Beckett's Spectral Silence

Breath and the Sublime

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THIS PAPER TAKES AS ITS POINT OF DEPARTURE TWO STATEMENTS FROM Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* concerning the 'Analytic of the Sublime'. The first concerns itself with relations of scale and measure in the context of the sublime ('sublime is the name given to what is absolutely great'§25), the second, issues of representability and the sublime (the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form' §23). The essay explores how Kant, and more recent philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, consider the sublime in relation to the work of art. It argues for a consideration of Samuel Beckett's exquisitely short piece of drama, *Breath*, in terms of a sublime of absolute minimum, contrasting Beckett's play with the film version directed by Damien Hirst which participates in the sublime only in so far as 'there is something of the sublime in capitalist economy' (Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 105).

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In the opening to his section on 'the Mathematically Sublime' Kant asserts that the 'sublime is the name given to what is absolutely great' (§25). He qualifies this statement with a distinction between greatness and magnitude, affirming that 'the computation of the magnitude of phenomena is, in all cases, utterly incapable of affording us any absolute concept of a magnitude, and can, instead, only afford one that is always based on comparison' (§25). However, the idea of a magnitude based on comparison is antithetical to the notion of the sublime itself. As Lyotard points out in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 'The sublime thing cannot have a measurable quantity because it does not admit of any comparison' (1994, 80).

In contrast to the mathematically determined notion of size elicited by comparison, the kind of greatness that Kant has in mind relates to what he calls *magnitudo* or absolute greatness, and this signals, as Kant puts it, 'the disposition of the mind evoked by a particular representation engaging the faculty of reflective judgement' (§26). The focus here shifts, then, from the thing itself to the mind that apprehends the sublime object. Crucial to the idea of greatness in the sublime is Kant's distinction between 'aesthetic' and 'mathematical' magnitude. The former is a magnitude judged 'in mere intuition' or 'by the eye'; the latter is magnitude judged 'by means of concepts of number' (§26). It is by virtue of the former, the apprehension of magnitude by intuition or the eye, that the greatness of the sublime can be properly experienced. Kant explains in *The Critique of Judgement* that:

> in the aesthetic estimate of such an immeasurable whole, the
> sublime does not lie so much in the greatness of the number, as in
> the fact that in our onward advance we always arrive at

proportionately greater units. The systematic division of the cosmos conduces to this result. For it represents all that is great in nature as in turn becoming little; or, to be more exact, it represents our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason, once their adequate presentation is attempted (§26).

This apprehension of magnitude is made without reference to any comparative measure. It is, as Lyotard phrases it, 'the extension of the manifold that can be "apprehended" intuitively at once, in the same breath. This measure can be called "first" or "fundamental" because its unit is that of the synthesis of apprehension' (*Lessons* 81).

When Kant makes his connection between the sublime and the great he has in mind a kind of magnitude that 'is a subjective evaluation reserved for the faculty of reflective judgement' (Lyotard, *Lessons* 82):

> For just as in the estimate of the beautiful imagination and understanding by their concert generate subjective finality of the mental faculties, so imagination and reason do so here by their conflict – that is to say they induce a feeling of our possessing a pure and self-sufficient reason, or a faculty for the estimation of magnitude, whose pre-eminence can only be made intuitively evident by the inadequacy of that faculty which in the presentation of magnitudes (of objects of sense) is itself unbounded (§27).

This is also a kind of greatness that pushes beyond the limits or boundaries of judgement. It does not simply coincide with the fundamental measure of apprehension, but, as Lyotard argues, 'it "almost" exceeds it; it is a little beyond its limit–let us say, at the limit' (*Lessons* 81). The question arises, at

this juncture, as to the nature of the limit that the sublime exceeds through its magnitude. A clue lies in Kant's insistence on the apprehension of the thing when he argues that 'true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object [...] that occasions this attitude' (§26).

At play in the mind of the judging subject is the relationship between reason, and the imagination. When reason partners imagination in sublime feeling, a conflict occurs because reason opposes the imagination with, as Lyotard explains, 'Ideas that are inapplicable *a priori* to any presentation, because the objects of these Ideas are absolute or limitless' (*Lessons*, 100). And so we return to the second of Kant's statements mentioned at the outset of the paper: 'the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form' (§23). Why is this the case? What is the antagonism between the sublime and the sensuous? At issue here is the relationship between reason and the imagination in the mind of the judging subject for, as Kant argues, the sublime concerns ideas of reason for which no adequate presentation is possible:

> For the sublime [...] cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation' (§23).

Jacques Derrida draws out the implications of Kant's thought, emphasising how the philosopher's search for a critique of '*pure* aesthetic

judgement' determines that the sublime 'will not be taken from the order of the "productions of art"' for, as he explains:

> The mastery of the human artist here operates with a view to an end, determining, defining, giving form. In deciding on contours, giving boundaries to the form and the cise, this mastery measures and dominates. But the sublime, if there is any sublime, exists only by overspilling: it exceeds cise and good measure, it is no longer proportioned according to man and his determinations. There is thus [for Kant] no good example, no "suitable" example of the sublime in the products of human art' (122).

Here we have an idea of the sublime based on the impossibility of its presentation, the limits of presentation itself have been breached by the pressure of reason, leaving as its trace the ragged edges of a rupture which bears witness to the sublime. Lyotard revisits this impossibility in his 1984 essay 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.' Writing in response to the American painter Barnett Newman's assertion that 'The Sublime is Now' Lyotard argues that 'quite to the contrary, isn't it essential to this feeling that it alludes to something which can't be shown, or presented [...]?' (89). This is an idea of the sublime that goes back to one of the earliest commentators on the sublime, the first century rhetorician, Longinus. Lyotard invokes Longinus in order to explore the inexpressible and the impossible in art. What concerns the philosopher here is the position of the artist faced with this impossibility, with, as he says,

> the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of his sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily. This is the misery that the painter faces with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, the misery of the

thinker faced with a desert of thought [...]. Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the 'beginning' of the work, but everytime something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning, at every 'and what now?' ('The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 91-92)

The anxiety that Lyotard evokes here recalls very clearly the question with which Samuel Beckett drew his writing to a close: 'What is the word?':

[…]
what -
what is the word -
seeing all this -
all this this -
all this this here -
folly for to see what -
glimpse -
seem to glimpse -
need to seem to glimpse -
afaint afar away over there what –

[…] (17-18)

This anxiety about the inexpressible and the impossible in art also evokes the silence that occupies the great majority of Beckett's 'vice-existers', most notably the unnamable, whose intense logo-rhythms speed toward silence. In the midst of his tirade against speech the unnamable recapitulates a theme from *Waiting for Godot* when he complains:

Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere, just enough to keep alight this little yellow flame feebly darting from side to side, panting, as if straining

> to tear itself from its wick, it should never have been lit [...]. (*The Unnamable* 88)

Though Longinus searches for the sublime in 'the ethos of rhetoric, in its pathos' and 'in its techniques' (Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 94), he recognises the presence of the sublime in the very absence of these things, arguing that 'a bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied. Thus the silence of Ajax in the Underworld is great and more sublime than words (Odyssey XI. 543 ff., at Perseus)' (Longinus IX). At the heart of Longinus' argument lies the paradox that 'there is no better figure of speech than one which is completely hidden, that which we do not even recognize as a figure of speech' (Lytoard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 95). Longinus contrasts technique with talent when he argues that:

> we see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter, emerging as the hard-won result not of one thing nor of two, but of the whole texture of the composition, whereas Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude. (Longinus I)

Of Samuel Beckett's late plays, the one that most eloquently resists presentation, that retires from visibility, remaining almost completely hidden except for faint light and a brief cry over a glimpse of detritus is *Breath*. It was written in 1969 in response to a request from the theatre director Kenneth Tynan for a piece to accompany an erotic review called *Oh! Calcutta!* that he was devising for production in New York and subsequently London. Kenneth Tynan's production of the play diverged significantly from

Beckett's direction by including naked bodies on the pile of rubbish: 'Beckett was reported to be appalled, especially as the revue's programme attributed the work to him' (Keller). Beckett subsequently refused to allow *Breath* to be included in the London run of Tynan's revue. It was not until 1999 that *Breath* had its West End London debut at the Arts Theatre, as part of a double-bill with a performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* played by Edward Petherbridge. Petherbridge describes how the reaction of the audience to the Arts Theatre's production of Breath ranged 'between respectful silence and uncontrollable mirth' suggesting that 'people find *Breath* quietly affecting and […] the imagery oddly haunting' (Keller). In contrast, Paul Keller, reviewing the 1999 London production, reports that 'the enigmatic quality of one of the world's shortest dramatic performances simply enrages some.' Greater success was had eight years earlier with the groundbreaking Beckett Festival produced by the Gate Theatre, Dublin. The Dublin production of *Breath* was directed by Robin Lefèvre and designed by Giles Cadie (the bill included *That Time* and *A Piece of Monologue*). Lefèvre and Cadie stayed close to Beckett's direction, maintaining the adumbral horizontality of the undifferentiated pile of rubbish, and the brevity of an evocative cry. Described by Claudia W. Harris as 'an uncanny footnote to the rest of Beckett's work,' *Breath* was, like all of the plays of the festival,very well received: 'This brief play was magical as the audience literally held its breath – the greenish light, the faint cries, the dust hovering over the rubbish, and that single, exhilarating breath' (Harris). This production travelled to very positive receptions at the Lincoln Centre, New York, in 1996 and the Barbican, London, in 1999. In a review of a 2009 Melbourne production of 'Beckett's Shorts' which included *Breath*, Alison Croggon argues for the

importance of Beckett's late plays, suggesting that 'the core of his thinking about theatre occurs in his shorter plays, which are very seldom performed'.

The liminal position of *Breath*, poised between life and death, light and dark, presence and absence, extends to its position on the boundaries between genres. That *Breath* engages more closely with the aesthetics of installation art than it does with the poetics of theatre is underlined by Croggan who argues that 'the short plays exist somewhere between installation and poetry, their strict aesthetic bringing the meditative rhythms of visual art into performance'. The Beckett Centenary production of *Breath* by Bedrock Productions in Dublin brought together elements of theatre and installation. Directed by performance artist Amanda Coogan, the mise en scène comprised a pile of rubbish illuminated by 'faint light' as directed by Beckett. However Coogan, in what might be considered an ironic gesture to Kenneth Tynan's production, includes a scattering of mannequin limbs amongst the detritus barely visible under the dim light, evoking also the prosthetic element of Beckett's work within the context of a very characteristic aesthetic of debilitation, dismemberment and decay. Yet the tangle of limbs points to the centrality of the body in Coogan's own art practice. Works such as *The Fall* in which the artist leaps from a ladder onto a mound, before dragging herself upright to start again, and again, 2,000 times over 17 days, make manifest the intense relationship between the body, space and time, emphasising repetition, futility and endurance. Reviewing *The Fall*, artist and writer Barbara Knezevic describes how the sense of embodiment so central to Coogan's art becomes a fundamental part of the viewer's experience:

> In *The Fall* there was a real sense of considered and intellectual control over every movement of the body; there was an incredible discipline and unnerving mental focus. This had the effect of causing the viewer to pause to consider every movement and nuance of their own physicality in response.

Coogan recognises the centrality of Beckett, and his engagement with the body, to her own practice, and indeed to her discipline: 'Beckett is really informative to contemporary performance practice in the visual arts.' Works such as *The Yellow Mountain* (2009) directly reference the physical containment of Beckett works such as *Happy Days* and *Play*. Made in collaboration with fifteen 15 year olds, Coogan describes the piece as 'up ending Beckett's *Happy Days*, the performers are embodied in an out-sized yellow jumper [sweater] and sit with heads protruding, lip-synching to the *Alleluia* chorus from Handel's *Messiah*'. One of Coogan's key pieces, *Yellow,* evokes tangentially the act of breathing so central to Beckett's play. In response to an image achieved during a presentation of the work in Manchester, Coogan expanded *Yellow* to include two videos of the artist taking the cloth in and out of her mouth, literally, as she describes, 'breathing it in and out.'

Kenneth Tynan's production of *Breath* is reworked by Barbara Knezevic at The Joinery, Dublin, in June 2010. Rather than staging Beckett's play, Knezevic explores the politics of performance and the aesthetics of repetition from the vantage of failure. Counterpointing a framed programme of *Oh! Calcutta!* with a copy of the 1971 Faber & Faber edition of *Breath and Other Shorts*, Knezevic introduces a book, bound in red, entitled *Beckett: An Exercise in Omission.* Within the boards of the book, Knezevic's

account of Tynan's New York production of *Breath* is duplicated numerous times, each copy of the account degraded by the duplication. Knezevic's exhibition is characterised by adjacency, contingency and repetition. The sculpture *A Testament to Bravery* sets a single stone against its image cast in microcrystalline wax. Almost touching, the stone and the wax are divided by a curved mirror that reflects only the wax stone. Like Beckett's couples who seek proximity while simultaneously rejecting it, Knezevic's sculpture reflects the thing back upon itself, refusing connection with the other. In contrast to the solidity of *A Testament to Bravery, Forewarned is Forearmed* evokes a precarious balance as a sharpened broomstick is elevated by a single bronze support. Hovering 20cm above the floor, the stick traces a line which is duplicated by its shadow, a shifting, fading, echo of the thing itself. Embodying the title of the exhibition, and of Beckett's play, Knezevic's *Temporary Equilibrium* tethers two latex weather balloons to the floor of an enclosed space reminiscent of the set of Beckett's television piece *Nacht und Träume* (1982) or the refuge described in the short prose piece *Lessness* (1969). Hovering between floor and ceiling, and between four walls, the large white balloons are not quite here nor there. They evoke the liminal state of *Breath*, suspended between inhalation and exhalation. Yet they also contradict it since the breath which elevates and gives form to the balloons is tightly held within the latex of the balloon's skin. Ciara Moloney analyses the importance of duplication in Knezevic's exhibition, arguing that 'these doppelgangers could be cast as interpretations or restagings of the original object, thus engaging with the artist's interest in the multitude of interpretations that may intervene between the production of work and its ultimate reception.'

Mostly ignored by critics on account, no doubt, of its brevity, *Breath* was described by an early reviewer as a play 'which defines life as two faint cries and the world as a rubbish-heap' (Nightingale 390). Though regarded as a 'logical terminal point in Beckett's writing for theatre' when it appeared, *Breath* wrong-footed critical expectation, pointing instead, as Knowlson and Pilling suggest, to the much reduced plays of the 1970s: 'this is not so much because of its actual brevity, as because of its meticulous interplay of light, sound, and silence, its balanced variations in lighting strength, its formal symmetry, and its use of amplified sound, adopted later in *Not I* and *Footfalls* (live) and *That Time* (recorded)' (128). Ruby Cohn emphasises the extent to which *Breath* contains key elements of Beckett's theatre: 'symmetry, repetition, inversion, the wresting of sound from silence, a flicker of light against the dark, dying but no definable death' (4). *Breath* is, surely, theatre in its most eviscerated form. Lasting a mere thirty-five seconds it comprises three movements:

CURTAIN

1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.

2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.

3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.

CURTAIN

(Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 371)

As we have come to expect of Beckett's plays, his directions are meticulous:

RUBBISH

No verticals, all scattered and lying.

CRY

Instant of recorded vagitus. Important that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath.

BREATH

Amplified recording.

MAXIMUM LIGHT

Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back.

(Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 371)

Much as the atmosphere of the play recalls the moments before exhaustion evoked by the unnamable's image of the feeble yellow flame quoted above, the two brief cries mirror the movement of visibility in *Breath*, recalling Pozzo's ejaculation in act 2 of *Waiting for Godot*: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more' (*Dramatic Works* 83). Beckett was not unaware of play's resonances between birth and death, taking some small pleasure, perhaps, in the five-second silence with which the play climaxes. Writing to John Kobler after the debacle that resulted from Tynan's production of *Breath*, Beckett describes his play as 'simply light coming up and going down on a stage littered with miscellaneous unidentifiable muck, sychronised with sound of breath, once in and out, the whole (ha!) begun and ended by same tiny vagitus-rattle' (Knowlson 566). But he nonetheless admits:

> I realised when too late that it is not unconnected with
>
> On entre, on crie
> Et c'est la vie.
> On crie, on sort,
> Et c'est la mort.
>
> (Knowlson 566)

Evoking the *petite mort* of an ecstasy which takes one outside of oneself, Beckett underlines the conjunction between desire and death. As Georges Bataille explains, 'it is the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live, the desire of an extreme state that Saint Theresa has perhaps been the only one to depict strongly enough in words. "I die because I cannot die"' (239-40). This moment of desire that connects life and death is depicted in, for example, Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa in the Saint Maria della Vittoria of Rome, and is an example, in Paul Crowther's opinion, of the Kantian sublime. Making a connection between Bernini's statue and a footnote in Book 1 of Kant's third *Critique* in which the philosopher quotes an inscription on the Temple of Isis, 'I am all that is, and that was, and that ever shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face', Crowther suggests that here Kant does admit the possibility of the sublime taking sensuous form:

> Kant now clearly concedes that representational artworks *can* have a content or subject-matter which *in itself* is in some sense sublime. [...] Bernini's *Vision of Saint Teresa* deals with a momentary encounter between the infinite (and therefore perceptually and imaginatively incomprehensible) Godhead, and a finite being. (154)

The transports of ecstasy in which Bernini depicts Saint Teresa are not unrelated to the transport that Longinus determines as key to the sublime in rhetoric, arguing, as he says, that 'sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression, and that it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence [...]. The effect of elevated language is not persuasion but transport' (Longinus 43).

Poised between birth and death (and a far cry from the elevated language of Longinus) the 'recorded vagitus' of *Breath* makes explicit reference to both the 'vagient' or squalling newborn, and the 'vagit' or lamentation for the dead. However Beckett insists that both the cry and the breath, both so central to the play, are performed recorded rather than live. The temporal distanciation between the body and the dramatic presentation necessary for the 'recorded vagitus' and the 'amplified recording' of the breath, dislocate, quite literally, the lived experience from its representation. *Breath* here exists at the moment of both anticipation of, and withdrawal from, presentation. It takes part in what Lyotard calls 'the sublime drama' that results when the 'faculty of presentation' resists 'all estimations of measure' (*Lessons* 102). However, Damien Hirst's direction of *Breath* is less ambivalent about presentation, and, indeed, representation. Filmed in 2001 as part of Michael Colgan and Alan Moloney's 'Beckett on Film' project, which translated all of Beckett's dramatic works from stage to set, Hirst's *Breath* reworks imagery that he has made his own. In particular, he returns to the pharmaceutical imagery explored in works from 1994 such as *Waste* in which large vitrines were filled with an assortment of medical waste, *Still*: a large glass cabinet displaying a selection of surgical equipment and, of course, the large installation called *Pharmacy* which is now in the Tate. For Hirst, *Pharmacy*

explores our 'confidence that drugs will cure everything. It's like a readymade' (Morgan 21). The ashtray glimpsed at the end of Hirst's film recalls his 1995 work *Party-time*: an oversized white ashtray (8 foot in diameter) filled with cigarette butts and empty cigarette packets, spent matches and assorted detritus, which featured in the Gagosian show called *No Sense of Absolute Corruption*. The sense of the 'readymade' in *Party-time* evokes Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and Claes Oldenburg's *Fagends,* an eight foot high foam sculpture of crushed cigarettes lying on a plinth.

   Gordon Burn has described Hirst's work as characterised by a 'hypothermic, sterilized, hospital "wipe" aesthetic' (10). It is, surely, this aesthetic we see in the film version of *Breath*. Opening in darkness, the light and voice rise slowly on a vision of pharmaceutical detritus. Ascending like a Starship Enterprise, the platform of Hirst's film bears the weight of discarded latex gloves, kidney-shaped plastic containers, bags of hospital waste, empty pill boxes and bottles. Scattered among these we find the odd keyboard or computer terminal and, inexplicably, two upturned hospital trolleys, their erect legs at odds with the exhausted and overlapping forms below. What matter that Beckett prescribed the scene of his play thus: 'RUBBISH: No verticals, all scattered and lying' (*Dramatic Works* 371). As the play reaches its climax in Hirst's film version, the white, yellow and blue that dominates Hirst's set are bleached by an intensity of light that evacuates colour and form. What matter, indeed, that Beckett describes the light in *Breath* in these terms: 'MAXIMUM LIGHT: Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back' (*Dramatic Works* 371). Hirst's film is not Beckett's play, just as cinema is not theatre.

Ruby Cohn describes Beckett's *Breath* as 'metaphoric rather than metonymic, the play etches human life against infinity, a voice against the void, breath-light of classico-Christian tradition against expanding space of modern science' (4). It is to modern science that Damien Hirst looks in his interpretation of Beckett's play. Obsessed with the mechanics and discourse of science, Hirst situates his *Breath* within the specifically extreme site of the visceral emergency. Taking Beckett's concern with the proximity of birth and death, Hirst looks at the way in which our experience of life at both these extremes is codified by technology. As Gordon Burn explains:

> [Hirst's] disinhabited dumb boxes speak of modern death in tiled hospital rooms, and silent technologised removal. They speak [...] of how the technological media, which enormously reinforce and heighten the illusion that death happens only to others, have put a distance between us and our own dying.' (10)

The *petite mort* of Beckett's play is dissected under the implacable glare of Hirst's film. The immediate context of Hirst's *vagitus rattle* is brutally reconfigured at the very end of the film by the image of the ashtray with a swastika in its mirrored left-facing form made of cigarette butts. Recalling, as we have seen, his 1995 piece, *Party-time*, this visual reference also evokes Theodore Adorno's concern about the possibility of representation after Auschwitz. Remembering the statement with which Beckett ended his novel *Watt* – 'No symbols where none intended' – we are jolted from the a-historical microcosm of Beckett's play which exists between the inhalation and exhalation of any breath, into the historically specific macrocosm of death as genocide with the political, social and religious contexts that are necessarily implied.

It is, perhaps, here that Beckett's and Hirst's different visions of *Breath* diverge most acutely. I have suggested that Beckett's *Breath* can be understood in terms of what Lyotard calls 'the sublime drama' that results when the 'faculty of presentation' resists 'all estimations of measure' (*Lessons* 102). Rather than resisting all estimations of measure, Hirst's film of *Breath* situates itself within a world defined by mensuration, that of science and medicine. Rather than retiring from presentation, Hirst's *Breath* works with a specifically identifiable iconography, incorporating in its standard issue ashtray even that most malign of twentieth-century symbols, the swastika. Hirst's *Breath* falls foul of what Lyotard describes as 'the crisis of overcapitalisation' ('The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 104) in which the artist 're-uses formulae confirmed by previous success, […] throws them off balance by combining them with other, in principle incompatible, formulae, by amalgamations, quotations ornamentations, [and] pastiche' concluding that 'sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art' ('The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 106).

In contrast, however, to Hirst's aesthetics of 'profitable pathos' – the *'petit frisson'* his work evokes (Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 106) – Beckett's *Breath,* as exemplified perhaps under Robin Lefèvre's or Amanda Coogan's direction, presents us with a new vision of the sublime; one which teases out Longinus's paradox that 'there is no better figure of speech than one which is completely hidden, that which we do not even recognize as a figure of speech' (Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' 95); one which refigures Kant's dictum that 'the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form' (§23); one which preempts

Derrida's query: 'why, if in phenomenality the excess of quantity is to announce itself, and likewise the movement beyond comparison, why should it do so on the side of the large and not of the small' (136)? Enacted between life and death, played out at the edges of ecstasy and terror, hovering between spectral silences, Beckett's *Breath* gives us a glimpse of a new aesthetics of an imperceptible sublime.

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