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Wittgenstein, Heidegger, the Unnamable, and Some Thoughts on the Status of Voice in Fiction

I wish to discuss in this paper the relation between modern theories of language and the practice of fiction. Specifically I wish to suggest some homologies between issues raised in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*⁰ and theoretical positions found primarily in the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, though I shall also make some allusions to the structuralist views of language derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. And more specifically, I wish to ask what is the status of voice in Beckett and how this question is illuminated by considering theoretical or philosophical points of view on the status of voice within a general theory of language. For in a way curiously analogous to fiction, every language theory must ask who speaks and whence the speaker speaks. Modern theory answers these two questions in terms of a series of oppositions that, I would maintain, set the limits for the way we think about the status of voice in a literary text. And in turn, certain key literary texts, such as *The Unnamable*, contest those limits by actually living them as an impossibility.

Much of language theory is concerned with setting the boundaries of the sayable. This creating of boundaries thus sets theory as an irritating other to the literary voice by making of it an arbiter of the boundaries of what might be said therein. This
state of affairs establishes a hostile complicity between literature and philosophy, and in many postmodern works this complicity gives rise to a kind of lamento about the work’s desire for the unsayable.

In this respect, one cannot overestimate the importance that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* continues to have for the writer who faces language as a limit to his voice. In fact, the *Tractatus* remains the *locus classicus* for the notion that the limits of (the) world are established by language, that the limits of my world coincide, insofar as I can speak my world, with the limits of my language. Wittgenstein’s first work thus casts many doubts upon language by suggesting that it is somehow less pure than such perfect constructs as logic, mathematics—or silence. The only voice that can meaningfully speak, according to the *Tractatus*, is a voice that is certain of a limited number of atomistic propositions. Moreover, this meaningful voice can say nothing about itself, for the speaking voice is excluded from the world that discourse can represent: “The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (5. 632). Thus, in a strict sense, the speaking voice can say nothing about what it is saying. It can only record states of affairs, much like a hyper-realist catalogue that excludes itself from its listing.

Although Wittgenstein’s second period of thought is essentially a critique of the representational view of language that the *Tractatus* offers, there is little in his second phase that provides support for those traditional humanist views of language that assume an unmediated relationship between self and voice or voice and discourse. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, voices arise as forms of participation in the various language games that, with their innumerable overlappings, make up that entity we give the name “language.” Language games are thus the multiple public spaces and the rules for their arrangement that go to make up the world. And if one asks where is the self that lies behind the speaking voice, the answer seems to be that the self is only a kind of abbreviation for talking about the multiple ways in which voices enter into language games. Or, if taken as a substantial notion, the self can only be viewed as a metaphysical error arising from a misunderstanding about the
nature of language. There is no self to be spoken, no inner locus that is the source of meaning, for the locus of speaking is merely speaking itself.

The writer who turns from Wittgenstein’s work to Heidegger’s voluminous production may be surprised to find many analogies between the two. In Heidegger’s early work, especially in *Being and Time*, he would discover that there is rarely, if ever, such a thing as an individual speaker. For what is taken to be the individual voice is really the voice of *das Man*, the anonymous “they” that speak, through inauthentic speech, the fallen logos of everyday existence. The only authentic voice would appear to be the voice of silence that stands opposed in silent resolve to the “they” that speak a language of publicly determined meanings, a language that has fallen from the plenitude of authentic being. Although Heidegger declares in his later work that language is the house of being, he never really gives up his view that everyday language is a form of fallen logos. But in his second phase, he does summon the poet to become a speaker of authentic language by listening to the call of Being and letting logos speak through him, such as Hölderlin presumably did. For it is language that speaks, not the Cartesian self that believes it is empowered to use language to mediate its thoughts. It is language that, in speaking, differentiates being against the backdrop of silence. Autonomous saying—Heidegger’s *die Sage*—is a showing of being as being itself. Heidegger’s claims for language in effect evacuate the self from language, leaving the writer in the difficult position of facing language as either the inauthentic expression of otherness or the grandiose revelation of Being itself.

Heidegger’s influence is also instrumental, I think, in the way many have come to interpret the Saussurian distinction between voice and language system. One encounters here an opposition that turns on the difficulty Saussure had in at once vouchsafing the individual’s capacity to speak an autonomous parole, or speech, and his need to make of the individual speaker a mere repository of the autonomous linguistic system, or *la langue*. Later structuralists have certainly emphasized the second half of the opposition, which coincides with Heideg-
ger’s contention that language, not man, speaks. What voice can be said to speak if the speaker is only a storehouse of his culture’s linguistic system, of its codes, syntagms, and potential paradigmatic options? Such a question finds an answer of sorts in Derrida’s claim that it is therefore language that constitutes the subject, a formulation that aims, I think, to reverse two thousand years’ of thought on the subject. And such a view of the autonomy of the linguistic system underlies Foucault’s even more resounding and ironic claim that man is dead.

Dead he may be, but this death does not prevent him from speaking, as we see constantly in Beckett’s prolonged sonata of the dead. And it seems to me that this elusive Irishman’s fiction presents exemplary postmodern responses to the questions and paradoxes that modern language theory brings up. For central to all of Beckett’s fiction, and especially to the works written in French and even more particularly to *The Unnamable*, is a constant self-interrogation about the status of the voice that speaks, about its relation to the language it speaks, and about the locus whence it speaks.

Let us recall in this respect how the unnamable comes to be the final speaker in Beckett’s trilogy of novels. First Molloy speaks to us about his narration, which is followed by Moran’s voice narrating his attempt to join Molloy. Both of these voices seem to be present to the Malone of *Malone Dies* as he, another bedridden speaker, talks about his narration and offers the tale of Macmann. This bloody tale comes to its end with Malone’s declaring that he will never say “I” again, although he immediately breaks his vow as he concludes the tale of the homicidal outing from the insane asylum. The refusal to say “I” brings the reader to the voice named the unnamable, who begins his speaking with a question: “Where now? When now? Who now? Unquestioning. I, say I.” The original “Dire je” conveys even more forcefully the imperative sense of the voice that must order itself to use the first person pronoun and hence force itself into complicity with the structure of language. And his questions point at the same time to the separation that seems to exist between voice and language. For *The Unnamable* takes the reader into a narrative space that is inhabited by a
voice that cannot speak except in nearly contradictory fashion to assert that it is not his language that speaks; thus it is not he who really speaks, though the I-voice would appear to have no choice about using this language if the voice wishes to decry this intolerable situation. For the unnamable finds himself undertaking the impossible quest to get around language, a quest that must perforce fall back onto language, onto stories, pseudo-narrations, other voices and laments, if the quest is to exist at all.

Beckett's reduction of fiction to this kind of self-reflexive rumination obliges us to ask what does it mean to say that voice and language are separated. For the unnamable's plight is perhaps the central one for illuminating the way much of contemporary fiction functions and, moreover, for seeing how theoretical concerns have become the very stuff of this fiction. Or perhaps it would be more precise to say, how literature seeks strategies for overcoming its own unhappy belief in language theory.

The homologies between Beckett's literary performances and the philosophical ones I briefly outlined are many, and they underlie the seemingly paradoxical assertion that voice and language can be separated, that there is indeed a place where, as the unnamable puts it, "language dies that permits of such expressions" (p. 335). The Unnamable's paradox first sends us back to read Heidegger again and to ask if we have found that region of intersection between the realm where authentic language is heard only in silence and the realm of average everydayness where the babble one hears belongs to the anonymous other. For the unnamable, if he dreams of silence, seems to reside precisely in that region where the only language he finds is, by its very ontology, the language of everybody, and hence nobody. His narrative trajectory thus moves toward a paradoxical ending that the other's language prevents from taking place:

All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten,
to perform, before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway. All lies. I have nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. (P. 314)

As pure voice, the unnamable can do nothing, for in Beckett’s world to say is to do; and he cannot speak since he has no language, except the language of everyone and no one. The unnamable thus sits chattering, looking across a silent space at Heidegger’s authentic man, that hero who remains locked in his quiet resolve. Yet the unnamable’s antics let us know that he exists, however paradoxically, and by contrast one might well suspect that quiet authenticity is a figment of a loquacious philosopher’s imagination.

For the unnamable is a clown version of the man who would live authentically by speaking his own language. He is a clown who stands in relation to his own discourse much like the philosopher who uttered the axioms of the *Tractatus*, a work of metaphysical nonsense whose goal, according to Wittgenstein, was to annul itself. Yet the unnamable is irremediably caught in a bizarre public space where voices reverberate everywhere, public voices that seem to be a pluralization of *das Man*:

It must not be forgotten, sometimes I forget, that all is a question of voices. I say what I am told to say, in the hope that some day they will weary of talking at me. The trouble is I say it wrong, having no ear, no head, no memory. Now I seem to hear them say it is Worm’s voice beginning, I pass on the news, for what it is worth. Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking? That’s theirs too. To make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs. Another trap to snap me up among the living. (P. 345)

What the rather schizoid unnamable presumably demands is an ideolect that would be the language of his absolute specificity, for the self that is spoken by public language is a mere conven-
tion, a trap designed to ensnare as it transforms one into otherness.

In another sense, Beckett's narrator puts into practice not only the notion that language is a publicly determined repository of usages, but he also has a profound sense that his (or their) language is a social contract. The social bond that language requires is but another form of pluralized otherness and the unnamable refuses that social quality even as he affirms, in common with structural linguistics and the Wittgenstein of language games, the social basis of all language:

It's of me now that 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. . . . Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. (P. 324)

Wittgenstein often said that to understand how a language game is played, it is often helpful to see how it is learned; for which the unnamable here sets forth the most general pedagogical principle the breed possesses for ensuring that the linguistic system will be, literally, internalized.

Thus the language of the tribe, as Beckett—after Mallarmé—puts it in French, cannot be the language of the voice that is engaged in a curious struggle for sanity. To speak a single word is, as the unnamable would have it, to enter into complicity with the tribe's codified system—or perhaps into complicity with the tribe's way of theorizing about its linguistic system. To speak is to force the voice to enter into an alterity that can be only a form of alienation. And even to say "I"—that "putain de la première personne"—is to accept the linguistic token that designates all voices. To say "I" is to accept something of a hoax fostered by the tribe's system of pronouns: for can "I" be "I" if every voice is "I"? Structural linguistics may point out that such a pronoun functions as a shifter, but this will bring little
semantic succor to the speaker who feels that precisely such a
semantic feature makes a mystification of the whole notion of
personal identity.

In this novel, Worm does not speak, nor, declares the nar­
rator, does he, and Mahood is aphonie. With this voiceless cast,
who can, then, speak in this text, except perhaps language
itself? And on the other side of language there might be—
farcical hypothesis—a self possessing a voice unmediated by
language, the pure self of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus or Heideg­
ger’s unalienated man. Except, of course, that this view of the
separation of language and self is a schizo-comedy that takes
desperate delight in its own impossibility. In this sense,
Beckett’s work ushers in the era of the schizo-text that is per­
haps the postmodern text par excellence. Beckett’s work gives
full expression to the voice alienated from itself, the voice for
which the first and the third person pronoun are a matter of
indifference. The speaker lives the “I” as an “it,” for the voice is
present to itself only as otherness:

My voice. The voice. I hardly hear it any more. I’m going silent.
Hearing this voice no more, that’s what I call going silent. That is to
say I’ll hear it still, if I listen hard. I’ll listen hard. Listening hard,
that’s what I call going silent. I’ll hear it still, broken, faint, unin­
telligible, if I listen hard. Hearing it still, without hearing what it
says, that’s what I call going silent. Then it will flare up, like a
kindling fire, a dying fire. Mahood explained that to me, and I’ll
emerge from silence. Hearing too little to be able to speak, that’s
my silence. (P. 393)

And thus the notion that one might listen to one’s voice as the
voice of someone else brings us to the paradox that one might
speak silence.

For Beckett’s narrators speak clamorously about silence. Like
Wittgenstein’s metaphysician narrator of the Tractatus, Beckett’s narrators spend enormous amounts of logical energy
saying the unsayable and talking about the unspeakable. And
as in the case of Heidegger’s vision of authenticity, one has the
feeling that silence would be a kind of utopia where the voice,
divested of the tribe’s language, would have direct access to
itself. In silence speaking and listening, I and it, would no longer be separated. The voice would be a pure self in which, as Derrida might have it, consciousness would be fully present to itself as a plenitude unmediated by the alienating otherness of the tribe's linguistic system. Yet Beckett's is a self-reflexive comic vision, and his noisy praise of silence mirrors Wittgenstein's dream of purity and Heidegger's claims for authenticity as in a distorting mirror:

. . . with regard to me, nice time we're going to have now, with regard to me, that it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence, to recall only two of the hypotheses launched in this connexion, though silence to tell the truth does not appear to have been very conspicuous up to now, but appearances may sometimes be deceptive. . . . (Pp. 388–89)

Appearances may be deceptive; yet in spite of all one's worst intentions, it does appear that the mere saying "I" fosters the illusion that a self has been created, that a character is present, that a voice speaks. The tribe's linguistic system has many powers, and Beckett's narrators are constantly playing with variations on the idea that mere naming suffices to grant existence or to offer being. Heidegger's poet may have the task of authentic naming and thus confer being against the backdrop of silence; but Beckett's unnamable narrator clearly wants to resist the power of language to hustle him into existence. To say "I"—how can this confer being when it offers existence to every "I" and thus to the pluralized no one.

In Beckett's work and in many other contemporary texts, we find at work a comic equivocation about the nature of language. For, on the one hand, these texts declare that merely to name cannot of course confer existence, and that to accept the deceitful appearances of mere pronouns is to give consent to a fraud fostered by language. But, on the other hand, it is precisely the nature of literary language, or a feature of the ontology of fiction, that to name is to confer existence. Heidegger can, in his later writings, play with one side of this equivocation, and
Beckett, as if in response to these extraordinary claims for poetry, can play with the other side. And of course both are right, for to name in literature is to confer being—merely fictive being, yet being nonetheless.

In another respect, however, Beckett’s equivocation with regard to fictive and nonfictive language functions as critical irony. By allowing his narrators to act as if they were dealing with nonfictive language, Beckett allows them to undertake an ironic critique of errors that can only exist as illusions in the realm of nonfictive language. The schizo-text comically blurs the line of demarcation between fictive and nonfictive text in order to live out the madness that our various philosophical systems would ascribe to our daily lives. The schizo suspension of logic allows the unnamable to live his narrative project as an experiential critique of language theory, much as Wittgenstein flirted with madness in order to create such antimetaphysical fictions as the following:

One may say of the bearer of a name that he does not exist; and of course that is not an activity, although one may compare it with one and say: he must be there all the same, if he does not exist. (And this has certainly already been written some time by a philosopher.)

Seen in this light, the claim of Beckett’s characters not to exist is at least as comprehensible as the claim that to say “I” might confer existence.

To conclude, I should like to note then how Beckett’s work, offering the “unnamable” as the name of our narrator, preludes with a great contradiction to the proliferation of postmodern works whose voices know not whence they speak or speak from that equivocal space called the text. Many of these works would go further than Wittgenstein or the unnamable in denying that language can reach any private sphere, that there could be such a thing as a private language, or that there could be a self that might exist beyond the voice that is created by language. Yet few of these works have Beckett’s richness, perhaps because they fail to allow for the view that there might be a not-I, a self to be translated by what is other than the self of
language, alienated in the tribe’s fallen discourse. The unnamable also stands as a contradictory protest against, as well as ironic affirmation of, the idea that character and self may only be functions of language. After all, who can be happy with the belief that his voice grants him a self merely because rules of grammar have been hypostatized into metaphysical entities? Beckett’s unnamable thus speaks with a voice that opens up most of the space of postmodern narration: voice is a comic automaton spoken by language, often the fallen language of public delirium that we have come to call pop. And, of course, these notions about voice and language tell us much about what has happened in contemporary fiction to what once was called character. Characters around 1900, as Queneau shows in his *Flight of Icarus (Le Vol d’Icare)*, had such ontological substance that they could be stolen or could abandon the novel in which they were to appear. No such fears haunt the writer for whom a character is simply a repository of the tribe’s language and need act only as a nominal function.