

Samuel Beckett's 'Ill Seen': Visual Impairment in the Late Dramatic Works

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's critics have often written about his "aesthetics of impoverishment," focusing on the ways in which Beckett impaired verbal language. Following the lead of those critics who have focused on the "ill said" in Beckett's work, this paper traces Beckett's use of the "ill seen"—i.e. the ways in which Beckett impaired the visual dimensions of his late dramatic works.

In 1949, during a series of dialogues about the nature of contemporary art, Samuel Beckett spoke of an art that prefers "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Disjecta*, 139). A number of critics have used this statement as a starting point for discussions of Beckett's "aesthetics of impoverishment."¹ They have argued that Beckett's work is full of that which is unspeakable, unwriteable and, indeed, unnamable. These elements, according to critics, contribute to an aesthetic of verbal impoverishment. In this paper, I argue that the "ill said" was not the only form of impoverishment that Beckett favored. Of equal importance was Beckett's use of the "ill seen"²—that which is unseen and unseeable, but which must, paradoxically, be seen. Beckett's later works are especially concerned with impaired and minimal vision. Visual impairment—either depicted in the work itself or literally imposed on the audience—features in nearly all of the late stage, film, and television works. In what follows, I examine the various techniques of visual impairment Beckett used in *Endgame*, *Rockaby*, and *Film*, while making passing references to several of his other late dramatic works. In each case, I examine how Beckett engenders visual impairment and to what end.

To begin, we must differentiate between the two forms of visual impairment that Beckett most often employs. The first form affects the characters in his work. Beckett's characters often have some impairment of, or aversion to, vision. *Endgame*'s Hamm—whose eyes have "gone all white" with blindness—provides one example of this form of visual impairment (*Endgame*, 94).³ The second form of visual impairment is generated by means of Beckett's stage or screen production and the visual dimensions of the work itself. While the first form of visual impairment affects his characters, the second form affects the spectators of his work, be they theatergoers, moviegoers, or TV viewers. To take one example, *Not I* calls for the "stage in darkness but for MOUTH," which is "faintly lit" with the rest of the

face “in shadow” (*Not I*, 376). In this case, the stage production places severe limits on the audience’s field of vision, creating the level of visual impairment Beckett sought. His stage directions for *Not I* make it clear that the audience should not even see the “invisible microphone” into which MOUTH speaks (*Ibid.*). In both instances, Beckett foregrounds vision itself by severely impairing it. Whether the impairment affects his characters, his audience, or both, Beckett constantly reminds us that our vision is no more reliable or stable than that of his characters.

Beckett once stated that he turned to drama as a respite from writing novels or, as he put it, the “awful prose” of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. He also suggested that it was comforting to work in a medium that requires the artist to submit to certain rules and constraints, no matter how much he seemed to challenge them. One of the inescapable constraints of drama that Beckett was forced to confront and challenge was its inherently visual nature. As Hugh Kenner points out, “drama is a ritual enacted in an enclosed space into which fifty or more people are staring” (Kenner, 133). In his early dramatic works, Beckett seems to have surrendered to this inevitable condition of the theatre. Early plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* employ sets and movement that provide a degree (albeit slight) of visual stimulation. If Beckett challenged the inherently visual aspect of the theatre at all in his early works, he did so by employing minimal sets that went unchanged between acts, thereby subjecting his audience to the same unstimulating visual field throughout the play. Beckett seems either to parody or grudgingly adhere to the convention of changing sets in act two of *Waiting for Godot*, which opens at the “Same Time. Same Place” as act one, but with one minor difference: “the tree has four or five leaves” (*Waiting for Godot*, 53). Meanwhile, *Endgame* contains only one act, which is set entirely in the “bare interior” bathed in “grey light” of Hamm, Nagg, and Nell’s room (*Endgame*, 92). This is hardly a visual feast, and yet *Endgame* contains more visual stimulation than any of Beckett’s later plays.

In his early plays, Beckett subverts the visual demands of the theatre by impairing his characters’ vision. This form of visual impairment is used to particular effect in *Endgame*. The play’s four characters suffer from some form of visual defect. Hamm, of course, is blind. When asked “How are your eyes?”, Clov says they are “bad” (*Ibid.*, 95). Similarly, Nagg and Nell, who sit just out of one another’s reach, admit that their “sight has failed,” for they can “hardly” see each other (*Ibid.*, 99). Since he is blind, Hamm must rely on Clov to look out of the windows and report what he sees outside. When Clov manages, with some difficulty, to “turn the telescope on the without,” he reports that he sees: “Zero...zero...and zero,” that the “light is sunk,” and that all is “lead,” “grey,” “light black” (*Ibid.*, 106-7). Clov is little help to the blind Hamm, who wishes at times to see “the sky, the earth” (*Ibid.*, 100). He is even less help to the audience, who would also like to see out the window if only to escape the grayness within. Clov not only acts as Hamm’s eyes, but also as the eyes of the

play's spectators. In this instance, Beckett uses the first form of visual impairment (that of character) to engender the latter (impairing his audience's view of the outside or offstage world).

Endgame contains several images associated with vision, all of which serve to foreground visual impairment. Eyes and darkness are prevalent in the play. Hamm prophesizes that Clov's bad eyes will continue to get worse until "one day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me... Infinite emptiness will be all around you" (*Ibid.*, 109). Beckett also refers to visual aids that no longer serve their purpose as a means to foreground visual impairment. Though he is blind, Hamm wears glasses. Clov uses a telescope to assist his examination of the outside world, but reports that it is "all gone" (*Ibid.*, 107). Similarly, the play begins with the curtains drawn, yet, even after Clov opens them, the windows frame a view of "zero" (*Ibid.*, 94) and are therefore as useless as Hamm's glasses or Clov's telescope. The picture hanging beside the windows is equally obsolete. It is turned to the wall from the beginning of the play, and even when it is removed by Clov, it is stood on the floor, still facing against the wall. These useless visual devices create an overall impression of visual impoverishment. After *Endgame*, Beckett took a more direct approach to challenging the inherently visual nature of the theatre. In later works, he focused more on impairing the vision of his audience than that of his characters.

If *Endgame* is representative of Beckett's early experiments with visual impairment, then *Rockaby* shows this theme coming into full maturity with Beckett taking more extreme measures. The sole image of *Rockaby* is that of a woman, "prematurely old" and dressed in black, sitting in a rocking chair listening to her own recorded voice (*Rockaby*, 433). Like *Not I*, *Rockaby* employs a visually-impoverished stage set, calling for the light to be "subdued" (*Ibid.*). The visual field is just "wide enough to include narrow limits of rock or concentrated on face" with the "rest of stage dark" (*Ibid.*). Beckett employed this "rest of stage dark" technique in many of his later works, including *Krapp's Last Tape*: "Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness" (215); *Footfalls*: "Fade up to dim on strip. Rest in darkness" (399); *Ohio Impromptu*: "Light on table midstage. Rest of stage in darkness" (445); *Quad*: "Dim on area from above fading out into dark" (452); and *What Where*: "dimly lit, surrounded by shadow" (470). In all of these works, the surrounding darkness acts to limit the physical space of the stage and, thus, to limit the space perceived by the audience.

In *Rockaby*, this restricted visual field is made worse by the lighting, which begins as "subdued" and becomes slightly dimmer at the end of each part. The woman's appearance also adds to the impression of visual impoverishment. She is dressed in black, her hair is gray, and her hands and face are white. This monotone color palette creates an austere visual effect. Commenting on Beckett's characteristic use of a black and white color scheme

in *Rockaby*, Jane Alison Hale says that these are the “predominant colors of Beckett’s latest works,” and that they “evoke for him the undifferentiation of the void, toward which tend human life and all the perceptual efforts of which it consists from the very moment of birth” (Hale, 135). While this may seem a rather bleak interpretation of Beckett’s work, Hale hits upon a central aspect of *Rockaby* and the other late dramatic works—namely, the “void” of perception which finds expression in Beckett’s techniques of visual impairment. This is the visual void into which Beckett wished to plunge both his characters and his audience.

While spectators of *Rockaby* are confronted with a visually-impooverished, poorly-lit, black-and-white image of a woman sitting in a rocking chair listening to herself, this image is not all there is to “see” in the play. The play’s onstage visuals are only the starting point for a succession of scenes which the audience is meant to conjure in their imaginations. *Rockaby* causes its audience to “see” something else in their minds as they listen to the woman’s recorded voice. In the case of *Rockaby*, conjuring up these images is not as simple as it sounds. The language of the play is, as Hale has astutely observed, “nonchronological, repetitious, spiraling, cumulative, and fluid” (*Ibid.*, 138). If another adjective could be added to Hale’s description of the play’s language, it would be “confusing,” for even the most sophisticated spectator will find it difficult to see another image in his or her mind. This method of inviting the audience to mentally conjure up an image by listening to the woman’s monologue while simultaneously impairing their inner vision through the sheer difficulty and fragmented quality of the language, seems intentional on Beckett’s part. He manages to impair the spectators’ view of any image derived from the woman’s voice by means of his convoluted language. Beckett uses a fragmentary verbal style to engender fragmentary visual perception.

Like *Endgame*, *Rockaby* foregrounds visual impairment through a series of images associated with vision. Eyes, windows, and blinds are prevalent in *Rockaby*. We learn from the recorded voice that the woman we see on stage has spent her life in pursuit of vision, desperately searching “to see” another like herself and to “be seen” by that other (*Rockaby*, 439, 441). Having searched “all eyes / all sides / high and low / for another / another living soul” like herself, having “[sat] at her window...facing other windows” with “famished eyes,” the woman has come back inside, “let down the blind,” and sat in the rocking chair to “stop her eyes” (*Ibid.*, 436, 437, 439, 441, 442). In the woman’s story, Hale sees “an indication that human existence is nothing more or less than a continual, albeit fruitless, struggle for perception” (Hale, 135). Perception and futility are indeed the central concerns of *Rockaby*. The woman has spent her life searching with “famished eyes” only to renounce her impossible hope of seeing, or being seen by, another like herself. Now the woman wishes to “stop her eyes,” so that perception (and she) may come to an end. In other words, for vision to end, being itself must also cease. This idea—taken from Bishop Berkeley’s

statement “*esse est percipi*” (“to be is to be perceived”)—was further expounded in Beckett’s *Film*, which is arguably his most explicit and methodical work on the theme of vision.

If *Rockaby* focuses on the futility of perception, then *Film* is fundamentally concerned with its inevitability. Significantly, Beckett used Berkeley’s “*esse est percipi*” as the epigraph to *Film*. Beckett summarizes the central idea of *Film* thus: “All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being” (*Film*, 323). This “suppression” of “extraneous perception” forms Beckett’s principal method of foregrounding visual impairment in *Film*. Upon entering his room, *Film*’s protagonist covers a window and a mirror, ejects a cat and dog, destroys a picture of “the face of God the Father” (*Ibid.*, 327), covers a parrot cage and a goldfish bowl, and sits down in a rocking chair to inspect a series of photographs before tearing them up. In other words, he attempts to remove all possible sources of “extraneous perception” in order to eliminate both his own perception and his state of being perceived.

Unlike *Endgame*, *Rockaby*, and other stage works, *Film* employs unique, filmic methods to foreground visual impairment. Beckett’s use of two camera perspectives is a case in point. The camera conveys two separate viewpoints: that of E, the perceiving eye, and that of O, the perceived object. Both perspectives belong to *Film*’s protagonist, but O’s vision is distinguished from E’s by being blurred through a lens gauze. By blurring O’s vision and alternating between camera shots of O’s and E’s perspectives, Beckett impairs the viewer’s vision, which adds to the overall effect of visual impoverishment. In this manner, *Film* subverts the visual advantage usually enjoyed by the spectator of a motion picture:

Conventionally, the viewer of a film sees more than the characters in the film. One might say that the spectator has a total perception of the action whereas the characters have a partial perception. In *Film*, however, since the field of vision of the camera-eye never exceeds that of the protagonist, the viewer is denied total perception (Federman, 279).

We have seen this denial of “total perception” employed both in *Endgame* (through Clov’s refusal to act as Hamm’s and the audience’s eyes) and in *Rockaby* (through the narrowing of the stage space, employing dim lighting, and adopting a monotone color palette).

The methods Beckett used to engender *Film*’s visual impairment parallel those he employed to similar effect in *Endgame* and *Rockaby*. Shot entirely in black and white, *Film* employs the same visually impoverished color scheme as *Rockaby* and *Endgame*—that shade between black and white which Clov calls “light black” (*Endgame*, 107). The “small, barely furnished room” (*Film*, 326) of *Film* recalls the austere setting of *Endgame* and the probable setting of *Rockaby* (were we able to see into the darkness that surrounds the woman on the rocking chair). The rooms in *Film* and *Endgame* are furnished with a door, one or two curtained windows, a picture on the wall, and a chair. In both cases, the windows serve as a means of visual contact with the external world, and in both cases they are obsolete. The

protagonist of *Film* takes great care to draw the curtain on his window the moment he enters the room. This drawing of the curtain recalls the woman pulling down her blind to cover her now-obsolete window and renounce her quest to see or be seen in *Rockaby*.

At the beginning of *Film*, the protagonist runs with blind haste through the streets with his hat pulled down over his eyes (in the script) or a handkerchief covering his face (in the film version starring Buster Keaton). He does this in order to prevent himself from perceiving or being perceived. Although this street scene is rare for Beckett in its portrayal of the external world (something denied to the spectator of *Endgame* and *Rockaby*), Beckett insists that the scene is only clear to E, but denied to O, who is “hastening blindly” through the outer world (*Film*, 324). *Film*’s protagonist, like Hamm in *Endgame*, uses two means of shielding his eyes from the external world. Both characters wear handkerchiefs over their faces and O’s black eye patch recalls Hamm’s black glasses. O’s eye patch is both a means to escape the awareness of being perceived, and a deliberate attempt to impair his own vision by eliminating his depth perception. As in *Endgame* and *Rockaby*, images of eyes are prevalent in *Film*, which opens and closes with a close-up image of Buster Keaton’s heavily creased and wrinkled eyelid. Close-ups of the elderly couple’s faces in the street depict them putting on and taking off corrective visual aids: a “lorgnon” and a “pince-nez” (*Ibid.*, 325). Eyes are also suggested by the rocking chair’s headrest and by the two eyelets on the folder in which the protagonist keeps his photographs. These photographs also contain eye imagery. The first photograph contains an image of an infant being “devoured” by his mother’s “severe eyes” (*Ibid.*, 333). For all its preoccupation with vision, *Film* contains instances of the many visual impairment techniques that are central to Beckett’s late dramatic works.

It is clear that as Beckett’s work progressed, it became increasingly minimalist or impoverished, especially in terms of its visual dimensions. From *Endgame* onwards, there was a progressive concentration and reduction of stage space, movement, language, and visual imagery. By adhering to this “less is more” aesthetic, Beckett ensured that every visual element that *is* present on stage or on screen would foreground vision and its impairment. New productions of the late dramatic works have not shied away from Beckett’s characteristic use of visual impairment. On the contrary, they have embraced it. In July 2015, a production of Beckett’s *All That Fall*, which was originally written as a radio play and therefore has no visuals whatsoever, was adapted for the stage during the Enniskillen International Beckett Festival in Northern Ireland. The play was staged in a pitch-black auditorium, with the lights turned off, and blackout blinds installed. The seven actors of the play were heard, but not seen. It should be noted that this production was fully sanctioned by the notoriously protective Beckett estate, who said that it was very much in the spirit of the playwright and that it would have met with his approval. Max Stafford-Clark, the director of this pitch-black production, described the experience of

pitching his idea to Edward Beckett, the sole executor of his uncle's literary estate:

I got a letter from Edward Beckett saying, "What is your vision for the play?" I replied that there was absolutely no vision at all. The whole thing takes place in the dark. He said that is exactly how Beckett imagined it - with voices coming from the void. It is gratifying to know that is how he himself conceived it (Singh).

This production is not only conducive to Beckett's aesthetic, it feels like the culmination of the playwright's lifelong subversion of the visual aspect of the theatre. Stafford-Clark is simply taking Beckett's use of visual impairment to its logical extreme.⁴

As is usually the case with Beckett, questions remain. Why did he focus on vision to such a great extent? To what end did he employ visual impairment? Several answers are possible. Perhaps it was an attempt to give expression to the visual affliction Beckett suffered in later life. Perhaps he simply wanted to challenge the inherently visual nature of the stage and screen. Perhaps it was just another facet of Beckett's aesthetics of impoverishment—an attempt on his part to match the "ill said" with the "ill seen."

In the early 1960s, Beckett began to suffer from a number of vision problems. He often complained to friends and correspondents about his deteriorating vision. James Knowlson's biography of Beckett contains numerous passages relating to the author's visual complaints. Once, after dropping off his car at the mechanic, Beckett, who had already been diagnosed with two cataracts and had only a "blurred tunnel vision," fell into a deep garage pit and cracked a few of his ribs (Knowlson, 513). According to Knowlson, it was after this incident that Beckett became obsessed with his severely-impaired sight:

He felt increasingly fearful of the damage he might do to himself in future, if his sight continued its recent decline. He was obsessed by the very real fear that he was starting to go blind (*Ibid.*, 486).

Of course, Beckett had a model for the blindness that awaited him in his friend and one-time mentor, James Joyce. During the 1930s, Beckett assisted the near-blind Joyce with a number of visual odd jobs, including note-taking, reading, and dictation. Remembering how dependent Joyce became on his friends and helpers during his progression towards blindness, Beckett was "filled with horror" (*Ibid.*, 486-487). Considering Beckett's own visual difficulties and his ever-present fear of going blind, it is easy to see why so many of his characters exhibit visual impairment and blindness. Take Winnie, the protagonist of *Happy Days*, who spends the first few moments of the play trying to read the writing on the handle of her toothbrush. Each time she brings the handle to her face, she is able to make out one more word. She begins: "pure...what?", and continues: "genuine...pure...what?" (*Happy Days*, 139). This goes on for a little while, until she finally admits defeat: "genuine...pure...what? - [*lays down brush*] - blind next - [*takes off spectacles*] - ah well - [*lays down spectacles*] - seen enough - [*feels in bodice for handkerchief*] - I suppose" (*Ibid.*). A few lines later, resuming her

struggle, she continues: “fully guaranteed...genuine pure... - [looks closer] - genuine pure... [Takes off spectacles, lays them and brush down, gazes before her.] Old things. [Pause.] Old eyes [Long pause.]” (*Ibid.*, 140). Anyone could reasonably interpret Winnie’s anxiety about her aging, failing eyes as a stand-in for Beckett’s anxiety. The connection is easy to see. Yet, for an artist as accomplished and indeterminate as Beckett, a simple biographical explanation is not entirely satisfactory. To put it bluntly, Beckett is not that easy to pin down.

Visual impairment is so prevalent in Beckett’s work that it must serve some higher artistic purpose. As with most of Beckett’s favorite devices and themes—verbal fracturing, aging bodies, babbling protagonists—visual impairment is just another facet of his overall aesthetic—what Beckett himself called an aesthetic of “impotence” (Shenker, 148); or what a recent study has called an “art of mismaking” (De La Durantaye, 1).

It is notoriously difficult to explain or sum up Samuel Beckett’s artistic achievement. One of the best assessments actually comes from Beckett himself. Because of his early association with Joyce, Beckett was often asked about how his work related to, or was influenced by, that of his friend. There is no doubt that Beckett’s early work, particularly his first novel *Murphy*, was directly influenced by Joyce’s writing. However, as he matured, Beckett’s style began to deviate from Joyce’s. By the end of his career, Beckett had moved so far away, in fact, that one might reasonably imagine Western literature as a spectrum with James Joyce occupying one extreme, and Samuel Beckett the other. In a 1956 interview, Beckett differentiated his artistic task from Joyce’s in a way that provides valuable insight into why he might have employed visual impairment to such an extent.

The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement - must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable - as something by definition incompatible with art (Shenker, 148).

In other words, Joyce aimed for omniscience by adding more and more to his work. Beckett, on the other hand, aimed for impotence by making do with less and less. His artistic goal was to continually pare back language, detail, and scenery. According to Beckett, his final work would be a blank page. Beckett’s explanation of his artistic task resonates strongly with his use of visual impairment. Considered in the light of his explanation, visual impairment emerges as just another tool in Beckett’s arsenal of impotence. Beckett goes on to justify his quest for impotence, saying, “I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his or her own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er [somebody who cannot]” (*Ibid.*). Beckett’s work is full of “non-knowers,” “non-can-ers,” and—as the foregoing inventory of visual impairment has shown—non-seers.

Whether he was motivated by biographical or artistic concerns, Beckett's ongoing treatment of vision and its impairment is one of the many ways his work gives off a sense of consistency and coherence. By tracing these preoccupations across his work, we gain a better understanding of his artistic task. The closer we look at Beckett's treatment of visual impairment, the more we see.

Notes

- 1 See especially Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Harvard University Press, 1993), and S. E. Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Indiana University Press, 1985).
- 2 These terms are taken from the title of Beckett's short novel *Ill Seen Ill Said*, which is collected in *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, and Worstward Ho* (Grove Press, 1996).
- 3 Pozzo, who goes blind between the two acts of *Waiting for Godot*, provides yet another example. Beckett's 1976 play *Rough for Theatre I* contains another blind protagonist, a beggar called A, who plays his fiddle in hopes of getting money from passers-by.
- 4 In March and April of 2016, Stafford-Clark staged another visually-impaired production of *All That Fall* on London's West End. This time, he blindfolded every member of the audience while the actors moved about them. Once again, the Beckett Estate gave the production its much-coveted, rarely-bestowed seal of approval.

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