5

Nothings in particular

Bill Prosser

In 1654 a performance about nothing took place more muscular than Beckett's double-negative *Waiting for Godot* three hundred years later.¹ The seventeenth-century event attracted a similarly expectant yet sceptical audience as that gathered in 1955, but instead of peering at Gogo and Didi it watched Otto Von Guericke pump air from two hollow bronze hemispheres, balanced together rim to rim. With all prepared, two teams of eight shire-horses strained in opposite directions, heaving to pull the sphere apart. It did not move. Unhitching the horses, Von Guericke opened the air-valve and gently separated the two halves.

Nothing comes from nothing, according to Parmenides. Nothing is more real than nothing, posited Democritus. Nature abhors a vacuum, concluded Aristotle. Beckett was earthier in describing how artists might deal with such *horror vacui*: 'If you ask me why the canvas doesn't remain blank, I can only invoke this clear need, forever innocent, to fuck it with colour, if need be through vomiting one's being.'²

His explicit imperative echoes troubles over nothing that had persisted until after the Renaissance, with Descartes, for instance, believing that a perfect vacuum was impossible.³ But the theatricality of Von Guericke's tug-of-war brought to prominence Torricelli's discovery, made several years earlier, of the earth's atmospheric pressure, together with its unwitting, vacuous progeny. By filling a glass tube to its brim with mercury, and then stopping the top with his finger, inverting the tube, placing its end in a mercury-filled bowl and releasing his finger, Torricelli watched the level drop until balanced by air pressing on the mercury in the bowl. As no air could have entered the tube Torricelli reasoned that the gap at its tip must

contain nothing. Subsequently, such down-to-earth vacua remained airtight until punctured by quantum theory, where nothing is never present in the topsy-turvy revelations of particle physics.

Although quantum ambiguities swept away the seemingly objective predictions of Newtonian laws, more personally we can all readily acknowledge the subjective paradoxes of everyday life – those that mix emotional and aesthetic worlds into the messy flux of human experience. Empty and full, something and nothing, these are oppositions that can be applied equally to states of both feeling and sensation. Phrases that we feel ‘something empty inside’ or ‘full of nothing’ might have been among the Knots untangled by R. D. Laing:

One is inside
 then outside what one has been inside
 One feels empty
 Because there is nothing inside oneself
 [. . .]
 one remains empty because
 while one is on the inside
 even the inside of the outside is outside
 and inside oneself there is still nothing
 There has never been anything else
 And there never will be⁴

Laing’s empathic reflections on the inner-world’s hall of mirrors include several allusions to the disturbing presence of nothings. Beckett, on the other hand, is gently upbeat:

Watt learned towards the end of this stay in Mr Knott’s house to accept that nothing had happened, that a nothing had happened, learned to bear it and even, in a shy way, to like it.⁵

Even more focused on our relationship with emptiness is Heidegger’s Freiberg lecture series of 1929–30, in which he speaks of a particular type of emotional vacuum: the emptiness of feeling bored. In this state we choose things to do not because they are interesting in themselves but simply to pass the time, ‘[m]erely so as not to fall into this *being left empty* that is emerging in boredom’.⁶ Boredom, Heidegger contends, is when ‘something at hand [. . .] offers nothing’. Being left empty means to be offered nothing by what is at hand’:⁷

Finding himself now alone, with nothing in particular to do, Watt put his forefinger in his nose, first in one nostril, and then in the other. But there were no crusts in Watt's nose, tonight.⁸

The concept of Nothing, and the disturbances it has to offer, Heidegger had already addressed in his inaugural lecture 'What is metaphysics.'⁹ Far from being simply an abstract term, Nothing can be experienced as the Dread felt when our secure, personal world of individual existence loses its meaning, panicking us towards 'a sort of "void without ground" [*Ab-grund*], toward a nothingness.'¹⁰ Dread arising from Nothingness is universal, with boredom just one of its minor tributaries, caused by being surrounded by things that are at hand but offering nothing.

His 'ready at hand' describes our generally inattentive, everyday experiences with things, and boredom, of course, arises in the most ordinary of circumstances. Factory work, unsurprisingly, is one cause, and a recent publication, *The Bored @ Work Doodle Book*, suggests that boredom remains endemic in the email era.¹¹ The book promises how aesthetic alchemy can shift universal tedium into everyday creativity, but turns out instead to offer a series of tired graphic exercises. Nevertheless, boredom can blossom into more genuine absent-minded pictorial ingenuity, as one of the few thoughtful texts written on doodling celebrates.¹² Ernst Gombrich writes that: '[i]t is the temptation of the empty sheet of paper [. . .] at a meeting that induces us to enliven the hours of boredom [. . .] by permitting our pen to play a game of its own on this licensed playground.'¹³ Gombrich was himself a doodler, albeit a phoney one. On his own admission he 'forged' a doodle (making it with a purpose in mind) and entered a competition enticingly billed as a 'Royal Academy for Doodlers' run by the London *Evening Standard*.¹⁴ Although Gombrich described himself as 'a terrible doodler', its editors were duped well enough to award him a prize of ten shillings. The contest cashed in on a worldwide craze for doodling in the late 1930s following Frank Capra's 1936 film *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*. A comedy, this revolves around Gary Cooper's amateur musician outsmarting city-slickers set to steal his inherited fortune. Charged that his obsessional tuba-playing is a symptom of insanity he argues that everyone has harmless illogical pastimes, which are even evident here, in the courtroom. The judge, for example, is an 'O-filler',¹⁵ and the expert witness,

the psychiatrist, covers his notes with grotesque figures. 'It's called doodling. Almost everybody's a doodler. Did you ever see a scratch pad in a telephone booth?'¹⁶

The *Evening Standard* published only a small proportion from over nine thousand entries, but after the event closed three psychologists gathered all the submissions for exhaustive statistical analysis.¹⁷ On the basis of written information accompanying each doodle, they, too, identify boredom as an important stimulus. This, coupled with impatience, causes the motor tension that results in doodling – an equivalent of 'trembling, fidgeting, or scratching'.¹⁸ Because this agitation exists below ordinary awareness it divides attention: one can both respond to external stimuli and operate on autopilot, achieving the mental semi-detachment necessary for doodling. They suggest that this frame of mind is close to hypnosis, in which repetitive movements are common – though omitting to mention that rocking a child to sleep was once called 'doodling'.¹⁹

In any case, a deeper association between boredom and drawing can be found by looking once again at Heidegger's 1929–30 lectures. His fascination with boredom is based on our paradoxical response to its relationship with time. We urgently escape boredom (*Langweile*) because time becomes long (*lang*) – a perverse reaction as we hope to live a long life. Boredom, '[w]e wish to know nothing of it' he says,²⁰ 'the time that drags must be coerced into passing more quickly, so that its being paralysed does not paralyse us'.²¹ We need to make sluggish time temporary:

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.

ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.²²

But this effort is not directed against time itself. 'We do not [. . .] stare at the seconds flowing by, in order to drive them on. On the contrary, even though we often look at the clock, we look away again just as quickly. Toward what? Toward nothing in particular.'²³ None the less we are looking for something – anything that will hasten time that drags.

So: we are waiting at a country station, hours before the train. How do we drive time on, pass dragging time?

We look at the clock – only a quarter of an hour has gone by. Then we go off into the local road. [. . .] Fed up with walking back and

forth, we sit down on a stone, draw all kinds of figures in the sand, and in doing so catch ourselves looking at our watch again – half an hour – and so on.²⁴

Dying of boredom we kill time by dragging pictures in the sand.

Drawing's etymological root is *trahere*, to drag. Its relationship to deep historical time cannot be known. Oliver Sacks describes how a sufferer from Tourette's Syndrome pressed a circular, sensuous mark on the ground around himself with his foot, saying 'I feel it in my bones. I think it's something primal, prehuman.'²⁵ Territorial markings, pawing the ground, dragging and drawing along can easily be seen as interconnected. Trail, trailer, track, tractive, tractor, traipse (a trailing walk), trait (a short drawn line), trace and tracery, all follow in train. Being slowed down by dragging something along is an experience that is as old as we are. Boredom is when that thing is time itself.

Beckett's ambition towards language, to 'bore one hole after another in it'²⁶ and, towards his audience, to "[b]ore the pants off them",²⁷ illustrate boredom's etymology. Born colloquially in the eighteenth century, its parents might be the Anglo Saxon *bor*, 'gimlet', the Latin *foro*, 'to bore', or the French *bourrer*, 'to stuff'. 'Stuff them' might be an equally uninterested response from Beckett regarding his audiences' enjoyment. *Ennui*, in English synonymously from around 1750, has a clearer, more vigorous, root, deriving from the Latin *in odio*, 'in hate'.

Adam Phillips writes of 'the great ennui of childhood' as 'the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire'.²⁸ Heidegger would see this nonsensical ambition as an opportunity: 'how are we to make room for this initially inessential, ungraspable boredom? Only by not being opposed to but letting it approach us and tell us what it wants.'²⁹

Despite its minute examination of the 'passionate intensity' of childhood, Phillips believes that psychoanalysis says little about more vague and subtle feelings such as boredom. To redress this omission he, too, identifies boredom as positive. Parents must allow space for it to flourish and not to 'sabotage it by distraction [. . .] It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take the time to find out what interests him. Boredom is integral to taking one's time.'³⁰

A similar sentiment is offered by the Tibetan Buddhist master Chogyam Trungpa:

Boredom is important in meditation practice: it increases the psychological sophistication of the practitioners. They begin to appreciate boredom and they develop their sophistication until the boredom begins to become cool boredom, like a mountain river. It flows and flows, methodically and repetitiously, but it is very cooling, very refreshing.³¹

Doodles spawn here, in the stream of boredom. It repeatedly hatches a teeming population of geometric patterns, organic fantasies, bizarre figures, hybrid animals, daisy-chain margins and merry-go-round calligraphs. Pictorially, these animate the moribund and invigorate the ornamental, becoming inadvertent 'gateways to the imagination'.³²

Having nothing particular or interesting to do evacuates the mind of impediments to drawing – from mere disinclination to graphic agoraphobia. Practically everybody doodles, Beckett as much as many, and much more than some. His ramble over the given range, and while all are idiosyncratic, as are the drawings of children, none shows any revelatory iconographic peculiarities. He is not an adult Nadia Chomyn or Jonathan Lerman, redefining our expectations. Nevertheless, again like children's drawings, all are worth looking at. This is because the specific properties of each drawing, rather than being appreciated for literary insight or aesthetic innovation, becomes an opportunity for imaginative engagement.

Beckett's most heavily decorated work is the six notebooks that comprise 'Watt'.³³ However, the manuscript of his play that came to nothing, *Human Wishes*, contains his highest concentration of doodled faces and figures, some seventy-seven of them across two consecutive verso pages.³⁴ All have nothing to do with the drama's narrative, and their relative compactness provides an intriguing opportunity to explore the particulars that result, one hazards, when nothing is on offer – in this case from his ready-at-hand, ready-and-waiting written drama.

The holograph runs to fifteen loose leaves, the second carrying twenty-four small faces and figures that witness his pen and crayon-scrawled text. (The faces and figures vary between approximately 4 mm and 45 mm in height.) Embedded among them a lone pair of disembodied legs scampers frantically, blindly seeking

the rest of itself. Three of the five profiles are facing left (the most common direction for right-handed doodlers), while the remaining characters stare straight out at us. Two of the profiles are wearing hats; one face peeks from below a crownless brim as the other shades himself beneath a shock of dark hair. Of the figures, two are seated, one in a three-legged, one-armed, high-backed chair, the other on a quadruped stool. Five are standing facing us, and five have their backs turned. Five stand in profile facing right, five left. One is lying on his tummy facing right, another sprints off towards the left. He, however, is severely impeded by what might be a bursting bagful of mixed soot and engine-oil.³⁵

As to posture, five are bow-legged, five arms akimbo. Three, all seen from behind, are bending forward to the right from their waists, peering or shouting. Another has his hands behind his back, a further has his shoved in his pockets. One appears to be doing what would later be known as the twist – knees sharply forward, arms bent, one in front, the other behind. Three figures might be one, in frozen stages of animation. These are drawn as slack S-shapes doing a loose-limbed dance, with pelvis grinding, arms chugging, feet pointing in, out, in. A zigzag snaps between figures one and two, while three esses throb beside the final dancer; snaking after-images from this louche trio.

These three share in miniature concentration the down-turned lips and jutting jaws of determined fruggers. Elsewhere, others seem to be enjoying themselves too, at least up to a point, with five definitely smiling and another wearing the half-grin of benign toleration. Six have their mouths open, the most dramatic showing a frenzied darkened howl, like a miniature hell-mouth, monstrously gummed and fanged (figure 1). Its owner has pinprick eyes like many of his companions, and the remainder have standard cartoon goggles – circles with dots for pupils. These minor variations in ocular description severely limit the possibility for subtle physiognomic expression. Beeded stares can only be emblematically altered by a smile or a frown, like some caricatural Photofit. This leads to a great deal of repetition, but even so there is enough variation in the shapes and proportions of faces to prevent it becoming a significant aesthetic drawback. Once in a while there is a real imaginative fillip that adds character to a specific face, as with the prone figure's nasal hair and pipe chewing (figure 2), or another's tap-handle ears (figure 3).

Figure 1

All wear trousers. Above the waist many are nondescriptly covered, but several sport specific tailoring. One, for example, wears a woolly pullover – strands straggling down his chest and along his arms and shoulders – over a smart collar and tie. Another is tightly fastened inside a four-buttoned, high-collared outfit, and a third flaunts a diagonally ribbed shirt. Many items are patterned with lines running bottom left to top right – the natural rhythm for someone drawing right-handedly – their density giving subtly different tones. Occasionally, these strokes come as short, punctuating jabs, describing a coarse, open fabric. Sometimes they will be more discreet and regular, suggesting a much finer weave. In one instance, a single line inside a pair of trouser-legs follows their

Figure 2

contour exactly, giving a neat military stripe. Other accoutrements are rare. A pouched belt can be seen, and a bespectacled intellectual (figure 4) proudly boasts a large waist-level patch-pocket on his tight-fitting painters' smock.

Hats are worn by about half the throng. Most are brimmed but indeterminate – perhaps trilbys, skimmers or pork-pies. One wears a plaid cap; another a cloche; a third what might best be called a crumple. Bowlers are not in evidence. Of the bare-headed, one is definitely bald, and the others coiffured in a range covering the neatly brushed, static-wired, combed-over, smarmed-down, slicked-up and bunched. Footwear is similarly variable, with pairs of lace-ups, Cuban heels and winkle-pickers parading amongst the generic nondescript boats.

Figure 3

But in sum this collection is merely the *hors d'oeuvre* for the following page. Here Beckett cranks up the number and complexity of figures exponentially, with fifty-three faces and figures loitering and scurrying across two horizontal bands. The first thing one notices is that in the lower strip a doomed trio are crucified; tiny, inky specimens pinned among the seething crowd. Buried within the upper frieze is another nailed figure, outstretched but incomplete – his hands spiked against a beam, his body lopped below the waist.

Figure 4

The miniature people themselves can be grouped in several ways. Those walking, for example, include one walking right, facing front, looking left; two walking left, facing front, looking front; one walking right, facing right, looking right; and one walking right, facing right, looking front. As for those standing, one faces right and looks right; two face front and look left; three face left and look left; and five face front and look front. Others kneel, crouch, lie or hurdle. Two appear to be doing the hornpipe, forearms laterally across chest and back, knees akimbo, head erect. Both share belts, chokers and spiky hair – energetic punk matelot twins. They are smiling, as are arguably nearly half their peers. A further six or seven look nervous, uncertain or quizzical, while one is desperately glum and a couple downright annoyed. A single *volte-face* head

reflects the equivocal nature of the group as a whole, summing them up in a Siamese physiognomy of comedy and tragedy: one face smiles breezily, but remains bracketed irrevocably with its partner, stiffly down-in-the-mouth.

Only a fifth or so of mouths are shown open, and an even smaller fraction are framed by beards or moustaches, with forty-eight faces being smoothly shaven. One of these shows a line running round its jowl suggesting five-o'clock-shadow, a graphic economy later to grace Fred Flintstone. Usually figures are again given formulaically dotted eyes, with more than half enclosed in elliptical or circular shapes. Once, as if to prove this rule, a square appears instead. Expressions are slightly more varied on this second page of doodles, as even moving pupils off-centre, which happens on several occasions, can hint at a character's thought or feeling (e.g. figure 5). One woman is speckled with a double dose of dots, one pair where her eyes would be and another, smaller, underneath. The latter might easily be tears, or perhaps simply cheeks ruddy from ardour or embarrassment.

The spread of fingers is also more expressive. Sixteen figures show them distinctly, tiny bananas or thorns rather than a generalised knobble or pad. One pot-belly aims his index pointedly, and several touch their fingers sharply upwards together as if in prayer. Two of those crucified have theirs splayed by the nails hammered through their palms, while the third's droop like trophies of dead birds. The condemned men's naked feet resemble hands too, with long fingers instead of short toes. Nail-heads make button-backed gloves of each pair. Crucifixion's dreadful mechanics ensure that arms end up diagonally stretched, a pose mimicked by one demonstrative figure nearby. More generally upper limbs are drawn either angled or arced, but a few hang limply straight or push rigidly this way or that. Occasionally a figure is animated by alternating a taut arm with one bent – such as the hurdler gallivanting who knows where, gloved hands punching the air.

Once again, it is their clothing that more than anything gives them individuality. Although nearly all wear some kind of trousers, a group of three have on traditional female attire. Each of these women has a narrow, even pinched, waist, and two wear full skirts, one neatly pleated with a hint of apron. Their two blouses are plain. One lady has chosen a smart four-button bodice with a round collar and long sleeves, while her companion, wringing a

Figure 5

cloth, has picked a no-nonsense short-sleeve *corsage*. The third is dressed in a pencil-slim number that falls vertically from her hips below a tight belt and a high pointed collar.

Trousers have a more cosmopolitan, or even international, air, ranging from the historic through the foreign to the sporting, respectable and workaday. On display are hose, chaps, jodhpurs, plus-fours, pressed, striped and workman's tied-at-the-knee. One can only guess at what the gentleman in the belted, ankle-length trenchcoat is wearing beneath it. Knickerbockers? Pantaloons? Pyjamas? Mundane details illuminate more ordinary costumes. Three fastenings clasp each of two jackets and a frock coat. One of the short jackets, drawn in profile, has its buttons protruding

as a silhouetted row of nipples along a concave torso. A waistcoat, centrally nipped by a single stud, has balancing slash pockets, while a flap-pouched, round-necked shirt or jerkin is buttoned to the throat. Jumpers come both roll- and v-necked, ties bow or Windsor-knotted. The exotic is represented in the forms of a ruff, cravat, doublet, sash and pair of suspenders.

Hats are similarly varied, comprising one sailor's cap, one topper, one mob cap, two helmets (one Norman), two trilbys, two snap-brimmed, two pillboxes, three peaked caps, three pork pies (e.g. figure 6), and four slouches. In addition, one Ascot-worthy confection puffs a billowing veil, and several vagues could be berets. Cutting a dash, the most ornate hairdo is teased into an unlikely but convincing pointillist afro-geometry. This, coupled with a stern Mohican (figure 7), gives the hirsute an adventurous flavour, expanded elsewhere by a doily perm and fringes ranging from the Betty Boop to the foppish floppy. Exaggerating these excesses is the austerity shown by a couple of modest short-back-and-sides. Some have less opportunity for choice, as the brushed-forward, straggled, and windy combed-over sadly testify.

As ever in Beckett, feet cannot be ignored. Laced-up men clump about in pairs of pointed or round-toed shoes, a woman totters on high heels, horses have trotters rather than hooves. Separated from the figures stand two boots with high ankles and block heels, one filled to the brim with ink and the other open as if to air, its boot-strap bobbing.

Harnessing all these characters is a linear dexterity of some material complication. Although drawn, one assumes, with the same fountain pen, line weights vary significantly. This suggests the use of a highly flexible nib, one that can open and close with the variations of pressure Beckett exerted as he drew. As a wider line reads more darkly than a finer, this, added to the spectrum of ink solubility, gives a broad range of tonal variation. To enrich matters further, as already mentioned Beckett has the habit of shading areas for ornamental reasons. One figure's trousers have been very carefully horizontally striped, rather than hastily hatched, and another character has been circumspectly finger-smudged. Proximity of parallel strokes coupled with a full ink reservoir can sometimes cause areas partially to fill in, giving a dark and broken field, pin-pricked with light. The happiest of accidents can also occur however, as when the paper's absorptive qualities

Figure 6

gently filch from an ink edge, resulting in a mohair glow around a jumper or pair of trousers.

Blots are occasionally turned to advantage. One has become the body of a swarthy, seated figure, another the overripe head balancing on a Lilliputian body. The saturated ellipse of an eye, perhaps as a result of blotting, gives a pious profile its hollow, sightless gaze. Sometimes chancy positives turn out to be too good to be true, as in a series where apparently accidental fillings-in under profiled noses make fortuitous moustaches. There are too many to be coincidence

Figure 7

alone, and a degree of nuanced nudging must have occurred. Also carefully modulated are gradated tonalities distinguishing the three crosses. Darkest is the central crucifix, leaving its sagging victim starkly white and, though clothed, nakedly vulnerable. The left-hand cross is tightly hatched, giving a fifty-per-cent tone, closely matched by quicker and more random marks on the figure's clothing. The crucifix to the right is the lightest, its sketchy diagonal flicks giving only a rudimentary shading and texture. Its prey is left bare too, but as the tonal contrast is negligible he is more graphically integrated with his immediate environment, despite his desperate situation.

All figures seem to have been drawn at an even pace: deliberate if not slow. Fillings-in and hatching are sometimes made more

quickly and with lighter pressure, so that less ink reaches the nib, giving paler lines and more control over darkening an area with layered strokes.

At a more abstract level, just as the lilt of Beckett's language is ingrained in its texture, here varied visual rhymes give the pages their formal coherence and grace. For example, the knee-angle of a running figure is replicated in another's elbow, and the U-bend backside and legs of one small canted figure are repeated, at regularly increasing sizes, in three more querulous folk. In addition to the crucifixions, several other figures are nearly symmetrical, faces and heads included. In particular, one has a very neatly applied internal geometry. His horizontal upper arms form the top bar of an inverted isosceles triangle, its sides each fashioned from a forearm linking straight-ahead with an upward femur and its apex poised at his crotch. Elsewhere graphic equilibrium is at play, as pendulum-scoops profile noses, lips and chins, and mirrored armpits balance hosepipe arms.

Mirror writing is here too: 'RHIN' THE BEST STRON', seen backwards. As if in aesthetic sympathy, the diagonal lines that fill HIN reverse their direction from those in other drawings, and slant top left to bottom right. Several other words appear – 'Hole', 'Holelelllll', 'Huussy', 'Hussy' twice, and 'Blifil'. All are more or less elaborated, the ornate 'B' having a double outline scored across at small intervals by short lines that just run over its edges, turning the letter into a diminutive serpentine railway track.

How many of these drawings were made without premeditation? Because of their overlapping components many figures need to have been imagined at least partially in advance. To give a simple example, if an arm is to appear in front of a body, the arm must be drawn first so that the outlines of the body can be interrupted when they reach it and then carry on beyond, giving the illusion that they have been obscured. Not all components are constrained like this. A head can be invented without committing which way its body will point. This can then be drawn in any orientation, sometimes appearing to make the head swivel extravagantly. To a certain extent torsos and legs can be lavishly twisted against each other like this too, the tension between them creating a swirling, tortuous pirouette.

So as to see how a single doodle might have evolved take, for instance, that of a plaid-capped man with his hands on his waist,

Figure 8

viewed from the rear (figure 8). This cove's head could have been composed first, but his arms and hands must have been drawn before his one armpit and the outlines of his torso, as these cease at his sleeves' edges. His shirt cuff, too, with its spot of button or link, could only have been sectioned off after his arm was completed. The evolution of his cap can also be imagined, as the largest, complete, enclosure seems to have been made first, with perhaps the smaller one to its right added next. The six loops that radiate from these two were then joined, amoeba-like, in sequence. The echoing horseshoe marking his legs was drawn after his torso, as it meets this at waist level, with its rhyming inside-leg line added next. Perhaps these broad shapes describing his head and body were complete before any hatching began. In any event, careful diagonal lines that give his pullover its tone and texture would have had to wait their turn until the garment was complete. Clearly Beckett's pen was ripe and flowed freely – sometimes too freely given the picture's bleeds, blots and smudges. But its ink dilution gives added clues to the drawing's chronology. His dense diagonal stokes reveal their drawn direction by their disposition of ink, as more is deposited at the termination of a line, darkening it. Those on this figure were made right to left, being lighter at their right-hand tip.

It is not at all easy to say how much a type of semi-detached pre-meditation played in this. But it cannot be nothing, for otherwise the drawing could not be what it is. Deliberation need only occur an instant before committing a line to paper, as, like all drawing, doodling is a process of give-and-take. The artist responds to what appears, and abstraction glides effortlessly into figuration. First draw any line, add another and it becomes an arm. Draw an enclosure, add two dots and it's a face. Once started, elaboration proceeds in a hinterland between conscious and preconscious processes, with the artist watching what is emerging with surprise as much as directing its 'inarticulate form'.³⁶ Inevitably drawings are as paradoxical as Winnicott's transitional objects, concurrently made and found.³⁷

Invoking the name of a psychoanalyst, particularly one who used drawing successfully in his work with children, suggests that analysing Beckett's doodles to divulge their psychological secrets is the next logical step. However, Beckett himself voices this concern:

The analysis of the relation between the artist and his occasion, a relation regarded as indispensable, does not seem to have been very productive [. . .] the reason being perhaps that it lost its way in disquisitions on the nature of occasion.³⁸

Susan Sontag expands on this disquiet by saying that we should avoid interpreting images because to do so is a contamination – a hangover from the excesses of evaluation occasioned by the repositioning of religious iconography in an evolving secular age.³⁹ In brief, a largely short-term and ‘political’ tactic has grown into an endemic attitude whereby there is always some kind of discrepancy between the visible work and its meaning. Further, as Maclagan makes clear,⁴⁰ this gap has been widened by Freudian theory, which postulates an apparently novel but in fact relatively restricted symbolism that has a degree of overlap with the figurative and emblematic interpretative traditions within art history. Both writers agree that the ‘form’ of images has been ignored in examinations of ‘content’, and offer similar recommendations on how this shortcoming might be addressed. These rely first of all upon paying scrupulous attention to the material qualities of pictures. Sontag, for her part, advocates ‘acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art’, even though this ‘seems harder to do than formal analysis’.⁴¹ Maclagan proposes analogous accounts that stay ‘close to the observed qualities of the work’ and yet ‘without undue forcing [. . .] evoke its feel [. . .] differentiate its internal dynamics’.⁴²

Seen from these perspectives, Beckett’s doodles clearly have nothing to hide. Complete in themselves, they want for nothing, have nothing to prove, nothing to declare, nothing better to do, and strictly in the wider scheme of spontaneous drawings are nothing special, nothing to write home about. Nothing is to be lost by making nothing of them. On the other hand, although they might be next to nothing, made free, gratis, and for nothing, they may not quite be a fuss about nothing – it is difficult to feel nothing for them.

But for those still tempted to speculate on avoiding the viruses and booby-traps that every attempt at detailed psychological analysis contains, nothing is more appropriate than Beckett’s cautionary advice to Billie Whitelaw: ‘If in doubt – do nothing’.⁴³

Notes

- 1 See Vivien Mercier's famous definition of Godot as 'a play in which nothing happens, *twice*', Vivien Mercier, 'The uneventful event', *Irish Times* (18 February 1956).
- 2 Samuel Beckett to George Duthuit, 9–10 March 1949, trans. Walter Redfern, in S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann, (eds), *Beckett After Beckett* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), pp. 18–21.
- 3 Visual arts have their own dilemmas. For example views with nothing in common, such as the fifteenth-century discovery of the vanishing point and late-twentieth-century high modernism's deification of flatness. In the former Nothing is taken as the ultimate focus in representing three dimensions, so that the picture-plane vanishes, while the latter's metaphysical purity relies on the immutability of a painting's surface. Postmodernism leaves nothing to chance, and tries to negate all meta-theories except its own. See Eagleton, Foreword above.
- 4 R. D. Laing, *Knots* (London: Tavistock, 1970; reprinted London: Penguin, 1972), p. 83.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Paris: Olympia Press, [1953] 1958), p. 87.
- 6 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. W. McNeill and N. Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 101.
- 7 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts*, p. 103.
- 8 Beckett, *Watt*, p. 42.
- 9 Delivered on 24 July 1929. See Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. and ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). On the role of nothing and Nothing in Heidegger in relation to Beckett see also Thomson, Chapter 4 above.
- 10 Pierre Thevenaz, *What Is Phenomenology?*, trans. J. M. Edie, C. Courtney and P. Brockelman (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962), p. 57.
- 11 H. G. Maule, 'Industrial environment', in A. H. Bowley et al. (eds), *Psychology: The Study of Man's Mind* (London: Odhams Press, 1949), p. 259. Rose Adders, *The Bored @ Work Doodle Book* (London: Carlton, 2008).
- 12 E. H. Gombrich, 'Pleasures of boredom', in *The Uses of Images* (London: Phaidon, 1999), pp. 212–25. For another excellent example see David MacLagan, 'Solitude and communication: beyond the doodle', *Raw Vision* (Summer 1990), 33–8.
- 13 Gombrich, 'Pleasures of boredom', p. 225.
- 14 11 September – 9 October 1937.
- 15 Beckett also advises us 'to obliterate texts [rather] than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words', *Molloy* (London: Calder, 1959), p. 13.

- 16 Robert Riskin, 'Mr. Deeds Goes to Town', in P. McGilligan (ed.), *Six Screenplays by Robert Riskin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 456.
- 17 W. S. Maclay, E. Guttman and W. Mayer-Gross, 'Spontaneous drawings as an approach to some problems of psychopathology', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, XXXI (1938), 1337–50.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 1346.
- 19 Joseph Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 2 (London: Frowde, 1900), p. 122.
- 20 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 79.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 22 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, [1956] 1957), p. 47.
- 23 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 99.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 25 Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (London: Picador, 1995), p. 79.
- 26 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), p. 172.
- 27 R. Muller, 'Coffee without brandy', *Observer* (1 September 1996).
- 28 Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 71.
- 29 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 82.
- 30 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, pp. 72–3.
- 31 Stephen Simmer, 'The academy of the dead: on boredom, writer's block, footnotes and deadlines', *Spring 1981* (1981), 91.
- 32 A phrase used by Enrique Pardo in his 1987 experimental theatre seminar 'Academy of boredom'. See Enrique Pardo, 'The theatres of boredom and depression: two gateways to imagination', *Spring 1988* (1988), 166–76.
- 33 Held at The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.
- 34 University of Reading, MS 3458.
- 35 This is in fact a smudged blot, trailing elegantly behind him and ending in Beckett's inky fingerprint.
- 36 See Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
- 37 See Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).
- 38 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder, 1965; reprinted 1970), p. 124.
- 39 Susan Sontag, 'Against interpretation', in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 95–104.
- 40 David MacLagan, 'Freud and the figurative', *Inscape* (October 1983), 10–12.

- 41 Sontag, 'Against interpretation', p. 103.
- 42 David Maclagan, 'Between the aesthetic and the psychological', *Inscape*, 2 (1994), 51. Maclagan gives examples such as Rilke on Cézanne and Artaud on van Gogh. Others might include John Berger comparing Francis Bacon with Walt Disney, and Adrian Searle on Jackson Pollock.
- 43 BBC Radio Three, *Nightwaves* (9 September 1999).