CHAPTER 1

Eye: Failing, Myopic, Grainy

First Incision: Into the Failing Eye of Krapp’s Last Tape

To embark on a study of haptics in Beckett’s work, it may be necessary to begin with the eye. Or, more accurately, the failing eye. The protagonists of the plays examined in this chapter, *Film* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, both suffer from myopic vision. However, dimming vision affects Beckett’s aesthetic practice more widely. Figures such as Hamm in *Endgame* and A in *Rough for Theater I* are afflicted with visual failure; for the spectator also, the dim and shadowy stage and filmic images seem to work against vision; it is no longer privileged as an epistemological tool for either the figures of the drama or their spectators. The very notion of theater is undermined. It is not “a viewing place” as in the meaning of the original Greek word *teatron*, but a place where the eye begins to fail.

Blindness in theater has often been represented as either punishment for a misdeed or as a sense that must be sacrificed in order for a higher insight to be gained. Insight itself can be blinding, as Oedipus puts out his eyes on learning the truth of his origins. The blind seer Tiresias, having been struck blind by the Gods for impiety, is given the gift of prophecy. Gloucester’s learning of the truth in *King Lear* is similarly paralleled by his loss of vision. In each case, blindness is associated with the discovery of some truth, with gaining knowledge or insight. Yet the blind bodies of Oedipus and Gloucester are both fallen bodies. Gloucester falls, literally, in his darkly comic “suicide” scene, and believes himself dead for a time. In Maeterlinck’s *The Blind*, the blind protagonists, without the priest to “guide” them, have lost their way and cannot return to the asylum that shelters them on their bleak island. The blind refer repeatedly to the fact that they do not or
cannot know where they are, to whom they are speaking, or how they are to return to their asylum. Any sense of individual identity, distance, and time become erased. Such an epistemological blind spot emerges in *Waiting for Godot* too. Like Maeterlinck’s blind, Vladimir and Estragon wait, hearing footsteps in the dead leaves, “all the dead voices,” “like leaves.” The situation in *Waiting for Godot* translates as epistemological insecurity, and the impossibility of action.

Representations of blindness can take on a moral tone, associating sight with “knowing the way.” The priest of *The Blind* symbolizes this; he is a guide, both literally and morally. Without him, the blind lose their way. The play expresses how humanity has become lost, cast adrift from its moorings in religious rituals and rules; thus blindness is associated with the lost, godless body. José Saramago’s parabolic novel *Blindness* details a plague of blindness, which cripples society, deliberately connecting ethics with vision. With all its citizens’ blinded, civilization falls in a moral as well as literal sense. It is a thought experiment that seems to echo the spirit of Brueghel the Elder’s painting *The Parable of the Blind* (1568). In Brueghel’s painting, blind men are pictured toppling or about to topple in a heap as each one follows the blind man before him. Saramago’s dystopian vision sees newly blinded humanity crawling about in its own excrement and murdering each other for food.

In whatever way blindness is interpreted and made culturally meaningful, it is clear that a certain denigration of the haptic sensorium occurs. Insight and reason act as compensation for the loss of the carnal and fallible eye. Blindness is associated with dirt, both moral and literal. However, enlightenment, both the epistemological tradition as well as the immediate revelation of insight, is not readily available for Beckett’s figures. The “old muckball,” to quote Krapp (Collected Shorter Plays, 62), is a much more familiar terrain. When sight is diminished the haptic sensorium must take over, and it is with that thought that this study commences. In *Letter on the Blind* Denis Diderot asserts the reliance that we have upon the senses for knowledge; he proposes that if the deaf and blind philosopher were to construct a man, “after the fashion of Descartes,” he would put the soul, not somewhere behind the eyes, but at the very limits of the body, at the fingertips. And, in the dim recesses of Krapp’s den, we proceed with an autopsy in the dark, an inquest into the death of vision. The irony here is that while in technological terminology “haptic” is used to describe a device that promotes interaction and access for the blind to technology, Krapp’s technology, his “haptic interface,” does not function as a prosthesis, but rather emphasizes its failure. The first incision into the Beckettian *corpus* is through the eye, reminiscent of the famous