anything but reverence and appreciation for the great painters of the past, but when they are dethroned from their high palaces and made sterile to do duty in the market-place for the benefit of bolstering useless if not harmful institutions to the detriment of painters of power and vitality. It is high time for Picasso or Cezanne, Severini or Boccioni to held a revolt against the tyranny of tradition.<sup>31</sup>

This statement is a call to arms for Dubliners to accept modernist painting. Sinclair was highly criticising the Dublin elite for rejecting these important artistic movements.

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<sup>31</sup> Sinclair 184.

The Dublin Society of Painters was the first to attempt to rectify the deficiency of outlets for Modern art and for over twenty years acted as a progressive innovator in avant-garde painting trends. The Society was the first to introduce the one man/woman shows in Ireland. While the Dublin Society of Painters opened to good reviews in 1920 and 1921, it was hard to remain in favour as society continued to push a highly nationalistic agenda that valued ancient, pastoral and Gaelic Ireland over the ever-changing tide of European Modernist trends. Art historian S.B. Kennedy has pointed out, “Collectively Swanzy, Jellett and Salkeld represent the pinnacle of achievement of the Dublin Society of Painters as far as avant-garde painting is concerned.”<sup>32</sup> Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy left the Dublin Society of Painters in the mid 1920s, and their daring individualism was replaced by more conservative figures. The growing conservatism reflects the political climate of Irish politics and life in the 1930s. “Boss” Sinclair also gives a lecture on German Expressionism to the Dublin Society of Painters in 1933 as way to again open up the Society to European trends. In this talk he develops his ideas from 1918 in more detail, and he also discusses German Expressionism.<sup>33</sup>

In 1920, the same year that Swanzy helped to create the Painters’ Society, she was personally affected by the mounting political tensions leading up to the looming Irish civil war. Her second cousin District Inspector Oswald Swanzy, RIC, was murdered outside Lisburn Cathedral in August 1920. This is believed to be a retaliation killing, because it was most likely Oswald Swanzy that ordered the assassination of Tomás MacCurtain, the Lord Mayor of Cork, on 20 March 1920. In a symbolic gesture, MacCurtain’s revolver was used to kill Oswald Swanzy. This personal event

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<sup>32</sup> Kennedy, S.B. 34.

<sup>33</sup> “Sinclair, Morris” Uof R, JEK A/2/274.

compounded by the violence of the Easter Rising and the impending civil war causes Swanzy flee to Yugoslavia and then to Czechoslovakia to join her older sister, St. Clair, in humanitarian relief work with a Protestant Mission (Lady Muriel Paget's Mission). While here, she saw the devastation that World War I had upon the landscape, and this would have an impact on some of her later paintings. She was in a "self imposed exile" as the death of her cousin was a "great hurt" to her.<sup>34</sup>

Between 1920-1925 she was not only exhibiting her works alongside Jack B. Yeats in the Dublin Society of Painters exhibitions and traveling in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, she traveled to the United States (Santa Barbara, California), Honolulu, the Sandwich Islands, and Samoa. She visited Oswald Swanzy's sister in Samoa, as well as an aunt through marriage on Swanzy's father's side that lived in Honolulu, Hawaii.<sup>35</sup> She exhibited some paintings while in America and the South Pacific. She produced a body of work in each location. Because she failed to date these works, it is sometimes difficult to tell when and where certain works were painted. The paintings she produced during the 1920s vary in style from works influenced by analytical and Orphic Cubism to Cézannesque landscapes and semi-expressionist scenes of the South Seas. During this time, she switches style and palette so regularly that it is at times surprising that these all of these works were executed by the same artist. She is not afraid to let her paintings revel in the failure of form and technique of the artistic movements that she experiments with in order to produce her own individual vision.

Like Beckett, she did not paint traditionally Irish subjects and travelled extensively, and this most likely also contributes to her lack of favour in Dublin. Unlike

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<sup>34</sup> Cullinane 27.

<sup>35</sup> Cullinane 31.

Mainie Jellett's, Evie Hone's and May Guinness' "commitment to New Ireland, Swanzy maintained her distance from national politics."<sup>36</sup> Her subjects were wide-ranging and highly imaginative. The locale was not clearly Irish, was not idealized and was not an example of the Ireland that mattered.<sup>37</sup> She often painted in and got inspiration from foreign locales. Art historian Julian Campbell points out that Swanzy "was more influenced by French art than was that of most Irish Artists and remained strongly 'French' in feel."<sup>38</sup> Despite French influence, she was not purely continental and displays a confident imaginative style. She exhibited widely outside of Ireland, as noted earlier, some of her most notable exhibitions include the *Salon de Independents* 1914 and 1922 and a half century exhibition in 1934. She had an Irish exhibition in Paris in 1924 and a one-woman show there in 1925. Andres Lhote also influenced her, which can be seen in *Oil Painting À la Mode d'Lhote*. Still, she did not like to label herself a cubist. Even in her homage to Lhote, her style and inspiration is clearly Swanzy's own point of view. Although her style changed throughout her career, she retained "underlying scaffolding onto which she applied colours."<sup>39</sup> Her soft colours overlapped "so that one seems to look at figures and background through a veil."<sup>40</sup> As her style developed, "she abandoned realistic context and chose scenes from childhood and dream."<sup>41</sup> Brian Fallon points out she favours the gothic rather than the Celtic.<sup>42</sup> She was influenced by Vorticism, Futurism, and Orphic cubism. Referencing Orphic Cubism, Róisín Kennedy points out

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<sup>36</sup> Kennedy, "Wrong-Headed" 77.

<sup>37</sup> Opening lines of MacGreevy's essay on Jack Yeats is "the Ireland that matters" and this echoes Daniel Corkery's "the Ireland that Counts."

<sup>38</sup> *The Irish Impressionists* 103.

<sup>39</sup> Campbell, *Irish Impressionists* 109.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, *Irish Impressionists* 109.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, *Irish Impressionists* 109.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Campbell, *Irish Impressionists* 109.

that “one of the main effects was to dematerialise the structure and to highlight the process of seeing.”<sup>43</sup> Revivalists like George Russell (AE) despised new types of art like cubism. He points out, “I feel somehow that the Cubists movement is wrong headed, and it springs from reason rather than imagination.”<sup>44</sup> In a review in the *Irish Statesmen*, he writes, we find “a late victim to cubism in some subsection of this artistic malaria.”<sup>45</sup> Russell’s comments illustrate the animosity of the Dublin public towards modernist artistic trends.

### **Swanzy and Cubism:**

Swanzy’s style is often seen as not truly cubist, or it is labelled as “watered down cubism.”<sup>46</sup> As Róisín Kennedy points out, “her cubism was ultimately highly subjective and linked to the increasingly fantastic nature of her painting.”<sup>47</sup> But as Terence de Vere White and P.J. Murphy point out, Swanzy does not merely exhibit weak cubism. In a review of a Swanzy exhibition at the Dawson Gallery in 1976 (this exhibition focused on her paintings in/of Samoa circa 1919-1925), Terence de Vere White, points out that comparing Swanzy to another artist like Gauguin just because she painted in Samoa is dangerous, because Swanzy’s great talent lies in “the ability to take someone else’s manner and impose upon it her own interpretation.”<sup>48</sup> Like Beckett points out, “there is a danger in the neatness of identification,”<sup>49</sup> and writing off Swanzy too quickly is a

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<sup>43</sup> “Wrong-Headed” 80.

<sup>44</sup> “Review” 15 January 1927.

<sup>45</sup> “Review” 27 Oct 1923.

<sup>46</sup> Campbell, “Mary Swanzy.”

<sup>47</sup> “Wrong-Headed” 77.

<sup>48</sup> “Mary Swanzy in Samoa” 10.

<sup>49</sup> “Dante...Bruno...Vico...Joyce” 19.

mistake. De Vere White points out that Swanzy “used the formula but only as a pattern; she has imposed upon it her own imagery.”<sup>50</sup> He goes on to point out

A jug of flowers on a brightly patterned cloth, a row of apples—it is all too familiar; but the daring with which the painter has put red, orange, purple, mauve together and saved them from internal combustion by an unobtrusive insertion of an area of pink.<sup>51</sup>

The constant contrast and contradiction in her paintings also attests to the imposition of her own imagery on the canvas rather than imitation. As is often pointed out, Swanzy’s art progressed through many styles. She was fiercely independent and painted whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. P.J. Murphy argues this was “the logical outcome of a strong personality exploring art at a most exciting time rather than weakly imitating others.”<sup>52</sup> Through her destruction of the tenets of painting, and her affinity in realising the inherent failure in trying to express, we can start to understand Swanzy painting in a new way. The fluidity of her style is a strength, and like Beckett and Yeats, this allows her to explore many possible outcomes much more so than strictly representational or strictly abstract works.

In the 1920s, Swanzy starts to develop a technique of “drawing” with oil paint that she continued to experiment with throughout her career. She achieved this effect by dragging a lightly loaded brush over the canvas, as if it were a stick of charcoal or a pencil.<sup>53</sup> This is the very opposite of the working style of impasto that Jack B. Yeats adopted in his later works. Though stylistically very different, both artists develop the

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<sup>50</sup> “Mary Swanzy in Samoa” 10.

<sup>51</sup> “Mary Swanzy in Samoa” 10.

<sup>52</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>53</sup> “Mary Swanzy” n.p.

tendency of vagueness. Like Beckett, with his big India rubber, once a line was drawn, there Swanzy and Yeats were rubbing out the image by vagueness and worsening it. They worked at slowly destroying the image while leaving some remains intact. She uses coarse weave canvas in many of her works, which makes the texture of the rough canvas visible through the paint. Like in Yeats and Beckett's work the materiality of the medium and of the tools—paintbrush, canvas/ actor, stage—take on a pivotal role in the worsening and distortion of images.

George Russell is not shy in pointing out what he sees as the defects in Swanzy's work:

The real defect in this form of art is that the convention is so simple that nothing can be said in it. It is impossible to be subtle in this convention as it would be to write poetry if the poet were limited to use fifty words, the same words no matter how many poems he wrote or what moods he wanted to express.<sup>54</sup>

He goes on to write that the same thing is said in all of the paintings, and "that is nothing."<sup>55</sup> While Russell saw this as a serious flaw, when looking at Swanzy's works through Beckett's lens of errancy we can see that perhaps someone like Irish Sculptor Maude Ball was closer to the truth when she wrote "The interpreter has chosen perhaps a language which we do not yet understand."<sup>56</sup>

The Czechoslovakian painting below is one that she exhibited at the Dublin Society of Painters Gallery in 1922. The rooftops curve through the painting in an "S" shape. In the distance, the houses look as if they are curling along on a train track, this further emphasises the feeling of movement in the painting. Swanzy's paintings in the

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<sup>54</sup> "Review" 27 Oct 1923.

<sup>55</sup> "Review" 27 Oct 1923.

<sup>56</sup> Qtd. in *Analysing Cubism* 56.

1920s and 30s often highlight foliage and greenery, and although the picture below references Czechoslovakia, it also reveals traces of the South Pacific evidenced in the palm trees. The many shades of green of her native Ireland also make an appearance in the background. The red roofs are also reminiscent of those found in Semur-en-Auxois in eastern France. Swanzy had painted this scene as well, most likely<sup>57</sup> before her travels to Czechoslovakia. We can see her experimenting with the style of a painter like Cézanne. Swanzy states that she only titles her works because she is told that she has to: “I give my paintings names, because I am told I have to, for the catalogues.”<sup>58</sup> Even in these pre-war works she purposely fails to create a coherent image that the spectator can place in time or space. It instead includes multiple locales, techniques and her own signature style and colour choice. The simultaneity of images from multiple locations in the piece vagues time, place, and relation between the interior world of the artists mind and the exterior world of the senses.

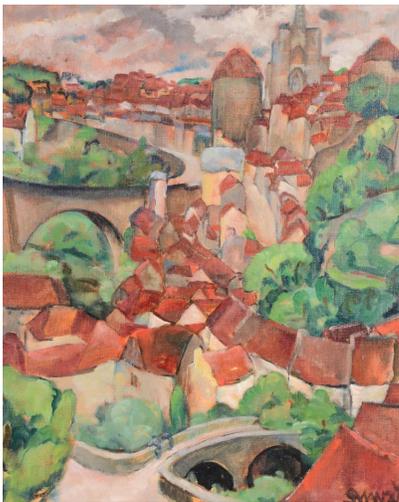
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<sup>57</sup> Although the date is unknown, we can speculate that because of the style and use of colour that this painting was painted prior to the one that depicts the rooftops.

<sup>58</sup> Lehane 12.



Mary Swanzy, *Pattern of Rooftops, Czechoslovakia*. c. 1920-22, National Gallery of Ireland.



Mary Swanzy, *View of Semur-en-Auxois*. c. unknown, Private Collection.



Mary Swanzy, *Samoan Scene*. c. 1923, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork.

Her lush, light-filled Gauguinesque Samoan paintings were first exhibited at the Santa Barbara Art Club Gallery in November 1924 and in 1925 at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris, where her solo exhibition was warmly received by the likes of Gertrude

Stein, and *The New York Herald's* art critic Georges Bal. Bal wrote: "Few painters have ventured thus far, and Mme. Swanzy has shown what excellent material for the artist's brush is to be found in the tropical vegetation of the distant archipelago."<sup>59</sup> She painted the above, *Samoan Scene* (c. 1923) around the same time or a little after the Czechoslovakian scene. We see a drastic change, and despite the array of rich colours, the texture of the canvas itself begins to become important. On close inspection the fibres and threading of the canvas itself are very visible. Art critic and an acquaintance of the mature Mary Swanzy, Brian Fallon, states,

What dominates these Samoan pictures is, almost inevitably, the light of the tropics – in this case, not a harsh or daunting glare but a warm, even luminosity which permeates them almost like some fluid substance this demonstrates fluidity and the ever changing lack of fixity.<sup>60</sup>

In several of Swanzy's works from the 1920s-1930s, tall institutional structures cast literal shadows on nature, as in *The White Tower* (c. 1926), and people, as in *The Storm* (c. 1930). The veil-like atmosphere Swanzy created with her paint application and colour choices often cast a shadow over the entirety of canvas. For example, in *The White Tower*, lines and angles slice through and dissect the canvas. The paint looks like it has seeped through the back of the canvas rather than being layered onto it. Similarly, creating this slicing and gashing effect formed by the disintegration of clear perspective creates an image of claustrophobia, chaos and despair in *The Storm*. This painting collapses the pictorial plane, and the images and lines in the painting are in a state of collapse. The claustrophobia and despair is made more apparent by the smallness of the

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<sup>59</sup> Connaughton-Deeny, "Mary Swanzy" n.p.

<sup>60</sup> "Swanzy in Samoa" n.p.

two figures in the bottom left of the painting that appear to be surrendering. One figure uplifts her arms in a gesture of helplessness as angles, curves and strikes of lightening come in sideways. A staircase leading nowhere collapses in on the figures. The failure of linear connection destroys perspective and order in favour of simultaneity and chaos. These paintings show some of the techniques of Futurism and Vorticism; but again with her unique colouring and fantastic subject matter, Swanzy makes these techniques and images her own.



Mary Swanzy. *The White Tower*, c. 1926, Private Collection.



Mary Swanzy. *The Storm*, c. 1930, Private Collection.

In 1926, Swanzy concluded her exotic travels, and, at forty-four years of age, she moved in with her sister, St. Clair, in Blackheath in London and remained in residence there for most of the rest of her life.<sup>61</sup> World War II did force her to leave Blackheath for Dublin for three years (1942-1945). Like Mary Swanzy, St. Clair Swanzy had travelled the world on humanitarian missions, even to Russia where she taught English to members of the Tsar's family in 1916. Like Mary, St. Clair never married or has children. Dublin would have proven too small for Swanzy; she was better able to keep up with artistic trends and view contemporary European exhibitions in London. In her nineties, Swanzy, with her characteristic wit, says of her only dwelling situation, "It is a great thing to live all one's life in the same house. It means one can always find one's stockings."<sup>62</sup> She regularly attended the theatre in London with her sister, and her works often take on this

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<sup>61</sup> Cullinane 37.

<sup>62</sup> De Vere White, "Mary Swanzy in Samoa" 10.

sense of theatricality and of the stage. When living in Dublin, St. Clair Swanzy was involved in the Irish Theatrical Club and was cast in performances such as Arnold Graves *Stella and Vanessa* in December of 1908.<sup>63</sup> She was also a performer at the Abbey Theatre playing the lead heroine, Una, in James Duncan's *A Gallant in Galway* (1909).<sup>64</sup> Mary Swanzy points out that Jack Yeats was in London at the beginning but that "he was wise to come back to Ireland."<sup>65</sup>

In 1930, Swanzy was represented at the Exposition d'Art Irlandais as the Musée des Beaux Arts de Belgique, Brussels, 10 May-8 June. Thomas Bodkin, director of the National Gallery of Ireland at the time, was the moving force behind this major international showing of Irish Art. Swanzy exhibited her French landscapes, such as *Maison dans la Foret, Sous Mer, Nature Morte, Le joie des Helices, Paysage and Allegro*, all undated. These paintings showcased yet another technique in the Swanzy repertoire, and they appear to be studies of the style of Andres Lhote and even Cézanne. In 1932, there was an invitation only exhibition of Swanzy's works at the home of Sarah Purser at Mespil House Dublin. This was most likely the first time that Swanzy's Cubist paintings were seen in Dublin despite the fact she had been dabbling in the style since the early 1920s, if not earlier. In 1934, the Municipal Gallery Dublin acquired *Butcher's Broom*. She also exhibits 20 new paintings in London in 1934. In 1938 she was represented in the Irish Art Exhibition in London in which 60 works by the Dublin Society of Painters are shown at the High Commission's office, Piccadilly House.<sup>66</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s Swanzy exhibited widely. She had an impact not only on

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<sup>63</sup> "Irish Theatrical Club" 6.

<sup>64</sup> "New Plays at the Abbey Theatre" 10.

<sup>65</sup> De Vere White, "Mary Swanzy in Samoa" 10.

<sup>66</sup> Cullinane.

the Irish modern art scene through her exhibitions with the Dublin Society of Painters, but also represented Irish modern art on the continent in both Irish and French exhibitions in France, Brussels, and London as well as exhibitions in the United States. She proves not only to be influenced by artists, but she is also influential. As art historian Roisín Kennedy points out, “original, unconventional, unsellable and unintelligible, Swanzy’s practice fulfils the criteria of the misunderstood avant-garde artist.”<sup>67</sup> What is most perplexing, Kennedy goes on to say, “is her refusal to engage in any radical activities to present herself in any way avant-garde.”<sup>68</sup> While she refrained from engaging in radical political views or holding regular company with the avant-garde set, her life was in many ways unconventional, especially for an upper-class woman born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She travelled the world alone, she never married or had children and she did participate politically in humanitarian efforts. Also, Swanzy settled with her sister in Blackheath, which had strong connections with the women’s suffragette movement. Swanzy and her sister St. Clair registered to vote at the earliest opportunity provided to them in 1927. It would be hard to believe that Swanzy did not participate in suffragette movement in some way, being that she was located in the middle of such activities. London would also have been more conducive to single women without children than a Catholic leaning Dublin. Swanzy lived her life by her own compass, both personally and creatively, which was very out of the ordinary and progressive considering her upbringing and background. She was, however, very much a Victorian lady in appearance and in some beliefs. She held on to the strong Protestant work ethic and frugality throughout her life. Her neighbours in London remember her chasing a piece of

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<sup>67</sup> “Wrong-headed” 76.

<sup>68</sup> “Wrong-headed” 76.

rice around her plate so as not to waste anything.<sup>69</sup> Her artwork disturbed and perturbed Dublin critics, while enchanting critics from France and America.

Swanzy's pieces are often defined in terms of failure of commitment to style or vision, much like her trepidation to commit to the avant-garde radicalism in lifestyle, even though the way she used her paintbrush was truly radical. She absorbed styles and materials as she pleased and adapted them to her own ends. She dabbled in Cubism and Futurism even after it was fashionable to do so and without adhering to the strict ideologies that were attached to such movements. She moved on to more surreal and fantastic forms in her later works that present images that are times horrifying and grotesque and at other times lyrical and light-hearted. As art historian Róisín Kennedy points out,

Her decision not to follow a specific style impacted negatively on her reputation in her lifetime, when Modernism and the marketplace dictated that a distinctive style was essential for the successful artist.<sup>70</sup>

Instead she stayed true to her own personal vision and symbols. Combining images from deep in her imagination, places she had been, places she hadn't been (she often looked at travel books and borrowed images from them), as well as images that were right in front of her in Dublin or at her home in Blackheath, England where she settled. She purposely fails to adhere to stylistic conventions, even avant-garde conventions.

It is difficult to date her paintings, because she would be inclined to use some of her early style even into her late paintings. She did not paint in order to sell or market her artwork. Swanzy resisted the commodification of her works. She mistrusted art dealers

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<sup>69</sup> Cullinane 35.

<sup>70</sup> "Wrong-headed" 121.

and gave much of her art away to friends. Her friend and *Irish Times* columnist P.J. Murphy states that “She had a life long mistrust of art dealers.” Swanzy did not seek popularity or financial success, unlike Mainie Jellet, to whom she is often compared and who is also seen as a more ‘successful’ artist than Swanzy. She says in an interview with Terence de Vere White, “I can never understand why an artist would want to push his work. It is enough to do it, and even if it isn’t good, what better way is there to live?”<sup>71</sup>

Swanzy had a very strong personality, especially for a woman of her time. She had strong opinions, and a strong sense of control over her work and what she painted. Any failures in her paintings were purposeful, demonstrative and a method of innovation. She was known to put people in their place. P.J. Murphy points out that “her own nieces and nephews were very much afraid of her.”<sup>72</sup> She also had soft spots, and Murphy seems to be one of them. Leo Smith, one of Swanzy’s art dealers, often questioned why Swanzy never “put [Murphy] in his place.”<sup>73</sup> She also did not hide her views on what she thought of other artists and the Dublin art scene. In a 1973 interview with Terence de Vere White, her interviewer promises not to talk about politics, or in Swanzy’s words: “The Yeatses [...] Nobody can talk about anything else.”<sup>74</sup> She thought that the John Yeats was the purist as the sons had “that admixture of Pollexfen business blood.”<sup>75</sup> She goes onto praise W.J. Leech, but “he lacked the little something extra.”<sup>76</sup> She did not agree with the French school that Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett attended in the ‘20s,

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<sup>71</sup> “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>72</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>73</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>74</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>75</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>76</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

criticizing the fact that “all the students dabbled with each other’s canvases.”<sup>77</sup> One cannot help but think of Beckett and the control he liked to maintain especially in his late works. He did not take kindly to anyone dabbling with his work. He also did not like to be compared to writers or philosophers, much like Swanzy. Una Lehane of *The Irish Times* asked about influences Swanzy responds bluntly, “I don’t like comparisons.”<sup>78</sup> She recognised and appreciated that she had control over her work. She states firmly, “I had control over my absorbing passion.”<sup>79</sup> Murphy points out that Swanzy had “special affection and admiration for Walter Osborne, Nathaniel Hone, May Guinness and Sarah Purser, who supported and encouraged her at the outset of her career.” She also spoke well of Grace Henry, whom she often exhibited with in Dublin. Both Swanzy and Henry were “considered too avant-garde to be widely bought in the ‘30s and ‘40s by the Dublin public.”<sup>80</sup>

Her withdraw from the commercial art world following World War II, despite the fact that she continued to fanatically paint during this time, is testament to her increasing need to paint whatever she wanted without care for public or critical approval. It also serves as evidence that after the war, her work becomes more and more personal; she does it for mostly for herself. She was always painting. Her house was filled with her work, and she still had an unfinished painting on the canvas when she died at 97 years of age. P.J. Murphy was in and out of her studio in the late sixties and seventies and was allowed to examine her works as “he was invited to open presses and drawers and look as I pleased at the hundreds of little panels and large canvases that had accumulated

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<sup>77</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>78</sup> Lehane 12.

<sup>79</sup> Lehane 12.

<sup>80</sup> Murphy 10.

there.”<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, the business of the art world was something that sparked both curiosity and disdain in Swanzy. On selling her artwork, she states, “Oh, people call. They know me or hear about my work. I don’t employ agents. I can never understand why an artist would want to push his work.”<sup>82</sup> When she begins exhibiting again in 1968, she was looked after by Leo Smith of the Dawson Gallery in Dublin. In 1973, Swanzy still considers Dublin her city, despite the fact that she had lived in London for so long. She also saw the current state of the city as quite dire, and she relays this to Terence de Vere White in a Buswell’s hotel near Stephen’s Green on Grafton Street.<sup>83</sup> Not long after, in 1975, she asks her friend and *Irish Times* writer P.J. Murphy, “What’s happening in Dublin? Dublin’s a marvellous place. Everything is happening in Dublin.”<sup>84</sup> Murphy had had many conversations with Swanzy; for this one they met at her home in Blackheath. She loved to hear about current exhibitions and about how the prices were moving, even though she mistrusted art dealers.<sup>85</sup>

Swanzy’s strong personality, and her irreverent passionate and original style do not suggest someone who mistakenly misused or copied the technique of others poorly. Instead errancy, vagueness and the simultaneous abstracting of images reveal a woman highly aware of these failures. Her techniques reflect her frustration at her position in society as a female, her humility and the effects of war. Her mind remains acute even as she ages “her memory and the clarity of her mind were undimmed and her judgements

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<sup>81</sup> Murphy, 10.

<sup>82</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>83</sup> De Vere White, “Mary Swanzy” 12.

<sup>84</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>85</sup> Murphy 10.

were precise and uncompromising.”<sup>86</sup> Her increasing fantasticism and worsening of image transition into scenes that are increasingly distorted and macabre.

### **During and After World War II**

Like Beckett, the war greatly influenced Swanzy and her aesthetic. She witnessed much destruction, and deals with this in her highly personalised art. In 1939, World War II commences, and by 1942, Swanzy returned to Dublin to live with younger sister Muriel because of the increasing threat of violence in London. She remained in Dublin until 1945. Soon after Swanzy fled London, the house where she had been staying with St. Clair was bombed in the London Blitz.<sup>87</sup> Luckily, St. Clair was also away from London at the time. The early 1940s was an interesting time for Swanzy to be in Dublin because the Irish public was beginning to accept some of the continental artistic trends that she had been so criticised for in the 1920s and 1930s. The works of Post Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism in particular were gradually assimilating into the Dublin artistic consciousness. Moreover, by the early 1940s a younger generation, of whom Mainie Jellett, Norah McGuinness and Louis le Brocquy were the most influential, began to make their presence felt in the visual arts. The White Stag group had also recently relocated from London to Ireland in 1939. The group had been relatively successful in promoting avant-garde art and creative psychoanalysis. They represented and encouraged a move from Academicism to Modernism, and their “Subjective Art” strongly influenced the work being made at the time by Irish artists such as Le Brocquy, May Guinness and Patrick Scott. The White Stag Group was not held together by an over-arching stylistic or formal ideology; it was a social, geographic and intellectual

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<sup>86</sup> Fallon, “End of a Line?” 8.

<sup>87</sup> Cullinane 25.

collective.



Mary Swanzy. *Clown by Candlelight* (1942-1943). Private Collection.

Looking at Swanzy's *Clown by Candlelight*, we can see a distinct shift in Swanzy's style compared to her earlier cubist influenced works. The picture depicts the physical and mental toll that performance can take on the actor. The clown's face is sad and pensive. He looks physically tired. His face is indistinct and drawn downwards. Swanzy uses the candle to spotlight the clown's white face and hands. The background is in obscured darkness. The brushstrokes are loose, which creates a softening of the image. It is difficult to make out specific features, and the viewer is left with a ghastly image.

In 1943, she contributes five paintings to the first-ever Irish Exhibition of Living Art in Dublin, *The Power and the Glory*, *Between Two Wars*, *Revolution*, *The Necklace*, and *This is Our Gift, Our Portion Apart*, also known as *Group of Sorrowing Women*.

Thomas MacGreevy attends and praises the Irish Living Art Exhibition. Samuel Beckett attends the Irish Exhibition of Living art in 1949, but he is in France for the exhibition that featured Swanzy's work. A one-woman show of her work was held at the Dublin Painters' Gallery in 1943, where she exhibits twenty-six paintings. In 1944, The White Stag Group held an Exhibition of Subjective Art in January at 6 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin. She had another one-woman show at the Dublin Painters Gallery in March of the same year. In 1945, the RHA exhibited *The Midnight Watcher* and *The Food Kitchen*. *The Message* was presented to the Municipal Gallery by the Haverty Trust. She then participated in an important group show, which included the works of Braque, Vlaminck, and Dufy at St. George's Gallery, London in 1946. This exhibition was followed by a solo show at the same gallery the year after. In 1947, she had a one-woman show of recent paintings at St Georges Gallery London that consists of 34 paintings. Unfortunately, detailed catalogues of these exhibitions do not exist. At this point, her exhibitions started to drop off. She exhibited one painting in the RHA in the years 1949 (*Night Piece* and *Parade*) 1950 (*Lady with Dogs* and *The Flat Dweller's Dream*) and 1951 (*Journeys End* and *Convalescent by the Sea*). She then did not exhibit for the next seventeen years (1951-1978), even though she continued to paint a great deal.

According to those who knew Swanzy,<sup>88</sup> the trauma of two World Wars as well as the violence she witnessed in Ireland caused her to become more and more reclusive following World War II. Interestingly, many of the paintings that she painted during her hiatus from exhibition often display the aftermath of war in a very similar way to Beckett and Yeats. The trauma, destruction and chaos is often reflected in tramps, beggars, and a

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<sup>88</sup> Neighbours in Blackheath, her younger sister's children, her close friend P.J. Murphy all confirm this according to Cullinane.

disdain for lavishness. Her paintings examine the toll that violence and war takes on landscapes and the people that inhabit them. A good example of this is the painting *Beggarman* (c. 1945). This painting portrays someone dropping money into the hat of beggar that is resting on a pile of rubble and/or rubbish. The panhandler's skeletal face rests on his knees; both his eyes are closed. His hands and feet are exposed, and the bones and tendons are visible through his grey flesh. His head, with thinning stringy hair, is skull-like. In contrast, a pudgy hand in the top right corner drops small change into the beggar's hat. The donor is clearly voluptuous and well fed as we see the hip of her dress jutting into the picture. The spectator is forced to view the beggarman's whole body, while she only sees the hand of the benefactor. The landscape is desolate and trash strewn. The two figures in the background, perhaps a parent and child, are either coming or going from the city and are reminiscent of the figures in the background of Munch's *Scream*. The road bends and the buildings are distorted. The image is further distorted through the strange use of colour and the thin application of the paint. The image is worsened in much the same way that Beckett's character in *The End* deteriorates after he is expelled from an institution of care. Beckett's narrator tries to find his own way in the world, before finally lying down to let life drift away. Like Beckett's works, this image forces the viewer to see something that is hard to look at. The beggarman's closed eyes, downward turned head, and pallid skin make it hard to know if the figure is alive, dead or dying. The proportion is off purposefully, so that the viewer is forced to acknowledge the parts of society that they would rather ignore, namely the destitute as well the rubbish and rubble that remains among the buildings as people work and carry on their everyday lives.



Mary Swanzy. *Beggarmen* (c. 1945). Private Collection. Image Courtesy of Whyte's.

*Beggarmen* has a much different feeling than *Hindu Ascetic* (1942), although the figures in both paintings are seated in a similar position and the bones and tendons of their hands and feet are exposed in a comparable way. *Hindu Ascetic* was painted the same year as Gandhi's hunger strikes and his "Quit India" campaign. In a painting like this, we can see that, at times, Swanzy was less averse to overtly suggesting historical or political themes than Beckett was. It reminds the viewer that there is concurrent violence and oppression happening outside of Europe during WWII. The harsh landscape is volcanic and lava-like, recreating the intense heat of August in India, when this protest took place. The figure in *Beggarmen* and *Ascetic* are both starving and under the oppression of social constructs, one of class and one of colonialism. Instead of having his eyes closed in submission, defeat or even death, the figure in *Ascetic* looks up wide-eyed in extreme pain, horror and anger. The Gandhi-like figure turns his emaciated back towards the viewer. His eyes bulge unblinkingly from the sockets. To whom does he look

up at? His oppressor? A supernatural force? Whatever it is, the viewer is made intensely aware of his eyes and the direction they are pointed. The viewer is also positioned as equal or on the same plane as the figure. The other striking features in this painting are the lips and teeth. While the beggar submits to his place, the ascetic is clearly fighting back. He is fighting back not with physical force; he is clearly seated, but with his words and with his refusal eat. He is making the viewer look at his emaciated body and his anger. Ghandi calls his followers into tasks of civil disobedience like his previous hunger strikes, and he coins the phrase “Do or die” in his “Quit India” speech. Despite the political themes in this painting some connections between the image depicted and Beckett’s stage images can be made. The gnashing of teeth and the focus on the mouth is evocative of Mouth in *Not I*. The contortions and distortions of Mouth are disturbing and violent. Mouth also references oppression and being under the control of others: “she was punished...for her sins [...] brought up as she had been to believe...with the other waifs...in a merciful... [*Brief Laugh*]...God.”<sup>89</sup> The image and sound of Mouth laughing is not joyous, it is twisted and horrific, much like the mouth of the ascetic. While colour is almost non-existent in many of Beckett’s plays, he was not averse to the use of dramatic colour like Swanzy used in painting. In fact, he prefers it, and this can be seen in the painting that Beckett admired. It is evidenced in the histrionic use of colour in the majority of Yeats’ paintings. German Expressionists such as Nolde and Ballmer also used bright and highly expressive and dramatic colours. Even Bram van Velde used bright dramatic reds, blues, greens, pinks and purples in the majority of his works, including the ones that Beckett owned. A critic for *Dublin Magazine* writes of Swanzy’s 1943 exhibition,

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<sup>89</sup> *CDW* 377.

She has individuality, somewhat morbid it's true, but consistently expressed in the fusion of form and content. Her tones are rich, subdued and charged with fatality. As a painter she has something to say, it may not be reassuring or comfortable, but she says it.<sup>90</sup>

Her painting during and after World War II becomes increasingly more disturbing.



Mary Swanzy. *Hindu Ascetic* (1942). Courtesy of Christie's.

In 1967, the same year her older sister St. Clair passed away at 91 years of age, Hilary Pyle, Jack B. Yeats' biographer and cataloguer, was invited to visit Swanzy at the request of Dr Elizabeth Fitzpatrick. Dr Fitzpatrick is Swanzy's friend and doctor, and she is concerned for Swanzy's well being. Swanzy had become increasingly reclusive and drew more and more into herself as the years went by. Pyle recalled the house being full of fantastical paintings with scenes of horror, many of which Pyle found difficult to

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<sup>90</sup> Qtd. in Connaughton-Deeny, *A Century of Women Artists*.

observe.<sup>91</sup> Swanzy was in Ireland for 1916 and the fight for independence and later witnessed the destruction that WW I caused on Czechoslovakia, and then the devastation of WWII; it is no wonder Swanzy's images became more morose after witnessing firsthand the inhumanity of war on many occasions.



Mary Swanzy, *The Mêle*, c. 1945. Private Collection.

One such painting Pyle may have viewed is Swanzy's *Mêle* (c. 1945). The naked bodies create a horrifically violent crowd that fight one another with weapons such as swords and crosses. The trumpets used to call to battle are also being used as weapons. There is no order, reason or tactic for their battle, and there is no sign of anyone winning. The contorted and grotesque multi-coloured creatures are evocative of Bosch's famous depiction of Hell. The broken sword stained with blood and crown on the lower right hand side suggest a lack of leadership or direction, and this also suggests that possibly a violent coup is in the middle of taking place. Anarchy has been unleashed upon the

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<sup>91</sup> Cullinane 38.

world. A figure in red with wild hair stands away from the crowd in the doorway. He or she lifts his or her arms in hopeless empathy or compassion. This is much like Beckett's Auditor's only movement in *Not I*, which "consists in simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion."<sup>92</sup> The bodies on the outside of the seething circle of fighting are crushing those in the middle. This painting is one of the first glimpses into her fantastical and at times horrific style. The distorted bodies clamour against one another. They are twisting in a writhing ball of movement. The building behind the mob is prison-like in its uniformity of doors and windows.

While her work became more imaginative, she responds directly to the upheaval, violence, cruelty and ignorance that she saw around her during the war years. Her paintings depict soldiers sent to the battlefield; women and children waiting in vain outside derelict buildings; dispossessed figures roaming the land as beasts. Human figures are often shown, open-mouthed, gesticulations, with oafish faces and exaggerated limbs. Paintings contain references to death and destruction, judgement and loss. Mankind is judged. The pictures may be allegories of the troubled twentieth century and all the changes that Mary Swanzy witnessed.

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<sup>92</sup> *CDW* 376.



Mary Swanzy. *The Sleepwalker* (c. 1941). Peppercanister Gallery Dublin.

*The Sleepwalker* (c. 1941) is one such painting that exhibits the ravages of war on the landscape. In the foreground, there is an oversized and out of proportion broken vase that conjures images of ancient Grecian earthenware. There also appear to be a couple of oversized books underneath rubble on the bottom left of centre. It is not only the buildings and bodies that are destroyed through violence but also cultural and historical artefacts. The figure that has awoken and walks outside is greeted by a landscape that is a collage of locales. There are buildings of the city in the background and a spiral seashell lying in tropical foliage amongst the debris. Unfortunately for the waking figure in the painting, the destruction is not merely a dream.

One way Swanzy handles cultural trauma is by vagueness of remembered events and making these events more fantastical in nature. Art historians have linked the trauma of war to Swanzy's *The Message* (c. 1940-45). *The Message* displays loose brushwork and lacks mimetic detail. The shepherds' exaggerated facial expressions in the painting are cartoonish in quality, and the perspective is distorted. The Madonna and child are weirdly large while the background structures and figures are disproportionately smaller. Like many of Swanzy's paintings of the 1940s and beyond, the background is desolate and

abstracted. This painting suggests typical religious iconography but distorts it. The figure in red takes on the persona of the angel delivering a message in a typical religious painting, but his hair stands on end. His bright red jumpsuit makes him look more like a clown. The Madonna and child are sombre and contrast with the clown-like angel and cartoonish shepherds. These strange images and juxtapositions make the painting dreamlike. There are elements of remembered events, for example, the ruin and desolation of war evidenced in the background. The ground is flat and stony like the aftermath of a detonated bomb. There is a lack of hope for those born into the world, but “the message” referred to in the title is unclear. The pangs of realism are drastically juxtaposed against the ridiculous and the fantastical, revealing that these two realms are at odds with one another, yet exist side by side. The spectator is left with a surreal image plucked from Swanzy’s imagination with reverberating echoes from her past.



*The Message*. Mary Swanzy (circa 1940-1945). Hugh Lane Municipal Art Gallery.

The 1940s through the 1970s show Swanzy's transition toward the macabre. She did not revisit the cubist style after the 1920s. Swanzy applied oils in thin glazes with intense tones, often drawing with the brush, and creating a quality like stained glass. She did not like her work to be varnished, and she applied only the thinnest layer to secure the paint.<sup>93</sup> Like Yeats, she purposefully rejected and failed to use established painting techniques, despite her history of classical training. This is much in the same way that

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<sup>93</sup> Cullinane 47.

Beckett fails to use accepted theatrical techniques. In many of her paintings from this period, animal and human forms become difficult to distinguish.

She was not happy as a portrait painter. She says to Andy O'Mahoney in a radio interview, "In general ladies do not wish to be painted by ladies, and gentlemen do not wish to be painted by ladies, ladies have to paint doggie-woggies and pussy-woosies." She would have been privy to such prejudice, not only in employment opportunities, but also in the reviews of her work. Her friend P.J. Murphy points out, "she was a rather strong personality who painted the figure and landscape with the strength of a man, as one critic remarked."<sup>94</sup> Negative views of female Anglo-Irish artists were also associated with their socio-economic position and continued well into the 1980s. Roisín Kennedy has pointed out that

An increasingly negative attitude towards prominent Anglo-Irish female artists is evident from an assessment of the art writing of the years 1962-1984. Much of this criticism is focused on the socio-economic position of these female artists, stereotyping their motivations and practice and diminishing the true significance and value of their work.<sup>95</sup>

Swanzy worked outside the accepted conventions during her long career. Independent and confident, she pursued what intrigued her, regardless of fashion or current movement.

Swanzy recognized the limitations that her gender had set. She tells Murphy, "if I had been born a Henry and not a Mary, my life would have been very different."<sup>96</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>95</sup> "Lhote's Wives-Scapegoating Women Artists 1962-84."

<sup>96</sup> Brennen 35.

recurring images of often grotesque and distorted animals and creatures in her paintings from the 1940s onwards rejects and satirises the limited subjects of a female portrait painter. Art reviews of the time often pitted compliments about female painters against their more esteemed male counterparts. For example, in the first exhibition of Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Swanzy was described as having “survived triumphantly” juxtaposed with Seán Keating, and Mainie Jellett “stood up” to the “nobly exacting test” of being hung beside a Jack Yeats painting.<sup>97</sup> Her methodology of errancy distorts and deforms the animals present in her paintings. She purposefully exaggerates and distorts the bodies through layering, lines, and unsettling juxtaposition of colour. Pig or swine-like creatures recur as a motif in many of these later works. Her errancy in depicting animals in the realist academic style takes the image and worsens it in order to show her originality and failure to adhere to conventions expected of her gender.

In a Swanzy painting, eyes are often not visible, or they are scratched-out, contorted or disfigured as can be seen in a painting like *The Businessman* (c. 1950s-60s). Swanzy infamously had did not trust art dealers and those in the business of making money by commodifying art and artists. The ridiculous pig-like portraiture of *The Businessman* is highly satirical. His thick glasses veil his eyes. He faces the spectator head-on, but because of the blurred or reflective screen of his glasses he is, like most dodgy businessmen, unable to look you in the eye. The glasses create pale iridescent disks in place of eyes adding to the contorted and grotesque nature of his figures, twisting and worsening the image to her own end.

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<sup>97</sup> “Living Art: A New Departure” 3.



Mary Swanzy. *The Businessman* (c. 1950-60s). Private Collection. De Vere's Art Auctions.

The distortion and mockery present in these paintings purposely fails to meet the standards of academically good and appropriate content for a female, especially of her class, to be painting. What results, is again an example of failure working to create multiple avenues of expression, while also realising the inherent failure in the action of expression. Swanzy's work relates more and more to her highly personalized view of the world. The paintings appear somewhat allegorical, but with a personalized set of symbols and systems that are difficult for the spectator to decipher.



Mary Swanzy. *The Balcony*. (c. 1946). Private Collection.

In *The Balcony* (1946), human beings and birds are gathered on the balcony of a large room, above the red roofs of a Mediterranean seaside village, giving a more light-hearted and festive mood than is common in many of Swanzy's imaginative paintings. Not only the people vary, from pretty and slender to oafish and comical, but also the birds range from realistic to sinister. In the centre of the picture, a pretty young woman in white is seen in profile seated on a sofa. She is surrounded by a group of smiling, impish and infatuated men. She holds the chin of a man in black, and he reaches out to touch her lip. But a colourful bird perches on his shoulder, as if to warn the woman. Her profile is silhouetted against a potted plant, behind which a woman with a tray approaches, perhaps a waitress. To the right of the group a plump woman is seated in an armchair beside the balcony, dozing and attended to by a tall wise bird. On the floor in the left foreground another young woman in white is seated, and reaches out to other standing birds. A blue bird in the foreground tears at a fish, and a red and yellow parrot looks over the balcony.

The square white houses and red roofs, and sunny bay, of a Mediterranean port can be seen below. Swanzy may have been remembering fragments of a social gathering in her childhood, or her visits to a Riviera town such as St. Tropez, or an Adriatic port, which the artist visited after the First World War. The birds seem to be intelligent guardians to the fallible, foolish human beings. Not only the tall or colourful birds, but also the varied treatment of the women, are striking. These include the aquiline profile of the woman in white, the understated but beautifully modeled head and arm of the woman on the floor and the plump face of the woman dozing by the window. The dominant orange-red hue of the room may suggest the influence of Matisse's celebrated painting *Red Interior*. But rather than aspiring to flatness or simplicity, Swanzy's interest in detail, and use of sweet colours: reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues and whites, achieves more an impression of activity and lightness. The fact that the birds appear to be more intelligent or coherent is an interesting commentary on Swanzy's realisation of and for disdain for a woman's place in the art world of being relegated to painting animals. Birds are prominent in her works and even act as a counterpoint to the barbarous and ridiculous swine.

Swanzy, like Beckett, outlived many of her contemporaries and friends such as Sarah Purser, Mainie Jellett, May Guinness, Evie Hone, and Wilhelmina Geddes. This also, like in Beckett's works, adds to an increasing sense of macabre and a failure in her works. She continued to visit Dublin yearly and had Irish friends in London. The death of so many of those close to her as well the atrocities of war that she experienced could have led to her increasingly morose pictures.

Julian Campbell and Liz Cullinane have suggested that another possible Swanzy self-portrait is *Ebb Tide* (1941). Again, the title is vague, and the fact that the face of kneeling figure is completely hidden rejects and questions autobiography and self-

reference. The hands are large and claw-like. We cannot say if it Swanzy for sure as her face is hidden. The body is contorted and conspicuous in the long red dress. Red clothing features prominently in Swanzy's works, and it is often contrasted against a darker background. The beach in the background is both desolate (the grey background and the body language of the figure) and idyllic represented by the seemingly perfect seashells. The image is desolate, and it reminds us of Beckett's worsening image of the "head in hands" in *Worstward Ho*. In Swanzy's painting, we have a head bowed into an overly large and out of proportion lap. The body language described in *Worstward Ho* and pictured in *Ebb Tide* is one of distress, desperation and also of concession. In Beckett's words, "Fail worse again. [...] Till sick for good. Throw up for good"<sup>98</sup> and "To throw up and go."<sup>99</sup>



Mary Swanzy. *Ebb Tide* (1941).

Blurring or obscuring are ways that Swanzy worsens and fails the image in order to compel the spectator to slow down and reconsider an image. She tends to isolate scenes or parts of a scene as a way draw attention to the misseen, the "ill seen" and the

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<sup>98</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

<sup>99</sup> *Worstward Ho* 81.

unseen. Swanzy often puts objects such as trees, foliage or abstract structures or crowded figures in order to block the spectator's sight, giving them often only a partial view of a scene. Art critic and former head of the Jack B. Yeats Archive at the National Gallery of Ireland, Róisín Kennedy points out that Swanzy's use of

low viewpoint enabled the artist to trace the patterns created by daylight in terms of radiating lines and curves. One of the main effects of this is to dematerialise the structure and to highlight the process of seeing.<sup>100</sup>

In a painting like *Propellers* (1942), Swanzy further obscures the image through a low vantage point. The viewpoint of the spectator is low in the painting, and she is forced to look upward toward the ascending propellers. The image invites one to crane one's neck. The propellers shoot upwards. Some are blurred, suggesting that they are a long distance from the spectator. Structures that one would expect to have physical substance dissolve into the fluidity of a curve or the sharpness of a line. The image is skewed to the right hand side of the canvas, forcing the spectator to view these propellers as if she were lying on her back looking up. The tall figures thrust upwards towards, not a sky, but towards abstract curves and lines that suggest a forceful movement and that also aid in further dematerialising the structure of the image. The low viewpoint forces the spectator to follow these lines and curves, trying in vain to formulate a stable image. The paint is so thinly applied that small patches of canvas form white spots in the painting. This is especially evident in the strips of bright mauve and red in the lower third of the canvas.

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<sup>100</sup> Kennedy, "Wrong-headed" 78.



Mary Swanzy. *Propellers* (1942). Private Collection.

The distorted and dematerialised structure and image are also created through low vantage point or perspective in Beckett's stage images e.g. the low lighting, disembodiment of characters, the placement of figures on stage that are difficult to see or hear, also dematerialise structure and highlight the process of seeing. The low-view point of the audience is exacerbated by the fact that many of the images are placed off-centre and/or quite high up on stage. For example Mouth in *Not I* is positioned "upstage right, about 8 feet above stage level,"<sup>101</sup> Listener's face in *That Time* is "about 10 feet above stage level midstage off centre,"<sup>102</sup> and Speaker in *A Piece of Monologue* "stands well off centre downstage audience left."<sup>103</sup> The viewer's sense of space and pre-conceptions of the medium's conventions, plot and dialogue, are thrown into question. The destabilisation created by distorted placement of bodies onstage, and the fragmentation of

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<sup>101</sup> CDW 376.

<sup>102</sup> CDW 389.

<sup>103</sup> CDW 425.

these bodies created by lighting and restrictive stage direction and/or props<sup>104</sup> adds to the anti-interpretive quality of the work as well as the worsening and restriction of the image itself.

In addition, the figures in *Sorrowing Women* (1942) obscure one another. The viewer can only see partial heads, faces or hands of many of the women, and because they are kneeling, most of the women look as if they are cut off at the knee. Only small portions of their faces and bodies can be seen. When we look at this painting, we see keening women, but they are not the stereotypical Aran women in shawls, but instead a group of women of various ethnic groups. Swanzy's world travels no doubt influenced the faces in this painting, as there are a variety of races and cultures represented. The colours are bright and expressive. The woman on the left with the golden locks has a face with classically angelic qualities. Her head faces skyward. The woman in the centre holds up her hands in either praise or defeat; it is difficult to say for certain. The fact that all of the women are on their knees suggests both worship and subservience or remorse. This painting at once offers comment on the atrocities that Swanzy has seen in the past as well as perhaps the subservient position that women endured during the time it was painted as well as during Swanzy's youth.

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<sup>104</sup> For example, the bondage-like contraption traditionally used in *Not I* (1972) or the strip that is "*nine steps, width one meter*" (CDW 425) in *Footfalls* (1976).



Mary Swanzy. *Group of Sorrowing Women* (1942). Private Collection. Courtesy of Whyte's.

While the histrionic tendency of a painting like *Revolution* (1942) would seem disanalogous to Beckett's lack of melodrama or colour in Beckett's theatre and prose, a painting such as this controls and/or frustrates the spectator, which implicates a Beckettian connection. In this painting, she puts the spectator at a difficult vantage point, which also obscures and worsens what can and cannot be seen. The figures in the painting are intensely crowded together, adding to a feeling of claustrophobia. The image is also manic, because the crowd depicted is rowdy and uncontrolled. The obscuring of images and figures is heightened as the spectator is positioned at street view. Like the other grotesque figures within the painting, the spectator fights for her own space in the crowd in an effort to see what is going on. In effect, these paintings create a frustration as the viewer struggles to see more. This is much like the darkness of the theatre in *Not I*,

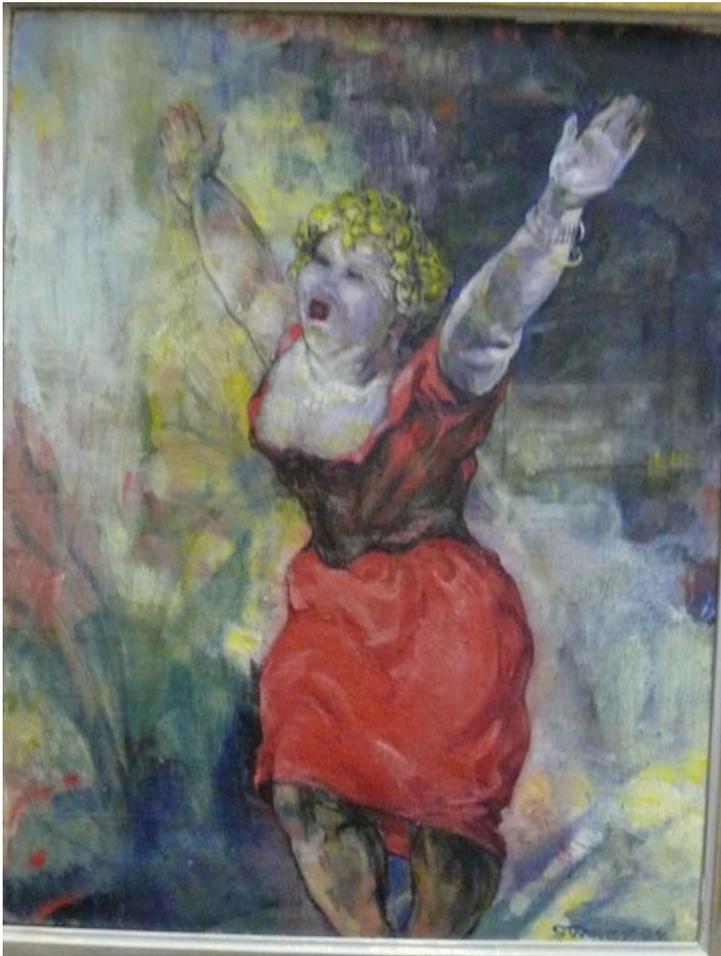
the spectator is forced into an uncomfortable situation. The woman in the foreground fails to be fully human. She looks animalistic, like a donkey mid-bray. A child behind this woman looks at the woman as if she is terrified.



Mary Swanzy. *Revolution* (1942). Private Collection. Courtesy of Whyte's.

In a later work like *The Opera Singer* (c.1950), the shadowy landscape of the painting coupled with the grey and blue colour palette creates a grotesque and haunting effect that distorts figure and line. The singer's outstretched hands literally divide the light and the dark space of the canvas. One hand exists in the light the other in the darkness. This light and shadow make visible the control of the spectator's gaze that the artist possesses. The brightness from the stage light exhibits what the audience is allowed to perceive and the shadowy darkness of the back or side stage is what the audience is not permitted to see. The way the paint is applied to create the background creates the impression of a smokescreen, as the spectator is unable to make out any concrete images even in the bright areas. The shadows are ever threatening to encompass the opera singer

herself as they creep over her from the top right and the bottom left corner. The brightness of her red mouth and her red dress draw the attention of the spectator. This contrast between light and dark and the use of colour in general demonstrate the way in which the spectator is carefully manipulated. The background and the place where one can guess an audience might exist is muted and vaguened through Swanzy's application of paint. The diffuse light fails to light the entire stage, much like in *A Piece of Monologue*. Even though this painting is quite dramatic in nature and includes an unsettling use of bright colour and grey tones, which seems to contrast with Beckett's stage images, connections can be drawn between the manipulation of the spectator during performance as well as drawing attention to the performer on stage as haunting and/or grotesque in much the same way Mouth does in *Not I*. Swanzy uses punches of colour in a similar way that Beckett uses a spotlight to control the spectator's gaze.



Mary Swanzy. *The Opera Singer* (c. 1950). The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA).

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger has points out that “the painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on canvas or paper.”<sup>105</sup> But this is impossible. Beckett recognises the inherent failure in the artist’s obligation to express, while knowing and accepting the fact that expression is impossible. For a piece of art

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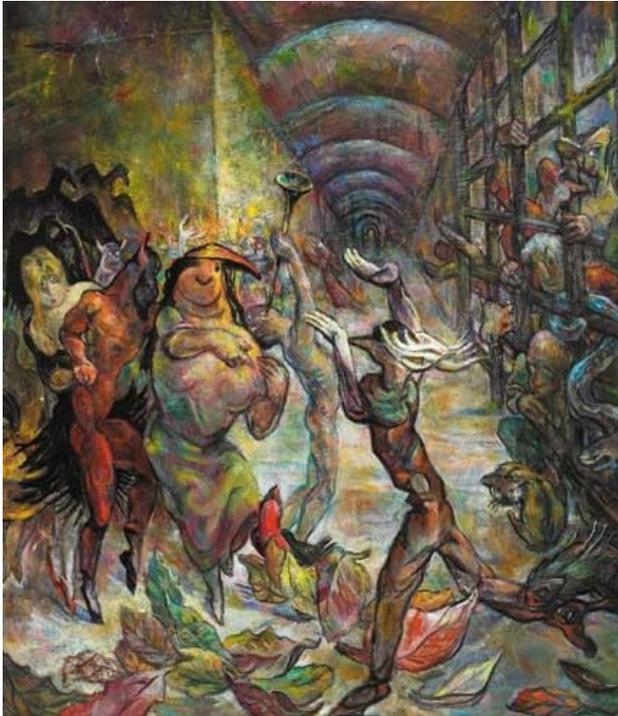
<sup>105</sup> Berger 3.

produced to represent or relate to what is in its creator's mind is impossible. For Beckett, this becomes the reason why failure is the best option for the creative process. Only art that recognises and revels in this inherent failure and, as a result, shows the spectator that the relationship between subject and object will always fail to relate or represent the intention of the artist is worthwhile. This, Beckett states, "is the task of the artist."<sup>106</sup> An artist that accepts the failure of expression does not reconstitute his way of seeing through his marks on the canvas. Instead, these marks on the canvas remind the spectator that this type of relation cannot be fulfilled. Beckett recognised this in Bram van Velde and Jack B. Yeats's painting. Mary Swanzy also continued to recognise this failure in her increasingly fantastical paintings. The fantastical paintings that Swanzy produced resist relation between the outer world of the senses and the inner world of the artist. The fantastical nature of some of the landscapes suggest the inner landscape of the mind rather than any tangible place, but her paintings acknowledge that this can only be a suggestion not an actualisation. Painting cannot fully realise or recreate the inside world anymore than it can recreate a realistic scene perfectly. The nonsensical takes on forms and figuration, if only to show the failure of convention. A painting like *Roundabout* (1966) juxtaposes light and dark, pastel and dull, as well as images of darkness and dreamlike figures to create an image of unprecedented strangeness. The image is full of bizarre disfigured creatures that exist in a hellish prison-like landscape. One of the only recognisable figures is that of Satan. On the left hand side of the painting, it looks as if the figures are dancing or swaying. On the other hand, the figure in the foreground, who might at first look like he is joining in the dance, is more likely to be trying to flee as a viscous cat bites his ankle. The figures on the right side of the painting are crowded

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<sup>106</sup> Driver 23.

behind bars that are guarded by a snake and other animals. Their body language suggests that these figures are trying to get out. There are dark crow-like figures, a dumbfounded blonde woman and a trumpeter. The strangeness of the image catches the spectator off guard, and suggests highly imaginative and personal symbols. There is some realism within the architecture of this painting. But like Yeats's figures that will never "intermingle," the relation between the inner world of the artist's mind and the outer world of the tangible present difficulties in relation and interpretation.



Mary Swanzy. *Roundabout* (1966). Private Collection. Courtesy of Whyte's Irish Art and Collectables.

Swanzy makes the awkwardness and grotesque nature of performance evident in a painting like *Above the City* (circa 1959), which features a tightrope walker, and *Stage*

*Act with Figures* (c. 1950s-60s). Her intense thinning and muting of paint colour emphasise the artist's manipulation of the paint before it is applied to the canvas. These paintings make the viewer aware that she is viewing something from a vantage point that she should not see. For example, in *Stage Act with Figures*, which features a group of what look women performers, the viewer is seeing the show from behind rather than in front of the curtain. Some of the women have made-up faces, while others wear masks. Some are active and in control, while others are passive, and appear to be helpless, or foolish. Elements of the circus and of opera are present on the stage. The spectator gets to see what the performers see as they look out at the audience; in this case, the space of the audience takes the form of blinding white light. Likewise in *Above the City*, the spectator is placed at the same height as the tightrope walker, rather than watching the scene from below. In this way, the viewer is forced to participate in the event of a dangerous act of performance.



Mary Swanzy. *Stage Act with Figures* (c. 1950-60s). Private Collection. Courtesy of Adam's Auctioneers.



Mary Swanzy. *Above the City* (c.1959). Private Collection. Courtesy of Whyte's.

In 1968, when she was eighty-six, a major Mary Swanzy retrospective was mounted by the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin advocated by Dr Fitzpatrick and other Swanzy admirers, such as James White, Ann Crookshank, Norah McGuinness, Frank Mitchell, Sarah Purser and Una Sealy. This was her first exhibition in seventeen years, and it succeeded in pulling Swanzy out of reclusion. She began exhibiting again and even giving interviews. The Dawson Gallery Dublin held a one-woman showing of 34 of Swanzy's paintings in 1974. She also began showing at the RHA again that year (*Scene in Provence* and *The Travellers*). In 1977, she is interviewed by Andy O'Mahony on RTÉ Radio 1 in May. The RHA exhibits *Donegal Coast* and *Hurricane* that year as well. She also features in a Kilkenny Group exhibition. In 1978, she dies in her London home at ninety-six years of age. After her death, she features in a few exhibits, but she falls into relative obscurity. In 1982, the Taylor Gallery in Dublin held a centenary exhibition of sixty-four of her works. In 1983, three of her paintings feature in an exhibit by the National Gallery of Ireland entitled *The Irish Impressionists*. In 1986, the Pym's Gallery, London, showed sixty-one of her paintings and drawings in *An Exhibition of Paintings by Mary Swanzy*. The Sligo Art Gallery held *Mary Swanzy Exhibition*, which displays forty-three paintings. In 1989, the Pym's Gallery held another exhibition of her work that included seventy-four of her works and was entitled *An Exhibition of Paintings by Mary Swanzy HRHA (1882-1978)* they reprised this exhibition nine years later in 1998. Swanzy, did not feature prominently in an exhibit again until the 2013 exhibit *Analysing Cubism* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, but even then, Hone and Jellet are given preferential treatment. Swanzy is much again banished to the space of watered-down Cubism.

Swanzy's friend and *Irish Times* writer, P.J. Murphy, describes Swanzy in the

following way,

She was unique, eccentric, cunning, highly intelligent and deeply interested in all aspects of human nature [...] before she died said to me one day: 'I [...] thought very seriously about going back to live and die in [Ireland], but I couldn't, because I couldn't stand the narrowness of my life there.'<sup>107</sup>

She remained in Blackheath, where she painted consistently until a fatal brain haemorrhage in 1978, which robbed her of life at the age of ninety-six, with her head still full of ideas for new paintings. Beckett echoes Swanzy's statement about living/dying in Ireland in a letter to Pamela Mitchell: "The old Irish slogan 'Die in Ireland.' It's a dangerous place to come back to for any other purpose."<sup>108</sup> Both Beckett and Swanzy realise the smallness of life there, and why they had to leave. The violence of the twentieth century and her gender influence her ever changing and increasingly disturbing and fantastical style. Like Beckett, she utilised failure to expand her artistic possibilities and as a response to her life experience.

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<sup>107</sup> Murphy 10.

<sup>108</sup> SB to Pamela Mitchell, 23 June 1954. Vol. 2, 505.

## Conclusion

This thesis has shown that Beckett's lifelong engagement with the visual arts shaped, nurtured and expanded his aesthetic of failure and his purposeful worsening of text and image through errancy, both thematically and technically. The failure of relation between the artist's inner world and the outer world of the senses that Beckett noticed in Bram van Velde's painting captivated him and inspired his late works. He also favoured painters that were not technically competent and that did not have a clear agenda or ideology, as he pointed out about Ballmer's work: "Object not exploited to illustrate an idea."<sup>1</sup> Painting allows Beckett to articulate and contemplate his increasing interest in purposeful failure.

This thesis has also described how Beckett's engagement with painting gave him a forum to consider and develop his aesthetic mission. This material is richest in his letters, diaries and criticism, especially in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. During this time, Beckett uses his letters and diaries to further his education on visual art as well as discuss his aesthetic concerns with people that are experts in the field of painting, such as Thomas MacGreevy and Georges Duthuit. His German diaries (1936-37) include copious notes about the paintings he had seen as well as transcribed details that he has obtained from art-books and gallery catalogues. His interest in painting is clear, and references to paintings that he was fascinated with show up in even his earliest creative works such as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932). But in the end, Beckett's thoughts on failure and expression in art proved more extreme than Duthuit's and MacGreevy's, and his

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<sup>1</sup> German Diaries, 26 November 1936. Vol. 2.

writing about art to mentors as well as in critical pieces about artists that he admired stop by the mid-1950s.

This thesis has also made explicit how Beckett uses his fidelity to failure to interrogate expression, abstraction and representation. The visual artists Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy acted as visual counterpoints to illustrate and illuminate this interrogation. The discussion has shown how artists, such as Beckett, Swanzy and Yeats, resist complete abstraction in order for images to abstract and worsening before the viewer's eyes without becoming fully abstract. This is significant, because, as Beckett pointed out, "we find ourselves being faced with the pure manustupration of Orphic and abstract art."<sup>2</sup> In other words complete abstraction is not the solution to the problems of expression and relation. Instead, for Beckett, and for Yeats and Swanzy as well, "there is nothing more exciting for the writer, or richer in unexploited expressive possibilities, than the failure to express."<sup>3</sup>

In addition, this thesis has argued Beckett's relationships with art, artists and art critics reveal that the way he viewed the art that he admired was indicative of how he wanted his texts and dramas to be viewed as well as performed. He utilises the methodology of errancy described in chapter one to elicit his desired response. For Beckett, it should be difficult to comment on a work or art, and the spectator should be drawn back to the work of art repeatedly to linger in front of it. He was insistent that spectators should "Merely bow in wonder"<sup>4</sup> in front of a work of art, and he tried to cultivate this response in his own works.

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<sup>2</sup> SB to Duthuit, 2 March 1949. Vol. 2, 131.

<sup>3</sup> SB to Matti Megged, 21 November 1960. Vol. 3, 377.

<sup>4</sup> "Homage" 149.

The second half of this thesis argues that this methodology can be used as a tool and guiding principle in understanding the works of two **important** Irish artists: Jack B. Yeats and Mary Swanzy. This thesis has shown how Jack B. Yeats uses purposeful failure to highlight the materiality of paint and canvas. The competition between the materiality of paint and canvas and the image portrayed reveal a violent argument or battle that takes place on the canvas itself. I have argued that Yeats purposefully failed to use accepted painting techniques and methods, including how he mixed his paints, in order to worsen his images in much the same way that Beckett does in his writing. Yeats also vaguens images and their connection to specific events or places in order further frustrate the spectator.

In addition to providing background on the much neglected Irish painter Mary Swanzy and demonstrating how she contributed significantly to Irish modernist painting, chapter four also contends that her utilisation of a methodology of failure, similar to the way that Beckett does, demonstrates remarkable similarities between the two artists, especially in their post-World War II works. The fact that Swanzy did not date her works and did not openly market her pieces has resulted in her falling into relative obscurity. She also refused to exhibit her works between 1951-1968 even though she continued to paint furiously. This has also contributed to the lack of scholarly work focused on Swanzy. She was a prolific painter who is very important in terms of Irish modernist visual art. This thesis has aimed to bring her out of obscurity and to give the detailed consideration of her art and life that her work merits.

The lacuna that this scholarship has filled is to examine in detail Beckett's relationship to the visual arts and to demonstrate how these associations nurtured his

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methodology of failure and his preoccupation with the spectator. It has also analysed Beckett's work alongside two Irish painters. Finally it has filled a gap in art history and criticism by offering more in-depth analysis of Swanzy's paintings.

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