

Beckett and Abstraction

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In a 1969 interview, twenty years after his celebrated Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit, Beckett claimed to have – “perhaps” – found an escape from the dilemma of mimetic representation: ‘I think perhaps I have freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I have turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction’. This chapter proposes to explore this philosophical notion of “the abstract” in Beckett’s work, both in relation to Kandinsky’s paintings, and as evolving out of Beckett’s realization of the role of perception in aesthetic experience. For Beckett, as for Kandinsky art presents, or makes manifest, what essentially has no equivalent in the objective world of phenomena. The implication of this is that the work of art no longer has to be, or even can be, a mimetic representation of reality. This “phenomenological approach to artistic production has been considered by Michel Henry with respect to Kandinsky; however, very little research exists relating to Beckett’s own project of phenomenological abstraction in the postwar fiction/drama. In approaching this subject, the present chapter argues that the object of artistic presentation need not, in Beckett’s philosophical rendering, exist independently of artistic perception; or as the 1964 Film has it (via Berkeley) ‘to be is to be perceived’.

This article explores Beckett's use of "abstraction." The concept of abstraction in Beckett's work has previously been considered by, to name only a few, Eric Tønning, who in *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama* delineates the complexity of Beckett's attitude to the concept; and by Pascale Casa-

nova who in *Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* introduces Beckett *l'abstracteur* to suggest that Beckett's decision to write about the impossibility of writing is a formalist solution to a technical problem.¹ However, the phenomenological aspect of his solution has been relatively little discussed. In the postmodern context, we use our minds to construct and reconstruct the world and ourselves. In other words, the world is mere appearance and identity has crumbled to pieces that can never make up a whole. Whatever identity we may construct is a bricolage in which no "presence" may endure. To Beckett, however, the mind's grasp of reality is inherently fictive and the very concept of meaning is therefore blurred. What is thematized in Beckett's abstractions is not "reality" but "irreality,"² that is, not the "truth" about reality represented in language, but the extent to which reality, as we perceive it, is frequently unintelligible, vague or unclear. To Beckett, abstraction is a methodological effort to overcome the problem of expression: a problem evolving out of the awareness of the role of perception in experience. More specifically, it is the thematization of experience and perception that allows Beckett's abstractions to appear. In effect, Beckett turns to abstraction as a "solution" to the problem of expression, well aware that the problem needs to be reformulated.

The problem of expression as it occurs in Beckett relates both to the problem of *mimesis* and to the spurious positing of the expression as a mediating entity between phenomena and the mind. Already in his 1934 review "Recent Irish Poetry," Beckett identifies a "rupture in the lines of communication" and suggests that "the artist who is aware of this may state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects ... as no-man's-land,

¹ See also Germaine Bree, "Beckett's Abstractors of Quintessence" (*The French Review*, 36 (1963), 572-6); Garin Dowd, *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy After Deleuze and Guattari* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007)

² The term "irreality" is here used in the sense introduced by Maurice Natanson in *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*. Drawing on Husserl's explication of eidetic intuition, Natanson refers to the manner in which the "reality" of the world appears to consciousness as "meant" only to suggest that these meanings are essentially fictive. What presents itself to consciousness in the natural attitude, does so "within what Husserl calls the 'irreality' of the world: the fictive universe of intentional consciousness, the world as meant". (*The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 20).

Hellespont or vacuum, according as he happens to be feeling resentful, nostalgic or merely depressed.”³ The problem of expression is here reformulated to concern not the problem of *mimesis*, not the identity of phenomena or meaning, but the meaning-making process itself.

Beckett’s “solution” has a formal as well as a methodological dimension – formal, because language as the medium of expression in itself is form, and methodological because it concerns the mode of presentation more than the object of perception. It is Beckett’s frustration with words that impels the effort to find a “solution” to the problem of expression. Although Beckett’s explicit desire “to create a literature of the unword” (*Disjecta*, 173) may be understood as a desire to do away with words as such, this contribution to *Beckett/Philosophy* will go on to suggest that it is, rather, the belief in language as a shaping force that is sought to be dethroned in Beckett’s fiction.⁴ “Paradoxically,” Beckett explains in an interview with Charles Juliet, “it is through form that the artist may find some kind of a way out. By giving form to formlessness.”⁵ The supreme task for the artist becomes, in Beckett’s view, “to find a form that accommodates the mess.”⁶

The term “abstract” generally refers to a concept derived from perception of the visible, concrete world. For example, the geometrical concept of a circle takes its departure from a tangible form in the world, i.e. a round thing. According to Michel Henry, “Mondrian’s or Malevich’s pure abstraction is precisely a geometrical abstraction, an abstraction which comes from

³ In the review “Recent Irish Poetry,” Beckett identifies “the breakdown of the object, whether current, historical, mythical or spook” as the “new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again,” Beckett wrote this review under the pseudonym Andrew Belis. It appeared first in *The Bookman* in 1934, but has subsequently been reprinted in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 70–76.

⁴ Admittedly, language, since Saussure, is not only words but also includes other signs, such as for example, body language.

⁵ Charles Juliet, *Conversations With Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, trans. Tracy Cooke, Axel Nesme, Janey Tucker, Morgaine Reinl and Aude Jeanson (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), 24.

⁶ Tom Driver, in “Columbia University Forum,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 219.

the world and gets its nature from the world while at the same time seeking to formulate its essence.”⁷ By contrast, the object of Kandinsky’s painting is not a concrete phenomenon of the world, but his own feelings.⁸ To Kandinsky, the abstract content which art seeks to express is invisible because “[t]rue reality is invisible, [and] our radical subjectivity is this reality” (Henry, 21). Kandinsky’s notion of the “abstract” therefore constitutes a break with traditional understandings of art by positing the abstract in the subjectively experienced, affective realm of life, rather than in opposition to the concrete world (Henry, 12-21).

Like Kandinsky, Beckett recognizes that what is given in experience is something completely different from concepts and ideas. In an interview with John Gruen, republished in *Vogue* in December 1969 following the award of the Nobel Prize, Beckett claims to “perhaps” having found a way to escape the dilemma of mimetic presentation:

I think perhaps I have freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I have turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction—not to give it yet another formal context.⁹

While Beckett sympathizes with Kandinsky’s project, he is also highly critical of its subjectivist stance: “[t]he problem with Kandinsky’s art for Beckett lies in what he sees as the painter’s incipient attempt to transcend the ‘rupture of the lines of communication’ between subject and object alto-

⁷ Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009), 21.

⁸ According to Henry, Kandinsky’s notion of the abstract grew out of the combined influence of the intense aesthetic experience of “seeing Monet’s haystacks at the 1896 Moscow exhibition,” and the lesson learned from reading Niels Bohr, namely, that “the physical reality has no substance and in some way no reality; quanta of energy move in leaps without crossing through it” (15).

⁹ Quoted in Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 126.

gether, leading him to a plane of fantasy.”¹⁰ Despite the fact that abstraction in Beckett’s work bears an affinity to the notion of the abstract in Kandinsky’s work – both grasp the role of perception in aesthetic experience and both emphasize the breakdown of the object – unlike Kandinsky, Beckett’s use of abstraction does not sustain belief in any kind of truth.

On the contrary, much of Beckett’s work suggests that the human condition is inexplicable: “[w]e cannot know and we cannot be known.”¹¹ For Beckett, “art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear” (*Disjecta*, 94). Clarity or intelligibility, therefore, either of perception or expression, seemingly, is not the aim of Beckett’s literary effort. In an interview with Tom Driver, Beckett speaks of an art that allows obscurity, suggesting that where ambiguity prevails art “is unexplainable, and there art raises questions that it does not attempt to answer” (Driver, 220).¹² However, in the light of Beckett’s literary use of abstraction, the emphasis on ambiguity should not be taken at face value. Highlighting ambiguity does not necessarily mean that a work is obscure and unintelligible. Rather, as Beckett’s own work testifies, ambiguity is as visible as any other phenomenon.

Beckett’s literary thematization of perception bears a strong similarity to the phenomenological investigation of human experience.¹³

The focus of the phenomenological attitude is to look *at* phenomena *as they appear to perception* from different angles, shades and aspects, in order to be able to see the manifold ways in which the phenomenon appears. The

¹⁰ Erik Tonning, *Samuel Beckett’s Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen, 1962–1985* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 67. The quotation is from *Disjecta*, 70.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, “*Proust*” and *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1999), 66.

¹² In the same interview with Tom Driver, Beckett contrasts the ambiguity of his work with the clarity found in the classical drama: “the destiny of Racine’s *Phèdre* is sealed from the beginning: she will proceed into the dark. As she goes, she herself will be illuminated. At the beginning of the play she has partial illumination and at the end she has complete illumination, but there has been no question that she moves toward the dark” (220).

¹³ “Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 2).

conviction that pervades the non-phenomenological or so-called “natural attitude” is “one of belief” (Sokolowski, 45). By contrast, the phenomenological attitude requires a suspension of belief. What is under scrutiny in the phenomenological attitude is *how* belief is constituted. Appearances, beliefs, practices, etc., are thematized and reflected on, not so as to deny them, but to clarify them. The thematization can be described as an “irrealization” or “reduction” (50) of the world of the natural attitude, which enables the phenomenologist “to preserve the reality of the thing itself [and] not turn the identity of the object into one of the ‘mere’ appearances” (50). Implicit in this view is also a questioning of the philosophical understanding of consciousness as internal to the mind and meaning as subjectively constituted. Meaning is not a phenomenon in the mind, whether in the artist’s or in the spectator’s, but appears as an identity in the manifold ways in which a phenomenon appears to be perceived.

Beckett was well acquainted with the tenets of phenomenology and already in 1938 he had read Husserl’s work *Ideas*, a work of “critical importance” to him.¹⁴ He was also aware of the work of contemporary phenomenological philosophers such as Sartre, whose work *The Psychology of Imagination* was published around the same time, and which also emphasized the role of perception as reinforcing the reality of phenomena as entities of the world rather than intrinsic to the subjective mind. It is with respect to the significance given to the many ways of appearing of phenomena and the thematization of perception that Beckett’s phenomenological attitude is most obvious. Essentially, it is this ‘phenomenological attitude’ that impels Beckett’s literary use of abstraction.

According to Matthew Feldman, Beckett’s writing underwent a “phenomenological turn” (Feldman, 14) starting with the post-war novel *Watt* and continuing throughout his career Beckett. In a manner similar to *Watt*, it seems that Beckett is not concerned with what a thing *is*, in reality, but with what it *appears to be*, in reality. Sitting at the train station, Watt perceives a figure in the distance, too far away for him to be able to really discern with clarity “what it was, coming along the road,” and whose approach Watt at first awaits impatiently, only to suddenly realize:

¹⁴ Matthew Feldman, *Beckett and Phenomenology* (London: Continuum, 2009), 17.

that it was not necessary, not at all necessary, that the figure should draw very near indeed, but that a moderate proximation would be more than sufficient. For Watt's concern, deep as it appeared, was not after all with what the figure was, in reality, but with what the figure appeared to be, in reality. For since when were Watt's concerns with what things were, in reality?¹⁵

The descriptions of Watt's "reality," in this case a vague perception of a distant figure, constitutes precisely what Beckett set out to find, namely a methodological solution within which to accommodate the chaotic and highly ambiguous and inexplicable aspects of being. In phenomenological philosophy, as in Beckett's literary abstractions, it is not the actual but the apparent that is at issue. Although not a philosopher, it would appear that Beckett owes a debt to phenomenology, both in terms of the understanding of perception and in terms of his use of abstraction as a methodological solution.

Essentially, Beckett's literary use of abstraction to thematize experience can be found in all of his writing. In all texts, there is a strong focus on the way things appear to be perceived by the characters. However, because of the limited scope of this article, I shall focus on one particular text that will serve as an example of Beckett's use of abstraction. The short story "One Evening" is a good illustration of Beckett's "phenomenological turn" and I have chosen to discuss one single text in greater depth instead of generalizing about several texts.

In "One Evening," an old woman's coming out at sunset is carefully crafted so as to describe what is given in experience – rendering both the "messy" quality of her perceptions and how these perceptions become tentatively meaningful to her, and to the reader. Coming out in search of yellow flowers, she stumbles on the body of a man lying spreadeagled on the ground: "He was found lying on the ground. No one had missed him. No one was looking for him. An old woman found him. To put it vaguely. It happened so long ago. She was straying in search of wild flowers. Yellow

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, edited by Édouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber, 2009), 196.

only. With no eyes but for these she stumbled on him lying there.”¹⁶ The woman’s experience of the world is a mixture of presence and absence – one where any actuality is consistently layered with many possible meanings, “[t]o put it vaguely” (119). The actual is thus only one contingent aspect within a temporal horizon of experience.

The event of the woman’s finding the man is described as “the shock of her foot against a body” (121). The narrative description of her experience reflects the way in which phenomena appear to her. The woman does not see the body lying on the ground but notices this “fact” only as she experiences the *shock of her foot against a body*. The description underlines the way in which phenomena appear to the natural attitude. The woman experiences her own foot, her own body. The body of another, the man lying there, only provides the context within which her own body “dys-appears” as an irksome presence.¹⁷ The woman’s perception of the man, then, grasps directly the meaning of the experience in a precise way; her own body comes to the foreground. The narrative description of the woman’s perception of the world constitutes a suspension or “bracketing” of the natural attitude, allowing the reader to see beyond the woman’s experience of her own body, to take in also the sunset, the flowers and the body of the man on the ground as the context within which her body appears.

Beckett’s focus on the world as experienced reveals a phenomenological structure immanent to the formulation of its “coming to givenness.”¹⁸ For example, the notion of identity is given as a structure that prevails be-

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, “One Evening,” in *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber, 2009), 119.

¹⁷ In *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Drew Leder convincingly argues that while “in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence” (1). However, although the body is absent from everyday performance of habitual acts, it nevertheless “dys-appears” when there occurs a disruption of sorts, as for example when a movement is dysfunctional or when we are in pain. The concept of “dys-appearance,” thus, refers to the thematization of the body in “times of dysfunction or problematic operation” (85).

¹⁸ The term “coming to givenness” should here be taken in the phenomenological sense, referring to the way in which the world presents itself, or appears, in and through perception.

yond the self's manifold ways of appearing. This can be seen in the way the woman's shadow "irks her. So much so that she turns to face the sun" (120). In order to escape the confusion of having "another" self, the old woman turns her face to the sunlight, trying to obliterate the irksome shadow which she cannot otherwise escape – similar to Buster Keaton's character in the *Berkeleyan Film*, scrabbling to avoid the camera – but she has to tread carefully because any movement away from the light means the obliteration of her transient freedom. Thus, she "moves with half-closed eyes as if drawn on into the glare," and "craves for sundown to end and to stray freely again" (121, 120). The thematization of presence means that the simple act of walking in the field at sunset stands out against the double background of self and non-self. However, more importantly, it reveals the woman's recognition of her own identity through the various appearances of self. Identity is here shown "beyond the dimension of appearances, as something presented through them all, and through other possible appearances as well" (Sokolowski, 30). The manifold appearances of "self" now allow the vagueness and ambiguity of identity to appear in a way that approximates the phenomenological suspension of belief in reality, in order to "distinguish the object from its appearances" (Sokolowski, 50). Although this does not mean that Beckett is conducting a phenomenological investigation into the structure of consciousness, the description of the woman's perception of self is a thematization *in abstracto* of the structure of experience.

What primarily concerns Beckett is not that "reality" is being misrepresented in literature, but that "reality," as it appears in perception, and as it is conveyed via language, is perceived in a state of utter confusion: "The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of" (Driver, 218). The problem of presentation in language therefore concerns the way in which language ultimately transforms and shapes perception.

The descriptions of the man on the ground and the woman poised beside him, in a manner similar to an abstract painting, emphasizes the colours and spatial relations of the tableau:

He lay face downward and arms outspread. He wore a greatcoat in spite of the time of year. Hidden by the body a long row of buttons fastened it all the way down. Buttons of all shapes and sizes. Worn upright the skirts swept the ground. *That seems to hang together*. Near the head a hat lay askew on the ground. At once on its brim and crown. He lay inconspicuous in the greenish coat. To catch an eye searching from afar there was only the white head. May she have seen him somewhere before? Somewhere on his feet before? *Not too fast*. (119, emphasis added)

Despite the emphasis placed on the points and lines of the tableau, the narrator's comments— "*That seems to hang together ... Not too fast*"— intermittently suspend the flow of the story and consistently signal to the reader an awareness of the process of interpretation that a painting, perhaps, would not include quite as explicitly.

The narrative voice suggests that the man's actual position on the ground, hiding the long row of buttons fastened all the way down, seems to hang together with an imagined upright position, where the skirts of the coat would sweep the ground in a manner parallel to the woman's skirt. The description introduces a third dimension of perception to allow the long row of buttons, now hidden, as well as the length of the coat to appear. Again a blend of absence and presence prevails in the description of the situation, allowing the ambiguity of the presentation to appear. What can be made of the fact that the greatcoat, "fastened all the way down" with buttons of "all shapes and sizes" would sweep the ground if the man were in an upright position? Is the man dead or will he be able to continue walking? Is there a bond between the man and the woman, or does the imagined position of the man's coat sweeping the grass, suggest a memory of a different time? Rather than concretizing the expression, the thematization of the bodies' different positions is suggestive of the possibilities of interpretation that appear through the manifold ways of appearing.

Yet another perspective is included when the narrator introduces an *imagined* third party's perspective of the old woman standing next to the body on the ground, which also *seems to hang together*:

Were a third party to chance that way theirs were the only bodies he would see. First that of the old woman standing. Then on drawing near it lying on the ground. *That seems to hang together*. The deserted fields. The old woman all in black stock-still. The body stock-still on the ground. Yellow at the end of the black arm. The white hair in the grass (120, emphasis added).

The introduction of “a third party” implies a perspective similar to the reader’s. This can further be seen as an illustration of how presence and absence permeate our intuitive acts. As readers, we are now intending the fictive situation, the absence as presence, as well as the act of “intending”¹⁹ this situation. We are reflecting *in abstracto* on the presentation. Clearly a “reduction” is taking place. Not, however, simply through a minimalistic emphasis on form and style, but in the sense that the reader is being asked to suspend belief in the “reality” of the fictive world described.

Similarly, the prescriptive yet ambiguous phrase, “not too fast,” which is repeated twice in “One Evening” acts as a meta-textual signal that invites the reader to abide in the moment of description with its suggestion that all possibilities of meaning have not yet been satisfactorily recorded or explored. Each intermission becomes a discriminating moment, thematizing different objects of attention such as the woman or the weather:

Not too fast. She was all in black. The hem of her long black skirt trailed in the grass. [...] *Not too fast*. The weather. Sky overcast all day till evening. In the west-north-west near the verge already the sun came out at last. Rain? A few drops *if you will*. A few drops *if you will* (119, 120, emphases added).

The narrative voice’s question and answer suggests that there is an ongoing process of evaluation, one in which the narrator assumes the reader’s

¹⁹ In phenomenology, the concept of “intentionality” is central. “The core doctrine in phenomenology is the teaching that every act of consciousness we perform, every experience we that we have is intentional: it is essentially ‘consciousness of’ or an ‘experience of’ something or other ... Every act of consciousness, every experience, is correlated with an object. Every intending has its intended object” (Sokolowski, 8).

potential disbelief. The idiom “if you will” is ambiguous. It both allows the narrator to escape commitment and emphasizes the sense of a phenomenological “perhaps” in the text.

The blend of absence and presence that prevail in “One Evening” is shown through descriptions of the old woman’s experience. Phrases like “[s]he remarks with surprise the absence of lambs in great numbers here at this time of year” (120) are further evocative of the woman’s intuiting absence as a presence. Technically, the moment of experience cannot be considered in itself because an experience cannot occur out of context (Sokolowski, 24). It is a moment existing “only as blended with [its] complementary parts” (Sokolowski, 24). Yet, the thematization of perception through language allows Beckett to discriminate and analyze aspects of perception otherwise taken for granted. The description of the old woman’s experience thus blends with the description of the situation to indicate the divide between the *way* in which phenomena appear to be perceived and the manifold meanings they may present. The thematization of phenomena and situations, therefore, reflects the way the theme of “perhaps” permeates Beckett’s creative work. The very same “perhaps,” as Feldman points out, is central to the “methodology of phenomenological reduction.”²⁰ If anything, then, Beckett’s understanding and use of abstraction is phenomenological.

Ultimately, what Beckett seeks is a “new form” in literature, one that “admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is something else” (Driver, 219). Beckett finds this “form,” for lack of a better term, through the use of abstraction. Beckett’s persistent exploration of the structures of perception should, however, not be seen as an effort to “explain” the world in terms of clear and precise representations. Instead, as Beckett himself suggested: “life is to be seen, to be talked about, [but] the way it is to be lived cannot be stated unambiguously but must come as a response to that which one encounters in ‘the mess’” (Driver, 223). The power of Beckett’s literature to present “the mess” lies precisely in setting the stage for potential meanings to appear.

²⁰ Matthew Feldman, “I Inquired Into Myself: Beckett, Interpretation, Phenomenology?” in *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui*, 12 (2002), ed. Marius Buning, Matthijs Engelberts, Sjef Houppermans (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 229.

Importantly, Beckett's presentations of the old woman's perceptions as experience, does not form a window through which we may perceive her world more clearly or "accurately." Nor do the descriptions of her experience reveal the "truth" about the reality of any kind of world — neither "the world" defined as the context in which the literary work is read or written, nor the literary work as a "world unto itself," providing its own context. Beckett does not present a phenomenological rendering of the woman's world; rather, his work converges with phenomenology in that the narrative experience of her world is constituted as *given in such and such a way*. Correspondingly, it is through his writing's positing of the world as *experienced* that Beckett evokes the unreal in the real. This is the way that Beckett finds to mock words with words, not by suggesting that they do not mean anything, but by showing how ambiguous and unreliable they are; and consequently, how ambiguous and unreliable any description of a perception must be, given that it coalesces with the natural attitude.

In Beckett's literary use of abstraction, it is the meaning-making process itself that is thematized. The abstractions we find in Beckett's work shed light on the extent to which our perception of the world is unreal. Irrealization, or thematization of the natural attitude, is in this sense, abstraction, and phenomena that are put into relief — for example, in "One Evening," the descriptions of the white head, the yellow flowers, the green coat, the body on the ground, the woman, her irksome black shadow, the sun, the weather, the rain, presence, absence, and so on — are thematized to show that meaning is not a phenomenon in the mind, whether in the artist's or in the spectator's, but appears as an identity in the manifold ways in which a phenomenon appears to be perceived. The thematization of the different phenomena also reveals how perception entails perceiving beyond the shades, aspects, or profiles of its multiple appearances. Although it may be argued that literature always seeks to illuminate the way we perceive the world, in Beckett's fiction the reality of the world is posited as inherently fictional. Perception of the world cannot convey "truth," or knowledge of truth no matter how "true" the perception is, but "the art of fiction may tell

us the truth about the fictions natural to the mind.”²¹

Paradoxically, it is language that enables Beckett to use the method of abstraction to reflect on human experience. It is by means of language that Beckett is able to describe the manifold ways in which phenomena appear to be perceived by the characters. The thematization of experience allows the gap between perception and meaning to appear and the descriptive reflection on the characters’ perceptual reality then constitutes moments of experience taken *in abstracto*. It is Beckett’s essentially phenomenological effort to describe the structures of experience without falling prey to the fallacy of trying to explain that impels his abstractions. Rather than imparting some kind of truth about this world, therefore, Beckett’s fictions and their descriptions make manifest that, since the mind’s perception of the world is inherently artful, “truth” in the philosophical sense of the word is unattainable. All that can be hoped for is to “fail better.”

²¹ George Santayana, quoted in Natanson, *Erotic Bird*, 4.