

“Remembering Beckett”

An interview with Herbert Blau

by Marie-Claire Pasquier

Herbert Blau has had a long career in the theater. Cofounder (with Jules Irving) of the Actors's Workshop of San Francisco (1952-65), he successively became codirector of the Repertory Theater at Lincoln Center in New York (1965-67) and Artistic Director of the experimental group KRAKEN (created in 1971). He was responsible for some of the first performances of plays by Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Durenmatt, Genet. Currently Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he has gained an international reputation for his theoretical writings on performance and postmodern culture, amongst which: Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point (1982), The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern (1987), The Audience (1990),¹ To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance (1992). Herbert Blau is preparing for the University of Michigan Press a new book on Beckett, mostly but not exclusively dedicated to his theater. The “theoretical memories” presented here may be regarded as a kind of overture or prelude to this new publication.



So, Herb, we hear that you are planning to publish a new book on Beckett, which is no surprise, knowing your interest in the man and his works. But did Beckett—this is an incidental question—ever read anything that you'd written about him, and did he react to it?

Marie-Claire Pasquier is professor of American Literature at the University of Paris X. The interview was conducted in Paris on September 18, 1996.

In all the time I knew him, a little over thirty years, I never gave him anything I ever wrote—except toward the end, once. In the early years, supposition was that Beckett never read anything written about him, whether by friends or by anyone else. That was just a fiction. It was soon apparent to me that he did. But for a very long time I never gave him anything. A while before he died, my wife, Kathy, berated me about that. I had written about him incidentally and sometimes extensively, but it was shortly after I had published two longish essays—the one on deconstruction and another on Beckett and Barthes—that I decided to bring him a book. He was already quite ill by then, over at the nursing home off the avenue du Général Leclerc. I gave

1. A French version will be published by Éditions Hyx, Orléans, at the end of 1997.

him *The Eye of Prey*. I know he was very moved by the gesture, but I didn't see him again after that, and so I never really knew whether he actually read the essays.

Kathy berated you for doing what exactly? For not showing them?

Yes, for not showing him anything, not even what I'd written about my work on his plays as a director. He was so moved, though, by my giving him the book that he got up with some difficulty—his arthritis, at that point, was severe—, made his way over to a bureau, and took out a manuscript. It was a manuscript of *Comment dire*.

You have a manuscript by him which is a late present. Will that appear in the book? Will you give these personal memories as part of your introduction to the book, or will it remain on a theoretical level?

I'm not quite sure what I'll do yet, but there will be personal materials in the introduction. It will give me a chance for some last reflections, maybe things that I never talked about. How much of a memoir, I'm not yet sure.

What I would like to know is when you first read your first line by Beckett, when you were first introduced to his work, and when you first met him as a person, and how long ago this was.

I came across Beckett early in the fifties, when I had my theater in San Francisco. I was also teaching at what was then San Francisco State College, which had one of the two major poetry centers in the United States. It was started by a woman named Ruth Witt Diamant. She had been in Paris, and first mentioned him to me. She talked about his fiction, which I remember vaguely—I may have seen something before. But she gave me a copy of *En attendant Godot*, which she said I must read. I forget exactly what year that was. It was probably about 1954 or 1955. Shortly after, we did the production of *Waiting for Godot* in San Francisco.

*So you knew *En attendant Godot* in French before you got the English version?*

Yes. Before we did the play, however, it was produced with peculiar notoriety by Michael Meyerberg in New York. Because they were afraid that the work might be prohibitive, they advertised, as I recall, for "ninety-six thousand intellectuals." That was apparently the number they needed to break even at the box office. Actually, it was produced first at the Copacabana Playhouse in Boca Raton, Florida, with Burt Lahr. It was a disaster. Alan Schneider directed it. People would have walked out on Beckett in those days

anyhow—as they did in Paris, and when he showed up in San Francisco—but down there in Florida, it was just totally...

Are you telling me that Alan Schneider, who was then to produce most of Beckett's plays, started doing Beckett in the Copacabana in Florida?

Oh yes, in Florida. I believe it was Burt Lahr and Tom Ewell. They did a production that was an utter disaster. Alan was shattered. I think it had just a couple of performances there. We were already interested. But it was impossible then to get the rights to a play that was being set up for production in New York. So we had to wait that out. The production in New York—directed not by Alan, but by Herbert Berghof—got a little respectful attention, and then pretty quickly disappeared.

And I suppose that Beckett in those days was not as particular as he became about controlling every single production. Since he was not well-known, he didn't have the authority he later acquired.

That's exactly so. He at least pretended indifference to what was being done to his plays then. Moreover, he hadn't yet directed. When we did early on a production of *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*), I sent him some pictures. It was just before I met him. The pictures were quite stunning, but the setting revealed was probably not what he had in mind when he called for gray walls in his stage directions. Our walls were gray, but with a sort of sumptuous poverty, shades of gray, textures of gray, an assemblage of materials that—as Hamm and Clov made their tour, counter-clockwise around the room—suggested, subliminally, the entire history of western culture in reverse. One would think that later on, had he seen the same pictures, he might have objected to the scene design. But I have a letter which indicates that he found what he saw, then, quite splendid. So he seemed to approve of what we did.

Have you ever seen any of the productions by Beckett as a director? And as a director yourself, can you make any comment on what you thought of them?

No, I was never there when he was actually directing. I was here in Paris, however, when they were filming the productions which he presumably approved. The series is called "Beckett Directs Beckett." Actually, the staging was done by another director, but following diligently Beckett's instructions, or repeating what Beckett himself had done. In all frankness, I found those productions rather banal, too straightforward and not terribly imaginative. I mean, they were pretty much what might be done off the page if in fact we sat here today, read the play, and said, "How should we put this on?" No, there was nothing extraordinary, and that, I think, is unfortunate, because

what's recorded on film will be taken as the authentic. Actually, a former student of mine had gotten the film rights, and I'd been invited, along with a couple of other people, to comment on those productions. It was very difficult to say much about the stagings, which more or less literalized what's apparent on the page.

As a more general principle, what do you think of this right to control productions that Beckett, the author, considered he had? And now that he is dead, do you think that directors should be allowed more freedom in their interpretations of Beckett? For instance, I'm thinking of what we are going to see at the Peter Brook's theater this week (Oh, les beaux jours!). We don't know what it's going to be, but we will probably see evidence of such freedom. What is your opinion on the principle of freedom?

I think such control is just untenable. There are no longer any grounds for it. Actually, if the ground went out from under, you could say that was in some measure Beckett's fault. After all, when we ask, who is Godot? and have no answer—"If I knew who Godot was, I would tell you," he said—we're into the indeterminacy of origins that, from Pirandello to deconstruction, would seem to jeopardize authority and virtually surrender copyright. Anyhow, I happened to be here in Paris some days after we had heard that Beckett had stopped the production at Bob Brustein's theater in Cambridge, at Harvard. The director was Joanne Akalaitis, who was associated previously with the Mabou Mines. Joanne had actually been with our theater in San Francisco; so I'd known her a long time. Several people in the Mabou Mines had been pretty well nurtured on our productions in San Francisco. They had virtually been weaned on Beckett. Later, they themselves had done work that he was aware of. Anyway, he and I were meeting at that place he frequented on the Boulevard Saint-Jacques, the Hotel PLM. I asked him about the controversy. I had not seen the production. I was already here in Paris when I heard that he had stopped it. The tone was probably critical when I asked why he did it. He immediately became flustered, even a little angry. I pressed the issue. "Look, Joanne grew up with your work. She's thought a lot about it. That's no sign of disrespect, her taking some unorthodox approach..." He simply became intemperate. It was very difficult. I'd never had any arguments with him. We could discuss almost anything, and sometimes we disagreed, but there was never anything like a real argument. But the more I tried to discuss it the more disturbed he became. Normally, if there were something of an impasse, I could joke him out of it. Which I tried. "Look Sam, we're in Paris. What are you worried about? People have been talking about the 'Death of the Author'..." That move backfired, it made him even angrier. Maybe I should have let it drop, but... He had been disturbed when he heard that I'd stopped working in the theater, and when I did see him, he'd always ask about when I'd start directing again. So when things calmed

down, I said, "Well maybe after all Alan was your best director." Because Alan Schneider was very, very dutiful in doing the plays. He would fly over, talk to Sam, get his word about something meant—I would never dream of doing a thing like that—and then he would produce it, at least to his mind, as Beckett would have wanted it done... Alan, you know, is dead now.

And he died before Beckett died, I think.

Yes, he died before Beckett, in a terrible accident in London. But in any case, I said, "Maybe he's your best director." Then I reminded him that he had wanted me to direct again. "But if I were to do that," I said, "the only thing I could assure you of is that I would never direct one of your plays so long as you're alive." I couldn't do it. Not with any guarantee that it would be dutiful as he wished.

How did he react to that? Was he hurt?

It was hard to tell. He took it, it seemed, calmly enough. It's very hard to reconstruct the atmosphere. It was quite tense.

There was a sentence he said when he heard a biography was going to be written about him. He said "I will neither help nor hinder." Why didn't he have the same attitude about his theater?

Well, let's go to the biographers. First of all, there's the more or less authorized biography that just came out, by Jim Knowlson. But the one Beckett was talking about was by Deirdre Bair. Beckett was equivocal about cooperating. He liked to think of it as a wise passivity, but maybe it was a little unwise, because it really upset him afterwards. In any case he did cooperate with Deirdre Bair's biography, which was done some years ago. She was a relatively young woman when she presumed to do it, and you have to give her a lot of credit. She was quite enterprising. She got a lot of material together, and if he didn't hinder, he did help. As for the theater, he eventually looked upon his texts as virtual musical scores, with more or less absolute notation, from which you departed at risk. It wasn't that he went to see other productions, he never did. But there were others around who served as guardians of the ring hoard, the text, alerting him to deviations.

I would like to come back to your first meeting. You say it was after you had produced your Endgame, right?

He was aware of several things by the time we met. We had done the production of *Waiting for Godot*, and while there were other things to be said

for it, it became notorious because that was the production we took to San Quentin prison—the first time a production had ever been done in a maximum security prison. Almost immediately after that Martin Esslin, who was completing his book on “the theater of the absurd,” turned up in San Francisco, saw *Godot*, and referred to the San Quentin performance in a kind of prologue. That made it widely known. Beckett knew about it. We had actually corresponded between the production of *Godot* and the production of *Endgame*, and then I met him. Before that first trip to Paris, I had directed two productions at once: a play by Sean O’Casey, *Cockadoodle Dandy*, which he was interested in, because he liked O’Casey, and *Endgame*.

Did the fact that you were working on O’Casey at the same time make you more conscious of Beckett as an Irish dramatist?

We were certainly aware when we were doing O’Casey that we were dealing with two Irish dramatists, but Irishness in Beckett was never a big issue with us. What we did with *Endgame* was quite unusual in other ways. In any case, it was right after I finished those two productions that I went abroad for the first time. It was at the end of the fifties. We had made an arrangement to meet, and Beckett came to pick me up at my hotel on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince, right across from the Polidor. The hotel’s no longer there. He was very gentlemanly, very courteous. He would always come pick me up at the hotel when we met, though I was over at his apartment on the rue des Favorites, when he was in Montparnasse—the first apartment where, next to the *poubelle*, there was the bicycle downstairs. There’s a picture of that somewhere. I think of it as a sort of Cartesian bicycle, head above wheels—I forget exactly how he put it, but like that in one of his novels.

*So, he met you as a director, and as an American director. And when you produced *Endgame*, you said, it was unusual, and perhaps you would like to talk a little more about it. But had you seen any productions before you did any yourself? When you say unusual do you mean as compared with other productions of the same play?*

No, I hadn’t seen any productions before. But we knew what we were doing was likely to be something more or other than what’s prescribed in the text. I like to think, however, that we were scrupulous to a fault. I mean that ontologically, the faultline there, its *rigor mortis*. I actually did two productions of *Waiting for Godot*. The second one was done after we did *Endgame*, when I came back from Europe, and that one was extremely different from the first. That was partly due to what we’d done with *Endgame*, a more “clawing” play, as Beckett himself said. Perhaps I can put the distinction this way: in *Waiting for Godot*, you may recall, there’s a moment when Didi—who is always in some

sense trying to recapitulate what's happened—keeps badgering Gogo to remember “any fact, any circumstance,” the trees, the leaves, the fishbones, Lucky's kick. Didi wants to be located in space and time, but memory is always failing and there are lapses of consecutive thought. As he keeps assailing Gogo with everything partially remembered that, moment by moment, keeps slipping away in thought, Gogo is merely bewildered, and except for the fact that he's hungry, only too ready to forget, even what happened a moment ago. “I'm not a historian,” he says. Neither is Didi, for that matter. Now, there are certain advantages to that. Because they have no historical memory, and no continuity of thought, the activity of performance feels almost improvisational. And I'm being very conscious of the distinction between activity and action in *Godot*. I mean there is no action. In this two-act drama, nothing happens twice. There is, however, a great deal of *activity*. What accounts for that? Well, you get a lot of promiscuous doing, because with memory always failing they have to do it again, making up reasons for doing it as they go along. And because they don't know *why* they're doing it, the reasons failing too, they accelerate the activity, doing more to cover up. In contrast, what's compelling to me in *Endgame*, focused in different ways in both Hamm and Clov, is that they seem never to forget anything. There is an almost remorseless continuity of self-excruciating memory. To see what that means: if I were to put my hand over this object, this remote control on the table, and at the moment I was deciding whether to pick it up or not to pick it up, at that moment two thousand years of Western history were to bear upon the prospect of action, containing all the reasons why I should and all the reasons why I shouldn't—the result is a kind of paralysis. If you can see all the motives for picking it up and all the motives for not picking it up, simultaneously present, what you have there, if in fact the action occurred, would be precisely that, an occurrence, a reflex, an abrupt or impulsive gesture against the incapacity to act. It would be an impacted version of the Hamletic impediment, the “ratiocinative meditateness” that Coleridge described. When Hamlet finally *does* the deed, it comes, after all the wild and whirling words, as if in a sort of brain fever, as a violent reaction against the incapacity—as when he stabs Polonius through the arras: “Is it the King?”

Have you seen the movie by Resnais, Smoking/No smoking? This is also about picking up an object.

No, I didn't see that. When we did *Endgame*, the distinction I just made determined how we investigated certain gestures or forms of behavior in the work—some of which were specified by Beckett, others we developed ourselves. For example, Clov is supposed to climb a ladder to one of the two windows at the back of the set, there like the eyes of the mind, split vision, one looking at the land, the other at the sea. He has to open some curtains. Now,

it didn't actually last this long in performance, but in certain rehearsals it would sometimes take him as long as fifteen minutes.

You don't say fifteen seconds, but fifteen minutes?

I'm saying fifteen minutes. He would literally stand up there, suspended over those curtains with an incredible tautness of the body, as if it were a moral issue to open or not open the curtains. When he finally opened the curtains—and by the way, the curtains were suspended on a metal rod with metal rings—they were opened very abruptly, with a revulsion of feeling against the necessity of doing it, or with some reflex against the resistance to doing it, the over-rationalized stasis I described before. When it was done, it was utterly shocking, literally shocking, because when the curtains scraped on the rod with their metal rings they made an extremely sharp sound. In the tight sequestered theater in which the play was staged, inescapably close, it felt like a scraping on the nervous system itself. I have said elsewhere, by the way, that Beckett's drama is like taking the spaces, silence, and stasis of Chekov one step further: realism *in extremis* at the very nerve-ends of thought. *Endgame* is a play I have seen since. It normally lasts an hour and a half. But certain of our rehearsals lasted as long as four hours.

This is the kind of thing you could impose on audiences in the late fifties, perhaps, or in the sixties. Do you think that an audience today would put up with this?

Well, no, the performance itself didn't last four hours. Actually the production lasted something close to two hours. I'm saying that the rehearsals often took four hours, because it was the ordeal of time that we were exploring. We took the time, and then compressed it. Now, what did last, and what Beckett might very well have objected to had he seen it, was the fifteen-minute opening. Gray stage, dim light, a kind of materialization of indecipherable objects in space; among them, gradually seeable, a shape, a body, barely perceptible in the back, Clov. The *poubelles*, Hamm in the center under his shroud, you have to make all of that out, including on the walls, as if measuring empty time, gradations in the gray. As I say, it took quite a lot of time before anything materialized, the objects infinitesimally, and then Clov unveiling Hamm. Well, I've seen several productions where the actors just go more or less routinely through the task of taking the covers off of Hamm. With us the process was fastidious. First of all, there was the veil, the actual composition of Hamm under the veil. When the veil is meticulously, immaculately removed, we see a handkerchief like a Veronica over his face. You may have seen the picture at my house in Milwaukee—it's really quite beautiful. The veil itself looks antique, and was in fact beautifully embroidered. When it was taken off, it was in the final precipitous moment almost the way

a bullfighter might whirl with a cape. It was a quite beautiful gesture, and it was done in such a way, with the one gesture, that the movement of lifting the veil also lifted the handkerchief, so that you got a little peek-a-boo effect on the face. Now you see it now you don't. That quick effect was startling in the extruded action of unveiling Hamm—the twelve to fifteen minutes before the veil actually came off. That's excruciating in the theater.

When you said Veronica, I thought of two things. You mentioned bullfighting, but isn't it the term used for the veil that Jesus had on his face? So this is maybe an allusion that was sensed also in your picture.

I suspect that is what Beckett had in mind. But as I've indicated, when I met with him I almost never asked him what he meant by anything in the texts. We might talk about something he wrote, but mostly we talked about quite other things than the work itself.

You were wise because he would have answered that he didn't have anything to say, presumably.

He sometimes took that tack, but if you did ask him something specific, he would say something about it, as he did with Alan and others, and in his letters as well. But you're right, he could be devious too.

He was helpful to some of his translators. His German translator could ask him questions and he would answer so that it would be useful for the translation, but not for the interpretation. I think you saw the recent production at the Bouffes du Nord of Endgame, in which Hamm is sitting on a tire. Did you see that?

No, I didn't.

Because that was an interesting change of image. I don't think that Beckett would have approved. What was amusing also was that it was performed by an actual son and father. These two great German actors. Their family name is Tenant. I think that's their name. And then another thing: in the dustbins there were actual dwarfs. They could stand in there because they were so small, and that had a stunning effect, but also anti-Beckettian. I don't think he would have approved. You say "clove." Is that how it is pronounced? Do some people say "cluv?"

No, we say "clove" in all productions in the United States. At least I haven't heard anyone pronounce it any other way than "clove."

So, you've written, as you say, "incidentally" about Beckett. He always comes up in your books, as you mentioned. Among the recurrent features you have Genet also, sometimes you have Ionesco, not so much though, and you also refer to Artaud. I know your cultural references by now, and one of your references which I would like to come back to is somebody who quotes Confucius. Do you remember that? "Better to light a single candle, than to curse the darkness." And your comment on this is: "A Beckett play lights a candle and curses the darkness." Do you remember writing this, and could you comment?

It's quite germane to things I feel about Beckett when I hear people discuss him today. There are those who have always tried to redeem him from his pessimism. The tendency in much thought about Beckett would be to reverse it and say "Curse the darkness and light a candle," the implication being that the darkness can be redeemed. But I've always felt that Beckett puts things in the order in which he in fact perceives them. The order is the lighting of the candle *and* the cursing of the darkness. But it's the darkness which is dominant. I think that this has to be the premise of any approach to Beckett. Or not to *him*, but to the materials he left us and to the reality that these materials contain. Which is to say that whatever powers there are in what we now speak of as the work of Beckett seem to consist of the really profound, essentially unrelieved, appalling perception of reality. That there is in some sense an impulse to move on, what Hamm says at the end, yes, is true. But the capacity to move is minimal. It's not to be redeemed in the way productions tend to do it today by, for example, putting an indulgent stress on the comedy, so that there's an evasive sense of levity in all the gloom.

So that when he was given the Nobel Prize, it seemed that they were doing exactly what you're saying, redeeming him from his bitterness.

Redeeming him. He disappeared, you recall, at the time of the Nobel Prize. Martin Esslin and I were actually in Canada the day we heard about it over the radio. We were in some sort of conference, giving talks, and after we heard it, we tried to get in touch with him. It was impossible. He had already disappeared.

On this question of pessimism or not pessimism you have another formula, which is your own this time. You call it the "last ditch humanism of Beckett." That's a wonderful formula because it's an oxymoron in a sense. Would you develop it in case somebody did not understand what you meant?

First of all, there's the "ditch." And sometimes the ditch is an abyss, a crevasse. It's deep, it's a big rift in reality. But the "humanism" is there. I think

it distinguishes him, particularly when people make distinctions between the modern and the postmodern. If you get involved in the debate as to whether there's continuity or a breach between the modern and postmodern, it seems to me that Beckett is really the pivotal figure. While many of the writers that we associate with postmodernity have similar strategies—parataxis, discontinuity, all of those things that are structurally identifiable in Beckett—the one thing that many of them don't have is simply the unrelieved poignancy of Beckett. Beckett has a way of saying in theoretical terms—he wouldn't put it in theoretical terms—that maybe authenticity is a fiction. Maybe origin never was. And yet, and yet... there is a kind of residual, unrelieved tenacity of memory that is inextinguishable in Beckett. He seems to be remembering something, whether or not it ever was. And that's something one doesn't have in most postmodern works. While the structural qualities are the same, the emotional content seems to me to be markedly different.

When you say emotional, would you be ready to say metaphysical, perhaps?

Well, metaphysical. It's one of those cases where you say, as Artaud would say, the metaphysics comes in through the pores, it comes in through the skin. It just seems to me to be a visceral metaphysics. It's not necessarily theological.

There's another formula of yours, dealing with this "inextinguishable poignancy." I think that's what you said. Here is what you wrote: "What we see in all of Beckett's writing is the trembling of perception at degree zero"—we remember Barthes here—"on the edge of its extinction." Could you explain what you meant by that?

There may be some combination there of what's in Beckett and what obsesses me, which is to say I've always been interested in the deception of appearances, and the incapacity at some limit of desire to see what we want to see. As Lacan and others have said, we see in the shape of our desires. But what seems to me to have been always provocative in Beckett is very much what I was describing before, when the objects materialized in *Endgame*. It seems to me that what really happens in Beckett, and what is most moving to me, happens in those moments when you are precipitously about to see something which, in the very activity of perception, disappears as if in fact exhausted in the energy required for you to see it. Almost as if there were a dramatization of the Heisenbergian principle: the very instruments of perception dematerialize the object, that is, the instruments of perception get in the way.

This is something I always found difficult to understand. Could you just take a little more time to explain what you mean? What is this principle? Because I think it is captivating, but difficult to grasp.

Well, as I understand the principle—and usually we presume on scientific ideas and use them metaphorically—but as I understand the notion of indeterminacy there, the idea is that the very instruments required for perception determine the nature of perception. They both permit us to see and get in the way of seeing, so that they in some sense change the nature of the object to be seen. And, in the case of human perception, it seems to me that the instrument is in part determined by want or desire, in other words, what we in some sense are looking for. And this both deranges the process and distorts the object of sight. But what, at a more basic level, has always interested me—and the same thing interests me in human experience, in Shakespeare, in Beckett—is the whole question of appearance itself. You love someone. You think you know that person. The person should be transparent to you. And suddenly you look again, and there's something else there, it's not what it was. So the whole question of the deception of appearances seems to me to come into play. But Beckett gets at it in a particular way that has to do with the apparent materialization. It's like something in a photographic studio, presumably coming into sight, the image materializing from the processing itself, and just when you think you've brought it into focus, it disappears. What you thought you were seeing is there and then not there.

There's the movie, Roma by Fellini, in which he finds these frescoes. The moment the eye discovers the frescoes, the frescoes disappear, they vanish. It destroys them as it reveals them.

I was once taken by Roberto Rossellini to see the frescoes at Cerveteri. You know, you have to open those tombs, and he had influence, we could get in. But otherwise they keep them closed, because they are afraid that if light got to them, they would disappear. Not only are the frescoes endangered by light, but also by the look. Here, the process I'm describing is very much like what was apparently believed in the Renaissance, that the eyes sent out energy. And it's as if the energy from the eyes erodes the object. In other words, as I look at Bernard Vincent, our technician today, the very energy of sight puts him in jeopardy, as an object subject to erosion...

Please don't erode our technicians! So we have come to perception after all. I won't keep you away long from specularly and all that. The Eye of Prey is a wonderful title, and you once said it came from Beckett. Maybe you will explain where exactly it comes from. There is the essay on Barthes and Beckett, "The

Punctum, the Pensum and the Dream of Love. How useful is Barthes in your interpretation?

It wasn't so much that he was useful. They were just two people that I wanted to write about for various reasons, and they permitted me to make an interesting distinction. At the time I wrote that essay, though I always admired Barthes, there was still the semiological retard in his work. Remember that through the earlier part of his career, he was at one level Marxist, always demythologizing.

Did you say retard?

Yes, a certain kind of semiological retard. Well, I thought it prevented him from seeing certain things. The semiological perspective, though it had certain assets, also had certain liabilities. If there was one fine difference between Barthes and Beckett, it's what Beckett couldn't contain in himself, which was precisely the emotional property that I was trying to describe before. Barthes always tried to displace that, emotions arising from privacy, subjectivity, depth. In the dialectic of surface and depth, Barthes preferred surface, and it wasn't until later on, with *La chambre claire*, when he withheld the fetishized picture of his mother, never showed it, kept it hidden, that it seemed to me something did surface that, in some sense, Barthes prevented himself from exposing before.

To put it a little crudely, you seem to take two people, one of whom was a creative artist, and the other more of an exegete and interpreter, but who never pretended he was an artist. Is that distinction, to you, irrelevant?

It's irrelevant. With Barthes, of course, the issue of what constitutes an artist seems to dissipate in his prose. Here you have two writers. They both write superbly. They write in different genres, but I was in some sense examining, I suppose, my own disposition, temperament, and instincts. At some final property of thought, they are, all told, a little more on the Beckettian side. And that's what I was trying to clarify.

Could you imagine directing a piece by Barthes? Could you imagine turning it into a stage piece?

I can imagine directing anything if I'm interested in it. When I first started to work in the theater, there were certain prescriptions about what was possible, and what was not possible. Certain things, they said, could not be put on stage. I tried dutifully to understand that, but after a while I realized

that there's nothing living or dead, under heaven or on earth, that can't be put on stage—if you have the right idea.

So now we come back to The Eye of Prey, and this extraordinary expression.

The “eye of prey” comes from *Imagination Dead Imagine*. And by the way, that in itself describes a distinction between Beckett and the Barthes of the semiological period. The Barthes of that period could not allow himself the second “imagine.” You’d say “imagination dead,” because imagination is a transcendental signifier. Therefore it’s out, along with “genius” and all those other terms that are no more than metaphysical derivations. Beckett critiques that critique in the title, *Imagination Dead Imagine*. In other words, you have to understand that imagination is dead before you can start imagining again. But imagination is like the leaves on the tree in *Godot*, going to sprout again, dead but always living. I think the later Barthes would have to accede to that. The eye of prey occurs in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, having to do with what, say, Lacan might have talked of in relationship to Saint Augustine as the *envenomed eye*, the eye which is always searching. It’s like the difference between the *look* and the *gaze*. The eye of prey is the one that searches, that looks, it’s the analytic eye, it’s the eye that’s incisive, that surgically cuts. It’s the eye which is on the other side of the eye which is slit in the Buñuel film. It’s the animal, predatory eye.

You say at one point, the “envenomed stare.” I take it this is a translation from Lacan?

That’s the phrase that Lacan gets from Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine has a passage in which the child is looking at his sibling, the younger child, and the “envenomed stare” suggests that the older one wants to kill the younger one.

And you use your own formula, saying the “cutting look,” and you say for Beckett there’s no look that is not cutting.

There is no look that’s not cutting. I think that’s an interesting proposition, the notion of the cut in the look. Most people in fact don’t like to be looked at. Why that should be so seems to me an issue of metaphysical proportions. By the way, I can explore this in any number of ways, but I remember vividly—since you know my daughter Jessamyn—an occasion involving her. But first consider the parents’ relationship to the child when, for example, the child is crawling on the floor. There you are standing over the child, a sort of monolithic figure. It’s still hard to decipher what a child, as an infant, may be feeling about the immensity of the towering figure. But there is

also, of course, the acquisitive or appropriative aspect of the gaze or the look. I'm collapsing the two at the moment. You look at the child, presumably with tenderness and love, but in fact the very look also contains the desire to be loved. In other words, I look at you, I love you, but I really want you to tell me that you love me. Now I remember one time, when Jessamyn was in the crib, and I was looking down at her. I'll come back to this in Beckett, but I remember looking at her, or was it gazing at her? I suppose there must have been something like the appropriative gaze, and I remember the first moment where she literally—I can't say this, but I'll have to show it to you—where she literally began to flail her arms in front of her, like this, as if she were saying, "Don't look at me!" Now why that should be is something that requires extraordinary reflection.

Just one anecdote of my own. When my son was small, I would crouch next to him so that I would be his size, and he would see me crouching and he would crouch too.

Exactly. But to stay with the unobtrusive or intimidating look: Beckett has another memorable phrase, I think it's in *The Lost Ones*, where he speaks of the *nesting stare*. Children, you know, before their necks are sufficiently formed so that they can keep the neck erect, tend to turn their heads around, as if they're looking behind. Beckett speaks of that turn as if they're looking back, so to speak, to the mother's breast. Thus, the nesting stare. It's as if they're staring back to where there was perfect accommodation...

I would be tempted to understand the nesting stare as the opposite of the cutting stare. That would be the protective stare, or the stare seeking protection?

The desire for that which is utterly protective and nurturing. Freud once said—and Beckett was very much interested in analysis; he worked with a Freudian analyst, Bion—although he was also very impressed with Jung, Freud said that all thought is a long detour from the memory of gratification. The nesting stare, it seems to me, is related to the memory of gratification. It is something other than the eye of prey, but speaking of that, and also of children, let me recall an incident which I referred to once before in something I wrote. In the year that I first met Beckett, we saw each other several times and, as I said, he would come to pick me up at the hotel on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince. My first wife was with me in Paris, and our three children, they were there. When he came to pick me up, the two of us would go out and walk, or go to dinner or whatever, but he always expressed interest in my children. I thought that this was more or less formulaic, at first, but from the questions he asked about them it became clear that he was really interested in the children. He said he would like to meet them, and my wife, so we eventually made an

arrangement to go out to dinner together, my wife, he and I, but he would meet my children before we went. So, he came to pick me up as usual, and I came down the staircase. He was down at the bottom, and he looks at me puzzled, because I was coming down alone. "They're all sick," I said. "They all have the flu. Everybody has the flu." He looked at me as if he could hardly believe it. But we went out and took a long walk. We had dinner somewhere, and when we came back near midnight, he looked upstairs—we had two rooms in the hotel—the light was out in one room, but was still on in the other. "I guess my wife is still up and the kids are sleeping," I said. Again, a puzzled look. "Next time you come to Paris," he said, "you must produce your children for my eyes of flesh." Twenty years later, he used that phrase in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Some years after that I actually brought Jessamyn to meet him, and I said, "I've now produced a child for your eyes of flesh."

And he remembered saying that?

No, he didn't quite remember. I reminded him.

There is a sentence by him you quote, which is "Am I as much as being seen."

That's from a play called *Play*. It has to do with the verification of being by sight. It's like when Pozzo says, "Is everybody looking at me?" It's as if I have no confirmation of being unless I am seen. But you have to play with that phrase too. "Am I as much as *being* seen?" "Am I as much as *being seen*?"

There is the same ambiguity as in Imagination Dead Imagine. You've been around actors a lot. Do they take pleasure in being seen? Are they different from other people in that sense, in that they want to be watched?

I think that that is the most complex ontological problem of theater. We speak of such things as "stage fright." Why should that be? It has always occurred to me that the real issue in theater always pivots upon displacement. If there's pleasure in being seen, what's being seen is no pleasure—if you really think about it. For the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes. If you're sufficiently patient, it will happen. You will see it, but it will not be visible.

Could you repeat that? Because this is quite a paradox. I want to take it in. Could you repeat it?

Well, it seems to me that it's existential truth. It's undeniable. The person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes, as I am right now. That's literally true. If you are sufficiently patient, you will see it...

Unless you die first...

Unless *you* die first, right. But it is not sufficient. It may be more or less covered up by various forms of theater, or mimicked in horrid splendor as it is in *King Lear*, but even when it appears to be empty, there is always death in the center of the stage. That's what's very powerful in Beckett, his consciousness of that, specifically dramatized in the very few seconds of his little play *Breath*. That consciousness is elaborated and mordantly focused in Hamm, who is being stared at, and, through black spectacles, seems to be staring back at us, subject/object, returning the gaze—and all the deadly implications of the structure of being watched. Again, in a very literal sense we're close to what the theater is: the seers being seen.

Would you say that the curtain is a shroud?

Oh yeah. But well, I'll come back to the curtain in a moment. The curtain is really an interesting phenomenon. Yes, it's a shroud, and many other things besides. It's a veil and a shroud.

Hamm is supposed to be blind. Because he says, "One day you will be blind like me"...

"One day you'll be blind," that 's what he says.

And maybe that's what he sees...

All of it pointing, sometimes painfully, to what we cannot see. "There's something dripping in my head," he says. You can't see that either, right? Something dripping in my head. But where was I before, I was trying to say something... Oh yeah. In *Waiting for Godot*, if you are following Beckett's stage directions—and in fact we did follow the stage directions in the first production that I did of it—the two tramps have to divert themselves from the impasse at which they appear to have come. There's nothing happening, so with increasing panic in the diversion, they resort to playing games. At one point, they're moving desperately back and forth across the forestage, looking out, presumably, into the maw of the auditorium, into the reversed and darkling perspective of what appears to be nothing there. That nothing, of course, is the audience. Which is—that body of conventional absence—*breathing death*, you see. Now, you might say this is the post-war existential aspect of the play. Even Winston Churchill shared its sense of reality. He spoke of this "great charnel house of Europe" at the end of the Second World War. The experience of the war and the nature of theater seem to merge in the immediacy of the play. The tramps move across the front of the stage,

pointing in horror at the darkness where the audience is, saying "A charnel house! A charnel house!" And that, in brief, is Beckett's view of it all. "You don't have to look." "You can't help looking." Which is what makes it theater.

You said you would come back to the question of the curtain, which separates the audience. But relative to the performance strategy in Beckett, going from the womb to the tomb, perhaps, is the issue of the audience as an absence. I don't quite understand why you mentioned the audience as an absence.

You've got a lot of questions there. Which one do you want me to talk about first?

...we'll start with the curtain.

Conventions of the theater are best approached if you try to imagine their not having been. Meaning, you try to imagine how, first, they came into being. For example, in almost every theater history I've ever read, if you look up the "curtain", it'll say something like this: "The Romans invented the curtain, which was called the *auleum*." And then they pass on. Yet it always occurred to me when I read things like that, well, yeah, that's interesting, but why did they do that? Who did that? Or how did it materialize? Try to imagine. Here we are, we're all looking at each other, right? Nothing between us. And then this phenomenon intervenes. Whether somebody invented it or it materialized at some time, what phenomenologically and psychically changed in human reality to warrant this intervention? In other words how...

Except that you use it exactly like a mask...

Well, that's what I was just going to say. A curtain is a shroud, a veil, a mask... But once you begin to reflect upon it, it can operate in various ways: you realize you can do this... you can do that... or you can do this...

All kinds of things... lifting, opening...

You can part the curtain, you can raise the curtain, you can move it from side to side. You can, of course, have a half curtain, the way they do in the Kathakali, so you can see the head-dresses above. Brecht had, similarly, a visible curtain line. You can have feet exposed below, like the Italian futurists did. I once did a production of Brecht's *Galileo* in which the curtain was raised over the heads of the audience, a vast canopy of resplendent blue. It hovered there like the sky itself, and when released, it came down floating, like a great minstrel galleon's enormous sail. But just as it was rustling to nest, a film suddenly came on, and it was a movie screen. On the other hand, in the

second production of *Waiting for Godot* that I did, the curtain was neither so gorgeous nor so adept. It was done in a smaller theater, and I wanted it performed in almost perfect silence. So the entire stage was foam rubber. When the actors walked on stage, you couldn't hear them, and then more often than not, you not only couldn't hear them, but they sort of sank into the stage. Whenever they walked they kept sinking into the stage. The curtain for this production was a shabby, see-through curtain. It had tattered holes in it like the clothes of the tramps themselves. It was a debilitated curtain. And, moreover, this curtain, which was supposed to rise, couldn't, as we say, "get it up." So, as it tried to rise, it would go halfway, then twitch and jerk, and then fall down. It would go limp. It was a limp curtain. It lay there on the stage like a ruined convention at the dead end of history. Even so, you can do a lot with a ruin when you think about it.

You can also decide to have no curtain. And then for the audience, what is present is the absence of the curtain. Also, what you said about the see-through curtain... I mean there's a whole transparency...

Opacity or transparency, the question is, why is it there? And why, historically, did it appear in the first place? By the way, that's what I think all my writing has been about. I've always been interested in the materialization of theater from whatever it is *not*. Life? reality? whatever we call it, the assumption of something other than theater, from which theater materializes, or out of which we make it, the thing which it is not. But, back to the history books. We're told, say, that theater came from ritual. When I read that somewhere, I always raise my eyebrows: "Who said so?" I mean, what had priority, ritual or theater? And is there any other reality except the reality which already has over it an integument of theater like a curtain or a film? After all, that's what the theater itself, or at least the drama, has traditionally wondered about. It's always been raising the question as to whether there is anything but theater. "Life is a dream." "All the world's a stage." Maybe so maybe not. But that's the thing in question.

You say, raising your eyebrow, what comes first? But where does the audience fit in all this, as a metaphor linked to gazing?

You asked about the audience as an absence. If the audience is not an absence, it's not a reliable presence. Think of even the conventional play: the reality that's dispersed through characters on the stage. Whatever may be improbable, impermeable, indeterminate about the characters, they are nevertheless there, featured on the stage. They have a certain palpability, embodied, carnal, spoken for. The one really indeterminate aspect of any performance, in some sense absent or unaccountably present, is the audience,

particularly when it's dark. We don't really know who's there, you know. I always make an issue of this in relationship to *Hamlet*. "Who's there?" "Nay, answer me. Stand, and unfold yourself." It's as if the text itself were speaking to the absence.

You remember—I know the title in French—Outrage au public, by Peter Handke, in which they address the public directly...

Offending the Audience. Well, offending the audience assumes, in fact, that somebody is there who can be offended. But what's interesting to me about *Hamlet* is that first of all there's a kind of reversal, which is to say that the person approaching the ramparts is the one who asks the question, instead of the guard who should. "Who's there?" It comes out of the dark like an existential question. "Nay answer me, stand and unfold yourself." It's as if the unfolding is required for the audience to materialize. Without answer, no audience. But there's another play that I always refer to, which, for me, defines this whole issue as deeply as anything I know. It seems a sort of poetic justice, or historical justice, that in the only existing Greek trilogy the first character to materialize—as if, you might say, from primeval darkness into platonic light—is the Watchman. The first play is the *Agamemnon*, in which the Watchman awakens from ten years of waiting and watching. Internally, dramaturgically, he is responsible for the exposition, what's happening in the House of Atreus. He's very nervous about that. Speaking elliptically, warily, he positions himself in the cosmos before "the grand processions of all the stars of night," vaguely suggesting what's going on. And then he says—I don't read Greek, but in all translations it amounts to this—"I speak to those who understand, but if they fail I have forgotten everything." It seems to me that those who understand are the audience. And anybody else who assembles before the curtain, as in the open sky at Epidaurus, is sort of irrelevant.

You call him in English "The Watchman" and, of course, "to watch" has a double meaning, which we cannot grasp in French, but "Watchman" is particularly interesting.

Another critical representation of this idea is the famous mousetrap, again from *Hamlet*, where you have the watchers watching the watchers watch. It's that aspect of theatricality that's always interested me. And Beckett's very attuned to it, for all his apparent indifference, conscious of the audience, or its absence. What always struck me is how attentive the plays were. In *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, those wonderful lyric duets of Didi and Gogo: they make a noise like wings, like ashes, like leaves... They all speak at once, what do they say? They say... well, what are they referring to? What is the referent? Who are *they*? As they speak, the actors are listening, as if they had a stethoscope to the heartbeat of the audience.

When you said the actors, you mean the characters. Or do you really mean the actors?

I mean the actors. I'm almost differentiating the actors from the characters. That distinction seems to me to be critically important. Take the one who is playing Hamm, presumably looking straight out toward the emptiness in front of him. Yet he may be more attentive to what's happening in the audience than the audience is to what's happening on the stage. He is a register of every sensation out there before him. It's as if he records the emanations of the gaze. He's like a sensitive photographic plate. In the deepest performance, he registers it all.

I was expecting you to use, at some point, and you haven't, Lacan's expression, "the scopic drive." This is also something which is important in your reflections on the theater. Do you feel like mentioning it?

There's a chapter in *The Audience* which is entitled "The Most Concealed Object." Lacan's treatment of the scopic drive, the desire to see, raises the question: to see what? Whatever there is to see that hasn't been seen. That's always in relationship to the taboo. What's interesting about the taboo, as we open up one taboo after another, is that the taboo is ingenious, the taboo always recedes. When you think you've got the taboo, it goes somewhere else. So the compulsion to see is, as Freud first suggested, an obsessive compulsion which is always and forever unrelieved. The most concealed object, as Lacan says, in reworking Freud, is in some sense the drive itself. One wants to see the drive. The drive itself is the most concealed object.

You quote Lacan as saying "There are eyes everywhere, I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides." Could this be used to refer to the relationship between actors who see from one point, while they are looked at from all sides by the audience, so many eyes watching them?

"Is everybody looking at me?" Again. Even now, is everybody looking at me? What's interesting—think here of Genet—is the sensation that, even when there appears to be nobody there, we're incessantly being watched. We are under surveillance. And of course, notions of shame and guilt are attached to that. Even when we are alone. To the degree that one feels guilt or anxiety or something. What is that about? It's as if we are still being watched, and there's nobody there, right? That, of course, permits Freud to construct a notion such as the *superego*.

You know, in books I used to read in my childhood, the little boy would say, "The eye of God is watching me." He's looking at chocolate, and the eye of God is watching.

That, by the way, comes up in *Waiting for Godot*. Gogo keeps looking up there to see whether somebody is watching him, who's utterly indeterminate.

You quote Shakespeare, a beautiful sentence, which is relevant to what you were saying before. Gloucester says in Henry VI, "I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque"...

No, that's *Richard II*...

Richard II? O.K. So did he really write that?

Who else could write that?

Say it again...

"I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque." It's as if Richard, with circuitous or devious vision, is an expert at the gaze. If anybody is inside the gaze, if anybody understands it as a phenomenon, he is it. "I'll slay more gazers than the basilisque." It's as if he has perfected from birth the envenomed stare, confronting the gaze with the gaze, as if it were lethal coming from him. He walks downstage at the beginning, he talks to the audience, virtually baits them: you can observe me all you wish, gaze at will, judge, you will never know me.

I have a question which is not directly connected to what we said before, but which I would very much like to ask you. And it's about the relationship between the theater and visual arts, such as sculpture. You mentioned Giacometti, and you said he was Beckett's favorite sculptor. I would like to ask you, as a director, if you think that a director working for the stage works in a sense like a sculptor, like a visual artist.

Without that capacity you don't have much of a director. But there are visual artists and visual artists, and how they detail and contour space is obviously a big issue. In the case of Giacometti, he figured in the way we were trying to conceive *Endgame*. What is compelling about the sculpture is the strength of its seeming fragility, submitting only as much metal to the air as the air needs to surround it. There would be less if it could be an intact structure. There would be even less, a desire shared by Beckett, who wrote the terribly moving *Lessness*.

You know, I saw the other day an exhibition at the Jeu de Paume. One sculptor put a figure kneeling against the side of the wall, and he said, "This sculpture is made of plaster, paint and air." Air is part of the sculpture. So, is it true on stage also?

Well, most of the stage is air. But this suggests something else I've always wanted to do in the theater. It has to do with what might be thought the opposite of air. Have you seen Picasso's *Death's Head*? It is, I think, one of his greatest pieces of sculpture. It looks like a great globule. If one can imagine the objectification of a black hole, the black holes in space, about which we say the mass is so dense that it impacts upon itself, in some sense implodes, gravity reversed to come out some other side—Picasso's *Death's Head* is like that. I wrote about it in *Take Up the Bodies*.

Une tête de mort?

Tête de mort, yes. That head is so dense it seems immovable, a totalized object. But theater is a temporal form. Now you see it now you don't. One of the reasons I never liked videotaping or filming the theater work I did is because it was *meant* to disappear. The desire to preserve it, I think, is a factitious sort of notion. It's a thing in passing that, once passed, not only shouldn't but can't be there. That makes for certain problems when publishers ask for pictures in my books, or even when, suddenly, I want them myself. But even in the fashion book I'm writing now, I like to describe things, and the idea of documenting them with pictures I always have mixed feelings about. I like the language to evoke it rather than illustrations. And that may come from some theatrical tendency. In any case, the theater's a temporal form. It moves through time, and therefore it changes and dissipates, and disappears, through time. Conceding that, the mind then moves, sometimes resolutely, in the opposing direction: to stop time, to make it all hold still. Imagine creating a theater work with all the obduracy, the gravity of Picasso's *Death's Head*. Now and then, I believe, I was close to imagining something like that on stage, with the illusion of achieving it. It was the doing of *Endgame* that initiated the idea, because of its stasis, its paralysis. The paradox: I wanted to create a theater work about which you would feel that it moves through time and disappears, utterly temporal, yet absolutely sculptured in space, immovable, an absolute object. Obviously, that's impossible. But the idea of doing that...

Slowing down, slowing down the action, as you did with the curtain in Endgame, would that be part of the effect?

Endgame had no curtain in our production...

No, I mean the curtain... drawing the curtain...

Well, that had some relationship to it, but I felt that—the desire to objectify the temporal—about almost anything that I ever did, and very markedly in what I did with my KRAKEN group much later...

By the way, Kraken, did that mean something?

The actual term comes from *kraken*, the Nordic sea monster. The reason we took the term is that we were interested in the relation of surface and depth. Tennyson wrote a poem about the kraken, which died when it surfaced after being fathoms deep. I got it, actually, not from Tennyson but from Melville, who was corresponding with Hawthorne, after finishing *Moby Dick*. Hawthorne asked him what he would be doing next. And Melville said, "I'm after bigger fish." The bigger fish would be the kraken. We Americanize and call it "krayken". The KRAKEN group did do certain work which addressed the problem, the fantasy, of achieving something marmoreal in a temporal form, as if the movement were frozen solid. A work we did, *The Donner Party, Its Crossing*, literally moved from beginning to end, over two hours, unceasing motion in the form of a square dance. I mean unceasing motion, intricate and exhaustive, even when the figures in the crossing, that fatal journey, were buried twenty feet beneath the snow. We wanted the materiality of the event to feel so dense that it virtually arrested time. That's essentially what I'm talking about, the illusion of immovable substance in this apparently dispersed form.

Yes, I was thinking that we will have to stop sometime, but we will not come to a conclusion. So we could say what you said of sight: now we hear you and now we don't.

