

Beckett's affective telepoetics

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1

Beckett's television plays confound the spectator, not least because of their representational ambiguity, their perplexing affective qualities and the singularity of their poetics. Of the five plays Beckett wrote specifically for television, *Ghost Trio*, his second teleplay, written in 1975, is considered by most critics to be his finest work for the medium. Filmed by the BBC in October 1976, and by Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) the following year, it opens with V, the female voice, describing the set as 'grey' in its colour or non-colour, the lighting as 'faint, omnipresent' and 'Faintly luminous', and itself as a 'faint voice'. The voice identifies the various rectangular objects visible in 'the familiar chamber' as 'a window', 'the indispensable door' and 'some kind of pallet' (Beckett, 2009a, 123, 125). F, the male figure, whom V refers to simply as 'he', is seated motionless listening to a cassette player, although it takes time and an eventual close-up for the spectator to register this, as the stage directions make clear: '*F is seated on a stool, bowed forward, face hidden, clutching with both hands a small cassette not identifiable as such at this range*' (123, 126). F himself, furthermore, resembles but another rectangle, which gives him a curious status in the chamber.

The play has three acts, titled 'Pre-action', 'Action' and 'Re-action'. 'Pre-action' introduces the spectator to the highly abstracted set, which Daniel Albright has characterised as being 'closer to a Mondrian' than to modern drama (Albright, 2003, 136). Following V's introduction of the set, the spectator is presented with a full-screen close-up of one of the rectangles, which the stage directions describe as a '*close-up of floor. Smooth grey rectangle 0.70m. × 1.5m*' (Beckett, 2009a, 125). During the five-second static close-up, V's voiceover announces that 'Having seen that specimen of floor you have seen it all' (125). The 'specimen of floor', in other words,

stands in for the whole floor or indeed for all floors, for floors in general, in a way that might be interpreted as an allusion to the Platonic theory of Forms: in its austere simplicity, 'specimen of floor' represents the idea of a floor, and therefore functions as a representation of the Platonic form of a floor. This is played out in what follows: a succession of further full-screen close-ups, now of the other rectangles that comprise the set.

As the spectator views the rectangles, V qualifies her earlier statement in a series of unfinished sentences – 'Knowing this, the kind of wall –'; 'The kind of floor –'; 'the kind of pallet –'; 'the kind of window'; 'The kind of door –', as if by showing us abstract examples of architectural objects (showing us the class or type of a thing) V is teaching us to recognise particular, concrete instances of such objects (Beckett, 2009a, 125, 126). And yet, the qualifier, 'kind of', can be taken to distance the objects from what they appear to be: rather than the thing itself, we are viewing simplified or schematic representations or simulacra of actual objects. Rather than the ideal wall, floor, pallet or window, these are imperfect representations of actual objects. In this sense, the qualifier, 'kind of', can be taken to mean that the objects are not really what they appear to be, only 'kind of'. This sense of hesitation over the representational significance of the objects displayed is reinforced by the fact that the rectangles appear interchangeable – they are described in the stage directions as '*Smooth grey rectangle*', '*[l]ong narrow (0.70 m.) grey rectangle*' or '*small grey rectangle*', with only slight variations in the dimensions of the cassette player and pillow, while floor, wall and window ('*0.70 m. × 1.5 m.*'), and door and pallet ('*0.70 m. × 2 m.*') are identical in size and in shape (125, 129, 126). The rectangles, in other words, are positively identifiable only because V names them. And yet, since they are identical or near-identical, the naming arouses a certain scepticism towards V's words. The play, in this way, suggests that the object before us is not really the object at all, but rather a shadow or shade (like the shades of grey mentioned by V) or indeed a copy of an already imperfect copy, and one that is made more poignant by the medium of television, which comprises a set of shades or shadows, produced by cathode rays emitted from a high-vacuum tube, by contrast with a theatre stage set, which, while itself a representation, nevertheless sports at least tangible, concrete objects. Neither ideal nor the thing itself, Beckett's tele-objects occupy a ghostly kind of hinterland, an undecidable ontology incorporating both thing and idea that, for Aristotle, characterises the artwork.¹

And yet I want to suggest that the verbally and visually austere opening sequence of *Ghost Trio* is not focused simply on the question of representation, Platonic or otherwise, but also raises the question of kindness. The insistent repetition of the noun 'kind' in 'kind of' brings to mind its homonym, the adjective 'kind', and V's rendering of it in adverbial form in her request – since

hers is, as she says, a ‘faint voice’ – to ‘Kindly tune accordingly’ (Beckett, 2009a, 125). What kind of kindness inhabits Beckett’s television plays, we might ask. What kind of kindness do his plays encourage, demand, generate, or imply? What kind of affect is involved, and how is empathy evoked or triggered by these strangely abstracted worlds?

F, the male figure, has a curious status in the play. No longer a character, he is one of a long line of late-Beckettian ‘players’.² Throughout *Ghost Trio*, with careful attention to posture and the familiar Beckettian greatcoat as his costume, F assumes a highly abstracted form – so abstracted, indeed, that for whole stretches of the play he resembles, as I have suggested, one of its many rectangles. There is a radical dehumanisation at work in this figure, in other words, which is also at work, rather differently, in the way that F may be said to belong to Beckett’s equally distinguished line of catatonics. The most famous of these can be found in his 1938 novel, *Murphy*, which features Mr Endon, a catatonic schizophrenic, who inhabits a padded cell, displays a ‘charming suspension of gesture’ and whose Greek name, *endon*, meaning ‘within’, reinforces the reader’s sense of his detachment (Beckett, 2009b, 116). The novel also features the patient Clarke, who is described as having been ‘for three weeks in a katatonic stupor’ (121), and who has been identified by J. C. C. Mays and C. J. Ackerley as representing the Irish poet, Austin Clarke, who suffered a breakdown in 1919 and was admitted to St Patrick’s Asylum.³ After witnessing Murphy in his rocking chair, Ticklepenny exclaims to him that ‘you had a great look of Clarke there a minute ago’ (121). Murphy has fallen under the spell of Mr Endon, but from the opening pages of the novel the reader has encountered him in a near-catatonic state, tied to his rocking chair as he is with six (rather than seven, as the narrator claims) scarves. The phrase ‘catatonic stupor’ appears again in the 1953 novel, *Watt* (Beckett, 2009c, 43), while Christine Jones has described another of Beckett’s rocking-chair bound players, W in *Rockaby* (1980), as bearing ‘a catatonic expression’, ‘body’ and ‘gaze’ (Jones, 1998, 185, 186, 192), and one could argue the same about May, the protagonist of the play’s companion piece, *Footfalls* (1975). Catatonia comes from the Greek ‘kata’, down from or under, and ‘tonos’, tone or tension, which might bring to mind *Ghost Trio*’s other reference to low tone in V’s comment, ‘Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly’; she reminds us a few lines later to ‘Keep that sound down’ (Beckett, 2009a, 125).

Catatonia presents in schizophrenia but it is also a symptom of a number of other psychiatric, neurological and psychological disorders. We know that Beckett came across the condition in his reading of Otto Rank’s *The Trauma of Birth* (1929), where it is treated as a ‘complete rejection of the outer world’ and regression ‘to the foetal state’ (Rank, 1929, 69, 70), and he would also have encountered catatonia in his reading of Ernest Jones’s

Papers on Psycho-Analysis (1923), where it is associated with dementia praecox, an early name for what is now known as schizophrenia. Catatonia is characterised by psycho-motor 'stupor' – a word, as we have seen, that Beckett himself used in the phrase 'katatonic stupor' in *Murphy* and in *Watt* (Beckett, 2009b, 121; Beckett, 2009c, 43). It is in most cases 'preceded by grief and anxiety, and in general by depressive moods and affects aimed against the patient by himself', as the German psychiatrist Karl Kahlbaum, the first to delineate the condition, writes in 1874. Kahlbaum adds that 'anguish related to unhappy love, or self-reproach resulting from secret sexual misdemeanors', commonly accompany catatonia (Kahlbaum, [1874] 1973, 33). Clinical symptoms, of which stupor is the most common, include mutism, immobility or rigidity of movement, analgesia or the inability to feel pain, automatic obedience, and repeated and formulaic gestures and actions (Moskowitz, 2004, 984–93). Catatonia is likely to originate in a fear response that in animals triggers tonic immobility or 'death feint'. It is the evolutionary expression of 'playing dead', most likely to have originated 'from ancestral encounters with carnivores whose predatory instincts were triggered by movement' but the condition is now 'inappropriately expressed in very different modern threat situations', such as anxiety, clinical depression and other overwhelming affective states, including grief. Moskowitz argues that catatonia, which presents in a number of serious psychiatric and medical conditions, 'may represent a common 'end state' response to feelings of imminent fear or doom' (984).

F, then, has all the hallmarks of catatonia. He remains immobile for exceptionally long stretches of time; when he does move or act or when he sits or stands he is repeatedly – no fewer than seven times – described in the stage directions as 'irresolute' (Beckett, 2009a, 127, 128, 129); he remains mute throughout the play; and it is unclear from the script or from the BBC and SDR productions whether V directs or commands F's actions or merely anticipates them – whether or not, in other words, his actions can be ascribed to his own agency.⁴ What we do know is that V's voice-over announces F's actions, as for instance in the opening line of the second act: 'He will now think he hears her' (127). This is followed by the direction: '*F raises head sharply, turns still crouched to door, fleeting face, tense pose*' (127). This posture is held for five seconds, as the camera lingers on F. At V's line, 'Again', this action is repeated, succeeded by V's 'Now to door'. Next comes the stage direction, '*F gets up, lays cassette on stool, goes to door, listens with right ear against door, back to camera*' (127). As if to foreground F's rigidity, this action is again held for the now-familiar five seconds. Automatic obedience, defined by the American Psychological Association's *Dictionary of Psychology* as 'excessive, uncritical or mechanical compliance with the requests, suggestions, or commands of others', is in turn represented in F's

apparent compliance with V's voice-over. Formulaic gestures and actions, finally, are witnessed in the repetition of themes in the play, such as the reflex turn F makes when he thinks 'he hears her', which is repeated seven times in *Ghost Trio* (127).

The representation of F as catatonic serves at least three purposes in the play: first, it allows for a highly stylised, minimal and abstracted performance; second, it implies a radical evacuation of subjectivity – which is reinforced by the fact that we only encounter F's face in the third and final act, for this is a play in which we are granted only residual if any access to interiority. Third – and this is a point that follows from the two preceding observations – it allows Beckett to produce marionette theatre, for the rigidity and minimalism of expression in catatonia are marionette-like, and one of the symptoms of catatonia, 'waxy flexibility', in fact enables the patient's 'submission to limbs' being manipulated or 'repositioned' (Moskowitz, 2004, 987; emphasis in original). As we know, Beckett was much taken by Kleist's essay, 'On the Marionette Theatre' (1810), and at the time of directing *Ghost Trio* at the BBC, he referred both the actor, Ronald Pickup, and his biographer, James Knowlson, to the essay (Knowlson, 1996, 632). The book had been given to him in 1969 by the German actress Nancy Illig, whom Beckett had directed in *Spiel* and *He Joe* (Van Hulle and Nixon, 2013, 97). In marionette theatre, after all, everything relies on subtle gesture and posture, which is to say on pure form.

Beckett's working title for *Ghost Trio* was 'Tryst', as he mentions in a number of letters and as can also be evidenced in the many manuscript drafts of the play (UoR MSS 1519/1, 1519/2, 1519/3, 2832 and 2833). A tryst is a private meeting between lovers, but the word surely also evokes its French near-homonym, the adjective, *triste*, 'sad'. The play is enigmatic, for while it appears to be about grief or mourning, its evacuation of subjectivity and emotion in its minimally expressive, catatonic, mute protagonist, seems to resist or at least complicate such a reading. Furthermore, V makes it clear that her faint voice 'will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens' (Beckett, 2009a, 125), and as Beckett himself put it in a letter to Antoni Libera, she speaks in a 'distant, anonymous, indifferent voice' (Beckett, 2016, 464) – a voice of at times chilling detachment, such that one might well wonder how the play's affective content can be communicated.

The title of the play comes from the music to which F is listening: the eerie second movement of Beethoven's 5th Piano Trio in D major (Opus 70, No. 1), nicknamed the 'Ghost', and rumoured to have been written for a prospective but never completed opera based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It is unclear from the script or from the televised BBC version of the play whether F controls the music, which materialises when he is in the listening position and stops abruptly when he diverts from it.⁵ The stage directions

for the volume of the music vary from 'Faint' (Beckett, 2009a, 125), to 'slightly louder' (126) to *grow[ing]* (131) without any obvious involvement from F, while the presence of the cassette player seems to contest an interpretation of the music as an aural memory or instance of F's imagination. The music, which clearly 'substitutes for the visual or vocal expression of emotion', however, simultaneously casts the affective dimension of the play into doubt, for as Jonathan Bignell has argued, its emotional charge is lessened by the play's 'constituent visual and aural components' that are here wrenched apart but that in conventional drama would tend to express the affective content 'in a unified and structured way' (Bignell, 2009, 49). The typescripts of *Ghost Trio* reveal that Beckett carefully divided the music into segments that were 'Heard' or 'Unheard' (Maier, 2001, 273). The extracts from Beethoven's piano trio do not appear in a linear or sequential fashion; rather, they are fragmented and re-ordered, which seems to cast further doubt over the implied solace or redemption afforded by the music (Laws, 2013, 148, 134). In this way, as Catherine Laws has argued, 'the spirit of German Romanticism' that Beckett so clearly draws on in *Ghost Trio* is interrogated, deconstructed, and cast under radical doubt (134).

This apparent disparity between subject matter and representational strategy – figured in the eerie voice or tone, and in the implied solace and simultaneous fragmentation of Beethoven's piano trio – is made even starker by the austere formal qualities of the play's medium: the limited, rigidly framed TV screen and its flatness; the literal shades of grey in a black-and-white broadcast, which is made to appear 'sourceless and smooth' by the singular cinematographic technique of shooting the film in colour but printing it in black and white (Voigts-Virchow, 2000, 125); the omnipresent light, produced by the firing of a cathode tube onto a television screen; and the fact that the limited and one-dimensional sound reproduction that characterised contemporary TV broadcasts, not only reinforces the performance of V's voice but is in fact also to a degree its very source: by default flat and faint. In a carbon typescript of *Ghost Trio*, entitled 'Notes on Tryst', Beckett furthermore states, in the instructions for the camera, that 'Once set for shot it should not explore, simply stare' (UoR MS 1519/3, qtd. in Maude, 2009, 122). And yet, the answer to how the play's affective content is communicated seems to reside precisely in its singularity and formal precision, in its detailed foregrounding of the artifice of representation and its late-modernist, minimal, pared-down aesthetic.

The spectator senses, in F's stylised, catatonic rigidity, minimal repetitive movements, and 'bowed' posture – foregrounded in the stage directions – that the play is performing the aftermath of a calamity (Beckett, 2009a, 126–8, 130–1). This much is communicated visually and pre-objectively; we do not need the voice-over to work out that all is not well. F brings to mind

the concentration-camp figure of the *Muselmann*, the individual who is radically de-subjectified, as if dead, resigned to his own extinction. Primo Levi refers to the *Muselmänner* as ‘non-men’ and goes on to describe ‘an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved’ (Levi, 1987, 69). On this level, the play functions through somatic identification, without the need to rationalise. (Something similar applies to the music, which gives the play its final title, for while it may arouse affect, it does so by bypassing conceptual awareness.) And yet, as Derek Attridge argues, rather than being ‘directly experienced as the reality they represent’, the emotions that are aroused by works of literature are ‘staged and controlled by the subtle arrangements of language’ – in the case of *Ghost Trio*, one might add, by the play’s formal qualities (Attridge, 2011, 339).

A key component in understanding how the evacuated subjectivity and abstracted form of *Ghost Trio* both provoke and dismantle affect, I want to argue, is V’s unmissable modifier, ‘kind of’, which is repeated seven times in rapid succession in ‘Pre-action’, and the homonym ‘kind’, as adjective, which also appears in adverbial form in V’s twice-repeated request of the spectator to ‘Kindly tune accordingly’. By foregrounding its own medium and artifice, Beckett’s television play – with its ‘shades of the colour grey’, its near-identical rectangles, and the ‘faint’ and ‘indifferent’ voice of its narrator – engenders a tension between the spectator’s own pre-reflective, somatic response and the detached formalism and self-conscious aestheticism of the *mise en scène* (Beckett, 2009a, 125). In this sense, the refrain, ‘kind of’, with its suggestion of both exemplarity and artifice, alludes to the aesthetic and to its instantiation as form. While F as a gestural figure invites the spectator’s empathy (itself a kind of kindness to another), and while the same pre-reflective effect can be noted in the music, the other formal qualities – such as V’s flat and seemingly indifferent voice and the near-identical rectangles it purports to identify – seem to withdraw the invitation, pointing to the inappropriateness of such a response. In *Ghost Trio*, therefore, the affect-inducing premise of literature or drama – the post-Romantic assumption about literature as an empathy-inducing ‘kindness’, on which the play unmistakably draws – seems to be undermined by V’s flat and indifferent tone, by the clinically framed shots, the grey, abstracted, affectless set, and the ‘staring’ camera eye. In this way, *Ghost Trio* destabilises the spectator by both invoking and stunting empathy, drawing on dramatic convention and exposing its methods, calling on and undoing the capacity of language to represent, and thereby contributing to the complexity, power and unnerving effect or affect of the play.

By requiring us to look at a ‘kind of’ floor and then at a floor, at a ‘kind of’ window and then at a window, it is as if V is instructing us in how to see the world. By looking at an exemplary floor or window, we can then

begin to grasp what a floor or window is in the 'real' world of the TV-stage set. In a similar way, perhaps, Beckett is requiring us to look at and to see a kind of suffering, an abstracted, dehumanised kind of suffering that is simplified and reduced to its minimal components in order to instruct us in how to see suffering in the world – and in how to be kind. But perhaps more disturbingly than that, he asks us, as we look, to consider what it means to be kind and to think about the kind of kindness that we feel we are projecting when we feel empathy. In abstracting and distancing the player in *Ghost Trio*, in evacuating the figure of almost all human attributes and affects – speech, interiority, agency, individuality, emotion, a face even (until the final act) – Beckett confronts us with the limits of our own impulse towards, and assumptions about, empathy in art, and with the limits, indeed, of our kindness towards our own kind.

2

Something similar can be said about . . . *but the clouds* . . . , *Ghost Trio*'s companion piece, written in 1976 and first televised in April 1977. In December 1976, Beckett wrote to the director of Süddeutscher Rundfunk, Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, that 'Though not expressly stated, the man in ". . . but the clouds . . ." is the same as in Ghost Trio, in another (later) situation' (Beckett, 2016, 445). The title, as is well known, comes from Yeats's poem, 'The Tower' (1928), and the play carries a Yeatsian elegiac, melancholic tone in M's yearning for W, the female figure, to appear to him. And yet, embedded in M's lyrical and plaintive lines are others that bear a disturbing resemblance to stage directions. M rehearses his movements in detail: 'Shed my hat and greatcoat, assumed robe and skull, reappeared – [...] Reappeared and stood as before, only facing the other way, exhibiting the other outline [5 seconds.], finally turned and vanished – ' (Beckett, 2009a, 137). But M also keeps revising his account, and lines such as 'No, that is not right' or 'Let us now make sure we have got it right' appear to suggest, in a curious candour that seems to exceed the confines of a metadramatic context, that grief is here staged as a near-mechanical performance and that what we are witnessing is a peculiar choreography of mourning in which the object, the 'Close-up of woman's face reduced as far as possible to eyes and mouth', which appears as 'Same shot throughout', is reduced to a schematised prop (137, 138, 135). Here mourning, as Freud predicts in 'Mourning and Melancholia', has become a bad habit, a habitus whose mechanics the play exposes.

Ruby Cohn comments that the play is 'marred by overreverence', and she also complains about M's 'invariant routine and costume changes' (Cohn,

2005, 343). But these seem precisely intended to distance the spectator from the lyricism and affective excesses of Yeats's poem and to deliberately foreground the play's rehearsed and staged mechanics of affect. Furthermore, M's bowler hat, another familiar Beckettian prop, together with his curiously stylised gait, verge on the comical, bringing to mind silent film, and particularly Beckett's love of Charlie Chaplin, while the 'Light grey robe and skullcap', in turn, are reminiscent of the formal minimalism of Noh theatre (Beckett, 2009a, 135).

Further distancing us from the more lyrical or affect-laden passages, the play stages a preoccupation with numbers, such as 'a fourth case, or case nought', which appears 'in the proportion say of nine hundred and ninety-nine to one, or nine hundred and ninety-eight to two' of M begging 'in vain' for W to appear (140). These elements seem to point to the obsessive-compulsive nature of M's grief, objectifying and quantifying its outcomes, and distancing us from the pathos of Yeats's elegiac lines while foregrounding instead the more clinical mechanics of melancholia. But this desire, in fact, is also staged in 'The Tower' – a desire to distance oneself from

... the wreck of body,
 Slow decay of blood,
 Testy delirium
 Or dull decrepitude,
 Or what worse evil come –
 The death of friends, or death
 Of every brilliant eye
 That made a catch in the breath – (ll. 184–91)

In its seeming complicity with and simultaneous detachment from Yeats's poem, the desire to undo attachments – the yearning to be done with yearning, to be done with being undone – further complicates Beckett's treatment of affect.

3

Nacht und Träume, written for Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1982 and first broadcast in June 1983, completes the cycle of plays about 'ghosts, clouds and dreams' that foreground the ephemerality or 'ontological instability' of the television medium, as Voigts-Virchow has argued (2000, 124). The play presents the spectator with a dreamer, A, and his dreamt self, B, in the upper-right-hand corner of the television screen. The play, in other words, reproduces or doubles the dreamer's body, and in so doing, foregrounds the

virtuality of what appears on the screen. The by-now familiar adjectives, 'kind' and 'faint', appear again in the telescript, for the spectator sees B's 'left profile, faintly lit by kinder light than A's' (Beckett, 2009a, 149). B is comforted by a pair of disembodied hands, one of which 'rests gently' on B's head. The hands then 'gently' convey a cup to B's lips and 'gently' wipe his brow. Finally, R, the right hand, reappears and 'rests gently on B's right hand', followed by L, the left hand that 'rests gently on B's head' (149–50). These movements are then repeated in slow motion and in close-up of B alone.

The iconography of the play, with B's 'upturned gaze, the ministering hands, the presentation of chalice and cloth' and the use of spotlight is, as Graley Herren has remarked, religious, 'eucharistic' (Herren, 2001, 61). It evokes the work of the Italian and Dutch Old Masters Beckett so admired. The play has no dialogue. Instead, we hear the 'Last 7 bars of Schubert's *Lied, Nacht und Träume*' (Beckett, 2009a, 149), in a way that provokes Daniel Albright to comment on the 'slight sentimentalization of music' in the play (Albright, 2003, 148). And yet, while the music is romantic and even sentimental, Catherine Laws perceptively raises the question of its origin or source, which is, in fact, 'unplaceable' within the play (Laws, 2013, 201). The fact that the spectator (or reader) cannot locate a clear source for the hummed or sung music – since we do not witness A singing or humming – decontextualises it and disconnects the image perceived from the music heard. The effect is to undermine the sentimental and consolatory charge of the *Lied*, which, as in Yeats's poem in . . . *but the clouds* . . . , is both evoked and revoked (208).⁶

Strikingly, the adverb 'gently' appears five times in the play's brief, two-page script. The adjectival form, 'gentle' comes into Middle English from the Old French *gentil* meaning 'of noble birth, high-born' (as in 'gentleman'), but by the sixteenth century the word had come to be used for someone 'mild' or 'moderate in action or disposition' (OED). In contemporary usage, the adverb 'gently' is synonymous with 'mildly', 'tenderly' and 'kindly' – the latter, as we have seen, familiar to us from *Ghost Trio* (OED). In *Nacht und Träume*, Beckett is again interested in the kind of gentleness or kindness rendered by art. This is something that he no doubt encountered in the Old Masters whose works the play evokes as well as in the Schubert *Lied* that lends the play its title; and it is also staged in the Beethoven piano trio to which F listens in *Ghost Trio* and in Yeats's poem that gives . . . *but the clouds* . . . its title and thematic content. And yet, the pronounced formalism of all three plays, the ambiguity of the music's origin, the plays' self-conscious foregrounding of virtuality, artifice, the television medium, and representation itself, work to undercut affect, empathy and sentiment, and to call such impulses into question.

Coda

This affective ambiguity is also a feature of Beckett's first television play, *Eh Joe*, which anticipates the later plays in various ways. Beckett finished writing *Eh Joe* in May 1965, and the play was filmed both by the BBC and by Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1966, and first broadcast by SDR on Beckett's sixtieth birthday on 13 April 1966. The BBC version, with Jack MacGowran as Joe and Siân Phillips as Voice, features Joe alone in one of Beckett's ghost chambers, listening to a disembodied female voice whose origin neither he nor the spectator can locate. Voice narrates to Joe the story of one of his former lovers, 'The green one . . . The narrow one', who makes two attempts on her life, before succeeding on the third (Beckett, 2009a, 117). These include the effort to drown herself, another to slit her wrists, and conclude with the green one taking 'tablets' and laying 'her face a few feet from the tide [...] scoop[ing] a little cup for her face in the stones' (118).⁷

The play is replete with signifiers of affect: 'the heart', 'love', 'pitying', religious 'passion' and 'los[ing] heart', not to mention the tone of what Beckett called 'venom' detectable in the female voice (2009a, 114–17).⁸ *Eh Joe* is concerned with the protagonist's affective responses to the narrative recounted by Voice, which the camera studies through nine progressive close-ups of Joe's face. The spectator expects signs of anguish, guilt, shock, distress and incomprehension, paired with grief and remorse that would typify the conflicted affective responses of suicide survivors. Confoundingly, in the SDR version Joe's face twice sports a fleeting smile before it lingers there on the third and final closing shot of the play, and the BBC production similarly closes on Joe's disquieting smile. Throughout the play, Beckett is careful to make Joe's affective range narrowly ambiguous: the script specifies that Joe's face should remain 'Practically motionless throughout [...] impassive except in so far as it reflects mounting tension of *listening*' (114; emphasis in original). This ambiguity is heightened by the play's formal qualities: *Eh Joe* opens with a long shot of the protagonist in the room, 'full length in frame' (113), followed by the nine progressive camera close-ups of Joe's face, which in the BBC production last just under two minutes each. The 'exaggerated movement' from long shot to close-up brings to mind 'silent cinema, pantomime and puppet theatre', while the progressive close-ups are one of television's stock techniques for representing 'psychological states' (Bignell, 2009, 21–2). The near-two-minute close-ups, however, are exceedingly long by 1960s standards, harking back to 1930s productions and contributing to the defamiliarising effect of Beckett's play (24). Furthermore, the strong shadows that are cast by the lighting of the BBC production not only bring to mind German Expressionist film, but serve further to complicate the deciphering of Joe's facial expressions (23). The BBC version of *Eh Joe* was

filmed in one shot, with a video camera that rendered 'less tonal depth and capacity for contrast' than a film camera, which only further interferes with the spectators' reading of affect in Joe's expressions. In this way, the production values of the BBC *Eh Joe* served to add to the ambiguity of interpretation that Beckett aimed for in his representation of Joe's 'impassive' demeanour (23).

Voice's narrative of the green one, however, also contains details that aestheticise and add pathos to the scene. There is, for instance, a poetic reference to the moon and to the green one 'looking at the beaten silver' of its reflection on the water (Beckett, 2009a, 118). Her eyes are characterised as 'Spirit made light', which brings to mind the references to Romanticism in the later television plays (117). More disquietingly, while the scant clothing of the green one adds to the foregrounding of her vulnerability, the scene is also eroticised in Voice's description of her 'Sitting on the edge of her bed in her lavender slip' and later, of the 'Slip clinging the way wet silk will' (118). The three smiles that cross Joe's face in the SDR *He Joe* and the closing smile of the protagonist in the BBC production of the play beg the question of whether Joe is in fact taking pleasure in the affective intensity of the recollection. There is even a suggestion of frisson in the manner in which Joe lingers on the scene. The formal details of the two productions reinforce the affective ambiguity of the play, since after the opening long shot, it becomes increasingly difficult for the spectator to situate Joe in the room.

The final camera close-ups progressively fracture Joe's face, and at the close of the SDR production, only his eyes and nose are visible. The close-ups, which Beckett wanted to sever from the voice – 'never camera move and voice together', as he put it (113) – serve to foreground the medium of television, for not only is the spectator brought preternaturally close to Joe's face, but the face itself seems to be dissolving 'into the insubstantial lines which make up the image' of an analogue television set (Connor, 1988, 161). In this way, *Eh Joe* seems both to elicit empathy and repeatedly to revoke it by foregrounding its affective, aesthetic and erotic complexities, which are paired with the formal qualities and techniques of the television medium.

As Billie Whitelaw once remarked, the set of *Eh Joe* closely resembles that of *Ghost Trio*, and both plays have a somnambulant air (Whitelaw, 1995, 227), an effect that applies to all four of the plays discussed.⁹ The kindness that we might intuit as a kind of ghostly shadow within V's austere, formalised and abstracted instructions to the viewer in *Ghost Trio* or in the fragmented rendering of Yeats's poem in . . . *but the clouds* . . . and the Schubert *Lied* in *Nacht und Träume*, is indicative of the way that, in Beckett's telepoetics, affect is both evoked and withheld. Affect in Beckett's television plays works from a distance, moving us, when at all, as if from a place far away.

Notes

- 1 For Aristotle, art offers us not merely the particular, as history does, nor solely the universal, as is the case with philosophy, but an undecidable combination of the two, the particular or exemplar in the universal (2013, 1451b).
- 2 For a useful summing up of the difficulties critics have faced in finding the correct term of reference for Beckett's fictional 'characters', see Ratcliffe (2008, 55–6).
- 3 See Ackerley (2004, 165) and Mays (1977, 199). For Mays' discussion of the correspondence between Austin Clarke and the character of Ticklepenny in *Murphy*, see pp. 199–203.
- 4 Beckett writes to Antoni Libera in May 1977 that V 'is observing and presenting from a distance, rather than manipulating. Her "imperatives" hardly warrant the name, as if she knew what was going to happen and was merely announcing it. A sort of astral presenter' (2016, 464). This would suggest that V operates as the modern-day equivalent of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, but for the reader and the spectator of the play, the fact remains that V's lines appear to represent commands or 'imperatives', in Libera's sense.
- 5 Although the telescript and the BBC version leave F's agency over the music ambiguous, in the SDR production the spectator does witness F turning on the music.
- 6 Similarly, although *Nacht und Träume*, as Trish McTighe has argued, is unique among Beckett's television plays 'for its visualization of the act of touch, that touch happens only in a dream space', which perhaps emphasises 'the failure of touch, relationality, and bodily wholeness', thereby again diminishing the affective charge of the scene (McTighe, 2013, 12).
- 7 For a discussion of suicide in Beckett's work, see Maude (2018).
- 8 Beckett wrote to Alan Schneider on 11 February 1966 about the filming of *Eh Joe* in London: 'Voice very low throughout – plenty of venom' (Beckett, 1998, 198).
- 9 Whitelaw played the role of Voice in a later production of the play.

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