

## “my thoughts are elsewhere” Reading (In)Attention in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*<sup>11</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay examines Samuel Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable* from the perspective of what N. Katherine Hayles calls “deep attention” and “hyper attention,” by which she respectively refers to the ability of human attention to focus on a single object for a certain amount of time and to shift rapidly between multiple objects. Hayles furthermore associates “deep attention” with the practice of (close) reading a printed text and “hyper attention” with digital (screen) reading, moving from one browser tab or hyperlink to the next. In today’s highly mediatized society, needless to say, digital reading is becoming increasingly common (if not the norm altogether). According to Hayes, the result is that “hyper attention” is being privileged at the expense of “deep attention.” While Beckett’s *The Unnamable* predates the practice of digital reading by some time, it is the contention here that the novel is nevertheless extremely pertinent in this context because of how it suggests inattention to be the necessary condition for the possibility of attention, both in its deep and hyper varieties.

**Keywords:** attention, Samuel Beckett, Katherine N. Hayles, Bernard Stiegler, technogenesis, *The Unnamable*

In a 1954 letter to Hans Naumann, Samuel Beckett confesses to “have always been a poor reader, incurably inattentive, on the look-out for an elsewhere. And I think I can say, in no spirit of paradox, that the reading experiences which have affected me most are those that were best at sending me to that elsewhere” (Beckett 2011, 465). At first sight, the idea of Beckett being easily distracted while reading appears to contradict the thousands and thousands of reading notes he took

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during his lifetime, most of which have been preserved in university libraries. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, Beckett, in his own words, “[read] wildly all over the place” (2009b, 324), ranging from literature (in various languages) to philosophy, psychology, and art, among other things. Add to this that he also had to read to and for James Joyce,<sup>12</sup> and it is safe to say that Beckett, if nothing else, exposed himself to an acute overload of information during the two or three decades leading up to his “frenzy of writing” (qtd. in Knowlson 2004, 358) between 1946 and 1951. That this was often more than his attention could bear is perhaps illustrated best by the numerous doodles he drew in his notebooks and manuscripts – they seem to have provided him with a welcome escape from the vast body of information he was gathering at the time. Most interesting in the context of this analysis is the way in which these little drawings implicate the failure of attention: by realizing the creative potential of *inattention*, by letting attention drift “elsewhere.” But what, then, is the role of (in)attention for Beckett’s writing? Furthermore, what does Beckett’s writing reveal about attention in today’s highly mediatized society, characterized precisely by failed “effort[s] of attention, to try and discover what’s happening, what’s happening to me, what then, I don’t know, I’ve forgotten my apodosis” (Beckett 2009c, 121).

As is clear from the letters to his friend Thomas MacGreevy in 1931, finding a suitable literary strategy for dealing with an excess of information, for channelling “the old demon of note-snatching” (qtd. in Pilling 1999, xiii), was not something that came easily to Beckett. “I’m right in a dead spot,” he writes on November 8, for example, “I can’t write anything at all, can’t even imagine the shape of a sentence, nor take notes (though God knows I have enough ‘butin verbal’ to strangle anything I’m likely to want to say), nor read with understanding, goût or degoût” (Beckett 2009b, 93-94). Nevertheless, by the time of *The Unnamable* (1953), the limitations of human attention no longer (only) paralyze the writing but (also) enable the discourse to “go on,” or so the novel’s narrator would have us believe:

To tell the truth, let us be honest at last, it is some considerable time now since I last knew what I was talking about. It is because

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<sup>12</sup> Apart from proofreading and editing the drafts for *Work in Progress* – “stupefying work” (2009b, 565) as Beckett himself described it – Joyce, whose eyesight was rapidly deteriorating, would “hand me [Beckett] a book from time to time and ask me to have a look at it and pick out passages that might help him [Joyce] with the writing of *Finnegans Wake*” (Beckett 2011, 463).

my thoughts are elsewhere. I am therefore forgiven. So long as one's thoughts are somewhere everything is permitted. (Beckett 2009c, 35)

The present study will thus examine in what ways the intrusion of an “elsewhere” upon the “here-and-now” of focused attention could be seen as constituting an important resource of creativity and (artistic) freedom in *The Unnamable*.

Katherine N. Hayles discusses attention from the perspective of technogenesis, or “the idea that humans and technics are coevolving” (2012, 10). According to her, the role of human attention in the creation and further development of technology is not to be underestimated, yet remains largely overlooked. “On the level of conscious thought,” Hayles believes that “attention comes into play as a focusing action that codetermines what we call materiality. That is, attention selects from the vast (essentially finite) repertoire of physical attributes some characteristics for notice, and they in turn constitute the object's materiality” (2012, 14). The materiality of the physical environment is, in other words, always already contaminated by human attention, by subjectivity: “Materiality, like the object itself, is not a pre-given entity but rather a dynamic process that changes as the focus of attention shifts” (Hayles 2012, 14). In this way, by reconstructing the physicality of the environment, attention sets up the material context for technical development: “it creates from a background of technical ensembles some aspect of their physical characteristics upon which to focus, thus bringing into existence a new materiality that then becomes the context for technological innovation” (Hayles 2012, 103). But if attention influences technological change, the reverse is also true: “the *mechanisms of attention* themselves mutate in response to environmental conditions. Whenever dramatic and deep changes occur in the environment, attention begins to operate in new ways” (Hayles 2012, 98). The result is a sort of collapsing feedback loop between the subject and its physical environment – or, the “technogenetic spiral,” as Hayles also calls this circuit which effectively dissolves the distinction between inside and outside, subject and object: “models of the nervous system provide clues for technological innovation, and technological innovation encourages the adoptions of models that work like the technology” (Hayles 2012, 147).

Pondering about what “the correct attitude” would be “to adopt toward things,” towards his environment, the narrator of *The Unnamable* emphasizes that “The best is not to decide anything, in this connection, in advance. If a thing turns

up, for some reason or another, take it into consideration” (Beckett 2009c, 2). What is taken into consideration is not the physicality but the materiality of things, and materiality, at least in Hayles’s view, is always already mediated by human attention and thus inseparable from subjectivity: “Where there are people, it is said, there are things. Does this mean that when you admit the former you must also admit the latter? Time will tell” (Beckett 2009c, 2). Time will tell, perhaps, because time might be precisely this relation between people and things – at least this is what French philosopher Bernard Stiegler argues: “technics [a clock, a calendar...], far from being merely in time, properly constitutes time” (1998, 27).

Finding and interpreting substantive references to attention in *The Unnamable* is not my main concern, however. Rather, I am interested in how the writing itself might operate *like* human attention, first and foremost by bringing into play the abstract materiality of its physical environment, namely words inked on paper – or, as the narrator keeps reminding himself, “It all boils down to a question of words, I must not forget this, I have not forgotten it” (Beckett 2009c, 48). I am therefore also interested in how this materiality brought into existence by writing can be seen as folding back upon the writing, perhaps even altering its mechanisms in such a way that, for the narrator, “all has gone clean from the head. For it is difficult to speak, even any old rubbish, and at the same time focus one’s attention on another point, where one’s true interest lies, as fitfully defined by a feeble murmur seeming to apologise for not being dead” (Beckett 2009c, 19). In short, I will examine how the writing, like human attention, gets subjectivity “embroiled in a kind of inverted spiral, I mean one the coils of which, instead of widening more and more, grew narrower and narrower and finally, given the kind of space in which I was supposed to evolve, would come to an end for lack of room” (Beckett 2009c, 28). The hypothesis is that this inverted spiral of writing is not at all unlike Hayles’s “technogenetic spiral” as mediated by human attention, setting up and fine-tuning material contexts for the development of ever more sophisticated technology, for ever more writing.

In *Molloy* (1951) and *Malone Dies* (1951), Beckett’s writing still draws attention to language as a medium of some sorts – “an ambulance perhaps, a vehicle of some kind certainly” (2010, 7), one capable of carrying Molloy into his “mother’s room” (2009a, 3) and Malone into “a plain private room in a plain ordinary house” (2010, 7). In *The Unnamable*, however, as Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller indicate in their *The Making of L’Innommable/The Unnamable*, “it is the problematic nature of the relation, or non-relation, between *language* and *world* – rather than

that between ‘mind’ and ‘world’ [...] – that comes to the fore in an unprecedented manner” (2014, 93). There occurs a shift, in other words, a shift which, I argue, is (also) a shift in attention, causing the vehicle, its passenger(s), and the physical environment to collapse into each other, in this way reducing the materiality of things to something “Grey. What else? Calm, calm, there must be something else, to go with this grey, which goes with everything. There must be something of everything here, as in every world, a little of everything” (Beckett 2009c, 77). Whereas the relation (or non-relation) between “mind” and “world” is said to be mediated by language, among other things, the relation (or non-relation) between “language” and “world” is at once held together and kept apart by writing. In writing, of course, “the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me, [...] I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words” (Beckett 2009c, 104). In other words, from *The Unnamable* and onwards, language is no longer *just* the vehicle of writing, of literature, but at once its subject and object, inside and outside, meaning one can speak of a vehicle only insofar “an old broken-down cart- or bat-horse” still counts as a vehicle, for it is “unable to receive the least information either from its instinct or from its observation as to whether it is moving towards the stable or away from it, and not greatly caring either” (Beckett 2009c, 32).

This shift in Beckett’s writing displays some parallels, I believe, to the shift in reading attention that is taking place (and arguably has already taken place) in contemporary society with the rise of digital media. “The age of print is passing,” Hayles observes, “and the practices associated with it are now becoming visible as media-specific practices rather than the largely invisible status quo” (2012, 2). It turns out that close reading is one of those practices typically associated with the medium of print. Indeed, the more print texts are being replaced by digital alternatives, the more “other modes of reading claim an increasing share of what counts as ‘literacy,’ including hyper reading and analysis through machine algorithms (‘machine reading’)” (Hayles 2012, 11). In the context of today’s highly mediatized society, where screen reading has become common practice, “hyper reading” thus refers to the new, seemingly specialized reading techniques that have developed in the wake of the so-called digital revolution:

Among these are hyperlinks that draw attention away from the linear flow of an article, very short forms such as tweets that encourage distracted forms of reading, small habitual actions such as clicking

and navigating that increase the cognitive load, and, most pervasively, the enormous amount of material to be read, leading to the desire to skim everything because there is far too much material to pay close attention to anything for very long. (Hayles 2012, 63)

But “hyper reading” is also often used as an umbrella term for the somewhat more inattentive ways of reading (at least when compared with close reading), such as “skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts, as a strategic response to an information-sensitive environment” (Hayles 2012, 12). After all, many of these techniques have been around long before the digital revolution in the 1990s; it just happens that if “hyper reading” was traditionally considered a mere supplement to close reading, the explosion of information and information availability with the development of the internet (to name but the most prominent example) has turned “hyper reading” into “a necessity,” as it “enables a reader quickly to construct landscapes of associated research fields and subfields; it shows ranges of possibilities; it identifies texts and passages most relevant to a given query; and it easily juxtaposes many different texts and passages” (Hayles 2012, 62).

If not the self-proclaimed distracted nature of Beckett’s reading then certainly the sheer volume suggests Beckett, too, had to resort quite often to “hyper reading.” However, instead of looking for (further) proof of this in his reading notes or letters,<sup>13</sup> let us turn directly to the question of how inattentive reading experiences set up a wholly different material context for writing when compared with the materiality of language brought into existence by attentive reading.

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13 Perhaps most interesting in the context of this analysis would be the reading traces inscribed in Beckett’s Italian Bible from his time studying French and Italian at Trinity College, Dublin. In their comprehensive analysis of the marginalia in the books from Beckett’s personal library, Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle note that Beckett combined “intensive reading [with] instances of extensive reading – marked by reference to other books read by the same reader” (5). While “intensive” reading developed historically from the Protestant practice of Bible study, of reading the Bible *closely*, “extensive” reading was a response to the far greater number of books available with the advent of printing technology. Nixon and Van Hulle accordingly posit that “Beckett turned this pattern upside down in that he applied an extensive reading method to *La Sacra Bibbia*” (2013, 5). To put it more simply, Beckett often used the Bible as a reference book for looking up the biblical references he encountered in other texts. If nothing else, intensive reading – or, if you will, close reading – was by no means an unquestioned good for Beckett – on the contrary, insofar it “was inspired by the Protestant practice of studying the Bible,” Van Hulle and Nixon argue that Beckett’s “‘extensive’ reading experience,” necessarily involving a number of hyper reading strategies, “reflects an act of rebellion of a reader with a rigorous Protestant background” (2013, 183).

“[R]eading is a powerful technology for reconfiguring activity patterns in the brain” (2007, 193), Hayles keeps reminding us, and now that “hyper reading” has arguably taken precedence over close reading, it should come as no surprise to learn of the “considerable evidence that hyper reading stimulates different brain functions than print [or close] reading” (Hayles 2012, 61). Moreover, “hyper reading” might actually be “involved with changes in brain architecture that make close reading more difficult to achieve” (Hayles 2012, 62). Before the digital turn, it was already quite difficult to create the right environment for what Hayles calls “deep attention,” which in her view is “characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times” (2007, 187). Today, however, the general inflation of outside stimuli is such that the problem of attention is precisely (and more than ever) its limited capacity. “There is too much to attend to and too little time to do it,” Hayles explains, and deep attention, though “superb at solving complex problems in a single medium,” only reinforces the problem, or so it seems, as “it comes at the price of environmental alertness and flexibility of response” (2007, 188). As a result, in an age where the guiding ideology is precisely that of flexibility, Hayles postulates that deep attention is making way for “hyper attention, a cognitive mode that has a low threshold for boredom, alternates flexibly between different information streams, and prefers a high level of stimulation” (2012, 100). The mechanisms of attention have mutated in such a way, she argues, that the single flow of information required by deep attention is not at all safeguarded; rather, its contamination is being actively pursued – cf. young people who “modify their [already information-sensitive] environments so that they become yet more information sensitive, for example by listening to music while surfing the web and simultaneously writing an essay” (2012, 100-101).

In *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Dirk Van Hulle writes that “Beckett seems to hit a nerve at this moment in time” (2015, xvii), a sentiment which is seemingly confirmed by the profusion of international Beckett conferences this year (2016), not to mention the countless critical studies that have recently appeared or are about to be published. A focus on attention offers some insight, I believe, as to why Beckett’s writing keeps grabbing the attention in an era where deep attention appears under constant threat. Stiegler, for one, writes that “Faire attention, c’est essentiellement attendre” (2008, 174) – or, “To pay attention is essentially to wait” (2010, 96). The potential connection to Beckett may seem



obvious enough, and indeed, a brief reference to *En attendant Godot* (1953) as the parodic example of endless waiting can be found in the notes to Stiegler’s text. Still, Stiegler considers here only the French etymology of the word “attention,” going back to the Old French *attendre*, “to expect, wait for, to pay attention” (Harper 2001). If the origins are traced back further, however, to the Latin verb *attendere*, “literally ‘to stretch toward’” (Harper 2001), attention reveals itself as a conflict, as the essential struggle between passively waiting for something and actively tending to this something. Indeed, attention is a *tension*,<sup>14</sup> the tension of the in-between, and it is precisely this tension which could be said to dissolve when people move further and further towards hyper attention, surrendering themselves to every possible outside stimulus. Beckett’s comment about Leopold Bloom is therefore also an apt description of modern man in general: “I provoke loud amusement by description of a man at such a degree of culture that he cannot have a simple or even predominating idea” (qtd. in Knowlson 2004, 258).

If Joyce writes in *Ulysses* (1922) that the “Longest way round is the shortest way home” (1986, 309), the writing itself very much mirrors this principle, indiscriminately consuming one “elsewhere” after another – think of the exhaustive inventories in the “Ithaca” chapter, to give but one example. Beckett’s writing, on the other hand, insists together with Molloy “that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery” (2009a, 9-10). Instead of cramming the materiality of language with the physical aspects of, say, a “blue and white checker inlaid majolicatopped table” (Joyce 1986, 610), Beckett’s writing predominantly refers to the more abstract linguistic categories, to “tables” if not to “things,” to “no things but nameless things, to no names but thingless names” (2009a, 29). To put it differently, where Joyce’s writing attends to every possible “elsewhere” in all its minute detail, Beckett’s writing, especially in *The Unnamable*, prefers to “toss and turn at least, roll on the ground, since there’s no other remedy, anything at all, to relieve the monotony” (2009c, 83). Unlike Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, the narrator of *The Unnamable* never truly crosses the threshold

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14 In his *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (2001), Jonathan Crary similarly writes: “The roots of the word attention in fact resonate with a sense of ‘tension,’ of being ‘stretched,’ and also of ‘waiting.’ It implies the possibility of a fixation, of holding something in wonder or contemplation, in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded. But at the same time a suspension is also a cancellation or an interruption” (10).



from deep to hyper attention – for him, “The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line” (Beckett 2009c, 52), to testify to but eventually resist hyper attention. “Personally I do not intend to be bored” (Beckett 2009c, 2), he states at the beginning of his narrative, but this is not to say that he will relieve the boredom of his existence, not even when increasingly plagued by “they” who “think I can’t bear silence, that some day, somehow, my horror of silence will force me to break it” (Beckett 2009c, 62). At no time is the narrator allowed to forget his essentially dual obligation – which, like that of attention, is one of “going on” while being unable to stir a muscle: “it is a blessing for him he cannot stir, even though he suffers because of it” (Beckett 2009c, 73).

To be sure, I am not suggesting that Joyce’s writing is somehow purely hyper-attentive; on the contrary, if the writing is said to attend to every possible “elsewhere,” it does so in great detail, with a lot of deep attention:

With what sensations did Bloom contemplate in rotation these objects? With strain, elevating a candlestick: with pain, feeling on his right temple a contused tumescence: with attention, focussing his gaze on a large dull passive and a slender bright active: with solicitation, bending and downturning the upturned rugfringe: with amusement, remembering Dr Malachi Mulligan’s scheme of colour containing the gradation of green: with pleasure, repeating the words and antecedent act and perceiving through various channels of internal sensibility the consequent and concomitant tepid pleasant diffusion of gradual discolouration. (1986, 580)

From a reader’s perspective, it is clear that the at times long and complex sentences in Joyce’s writing, more often than not riddled with an abundance of adjectives and adverbs, require a great amount of focussed attention. What is more, it is precisely the reader’s capacity for “deep attention” which offers (the illusion of) a way out of the constant struggle of attention: “That as a competent keyless citizen he had proceeded energetically from the unknown to the known through the incertitude of the void” (Joyce 1986, 572).

What I *am* suggesting, then, is that, in Beckett’s writing, the conflict of attention is so pervasive (and arguably omnipresent) that deep attention can no longer be distinguished from hyper attention, that “waiting” has become inseparable from “going on”:

I’m not there yet, I’ll go there now, I’ll try and go there now, no use trying, I wait for my turn, my turn to go there, my turn to talk there, my turn to listen there, my turn to wait there for my turn to go, to be as gone, it’s unending, it will be unending, gone where, where do you go from there, you must go somewhere else, wait somewhere else, for your turn to go again, and so on, a whole people, or I alone, and come back, and begin again, no, go on, go on again, it’s a circuit, a long circuit, I know it well, I must know it well, it’s a lie, I can’t stir, I haven’t stirred, I launch the voice, I hear a voice, there is nowhere but here, there are not two places, there are not two prisons, it’s my parlour, it’s a parlour, where I wait for nothing [...]. (Beckett 2009c, 129)

We see now that this circuit in Beckett’s writing indeed mirrors that of the “technogenetical spiral” (Hayles 2012, 147) as mediated by human attention: it prevents (absolute) passage “from the unknown to the known through the incertitude of the void” (Joyce 1986, 572) precisely in the sense that any (profound) attempt at passage is destined to transform what was known into what is now unknown: “perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (Beckett 2009c, 134). Furthermore, if the circuit of human attention collapses the distinction between inside and outside, subject and object – between what Stiegler calls the “who” of subjectivity and the “what” of technology – then so does the circuit in Beckett’s writing, as not only does this circuit lock in the attention of the novel’s narrator, forcing it to follow a “course that is not helicoidal but a succession of irregular loops, now sharp and short as in the waltz, now of a parabolic sweep that embraces entire boglands, now between the two, somewhere or other, and invariably unpredictable in direction, that is to say determined by the panic of the moment” (Beckett 2009c, 39). Rather, the constant state of being in-between cognitive modes, of not being able to “go on” while neither being allowed to slow down and pay close attention, this irresolvable tension, also invades the attention of the reader, of

oh you know, who you, oh I suppose the audience, well well,  
so there’s an audience, it’s a public show, you buy your seat and

you wait, [...] it takes time, you hear a voice, perhaps it's a recitation, that's the show, someone reciting, selected passages, old favourites, a poetry matinee, or someone improvising, you can hardly hear him, that's the show, you can't leave, you're afraid to leave, it might be worse elsewhere, [...] that's the show, waiting for the show, to the sound of a murmur [...]. (Beckett 2009c, 98-99)

It is in this sense, by neither privileging deep nor hyper attention but always insisting on the essential, irresolvable struggle between the two cognitive modes, that I argue Beckett's writing to, quite literally, *hit a nerve at this moment in time*: "What about trying to cogitate, while waiting for something intelligible to take place? Just this once. Almost immediately a thought presents itself, I should really concentrate more often. Quick let me record it before it vanishes" (2009c, 54-55).

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