“I, OF WHOM I KNOW NOTHING”:
Biblical Echoes in Samuel Beckett’s *L’Innommable* and *The Unnamable*

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The Unnamable’s ‘preamble’ prepares the way for a last ‘paragraph’ that begins with canonical force: “I, of whom I know nothing.” Specific biblical echoes (John 14.10, speaking of “things of which I cannot speak”; or Job 7.11: “I am obliged to speak”) culminate in the “not I” of Corinthians 15.10, while others image a theological mindscape. They define the predicament of one entrapped whose need to ‘utter’ in the anguish of the spirit struggles with a sense of ‘being spoken’ by an authority beyond the self, of which it knows nothing. Biblical echoes are more pervasive in *The Unnamable* than in *L’Innommable*, yet the opening pages of each foreshadow the impossible paradox that drives the entire novel: the search for a voice that is either within, and potentially schizophrenic; or without, and thus embodying (as it were) a transcendental authority.

That Beckett read widely in *La Sainte Bible* is evidenced by a quotation (recorded in the Whoroscope Notebook) of a verse the incongruity of which had clearly caught his eye: “Circoncisez donc le prépuce de votre cœur, et ne roidissez plus votre cou” (UoR MS 3000, 63v); or, as the King James Authorised Version puts it: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked” (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 51).¹ One quality of this remarkable image is that it is contextually rather than linguistically bound, as it may be translated (from Hebrew to Latin to French to English) without losing its essential metaphorical force. This is not often the case with metaphors and quotations, biblical or otherwise; and, as a consequence of such inevitable linguistic différence, their authority within *L’Innommable* may assume different intonations in the English ‘translation’ of *The Unnamable*.

I have placed ‘translation’ in quotation marks because the English versions of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, three novels that together constitute a trilogy (however much Beckett disliked that...
word), have a complex ontology, with respect to which this paper assumes some simple premises, none of which are meant to be contentious:

1. one reason that Beckett chose to write in French was to divest himself, to some degree, of the impedimenta that would have been otherwise the inevitable consequence of his using the language of Shakespeare, Joyce and the King James Bible (elements of which sneak back into his English rewritings).

2. when Beckett wrote first in English and then in French, the result is generally (I do not wish to be too insistent) a translation; but when he wrote first in French and re-composed in English the works thus generated are not translations in the usual senses of that word, but are better defined as bilingual texts.

3. a genuinely bilingual text is rare, with an unusual ontology: it is not a pseudo-coupling but a structure in which each version while sufficient unto itself is yet part of a greater whole. In the Three Novels, this defines not only the bond between the French and English texts, but also the relationship of each individual text to the other two (or possibly five) in the sequence.

4. Beckett, for all his anguished disbelief, is a major religious writer, and his greatest works are saturated in religious echoes, none more so than The Unnamable.

In Beckett’s early works, such echoes are often ostentatious; their intention is broadly literary, philosophical or ironic, and they delight in their witty irreverence. Thus, Dream of Fair to middling Women, Murphy and Watt, or poems such as “Hell Crane to Starling” and “Casket of Pralinen for a Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin,” are full of arcane phrases that signal allusive intention and call for exegesis, much of it biblical; but few would call them major religious texts (Watt is perhaps the exception). However, the bilingual works of Beckett’s middle period (the Three Novels, Texts for Nothing, Waiting for Godot, Endgame and How It Is) are equally, if less obviously, replete with biblical allusion and together constitute perhaps the most important body of secular religious writing (the paradox is intended) from the past century. Beckett’s conclusion, like that of the narrator of How It Is, might be that it is “all balls”; but the questioning is relentlessly theological, and Christianity is more than the convenient mythology that he was wont to dismiss it as. In particular, the Bible (usually the Authorised Version) is a constant point of reference and authority, even if that authority is questioned and mocked as much as it is observed.2