

The Neutral Voice of the Subject: Samuel Beckett and Maurice Blanchot

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Abstract: The question of who speaks in Beckett's work is one that has intrigued critics ranging from Maurice Blanchot to Jacques Derrida. This undecidability stems predominantly from a modernist poetics characterized by authorial neutrality, the effect of which is a floating, anchorless and disseminated subject that resists articulation and has no definite point of origin. The speaking voice, therefore, becomes the proxy for this subject, itself a spectral entity which incessantly presents the subject despite its desire for silence. The aim of this article is to examine subjectivity in Beckett's fiction, especially the third part of his trilogy, *The Unnamable*, in reference to the agency of the voice as it is defined in Maurice Blanchot's concept of the neutral voice. Blanchot's theory of neutrality gives insight into the paradoxical nature of subjectivity in Beckett's fiction by foregrounding the irresolvable aporetic undermining the objective/subjective dualism at the heart of Western metaphysics.

Keywords: Beckett, Blanchot, subjectivity, voice, modernism, philosophy

Much of the considerable scholarly output dealing with subjectivity in Beckett's work seems to have been inspired by poststructuralist theory, and, indeed, it goes without saying that such philosophers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have been instrumental in occasioning a paradigm shift in Beckett studies from predominantly existential considerations to studies concerned more with linguistic instability and authorial indeterminacy. Incidentally, all three aforementioned philosophers had at one point or another written or undertaken studies on Beckett – Foucault refers to Beckett extensively in formulating his ideas relating to the author's demise and Deleuze regards Beckett's prose as an a prime example exhaustion.

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The notable exception among these philosophers is Derrida, who mentioned in his interview with Derek Attridge that his inability to write about Beckett stems from the proximity that exists between his style and Beckett's (Attridge 1992, 61). This poststructuralist tendency in Beckett criticism is further exemplified by publications devoted primarily to this topic: Eric Migernier's *Beckett and French Theory: The Narration of Transgression*, Anthony Uhlmann's *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, and Paul Stewart's *Zone of Evaporation*, where the topic of Derrida and Beckett is thoroughly addressed.

It, therefore, comes as little surprise that what most contemporary criticism of subjectivity in Beckett's writing suggests is a predominantly postmodern view, focusing on subjectivity as severed from its metaphysical source, destabilized, absent or in infinite regress. Couched comfortably in poststructuralist jargon, such studies tend to present subjectivity as an illusory by-product of language, instead of a source of meaning. Accordingly, all intimations of a self are seen as merely treading the surface of language which has come to be understood more as an infinite system of references than a referential system of signs. The effect of this reconceptualization is the appearance of a floating subject that has no anchor in any ideality, a conception which seems to offer insight into Beckett's strategies of frustrating cognitive comprehension.

Though these various interpretations of subjectivity have gone a long way in bringing to light a postmodern Beckett, it would be beneficial to trace Beckett's artistic and theoretical decisions back to his contemporary, Maurice Blanchot, whose fiction and theoretical work provides us with a most fertile context within which to examine Beckett's artistic strategies, not to mention the important influence his work exerted on French criticism of the 1960s. In many ways Blanchot's work anticipated the turn in literary theory associated with Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze, which is why relating Beckett's prose directly to Blanchot is of particular importance and will be the primary focus of this article. Though critics have commented on the affinity between Beckett and Blanchot (most notably Simon Critchley and Leslie Hill), there exist, however, few studies that develop particular aspects of this relationship. There is relatively little information about Maurice Blanchot beyond the role he had in French politics and literature. His writing can be divided into four types: political journalism, literary reviews, novels and a hybrid style of writing which escapes classification, often referred to as *recits* written in an enigmatic and aphoristic style (*Awaiting Oblivion*

is a prime example). There is no evidence that the two writers had been acquainted with one another personally, we also do not know to what extent Beckett was familiar with Blanchot's work; however, we do know that it would have been highly unlikely for Beckett not to have been aware of Blanchot, given his position as editor in in "Journal des débats" in Paris during the 30s. On the other hand, Blanchot acquaintance with Beckett's work is well-established, given the brief references to Beckett in *The Infinite Conversation*, the more developed analysis, entitled "Where Now? Who Now?" found in a collection of critical essays entitled *The Book to Come*, and the glowing review of *The Unnamable*, which was, in the words of Beckett's biographer Anthony Cronin, "a milestone in the progress of Beckett's reputation" (436). What constitutes the common ground between these two writers can be defined as a concern with the ambiguous ontological status of the speaking subject in literature or, more precisely, "the link between language and negativity, where negativity describes the power of language to negate the reality of things through the insubstantiality of the word" (Hasse and Large 2001, 25).

The question of who speaks in Beckett's work is acutely articulated in *The Unnamable*, a book that not only exemplified Beckett's treatment of subjectivity but redirected his work towards a more exhaustive, minimalistic prose style. This is not to say that *Texts for Nothing, Ill Seen Ill Said*, and the earlier *Watt* could not serve this purpose; yet, what *The Unnamable* seems to present is the most distilled formulation of Beckett's incessant themes, whereas his later work presents variations and developments of that theme. It is in this last volume of what has come to be considered a trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*), where the subject is thrust into a purely hypothetical and predominantly linguistic existence, questioning its own existence. In one of the few recorded interviews (with Isreal Shenker), Beckett said "in my last book - *The Unnamable* - there's complete disintegration. No I, no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on" (Shenker 1979, 147). With the end of this trilogy Beckett believed to have come to an impasse in his writing career, unsure whether he would be able to write anything beyond *The Unnamable*.

Nothing is certain of who the I speaker is, a point made clear with the three questions opening the novel: "Where now? Who now? When now?", questions which are left unanswered, forcing the I speaker to find his bearings with only what is at hand - figments of memories and imagination (elements often taken from Beckett's earlier texts). Indeed, much of *The Unnamable* is organized

around a failed attempt at constituting self-consciousness with a singular voice narrating its disembodied 'self' in a dark empty space. "In my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that's what I've had to make the best of" (Beckett 1973, 400). This paradoxical position of not being able to be silent while at the same time not being able to say anything defines the ontological status of the I speaker. At one point this speaking "I" asks: "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" (Beckett 1973, 248). This constant questioning mired in self-doubt, paranoiac conviction that one's sense of self is a lie perpetuated by some mysterious "they" suggests a desire for self-constitution or self-definition, but it is a desire that is constantly frustrated, as the narrative voice is often led astray with linguistic games and logical paradoxes, enacting a playful response to Descartes's establishment of the modern subject.

The speaking voice has no name, but, as the title states, it is also unnamable; the names that do appear quickly change and are succeeded by other names, or "delegates" which speak on behalf of the voice, thus avoiding a fixed place in the linguistic sphere. "But it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate, they've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear. Who, them?" (Beckett 1973, 327).

The act of naming is a powerful theme here with multiple references and questions. Biblically, naming is conflated with creation; conversely, this desire to name the self can also be construed as an imposition of language onto a pre-linguistic, and, therefore, semantically empty, self. This, in turn, bears a completely opposite conceptualization of naming. As Leslie Hill in his study on Beckett states:

To accept the name inscribed by others is to be born under an assumed name, and therefore not to live but die, just as to be buried under a false name is not to die at all, but to live on as a restless ghost. (Hill 1990, 106)

This ghostly, disembodied voice is precisely that, a nameless, and, therefore, dispossessed, subject whose sole claim to existence is hearing oneself speak.

The question which revolves around the precarious ontological status of the I speaker, the uncertainty of the I speaker's presence in language

undermines his existence as such. With only language as the medium, the final I, like the transcendental referent, is always kept at bay in the interminable referential game Beckett's prose plays. This understanding of subjectivity is in line with postmodern thinking, which, generally speaking, frustrates any kind of teleological satisfaction by negating referential certainty; hence, the critique of postmodern depthlessness by Jameson, simulations by Baudrillard's and logocentrism by Derrida to name only the most salient examples. What we do have in Beckett's prose, amid and perhaps behind the characters and discarded names, is a singular voice. As Chris Ackerley writes in his article for *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*,

The mystery of the voice is the paradox that drives Samuel Beckett's supreme fiction, the three novels that culminate in *The Unnamable*, and then manifests itself in the fiction (and ultimately in the drama) that follows. It may be finally, Beckett's most profound literary creation. (Ackerley 2004, 40)

It is with this concept of voice that any discussion of subjectivity in Beckett's fiction should begin. This voice is not only a creation of literature but is also, at the same time, the necessary remnant of literature, it is what remains after language is turned on itself in a self-questioning aporetic that characterizes the drawn-out monologues found in *The Unnamable*. It is indeed a profound literary creation, because this voice which breathes life into the Beckettian subject seems to be always alien to the subject, as if to speak of the voice of the Beckettian subject is to silence its profundity. There seems to be, therefore, no voice that would once and for all belong to the subject. All the words are spoken by "them," by the invisible others, whose voices only provisionally assume the guise of the unitary self. The self, which is only the hearing self, is thus without a mouthpiece of its own; it is merely brought into existence by the voices of others, just like Echo's words are provided by Narcissus. In the attempt to escape the contextualizing effects of the voice, the unnamable systematically rids itself of all the images in which his self takes form, all the past literary incarnations of the subject from previous books,

All these Murphys, Molloy's, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them

when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone. (Beckett 1973, 305)

To this end, Beckett pares down language to its minimum structure; in a negative movement he isolates the impossibility of isolating anything like a voice or a center of the subject. Repeatedly, the I speaker expresses the frustrated longing for the voices to stop, “Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing” (Beckett 1972, 374) or for a voice to be appropriated, “Ah if I could only find a voice of my own, in all this babble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine” (Beckett 1973, 351). But in both cases the voice is deferred, always beyond reach, though language nonetheless necessitates the use of the “I” standing in the place of the subject, thereby creating the illusion of a stable subjectivity.

It is this idea of the deferred apperception of self-consciousness that constitutes the narrative as well as what is often paradoxically interpreted as being the manifestation of self-consciousness. The title itself – *The Unnamable* – is precisely this designation of an empty space, where the possibility of signifying mainly asserts itself but without meaning and content to follow suit; it is in effect a marker of its own absence, an externalization of its emptiness and impossibility. And yet, language brings with it a certain declaration of presence from which Beckett’s prose constantly and in vain struggles to reject. Paul Stewart remarks of this situation that “Presence, the verb to be, always intrudes upon the language, or, rather, is a condition of that language” (Stewart 138) and later goes on to correctly argue that such a declarative statement as “to be” seems to be an unavoidable necessity entailed by language itself, it is, as Stewart says, “inevitable and inadequate, because it grants too much, for the Unnamable’s situation” (Stewart 138). Language is the excess that is being pared away with each word, thereby constituting the fundamental *aporia* of Beckettian poetics. The first page of *The Unnamable* states this problem succinctly with a series of questions and self-contradictory statements:

I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how to proceed? By *aporia* pure and simple? Or by negations and affirmations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? (Beckett 1973, 293)

This aporetic impasse separating the speaking subject from the attainment of silence and non-being necessitates a method of apophatic speech, negating whatever is affirmed in a process of reduction *ad nihilo*.

So who speaks in Beckett's prose? The question of the speaking voice and its relation to subjectivity in Beckett's trilogy is elaborated in Blanchot's essay the title of which comes from the first sentence of *The Unnamable*, "Where Now? Who Now?". This is not the only text where Blanchot refers to Beckett, though it is the only one where Beckett is given center stage and is not just mentioned in passing. As is the case with much of Blanchot's work, the purpose of this essay is not solely to offer an interpretation or commentary on the work of another writer, but to showcase his own theoretical arsenal. The question of the neutral voice speaking from behind the veil of the text occupies much of Blanchot's writing and it also happens to be of the most important themes in relation to Beckett's writing. Blanchot starts his article with a question: "Who is speaking in the books of Samuel Beckett? What is this tireless "I" that seemingly always says the same thing? Where does it hope to come?" (Blanchot 2003, 210). Blanchot is using this question to make a case for his concept of the neutre.

In an attempt to define the neuter, we will come upon the same difficulties as with Derrida's *différance* or Levinas's *il y a*, none of which are concepts in the strictest sense of the term. Much like these terms, the neutre is meant to stand beyond conceptualization and is, therefore, indefinable. However, residing outside the narrative and ultimately outside signification, this neutral space is what precedes language and what makes language possible. Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* states explicitly that:

The neuter is that which cannot be assigned to any genre whatsoever: the non-general, the non-generic, as well as the non-particular. It refuses to belong to the category of subject as much as it does to that of object. And this does not simply mean that it is still undetermined and as though hesitating between the two, but rather that the neuter supposes another relation depending neither on objective conditions nor on subjective dispositions. (Blanchot 1993, 299)

The neuter, therefore, occupies a pre-ontological place in which the very distinction between presence and absence or between subject and object

is irrelevant. What is absolutely unknown, unable to be known is the neuter and so it is not a site of possibility but of radical and infinite impossibility through which literature and writing can exist.

As Leslie Hill points out in his study on Blanchot, “the neutre is perhaps best understood as a movement of perpetual effacement and re-inscription that is logically prior to all conceptual distinctions” (Hill 1997, 132). Again it is important to emphasize that the neuter as well as namelessness necessarily precede language and thus cannot be applied and subordinated to the logic of dialectics. Nevertheless, despite this conceptual marginality, namelessness and the neuter refer to the impossible limit of thought, which is always already the “alterity that is at the origin of all thought as such” (Blanchot 1997, 133). For Blanchot this originary state of namelessness is precisely the domain of the neuter.

This is also the situation one finds in *The Unnamable*, where the speaking “I” recedes into the neutral background. With the loss of the “I”, the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* slips into a neutral space, which is neither the voice of the author (who, for all intents and purposes, is dead) nor the voice of the narrator, who maintains an infinite distance from the text. At one point the narrator says that:

It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, it’s round that I must revolve, of that I must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong, they have never come near me. (Beckett 1973, 309)

Some light on this point is shed by Blanchot, who in the first chapter of *The Space of Literature*, called “The Essential Solitude”, deals with the solitude encountered by the writer upon entering the literary work. One of the essential conditions of the work, for Blanchot, is that it must be separated not only from the world but also from the self: “to write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself” (Blanchot 1982, 26). This notion can be traced back to Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Crisis in Poetry”: “The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, yielding his initiative to words, which are mobilized by the shock of their difference” (Mallarmé 1982, 75). In addressing the role of solitude of the writer who loses authoritative control

over his work, Blanchot conceptualizes literature as containing statements which

state nothing, that is not the repose, the dignity of silence, because it is what is still speaking when everything has been said, what does not precede speech because it instead prevents it from being a beginning of speech, just as it withdraws from speech the right and the power to interrupt itself. (Blanchot 1982, 26)

It is language that is supposed to speak in literature, not the author whose link with the reader must be severed if such an unveiling of language is to take place. Moreover, it should be remembered that, according to Blanchot, the writer does not put language to use for the purpose of expressing “the exactitude and certainty of things and values according to the sense of their limits” (Blanchot 1982, 26) but instead must ‘surrender to the interminable’ (Blanchot 1992, 27). Therefore, the disappearing “I” speaker that we find in *The Unnamable*, its waning authorial voice, must recede into the background if language is to speak in a voice disposed of its owner.

As was mentioned before, the arbitrariness of naming is a central problem in *The Unnamable* and perpetuates a self-effacing withdrawal from all names and deictic markers. It seems that Blanchot could have been writing about *The Unnamable* when he said that “[t]he novelist is a person who refuses to say “I” but delegates that power to other people; the novel is filled with little “egos”” (Blanchot 1999, 461). Are not the Murphys, Molloys and Malones mentioned earlier precisely these egos preventing the I speaker from speaking in his name? The defining property of literature for Blanchot is the departure from the first person “I” towards the impersonal “he” (it should be pointed out here that in French “he” and “it” share the same pronoun “il”). In the trilogy, there is a similar withdrawal from the first person pronoun, as the characters of Molloy, Moran or other names these “delegates” assume no longer have corporeal presence, and are conceptualized only in the form of voices. Eventually, these voices refuse even the pronoun “I”, opting instead for the impersonality of the third person: “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” (Beckett 1973, 358). The neutral “he” should not be seen as representing yet another site from which the narrator can speak, it is not another mouth-piece for the writer; instead, the neutral “he” could be seen as representing

the alterior voice, speaking from beyond the limits of the narrative, its source remaining outside the narrative and outside language.

As Simon Critchley notes, what speaks in Beckett's work is "an incessant, interminable and indeterminable voice that reverberates outside of all intimacy, dispossessing the 'I' and delivering it over to a nameless outside" (Critchley 1997, 173). It would, however, be a gross generalization to state that Beckett's fiction enacts a wholesale rejection of subjectivity. This endeavor would be impossible, which is precisely the idea behind the impossible obligation of the incessant voice. In an oft-quoted passage, referring to Bran Van Velde's painting, Beckett said that in art he prefers "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett 1984, 139). Compare this with Blanchot's thoughts about obligation in "From Dread to Language": "possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something. But is it possible?" (Blanchot 1973, 313). In both cases we see the obligation to express being married to the impotence of such an endeavor, an attempt that will inevitably lead to circularity and aporia, not rejection, not liquidation. The impossibility of the voice to represent itself in both Beckett's and Blanchot's writing constitutes not an illusory end in itself but a determining force calling one to write, which is the source of literature.

Blanchot's concept of the neuter, obscure as it may be, provides a language that goes some way towards coming to terms with the paradoxical nature of subjectivity in Beckett's fiction. Namely, it is a subjectivity that is predicated on a voice, which – as Derrida has already pointed out – is imbued with a privileged association with presence. Beckett demonstrates what Derrida later conceptualized, namely, that every concept that has been assigned qualities of plenitude and metaphysical purity is always dependent in some way or another on the exteriority that it excludes, a dependence which inevitably implicates the other into the same. The voice is as impotent as the written word in determining its source. What Blanchot's neutral brings to the fore, apart from anticipating the type of rhetoric Derrida would employ in his deconstructive readings, is the possibility of thinking otherwise, thinking in a way that would bypass the dialectical reasoning rooted in Cartesian notion of subjectivity. This negative, or apophatic, approach to subjectivity is a continuation of Mallarmé's and Blanchot's poetics which attempt to reinstate

the idea of language divorced from the writer. Because language is seen as an alien imposition on the subjectivity of the I speaker, it can never serve the purpose of expressing anything related to apperception or pure expression. In the hands of Beckett and Blanchot, language used as an end in itself, not a referential medium that might be able to express anything beyond its existence. This particular literary tradition harkening back to Mallarmé and revived by Blanchot is very much a part of Beckett's poetics of inexpressibility, especially in regards to the ontological status of the subject in language.

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