
Negativity, Language and “God” in Beckett

This chapter investigates the resemblance of Beckett’s discourse to negative theology. I think that not only can we speak of such a resemblance but that the understanding of its function might yield new insights into a vital aspect of Beckett’s work, namely his interest in “nothingness” and his commitment to thinking in the negative. At least from Watt onwards, this author was incessantly experimenting with the rhetoric of negation, a practice that culminated in his last prose work, Worstward Ho. Fascination with “nothingness” and various attempts to capture it by focusing on language and staging its failure always accompanied this endeavor. This trait, so characteristic of Beckett’s writing, can be illustrated by an idea he expressed in the already mentioned letter to Axel Kaun: “(m)ore and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it.” Beckett’s remark, perhaps also because the name of God does not appear in it, is a quintessential expression of the idea of negative theology. According to this idea, God – who cannot be named and is, strictly speaking, “nothing” – can only be reached by tearing away the veil of language.

Negativity and God

In the concluding passages of Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words, Leslie Hill indicated the importance of negativity in reading Beckett in the following way:

The questions of Beckett’s writing are questions of negativity, and the fate of Beckett’s texts hangs, quite uniquely, on the issue of how the power of the negative in his work is understood. Indeed, the history of reception of Beckett’s texts could be written in terms of the different interpretations put forward as to the force and significance of the

575 What Marlène Zarader argues with respect to Blanchot applies just as well to Beckett: he wanted to be the “guardian of Nothing,” rather than the “shepherd of Being.” Marlène Zarader, L’être et le neutre. A partir de Maurice Blanchot (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001).
negative. It leads one to believe that the single most important reason for Beckett’s success, with critics and audiences alike, is in the questions his work raises as to the shape and character of the negative, the different, the other, the something without name that haunts not only the words and rhythms of Beckett’s writing, but also the words with which audiences, too, strive to pattern their lives.578

What is the meaning of “the negative, the different, the other, the something without the name” in Beckett? The idea of God seems not to be very distant from the idiom of this phrase. Leslie Hill must have realized this affinity, for later on579 he qualified his own position by insisting that the “use of negative constructions” is “not the admission of God by the back passage.” In other words, here Hill severs the link between negativity and God, the possibility of which had been opened up by his suggestive words in Beckett’s Fiction.

I would argue that there is more to the link between negativity and God than Hill’s denial implies, for the reliance of mystical discourse on negativity is by no means accidental. They are mutually dependent – which is well captured by Jacques Derrida when he says that the reading of “God” as “that without which one would not know how to account for any negativity (...) will always be possible.”580 While sympathizing with Hill’s intention to keep negativity and God apart, I think that this intention reflects just one certain way of thinking “God,” namely as presence. The tradition of negative theology permits such a reading. However, there is more than one possible way to think about “God” in accordance with this tradition.

The other possible approach is to resist lapsing into thinking Him as presence. On this reading God would be a name of a certain void and of a process that is propelled by this void. In this chapter I want to consider the possibility that Beckett’s art was an example of such a discourse, namely a discourse focused on articulating God as absence.

The discourse focused on articulating God in the negative has a long history. The procedure was known to the Stoics, to the neo-Pythagoreans, to the neo-

578 163, my italics.
579 In a presentation held at the “Beckett Against the Grain” conference (York, England: May 1999).
Platonists. It appears in the hermetic texts of the Hellenistic Gnostics and in the texts of the Judeo-Christian authors. Within the Christian tradition the first known adherent of the speaking about God in the negative, via negativa was Dionysius the Aeropagite (5th century), whose work, translated in the 9th century by Scotus Eriugena into Latin, prepared the way for other apophatic discourses in which the neoplatonic and, after Aquinas, thomistic influences prevailed alternately: for example those of Meister Eckhart (1260-1329), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) or, as late as the 17th century, Angelus Silesius.

Recently, the discourse of negative theology has drawn renewed attention, especially since the philosophical project of Jacques Derrida (most notably the part accompanying the introduction of the notion of différence) has been repeatedly identified with apophatic discourse. This comparison brought about a number of responses from Derrida that in turn provoked a substantial critical discussion about the rapprochement between philosophy and theology and the way other discourses hinge on the apophatic. As a result, the quasi-apophatic thought of Derrida that both subscribes to and questions this tradition cannot be ignored when addressing the topic of negative theology. It is partly in the wake of the above discussion that negative theology no longer indicates merely an immensely rich yet obsolete, esoteric tradition, but rather stands for a kind of rhetoric from which we draw new insights on the functioning of language and representation. It is this latter content of negative theology that I want to address when examining the resemblance of Beckett’s discourse to it. The echoes of the via negativa in Beckett go therewith beyond epigonism — they do not testify to a certain nostalgia for a remote tradition, but they employ a strategy characteristic of this tradition in an experimental way — to let certain effects become apparent in its working.

Negative theology begins with the insight that predicative language (that is, the formulations of the type S is P) is inadequate to speak about God. In the words of

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581 Rico Sneller, Het Woord is schrift geworden. Derrida en de negatieve theologie. (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1998), 52.

582 For example by Mikel Dufrenne in “Pour une philosophie non théologique.” See also Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 73-77/535-539. For an extensive discussion of the misunderstandings around this issue (Mikel Dufrenne’s going to the opposite extreme in particular) see Revealing Revelations” in Hent de Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 40-95. “Rodolphe Gasché’s “God, for Example,” contains (also) a recapitulation of the discussion around this issue. (150-170).

583 Among others, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” and “Sauf le nom.”

Meister Eckhart "God is neither this nor that, that man can say" (Got inist noch diz noch daz, daz man gesprechin mac). This insight of non-adequacy that as such already indicates an alternative to predicative language in the form of negative attribution is the first step of the via negativa.

The next step is from negation to subtraction. The negation of the via negativa is not dialectical and thus is irredeemable. (A dialectic would promise a third moment in which the positive element, i.e., the first moment, after being negated in the second moment, is finally recuperated via a synthesis or Aufhebung in the third.) That which is excluded by negation is excluded for good and cannot be reintroduced – herein lies the characteristic radicality of the via negativa. Since that which is negated is therewith elided from discourse, there remains less and less to be said – or rather to be unsaid. As a consequence, the discourse evolves towards being rarefied to the point of silence. As Pseudo-Dionysius says in his "Mystical Theology":

> my argument now rises (...) and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be one with him who is indescribable.

By rarefying the discourse, negative theology moves towards a void, which can only be filled up with a mystical experience -- or so the proponents of negative theology surmised. The favorite image illustrating the void is the one of the desert. It is not by accident that the "desert" which is the image of ultimate rarefaction is also the biblical place of encounters with God: the desert was the ultimate image of renunciation, a self-denial, which by its negative aspect paved the way to the direct intimation of God. The deserted space of Beckett's stage settings reflects this climate of renunciation.

It may be concluded that the discourse of negative theology eventually recuperates the presence of God. After naming everything God was not, it would be somehow possible to experience His sheer presence in the created linguistic void or desert. Yet a careful reading of the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart

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clearly demonstrates that the via negativa can only endlessly hover over the threshold of the promised revelation without being able to step over it. The experience of the presence of God is simply not built into its procedure.

Derrida's radical reading of the via negativa, in which he refrains from conceiving the final goal of the apophatic discourse in terms of an experience of presence, allows him to assign it to a larger domain. After detracting the final moment of God's presence, the via negativa can be approached as a textual practice proper to many discourses, a procedure of address constructed on the principle of negation. As Derrida says, negative theology is a "language" or an "attitude toward (it)," and

[b]y a more or less tenable analogy, one would thus recognize some traits, the family resemblance of negative theology, in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination, endlessly multiplying the defenses and the apophatic warnings.587

This is a reading of apophasis in which that to which the address directs itself is effaced. The discourse empties itself in order to arrive at an empty place. Even though empty, or maybe precisely in virtue of being such, this place is of great interest to modern philosophy and theology – and, as I argue in this essay, to Beckett's "writings." The space, which can no longer accommodate the presence of God, and which therefore is home to an originary absence is perceived by Derrida as the locus of that which he calls "writing," "différance" or the "trace" – a quasi-transcendental principle governing our experience. The purpose of the thus modified negative way is then to address something that cannot be isolated in its presence but that can only be discerned in its working. This emptying, kenosis of discourse is the place where the interests of Beckett, negative theology and Derridean reflection on it come together.

The Negative Way in Beckett

The negative discourse so often stigmatized as heresy was in fact the most critical, consistent and uncompromising way of speaking about God. It is not surprising that it appealed to Beckett. Several critics stress the relevance of the mystical tradition for his writing. It is known that Beckett read the work of mystics in his youth, that he discussed the writings of Meister Eckhart (1260-1329) with Charles Juliet in 1977 and that he quoted the 5th century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius in his 1931/2 "Dream" notebook and subsequently in the Dream of Fair to Middling Women. The same notebook contains references to St. Augustine, John of the Cross, Thomas à Kempis and Julian of Norwich.

The content of what has been widely referred to as Beckett's "revelation" or "mystical experience" reflects the mode of renunciation so characteristic of negative theology. Beckett restates this experience in the following words: "I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding."588 It would be an oversimplification to treat this revelatory moment (that took place in the summer of 1945 – and thus after Watt and before Waiting for Godot) as a sharp caesura indicating a radical and unexpected change in Beckett's work. On the other hand, it is undeniable that it reflects a direction that this later work pursued and that one aspect of this direction was the radicalization of its apophatic nature.

It is not difficult to observe that Beckett's miming of the discourse of negative theology is often playful – it has the nature of an experiment designed more to test the tenacity of language than to bring about its rarefaction. This is especially true of the early texts which tend to mimic the via negativa in its rhetorical patterns (various modes of "unsaying")589 rather than in its inevitable consequence (silence). True, Beckett's silence is never far away – but only from a certain point on in his work is language deliberately thinned down in order to expose it in its working, rarefaction becoming an instrument of inquiry. I will discuss two cases of such playful early "unsaying," one in Beckett's early novel Watt, and one in Waiting for Godot.

588 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, 352.
589 The meaning of "unsaying" in Beckett evolves: from the neat reversal of the order of what is said (Watt), through bringing language into turmoil or "undoing" it (Lucky's monologue in Waiting for Godot), to the retraction of what has been said (The Unnamable).
At first, the "unsaying" in Beckett's work consists not in a retraction but simply in speaking backwards, in the reversal of spelling- and syntactic order. This kind of situation takes place in Beckett’s novel *Watt*, a humorously mystical account of the perambulations of the titular character including the description of his stay in the house of the unfathomable Mr. Knott. The “nicest” examples of the *via negativa* in Beckett can be found in *Watt*, even though they are surrounded with red herrings and even though their function is not as clear as in later writings. *Watt* could be, after all, just a parody (of negative theology among other things) and still be as good a book. Yet the element of the mystical is undeniably there. *Watt* starts speaking back to front, as Shira Wolosky reminds us, in pursuit of Mr.Knott’s Nothingness” and in this he imitates “the linguistic breakdown of an apophatic prayer.” The breakdown here described is not incurable – even though this “unsaying” renders the speaker apparently incomprehensible there is a code to it. An example of the negative way of thinking from *Watt* illustrates this:


Which, by following the narrator's instructions (in this case: “invert (...) the order of letters in the word together with that of the sentences in the period”), could be translated into something like “So lived, for time. Not gay, not sad. Not awake, not asleep. Not alive, not dead. Not body, not spirit. Not wat/Watt, not Knott. Till day came, to go.” The narrator’s comment is, appropriately, “This meant nothing to me.” For the objective of the *via negativa* is, precisely, to express the “nothing.”

The other mode of “unsaying” – by undoing language irreversibly – can be found in *Waiting for Godot* written in a few years after *Watt*. The incomprehensibility of Lucky's monologue is the more tragic as it is no longer reversible – this time the code is missing. If the essence of negative theology can be said to consist in provoking a linguistic breakdown in order to address God, then Lucky’s soliloquy is an extreme case of such an experiment. Wolosky points out that this monologue,

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591 Wolosky 90,97.
592 165.
593 165, my emphasis.
while playing with the idea of God "outside time without extension" by a pun on scholastic terminology links the discourse on God to a linguistic breakdown known as aphasia. This might suggest, among other possibilities, that only through aphasia is it possible to speak about God -- or that speaking about God leads to aphasia.

Such expressions as "unwording," "unsaying," and even "leastward on" testify to the interaction of Beckett's work with the discourse of negative theology. Mary Bryden mentions the "apophatic" characteristic of Beckett's work and the "kenotic" mode in which Christ is depicted in *Waiting for Godot*. Precisely apophatic kenosis – draining language of all content by means of "unsaying" – is the essence of negative theology. Wolosky goes even so far as to insist that "the premises and practices of negative theology act as a generative condition of Beckett's books" and that, for example, "The Unnamable openly parades this impulse," in stating the procedure to be followed. "'First I'll say what I'm not,' declares the narrator, 'that's how they told me to proceed, then what I am.'"594 "The way of negation – of passing to true reality by progressive denial and reduction – is here declared the Unnamable's very method."595

Yet, if this mimicking was applied as a method, its function has not been sufficiently elucidated. We are familiar with Beckett's ambiguous but mainly negative attitude to religion which many commentators qualified as agnostic, his denial of having "religious emotions" or "the least faculty or disposition for the supernatural."596 On the other hand, as Derrida reminds us, there is always a possibility that "the extreme and most consistent forms of declared atheism will have always testified to the most intense desire of God."597 But then again, if it is true that the propensity of Beckett's discourse to the rhetorical practice of negative theology testifies (just as the negative discourse itself) to the "most intense desire of God," how is this God to be thought? How is it possible to think God – without lapsing into the metaphysical trap of thinking him as presence or being?

594 Beckett, Trilogy, 326.
Thinking God as Language

In its most radical gesture, the via negativa addresses God without hoping ever to reach him in his presence or being, without conferring on him the status of being. God addressed in the negative way would be, in Jean-Luc Marion's formulation, a "God without being" (Dieu sans l'être). According to this discourse "God" "is" not; the word "being" does not apply in the discourse on God. About God so thought nothing can be said, except maybe what Hamm says in Endgame: "The bastard, he doesn't exist" (my italics). Or what we learn about Mr Knot in Watt: "Not that Watt was ever to have any direct dealings with Mr. Knott, for he was not." In this God of questionable origin who "doesn't exist," can be addressed in prayer, but to no avail. The only thing that can be evoked in this prayer is "God's place which is not God." In that place, that which we call "God" is visible in its effects. According to the tradition of negative theology, God's place, the place where God appears, is the origin of language: as Angelus Silesius put it, "der Ort ist dass Wort," "the place is the Word."

Der Ort ist dass Wort.

Der ort und's Wort ist Eins, und wäre nicht der ort
(Bey Ewger Ewigkeit!) es wäre nicht das Wort.

The place is the word

The place and the word is one, and were the place not
(of all eternal eternity!) the word would not be.

God without being and, arguably, favourite his place — language — are interdependent and neither of the two can be thought without the other. It is

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598 "(I) faille libérer 'Dieu' de la question sur/de l'Être." Jean-Luc Marion, Dieu sans l'être (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 91. This is also how Heidegger may be said to have attempted to speak about God: by crossing-out or erasing the notion of being.


600 Beckett, Watt, 64, my emphasis.


603 "Place" is a "site of gathering [that accommodates] Being and beings" — hence a site that accommodates
impossible to think God independently of language. In the end, that which negative theology addresses is language and the fact that it cannot point beyond itself. In other words, negative theology is a rhetorical practice that addresses its own rhetoricity. I suggest that Beckett's gesture towards it is prompted by the realisation that the only thing we can speak about are the effects of God in language, and that God is, strictly speaking, "nothing," but a "nothing" that "happens," that has the status of an "event." This was "(w)hat distressed Watt": that "nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen, in his mind."604

The Dependence of God on Language

Thought about God, both in its positive and negative modus, originates in and through language. This is the questionable origin of God, the reason for Hamm to call him a "bastard": God is the consequence of the way our language is. And our language is such, that "any expression of an abstract idea can only be by analogy"605 -- to an expression denoting something particular and tangible. Only by an analogy that obliterates the tangible, "primitive" referents does a new, universal and abstract concept enter language. In the words of Watt,

the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man, which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time, and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realised that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite.606

If this gesture of trying to account for the sublime, abstract, or baffling by drawing parallels to the everyday and tangible, so well captured here by Beckett, is

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604 Beckett, Watt, 73.
indeed “the only way one can speak” then it indicates something very elementary about language, namely the intersection of the ontological and the ontic, or of the transcendental and the empirical. By virtue of this intersection one element of the pair is unthinkable without the other – an insight central to Derrida’s thought.607

It is not inconceivable that the principle of analogy “engendered” or “yielded” a couple of abstract ideas including the idea of God. Our language’s ability to express abstract ideas would in this case be the origin of the idea of a transcendent being. This being, by analogy, would be capable of explaining the world.

HAMM: We’re not beginning to...to... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!

HAMM: I wonder. (Pause.) Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be able to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. (Voice of rational being.) Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at! 608

**The Dependence of Language on God**

As much though as God is the product of language, this language (as Jean-Luc Marion has argued609), always already has the structure of prayer and is thus dependent on God, understood as the telos of this prayer. Prayer, as the etymology of the word610 tells us (the word evolved from Middle French prière, from Medieval Latin precaria, from Latin, feminine of precarius - “obtained by entreaty”), is a precarious address, a leap into uncertainty. If language has its paradigm in prayer (praise, as Derrida demonstrates, rather than being non-conceptual, is a paradigm of

606 Beckett, Watt, 74, my italics.
609 Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 259-277.
610 See e.g., lemma “prière” in Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969). This is not to say that prayer is a non-predicative mode of speech. Cf. Derrida's
predication), all predication is a function of an address to God. This testifies to an interdependence of “God” and language. It is no longer possible to conceive either of them as “a purported Archimedean point outside all textual determinations,” in other words as a “transcendental signified,” to use Derrida’s expression.

As mentioned before, Beckett’s project of experimenting with the rhetoric of “unsaying” may be said to have culminated in his last prose work, *Worstward Ho*. This remarkable text might be read among other things as a reflection on the human condition, a phenomenological study of experience, or as an account of the persistence of artistic inquiry going on “till nohow on.” It seems to me that it is possible to interpret the quest of *Worstward Ho* as directed towards “God,” understood as the condition of possibility (and impossibility) of meaning and language.

In this reading I will be trying to avoid reading “God” as presence or substance (including the hyper-ousia, excess of presence that Derrida shows to be the telos of various negative theologies). While it has been demonstrated (against Dufrenne) that Derrida’s project is not that of theology and (against Marion) that it is not eliminating God either, it is possible to show, as Rodolphe Gasché does, that in addressing God, Derrida pursues the law (in the form of the quasi-transcendental structures of referral) “regulating the exchange between different types of discourse on the Other.” Gasché goes on to show that it is in virtue of thinking this law that Derrida can say that God is an effect of the trace. The “theological trap” consists in the fact that even when we try to keep in mind that “the dream of full presence is not possible without a trace,” since a trace is “erasable,” we have to do with a “structural occultation and oblivion [of the trace] by the idea of God.” Gasché’s argument stems from the conviction that “[b]rutally put, God is not God if, even as absconditus, He cannot be said somehow to exist.” Without denying that this is a possible reading of “God” in Derrida (cf. “the name of God, at least as it is pronounced within classical rationalism”), in my exposition I am trying to pursue a different reading of “God,”

discussion concerning this issue in “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.”
614 Gasché, “God, for Example,” 154, seemingly oblivious of Kant’s refutation of the ontological proof of God: existence is not a predicate...
615 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 71/104.
namely, as a figure, (or as a name that Derrida wants to "save" [saufl]) yet not as a figure of presence that occludes the trace. Instead, I would like to read it as the figure of an originary, quasi-transcendental, difference "before" it has been occluded by an appearance of presence (including Derrida's move beyond the ontico-ontological difference, towards the one that is "older than Being itself"), taking up what Derrida says on this topic in his essay on Levinas.

God is nothing (determined), is not life, because he is everything [,] and therefore is at once All and Nothing, Life and Death. Which means that God is or appears, is named, within the difference between All and Nothing, Life and Death. Within difference, and at bottom as Difference itself.

From its very first word, Worstward Ho addresses Being: "on" is in Greek the very word of being. But which side of the ontico-ontological difference is at stake here, Being (the Being of beings) or the beings? Introducing the question of Being in Sein und Zeit, Heidegger quotes Thomas Aquinas: "An understanding of Being is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends in entities." Of the three ways to (mis)understand the notion of Being on the basis of the way it is used in language (identity, something is what it is; existence, something is, exists; or truth, something is the case), the Heidegger of Sein und Zeit was most preoccupied to distinguish Being from "existence." "The Being of entities 'is' not an entity." God as the Supreme Being, hence also an entity, must be distinguished from "Being." To conceive "of them as equivalent would mean to give in to onto-theology, to neutralize the ontological difference between "Being" and beings (in making the former appear simply as a variation in degree of the latter). It is in order to protect the ontico-ontological difference that Heidegger insisted on a clear-cut distinction between Being (the Being of beings) and God as the Supreme Being.

617 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 115-116/170.
619 Heidegger, Being and Time, 22; Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 3.

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At the same time Heidegger was, paradoxically, inclined to thinking of God in terms parallel to those of Being, namely, by exclusion of “being” (supreme or not): in his own words, were he “to write a theology, as [he was] sometimes tempted to do, the word ‘being’ ought not to appear there.” In his “How to Avoid Speaking,” Derrida addresses this remark and points out, first, that in virtue of this exclusion of being from both “Being” and “God,” they become indistinguishable. And second, that addressing both God and Being presupposes a detour through being (in virtue of Derrida’s argument that the universal, the ontological, the ideal cannot be separated from the particular, the ontic and the real).

Heidegger says (...) that if he were to write a theology, he would avoid the word being (...). But didn’t he write it? And in it did he avoid writing the word being? In fact, since Being is not (a being) and in truth is nothing (that is), what difference is there between writing Being, this Being which is not, and writing God, this God of whom Heidegger also says that He is not? 

Consequently, *Sein und Zeit* can be read as a “theology with and without God,” the latter understood as Being or as being. This was Heidegger’s testimony, in Derrida’s words “he was not there without leaving a trace of all these folds.”

If we keep in mind Stanley Cavell’s insistence on the “hidden literality” of everything that is said in *Endgame*, Clov’s question, “what in God’s name could there be on the horizon?” anticipates the search of *Worstward Ho*, the search for the content of God’s name within the horizon of language. There is nothing representable in God’s name, unless the representation itself is addressed. This is what happens in negative theology, and this is what happens in Beckett: his negative way is, in Carla Locatelli’s words, a “duel of language” with representation, language trying to shed its function of representation.

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622 S’il m’arrivait encore d’avoir à mettre par écrit une théologie – ce à quoi je me sens parfois incité – alors le terme d’être ne saurait en aucun cas y intervenir. La foi n’a pas besoin de la pensée d’être.” Quoted in Marion, *DieuDieu sans l’être*, 5.
625 Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett's Endgame," 119.
Rather than resort to the principle of analogy as he did in Watt (speaking of God as of a man, and of man as of a termite) to account indirectly for that which cannot be accounted for as it is, Beckett does something else in Worstward Ho. One of the images (the "plodding twain") is said to be "bad as it is as it is." The doubling of the phrase "as it is" reflects the doubling inherent in any kind of re-presentation that both prevents and allows capturing its object in its presence. Since it is impossible to say "Being as it is" — and it is impossible to address beings, superior or other without the detour of an analogy or of a negation, or of a metaphor (God is precisely the name of this impossibility) — Beckett's way to deal with it is to address the detour or referral itself, the originary silence that splits the doubling of "re-" and "- presentation."

The Function of Subtraction in Beckett

Negative theology must address God and language at the same time. On the one hand, it demonstrates the origin of language in prayer (and to whom would the prayer be if not to God, whether understood as presence or as absence?); on the other hand, it prepares the way for the deconstruction of God's image by leading it back to its origin in language. In both cases, language interrogates itself. Self-interrogation, interrogation of itself was for Beckett the function of art (and thus the function of art is, in a sense, epistemological): "Art has always been this — pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric." In her Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Fiction after the Nobel Prize, Carla Locatelli concludes from the above passage that in Beckett's view, a "'pure interrogation' can only be structured as a subtraction (of rhetoric from the rhetorical question)."

Hence subtraction, earlier shown to be an essential phase in the via negativa, functions in Worstward Ho as an "epistemological instrument" (Locatelli's expression, but confirmed by Badiou's diagnosis that Beckett applies here the method of epoch ). This instrument is applied here to indicate and explore further the interdependence of language and God. According to Locatelli, the notion of

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629 Beckett, "Intercessions by Denis Devlin" in Disjecta, 91.
630 Locatelli, Unwording the World, 228. In this sense Beckett might be found, just like Heidegger, to be privileging the question, a gesture in which Derrida discerns the legacy of Aufklärung.

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subtraction stands for a process of emptying language to see what is left. Yet it might also refer to the process of emptying for its own sake. Indeed, the primary concern of *Worstward Ho* is that language empty itself:

The words too whosesoever. What room for worse! How almost true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity!631

The words seem to be “wanting in inanity” because they “ring” “true.” However, this “true ring,” as in Husserl’s expressions (that he contrasts with indications) is (Derrida demonstrates in *Speech and Phenomena*) always intertwined, *Verflochten*, with absence, death, deferral. The function of negative representation in Beckett comes to light here: it is to address the originary division, delay inherent in language that both keeps up and subverts the “true ring” of words.

**Language and God in Beckett**

The relationship between language and God in Beckett may also be determined by the latter’s reception of Dante of whom he was an avid reader. Dante’s was the idea that the fall in Paradise was semantic in nature.632 Part of the first man’s disobedience was the trespass of a linguistic sign. The punishment was appropriate to the misbehaviour: Adam, and with him the whole of mankind, experienced a fall from unmediated knowledge and communication with God to the imperfect mediation by means of (mutable) signs.633 This meant that the direct intimation of God was no longer possible. In light of the above it is interesting to consider the failure that Beckett addresses in *Worstward Ho*:

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.634

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Granted that *Worstward Ho* is an “epistemic novel,”\(^{635}\) and taking into account Dante’s reading of the mediation of language as the result of the fall, the failure addressed above consists in not being able to overcome the fall, to overcoming the mediation of signs. “Failing better” cannot undo the fall but it is nevertheless inevitable. This was negative theology’s problem: “how to talk properly of God when language can only improperly signify Him.”\(^{636}\) The purpose of negative theology would be then to unsay the distance created by the fall. This was how Beckett perceived the function of his discourse in the already mentioned letter to Axel Kaun:

> More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. 

(...) 

Language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. \(^{637}\)

The idea of representation expressed in this letter, later discarded by Beckett, was to “perforate” language in order to get beyond it to the “thing behind (it).”

The acceptance of the position that there is no “beyond” language calls for rethinking of the role of negative theology. The act of emptying of language would no longer serve the purpose of revealing that which is “behind” it but rather focus on language itself. The purpose of “failing better” would no longer be to undo the fall but rather to address the principle, the law of failing itself: the silence dividing every sign from itself. Saying is failing: “How try say? How try fail?”\(^{638}\) The function of Beckett’s negative discourse in *Worstward Ho* would be to address the saying by unsaying it. As a representation of a representation it could focus on the traces of the unsayable principle called God (itself not linguistic in nature) that is at work in Beckett’s

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\(^{635}\) Locatelli, *Unwording the World*, 230.


language, in the sense in which Caputo writes, "différance describes the possibility and the impossibility of a language that addresses God."  

### i. Original Affirmation as the Source of the Obligation to Express

Obligation recurs throughout Beckett's writing. It manifests itself in various forms of compulsive behavior of which the most characteristic is the dutiful or fearful obedience of Beckett's characters to what is often no more than a name (Godot, Mr. Knott, Youdi). With time, the names gradually disappear, making the obligation even more prominent. Obligation to express is omnipresent in Beckett's work. Next to the renowned fragment from the "Three Dialogues" to which I will return, it is especially strong in the Trilogy, in How It Is (as an obligation to quote), and in Worstward Ho. To my knowledge, Beckett has always refrained from speaking about the source of or the reason for this obligation. Beckett’s “obligation to express” bears in any case a certain resemblance the expression “creative exigency” that Bergson uses when discussing sources of moral obligation in his Two Sources of Morality and Religion, which might suggest that Beckett linked the three exigencies (creative, moral, religious) together.

As Derrida reminds us, language is dependent on a kind of original affirmation, the affirmation of the precarious identity and both power and weakness of a sign. Using language requires a minimal element of faith, by virtue of which one assumes that something means/is “what one thinks it means/is." This affirmation of a sign, despite its vulnerable and imperfect identity (for one can never be absolutely certain that something means “what one thinks it means”) coincides with the acceptance of the “obligation to express.” Once we have started to “speak” by acknowledging the

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639 Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, 13. “Différance describes the languages of faith and prayer which, as Derrida’s work evolves, prove to be not just particular examples of language, but exemplary uses that exceed linguistic categorization and tend to coincide the language itself” (ibid).

640 “[H]ow it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim.” Beckett, How It Is, 7; Comment c’est, 9.


642 See Jacques Derrida, Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question (Chicago [etc.]: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 129-136. (Jacques Derrida, Heidegger et la question; De l’esprit et autres essais (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), 114-121.) In the much discussed footnote 5 Derrida addresses the privileging of the question in Heidegger. Derrida writes: the “infinite legitimacy of questioning (...) tips over into the memory of a language, of an experience of language ‘older’ than it, always anterior and presupposed. (...) Language is already there, in advance. (...) This advance is, before any contract, a sort of promise of originary alliance to which we must have
mediated nature of all experience, it is impossible not to express, that is, to be
"silent," in other words, to leave the mediation. In his reading of Joyce's Ulysses, Derrida compares the interpretive gesture that allows us to experience "the world" to a gesture we make when receiving a phone call. The "yes" uttered into the receiver acknowledges that the mediation is there and that it is successful. This "yes, I receive you," indicates also a certain commitment (and thus faith again): it means, "yes, I will.
I will respond to what you say next. What you are going to say will not remain without response." In other words, in every interpretive gesture (and that includes all experience) we have said "yes," and in saying "yes" we have promised. It is in this promise that the "obligation to express" is rooted.

"Thought is fidelity to this promise," Derrida says. But the thought should be aware that the promise at stake (Derrida repeats Paul de Man's pun on Heidegger's famous phrase "die Sprache spricht": "die Sprache verspricht," and later "die Sprache verspricht sich") is not simply docile. "[L]anguage or speech promises (...) but also goes back on its word, becomes undone or unhinged, derails or becomes delirious, deteriorates, becomes corrupt just as immediately and as essentially."

The imperative "say on" in Worstward Ho reflects this obligation, arising from being thrown into language. It means "you have (always) already said (even if only in silence). Go on saying." "One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will," laments the Unnamable. Once we have started to speak, everything we say addresses what has already been said. In Beckett's words, language is "praying (but also "praying") on foresaid remains." This prayer on or to the remains does not take place within a unifying sphere of a "dome," but echoes from "temple" to "temple." The vocabulary of places of worship mimics human anatomy (the dominant image in this passage is that of a human skull) but beyond these two referential series the originary division of meaning (between the two temples) appears to be even more important.

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643 In the beginning was the telephone." Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," 270. See also Samuel Weber, "The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions," in Institution and Interpretation, ed. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
644 Derrida, Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question, 93/118.
645 Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 277.
647 Beckett, Trilogy, 301.
Beckett's observation that it is impossible to express does not entail that no expression is possible. This paradox is well known to Beckett-readers who seem to be repeatedly reminded that a condition of the possibility of discourse (and of meaning, truth, reference etc.) is rooted in its impossibility. Not only in the fragments that show both the impossibility of expressing and the gesture of expressing, despite this impossibility but in the whole oeuvre as such, pursuing silence but not actually falling silent.

There is of course Beckett's famous dictum from the "Three Dialogues" that indicates the impossibility to express. Beckett had by then already indicated impossibility (*empêchement*) as the field calling for artistic investigation.

There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.\(^\text{650}\)

The statement that there is "nothing with which to express" may reflect a conviction that linguistic reference is not possible (and so it is commonly read). Yet it can also mean that that which must be expressed is not a thing -- that it is not something that "is," but, depending on how we name it, "Being," "God," or some quasi-transcendental principle. In this case, the tool (the "nothing with which to express") and the object of expression (the "nothing to express") coincide -- the tool becoming the object of expression, exactly as in my discussion of the "subjectile" in Beckett. The obligation is then to express the impossible. We might say that all experience begins with this impossibility or impasse, this, as Watt called it, "nothing" that "happened" and that "continued to happen."

But if he could say, when the knock came, the knock become a knock, on the door become a door, in his mind, presumably, in his mind, whatever that might mean, Yes, I remember, that is what happened

\(^{650}\) Beckett, *Disjecta*, 139.
then, if then he could say that, then he thought that then the scene
would end, and trouble him no more.\footnote{Beckett, \textit{Watt}, 74.}

What "troubled" Watt was the unbridgeable gap, the difference between the
knock as it was, and its becoming "a knock" to him. Watt's "mystical" experience
related to the visit of the Galls consisted in the impasse produced by this difference,
the impossibility to express. Beckett seems to have indicated precisely this impasse
as the object of the obligation to express, when, in the "Three Dialogues," he
criticized the art that "never stirred from the field of the possible."\footnote{Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," 139.} To \(D\)'s question:
"What other plane can there be for the maker?" \(B\)'s response was "logically none."
This illustrates Beckett's urge to investigate the impossible -- and there is no better
way to express and explore the impasse than the negative way that consists in the
impasse itself, in the words of Angelus Silesius,

Go there where you cannot; see where you do not see;

Hear where nothing rings or sounds (...).\footnote{Silesius, \textit{The Cherubinic Wanderer}, 1:199.}

In this sense Beckett's statement above could be interpreted as attempting to
reach through negation to the most radical conditions of experience, language and
knowledge, conditions that are not transcendental but co-dependent on the very
things they bring about. And these conditions would be arising out of an impasse.

For, despite the fact that the artist is "helpless to paint" -- since "there is
nothing to paint and nothing to paint with,"\footnote{Beckett, \textit{Disjecta}, 142.} in \textit{Worstward Ho} we read:

Nothing to show a woman and yet a woman.\footnote{Beckett, \textit{Nohow On}, 108.}

Nothing to show a child and yet a child. A man and yet a man. Old and
yet old. Nothing but ooze how nothing and yet.\footnote{Beckett, \textit{Nohow On}, 115.}
Already in *Endgame* Beckett signalled the feeble nature of the sign that is also its strength. The language of Hamm and Clov may be made of "hollow bricks" (if we read with Heidegger the house as language, "the house of Being"\(^{657}\), in other words constructed from pieces of vacuum, but still it does not collapse. Also in *Worstward Ho* the signs are "graves of none" in the "old graveyard" of language:

In that old graveyard. Names gone and when to when.\(^{658}\)

They refer, properly speaking, to nothing. Despite, or maybe by virtue of this hollowness of the sign, representation is omnipresent. This precarious status of language that originates from "nothing," from "impossibility" (or from God so defined) is addressed in *Worstward Ho*.

### ii. The Unnamable Source of Authority

The first word of *Worstward Ho* is not only "the very word of Being." It is also an *imperative* to continue with something that apparently started without us. This injunction to go on might address the Heideggerian notion of *Geworfenheit* (a state of "thrownness," of "being thrown" into Being, or, as Locatelli puts it, the state of being caught in a "hermeneutic circle"\(^{659}\)). It echoes the Mexican poem by Manuel Gutierrez Najera that Beckett translated as "To Be":

"We crave a single instant of respite / and a voice in the darkness urges: 'On!'"\(^{660}\)

Much of *Worstward Ho* is written in the same, imperative mode, indicating that it comes from some higher yet unidentifiable and absent authority. The modus of

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\(^{659}\) Locatelli, *Unwording the World*, 233.

\(^{660}\) Octavio Paz, ed., *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (transl. by Samuel Beckett) (London: Thames and Hudson,
authority is already there in language, conferring obligation and hiding its origin in one gesture. "The words too whosesoever."661 "On. Say on."662 This is an obligation to speak, but who or what says these words?


In the above fragment, the demanding yet absent other (speaking in the imperative) is indistinguishable from the one who is called upon to obey (speaking in the constative). They speak in a single voice -- the demand speaks through the voice of the demanded. It is interesting to note that Heidegger defines in a similar way the voice of conscience: the call of conscience is from Dasein to Dasein. On this reading, "on" would be the voice of conscience summoning Dasein "to its ownmost potentiality for Being its Self," to authentic existence.664 "Ever tried. Ever failed" is no excuse: "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."665 The uttering of the injunction "Say on" and the performance of the duty it confers (to speak, to express) are one. This is not only an act of "saying" -- the saying itself is shown, or "said," here.

_Worstward Ho_ is a portrait of the "saying," a portrait of language in its working, a self-portrait of language. Language speaks here itself (compare Heidegger's expression "Die Sprache spricht"), as through a medium in an oracle - for the origin of the words remains unknown. This almost-autonomy of language reflects the position of God. As Derrida says, "Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak."666 Yet that where the language comes from cannot be named (a gesture similar to the one in which Derrida, in _Speech and Phenomena_, attributes to Husserl's "critical vigilance" that he did not address the essence of the "sign in general"):
Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words.667

The above passage addresses that which engenders words, the "language into which we are thrown." Can it be called "God'? That which engenders words is anonymous. Similarly Heidegger says about conscience: "if the caller is asked about its name (...) it (...) refuses to answer."668 (And the functioning of conscience in Heidegger can be understood as relying on a temporal deferral, différance.) Negative theology might be helpful here: "in negative theology ... that which calls forth speech is called 'God.'”669 "Whose words? Ask in vain." The question about the identity of the voice is of no avail - unless you know the negative way: "Or not in vain if say no knowing." The only way God can be addressed in His singularity is by negation: "no words for it whose words." The pronoun "it" functions here as it does in Heidegger's "es gibt," which is to say that it is something that "gives" (i.e., produces certain effects) rather than "is." In this it displays a similar structure to Derrida's "différance." "It" lies at the origin of language and representation.

As Caputo insists, God is not "différance." But then, the main force of his argument is directed at the God of negative theology, of whom Derrida has already shown that He must somehow be permitted to partake of being (whether by relation or by degree - beyond being or more than being). After having dealt with this distinction, Caputo qualifies his position as "sous rature, with a measure of sic et non,"670 in order to say that "[différance is altogether too meagre and too poor a thing to settle the question of God, as if there were only one question instead of a mise en abîme of questions spreading in every direction."671 But is it not precisely the working of différance to permit this mise en abîme to "spread in every direction?"

Where none. For the body. To be in.672

667 Beckett, Nohow On, 98.
668 Heidegger, Being and Time 318/274.
671 Ibid., 13.
672 Beckett, Nohow On, 89.
On the other hand, again, it is impossible to think “it” as an origin independent of what it originates. “It” can only be made visible in its effects, that is, in the language, in the words. The words are everything we have to express their origin:

Worsening words whose unknown. (...) Dim void shades all they.  

A sphere of secrecy protects the anonymous source of authority. The way to express the “it” is, just as in negative theology, by renunciation: images are rarefied, and words are banned (“pox on bad”). A sphere of secrecy surrounds the origin of words and images. The productive “dim” is described as a “grot” or a “gulf” in the void in which “shadows” appear. Both “grot” and “gulf” carry mystical associations: “grot” is also a “crypt” (from Italian “grotto”) and “gulf” can be both a “vault” and an “abyss.”

Whence no knowing.

At all costs unknown.

According to Derrida the negative discourse is inseparable from the notion of the secret.

There is a secret of the denial and the denial of the secret. The secret, as secret, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself. This denegation does not happen to it by accident; it is essential and originary.

Significantly, Derrida has also confessed that he has a “taste for the secret.” At the beginning of my argument I discussed Derrida’s preference of the secret by linking it

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673 Beckett, Nohow On, 104.  
674 Beckett, Nohow On, 96.  
to the secrétaire, a container for gathering. On the other hand, I have also shown how in Derrida the force of law relies on that which is secret because endlessly deferred, the "mystical foundation of authority." In the figure of the secret and of the secrétaire that harbors the possibility of the secret, the "essence" of literature now revisits this argument, showing itself to be no different from the economy of the discourse on God.

I have been trying, with the help of Derrida, to approach Beckett in the way Derrida approaches Heidegger, when he gives a theological reading of the latter in "How to Avoid Speaking; Denials" and in Of Spirit. In other words, my intention was not to give an apodictically theological reading of Beckett that would present itself as a necessary truth but rather to demonstrate that under certain conditions such a reading is possible, and to see what this would entail for the understanding of the whole corpus of Beckett's work. It is possible to read certain aspects of Beckett's work from within the context of negative theology. To mobilize a corpus of semantic resources to make sense of Beckettian desire for the "least" which propels Worstward Ho is not the same as to assign to it an all-explanatory power. I do not wish to propound that Beckett is all about negative theology, even less that his work is about religious experience, which for Beckett, "in the only intelligible sense of that epithet" would have to be "at once an assumption and an annunciation." If religious experience so understood were to be addressed by Beckett at all, it would rather be in its impossibility. Rather, in this chapter, some aspects that can be and are associated with religion, like faith, obligation and its impossible and unnamable source, are shown to permeate language and representation. And that means that Worstward Ho, since it is about language and representation, therewith also addresses "religion." It is true that God addressed in this manner loses all specificity. But since, as Derrida says, his name is all we have got, and it is the name of a mortal, addressing in the end the "tout autre est tout autre," it is, on a certain reading at least, a very gathering, unspecific name.

I have deliberately omitted what might be taken to be the "characters" of Worstward Ho: the "head," the "crippled hands," the "pain," the "bodies" male and female, "walking" and "kneeling" which, their clothes removed and their limbs taken

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679 Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 54/60.
away, are gradually reduced to the minimum, to be in the end no more than "(t)hree pins. One pinhole." For *Worstward Ho* is mainly about words:


In the tradition of negative theology, *kenosis* is supposed to lead to a silence that enables the faithful to experience the ineffable. Needless to say, this is not the intention of Beckett’s gesture. Beckett’s insistence on the obligation to express precludes interpretation of his work as a plea for silence. Rather, silence is being investigated here in the sense of the ineffable, the secret as the source of obligation, as that which is being affirmed by language but at the same time resists any mediation by it, cannot be represented by it. (The ineffability of différance is not a mystifying gesture but a structural necessity: language, which is always a language of identity, tends to occlude difference, which it nevertheless presupposes.)

That which is left of God in Beckett cannot be understood as an absolute, whether linguistic or epistemic – not least because Beckett’s work does not allow us to think in terms of an absolute “beyond.” In a consistently developed discourse of negative theology God becomes “a name that no longer names anyone or anything.” At most one might call it a productive absence at work in language, an absence that never fails to manifest itself and that in this way is both inside and outside language. If we assign to this absence the status of the source, it is only provisionally -- for this “source” is always already embedded in language. The analysis of the discourse of negative theology demonstrates that when language becomes the object of inquiry it can only empty itself and show its original desert-like quality. I suggest that when Derrida, while referring to the kenotic procedures of negative theologies, says “‘God’ ‘is’ the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language,” he is moving beyond a simple commentary to indicate his own point of view.

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“It was on the key issue of pain, suffering and death that Beckett's religious faith faltered and quickly foundered,” writes Knowlson in Beckett's biography. At the same time it is difficult to disagree with Christopher Ricks when he observes: “Beckett ... felt twinges of the quondam believer, as in a phantom limb.” Was God a limb that Beckett discarded? Paradoxically, from the point of view of negative theology this would mean the most profound experience of God, the desired end of the via negativa, according to which only by getting rid of God can we understand His real nature. In the words of Meister Eckhart's confession: “I pray God to rid me of God.”

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684 Ricks, Beckett's Dying Words, 55. Also Charles Julliet recounts: "We discuss religion, and I ask whether he has been able to free himself from its influence. SB. 'Perhaps in my external behavior, but as for the rest...'