

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Eleven, Number One

Joyce or Beckett? On Žižek's Choice

Will Greenshields, Independent Scholar

Abstract

We are used to hearing Žižek respond to a proposed choice between two options with the replies “yes please!” or “no thanks!” – this answer amounting to a refusal of choice that maintains the productive antagonism between the presented options or a refutation that one offers a better solution than the other (“both are worse!”). However, when it comes to the question “Joyce or Beckett?” Žižek unequivocally responds “Beckett, please!” Through a close reading of Žižek’s scattered references to and reflections on both writers, this paper sets out the theoretical stakes of such a response whilst also addressing other matters such as Žižek’s remarks on the “Joycean” Lacan.

Žižek has frequently asserted the “refusal of choice” that was so memorably voiced by Groucho Marx when he replied to the question “Tea or coffee?” with the answer “Yes, please!”, most notably in his rejection of the antinomy between “class struggle” and “postmodernism” (Žižek 2000: 90) – an argument that, following 2016, has taken on heightened significance with many observers blaming Trump’s election on a Left bogged down in arguments about transgender bathrooms. For Žižek, such a refusal of choice between options is not predicated on the optimistic notion that a harmonious synthesis awaits construction but that the two options are at their most productive when the spark of antagonism emerges from their conjunction – or, better, their preserved disjunction. However, when it comes to the question “Joyce or Beckett?”, Žižek makes very clear his preference for the latter, going as far as to state that Beckett’s interest lays in his “*break*” with Joyce, his definitive movement beyond Joyce (Žižek 2012a: 207).

It is the aim of this paper to enquire as to the stakes of Žižek’s choice and to examine his reasons for making it. In response to the question “Joyce or Beckett?” why does Žižek so stridently answer “Beckett!”?

Joyce with Beckett

Žižek’s distaste for Joyce and accompanying preference for Beckett are relatively recent features of his work. Indeed, in *Looking Awry* (published in 1992), both authors are recruited as exemplars of *the same side* in another dialectical face off – this time between modernism (Joyce, Beckett) and post-modernism (Kafka). According to Žižek, the former is characterised by the Other’s *incompleteness* and the latter is characterised by the Other’s *inconsistency*. Joyce and Beckett are said to be modernists insofar as their texts make felt the Other’s incompleteness. The reader of *Finnegans Wake* is always denied the transcendental, stabilising *point de capiton* that may await him around another bend of the interminable “riverrun”, he is gripped by “the interpretive delirium taken to the infinite, of the time (to interpret) where each stable moment reveals itself to be nothing but a ‘condensation’ of a plural signifying process” (Žižek 1992: 146). If in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* the erudition of an “interpretative delirium” is replaced by the idiocy of endlessly waiting, the cause of this response is no different: the Other is, once again, incomplete: “The whole futile and senseless action of the play takes place while waiting for Godot’s arrival when, finally,

'something might happen'; but one knows very well that 'Godot' can never arrive because he is just a name for nothingness, a central absence" (Žižek 1992: 145).

Contrary to critics who have perceived in Kafka's work the malfunctioning of an incomplete Other or the effects of an "absent God" – insofar as an "inaccessible, absent, transcendent agency (the Castle, the Court)" torments a protagonist by virtue of its inaccessibility – Žižek proposes that in texts such as *The Trial* the court is instead an "inert, obscene, revolting *presence*" embodied by *inconsistent* judges who laugh at the wrong times and indulge oddly public modes of *jouissance* (Žižek 1992: 146). Far from being too far away or simply absent, Kafka's *lawless* and obscene God is uncomfortably close. If Beckett were a post-modernist, argues Žižek, he would have introduced just such a God(ot) on stage. The "central absence" or incompleteness of the Other would be supplanted by a stupid presence or inconsistency of the Other. We can only speculate as to what a post-modernist Joyce might look like (since Žižek does not himself provide a suggestion) but perhaps this hypothetical figure might, as a performance art, have bequeathed on his deathbed the "key" to *Finnegans Wake* in the form of a mundane and stupid phrase (itself laying behind some obscure code in the text), in imitation of the banalities that invariably follow the inquiry, "What is the meaning of life?" Much like a Godot "who lives the same futile, boring life that we do, who enjoys the same stupid pleasures" (Žižek 1992: 145), such a phrase would fill the absence with a dumb, non-revelatory presence. If the modernist Joyce had wished to keep literary critics busy for centuries, the post-modernist Joyce would obstruct this activity, forcing critics into a traumatic encounter with an inconsistent Other that knows no more than they do.

While in this instance Joyce and Beckett belong to the same set (i.e. modernism, incompleteness), traces of the split between the two authors that Žižek would later concentrate on can already be identified. Where *Finnegans Wake* is composed of a superabundance of associative signification, *Waiting for Godot* is composed around "a central absence", a void from which all but a name ("Godot") has been evacuated.

In the sole piece that Žižek explicitly devotes to Joyce ("From Joyce-the-Symptom to the Symptom of Power"), he slightly modifies the argument outlined above: "The 'modernism' of Joyce resides in the fact that his works, at least *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, are not simply external to their interpretation but, as it were, in advance take into account their possible interpretations and enter into a dialogue with them." (Žižek 1997: 13) In Žižek's first definition of modernism the Other is incomplete because there is clearly something missing whilst in the second definition the Other is incomplete because there is no final enclosing frame *qua* Other of the Other. In other words, the impossibility of completing the Other (that is, delivering to *Finnegans Wake* its meaning) stems not simply from its extraordinary polysemy but the self-reflexive nature of this polysemy (recall here the delight that Joyce

took in a picture of cork surrounded by a frame made of cork). Derrida makes this same point, observing that Joyce's rapacious gathering of religions, literatures and languages means that whatever one might say about Joyce "finds itself already programmophonied in the Joycean corpus" (Derrida 1992: 283). If we are to accept this definition of modernism – according to which the framing Other is always incomplete because it is folded into the content and the "exterior" reader is thereby anticipated by the "interior" text – we must say that, before *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is a modernist text *par excellence*. Thanks to an unreliable narrator, the picture is incomplete and we cannot tell whether the ghosts exist or not. However, in attempting to resolve this question, critics have, as Shoshana Felman has convincingly shown, employed the very same reading practices of the narrator, unwittingly mimicking the governess's search for a truth that is ultimately undecidable: "[i]n repeating as they do the primal scene of the text's meaning as division, the critics can by no means master or exhaust the very meaning of that division, but only act the division out, perform it, be part of it" (Felman 2003: 160). Žižek's definition of modernism would require an idiosyncratic chronology especially when applied to the field of visual art (insofar as we would surely have to go as far back as Velázquez's *Las Meninas*).

If, as Žižek observes, the Joycean text induces an "interpretative delirium" spanning decades, a pain-staking and disciplined dedication to an unpicking of the intricacies of a dense weave of intertexts, it is striking that this is precisely *not* how Žižek reads Joyce. As Shelly Brivic notes in *Joyce through Lacan and Žižek*, in the single paper where Joyce features in the title Žižek "leaves Joyce behind after the first page." (Brivic 2008: 229, n. 21) While the refusal or inability to focus on one topic for more than several paragraphs is a well-known feature of Žižek's work and the reader cannot say that he is not given fair warning since movement is implied by Žižek's title ('*From Joyce-the-Symptom to the Symptom of Power*'), one could suppose, as Luke Thurston does, that there is something about Joyce's work that, quite simply, cannot be metabolised by the Žižek reading-machine:

Whenever Slavoj Žižek's fast-moving theoretical engine has touched on Joyce, it has rapidly come unstuck... The very *quidditas* of Žižek, one might say, is fundamentally at odds with Joycean writing, since the latter does not lend itself to rapid summary and acrobatic redeployment (as an anti-Berlusconi critique of *Così Fan Tutte*, for example, a Marxist footnote to the soundtrack of *Vertigo*, or a dialectical riposte to 1990s eco-feminism). In other words, you do not have to be an obsessive devotee of Joyce's work to sense how, at some level, it is likely to *resist* easy assimilation into Žižek's vertiginous concatenation of cultural intertexts... *Ulysses* is a semiotic network relating

to almost everything, our desire to map that network requires meticulous, repeated reading... (Thurston 2010: 305)

It is tempting to add that if Žižek is himself engaged in a mapping of almost anything – using Hegel, Marx and Lacan as his three Cartesian coordinates – then it is no surprise to learn that he would have little interest in devoting himself to the more secondary task of studying somebody else’s map – the irony here being that Žižek’s oeuvre is far more Joycean than it is Beckettian. While there is surely some truth to Thurston’s observation, one could also argue the point that if the “*quidditas* of Žižek” has a lot to do with its extraordinary speed (“fast-moving theoretical engine”), then this *quidditas* is at its most exemplary when it encounters Joyce: as we shall see, while Žižek discusses individual texts in Beckett’s oeuvre and actually quotes from these texts, he never gives Joyce the same attentive treatment; the latter is never more than the subject of swift summaries composed of vague and well-tread references to glossomania. In his public role as a provocateur, Žižek has stated that in order to preserve “Beckett, Kafka and the Russian Andrei Platonov” he would be “ready to burn... all other books” (Žižek 2014: 1). It is therefore Beckett and Kafka (who, in comparison to Joyce’s several dispersed paragraphs, is granted seven consecutive pages worth of discussion in *Looking Awry*), and not Joyce, who are, for Žižek, unusual.

In *Looking Awry* Žižek writes that “[i]f Joyce’s text provokes interpretation,” because in order to complete the Other there is always one more association to be made, one more etymological rabbit hole to explore, “Kafka’s blocks it.” (Žižek 1992: 146) It not simply as a demonstration of his tireless contrarianism that in subsequent pages Žižek spends much more time “interpreting” Kafka than he does Joyce. For Žižek, what is of interest is that which is situated in a topological “extimacy” with respect to signification, that point at which *any* “theoretical engine”, be it Žižekian or otherwise, judders to a halt:

[In *The Tria*] the Other of the law appears... as inconsistent: nothing is wanting in it, nothing is lacking, but for all that it still is not “whole/all,” it remains an inconsistent bricolage, a collection following a kind of aleatory logic of enjoyment. This provides the image of Kafka as a “writer of presence” – the presence of what? Of a blind machinery to which nothing is lacking insofar as it is the very surfeit of enjoyment... It is as if Kafka’s text were a coagulated, stigmatized, signifying chain repelling signification with an excess of sticky enjoyment. (Žižek 1992: 151)

Kafka’s readers have erred in presenting the German as a writer of negative theology, the writer of an absent God. Instead, we are confronted with an Other whose malfunctioning defies any explanation that interpretation might offer. We cannot say, for example, that the

Other falters because God(ot) is absent: he is present and yet still the Other falters. The task of filling in Beckett's void or re-constructing Joyce's map of everything gives interpreters much to do – faced with an incompleteness to rectify rather than an inconsistency to explain, the apparently indefatigable industry of Joyce criticism positively motors along, churning out paper after paper. Nonetheless, this still does not explain why, after having placed Beckett *on the same side as Joyce* in a comparison with Kafka, Žižek will vigorously assert his preference for one over the other.

Why not Joyce?

The first thing to note is that Žižek's willingness to burn Joyce in order to save Beckett is closely linked to the antipathy with which he regards what we might loosely call the Joycean Lacan of the mid 1970s:

Jacques Lacan sometimes gets seduced by the rhizomatic wealth of language beyond – or, rather, beneath – the formal structure that sustains it. It is in this sense that, in the last decade of his teaching, he deployed the notion of *lalangue* which stands for language as the space of illicit pleasures that defy normativity, of the chaotic multitude of homonymies, wordplays, “irregular” metaphoric links and resonances. Productive as this notion is, one should be aware of its limitations. Many commentators have noted that Lacan's last great literary reading, that of Joyce... is not at the same level of his previous great readings, such as of *Hamlet*, *Antigone* or of the Coufontaine trilogy. There is effectively something fake in Lacan's fascination with late Joyce, with *Finnegans Wake* as the latest version of the literary *Gesamtkunstwerk* with its endless wealth of *lalangue* in which... the very gap between linguistic meaning and jouissance seems overcome and the rhizome-like *jouis-sens* proliferates in all directions. (Žižek 2012a: 207-208)

There are two important descriptors here: (1) Lacan's fascination with *lalangue* is the effect of a seduction and, (2) his fascination with Joyce's *lalangue* is somehow fake. Let us briefly discuss both:

(1) The distinction that Žižek makes between language's “rhizomatic wealth” and its “formal structure”, between the singular and secondary *poème* and the universal and primary *mathème*, combined with his observation that Lacan's fascination with the former is the result of a *seduction*, is suggestive of an involuntary loss of discipline, a lapse into non-serious concerns. But what is the difference between the Joycean/Lacanian pun and the

Žižekian joke? The reading of *lalangue* may only have a limited productivity in, for example, the elaboration of a political project but it is central to the psychoanalytic clinic. As Lacan remarks in his seminar on Joyce, “[i]t’s good of you to chuckle [at my *lalangue*], but it’s not funny because when all is said and done the equivoque is all we have as a weapon against the symptom.” (Lacan 2016a: 9) Similarly, we can chuckle at Žižek’s jokes but they are often deployed in order to illuminate some previously unnoticed contradiction in the popular fantasy. In neither case should Freudian *Witz* be considered separate to “formal structure.”

(2) For Žižek, if Lacan’s reading of Joyce does not match up to his reading of Shakespeare then this is because there is “something fake” about the former. What does he mean by this? This is not the first time that Žižek has accused Lacan of faking it. In a scene from Astra Taylor’s *Žižek!*, her subject can be seen watching the interview that Lacan gave to French television in 1973. Žižek’s expressed discontent with Lacan’s idiosyncratic oratory contains two uncanny repetitions: “what interests me are his propositions, the under-lying logic, not his style. His style is a total *fake*, I think... Maybe it works as a strategy... first you have to *seduce* people with obscure statements...” (Taylor 2005) Echoing this split between style and logic, Lacan’s interviewer, Jacques-Alain Miller, in the margins of the published transcript of this interview, has provided various mathemes and aphorisms in order to show that “every rhetorical flourish is in fact built upon a structure, and that his playing with language corresponds to lines of reasoning.” (Miller 1990: xvii-xviii) Leaving aside the perhaps unanswerable question as to whether or not Lacan’s carefully cultivated style is just superfluous fluff – Lacan himself was of the opinion that it would do analysts some good to read something that they cannot immediately understand – it is certainly the case that Lacan’s style became progressively more Joycean throughout the 1970s (until this shift itself gave way in *Seminar XXV* and *Seminar XXVI* to the more taciturn inscription of knots and tori). However, this is not to say that Lacan did not himself clearly pose the distinction between the asemeic matheme (that is, structure written by the letter) and the polysemic excess of *lalangue*: “there is no teaching but the mathematical, the rest is a joke.” (Lacan 2011: 27)

Speaking to eminent Joyceans in 1975 Lacan preceded a particularly flamboyant display of *lalangue* with the warning that he was about to “*poursticher*” Joyce, to pursue (*poursuivre*) and pastiche Joyce (Lacan 2016b: 141). It is perhaps this that Žižek finds fake – that is, a sort of superficial and self-indulgent showmanship that is nothing more than weak mimicry. Lacan had made no such attempt to imitate Shakespeare, instead concentrating on the subject’s *formal structure* in *Hamlet* (i.e. the topological co-implication of the subject’s desire and the Other’s desire). Lacan does go on to say that “[t]he important thing for me is not to do a pastiche of *Finnegans Wake*... but to say in what respect, by formulating the title *Joyce the Symptom*, I endue Joyce with nothing less than his proper name.” (Lacan 2016b:

142) Lacan is here alluding to a formal structure, that of the Borromean knot, where Joyce's "proper name" *qua* symptom forms a fourth ring that repairs a fault. The distinction between *lalangue* (fake *pourstiche*) and structure ("the important thing") is again asserted. However, for Lacan, the former remains a vital path to the latter: he tells analysts to "read *Finnegans Wake*" (and, by extension his own pastiche), to read the materiality of letter as opposed to the effect of meaning produced by combinations of signifiers (Lacan 1998: 37). We should also state that Žižek's assertion that, for Lacan, the gap between "linguistic meaning" and *jouissance* is overcome is only correct to a point: according to his Borromean organisation of *jouissance*, there are two modes of *jouissance* that are wedged by the over-lapping of the symbolic and the imaginary (*jouis-sens*) or the symbolic and the real (phallic *jouissance*) but there also remains a mode of *jouissance* that remains beyond the symbolic despite being a feature of the same knot (*jouissance* of the barred Other) (Lacan 2016a: 43). Just as there is no sexual relationship, there can be no *Gesamtkunstwerk* straightforwardly uniting *jouissance* and the signifier.

In a Q&A held by the *Guardian* newspaper, Žižek put his point more bluntly: "Joyce is I think too bright for his own good. It's too pretentious in this encyclopaedic approach, like using all languages in *Finnegans Wake*; the true genius is for me Samuel Beckett." (Žižek 2014: 1) While we might be struck by Žižek's refusal of scholarly tact and the social conscience of canon bashers, he is, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle reveals, in good company: "There is no cultural relativism in either Badiou or Deleuze: there are great texts, faithful either to the event or to life, and the task of the philosopher-critic is to find them and extol their greatness." (Lecercle 2010: 119) However, if the *fake* genius is the hyperglot genius of accumulated intertexts, the *true* genius is the genius of... what, exactly? Formal structure, perhaps?

From Joyce to Beckett

In *Less than Nothing* Žižek again addressed the place of Joyce and Beckett within modernism – only, this time, Beckett is presented as the instigator of a break:

[The revelation that]... there is no big Other... brings us again to the fate of modern art. Schoenberg still hoped that somewhere there would be at least one listener who would truly understand his atonal music. It was only his greatest pupil, Anton Webern, who accepted the fact that there is no listener, no big Other to receive the work and properly recognize its value. In literature, James Joyce still counted on future generations of literary critics as his ideal public, claiming he wrote *Finnegans Wake* to keep them occupied for the next 400 years. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, we, writers and readers, have to accept that we are alone, reading and writing at our own

risk, with no guarantee for the big Other. (It was Beckett who drew this conclusion in his break from Joyce.) (Žižek 2012b: 29)

With modernism, the big Other is no longer found in or founded by the work itself – which instead concerns itself with the fragmentation and dissolution of self, artistic convention and the faith in man's progress – but in its supposed reception. In other words, this is the modernist artist's new belief system: "perhaps somewhere there exists a non-naive big Other, a big Other that does not believe in himself, that appreciates the blow that I have struck to the big Other to which the naive cling." There is, then, some pride to be taken from the Fall.

Superficially, at least, Žižek comes to much the same conclusion as Lacan – who asks in *Seminar XXIII*: "Why not conceive of the case of Joyce in the following terms – isn't his desire to be an artist who would keep the whole world busy, or in any case as many people as possible, what compensates exactly for the fact that, let's say, his father was never a father for him?" (Lacan 2016a: 72) In the formation of Joyce's subjectivity, the big Other has not been secured by the Name-of-the-Father and so a supplement must be forged. This supplement – or, better, symptom – is the art through which Joyce makes his own name. However, if, as Žižek puts it, Joyce's readers amount to a "guarantee for the big Other", they only do so insofar as they fail as a big Other. In other words, Joyce's fame, his name, derives from the inability of the Other for which he writes to assert itself as the subject supposed to know by delivering to his symptom its meaning. It is necessary for the Other to fail for it to be the Other that allows a non-triggered psychotic to become "Joyce the symptom." There is no guarantee from the big Other but Joyce made of this lack of guarantee his guarantee.

Nevertheless, whilst we might quibble with it, let us remain within the track of Žižek's argument and see where it takes us. As is stated above, Žižek argues in *Less than Nothing* that Beckett's "break" from Joyce derives from the former's recognition that not only is there no big Other in the work itself, there is also no big Other in the work's reception. In other words, Beckett extends the *incompleteness* of the Other. However, in "Cogito in Literature: Descartes and Beckett", Žižek concentrates instead on the work: "After his early period, in which he, more or less, wrote some variations on Joyce, the 'true' Beckett constituted himself through a true ethical act," – we see again the distinction between the fakery of *pourstiche* and the "true genius" – "a cut, a rejection of the Joycean wealth of enjoy-meant, and the ascetic turn towards minimal difference, towards a minimalization, subtraction of the narrative content and of language itself." (Žižek 2012a: 208) Žižek repeats his Schoenberg/Joyce – Webern/Beckett comparison but again whereas in *Less than Nothing* what was at stake was the reception ("Schoenberg still hoped that somewhere there would

be at least one listener who would truly understand his atonal music. It was only his greatest pupil, Anton Webern, who accepted the fact that there is no listener”), what is at stake in this essay is the content (or lack of it): “Beckett is effectively the literary counterpart of Anton Webern: both are authors of extreme modernist minimalism, who extract a minimal difference from a wealth of material.” (Žižek 2012a: 208) There are two ways to demonstrate the incompleteness of the Other: Joycean maximalism and Beckettian minimalism – the latter, according to Žižek, is the act of the *true* genius. Why?

Put simply, where Joyce symptomatically responds to a defect in formal structure (and what we read is his response) Beckett exposes formal structure (and what we read is his exposure). When speaking about the Lacanian-Žižekian conception of structure we should be careful not to confuse it with historicist, Foucauldian notions of structure (i.e. signifying networks of narrative and power). For Lacan, structure is not simply a symbolic constellation: “The structure is... real. It is determined by convergence towards an impossibility” (Lacan 1968-69: 20/11/68). Lacan presents this impossibility through axioms (e.g. ‘there is no Other of the Other’) and mathemes (e.g. \mathcal{A}). Žižek’s contention is that Beckett’s “convergence towards an impossibility” is more effective, more revealing than Joyce’s convergence. Paraphrasing Lacan, he writes that “[w]e touch the Lacanian real when we subtract from a symbolic field all the wealth of its differences, reducing it to a minimum of antagonism.” (Žižek 2012a: 207) It is in what Beckett referred to as a “literature of the unword”, as opposed to Joyce’s “apotheosis of the word”, that such a subtraction is realised (Beckett 1983: 173).

Why Beckett?

On the topic of Alain Badiou’s literary predilections, Andrew Gibson reveals that “Badiou recently told me... that he has no liking for Joyce. One expects there is simply too much world for him there.” (Gibson 2012: 67, n. 53) As is well known, “world” is the term that Badiou gives to the techno-capitalist organisation of local affinities and parochial relations that inhibit Philosophy’s non-hermeneutic discernment of any universal truth arrived at by art, politics, science or love. Badiou identifies in Beckett’s oeuvre the process of an evacuation of world from being that, once it touches the ontological minimum first reached by Descartes, takes a very different path to Descartes’s re-envelopment of being in the big Other (God). In summarising the reasons for Badiou’s fidelity to Beckett, Peter Hallward writes that “Beckett’s subtractive prose” is an “uncompromising effort to ‘extract’ a generic or universal truth from a world” (Hallward 2003: 203).

We might say that just as for Badiou, there is too much world for Žižek in Joyce. Like Badiou, Žižek discerns in Beckett’s trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*) a brutal subtraction of world (and body): “The whole of the trilogy can be read as a gradual

getting rid of subjectivity, a gradual reduction of subjectivity to the minimum of a subject without subjectivity.... Is this subject, deprived of all substantial content, not the subject... of the Cartesian *cogito*?" (Žižek 2012a: 209-10) This is the anti-humanist, non-egoic subject emptied of content but without the ontological assurance (that is, the firm basis for the re-gathering of content) that Descartes's big Other offers. It is Lacan's divided subject, the subject reduced to a minimal antagonism that is its being. For Žižek, the universal or generic truth that Beckett provides is that of the subject *qua* formal structure. Reading the trilogy we move from humorously evoked material deprivation to a formal void, from "Molloy, or life without a chambermaid" (Beckett 1966: 59) to a subject without subjectivity, from a mocking evocation of the novelistic title to what is strictly unnameable. At the peak of its dissolution in *The Unnamable*, the Beckettian subject is found in neither the "mind" – that is, the self-conscious and unified individual – nor the big Other, instead subsisting as an impossibly thin plane between the two, a lone monologue apparently without reception or conventional source:

[A]n outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two... I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness... on the one hand the mind and on the other the world. I don't belong to either, it's not to me their talking. (Beckett 1966: 386)

Interestingly, however, in *Not I* – the play that Žižek regards as the staging of *The Unnamable* – the Other *is* present in the form of the Auditor whilst the subject, for its part, has been reduced to a disembodied mouth. The Auditor is a voiceless addressee of the mouth's monologue and responds only by raising his or her arms and letting them fall in an exaggerated shrug. Žižek's assessment of the function and effect of the Auditor allows us to clearly discern the difference between his own Lacan inspired practice of reading and that of more conventional literary criticism – here referred to as "Beckettology" (Žižek 2012a: 212). We might hear in this an echo of Lacan's insistence that, with respect to the Joyceans to whom he was speaking, "I belong to a different species of analyst." (Lacan 2016b: 143) Beckettology has sought "the empirical sources of the play's imagery", discovering a prefiguring of the Auditor in the spectators in Caravaggio's *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*. To do so is to remain on the plane of the *imaginary*, the plane of visual signification organised in terms of difference and similarity. "Much more interesting", argues Žižek, that these questions of *content* is the difficulty of *form* that Beckett had in finding an appropriate place for the Auditor, ultimately resolving to leave this matter to the discretion of future producers. For Žižek, this difficulty can be accounted for not by an archaeology of the image

(this would only serve to reintroduce the world) but by *the irreducibility of the real of structure to an image*:

From the Lacanian perspective, it is easy to locate the source of [Beckett's] trouble: Auditor gives body to the big Other, the Third, the ideal addressee-witness, the place of truth which receives and thereby authenticates the speaker's message. The problem is how to visualize or materialize this structural place as a figure on the imaginary of the stage. (Žižek 2012a: 213)

The play is comprised of four scenes described by the mouth. The first is a primal scene in which an event has taken place. This traumatic event compels attempts at re-presentation in additional scenes linked to the primal scene. Each of the first three scenes end in "failure": just as the event begins to be circumscribed, the monologue judders to a halt with the words, "what?... who?... no!... she!..." (Beckett 2003a: 382) The subject is barred from even her self-experience, the experience that is compelling the very staging of a lacking subjectivity (*qua* search for adequate re-presentation). After each of the first four attempts, the Auditor performs his or her shrug. The fifth attempt, however, "concludes" in a different fashion: "what?... who?... no!... she!... SHE!... [Pause]... What she was trying... what to try... no matter... keep on... [Curtain starts down]" (Beckett 2003a: 383). There are three differences here: the capitalised "SHE!", the absence of the Auditor's shrug and the Beckettian articulation of dogged persistence. The fragment "no matter" immediately recalls the famous line from *Worstward Ho!*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett 1992: 101)

We should not, Žižek argues, read this play in the spirit of "the predominant cliché about Beckett as the author of the 'theatre of the absurd'" – a theatre in which Godot/Other does not arrive, the protagonists/subjects are trapped in interminable repetitions of dialogue and nothing takes place (Žižek 2012a: 217). We must, in other words, drop the very image of Beckett that Žižek made use of in *Looking Awry*. The Other is present (although this presence provides a perhaps irresolvable directorial quandary), there is a decisive change that 'concludes' the subject's repetitions and something does take place. This 'something' is a final reduction that touches the real of subjectivity and the Other:

What then happens in the final shift of the play is that the speaker accepts the trauma in its meaninglessness, ceases to search for its meaning, restores its extra-symbolic dignity, as it were... This is why the Auditor no longer reacts with the gesture of impotent compassion: there is no longer despair in Mouth's voice, the standard Beckettian formula of the drive's persistence is asserted ('no matter... keep on...')

Even after all content is lost, at this point of absolute reduction, the Galilean conclusion imposes itself: *eppur si muove* (and yet it moves). (Žižek 2012a: 220)

There is a shift, then, from what Beckett referred to as Joyce's "*purgatorial... absolute absence of the absolute*" (Beckett 1983: 33) – his circular *Finnegans Wake* which never ends (*fin negan*) because one is always undertaking another loop (*fin again*) of its "riverrun" – to the post-purgatorial presence of the de-psychologised result of "absolute reduction", the pure, non-signifying drive that is defined not by any content but solely by its enduring perseverance.

To "Finn again" with Joyce or to "begin again" with Beckett?

Writing in 1922, Lenin took stock of the revolutionary project's gains before turning to the magnitude of material and intellectual effort that the construction of a functioning socialist economy still required, adding that "Communists who have no illusions, who do not give way to despondency, and who preserve their strength and flexibility 'to begin from the beginning' over and over again in approaching an extremely difficult task, are not doomed (and in all probability will not perish)." (quoted in Žižek 2009: 86) This rejection of piecemeal correction and unspectacular consolidation in favour of an orderly retreat, argues Žižek, is "Lenin at his Beckettian best, foreshadowing the line from *Worstward Ho!*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'" (Žižek 2009: 86) If for Beckett the imperative was always to *begin* again, to reduce the subject to a nothing not in order to produce a pessimistic theatre of the absurd but to provide the groundless ground of a *true* act, a decision that is "purely formal", "a decision to decide", a "non-psychological" and "totally free act" (Žižek 2012a: 219), the task for Joyce was always to *fin again*, to end (or succeed) better – precisely by never ending. Confessing his dissatisfaction with the repeated affirmative "yes" with which *Ulysses* ends, Joyce states that he '*tried to do better*' when writing *Finnegans Wake*: "This time, I have found the word which is the most slippery, the least accented, the weakest word in English, a word which is not even a word, which is scarcely sounded between the teeth, a breath, a nothing, the article *the*" (quoted in Ellman 1982: 712). With this word, the very antithesis of a firm *point de capiton*, we continue to slide along what Lacan refers to as Joyce's Viconian "eternity" (Lacan 2016b: 141), turning in an endless loop in which *commencement* and *fin* are indistinguishable.

At the start of his 1975 presentation, "Joyce the Symptom", Lacan begins by musing that *Finnegans Wake* "is the dream [Joyce] has bequeathed, set down as an end-point to – what?... This dream sets down the *fin* to the oeuvre – *Fin again* – of being unable to do any better." (Lacan 2016b: 141) Lacan's contention that *Finnegans Wake* marks the end of an oeuvre stands up in a very obvious sense (it was the last thing Joyce published) but also in a

more profound sense – that is, in the sense that it marks the end of a progress that Lacan conceives of in terms of a dissolution of the (imperial, Catholic, English, etc.) language imposed on Joyce (Lacan 2016a: 79). If Joyce had “tried to do better” with *Finnegans Wake* and the article *the*, if this pinnacle represented the “apotheosis of the word”, he was “unable to do any better.” In a **pourstiche of the structure of *Finnegans Wake*, Lacan, at the conclusion of “Joyce the Symptom”, returns to his original question: “how can *Finnegans*, this dream, be said to be finished, since already its last word cannot help but join back up with the first[?]” (Lacan 2016b 148) If *Finnegans Wake* is indeed a dream, then it is one from which we can never wake.** The Leninist Beckett was unwilling to try to do better in *this* vein, to cautiously supplement Joyce’s revolutionary progress, for it was a revolution in the sense of a circular turning that lasts for an “eternity”.

Let us end by placing the final words of Anna Livia Plurabelle’s monologue alongside those of Mouth:

End here. Us then. Finn again!... A way a lone a last a love a long the (Joyce 1939: 628. 13-16)

What she was trying... what to try... no matter... keep on... [*Curtain starts down*]
(Beckett 2003a: 383)

While for Joyce the beginning and end were so close as to be indistinguishable – importantly, this indistinguishability was *itself* the end or final result of an artistic progress, such that we can say that the Joycean end is the dissolution of any such thing as an end or a beginning –, for Beckett there is such a thing as a beginning, a bare minimum, and if the truly revolutionary act is to be achieved, one must return to it.

References

- Beckett, S. (1966) *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, London: John Calder.
 Beckett, S. (1983) *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, R. Cohn (ed.), London: John Calder.
 Beckett, S. (1992) *Nohow On*, London: John Calder.
 Beckett, S. (2003a) *Not I* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* London: Faber.
 Beckett, S. (2003b) *Waiting for Godot* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* London: Faber.
 Brivic, S. (2008) *Joyce through Lacan and Zizek*, New York: Palgrave.
 Derrida, J. (1992) “Ulysses Grammophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce” in *Acts of Literature*, London: Routledge.
 Ellman, R. (1982) *James Joyce*, New York: Oxford University Press.

- Felman, S. (2003) *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gibson, A. (2012) *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hallward, P. (2003) *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- James, H. (2010) *The Turn of the Screw*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Joyce, J. (1939) *Finnegans Wake*, London: Faber.
- Lacan, J. (1968-69) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVI: From an other to the Other, 1968-1969*, unofficial trans. from unedited manuscripts by C. Gallagher, London: Karnac.
- Lacan, J. (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, J-A. Miller (ed.), trans. by B. Fink, New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2011) *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIX, ...ou pire, 1971-72*, J-A. Miller (ed.), Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (2016a) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII: The Sinthome, 1975-1976*, J-A. Miller (ed.), trans. by A. Price, Cambridge: Polity.
- Lacan, J. (2016b) "Joyce the Symptom" in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII: The Sinthome, 1975-1976*, J-A. Miller (ed.), trans. by A. Price, Cambridge: Polity.
- Lecerclé, J-J. (2010) *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Miller, J-A. (1990) "Microscopia: An Introduction to the Reading of Television" in J. Lacan, *Television/ A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, New York: Norton.
- Taylor, A director (2005) *Žižek!*, New York: Zeitgeist Films.
- Thurston, L. (2010) "Googling Blazes: Review of Sheldon Brivic, *Joyce through Lacan and Žižek*" in *James Joyce Quarterly* vol. 47, no. 2, 305-307.
- Žižek, S. (1992) *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, London: MIT Press.
- Žižek, S. (1997) "From Joyce-the-Symptom to the Symptom of Power" in J. Ayerza (ed.) *Lacanian Ink* 11: 13-25.
- Žižek, S. (2000) "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2009) *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2012a) "Cogito in Literature: Descartes with Beckett" in S. Biswas (ed.) *The Literary Lacan: From Literature to Lituraterre and Beyond*, London: Seagull Books.
- Žižek, S. (2012b) *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2014) "Slavoj Žižek webchat". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/live/2014/oct/06/slavoj-zizek-webchat-absolute-recoil>. Accessed January 20th 2017.