

Literature, Politics and the Loutishness of Learning.

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A paper developed from a talk given at the *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies* seminar, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 19 June 2009, and a plenary lecture to the *Literature and Politics* conference of the Australasian Association of Literature, University of Sydney, 6 July 2009.

Et In Academia Ego

For as long as I can remember, I have been irritated by the word 'academia', used to describe the professional sphere I inhabit. There is something so wilfully ridiculous and wish-fulfilling about the notion of academic life as constituting a kind of looking-glass land, or fantasy republic – a kind of Ruritania of the mind. Of course, this idea of the academy has a long history. Though its contemporary meaning is very distinct from its historical meanings, the aroma of that long history is an important component in its modern meaning. The original academy was the plot of land in which Plato took up residence, and was so named because it was the property of one Academus. As a result, the word came to mean a place of learning, or more metaphorically, a philosophical school of thought, especially one marked by extreme scepticism. From the end of the seventeenth century, the word was applied to a particular kind of institution, whose role was not so much instruction as cultivation and preservation of national forms of culture. From the seventeenth century onwards, an 'English Academy' was frequently mooted, but meant mostly an institution, on the French model, that would reform and regularise the English language (Monroe 1910). Eventually, its function was performed, in a descriptive rather than a prescriptive manner, by the Oxford English Dictionary project. The Royal Irish Academy was described in 1835 as 'a society of men under whose sanction and auspices...antiquities might be investigated, and the fugitive productions of genius, in other departments of literature, cherished and preserved' (Anon 1835, 120).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the idea of the academy took up residence more and more in the university, as universities, especially in the USA, expanded their reach and function. By 1904, it was possible for R.S. Woodward, in an address on the opening of the new academic year in Columbia University, to enumerate some of the distinctive features of the modern university. He emphasised that the university no longer fulfilled the conserving and cultivating function of the academy, in that it owed less allegiance to the arts and historical achievements of a particular nation:

The modern American university has broken to a large extent with custom and tradition. It is an institution characterized by intellectual agitation, by adjustment and readjustment, by construction and reconstruction, the end of which is not yet in sight. This complex organization is the resultant of the more or less conflicting educational activities of our times. It is a resultant due in part to world-wide influences; it expresses a generalized academic ideal. (Woodward 1905, 42)

Woodward focussed on the range and complex internal differentiation of the modern university:

Little surprise is manifested at the close juxtaposition of a professor of metallurgy and a professor of metaphysics, and it has actually been demonstrated that professors of poetry and professors of physics can dwell in peaceful activity under the same roof. Here too the ten or a dozen faculties and the various student bodies mingle and intermingle in a spirit of cooperation and mutual regard almost unknown outside and hitherto little known within, the academic world. (Woodward 1905, 42)

Woodward also identified an important new feature of the modern academic institution, namely, its distinctive mixture of closure and openness. The university is both powerfully integrated, and yet also more open to knowledge as such.

[T]he domain of this atmosphere is not bounded by academic walls. It is not a limited medium within, but is actually a part of, the unlimited medium of the intellectual world; for the modern university has broken also with custom and tradition in allying itself closely with the external world of thought. (Woodward 1905, 42)

Woodward points here to the most distinctive and defining anomaly of the modern academy. For 'the academy' now no longer refers to a particular institution, or a particular tradition or set of allegiances – Platonic philosophy, French language and culture, or Irish antiquities. It refers to an entire academic culture, concentrated in and typified by universities, yet also extending well beyond them. So 'the academy' no longer means a particular kind of withdrawal, signified by a particular place, but rather a particular kind of noplacement, a floating republic. It is constitutionally suspended between the actuality of particular kinds of institution and the complex, if embattled dream of an ideal. It is for this reason that the academic is made up of much fantasy and projection.

During the twentieth century the idea and the actuality of the academic have both amplified and pulled against each other. Universities have become a central part of the economies of leading and developing nations. Their teaching and, in science and engineering, their research functions have demanded huge amounts of investment

and have themselves sometimes generated significant economic returns. As universities have become ever more integrated into their societies, so they have proclaimed, as it seems, ever more insistently, their need for autonomy, especially in the form of academic freedom. A search on the word ‘academic’ in any database of academic writing will find more articles with the phrase ‘academic freedom’ in their titles than any other pairing. The university is defined by this tension between intellectual autonomy and economic function. We are accustomed to see this as a recent development, but we find a writer in 1955 complaining that ‘Education has become big business, and business has become the touchstone for educational practices’ (Kattsoff 1955, 313).

Of course, the academy has also made a business out of minding its own business – renewing and prolonging itself in its own self-reflections, and reflections, like this one, on its own self-reflectiveness. The heated debates about the political function or not of academic writing are often conducted as variations of this theme.

The rise of what is called the academy during the twentieth century has been the consolidation of what one might think to be a disabling contradiction, though it ought to have become clear long before now that there is nothing in the least disabling about it. This is the contradiction between the pure ideals of academic freedom, unconstrained critique and pure research, and the economic and political demands of those who plan, manage and finance academic institutions. Only radical heteronomy, the fact that universities are so bound into the complex requirements of education and economic planning, can underwrite the kind of autonomy that academics want to believe they should have.

More Essential Work

Modern art and literature have been deeply impacted by the parallel growth of the institutions of explication and transmission formed by the academy. The most important and influential mediator between literary culture and what would become known as academic culture was T.S. Eliot. Like many other writers in the twentieth century, Eliot made a conscious choice to write instead of being an academic – the most likely destination being a department of philosophy rather than literature. But the choice was not straightforward, nor was it in any sense conclusive for Eliot. He arrived in London in 1914 as the holder of a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship from Harvard, and went up to Merton College in the autumn of 1914. Following his marriage and move to London in 1915, Eliot turned to teaching, supplemented by such reviewing as he could get, to support himself and his new wife, Vivien. He taught for a term at High Wycombe Grammar School and then at Highgate School, where one of his pupils was John Betjeman.

Eliot then applied to the Oxford University Extension Delegacy, who hired him to give a course of lectures (in Yorkshire) in 1916 on French literature. In 1916, he applied for work with the University of London Extension Board and was taken on to teach a course on English literature in Southall, which he did until early 1917. At the same time, he continued working on his dissertation on F.H. Bradley, which was submitted to Harvard in April 1916. He repeated the Southall course later in 1917. He also taught courses on Victorian literature and Elizabethan Literature for the London County Council, at the County Secondary School in Sydenham, during 1917 and 1918. The audience for the latter dwindled from 24 to 10 because of things like influenza and what Eliot described as 'death, removal and more essential work'. He seems to have taken the lectures seriously, but was also somewhat dismissive of his students. He regretted the fact that his Ilkley audience was 'mostly ladies' and that, while it 'did not wish mere entertainment... [it] was not prepared for study'. In 'The Function of Criticism', five years after he finished lecturing, he offered the following advice: 'I have had some experience of Extension lecturing, and have found only two ways of leading any pupils to like anything with the right liking: to present them with a selection of the simpler kinds of facts about a work - its conditions, its setting, its genesis - or else to spring the work on them in such a way that they were not prepared to be prejudiced against it'. In March 1917, Eliot had also joined the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank in Cornhill. So during this time, he was leading, not just the double life of the poet and banker, but a triple life as poet, banker, and academic.

Eliot's reputation was secured simultaneously as a poet and a critic. Most decisive of all was his influence on the discipline of English studies as it was forming in Cambridge. This had begun even before the fame which came with the publication of *The Waste Land*. The young I. A. Richards read the volume *Ara Vos Prec*, a collection of Eliot's verse up to 1920 and went to meet Eliot at Lloyds bank to try to persuade him to take up a position in the Cambridge teaching faculty (Ackroyd 1984, 99). When *The Waste Land* did appear, it was taken up not so much by the literary world as by undergraduates. In 1926, Eliot gave the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, on the Metaphysical poets, and was persuaded to apply for a fellowship at All Souls, though it seems that, in the end, the Fellows took fright when they read Eliot's most recent volume of poetry (Ackroyd 1984, 157).

Eliot's career provides a remarkable example of a writer who was at once artist and self-explicator. Eliot's critical views, on the necessity of difficulty in poetry, on the struggle between modern chaos and poetic order, on the relations between the primitive and the modern, and the impersonality of modern art, formed the methods and perspectives used to read his work. Richards's practical criticism, designed to elicit and display the intricately-wrought composure of poems that created structure out of tension, was almost tailor-made to fit Eliot's poetry, and Eliot remained the most representative example of modernist writing. Wyndham Lewis summed up the symbiosis between Eliot and Cambridge critical method acidly but aptly in suggesting

that, if you were to ask Eliot for guidance about his work, he would be likely to reply 'I am sorry, I am entirely unable to answer you. I have not the least idea. It is not to *me* that you must address such questions. Go rather and address yourself to my partner, Mr I.A. Richards. He is not very reliable, but he probably knows more about it than I do' (*Men Without Art*, quoted Ackroyd 1984, 220). Altogether, one may readily agree with Peter Ackroyd that Eliot provides an example of 'a poet setting the context and the principles for the description and critical evaluation of his own work' (Ackroyd 1984, 177). And yet Eliot seemed able to perform this dual function only by anticipating and enacting in himself the relation of noncoincident convergence that has characterised the relations between art and academic criticism. One part of Eliot, the authoritative lecturer, the judicious critic, and the institutionaliser of modernism as editor at Faber, was involved in developing the literature to the second degree that would become an indispensable bridge between artistic culture and society in the second half of the twentieth century. The other half seemed to exist in a state of permanent fugue, resisting any communication with or acknowledgement of his academic self. Hence the strange oscillation within Eliot's criticism between a classical respect for form, impersonality and the careful and knowing negotiation of complex tensions, and the frequent assertions of the unknowable and unanalysable roots of the poetic impulse. It was necessary that the poet both know and not know what he was doing, though neither knowing nor unknowing were quite satisfactory or sufficient.

Bright Boy of the Class

If we are to judge by the final sentences of *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, the figure cut by the young Samuel Beckett in the Joyce circle was that of a brilliant, if slightly bumptious scholar. The putdown of the uppity young Protestant swot that suddenly appears in Joyce's text – 'Latin me that, my trinity scholar, out of eure sanscreed into oure eryan!' – is given its sting by the fact that Beckett had been involved in translating part of this section of the *Wake* into French: Beckett in fact quoted the sentences that immediately precede this one in his 'Dante ... Bruno .. Vico . Joyce', but broke the quotation off just before it (Beckett 1983, 29). The portmanteau idea of the dullard scholar captures well the dunciad quality of much of Beckett's learned wit at learning's expense. Indeed, the very history of the word 'dunce' – originally a term of respect for a follower of Duns Scotus – displays a nice Beckettian declension. The denunciation of the dunce has a poignant self-application in the case of Beckett that it does not in other writers, and is necessarily delivered with more of a forked tongue.

I think that where, for Joyce, the apparatus of scholarship was the arbitrary and disposable institutional envelope of learning, for Beckett, the two remained anxiously entangled with each other. The Schoolroom scene in *Finnegans Wake* II.ii is the work of one who can richly exploit the infantile comedy of the schoolroom because it is so

far from him, or all the elements of it are equidistant. It is easy to see the similarity of the marginal annotations of the textbook, forming a trinity of Shem and Shaun to left and right, with Issy's comments in the footnotes, to the joyous ramifications of reverie and obscenity that flourished in the medieval scriptorium. We can contrast this with the inquisition of Louit, which is a magnificent example, sad and savage at once, of that kind of mauling of the academic order of things that only the apostate can effect. Perhaps this is, in a variant on the Wildean formula, the rage of Caliban at not seeing himself on the class-list. Though battles of books abound in Joyce's work, the academic feudings and altercations are rendered with a kind of equanimity, and therefore a sort of even-handed amicability, that is not to be found in Beckett. For Beckett, there is always the sour ache of reproach, that he was not able to live up to his own academic self-ideal, and that the academic life was equally unable to live up to his ideal of it. Joyce, all this goes to say, is a gaily, gaudily postgraduate writer; Beckett is stuck in the remedial form, doggedly cramming for the retake.

It is far from an exact analogy, but one might perhaps say that scholarship has something of the same status for Beckett as Catholicism does for Joyce. Joyce remained 'supersaturated' by Catholicism, even after he seemed to have left its articles of faith and observance far behind. Beckett remained orientated and impregnated by an academic habitus long after he seemed to have broken with it (no doubt Joyce, in the vulgarly sectarian mood into which he could very occasionally descend, would say that there was nothing to break with in Protestantism). And yet, the academy exerted its pull even on Joyce. He spent a little time in 1920 teaching English at the University of Trieste. It is an extraordinary thought that, even at the moment of his apotheosis, following the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce was so strapped for cash that he was considering teaching. Beckett discovered for him that the University of Cape Town needed a lecturer in Italian – this might perhaps have been the same post that Beckett himself had applied for in 1937 (Beckett 2009, 523-8) – though Joyce decided against applying when he heard how violent the thunderstorms could be in South Africa (Gluck 1979, 39).

The struggles to be and say that absorb Beckett are regularly represented as struggles to learn and know. Through the length and breadth of Beckett's writing the pretentiousness and vanity of scholarship are routinely mocked. Saposcat toils ineffectually to become the academic high-flier his parents wish for. Called upon to think, Lucky produces a panic-stammering, Touretteish outpouring of vacuous philosophical jargon. In characterising the relation between Mahood and the 'college of tyrants' who struggle to impart to him the lessons of how to have been a human being, Beckett glosses his own condition as a writer, in which pedagogy is always at issue:

they gave me to understand I was making progress. Well done, sonny, that will be all for today, run along now back to your dark and see you tomorrow. And there I am, with my white beard, sitting among the children, babbling, cringing from the rod. I'll

die in the lower third, bowed down with years and impositions, four foot tall again, like when I had a future, bare-legged in my old black pinafore, wetting my drawers. Pupil Mahood, for the twenty-five thousandth time, what is a mammal? And I'll fall down dead, worn out by the rudiments. (Beckett 1973, 339)

The voice of *The Unnamable* speaks of the pensum that, as alternately dunce and 'bright boy of the class' (Beckett 1973, 380), he is required to learn and discharge, as though he were simultaneously preparing for and participating in an infernal, interminable viva voce examination. The peristaltic passage of Mr Knott's servants into, through and out of his service is a little like the intake and output of successive cohorts of students. The heads in *Play* resemble a row of schoolchildren blurting out their answers as the eye of the teacher lights on them. *How It Is* seems to give us a narrator caught in a pedagogic *ménage à trois*, struggling to inflict his cruel instruction on Pim, as he himself strives to repeat his own lesson. Anthony Cordingley has noted Beckett's observation, in a letter written during the composition of *Comment C'est*, of the origin of the ubiquitous mud of the novel in the 'Portora mud' of his school, that emphasises the link between power and pedagogy. These scholastic associations may be given extra bite by the fact that it was while in the early stages of floundering in the imaginary mire of *Comment c'est* in February 1959 that Beckett received, and accepted, the offer of a D.Litt from Trinity. Beckett perhaps enjoyed the chime between the *comment c'est* of the novel he had in hand and the fact that the degree was conferred at what he referred to as 'the Commencements farce' (meaning the Summer Commencements ceremony) in July (Knowlson 1996, 465). Cordingley also persuasively suggests that the masochistic dynamics of self-translation involve Beckett in an 'internalized pedagogical sadism' (Cordingley 2009, 206). The notion briefly bubbles up late in Beckett's writing life, in the reference in *Ill Seen Ill Said* to the observing eye which is 'on centennial leave from where tears freeze' (Beckett 1981, 27), the term oddly recasting Dante's frozen hell as an academic institution from which only occasional sabbaticals can be extorted. For Beckett, the examined life is decidedly not worth living.

For Beckett, the conflicted desire for the academic life, crossed by the desire to leave off desiring to desire it, seems to have been bound up in part with his relation to his (not very academic) father. The speaker in 'From An Abandoned Work' assures us 'Fortunately my father died when I was a boy, otherwise I might have been a professor, he had set his heart on it. A very fair scholar I was too, no thought but a great memory' (131). It seems to me to be possible that Beckett feared that the truth was the opposite of this; perhaps the greatest anxiety he had about resigning his Trinity fellowship in 1931 was the disappointment it would mean for his father, who then died eighteen months later, seemingly bringing to a pitch the intense physical and mental distress that led Beckett to psychoanalysis. Part of Beckett may thought that, for from being saved from an academic career by the death of his father, his spurning of the chance of such a career may have hastened his father's death, or at least darkened his last year of life. Beckett seems to have read up on psychology,

perhaps self-defensively before and during his psychotherapy with W.R. Bion, as though in preparation for some kind of formal disputation rather than a consultation.

The resignation also precipitated two poems that address Beckett's sense of displacement in, and from the academy, represented for him by Trinity College. The first, more well-known piece is 'Gnome', which Beckett enclosed in a letter of January 1932 (Beckett 2009, 107), but which was first published in 1934:

Spend the years of learning squandering
 Courage for the years of wandering
 Through a world politely turning
 From the loutishness of learning. (Beckett 1977, 7)

Loutishness is a striking term to use for the posturing emptiness of learning. Beckett may recall it in the name of his mendacious Louit, who, it is implied, has never undertaken at all the expedition to the west of Ireland for which he extracts funds from the College, but rather trained up Thomas Nackybal to play the part of the prodigious Gaelic mathematician he claims to have discovered. To be loutish is to be crude, unrefined, blundering, as well as merely unlearned. The term runs together the clumsiness of the bumpkin with the stupidity of the unschooled. Golding twins 'the lerned and the lout' in 1567 (Ovid 1567, sig. A3v). Beckett's use of the term reflects his strong sense of the betrayal of academic or intellectual vocation amid the trivialities of the academy, and of his association of class and spiritual distinction with academic distinction. What seems to have enraged him most of all was the vulgarity of the academic life – academics should simply not be as slovenly and self-serving as they are.

The term aptly replays the duality contained in the poem's title. A gnome is defined by the OED as 'a short pithy statement of a general truth; a proverb, maxim, aphorism, or apophthegm'. A gnome is also a squat, dwarf-like inhabitant of the lower earth. The root *gno-* means to know, and yields words like gnostic, prognosis and diagnosis. But Beckett may also have in mind the strange fascination of the word 'gnomon' for the young boy in Joyce's story 'The Sisters'. A gnomon is defined in Euclid as the remainder of a parallelogram after the removal of a similar parallelogram containing one of its corners, and Bernard Benstock (1988) reads the gnomon as a figure for omission itself, seeing *Dubliners* as 'gnomonic' throughout. Beckett's 'Gnome' seems similarly orphaned from its predication, with the dull euphonies of its gerunds and the incongruously jogalong lilt of its feminine endings failing to parse that opening 'spend', which is as grammatically enigmatic as it is seemingly emphatic. Is it a sardonic imperative – 'Go ahead, you may as well spend those years squandering your courage'? Or is it the bitten-off end of a lament or protest – 'What misery, to spend the years of learning squandering courage'? The poem is both impeccably folded on itself and missing its essential point or payoff, and so spools out frictionlessly in mid-air.

On 10 May 1934, Beckett sent what seems to be a companion quatrain to Nuala Costello:

Up he went & in he passed
 & down he came with such endeavour
 As he shall rue until at last
 He rematriculate for ever. (Beckett 2009, 209)

Beckett implicitly linked the two poems with the remark ‘I grow gnostic. It is the last phase’ (Beckett 2009, 209). To matriculate is to enroll, or be incorporated into an institution, which Beckett here associated with a less than bounteous alma mater. Here, the word ‘rematriculate’ connects the academic process of going up, passing through and coming down to bodily processes, of birth, defecation, and other kinds of academic and corporal expulsion, in a way that looks forward to the Trilogy, and to the caca and poo that are spasmodically induced in Lucky’s ‘Acacacademy of Anthropopometry’ (Beckett 1986, 41). To rematriculate here means, in the expression Malone ventures, to be given birth to into death, to be taken back into the womb of unbeing. Beckett may have remembered this when he was himself rematriculated, or received back into the womb of Trinity in 1959. Beckett’s account to Con Leventhal of his horror at having to accept the degree is full of a characteristic ambivalence regarding the academic world:

I shall accept the honour if it is offered to me. I don’t underestimate it, nor pretend I am not greatly moved, but I have a holy horror of such things and it is not easy for me. If I were a scholar or a man of letters it might be different. But what in God’s name have doctoracy and literature to do with work like mine? However there it is, right or wrong I’ll go through with it if they ask me. (Knowlson 1996, 465)

I think Knowlson is right to suggest that Beckett saw this as a making of peace, or at least the striking of a truce, both with the college he had deserted – albeit, if Anthony Cronin is to be believed, taking with him a college master key (Cronin 1997, 165) – and the bright future which he had denied his parents (Knowlson 1996, 465). A further reassimilation was Beckett’s donation of large amounts of unpublished materials to Trinity before and after his death.

Anathema

Academic fantasy hums with fear, rage and envy. It is above all anathema and the associated affect of contempt that characterises Beckett’s relation to academic life. Beckett is caught up in this in his denunciations of the academic disposition, many of which occur in his own sporadic, conflicted attempts at critical writing. Sometimes, as

in the episode of Louit's inquisition in *Watt*, the denunciation is numbered by a kind of melancholy absurdity. At other times, it is much more fiercely sardonic, as for example at the beginning of 'Peintres de l'Empêchement':

I have said everything I had to say about the painting of the Van Velde brothers in the last number of *Cahiers d'Art* (unless there has been another one since then). I have nothing to add to what I said there. It was little, it was too much, and I have nothing to add to it. Fortunately it is not a matter of saying what has not yet been said, but of saying again, as often as possible in the most reduced space, what has already been said. Otherwise one disturbs the connoisseurs. That to start with. And modern painting is already disturbing enough in itself without one wanting to render it still more disturbing by saying sometimes that it is perhaps this thing and sometimes that it is perhaps that. One would then give oneself unnecessary trouble. And one is already troubled enough, of necessity, and not only by modern painting, without wanting to give oneself any more trouble, by trying to say what has not been said, to one's knowledge. (Beckett 1983, 133, my translation)

The text rolls ingeniously and with apparent affability on, spinning out the joke that to carry on saying nothing is better than risking saying something new, while all the time allowing the pressure of contempt for habitual and received opinions to accumulate beneath the patient reasonableness:

For in affirming something and cleaving to it, through thick and thin, one may end up forming for oneself an opinion on practically everything, a good solid opinion, capable of lasting a lifetime... [B]y affirming, with firmness, one fine day, of modern painting, and then again affirming on the next day and on the next and every day, that it is this thing and this thing only, then, at the end of ten or twelve years, one will know what modern painting is, perhaps even well enough to enlighten one's friends, without having had to spend the best part of one's leisure time in those so-called galleries, narrow, cluttered and badly-lit, using one's eyes. This is to say that one will know everything there is to know according to the accepted formula, which is the summit of all science. To know what you mean, therein lies wisdom. And the best way of knowing what you mean, is to mean the same thing, patiently, every day, and thus to familiarise oneself with the customary formulae, amid all the shifting sands. (Beckett 1984, 133-4)

Siegfried Unseld, the director of Suhrkamp press, relates an episode which illustrates Beckett's impatience with the *TLS*-like impermeability of the academic. Unseld had arranged a reception in Beckett's honour in Frankfurt in 1961, at which Adorno was to speak. Beckett had had lunch with Adorno earlier, and had politely rebutted Adorno's suggestion that the name of Hamm in *Endgame* derived from Hamlet. Adorno persisted, provoking some anger in Beckett. When Adorno spoke at the

reception that evening, he repeated the suggestion, prompting Beckett to whisper into the ear of his host ‘This is the progress of science that professors can proceed with their errors!’ (quoted Knowlson 1996, 479). The danger, for the exacting young man that Beckett was, always lay, as he put it in the first sentence he ever published, ‘in the neatness of identifications’ (Beckett 1983, 19), in ‘solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle’ (Beckett 1983, 92).

But the assault upon factitious and formulaic certainties is at odds with some of the tendencies of Beckett’s own earliest forays into critical and scholarly writing, which are nothing if not opinionated. Beckett sneers, snipes and dismisses as arrogantly as any safely ensconced Regius Chair. Beckett’s minting of opinion in response to Ezra Pound’s judgements, in a review of 1934, is characteristically arbitrary, self-regarding and dogmatic:

Strange that such *sen de trobar* as Mr Pound’s should not vibrate to Rimbaud’s ironical Hugoisms, also that it should succumb to Gourmont’s *Litanies de la Rose* (transcribed in full). There is no mention of Apollinaire, whose *Chanson du Mal Aimé* seems to me worth the whole of the best of Merrill, Moréas, Vielé-Griffin, Spire, Régnier, Jammes (all quoted, the last copiously) put together. (Beckett 1983, 78)

Beckett’s critical writing during the 1930s, in the difficult period following his break from Trinity, bristles with the conflict between different manners of writing. On the one hand, there are the apparently painstaking abstractions and philosophical technicalities: ‘The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance’ (Beckett 1970, 74). On the other hand, there are the throwaway jokes, that suggest a kind of scornful disgust at the whole business of explication and discrimination. Beckett wrote in nervous self-defence to McGreevy of his *Proust* that it seemed ‘very grey & disgustingly juvenile – pompous almost – angry at the best...I feel dissociated from my Proust – as though it did not belong to me, ready of course to get any credit that’s going but – genuinely, I think – more interested than irritated at the prospect of the nose-pickers’ disgust’ (Beckett 2009, 65). A month later, Beckett wrote a grateful letter in response to McGreevy’s praise of the book, but acknowledging that it was more about him than its apparent object: ‘I feel it tied somehow on to Proust, on to his tail board, with odds & ends of words, like bundles of grass jack in the boxing under a kite. Not that I care. I don’t want to be a professor (its almost a pleasure to contemplate the mess of this job’ (Beckett 2009, 72). There is much comedy to relish in Beckett’s evocations of the academic, but this ridicule is closely allied to rage, even when it seems to be diffusing it. Beckett takes revenge on the academic disposition in sarcastic sniggers and quips, though he was also bored and repelled by his own frippery, and appalled by how much it had in it of the cynical academic self-satisfaction he loathed. Much turns on the word ‘quip’. He wrote to Tom McGreevy

in May 1931 of his sense of the ‘futility of the translation’ of *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, adding that ‘I can’t believe he doesn’t see through the translation himself, its horrible quip atmosphere & vulgarity’ (Beckett 2009, 78). The word occurs in November 1930 in a letter in which Beckett complains of the combined influences of college and home:

This life is terrible and I don’t understand how it can be endured. Quip – that most foul malady – Scandal & KINDNESS. The eternally invariable formulae of cheap quip and semi-obscene entirely contemptible potin chez Ruddy & in the Common Room Club, and Kindness here at home, pumped into me at high pressure. I am getting my rooms (Fry’s) ready at the top of 39. Perhaps things will be better when I get in there. But the Ruddy vico seems to be a dead end. If I could merely listen to him talking philosophy or Motin & the Précieux, things would be easy. But all his old anti-isms are flourishing and I am tired of them: you know what they are – priests and soldiers & the Romantics – mainly. And then the enduring & unendurable QUIP, far worse than the Giraudoux astuce. I like Ruddy toujours and very much as you know, but how am I to give him that impression when he quiptificates in the midst of his adorers. (Beckett 2009, 48-9)

Beckett’s frustration seems to come together with the judgement that ‘every day here vulgarises ones hostility and turns anger into irritation & petulance’ (Beckett 2009, 49). The here is technically Cooldrinagh, but seems to encompass Trinity too. Beckett had not forgotten his sense of the vulgarity of ‘quiptification’ fifteen years later when translating *L’Innomable*, in which he resolves ‘Yes, now I’ve forgotten who Worm is, where he is, what he’s like, I’ll begin to be he. Anything rather than these college quips’ (Beckett 1973, 351).

Altogether, Beckett’s critical writing conveys the sense of a peculiarly knotted kind of performance, a strangulated effort to sing in academic tune, on which much of the Trilogy and especially *The Unnamable* might be seen as a bitter, teeth-gritting commentary. Academic writing seems to have provided Beckett with the model of a violent ventriloquism, the force-feeding and forced evacuation of words and opinions not his own, that runs through *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is*. But here Beckett seems to fuel his contempt for the loutishness of learning with the very habit of angry condemnation that disgusted him. It is not the least, and among the most unlovely of the loutish habits that Beckett clung to in his long retreat from the academic life.

Another remarkable, but little-remarked feature of Beckett’s critical style in his writing of the 1930s is its crustacean antiqueness (and in this it resembles other modernist writer-critics, such as Pound and Lewis). His is a language of smirking self-exhibition, of highly wrought phrase-making, creased and corrugated by snarling self-disgust. It is a sort of poisoned belle-lettrism, a connoisseurship turned convulsively

and self-mutilatingly on itself. It is entirely unlike the plainer, more professionalised, technicised critical diction that had begun to be developed among university critics like Richards and Empson from the early 1920s onwards, a critical writing that attempted to take the measure of its literary object rather than wrangling or straining to effect sacramental mingling with it.

Erudition

Nobody could ever accuse Beckett of wearing his learning lightly. Where Joyce was an unabashed pilferer and pillager of ideas and arguments, Beckett wrapped his allusions up in an air of patrician mystery. Where Joyce's writing honestly invokes and encourages the ingenuity of the crossword-solver, at one point even invoking the name of Beckett in his encouragements to the perplexed reader – 'Bethicket me for a stump of a beech if I have the poultiest notion what the forest it all means' – Beckett's erudition is intended to mock and lock out 'the great crossword public' (Beckett 1983, 92).

Ruby Cohn describes the Beckett who wrote 'Gnome' as 'this erstwhile academic who would spend years whittling down his erudition' (Cohn 2001, 66). Beckett's notebooks help us appreciate the surprising amount of effort he put into whittling it up. Matthew Feldman says that the notebooks Beckett compiled between 1932 and 1938 show him 'progressively pulling up the ladder of knowledge in order to destroy erudition from above' (Feldman 2006, 149). Well, I am not sure how many rungs Matt still thinks there were in Beckett's *scala scientiae*, but his own investigations, leading the way for many others, seem to make it clear how much of the Indian rope-trick was involved in the ascent to his windswept eyrie of unknowing. What is amazing is how the myth of Beckett's erudition continues to prosper in the face of the obvious fact of his dependence upon cribs and bluffer's guides. Matthew Feldman observes, accurately, and helpfully, that the study of the notebooks shows that Beckett studied very few philosophers in the original (and probably studied even fewer psychologists in this way). Instead, 'he sought to understand the tradition of philosophy *qua* systematic thought'. By this, Feldman clearly means that Beckett spent a long time copying out passages from general guides like John Burnet's *Greek Philosophy*, Archibald Alexander's *A Short History of Philosophy* and Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, none of them very up to date or even at the time particularly highly-regarded. Feldman concludes that '[t]he relevance of synoptic texts to Beckett's art clearly and significantly points away from an immersion in particular ideas, thinkers or modes of thought, to more general interests in the development of various European intellectual trends' (Feldman 2006, 149). It would be a justification at once lofty and nifty for an undergraduate, who had been detected basing his opinions and assertions on pilferings from survey rather than primary set

texts, to claim that he was more interested in philosophy ‘*qua* systematic thought’ rather than actual philosophers.

The word ‘erudite’ has undergone an interesting shift since it entered English in the fifteenth century. Coming from Latin ‘eruditus’, meaning taken out of a rude or uninstructed condition, the word ‘erudite’ originally meant educated or well-instructed; erudition usually meant the process of instruction, as applied to others – so ‘the erudition of the young’ would mean simply the instruction or education of the young. During the seventeenth century, the word started to be used to mean the condition of acquired learning rather than the process of imparting it, and slowly began to take on the slight connotations of pomposity, mystification and self-regard that it can have today. The OED suggests that the adjective ‘erudite’ is ‘now somewhat rare exc. in sarcastic use’. This seems to me to overstate it a bit, but the word ‘erudite’ has certainly drifted closer to words like ‘recondite’ and ‘esoteric’. Certainly, Beckett’s erudition has more than a little of this exhibitionist occultism. It seems to me that, despite his efforts at times to force himself to acquire systematic knowledge, Beckett was a collector of orts, anomalies and outcrops, which, flourished as they were in his early writing, served admirably to hint at a hinterland of systematic and integrated scholarship. While also suggesting by the very casualness of the way in which they were tossed out that nothing as vulgarly plodding as conscious and systematic study, of ‘erudition’ in the honest old sense, had gone into their acquisition. At times, it is almost as though Beckett were deliberately preventing himself from seeing the larger picture, lest he come to resemble the kind of ‘gentle skimmer’ he wanted so to despise. So he became a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles instead. ‘I bought the Origin of Species yesterday for 6d and never read such badly written catlap. I only remember one thing: blue-eyed cats are always deaf (correlation of variations)’ (Beckett 2009, 111).

Of course, Beckett must have spent a considerable amount of time reading and thinking about this material, but not nearly as much as an average undergraduate might be expected to, and none of it could come near to constituting erudition. But then, let us be fair, this is not Beckett’s own aim or claim, or at least it ceases to be after the 1930s. Beckett has not in the least cheated us, or himself. However, the evidence of the notebooks risks cheating academic writers on Beckett of their imago of the learned author, one who, in denouncing learning, is their fantasy twin, in that he has not merely turned from philosophy, but has turned philosophically from it: that ‘Beckett was a scholar who (despite his protestations of ignorance and bafflement) continued to wear his learning in almost everything he wrote’ (Abbott 1996, 173), or that ‘Beckett’s meticulously cultivated protestations of ignorance were deeply learned’ (Feldman 2006, 20). The academic fantasy, of Beckett’s secret cleaving to the academic in his secession from it, tugs in several directions.

Academic Fantasy

For Beckett, the academic life remained saturated by fantasy – saturated by the fantasies of those in it, but also by his own projected fantasies of it. Not only that, but Beckett's work, and its critical afterlife, embody and relay a certain professional discomposure that the academy and the academic entertains with regard to itself. I would like the phrase 'academic fantasy' to harbour a number of different identifications and desires, and so, just in case it doesn't, let me say now what they are.

There is, first of all, the fantasy of being an academic, the fantasy, doubtless naïve, but still potent and far from contemptible, of having the kind of knowledge and wisdom and integrity that professors are supposed to have. I saw a bumper sticker once in America that read 'I want to be the kind of person my dog thinks I am'. Perhaps people spend so long toiling to be academics and then, once they are, striving for ever greater glory and success, on the long ladder from freshman to emeritus, in order to give substance to their pretence to themselves that they are the kind of person that they think other people think a professor is.

Or that they wish other people thought a professor was. For then there is also the no less tenacious fantasy of what academics are popularly supposed in fact to be like: vain, envious, petulant, self-important, resentful, bullying, backbiting, devious, credulous, cupiditous, cowardly, egotistical, obstinate, obsessional, myopic, pettifogging, parochial and, in the sub-genre of academic detective fiction, homicidally sociopathic. Though academics groan about these clichés, they have their share in shoring them up, not least when they turn to the writing of academic fiction.

But, added to these, there is the unsleepingly energetic dreamwork of the academic himself or herself, internalising all of this and turning it to psycho-professional account in the mode of self-incrimination. Nobody has fingered this aggrandising self-belittlement better than Stanley Fish in his hilarious essay 'The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos'. Fish writes here, as elsewhere in his work, about the methodical bad faith of a profession that dare not admit to the manifold privileges and gratifications it enjoys, for example, during the growth during the 1970s and 1980s of the lecture and conference circuit,

new sources of extra income, increased opportunities for domestic and foreign travel, easy access to national and international centers of research, an ever-growing list of stages on which to showcase one's talents, and a geometrical increase in the availability of the commodities for which academics yearn: attention, applause, fame, and, ultimately, adulation of a kind usually reserved for the icons of popular culture. (Fish 1994, 274)

Fish provides a series of aphorisms that summarise the ways in which academics masochistically manipulate their self-loathing into self-gratifying forms. The first two of these are: ‘*Academics like to feel morally culpable, especially in relation to those who would give anything to be in their place*’ and ‘*Academics like to feel morally superior, which they manage by feeling morally culpable*’ (Fish 1994, 277). Fish describes the way in which ‘enfranchised academics, largely male, gazed with envy and strangely mediated desire at the disenfranchised, first at Jews, then at women, then at blacks, and then at Native Americans, and now at gays and Arabs’ (Fish 1994, 277). He also points to the ways in which academics borrow from the real hostility towards academic life in popular culture (but is it quite as real as academics would like it to be?), since his aphorisms require ‘a two-way commerce, victim and victimizer, trashers and trashees, each not only needing but desiring the other’ (Fish 1994, 278). Thus, ‘[a]cademic-bashing has become the national spectator sport, and, predictably, some academics are among the best players’ (Fish 1994, 278). Actually, this is not at all a new phenomenon. In an essay of 1955, Louis A. Katsoff remarked that ‘The most amazing fact about contemporary liberal-arts programs in higher education is the amount and kind of self-examination going on. It is as if those who teach in liberal-arts programs had developed deep-rooted guilt feelings which they seek to alleviate by loud cries of “I have sinned” ’ (Katsoff 1955, 311).

I called this methodical a moment ago, but I might perhaps as well have said methodist, since there is in it much of what used to be called the scrupulousness that characterised the clergymen with which Britain was so over-liberally supplied for several centuries, and who occupied more or less the same social niche as academics do now (indeed the requirement at Oxford and Cambridge for dons to be in holy orders made the coincidence actual rather than merely metaphorical). Scrupulousness means the excessive examination of one’s conscience for real or imagined sins, mostly of omission, and its public form is self-righteous denunciation of others through one’s own self-excoriating humility.

Indeed, the vast outpouring of sermons during the eighteenth century has parallels in the increasingly readerless publications that the academic profession nowadays uses for professional currency. If only the eighteenth century had had the internet, then every volume of sermons slaved over by a Suffolk curate, that that, like Louit’s dissertation *The Mathematical Intuitions of the Visicelts*, ‘could not be of the slightest value to any person other than himself, and, eventually, humanity’ (Beckett 1972, 171), could have been ‘disseminated’, as the research councils like to say, online, without the need for such prodigious sacrifice of good timber.

There is a particularly fraught relationship between writers and academic critics of writing, because they communicate and excommunicate in the same medium. I remember being struck as a teenager by a phrase used by George Steiner, a writer whom I read with dutiful avidity at the time:

When he looks back, the critic sees a eunuch's shadow. Who would be a critic if he could be a writer? Who would hammer out the subtlest insight into Dostoevsky if he could weld an inch of the Karamazovs, or argue the poise of Lawrence if he could shape the free gust of life in *The Rainbow*? (Steiner 1967, 21)

Never at the time having read either of these writers (and never having succeeded, before or since, in feeling on, or even between my cheeks, that authentically Lawrentian afflatus), I nevertheless embraced my sweet-sour fate, joining in the fantasy of the literary academic that I was really just biding my time, before emerging as the fully-fledged writer, possessed of a full set of generative organs, that I had secretly been incubating all along. After years of adherence, I at last gave up the idea that to be an academic critic is perforce to be a parasite, a hanger-on, a heel-tapper, a rag-picker, as though it were obvious that anyone who had any jizz in him would in the end start to write something real, which is to say, made-up, poetry, drama or, for preference (but why?) fiction. Having, late in the day, but still with some time left to profit from it, given up the grim destiny of being a Writer, it became possible for me to see what kind of writing I might be able to do. But I still remember what it was like to hug the delicious, desolating dream of my own impotence as a writer, and how gratifying it was to find in Beckett a writer whom I could assist and who could assist me in levitating impotence into a kind of omnipotence.

Beckett, his work and his commentators are skewered and traversed by these projections and hostilities. Beckett became an academic author in a way that Joyce expected to, but never quite did in his own lifetime. In fact, one might reflect on the formative humiliation it may have been for Beckett to make his debut as a published writer with an essay that was part of the PR exercise that was the *Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* engineered by Joyce to establish academic credentials for his work. At the time the book was being prepared, under his direction, Joyce wrote to Valéry Larbaud 'Depart from me ye bleaters, into everlasting sleep, which was prepared for Academicians and their agues!' (Ellmann 1982, 613). In 'Dante .. Bruno . Vico .. Joyce', we can hear the gnashing of teeth as Beckett carries out his assignment to the letter, while doing everything he can to register his irritation at the job of explication that has been allotted to him and to leave his surly stain on it.

Joyce has certainly kept the professors busy in just the way he meant to, but he did not live into the era in which they would come knocking at his door begging audiences and testimonials as they did at Beckett's. Many of the remarks from which a Beckettian poetic might be constructed were produced as responses to the demand for authoritative guidance and explication. Beckett seems to display a marked duality with regard to academics. On the one hand, there is his well-known hostility towards explication, or, as the Director in *Catastrophe* puts it, 'explicitation' (Beckett 1986,

459), a charge which seems to include in it the desire to protect the authentic art work from the cheapening and vulgarisation that would render it merely intelligible, and make it unnecessary really to encounter it. On the other hand, there is the fact of Beckett's patience with and respect for the actual academics and scholars with whom he came into contact. This ambivalence may be a special instance of the split that Knowlson observes between Beckett's capacity for cruel and sneering aggression and his horror at the thought of giving offence, a split which meant that he had often to write letters of apology for his boorish or insensitive conduct. It may very well be that, for somebody of Beckett's temperament, the courtesy may be a modulation of the antagonism, a calmative screen that enables the contempt to be kept at full pressure.

Prior to his imperfectly-executed policy of noncompliance with criticism, Beckett formed a kind of credo designed to keep his work clear of the avaricious clutches of the academy. This is the argument that, because art is of the order of the irrational, it has nothing to do with 'doctoracy' and the vulgar agonies of the dissertation. This creed seems first to emerge in *Proust*, and then to be articulated in splinters through the 1930s reviews, finally being informally formalised in the *Three Dialogues*. The claim for the irrationality of art is designed most of all to establish a kind of sovereignty by subtraction. Art is what is left after the work of explication and making clear has surrendered or receded. Not only is art ineffably untranslatable into any terms but its own, this undefinability is the only definition left of it. Poetry, Beckett writes in his review of Denis Devlin's *Intercussions* (almost as though he were denying the title of the collection) must be 'free to be derided (or not) on its own terms and not in those of the politicians, antiquaries (Geleerte) and zealots' (Beckett 1983, 91). What matters most about art is its inexplicability, its incomparability, its nonexchangeability with anything but itself. Hence Beckett's remark, after a quotation from Devlin, 'If I knew of any recent writing to compare with this I should not do so' (Beckett 1983, 93). For the Beckett of the 1930s, art is the name for radical immediacy – that which cannot be approximated, expropriated or unseated from itself, precisely because it has no self-subsistence. That, while ceasing to formulate this view publically, Beckett continued to hold stubbornly to it, is suggested by the translation he made in 1971 of the 'Hommage à Jack B. Yeats' which he had originally written for an exhibition of the painter's work in Paris in 1954. Where the French responds to the suggestion 'Border alors?' with the assertion that 'Sur ces images éperdument immédiates il n'y a ni place, ni temps, pour les exploits rassurants' (Beckett 1983, 148) ['Decoration then? There is neither place nor time in such sublime images for exercises of reassurance'] the English pins the question much more tightly to the question of explication: 'Gloss? In images of such breathless immediacy as these there is no occasion, no time given, no room left, for the lenitive of commentary' (Beckett 1983, 149). Beckett frequently has recourse to metaphors of alimentation or bodily incorporation to gloss the work of glossing, described in 'Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce' as '[t]he rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense ... made possible by what I may call a continuous process of copious intellectual salivation' (Beckett 1983, 26).

Beckett was opposed to anything that eased the passage of art, whether inwards or outwards: 'May it stick in their anus', he wrote to Reavey of the 'bolus' of *Echo's Bones* (Beckett 2009, 295). Hence his deliberately dyspeptic criticism, a criticism contrived to catch in its own craw.

Beckett's reluctance to cooperate with academics, or to cooperate too much with too many of them, can reasonably be defended as a reluctance to give a stamp of approval to interpretations that critics should be willing to assume responsibility for themselves – 'If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin' (Harmon 1998, 24). Beckett wishes not to be forced to participate in the mediation of his own work, to become his own intercessor. But he felt the repeated necessity of interceding on behalf of the work precisely in order to protest and protect its incommensurability. Beckett is necessarily his own mediator, acting on behalf of his work's immediacy, often, as Bruno Clément has observed, within the work itself, in which 'there is...a voice resembling, to the point of their being mistaken for one another, the critical voice'... Few, very few readers succeed in refusing a full and complete legitimacy to this metatextual voice of Beckett's texts, which denies them any pretension to stating the truth about the work in question' (Clément 2006, 199, 120).

Beckett must reluctantly have come to recognise that he was, if not an academic writer, then certainly an academics' writer, a writer whose work it would be implausible, even perhaps impossible, to subtract from the contexts of critical and scholarly explication that framed it. This is not just because of the loutishness of academic appropriation, but also because Beckett himself, inveterately vexed by academic longings and the vehicle of the vicarious longings of academics, found himself not altogether despite himself facilitating the work of academic self-inculcation. Beckett's suspicion of the exercise of academic explication ideally nourished the hermeneutics of suspicion on which academic criticism came to prosper from the 1970s onwards, impelled to some considerable degree by Beckett's own critical example. Beckett's mode of repelling all boarders came to provide an ideal point of identification for an academic self-ideal. Beckett's desertion of the academy validates the institutional phobia of institutions cultivated by academics. How true, the academic critic says, when confronted by Beckett's hostility to academicism; this is how loutish academics can be, as we, uniquely equipped as we are to reflect rigorously and unflinchingly on our own intellectual culpability, best know. Beckett and the academy are locked in a lascivious, Laocoon-like clinch, a cycle of dependence and resentment that constitutes a veritable anxiety of confluence.

There is a striking parallel between the great theme with which modernist writers and artists wrestled, namely the question of what kind of distinctiveness or autonomy art might be said to have in a world of commodities, consumption and corporate power, and the academy's self-reflections. What is more, the two are intertwined. Art and the academy are twins as well as antagonists. The autonomy and the sovereignty of the

artist on the one hand and the academic on the other, are maintained through a reciprocally-defining distance; the artist is free of the encumbrances and accountabilities of the academic, the academic is free of the unknowingness, that is, of the false freedom, of the artist.

The world of art and the world of learning are looped together in a series of Laingian knots. Academia uses art and literature as an arena to consider its own struggles over autonomy. The artist-writer looks down on safely tenured academics, while envying their security and assured social status. At the same time, the artist-writer may despise the featherbedded unworldliness of the academic, regarding himself as having a much more authentic and immediate relationship with his or her reader. The artist-writer regards himself as the *Ding an sich*, the primary *materia aesthetica* on which academic criticism must feed, while resenting the tendency of criticism to develop more and more ways of operating in the absence of texts or authors.

Art and the academy furnish each other with the means to secure their respective forms of autonomy, that is, by each assuming or affirming its freedom from or exceeding of the other. But, for this same reason, each mistrusts and resents the other, as the proof of its own dependence, or less than absolute condition. The freedom of each is constrained by the fact that it is precisely a freedom from the other. Art requires the forms of mediation that the academy, among other agencies, supplies. The academy must sometimes reluctantly acknowledge its continuing need for forms of artistic object on which to operate.

Academic Politics

All this might be thought of as an argument regarding politics in a minor sense, bearing on the institutional politics of literature and the academy. Academic criticism has of course had a great deal to say about much larger, and apparently less introverted kinds of political investment and purchases of literary forms. I want to conclude by suggesting that in fact the particular form of familial rivalry that has developed between art and its accompanying academic institutions has also in fact formed and indeed limitingly deformed the understanding of the politics of literary art.

Although there are almost illimitable ways in which the political formations, implications and effects of literary and artistic works might be made out, in fact the political readings of literary works that have become normative in the last two or three decades fall into a very narrow and repetitious routine. The question to be asked is always some version of the following: how does this work consolidate or resist the operations of power? This question is itself pre-coded in terms of the power of the text either to affirm coherent and determinate meanings, or to disturb and

perplex those meanings. The politics of texts are read, that is, in terms of a polarity between works that institutionalise meaning and works that in various ways elude, or prevent this kind of institutionalisation. How do these texts allow me to thematise their resistance to my powers of thematisation?

Two things might strike us about this way of thinking about politics. The first is how astonishingly romantic, not to say positively adolescent it is to assume that the assertion and maintenance of fixity and limit is always on the side of political reaction, and the assertion of indeterminacy and radical change always to be seen as politically desirable. The rhetoric of academic politics continues to be locked into a Blakeian ethic of damning braces and blessing relaxes, and hopelessly mortgaged to the emancipatory fix. This view of things, leading to an unchallengeable lexicon of the illimitable, has grave difficulties in coping both with the forms of contemporary economic relations and the urgent demands of climate change. Generations of students and teachers continue to assure each other that the evil of capitalism consists in its constraining of the infinite potential for difference of human beings, unable to grasp or acknowledge that, if capitalism is to be identified with any single principle at all, it is that of mutability and indeterminacy. There seems no way to connect this politics of absolute indeterminacy to the forms of carefully-deliberated limit that adapting to the depletion of natural resources and anthropogenic climate change will demand. There continues to be no way to conceive a left politics of limit.

The most recent example of this is the philosophy of the event, identified with Deleuze, Lyotard and, most frequently nowadays, Alain Badiou. What matters more than anything else, Badiou insists, is that we should form a revolutionary subjectivity out of adherence to the event, defined as kind of occurrence that resists all formalisation, resists all reduction to *doxa*, or positive knowledge.

The second is that it recapitulates in its form the *pas de deux* that is danced out by art and the academy, art insisting on its incapacity to be hemmed in by explication, and academic readings instituting this very same value in their explications of the indeterminacy or exalted exceedings of art. The lexicon of the illimitable, and the privilege of the event is the doxological refusal of doctrine, the institutionalised phobia of institutions. It is the image and the reflex of the noncoincident convergence, the rivalrous mimesis, acted out in the academic fantasy, between the academic and its fancied others, in which what is at stake is always the imaginary power of escaping the demands of power. If ethics may be defined as the deliberation of the good, and politics as the necessary coercion of the good, then this is a politics characterised by a refusal of coercion.

Let me recapitulate the three arguments I have been trying to stand up.

First, modern writers and artists on the one hand, and their academic explicators on the other, have had to develop a deep and defining relation of rivalrous mimicry with each other.

Second, the academic politics of this semi-amicable psychomachia involve a huge overemphasis on epistemology, or questions of knowing – in which ineffability, uninterpretability, cognitive indigestibility and irreducible otherness become sovereign principles, enabling both academic interpreter and artistic interpretee to affirm their autonomy from and through the other.

Third, the absorption in this specifically epistemological drama allows both academic and artist systematically to let academic politics (which is to say the politics of the sibling cultures of academic and artist) stand for actual politics – actual politics being dull, ugly, bungling and entirely indispensable, while academic politics are subtle, scrupulous, exacting, fascinating and exquisitely gratuitous.

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