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SIMON CRITCHLEY

Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?

We *have* to talk, whether we have something to say or not; and the less we want to say and want to hear the more willfully we talk and are subjected to talk. How did Pascal put it? "All the evil in the world comes from our inability to sit quietly in a room." To keep still.

—Stanley Cavell

STORYTIME, TIME OF DEATH (*MOLLOY, MALONE DIES*)

In Beckett's *Trilogy*,¹ there is a relentless pursuit, across and by means of narrative, of that which narration cannot capture, namely the radical unrepresentability of death. Yet—and this is the paradox upon which, arguably, the entirety of Beckett's fiction turns—to convey this radical unrepresentability, the *Trilogy* must represent the unrepresentable. That is to say, it must construct a series of representations, a litany of voices, names, and figures, "a gallery of moribunds" (*T*, 126), that revolve or "wheel" (*T*, 270) around a narrative voice or protagonist, passing in succession. These wheeling figures, these "delegates" (*T*, 272), have names that have long become familiar: Molloy (but also Dan [*T*, 18], Mellose and Mollose [*T*, 103]), Jacques Moran,² Malone, Mahood (but also "Basil and his gang" [*T*, 278; 283], the billy-in-the-bowl), and Worm. But, in the *Trilogy* we also find earlier delegates recalled: Murphy (*T*, 268) and the pseudo-couple Mercier-Camier (*T*, 272), a mini-library of Anglo-Gallo-Hiberno-nyms, a series of "M" names (forget-

1. Throughout, I use the abbreviation *T* to refer to Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (*Molloy*; *Malone Dies*; *The Unnamable*) (London: Picador, 1979).

2. And how does one pronounce these names? Are they to be spoken *à la française*, in British English, or Irish English? To take the example of Moran, is this to be pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, as in Irish English, on the second syllable, as in British English, or with equal stress on both syllables, as in French?

ting Watt for a moment) which is completed by a "W," an inverted "M," where Worm "is the first of his kind" (T, 310).³

The dramatic tension of the *Trilogy*, to my mind, is found in the disjunction that opens up between the time of narrative, the chain of increasingly untellable and untenable stories, and the nonnarratable time of the narrative voice, which I have elsewhere described in detail as the time of dying.⁴ In Blanchot's terms this is the disjunction between the impossible temporality of *le mourir* and *la mort*, the time of the possible. The double bind within which the *Trilogy* wriggles, and out of which it is written, is that between the impossibility of narration or representation, and its necessity. The development of the *Trilogy*, to speak provisionally in a quasi-teleological vocabulary, is one where the experience of disjunction between these two temporal orders becomes increasingly acute, where the order of the work (narrative, representation, and storytelling) breaks down or opens into the experience of *désœuvrement*, a worklessness that should not be confused with formlessness. Blanchot summarizes his reading of the *Trilogy* as follows:

Aesthetic sentiments are out of place here. Perhaps we are not in the presence of a book but perhaps it is a question of much more than a book: the pure approach of a movement from whence all books come, from this original point where doubtless the work is lost, which always ruins the work, which restores endless worklessness in the work, but with which an ever more primal relationship has to be maintained, on pain of being nothing.⁵

This disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying can be traced in *Molloy* by considering the symmetries and disymmetries between the two parts of the novel. Initially, at least, the figures of Molloy and Moran—the latter being the agent given the assignment of finding the former, an encounter which never takes place—seem to be completely opposed. Moran, with his authoritarian relationship to his son who, like his father, is named Jacques, his dutiful relation to God, whether through the intermediary of Father Am-

3. On "M" and "W" as names in Beckett, see the following passage from the beautiful late prose piece *Company*: "Is there anything to add to this esquisse? His unnamability. Even M must go. So W reminds himself of his creature as so far created. W? But W too is a creature. Figment" (Beckett, *Nohow On* [London: Calder, 1992], 37).

4. I give a fuller discussion of Blanchot's and Beckett's work in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 1996).

5. Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Idées", 1959), 313; my translation

brose or the agency of Gaber (all too obviously the archangel Gabriel), and his possessive relation to self and to nature, is sharply distinct from Molloy, "the panting anti-self,"⁶ with his expropriative relation to nature. To employ a psychoanalytic register, which much in the novel seems to encourage and which, I think, must be refused because it is so encouraged (for an example of a psychoanalytic red herring, see Moran's anagrammatic gift to Freudian readers, where "the Libido" becomes, somewhat clumsily, "the Obidil": "And with regard to the Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face . . ." [T, 149]), the happily Oedipal Moran can be played off against the pre-Oedipal Molloy, with his failed quest for identification with his mother and his consequent abjection.

However, there is a progressive and deepening symmetry between the two parts of the novel, where, if you like, the authoritarian Oedipal subject becomes the pre-Oedipal abject self, what Moran calls "the disintegration of the father." Moran loses his faith, telling Father Ambrose "not to count on me any more" (T, 161), and the virile bourgeois subject undergoes "a crumbling, frenzied collapsing" (T, 137), through a syntax of weakness, through a poetics of increasing impotence: "I grew gradually weaker and weaker and more and more content" (T, 150); "on me so changed from what I was" (T, 136). On a more careful reading, the novel reveals what Molloy calls his "mania for symmetry" (T, 78),⁷ where a chain of cumulating correspondences between Molloy and Moran can be detected: both hear a gong (T, 82; 106), both ride bicycles and end up on crutches (T, 60; 161) because of their painfully stiffening legs, both hear a strange voice offering succor (T, 84) or giving orders (T, 121; 156; 162), and both attain a point of stasis, with Molloy in his ditch ("Molloy could stay, where he happened to be" [T, 84]), and Moran in his shelter prior to the real or hallucinated arrival of Gaber ("I was all right where I was" [T, 151]).

However, more profoundly, the symmetry resides in the narrative form of both parts of the novel, where each protagonist writes from a position outside the events described in the narrative. Molloy writes at the behest of a man who gives him money in exchange for his pages (T, 9), Moran writes his "report" under the orders of Youdi (T, 84–85; 161).

6. See Declan Kiberd, "Beckett and the Life to Come," in *Beckett in Dublin* (Dublin: Liliput Press, 1992), 75–84; particularly 82.

7. On the figure of symmetry in Beckett, see J. M. Coetzee's "The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*," in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39–42.

Indeed, they both seem to be writing for the agent Gaber, Moran explicitly, Molloy implicitly insofar as "the queer one" who takes his pages, like Gaber, visits on Sunday and is always thirsty, usually for beer (*T*, 9; 86; 161).

What underpins the symmetry is the disinterestedness and disaffection of the relation each of the protagonists maintains to his writing, and it is here that the disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying can most clearly be seen. Molloy, finally in his mother's room, wants nothing more than to be left alone, to "finish dying" (*T*, 9), but "they do not want that." He is thus under an obligation or "remnants of a pensum" (*T*, 31) to write stories, although the origin of this obligation is unknown and the stories are incredible: "What I need now is stories, it took me a long time to know that, and I'm not certain of it" (*T*, 14). This situation produces a characteristically oxymoronic formulation of Beckett's writerly credo:

Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition. [*T*, 27]

It is only when this is kept in mind that "the pages fill with true ciphers at last" (*T*, 60). Moran expresses a similarly disaffected attitude toward the writing of his "report," calling it "paltry scrivening" (*T*, 121), and noting toward the end that "it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature" (*T*, 139):

What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would never have believed that—yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one. [*T*, 126]

Moran tells untellable stories because he is following orders, although he admits that he is writing not out of fear, but rather out of the deadening force of habit, a habit whose implacable narrative drive opens onto the impossibility of that which the narrative voice cannot give itself, namely death.

In contradistinction to Moran's initial certainty about death, when he visits his little "plot in perpetuity" with its gravestone already in place (*T*, 124), Molloy writes:

Death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe. [*T*, 63]

This inconceivability of death is explored at length in *Malone Dies*, where the space of narrative is reduced from *Molloy's* landscape of forest, seashore, and town—Turdy, Turdyba, Turdybaba, Bally, Ballyba, Ballybaba and Hole⁸—to a bed in a room where a figure, called Malone (who notes, without conviction, “since this is what I am called now” [T, 204], just as Moran noted, “This is the name I am known by” [T, 88]) lies dying. He is immobile except for a hand holding a pencil (a “Venus,” which is later associated with “Cythera” [T, 192; 217]: morning star, evening star, source of vengery)⁹ that glides over the page of a child’s exercise book. The third person present indicative of the book’s title—*Malone meurt*—at the very least leaves it open as to whether Malone dies or not, as Christopher Ricks rightly points out: “*Malone Dies*: does he? In a first person narrative, you can never be sure.”¹⁰ In Heideggerian terms, the voice gives itself the possibility of death as possibility on the first page of the text—“I could die today, if I wished, merely by making a little effort”—only to deny this possibility: “But it is just as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things . . . I shall be neutral and inert . . . I shall die tepid, without enthusiasm” (T, 165). A little later, the voice runs through the same patterns of assertion and negation, articulating the whole gravity of the body, the fact of being riveted to oneself:

8. On this nomenclature, Martha Nussbaum claims (swallowing Beckett’s psychoanalytic red herrings whole and with some sauce) that Moran’s failure to get to Bally or to Hole “may suggest that he [i.e. Moran] is impotent as well as guilty.” See “Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love,” in *Love’s Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 301. Despite the undoubted felicities offered by a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Molloy*, I find Nussbaum’s use of Kleinian categories a little too easy and fluent (the object of guilt is “parental sexual act” [298], the object of disgust is “above all the female body” [299]). What does it mean to employ such interpretative categories in relation to a literary text of such theoretical self-consciousness as Beckett’s? There is, I feel, the danger of a *hermeneutic literalism* here, which is also revealed when Nussbaum claims, mysteriously, that Beckett identifies Moran as the writer of all the novels in the *Trilogy* (“he [i.e. Moran] identifies himself as the author of this entire novel and of Beckett’s other novels” [303; the claim is repeated on 308]); a claim that can be refuted with reference to T, 299, “I am neither, I needn’t say, Murphy, nor Watt, nor—no, I can’t even bring myself to name them.” For a more extended critique of Nussbaum’s reading of Beckett, see Lecture Three in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*.

9. This might be connected with the opening lines of the late prose piece *Ill Seen Ill Said*: “From where she lies she sees Venus rise” (*Nohow On*, 7). A possible source for the reference to Cythera might be Baudelaire’s dystopic vision in “Un voyage à Cythère,” in *Les fleurs du mal* in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 117–19.

10. Christopher Ricks, *Beckett’s Dying Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 115.

If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought. All hangs together, I am in chains. [T, 201]

Thus *Malone Dies* takes place in the impossible time of dying, and it is into this ungraspable temporal stretch that the voice gives itself the possibility of telling stories: "while waiting I shall tell myself stories, if I can" (T, 115). Thus, Malone is an identity minimally held together by a series of stories—of Saposcat or Sapo, the Lamberts, Macmann, Moll, Hairy Mac, Sucky Moll, Quin, Lemuel and Lady Pedal—but these stories are no longer credible. The tales are like the teller, "almost lifeless," "all my stories are in vain" (T, 214). Each of the stories breaks down into tedium—"this is awful" (T, 175), "what tedium" (T, 174; 198; 201). The reader is continually referred back from the time of narrative to the time of mortality, to "mortal tedium" (T, 200), the time of dying. The time of narrative and possibility, where the voice is able to lay hold of time and invent, continually breaks down into an unnarratable impossibility, a pattern typified by Beckett's syntax of weakness that can be found in a whole series of self-undoing phrases in the *Trilogy*: "Live and invent. I have tried, Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried" (T, 179).

A similar disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying can be illustrated with a couple of examples from *Endgame*. First, Nagg is unable to tell the rather hackneyed Jewish joke about the Englishman, the tailor, and a pair of trousers, and this inability is marked textually with a series of stage directions, where Nagg moves between the voices of the Englishman, the tailor, the raconteur, and his normal voice: "I never told it worse. (*Pause. Gloomy.*) I tell this story worse and worse."¹¹ However, this disjunction can be seen even more clearly in the central speech of *Endgame*, Hamm's ham-fisted soliloquy where he tries to tell the story of how Clov came into Hamm's service, what Adorno neatly calls "an interpolated aria without music."¹² Once again, Beckett marks the disjunction in stage directions by calling for a shift between "narrative tone" and "normal tone":

Enough of that, it's storytime, where was I? (*Pause. Narrative tone.*)
The man came crawling towards me, on his belly. Pale, wonderfully pale and thin, he seemed on the point of—(*Pause. Normal tone.*) No,

11. Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1958), 21.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," trans. S. W. NicholSEN, in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 267.

I've done that bit. (Pause. Narrative tone.) I calmly filled my pipe—the meerschaum, lit it with . . . let us say a vesta, drew a few puffs. Aah! (Pause.) Well, what is it you want? (Pause.) [Endgame, 35]

Blanchot asks, “Why these vain stories?” and responds that it is in order to people the emptiness of death into which Malone and the whole gallery of moribunds feel they are falling, “through anxiety for this empty time that is going to become the infinite time of death” (*Le livre à venir*, 310). Stories both try to conceal the failure of narrative identity by drawing the self together into some sort of unity while, at the same time, Malone’s transcendent sarcasm (For example: “A stream at long intervals bestrid—but to hell with all this fucking scenery” [T, 254]) is directed toward trying to disengage the time of narrative from the time of dying. Malone tries to silence the emptiness by telling stories but only succeeds in letting the emptiness speak as the stories break down into mortal tedium. Thus, stories are a deception, but a necessary deception: we cannot face the emptiness of death with them or without them. They return us insistently to the passivity, ungraspability, and impossibility of our dying: “with practice I might be able to produce a groan before I die” (T, 232). Beckett is often given to the phrase “come and go,” and it provided the title for a 1965 dramaticule.¹³ Malone writes: “Because in order not to die you must come and go, come and go” (T, 213). Stories enable one to come and go, come and go, “incessant comings and goings” (T, 268), until one dies and “the others go on, as if nothing had happened” (T, 214). On.

MY OLD APORETICS: THE SYNTAX OF WEAKNESS (*THE UNNAMABLE*)

This experience of disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying is pushed even further in *The Unnamable*, a book Adorno describes as Beckett’s “wahrhaft ungeheuerlicher Roman” (truly monstrous or genuinely colossal novel),¹⁴ in comparison to which, and in opposition to both Sartre and Lukács, the “official works of committed art look like children’s games.” The opening pages of *The Unnamable* are the methodologically most self-conscious part of the *Trilogy*, where

13. In Beckett’s *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), 351–57, the phrase can be found on T, 168; 170; 176; 178; 201; 231; 214; 218; 226; 229; 254; 268; 353.

14. *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 90.

the narrative voice gives the faintest sketch of the method to be followed in the text: an *aporetics*.¹⁵

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By *aporia* pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later. Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention without going any further that I say *aporia* without knowing what it means. Can one be *ephectic* otherwise than unawares? I don't know. [T, 267]

This echoes a line from early in *Malone Dies*: "There I am back at my old *aporetics*. Is that the word? I don't know" (T, 166).

Of course, these phrases are performative enactments of the very method being described. They are *aporetic* descriptions of *aporia*, suspensions of judgment (hence "*ephectic*") on the possibility of a self-conscious suspension of judgment: "I don't know." We proceed by *aporia*, that is, the path to be followed is a pathless path, which means that we do not proceed, but stay on the same spot, even if we are not quite at a standstill, although this is the voice's desire: "the bliss of coma" (T, 298); "the rapture, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness" (T, 179). As a consequence, we wheel about as if with one foot nailed to the floor.

Although *The Unnamable* is hardly a discourse on method, the word "*aporia*" reappears at several key moments in the text,¹⁶ and Beckett's *aporetics* are a performative and quasi-methodological expression of what we saw above as the impossibility and necessity of narration: we have to go on and yet we can't go on (and yet we can't not go on). This technique—and it is a question of technique here, of a quite rigorous rhetorical procedure at work in Beckett's writing—might be characterized in terms of what Adorno rightly calls, with reference to *Endgame*, a technique of reversal:

Where they come closest to the truth, they sense, with double comedy, that their consciousness is false: that is how a situation that can no longer be reached by reflection is reflected. But the whole play is constructed by this technique of reversal. [Notes to Literature, vol. 1, 274]

15. On the figure of *aporia* in Beckett, see Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 63–64.

16. T, 274; 278; 318; 321; 334; 338.

It is in terms of this technique of reversal that I would understand Beckett's remark, cited above, about "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered." As Stanley Cavell points out, this can be seen as an almost spiritual exercise in logic, where statements are made, inferences derived, negations of inferences produced, and these negations are, in turn, negated.¹⁷ The language of *The Unnamable* is an endlessly elaborating series of antitheses, of imploding oxymorons, paradoxes, and contradictions, a "frenzy of utterance" (T, 275), where a coherent and perhaps even formalizable technique of repetition is employed to give the appearance of randomness and chaos.¹⁸ Some examples: "I, say I. Unbelieving. . . . It, say it, not knowing what. . . . So I have no cause for anxiety. And yet I am anxious. . . . Perhaps it's springtime, violets, no, that's autumn. . . . Perhaps it's all a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me" (T, 267; 276; 376; 381). Or a longer passage:

These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don't know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places when I was, where I shall be. [T, 276]

It is a question here of an uneasy and solitary inhabitation of the aporia between the inability to speak and the inability to be silent (T, 365). We cannot speak of that which we would like to speak—in my reading, the unrepresentability of death—and yet we cannot not speak, blissful though this might seem: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." There is only this voice, this meaningless voice "which prevents you

17. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 126.

18. On repetition in the *Trilogy*, see the wonderfully detailed essay by Rubin Rabinowitz, "Repetition and Underlying Meanings in Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*," in *Rethinking Beckett*, ed. L. St. John Butler and R. J. Davis (London: Macmillan, 1990), 31–67. See also Rabinowitz's *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); *Becketts' Fiction*, 66–68. Repetition is obviously also central to Beckett's later fictions, in a text like *Lessness* (1969), which contains 1538 words, where words 770–1538 repeat, in a different variation, words 1–769. On precisely this point, see Coetzee's "Samuel Beckett and the Temptation of Style," in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, 45; 49.

from being nothing" (T, 341), and all it has are words "and not many of them" (T, 381). And even when Malone writes, "I am lost, not a word" (T, 241) or Krapp—a later delegate—says "Nothing to say, not a squeak,"¹⁹ this is not yet silence, it is yet a word, yet a squeak.

To return to my epigraph from Cavell, Beckett's work and perhaps—to generalize suddenly and rather violently—literature as such is a *long sin against silence* (T, 345) that arises from our inability to sit quietly in a room. The origin of the sin being unknown, we still sit in our thousand furnished rooms to read and even write books; which, of course, only produces inconstancy, boredom, anxiety, and the desire for movement—to come and go, to come and go.

The radicality of *The Unnamable* with respect to the earlier parts of the *Trilogy* is that the disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying takes place within the unit of the sentence itself, where each series of words seems to offer and deny "the resorts of fable" (T, 283). Of course, there are fables in *The Unnamable*, the quite hilarious story of Basil, arbitrarily renamed Mahood (T, 283), the billy-in-the-bowl, who completes the dwindling physicality of the "M" names, and Worm. What is one to say of Worm? First of his kind, "who hasn't the wit to make himself plain" (T, 310). Worm is unborn, unperceiving, unspeaking, uncreated, "nothing but a shapeless heap" (T, 328), a "tiny blur in the depths of the pit" (T, 329). And in this heap, a wild and equine eye cries without ceasing. He makes no noise apart from a whining, the noise of life "trying to get in" (T, 335)—a terrifying remark. With this last in the series of "bran-dips" (T, 359), the stakes have been raised once again: for if Mahood, like Malone, craved what he could not give himself, i.e. death, then Worm is not even born: "Come into the world unborn, abiding there unliving, with no hope of death" (T, 318). Worm is that which somehow *remains*, he is a remainder, what Blanchot calls "*une survivance*" (*Le livre à venir*, 312), outside of life and the possibility of death. Although he is the first of his kind, it is difficult to imagine how this series might continue and perhaps Worm is the end of the line.²⁰

19. Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Faber, 1959), 18.

20. Perhaps. For nothing is the end of the line in Beckett, the line of writing stretches on interminably—*pour finir encore*. On this question of ending and beginning, one would need to read *The Unnamable* together with Beckett's final novel, *Comment c'est* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), a title which, in French, is at least a possible quadruple pun (comment c'est [how it is], and the infinitive [*commencer*], the imperative [*commencez!*], and past participle [*commencé*]) of the verb "to begin." Thus, even at the end of *The Unnamable*, one re-commences with a further dissolution of narrative form in

However, despite such fables, which have to be tempered with familiar comments on the inadequacy of narrative—"this hell of stories" (T, 349)²¹—*The Unnamable* is made up of an endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series and sayings and unsayings, Beckett's syntax of weakness.²² Some examples:

I shall have to speak of things, of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. [T, 267]

And again,

But my good-will at certain moments is such, and my longing to have floundered however briefly, however feebly, in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans, that I, no, parenthesis unfinished. I'll begin again. My family. [T, 295]

And again,

And would it not suffice, without any change in the structure of the thing as it now stands, as it always stood, without a mouth being opened at the place which even pain could never line, would it not suffice to, to what, the thread is lost, no matter, here's another. [T, 353]

And again,

I resume, so long as, so long as, let me see, so long as one, so long as he, ah fuck all that, so long as this, then that, agreed, that's good enough, I nearly got stuck. [T, 367]

As Ricks rightly points out, this is a syntax of weakness not because the syntax is weak, but rather because it presses on, "unable to relinquish its perseverance and to arrive at severance" (*Beckett's Dying Words*, 83). Beckett's sentences are a series of *weak intensities* and *double inabilities*: unable to go on and unable not to go on. It is this double inability

the punctuationless prose blocks of *Comment c'est*, where a crouched figure murmurs in the mud, its tongue lolling out.

21. For other remarks on storytelling in *The Unnamable*, see T, 299; 354; 374; 381–82.

22. Although to qualify the implied teleology of my reading of Beckett here, I am not claiming that the syntax of weakness is absent from other parts of the *Trilogy*, only that it is presented in *The Unnamable* in a more extreme fashion. Indeed, if one rereads the opening pages of *Molloy* in the light of the quasi-method of aporetics, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain a simple teleological reading of the *Trilogy*. For example, the opening paragraph of *Molloy* contains four uses of "perhaps," five uses of "apparently," and six uses of "I don't know"!

that describes, I think, the weakness of our relation to finitude, the articulation of a physical feebleness, a dwindling, stiffening corporality, which is a recipe not for despair but for a kind of *rapture*: "There is rapture, or there should be, in the motion crutches give" (T, 60).

WHO SPEAKS? NOT I

Who speaks in the work of Samuel Beckett? Who is the indefatigable "I" who always seems to say the same thing? It is with these seemingly innocent questions that Blanchot begins both of his pieces on Beckett.²³ Yet with this question we brush against an (perhaps *the*) enigma.

The obvious response to the question, "who speaks?" is to tie the "I" to the narrative voice of the text and to identify that voice with the controlling intentionality of the author. Who speaks? Samuel Beckett speaks. Well, yes, this is doubtless correct, there existed a writer whose name was Samuel Barclay Beckett, who wrote the books we have read, played first class cricket for Trinity College Dublin, received the Croix de Guerre in 1945 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, had terrible boils on his neck ("bristling with boils ever since I was a brat" [T, 75]), etc., etc., etc. There is an irreducible existential residuum of authorial experience in the creation of any text that we might call "literary."²⁴ But, to ascribe the voice that speaks in the work to the name Samuel Beckett, or to identify the narrative voice with a controlling consciousness that looks down upon the drama of Beckett's work like a transcendent spectator, is to fail to acknowledge the strangeness of the work under consideration and to read the work as an oblique confession or, worse still, a series of case studies in a reductive psychobiography. After remarking, "For if I am Mahood, I am Worm too, plop,"²⁵ the voice in *The Unnamable* continues:

23. "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?," essentially a review of the *Trilogy*, first appeared in *La nouvelle revue française* 10 (1953): 678–86, and was reprinted in *Le livre à venir*, 308–13, with some significant but minor changes, mainly deletions. "Les paroles doivent cheminer longtemps," an *entretien* on Beckett's *Comment c'est*, first appeared under the title "Notre épopée," in *La nouvelle revue française* 100 (1961): 690–98, and was reprinted with very minor alterations in *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 478–86. *L'entretien infini* is translated as *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

24. Obviously, in Beckett's case, this residuum has been decisively documented by Deirdre Bair in *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).

25. On the possible significance of terms such as "plop" and "ping" in Beckett, see Coetzee's "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," 43–49. Coetzee reads these terms as an "editorial metalanguage . . . that repeatedly fractures the surface of the fiction," and that has "evacuated itself of lexical content" (45). This partially confirms

Or is one to postulate a *tertius gaudens*, meaning myself, responsible for the double failure? [i.e. of Mahood and Worm] Shall I come upon my true countenance at last, bathing in a smile? I have the feeling I shall be spared this spectacle. At no moment do I know what I'm talking about, nor of whom. [T, 310–11]

If one is to be capable of listening to the voices that speak from the pages of the *Trilogy*, then it is at the very least necessary to suspend the hypothesis identifying the narrative voice of Beckett's work with the smiling third party of a controlling pure consciousness and ascribing the latter to Samuel Beckett. As Blanchot writes—rightly—"in literature there is no direct speech" (*The Infinite Conversation*, 327). That is—and this is Blanchot's hypothesis—in Beckett's work we approach an experience, a *literary* experience, that speaks to us in a voice that can be described as impersonal, neutral, or indifferent: an incessant, interminable, and indeterminable voice that reverberates outside of all intimacy, dispossessing the "I" and delivering it over to a nameless outside. Beckett's work draws the reader into a space—the space of literature—where a voice intones obscurely, drawn on by a speaking that does not begin and does not finish, that cannot speak and cannot but speak, that leads language toward what Blanchot calls with reference to *Comment c'est* "an unqualifiable murmur,"²⁶ what I will describe presently as a buzzing, *the tinnitus of existence*. As Blanchot writes, this is "strange, strange" (*The Infinite Conversation*, 330).

Blanchot's point about the narrative voice can be restated by following a crucial feature of Beckett's prose in the *Trilogy*. On three occasions in the second part of *Molloy* (T, 115; 128; 152), we come across the words "Not I," employed in a seemingly innocent way during Moran's monologue. However, this phrase comes to pervade *The Unnamable* in a number of crucial passages, not all of which can be cited, and which begin to be repeated with ever-increasing frequency—mania even—toward the end of the text.²⁷ About a third of the way into *The Unnamable*, the voice writes:

his otherwise contestable thesis that, in Beckett's later fictions such as *Ping* and *Lessness*, Beckett marches "with eyes open into the prison of style" (49). But why should style be a prison? If style is redescribed in terms of worklessness, then might it not, on the contrary, be some strange kind of liberation, however workless?

26. Although the main reference is to "the murmur in the mud" in *Comment c'est*, references to murmuring can already be found in *The Unnamable*, initially to describe the voiceless noise emitted by Worm (T, 310; 323; 351; 375; 376; 381).

27. See T, 292; 315; 319; 326; 355; 369; 370; 371–72; 373; 374; 375; 380; 381.

But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even less. [T, 315]

Slightly further on, we read:

I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. [T, 315]

Unsurprisingly enough, and in accord with the aporetic method sketched above, the voice does not always "think of it" and persistently falls back into the first person. However, the point here is that the voice is attempting to move from the first person to the third person, from "I" to "s/he/it" (a Beckettian pun of questionable taste offers itself here, but I will resist). The voice insists that "it's not I speaking," but another, a more impersonal and neutral voice. In this way we can begin to make sense of the first line of *The Unnamable*, "I, say I. Unbelieving" (T, 267), and the almost mantric phrase that is repeated obsessively toward the end of the text, "It's not I, that's all I know" (T, 380). But the crucial passage in this regard is the following; I quote it in full:

It's always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seem to speak, that's because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I am far, who can't move, can't be found, but neither can he, he can only talk, if that much, perhaps it's not he, perhaps it's a multitude, one after another, what confusion, someone mentions confusion, is it a sin, all here is a sin, you don't know why, you don't know whose, you don't know against whom, someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, it's a kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either, let us leave all that, forget about all that, it's not difficult. [T, 371–72]

There is no name for the voice that speaks in *The Unnamable*. Whoever speaks in Beckett's work, it is not "I," it is rather "he" (although this is still a pronoun, and that's the trouble), the third person or the impersonal neutrality of language. The neutral character of the third person is what Blanchot refers to as "the narrative voice," and, for him (thinking of Kafka rather than Beckett),²⁸ to write is to pass from

28. There is an almost amusing moment in Blanchot's obituary for Beckett in "Oh tout finir" (*Critique* 46/519–20 [August/September 1990]: 635–37), when he writes, "In the eulogies that have been respectfully delivered in order to mark his (i.e. Beckett's)

the "I" to the "he" (*The Infinite Conversation*, 380). In literature—and this is the defining quality of the literary for Blanchot—I do not speak, it speaks. In relation to Beckett, Blanchot writes of "a soft specter of speech" (*The Infinite Conversation*, 331), the unqualifiable murmur at the back of our words. The narrative voice is like some specter that lingers in the background of our everyday identity, disturbing the persistent "I" of our monologues and dialogues, denying the "daydream gratification of fiction"²⁹ and reappearing at nightfall, a kind of void that opens up in the work and into which the work evaporates in a movement of worklessness. There is an irreducible logic of spectrality at work in literature, the night of ghosts, that denies us the sleep of the just in the name of justice. This is perhaps why Blanchot defines the writer as "the insomniac of the day."³⁰

Who speaks? Not I. On this point an interesting connection can be made between *The Unnamable* and the extraordinary 1973 dramatic piece *Not I*, a piece that I would want to see as a distilled redrafting of *The Unnamable*, and that employs a very similar, apparently manic, pattern of repetition and breathless phrasing as in the final pages of the latter.³¹ On five occasions in the ten-minute dramaticule, the Mouth cries "what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she!" As Beckett laconically points out in the only note to *Not I*, the Mouth is engaged in a "vehement refusal to relinquish third person." It should be noted that this third person is "she" rather than "he," (played in the original production by the sublime Billie Whitelaw), and it is here that one might want to raise the question of gender and challenge the alleged neutrality of the narrative voice.

passing, the great works of the age have been evoked, Proust, Joyce, Musil, and even Kafka. . . ." For readers of Blanchot, this "and even Kafka" is so revealing.

29. Coetzee, "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," 49.

30. Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 185. On the themes of insomnia, sleep, and the night in Beckett and Blanchot, see Deleuze's reading of Beckett; he writes, "In the insomniac dream, it is not a question of realizing the impossible, but of exhausting the possible" ("L'épuisé," in *Quad et autres pièces pour la télévision* [Paris: Minuit, 1992], 100–01).

31. *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 373–83. Possible precursors for the two characters in the cast of *Not I*—"Auditor" and "Mouth"—might be found in *Malone Dies*: "the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers" (T, 254); and in *The Unnamable*: "Evoke at painful junctures, when discouragement threatens to raise its head, the image of a vast mouth, red, blubber and slobbering, in solitary confinement, extruding indefatigably, with a noise of wet kisses the washing in a tub, the words that obstruct it" (T, 359). On the connection between *Not I* and *The Unnamable*, see James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull* (London: Calder, 1979), 197.

On several occasions, the Mouth speaks of a buzzing in the ears: "for she could still hear the buzzing . . . so-called . . . in the ears . . . the buzzing? . . . yes . . . all the time the buzzing . . . so-called. in the ears." This buzzing is described as "a dull roar in the skull . . . dull roar like falls," which can be linked both to what was said above about murmuring and to references to "the noise" in the *Trilogy*.³² For example, Malone notes:

What I mean is possibly this, that the noises of the world, so various in themselves and which I used to be so clever at distinguishing from one another, had been dinning at me for so long, always the same old noises, as gradually to have merged into a single noise, so that all I heard was one vast continuous buzzing. [T, 190]

Who speaks in the work of Samuel Beckett? It is not the "I" of the author or a controlling consciousness, but rather the "Not I" of the insomniac narrative voice that opens like a void in the experience of literature, as the experience that literature approaches: *le neutre, le dehors, désastre, l'espace littéraire* [the neutral, the outside, the disaster, the literary space]. Beckett's work leaves us "open to the void" (T, 377), and this void is not the ultramarine blue of Yves Klein or Derek Jarman, but a more sombre monochrome; not the Mediterranean, but the Black Sea:

These creatures have never been, only I and this black void have ever been. And the sounds? No, all is silent. And the lights, on which I had set such store, must they too go out? Yes, out with them, there is no light. No grey either, black is what I should have said. Nothing then but me, of which I know nothing, and this black, of which I know nothing except that it is black and empty. That then is what, since I have to speak, I shall speak of, until I need speak no more. [T, 278]

The narrative voice approaches a void that speaks as one vast, continuous buzzing, a dull roar in the skull like falls, an unqualifiable murmur, an impersonal whining, the vibration of the tympanum (T, 352). This is what I mean by the tinnitus of existence. It is, I believe, this condition that the voice in Beckett's work is trying to approach. It is this *truth* with which Beckett's frenzy of utterance is concerned (T, 275). Of course, there is *only* the approach, because the voice cannot grant itself the possibility of its own disappearance into the void—death is impossible. Thus, we resort to fables: "To tell the truth—no,

32. See T, 189; 190; 325; 332; 345; 357.

first the story" (T, 300). That is just how it is. And that is how I read a phrase near the end of the 1981 text *Ill Seen Ill Said*: "Absence supreme good and yet."³³ It is this "and yet" that is so determinate for Beckett's art, this holding back from the bliss of absence, this qualification of the rapture of annihilation in a syntax of weakness.

33. *Ill Seen Ill Said*, in *Nohow On*, 58.