

# Samuel Beckett: Color, Letter, and Line

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ABSTRACT. Samuel Beckett is portrayed as a supreme “colorist of prose” through a decoding of the letter in the text. A critical spotlight is focussed on the subtle nuancing of monochromatic black on white lettering in Beckett’s *Mal vu mal dit* and on the shading arising from an overlay of the French on Beckett’s own translation into English (*Ill Seen Ill Said*) and the bilingual punning that results. The text and its subject hover between two languages in complementary and conflictual relation to each other, and between two arts. The fundamental ambiguity in the text and lack of definition of the subject — whose pronoun shifts from *I* to *he*, to *she*, to *we* — are amplified by the translation from the affective (“colored”) French to terms of clearer articulation, in the black on white of Beckett’s native English. *Mal vu mal dit*, the text that embodies the subject, hesitates between the now fading vision that inspired it and the act of articulation and is thus both “ill seen” and “ill said.” To conclude, the blue that colors the beginning of Beckett’s text is defined in Cezanne’s terms, as an atmospheric tone evoking a super-nature and the illusion of infinite depth. Awash in this bluish cast (*bleuté*), *Mal vu mal dit* is thus divested of semantic distinctness and permits the play of, and play with, visible signifiers, or letters.

Critics argue only occasionally that Samuel Beckett is a superficial writer. His vision has often been burdened with tragedy, melancholy, despondency, anguish and existential pathos. This may be for the good reason that his work tells us how frail is the first person singular on which speech and meaning are based. The paragraphs to follow intend to specify some literal aspects of the art of Beckett’s style. They will posit that his diction is inherently bilingual, and that the bilingualism engenders a visible writing, in which words can be seen disintegrating into letters; in turn, these become agents refracting unconscious rhetorical “colors” from the lines of words printed between English and French. The style is therefore composed in the manner of a rebus.

The process releasing colors from words depends on a simultaneously *regressive* reading and viewing of Beckett’s writing. Letters can be pictograms, transitional or intermediate figures of poetic dialogue.<sup>1</sup> They hint at a number of virtual languages both within and beyond the characters of individual words; they cast writing into concrete shapes.

Beckett’s *oeuvre* always stages scenes of regress to a child-like sensibility of language. A sort of reverse psychogenesis takes place when characters, looking for themselves or some ultimate essence, are reduced to a condition

of visible letters that are situated between English or French. They progressively lose their national appendages (or their mimetic virtue) as they are reduced to simple traits (as in the instance of an I in upper case which becomes suggestive of a brushstroke). In their intermediate condition, the characters embody a sensibility that allows readers to behold them in their infantile, dialogic, transitional state suspended — if a Freudian ideolect can be used — between primary and secondary process. Here consequences are manifold for a poetics of visibility. The texts body forth an opulence of abstract shapes and forms that are apprehended with simultaneously tactile, visual and aural sensibilities. Language is freed of semantic order; it releases sensation and savor through a free play of syntax and concrete tensions that are of a poetic order — unstable in form, both tender and sadistic in affect, and of an always indeterminate eros and drive. That color and line commingle in the work is particularly important for the study of the letter as a minimal but essential raw matter of literature.

Multilingualism, letters, colors and a tabular feel for the printed page motivate much of Beckett's style. The dynamics are as old as those of Dante, but the combinations of words and their rhythms have no equivalent in the literary tradition. These pervade the oeuvre so much that it would be impossible to detect much evolution in the style or work in either French or English. *Premier amour* (1970), a text about ambivalent beginnings, illustrates the point. Early in the work the narrator recalls childhood prior to the sentimental education announced in the title. Memories of his relation with his father precede tales of loves lost in later years. His narrative of a "first love" antedated whatever the narrator sought to record in the disastrous aftermath of romance. The child's relation with the father was indeed the basis for the heterosexual miasms of the life that followed. With feigned nostalgia, the voice returns to the paradise garden of his childhood, then figured as a kind of greenhouse or closed area bathed in light.

Il n'y avait que mon père et moi pour comprendre les tomates,  
dans cette maison (p. 14).

[Only my father and I could understand tomatoes in this  
household.]

The narrator seizes upon the memory of *tomatoes*, but with a flair that seems uncharacteristic of most of Beckett's prose, since the range of colors in most of the work includes only black, white and grey. When a figure suggesting green or red is inserted over an austere background of absolute light and its contrary, the color hints that some play of language or letters is inspiring the representation. In the context of the narrative still-life,

*tomates* refers not just to tomatoes but, through amphiboly in English, to “two mates.” Two mates live their subjectivities in the closure of a greenhouse. With the imaginary palette of red or green cast over the white and black, colors surge through the bilingual discourse and heighten our pictorial relation with the writing.

Between the English and French of tomatoes and *tomates* letters slip and glide; they fracture the memory of the Oedipal scene (as well as its own theatricality), and in the comedy of Eros, they establish a tonal range in writing. If, as the sentence suggests, words are sometimes exploded in the collision of English and French, and if, too, an unconscious dimension of color emerges from their identity in the *jeu de mots*, it may also be that *tomates* includes the pictorial dimension of *matting*, of flattening, or of working with matte-boards on which illusory three-dimensional scenes can be staged. *Tomates, to matte*: from words and psychic scenes we regress — salubriously — to letters, pictures and accretions of ink and pigment.

The implied presence of red tones acquires an almost identical function in another scene of Oedipal torture in *Endgame*. Once again, colors refract from the bilingual stamp of the discourse. Seen in English, blood drips from a speech in *Endgame* (1957) when Hamm starts to finish a soliloquy:

Where was I? (*Pause. Gloomily.*)

It's finished, we're finished. (*Pause.*)

Nearly finished. (*Pause.*)

There'll be no more speech. (*Pause.*)

Something dripping in my head, ever since the fontanelles.

(*Stifled hilarity of Nagg.*)

Splash, splash, always on the same spot. (*Pause.*)

Perhaps it's a little vein. (*Pause.*)

A little artery. (*Pause. More animated.*)

Enough of that, it's story time, where was I? (*Pause. Narrative tone.*)

The man came crawling towards me, on his belly. (...)

Memories of *Macbeth* become derisory. The pun on *vein* and *artery* — art in a comic vein, or a little vain art-ery in a Shakespearean vein — releases a glimpse of red over a somber decor of black. Allusion to the fontanelles, or six membranes of the cranium of a fetus that has not yet ossified, emphasizes the regressive sensibility confusing that growth and psychogenesis usually differentiate. The speech graphically leads writing to a field of intermediate play of language and letters.

Both in *Endgame* and *Premier amour* the palette of colors emanating from the words is manifest in words that self-translate. They invariably self-duplicate; they emulsify their vocables and graphemes into —meta-

phorically, we must add, — what can be termed a languished paste of letters. Colors become palpable when letters and words betray themselves, when their minimal units of signifying force — which is to say their form, corporal aspect or composure as recognizable units separated from others both in sound and in visible shape — move back and forth from one semantic field to another. When words are in a state of amphiboly, or when they have a kind of “amphibious” condition (when they “reptate” or glide), they turn into letters which concretize the entire field of symbolic tension elaborated elsewhere or on other levels in the writing. In identical fashion we can discern the iridescence emanating from the seemingly toneless script of *Mal vu mal dit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

From the first sentence of this work, the narrative appears to tell of the problems encountered in a hypothetical description of a Botticelli Venus. The sculpture made from the painting is either a radiant mass of varnished, cerulean tints visible in most prints of the famous picture or, simply, a star heralding the evening from the deep Limbourg blues of a winter horizon at dusk giving way to the black of night. Both a color — blue — and a form reducing itself to the all-or-nothing of starry presence, the text begins, “De sa couche elle voit se lever Vénus. Encore. De sa couche par temps clair elle voit se lever Vénus suivie du soleil” (p. 7) [From her bed she sees Venus rising. Still. From her bed in clear weather she sees Venus rising followed by the sun]. The description implies that the scene is under the star of Midnight. A reader who has just opened the book cannot help associating the tableau with the star at the center of the frame of white surrounded by blue borders on the cover of the book. In question is the emblem of Les Editions de Minuit, now *mal vu* in light of the confusion of the memory-image of the first impression of the cover with the descriptive scene. Venus will be engendered in the white of *minuit*, but *mal dit* because the words have an inevitably pictorial relation with the frame or typographical “support” of the Midnight Editions. The entire narrative seems to be a project that varies on descriptive and minimally narrative changes that are made through reiteration, including reference to the format of the book itself. The scene is repeated in such a way that the text amounts to an often comic exercise in graphic palinody.

Now in the fragments ending the first paragraphs or tableau of text, a color appears only in order to disappear into the prose of the rest of the work.<sup>2</sup>

pour quel motif. A genoux surtout elle a du mal à ne pas le rester pour toujours. Les mains posées l'une sur l'autre sur un appui quelconque. Tel le pied de son lit. Et sur elles sa tête. La voilà donc comme changée en pierre face à la nuit. Seuls tranchent sur le

noir le blanc des cheveux et celui un peu bleuté du visage et des mains. Pour un oeil n'ayant pas besoin de lumière pour voir. Tout cela au présent. Comme si elle avait le malheur d'être encore en vie. (p. 8)

[for what motive. On her knees especially she has difficulty in not remaining so for-ever. Her hands placed one above the other on a some kind of support. Such the foot of her bed. And on her hands her head. There she is therefore as if turned to stone facing the night. Solely cutting through the black the white of her hair and that of a little blue of her face and hands. For an eye not needing light in order to see. As she had the malediction of still being alive. (tr. mine)]

The words seem to be providing implicit directions about how to stage a *tableau vivant*. Black should background the white of the sculpted body illuminated by floodlamps casting intense reflections from the white wig over the actor's head in a Venetian — as Venus is the figure in question — style of portrayal. The body acquires pallor under the bluish light thrown on the face and hands covered with flesh losing its sanguine pink and, in the general aura of the scene, dissolving into an icy blue-black (reminiscent of Philippe de Champaigne's later paintings of corpses).

Where the text is not exactly a painting projected onto theatrical space (in the block of prose), tonalities emerge through the texture or "paste" of its discourse. As in every one of Beckett's works, pains are taken to limit a scene. Here a rectangular cast surrounds the words with a bluish frame. The bedstead serves as an interior perimeter for what will happen to become a description. But the text reduces its colors — and loses its sense of blue — when the corners or *appuis quelconques* [some kind of support] of the words, the evanescent base of the sculpture that projects it into eminence and light — are lost in the pronoun standing in its place, which in turn succeeds, represents and replaces it. *Elle, qui a du mal à ne pas rester pour toujours* (She, who has difficulty in not remaining forever), stretches into a divided shape within the frame,

*Tel le pied de son lit.*

[Such the foot of her bed]

"Et sur elles sa tête:" [And on her hands her head:] Visual and verbal confusions are such that *elle* and *telle* redound. The next phrase forces *elle* to stand not on the trumeau of the tabular, erectile T that would hold *elle*, the sculpted Venus in the limelight on stage, but be divided and mirrored as an

echo of the letter that has just lost its plosive sign heralding meaning to follow. T beckons L, no doubt because the context confuses the hand with the Venetian portrait with the head. Blue members are perched on the head in a pose of meditation on death (borrowed from any number of samples from the *vanitas* tradition and its theatrical iconography) with reduction into two identical halves of itself.

The divided *T-el-le-pied* turns into the hands, the head and skull that inaugurated the description. But, thanks to the confusions of *elles*, regress to the beginning occurs only through the fracturing of the scene by way of the letter L. The senescent Venus we imagine is on her knees, but their juncture (or articulation) in the underlying "artery" of the description dictates the order and color of decomposition through its relation with the third person pronoun, *elle*. A border, an L, is a shifter between word and image, *elle*. That she is Venus is clear, since "quelconque" resounds the echo of the sight of the *conque* or cockleshell on which the classical frame is based. The first and second persons, *je* and *nous*, are conflated in *genoux* which fractures and connects human forms to the surface that the text has partially staged. Given the shift of attention from remainders of a description to a scene of pronouns visualized as disjointed letters (rather than sites from which voices emanate), L can be nothing other than the literal edge of its own frame, a paginal or painterly angle, an edge, or a corner disallowing any representation to overtake its own visualized, literal remainder of visibility. Physical apprehension of the letter occludes the reader from engaging in a narrative or a theatrical scene it might lure us into imagining *pour un oeil n'ayant pas besoin de voir* [for an eye not needing to see].

Keeping the scene from acceding to a coherent representation, reading and framing the block of words as it does, Beckett's L projects language into a realm of *tonal* force. Perhaps the most fruitful way of discerning a palette radiating from the words is to reread the pronoun *elle* in terms of the title and its translation. We know that every work of art becomes literature (and vice-versa) when the title is tipped, slanted, shunted, adjusted, or drawn into a work. Painting cannot ever be free of writing because letters or words assure it of its alterity in respect to all description. Most works in the mimetic tradition reproduce what their title encapsulates or simply "stands for," while abstractly expressive pieces try to deny or disavow any relation between the heading and the work (e.g., an untitled composition or a work named only by a serial number). A few dare to make the difference of one and the other identical and maddeningly congruent, where letters *are* pigments, and pigments are letters.

Such the case of the same segment taken from *Mal vu mal dit*. The English translation acts, as it were, as an *other* title hinting at the visibly

unconscious shapes of pigment or wash of the French text. Where Beckett's English would be literature, his French avers to be painting, and vice-versa. *Ill Seen Ill Said* figures as a nicely literal rendering of the French. Wherever pronouns disaggregate into tonal relations or colors embedded in the unconscious of language, they lose their function as shifters. Grammatical, cardinal and topographical functions no longer hold; the pronoun does not maintain a structural or mimetic role allowing discourse to "take place." Simultaneous cross-translation at the junction of the pronoun allows color to radiate in the course of its loss of meaning.

Bilingual readings allow a palette of colors to flourish along the lines of letters. This can be explained by the fact that the movement from *a*) writing or a field of meaning (in a grammatical sense) to *b*) apprehension of letters and, finally, *c*) their figures as simple strokes is ostensibly regressive. In following this backward path, the words and letters suggest that a primary process always works in the secondary or intellectual process of literature. Clearly, Beckett inspires his readers to follow the course of an analytical scene in which a patient permits an intermediate or transitional sensibility to take over. In the course of rewriting or re-scripting primary material (colors, or elemental secondary impressions), pictograms, ideas and infantile originary figurations are mixed. Taking up the clinical experience in terms that are uncannily close to Beckett, Piéra Aulagnier notes, à propos of patients who recover their first lines of poetic access and self-defense in their rapport with the world,

Entre le début et la fin de partie, le jeu n'en reste pas moins mouvementé et imprévisible: L'idée-pensée, la mise-en-scène figurée, le pictogramme coexisteront côte à côte. L'expérience corrélatrice à cette rencontre continue entre le sujet et le monde se traduit de manière tout aussi continue par ces trois productions. Aucune d'elles n'abandonne jamais sa tendance et son espoir d'abolir toute concurrence, d'obtenir une satisfaction qui ne pourrait être totale que si elle était seule présente, et si elle pouvait réduire au silence les exigences des autres processus et instances psychiques.

C'est pourquoi la pensée, la figuration primaire, le pictogramme gardent, plus ou moins ouvertement, une relation conflictuelle. Ce qui oblige à privilégier l'idée-pensée dépend de la relation spécifique liant l'activité du secondaire à la connaissance et, aussi, du paradoxe propre à cette relation.<sup>3</sup>

[Between the beginning and the endgame, the play is less active or unpredictable. The idea-thought, the imaginary stage, and the

pictogram exist side by side. Continuous experience correlative to this encounter between the subject and the world is translated in such a way that is equally continuous through these three productions. None of them ever entirely abandons its tendency and its hope to abolish all rivalling parties, nor to obtain a satisfaction which would only be total if it was sovereignly present, and if it could reduce the requirements of the other processes and psychic instances to utter silence.

That is why thought, primary figuration and the pictogram more or less overtly maintain a conflictual relation to each other. What requires the idea-thought to be favored depends upon the specific relation binding the activity of the secondary process to knowledge and, too, of the paradox belonging to this relation.]

Regressive scenes liberate the rhetoric or “colors” of letters through stagings, or “scenes of writing” (*mises-en-scène*). That Aulagnier initiates the return to this transitional consciousness through a — maybe unconscious — reference to Beckett’s theater — *Fin de partie* — seems appropriate; it explains the literal process of inscription and effacement of letters and colors in a staging of ever-primary encounters with the world. The shift through registers of English and French simply gives definition to the process.

In English, *Ill Seen Ill Said* closes the frame of the “original” French by implying that the figure of L is grounded in *elle* in the translation. The absent apostrophe between the I and the double ll emerges as a meaningless but urgently pointillistic brushstroke, for when we misread “I’ll Seen I’ll Said,” I and L become identical in voice. Once more, characters function not only syntactically — along a linear or directional axis that would be “opposed” to a tabular or uncentered sense of plastic extension with minimal support — or semantically (in the realm of meaning), but also in both directions at once.

“I’ll Seen I’ll Said” folds an abrupt passage of the future and the past tenses into each other. By the time I-L-L are scripted, painted on the page, or seen having been marked by an order of succession, the intention behind a vision — of writing or painting an aesthetic object — is past, already *said* and already *seen*. A “anterior” or pictorial view of the graphemes closes the vocables into the frame of the text and furnishes an area for a scansion of a future in the past. A typological, typographical, thoroughly animistic view of time triumphs in the rupture of grammar.

The same process informs the *Unnameable*. In French it reads *L’Innommable*, but the English bodies forth a more strongly metaphysical dimension of the self, I, as the absolute zero-degree of language and being. The

tourniquet of French and English generates other tones, however, that tighten the constriction of un-naming a name in a text of proper names, since *L'Innommable* carries with it, first and foremost, the L, the *il*, the *il(1)* or the mannequin of ILL (*L'InnommabLe*), of *Ill Seen Ill Said* in anagram. Seen as a jumble of strokes and marks, it can be said,

*L: I now 'm able*

and

*L: I now 'num able*

as both signalling, with the triumphant inscription of the first and last touch before and after completion of the work, the will to begin. *L'I now am able*. Or the sign of failure — the author is tired, supine, done, numb, *unable*; or, now that there is nothing more to be seen or said, *I* is now able to begin the work of negation, of *un*-naming. In the title M and N toss in the same abstraction of I and L, *il* and *elle*, making of “man” no more than a skeletal letter. The transliterated title designates how ambiguous is an enterprise of writing about an I that has to be framed by the four corners of a frame marked by L — that is, by the visible angularities of the four corners of the frame. With that letter the four corners of *Ill Seen Ill Said* are scripted as a frame; a sort of fantasized reversal of the letter L moves from one unit of the title to the next. Its passage allows the four cardinal points of the book (and bluish outline of the title-page) to be associated with each of the descriptive units of the work itself. The latter shift back and forth from a grammatical to a pictorial view, in which a tabular condition of writing defines much of the shape of the discourse. In a sense, the vision is thoroughly grammatical insofar as grammar, in a strict historical sense, involves the tracing of letters along straight lines.<sup>4</sup>

*Ill of Ill Seen ...* and *Mal of Mal vu ...* function identically as both adjectives and substantives. In this field of ambiguity, the “ill” or “mal” that is seen and spoken first evokes problems of originary sight and sound, but subsequently, issues of creation — of the seeming anguish of the white page or the white canvas facing the artist — take over. *Mal vu mal dit*: there seems to be an enthusing sense of *malédiction* in the scansion, where the malediction — the improper, poor, even hesitant diction — of French through the English is enough to motivate a collective guilt about an Anglophone's uneasy relation with French.

Also implied is a critique of a pristine, monolingual clarity that French has historically ascribed for itself since the Cartesian revolution. A white language of absolute expression, it begins to be colored only when it is

badly — or artfully, even bilingually — seen and said. To pronounce and to behold French as just another foreign language is to destabilize the authority of its literary and diplomatic traditions. It also invites the schizophrenia that goes with its institution of letters. Implied is the fact that the artist must color language with tones of an unconscious rhetoric coming from other shores and other linguistic frames.

The point where the manifold languages and painterly lines meet and separate is along the literal trace of the letter. *Mal vu mal dit*: M, a code used to retrieve all the dead characters from the bookish caskets of the fiction, is the visual figure of mimicry, of the integuments of “man” or all the dead souls encrypted in the narratives, whether Malone, Mahood, Moran, Molloy, Mercier or others. In one mark M scripts and inaugurates a figure of plastic extension. Figure is ground and vice-versa. An anguish of angularity,<sup>5</sup> the moment when sound and sight are one — ill said and ill seen — is framed, expressed and immobilized. An effect of what an eye will have seen, *mal* traduces *ill* before any completion of its accession to vision. At the point when a spectator sees the letters of Beckett’s text shifting between their vocal form and their seeming visibility, the words perform the very regress to the origin of art and biological life that is simultaneously being treated thematically in the narratives (for example, in the tale of two letters in quest of each other in *Molloy*). The letters are suddenly, maddently, autonomous and self-contained as graphemes and “vehicles” of narration; the prose becomes a work of scripture practically unmediated by the metaphors it puts forward.

The “anguish” of a mix of letters independent of voice can be elucidated through appeal to the concept of *le moment régressif*. According to this concept, we are sempiternally returning, at every moment in our total everyday lives, to seizure of the palpabilities of language. Verbal textures, the sounds that tell us where and what we are, are treated *as if* they were extensions of ourselves, or free of the constraint of voice that endows them with gratuity of meaning.<sup>6</sup> In these moments we apprehend what indeed is “secondary” narcissism, a stage of development when we articulate language with our bodies or our ken, but with the realization that the motivation is based on an entirely arbitrary relation that exists between symbolic forms and ourselves. A dazzling and deadening freedom: at play is a sort of liberation from a single language dictating the order of the world. Orthogonal or unilateral meaning is undone by the artful use that is made of the tactile shapes of letters. Beckett reproduces scenes of regression that scatter hierarchies which maintain semantic and logical orders.

Yet the title cannot solely be seen as a supreme plastic moment to which a reader must return in order to make any allegorical sense of Beckett’s work. Better to see the heading *refracted* through the prose, in parcels that

textualize the mimetic or even dramatic sides of each composition. In the case of *Fin de partie* recidivism is witnessed in the contiguous monologues of Hamm and Nagg, exactly where they discern what was artfully located in the bilingual, dialogical scansion of the title. *Fin de partie* opens onto an imperative asking the viewing reader to *fin(d)a part I*, or to *find uh part-y*. The Y is a divided I in the vain endgame of art(er)ie through the mix of voices.

Already in the first unit of *Mal vu mal dit* we saw variation on the four words that had informed them. Now we can see how letters project over the surface of the work. “De sa couche elle *voit* se lever Vénus. Encore. De sa couche par temps clair elle *voit* se lever Vénus suivie du soleil.” [From her bed she *sees* Venus rising. Still. In clear weather from her bed she *sees* Venus rising followed by the sun]. L or *elle*, the I of ill, ill sees Venus rise, or sees her well when the sky is clear. But the *elle* has difficulty in spotting the goddess from the bed that provides a point of view; or else Venus — we cannot tell if *elle* is she or we — is tired of sitting for the pose that the painter requires in order to endow her image with form and color. *A genoux surtout elle a du mal à ne pas le rester pour toujours* [on her knees especially she has difficulty in not remaining so forever]. And all this in the present, “comme si elle avait le *malheur* d’être encore en vie” [“as if she had the malediction of still being alive”]. Clearly, as it were, the text varied on the letters and fragmentary marks of the title. *Mal* and *voir* recur obsessively throughout the fiction. Shapes are rearticulated so often that only a certain melodic configuration will emerge from the unconscious of so many repetitions of the same design.

Having momentarily forgotten the title because it has been reiterated to the point of invisibility, we finally glimpse its momentary integrity in the text, fifty pages below the title. The inner voice reveals, “Voilà le logis *mal vu mal dit*. Extérieurement. Il était temps” (p. 54, underlining ours). [There is the cabin ill seen ill said. Outwardly. It was about time.] Yes, it was *time* to repeat, insists the narrator in a sort of telepathy with the impatient reader. If such a narrative depends on the recurrence of the plastic shape of the title in the expressive texture of the work’s words, it happens only to frame the scene that had begun with the coming of Venus or a past participle. Venus moves with time, coming and going as the morning and evening star, as a letter that appears and disappears.

*Mal vu mal dit* engages visibility such that a ground is identical to the figures of letters placed upon it. Hence the beginning of the second unit draws us back to the colors of the letters that are released when words are repeated twice:

Le cabanon. Son emplacement.  
Attention. Aller. Le cabanon. A  
l'inexistant centre d'un espace sans  
forme. (pp. 8-9)

]The cabin. Its placement. Watch out.  
Let's go. The cabin. In the inexistent  
center of a space without form.]

The *cabanon* figures incipience itself, the lean-to stayed by the *c-a-b-a* of writing that is denied in a tonic accent, in the following *non* voiced at the end of the word. Seen in this light, the space of the description leading to narrative — or oblivion coded as invisibility — is always displaced by the presence of some literal form which marks it as illusory. The beginnings recur insofar as words continually redefine the paginal space of each paragraph or creative block in the text.

This is not to imply that color can be reduced or expanded to black and white or black *et blanc*.<sup>7</sup> *Bleuté* figured prominently — like tomatoes in the *First Love* — in the initial sequence of *Mal vu mal dit*. *Bleuté* returns not as if it were a word reproducing our sensation of flesh veiling the pale red of tired blood, but rather as a tint having a forceful tonal register in play with black and white at the limits of the palette. The most daring and inventive painters in the modern tradition have conferred uncanny force on the spectrum through insertion of black and white into highly colored compositions. In opulent paintings, black and white tend to essay colors by placing them out of a field of representation. Black and white bring abstraction and paradoxically extended ranges into canvasses using tonal field of color. Beckett's use of *bleuté* functions identically to the great blacks and whites in the works of Rembrandt, Goya and Manet, but now from an absolutely opposite direction, as they expand and reduce the range of infinitely varied tones that reside in the description. With such insistence on typography, the world is deprived of vegetation or any sensorial material outside of the shapes of letters.

It may be that Beckett's use of *bleuté* is motivated in some distant but significant way to Cézanne's famous remark to the effect that blue is the only color which can emerge from a picture of infinite extension and depth of field. Or, too, that it can be the only imaginary accretion of nature which can emanate from strictly formal compositions of line and surface. "Les lignes parallèles à l'horizon," wrote Cézanne to Emile Bernard in 1904,<sup>8</sup> "donnent l'étendue, soit une section de la nature ou si vous aimez mieux le spectacle que le Pater omni-potens, oeterne Deus, étale devant nos yeux. — or la nature pour nous-hommes est plus en profondeur qu'en surface, d'où

la nécessité d'introduire dans nos vibrations de lumière, représentées par les rouges et les jaunes, une somme suffisante de Bleutés, pour faire sentir l'air" (*sic*) [Lines parallel to the horizon furnish extension, either as a section of nature or, if you prefer, the spectacle that the omnipotent Father, the eternal God, stretches before our eyes. — so nature for us-men is more in depth than in surface, whence the necessity of introducing light into our vibrations, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient sum of Blue tones to make us feel the air.]

Cézanne intimates that bluish tints are a sort of *corrective* to nature, both reflective of the humid depth of field we tend to invest in it, a synthetic tone affirming a distance taken from it, flattening it and, paradoxically, heightening its sensorial extension. *Bleuté* emerges from the mediation of horizontal definition of a frame with vertical lines, but it also keeps painting superficial and formal, always devoid of spatial illusion. The painter introduces *Bleuté* to divest red and yellow of their natural tones by arranging rapport with the primary axes of lines. It emanates as an eminently typographical color. A product of the book, it is a chromatic analogy to a depthless field of characters and an entirely paginal extension.

In *Mal vu mal dit* the linear configuration of a frame that is at once a figure and ground of words (which in turn are both figures and grounds of themselves) is best seen in the blocks of paragraphs establishing the support and frame of each textual unit. In the initial segment, the word *bleuté* seems to function somewhat less as reference to fleshtones than to the denaturing instance of Cézanne's mention of the color that maintains a primacy of surfaces over a perspective evoking depth. Where the artist had introduced a "sufficient sum of Bluishness" into his work to have us "feel the atmosphere" (*sentir l'air*), the writer strokes it into the composition in order to have tones of a sort of reductive expansion resonate everywhere. *Bleuté* tells us how to read Beckett as a supreme verbal colorist. Artfully juxtaposing white, black and blue in the same Venetian tradition so adored by Cézanne, Beckett also defines the linear extension of the closed unit of prose that is of absolute and rich color exactly *where it is never designated*, or never named: color varies on what defies naming in *L'Innommable*.

*Bleuté*, of vivacious and bold beauty, is tipped into *Mal vu mal dit* at the very beginning, and with almost crucial intention. It comes close to naming the formal tonal palette within the letters but without forcing the writer to take recourse to mimetic urges of description. From this instance of *Mal vu mal dit*, no single reference to nature can be endowed with color exclusive of the black and white of lines, characters, or the white of the page. In the same fashion, the function of the pronoun I no longer plays the role of a "shifter,"<sup>9</sup> or, in Cézanne's terms, of a *vertical line* which would confer volumetric, psychological or theatrical depth upon the plastic configuration of the writing.

The I is not just a sign of subjectivity. Its erectile form at the incipient moment of a confessional discourse confers depth of field upon the page both in relation to characters in lower case and to its own eminence. The text puts in question all unconscious association of volume and psychology with the first person singular. The consequence in visual terms is that the I does not establish perspective; it bars illusion in its shape as a stroke. The letter denies the landscape that its own form would frame. After Proust, only Beckett — and possibly no other writer in the modern canon — would make an identity of (I) a pronoun identifying the self as a vertical line. By doing so, in the act of their writing, they produce landscapes deprived of depth. That Beckett writes in the mode of Cézanne seems clear. But that his written expression embodies a sensorial beauty in austerity or verbal paucity is not: for Beckett's erasure of the I might be likened to its bleeding into the pores of absorbent watercolor paper. The I dissolves and therefore is divested of centrality, topicality, verticality or even the positionality that practical usage of language had invested into the dynamics of pronouns, or that the mimetic tradition had assigned to perspective and to color in the tradition of painting. The alienating property of his verbal pictures offers avenues of escape from the idea that a pronoun is engaged in an existential relation with other shifters or referents having human aspect or flesh tones of pink and tan.

1. The crucially poetic and plastic area of the intermediate, or "dialogical" imagination is studied carefully in Gabriele Schwab, "Genesis of the Subject, Imaginary Functions, and Poetic Language," *New Literary History*, 15 (1984), 453-74. Her work provides a precious background for the style of all of Beckett's narratives.
2. Titles are "tipped" into the prose in order to recur or to be reiterated or shifted according to contextual changes. The anticipations and delays — or more simply, the aesthetic effects — of the gaps between title and text in Beckett are studied in our "Crutches," *Chicago Review*, 33 (1982), pp. 84-92.
3. *La Violence de l'interprétation* (Paris: PUF, Série "Le Fil rouge," 1976), p. 126.
4. "Grammar is not only the art of straight speech and writing (*recte loquendi scribendique*)," notes R. Howard Bloch of language in the High Middle Ages, "but the science of literal meaning. The function of early medieval grammar is thus the delineation of straight paths, the creation of linear links between symbols, sounds, and letters as well as between words and the physical property of things," in *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 52.

5. *Angle* and stress are of the same etymology. Return to origins of vision entails anguish. Lucette Finas provides a gloss of *angle* to initiate a visual reading of Georges Bataille in *La Cruel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 20. Beckett shares the same visibility in his work.
6. Michel de Certeau writes of Merleau-Ponty in terms that approximate the scenes of language in Beckett's prose: "To see is already an act of language. This act makes of seen things the enunciation of the invisible texture that binds them. It is the perception of an invisible solidarity by and in the 'terms' of seen objects. It is word, but silent still. It is already of the order of language; it represents a mute stage of language, which precedes its verbal stage. Thought is born with this silent 'pact' between things that is the infrastructure of vision. Conversely, it could be affirmed that visual experience still haunts verbal language. It is the infancy (*in-fans*, it cannot talk yet) that language represses and that keeps coming back, which is why we must retrace our steps up (or down) to that point — to that vision which has been effaced by verbal discourse but which inaugurated the structure that the latter repeats — in order to grasp in its primal scene the dialogue between language and the real. This scene remains the theater of everyday life, its ordinary landscape," in: "The Madness of Vision," *enclitic*, 7 (1983), p. 29.
7. The pun of *blank* and *black* is typographic; white becomes black and vice-versa. The persistence of the combination echoes in common speech. At a liquor store in Walker, Minnesota (on Leech Lake), one evening the author heard a drunken musky fisherman ask a clerk for some white wine. The salesman uttered, "How about a Colombar Blanc?" To which the fisherman replied, "I always thought white wine was black, at least in the country I come from" [that is, from a metaphysical landscape of words rather than woods, forests or the land of sky blue waters.]
8. In *Conversations avec Cézanne* (Paris: Editions Macula, 1978), p. 27. The reflection is somewhat altered in Raymonde Carasco's productive "Journeaux-aquarelles de Joë Bousquet," *Critique*, 433-34 (June-July, 1983).
9. At least in many readings of Emile Benveniste, "La Nature des pronoms," in: *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 251-57.