

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing

Death, Philosophy, Literature

Second Edition

Simon Critchley

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Very Little . . . Almost Nothing

‘This is a very brave book . . . it makes philosophical conversation possible again after two decades of pragmatist intolerance.’ Roger Poole, *Parallax*

‘(T)his is an often beautifully written philosophical act of mourning. . . . It also commands respect because it obliges one to examine the fictions one employs to avoid really doing philosophy. Critchley’s steadfastly post-Kantian rejection of theological answers to the questions he asks is very welcome.’ Andrew Bowie, *Radical Philosophy*

‘*Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* manages with some aplomb, to pull off the extraordinarily difficult task of saying something new and interesting about Beckett and Blanchot.’ Martin McQuillan, *New Formations*

‘Critchley keeps his writings for the most part powerful and elegant, wide-ranging but well-focussed. The book is at all times sibylline, moving, insightful, explorative.’ Colin Davis, *French Studies*

‘Altogether beautifully written, with rich and deep insights. It is the most original and enlightening book I know about the so-called nihilism of present times and its genealogy and a key book for the understanding of the contemporary condition of man.’ Michel Haar, *Université de Paris*

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing is a profound but secular meditation on the theme of death, putting the question of the meaning of life back at the centre of intellectual debate. Simon Critchley traces the idea of nihilism from Jena Romanticism to Cavell and Blanchot, culminating in a reading of Beckett, in many ways the hero of the book. This second edition has added a revealing new preface, and a new chapter on Wallace Stevens which reflects on the idea of poetry as philosophy.

Simon Critchley is Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York and at the University of Essex, and Directeur de Programme, Collège International de Philosophie, Paris. He is author and editor of many books including *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and *On Humour* (also published by Routledge).

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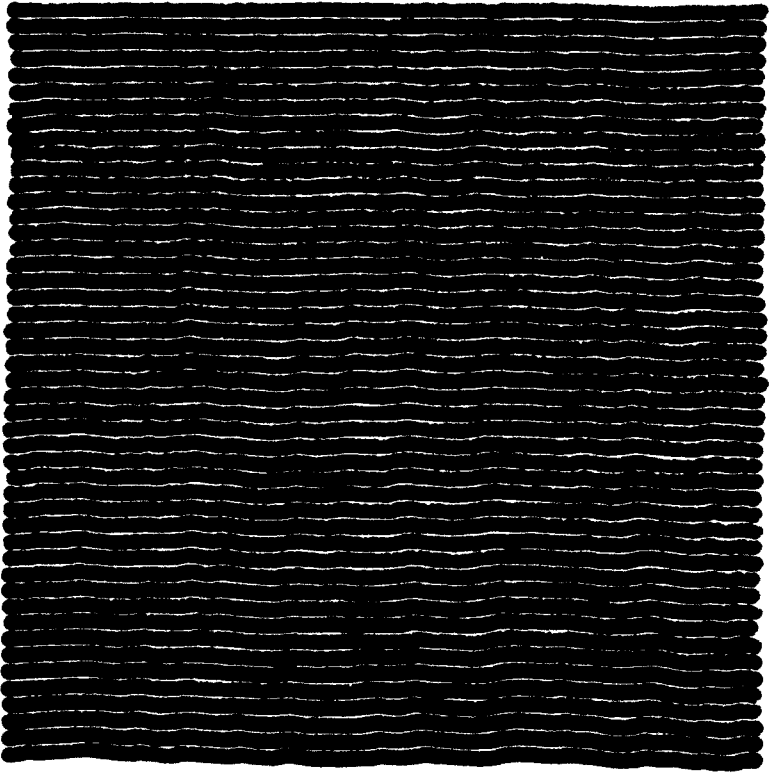
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In memory of William James Critchley
Born 10th February 1929
Died 28th December 1994



Images: Five Drawings – Very Little . . . Almost Nothing – David Connearn 2003

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- AE Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974).
- AF Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäum Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 18–93.
- AL Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire* (Seuil, Paris, 1978).
- AT Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984).
- AT Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 7* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970).
- BF Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 'Brief an Fichte' in *Appellation an das Publikum. Dokumente zum Atheismusstreit Jena 1798/99* (Reclam, Leipzig, 1987), pp. 153–67.
- CF Friedrich Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 1–16.
- CP Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (Faber, London, 1955).
- CPP Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1987).
- CR Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979).
- DEE Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existent*, 3rd edition (Vrin, Paris, 1986).

- DQVI Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 2nd edition (Vrin, Paris, 1986).
- ED Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Gallimard, Paris, 1980).
- EE Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978).
- EeI Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Fayard/France Culture, Paris, 1982).
- EI Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Gallimard, Paris, 1969).
- EL Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Gallimard, Paris, 1955 (Collection Idées, 1968)).
- FP Maurice Blanchot, *Faux pas* (Gallimard, Paris, 1943).
- GO Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (Station Hill, New York, 1981).
- HAH Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1972 (livre de poche edition)).
- HO Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 6th edition (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1980).
- IC Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993).
- ID Friedrich Schlegel, 'Ideas' in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 94–109.
- IQO Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988).
- KA *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, Vol. II, ed. H. Eichner (Ferdinand Schöningh, Munich, 1967).
- LA Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. P. Barnard and C. Lester (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988).
- LF Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 'Open Letter to Fichte', trans. D. I. Behler in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. E. Behler (Continuum, New York, 1987).

LV	Maurice Blanchot, <i>Le livre à venir</i> (Gallimard, Paris, 1959 (livre de poche edition)).
MWM	Stanley Cavell, <i>Must We Mean What We Say?</i> (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976).
NA	Wallace Stevens, <i>The Necessary Angel</i> (Faber, London, 1960).
ND	Theodor Adorno, <i>Negative Dialektik</i> (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1966).
NDS	Theodor Adorno, <i>Negative Dialectics</i> , trans. E. B. Ashton (Continuum, New York, 1973).
NL	Theodor Adorno, <i>Noten zur Literatur</i> (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, Frankfurt am Main, 1981).
NTL	Theodor Adorno, <i>Notes to Literature</i> , Vol. 1, trans. S. Weber NicholSEN (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991).
NTL2	Theodor Adorno, <i>Notes to Literature</i> , Vol. 2, trans. S. W. NicholSEN (Columbia University Press, New York, 1992).
NYUA	Stanley Cavell, <i>This New Yet Unapproachable America</i> (Living Batch, Albuquerque, 1989).
OB	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence</i> , trans. A. Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1981).
PF	Maurice Blanchot, <i>La part du feu</i> (Gallimard, Paris, 1949).
QB	Martin Heidegger, <i>The Question of Being</i> , trans. W. Kluback and J.T. Wilde (Twayne, New York, 1958).
QT	Martin Heidegger, <i>The Question Concerning Technology</i> , trans. W. Lovitt (Garland, New York, 1977).
RP	Hilary Putnam, <i>Renewing Philosophy</i> (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1992).
SL	Maurice Blanchot, <i>The Space of Literature</i> , trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982).
T	<i>The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable</i> (Picador, London, 1979).
TA	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Le temps et l'autre</i> (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989).
Tel	Emmanuel Levinas, <i>Totalité et infini</i> (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1961).

Abbreviations

- TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969).
- TO Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987).
- WE Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 2nd edition (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1978).
- WM Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht* (Kröner, Leipzig, 1930).
- WP Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, New York, 1968).

Preface to Second Edition

As my father, I have already died

If one spends much of one's time writing, or – as is sadly more often the case – thinking about writing, then it is often difficult to know whether work follows life or whether it is the other way round. In memory, life and work tend to merge deceptively. That said, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* belongs to a troubled period in my life. I won't go into too much detail, but events circled around my father's illness with lung cancer which resulted in his death a couple of days after Christmas 1994. I remember taking breaks from nursing him by sitting downstairs and reading Beckett's *Malone Dies* – an act that didn't seem to make much sense at the time. Nietzsche somewhere speaks of an author's life as not just the womb or soil, but more often the dung or manure out of which the work sprouts. Let's just say that I had heaps of manure lying around in the years *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* was being written. But, as every gardener knows, manure is excellent fertilizing material and the book bears some blooms that I still find attractive, even if I find my prose prolix and the whole thing horribly overwritten. In this Preface to the Second Edition, I'd like to provide a little context for *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, and spell out some of its ideas that I still value and, more importantly perhaps, still use.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing is thus an act of mourning. It is dedicated to my father, and my memory of his death's head is the perhaps ultimately senseless source of the book's attempted sense-making. My father's last days were long and agonizing, where my mother, sister and I took turns to sit sleepless watching him drift in and out of awareness surrounded by the death-rattle of oxygen cylinders through which he kept trying to catch hold of the breath that was slowly leaving him. Having survived Christmas, as was his stubbornly-held wish, he was taken into the local hospice for respite care so that we could all take a break and get some sleep. As he was being lifted into the ambulance, he caught my eye and extended his hand. He held my hand in his for a few seconds and nodded without speaking. There was something definitive in this gesture. I drove back home, some 70 miles away, thinking of how bony and small his hand felt and how changed it was from the large and warm hands that I remembered from childhood. During that night, his condition worsened and early next morning my sister called me to say that he was dying. Driving like a *fou*, I missed his death by twenty minutes and found everyone gathered silently in the hospice waiting room. A nurse took me in to see him and then left me alone. The room was unlit and sparsely furnished. In the pale winter light, he lay with a single sheet covering his corpse: tiny, withered and ravaged by cancer. I spent no more than five minutes alone with him, initially standing petrified, then sitting, and finally summoning up the courage to touch his cheek and nose and caress his forehead. It felt cool. So, this is what death looks like, I thought. This is what my death will look like. The kernel of this book is an attempt to make sense of those few minutes, of the death that I saw in my father, an attempted sense-making that doubtless fails, but where what matters is the attempt.

By virtue of my profession and passion, the way in which I attempt to make sense of my father's death and the events that surround it is philosophically, that is to say, theoretically and indirectly. If I had the ability, then I might have hoped that my existential manure would flower into a story, novel or poem. But I don't and it didn't. What it

became instead is a book that attempts to understand the significance of death for philosophy, that is, for the way in which human beings reflect upon questions and problems of the most general, imponderable and burningly important kind. There is an ancient Ciceronian wisdom that says to philosophize is to learn how to die, but learning how to die also tells us something about philosophizing.

Let me say a few words about how I see philosophy. The book opens with the statement that philosophy begins in disappointment. That is to say, philosophy begins not, as ancient tradition relates, in an experience of wonder at the fact that things (nature, the world, the universe) are, but rather with an indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. One feels that things are *not*, or at least not the way we expected or hoped they might be. Although there might well be precursors, I see this as a specifically modern conception of philosophy. To give it a name and date, one could say that it is a conception of philosophy that follows from Kant's Copernican turn, namely that the great metaphysical dream of the soul moving frictionlessly towards knowledge of itself, things-in-themselves and God is just that, a dream. Absolute knowledge of things as they are is decisively beyond the ken of fallible, finite creatures such as ourselves. An insistent theme of *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, which also resounds through much of my other work, is that human beings are exceedingly limited creatures, a mere vapour or virus can destroy us. As Pascal said, we are the weakest reed in nature and this fact requires an acknowledgement that is very reluctantly given. Our culture is endlessly beset with Promethean myths of the overcoming of the human condition, whether through the fantasy of artificial intelligence or contemporary delusions about cloning and genetic manipulation. We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness, and this failure is a cause, in my view, of much tragedy.

One could, and perhaps should, give an entire taxonomy of disappointment, and I am trying to think about epistemological disappointment in some work I am preparing. However, the two forms of disappointment that concern me most urgently are religious

and political. These forms of disappointment are not entirely separable and continually leak into one another. *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* is overwhelmingly concerned with religious disappointment, but one can find ethical and political themes touched on in each of the Lectures, in particular in my talk of an ‘ethics of finitude’.

With political disappointment, the sense of something lacking or failing arises from the realization that we inhabit a violently unjust world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne. I take no solace from the fact that this sense of political disappointment is much more tangible with today’s unending war against terror than it was when I wrote the Preamble in 1996. But the consequence is the same: the experience of political disappointment provokes the question of justice and, to my mind, the need for an ethics or what others might call normative principles that might enable us to face and face down the present political situation. Although much of my previous work has been on ethical and political issues, I am currently writing a short, systematic account of my views in this area; I hope to publish in 2004 or 2005.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing is about religious disappointment: disappointment that what I desire but lack is an experience of faith, namely faith in some transcendent God, God-equivalent or, indeed, gods. As I say at the beginning of the book, the great metaphysical comfort of religion, its existential balm, is the idea that the answer to the question of the meaning of life lies outside of life and outside of humanity. We can hear this answer by turning ourselves, converting ourselves, towards some divine source, some theistic alpha and omega. Now, much as I would very often like to have faith and am sometimes deeply envious of people who have it, I simply am not soothed by this balm. In fact, it irritates my skin, bringing me out in a nasty rash. The experience of religious disappointment entails that philosophy is atheism and an experience of faith would mean that one could no longer do philosophy in a way that I recognize. This is an extreme view and I have been criticized for holding it, but unless one is capable of the most subtle psychological bicameralism, I simply do

not understand how one can be a philosopher and have religious faith. To be a philosopher means that all questions have to be open, that there has to be an experience of utter intellectual freedom, and, of course, there is nothing more vertiginously disappointing than such freedom.

Such an atheism is, I trust, far from being triumphalistic. I have little sympathy for the tendency that one can find in philosophers like Russell and Ayer that is simply dismissive of religion. This can be an invitation to the worst philistinism. On the contrary, I think that the religious tradition with which I am most familiar, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is a powerful way of articulating questions of the ultimate meaning and value of human life. Whilst I genuinely prize the way in which thinkers such as Augustine or Pascal raise these questions, I cannot accept their answers. If I had an experience of faith – and who knows, it might happen – then everything about philosophy would change for me and I wouldn't be writing the Preface to this book. I would be penning my *retractio*.

The experience of religious disappointment provokes the following, potentially abyssal question: if the legitimating theological structures and religious belief systems in which people like us believed are no longer believable, if, to coin a phrase, God is dead, then what becomes of the question of the meaning of life?¹ It is this question that provokes the problem with which I frame the book, Nietzsche's uncanniest of guests: *nihilism*. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that we previously imagined as a divine, transcendent basis for moral valuation has become meaningless. Nihilism is this declaration of meaninglessness, a sense of indifference, directionlessness or, at its worst, despair that can flood into all areas of life. For some, this is the defining experience of youth, for others it lasts a whole lifetime. The philosophical task set by Nietzsche and followed, as I try to show below, by Heidegger and Adorno in distinct but related ways, is how to respond to nihilism, or better, how to *resist* nihilism. For me, philosophical activity, the free movement of thought and critical reflection, is defined by the militant resistance to nihilism. That is, philosophy is defined by the thinking

through of the fact that the basis of meaning has become meaningless. Our devalued values require what Nietzsche calls revaluation or transvaluation. The difficulty consists in thinking through the meaninglessness of meaning without bewitching ourselves with new and exotic forms of meaning, with imported brands of existential balm.

However, if things weren't bad enough, then they become even trickier for the following reason. If one accepts the premises of Nietzsche's, Heidegger's or Adorno's treatment of the problem of nihilism as discussed below, then philosophy is nihilistic. That is, for Nietzsche, philosophy conspires with the Judaeo-Christian moral interpretation of the world; for Heidegger, it is driven by a wilfulness that misses the phenomenon of the world and leads instead to its technological devastation; for Adorno, it conspires with the dialectic where enlightenment becomes an ideology of domination whose nadir is Auschwitz.

What, therefore, is to be done? Beyond its philosophical diagnosis, the resistance to nihilism consists in the cultivation of new, non- or para-philosophical discourses: tragic thinking for Nietzsche, meditative thinking or *Gelassenheit* for Heidegger, aesthetic experience for Adorno. In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, the anti-nihilist discourse in relation to which I attempt to think through religious disappointment is *literature*. A major preoccupation of the book is the relation between philosophy and literature, or better, what might philosophy be and do when faced with the experience of literature. The conviction that ties together my fascination in each part of the book is that literature is the name of that place where the issue of religious disappointment is thought through. After the death of God, it is in and as literature that the issue of life's possible redemption is played out. Of course, as some of my reviewers reminded me, although I think it is clear from the book itself, this is an essentially modern conception of literature that works in the wake of the Copernican turn. In Lecture 1, I follow Blanchot's attempt in his fictional and critical writing (where his distinction between fiction and criticism

eventually fruitfully collapses) both to describe and enact the enigmatic source of the artwork. This is what he calls the ‘other’ or ‘essential’ night that retreats from philosophical rationality and which I attempt to illuminate with Levinas’s notion of the *il y a*, a light which casts a broad and troubling shadow across the rest of Levinas’s work. In Lecture 2, after having described the predicament of post-Kantian philosophy, I try and show how the Jena romantics respond to this predicament by cultivating the fragment, that is, a self-undoing theoretical practice. This is what I call ‘unworked romanticism’, which I then try to show to be continuous with certain preoccupations of Cavell’s work, in particular with what I call his tragic wisdom, that is, his concern with the acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite. Although I omitted to cite them in the book, the words of Cavell that were really on my mind are those with which he ends *The Claim of Reason*, ‘Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?’ (CR 496). To which the answer might be, ‘yes’ and ‘no’: yes, philosophy *can* become literature and still know itself, but not *as* philosophy.

However, the issue of how the experience of religious disappointment is thought through in a way that lets us get a hold on the relation of philosophy to literature becomes clearest in my reading of Beckett. I spoke about the indirection involved in writing about death philosophically. Although my father’s death’s head is the experiential kernel to the book, I do not philosophize about it. Truth to tell, I do not think I am capable of philosophizing about it and would feel a terrible *mauvaise foi* if I did. There is much more in this Preface about my father’s death than the couple of clumsy passing references given in the book itself. If that which articulates this experiential kernel is literature, then Beckett’s work is literature par excellence, becoming the place-holder for the experience of death in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*. I mentioned how I was reading Beckett while nursing my father. Although I couldn’t have articulated what was going on at the time, and still find it difficult to explain what I was up to, there is no doubt that something crucial was taking place in and as this experience of literature. So Beckett is very much the hero of *Very Little . . .*

Almost Nothing and one of my major self-criticisms is that I do not think it is clear enough what I am about in my discussion of Beckett. As some reviewers pointed out, I spend a little too much time agonizing over the secondary literature on Beckett. Let me try and restate my concerns more clearly.

My initial concern in the discussion of Beckett is with the way in which his writing trips up the activity of philosophical interpretation by littering the text with various red herrings that lead philosophers off the track and allow them to ascend from the experience of Beckett's language into the cool stratosphere of a conceptual metalanguage. In short, the acute philosophical self-consciousness of Beckett's writing makes philosophers look stupid when they try to interpret it – the herrings have the better of the philosophers. Beckett's writing is a defining test-case for the relation between philosophy and literature: philosophical interpretations of Beckett either lag behind the text or overshoot it, either saying too little or saying too much, or saying too little in saying too much. The issue, then, is how we might avoid the platitudes of academic metalanguage and actually undergo an experience of Beckett's language, how we might let his language 'language', as it were.

This brings me to the question of meaning. Namely, what philosophical interpretations of Beckett do (and by 'philosophical' here I include the many literary critical interpretations of Beckett that tend to be fatuously stratospheric) is to transform the work into a meaning, whether it is some twaddle about the Cartesian or Kantian subject, the tragic state of the modern man, the authentic relation to being, or whatever. This is where the lessons of Adorno's readings of Beckett remain, to my mind, definitive and unsurpassed. Adorno's overwhelming concern is how one responds to the fact of Auschwitz and his initially perplexing conviction is that Beckett's *Endgame* gives the only appropriate reaction to the situation of the death camps. What he means is that by refusing to name the Holocaust, that is, by deliberately abstaining from dredging meaning out of the suffering of victims in the manner of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and much of the Holocaust industry, Beckett gives us the only appropriate response

to it. As such, Beckett's work is an index for the best of aesthetic modernism, that is, artworks whose autonomy provides a determinate negation of contemporary society and which, in so doing, give the formal semblance of a society free from domination. Thus, by steadfastly refusing to mean something, Beckett's work refuses nihilism and gives an indication of the transformative ethical and political practice from which it abstains.

If what should be avoided in the interpretation of Beckett is the construction of philosophical meaning, of some new, abstract positivity, then is one to conclude that Beckett's works mean nothing at all? Should the philosopher simply give up and go fishing? Not at all. It simply means doing philosophy in a different way. If what has to be respected in Beckett's work is its steadfast refusal to mean something, then the task of interpretation consists in the concrete reconstruction of the meaning of this meaninglessness. That is, making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs, or conceptually communicating that which refuses conceptuality and communication. In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, I call this a necessary and impossible task. It is a task that gives the book its peculiar and seemingly quirky form. It is a book that points at something which it cannot discuss or fully comprehend, from which it refuses to dredge meaning and towards which it edges: the finiteness of the finite itself.

Returning to the problem of religious disappointment, Beckett's work challenges its readers and spectators because it refuses to offer up a simple and determinate meaning that might be used as a guide for redemption. On the contrary, insofar as Beckett's works claim us in eluding us, they *de-create* narratives of redemption, they strip away the resources and comforts of story, fable and narration. Reading Beckett's *Trilogy* from beginning to end is an experience of literary atrophy. This is what I mean when I talk about Beckett as offering us a redemption from redemption. His work continually frustrates our desire to ascend from the flatlands of language and ordinary experience into the stratosphere of meaning. As is all too easily seen in both contemporary New Age sophism, crude scientism, and the return to increasingly reactionary forms of religious fundamentalism,

there is an almost irresistible desire to stuff the world full of meaning and sign up to one or more salvific narratives of redemption. Beckett's work, in my view, is absolutely exemplary in redeeming us from the temptations of redemption. My claim is that in doing this it returns us to the ordinary or the everyday, which I discuss in relation to Beckett, but also Cavell and especially Wallace Stevens in Lecture 2. However, the ordinary is not something we can simply turn to by taking a walk in the street or a break from our work. On the contrary, the ordinary is an achievement, the goal of a quest, which is what Cavell means when he opposes the common-sense notion of the everyday with what he calls the 'eventual everyday'. I think this is what Cavell means when he talks about meaninglessness, emptiness and silence not as the givens of Beckett's work, but as its goal, its heroic undertaking.

This brings me to a major motif of *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, what I call meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary. The thought here is that if what has to be avoided in philosophical interpretation is the construction of a redemptive narrative of meaning, then what is achieved in this avoidance is the meaninglessness of the ordinary. Such is Beckett's materialism, namely that his universe is not one of being, the *cogito* or the absurd tragedy of western civilization, but of forlorn particulars: refrigerators, bicycles, tape recorders, dustbins and pap. It is to these particulars that his work points. This is something that I link in Lecture 2 with Stevens's late concern with what he calls 'the plain sense of things': pond, leaf, tree, rat, mud, water. Or again, with Rilke's counsel in the *Duino Elegies* about what one should say to an angel, what might astonish and interest such a being, which would be to speak not of infinity and the nature of God, but rather of house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug. What each of these authors is concerned with, and what continues to fascinate me, is what we might call the sheer mere-ness of things. In other words, when we learn to shake off the delusions of meaning and achieve meaninglessness, then we might see that things merely are and we are things too.

This is not much, very little in fact, but not nothing. The key word

in my title is *almost*. Namely, if we are, as Stevens writes, natives of a dwindled sphere, then this is still a sphere, still a world, with a climate, cluttered with particulars. A poet might write poems appropriate to this climate, to the variousness of things scattered around: to cities, towns and villages; to buildings and houses; to birds, plants and trees; to transport systems, the subtleties of trade and the speed of commerce; to weather, heavy weather and slight, to the movement that clouds make over a wet landscape on an afternoon in late November; to a time of war and what passes for peace; to wine, water and the sensation of eating oysters; to air, light and the joy of having a body; to your mother and your lovers, who should not be confused; to the sea: cold, salt, dark, clear, utterly free; to quail, sweet berries and casual flocks of pigeons; to the yellow moon; to the whole voluptuousness of looking. The point is that one resists nihilism in giving up the wilfulness of the desire to overcome it, by learning to cultivate what Emerson calls 'the low, the common, the near'.

At the centre of my reading of Beckett is a head, eyes shut, talking incessantly but almost inaudibly, eyes open, pausing, talking again, flayed alive by memory. The head sits atop a body, propped up in a bed in the dark. For reasons that I hope are a little clearer now, this figure both is and cannot be my father. The movement that I follow in Beckett is the reduction of experience to this talking head panting on in the darkness. This head listens to a buzzing, a ringing, what Beckett calls variously a dull roar in the skull like falls, an unqualifiable murmur, the vibration in the tympanum. This is what I call the tinnitus of existence, the background noise of the world that underlies the diurnal hubbub, returning at nightfall as the body tries to rest. Tinnitus is no fun, I can assure you. In Lecture 1, I describe it as the experience of the night in Blanchot that I try to analyse with Levinas's concept of the *il y a*, which he also describes as the murmur of silence. This night is not the starry heaven that frames Kant's moral law or the night into which the romantic poet sings, but is rather the night of our dying, the vertiginous knowledge of our finitude that we keep close to us, as if it were a secret. What this suggests to me, and

it is a major idea that rather comes and goes in the book, is the experience of atheist transcendence, a transcendence without God, God-equivalents or gods, but simply the ringing void at the heart of what there is and who we are. Perhaps this is what Nietzsche meant in the words I have borrowed from *Ecce Homo* for the title of this Preface.²

None of this exactly sounds like fun. If philosophy begins in disappointment, then does it end in disappointment? *Au contraire*. It is my belief that acknowledging that there is very little, almost nothing can also be the entrance ticket to the world of humour, which is – as many of its best practitioners can attest – a rather dark world. *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* has its comic flipside in my 2002 book, *On Humour* (Routledge), where the careful reader will observe that quite different sounding conclusions are generated from very similar philosophical premisses. The shape of the thought here can be traced to my criticisms of Adorno's reading of Beckett in Lecture 3, where I try to show how Adorno singularly failed to understand the nature and force of Beckett's humour. If what defines Beckett's use of language is what I call below 'the syntax of weakness', of language endlessly undoing and undermining itself, then this is also a comic syntax, witness Groucho Marx with his hand on Chico's pulse: 'either this man is dead, or my watch has stopped'. I would claim that the sardonic laughter that resounds within the ribs of the reader of Beckett escapes the totalizing bleakness of Adorno's description of life after Auschwitz. At its best, humour is a practice of resistance to nihilism that deflates the pretensions of human beings. Humour also reconciles us to the fact there is very little, almost nothing, and this is perhaps even a happy recollection. Several years ago, in Oslo, I was asked during a seminar on the book what I thought about human happiness. To which I replied: it is all very nice, but not for us. I think that was a little flippant. When we have been redeemed from redemption and learnt to see meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary, the realization can bring a calm of sorts, perhaps even a happiness. At least this is the way I would now choose to interpret the frankly peculiar final line of the book: 'No happiness? No? No. Know'. But,

then again, you might disagree. After all, it's only human. A herring couldn't do it.

Very Little . . . Almost Nothing was, for the most part, kindly received and reviewed. Unlike anything I'd written before or (more worryingly) since, the book seemed to hit a nerve with some people and over the years I have had some fascinating and detailed reactions from friends and from strangers, some of whom have become friends through the book. Paradoxically, given its topic, some readers seemed to find in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* something lived, something felt and experienced. It was a particular pleasure to see how one of the book's objects, Stanley Cavell, objected to my objections to him.³ Other readers, like Jane Bennett, took issue with my entire approach in ways that quite stopped me in my tracks and I am still thinking about the best way to respond.⁴ Some reviewers, such as Andrew Bowie, helpfully pointed out inaccuracies in my scholarship on the history of nihilism and romanticism as well as raising the question of why music did not play a significant role for me, particularly in my discussion of romanticism.⁵ However, some people really hated it. In that connection, let me tell you about the worst review I have ever had, a twenty-page broadside by Robert Grant that appeared in *Inquiry*.⁶ Although Grant does grant reluctantly that some things in the book are 'moderately interesting', he goes on to add that 'much verges (or so it seems to me) on sheer blather and name-dropping, a mere random spraying-about, for rhetorical effect, of inchoate, ill-defined terms'. Believe me, Grant is still only warming up. What follows are pages and pages of vitriol and speculation written in a rambling, unclear and highly mannerist style. Writing from an arch-conservative viewpoint, Grant has a huge problem with what he (not I) calls 'Theory' and keeps confusing my approach with all sorts of bogeymen like structuralism (which I confess I have never really understood), post-structuralism (which is a term I neither use nor recognize) or postmodernism (which is a term I am on record in numerous places as disapproving for both philosophical and sociological reasons). That said, Grant's piece is so cranky and so wide of

the mark, that it is difficult to get cross with it. Indeed, there is almost something likeable in his energetic tilting. Grant's closing advice to me, having listened to a radio programme that I recorded for the BBC in 1998, is the following:

As for Dr Critchley, he should model his future work on his radio scripts. Radio is the most taxing of all expository media, and a wonderful intellectual discipline for anyone who thinks he has something to say. It will soon tell him whether he has or not.

I would sincerely like to thank Dr Grant for his career advice. My advice to him, given the windy incoherence of his review is: don't give up the day job.

Books are fragile blooms, often flowering unseen in the desert air of the book market and quickly returning to the authorial dung from which they sprang. I am very grateful that this one is still around and would like to thank my friend and editor at Routledge, Tony Bruce, for his faith in this book over the years and Julia Rebaudo for her extremely helpful work in preparing the Second Edition. I have reread the text as carefully as possible, correcting typographical errors and made a number of changes, none of which will affect the substance of what is said, but might improve the style. I am adding a new Lecture to this Second Edition which was originally drafted as part of Lecture 2, but which was separately developed and published as 'The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (On Wallace Stevens)', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1996, pp. 1–23.

Preamble

Travels in Nihilon

Under a vast grey sky, on a vast and dusty plain without paths, without grass, without a nettle or a thistle, I met several men bent double as they walked.

Each one of them carried on his back an enormous Chimera as heavy as a sack of flour or coal or the paraphernalia of a Roman infantryman.

But the monstrous beast was no inanimate weight; on the contrary, it enveloped and oppressed the man with its elastic and powerful muscles; it clutched at the breast of its mount with two vast claws; and its fabulous head overhung the man's forehead like one of those horrible helmets with which ancient warriors hoped to add to the terror of their enemy.

I questioned one of these men and asked him where they were going like that. He replied that he did not know and that none of them knew, but that they were evidently going somewhere since they were driven by an invincible need to go on.

A curious thing to note: none of these travellers seemed irritated by the ferocious beast hanging around his neck and glued to his back; one might have said that they considered it part of themselves. All these tired and serious faces showed not the least sign of despair; under the spleenful dome of the sky, their feet deep in the dust of the earth as

desolate as the sky, *they continued along with the resigned physiognomy of those who are condemned to hope forever* [SC's emphasis].

And the cortège passed by me and disappeared in the atmosphere of the horizon, where the rounded surface of the planet is concealed from the curiosity of the human gaze.

And for a few moments I persisted in trying to comprehend this mystery; but soon irresistible Indifference descended upon me and I was more heavily overwhelmed than they were by their crushing Chimeras.

(Baudelaire, 'Chacun sa chimère', *Le spleen de Paris*,
Armand Colin, Paris, 1958: 10–11)

(a)

Philosophy begins in disappointment

Where does philosophy begin? It begins, I believe, in an experience of *disappointment*, that is both *religious* and *political*. That is to say, philosophy might be said to begin with two problems: (i) religious disappointment provokes the problem of *meaning*, namely, what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief?; and (ii) political disappointment provokes the problem of *justice*, namely, 'what is justice' and how might justice become effective in a violently unjust world? In most of my previous work, I have sought to address, more or less directly, the problem of political disappointment in terms of an ethical injunction that might at least permit one to face critically the experience of injustice and domination.¹ However, the focus of this book is religious disappointment, the problem of meaning, which will nonetheless continually broach ethical and political issues, but in a more oblique way.

Religious disappointment is born from the realization that religion is no longer (presuming it ever was) capable of providing a meaning for human life. The great metaphysical comfort of religion, its existential balm, surely resides in its claim that the meaning of human life lies outside of life and outside humanity and, even if this