Still Living: The Influence of Visual and Performing Arts in Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*

BA dissertation

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's late prose text *Ill Seen Ill Said* is one of his most enigmatic works. Consequently, many scholars have carried out exhaustive studies to uncover meaning through the many intra- and intertextual references that the text contains. In this search for elucidation, however, the highly visual nature of this work has received relatively little critical attention.

This study focuses on the images in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and how they are constructed. It traces Beckett's interest in painting and how techniques from this medium are transferred into prose. Similarly, it shows how Beckett's work for stage, film and television influences the creation of a mutable world in which the border between the animate and inanimate grows increasingly indistinct.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, visual arts, eye, camera.

0. Introduction

The minimal storyline of *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), Samuel Beckett's English translation of the original French *Mal vu mal dit* (1981), comprises an "old so dying woman" (20)[1] who spends her days in a humble cabin, except for when she ventures out to visit a "distant tomb" (16). Likewise, the surrounding landscape is easily described. The dwelling is located in a flat area of "meagre pastures" (8), ringed by "a zone of stones" formed by twelve upright blocks (13). Such a surface account of protagonist and place, however, fails to include the main source of narrative interest in this work.

As the title suggests, it is the acts of seeing and saying that provide the narrative tension in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, as well as its complication. This prose piece is both perceived and conceived by two 'eyes': "the eye of flesh" and "the other" (17). The former is external and predatory, surveying the scene, and the latter is the inner eye of the imagination "having no need of light to see" (23). Here, as Nicky Marsh observes in her essay "All Known – Never Seen", "[t]he text overtly fictionalises a tension between the act of perception and the act of fiction" (Marsh, 2000: 247). This narrative counterpoint, however, fails to hold: "Already all confusion. Things and imaginings" (20). As Marsh points out, "[the text] actually becomes entangled in the apparent contradiction that it presents to itself between whether it is perception, or the power of fiction, that creates the 'reality' that it describes" (Marsh, 2000: 247-248).

Indeed, such 'confusion' is endemic in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. As the work progresses, temporal and spatial parameters grow unstable, and boundaries blur between the real and imaginary – "[t]hat old tandem" (40) – the living and the dead, and the physical and ethereal. Similarly, shifts take place in narrative viewpoint and language. Metafiction

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[1] Quotations from Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982) will be denoted by page number only.

intrudes upon third person narration, and the texture of language moves between prose and verse.

Given the enigmatic and uncertain nature of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, it is not surprising that critical analyses have often centred on providing external anchorage for the text by placing it within a theoretical framework. Readings range from Late Modernist (Weller, 2015) and the ontological (Poina, 2009) to the psychoanalytical (Piette, 2014) and, more recently, the ecocritical (Farrant, 2020). Likewise, academics have sought to provide elucidation through the mining and interpretation of the many teasing references in the narrative; intratextual and intertextual (Nixon, 2006; Brater, 1994), as well as numerous other cultural allusions (Byron, 2020). What is notable, however, given the plethora of academic studies available on *Ill Seen Ill Said*, is how few centre on the highly visual nature of the work, and the way that images are perceived and rendered into words.

The aim of this study is to foreground the visual aspects of *Ill Seen Ill Said* by examining three interrelated questions. The first concerns the painterly depiction of the central images and the effect this has within the context of the narrative; the second centres on how fictive images transform or mutate, and the means by which these changes occur; and, finally, the third focuses on the different types of language employed in the text, and the end to which they serve.

In an attempt to address these three elements, I will be putting forward the hypothesis that the unstable nature of animate and inanimate objects in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is affected by the different uses of media that Beckett brings to bear upon the work. I will argue that Beckett's interest in painting and the visual arts informs his written practice, as do his experimentation with the effects of stage lighting in the theatre and his innovative use of the camera in his film and television work.

My analysis of *Ill Seen Ill Said* takes the form of a close reading of the text. In order to support my arguments, I will make reference to academic studies that explore the use of visual representation in Beckett's prose fiction, as well as drawing on recent criticism which examines the intermedial nature of his oeuvre.

1. Painterly Prose

Beckett had a deep and lifelong interest in painting and the visual arts which informed every aspect of his literary work. Indeed, according to James Knowlson, on the basis of the powerful imagery of his stage and television plays, Beckett can also be considered as an important visual artist in his own right (Haynes and Knowlson, 2003: 43).

It was Knowlson's biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame* (Knowlson, 1997), which revealed the extent of Beckett's knowledge and love of painting, as well as his active involvement in art criticism in the form of published reviews in the 1930's (collected in *Disjecta*,1983), and his discussions on the nature and purpose of art in the late 1940's with art critic Georges Duthuit (Beckett, 1999). Since then, scholars have hotly debated Beckett's artistic aesthetic, but as Conor Carville points out in *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts,* "although Beckett's aesthetic of the image has a certain consistency across time, it is also always in a nuanced dialogue with the history of the twentieth century" (Carville, 2018: para 293). Lois Oppenheim also charts the different artistic influences in Beckett's work, although she maintains he ascribed ideologically to none: "an Expressionist, a Cubist, and a Surrealist – though never a Conceptual artist" (Oppenheim, 2000: 28). Speaking of his work in an interview with John Gruen in 1969, Beckett's standpoint seems to concur with this view: "I think I have freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky,

I have turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction – not give it yet another formal context" (Haynes and Knowlson, 2003: 92-93).

Many of Beckett's most arresting stage images have paintings as their inspiration. For example, Caspar David Friedrich's *Zwei Männer betrachten den Mond/Two Men Observing the Moon* was the source for *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* (Knowlson, 2003: 53), and Caravaggio's *Decollazione di San Giovanni Battista/ The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* lay behind the staging of *Not I*. Not only did the central image in Caravaggio's painting give Beckett the idea for the disembodied mouth in *Not I,* but the horrified woman standing to the left of Salome also partly inspired the figure of the downstage silent Auditor (Knowlson, 1997: 588).

Figure 1. Caravaggio's *Decollazione di San Giovanni Battista/The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608)

Paintings that Beckett had seen in art galleries and museums in Dublin, London, Paris, and during trips to Italy and Germany informed his theatre plays, but the influence of paintings and their observation is also very much present in his prose texts. At times, Beckett's narrators self-consciously wish to still what they observe to appreciate colour, composition and lighting, as in this scene from the short prose piece *From an Abandoned Work* (1954-55).

> The window-frame was green, pale, the house-wall grey and my mother white and so thin I could see past her... into the dark of the room, and on all that full the not long risen sun, and all small because of the distance, very pretty really the whole thing. I remember it, the old grey and then the thin green surround and the thin white against the dark, if only she could have been still and let me look at it all. (Beckett, 1995: 156)

Here, not only is a framed painting being composed within written narrative, but the act of looking at that image is also present. On this occasion the narrator does not succeed in freezing the scene, his mother "waving and fluttering and swaying in and out of the window" (Beckett, 1995: 156), but Beckett's experimentation with film and television would soon provide him with the ideal technological solution for the creation and viewing of static images.

Creating a painted scene in words is also pronounced in the prose fragment *Un soir*/*One Evening* (1980), which, according to Charles Krance in his bilingual varorium edition of *Mal vu mal dit*/*Ill Seen Ill Said Ill Seen,* was originally written as the opening for the later work (Krance, 1996: xx). In this short text a woman carrying plucked yellow flowers chances upon an old man in a green greatcoat lying in the grass as daylight fades. "The deserted fields. The old woman all in black stockstill. The body stockstill on the ground. Yellow at the end of a black arm. The white hair in the grass. The east foundering in night" (Beckett, 1995: 253-254). The scene is composed as if the reader's eye were scanning a painting: background, foreground, horizontal and vertical lines, contrast of colour and lighting. Towards the end of the piece, the image is distilled even further: "Black and green of the garments touching now. Near the white head the yellow of the few plucked flowers. The old sunlit face." The artifice is such that the narrator adds: "Tableaux vivant if you will" (Beckett, 1995: 254).

As in *One Evening*, in *Ill Seen Ill Said* attention is drawn to the composition of images. In the description of the old woman, the reader is privy to the shapes and colours of her construction: "Seated on the stones she is seen from behind. From the waist up.

Trunk black rectangle. Nape under frill of black lace. White half halo of hair" (27). There is also the materiality of paint present in the prose, the lambs being described as "[w]hite splotches in the grass" (11). By far the most notable painterly aspect of this work, however, is the diminished colour palette: except for the old woman's "washen blue" eyes (25, 39), the text's imagery is monochromatic.

There is an insistence on black and white and light and dark in *Ill Seen Ill Said* in the descriptions of the old woman, the cabin, the stones, moon and sky. The old woman's hands are "[s]trident white" with "[t]heir faintly leaden tinge killed by the black ground" (31); the lamb stockstill next to the darkly clad woman creates a "[c]lash of black and white" (36); and when walking in the snow, the woman is transformed into the polar opposite of her unlit dwelling: "All dark in the cabin while she whitens afar" (34). Other black and white contrasts abound in the text, such as: the clock, "[w]hite disc" with "[s]ixty black dots" (45); the stone, "[b]lack as jade the jasper that flecks its whiteness" (44); and what remains when all the created "bits and scraps" have gone: "Nothing left but black sky. White earth" (31). As if the images were musical compositions, black and white also have their own variations, respectively. The cabin floor and the old woman's skirt are depicted as "[e]bony boards. Black on black the brushing skirt" (41); and the stones in the moonlight are described as "[i]nnumerable white scabs all shapes and sizes. Of striking effect in the light of the moon" (10).

Beckett's stark imagery and his attention to the way mundane scenes and objects are lit could be partly influenced by his interest in the Old Masters' use of *chiaroscuro*. Carville points to a sub-genre of seventeenth century Dutch paintings that Beckett would have known well which depicts "anonymous figures sitting or reading bedside windows, often bathed in light" (Carville, 2018: para 7293). The parallel with the description of the old woman in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is striking: "At the other window. Rigid upright on her old

chair she watches for the radiant one. Her old deal spindlebacked kitchen chair. It emerges from out the last rays and sinking ever brighter is engulfed in its turn" (7).

At the time of writing *Mal vu mal dit,* Beckett was working on a piece for theatre, *Ohio Impromptu* (1980). This stage play also takes common themes from Dutch genre painting to form its central image: seated figures reading and listening. The set comprises two men sitting on white chairs at a white table with a black wide-brimmed hat placed in the middle. Both men are dressed in black and have long white hair; one reads from an open book, the other listens silently. According to Knowlson, the stage composition of this play is "thoroughly Rembrandtesque", and he observes that *Rockaby* (1980), the play that directly preceded O*hio Impromptu*, evokes another Rembrandt painting, *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer* (1661), which Beckett would have seen many times in the National Gallery in London (Knowlson, 2003: 69).

As well as creating resonant images suggesting themes and painting techniques from Old Master paintings, the black and white imagery in *Ill Seen Ill Said* also represents a movement towards death. In a number of his literary works, Beckett recreates a scene or resurrects a figure that he has used in an earlier piece but sets them in a later time. For example, the pacing figure in the 1976 stage play *Footfalls* is the same as the seated woman in *Rockaby*, rocking herself to death. Beckett explained to Knowlson that "[s]he has just gone a stage further" (Knowlson, 2003: 11). Similarly, the four scurrying figures in the television play *Quad* (1982) are transformed in a second version entitled *Quad II*. The players continue to follow a choreographed course across a square avoiding "a danger zone" in the centre (Beckett, 2006: 453), but their pace has slowed, and the white, yellow, blue and red gowns worn by the figures have been replaced by four identical white gowns. Beckett explained that the slower tempo and black and white tones were used in *Quad II* because it took place "a thousand years on" (Knowlson, 2003: 11). It is

therefore tempting to deduce that the woman in *One Evening* also appears in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and that this nearer-to-death state, as with the players in *Quad II*, is partly denoted by the bleeding of colour from the narrative.

2. The Ghost and the Cromlech

The bold, stark images in *Ill Seen Ill Said* are apparently flat, still, and as indelible as the surface of a painting. Under the gaze of "the relentless eye" (29), however, both figure and objects start to shift, lose definition, and their animate-inanimate distinction grows unstable.

Whether the old woman in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is alive, dead, or a ghost haunting the landscape, is unclear. The narrator appears to make her as dead or alive as needs be: "…were she already dead. As of course she is. But in the meantime more convenient not" (41). Her presence, however, is evanescent, and like a spectre, she comes and goes.

> There was a time when she did not appear in the zone of stones. A long time. Was not therefore to be seen going out or coming in. When she appeared only in the pastures. Was not therefore to be seen leaving them. Save as though by enchantment. But little by little she began to appear. In the zone of stones. First darkly. Then more and more plain. Till in detail she could be seen crossing the threshold both ways and closing the door behind her. (13)

The woman goes from being absent, to shadowy, to well defined, as if she were an image on a TV screen gradually gaining pixels to complete herself. In the scene in which she eats a bowl of soup, this visualisation process works in reverse: "With her right hand she holds the edge of the bowl. With her left the spoon dipped in the slop. So far so good. But before she can proceed she fades and disappears" (35-36). Her image also freezes and unfreezes as it might do on an analogue TV.

> With her right hand as large as life she holds the edge of the bowl resting on her knees. With her left the spoon dipped in the slop. She waits. For it to cool perhaps. But no. Merely frozen again just as about to begin. At last in a twain movement full of grace she slowly raises the bowl toward her lips while at the same time with equal slowness bowing her head to join it. (35)

The old woman is not the only entity in the text to appear from the dark and then fade back into it. Inside the cabin, "[n]ext to emerge from the shadow an inner wall. Only slowly to dissolve in favour of an inner space" (21). While this interior space could suggest a form of arena or theatre, the fact that the wall 'dissolves' into it also suggests a space which is televisual. Similarly, other objects are also brought into sharp focus, before losing definition. The button hook of silver pisciform, for example, is described in detail; the scale-like design of its handle, the slightly bent shank, and the way it "trembles" and "shimmers" on cloudless evenings hanging from a nail. "Long this image till suddenly it blurs" (19).

As the narrative progresses, or, better said, moves along in fits and starts, light loses force and becomes murky: "In the dim light the skylights shed. An ever dimmer light. As the panes slowly dimmen" (21). The skylights then appear to lose their quality as light givers to act as a kind of membrane through which to cast "[b]lackness in its might" (58). "Here reappearance of the skylights opaque to no purpose henceforward. Seeing the black night or better blackness pure and simple that limpid they would shed" (58). The verb 'dimmen' and adjective 'dim' are not as weak as they sound, however, and in Beckett's next prose work, *Worstward Ho* (1983), they continue to shed a persistent light. "So leastward on. So long as dim still. Dim undimmed. Or dimmed to dimmer still. To dimmost dim. Leastmost in dimmost dim. Utmost dim. Leastmost in utmost dim" (Beckett 1999: 33).

Just as increasing 'gloom' (47) obscures sight in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, so does its incandescent counterpart: a "[s]hroud of radiant haze" (28). If 'dim' is stronger than it sounds, so is 'haze'. It slowly creeps across the landscape of the fictive world until it has engulfed it.

Haze sole certitude. The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. To be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light. In one treacherous word. Dazzling haze. Light in its might at last. (48)

The way in which figures and objects lose their precision and grow fuzzy fits into a process of 'vaguening', according to Graham Fraser in his study "Haze Sole Solitude". He quotes the OED's definition of 'vague' as "wandering, inconstant, uncertain" (Fraser, 2015: 118), and these three adjectives could not more aptly describe the 'wavering' images that come and go in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. He argues that Beckett pursues "an aesthetics of vagueness" and refers to Beckett's appeal for a new form in art, expressed in an interview with Tom Driver in 1961. "[T]his form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else… To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (In Fraser, 2015: 118). For Fraser, 'vagueness' dominates Beckett's late work, "finding its fullest expression in *Ill Seen Ill Said*" (Fraser, 2015: 117). While Fraser's arguments are convincing, they do not take into account the way the images in the text seem to strain towards different media, and, as Daniel Albright points out in *Beckett and Aesthetics*, "recalcitrance against the medium is central to Beckett's aesthetic" (Albright, 2003: 135).

Recently, the little explored intermedial aspect of Beckett's work has received critical attention, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* dedicating an entire special issue to Beckett as an intermedial artist in 2020. In her introduction to this "Intermedial Beckett" publication, Trish McTighe highlights the difficulty of providing a single definition of the term intermedial, maintaining that it will depend on "its specificity within particular fields of study and aesthetic practice" (McTighe, 2020:2). For the purpose of this paper, I will be following Christopher Balme's definition, cited in Anna McMullan's *Beckett's*

Intermedial Ecosystems, namely; "the attempt to realise in one medium aesthetic habits of seeing and hearing in another medium" (McMullan, 2021: 5-6).

Ill Seen Ill Said is not an overtly intermedial work as, for example, the television play *Nacht und Träume* is. This play comprises the stage set of a 'dreamer' sitting at a table in a dark room, and is wordless except for a male voice humming, and then singing, the last seven bars of Schubert's *Lied* "Nacht und Träume". Although *Ill Seen Ill Said* is first and foremost a written text, the way in which images exist 'darkly', 'fade' and 'dissolve' bring to mind an image on a television monitor. Arguably, one of the effects of describing images in this way, as Daniel Albright maintains, is because "[t]echnology provided Beckett with more possibilities for unfiguring things than words ever could" (Albright, 2003: 137).

In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this process of 'unfiguring' is relevant to the narratorial eye that tries to "scrute" the woman's "inscrutable face" (55). Despite the face being "unyielding" (55), during an earlier "inspection" (55) it fixes on her lips, "[p]eeping from their join a suspicion of pulp" (49), and 'rivets' her eyes: "One is enough. One staring eye. Gaping pupil thinly nimbed with washen blue" (39). The narratorial eye can home in on the woman's features in one of its 'close-ups' and the images that it gathers, using Albright's term, are 'unfigured'. Indeed, the descriptions of the woman's facial features are questionably human.

The human-non-human boundary is one which is probed continually in Beckett's 'closed space' prose texts written between 1960-1970, starting with *Comment c'est*/*How It Is*, and finishing with *Le Dépeupleur*/*The Lost Ones*. While not a totally hermetic world, like the 'closed space' fiction, *Ill Seen Ill Said* displays some of the characteristics of these earlier works, which McMullan describes as follows.

> Beckett's closed space texts both model worlds in which the human is reduced to an exhausted species in a shrunken environment […] The nature of who or what regulates the environment that Beckett's creatures inhabit most often remains unclear or beyond cognition, though ultimately the works reflect on their own increasingly depleted conditions of creation or imagining. How these works then position their readers or spectators engages them in confronting ways of seeing and responding to both human and more than human creatures that question the histories, knowledges and technologies of anthropocentric agency. (McMullan, 2021:7)

'More than human' here refers to a term coined by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), originally meaning earthly nature. Since then, this term has become a key phrase in ecocriticism.

The term 'more than human' is directly applicable to *Ill Seen Ill Said* as 'the shrunken world' that it presents not only mutates but also anthropomorphises elements in nature. Firstly, there is a very strong attraction between the old woman and a gravestone which "draws her" (13), and, like many other Beckett characters before her, she freezes, as if "turned to stone" (7, 28). Likewise, when she "consents at last" for her face to be examined by the narratorial eye, there is transference between the qualities of the stone and her skin: "In the dim light reflected by the flag. Calm slab worn and polished by agelong comings and goings. Livid pallor. Not a wrinkle. Livid pallor. Not a wrinkle. How serene it seems this ancient mask" (25).

The old woman is also associated with ancient and mythological stone. She is described as statuesque "taking on the rigid Memnon pose" (35), invoking the two colossi guarding the tomb of Pharaoh Amenhotep III at Thebes; and Medusa's stare, turning her victims to stone, is suggested in the image: "The long white hair stares in a fan. Above and about the impassive face. Stares as if shocked still by some ancient horror" (28-29). Through these references to stone the old woman appears to straddle time, and, as Mark Byron observes in *Samuel Beckett's Geological Imagination*, they have the effect of "enjoining us to hear the echoes and resonances from history and literature" (Byron, 2020: para 289).

While the woman-cum-ghost turns mineral, 'the twelve', most likely a cromlech (Brater,1994), are personified: "She raises her eyes and sees one. Turns away and sees another. So on. Always afar. Still or receding. She never once saw one come toward her […] Are they always the same? Do they see her? (10). Here, the animate and inanimate meet and the narrator appears to be questioning where agency actually lies. As Byron suggests: "Megalithic archaeology becomes an especially acute source of the story's imagery mediating the human and the inorganic" (Byron, 2020: para 1111).

Traces of the human remain in the imagined world of *Ill Seen Ill Said*: "And man? Shut of at last? Alas no" (10), but "[e]verywhere stone is gaining" (26) moving towards "[u]niversal stone" (51). Indeed, there is a calcification process going on which is evidenced in the visual-sound image of the gap between the pastures being filled with stones. The way the event is constructed calls to mind a camera and microphone being left over a period of time to record a phenomenon in the natural world for a documentary which will subsequently be speeded up. On this occasion, however, the temporal window involves "accelerated geological time" (Byron, 200: para 1219).

> From the stones she steps down into the pasture. As from one tier of a circus to the next. A gap time will fill. For faster than the stones invade it the other ground upheaves its own. So far in silence. A silence time will break. This great silence evening and night. Then all along the verge the muffled thud of stone on stone. Of those spilling their excess on those emergent. Only now and then at first. Then at ever briefer intervals. Till one continuous din. With none to hear. Decreasing as the levels draw together to silence once again. (28)

The images in *Ill Seen Ill Said* are as unstable as the world they represent. Figures and objects come in and out of focus, evaporating or fossilising from one moment to the next. At one and the same time they can be "large as life" (35) or "faintly far" (42), and this homing in and panning out is something that is central to Beckett's literature. In a conversation with Beckett in 1973, Charles Juliet commented that he considered Beckett

to be sensitive to the smallest details while still being able to view the world as if from another planet. To this, Beckett replied:

> You have to be right there – (finger pointing to the table) – but at the same time – (finger raised aloft) – a million light years away. (Juliet, 1995:164)

Ill Seen Ill Said can therefore be considered an intermedial work: it is a prose text with a camera-cum-eye in the landscape at ground level among the blades of grass perceiving "the faintest shiver from its innermost" (29). This 'ravening eye' is mobile and can see through walls, "[f]or slowly it emerges again. Rises from the floor and slowly up to lose itself in the gloom" (21). It can bring into focus and 'ill focus', invading, preying and surveilling in its role as purveyor of narrative images.

The source for the external "hovering eye" (45) in *Ill Seen Ill Said* goes back to the relationship between the seer and the seen. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger describes this dynamic in the following way. "Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world" (Berger, 1972: 9). However, many of Beckett's characters struggle to know if they are indeed 'part of the visible world'. In the stage drama, *Play*, the man in one of the grey urns asks:

> Am I as much as…being seen? (Beckett, 2006: 317)

Winnie, on the other hand, buried in her mound in the stage play *Happy Days*, feels that an observer is actually consuming her through one of their eyes.

> Strange feeling that someone is looking at me. I am clear, then dim, then gone, then dim again, then clear again, and so on, back and forth, in and out of someone's eye. (2006: 145)

Winnie does not experience a comfortable relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, and neither did Beckett. In a provocative article entitled "Recent Irish Poetry", published in *The Bookman* under a pseudonym in 1934 (Ackerley& Gontarski, 2004: 478), Beckett speaks of the "rupture of the lines of communication" caused by the

breakdown between subject and object, and he praises those writers aware of the vacuum existing between the perceiver and the thing perceived, a space he refers to as "no-man's land" (Beckett, 1983: 70). He also expresses this same idea in a letter to Tom Greavy in 1934 with respect to Cézanne. "How far Cézanne had moved from the snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie when he could understand the dynamic instruction to be himself & so landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms…" (Beckett, 2009: 108).

Beckett returns to the problematics of the dehiscence of subject and object in his only screenplay, *Film* (1963). In this silent black and white film, he sunders the protagonist into the perceiver, E (a camera), and the perceived, O; the former 'in pursuit', the latter 'in flight'. In the notes to the play it is revealed that: "It will not be clear until the end of the film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self" (Beckett, 2006: 323). The dramatic tension in *Film* is therefore not dissimilar to that depicted in *Ill Seen Ill Said.* In both there is an assailant, or predator compelled to seek out and 'set eyes on' a hungered after object.

Interestingly, although these two works do not share the same medium, the mobility of the pursuing eye is similar in each. Both 'eyes' are capable of close-ups and stills, and both creep up on their victims from behind. One difference is that the eye in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is invisible to the old woman, whereas E and O are visible to each other at the end scene. The other difference is the energy of the two pieces. *Film* belongs to a group of Beckett texts which Charles Deleuze in "The Exhausted" describes as 'Language II' (imagination sullied by memory). While Deleuze primarily associates the works in this category with cruel voices "which never cease to pierce us" (Deleuze, 1995: 8), *Film* comes under 'Language II', despite being silent, because of O's vulnerability and his palpable fear; E's pursuit and final confrontation being able to 'pierce' him. *Ill Seen Ill*

Said, however, belongs to 'Language III', which Deleuze attributes to works displaying "images, sounding, colouring" with "immanent limits that never cease to move about" (Deleuze, 1995: 8-9). This description is very apt as not only is it difficult, or perhaps inadvisable, to assign this prose work to a single literary form, but its varied tones and patterning also point towards other media.

3. (Mis)directing Narrative

Ill Seen Ill Said has been described variously as "a prose piece" (Beckett, 2016: 544) "an exquisite prose poem" (Knowlson 1997: 668), one of "Three Novels" in Grove Press' collection *Nohow On. Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (1995), and other scholars have referred to it as a "novella" (Fraser, 2000: 775). This lack of agreement as to how to describe the form of this literary work is telling of its resistance to literary categorisation.

The narrative method in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is slow and deliberate, but the text tends to unravel very quickly. Narrative is built up in a cumulative way, resembling the patterning of the British nursery rhyme 'The House that Jack Built'. Short phrases are stacked one on top of another, sometimes overlapping or repeated. The opening of the text exemplifies how the narrative advances. "From where she lies she sees Venus rise. On. From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the moon" (7). Conversely, the text is deconstructed with successive quick-fire phrases.

> Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. Last rays. And the moon. And Venus. Nothing left but the black sky. White earth. Or inversely. No more sky or earth. Finished high and low. Nothing but black and white. Everywhere no matter where. But black. Void. Nothing else. Contemplate that. (31)

Questions can help to forward the narrative, especially when it appears to have jammed and is looping upon itself: "Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How came a cabin in such a

place? How came?" (8). Questions, however, can also create havoc and trigger an undoing of the text: "Was it ever over and done with questions? Dead the whole lot no sooner hatched. Long before. In the egg. Long before. Over and done with answering" (37).

The narrator is unreliable, and the language of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is unstable. The negative prefixes that litter the text also point towards unsatisfactory expression: the pastures are "missaid" (26), the first zone of stones is "ill said" (26), words never seem to be right: "what is the wrong word?" (44). Enoch Brater, in *Drama in the Text*, also claims that, "*Ill Seen Ill Said* sets other "wrong" words in motion" with many "misfired quotations" from Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic and Victorian poets, as well as Modernist poets; T.S. Eliot's "At the still point of a turning world" from "Burnt Norton" being transformed into the elusive "At the inexistent centre of a formless place" (Brater, 1996: 128). Majorie Perloff also exhaustively lists textual allusions in *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric.* Not only does she closely reference words and imagery to draw out parallels, attributing "Ever scanter even the rankest weed" (8) to "Do not spread compost on the weeds/To make them ranker" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but she also uncovers similarity in form and rhythm in the same line commenting that the "predominantly trochaic pentameter" contains a sound structure that "alludes parodically to Milton's "Lycidas" (e.g., "As killing as the canker to the rose")" (Perloff, 1990: 165-66).

In addition to 'misquotation', it appears there is also something not quite right with Beckett's English translation. In "Atropos All in Black or Ill Seen Worse Translated", Sinead Mooney comments:

> [A]mid its late Victorian vocabulary, heavily larded with words such as 'perforce', 'collatement', 'dimmen', 'bedimmed', 'gloom', 'olden', 'washen', 'semigloom', 'occult', 'horrent', 'deathless,' etcetera […] [t]he translation has selected a strikingly different diction to that of its original, and one which incarnates, even flaunts, the lexical obsolescence so feared by much writing on translation. (Mooney, 2002: 170)

Here, Beckett turns full circle on his 'larded' language, as he had started writing in French after the Second World War precisely to rid his language of "Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatisms", claiming he wanted to "cut away the excess, to strip away the colour" (Knowlson, 1997: 357). In this late work, as Mooney points out, Beckett would have chosen "archaism over a more contemporary diction, and an insistent spectrality or phantom-like quality over any attempt at rendering the 'living' original" (Mooney, 2002: 170).

What is striking about the language in *Ill Seen III Said* is its sheer range. Majorie Perloff in "Between Verse and Prose" claims the text "sweeps up references, allusions, short sharp phrases, neologisms, and contorted elliptical clauses into an associative monologue" (Perloff, 1982: 424). Within this 'associative monologue' are different tones of voice. There are those of the poet: "Imagination at wit's end spreads its sad wings" (17), "winter in her winter haunts she wanders" (15); the neutral commentator, who could very well double up as the writer of stage directions: "[t]he two zones form a roughly circular whole" (9); a neurotic voice that questions and panics: "What forbids?" (21); and a director-cum-automaton that metes out imperatives in an attempt to regulate the narrative: "Gently gently. On. Careful" (20).

After the 'closed space' prose works, devoid of emotion, and described with almost "anthropological detachment" (McMullan, 2021: 56), poetic lines and cadences seep back into *Ill Seen Ill Said*, but they are not sustained. The language, which Perloff describes as "strange discourse" (Perloff, 1982: 415) and Fraser refers to as "telegrammatic lyricism" (Fraser, 2015:122) is as inconstant as the world it depicts. This "odd prose-verse ambiguity" (Perloff, 1982: 416) also contains language from other media, which gives instructions for lighting, "[f]ull glare now on the face" (57), and recorded images: "…[t]he chair…At length. Every angle" (52). As McMullan points out,

"Beckett translates his experience of working in one medium into his exploration of the boundaries of another and how it creates a world" (McMullan, 2021: 6).

This abundant use of literary language does not delineate or illuminate the fictive world of *Ill Seen Ill Said,* however. The snatches of poetry, broken rhymes, aporia leading to paradox, "doubt certain" (46), like the homophone which closes the piece, "[k]now happiness" (59), keep meaning in suspense. Inscriptions do not elucidate either: the scrap of paper spied in the coffer bears "[o]n its yellowed face in barely legible ink two letters followed by a number" (39), and the etching on the gravestone is but "obscure graffiti" which has been "[s]crawled by the ages" (44). Among the "fond trash" (56), however, pictures continue to emerge in the form of neutral descriptions: "Here to the rescue two lights. Two small skylights. Set in high-pitched roof on either side. Each shedding dim light" (20-21). While emotive language appears to dry up narrative, matter-of-fact description keeps it going. Written instructions prefacing television and stage drama therefore appear as a resource which can cross into prose and 'rescue' a floundering text laden with archaisms and ill remembered lines from a literary past.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

In this study, following my initial hypothesis stated on p.2, I have attempted to show that the instability of the fictive images in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is produced through techniques coming from other media. The effects of lighting, which Beckett knew well from his stage and television work, as well as his interest in Old Master paintings, brings images into sharp focus or 'vaguens' them; the light serving to enliven or deaden the focused subject. There is also a mobile camera in the text, a hungry eye which provides aerial shots and grainy close-ups that can equally pan a scene as provide static shots. Beckett uses these techniques to probe the boundary between the animate and inanimate, with objects

coming to life, and the human turning mineral. He also uses them as a way of juxtaposing time and scale: the here and now represented in such images as the close-up of the advancing dart-like hand of the unticking clock (46), and the primeval referenced in stone imagery, such as the erosions in rock lit by the moon (42). The different textures of language in the text also parallel these temporal switches through the immediacy of imperatives and the broken lines and rhythms from poetic heritage.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said* Beckett has therefore created a world in which human agency is called into question. There is transference between the animate and inanimate, flesh and stone, and objects and natural phenomena are anthropomorphised. Within such a mutable landscape, technology witnesses, if not brings about, transformations in the objects it surveils. Although the natural world in *Ill Seen Ill Said* may be dying, the more than human maintains a robust presence which is familiarly contemporary.

A possible line of further research would be a comparative study on the influence of painting in the prose of Samuel Beckett and the novels of the Irish fiction writer, John Banville. Although the two writers are at different ends of the stylistic spectrum – Beckett's prose being faltering and sparse, and Banville's intricate and lush – the work of both is heavily indebted to their shared love and knowledge of painting. While Banville's use of ekphrasis in his novels has been a focus of academic study, and Beckett and Banville have been compared for the Irishness of their landscapes and their interest in spectrality (Boxall, 2011), there have been few studies on how works of art are represented or referenced in their prose. This seems a particularly fertile area of research given that both writers have spoken at length about their aesthetic views on art and how they relate to literature, as well as the fact that their narratives are full of eyes and insist on different ways of seeing.

Banville has written extensively on photography, and although references to painting appear in his work more frequently than photographs, he is acutely aware of how an image is modified through a camera lens. Further research could therefore include Beckett and Banville's dialogue with art across media, and this current study would provide a useful point of departure.

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Figure 1: Caravaggio's *Decollazione di San Giovanni Battista*/*The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1608.

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