Beckett's Low Church

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Nobody, at this time of day, could miss the abundant signs and tokens of belief in Beckett's work, which have been thoroughly tracked and ticketted by a succession of writers. The most comprehensive by far of these concordancers is Mary Bryden. Introducing her religion-detector to every nook not only of Beckett's published works, but also his letters and unpublished manuscripts, her book *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God* (1997). shows just how thronged Beckett's work is with the bric-a-brac of religious belief, practice and sentiment – saints, priests, hymns, prayers, psalms, qualms, knotty points of doctrine and more crucifixions per square inch than *Spartacus*. Increasingly, it seems, the question to be asked of religion in Beckett's work is not 'what religion is there in Beckett?', but rather 'what is all this religion doing in Beckett?' – or even 'what are we to do with all this religion in Beckett?' So insistent is the presence of religious matters and allusions in Beckett's work that assertions like that of Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou, that Beckett is opposed to all forms of 'metaphysical quest' and aims to help people to accept reality in all its absurdity and thereby allow 'peace, dignity and freedom to enter in their souls', seem archaic and scarcely credible, even though her view is one for which I feel considerable sympathy (Athanasopoulou-Kypriou 2000, 48).

We can perhaps characterise readings of religion in Beckett in three ways. Early readers of Beckett were at pains to bring to light such religious references, seeing in them a compensation for the savage 'existential' bleakness of Beckett's world and work. Religious belief here is said to be hidden, tenuous, perhaps infinitely deferred, yet, once intimated, unmistakable. Perhaps representative of these approaches is Colin Duckworth, who, observing that 'Beckett constantly denies God and yet is obsessed by God', follows Jean Onimus in maintaining that 'God is absent *in* Beckett's work and world, but not absent *from* it' (Duckworth 2000, 138, 135; Onimus 1968, 75). Lance St. John Butler acknowledges what he calls the 'sarcastic-ironic-blasphemous' element that is prominent in many of the references to religion in Beckett's early work, but finds an unironic solemnity in later religious references, leaving religion 'a raw, sore place where salvation, hope and comfort are on offer in a way that, if true, would overwhelm Beckett's world with a heartbreaking joy' (Butler 1992, 180-1).

Such approaches attempt to show that Beckett's world and Beckett's works are not, despite appearances, or not quite yet, beyond belief.

Another line of argument, which has sometimes been deployed in rivalry with or contradiction to this, reads all the religious references in Beckett as merely an elaborate apparatus of sardonic denial or denunciation. According to this line of argument, God crops up throughout Beckett's work in order for it to be demonstrated decisively yet never quite conclusively that he is not there: 'First dirty, then make clean' in the formula offered in *The Unnamable* (Beckett 1973, 302). In this sense, religious feeling and belief are on a level with all the other shreds and patches of customary life that survive in Beckett's world, in order to provide a kind of comic energy of collapse – and the bigger, like God, they come, the louder and more ignominiously they fall. Like the goods gathered for the potlatch, religion, on this view, is just another vanity to feed the bonfire. This view is typified by Hersh Zeifman, who concludes that '[i]nstead of providing support for a Christian interpretation, the presence of biblical imagery in the plays serves rather to undermine such an interpretation through ironic counterpoint' (Zeifman 1975, 93). This is in fact the default reading to be found almost throughout Mary Bryden's *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God.* It takes a more melancholic form in arguments like those of David Hesla and John Pilling, that Beckett is a 'mystic without God' (Pilling 1976, 138), that Beckett's work retains the scenery and properties of theological, or even mystical tradition, in order to make the absconding or evacuation of the divine tenant the more bitterly or ridiculously evident.

But a third mode of reading the question of religion in Beckett began to emerge in the 1980s, and has become ever more vigorous in recent years, for reasons which I will consider a little more explicitly, with any luck, later. This distinguishes the religious from the mystical in Beckett's work, finding in Beckett's comic antipathy to established forms of religious belief a mystical atheology, or *via negativa*, which either parallels or frankly recapitulates the apophatic tradition. Apophasis names the attempt to arrive at knowledge of the divine through negations of all the things that the divine is not, which is to say pretty much anything you could bring to mind or tongue. This line of argument really begins with Hélène Baldwin, whose *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence* (1981) maintains that '[t]he progressive stripping-down of the self which takes place in so many of Beckett's works is not just a search for self, but in fact the "negative way" of mysticism, whose object is to break the bonds of time and place and find what Eliot calls the still center of the turning world' (Baldwin 1981, 6). Beckett's works therefore 'analogically represent the negative way' (Baldwin 1981, 155). Baldwin's claims are extended and particularised by Marius Buning, with particular reference to the figure of the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart, especially

his principles of 'detachment' ('*Gelassenheit*'), dissimilarity or 'self-naughting', 'breakthrough' ('*Durchbruch*') into nothingness. Buning sees the TV play *Nacht und Träume* as Beckett's 'furthest (allegorical) journey into nowhere and into nothing, which is at the same time everywhere and everything' (Buning 1990, 140).

So let it be supposed that there are three strains of the religious in criticism of Beckett. The first is cryptic belief – where the belief, though straightforward and even orthodox in form, is nevertheless fugitive and uncertain. This kind of religious belief remains what it is or traditionally has been, but almost terminally diminished, like so many other things in Beckett. Then there is repudiated belief, in which religion is there to be sighed over, signed off, or sent up. Finally, there is the religion beyond belief. In this form of belief, belief is actually beside the point. The very form of religious negation is what guarantees it as religious. It is not just that Beckett never definitively has done with religion; it is that this never-having-done, the 'leastmost all' of the dwindling that can 'never to naught be brought', as the jingle of *Worstward Ho* has it, itself becomes definitive.

An apparently more secular – and also more sectarian - version of this argument is brought forward by those who find in Beckett a Protestant sensibility powerfully at work despite, or perhaps even because of Beckett's religious scepticism. Declan Kiberd gives us a roll-call of Protestant qualities to be found in Beckett, finding him 'the first since Swift to confront head-on the great drama of the puritan conscience, tackling such themes as work and reward, anxious self-scrutiny, the need for self-reliance and the distrust of artifice and even art' (Kiberd 1985, 122). One might object that the Protestant work ethic seems strangely lacking in the bedridden Beckett of the 1930s, but Kiberd finds even in Beckett's most indolent heroes a strangely puritanical absolutism, in 'the desire for self-sufficiency in the world of pure mind', and argues that '[f]or the Protestant ethic of work, he has substituted the Puritan ethic of relentless self-exploration' (Kiberd 1985, 124, 129). This line of argument has recently been taken further by Sinéad Mooney, who decodes Beckett's Protestantism in a more politicised manner:

> It is this Irish Protestant sense of the marginal and excluded, the spiritually-hyphenated, the less-than-complete assent to an identity, a coercive cultural heritage, a literary tradition perceived as unmediated pressure rather than incitement, which provides, so to speak, the bedrock for Beckett's henceforth increasingly puritan probing of the quintessentially Protestant activities of examination of conscience, autobiography and iconoclasm. (Mooney 2000, 225)

This way of arguing seems to cut in two directions at once. On the one hand, it seems to drain the theology out of Protestantism, which then becomes culturised, and no more than the name of a generalised self-reliance and disaffection with institutionalised belief. On the other hand, continuing to identify such disaffection as 'Protestant' maintains the bond with that from which the protesting sensibility might wish to abscind, not to mention assuming the inescapable necessity of the sectarian alternative, as neatly expressed in the joke about the newcomer to Belfast, who, when asked his religion, replies that he is a Jew, to be met with the impatient rejoinder: 'Yes, but do you mean a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew?'

The difficulty of making any definitive break with religion parallels the difficulty for the artist of making a definitive break with represented subject or 'occasion' of which Beckett speaks in his *Three Dialogues With Georges Duthuit* – indeed, Beckett himself makes clear the analogy between the aesthetic and the religious:

> I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation…No more ingenious method could be devised for restoring him, safe and sound, to the bosom of Saint Luke.

The very forms of Beckett's unbelief are said to be those of a believer rather than an unbeliever. His belief is constituted as doubt, which is a mode of belief, rather than incredulity. Indeed, Beckett has become a centrepiece of attempts to recapture for religion or render as religious the experience of religious doubt, or doubt about religion. Perhaps this can be seen as the effort to give Beckett's work a distinctive content, to reduce it, or lift it to a series of propositions *about*. Beckett's failure, disinclination, or refusal to believe, is turned into an interesting relation to belief, rather than being allowed to be an absence of relation to belief. Too often, the feeling that, in Beckett 'uncertainty is always raised to a metaphysical power', as James Wood has put it, jumps precipitately and illegitimately to the assumption that there is indeed a kind of metaphysics of uncertainty in Beckett (Wood 1999, 276). Shira Wolosky's *Language Mysticism* (1995) proposed a Beckett whose work 'repeatedly recalls the discourse of theology' and of which 'the premises and practices of negative theology act as a generative condition' (Wolosky 1995, 91, 93). And yet, she insists, the failure of language to achieve immaculate negation, to arrive at nothingness, makes Beckett a 'counter-mystic'. The problem is that Wolosky simply affirms that Beckett is negative theology without the theology – that never arrives at mystical unity or emptiness. This may be counter-mystical in the sense in which mysticism has hitherto been understood, but it is of little utility against the kinds of

claim that are currently made on behalf of radical negation of the Beckettian kind (and perhaps partly because of the Beckettian example), namely that a theology or a mysticism that never comes home, 'safe as the saying is and sound' is in fact the truest mysticism, that the theology that is absolutely bereft of God is the only possible theology.

Perhaps the problem of what to do with the matter of belief in Beckett is a localised version of the problem, if that is what it is precisely, of the return or refusal to be evaporated, of religion in the heart of the most radical and sceptical forms of philosophical thought. For this way of taking Beckett's refusal of religion, namely, as a religious refusal, as a believer's disbelief, associates Beckett with the mysterious but unmistakable drift with certain strains of radical critical theory towards theology. More particularly, it links with the marked strain of the apophatic within what has been called the 'theological turn' in contemporary literary and cultural theory, which has been tracked in collections such as Robert P. Sharlemann's *Negation and Theology* (1992), H. Coward and T. Foshay's *Derrida and Negative Theology* (1992) and Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate's *Flight of the Gods* (2000). Not for many a long year, one may surmise, has the name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite been on the lips of so many.

In what follows, my definition of religion and religious will need to be wider than, say that of Daniel Dennett and A.C. Grayling, who both make belief in supernatural beings essential to religion. My definition of religious thought requires only that it be radically unworldly, that it depend on beliefs that are out of this world. Another name for this kind of belief is magical thinking, since it will often, and perhaps even most often, depend upon an accessory belief, or faith, in the powers of thought to make the world in its own image, even and especially when the manifest content of that thinking affirms the limits of language. It involves what is known as 'the power of belief', which is the belief, or will-to-believe, that belief has power.

Believing On
Before proceeding to the consideration of this rhyme between readings of Beckett and some wider currents in contemporary thought, I want to pause to lay out some thoughts about the nature of religious belief, and its relation to other kinds of belief.

For us, believing has become a matter of believing *that* rather than believing *in*. Belief derives from *be-leven* and cognate forms like O.E. *belyfan* and West Saxon *gelyfan*. These in turn derive from Germanic **ga-laubjan*, hold dear, love," from an Indo-European base **leubh-* , like, love, desire. This makes sense of the expression to 'believe on', which was more common than

'believe in' during the fifteenth century, as well as earlier expressions which have also had their day, like 'believing into' and 'believing on to'. As so often, the preposition carries the freight of the proposition. Belief in this sense is much closer to the idea of love to which it is etymologically related than to the question of truth.

The usage which is primary today is belief in the truth of a proposition or body of doctrine or, as the OED has it, in 'the genuineness, virtue, or efficacy of a principle, institution, or practice'. 'Believing in' something, in the sense of believing in the truth of its existence, is also a later development. To believe something has for some time meant to accord it credit or grant it veracity. It introduces a hiccup or flicker into belief, making every statement of belief a statement about another statement. 'I believe that the earth is round' is henceforth a telescoping of the proposition 'I believe that statement "The earth is round" is a true statement.' Once belief enters into discourse, then discourse, in the literal sense of a running back and forth – *dis-currere* – enters into it.

The mediation involved in believing that something or other is true rather than, as we tellingly say, trusting implicitly in its truth, which is to say never raising or reflecting on it as a question of truth or falsity, always threatens a sort of fracture. Once one affirms the truth of a belief, once one affirms a belief in a truth, one has entered the jurisdiction of the dubitable, of that which one may henceforth take leave to doubt. The difference is coiled up, spirochete-like, in the expression 'I love you'. In response to the statement 'I love you', one may say 'your love is not true', but this is a different thing from saying 'That (the statement that you love me) is not true'. The one is a matter of fidelity, the other of sincerity. The opposite of truth is falsity, while the opposite of fidelity is betrayal. This is why being an infidel is so much more drastic than being an unbeliever. Unbelief is a matter for remedial persuasion, since it suggests that one may yet be brought to believe, while infidelity is a matter for punishment or pardon, suggesting as it does an act of betrayal or unfaithfulness that has already occurred.

Enunciating his own kind of epistemological credo, Donald Rumsfeld instructed us that there are known knowns (things we know we know), known unknowns (things we know we don't know), and unknown unknowns (things we don't know we don't know). One of these unknown unknowns is the missing corner of what is in fact an epistemological quadrangle. For are there not also *unknown knowns*, things we do not know that we know? Belief is perhaps in this category.

There are two kinds of unnegotiable belief, which is to say beliefs that are intransigent to reason because they are not predicative beliefs. One is what

we might call *infracredential belief,* or belief that has not risen to explicitness as a predication. This characterises the way in which many forms of institutionalised belief are held by its adherents, that is, as the kind of faith that has never been questioned, because it has not yet risen to the level of propositional truth. It may perhaps be, as Slavoj Žižek has suggested, that 'the direct belief in a truth that is subjectively fully assumed ("Here I stand!") is a modern phenomenon, in contrast to traditional beliefs-through-distance, like politeness or rituals' (Žižek 2003, 6). Infracredential belief becomes evident in what we call fundamentalism, but it also changes its nature. For fundamentalism will tend fatally to pin belief to a text, or series of formalised articles of belief. Now its strength, namely its willingness to assert its faith in the mode of credo, or absolute belief, is its weakness. Fundamentalism is brittle, or can always become so, because its adherents and its antagonists are required to know and affirm so clearly what it would mean no longer to believe, because it makes unbelief so eminently thinkable. Theirs is now a matter of known rather than unknown knowns, which makes them, in Žižek's terms, modern rather than premodern. Fundamentalism has always begun to see round itself, hence its hysterical obsession with the infidel or the fallen. Arguments about belief often disguise this faultline that runs through the question of belief. Religious belief attempts to approximate to the condition of faith without credence, of a belief that has no need to route through propositions. And yet no religion can exist for long without a formalised statement of beliefs, which immediately opens a gulf between belief-in-action, or acting-in-the-belief-that, or acting-as-though-you-believed, and the act of affirming belief, wherein, as we have seen, falls the shadow. Perhaps no religion has had more difficulty in negotiating this movement from the realm of faith into credence than Christianity, precisely because it stakes so much on the ritual of professing faith, the 'credo'.

Then there is *ultracredential belief*, that is to say, belief in which all possible predications have been dissolved or rendered undecidable, leaving only the form or force of belief remaining, in the absence of any content. As we will soon see, this is the form taken by the more theological forms of deconstructive thinking.

Accordingly, there might also be said to be two ways of being beyond belief. One of them involves the withdrawal or withering of credence from propositions or doctrines to which it had previously attached. Another involves the leaving behind of that mode of according belief, and returning to a mode of *believing on*, a mode of no longer knowing what one knows. In this condition, one is in belief as one is in love. The form of argument known as fideism, for example, makes a positive virtue of the disconnection

of faith from credence. It finds its canonical exponent in Tertullian's *De Carne Christo*:

> crucifixus est dei filius: non pudet, quia pudendum est. et mortuus est dei filius: prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est. et sepultus resurrexit: certum est, quia impossibile. [The Son of God was crucified: there is no shame, because it is shameful. And the Son of God died: it is wholly credible, because it is ridiculous. And, buried, He rose again: it is certain, because impossible.] (Tertullian, *De Carne Christo*, ch 5)

Pascal argued a version of this in his *Pensées*:

> Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give reasons for their beliefs, since they profess belief in a religion which they cannot explain? They declare, when they expound it to the world, that it is foolishness, *stultitiam*; and then you complain because they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their word; it is through their lack of proofs that they show they are not lacking in sense. (*Pensées* 223)

Apophatics

Fideism finds a curious parallel in the religious turn taken by late deconstruction. From its beginnings, deconstruction has been accused of being a form of 'negative theology'. And, from early on, Derrida has defended himself against this charge by arguing that deconstruction is more radical than negative theology, since negative theology finds a kind of frame or terminus in the idea of God, the point of negative theology being, if only in some unthinkable end, to arrive at an understanding of God . The problem with traditional negative theology, for Derrida, is precisely that it is never really negative: it operates ultimately as 'the name of a way of truth', characterised by a 'desire to say and rejoin what is proper to God' (Derrida 1995, 69), meaning that 'the generative movement of the discourse of God is only a phase of positive ontotheology' (Derrida 1976, 337 n.37). By contrast, deconstruction, *différance*, aporia, the trace, the gift, and the rest of the rattling caravanserai of différance's 'vice-existers' ensures its own survival in the very non-arrival of God. 'Theological' seems an odd term for this, since the absolute, eternal deferral of the decidability of the existence of God is God itself.

Theologically-minded readers of Derrida have had to find ways to cope with, or sidestep, Derrida's early remarks that '*Différance* is not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies' (Derrida 1982, 6). One way to cope with this is indicated by Hugh Rayment-Pickard, when he writes that 'The point of these refutations and deconstructions is to

clear the path not for a new kind of negative theology – still less a new positive theology – but a theology of impossibility' (Rayment-Pickard 2003, 126). The suggestion is that, for Derrida 'aporia itself would constitute the basis of an 'other' theology which is neither positive nor negative, between the life and death of God' (Rayment-Pickard 2003, 130). 'Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God', Derrida has murkily affirmed (Derrida 1989, 29).

There is no more enthusiastic exponent of Derrida's 'generalised apophatics' (the 'enthusiast' being literally the one who has a god in him) than John D. Caputo, whose *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* is an energetic, exhilarating, infinitely elastic series of variations upon Derrida's 'apophatico-apocalyptico-quasi-atheistic messianic' religion (Caputo 1997, 41, xxviii). Caputo captures very well the voluptuous hunger that runs through Derrida's work and writing:

> There is in Derrida what one might call a certain overreaching, trespassing aspiration, what I have been calling here, all along, a dream, or a desire, a restlessness, a passion for the impossible, a panting for something to come. …[T]here is in Derrida, in deconstruction, a longing and sighing, a weeping and praying, a dream and a desire, for something non-determinable, un-foreseeable, beyond the actual and the possible, beyond the horizon of possibility, beyond the scope of what we can sensibly imagine. (Caputo 1997, 333

This is a weak thought amplifying itself into unlimited power – a kind of acrobatic apophatics, or omn-impotence. If infracredential belief is both manifested and put at risk in what we call fundamentalism, this intimate opposite of fundamentalism may be called repressive antifoundationalism. It is repressive because it does not allow any kind of outside or differentiation. Every disagreement with or refusal of religion will find itself enfolded in the nebulous embrace of this religion that has bought up all the shares in atheism, a theology without God. Like Murphy's mind, it 'excludes nothing that it does not already contain'. The inability, or is it refusal, to tolerate either decisive affirmation, or decisive negation that is enacted through the trilogy and reaches it apogee in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, a condition which Beckett names as the purgatorial, forms a close parallel with this mode of never-quite-negative theology that does not want to help itself turning into a theology of the never-quite-negative.

Absolution
But there is another modality of religious thought, which is even more aggressively emptied of content. This is to be found, not in the work of Levinas and Derrida, but rather the work of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben.

As it happens, this work has come to cohere upon a single figure, Saint Paul, who writings are traditionally held to embody a shift from a Jewish to a Greek, a Judaic to a Christian dispensation, and has routinely been blamed for the formalisation of Christian revelation into oppressive doctrine ('Give me back the Berlin Wall, give me Stalin and Saint Paul/I've seen the future, brother, it is murder', as Leonard Cohen sings.) This may account in part for the emphasis in this work, not on the (unknowable) divinity as Father, but on the revolutionary irruption of the Son. The ineffable absolute, the absoluteness of its ineffability, here becomes the unassimilable event of revelation (We will have for quite a while to put up with a lot of 'in-'s and 'un-'s.) And yet there will prove to be striking rhymes between the apophatic and the evental.

In marked contrast to the divinity-bibbing agnosticism of Derrida, which is religiose because of its condition as religious excess, a religious exceeding of religion - Alain Badiou insists that his interest in Saint Paul is that of a militant atheist, stating unambiguously at the beginning of his *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, that '[f]or me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him' (Badiou 2003, 1). Badiou's interest in Paul is as one who bears witness to the event of Christ's life and, more particularly, his death and resurrection. The concept of the event is at the centre of Badiou's philosophy. He means by an event, the sudden, disruptive arrival of a truth. But truth, for Badiou, is not a property of propositions, and has nothing to do with the common-or-garden concurrence between statements and states of affairs. Truth occurs rarely, and is always apprehended, when it is, in the form of radical strangeness or indigestibility by previously existing dispensations of thought. But it is precisely for this reason that the truths announced in events can lay claim to being universal, though also utterly unique, or irreducible to previously-existing frames of understanding. This means that truth-events are both singular and universal. A truth is singular, because '[i]t is neither structural, nor axiomatic, nor legal. No available generality can account for it, nor structure the subject who claims to follow in its wake. Consequently, there cannot be a law of truth' (Badiou 2003, 14). But it is also universal, and for the same reason, namely because it 'is diagonal relative to every communitarian subset; it neither claims authority from, nor (this is obviously the most delicate point) constitutes any identity. It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address' (Badiou 2003, 14). But, as so often with Badiou, this universalism is exclusive rather than inclusive. The universal comes about, not because every community of belief is included, but because every limiting community is excluded: 'the fidelity to such an event exists only through the termination of

communitarian particularisms and the determination of a subject-of-truth who indistinguishes the One and the "for all." ' (Badiou 2003, 108).

Truth-events of this kind are not simply offered up to, or available for inspection and adoption by subjects. For Badiou, subjects are actually requisitioned, or called into being by events. One can scarcely make a choice, informed or not, to follow the implications of an event, since there is no subject worthy of the name before the fidelity to the event. The subject *is* the not having a choice. This subject is not only founded upon an untimely ripping of the event out of the continuum of history, but itself takes the form of a continuing or extended rupture: '{A]n eventual rupture always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a "not…but," and that *it is precisely this form that bears the universal.* For the "not" is the potential dissolution of closed particularities (whose name is "law"), while the "but" indicates the task, the faithful labor, in which the subjects of the process opened up by the event (whose name is "grace") are the coworkers (Badiou 2003, 63-4). Another name for the 'event' is what Paul, distinguishing the news dispensation from the old, is 'grace', which 'is neither a bequest, nor a tradition, nor a teaching. It is a supernumerary relative to all this and presents itself as pure givenness.' (Badiou 2003, 63)

For this reason, 'proceeding from the event delivers no law, no form of mastery, be it that of the wise man or the prophet' (Badiou 2003, 42). It is like nothing on earth. If you want to know what kind of thing an event is, you need to think of something that you can't possibly think of, an exercise that would tax the capacities even of the White Queen. You can recognise an event (or, pretty much always, can't) because there is no way to name or describe it, or not in existing language: the event 'is of such a character as to render the philosophical logos incapable of declaring it… For established languages, it is inadmissible because it is genuinely unnamable' (Badiou 2003, 46). The language that Paul is driven to invent, we may read with some surprise, is one 'wherein folly, scandal, and weakness supplant knowing reason, order and power, and wherein non-being is the only legitimizable affirmation of being' (Badiou 2003, 47). Given all this negativity, it is not surprising that what Badiou calls 'the Christ-event' can be interpreted as the beginning of negative theology, for

> One must, in Paul's logic, go as far as to say that *the Christ-event testifies that God is not the god of Being, is not Being.* Paul prescribes an anticipatory critique of what Heidegger calls onto-theology, wherein God is thought as supreme being, and hence as the measure for what being as such is capable of. (Badiou 2003, 47)

Alain Badiou's reading of Saint Paul has provided the core of Slavoj Žižek's remarkable attempt to harness what he sees as the radical force of Christianity for revolutionary politics. Žižek is much more explicit than Badiou about the clean break that his politics would make with the Levinasian ethic of alterity, as it is expressed both in deconstructive messianism, and in weaker, blurrier form, in liberal tolerance for the other.

Žižek insists that his is a materialist reading of the radicality of Christianity, though it is hard to square this with the gloss he offers on Pauline grace through Lacan's conception of the access of Holy Spirit as the rupturing effect of the symbolic order – 'the Holy Spirit stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of "life"… When we locate ourselves within the Holy Spirit, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one' (Žižek 2003, 10). For this reason, and once again like Badiou before him, Žižek stresses Paul's lack of interest in the life of Jesus, the miracles, the parables. Just as Lenin betrayed Marx into actuality, so Paul, the aftercomer who was not part of Christ's apostolic inner circle, ' "betrayed" Christ by not caring about his idiosyncrasies, by ruthlessly reducing him to the fundamentals, with no patience for his wisdom, miracles, and similar paraphernalia' (Žižek 2003, 10). In contrast to the quietism of Buddhism, and the sentimental alterity that contemporary postmodernists admire in Judaism (mistakenly, in Žižek's view), Paul is, quite simply, Lenin, who makes the revolution actual (Žižek 2003, 9), and Christianity is to be identified with 'authentic revolutionary liberation'. This 'is much more directly identified with violence – it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation' (Žižek 2003, 10). Christianity is important for revolutionary politics, not because of any ethical correspondence between Christian belief and revolutionary principles, but because of a purely formal correspondence in the nature of the violent act which inaugurates them: 'Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others' (Žižek 2003, 33).

At first sight, the event is at completely the other end of the scale from the Derridean process. Derridean religiosity represents the extreme of a form of implicative thought. The force of its denial and denegation is directed against any form of entirety, exclusiveness or isolated self-sufficiency, in which nothing is ever quite itself or exactly other to itself. The Badiouan event resembles Derridean apophasis, in that it is defined wholly through negation. But where Derridean aporia propagates and tends towards apophatic saturation, the Badiouan event is scarce, exotic, difficult to detect and harder to cleave to. The absolute exceptionality of the event denies all inclusiveness or implication. Events don't just happen to be hard for law,

language, or reason to get hold of, they are definitionally so. The event is 'a-cosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signaling nothing' (Badiou 2003, 42).

The religiosity of Badiou and Žižek expresses itself primarily in the desire for absolutes, as opposed to the 'absolute absence of the Absolute' that Beckett found in Joyce. As opposed to a contingent mooning after absolutes that somebody of my disposition can fall into in milky moments – wouldn't it be nice if there were an absolute end to hunger, absolute freedom for everybody, absolute justice, but, hey, what can you do? - theirs is an absolute craving for the absolute, meaning that nothing but an absolute will do, and unless there is an absolute, there is in fact absolutely nothing. They share the conviction that only absolute change could be real change, and, without absolute change, everything must inevitably remain absolutely the same. This suggests an important distinction from Derrida's religion, which indulges and encourages a kind of voluntarist totalism, which employs the principles of suspension and deferral to ensure that everything is in part invoked by everything else. Derrida's is a mysticism of the All. By contrast, religion provides for Badiou and Žižek the fantasy of the absolute break, the absolute subtraction from, and transcendence of the order of the given, for what is given can only be the law, the State, Capital, and so on.

What the two religiosities have in common is the refusal of worldedness, which is to say, of finitude (contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, mortality). In the case of Derrida, thought magically totalises the world, conjuring *pleroma* out of deferral. In the case of Badiou and Žižek, the refusal of the world is a refusal of connection or contamination, something like the 'attack on linking' theorised by Beckett's analyst W.R. Bion (and, according to some, suggested in part by his experiences with Beckett). For the finitude of 'the world' now increasingly presents itself in the form of the hyper-connectedness that ensures that nothing can be absolute, autonomous, sole or whole, because there is nothing that does not have everything to do with everything else. This is what the austere principle of the event is designed to disclose and refuse. Seen through the scorching eyes of the political mystic, the world appears merely as base remainder, a Beckettian landscape of cinder and clinker.

We should, I think, acknowledge that Beckett allows himself the profound infinitism that characterises our present explosive moment of religion, that rapturous embrace of the impossible, the absolute, the unencompassable. There is a war in Beckett's works, between his impulse to finitude, his intense desire to find a way of being in the world, and the ways out into the absolute that he allows himself – the relaxing of the vigilance that would prevent one naming the unnamable.

Exposure

There is a kind of arrogance involved in taking Beckett's way of the negative as a religious way. Even granted that Beckett's art may be regarded as a *via negativa*, and granted the striking parallels between his systematic project of undoing and that of mystical writers, there is no reason to assume that the end of the particular low road taken by Beckett is God, or 'the divine'. The illogic here goes: Beckett proceeds via negations; negative theology attempts to approach God via negations; therefore Beckett must be attempting to approach God. Actually, Derrida has given typically luxurious warrant to this view of what he calls 'the becoming-theological of all discourse' in his 'How To Avoid Speaking':

> From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity that manifests itself need only be pushed to the limit and it at least resembles an apophatic theology. Every time I say: *X* is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor of that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has *nothing in common*, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. God's name would then by the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity that is consistent in its discourse. God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God's name opening up the very space of this enigma. If there is a work of negativity in discourse and predication, it will produce divinity. (Derrida 1989, 6)

One can see how Henry van Vries can claim that '[t]his is one way to affirm the continuing – and perhaps, ever more prominent and promising – conceptual, imaginative, argumentative and rhetorical resources of the religious and theological tradition, of its archive and its acts, its judgments and imaginings' (Vries 2005, 615-16). A set-up in which every undermining is its own undermining, every refutation is the secret proof of what it seeks to do away with, is indeed Philip Larkin's 'quite unlosable game', or, in Beckett's version, a way of having you cake and throwing it to the cat. Where Beckett does everything he can to maintain his incapacity to write *about*, here that incapacity to write about but only amid, is itself the occasion, the aboutness, the import, outcome or upshot of his work.

At his best, Beckett inhabits belief in the mode of exposure. Belief is always liable to the condition of being 'posited', set out in a form that would prompt credence or incredulousness. Beckett's work often deals in notions,

propositions, data, in the strict sense of that which is given. 'That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark, a voice tells of a past.' Getting, or keeping things going, is a matter of 'notions' being maintained. This gives the impression of a work developed, not out of belief, but out of self-conscious hypothesis and experiment. But in fact, these works rely upon an imperfectly possible faith in that which is merely given as possible. Beckett works in hypothesis, which literally means what stands beneath, or understanding. Of course, because there is no reason to believe, because this is a belief beyond or without reason, so equally there is no reason to prefer any one form of belief over another. Perhaps this is what we are likely to find in Beckett: that there is the impulse or the gesture of unreasoning belief, without a particular or determined content. Belief has a way in Beckett of suddenly being precipitated, out of the act of narrating alone. 'Yes, it was a pomeranian. The less I think of it the more certain I am'.

This exposure to the nature and consequences of belief is part of the condition of finitude that Beckett can never wholly set aside or let alone, the condition precisely of never being able to account for oneself, because one may always at any one moment be betrayed into such accounting. It is, however, also true that Beckett's exposure can become a self-protective routine, a shield against exposure, just as masochistic self-shaming can be brandished or deployed as a defence against the hypervisibility of shame.

And it is just this kind of apophatic routine that makes Beckett's work come to resemble and probably provide some considerable comfort to the negative theology of some forms of modern critical theory. Beckett's work sometimes comes close to the arrogant or anxious intransigence that, far from being a mode of the 'nohow on' is a self-propagation, because it has taken itself so far beyond predicable belief as to constitute a kind of authoritarian inviolability, an immunity of the ineffable. The lexicon of the illimitable that expresses itself in so many positive forms of excess in critical theory has passed across into a religious discourse that secures all the traditional forms of prestige of metaphysics in the mode of a negative, or, rather, of a deferred or conditional negative, a negative that will never allow itself to resolve into positive negativity.

This pride in being laid low is a familiar predicament in the history of religion, which has seen so many efforts at disestablishment, whether among Montanists, Diggers, Levellers, Shakers, Quakers, so liable to found schools of belief and find followings. It is in this sense that 'the dirty low-down Low Church Protestant high-brow' has helped form a kind of low church, a church sustaining itself in abasement raised to the condition of indemnified self-assurance.

Beckett's work finds its unfolding between imposed and exposed belief. By imposed belief, I mean belief that comes unbelievably from the outside, and is therefore relatively easy to dispose of. *Texts for Nothing* perhaps gives us the handy-dandy of belief and unbelief in most concentrated form. Much of the text is taken up with the work of unbelieving, the effort to effect unconsent in the face of implausible beliefs - 'It's they murmur my name, speak to me of me, speak of a me, let them go and speak of it to others, who will not believe them either, or who will believe them too' (Beckett 1984, 87) – or with the denunciation of the impulse to believe attributed to his keepers or internal locutors – 'Vile words to make me believe I'm here , and that I had a head, and a voice, a head believing this, then that' (Beckett 1984, 107) But the *Texts for Nothing* are also corrugated by the will-to-credulity: 'I had it told to me evening after evening, the same old story I knew by heart and couldn't believe' (Beckett 1984, 74). Rather than being simply imposed upon him, the voice in *Texts for Nothing* is in a continuing condition of exposure to his belief, and need for belief. 'From An Abandoned Work' provides two striking examples of the intemperate power of belief to erupt into the work, discovered, with a kind of delight, after the fact:

> Ah my father and mother, to think they are probably in paradise, they were so good. Let me go to hell, that's all I ask, and go on cursing them there, and them look down and hear me, that might take some of the shine off their bliss. Yes, I believe all their blather about the life to come, it cheers me up, and unhappiness like mine, there's no annihilating that. (Beckett 1984, 133)

An even more plausible moment of involuntarily recovered belief, that cannot quite be dismissed as credulity, occurs a few lines later. 'A ton of worms in an acre, that is a wonderful thought, a ton of worms, I believe it. Where did I get it, from a dream, or a book read in a nook when a boy, or word overheard as I went along, or in me all along and kept under until it could bring me joy' (Beckett 1984, 134). Indeed, the very determination not to believe, the will-to-incredulity often finds itself ring-a-rosying with the items of belief: 'Organs, a without, it's easy to imagine, a god, it's unavoidable, you imagine them, it's easy, the worst is dulled, you doze away, an instant. Yes, God, fomenter of calm, I never believed, not a second' (Beckett 1973, 307).

Perhaps the most sober and most slowly-dissipated eruption of belief is the pseudo-religious discussion of the belief in 'a way out' among the denizens of the cylinder in *The Lost Ones*. The first thing we learn about the belief is that it fluctuates, but with a sort of permanently-recurring rhythm: 'From time immemorial rumour has it or better still the notion is abroad that there exists a way out. Those who no longer believe so are not immune from

believing so again in accordance with the notion requiring as long as it holds that here all should die but in so gradual and to put it plainly so fluctuant a manner as to escape the notice even of a visitor' (Beckett 1984, 162-3). The belief also gives rise to sectarian rivalry, rendered with mock-scholarly solemnity as though they were the terms of a medieval disquisition:

> Regarding the nature of this way out and of its location two opinions divide without opposing all those still loyal to that old belief. One school swears by a secret passage branching from one of the tunnels and leading in the words of the poet to nature's sanctuaries. The other dreams of a trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling giving access to a flue at the end of which the sun and other stars would still be shining. (Beckett 1984, 163)

Once again, this division is as it were multiplied through fluctuation, as members of the two parties of belief repeatedly change affiliation: 'Conversion is frequent either way and such a one who at a given moment would hear of nothing but the tunnel may well a moment later hear of nothing but the trapdoor and a moment later still give himself the lie again.' (Beckett 1984, 163).

Gradually, however, a kind of logical trajectory seems to emerge from the arbitrary fluctuations: 'The fact remains none the less that of the two persuasions the former is declining in favour of the latter but in a manner so desultory and slow and of course with so little effect on the comportment of either sect that to perceive it one must be in the secret of the gods' (Beckett 1984, 162). The last phrase neatly encapsulates the credential fissure, for it either means having the omniscience of divine beings' or 'having the all-seeing point of view of those seated in the gods, i.e. the gallery. Nevertheless, and though we have earlier been assured that 'it is doubtful that such a one exists', the conviction grows that there is a logic, and even a providence in this shift from belief in a way out via the tunnels to a way out through the roof.

> For those who believe in a way out possible of access as via a tunnel it would be and even without any thought of putting it to account may be tempted by its quest. Whereas the partisans of the trapdoor are spared this demon by the fact that the hub of the ceiling is out of reach. Thus by insensible degrees the way out transfers from the tunnel to the ceiling prior to never having been. (Beckett 1984, 163)

Belief here seems to be governed either by self-interest (better a belief in something safely impossible, a belief on which it would not be possible to act, than a testable belief that, once tested, would in the end inevitably lead

one to despair, even if that is what is going to happen anyway. .The passage ends with a remarkable tender salute to the helpless determination of the cylindrees to continue in 'possession of their belief (and the grammar allows the possession to go both ways round) right up to the putative end of their world: 'So much for a first aperçu of this credence so singular in itself and by reason of the loyalty it inspires in the hearts of so many possessed. Its fatuous little light will be assuredly the last to leave them always assuming they are darkward bound' (Beckett 1984, 163).

The Derridean and the Badiouan modes of the religious are lent credence by two distinct modes of writing in Beckett, the omnimpotence of the Derridean mode which sustains and succours itself through the indefinite holding at bay of belief, and the austere vigilance of Badiou, on the *qui vive* for some principle that would transcend the believing business. The Derridean mode of opulently maximised denegation comes to a head in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, and the Badiouan in the mode of vigilant parsimony visible in later, sterner texts like *Worstward Ho* and *Stirrings Still*. Badiou is far from simply wrong, I think, to make out in Beckett's work a hankering for the event that would set at naught the twistings of 'no's knife in yes's wound' (Beckett 1984, 115), and nor is Andrew Gibson wrong in his recent efforts to reorientate our reading of Beckett in Badiou's cold, bleak light.

But, in the end, or at least for a good part of the way leading to it, Beckett is possessed by a need that exerts little traction on either Derrida or Badiou, namely the desire to have been of this world, sufficiently so, at least, to be able credibly to take leave of it. This fundamental worldliness entails a sad, glad giving over of the omnipotence of thought practised by all forms of theology, and especially the two opinions, of generalised apophasis and austere fidelity to the event, that divide without opposing those still loyal to that old belief.

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