

Beckett and the Temptation of Solipsism 'Esse est aut percipere aut percipi'

Ileana Marculescu

Of all philosophical positions and forms of speculation known to mankind, solipsism is perhaps the most extreme and paradoxical. The remarkable thing about affirming the existence of the *solus ipse* as the only known and testable instance and source of existence for the universe is that this affirmation seems to be reached as an extreme logical conclusion of both idealism and empiricism, two otherwise irreconcilable doctrines of thought.

There are few, if any, consistent doctrinaire solipsists in the Western tradition (while they literally abound in Eastern philosophical systems). The best known instances of solipsistic talk (not always accepted as such) are given by George Berkeley and, closer to our days, by Husserl and Wittgenstein. While Beckett is certainly not indebted to the last two (at least not in this respect), he owes much both to some logical persuasions, and to Berkeley. Berkeley, in his turn, owed a lot to Locke's description of ideas and even to Hume's relational concept of matter. Unlike Locke, however, the Bishop of Cloyne flatly denied the existence of a material substance. "All I can do," he wrote, "is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them existing out of the minds of all spirits."¹

Few thinkers, writers and ordinary men resonate with the idea of solipsism to the point of, say, enjoying its inner attraction/repulsion, consistency/inconsistency. Among them Samuel Johnson, in a letter to Berkeley, confessed: "The reading of your books has almost convinced me that matter as it has been commonly defined for an unknown Quiddity is but a mere non-entity. That it is a strong presumption against the existence of it, that there never could be conceived any manner of connection between it and our ideas. That the *esse* of things is only their *percipi*..."²

The laconic dictum, '*esse est aut percipi aut percipere*,' which summarises the impossible central solipsistic position, without properly enlisting adherents in the Western hemisphere, nevertheless haunted several powerful and critical minds, among whom Fichte, Wittgenstein, and Husserl, let alone Husserl's, progeny: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. None of these philosophers succumbed to the temptation of absolute, mad, yet contrary-to-fact consistency, more than for a fleeting moment. Solipsism as qualifier is, in philosophical parlance, an insult, and even the suspicion of flirting with it stigmatises one with ignominious guilt.³ As a consequence, a philosopher contaminated by it, however slightly, will retreat into philosophically more sound positions by trying to deploy his own kind of realism, phenomenological (*cum corpore, cum conscientia*), transcendental, communicational, empirical, dialectic, scholastic, etc.

Not so with Beckett who, fortunately, not being a philosopher, can therefore experiment with the dangerous central dictum of solipsism at will.

But if philosophical solipsism is no more than a provisional, ephemeral, almost fictional stage in the development of an argument, it appears in Beckett's work as one of the leitmotifs that lend

his artistic construct the indelible emblem of an impossible wager. A singular rhetoric will betray this obsession, a rhetoric of the first person singular (sometimes plural), —soliloquy.

Film—a metaphysical visual joke about perceiving and being perceived, and therefore, being thrust into being without one's consent—operates no longer upon the Cartesian split of mind and body, but on the more sophisticated one between the Transcendental Ego and the constituted self.

The aporia in *Film* consists actually in the unbearable of “being perceived” (*percipi*)—presumably by oneself, but the perfect neutrality and admissibility of “*percipere*,” e.g., the room as perceived by O, is normally perceived, described as bearable. It is the perceivedness of O by E which is agonizingly painful, this very form of *inspectio sui à la Geulincx*. The split in film might also be expressed as one between the for—and the in—itself, in Sartrean terminology; then it will be the fear of reification leading to the pathological flight of the subject in front of the camera. The camera is objectifying, casting, constituting Buster Keaton in being—an image. It makes visible, it sustains in being, it “creates”; but that may be a secondary, “evil” creation, and the character has our sympathy in trying to escape the camera. It is an evil voyeur engaged in an eternal pursuit of its “object,” by violently “bracketing” that object's individuality, subjectivity, inner privacy, soul.

Philosophically, Beckett's descent stems from Descartes, although there are quite a few important allusions to Greek and medieval philosophy scattered in his work; but as far as the subjectivistic close-in is concerned, one cannot go further in time than Sr. du Perro, who appears as master-model already in the early poem, *Whoroscope*.

The Cartesian track has been explored exhaustively, in all its implications, especially in Morot-Sir's “Beckett and the Cartesian emblems,”⁴ My contention is that from *Murphy* on—and *Murphy* is acknowledged as both a prototype for future incarnations and as a Cartesian hybrid (not to say Centaur, or chimera),—the Cartesian ontology is refracted through Occasionalism, mainly that of Geulincx, according to whom the “*Cogito*” is an assertion of powerlessness associated with an incessant and painful introspection; the ego, unlike the Cartesian subject of “*cogitationes*,” is at best an occasion for, and not an underlying substructure of, thinking. Geulincx spills out treasuries of ratiocination only to prove in the end the spirit's impotency of probing into the abyss of matter and of itself. Occasionalism, while acutely aware of the Cartesian problematic, is also convinced of its insolubility and has indefatigably, obsessively insisted, for years, as in a hopeless waiting (Simone Weil), on incomprehensibility and its correlate, the miracles, in the universe. Beckett's moods, even in *Murphy*, but certainly more so in *Watt*, sound infinitely more akin to the agnosticism and pessimism of a Geulincx than to Descartes's apodictic certainties, purely Cartesian. But even *Murphy*, once his conarium (pineal gland) is reduced to zero through ascetic practices, allows himself to be “kicked,” both in intellectu and in re, and is therefore shaken off his solipsistic posture.

Another pillar of Beckett's solipsism seems to arise from his artistic minimalism which directly leads to the last, minimal, and actually non-reducible, residue of all subjectivity: the ego.

At the risk of appearing pedantic and of projecting a favorite grid upon the reading of Beckett, I would advance that he operates in his work one of the most thoroughgoing phenomenological

reductions. His aporetic, the systematic deconstruction of language and of meaning, but especially that of reference, is akin to the tedious and sometimes outright inexplicable steps of the Husserlian *epoché*, as well as to a ladder of successive purifications in any genuine mystical system, e.g., that of Advaita Vedanta. This is not to say, however, that Beckett is intent upon reductions or purifications in a teleological way, with a purpose of gaining anything—certainty, salvation, heaven or hell. Phenomenological reduction comes spontaneously to the artist in quest of essences, of simplicity and, in turn, it yields pure formal translucency. By uncluttering the natural landscape, the artist arrives at bare figures and scarce colors; successive eliminations, far from hurting the mysterious meanings, let them shine through. Sometimes the illumination is produced by baring the descriptions, speeches and stories of all their elemental components and leaving intact their genitor: the “I” that speaks. That way, the Universe will appear as vanishing or be kept in being by a mouth, traversed by a verb or two, which even then seems to transcend its power of generation. Credibility in the evanescent structures of the universe borrows its evocative strength from the ego that gives it intention and intentionality, direction and vectoriality. Outside the “I” that we can vaguely guess behind, the enfeebled syntactic and semantic game little prods us to pay attention: an I, seldom a we. Sometimes only fleeting images which, we know for sure, are shreds of memories, imaginative rags; yet somebody’s. Moreover, this asymptotic pole of the artistically suspended universe tends constantly to negate itself: isn’t that the only way to silence the whole, the “blooming, buzzing confusion,” to annihilate at last Being.

Solipsism might be stirred up by the existential anguish which Heidegger expressed in quite classical fashion: “Anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as *solus ipse*. But this existential ‘solipsism’ is so far from the displacement of putting an isolated subject-thing into the innocuous emptiness of wordless occurring, that in an extreme case what it does is precisely to bring Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus bring it face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world.”⁵ One step beyond that, however, the attempt to supersede anguish brings about the nihilation of the ego itself. This is, it seems to me, the deeper sense of Beckett’s mysterious play with the: “not-I”—a repeated negative—which exorcises anguish, as in the mouth of Mouth, in *Not I*, where the “battle of the soliloquy” was won, according to Beckett’s own expression in *Mercier et Camier*. The same juggling with “I/not-I” pointing both to the ultimate instance in constitution of the universe of discourse and to its cancellation, is to be found in the *Unnamable*, where a constant irony about, and rejection of, the I are exhibited: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Question, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.” And a little further: “I did nothing. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.”⁶ “Ah yes, all lies, God and man, nature and the light of day, the heart’s outpourings and the means of understanding, all invented, basely, by me alone, with the help of no one, since there is no one, to put off the hour when I must speak of me. There will be no more about them.”⁷

To transcend the state of solipsism, the *solus ipse* must be killed or just bracketted. In *Company* the situation obviously obtains: a super-instance—the Voice—addresses the character in the dark, describing his spatiotemporal coordinates. But the whole is an act of the imagination. Quick, hushed silence is required in the mysteriousness of the process. One could say that the Voice is the Transcendental Ego, absolutely impersonal, addressing a third, an alter Ego. The emergence of any third appears as highly improbable—in any event, exceedingly difficult.

There are two: the Voice and the one, whose reference frame is spelled out by the Voice and whose mind is passive to the point of not even reaching to the Voice. The voice recites the litany of the little boy, and of his mother, hand-in-hand in the Irish—presumably—landscape. The voice speaks of the blue of the sky, and of the day when the other saw the day, and of the father's regrets about it, themes familiar from *Texts for Nothing*, *Fizzles*, and other opuscles. But in *Company*, a subtle advance takes place, which, one could say, is the investigation of the need not to be the only one left in the world inventing the voice and the hearer and himself. "Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. Leave it at that. He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of himself as of another. Himself he devises too for company. Leave it at that. Confusion too is company up to a point."⁸ *Company* offers in a nutshell the most extreme, and extremely advanced, modern literary shape of solipsism together with Beckett's central "*trouvaille*," a philosophical one, if anything, about the necessity, the duty even, to live with and within the "mess" (*le gâchis*). The piece is about loneliness (and sole-ness too), a loneliness engendering another loneliness, in order to dispell loneliness, an Ego generating an After Ego and another, and so on up to the genesis of the "blooming buzzing confusion" of the world as the end of any alterity. The vast parable of solitude grows into hyperbole when the comic overtones start taking over. What could possibly "enhance company"? Within this feverish activity, led by the author since centuries, is that of "The conjuring of something out of nothing,"⁹ a voice, even one's own, perceived as not one's own, a different voice received as mysteriously different, imagination, confabulation, even prayer-with a slight shade of self-mockery: the black (of darkness) apt at keeping company, some shades at least, some postures more capable than others. But which ones? Some locomotion modalities, although they too might remain unidentified, apparently because they might foster some possibilities of meeting. Whom? A dead rat, for example. Fine example of company: long ago a dead rat!

In the impossibilities to fight loneliness coupled with the need for company, Beckett touches on his usual aporia at a most delicate point of the phenomenological balance. The "I" that speaks is obviously alone; at the same time, in the mode of its constituting the world in imagination, it must seek the company of others, of an other at least. The first such to be taken seriously is the body: in its "spectral bone-whiteness," it is the first real companion to the "I." The others, as we have seen, are possibly aural phenomena, not far from the hallucinatory, the voices any poet hears, emanating from behind one's own, or from within, but nonetheless pure, disembodied. Finally, there are the even less real, sometimes mock companions, like the vanishing woman in *Company* (which, by the way, seems to carry the mood obverse to that of the woman in *Premier Amour*),¹⁰ the sea, or the tide, the dead rat, etc.

This concrete literary experience in solipsism is floating amidst a sea of pessimistic if not outright nihilistic moral connotations. Obviously, meditating on the evils of mankind, one may emerge as a solipsist—a pathway current in Oriental metaphysics. The idea that every other is a projection of self transcends, however, the implicit moral meditation and takes one abruptly into a hard-to-accept ontological statement. But Beckett had anticipated this aporetic demonstration through symbols much earlier, in the poem "Echo's Bones,"¹¹ in *Murphy*, and *Watt*. Only a reader capable of accepting this progression or regression of thought from search of sole-ness to its less-than-conditional final assertion can take an opus like *Company* at all seriously. Yet

Company, along with the stress on the counterfactual of absolute solitude, paradoxically populates the world of the writer and the reader with innumerable phantoms, all results of the fantasmagoric capacity of the I to proliferate and create more similes to one's own self. Modern solipsism, in shifting emphasis from everyday experience and the man in the street to an "author in search of characters" or of subject-matter, proves undeniably subtler, more elusive but also more "realistic," if this word be permitted now, than the classical one. It is a solipsism of language and meanings, not one of being and knowledge.¹²

But why speak of solipsism? Isn't loneliness sufficient as a critical category? The Paradox of solipsism exhibits almost literally the same shape as that of Beckett's ultimate and most profoundly stated aporia: impossible, therefore, unavoidable. I can't, I shall. It is impossible to think of myself as the sole source of being, yet this is inescapably true for the poetic universe, the only one delivered by the writer, anyway; and it is rigorously correct, both experientially and logically. Thus the absurd lies at the core of Beckett's dramaticules, not as sheer non sequiturs, nonsense and flat denials of meaning, but as the logical paradox which moves the writing hand out of its inertia. What logic and reflection affirm, ordinary experience is sure to deny, if we accept Locke's rambling thought that "the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object than its own ideas, which alone it can contemplate,"¹³ we must also admit as evident "that our knowledge is only conversant about them."¹⁴ It appears thus that the possibility of a would-be pragmatic solipsism is at the very roots of modern philosophy, and not at all a post-modern contraption. It is true, however, that the wager of transmogrification of an abstract epistemological argument into the stuff of prose, drama and poetry was won by Beckett, our contemporary, with far-reaching consequences for the notion of art itself. I mean solely that Beckett stands at the frontier between the minimalist experiment and its self-cancellation altogether.

Thus, the crave is for a real close-in, and then again for an expansion to the size of the universe as if the skull, once folded in upon itself in deep reverie or reflection, could then, at will, produce or reproduce the whole universe. A passage from *The End* mimics that: "The sea, the sky, the mountains, and the islands closed-in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space."¹⁵

So the roots of Beckett's solipsism are in classical British philosophy, although not exclusively there. Here is also his skepticism equal in power and stringency to that of a Nagarjuna or Sextus Empiricus. Beckett's pessimism is of Buddhic intensity, whether acquired indirectly through Schopenhauer,¹⁶ or independently. Beckett's version of cosmic pessimism is couple with an abhorrence of Self and the sheer mystical bent to destroy Self whenever feasible. The solipsist character par excellence, Murphy, who is also the prototype for all future "egological" characters in Beckett's prose, sleeps well, the first in along time, when he succeeds in conferring upon the self he hates, the aspect even to Ticklepenny's expert eyes, of real alienation.¹⁷

Another concomitant or perhaps mandatory correlate of solipsism is Beckett's minimalism, which I would characterise as the conscious progression, in his art, towards, experiencing the minimal structures still able to account for an aesthetic effect. In this perspective, the *solus ipse* (in the act of writing) emerges as a minimal, vestigial structure, a bedrock source of difference,

the last irreducible residue (of subjectivity) out of which the universe—dilated or contracted at will—can be engendered.

Similarities between Beckett's progressive simplification of the world and the phenomenological reduction have been pointed out by Hesla,¹⁸ and others; it is a procedure he shares with many of the artists in the abstract expressionist tradition. Yet none of these artists has eliminated the outer world or deconstructed so systematically every objective meaning. "Beckett climbs one more rung in the ascetic ladder" as Jean-Louis Mayoux aptly remarked.¹⁹ The parallel with Husserl, requirement for his *epoché* is striking indeed.

Each time Beckett stages pure voices, void discourses, rather than polyphonic narratives and descriptive paragraphs, it seems *bel et bien* that it is the Transcendental Ego who speaks, who constitutes himself a body, (mostly a mutilated one), then some kind of persona whom he immediately addresses in the second person, then—why not?—a whole bunch of Alter Egos—the Murphys, the Molloys, the Malones, the Watts, and Worms, and Mahoods, and Macmanns, a whole intersubjective community of monads as Husserl would call it. All this, however, only to retreat once more into the inaccessible Jar of the Unnamable, or a primordial Womb, Skull, or Tent; yet no sooner is the word "monad" uttered—whether Leibnizian, without window, or phenomenological, somewhat more open to communication, than we are relapsing into the world of absolute closedness, self-containment and self-sufficiency of solipsism. Beckett's world is a rather unique combination of static and dynamic in the metaphor of the skull, a "hollow sphere hermetically closed to the world without,"²⁰ and the "inside of my distant skull where once I wandered, now I am fixed, lost for tininess or straining against the walls,"²¹ as the Unnamable would have it.

The padded self, like the hollow sphere or the empty chambers, the huts, the caves and the cabins, or, more archetypally, the caskets, are all privileged places that release the imagination and hence the creative power to produce or to annihilate the world. This is the case in *Endgame*.

In *Watt*, the Kafkian incident of the piano-tuners, the Galls—father and son—as related by Watt, takes on the value of a symbol for a solipsistic and apriori constitution of meaning. After the younger piano-tuner declares the piano doomed, and they both depart, the narrator starts wondering why the incident did not die in Watt's mind but "continued to unfold, in Watt's head, from beginning to end, over and over again, till it developed a purely plastic content, and gradually lost in the nice processes of its light, its sound, its impacts and its rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal."²² Whatever had happened that day, "the scene in the music-room, with the two Galls, ceased very soon to signify for Watt a piano tuned, an obscure family and professional relation, an exchange of judgments more or less intelligible, and so on, if indeed it had ever signified such things, and became a mere example of light commenting bodies and stillness motion, and silence sound, and comment comment."²³ The passage suggests the filmic constitution of a perceptual noema where some allowance is still made for comment on comment" but what a definitely artistic, uninvolved point-of-view, that of the mind that entertains perceptions and "percepi," the type of mind that in *Film* constituted the whole chase of the "I" in rapid, and less rapid, motion.

This “fragility of outer meanings” discovered by Watt passes further into no meanings whatsoever, into the very annulment of the pursuit for meaning. The incident of the Galls which was converted into images “rather belonging to some story heard long before, an instant in the life of another, ill told, ill heard, and more than half forgotten”²⁴ plays in the narrative the miraculous role of abolishing, for Watt, all possibility of the pre-existence of any “outer meanings” altogether, even of objective correlates of meanings, simultaneously with the occurrence of events, or the encountering of objects.

Watt is a drama of “Surds,” of utter incommensurability: of Watt to his task; of Knott to his image; of language to feeling; of emotion to reality. No wonder it ends up, for Watt at least, in the paraphrastic distortion of his language, a total glossolalic effect. It is true that in the end, all the incredible inversions in Watt’s speech are straightened out, deciphered, made sense of. But what of Mr. Knott, the master and endgoal of Watt’s pilgrimage? Was he discovered? Seen? Understood? Did he succeed in taking away Watt’s doubts, down-to-earth habits, empirical convictions, changing him in any way? Well, in this universe of total ‘surds,’ “Mr. Knott needing nothing, if not, one, not to need, and two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing, And so, he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease....”²⁵ Actually, to make things more comical, Mr. Knott needs to be witnessed permanently, that is why he is careful to keep two valets, one on the going, one on the coming, lest he be faced with extinction by not being watched. This is the supreme irony directed by Beckett against the very Berkeleyan emblem of solipsism, as there are other ironic treatments of the Leibnizian monadology. The wager of solipsism which, at times, looks sterner and more earnest than, say, Tertullian’s paradoxes, Kierkegaard’s fear and trembling, or Pascal’s emotional wager of faith, takes on definitely the hue of a literary jocular device, being saved thereby from physical impossibility and ridicule.

Telling as these stratagems and devices are in Beckett’s art, it would be preposterous to try to inflate his flickering meditations to the size of a philosophical self-conscious thesis, or to dissolve his work into a mosaic of metaphors each of them signifying a philosophical dilemma, an argument, or a counter-argument. Solipsism is not really thematized by Beckett, but only lightly touched upon, toyed with, and, in the end, deconstructed as surely as any other, formal or informal, intellectual proposition that occurs to him; the term “solipsistic” itself appears in the texts qualified in ironic or even oxymoronic ways: “seedy” (Murphy), “peripatetic” (Belacqua), “in love” (*First Love*), etc.²⁶ But even as it becomes more qualified, it is negated as such, i.e., text as the willy-nilly accompaniment of the drive to think (along with the impossibility to think) over one’s lived experience, as the trace (grammé-Derrida) and/or an allusion to it, never as the thing-itself, humor pulverizing everything, even the hardest of philosophical dilemma, into a shining cloud of stardust.

NOTES

1. G. Berkeley, *Principal Dialogues and Philosophical Correspondence*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), p. 145.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

3. Indicative of this stigma is the curious fact that in a 340-page book, *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Colin Turbayne (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), the word “solipsism” does not occur even once; “solitary man” is mentioned, however, as the 17th-century image from which Berkeley tended to deviate toward a philosophy of action of sorts.
4. Edouard Morot-Sir, “Samuel Beckett and Cartesian Emblems,” in *Samuel Beckett. The Art of Rhetoric*, eds. Edouard Morot-Sir, Howard Harper, and Dougald McMillan III. North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, Symposium no. 5 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1976).
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 233.
6. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 291.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
8. *Company*, (London: John Calder, 1980), p. 740.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
10. In *Premier Amour* the mood was toward a “monadic” relationship to life, in Peirce’s terms, a pure beatitude of sound, color, with almost no “shock of individuation.” In *Compagnie*, it seems that Beckett really won the “battle of the soliloquy” of which he used to speak in *Mercier et Camier*.
11. Clearly, there is early talk of the skull, and prefiguration of the close-in universe, while the “I” sees itself as *The Vulture*: “dragging his hunger through the sky of my skull / shell of sky and earth,” “The Vulture,” in *Poems in English By Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 21.
12. A. D. Nuttal in *A Common Sky: Philosophy and Literary Imagination* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), gives the following elaborate classification of solipsistic devices met in literature: intermittent, epistemological, methodological, communicational, of meaning, and doctrinaire. While Wittgenstein and Husserl are evidently of the “doctrinaire” type, they also tend to back off its ultimate consequences. Hume, Bradley, Wordsworth and Eliot are said to have created fancy chimeras, centaurs out of sheer solipsistic fear or unease.
13. John Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (reprint of the 5th edition), J. W. Yolton, ed., (New York and London, 1961), vol. 1, p. 23.
14. *Ibid.*

15. *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 72.
16. Schopenhauer, however, hated solipsism, and thought that all its representatives belonged in the nuthouse.
17. And in effect Murphy's night was good, perhaps the best since nights began so long ago to be bad, the reason being not so much that he had his chair again as that the self whom he loved had the aspect, even to Ticklepenny's inexpert eye, of real alienation. Or to put it perhaps more nicely "conferred that aspect on the self whom he hated." *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 194.
18. David Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).
19. Jean-Louis Mayoux, "Comment se tenir compagnie?" *Critique*, (402, 1981), pp. 1105-107.
20. *Murphy*, loc. cit., p. 107.
21. *The Unnamable*, loc. cit., p. 34.
22. *Watt*, loc. cit., p. 74.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
26. Eugene Kaelin has exhaustively listed all the instances where "solipsism" occurs in Beckett's work. See *The Unhappy Consciousness: The Poetic Plight of Samuel Beckett* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1981). Kaelin's thoroughness in phenomenological description and analysis is admirable; however, I cannot agree with his conclusion on p. 58 that, "sooner or later, (e.g. in the Stories) the solipsist will die." Like every philosophical posture, and structure of "nihilation" in Beckett's prose, solipsism is cyclically revived and obliterated, without ever disappearing as a metaphoric correlate of artistic creativity. The artistic drama unfolds exclusively within the confines of one's skull. And this is not, by any means, an impoverishment; let us not forget that, roughly speaking, the number of neurons in one fully-developed brain equals that of the stars in our galaxy.