

“A Step Towards Silence”: Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and the Problem of Following the Stranger

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Summary

In this article, I argue that Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* evinces the kind of aesthetic ambivalence that Theodor Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, ascribes to the artwork’s location both in and outside of society. By tracing the metaphors used in the narrator’s depiction of the act of narration, I demonstrate that this novel self-reflexively articulates and meditates on its ambivalent position in society. Thereafter, I relate the work’s suspicion of its medium, and therefore its estrangement from itself, to its critique of community’s norms of recognition, which are embedded in language. Finally, I reflect on the potential effect of the text’s aesthetic ambivalence on the reader.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat Samuel Beckett se *The Unnamable* die soort estetiese ambivalensie openbaar wat Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* toeskryf aan die kunswerk se plek in sowel as buite die samelewing. Deur die metafore na te spoor, wat in die verteller se uitbeelding van die daad van vertelling gebruik word, wil ek aantoon dat hierdie roman op ’n selfrefleksiewe manier sy ambivalente posisie in die samelewing artikuleer en diep daaroor nadink. Hierna trek ek ’n verband tussen die werk se agterdog ten opsigte van sy medium en derhalwe ook sy vervreemding van homself en sy kritiek op gemeenskap se norme van erkenning, wat in taal ingebed is. Laastens dink ek na oor die moontlike uitwerking wat die teks se estetiese ambivalensie op die leser kan hê.

For the stranger to be truly strange, he or she would have to be unidentifiable and unrecognisable from within community’s language and epistemic structures. Being singular and new, strangeness is not repeatable and is thus beyond the grasp of words, which are, of course, grounded in repetition and therefore generalisation. What, then, is the relationship of the literary text, whose medium is language, to the stranger? In this article, I address this question through a close reading of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, a novel that engages with language’s inscription in society of

JLS/TLW 32(4), Dec./Des. 2016
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© JLS/TLW
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2016.11892

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forms of identification and norms of recognition that produce subjects and determine their legibility. My analysis is informed by Theodor Adorno's related arguments on identifying thought and the "twofold essence" of the artwork (1984: 8) – that is, its ambivalent location both within and outside society. For Adorno, it is this dimension of the work that enables it to counter identifying thought, thereby exemplifying his contention that "aesthetic identity is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world" (6). In developing my argument, I show that *The Unnamable's* profound suspicion of its medium is directly related to its critique of community's norms of recognition, and that this language scepticism, which establishes the work's difference from itself, enables it to invoke strangeness, without ever identifying it. My ultimate argument is that the text's estrangement from itself necessitates an indeterminate reading in which the process of recognition that informs reading is constantly deferred. By extension, the reader's reading of this novel becomes a performative part of its critique of identifying thought.

For Adorno, identifying thought is a process through which otherness is reduced by being integrated into the known and familiar (see, for instance, 1973: 144-151). In terms of Kantian reason, the subject understands an object by subsuming its particularity under a universal concept within a priorly formed conceptual system. Adorno maintains that the concept, in its lack of particularity, deprives the thing conceived of its sensuous life. The question that preoccupies him is how to counter the transformative violence inherent in identifying thought's subsumption of the specific under the universal. Importantly, in this regard, he argues that the concept "does not exhaust the thing conceived", and so leaves a "remainder" (1984: 5). As a result of this excess, concepts always also "refer to nonconceptualities". Albeit tacitly, they mean beyond themselves. With this in mind, Adorno argues that the *telos* of thought should be to reveal the "nonconceptual in the concept" (11, 12), the concept's inability adequately to identify its object, and hence its estrangement of the object from the thinking subject. Thought's *telos*, then, is to think that which exceeds thought's grasp, to reveal the non-identity of objects with thought.

Herein lies the importance of aesthetics for Adorno. Ever since Kant, who argues that the beautiful cannot be contained by a "definite concept", that the relationship between the concept and the object to which a beautiful representation refers is undecided (1911: 57-60), aesthetic thought has been deemed different to conceptual thought. Adorno takes this argument on the indeterminacy of aesthetic thought much further, though. An aesthetic thought is able "to assist the non-identical" in its resistance to identifying thinking because it is true to the opacity of the object. In pointing to the inadequation of concept and thing, and therefore to the "remainder" which the concept necessarily leaves but seeks to conceal (1984: 5), an artwork can

evoke that which its own implication in language, discourse and thought denies. In this regard, the artwork’s aura is all-important. Related to the “transcendent tendency in any work of art”, aura is the “connection” of the artwork’s “moments in so far as they point beyond themselves, singly and together. It is this dimension of art [...] which represents the side in works of art that goes beyond reification and factual description” (386). In other words, a work’s aura enables it to gesture beyond itself and so distance itself from itself and the culture in which it is nevertheless implicated. Moreover, its aura absorbs the viewer or reader into the work, thereby preventing him or her from making it identical with himself or herself (182, 236, 387). What is at stake here is an anti-Platonic form of mimesis, in terms of which the viewer or reader identifies with the work and so becomes like it (80, 465; see also Hansen 1992: 52-53; and Pizer 1993: 145-146).

For Adorno, art thus has a “twofold essence” (1984: 8): although it is in the world, its relationship to the non-conceptual divorces it from the world, the language of subsumption, identifying thought and, importantly, itself. The work of art is “an autonomous entity and a social fact” (8), estranged from history yet unable to take up a position outside it. Through this precarious and ambivalent position “both within things and outside them”, art gains the ability to criticise society. Its difference and distance from the world, and therefore from itself, enables it to protest against what Adorno refers to as the “ignominy of the immutable”, and to suggest the possibility of a better world (32).

Although Adorno, in one of his notes on *The Unnamable*, describes it as “anauratic” (1994: 177), by which one assumes he means that it is unable to point beyond what it says, my ultimate argument is that this is, in fact, exactly what the novel does do. As Adorno was well aware, Samuel Beckett’s writing seeks to go beyond the identity principle. Indeed, it tries to reveal the non-identity of objects with thought, and thereby to expose the concept’s estrangement of the object from the thinking and identifying subject. On the most obvious level, Beckett’s concern with this principle is evident in the ubiquity of the figure of the vagrant in his work. As Jacques-Alain Miller notes in a discussion of Jeremy Bentham and panopticism, the vagrant is without a place and unidentifiable. He or she is invisible in society, which, being panoptical, strives to render all visible, identifiable, recognisable, and therefore categorisable (1987: 17). In resisting such placement, the vagrant points to the excess of community’s totalising epistemic structures. If this is so, the mere presence of a vagrant figure in a literary work signals its concern with issues of surveillance, identity, and recognition.¹

1. Angela Moorjani relates Beckett’s conception of vagrancy to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, who were known for “their vagrant ascetic life, their sardonic assault on all established values and hierarchies (including gender), and their celebration of freedom” (2003: 77). I conceive of the vagrant as a

In one of the scenes in Beckett's *Molloy*, the eponym is required by police to show his "papers", to account for himself, and to do so in community's terms, rather than his own. This, of course, he is quite simply unable to do: he has no papers, no home, no occupation, and no fixed destination (2006a: 18). While he is inside community, he is not quite a part of it. Not being categorisable, he is illegible, unreadable, unrecognisable from community's perspective. In a subsequent, and closely related, episode (28-54), Molloy is taken home by a woman, man or androgyne, whom he, very tellingly, does not care to identify determinately. Although motivated by charity, even hospitality, the actions of this person, who may or may not be called Lousse, are ultimately indistinguishable from those of the police. She, he or it locks him up, and has him washed and dressed – albeit in women's clothes. The point of the episode is that Lousse tries to domesticate Molloy. She, he or it transforms him, and is for this reason associated with Circe. But whereas Circe transforms Odysseus's men into swine, Lousse tries to change Molloy into something that is recognisably human. The process of identification, this scene thus indicates, consists not simply in naming what is already there, but in producing and creating subjects. What is involved is the violent subsumption of the particular under the universal. Molloy, whatever he is, is related to a conceptual end, and thus identified, which is to say made recognisable.

From this scene, however, it becomes evident that the kind of concept here at stake is not simply an *apriori*, innate Kantian category, but one that is differentially produced and therefore located in language and culture. If Molloy has to be made human, it must be because he is seen to be somehow less than, and therefore different to, human. That is, he does not comply with a communally arrived at idea of human. Moreover, the fact that he has to be brought into conformity with this concept indicates that it operates normatively and thereby determines and produces what is recognisably human. Lousse makes Molloy recognisable by making him conform to what Judith Butler calls the "normatively human" (2004: xv). While a creator, Lousse, however, is not an originator. When she, he or it creates Molloy, and thereby confers on him recognition, Lousse does so in terms that are public rather than individual. Far from acting independently, she, he or it is submitting to an impersonal, indifferent norm that enables a form of recognition, which is, in fact, an ongoing, iterative process of identification.

figure of otherness rather than a representation or type, though. As Arthur Rose points out in a letter to me, to present "the vagrant or the cynic as a physical type, which is then translated into the Beckettian world", is to run the risk of overlooking the fact that these figures are "operations of thought" that enable a critique of representation (2016). This conception of cynicism as an operation of thought is elaborated on at length in Rose's excellent, forthcoming study on literary cynicism.

In a later scene in *Molloy*, it becomes very clear that the norms that enable the identificatory process of recognition are embedded in language. Moran, in a shelter outside Bally, has withdrawn from community and is in the process of forgoing language. He is forfeiting the human, and becoming animal. When he encounters a shepherd, for instance, it is apparent that he can hardly speak and that his retreat from community has therefore left him on the very margins of language: “I looked about me again incapable of speech. I did not know how I would ever be able to break this silence” (2006a: 153). He only breaks the silence after encountering Gabar, who brings him a message from the panoptical Youdi, instructing him to return home. Effectively, Moran is to reintegrate into language and community by becoming recognisably human. The novel’s presentation of the encounter emphasises its occurrence in a language which inscribes norms that determine what is and is not recognisably human. Confronted by Gabar, whose “far-off voice” he, very significantly, fails to “recognize” (157), Moran twice asks him the question “Do you recognize me?” (157). In his turn, Gabar addresses Moran by his name, and then responds to his question on his recognisability by again using his name, “Ah Moran”, followed by the words “what a man!” (158). By being recognised, Moran is identified and produced as a ‘man’. What becomes visible in this scene, then, is the linguistic and normative horizon within which the subject sees, knows, recognises, and thus identifies. In other words, the scene exposes what Butler refers to as the “anthropocentric dispositions and cultural frames” that make a “given face” appear to be a human face (2001: 23).

In *The Unnamable*, one finds a similar preoccupation with language and the processes of surveillance, identification and recognition. The homeless, placeless narrator describes these processes, to which he is constantly subjected,² in general and generic terms, which emphasise their iterative nature:

But my dear man, come, be reasonable, look, this is you, look at this photograph, and here’s your file, no convictions, I assure you, come now, make an effort, at your age, to have no identity, it’s a scandal, I assure you, look at this photograph, what, you see nothing, true for you, [...] look, here’s the record, insults to policemen, indecent exposure, sins against holy ghost, contempt of court, impertinence to superiors, impudence to inferiors, deviations from reason, without battery, look, no battery [...] I assure you, you won’t do better, at your age, no human shape, the pity of it, look, here’s the photograph.

(2006b: 370-371)

2. In referring to the narrator, some critics use the third-person, impersonal pronoun (see, for example, Trezise [1990], Rose [2014], and Salisbury [2008]). While it may not conclusively resolve the question of his gender, the following passage does suggest that the narrator is male.

At issue here is once more community's attempt to bring strangeness into conformity with the recognisably human. Elsewhere, the narrator refers to human as a category into which he has been "assimilated": "And man, the lectures they gave me on men, before they even began trying to assimilate me to him!" (2006b: 318). What is suggested is again that identification consists not just in naming what is already there, but in producing and creating subjects. In being related to a conceptual end, the narrator is identified, made recognisable. Yet, the concept 'man' does not exhaust the thing it conceives. Tellingly, in this connection, the narrator questions the adequacy of the signification of the sign 'man': "and this word man which is perhaps not the right one for the thing I see when I hear it" (400). The concept leaves a remainder, which suggests that it, although purporting to be a universal, is differentially produced in language.

Like the vagrant Molloy, the narrator of *The Unnamable* is not at home in the concept of human. He is neither quite in society nor quite outside of it, which is precisely the non-position of the vagrant. Importantly, his ambivalent location affects not just how others see him, but also how he sees himself. The narrator views himself from within norms of recognition that he shares with others and which are accordingly public and impersonal in nature.

The narration of the novel performs the resultant tension between the communality of the narrator's identity and his desire to transcend that communality by expressing himself in and on his own terms. Although first-person, the narration is not the expression of a stable subject secure in the belief that it is possible to know the self and convey that knowledge in language. Tellingly, the second sentence of the novel is "Who now?" (285), in which the interrogative pronoun questions the narrator's identity by foregrounding his strangeness to himself, thereby troubling his subsequent use of the first-person singular pronoun. In asking this question of himself, he is, of course, viewing himself from the outside, from an ecstatic, external perspective. His detachment from himself does not change when he does eventually use the first-person singular pronoun. Instead of enabling the self to express its interiority, this personal pronoun becomes increasingly impersonal, as emerges in the narrator's following statement: "I, say I. Unbelieving" (285). In a modified form, this disavowal of the pronoun's ability to name and identify him recurs later in the novel: "I say I, knowing it's not I" (398). In being conflated with the third-person singular "it", the first-person singular pronoun is objectified, and thereby separated from its user. In fact, the following variation of this disavowal suggests that this pronoun has no antecedent: "someone says I, unbelieving" (395). Grammatically, a pronoun takes the place of a noun. The root of the word is the Latin *pronomen*, which may be translated as "for a name" or "in place of a name". To function effectively, personal pronouns thus require antecedents or implied antecedents, the names that they replace. Significantly, in this

regard, the “I” in the narrator’s disavowal is related to the word “someone”, which, being an impersonal pronoun, lacks a definite antecedent.

Beckett’s deployment of a first-person singular pronoun divested of an antecedent in the form of a name is, however, already evident in the novel’s opening words. The question “Who now?”, followed shortly by the first-person singular I, indicates that this pronoun is not tied to a name, which means that whenever the narrator uses it, it signifies the absence of a name, and, indeed, of an origin. To refer to the narrator as the Unnamable, as is frequently the case in Beckett criticism, is to name him, and thus to provide the I with precisely the antecedent it lacks. It is to disregard the fact that the I is without origin and place and therefore a vagrant pronoun.

The novel’s interrogation of the first-person singular also blurs the distinction between it and the third-person plural pronouns, between the interiority of self and the exteriority of community. So, for instance, the narrator interrupts his attempt to reflect on himself with the following reflection on the futility of such reflection: “They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking” (363). It is the pronoun I, one of the “words of others” (308), that distances and estranges him from himself, forcing him to see himself from what is effectively an external, third-person perspective. While it enables the self to speak, this pronoun requires that he do so in terms that are not his own and thereby displaces the first-person perspective that it offers. Since the I with and of which the narrator speaks is not his own, it mediates him from the outside, places him outside of himself, and circumscribes, even compromises, the account that he is able to provide of himself. His account of himself can never be his own. It is for this reason, as Llewellyn Brown points out, that the voice with which we are presented in the novel “continually denies being the author of its utterances” (2011: 175).

In his following description of his narration, the narrator uses demon possession as a metaphor for his dispossession of self by the words he utters: “I expiate vilely, like a pig, dumb, uncomprehending, possessed of no utterance but theirs” (2006b: 362).³ If the “utterance” that he possesses is “theirs”, it cannot be his possession, and he may well be its possession. The narrator’s depiction of his narration as voice, the articulation of sound,

3. Clearly, Beckett is here alluding to the story of the devils in Mark 5.2-20, Matt. 8.28-36, and Luke 8.20-34 (*Authorised King James Version of the Holy Bible* n.d.). Having been exorcised from a “sick” or “mad” man by Christ, the demons enter a herd of swine which then rushes headlong down a steep bank into the sea. Christ initially assumes that he is dealing with one demon, only to find out that they are “legion” or plural. See also Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* (1971), which uses the tale of the Gadarene swine as a structural metaphor in its exploration and condemnation of political nihilism.

echoes his earlier description of his relationship to this voice: “Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice” (305). Again, the play on “possessed”, followed by the replacement of the possessive in “my voice” with the impersonal, neutral, definite article in “the voice”, renders this statement ambiguous, even contradictory. Later, the narrator acknowledges that his voice is not his possession alone: “They’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it’s them I hear” (319). In this description, the voice is insubstantial, like air, breath and, by extension, spirit. Elsewhere, the connection here between narration, voice, air and spirits is even clearer: “these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me” (341). In the logic of these metaphors, the narrator has been invaded and possessed by the demonic I that he utters. Accordingly, when he speaks, he hears a voice, as though from beyond himself, which is both his and not his. His narration performs his possession. It expresses not himself, but the I by which he is possessed, and which is, in fact, part of the third-person “them” to whom he constantly refers. The voice with which he speaks is thus actually plural rather than singular.

Since he is possessed by this I, he needs to locate the self of which it has dispossessed him. The novel’s narration is thus also figured as a search for a lost self that is conducted in language,⁴ as emerges from the narrator’s following resolution: “It’s of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step towards silence and the end of madness, the madness of having to speak and not being able to, except of things that don’t concern me” (318). The inert narrator’s narration is a “step” toward finding himself. As he subsequently intimates, his “speaking” is a “seeking” (384). In language, he must seek, find, and so recognise, a self that precedes and exceeds language, and which is therefore in the silence: “he is made of silence, there’s a pretty analysis, he’s in the silence, he’s the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, [...] we’d be reunited” (406).

The novel thus simultaneously figures its narration as an expression of the narrator’s possession and of his attempt to repossess himself. Through his narration, by speaking, that is, the narrator must expel the voices or “demons” which “beset” him. With the language by which he has been

4. Many critics have commented on the trope of the quest or stalled quest in Beckett’s writing. Lance St. John Butler sees the entire Beckett oeuvre as a “search for a self that will be more than a self” (1994: 12). For an insightful discussion of Beckett’s use and abuse of the quest narrative, see Leslie Hill (1990: 59-61, 77-78, 82-83, 137). See also Shira Wolofsky (1995). In particular, see Anthony Uhlmann’s argument that *The Unnamable* “concerns attempts to identify the self through recourse to language, but that the narrator feels that language comes from outside, that it does not belong to him, [...] and so can in no way constitute him” (1999: 138; see also 168).

possessed, he must exorcise these voices or demons, this plural I. In effect, the I, to restore his singular self, must forfeit himself, must commit suicide. If his alterior self is to be born, the I that he is must die. His narration, utterances or texts, must assist him in this endeavour, and so become both his midwife and murderer.⁵ Effectively, then, the narrating I’s narration is an attempt to die. In terms of the link between voice and air, it is his dying breath. But because the first-person narration constantly reasserts the I that it seeks to expel, the process of dying is interminable, and the dying breath or expiration is consequently endless. Put slightly differently, the narration is the dying breath of someone who cannot die. The narrator speaks in order to die, but because he cannot complete this action, he dies and speaks endlessly.⁶

Far from being contradictory, the novel’s characterisation of its narration as both an expression of possession and an attempted exorcism simply foregrounds the aporetic nature of the narrator’s endeavour. Only through the death of the subject that seeks, can the lost self be recovered or be born. And, as the seeking subject would be dead, he could not have found this self. In any case, he would not be able to recognise, and so identify, the self that he seeks. The narrator acknowledges as much when he says “I never saw myself, [...] how can I recognise myself who never made my acquaintance” (391). Being singular, the lost self, in the narrator’s words, albeit in a different context, would be “as good as new, unrecognisable” (305). For the new to be new, as I have pointed out, it must be singular, and recognition, being iterative in nature, generalises. If the seeking subject were to claim to have recognised his alterior self, it could only mean that he had produced this self as a recognisable subject and therefore that it could not be the self he had sought. One implication of this aporia is that the search, and the narration through which it proceeds, is a form of surveillance. A search not informed by the need to recognise, could not be conducted by an intending subject.⁷ As is implicit in the blurring of the distinction between first-person and third-person perspectives in this novel, the subject that seeks itself,

5. Foucault, in his discussion of the “kinship between writing and death”, famously suggests that the text must “become the murderer of its author” (1977: 116, 117).

6. See Blanchot on the nexus between the suicide and the artist. Both try to control the uncontrollable (1982: 106). Also, see Simon Critchley’s discussion of the impossibility of death (1997: 88).

7. In his fiction, Beckett often stages waiting as a form of non-intentional seeking. See Molloy’s following comment on the “incurious seeker”: “For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker” (2006a: 58-59).

surveils itself, and therefore occupies the panoptical perspective of the third-person “they” who constantly try to render him recognisable. Ironically, then, the I’s search for his alterior self is a project that he shares with the third-person “them”, the panoptical community in which he both is and is not. Rather than being its opposite, the search becomes part of community’s project of identification, and therefore a form of self-surveillance.

The narrator’s narration thus enacts an aporia. He must express a self so private and singular that it exceeds the generalising medium of language in which he must perform this action. Because he uses the “words of others”, which bear community’s impersonal norms of recognition, to express his singular self, his utterances necessarily fail to achieve this end, and inevitably become part of society’s identification project. In the idiom of the birth metaphor (332, 343, 345), his utterances cannot “deliver” and, as this word also suggests, save, this self. Accordingly, the narrator, to resist this panoptical project, must resist his own utterances, which, for the most part, take the form of the stories and characters he invents. He calls these characters his “vice-existers” because they are attempts at autobiography (309), at presenting, and so finding, his lost self. Thus, for instance, he describes Worm as “a step” toward himself (339), thereby again associating his narration with an intentional, teleological search or quest. Crucially, though, the narrator repeatedly abandons the various stories that he tells in his attempt to locate himself. Once it becomes clear that the story of Mahood cannot attain this goal, he suspends the narrative *in medias res*, and rejects it with the words: “It’s time Mahood was forgotten, he should never have been mentioned” (366). The same fate befalls Worm, Mahood’s successor, whose dismissal, tellingly enough, is couched in terms that reflect on his inadequacy as a means to an end: “To think I saw in him, if not me, a step towards me!” (339). Since the generalising movement of its medium means that it cannot not fail to achieve its *telos*, the story that replaces the old story, and which should therefore be new, is, in fact, the same story. For this reason, the narrator describes himself as “ever murmuring my old story, as if it were the first time” (296). For this reason too, his “vice-existers” are remarkably similar, as is implied by his difficulty in distinguishing between them: “Mahood too, I mean Worm, no, Mahood, Mahood too is a great weeper” (366).

The movement of story-telling in *The Unnamable* is therefore iterative rather than progressive. In the context of the novel’s association of seeking with speaking, the narrator’s immobility, the fact that he cannot take a “step” toward anything, reflects on the inadequacy of language as a means with which to find and speak the singular self. This, however, is not to say that there is no movement in the narrative, and that Mahood and Worm are simply interchangeable. Precisely because he is aware of the norms of recognition that are embedded in the language he uses, the narrator strives to reduce the recognisability of his “vice-existers”. While Mahood is barely

recognisable as human (see 331), Worm, as his name suggests, is “less than a beast” (351), which means that there is a difference of sorts between these two characters, or, at least, that the narrator tries to make Worm less identifiable than Mahood (which, in itself, indicates that he finds Mahood too recognisable). The narrator knows that, if he is to speak of Worm, he will have to do so in language that does not compromise his unrecognisability: “I must not forget I don’t know him” (331). In order to speak of him, he must forget “who Worm is, where he is, what he’s like” (342). This is, of course, impossible. Even to call Worm Worm, is to locate, recognise and thus identify him, and thereby to collaborate with community’s identification project. The narrator’s mistake is the very mistake he ascribes to community when he reflects on the attempts of the nebulous “they” to speak of Worm: “The mistake they make of course is to speak of him as if he really existed, in a specific place, whereas the whole thing is no more than a project for the moment. But let them blunder on to the end of their folly, then they can go into the question again, taking care not to compromise themselves by the use of terms, if not of notions, accessible to the understanding” (365).

Ultimately, then, Worm can take the narrator no closer to his *telos* than does Mahood. Although designed to say what is other than – rather than different to – human, Worm is an anthropomorphic structure, and therefore recognisably human. Like Mahood, he is a misrepresentation that threatens to compromise the unrecognisability of the narrator’s lost self, and for this reason he, again like Mahood, must be abandoned so that a ‘new’ story may be told. The narrator must speak again, tell another story which, as he well knows, can only ever be a variant of the old ones, and which he will therefore also have to abort, if he is to remain true to the yet-to-be-told story. This process of supplementation is endless, as is evident from the fact that the narrator’s list of the figures whom he has constructed includes not only Mahood and Worm, but also the names of characters in Beckett’s earlier novels: “I am neither [...] Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier, nor – no, I can’t bring myself to name them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be, under duress, or through fear, or to avoid acknowledging me, not the slightest connexion” (319). Rather than identifying the narrator with Beckett, this metaleptic dissolution of the ontological difference between narrator and author posits the lack of an origin. What Mahood and Worm are to the narrator, he and all his predecessors reaching back to Murphy are to the author – that is, failed and incomplete representations of an absent self that nevertheless demands to be found, to be presented. Far from providing the I that speaks in the novel with an antecedent, then, the metalepsis here at work confirms the

absence of such an origin.⁸ By extension, it suggests that all of Beckett's novels are the same, incomplete story, and that all of his characters are misrepresentations of the self for which he seeks.

Beckett's *The Unnamable* thus stages an endless process of supplementation through which the narrator and author surrogate responds to the imperative to present his anterior self, only to abandon the representation because it inevitably encodes community's norms of recognition and thus compromises the unrecognisability and inhuman aspect of this self. The interminable nature of the narrator's project is self-consciously suggested by the metaphors that are used to describe it. When he wearily asks "Worm will I ever get born" (345), the implication – which is strengthened by the absence of a question mark and so the expectation of an answer – is that his narration is a labour without term. Similarly, the search that he attempts to conduct is endless, and therefore also just a following. He seeks in language for language's excess.⁹ What the narration thus presents is the paradox of a search or journey which is without *telos* or destination, and therefore a form of vagrancy. The search cannot end; the voice must go on. While the narrator may talk about a reunion with his primordial self (406), it, and the closure it would bring, is not a possibility open to a subject in a realm of action. In any case, the desire for reunion suggests that the I and its singular self were once united, when, in fact, the former is the displacement of the latter. The I that seeks and speaks is the negation of that which it seeks and of which it tries to speak. By extension, this subject's search is for its own excess, which is also the excess of the human.

It would seem, then, that the narrator's endless search for that which can only ever be unrecognisable from the perspective of the seeker is futile. He himself appears to think as much, as is graphically conveyed by one of the associations produced by the aforementioned metaphor of the deflating balloon, which compares voice and speaking not only to air, spirit, and

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8. In effect, this instance of metalepsis asks the same question that Maurice Blanchot has famously asked, that is, "Who is speaking in the books of Samuel Beckett?" (2003: 210), and makes it clear that the answer is not Samuel Beckett. See Thomas Trezise's following shrewd comment: "if the voice of the trilogy is to be construed as the allegorical self-representation of its author, the essential non-self-coincidence of the former defines the latter as already an allegory. In still other words, one may say here that the relation between author and narrator is analogous to the relation between narrator and character" (1990: 107).
9. See Hill's following comment: "There remains, to speech, an excess, a supplement, a waste which cannot be pronounced or incorporated within words, though it seems to be inherent within the act of speaking. This is one reason why the goal pursued by *L'Innommable* is never reached and why the language deployed to attain that goal seems, in principle, to extend to infinity" (1990: 82).

therefore expiration or dying, but also to farts and farting.¹⁰ The clear implication is that the narrator’s narration is his dying fart. And because he cannot die, he must fart endlessly.

One, however, cannot talk about the futility of the narrator’s narration, without considering what it presupposes, that is, a listener and, by extension, the reader whom the novel awaits. When the narrator compares himself to a deflating balloon, he equates the noise he hears, that is, his own voice, with the impersonal, communal voices of “them”, that is, community. It is this plural voice that the reader hears on reading the text, and with which it aligns him or her. In reading the novel and hearing the narrator’s impersonal voice, this is to say, one is listening to what is, in part at least, one’s own impersonal voice. One hears oneself, and reads of one’s possession of the narrator. In terms of the complex of metaphors I have been tracing, the reader is one of the voices and demons that the narrator seeks to expel from himself through his narration. To read, these metaphors further suggest, is not just to listen to the voice, but to breathe in the air, spirits, demons, farts with which it is associated. It is to inspire the narrator’s dying breath, to be possessed by the demons that he seeks to exorcise, and therefore to be possessed or repossessed by oneself or by that part of oneself that is communal, public, impersonal and therefore not fully oneself.

Through its alignment of the reader with the impersonal voice of the narrator, the novel recognises and so identifies him or her. It expects a reader who has expectations of it. It knows that its reader approaches it from within community and that his or her encounter with it will thus be mediated by community’s norms of recognition. In the novel, the attempts of the “they” to “assimilate” the narrator, to render him recognisable, quite self-consciously mirror the reader’s attempts to make this character legible. This alignment of the reader with the narrator’s listeners, and, moreover, this I’s scrutiny of himself, casts reading as a form of surveillance.

The novel thus implies that its failure to present the reader with the stranger it seeks means that it simply endorses community’s identification compulsion and reinforces its norms of recognition, despite its efforts to resist them. If this is so, the narrator’s search for the stranger that he is, is indeed futile. Such a conclusion would, however, ignore the possible effect of the novel’s “twofold essence” on the reader. For Adorno, as I have noted, the artwork, although located in the world, gestures beyond it to the remainder attendant on the concept’s inability adequately to identify its object. It is just so with *The Unnamable*, which, in pursuing its own excess, points beyond the language and culture in which it is nevertheless implicated. By seeking its excess, this novel asserts its difference from what

10. Laura Salisbury quite correctly notes the equation of “narration and excretion” in *The Unnamable* (168). See too Leslie Hill’s discussion of the theme of anal birth in the trilogy (2008: 88-90).

it is and thereby defamiliarises its medium and the norms of recognition that inform its representational procedures. In so doing, it lays bare the impersonality of language and the norms that mediate our relations with others and ourselves.

As I have shown, this defamiliarisation process is especially evident in the text's interrogation of the concept of human. Very significantly, in this regard, the narrator sees himself as a reduction of Worm (2006b: 345), which means that whatever it is that Worm is, and which he seeks through Worm, is not less than but more than human. In attempting to take his "first step" toward this excess, which lies not behind him in the past but ahead of him in the future, the narrator is trying to become posthuman, rather than prehuman, and so less recognisably human. He is trying to become that which is not identifiable and recognisable from the perspective of the search, and therefore always yet to come. Ultimately, he is trying to be new, and so unrecognisable to what he presently is.

The novel's defamiliarisation of language and its norms of recognition is also evident in its divestiture of pronouns of their antecedents, which ultimately reduces the legibility of language itself. In the narrator's statement "there is no name for me, no pronoun for me", the irony derives not just from the fact that his use of a pronoun to dismiss pronouns inevitably asserts pronouns (397), but also from one's recognition that the pronouns thus asserted nonetheless fail to take the place of a name. Whenever pronouns are used in this novel, they instantiate an irony that derives from one's sense of their excess, and hence of their estrangement from what they purport to say. In particular, the first-person singular pronoun raises the question of who it is that speaks, which Gilles Deleuze has answered as follows: "it is always an Other who speaks, since words have not expected me and there is no language other than the foreign" (1995: 7). In laying bare the strangeness of language and its estrangements, the text makes this naturalising and normalising medium question its own premises. If the narrator, who is words, finds himself strange, it is because language itself has made him so. At least, this is what he himself suggests: "I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling" (Beckett 2006b: 380).

Far from being futile, then, the narrator's search for himself through his narration places words in proximity with their own excess not by representing that excess but through the failure of the attempt to do so. The importance of this strategy lies in its potential effect on the reader. When reading this novel, one is constantly required to read more than one reads. This is probably most evident in the representational status of the narrator's account of Worm. If Worm cannot be spoken of in "terms" that are "accessible to the understanding", he cannot be spoken of at all. As I have already indicated, the novel ironises the narrator's attempt to distinguish between the way in which he speaks of Worm and the "mistaken" way in

which “they” do. To place Worm in opposition to knowledge, subjectivity and language, as the narrator does (see 340), is to position him, to locate him, and thus to understand him. Importantly, though, the novel’s ironisation of the difference that the narrator attempts to establish between his and community’s ways of speaking about Worm exposes an infinite distance between the sign Worm and whatever it is that it seeks to present. Tropologically speaking, this distance indicates that the word Worm is nothing other than a catachresis – that is, a figure for something that cannot be figured. Unlike standard forms of signification, which assume the presence of what they claim to signify, catachresis signifies absence, which is why Paul de Man describes it as the “trope which coins a name for a still unnamed entity” (1986: 44). When we read of Worm, though, we read not just a representation of what cannot be represented, but one that draws attention to the inadequacies of its identifications. We read of a state of being outside of language, which means we read of that of which we cannot read, and from which we are irrevocably separated by the act of reading itself. Like Borges’s yellow rose (1964: 38), whatever it is that Worm may be exists in its own eternity, and cannot be grasped by the name Worm. Ultimately, when we read of Worm, we read only a word that signifies its inability to say what it seeks to say. We read a word that is aware that its excess ironises its signification.

Through the catachrestic figure of Worm, then, the novel directs its readers to its excess, to that which is infinitely distant from it itself. And, in making us aware of its status as failed representation, of its difference from itself, this text demands of us a different kind of reading. It insists on more than a determinate, and therefore teleological, reading. Instead of following the text faithfully, we are required to follow what it follows, and what it can never reach as a fixed destination. We are required to read after the novel’s excess. As I have said, the text makes us read more than we read. In fact, the individual reader reads after the excess of his or her own reading, which entails an awareness of the inadequacy of that reading and of the norms of recognition that inform and enable it. It follows that the novel, rather than endorsing community’s norms of recognition, makes of reading a process in which recognition is constantly deferred. Should one’s reading become such a process, the novel’s search will have become one’s own. In reading, this is to say, one engages in a search which, being ateleological, is also only ever a following. By extension, one’s reading will have become a waiting with minimal expectation for the new and unrecognisable, for what one’s norms of recognition preclude one from recognising. If this were to happen in one’s reading, one would no longer be quite the reader whom the novel had expected. Inspired by what exceeds the work rather than being possessed by its misrepresentations, one would have become almost illegible, unrecognisable to it. At the same time, one would be becoming unrecognisable to oneself, a stranger of sorts. One would be becoming more than human,

posthuman, and therefore inhuman. The impersonal voice that one hears when one reads the novel, and which is partly one's own, would be the voice that one's very reading would be seeking to exorcise. One would be becoming unnamable, which is to say a vagrant uncannily in and out of community. Effectively, then, one would have become like the text, and would therefore be in a mimetic relationship with it.

Acknowledgements

I hereby acknowledge the financial assistance of the National Research Foundation in the writing of this essay. Also, I am very grateful to Arthur Rose, Jessica Marais and Karen McCarthy for commenting on earlier drafts of the essay.

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