Introduction
Beckett and the Image

Like many of us the young Samuel Beckett did not relish the idea of working for a living. As far as we know his only conventional employment was as a lecturer in Modern Languages at Trinity College Dublin from 1930 to 1931. He resigned after just over a year. Perhaps this is why Beckett's early novels and short stories, most famously *Murphy*, written in London while being supported by his mother, are full of those known in French slang as *voyou desoeuvre*, 'lazy rascals': young men – often artists or writers – to whom the very idea of selling their labour is anathema.[1]

So it comes as some surprise to find Beckett writing the following to his friend Thomas MacGreevy on 9 September 1933:

> [i]n a moment of gush I applied for a job of assistant at the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, and got Charles Prentice and Jack Yeats to act as referees. I think I'd be happy there for a time among the pigeons and not too far from the French charmers in the Garrick. Apart from my conyser-ship that can just separate Uccello from a handsaw I could cork the post as well as another.[2]

Beckett had spent July and August of 1932 in London, putting off his return to Dublin after having left his lecturing job the previous Christmas. It was probably during this summer that he first began to visit London's National Gallery regularly. He had met Thomas MacGreevy, the recipient of the letter quoted, in 1929 in Paris. Beckett was twenty-three at that point and an exchange *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieur. MacGreevy, aged thirty-five, was editing the French avant-garde art

[1] The term was used in 1952 by Alexandre Kojêve to describe the protagonists of three novels by Raymond Queneau and subsequently taken up as a term of art by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben. Beckett himself uses the term in a letter to MacGreevy on 20 February 1935; see Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol 1, 1929–1940*, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld et al. (eds.) (Cambridge, 2009), p. lxxxii. (Henceforth *LSB1*.)

[2] Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 9 October 1933, *LSB1*, pp. 165–170, pp. 166–167.

magazine *Formes* at the time, and would eventually become director of the Irish National Gallery. It was MacGreevy who was Beckett's guide to the rich visual culture of Paris in the later 1920s and early 1930s, from the holdings of the Louvre to the ongoing provocations of the Surrealists.

The regular correspondence between Beckett and MacGreevy carried on throughout the 1930s, and will be an important source for my account of Beckett's deep interest in painting. This interest is particularly apparent in the two-year period he spends in London in 1934 and 1935. Severely shaken by the death of his father, Beckett moves to the city to seek psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic in Russell Square. In this period, he attempts to place his writing with publishers, find commissions and earn money by reviewing. However, as it becomes clearer that he will not be able to support himself by writing, a career as curator or critic begins to appear as a realistic alternative. Other options – airplane pilot, advertising copywriter, filmmaker – are sometimes referred to, but on the whole some sort of professional position in the field of art is the most consistently explored.

We know about all of this from a number of key letters, but also from a notebook Beckett kept, now held at Reading University. This has extensive notes from Reginald Wilenski's *An Introduction to Dutch Art*, as well as from some other sources, including Mary Margaret Heaton's biography of Dürer.[3] It also lists Dutch and Flemish paintings from the V & A, the Wallace Collection, Kenwood House, Hampton Court and the Dulwich Picture Gallery.[4] This evident impulse to study art methodically continues into 1936 and 1937, when, aged thirty-one, Beckett embarks on a tour of almost all the great art collections of Germany, keeping a meticulous account of the paintings he saw, and the many artists and critics he sought out and spoke to. These diaries will be a second vitally important source.

Curiously though, in the earlier notebook, compiled while in London, there is no list from the National Gallery. I like to think that this is simply because he knew the collection there so well, that it was such a regular port of call, that he didn't need to remind himself of what it contained. It is a gallery in which I have also spent a great many happy hours over the last thirty years. By way of an introduction to this book on *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts*, I am going to briefly consider a painting that would have certainly featured had Beckett recorded his many visits. In doing so, I will sketch out some of the main themes of this book, ideas that will

[3] Wilenski (1929); Heaton (1870).
[4] Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading (henceforth UoR) MS5001.

return in different forms and combinations as we proceed, reflecting the way that Beckett's thinking about painting, visual art and the image constantly evolved over the course of his life.

It is in Beckett's poem 'Malacoda' that we find the first trace of his visits to the gallery in Trafalgar Square. 'Malacoda' is an elegy for his Father William, who as mentioned earlier, passed away in June 1933. The poem was started soon after the funeral.[5] It describes the three visits of the undertaker: one to measure the body for the coffin, one to coffin the body, and one to bury it. It is highly allusive, as was Beckett's style at the time: the title is the name of one of the devils that Dante encounters in *Inferno*.[6] However, the poem also refers to a painting, and relies on a shared knowledge sufficient enough for the reader to imaginatively supply one of the poem's central images:

> to cover
> to be sure cover cover all over
> your targe allow me hold your sulphur
> divine dog day glass set fair
> stay Scarmilion stay stay
> lay this Huysum on the box
> mind the imago it is he
> hear she must see she must
> all aboard all souls
> half-mast aye aye
>
> nay

The poem deals with revelation and concealment, with what the narrator sees as the hypocrisies of the ritual surrounding death. It is also concerned for an unnamed 'she', and what she will or will not be permitted to see, and hear, of the process of burial. The reference to Huysum here is an allusion to Jan van Huysum, the noted Dutch painter of floral still lives. Beckett told a scholar in later years that he was thinking of a painting of a butterfly on a flower by this Dutch artist, and such a picture, *Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*, hangs still in the National Gallery.[7]

Van Huysum's painting is a very beautiful one, displaying the vivid colours and meticulously smooth finish for which the painter was and is renowned. This beauty is one of the reasons that Beckett inserts it into the poem. For it figures there as a means of concealing and aestheticizing death: 'Lay this Huysum on the box', the narrator says, i.e. on the coffin.

[5] Beckett (2012), p.21, p. 293. [6] Beckett (2012), p. 294. [7] See Harvey (1970), p. 111.

Figure I.1 Jan van Huysum, *Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*, © National Gallery London

In this way the painting takes its place alongside the other clichéd rituals and metaphors – the flag at half mast, the ship of death – through which the speaker vainly attempts to come to terms with his loss.

At the same time, however, Huysum's picture cannot be reduced to such a simple consolatory function. The painting is in the tradition of the Vanitas, as all of Huysum's flower pictures were, and anyone familiar with the Dutch painter would have known this. Some of the flowers seem slightly past their prime, and if one looks closely there is a fly painted on the lip of the urn, a symbol of decay. There is an ambiguity to the picture then; beauty is already tinged with transience, the passage of time. The image cannot quite be said to be concealing or compensating for death because it features

death as a trace. As we shall see, Beckett was intensely interested in the question of how art can both accommodate and arrest temporality, and the way the van Huysum image here acts both to obscure and (implicitly) reveal death is characteristic of the kinds of images he was attracted to.

Immediately after the introduction of Huysum, Beckett refers to the butterflies in the painting by the entomological term 'imago' (the final stage of an insect's metamorphosis). In Vanitas painting of Huysum's style and period butterflies are traditionally seen as representations of life after death, in that during a typical life cycle they become dormant, only to emerge transformed. Beckett is clearly aware of this tradition here. By calling the butterfly an imago, however, he raises other important ideas, ones that were, for him, deeply interconnected. Most obviously, the term 'imago' suggests the faculty of the imagination itself, as well as the image it produces. It is also used in psychology to describe the idealized conception of the parent that the child forms. The allusion to the Huysum painting thus brings together a number of ideas: death and temporality, the notion of beauty and its compensatory power, the image of the Father and the idea of the image itself. This tension between the autonomous, authoritative image and the passage of time towards oblivion is fundamental to Beckett's poetics.

Shortly after his Father's death, Beckett wrote, again to his friend MacGreevy:

> My Dear Tom,
>
> Father died last Monday afternoon after an illness lasting just under a week, and was buried the following Wednesday … Mother and I nursed him while he was ill … He was very beautiful when it was all over.[8]

We can easily relate this to our examination of 'Malacoda'. Reading it, however, I am also reminded of a passage from a later short story, 'First Love', written in the late 1940s. There the narrator is describing, or trying to describe, the face of a prostitute who has accosted him:

> [a]s to whether it was beautiful, the face, or had once been beautiful, or could conceivably become beautiful, I confess I could form no opinion. I had seen faces in photographs I might have found beautiful, had I known even vaguely in what beauty was supposed to consist. And my Father's face, on his death bolster, had seemed to hint at some form of aesthetics relevant to man. But the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects?[9]

[8] Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 2 July 1933, *LSB1*, pp. 164–165, p. 164.
[9] 'First Love' in Beckett (1980), pp. 7–30, pp. 22–23.

Once again, as with 'Malacoda' and the letter to MacGreevy, both written shortly after his Father dies, Beckett deploys visual beauty alongside the fact of death. However, 'First Love' adds a further detail which can usefully demonstrate, in a preliminary way, how Beckett develops some of his key aesthetic concerns in terms of the visual image. Beauty is introduced here primarily in terms of visual sensation, but it is an experience that the narrator has little or no knowledge of. Or, more accurately, not enough to make an aesthetic judgement. There is a 'hint' that such an exercise of judgement might become possible at the moment of death, or in a photograph, however. In other words, there is the implication that it is only at the point where the face, in death, achieves the status of object, definitively displaced from human experience, that aesthetic judgement is possible.

This passage was written after Beckett's most intensive encounter with Kantian philosophy, when he had all eleven volumes of the *Werke* shipped to him from Munich in January 1938.[10] The tentative nature of the narrator's relationship with the idea of beauty accords with Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement. A brief and necessarily schematic account of this theory will be useful here, as it is essential to an understanding of the evolution of Beckett's visual poetics.

In cognition, for Kant, the faculty of the imagination synthesizes sense perceptions by applying to them concepts supplied by the faculty of the understanding. Thus, for example, the imagination applies the existing concepts 'square' and 'red' to visual sensations, and we recognize a red square. For Kant, however, beauty is not a concept in the way that red is, and the judgement of the beautiful does not involve the application of a universal by the imagination. This is because beauty derives from a subjective feeling, that of pleasure, rather than from cognition. More precisely, aesthetic pleasure results from what Kant calls the 'freeplay of the faculties' of imagination and understanding.[11] That is to say, the beautiful object excites the two faculties to interact in an undetermined fashion, stimulating the action of a pure synthesis without subsuming the sensations generated under a single, familiar concept. One of the attractions of art is that we never arrive at a stable conclusion, but remain in a state of delighted potentiality. In this way, beauty reveals something like the pure workings of the synthesizing faculty of the imagination itself. As such it is not merely a subjective feeling, but a potentially universalizable condition one feels impelled to extend to the whole community. One wants to make

[10] Kant (1921–1923). See Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 5 July 1938, *LSB1*, pp. 579–583, p. 581.
[11] Kant (1914), pp. 64–65.

subjective pleasure into objective truth by convincing others of the beauty one sees, though such a task is onerous, and perhaps impossible.

It is significant that one of the few marked extended passages in Beckett's edition of Kant concerns precisely these questions of the beautiful, the beholder and the possibility of universalizable, objective judgement. It comes in the course of Ernst Cassirer's 'Introduction' to the eleven volumes:

> [i]t would . . . be ridiculous if anyone who plumed himself on his taste were to think of justifying himself by saying: This object . . . is beautiful for me. For if it merely pleases him, he must not call it beautiful. Many things for him possess charm and agreeableness – no-one cares about that; but when he puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things.[12]

'First Love''s meditation on the beautiful both conforms to and challenges this Kantian account of aesthetic judgement. Kant's sense of the difficult questions the aesthetic object poses for the beholder, the way the object provokes a testing and retesting of the forms of the understanding, is present in the narrator's concern to categorize what he sees. Yet, for Beckett, such questions also raise issues of temporality, affect, the body and the everyday. In the passage from 'First Love', temporality is present first through the narrator's claim that the prostitute's face might once have been, or might become, beautiful, and second through the highly visual account of the changeability, affects and sensations of the living face at the description's end. When the narrator wonders whether the faces of the living can be described as objects, and so be understood as art, he emphasizes the excess of sensation over concept, and the time-bound nature of the human experience of the world. In this way the narrator's relation to beauty does not conform to the Kantian model, as for the latter art stages the process whereby the understanding organizes sense-experience into intelligible form, albeit without ever concluding it. Contrary to this, Beckett suggests the possibility of a strictly non-Kantian process: the experience of pure sensation without the mediation of the concept. Such a desire reaches back beyond Kant to the earliest aesthetic theories of Baumgarten and the notion of art as *aisthesis* or to the Jena Romanticism that succeeded Kant, Schiller in particular. Beckett's influences are more recent, however, as we shall see.

At the same time, although there is a departure from the transcendental aesthetic and its associated notions of apperception, there also seems to be a latent attraction to a formalism that is ultimately securely Kantian.

[12] Translation taken from Cassirer (1981), p. 317.

The suggestion that the static photograph and the impassive face of the corpse might be the ideal aesthetic objects is in keeping with the mocking, disenchanted tone of the story. And yet, as is so often the case in Beckett's mature work, something serious is afoot alongside the irony. This is particularly evident when the extract is considered in relation to the 1933 letter on the father's death and the many undead, 'petrified' bodies and faces of the later work. The mechanical objectivity of the photograph and the absolute desubjectification of the corpse both, in their different ways, accord to the idea of an autonomous object, subtracted from the everyday, replete and self-communing. In this sense, the passage from 'First Love' reads like a version, or perversion, of a mode of visual aesthetics, heavily indebted to Kant, that will become highly influential in twentieth-century visual culture. The twentieth-century displacement of Kantian formalism from the activity of the 'disinterested' beholding subject to the material art object itself, epitomized by Clement Greenberg's work, but also present in different ways in the aesthetic thought of both Heidegger and Adorno, bears a marked affinity to the 'aesthetics relevant to man' that Beckett sketches in 'First Love'. Having said this, Beckett's rueful, paradoxical association of such a 'human' aesthetics with the corpse brings to this nexus of ideas something that is wholly his own.

The tension between the beautiful, integral image and the passage of time that we saw in 'Malacoda' is thus clearly apparent in 'First Love'. On the one hand we have an identification with the unnerving objectivity of corpse and photograph, and on the other hand the option of a bedding down in the temporal flux of pure subjective sensation. In this way, a Kantian aesthetics that places man at its centre is challenged, ironized and extended in Beckett's work, but never entirely abandoned. Central to his concerns is the question of the ontology of the artwork itself, its status as material object and the consequences of such independent materiality for its efficacy as a register, or producer, of subjective experience. If the artwork is an object, it is dead and cannot capture the sensation of life. And yet if life and sensation themselves are problematized, as Beckett will eventually do, then the static image or the repetitive, stuttering narrative may come to seem the most adequate responses to the world: an aesthetics relevant to man.

For Beckett, painting is thus intimately related to broader philosophical accounts of the image as an interaction of sense impression and conceptual form. In this he is absolutely typical of his time. The issue of how the human experience of light and sound waves is cognitively organized into stable images, how sensation becomes perception, is one of the great

philosophical problems of modernity. In the France of the 1920s and early 1930s it was especially contentious as a central point of disagreement between the two dominant philosophical currents of the time: neo-Kantianism and Bergsonism. In the cultural and critical realm it was in the arena of painting that the debate was played out in its most radical forms. This is most obvious with reference to Cubism, where the neo-Kantian approaches of critics like Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Maurice Reynal responded to, and for a long time obscured, the Bergsonian analyses of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger.[13] Indeed it is not too much to say that, right across Europe, painting became a key means of testing philosophical questions of epistemology. That is to say, the question of the correlation between painting and beholder was conceived in terms of the relationship between subject and object, with particular attention paid to the possibility of direct, unmediated access to the object. Beckett's life-long concern with the aesthetics of the subject–object relation must be seen in this context. The paradoxical traces of both Kant and Bergson we can find in his work also have their origins in such art world debates.

Yet Beckett's relationship with such debates must also be placed in a wider, more properly literary context. A sensitivity to the visual image is a tendency that he shares with many modernist writers. Walter Pater, for example, is a figure with an immense influence on modernist literature and one who, in the essays on Leonardo and Giorgione, for example, made important aesthetic advances through the consideration of painting. Pater often described the imagination in terms of intensity of visual perception, and argued that great poetry depends upon 'perfect fidelity to one's own inner presentations, to the precise features of the *picture* within'.[14] In *The Renaissance*, meanwhile, he claimed that art is 'always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of *pure perception*'.[15] We also find the latter phrase prominently in Beckett's 1931 essay *Proust*. It may be that both Beckett and Pater discovered the phrase independently in Schopenhauer, but the coincidence, if such it is, demonstrates at the very least Beckett's early interest in the unmediated visual image, a concept that stretches from Andre Breton's idea of 'the savage eye' right back to modernism's first stirrings. And this is not the only connection we can find with Pater: the pronounced *Giorgionisme* that Beckett shared with Thomas MacGreevy in the 1930s

[13] For an excellent account see Cottingham (2004).
[14] 'Wordsworth' in (1910), pp. 39–64, p. 51.
[15] 'The School of Giorgione' in Pater (1919), pp. 139–154, p. 138. My italics.

is again typical of a modernist enthusiasm that can be traced to Pater's celebrated essay on the painter.

It is most probably through Joyce that Pater makes an impact on Beckett's early accounts of the image. In 'Dante ... Vico. Bruno .. Joyce', *Work in Progress* is described in terms of 'a sensuous untidy art of intellection', a phrase which is then qualified slightly: 'perhaps "apprehension" is the most satisfactory English word'. Significantly, Beckett goes on to quote Stephen Dedalus's modernist description of the ideal, autonomous image in *Portrait of the Artist*:

> the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehended it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness.[16]

Stephen's account is of course highly idiosyncratic, but it is also a product of its time. Although its terms are taken from Aristotle and Aquinas, it owes much to Pater. When the latter argues that in artistic creation 'all depends upon the original unity, the vital wholeness and identity of the initiatory apprehension', he anticipates Joyce's description of 'the instant wherein ... the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness'.[17] But Pater also supplies another important ingredient of pure perception when, in *Appreciations*, he sees 'a sort of thought in sense' as the goal of art. This anticipates the desire of a wide range of modernists for a writing that can mobilize conceptual thought without losing its grasp on the particular. Such a notion of apprehension as a comportment towards the aesthetic object that is immediate, sensuous and yet not limited to somatic response, is strongly present in Eliot, for example, and in particular his well-known 1921 appraisal of the Metaphysical poets and their 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought'.[18] If the Beckett of the Vico essay thinks 'apprehension' is the best word to describe how *Work in Progress* might be grasped, he is thus situating himself in an established tradition.

Echoes of this high modernist interest in apprehension, sensation and the image can still be heard in the crucial year 1937, when Beckett addresses the idea of the poetic image in the context of his friend Denis Devlin's poetry:

[16] Beckett (1961), pp. 5–13, p. 10.
[17] Pater, (1910), pp. 5–38, p. 22. Joyce (1992), p. 231.
[18] Eliot (1993), p. 46.