ICONIC SPACES

The Dark Theology of Samuel Beckett’s Drama

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Chapter 1

Introduction

While staying at his mother’s house in Ireland just after the end of World War II, Samuel Beckett decisively closed an early chapter of his writing career. He had what is often touted in Beckett criticism as a “revelation,” which at the very least was a radical insight that would guide his writing for the rest of his career and, indeed, would lead his development into the inimitable writer he became. During his stay in Foxrock, Beckett came to realize “that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, \( \text{being} \) in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I saw that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.” Beckett undoubtedly began to come into his own when he stopped producing mere carbon copies of Joycean texts. He began to write in French, which as a second, consciously learned language made it easier for him to cut through the “terribly arbitrary materiality of the word surface” (\( D 53 \)) in an attempt to make language conscious through a process of reduction. Beckett took the dictum “less is more” seriously.
It may be dangerous to make too much of a single and singular insight such as this one; to be sure, there were other important turning points in Beckett’s career. One of these was the impasse he encountered after completing _The Unnamable_, which left him floundering for quite a long while. Then a modified approach opened up new vistas of radically pared down, almost static prose such as one finds in _Worstward Ho_ and the other works of the second trilogy, the so-called closed space novels. Yet even this change depended on—or was a variant pursuit of—the revelation at Foxrock. The shift in direction after _The Unnamable_ did not solve Beckett’s dilemma; rather, it enabled him fully to articulate it in increasingly radical experiments until he found himself driven to distraction by his own uncompromising nature. In a letter, he described his work on the novel _Worstward Ho_: “Struggling with impossible prose. English. With loathing.” This idiosyncratic staccato message is part of a letter to his American producer Alan Schneider. Somewhat humorously the letter adopts the same style that dominates _Worstward Ho_ throughout. Beckett here is obsessively engaged in a project that is by definition endless.

At Foxrock, Beckett realized that his work was motivated not by fullness, but by the infinite circumscription of an unfathomable emptiness. In many ways, including its fragmentation of plot, its mélange of discursive snippets, its long stream-of-consciousness passages, Joyce’s _Ulysses_ is doubtless a typically “decentered” modernist text, but as an artistic whole it is masterminded by Joyce. It is well known that it is possible to cross-reference _Ulysses_ and to end up with a minute chronology of Bloomsday, and, in fact, with a minute portrait of Dublin. In this sense the centrality of consciousness reigns supreme in the book. Beckett’s project is in some ways more radical because he asks whether or not it is mistaken to assume that the process of writing can ever be “complete.” If writing, as Beckett proposes, is a self-contradictory process that cannot be unified or totalized, it is a mistake to approach it through the covert ego-identity of authorial consciousness, even if that hides behind the wholeness of a work of art.

This decentering of consciousness is in many ways part of a process that reaches as far back as the sixteenth century, when Giordano Bruno’s radical Copernicanism challenged the firmly entrenched dogmatic
idea that God is the ubiquitous center of the universe. In what was a
time thoroughly characterized by Aristotelian thought, Bruno returned
to Neoplatonist ideas. He took seriously the understanding that God has
his center everywhere and his circumference nowhere: if that is the case,
Bruno conjectured, it must be possible for each soul, for each conscious-
ness, to see God from any point whatsoever. In fact, the world would
cease to be a universe and be seen instead as more of a “multiverse.”
While this realization could increase human appreciation of the infinite
glory of God, at the same time it ushered in a gravitational shift from
divine to human.

A series of substitutions begins with Petrarch and continues through
the Renaissance and Enlightenment in which human consciousness be-
gins to take the place of a centered conception of God. No true decenter-
ing occurs. Instead the center merely shifts to a secular context. Thus
during the Renaissance human love, love of an idealized woman, can
lead to the pinnacle of religious experience. Idealized objects of love
such as Dante’s Beatrice or Petrarch’s Laura begin to personify the Pla-
tonic idea of beauty. In Descartes, finally, human consciousness in the
form of the cogito becomes the only source of certainty. Consciousness
becomes a self-grounding principle, with the result that the divine runs
the danger of being reduced to anthropomorphic proportions: secular-
ization dismisses the sacred and at the same time the sacralization of the
secular ensures that the boundaries between the secular and the sacred
become blurred. The divine assumes human proportions and, mutatis
mutandis, the human is given near-divine status. Another cycle repeats
itself; now the centrality of human consciousness must be questioned,
but the process can lead to utter nihilism just as much as it can facilitate
an attempt to see infinite divine transcendence for what it is.

So dislodging the centrality of human consciousness, as Beckett
does in *The Unnamable* and numerous shorter texts—works in which it
becomes impossible to say who, if anyone, is speaking—to a certain ex-
tent means dislodging the anthropomorphic God, or more generally the
God of the positive religions. But this does not equal the outright athe-
ism of a Sartrean existentialism, which was dominating the intellectual
scene in mid-twentieth-century Paris. Beckett’s position, sometimes de-
scribed as an atheism, is subtler (if one can indeed still call it atheistic),
and there were figures other than Sartre on Beckett’s intellectual horizon in the 1940s and 1950s who were much more important to his own artistic obsessions.

One of these figures is Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot himself and his immediate circle spent a good part of their intellectual lives in the shadow of existentialism. The work, for example, of his lifelong friend Emmanuel Lévinas was merely tolerated by *Les Temps Modernes*. Blanchot’s work, much like Beckett’s, deliberately undertakes to separate God and the sacred from the conceptions of the positive religions. Like Beckett, Blanchot calls himself an atheist and at the same time is aware that the statement “I am an atheist” cannot legitimately be made: “the I and God are homologous.” Blanchot lends new credence to the truism that the profession of atheism is as much a profession of belief as that of the believer.

In *Faux Pas* Blanchot memorably advances his own formulation of the dilemma in which the contradictory impulse of writing lands the writer. “The writer,” Blanchot says, “finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it. Having nothing to express must be taken in the most literal manner.” Beckett gives very similar expression to the problem and in all likelihood the convergence with his formulation in the “Three Dialogues” is not coincidental: too close is the resemblance, too obvious the influence. There Beckett postulates that in the process of writing 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” (“TD” 139). Until correspondence between Beckett and Blanchot or some other indication of direct influence surfaces, there is no way of knowing whether this convergence was a deliberate act on Beckett’s part or a coincidence born of the fact that sharing a very narrow preoccupation with a particular question might result in very similar formulations. In any case, Beckett aligns himself much more closely with the man in the shadows of existentialist Paris.

For Blanchot, as for Beckett, the process of writing is inherently aporetic: it involves the approach to a point that can never be reached and never be known discursively. This point is brought into “existence,” if such a word can aptly adumbrate its elusive nature, by the process of
writing and yet writing can never “own” it nor fully define it. At the same time the elusive point is its only “purpose”: it draws its energy from nowhere else. In a chapter titled “Encountering the Imaginary,” Blanchot describes this contradictory dynamic:

Narrative is the movement toward a point—one that is not only unknown, ignored, and foreign, but such that it seems, even before and outside of this movement, to have no kind of reality; yet one that is so imperious that it is from that point alone that the narrative draws its attraction, in such a way that it cannot even “begin” before having reached it; but it is only the narrative and the unforeseeable movement of the narrative that provide the space where the point becomes real, powerful and alluring.

In the “Three Dialogues” Beckett tries to come to theoretical terms with the possibility of an art that defines itself outside the quest for and the chase after this elusive point. This does not mean that Beckett is uncertain whether the process of writing is an aporia or not: the artistic “pursuit” never loses its aporetic nature for Beckett and he would always embrace Blanchot’s formulation. The question rather becomes whether the aporia of art is driven by a quest for what the artist knows to be an unattainable resolution of the aporia, or whether its defining feature is a simple embrace of the aporia that the artist should not even try to resolve. Indeed, Beckett argues in the “Three Dialogues,” the quest might impose a linearity on the artistic endeavor that is quite foreign to its aporetic nature.

Perplexingly for those accustomed to reading Beckett in the light of existentialist atheism and the Theater of the Absurd, the aporia of writing as it is performatively enacted in Beckett’s texts bears the same mark of irreducibility as does the divine in the texts of negative theology. The negative theologian cannot hope ever to capture God conceptually, and indeed the verbal acrobatics apophaticism enacts indicates that this cannot and must not be negative theology’s aim. And yet, despite this parallel, Beckett the self-professed atheist could not be called a “religious” person by any stretch of the imagination. “I have no religious feeling,” he said to Tom Driver. “Once I had a religious emotion. It was at my first communion. No more.” Beckett, it is safe to say, does not affirm the
presence of God. His writing attests rather to God’s absence. The “God”
his characters appeal to refuses to reveal himself and to fulfill their pe-
titions, and the world his characters inhabit lacks any indication of
bearing divine meaning or being guided by divine will. Beckett’s people
go around in circles, unable to free themselves from their self-imposed
shackles.

Yet what is this absence? Should we unquestioningly take it at face
value? Or, differently put, is the absence of God truly an absence? Mar-
tin Heidegger reminds us in “The Thing” that “absence is not nothing.”
The absence of God can be experienced as a presence and Beckett’s writ-
ing is a testimony to that experience. The absence of presence, or, more
accurately, the presence of absence thus turns into an experience of tran-
scendence. Denying God, or denying the God of the positive religions,
does not in itself abolish transcendence. For Heidegger, any tradition of
thought that proclaims the absence of God must still contend with the
“hidden fullness and wealth of what has been.” It builds on that past, in-
herits its categories, redefines itself in contradistinction from these cat-
egories. The task is to be vigilant and to look for the new, displaced ways
in which the transcendent henceforth manifests itself: it returns, for in-
stance, as the transcendental ghost of *diff érance* in Jacques Derrida, as
well as in the aporetic conception of writing in Beckett and Blanchot.
Indeed, for Heidegger it is the poet’s role to keep a space open for the
return of God.

Blanchot’s idea of the “Outside” is another such transcendental ghost
that manifests covertly a form of transcendence that takes its lead from
negative rather than positive theology. It is worth dwelling on this idea
for a while insofar as it helps us understand Beckett’s conception of writ-
ing. Writing has to pass through the “Outside” of language, a neutral,
empty space detached from author as well as reader, and therefore from
all interiority of authorial intention as well as its expression in the work
of art. The Outside approaches in the paradoxical movement of drawing
near to what withdraws. Therefore it is not really “outside” at all. That
is, it is not in opposition to something else outside itself. Properly speak-
ing, then, what Blanchot calls the “Outside” is inside and outside at the
same time.

Understanding writing in this way allows us to see it as an iconic
space: like the icon, writing through the Outside does not renounce the
realm of representation but situates itself squarely in it. Yet at the same
time it upsets the logic of representation because it functions by its own.
This is a nonmimetic logic that aims to make the divine experientially
present in the realm of representation. The painted icon uses techniques
such as reverse perspective in ways similar to the manner in which neg-
ative theology employs aporia: to indicate an order that will not bow to
the laws of representation and to the reifying human gaze. Instead the
image will exert its own gaze. The icon confronts the viewer directly; it
threatens to burst out of the frame instead of collecting the image tidily
within it. Beckett’s prose and his stage images converge in a kind of
iconic point zero, where the inevitable metonymy of aporetic discourse
tips over into the metaphor of visual iconicity.

Yet it needs to be said again that Beckett’s existentialist critics have
a point: Beckett does not profess God’s presence in the same way an icon
does. Beckett does not affirm God, but an absence or emptiness of God.
This is an iconic emptiness, however, and I contend that it is structurally
indistinguishable from the conceptual emptiness of God in negative the-
ology. But how can this parallel be a legitimate move given Beckett’s
atheism? The answer is that confessional declarations of loyalty are
wholly inadequate here. Reconsider what “atheism” means. Popular wis-
dom has it that atheism and theism are really not very different from one
another. They are two sides of the same coin: both are based on faith or
belief, the content of which the two positions merely configure differ-
ently. But there is more truth to the common sense of this picture: athe-
ism will not be a genuine alternative to theism as long as it configures
itself as the coin’s reverse. For as long as it does so, it effectively buys
into the same principles as the theism of the positive religions, namely
those of presence. Jean-Luc Nancy points out that to this day atheism
has not managed to substitute for the positivist God anything other
than another figure, instance, or idea of supreme meaning: “of an end, of
a good, of a parousia,” that is to say, of presence, and, as we have seen
earlier, especially the presence of the human being, particularly human
consciousness.10

“Absence” as it occurs in Beckett, then, must not be seen in opposi-
tion to presence. It is neither a presence nor an absence, but rather both
presence and absence: a point that withdraws as one approaches and
whose only claim to “existence” is this aporetic movement. In order to
be genuinely different from positive theism, atheism must resist the temptation to substitute another presence for God. This “deconstructed” atheism begins to converge with negative theology, putting a postmodern spin on Bruno’s suspicion of the unity of opposites.

Negative theology tries to “deconstruct” theology, so that we may speak of God unhampered by such metaphysical categories as “being” and “existence,” which pertain exclusively to the relative, human realm. Its aim is to guard the absolute transcendence of God, to whom no humanly conceivable categories like being, affirmation, or negation—presence or absence—can apply. The question whether there is or is no God is deflected and becomes a performative “event,” an experience of the nonconceptual performed in and by language in the process of writing.

The Outside provides Blanchot with an imaginary complex that enables him to consider God or the sacred detached from the positive religions—and this Beckett wants to do at all costs. As an Irishman he is acutely aware of the political aberrations of organized religion. During his formative childhood years Beckett experienced the positive religions largely as instruments of power driven by ideology. Dublin was caught up in violent turmoil following the Easter uprising of 1916 and Beckett was there to witness it: in Foxrock, safely on the margins of the troubles in Dublin, his father took him to the top of a hill from which the flames that raged in the city could be clearly seen. Only nine years old at the time and still attending primary school at Earlsfort House in Dublin, Beckett was but vaguely aware of the political conflicts shaking his country. Nevertheless, the experience on the hill in Foxrock stayed with him for many years to come and he continued to think of it with “fear and horror.” The school Beckett attended after completing his primary education was a prestigious Protestant institution, Portora, in what was to become Northern Ireland. After the nation was partitioned during his second year at Portora, the military consequences of misguided religion accompanied him at the end of each term when he had to pass armed British border patrols on his way into Ireland.

In a landmark interview conducted by Tom Driver in the early 1960s, Beckett speaks with derision of the customs of popular Catholicism in Ireland: “When you pass a church on an Irish bus, all the hands flurry in the sign of the cross. One day the dogs of Ireland will do that too
and perhaps also the pigs.” 13 There was never a tendency in Beckett to reconcile himself with the manifestations of organized religion, which he continued to view as hypocritical, superficial, or unthinking. Yet he recognized that the fundamental religious impulse is everywhere present. Thus, while he refused to stage this transcendence in classical terms, it does not disappear entirely; it merely manifests itself differently, in a displaced fashion. This moment of displacement of the sacred pervades the literary and cultural milieu of the time: it is recognizable in Blanchot’s Outside; Georges Bataille celebrates it in the irreducibility of excess and frenzied expenditure: laughter, festival, sacrifice, religion, sexuality, violence, death, as well as God are all manifestations of the sacred for Bataille. And the displaced sacred recurs in yet a different guise in the quasi-transcendental status of Derrida’s différence.

The voluminous and insightful body of Beckett criticism has for the most part objectified and domesticated the role of religion and the sacred in Beckett’s work, and as a result it has failed to grasp the full extent of the challenge his writing presents for the reader’s understanding of literature and the religious. In the early days of grappling with the religious dimension in Beckett’s work, and from then on with surprising persistence, scholars have focused on his resistance to domesticated forms of religion—whether institutional, political, or emotional—as if Beckett’s engagement with the religious stopped there. Not shedding their own blinkers, critics of religion often situate it as diametrically opposed to the courage of existential enquiry. Believers are seen to seek solace in false security. But it is dangerous not to question one’s own ideas of religion and to assume Beckett to do the same. As a result, engagement with religion and with Beckett’s work does not take place at the most fundamental level, but at the level of concept.

As part of the attempt to uncover the religious dimension in Beckett’s work, one often finds appeals to episodes or tendencies in Beckett’s life itself or to his characters. A character’s derision at the surface forms of religious convention, for example, is easily assumed to be consistent with the values Beckett as a person stands for. Beckett the author does not graduate from his position as a disgruntled lapsed Protestant obsessively pontificating on the hopelessness of human existence in a spirit of
wallowing negativity. Yet in character coherence (as the centered analyzing subject’s counterpart), plot content (which implies a container and something contained within it), or narrative linearity (and its teleological trajectory), objectification has already occurred. Beckett thoroughly questions each of these literary conventions. Why should a critic hang on to them in the face of abundant rhetorical strategies that undermine them? Even Mary Bryden’s landmark study *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, which handles religion evenly and strives for neutrality, refuses to address the *idea* of God or our lack thereof. Instead, it uncovers a fascinating array of religious or theological allusions at the phenotypic level and argues positions Beckett’s text may take toward them. However, in the depths of Beckett’s theology of transdecendence these positions fall before rigorous self-deconstruction.

Beckett’s work emphasizes metaphor and remains incomprehensible at the mimetic level. As a result allegorical readings proliferate fruitfully. The odd one has reached notoriety: Godot stands for God? . . . Against any indication to the contrary Didi and Gogo become believers. Allegorical readings fully account for the antimimetic nature of Beckett’s work, but a danger lurks in them, too. Allegory is built on one-to-one correspondence of the literal and the allegorical levels, and a conceptual frame is once again imposed on wild writing that tries to free itself from such constraints. Attempts to read Beckett in the light of the work of a specific philosophical system can easily fall into the same reductive trap. In trailblazing explorations during the late 1980s and early 1990s, such scholars as Thomas Trezise, Steven Connor, and Carla Locatelli alerted others to the striking affinities between Beckett’s work and Derrida’s thought, providing the first informed accounts of Beckett’s writing in the light of something other than existentialist philosophy. (The latter still exercises its grip on Beckett studies—so much so that even Shira Wolosky’s 1995 study of Beckett, Eliot, and Celan, which clearly appreciates the role of negative theology in Beckett’s work, assumes the values that inform negative theology to enter Beckett’s work only in an inverted fashion.) Yet when a particular theorist’s thought is “applied” to literature, that which fails to defer to the specificity of the reading must fall by the wayside.

This book is an attempt to talk about Beckett’s works not as books—not as the prestigious cultural objects with intellectual clout and market
value, their “knowledge” neatly packaged between the covers—and to take seriously the interminable challenge of writing they bring to life for the reader. Beckett makes the insistent demand on his reader to throw conceptuality overboard and to confront in the interminable process of writing that which refuses to yield to the power of the concept: an “Outside” of language, brought into being through literature and nonetheless never captured by it. Negative theology, when practiced rigorously, deconstructs its own concepts of God in order to guard his absolute transcendence, including the dualism implicit in the concept of absolute transcendence. Literary apophaticism, which understands writing as a spiritual vocation, cultivates extreme self-referentiality in order to avoid the traps of objectification and reification that arise from the analytic conventions of plot, character, narrative, and so on.

Hence I do not intend to offer interpretations of Beckett’s texts. Rather, I intend to uncover the fundamental apophatic impulse in Beckett’s work that makes any postulation of objectifiable “content” impossible. By way of this apophatic impulse his writing appeals to what by definition exceeds conceptualization. In other words, I intend to approach the impulse to conceptualize, which drives the majority of Beckett’s commentators, in the way late Beckett approaches early Beckett: deconstructively.

Beckett’s earlier and most famous work for the theater, especially *Waiting for Godot* and the more severe *Endgame*, is in retrospect also his most “conventional” (although it must have hardly seemed so for those who walked out of the early performances in shock). It is conventional because it holds on to a skeletal framework of character and plot: Didi, Gogo, Hamm, and Clov are distinct personalities, and although hardly anything “happens” in the play, the plot of *Godot* unmistakably consists of two tramps waiting beneath a tree. The daring austerity of the late work is embryonically present, but Beckett has not yet completed the leap into a type of writing that systematically and categorically empties itself of all positive conventions traditionally used in the production and analysis of the literary text. It is not difficult to demonstrate that earlier Beckett is preoccupied with the same undecidabilities, but late Beckettian prose and drama performs them more radically and self-referentially in the depths of text and image, not at the surface level of plot, which has long since ceased to exist in late Beckett.
Driving the plot of *Endgame*, for instance, is a dichotomy of form and formlessness. Hamm is tirelessly at work on the project of situating himself firmly in a narrative space-time continuum (“it’s time for my story” [*E 34*]), while Clov works equally tirelessly at undermining his every effort. The peculiar symbiosis of their relationship derives precisely from this aporia: psychologically the two are in a destructive deadlock (Hamm is dependent on Clov and Clov is unable to define his existence independently of Hamm), but formally they perform a play on the verge of the breakdown of the spatiotemporal narrative (that is, the book in the Blanchotian sense), which Hamm tries to uphold and on which he builds his power. Its demise is the precondition for Blanchotian writing. Hamm needs the certainty of knowing precisely what and where he is. Anxiously he inquires whether it is time for his pain killer (*E 14*). Evidently the emphasis is not so much on the sedative effects of the medication, which could be obtained without further delay, but on knowing precisely what time of day it is. Likewise, he asks for his chair to be put precisely in the center of the room (*E 23*), a position of unrivaled clarity from which he may survey the entirety of his kingdom. Clov, however, puts him up against the wall rather than in the center, and later tells him point blank that there is no more pain killer (*E 46*). Hamm’s world is on the verge of chaos; it has run out of the fixed reference points on which it depends. The rudimentary plot structure of *Endgame* supports such allegory; for Beckett’s late work it is wholly inadequate.

It is no accident that the anecdote about the tailor, who takes more than three months to finish a pair of trousers and drives the customer to exasperation in the process, occurs in *Endgame*.* The anecdote allegorically sets the theme for the play and for Beckett’s entire body of work: what is the relationship between representation and the real, between art and what we call reality? Which of the two do we valorize, and which may we call the real? Beckett asks us to radically rethink these categories. The late texts programmatically empty themselves, and any attempts to force them into trusted models of literary interpretation based on character and plot inevitably return the interpretation to a level of specificity the text has already transcended. It is plausible to read Mouth, the voice in *Not I*, as schizophrenic; the text may support such a reading, but is it useful? To diagnose a personality split decenters the concept of character, but only while presupposing and maintaining its validity. The
text of the play, however, cultivates a fragmented, antinarrative mode of presentation, which does not provide sufficient information to reconstruct a coherent plot, and a voice that consistently undermines itself. The text does not offer external, objectified meaning, but performs the radical interiority of writing and the cognitive limits it encounters.

For Beckett the “site” of the sacred is at the level of the transcendental. It is at work in language and writing, and, more immediately and idiosyncratically for him, in the visual arts: the apotheosis of art, as it were, is painting. His closest contemporary intellectual soul mate, Blanchot, remains more skeptical of the visual. For Beckett, however, were it not for the fact that the durability of all ontological categories is highly suspect in his work, the visual occupies such a privileged position as to warrant the thesis (defended by Lois Oppenheim) that it claims ontological primacy. One could more accurately say that the visual provides a glimpse of an “ontology without ontology,” to adopt the rhetorical figure of Meister Eckhart’s preference. Beckett has no doubt that the visual medium is able to achieve what language cannot: its immediacy eludes language. Only the visual, Beckett insinuates time and again, can disclose the immediate presence of phenomena because it skips the mediation of language. Even his prose work strives to approximate as closely as possible the characteristics of the visual, especially its stillness. From this point of view the visual is clearly privileged, but one cannot derive from it ontological certainty.

A Buddhist perspective helps illustrate Beckett’s perch between ontological metaphysics and nihilism. It makes it possible to view his concern with emptiness from a spiritually constructive position, as the prerequisite for spiritual enlightenment, and it situates emptiness “outside” the conventional binary opposition of fullness versus emptiness, where emptiness symptomatically is given no more insightful definition than “that which is not full.” In Mahayana Buddhism the term for emptiness is sunyata. David Loy, who specializes in comparative studies of Western and Eastern philosophy, points out how inadequate the conventional translation of sunya as “empty” is. For the implications of the Sanskrit root su, from which the term derives, are twofold: it means “to be swollen,” both like a hollow balloon and like a pregnant woman; therefore the
usual English translation ‘empty’ and ‘emptiness’ [for sunya and sun-
yata] must be supplemented with the notion of ‘pregnant with possi-
bilities,’” Loy suggests.15 Loy finds Mervyn Sprung’s translation “ab-
sence of being in things” “cumbersome.”16 No doubt it is, but it alerts us
to the important fact that sunyata does not pertain to the ontological
realm. For Buddhism the ontological question does not arise: it is inter-
ested solely in the liberation of human beings from suffering and in of-
fering practical help in overcoming the epistemological obstacles that
present themselves along the way.

Looking at Beckett’s stage images it is diffi   cult not to agree with
Beckett that the idea of emptiness can be made most evident visually.
Vast expanses of dark empty space unmistakably make their point. The
relation of darkness to light, space to matter, and the arrangement of
objects in space follow the aesthetic principles of Chinese monochrome
ink splash paintings, which, in turn, are products of the Buddhist spiri-
tuality that subtends them. Visually as well as linguistically Beckett is a
poet of absence (of color), of emptiness (of substance), and of darkness.
He is a virtuoso of all conceivable shades of grey, not black. (Again, the
tenor is not hopelessness, nihilism, or nothingness.) In all his fascination
with the visual and his belief that the visual can yield the truth of phe-
nomena, he does not fall for a metaphysics or a theology of light.

Though not always fully acknowledged, Christianity’s roots in Pla-
tonism and Neoplatonism has led it to associate God with light. God is
the light of truth into which the Christian emerges from the depths of
her cave of delusion. The theology of light is pervasive: St. Augustine is
not immune from it and neither is St. Thomas Aquinas; St. Bonaven-
ture’s idea of the reduction of the arts to theology rests on the refl ection
of the divine light in creation. Later on this theology of light turns into
a metaphysics of light that substitutes for the truth of God the light of
human consciousness: the cogito perceives its object on the basis of per-
spectival Renaissance optics.

Yet theology is no monolith. There are deviations from the near-
ubiquitous stronghold of light. “Mystical” thinkers of various traditions
have chosen darkness as their preferred image of God. It should go with-
out saying that it is not God who is imagined as dark. Who would know
better than the mystics that God can only be represented inadequately?
The image of darkness is no exception. Rather, the human approach to God can only be shrouded in cognitive darkness, since no human being can possibly know God in his fullness.

The “mystical” has somewhat fallen into disrespect. It is a broad and ill-defined term, sometimes wrongly associated with a vague sense of intuition that runs the danger of subtending an identitarian conception of experience. Nonetheless many contemporary theologians, including Michael Sells, Denys Turner, Vladimir Lossky, and Jean-Luc Marion prefer the term “mystical theology” to the misleading and inadequate name “negative theology.” For “negative theology” is neither the negation of kataphatic, or “positive,” theology (this would keep it locked inside a conceptual binarism) nor does it proceed primarily by negation. It is true that negative theology thinks it can present God’s inconceivable nature less inaccurately by taking away rather than ascribing attributes to him. But this strategy does not confine it to the negative side of the equation. Negative theology’s primary objective is to guard God’s transcendence from the anthropomorphizing tendencies of the conceptual mind. Conceptual thought is best dislodged by paradox, a figure that disobeys the logic of noncontradiction serving binary thought structures. Properly speaking, negative theology is that theology of paradox. It does not exist in a vacuum, isolated from positive, or kataphatic theology, but is always braided in with it: negative theology destabilizes the statements kataphatic theology makes by negating them but then, in a third movement, negates its own negation. It is impossible, it implies, to remain in either the affirmative or the negative mode, which makes it necessary to proceed by a “third way.” Thinkers who wish to remain true to the third way will hence rate apophatic theology over kataphatic theology—otherwise negative theology would turn into a hermeneutic leading to ever more exact positive knowledge of God.

Jean-Luc Marion is one of the foremost theoreticians of the gift. For him the third way is synonymous with an exit from an economy of exchange. He agrees with Derrida that a genuine gift, be it relative or absolute, can only give itself “outside” such an economy and he develops the idea of the saturated phenomenon to illustrate how such self-giving might be possible. The saturated phenomenon need not be the divine. It can be anything that resists being taken in its entirety from a single
vantage point because it gives itself superabundantly. Thus a military battle can be as much of a saturated phenomenon as a beautiful summer day. Its defining characteristic is that it gives itself in excess and overflows the intention the perceiving subject had of it.

According to Edmund Husserl’s conception of the “poor” phenomenon, no intuition the subject receives of a phenomenon can ever fulfill the intention. Marion does not doubt that such common phenomena exist, but he contests their ubiquity. In addition, he says, there are other phenomena that give themselves in excess. With great subtlety and rigor Marion demonstrates how the saturated phenomenon as he conceives of it avoids being reabsorbed into the economy. He reconfigures the phenomenological model in terms of pure givenness so that the subject does not constitute the phenomenon; the subject merely receives it.

The idea of a form of excess destabilizing economic order is a recurring motif that has taken various forms in the intellectual debates of the past century. Bataille is no doubt the foremost contributor. In his own ruminations on the sacred he imagines a system based on excess of expenditure without return. A constipated, restricted economy based on accumulation needs to turn to ruthless expenditure as its saving grace.

Beckett contributes his own thoughts on economy in “Three Dialogues.” There he talks of “an art . . . too proud for the farce of giving and receiving” (“TD” 141). But Beckett’s idea of how the economy is to be destabilized is subtler than Bataille’s. Anyone who has seen a single Beckett play can attest to the fact that his is not an art of excess in the sense of total theater, for instance. There is no sensory onslaught threatening, and aiming, to overwhelm the spectator with pure all-enveloping spectacle. Excess here must be understood less literally as excess of saturation, which can manifest itself in categories other than quantity. (Marion is content to adopt the Kantian categories in working out the different types of saturation, so a phenomenon can be saturated according to quantity, quality, relation, as well as modality.) Beckett creates minimalist images of extreme concentration that can best be understood as saturated phenomena.

The saturated phenomenon is the master key with which to unlock Beckett’s art. Here we have an all-encompassing idea that aims to account for the whole spectrum of phenomenological experience, or rather counter-experience, ranging all the way from the physical sensation of
taste to the phenomenon of divine revelation. Marion speaks of “the banality of saturation.” Here we can approach divine revelation as well as its displaced counterpart with the same fundamental idea without eliding the difference between them. In an unprecedented way Marion provides the vocabulary for doing so. Diverging from Derrida’s position, Marion assumes that what can give itself phenomenologically (and for a Christian there can be no doubt that God can do so) must be describable in phenomenological terms. This does not mean that we can say precisely what counter-experience implies, since counter-experience is by definition that which cannot be assimilated to any previous pattern of experience. It does mean, however, that we can put a phenomenological name to that occurrence.

I begin by asking what the specific conditions of experience are that allow for phenomena of saturation. I do not mean to suggest that there are conditions that bring saturated phenomena into existence. Rather, certain conditions help us perceive saturated phenomena for what they are. Catastrophe illustrates this shift toward givenness, which, the play suggests, can only occur by way of nondual perceptual practices. So how can we talk about such experiences of givenness once they have occurred? Here the problem of economy presents itself, which I discuss in relation to the “Three Dialogues.” If a saturated phenomenon gives itself “outside” an economy of exchange, how can we talk about it without reentering the economy in the process? Art tries to present what it cannot name or represent, but if art is the adventure of creating an absolutely irreducible discourse—one that presents rather than represents—then its own strategies, but certainly its criticism (the process of writing about art), becomes a negative theology that has to be extremely self-conscious and vigilant. Beckett’s work accomplishes both: it creates an irreducible space and it does so by making apparent the process of writing itself. It makes the process of writing its “object,” or its topic, and it produces a literature that “embodies” this object and in this sense no longer has an object, just as God cannot be the “object” of negative theology. In this way it becomes the apotheosis of the space of literature as Blanchot conceives of it via the Outside. Hence Beckett’s work can only be an embrace of postmodernity, as Film makes unmistakably clear: there is no nostalgia for lost unity, but a whole-hearted embrace of nonduality.
This book stages no debate of legitimacy between Beckett’s position and a Christian perspective. I do not wish to weigh one against the other and my aim is not to turn Beckett into a closet negative theologian or to prove that he is really a Christian after all. I would not want to be seen as asserting some hypothetical moral superiority of the Christian position—my task is not to judge. Above all, I intend to take Beckett seriously as a thinker of religion and the spiritual life. What I hope the reader will draw from this work is the insight that what Beckett enacts at the level of the transcendental is indistinguishable in form and, to a large extent intent, from negative theology’s performative tight-roped act at the level of the transcendent. Beckett’s position is symptomatic of a time in history that has renounced classical conceptions of the divine but is haunted by it nonetheless, and as a result seeks God in unusual places. The attempt at an apotheosis of art has occurred at various points throughout literary history—one need only remember l’art pour l’art. Unusual is the moral force and spiritual value Beckett finds in art and in literature or the process of writing in particular. Politically motivated power structures cannot hold under the impact of the sacred. Adherents of traditional spiritual traditions have much to learn from the rigor with which Beckett approaches art as spiritual practice. In the end it is up to each reader to affirm God through his or her own act of faith and, surprisingly, to find no contradiction at all with what Beckett affirms differently in his work.