In the play within the play *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, an actor plays the set. As contemporary actors can play tree or serpent, Shakespeare’s tinker plays a wall that separates young lovers. The tinker Snout even particularizes the wall: “And such a wall as I would have you think / That had in it a crannied hole, or chink.” Less adept than contemporary actors in sheer physical skill, Snout summons properties to enhance his credibility: “This loam, this rough-cast, and this stone doth show / That I am that same wall; the truth is so.” For all Snout’s assurances, however, theatrical truth is never simply “so.” The tinker’s Wall is at once a speaking character and a dumb artifact of loam, stone, and roughcast. Both character and artifact are concrete stage entities or signifiers or sign-vehicles, according to your ideolect. However you may designate this person-object amalgam, he/it functions as a barrier between lovers, who can communicate only through an aperture that happy Freudians will hasten to penetrate.

Samuel Beckett’s dramatic characters—he calls them “my people”—never play artifacts, and one can never dogmatize: “The truth is so” about his resonant plays. I propose to examine a few harmonics of that resonance, especially for plays we experienced together at the symposium. But to show how far Beckett has traveled, I begin with his first extant complete play, the unproduced, unpublished “Eleuthéria” of 1947. *Eleuthéria*
is Greek for freedom, which is the goal of the play’s oxymoroni-
cally named hero, Victor Krap. In a well-worn dramatic path to
freedom, Victor Krap has left his comfortable Passy home for an
uncomfortable Left Bank hotel room. Beckett confronts his
putative audience with both dwellings simultaneously—for two
of his three acts. No wall separates the stage rooms, but no
character crosses the invisible border from one area to the
other. The Krap living room is stuffed with bourgeois furnish-
ings, but Victor’s hotel room is bare of everything but a folding
bed; and yet that nearly empty room fills three-quarters of the
stage space in act one, while the remaining quarter is stuffed
with the Krap salon. These two stage rooms are of course sym-
Ibic of two different ways of life, and the dramatic action of the
play is predicted by the change of setting. The opulent Krap
living room hosts the act one action on its quarter-stage, and
Victor’s dingy space accommodates act two. By act three the
Krap living room vanishes; it would fall into the orchestra if the
stage were round. When Victor’s wretched room usurps all the
space, he has achieved his victorious freedom—to do nothing
in indigence. And this will surprise no one familiar with
Beckett’s other works.

In “Eleutheria” Beckett himself is not free from traditional
symbolism of the realistic play, despite his simultaneous sets.
Each partial set bespeaks its way of life, like Ibsen’s Doll House
or Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard. Victor Krap has turned his back
on the Krap way of life, as lived on a quarter of the stage.
Peeping beyond realism, however, Victor finally stretches out
on his unfolded folding bed; he stretches out and literally turns
his back on the theater audience, who have absorbed the Krap
living room, bourgeois as they probably are.

Written less than two years after “Eleuthéria,” Waiting for
Godot spurns realism, since it is set in a no-man’s-land at twi-
light. The nearly bare stage, as everyone knows, symbolizes not
a way of life but the human condition, where momentary activ-
ities are wrested from the surrounding void. The printed text of
Godot designates only two items of the set: “A country road. A
tree.” Both road and tree are traditional symbols of human life,
and Beckett relies on our familiarity with this convention, in
order to subvert it. His life-road does not lead to Godot, and his life-tree is linked to death wishes by hanging.

In Godot Beckett's scenic directions are minimal for set, but they are virtually absent for costume (except for footnoted bowlers). From the first Paris production on, however, Vladimir and Estragon have worn the tuxedos and derbies of vaudeville comedians, which prepare us for their vaudeville turns even before we hear a word. No such convention governs the costumes of Pozzo and Lucky, but when Beckett directed Godot in Berlin in 1975—the only time he has directed his most famous play—he designed his costumes symbolically. In act one Beckett's Vladimir wears black coat and striped trousers whereas Estragon wears striped coat and black trousers, and the reverse is true in act two. The two friends belong together, matched through mismatch. Pozzo and Lucky also belong together in Beckett's production; the tan-brown check of Pozzo's trousers is picked up in Lucky's vest, and Pozzo's gray vest is cut from the same cloth as Lucky's gray trousers. Different as the four men are, they belong in the same play through their bowler hats, at once correct city attire in Britain and international comedian attire in show business of the Western world. Perched on heads, these bowlers are related to human minds, but in no allegorical fashion that could not survive a juggling act.

Godot's bowlers may serve as transition to the resonances Beckett obtains from numbers, as few other playwrights do. Worn though the hats may be, the bowlers retain circularity—roughcast zeroes, like the setting sun or rising moon. The sun was invisible in Beckett's production, but the moon was a full round zero. In the printed scenic directions, Vladimir and Estragon circle around Lucky, and in directing, Beckett often had the two friends walk in small circles during the verbal canters of act two. A tradition of divinity in a perfect circle is subverted by Beckett to the zero that is never uttered in Godot, as it is repeatedly in Endgame. But zeroic circularity is nevertheless confirmed in Godot by thirty odd repetitions of the word "nothing"—the nothing that is both "done" and resisted.

Set, costumes, and circularity depict this version of the
human condition, or life unlike a dome of many-colored glass staining an unradiant eternity, or void. *Godot* also plays against the void, since the drama of waiting absorbs us for over two hours, and it does so by inventive if repetitive word and gesture, sometimes geared to larger numbers than zero. The Christian number three threads through the play, which we view through three changes of light in each act. The two friends move through several triads. Vladimir probes the interior of his hat and Estragon the interior of his boot in three distinct movements—looking, feeling, shaking the prop. Vladimir shifts mood in three phases, as in the sequence: "There you are again, there we are again, there I am again." Pozzo's name is deformed to Bozzo and Gozzo, Godot's to Godin, Godet—phonetic triads. The two friends juggle three hats. When Estragon is wounded in his leg, the two friends hop together on three legs. Most striking in Beckett's direction is his segmentation of Lucky's monologue into three movements, the theme of the first an apathetic God, the second dwindling man, and the third indifferent nature. In three increasingly desperate degrees, Pozzo registers dismay at Lucky's logorrheal triad. In act one the two friends prop up Lucky, and in act two Pozzo, each human trio recalling the iconography of Christ crucified between two thieves.

Every critic has commented on this last trio, which troubles Vladimir in the actual dialogue of *Godot*. Three crucifixions and two thieves. The number two lacks the sacramental associations of three, and Beckett deploys two as a Janus-symbol in *Godot*. On the one face, the number two can indicate repetition, and on the other, opposition.¹ Repetitions in *Godot*—two acts, two pair of couples, two men in each couple, two entrances and exits of Pozzo and Lucky, two entrances and exits of the Boy, two brothers serving Godot, and many, many gestural and verbal doublets. For Beckett as for Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun, and these pairs hint by one repetition at an infinity of repetitions during the course of life on this muck-heap.

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew presents the two thieves reviling Christ, but Saint Luke contrasts the two, the
one thief rebuking Christ and the other defending Him and receiving His mercy. It is Luke’s version that informs the oppositions of Godot. One couple is bound by serfdom, but the other by fraternity. Within each couple are contrasts: master Pozzo and menial Lucky, pensive Vladimir and physical Estragon. Even props contrast: phallic carrots and vaginal radishes, hats and shoes at opposite ends of the human body.

In the resonance of numbers, I leap from two—contrast or redundancy—to Vladimir’s “million years ago” and Estragon’s “billions” whom he claims Vladimir has killed, as well as “billions” who have kept their appointment. Patent exaggerations, these numbers reach out toward infinity—of years in time, of human mites in cosmic time.

In Godot Beckett is no traveler in an undiscovered country of symbols. Set, props, shapes, numbers, costumes, and even the bones that span prop, word, and intertextuality have all appeared in pre-Godot plays; but through their convergent resonance, Beckett has shaped a theater classic of our time.

Rather than rest on his laurels, Beckett ventures ever deeper into an unbaudelairian forest of symbols. Some fifteen years after Godot Beckett wrote Play and invented a new kind of theater sign with its own generative capacity—an invention that he has refined in his plays of the last decade. Play of 1963 requires three actors to play a man and two women confined to an eternal triangle inscribed in a vicious circle of repetitions. Each of the three characters believes himself or herself to be alone, although their urns touch. We glean their supposed solitude from their speech, which is triggered by a spotlight that Beckett in his scenic directions designates as an “inquisitor.” Unlike Shakespeare’s Wall, the spotlight does not speak, but all three characters speak to it. Provoked by the spotlight, the three characters first deliver a Narration of their earthly imbroglio and then a Meditation on their present situation, both frankly physical and fictionally metaphysical.

In Play Beckett subverts an old symbolic tradition of life as light. The spotlight of Play acts like an alarm, awakening the characters to their living death. This light is an instrument of a theater technician, which enables us to see Beckett’s play. It is
also a fictional inquisitor eliciting confession and inspiring interrogation from a man and two women in supposed isolation from one another. This light—a reality in the theater and a fiction in the drama—is what I call theatereality. Of it the man asks anxiously: “Am I as much as . . . being seen?” Since we see him, the answer is affirmative. It is small wonder that in rehearsal director Alan Schneider baptized so effulgent a light—with the name Sam.

Advancing to Beckett’s most recent plays, I quote Albee’s George in praise of their “quiet intensity”—a spotlit quivering mouth in the darkness (Not I), a spotlit head with its halo of white hair (That Time). Paradoxically and perilously for the theater, Beckett limits stage movement in these plays. In even later plays Beckett again blends the reality of the theater into the fiction of the drama. Brecht uncovered the theater machinery, and his disciple Richard Foreman bares more sophisticated technology, but only Beckett makes a play (pun intended) of physical fact against dramatic fiction.

Brief as it is, Footfalls of 1975 contains four movements, punctuated by blackouts followed by chimes, but that is a structure we appreciate only in retrospect. Through the four movements we behold a long wooden board, a meter wide. The high spotlight of Play, Not I, and That Time falls in Footfalls to the floorboard. The footfalls are not, however, visible, for the single visible character is a woman with a “worn gray wrap hiding [her] feet.” In the first three of the four movements, the gray ragged figure paces back and forth on the wooden board—nine steps and turn, nine steps and turn, the number of steps decreasing from movement to movement, the light dimming from movement to movement, until, in the fourth and final movement, the stage board is barren of human trace.

The first three movements of Footfalls dramatize mother-daughter relationships, a drama conveyed by two voices, although we see only the one gray woman. Each of the first three movements alludes to a daughter pacing back and forth—at once our visible fact and audible fiction. During the course of the first three movements, mother, daughter, and pacing woman garner details, for even as the footfalls decrease, the
words about them increase. The first movement presents the pacing woman as a daughter named May, offering various ministrations to her invalid but invisible mother. Despite her own illness, the mother worries about her daughter’s restlessness, revolving a mysterious “it all” in her mind. The second movement, a monologue by the invisible mother, seems to be a flashback to her daughter May’s compulsion to pace back and forth on a wooden floor and to hear her own steps. The third movement, a monologue by the woman we see, begins what she explicitly labels a sequel, and thus implicitly continues the mother’s account. Both women speak obliquely of the daughter’s anguish at “it all,” the gonglike syllable that closes each of the first three movements.

I see theatereality in an actress pacing nine steps, counted off on the board as she shudders through ghostly roles. The words of the first movement situate an aged woman perhaps in a hospital, her middle-aged daughter tending her, and revolving some matter in her mind. The words of the second movement situate a mother and her young daughter in a family home where the daughter spurned games in order to pace back and forth, even tearing up the carpet so that she could hear her own steps. The words of the third movement situate a nameless walker in a locked church where she broods about Christ’s poor arm as she paces. Hospital, home, and church coalesce into a sounding-board for footfalls, visual analogue of a mind revolving the unnamed pain of “it all.”

This brief but complex play fuses several harmonics of theatereality. The titular footfalls are at once actual and fictional; we hear them and we hear about them. We see a wooden board as we hear about a transept, and churches are built in the shape of a cross. The invisible woman directs our attention to the visible woman; in scene one she counts her steps, and in scene two she solicits our regard: “See how still she stands.” “But let us watch her move.” “Watch how feat she wheels.” The third and longest movement is segmented into three: the woman we see announces “The sequel” about a ghostly woman walking in a locked church; the second part, entitled “The semblance,” gradually builds a verbal self-portrait of the woman we see,
culminating in the vivid phrase "A faint tangle of pale gray tatters." Without title, the third part offers to a reader description and dialogue of old Mrs. Winter and her daughter Amy at Sunday night supper.

Not only does Beckett fictionalize the theater facts—the sight of the woman pacing on a wooden board and the sound of her footfalls (a sound Beckett changed in successive productions from a hard knock to a grating rasp), Beckett also literalizes the old genre of mystery play through playing against what is literally hidden. One character, the fictional mother, is always hidden from our sight. In scene two her bodiless voice narrates how the fictional daughter was absent from the childhood game of lacrosse, how the adult daughter speaks only "when she fancies none can hear," implying our absence from scene three when it is apparently a daughter who speaks. She tells of a fictional daughter Amy who claims to be absent from a church service where her mother Mrs. Winter nevertheless heard her respond "Amen." The Winter segment is addressed to a reader, and yet book and reader are absent from the stage (in marked contrast to Ohio Impromptu). As the nothings of Godot become almost palpable through the several circularities, the absences of Footfalls haunt us through these verbal traces, but by scene four even they are absent.

Words and music of Footfalls harmonize in an exquisite "cascando" of steps, chimes, and light. A Piece of Monologue, in contrast, is a still life unveiled by the parting of a curtain (unfortunately lacking in the Columbus performance). On audience left is a figure in white—white nightgown and socks. To his left is a lamp as tall as he is, topped with a skull-sized white globe faintly lit. Just visible on audience right is the white foot of a pallet bed. After ten seconds the figure utters the word "Birth." Some fifty minutes later he closes this piece of monologue with the word "gone." Between start and stop of speech, the white-clad figure on stage describes a white-clad figure in a room that contains a lamp the height of a man, and the corner of a pallet bed. The monologuist barely moves, but he tells of the movements of his subject in the room—westward toward a window from which he looks out into darkness, eastward
toward a wall on which photographs once hung. Between west window and east wall, continues the monologue, the white-haired figure in white gown and white socks stops at a man-sized oil-lamp whose wick he lights, sometimes with a match, sometimes with a spill. Gazing before him at wall or window, the narrated man sees below him in his mind’s eye a rainy burial. My account is more coherent, more sequential than the actual monologue composed of terse phrases in semi-sentences—repeated, accreted, qualified, denied, with the delicate tonal variations of David Warrilow, for whom the play was written.

Unlike *Footfalls*, where we have a slow eclipse of theater fact by dramatic fiction, *Monologue* very soon presents an apparent coalescence. After the curtain parts but before a word is spoken, we have ten seconds to absorb the still, invariant image—two uprights and a corner; the two uprights—man and lamp—are visual reflections of one another. Through them Beckett subverts the old symbol of life as light. During the course of the monologue, we sense a man moving toward death while the lifeless lamp glows unmoving on. (At the Stanford University performance, where the audience was distant from the stage, after-images produced a symbiotic exchange between man and lamp.)

Once words are heard, counter-images are conjured against the hypnotic still life. *Footfalls* plays with an identity between the pacing woman of fact and fiction, but *Monologue* plays on the divergence between a narrative of frequent displacement and a white-clad figure “still as the lamp by his side.” We count the titular footfalls—nine and wheel—but the bleached figure of *Monologue* is still as he recounts how another totters, gropes, stands, turns, backs. A single gesture is mimetic; the speaker wryly describes “Making do with his mouth,” as he makes do with his mouth.

This stage figure in his setting is both coalescence and contradiction, through theaterality. There are, moreover, degrees of contradiction; most blatant is the repeated and accreted choreography of lighting an oil-lamp while the electric lamp on-stage is untouched by human hands. Further, we see a white
pallet, but we hear of a brass bedrail. Although the stage set is bare of wall and window, the narrated figure moves between them. And a rainy burial—three times described—in the mind’s eye of the narrated man is summoned by words to our minds’ eyes.

Man, lamp, corner pallet are a sounding board for words between the opening “Birth” and the closing “gone.” Through words Beckett draws a faint thread of theatrum mundi. About halfway through the piece, we hear these phrases: “Gown and socks white to take faint light. Once white. Hair white to take faint light. Foot of pallet just visible edge of frame.” What began as narration appears here to be performance. Then, a shadow review describes how, in the light of a spill, a pair of hands light the lamp with a spill. In the actual theater the light is constant to the end of the play, but periodically the narrator punctuates a narrated scene with: “Fade.” Less often, “Thirty seconds” sounds to delay the funeral scene—the anonymous funeral framed to exclude the coffin. Toward the end of the monologue, we are fixed in a theater by “White foot of pallet edge of frame stage left”—where we see the actual corner of a pallet bed.

While the white-clad figure absorbs the invariant light, while the skull-sized globe glows with its invariant light, we listen to a piece of monologue, beginning with “Birth,” ending with “gone,” and oscillating between two kinds of light. One kind clings to the old light/life metaphor through an old man made of words—thirty thousand nights or two and a half billion seconds old, with both numbers belittled as “so few.” His loved ones are long gone, along with their photographs in a thousand shreds. The stubborn durability of human life is hinted by those large numbers for 79 and 82 years, avatars of the biblical three score and ten. Yet those huge numbers are mere specks in infinity, variously rendered in Monologue as “black vast,” “empty dark,” “dark whole,” “black beyond,” “black veil,” whence emanates the second kind of light of a lifeless cosmos. As we in the theater “take” the steady light from the stage, death seeps through the words of the monologue: the sun is long sunk, the light is fading, and the white figure moves west-
ward; birth collapses into a funeral scene and loved ones into ghosts. Death even plays through a pun: “Never but the one matter. The dead and gone.” When all beings and their memories are dead and gone, it does not matter about mere matter. Light is finally not life, for man is finally not the measure. An unaccountable light “whence unknown” drizzles through the cosmos, but there is no one to perceive it, once the globe darkens.

A Piece of Monologue and Footfalls, like the thirty-second Breath, announce in their very titles Beckett’s view of life theatrically imaged. Footfalls are what we hear and what we hear about as a metaphor for the mind revolving life’s pain. A piece of monologue shimmers through the many meanings of piece—fragment, entity, example, play, game-counter—all synecdoches for life. In both plays moving figure or still figure sketches a verbal self-portrait that is then animated into imaginary actions. As Beckett’s recent fiction Company proves so dramatic that he has accorded Frederick Neumann permission to perform it, so these two late Beckett plays precipitate fiction and drama as a new concentrate. Paradoxically, A Piece of Monologue abjures narrated dialogue in favor of pure description of a life spent between birth and death, groping toward western window from eastern wall.

Which leads me to deliberate circling back to Shakespeare’s Wall, character and artifact. In Beckett’s late plays character is etched into artifact. Feet fall on a wooden board that is hospital, home, and church; a lighted globe is man’s conquerable mind and his vulnerable world. Beckett’s late plays, like the early ones, theatricalize his vision of the human situation, but the late plays fuse the actual audience experience into the dramatic fiction. It is as theater experience that I cherish these plays—that weary old word experience—and if you see the plays as codes of signifiers that conform to a theoretical model, then you and I view the plays from opposite sides of a wall, “[But] such a wall as I would have you think / That had in it a crannied hole, or chink” through which dialogue may still be possible, within humanistic perspectives.
Addendum on "Ohio Impromptu"

Ohio Impromptu was written in English (in 1980), but in keeping with its "Latin Quarter hat," it sports a French angle to "Impromptu." I quote from a recent theater dictionary: "Pièce théoriquement improvisée et jouée sans préparation. . . . Souvent, le dramaturge y expose les difficultés de l'activité d'auteur et d'acteur." Beckett again subverts, for the difficulties he asks his actors to expose are those of the creative and critical aspects of fiction-writing—in his most convoluted example of theatereality.

The stage is strictly black and white, lacking the glowing globe of Monologue. As in a Magritte painting, we see two images of the same figure, a black-coated, white-haired man—the one nearer us in profile, the farther one full-face, although both heads are bowed, obscuring the faces. Both actors sit in "armless white deal chairs" at a white deal table, on which a single black, broad-brimmed hat reposes. The man facing us is silent—and motionless except when he raps with left hand on the table; the profiled man reads aloud from the last pages of a large book. He reads about a man in long black coat and wide-brimmed hat who, having moved to a lonely abode overlooking the Isle of Swans, is visited by a man who reads to him throughout the night, quieting his malaise. Night after night, the man visits him "to read the sad tale through again." Of that second-degree "sad tale" we learn nothing, except that through it the reader and listener "grew to be as one."

Not only does Ohio Impromptu condense genres even further than Footfalls—a tale within a tale within a play—but the coalescence and divergence of theatereality is more involved than can be absorbed in performance. On stage the refracted images of old men resonate toward reflection within the tale that is read from the book—hinted through the fictional place to a swan song. Within the book-tale, however, the two men "grew to be as one" as the tale is repeatedly read, while on stage the two men diverge before our eyes. The single hat, starkly black on the long white table, may be a symbol for a single mind, for a single creating mind, one aspect reading the noted words and
the other aspect pacing or judging the reading. Toward the end of our play, we hear that once the sad tale is read a last time, the two men sit "as though turned to stone." On stage, in contrast, once the book is closed, the two men raise their heads to "look at each other. Unblinking. Expressionless," and only then as still as stone. Unlike Proust's transcendent book admired by Beckett in his youth, unlike Molière's impromptu about producing a play for a king, Ohio Impromptu almost drains a story of experience in order to theatricalize the reading/writing itself as experience. To adapt the end of Watt to this occasion: "No resonance where none intended."

3. Warrilow turns twice to his right: east or west?
4. I am grateful to Linda Ben-Zvi for calculating the ages.