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A WOMB WITH A VIEW: FILM AS REGRESSION FANTASY

Graley Herren

ESSE EST PERCIPI. Being is being perceived. There it is: the meaning of Samuel Beckett's *Film*. Had Samuel Beckett not spelled out his debt to Bishop Berkeley in the published notes on *Film*, it is entirely possible that no one would have intuited the link. Granted, no sooner does he cite Berkeley's dictum than he begins backpedaling away from it: 'No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience' (CDW 323). Nevertheless, the critical convenience can scarcely be overstated. It is so rare for Beckett to throw his critics such a prize – a direct acknowledgement of inspiration – that we have been gnawing away at this bone ever since. Berkeley's dictum is indeed vital to understanding *Film*, but in focusing upon this source to the exclusion of all others, critics have ignored some other key influences and intertextual dialectics at work in the piece.

Film investigates the nature of being by dramatising a figure's desperate attempt not to be. Given the visual nature of the cinematic medium, Berkeley's perception-based ontology provides an appropriate paradigm for viewing being-on-film and for experimenting with how one might attempt to achieve a state of non-being. If being is being perceived, then this implies a possible pathway to non-existence: avoid being perceived. *Esse est percipi* is not the only understanding of being under investigation, however, nor is non-perception the only escape route considered. *Film* also dramatises a fantasy of escape to the womb. *Being is being conceived*. The problem posed in *Film* is not only one of perception but also of parturition, 'the sin of having been born' as Beckett puts it in *Proust* (1965: 49). Viewed through this lens, the apparent solution is to get un-born through a regression back into the womb. Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1929) is the key source to understanding this dimension of *Film*, though Beckett also engages in a much broader intertextual dialectic, notably with the theories of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, as well as with other works of art important to psychoanalytic criticism. Ultimately, however, his creative uses of these sources require the same disclaimer as his appropriations from Berkeley: 'No truth value attaches to above.' Retroactive contraception proves as futile as non-perception, and the mythical womb of regression turns out to be less fantasy than nightmare, a haunted hall of mirrors.

The explicit philosophical context of Berkeley needs establishing first as an in-road into the implicit psychological contexts. Although the shooting and editing of *Film* provided no end of difficulties, its basic premise can be summarised easily enough. Adopting the 'structural and dramatic convenience' of '*Esse est percipi*', the film depicts 'Search

of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception' (CDW 323). That is, the main character attempts to escape being by escaping perception, only to discover that he cannot escape his own self-perception. In order to represent this internal conflict externally on film, 'the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit' (CDW 323). O staggers down a street where he flees the gaze of a couple, into a building where he flees the gaze of a flower woman, into a room where he flees the gazes of pets, photos and even the window and mirror. All the while he is being surreptitiously pursued by the camera (E), his self-perception. Believing that he has successfully avoided all perception at last, he temporarily rests, only to be startled awake by the presence of E. 'It will not be clear until end of film', Beckett remarks in his notes, 'that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self' (CDW 323). E is depicted (from O's point-of-view shot) as having 'O's face (with patch) but with very different expression, impossible to describe, neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute *intentness*. [. . .] Long image of the unblinking gaze' (CDW 329). The film concludes on the very image with which it began: an extreme close-up of an eye, blinking its wrinkled lid and gazing relentlessly straight into the camera.

This Eye at the beginning and end of *Film* constitutes a striking meta-cinematic gesture, as if the film is staring out of the screen at its own spectator. The effect is analogous to the final confrontation between O and E, a scene Beckett refers to as the 'investment' (CDW 326, 327, 328) because of the revelation that O and E are inextricably intertwined mirror images of one another. Likewise, the camera Eye and the film spectator are inseparable partners in crime within *Film*'s logic of predatory surveillance. O is condemned to existence equally because of inescapable self-perception and inescapable cinematic perception. Through the camera we see O, and so long as we do, his aspiration of achieving non-being by going unseen can never be fulfilled. As Simon Critchley frames it, 'For Beckett, unlike Hamlet, to be or not to be is not the question. It is rather to be while wanting not to be, and this constitutes a *fact* to which we are answerable prior to any questioning' (2007: 114, Critchley's emphasis). The fact that there is a film called *Film*, and that O is an object captured on celluloid and projected on screen for viewers to see, renders the concrete fact of his existence inescapable and his flight from being futile a priori. As surely as O is culpable of his own *esse* because of his self-*percipi*, so too is the spectator culpable of co-conspiracy with the camera Eye in perceiving this character cinematically into being against his will.

The camera and spectator are not the only co-conspirators indicted by *Film*, however, as a careful inspection of the primal scene of the crime reveals. In a pre-production meeting with the film crew,¹ Beckett noted that the room to which O retreats cannot possibly be his own: 'It can't be his room because he wouldn't have a room of this kind. He wouldn't have a room full of eyes' (Gontarski 1985: 190). During this same meeting, Beckett further explained that the room 'is a trap prepared for him, with nothing in it that wasn't trapped. There is nothing in this place, this room that isn't prepared to trap him' (ibid.). So whose room is it? Who has set the trap? The published notes are once again unusually forthcoming: 'This obviously cannot be O's room. It may be supposed it is *his mother's room*, which he has not visited for many years and is now to occupy momentarily, to look after the pets, until she comes out of the hospital' (CDW 332, my emphasis). What a boon for critic and actor alike, usually so starved for back story in Beckett. Of course, no sooner does Beckett tip his hand than he folds it: 'This has no bearing on the film and need not be elucidated' (CDW 332). Disclaimers notwithstand-

ing, the mother revelation is as significant a key to unlocking *Film* as the Berkeley revelation. S. E. Gontarski interprets the location of the primary action, combined with the doubling effect of O and E as mirror-selves, as gestures toward Lacan's mirror phase of early ego formation: 'Within the Lacanian paradigm, *Film* suggests the desire for the m(other), the desire to return to the wholeness and integration [. . .] of child and mother in the prelinguistic Imaginary phase' (1985: 107–8). While conceding a Lacanian resonance, my own interpretation goes farther back in psychoanalytic theory, and farther back in infantile development. I read O's withdrawal into his mother's room as a fantasy of regression into the mythic womb.

In *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, Phil Baker notes the prevalence of intrauterine references in Beckett, asserting:

The womb is a prime instance of a psychoanalytic myth in Beckett's work, and there is far less irony in Beckett's treatment of it than there is, for example, with the Oedipus complex. Of all the psychoanalytic myths in Beckett, this is perhaps the one he has the least critical distance from. (1997: 73)

Beckett's interest in the subject was in the first place intensely personal. For instance, in a letter to Arland Ussher on 26 March 1937, Beckett confided, 'My memoirs begin under the table, on the eve of my birth, when my father gave a dinner party & my mother presided' (*Letters I*: 474). On numerous occasions throughout his life he shared similar memories, claiming to recall vivid sensations from his prior life inside the womb. During and after his psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion, Beckett studied psychoanalytic literature in depth, supplementing his visceral experiences with theoretical and clinical comprehension. For example, in Beckett's 'Psychology Notes' from the 1930s, he dictates Ernest Jones's observation in 'The Theory of Symbolism' that 'a room is a regular unconscious symbol for woman' (Jones 1923: 167). Beckett additionally glosses '(as room for womb or for woman)' (TCD MS 10971/8/12, Beckett's emphasis). Rina Kim astutely observes that Jones's original source did not actually reference the womb, and that Beckett inserted the missing term 'as if pointing out a crucial link that Jones misses out' (2010: 70).

Beckett's familiarity with the psychological symbolism linking rooms to wombs would have first come through Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud posits, 'Rooms in dreams are usually women [. . .]; if the various ways in and out of them are represented, this interpretation is scarcely open to doubt. In this connection interest in whether the room is open or locked is easily intelligible' (1953: 354). O's passage up the dark and narrow stairwell, and his fumbling with the keys to unlock and relock the door of his mother's room (CDW 326) draws precisely upon such symbolism. Still more intriguing with respect to *Film*, Freud offers other dream images that connote a woman's reproductive organs, including symbolism involving the eye: 'The genitals can also be represented in dreams by other parts of the body: the male organ by a hand or the foot and the female genital orifice by the mouth or an ear or even an eye' (1953: 359). The staring eye at the beginning and end of *Film* sends certain meta-cinematic signals when interpreted from a perception-based perspective, but this same imagery suggests entirely different possibilities in light of psychoanalytic symbolism, where the eye as proxy for the genital orifice marks a liminal boundary, the threshold for crossing over to the external world and for re-entering the womb through regression fantasy. Passage across this threshold – in both directions – is attended with tremendous anxiety in Beckett. 'Birth was the death of him,' opens the Speaker in *A Piece of Monologue* (CDW 425). As early as *The*

Interpretation of Dreams, Freud began to recognise the curious psychological links between birth and death, womb and tomb, as well as the crisis induced by birth:

It was not for a long time that I learned to appreciate the importance of phantasies and unconscious thoughts about life in the womb. They contain an explanation of the remarkable dread that many people have of being buried alive; and they also afford the deepest unconscious basis for the belief in survival after death, which merely represents a projection into the future of this uncanny life before birth. Moreover, the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety. (1953: 401–2 n. 3, Freud's emphasis)

Freud's footnote would eventually be expanded into a highly influential study by his protégé Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*. Rank provides the most extensive psychological examination to date of the anxieties associated with being born and the idyllic fantasies associated with returning to the womb.

Rank's groundbreaking study is one of the books Beckett studied in his 'Psychology Notes' (TCD MS 10971/8/18). In her excellent overview of 'Beckett and Psychoanalysis' Angela Moorjani rightly credits the discovery 'that Beckett read Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* at the time of his treatment helps to shed light on Beckett's fictional and dramatic reenactments of intrauterine existence, expulsion from the womb, and fizzled-out births-into-deaths that readers have puzzled over for decades' (2004: 173). Even before Rank's first words, the book was sure to appeal to him. It opens with an epigraph from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, relating the legendary exchange between King Midas and Silenus. Asked by the king what the best possible thing is for humankind, Silenus replies, "The very best is quite unattainable for you: it is, not to be born, not to exist, to be Nothing. But the next best for you is – to die soon" (1929: v). Drawing upon Schopenhauer and Calderón, Beckett makes a similar point about tragedy in *Proust*:

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organised by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum', the sin of having been born.

'Pues el delito mayor
Del hombre es haber nacido'
['For man's greatest crime
Is to have been born'] (1965: 49)

Rank reformulates the notion of original sin, the sin of being born, in psychoanalytic terms. He finds lingering psychic wounds inflicted by childbirth, the forcible eviction that sundered the infant's physiological connection to the mother. Rank locates the birth trauma as the ground zero of all anxieties. He goes so far as to suggest that this trauma gives rise to memory itself, a faculty that is always already scarred, incomplete, selective and occluded: "The primal repression of the birth trauma may be considered as the cause of memory in general – that is, of the partial capacity for remembering" (1929: 8). For Rank, memory's primary function is not recollection but repression, protecting the conscious mind from its first and deepest wound, but also serving as the reference point for all subsequent formative traumas:

All memories of infancy must, to a certain extent, be considered as 'cover-memories'; and the whole capacity for reproduction in general would be due to the fact that the 'primal scene' can never be remembered, because the most painful of all 'memories', namely the birth trauma, is linked to it by 'association'. (Ibid.)

But if the birth trauma sets the parameters for all memories and anxieties, it also holds the key to all fantasies of healing and pleasure: 'Just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intrauterine primal pleasure' (1929: 17, Rank's emphasis).

Though all of us endured the birth trauma, not everyone is permanently crippled by it. For Rank, assimilating this primal wound involves reversing it one way or another, effectively restoring the security, wholeness and integration associated with life in the womb. Some seek this solution through psychoanalysis. Rank was led to his theories when he realised that his patients were repeating the birth trauma by replicating their attachment to the mother in transferring it to the analyst: 'The fixation on the mother, which seems to be at the bottom of the analytic fixation (transference), includes the earliest physiological relation to the mother's womb' (ibid.: 4). By re-establishing these original conditions, "The patient's 'rebirth-phantasy' is simply a repetition in the analysis of his own birth. The freeing of the libido from its object, the analyst, seems to correspond to an exact reproduction of the first separation from the first libido object, namely of the newborn child from the mother' (ibid.: 4, Rank's emphasis). Others gradually learn to assimilate the birth trauma vicariously through child's play, or through art, or through the healthy reattachment of the libido to new love objects. However, there are some, labelled by Rank as neurotic, who can find no acceptable compensation or sublimation for the primal breach. For the neurotic, no substitute or half-measure will suffice; he will only be satisfied by complete removal to the womb:

The neurotic, generally speaking, as analysis has proved, fails in sexuality; which in this connection is as good as saying that he is not content with the gratification of partially returning to the mother, afforded in the sexual act and in the child, but has remained fixedly 'infantile' and even still desires to go completely or as a whole back into the mother. Finally, he is incapable of settling the birth trauma in the normal way by preventing anxiety through sexual gratification, and is thrown back to the primal form of libido gratification which remains unattainable and against which his adult Ego strives by developing anxiety. (Ibid.: 47–8, Rank's emphasis)

This irreconcilable impasse – unable to settle the birth trauma through subsequent libidinal attachments, yet equally incapable of wholly returning to the original exiled home in the womb – is the chronic condition of the neurotic. But a temporary experience of this neurosis may be endured by anyone suffering from a more recent loss: "When one loses a closely connected person of either sex, this loss reminds one again of the primal separation from the mother; and the painful task of disengaging the libido from this person (recognized by Freud in the process of *mourning*) corresponds to a psychical repetition of the primal trauma" (ibid.: 25, Rank's emphasis). These problematic cases of unresolved birth trauma, where subsequent losses aggravate old wounds and spur fantasies of retreat into the womb's sanctuary, deeply inform Beckett's melancholic portrait of O in *Film*.

Visual evidence within *Film* shows that O was once able to endure the gaze of others.

This proof comes in the form of several photographs he brings with him in a briefcase to his mother's room. Having cloaked or dispensed with all of the eyes in the room, he turns to a systematic review of these seven photos, his personal 'seven ages of man' summarising his life thus far. Each image save the last captures him as a double object of perception, perceived by the camera and by others important in his life. In the first he is a babe in arms, gazed upon by his mother; in the second a child at prayer, gazed upon by his stern mother and presumably a likewise stern God; in the third a schoolboy, gazed upon by his dog; in the fourth a graduate, gazed upon by his peers; in the fifth a lover, gazed upon by his fiancée; in the sixth a soldier and father, gazed upon by his daughter; and in the seventh a solitary older man with a patch over one eye (CDW 333-4). Although neither the silent film nor the published notes spell it out, a biographical back story is unmistakably implied by this sequence of photos. Raised beneath the 'severe eyes' (CDW 333) of a demanding and religious mother, O nevertheless managed to be happy as a child and to thrive as a student. He eventually fell in love, had a family and joined the military. However, something devastating happened between the sixth and seventh photos, as evidenced by the absence of his family, the injury to his eye and the 'Grim expression' (CDW 334). Gontarski points out that in an early manuscript Beckett had considered setting the film in 1914, before eventually settling on 1929 (1985: 106), perhaps indicating that O lost his family as well as his eye in the war. In any case, these most recent losses have left him in a state of dilapidated solitude. Furthermore, the losses may still be mounting. With his elderly mother sick in hospital (CDW 332), O may also be steeling himself against the impending death of his mother. Just as Rank diagnoses, these latest losses reopen the primal wound of the birth trauma, prompting O's retreat into the supposed sanctuary of his mother's room/womb. Even O's handling of the photos enacts the motif of regression. Having scrutinised each chronologically, he then rips each apart in reverse order, as if systematically renouncing every love object and libidinal attachment that once bound him to others and grounded his existence in life. After completing his destructive gestures disavowing all connections to the external world, O drifts off to sleep in his mother's rocking chair, ostensibly sinking into the security and pleasure of intrauterine oblivion.

This is where things take a turn for the worse for O – and for Rank's theories. A central premise of Rank, given as a self-evident article of faith, is that conditions in the womb were pleasurable, an idyll to which any infant should desire to return. He refers to birth as the 'expulsion from Paradise' (1929: 75), even asserting that the basis for religion is the fantasy of re-establishing those ideal conditions which once prevailed in the womb: 'Every form of religion tends ultimately to the creation of a succouring and protecting primal Being to whose bosom one can flee away from all troubles and dangers and to whom one finally returns in a future life which is a faithful, although sublimated, image of the once lost Paradise' (ibid.: 117). Beckett utterly rejects this idealised depiction of intrauterine life. On those several occasions when he confided his memories before birth, he consistently recalled the womb as a chamber of horrors. 'Ever since his birth,' reports Peggy Guggenheim, 'he had retained a terrible memory of life in his mother's womb. He was constantly suffering from this and had awful crises, when he felt he was suffocating' (1960: 50). Beckett chronicled still more tortures in an interview with John Gruen: 'Even before the foetus can draw breath it is in a state of barrenness and of pain. I have a clear memory of my own foetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to' (1970: 108).

Beckett replicates these conditions throughout his career in many 'closed space' narratives for page, stage and screen.² Indeed, he intimated to Martin Esslin that his entire artistic career was motivated by a sense of obligation to bear witness to the wretched experiences endured in the womb:

Sam told me (and I know he told other people) that he remembers being in his mother's womb at a dinner party, where, under the table, he could remember the voices talking. And when I asked him once, 'What motivates you to write?' he said, 'The only obligation I feel is towards that enclosed poor embryo.' Because, he said, 'That is the most terrible situation you can imagine, because you know you're in distress but you don't know that there is anything outside this distress or any possibility of getting out of that distress.' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 151)

As late as November 1989, a month before he died, Beckett could still recall stark intrauterine memories recovered during his psychotherapy over fifty years earlier:

I certainly came up with some extraordinary memories of being in the womb. Intrauterine memories. I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out but no one could hear, no one was listening. I remember being in pain but being unable to do anything about it. (Knowlson 1996: 171)

For Rank, the mythic womb is equivalent (even antecedent) to prelapsarian Eden. For Beckett, the birth trauma merely marks the delivery from one hell into another. The vagitus of the newborn taking its first breath, commemorated in Beckett's *Breath* (CDW 371), may indeed be a howl of protest against birth; to be sure, Beckett shares Rank's perspective on the trauma of parturition and the anxieties of extra-uterine life. But the newborn's cry might just as well represent preverbal testimony about the intrauterine trauma just endured and escaped. If the strategy in *Film* is to flee pain and persecution, then from Beckett's perspective, contra Rank, the womb is the last place O should seek asylum.

Beckett's darker vision of the womb, and his more ambivalent depiction of the mother, is tempered by his strong influence from the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein, mentor to his own therapist Wilfred Bion. In *Envy and Gratitude*, Klein concedes that 'It may well be that his having formed part of the mother in the pre-natal state contributes to the infant's innate feeling that there exists outside him something that will give him all he needs and desires' (1975: 179). However, she challenges the assumption that the intrauterine condition was in fact entirely pleasurable: 'While the pre-natal state no doubt implies a feeling of unity and security, how far this state is undisturbed must depend on the psychological and physical condition of the mother, and possibly even on certain still unexplored factors in the unborn infant' (ibid.). Instead, Klein posits that regression fantasies are rooted in 'idealization':

We might, therefore, consider the universal longing for the pre-natal state also partly as an expression of the urge for idealization. If we investigate this longing in the light of idealization, we find that one of its sources is the strong persecutory anxiety stirred up by birth. We might speculate that this first form of anxiety possibly extends to the unborn infant's unpleasant experiences which, together with the feeling of security in the womb, foreshadow the double relation to the mother: the good and the bad breast. (Ibid.)

Klein's emphasis on the infant's 'double relation to the mother' – taking in both the pleasurable functions of the mother to love and nurture (good breast), and the persecutory functions to reject and withhold (bad breast) – is much more compatible with Beckett's own contentious relationship with his mother, the 'savage loving' May Beckett.³

Likewise, judging by O's childhood photos, his relationship with his mother was characterised more by Kleinian ambivalence than Rankian idealisation. The first photo shows O as an infant, smiling in the protective arms of his mother, yet Beckett adds, 'Her severe eyes devouring him' (CDW 333). Similarly, the second photo depicting four-year-old O at prayer again emphasises the mother's 'severe eyes' (CDW 333). Rina Kim links these maternal images and the psychological dynamics behind them to Klein's *Love, Guilt and Reparation*. 'To reiterate Klein's argument, the baby perceives aspects of the mother as bad objects and as dangerous "persecutors who it fears will devour it" (LGR 262) because it projects its own aggression onto these objects which frustrate its desires' (2010: 137). The concepts of introjection (internalising an object and identifying with it) and projection ('dis-identifying' an introjected object by attributing it to an external source)⁴ are key concepts for Klein and for *Film*. As Kim argues, 'These Kleinian concepts are essential in explaining O's paranoid and persecutory fear and his relationship with the introjected mother – not just with the real one – in *Film*, since the film reveals at the end that the persecutory gaze is nothing but his own' (112).

The 'persecutory gaze' resituates the focus on E, and surely any critical interpretation of *Film* hinges upon this enigmatic figure. In a Berkleyan context, E stands in for both the camera Eye and the 'I' of self-perception. Viewed from the perspective of regression fantasy, how might E be understood? Klein points the way toward one of several alternative interpretations. It should be clear by now that *Film*, like most of Beckett's maternal treatments, is far more concerned with the persecuting 'bad breast' aspects of the introjected mother. In *Envy and Gratitude* Klein delineates the two main infantile defence mechanisms for combating the mother:

The phantasized onslaughts on the mother follow two main lines: one is the predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop out and rob the mother's body of its good contents. The other line of attack derives from the anal and urethral impulses and implies expelling dangerous substances (excrements) out of the self and into the mother. (1975: 44)

These two strategies – to devour and to expel – are both represented in *Film*. In fact, Beckett regarded it as one of the film crew's primary challenges to devise some means for visually communicating the split between O's impulse to expel and E's impulse to devour. As Beckett expressed it in the pre-production meeting, 'we're trying to find the technical equivalent, a visual, technical, cinematic equivalent for visual appetite and visual distaste. A reluctant, a disgusted vision, and a ferociously voracious one' (Gontarski 1985: 192). In other words, Beckett sought to link E's voracious way of seeing with the mother's 'severe eyes devouring him' (CDW 333). This maternal inheritance may ultimately reveal less about the protagonist's real mother and more about the persecutory role he has cast for her introjected image. When the camera is finally turned against itself in the 'investment' scene, O's predator is revealed not to be his mother but rather to be part of himself. Thus, for Rina Kim, 'this ending is the moment of revelation when O also realizes that the mother's severe and devouring gaze, seen as dangerous persecutors, is in fact nothing but his projection of his own dread of his internalized bad objects onto his mother' (2010: 139).

One apparent effect of this Kleinian analysis is to shift the site of conflict in *Film* from the mother's womb to the internal object world of the protagonist. In attempting to retreat into the mind, O seems merely to have penetrated further into the darkest recesses of his own mind. These two spaces might seem so discretely separate from one another as to be mutually exclusive. For Beckett, however, the mother and the mythic womb are so deeply entrenched in the psyche that it can become impossible to disentangle 'self in the womb' from 'self as a womb'. Moreover, the word 'self' in the singular is not quite right either. Consider, for instance, Beckett's personal conviction that he had an unborn other self. Between 1961 and 1962 (the period immediately preceding *Film*), Lawrence Harvey conducted several interviews for his seminal book *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*. 'An image Beckett used repeatedly to express his sense of the unreality of life on the surface was "existence by proxy";' reported Harvey. 'Very often one is unable to take a single step without feeling that someone else is taking the step. Going through the motions, "being absent", are common experiences' (1970: 247). This 'existence by proxy' or feeling of forever 'being absent' sounds very much like the experience of having 'never been properly born', the memorable diagnosis from Carl Jung which Beckett references in multiple works.⁵ The corollary to an external self who was never fully born is another self, or partial self, who was left behind in the womb. Beckett spoke to Harvey about his 'unconquerable intuition' of 'a presence, embryonic, undeveloped, of a self that might have been but never got born, an *être manqué*' (ibid.). Even more provocatively, he confessed to Charles Juliet that this unborn other self, his '*être assassiné*', lay slain inside Beckett himself: 'I have always felt as if *inside me* someone had been murdered. Murdered before my birth. I had to find this murdered being. Try to give him life' (2008: 121, my emphasis). In this new light, one wonders if Beckett's testimonial to Martin Esslin, 'The only obligation I feel is towards that enclosed poor embryo' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 151), refers to the embryo he once was, or to the dead embryo in his mother's womb (killed by his embryonic brother Sam?) – or to the embryo he still harbours inside, an aborted self who lies dormant in the 'womb' of the living self. This latter understanding is explicitly invoked in *Rough for Radio II* (also written in the early 1960s), where Fox refers to 'my brother inside me, my old twin, ah to be he and he – but no, no no' (CDW 279). Fox's partner offers to serve as mother for the unborn twin: 'Have yourself opened up, Maud would say, opened up, it's nothing. I'll give him suck if he's still alive, ah but no, no no' (CDW 279). The silent *Film* is less verbally explicit, but no less visually suggestive, of the imaginary twin theme. Rather than the lost Eden envisioned by Rank, O's regression into the womb, be it the womb of the mother or the womb of the self, recuperates a post-lapsarian world pitting Cain against Abel, an interior world haunted by the fraternal rivalry of imaginary twins.

Critics have long suspected that Wilfred Bion's case study called 'The Imaginary Twin' is based upon his former patient Samuel Beckett.⁶ For this patient, 'the prominent features of the analysis were exhibitions of introjection and projection, splitting, and, not least, personification of the split-off portions of his personality' (1984: 9). The most notable personification came in the form of an 'imaginary twin', with whom he co-inhabited the womb. Bion's detection of the imaginary twin prompted regression fantasies from the patient, who imagined 'he had retreated into the womb and feared being born' (ibid.: 11). Especially interesting with respect to *Film*, Bion recalls the patient's preoccupation with eyes, culminating in a story about a student with an eye infection who consults first one 'eye man' and then another but gains no relief. Bion observes, 'The

consultation of two eye men indicated an ocular method of investigation. Furthermore, a modification of the twin theme, the two eye men, was again in evidence' (ibid.: 13). The 'two eye men' offer an uncanny anticipation of Beckett's cinematic treatment of the 'imaginary twin' theme in *Film*.

Through his thematic convergence of eyes, twins and the womb in *Film*, Beckett constructs a palimpsest of 'visual quotations' from several other psychoanalytic and cinematic sources. Critics have long noted a possible visual allusion in *Film*'s creepy close-up of an eye to the far creepier close-up of an eyeball slit with a razor in *Un Chien Andalou* [*An Andalusian Dog*], the surrealist silent film by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. A less acknowledged cinematic source, but one far more fundamental to the conceptual framework of *Film*, is *Der Student von Prag* [*The Student of Prague*]. Film historian Ian Christie observes:

Interestingly, in creating the 'inadvertent' double, what Beckett and Schneider did was go back to a key moment in cinema and psychoanalysis, their first point of contact in fact, because the very first film that attracted psychoanalytic interest was Hanns Ewer's [sic] and Stellan Rye's *The Student of Prague* in 1913, which is a film about a man who sells his soul to, effectively, the devil and then is haunted by his double, played by the same actor, who keeps popping up beside him and eventually kills him. (Christie et al. 2003: 41)

While I am indebted to Christie for drawing my attention to this source, I do not share his opinion that Beckett 'no doubt unwittingly' (ibid.) evoked themes from *The Student of Prague*; the allusions strike me as too numerous and too intrinsic to be coincidental.

Since many will be unfamiliar with this film, a brief synopsis will help illustrate my point. The protagonist Balduin, a student at the University of Prague, is plagued with melancholia and finds it impossible to share the mirth of his companions. He attracts the attention of a flower girl, who attempts to woo him away from the woman he loves, a beautiful contessa engaged to another man. Exploiting Balduin's desperation to improve his lot, a devil figure, Scapinelli, offers him a large sum of money in exchange for anything Scapinelli chooses from the student's lodgings. After Balduin signs the contract agreeing to these terms, Scapinelli goes over to the looking glass and confiscates Balduin's mirror image. From this point forward, his split-off doppelgänger follows him around wreaking havoc. Balduin becomes increasingly unhinged in the process. Eventually, pursued by his alter ego, he retreats to his room. There the two doubles confront one another and Balduin shoots his mirror image. For a moment, Balduin believes that he is finally reintegrated and whole again. But then he feels a sharp pain and realises that he has in fact shot himself, whereupon he dies. In the final scene, the double keeps vigil at Balduin's grave. The epitaph on the headstone reads, 'Wherever you go, I shall be there always, / Up to the very last one of your days, / When I shall go to sit on your stone.' The premise of a neurotic man pursued by his phantom self, culminating in a decisive final showdown with his mirror-image double, is absolutely central to both silent films. Even smaller consistencies, like Beckett's inclusion of his own flower woman, suggest a subtle nod toward this important cinematic source.

Most crucial of all, however, is the psychoanalytic suggestiveness of the scenario in *The Student of Prague* – a suggestiveness first recognised by Otto Rank. The 1913 film features prominently in his 1914 study of the double motif, *Der Doppelgänger* [*The Double*]. Rank

was one of the first commentators to recognise film's capacity for deep exploration akin to and compatible with psychoanalysis:

It may perhaps turn out that cinematography, which in numerous ways reminds us of the dream-work, can also express certain psychological facts and relationships – which the writer often is unable to describe with verbal clarity – in such clear and conspicuous imagery that it facilitates our understanding of them. The film attracts our attention all the more readily since we have learned from similar studies that a modern treatment is often successful in reapproaching, intuitively, the real meaning of an ancient theme which has become either unintelligible or misunderstood in its course through tradition. (1971: 4)

He argues that in *The Student of Prague* – and, I would argue, in *Film* as well – the cinematography of the double 'calls our attention, with exaggerated clarity, to [. . .] the interesting and meaningful problems of man's relation to himself – and the fearful disturbance of this relation' (ibid.: 7). Both films emphasise the inescapability of the past and of the self. The imaginary evil twin ruthlessly plots to destroy the self and sabotages all attempts at love and peace. On one hand, the exact mirror replica suggests a strong degree of identification, as if the self acknowledges that it is at heart its own worst enemy. On the other hand, the deflection of responsibility onto a separate self represents 'a thoroughgoing persecutory delusion [. . .] assuming the picture of a total paranoid system of delusion' (ibid.: 33). The double also bears a paradoxical relationship with the self in terms of birth and death, mortality and immortality. One staves off death by creating a second self, ensuring the continuation of existence if only by proxy. However, the prototypical depiction of the doppelgänger as antagonist, devoted to thwarting and even destroying the self, makes every double – from Ovid's Narcissus to Poe's William Wilson, from Wilde's Dorian Gray to Beckett's E – ultimately harbingers of death.⁷ As Rank asserts at the close of *The Double*, 'So it happens that the double, who personifies narcissistic self-love, becomes an unequivocal rival in sexual love; or else, originally created as a wish-defense against a dreaded eternal destruction, he reappears in superstitions as the messenger of death' (ibid.: 86).

The visual evidence in *Film* suggests Beckett's familiarity with Ewers' and Rye's film and with Rank's study, as well as with a related source, Freud's famous essay on 'The Uncanny'. Freud cites Rank and his interpretation of *The Student of Prague* as formative influences on his own understanding of the uncanny, and indeed Freud's essay builds upon several of Rank's arguments about the double outlined above. Like Rank, Freud employs detailed analysis of an artwork in an effort to demonstrate and apply his psychoanalytic theories. In this case, the work under consideration is E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', a story exemplary for fostering a sense of the uncanny. Certain key features of the story deserve highlighting for their resonance in Beckett's *Film*. Hoffmann's protagonist Nathaniel harbours a childhood terror of the legendary Sandman, a monster said to steal children's eyes in the night. This childhood fear becomes associated with Coppélius, a man whom Nathaniel fears will steal his eyes and whom he later associates with his father's death. Later in life, Nathaniel encounters another man Coppola, who sells 'eyes' (eyeglasses, telescopes) and whom he perceives as a threat. Coppola is later identified as the very same Coppélius. Nathaniel falls in love with a girl called Olympia, but it turns out that she is merely an automaton. He is driven mad when he sees Coppélius/Coppola dragging off the dismantled Olympia, her discarded eyes lying on the floor. Nathaniel

seemingly recovers, only to encounter Coppelius/Coppola yet again selling 'eyes', at which point the protagonist leaps from a steeple to his death. The pathological obsession with eyes and their loss (which Freud reads as manifestations of castration anxiety) is blatantly shared by O. He compulsively avoids all perceiving eyes, and his eyepatch implies that his fear of losing an eye has already been realised. O also re-enacts Nathaniel's paranoid persecutory fantasy that he is being pursued by a malignant double, one who has played a central role in destroying his happiness.

Freud moves beyond Hoffmann's story to consider numerous other examples of the uncanny, expounding on the effects of doubles, repetition and situations that seem unfamiliar on the surface yet somehow familiar at a deeper level. With respect to this last point, he comments upon the strange etymology of the term 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]: 'The German word "*unheimlich*" is obviously the opposite of "*heimlich*" ["homely"], "*heimisch*" ["native"] – the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar' (1953: 220). Later in the essay, however, Freud reconciles this seeming contradiction by returning the uncanny to its original home:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before', we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix '*un-*' is the token of repression. (Ibid.: 245)

As befits a character with the name O, he comes full circle by the end of *Film*. He returns to his former home, the former *Heim* of us all, but there he receives a most *unheimlich* welcome. All eyes are upon him there – those of the camera, the spectator, the introjected mother, the projected mirror-image double – and the inescapability of these savage eyes proves to be his undoing.

Or not quite his undoing, since that term implies a degree of completion that is always sought and never achieved in Beckett. As Gontarski suggests in his memorable phrase 'the intent of undoing', Beckett no more succeeds with his intention of complete self-erasure than his characters do. If O could become fully unperceived or unconceived, then he could would happily lose himself in oblivion . . . but of course he can't. *Film* is a film about the 'intent of *unbeing*', pursued through many strategies and invoking diverse philosophical, psychological and cinematic precedents. Beckett investigates various pathways to unbeing, but all prove inadequate. Neither Berkeley nor Rank nor any of the other theorists and artists referenced in *Film* is capable of opening a loophole in being wide enough to crawl out of existence. For Beckett, there is no expiating the sin of being born.

Notes

1. An edited transcript, focusing solely upon Beckett's select comments during this meeting, is reproduced as Appendix A in Gontarski (1985: 187–92).
2. Gontarski adopts the 'closed space' descriptor in 'The Conjuring of Something out of Nothing:

Samuel Beckett's "Closed Space" Novels', his introduction to *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (1996). For more specifically psychoanalytic readings of Beckett's closed spaces, see any number of works by Angela Moorjani. Consider, for instance, her recognition of Beckett's predilection for depicting 'the tomblike womb and the womblike tomb in the darkness of the mind in which the living are unborn and the dead do not die', in 'Beckett's devious deictics' (1990: 21).

3. I refer to one of the most frequently cited passages from the first volume of Beckett's published letters. In his 21 September 1937 letter to Tom MacGreevy, Beckett draws this searing conclusion about his relationship with his mother: 'I am what her savage loving has made me, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally' (*Letters I*: 552).
4. I borrow the term 'dis-identification' from James S. Grotstein, a practising psychoanalyst of the Klein and Bion schools. He explains that 'in all projections, an aspect of the subject's *identity* is being cut and pasted (dis-identified) elsewhere as a relocation known as *identification* (by the projector). *No projection can occur without the deployment of identification by the projecting subject*, first, as a *dis-identification* (splitting-off) from the projecting subject of its own disowned qualities, which is then followed by a *re-identification* of them in the object (in the mind of the projecting subject)' (Grotstein 2009: 269, Grotstein's emphasis).
5. According to biographer James Knowlson, Beckett and Wilfred Bion attended a lecture by given by Carl Jung on 2 October 1935, the third in a series delivered at the Tavistock Clinic in London (Knowlson 1996: 170). During the post-lecture discussion, Jung remarked of this patient, who died young, 'she had never been born entirely' (Jung 1968: 107). Beckett later told Charles Juliet that he related quite personally to this abortive state of being (2008: 121). He briefly alludes to it in the Addenda to *Watt*: 'never been properly born' (1953: 248). Maddy Rooney recalls attending the lecture in *All That Fall*, a memory that moves her to tears (CDW 195–6). Beckett also invoked Jung's diagnosis while directing his 1976 Berlin production of the *Trite* [Footfalls] Schiller-Theater Werkstatt. According to directorial assistant Walter Asmus, Beckett offered the story of the 'unborn' patient to actress Hildegard Schmahl as a model for *May/Amy*.
6. Angela Moorjani includes extensive consideration of the 'imaginary twin' theme in connection with Bion. See 'Beckett and psychoanalysis' (2004: 177–80).
7. On a related note, Rosemary Pountney points out that in an early draft of *Film* Beckett added, 'If music unavoidable, Schubert's *Doppelgänger*' (1995: 42).

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