The Empty Too

The Empty Too:
Language and Philosophy in the Works of Samuel Beckett

By

Arthur Broomfield

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For Assumpta

That voice
testing the palate of the void
was yours ;
—Fiona Sampson

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FOREWORD

BENJAMIN KEATINGE

SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY, MACEDONIA

It has been suggested that there are two ways of 'doing' Beckett and philosophy. On the one hand, the recent archival turn in Beckett studies has urged an empiricist approach based on Beckett's exhaustive, autodidactic study of (mainly) Western philosophy in the 1930s as evidenced chiefly in his Philosophy notebooks held at Trinity College Dublin. The leading advocate of this approach, Matthew Feldman, has advanced a major revisionist reading of Beckett's engagement with philosophy in his 2006 volume, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'*. More recently, Feldman has been at work as co-editor of *Beckett/Philosophy* (Sofia University Press, 2012) where a range of contributors have followed Feldman's 'falsifiability principle' in excavating Beckett's debt to the philosophical tradition. These scholarly works have confirmed what has long been evident, that Beckett was deeply immersed in the world of ideas, but at the same time, it has shown that some corrective readings are necessary as to the scope and sequence of Beckett's erudition.

The alternative approach might be termed the speculative or exploratory approach, one which suggests affinities and confluence of interests even in the absence of hard evidence of inter-textual indebtedness. Much early Beckett criticism, based on Beckett's presumed allegiance with existentialist thinking, or with theorists of 'the absurd', was based on a sense of Beckett's affinities with various thinkers—Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, E.M. Cioran—but without the benefit of actual, verifiable evidence. Beckett himself, on the other hand, has said:

> When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what

> is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess. (Samuel Beckett, interview with Tom Driver, Summer 1961)

We must take Beckett's claim to not be a philosopher at face value. After all, he also is on record as saying: "I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms". Nevertheless, there is a slight disingenuousness here, I would suggest. How can we *not* read Beckett philosophically when his works so conspicuously engage with major philosophical concepts: being, existence, the subject, identity, epistemological questions, ethical questions … the list could continue indefinitely?

The whole question of Beckett and philosophy therefore includes a complex network of debts and legacies, not least the strong contemporary tradition of thinking with or alongside Beckett evidenced by such major thinkers as: Alain Badiou, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot and, of course, Jacques Derrida. These latter two thinkers—Blanchot and Derrida—are the major reference points in Dr Arthur Broomfield's study, *The Empty Too: Language and Philosophy in the Works of Samuel Beckett*. Broomfield is interested in that key Beckettian theme: the self-sufficiency of language and the irreducibility of the word. Of course, a key insight of post-structuralist thinking generally has been the sense that language constitutes and, in a sense, creates 'the world' or 'the real'. When Beckett famously ends his 1950 novel *Molloy* with the lines: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" he is drawing our attention, in a way seemingly prescient of much post-structuralist thinking, to the textuality of experience. Rather than words representing experience, words create and constitute experience. Language is prior to being.

None of this is new in the arena of Beckett studies. Indeed, one of the most curious aspects of the history of Beckett and post-structuralism, is the apparent affinity between Beckett's literary experiments and the theories advanced by Derrida under the rubric of deconstruction, while neither Beckett nor Derrida are on record as saying anything extensive about each other's work. This is particularly surprising on the part of the French philosopher who, when asked by Derek Attridge about his lack of response to Beckett, famously said:

> Beckett is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard. I have perhaps

> avoided him a bit because of this identification. (*Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, Routledge, 1992, 60–1).

As numerous critics have suggested, it is because Beckett's works appear to deconstruct themselves that the architect of deconstruction felt uneasy at his apparent proximity to the Irish writer's work. Beckett's novels, in particular, have appeared to many as literary proof of deconstruction as a methodology and critical procedure and several noteworthy critical interventions on Beckett studies have read Beckett alongside or through Derridean deconstruction.

It may be further said that more than one Beckettian has felt the same sense of intellectual proximity to Beckett's writing as articulated by Derrida. One of the many merits of Dr Broomfield's study is that he combines personal conviction with a good measure of critical objectivity. Without lapsing into jargon, Dr Broomfield offers a wide-ranging analysis of Beckett's work with particular attention to how Beckett has apparently cast off the very conditions of an older literary tradition—subjectivity, narration, character—so that we are left with the words themselves which refuse to concede and which 'go on', as murmurs or traces, long after a speaking subject has left the scene. Broomfield casts a cold eye across the Beckett canon with particular focus of the dilemmas of perceptual experience and linguistic expression in: *Film*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *How It Is* and *Worstward Ho*. Although his approach is philosophical, it is neither purely excavatory nor purely speculative; rather, it relies on a kind of empirico-theoretical demonstration of how key aspects of deconstruction are at work in Beckett. Added to this is Dr Broomfield's personal conviction that Beckett's writing matters, in a way which few other things do in our postmodern and post-literate world.

So what we have is a book written with the enthusiasm of a poet (Broomfield is also a short story writer and published poet) but with the critical rigour of the literary scholar. This is certainly not the first, nor will it be the last book to interrogate the relationship between Beckett's writing and complex questions of being, perception and language. It is, however, a noteworthy attempt to grapple with these intriguingly elaborate riddles of our time.

Benjamin Keatinge,
Skopje, November 2013

THE REAL AND THE OTHER FROM PLATO, THROUGH DERRIDA, TO BECKETT

Plato's core thinking on the intelligible versus the sensible, the same and the different, forms the foundation of Beckett's works. Jacques Derrida takes issue with aspects of Plato's thinking and directs his focus to the chora through which he seeks to break down the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible in his thesis "*Différance*" (Rivkin & Ryan 1998). Beckett, through artistic and linguistic application of Plato's thinking, locates the question of language at the centre of the question of being.

The question of being arises from the crisis between that which can be intelligibly deduced and that which is perceived through the senses. To argue that this crisis is evenly matched, so to speak, creates an impasse, erects a barrier to the inquiry into the nature of being. It is a barrier that Samuel Beckett in his important works, from *Waiting for Godot* (1956) and *The Unnamable* (1959) on, addresses and overcomes. Beckett fine tunes the relationship so that it is weighted in favour of the intelligible. The intelligible to Beckett is that which, through reasoning and deduction, can be shown to uniquely exist or be the real when all that is perceived through the senses can only be doubted. He moves the thinking on being forward to an emphasis on language. The real to Beckett is language; the empty, pure word that remains after his process of interrogative deduction has reduced the existence of the perceived to doubt. Before going into deeper discussion on the thesis of the real and otherness that runs through Beckett's works it is necessary to refer to his great precursor, Plato, and that which, in principle, links their thinking.

This relevant link in thinking is specifically related to what we call "the real" in Beckett and "the same" in Plato. That which is relevant and central is the leading question Plato (1997) asks (through Timaeus) in *Timaeus*: "What is that *which always is*, and has no becoming, and what is *that which becomes* but never is?" (1234). The former is grasped by understanding, which "always involves a true account" (1254). It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception: "It comes to be and passes away, but never really is" (1234). Central to that which is grasped by understanding is what Plato calls "the same"; the same is "the same unchanging essence which is

invisible—it cannot be perceived by the senses at all" (1255). This is the significant point through which we understand the same—it is not material, in the sense that we understand materiality, but invisible and cannot be perceived by the senses at all, yet it is "a thing" (1255), albeit unpresentable to the senses. Plato draws us towards a different dimension through a philosophical approach, while Beckett does so through a combination of the philosophical, the imaginative and the linguistic. In both instances, textual evidence affirms each author's commitment to their philosophical propositions. The marked distinction between the same, "the unchanging," on the one hand, and that which is grasped by opinion on the other, "all the things we perceive through our bodily senses" (1254), is explained by Plato. The same is unchanging, but that which is perceived through the senses is "constantly borne along, now coming to be in a certain place and then perishing out of it" (1255); the perceived world is unstable and ever changing, which raises all the questions about the fallibility of the perceived and the perceiver. What is not in doubt, according to Plato, is the impossibility of the perceiver experiencing the same—"it cannot be perceived by the senses at all." The significance of the relationship of Plato's thinking on the same and what "we invariably observe becoming different at different times" (1252), the different, to Beckett's thinking can hardly be overstressed. Importantly, Plato's "same" and Beckett's language (the real) are intelligibly deduced while that perceived through the senses never is, remaining an unstable, unprovable perception of our senses, which are themselves unprovable. Alternatively, it could be said that the same to Plato is the real that is haunted by perceptions of the senses; they are a nuisance to it, but "it is the role of understanding to study it" (1255).

Plato and Beckett reverse the notion of the other and the same/the real. To both of them the perception of the senses is the other which disturbs the real, where in conventional thinking the other is that which is other than what we perceive, that which upsets the confidence borne of belief in our self-identity. This is the high point of their philosophical agreement. It establishes a definitive link between the thinking of Plato and Beckett. The essential core principle that the other is the unverifiable which is perceived in the empirical world, and being cannot be perceived by the senses, but through understanding remains central to both.

Plato defines the same as that "which cannot be perceived by the senses at all." It is invisible yet is "one thing" (1255). The same to Plato is one thing just as the empty, unpresentable word is a Messianic aspiration for Beckett. The logic of Beckett's thesis also points to the invisible, unperceivable word as a "thing," though not material, but very much a

thing in his imagined dimension, indeed the real. The perceived, on the other hand, according to Plato, "can be perceived by the senses … it has been begotten" (1255), brought into existence by the actions of the corporeal. The perceived is unstable; it comes to be in one place then disappears out of it. Because it is understood by opinion "which involves sense perception" (1255) the perceived is unreliable, and does not have support from independent evidence beyond the perceptions and opinions of the corporeal. On the evidence of his analysis it seems logical for Plato to call what has been deduced through intellectual investigation "the same," and that which has been arrived at through a combination of sensory perception and opinion "the different," which appears to draw a clear distinction between them both. But, Plato argues, "we prove unable to draw … these distinctions," (1255) because there exists a third thing that clouds the possibility of posing a neat argument in favour of the intelligible, and against one in favour of the sensible. Plato argues that this third place "provides a fixed state for all things that come to be" (1255). It is understood through a "bastard reasoning" that does not involve perception. Though things come to be, or into being, from the chora—which can be best understood as a neutral, amorphous something which cannot be destroyed—those things cannot be described definitively as things as such; i.e. since none of these appear to remain the same, "which one of them can one categorically assert … to be some particular thing, this one, and not something else?" (1252). Bastard reasoning is "bastard" because it creates a schism within the legitimate reasoning that understands the same, which is invisible and cannot be perceived by the senses, as the true account. The chora "is itself apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning" (1255). As part of the make-up of the chora, bastard reasoning does not involve sensory perception, yet it is a kind of bastard offspring that indulges sensory perception, and by so doing betrays its rightful parent, the intelligible, that which reaches a true account through reason. Hence, even though the chora is an amorphous space, an indefinable "something," it creates a situation where "it takes on a variety of visible aspects" (1255). Therefore, the bastard reasoning element of the chora is forced to identify it. However, the process of identification creates a scenario where it cannot be dismissed even if identified by us in our "dreaming state" (1255).

The acknowledgement of the chora challenges Plato's notion of the same because it takes on a variety of visible aspects which, being visible, are perceptible to the senses. Bastard reasoning has allowed this situation to occur because, it seems, it permits the application of pure reason to that which has been infiltrated by the senses. Heretofore, Plato has argued for a

clear distinction between the intelligible and the sensible because "the one is not like the other" (1254). However, in the chora the distinct independence of both has been compromised by the intelligible, because of the recognition of something that is hardly even an object of conviction (through bastard reasoning)—and therefore hardly not—and the sensible being the "wet nurse of becoming … [ensures] that it takes on a variety of visible aspects" (1255). The chora is that place or process where invisible being is made available, through the miscalculations of a bastardized reasoning to appropriation by the senses—what Plato calls "becoming." These core principles in Plato's thinking form the foundation of Beckett's thinking; he develops and recreates them artistically and they form the bedrock of his artistic and philosophical vision.

Beckett's thinking exceeds that of the better-known philosophers to date, which may appear to be a sweeping claim. His philosophical thinking is part of his art. His work corrects the apparent miscalculations in their thinking and goes on resolutely in a specific direction from the point where they falter, seemingly driven by what Andrew Gibson calls "a faith in possibility" (2006, 133). For example, we can relate a similarity in Plato's thought on the same and the other to Beckett's—Plato's description of the same as invisible and the impossibility of perceiving it through the senses and Beckett's silence, and through their common belief that perceptions of the senses are unprovable, and therefore the different, or the other, insofar as Plato's thinking goes. However, Beckett insists on going on from the impasse in Plato's thinking and pursues what is possible, that which is so obvious and so ignored—the question of language.

We shall return to Beckett in greater detail, but first we must speak of Derrida's contribution through his method of Deconstruction to the thinking on language and meaning, and to the relationship between the word and the referent, and we will identify the point where he too miscalculates, from which Beckett insists on going on from.

Plato's realizations that a place or space—a chora—cannot be denied, is there, so to speak, and that perceptions of the senses are unstable digressions, steer him towards the discourse on the Forms and away from an intellectual interrogation of language. The questions that expose the unprovability of sensory perceptions, and that prompt an interrogation of language and the real, remained unasked in a fully serious way until the arrival of Derrida and Beckett well over two millennia later. Derrida develops the thinking put forward by Plato in that key passage of Timaeus (1997, 1251–1252) by applying it to his understanding of the relationship between language and perceptions. He continues the intellectual

interrogation of that which yields to that type of interrogation. Where Plato could be said to see the chora as an intrusion that questions the clarity of his distinction of the intelligible from the sensible, Derrida grasps it as a justification of his thesis that the chora represents that phase where the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible breaks down. Derrida's thesis "*Difference*" argues for this breakdown; difference makes the possible impossible, and the impossible possible. *Differance* is a neologism in the French language, and in it Derrida replaces the second "*e*" with an "*a*," which puts into play the two distinct interpretations that can be taken from *differance*—the verbs to differ and to defer. Because the replacing of the letter "e" by the letter "a" in the word *differance* eludes the senses of sight and hearing (in the French pronunciation), it may seem that we are dealing with "an order that no longer refers to sensibility" (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, 387–8) (the intelligible is also responsible for inserting silent punctuation and spaces in written texts). However, neither is it ideally intelligible, because the written neologism signifies the breakdown of the classical opposition through "a movement of *differance* between two differences" (387–8) (to differ and to defer). The Platonic distinction between opinion that is perceived through the senses and the intelligible that is arrived at through understanding, cannot be sustained, according to Derrida, because that which resists it, the movement of *differance*, challenges the certainty of the verb to defer when it is understood as to differ, and vice versa when to differ is understood as to defer also sustains it for the same reason. The play that is inherent between both terms is emphasized in the neologism "one cannot choose one's favoured interpretation at the expense of the other." When Derrida says *differance* or "the trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself" (403), he is, at core, talking about the attempts to represent in language the perceived that is fleeting and unstable, that cannot for sure be stabilized as a "this" or "that" but is in constant play, reflected in the word that seeks to represent it.

Derrida holds, according to Caputo, "that presence (or reality) is always the effect of … representation … meaning and reference are always built up … from within the network of codes and assumptions with which we all always already operate" (Caputo 1997, 101). Our acceptance of what is represented through this process as meaning and truth is challenged in *differance*. This acceptance is granted conditionally, allowing the terms provisional status only but resisting holding them off completely, and is the necessity of agreement on the meaning of words and thus our ability to survive in the existential world. Yet it remains true

that what we call meaning is no more than our attempt to make sense, through language, of unstable and inconsistent perceptions. We defer naming presence because the present is representable, hence the possibility of the empty, meaningless word that we will discuss later. Rather than the intelligible subordinating the sensible, the breakdown creates an equality of sorts between the two where neither dominates. This is "an order that resists philosophy's founding opposition between the sensible and the intelligible" (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, 387–8); both are an admixture of themselves and the other, and both infiltrate and subvert the other. We might attempt to simplify the complexities of Derrida's prose by summing up this parity between the intelligible and the sensible like this: the same, which is invisible and cannot be perceived by the senses, infiltrates opinion formed and gathered through the senses, thus rendering it not fully of the senses and questioning the truth value of the opinion. It breaks down the neat side of the opposition that had been thought to be the sensible into a confusion of the sensible and the intelligible (or the same). The sensible may attempt to articulate and represent the same, but it is infiltrating the realm of that which it cannot perceive and purporting to represent the representable (which is in fact the unpresentable), so that neither the sensible or the intelligible is a concept. For sure, the supposed clarity of the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible has been broken down, but has it not been replaced by an aporetic undecidable that, by giving equal status to the sensible and the intelligible, recognizes the reality of the world of perceptions and by so doing restricts exploration of the possibility of the empty word. Derrida advances the thinking on language to a linguistic chora where there is continuous play between language and perception, and resolution is not possible.

Nevertheless, *differance* is located in the play between language and perception in the world which we believe exists. The parity of status mentioned gives the world of perceptions—of "non-being' for Beckett in *Film*—an unjustified advantage over the intelligible, because recognition of it as reality creates the inevitable aporia that restricts full exploration of the possibility of language as the real. The effect of that which "resists philosophy's founding opposition," that between the intelligible and the sensible, is that which traps Derrida in a prison of his own making—the prison of the undecidable, which inhabits the "philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it … without ever leaving room for a solution" (Derrida 2002, 43). "'*Differance*," he claims, "is even the subversion of every realm" (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, 401). To which we might respond—every realm bar one, the realm of the empty word, for this is where Beckett's view of being differs from Derrida's.

Derrida's refusal to contemplate a disparity—rather than an opposition—within *differance* creates a kind of muddled relationship between the word and the perception that puts an onus on the word to translate shifting unstable perceptions into language. The result is the so-called failure of language, by which it may be understood that the limitation of meaning in words, or the unavailability of the appropriate word, fails to clearly or fully represent the perception. To say that language fails when it clearly does not—or cannot—is said and accepted because it is based on the flawed premise that the word and the perception are equal in status when such a proposition is impossible to prove. For Derrida, this failure is concentrated in the fruitless quest to present the referent. "It is a feature of 'marks' that they are the signs of something nonpresent" (Miller 2011, 201, 264), and the nonpresent to Derrida is "the irreducibly nonpresent" (264). This, however, is not as it is in Beckett's pure language beyond relation to the corporeal, it is being beyond language but not beyond the referent. The muddle in which this doubtful premise lands language prevents the exploration of empty language as a something beyond, free of the referent which is always of the perceived. It contains language within the interminable chain of signifiers. It is perceptions, not language, that fail, a point made in *Texts for Nothing* (Beckett 2010) where the "I" that is language summarizes the conflict with the corporeal "he" on the matter.

> He thinks because words fail him he's on his way to my speechlessness, to being speechless with my speechlessness, he would like it to be my fault that words fail him, of course words fail him. He tells his story every five minutes saying it is not his, there's cleverness for you … He would like it to be my fault that he has no story … (17)

Words fail the corporeal "he" because he is trying to "tell his story," which will necessitate representing perceptions that are outside of language. But the corporal's failure is the failure to represent, and his speechlessness is borne of that failure, not of the failure of language. His failure is not "my speechlessness," the speechlessness that is free of the corporeal and of meaning, that will not compromise its freedom by attempting to represent, hence the corporal's desire to blame the pronoun "I." "My speechlessness [is] a voice that makes no sound" (18), because it is uncontaminated by association with perceptions.

The other to Derrida will always be that which is beyond language, the possibility of non-linguistic existence, rather than that which is beyond meaning, the empty pristine word: "Certainly deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed … (but) to challenge or complicate our

common assumption about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language" (Kearney 1993, 173). The other to Beckett is the different, non-being, the parasite that is a torment to the real.

From a Beckettian standpoint, *differance* is immersed in a discourse on non-being, the world of perceptions that are received through the senses, and the frustrating task of trying to represent them in language. Beckett's faith in possibility is thwarted by *differance*'s claim to make the possible impossible. Derrida's order that resists philosophy's founding opposition between the sensible and the intelligible is challenged throughout the imagined dimension created in Beckett's works through an insistence that language is the real—to which we can link Plato's same—albeit the real that is annoyed and tormented by that from which it cannot disassociate itself, that which is perceived through the senses. The impetus of this dimension is towards freeing language from referent, subject, characterization, time and space, and from knowledge of anything outside of language. Some of the most frequently used words and phrases in Beckett's works are "things," "nothing," "matter," "it," "that," "don't know," "and," and "go on." The verb "to be," especially in its present tense, is used infrequently and with marked precision and purpose. He narrates "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" (Beckett 1959, 267). Seemingly commonplace terms and phrases are defamiliarized so that their accepted meaning is questioned, e.g. "no matter" in "no matter how it happened" (267), where the focus is switched from the everyday filler in conversation to implicitly asking if there is no matter then how did the word "it" happen? This dimension is located in a moment of decay in the existential world like that in *The Unnamable* where "it" doesn't "matter"—"that's all words" (Beckett 1959, 381)—which the reader finds it almost impossible to go beyond, just as the narrator cannot get beyond the threshold of the story he would like to tell.

Because the objects and concepts of the perceived world are never more than perceptions that cannot be conclusively represented in language, they also cannot be dismissed as non-existent. Beckett acknowledges them unenthusiastically, "since none of these appear ever to remain the same" (Plato 1997, 1252). Because he understands perceptions as non-beings that nevertheless co-exist in some kind of parasitical relationship with being, the real, which is language, he is constantly on guard against granting them legitimacy by being seen to acknowledge them as referents, even to the stage of *differance* which would reduce language to their level of indeterminacy (and thus compromise its possibility of emptiness). The great question that is central to Beckett's works goes something like this:

empty language is the real but, annoyingly, is haunted by association to the world perceived by our senses—discuss.

This question shares a common origin with the thinking of Plato that sees the same as "invisible—it cannot be perceived by the senses at all" (Plato 1997, 1255) from which Beckett "goes on" from to seeing this invisible, imperceptible as pure, empty, meaningless language that somehow remains beyond the realm of the senses, the "voice that makes no sound because it goes towards none" (Beckett 2010, 18) to explode the aporia in *differance*: "What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed ? By aporia pure and simple ? … I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means" (1959, 267). Where Derrida is locked into an undecidable, an aporia, because of the parity of status notion that he pushes through *differance*, Beckett, in an example of what Blanchot calls "neutral speech … (that) is the incessant, the interminable" (Blanchot 2003, 213), breaks free of the aporia by rendering the word aporia meaningless.

If Beckett insists that language is the real, and if, to prove his point, he undermines the credulity of character, narrative and narrator, we must ask, as Maurice Blanchot asks, who is speaking in the works of Samuel Beckett? "Who is speaking here, then? Is it the author? But what can this title (*The Unnamable*) designate, if in any case the one writing is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself" (213) writes Blanchot in his insightful and yet to be surpassed essay on Beckett's works "Where now? Who now?" (210–217). Blanchot's noting of the demand that led him outside of himself pulls his understanding of Beckett's works agonizingly close to seeing—as it is argued here—that for Beckett language is the real, and perceptions are the other. However, that demand, for Blanchot, leads to the empty place "in which the listlessness of an empty speech speaks" (213). It seems for Blanchot that the demand is from an elsewhere, from an other to language—a who or what, maybe—that will create, or be, an empty place in which empty language itself resides. However, this is not a fully satisfying reading of Beckett, for in his works language itself is demanding for itself, and there is no place in which language resides—it is the ultimate, the real. Language is beyond place, the material. We cannot say language is, as to do so is to question and to assert its reality simultaneously. All we can say (is!), after Beckett's "I say I" (1959, 267), is language say language, or language language. Blanchot, too, is conscious of the disparity seen by Beckett in the crisis between the same and the other, the intelligible and the sensible. Yet he, crucially, misreads Beckett when he says that "the being without being …

with great difficulty regains a porous and agonizing I" (Blanchot 2003, 213), for what Blanchot sees as the being without being is for Beckett being (empty language), haunted and tormented by non-being (perceptions), being *with* non-being. Yet because he sees language not as the real but as subjected to a demand from some force beyond it, Beckett's thesis goes unacknowledged by Blanchot. The I which is regained or reclaimed in a porous and agonized state is not the I that is the real but is the I of non-being, the perceiver, we might say the deceiver, the corporeal. Blanchot's misreading of Beckett leads him to assume that there is a who, or a what, that is outside of language, making the demand when, for Beckett, the who is "it," i.e. language itself demanding of itself. Blanchot asks "What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears into it?" (2003, 210). By so doing he may leave himself open to accusations of ignoring the linguistic, but also, by misreading Beckett, of asking a philosophically related question that cannot be supported with evidence from Beckett's text. Blanchot's assumed void is not a void devoid of language, even if it becomes speech, and the questions of language raised throughout Beckett's works are utterly complex propositions that embrace the philosophical, the imaginative and the linguistic. Through all three they insist on exhaustively addressing the question that is central to Beckett's works.

We need to challenge Blanchot's assertion that the void becomes speech by arguing that in Beckett's works the void does not become speech, and that there is not or cannot be a void because the I who speaks in *The Unnamable* (and his other major works, *How It Is, Texts for Nothing, Worstward Ho*, etc.) is language itself, the real: "I'm in words, made of words … the place too, the air, the walls the floor, the ceiling, all words … I'm the air, the walls …" (Beckett 1959, 355). The I is in words and made of words, is preceded by words; the place—even the air—is all words, so a void outside of words, of language, is not contemplated because to Beckett originary language is the beginning. "I'm the air, the walls," and nothing precedes it. Language is the singular truth towards which, Beckett says, we go on. It is the "me who am everything (2010 17) … the voice that makes no sound" (18), language that is neither heard nor spoken because to be so would necessitate the use of the senses, whose existence to Beckett are always in doubt, always non-being (which is not a lapse into negative metaphysics), as we can see in the opening lines to part IV of *Texts for Nothing*: "Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had voice, who says this saying its me?" (2010, 17). Here it is language speaking, but speaking through the doubted corporeal, as it must, just as it does when the speaker in *The*

Unnamable says "I'm in words" (1959, 355). The frustration of language wanting to speak independently of the corporeal, but at the same time dependent on it, is obvious. Yet the certainty of the real as opposed to the doubted existence of the corporeal, non-being is stressed in "I'm not in his head, nowhere in his old body and yet I'm there" (2010, 17). Of equal significance, in relation to Blanchot's assertion on the void, is what appears to be a spirited riposte to that type of position where language, in response to the corporeal's feelings, insists: "And where he feels me void of existence it's of his he would have me void" (2003, 17). The corporeal, believing that all existence perceived through the senses would have empty language (language that makes neither sound nor meaning), stripped the senses definition of existence and condemned it to what s/he believes to be a void. But language's refutation, "and vice versa" (17), which would have the corporeal stripped of his/her existence, would leave the corporeal existing in the void, and language, stripped of the corporeal and all of the impediments that its sensory perceptions impose on language's liberty, free, not in the void at all, but as the real.

Beckett's art is built on a philosophical foundation—the question of the opposition between the intelligible and the sensible. He reconstructs Platonic thinking and applies it to the question of language, which he sees at the centre of the question of being. Unlike Derrida, who becomes imprisoned in the parity of status of the undecidable, he pursues the possibility of a real where the intelligible is fine-tuned to outweigh, but never dismiss, the perceptions of the sensible. When we ask who is speaking in the works of Samuel Beckett we are faced with the daunting possibility that language speaks, the possibility in which Beckett entrusts his faith, that language is being; perceptions, the real's great tormentor, because they can neither be proved to exist, or disproved, are non-being.

FILM: LET'S LOOK AT THE TEXT

Beckett's texts strive to remain faithful to the underlying philosophy that guides them, and this is also the case in the screenplay of *Film.* For this reason we need to be rigorous in reading what can often appear to be cryptic language lest we rush to apply our philosophy of choice, instead of Beckett's vision, to the work. Beckett's choice of language in the screenplay is no less measured or exact than in any of his other works. Therefore, to grasp the full significance of the work it is advisable to study the text of the screenplay in depth. Where Beckett, in his other major works, strives to establish the primacy of language over the unprovability of perceptions, in *Film* the focus is directed towards proving the unprovability of perception, and is concerned with the question of perception of the external or extraneous world, and self-perception. Language makes one brief appearance in the significant "ssh," of which more shall be said later.

The climate of the film, the screenplay tells us, is "comic and unreal," which is a strong suggestion of what is to follow: comic, possibly intended to amuse but also, in conjunction with "unreal," to create a setting that subverts rather than affirms the credulity of the actions in *Film*. Beckett's choice of the term "unreal" in the screenplay is significant, as it emphasizes why it is to the screenplay rather than to the film "proper" that this chapter will direct its focus, the obvious reason being to savour Beckett's choice of language, which in turn reveals his philosophy. The climate may be unreal but the actions in *Film* proceed in seriousness, for they are the actions of the perceiver trying to make sense of the perceived world from within the perceived world. The world in *Film* is the world of the perceived and is set in a climate of unreality, but the actions therein are believed to be real to the characters, E and O.

So what is going on in *Film*? Does George Berkeley's maxim *esse est percipi*—"to be is to be perceived"—act as some kind of philosophical guideline within which *Film* proceeds, or does Beckett interpret it creatively, even ironically? A little of each seems to be the answer. Beckett is certainly possessed of the relationship of perception to reality, as is Berkeley. But where Berkeley "denies the existence of that which philosophers call matter, or corporeal substance" (Berkeley 1988, 65), Beckett will only go as far as doubting its existence, as we see from part of

another cryptic sentence from the opening page of *The Unnamable*: "The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak …" (Beckett 1959, 267). Beckett's philosophy—that language as the real is privileged over the perceptions which are doubted—is clear, but unlike Berkeley he does not deny the existence of "facts" or "things," or as he says later in that long sentence: "I forget, no matter," which may be taken as a refutation of Berkeley's maxim on the non-existence of matter. Rather than guide or inspire, *esse est percipi* may be taken as an introduction to the theme of *Film*, which is perception.

This chapter will argue that the subject matter of *Film* is the questioning of perception by itself, i.e. by self-perception. It may be seen as a chapter in Beckett's philosophical thesis, one that seeks to isolate perception from the real, from language, and to exhaust all the avenues of possibility that could lead to definitive proof of the perceived to be the real. This is argued in spite of the references to the "search of non-being" (Beckett 1986, 323) and that "Self-perception maintains in being" (323) in the screenplay, which would seem to argue that *Film* is about the search for non-being by being. I do not think that anywhere in his works is Beckett involved in the search for non-being, or in the escape from being (Critchley 2009, 9); he is driven to prove the truth, that empty language is the real, and to break free, to escape from the impediment which makes it impossible to reach, or go on to the truth, it being the actions of the senses of the corporeal that perceive, and whose existence, and therefore whose findings, can never be independently verified. This argument can be sustained through closer scrutiny of the relevant passages in the screenplay. The search is not *for* non-being, and the passage reads "Search *of* non-being in flight from extraneous perception" (Beckett 1986, 323), which may read as the search of that which cannot be disassociated from being, that from which being cannot extract itself, i.e. the corporeal and its inability to escape the act or process of perceiving. This search of non-beings in flight from extraneous perception, helped by an eye-patch over his left eye, cannot succeed because he is perception itself, or at least represents the consciousness of perception in the process of rejecting extraneous perception as it moves towards self-perception. He may flee from extraneous perception but this flight heightens his consciousness, thus driving him towards self-perception.

If we read the corporeal as that which is part of what is perceived through the senses and is, therefore, non-being, are we not leaving Beckett open to the charge of negative metaphysicist? Surely, the negative of being is non-being, it can be argued? It is indeed, if we look at being and non-

being as the dominant and subordinate poles of a binary opposition, but that is not the case in the works of Samuel Beckett, and explicitly not so in *Film*. Non-being is, as has been said, that from which being cannot disassociate itself, that which adheres to being though not being itself. If we look closely at the passage which mentions being we can justify this claim. It states "self-perception is maintained, kept in existence *in* being," and therefore a parasite on being, though not of being but separable from being itself. The passage makes it clear that self-perception is not being, it merely maintains, exists in, and depends upon being for its doubted state of existence. The search *of* non-being is the search of human perception by human perception in its state of rising consciousness; its rejection of things perceived externally leads it to self-perception, which is as far as it can go, as we see at the end where O (object), who represents the process that takes consciousness from extraneous to self-perception, is left redundant and slumps head in hands into his chair. The protagonist has moved from extraneous to self-perception, as the slumped body of O suggests, so the focus is now on self-perception. But self-perception is not a release from perception; quite the opposite, it is an intensification of the process and cannot be otherwise, bringing perception to its deepest level, the point from which it can go no further. That which maintains in being, self-perception, is perception perceiving *itself*, perceiving perception. It is the non-being parasite in being which, because it is non-being, cannot be, which seems to be stating the obvious. Yet the obvious can present the reader with the considerable problem of coming to terms with Beckett's proposition—that what we perceive ourselves to be is not being but that which haunts being.

The great crisis, the question that runs through Beckett's key works, also emerges in *Film*, i.e. language is the real but is haunted and tormented by that which will neither disappear or be proved to exist, that which is perceived by and through the senses. Nowhere else in his works is Beckett's proposition on the nature of non-being, the "Search *of* non-being in flight from extraneous perception," explained with such brevity and so coherently. Or so it seems, until we read on to Beckett's strategy of proceeding "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered or sooner or later?" (1959, 267). The negation comes in the next paragraph: "No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience" (1986, 323), which will completely throw us if we insist on remaining within the realm of concepts and meaning. How, we may ask, can such a cogently expressed philosophical proposition be dismissed as having no truth value, in the next breath, so to speak? Surely it leaves Beckett's work open to the charge of being absurd? Forensic

reading of the texts will reveal his philosophy which, in turn, will explain what are often misread as absurd contradictions therein. Beckett's philosophy, the belief that language is the real that is haunted by perceptions, is inseparable from his texts. His quest is to prove that reality and to distinguish it from perceptions which cannot be either proved or disproved. His definitive instructions that "all extraneous perceptions [be] suppressed (and) self-perception maintains in being," however, bring the text away from language and relate it to perceptions and concepts "extraneous" to language, i.e. suppressed and self-perceptions. The brusque command affirms, without suggestion of doubt, the reality of perceptions, clearly in defiance of Beckett's philosophical belief. The affirmation is negated in "No truth value attaches to above" (323), but also, importantly, it is of "merely structural and dramatic convenience" (323), i.e. the temporary nod to the "reality" of perceptions is affirmed merely to facilitate the narrative. Beckett, in *The Unnamable*, will not go beyond language to tell the narrative. The novel closes with the narrator at "the threshold of my story before the door that opens on my own story, that would surprise me, if it opens?" (1959, 382), the same door whose existence he doubts "it's I now at the door, what door" (381). In *Film* he puts the focus, as has been said, on the incredulity of perceptions; he stresses the distrust of that on which the narrative is built. The emphasis on always-doubted perceptions, however, cannot escape the presence of being. Language is being, language that is "all words, there's nothing else" (381), though it can never be more than an aspiration, the to come of the unpresentable presence, that is beyond experiencing in the existential world. Beckett's point that the relationship between the real and the perceived is an imbalance that is weighted in favour of language being the real. We must also remember that Beckett proceeds by affirmations and negations "invalidated as uttered." That imbalance is revealed to us in a startling way in the phrase "no truth value attached to above" which, rather than being an absurd negation for negation's sake, releases the previous instruction from what appears to be a unity of word and perception, of signifier and signified. Any supposition that *Film* is about to embark on some kind of narrative journey involving a struggle between credulous extraneous and self-perceptions is immediately dispelled by the qualification. The door is closed to the possibility that can lead to the unacceptable reification of perceptions. Perceptions do not have a credible future in the works of Samuel Beckett. To continue a narrative involving belief in the existence of that which can be perceived would undermine his philosophy; perceptions must be let wither on the vine so to speak, condemned to the void.

If Beckett's negation "no truth value attaches to above" closes the door on proceeding towards a narrative, it opens to an infinitely exciting possibility—the possibility of the real, of language freed from meaning. This is the possibility that Andrew Gibson says "Beckett edges towards" (Gibson 2006, 133). This revelation in the passage—we might call it an event—confronts the notion that Beckett's text disappears into a void of nothingness. Even Maurice Blanchot's more enlightened misreading that "the void … becomes speech" (Blanchot 2003 210), claiming that there is a void of nothingness out of which speech "becomes," is fundamentally at odds with Beckett's thinking on the void. If language is the real it cannot be located in or "become" from, it merely is, without question (see chapter 5). Beckett's philosophy is magnificently encapsulated in the passage from *Film*, to which I here refer. Beckett does not merely affirm and negate, but both affirmations and negations are invalidated as uttered, thus stripping language of association to meaning yet showing it to continue in existence.

If we ask what is being affirmed, in the first instance the answer may be the perception of extraneous *and* self-perceptions, but we must remember that affirmation is simultaneously negated, "invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later" (1959, 267). There is no value in the claim of affirmation of perceptions because the claim of truth that is attached to them has been invalidated, which gives us license to state, categorically, that because we cannot in truth claim that the perceived for certain exists it is not part of being, the real. What then of negations—what, firstly, is being negated? That which is being negated may be the truth value in the affirmation of perception which could suggest that the perceived does not exist. Could this negation be construed as a descent into negative metaphysics? If it were it would imply denial of the existence of the perceived, but that is not what is happening here because the negation is invalidated, as is the affirmation in the first instance. Does this mean, then, that the perceived can now be argued to exist? Not at all. Just as the invalidation of the affirmation undermines the certainty implied therein so does the invalidation of the negation undermine any desire to claim absolute non-existence of the perceived. That which is being affirmed through the affirmations, negations and invalidations is the status of perceptions, which runs through Beckett's works, that are neither provable nor unprovable, not *of* being but those which maintain *in* being. The search of non-being confirms it as non-being. No truth value can be attached to the passage in the screenplay because it is the perceptions of the narrator/director, gathered through the five senses of the corporeal and "uttered sooner or later" (267) through the sense of touch in writing and presumably of speech on the set of the film. As perceptions are of non-

being they cannot verify any truth, only being can—so why does Beckett include them in his text? Does his "structural and dramatic convenience" fully explain the extent of his art?

By going away from the text to the world of perceptions, seemingly without qualification, in the two paragraphs under discussion Beckett could be seen to lapse into a narrative that would verify their reality. Because *Film* is primarily involved in showing that perceptions are non-being they need to be shown to be incapable of going on, as language can, interminably; they remain stuck in some kind of aporetic limbo; the highest state they can reach is not an understanding of reality but perception of the self by the self, perception of the senses by the perceiving senses. This inevitably calls into question the relationship between language and perceptions; the reality status of both extraneous and self-perceptions are re-presented in words in the screenplay of *Film*. If we accept Beckett's thesis that the existence of perceptions can neither be proved nor disproved then we need to ask what precisely—and can we actually say precisely?—does the language represent? Is the word re-present a misnomer? Can something that is not a clear stable presence be re-presented, or even presented and vested with what we call meaning, in any instance? For Beckett the answer is "no" to all of the above questions. No truth value attaches, not only to the possibility of the being of perceptions but also to the claim to mean the language that purports to re-present them. The structural process in the passage, when put under scrutiny, is shown to de-structure the structure (which is more than deconstruction—deconstruction implies a narrative in the perceived world outside of the text, which the text subverts). The truth value of the perceptions is invalidated; any and all claims of their non-being, or of extraneous perceptions or self-perception's inescapability, are relieved of a relationship to truth, or so it could seem if we did not continue to apply, as we must, Beckett's prescribed rule of proceeding "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" to the rider of the screenplay's direction. When we do (apply it), the implied meaning in the rider itself is diffused.

The stern rebuke of any claim to truth in the previous paragraphs is now directed to itself. The truth value of an edict that purports to affirm truth value is itself negated and both are invalidated as the edict is uttered. The relationship between language and perception is shown to be tenuous. Language cannot truthfully represent perception that is in such a state of confusion. We need to ask whether this means there is no truth *per se*. First, we must look more closely at what is happening in the breakdown of the assumption of re-presentation in the relationship between language and perception. That which is perceived by the senses of the corporeal,