ALL LIFE IS FIGURE AND GROUND:
Perception and Self-reflexive Structures
in Beckett's Early Prose and Late Drama

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Beckett's dominant interest in visuality in his late plays is well documented by now. So is his knowledge about some representatives of Gestalt psychology. This article concentrates on Beckett's relationship to both the visual arts and psychology and takes as examples stories from *More Pricks Than Kicks* and the later plays, in particular *Catastrophe*.

Beckett's relationship to the fine arts and his deep interest in contemporary avant-garde painting and sculpture are manifested in his art criticism, notably "Three Dialogues" (with Georges Duthuit) and "Les Peintres de L'empêchement" (Beckett 1983) and by his friendship with artists like Jack B. Yeats, the brothers Van Velde (Bram and Geer) and Alberto Giacometti. His taste in painting was avant-garde as Vivian Mercier remarks:

In painting [...] his taste was at first for traditional if not conventional work but moved fairly quickly in the direction of the contemporary and the avant-garde; in music his taste seems to have remained essentially traditional.

(Mercier 1977, 113)

Mercier gives an at first sight paradoxical, but convincing, biographical explanation for Beckett's avant-garde interest in painting and his traditional taste in music. He states that Beckett had no theoretical interest in music because he had learned about music at a very early age and as a performer concerned himself with practical problems rather than with theoretical ones. Mercier writes:

On the other hand he gained his knowledge of painting and sculpture mainly as an adult [...] and in spite of his frequent denials, was deeply interested in problems of aesthetic theory discussed in his critical articles. [...] Beckett developed a wide and deep knowledge of contemporary painting and sculpture, while showing virtually no interest in contemporary music [...].

(Mercier 1977, 112-113)

Beckett's knowledge of modern psychology, notably with Behaviourism, has been documented by Horst Breuer, who attempted to prove the
relationship between Wolfgang Köhler’s experiments with his Teneriffa apes (1914) and *Act Without Words I*. Köhler, like Wolfgang Metzger, was also a student of Max Wertheimer’s. Beckett could have known Wertheimer’s writings before the ostracism of this school by Nazi-prosecution. Wertheimer was an important representative of psychology in Germany. At the time (1928-1933) when Beckett frequently visited the Sinclair family in Kassel, Wertheimer was Professor of Psychology in Frankfurt (until 1933). His pupil, Wolfgang Metzger, who specialized in visual perception, was quoted extensively in Kurt Koffka’s *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. In his new biography James Knowlson finds an additional source for Beckett’s knowledge of Gestalt psychology, Woodworth’s *The Contemporary Schools of Psychology* — the book Beckett read in London, while undergoing psychotherapy from 1933-1935. But my aim is not a biographical one, or anything like showing ‘influences’.

Breuer called the behaviouristic experiments of Köhler “gestaltpsychologisch”; this could imply that the only school of Gestalt psychology is the behaviouristic one. But there are several schools of Gestalt psychology. The most important of these — the Frankfurt one — has to do with perception and phenomenology rather than with behaviouristic ‘learning’ and as I will show is of greater importance for Beckett’s writings. Rudolf Arnheim writes in his classic about the connection between art and visual perception:

> The foundation of our present knowledge of visual perception has been laid by gestalt theory. From its beginnings and throughout its development [...] gestalt psychology has shown a kinship to art. The writings of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka are pervaded by it [...].

*(Arnheim 1965, VII)*

Then he implicitly defines Gestalt by translating the well known credo of Gestalt theory, “Das Ganze ist mehr als die Summe seiner Teile”:

> The realization that a whole cannot be attained by adding up isolated parts was not new to the artist [...] But at no time could a work of art have been made or understood by a mind unable to conceive the integrated structure of the whole.

*(Arnheim 1965, VII)*

In her study *Back to Beckett*, Ruby Cohn pointed out that Murphy, although a very common Irish name which is used by Beckett for the