

Echo: Reading *The Unnamable* Through Kant and Kristeva

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Do we really know how to respond to Beckett's writing? Or are we still grappling with it, poorly, clumsily, from an unnecessary remove? The following essay will stage yet another attempt to close in on one of Samuel Beckett's most elusive texts: *The Unnamable*. We will try to close in on it by way of a figure: the echo. Echo—in evoking this term, from the beginning, are we not just proposing yet another name for that which must remain unnamable? Perhaps. It is not only a name, though, but also resonates as a deposit—a depositing which returns only what has been invested in it: Do you read me? If so, you find yourself. The name you give me, I don't deny it—I repeat it, I echo it. Like a child echoing, for instance: the echolalia of incomprehension. Overcome, baby talk repeats the Name of the Father. Or, according to another route, it repeats unknowable Reason. Or like a woman spurned, call her Echo, her body renounced by a treacherous child-god who finds and finds himself in the mirror of the Other. Only the music of her voice would remind us, only that voice would be a remainder. Or like a lessness less than the voice: a mark, no, a mark of a mark receding even as we speak—unreadable, unnamable.

This essay will try to listen to that muffled non-sense of the unnamable by way of Immanuel Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. Our itinerary will first bring us to the sublime (Kant), and then to its psychoanalytical inversion (Kristeva). Ultimately, in our third and final step, we will approach Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*—listening to the vexing of its voice before we release it from a plethora of names and readings. For no nickname, not even the "sublime" or the "object," will nick the unnamable.

A Sublime Story

We will try to listen to the unnamable by way of the sublime. Throughout its many theoretical articulations, the sublime has always been directed towards something that is beyond, or on the verge of, extreme limits: *sub-limes*. Longinus, the first theoretician of the sublime, insisted that the sublime "takes the reader out of himself."¹ A radical ek-stasis would move or affect the subject (hence Longinus' interest in e-motions and affects) so that it was literally beside itself. This moving force (*dynamis*) had a cause, Longinus believed, namely the author. Therefore a detailed exploration of rhetorical devices utilised by such an author was necessary. This "rhetorical sublime," as it is usually dubbed, was followed in the 18th century by the "natural sublime." Following the interest awakened by Boileau's translation of Longinus (1674), the moving power was now identified as belonging to certain typical landscapes (which ultimately witnessed to God's creative powers). The sublime was identified with waterfalls, mountain peaks and the like. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was of vital importance in establishing a clear differentiation between the sublime (the overpowering and terrifying, which threatens one's self-preservative passions) and the beautiful (which is subject to one's own power, and congenial to one's social passions). Kant's theory of the sublime inherits and modifies this distinction.

After Kant, and the following efforts by Schiller and Hegel, interest in the sublime dropped. In 1843, John Ruskin was symptomatic for a general watering out of the concept, when he claimed that "Anything which elevates the mind is sublime."² The concept was subsequently relegated to the backwaters of aesthetics, where it stayed until the emergence of post-structuralism. The most

¹ Longinus 1957, 4. Longinus' treatise, titled *Peri Hypsous* in the original, was either written in the first or the third century A.D. (See *ibid.*, xvii-xxi).

² Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (Book I, section II, chapter 3) quoted in Wilton 1980, 9.

emphatic revival of the sublime belongs undoubtedly to Jean-François Lyotard, who has identified postmodernism as a basically sublime venture in its attempt to present the unrepresentable and in its denial of "the solace of good forms."³ There has also been a return to something like Longinus' rhetorical sublime, with the added twist that the uncontrollable nature of the literary work is not accredited to the powers of the author, but to the indeterminate nature of language.⁴

Reasoning the Edge: Kant

Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" is found in the last of his three critiques, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). Each of Kant's three critiques allocates, according to a juridical and political metaphor, a distinct territory of objects to the jurisdiction of a certain mental faculty. The first critique gives the Understanding the rule of the domain of natural objects. The second critique gives Reason the rule over the suprasensible, ethical domain. This domain of the free will is completely outside of the natural, causally determined territory of the first critique. Thus Kant enables ethics and science (i.e. Newtonian physics) to operate side by side, rulers of their own distinct kingdoms who never interfere with each other. This peaceful coexistence is, however, rendered problematical by an inner exigency of Kant's ethics. For in order to follow the moral law, reasonable beings must believe it is possible to attain a perfect society—a "kingdom of ends" where each individual is an end in himself. But the possibility of such a society is problematical, since the ethical (suprasensible) domain is fully heterogeneous to the natural (sensible) world. *The Critique of Judgement*, as its introduction points out, is

³ Lyotard 1991, 81. Lyotard's position on the sublime is anticipated, on some major points, by Adorno. See Adorno 1970, 292-296.

⁴ See for instance Neil Hertz's book *The End of the Line* for readings that, somewhat reductively perhaps, show how close certain strands of post-structuralism are to the sublime.

meant to bridge the gulf between these two (36-37).⁵ Both the beautiful and the sublime are such bridge-like structures. They are the two forms of the aesthetic judgement, both connecting two of the transcendental faculties. Kant's sublime builds upon interplay between the Imagination and Reason, rather than between the Imagination and the Understanding as is the case of the beautiful. The critique's aim of connecting the sensible world (where the Imagination functions as a faculty of representation) and the suprasensible (which is under the jurisdiction of the moral faculty of Reason) is thus accomplished more immediately by the sublime than by beauty (which goes via the Understanding). Hence the two faculties involved in beauty are described as reaching harmony through "concert," while the harmony of the sublime is attained through "conflict" (107).

The sublime reveals Imagination's "inadequacy" or *Unangemessenheit* (92; 136) before the ideas of Reason. Between these two faculties, a natural scene typical of 18th century notions of the sublime (stormy seas, huge mountains, cathedrals, etc.) functions as a mediating object. It is a representation (*Darstellung*) sought out by the Imagination in order to represent the suprasensible. The domain of the suprasensible is not immediately apparent. The realm of Reason is a "substrate underlying the intuition of the world as a mere phenomenon" (103)—submerged below it, as it were—and it has to be uncovered (*entdeckt*). Such a process of unveiling is only possible subsequent to a failed representation: the Imagination attempts to present an adequate sensory equivalent to the absolutely great (the ideas of Reason) and fails.

Thus the first step of the sublime is of a semiological nature: the signifier (the natural representation) is not adequate to the signified (the ideas of Reason). The arbitrariness of this juxtaposition is, however, not simply accepted—as it is in Saussurean linguistics. The manifestation of the truth of the sublime is a possibility following the desertion of this model of *adequatio*: in Heideggerian terms the

⁵ All English quotations given directly in the text of this section of the essay refer to Kant 1952. All German quotations refer to Kant 1963. If two page references are given, the first is to the English text and the second is to the German.

truth of the sublime is one of uncovering, of *aletheia*. The underlying ideas of reason, the basis for our sensible world of appearances, are unveiled—but only in an intermediate fashion through an awakening of a moral feeling (respect) which is an effect of Reason's moral law.⁶ The latter is, as are all of Reason's ideas, a *Noumenon*, or a thing in itself, and not accessible to direct knowledge. Even the effects of Reason, though, are not uncovered by everyone: some people do not grasp this possibility, according to Kant. Some—the uncultivated, "untutored man" (115)—see an absence rather than the hidden effect of Reason: they see an "abyss" or *Abgrund* (107; 155-156) rather than the "highest principles" or *Grundsätze* (111; 162) of Reason. This inability to see a hidden foundation (a *Grund*) is declared, by Kant, to be a mistake. However, the displacement which the third critique has permitted with regard to what we might call the "hero" of the critical story, makes the mistake fully understandable. In Kant's previous ethical works, the sensory side of reasonable beings (*Sinnlichkeit*) was described as heterogeneous to them, while their true, autonomous centre was identified as Will or practical Reason. In the third critique, however, a slippage has occurred whereby the sensory side, this time represented by the Imagination, has been granted as much psychological liveliness as Reason. The extreme point of this slippage may be found in Kant's "General Remark" immediately following the "Analytic of the Sublime": there, Imagination is said to make itself Reason's instrument by "depriving itself of its own freedom" (120). Strangely enough, the Imagination has been granted its own freedom here—thus contradicting that freedom solely belongs to Reason, as is elsewhere claimed by Kant. Thanks to this slippage, Imagination stands before Reason almost as a separate individual. In fact it is a relationship to an alter ego, a *doppelgänger* (neither identical nor simply other) who tries to subjugate the Imagination through force.

⁶ In Kant's second critique, respect is defined as a *Wirkung*, or effect, of the moral law belonging to Reason. See Kant 1961, 123-124.

Thus the Imagination and Reason soon seem like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, if one keeps to the perspective of the Imagination. Indeed, in a sense it is a "perspective" or a "focalisation" (to use Genette's terminology) since the relationship between the two faculties plays itself out very much like a fictional narrative. In this tale, the Imagination seeks out a threatening natural scene due to a demand from an agency it is "not always conscious of" (112). It seeks out terror, sacrifices itself, not knowing for what cause it does so (120). It is in fact subject to a hidden master. The master's wish is not shared by the Imagination, and therefore an affective ambivalence ensues: it is like "a rapidly alternating *repulsion* [for the Imagination] and *attraction* [for Reason] produced by one and the same Object" (emphasis added, 107).

So far we have not differentiated between the two forms of the sublime: the dynamical and the mathematical.⁷ The dynamical sublime involves a relation to any *fearful* natural object, and inherits Longinus' reference to a moving force. Kant gives the mathematical sublime a more complex elaboration. It, too, is based upon a basic demand for representation coming from Reason. Reason asks for the comprehension of its own absolute magnitude through a presentation of infinity in one sensible experience. Imagination seeks out a fitting sensible object (St. Peter's cathedral is Kant's most striking example) and then starts receiving impressions. This process of impressions—this "apprehension" (99)—keeps going, though, and the imagination cannot achieve a "comprehension in one intuition" (102) of all the impressions. The *aesthetic* comprehension, unlike one of mere numerical comprehension (a mathematical kind belonging to the Understanding) is limited. Once it reaches this limit the Imagination attempts to proceed, but this is a "fruitless effort" and it "recoils upon itself" (100). Despite the attainment of a certain extension of its powers, the Imagination has failed—and fail it must, since the infinite totality of the ideas of Reason is by definition incommensurable with a sensible presentation. Thus Imagination, as in the dynamical sublime,

⁷ The two forms are intertwined and, arguably, confused by Kant. He tends towards giving the dynamical kind precedence and assimilating the mathematical to be a particular manifestation of it. See for instance his descriptions of the sublime in the later "General Remark" (especially 120-121).

is subjugated to Reason in a power relation: it feels "displeasure," while Reason, assured of its supremacy, feels "pleasure" (106).

What is needed in order to go beyond this terrible lock, the Imagination's aporia of the abyss, is, in fact, a kind of identification. A certain "awakening of a feeling of a suprasensible faculty within us" (97), an understanding of that Reason is our "vocation" (106), can only take place through a transference of perspective where the oppressive force is identified as the true self. "Transference," "identification": my use of these terms announces what has already been at work, implicitly, throughout my explication: a *rapprochement* between Kant and a psychoanalytical register. I will now present Kristeva's theory of the abject, before comparing it to the Kantian sublime.

Repression and Reversal: Kristeva

The fluid style of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), and its eclectic borrowing from both Lacan's systematics (the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic) and Freud's second topography (the id, the ego, and the superego) may lead one to believe that hers is a somewhat anarchic approach. The basic opposition of the semiotic and the symbolic, which permeated Kristeva's doctoral thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language*, is however still present, albeit in a new guise: the unnamable topos of the mother's pre-Oedipal body is now contrasted with the nameable surface of differentiated society (the realm of the Name of the Father). The specific topos explored by Kristeva here, and entitled "the abject" by her, is a pre-Oedipal phase situated between the original, autoerotic, "oceanic" unity with the mother, and the later narcissistic phase where libidinal drives are auto-cathected.⁸ Her later study *Black Sun* (1987), focuses on regressions to the latter, narcissistic position.

⁸ Kristeva has called the abject both a "*precondition of narcissism*" and an instance of "primal narcissism" (Kristeva 1982, 13 and 62), as well as "pre-narcissistic" (Kristeva 1986, 259).

The abject regressions of *Powers of Horror* take place "at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion" (45).⁹ Phobias represent the first, fundamental articulation. The real "object" of object phobias is no concrete thing, but a horrifying return to a pre-subjective (and hence also pre-objective) relation where the child cannot clearly delimit the boundaries between his (the main emphasis is on males) body and that of the mother. The child is a stranger to himself at this juncture, riveted to the mother's body yet also rejecting it due to a "Third Party" (9) who functions as an alter ego. A full identification with the paternal function, already at work in that third party, is what later enables the child to draw itself out of the abject impasse.

The mother, the father, and the son—their story is the truth, the ultimate reference, of the abject. Phobias represent lapses back to this forgotten territory, the phobic, repulsive object becoming a hallucinatory representative for that ambivalent relation which gives both "pleasure and pain" (61)—a fundamental "uncertainty" of both "borders" and "affective valency" (63). That object is only an outer representative for an inner complication—a complication which cannot really be solved via object relations. Instead it relates back to a want and an aggressiveness prior to such relations (cf. 5 and 39): before desire there is *jouissance*, before the pleasure principle there is the death drive. The phobic person joys in the pre-Oedipal unity with the mother, whilst simultaneously rejecting it from the (Oedipally erected) vantage point of the "symbolic, paternal prohibition" (39).¹⁰ Abject perversions add an extra twist to the phobic scenario, by eroticising the phobic object. The obsessive discourses of certain narcissistic egos represent another elaboration of the phobic situation. There, the phobic *object* is replaced by the linguistic "*process*" (43).

⁹ All page numbers given directly in the text of this section, refer to Kristeva 1982.

¹⁰ Hence the imaginary father of individual pre-history, present in the original abject relation, has been replaced by the symbolic father in all phobic regressions.

In later chapters, Kristeva investigates how the abject is contained by more general societal structures.¹¹ She endorses Levi-Strauss' claim that the prohibition of incest founds the symbolic order (which is any social order, insofar as it is a hierarchical structure of differences), but does not—as Lacan does—root this prohibition exclusively in the Oedipal drama. She sees it as a denial of the pre-Oedipal, abject mother—a denial necessary for the establishment of all societies. Society represses this maternal power through cleansing rituals and taboos, which maintain the *corps propre* (cf. viii and 65) of the subject. Defilement rituals take care of "excremental and menstrual" objects, while food remainders are kept taboo—all of these bearing witness to the "semiotic authority" of the pre-Oedipal mother (71 and 73). Kristeva grants psychoanalysis a cathartic status, too, but not one of simple purification. She defines the goal of analysis, somewhat elusively, to be "rebirth with and against abjection" (31). During treatment, the analyst taps into the pre-symbolic resources of language, in a mimetic identification with the patient. Such resources are the same as those utilised by writers.

"The writer is a phobic," claims Kristeva (38). Thus she identifies literature, or at least certain manifestations of it (Céline, Joyce, Artaud, etc.) with these "borderline cases" (47), with these patients to be analysed. The semiotic resources of language are displayed through an accentuation of its musical potential (making a language of pure signifiers), through disruptions of syntax, or by any disruption through "breaks in discourse" (30). Language is then no longer a process of signification, but something which "points to" (91), or shows like an "incarnate" metaphor (70), the semiotic processes of the maternal chora.¹² Literature is, however, not completely lost in these maternal folds: "contemporary literature [...] propounds, as a matter of fact, a sublimation of abjection" (26).

¹¹ Only chapter three ("From Filth to Defilement") is of relevance to us, here. Hence I will not delve into Kristeva's interpretation of Biblical food taboos (chapter four), or her Hegelian reading of Christian sin (chapter five).

¹² The latter definition, especially, represents a surprising about-face for Kristeva, who previously described modern thought as turning "From Symbol to Sign" (Cf. the essay of that name in Kristeva 1986).

Thus this literature makes the same movement as the sublime, according to Kristeva, which consists in "naming" the abject, sublimating it, keeping it "under control" (11). Are these two, then, the same thing? Is Kristeva claiming, like Lyotard but with a psychoanalytic twist, that contemporary literature is, in fact, sublime? Later mentions of the sublime, in her analysis of Céline in the second half of *Powers of Horror*, indicate rather that the sublime is being seen as a second stage of a two-step process. First, there is a confrontation, a regression, which is a "coming face to face" (75) with the abject horror. Then, secondly, there is a sublime withdrawal, an example of which Kristeva finds in the "angelic idealisation" of Céline's "sublime" Molly (162).¹³ Both the encounter and the withdrawal are inherent in language itself:

The abject lies [...] in the way one speaks; it is verbal communication, it is the Word that discloses the abject. But at the same time, the Word alone purifies from the abject [...]. (23)

There are two steps at once, then, for language—the sublime would be isolated to the second step, the retreat. But is the sublime really reducible to such a defensive withdrawal from the abject? Is not Kristeva really closer to the sublime—specifically the Kantian sublime—than she admits? Like a slip of the tongue, like an echo from afar, the systematics of the sublime are repeated in Kristeva's theory.

The repressed reappears, in this case, in the form of a negation: Kristeva's theory inverts the sublime, switching the places of the law and the sensory side of the psyche. Both theories involve a crossing the limit from one field, or province, to another. One field is on the surface (Kant's sensory, Kristeva's symbolic), while the other one (Kant's suprasensible, Kristeva's unnamable) is hidden and obscure, but causally constitutive of the surface. The instance in charge of this hidden field (Reason, the incorporated mother) is at once an

¹³ See also, for instance, 151: "And then the vision of murder turns sublime, the murderous apocalypse shows its lyrical side before everything founders into vomit."

alter ego and a "true" self, but is inaccessible to signification. Both Kristeva and Kant—the latter with regard to "untutored man"—compare it to an abyss. The encounter between the two fields takes place via an outside, mediating object (Kristeva's phobic object, Kant's landscape) which the surface instance seeks due to an inexplicable demand (the behest of the hidden instance). This encounter is experienced as affectively ambivalent: there is repulsion and horror (for the surface instance), and there is satisfaction (for the depth instance). Kristeva explicitly sees the solution of this situation in an act of identification away from the hidden instance: the phobic (or obsessive, or pervert) must identify with the imaginary father. Kant's solution is also, in fact, an act of transference: the Imagination must find its true self in Reason. Hence his is an inverse movement to Kristeva's in terms of systematics, but similar in its contents (identification with morality and common humanity).

The temptation to add Kristeva to our little *histoire* of the sublime leads us to the following question: Is the abject, then, an example of the sublime?¹⁴ Or, is the sublime sublimated abjection?¹⁵ In short, which is the (hidden) cause? We are moved, yes, but not to the tear: we cannot decide, we cannot tear this couple apart. The ecostate structure of their embrace indicates a supplementary logic (cause and effect being undecidable) whereby the complacent continuities of any historical narrative, including the aforementioned one, can be fundamentally challenged. Instead of shaking up the narrative of the sublime, though, let us instead utilize

¹⁴ An unearthing of the abject's Kantian roots could take three paths. (1) It could point to Lacan's radicalization, inherited by Kristeva, of Freud's theory of the unconscious, which explicitly draws upon Kant's theory of the *Noumenon*. See Lacan 1977, 21. (2) It could demonstrate the similarities between Freud's topographies and Kant's theory of the faculties. For instance, Freud's Letter 52 to Fliess compares his agencies to rulers in charge of separate provinces—precisely the metaphor Kant uses for his faculties. See Freud 1966, 235. (3) It could trace Freud's theory of the unconscious back to the 19th century philosopher J. F. Herbart, a Kantian in part, who had a theory of repression and the unconscious. Herbart described the unconscious through a coinage that still resonates in many languages—as *subliminal*.

¹⁵ Thomas Weiskel's book *The Romantic Sublime* contains a fine psychoanalytical reading of Kant's theory.

the very special effects of both discourses—both Kant's and Kristeva's—in our reading of Beckett. Let the interrogation begin.

Presenting, in effect, The Unnamable

Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* was first published in 1952 by Editions de Minuit.¹⁶ A common interpretation of this, and other works by Beckett, is largely Cartesian—the narrators are seeking a true self, a true "I" inside the mind, oblivious to the cares of the outside world.¹⁷ This is not a completely incorrect interpretation. However, the question remains: Who am "I"? If "I" is indeed an other, as Rimbaud claimed, then a purely Cartesian reading of *The Unnamable* is insufficient. The previously explicated theories of Kant and Kristeva will help us focus on the heterogeneous and non-representational aspects of Beckett's text. By replacing Kant's dichotomy of the sensible and the suprasensible with the sayable and the unsayable, we will bring Kant closer to Beckett's text. For the narrator in *The Unnamable* is also pitted between two poles. He is caught between the realm of language where his interrogators, his stories, and his puppet-like representatives (primarily Mahood and Worm) ceaselessly chew the cud of vain locutions, and the other domain where the unspeakable "I" may be found. Both of these poles are, however, internalised: "it's I who do this thing and I who suffer it" (370).¹⁸ Language is both the field of *Darstellung* where this struggle comes to light *and* an interior realm belonging to something like Kant's Imagination.

¹⁶ The original French title was *L'Innomable*. Beckett himself wrote the English translation. This novel was later assimilated into a trilogy, together with its two predecessors: *Molloy* (1950) and *Malone meurt* (1951). In fact, all three texts contain allusions to characters from even earlier works by Beckett. Our main focus, throughout, will be on *The Unnamable*; references to other works will only be made in order to cast light—or shadow—on it.

¹⁷ For instance, Hugh Kenner claims, in the article "The Cartesian Centaur," that "*The Unnamable* is the final phase of a trilogy which carries the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with a bodily *je suis* and ending with a bare *cogito*" (Kenner 1965, 59).

¹⁸ All page references given directly in the text from now on (apart from those explicitly referring to Kant or Kristeva) refer to Beckett 1976.

"Imagination dead imagine": this title of one of Beckett's late short prose pieces gives us a provisional translation of *The Unnamable's* torments into Kantian terms.¹⁹ The Imagination, or the creative ability of the subject, is so impotent before the impossible demands of the unnamable that it feels itself virtually killed by their pressure. This unnamable is unknowable and plays, therefore, a role analogous to that of Reason in Kant's system. As in Kant, we must go beyond "terms, if not notions, accessible to the understanding" (342). The representations, or stories, we are offered are representations of the non-representation of the unnamable. The unnamable is referred to as "unimaginable" (380), and the narrator dismisses his own repeated inventions as "more mere imagination" (331). It is as if after failing once (presuming, of course, that there was a first time), the Imagination knows it can never succeed: "seek, find, lose, find again, lose again, seek in vain, seek no more" (358). But it has no other ability than to heap on more stories—it cannot go silent. Instead of presenting the absolutely great, these stories try to reach an absolute destitution, a "living degree zero." These spurious inventions—each gradually erasing the memory of those prior to it—reach a certain peak (the point of incomprehension) before they have to start all over again: "it's unending, it will be unending" (377). For Beckett's narrator is definitely "untutored" according to the Kantian model: he never reaches self-recognition, and instead sees only "a vault, perhaps it's the abyss" (377).

If the narrator could give an adequate representation, this would be a true sentence, in the sense provided by traditional theories of truth.²⁰ But truth has become an impossibility: "it's not the moment to tell a lie, but how can you not tell a lie" (378). Every stasis or thesis achievable in language, with "blank words" (375), is already on an exorbitant course away from the unnamable: "that's all hypotheses, lies" (378). Can the narrator then be introduced, indirectly, to the unnamable by way a failed representation of it? Is

¹⁹ See Beckett 1984, 145-147. The same phrase recurs in the earlier "All Strange Away" (*ibid.*, 117-128).

²⁰ This is the "traditionelle Wahrheitsbegriff" discussed in paragraph 44a of Heidegger 1986.

this the same succeeding through failure, granted as one of two possibilities for Kant's Imagination? Such a solution is encumbered by the fact that the narrator has no concrete "demand," no known way of access:

I see me, I see my place, there is nothing to show it, nothing to distinguish it, from all the other places, they are mine, all mine, if I wish, I wish none but mine, there is nothing to mark it [...]. (334)

There is no demand, no mark, no spoor that bears incontrovertible witness to that one is on the right path—*unterwegs*—to the unnamable. Therefore the narrator grasps at anything that might facilitate the impossible mediation: "Perhaps I've missed the key-word to the whole business. I wouldn't have understood it, but I would have said it, that's all that is required" (339). Even silence, a route favoured throughout by the narrator, is not a sure spoor: "what can be said of the real silence, [...] that there is no such thing, that perhaps there is such a thing" (376). Thus the narrator doesn't have unqualified access to an effect of the unnamable (à la Kant's "respect"), nor even to a determinate demand. Yet the fact that he is trying to reach the unnamable, that it concerns him, might lead one to speak of an effect of an effect, an echo of an echo of the "unthinkable unspeakable" (307). Thus the unnamable is like a thing in itself, like a *Noumenon*, yet even more elusive. The accentuated inaccessibility of the unnamable explains why the stories of Beckett's narrator degenerate into parody: unlike aficionados of the sublime, he has not much hope of illumination. Or perhaps he's merely skirting the unnamable, too frightened to really confront it? Kristeva's theory would suggest so, if we let her abject mother flesh out this unknowable abyss.

The Big 'M'

Is there a mother in this text? The first novel of the trilogy to which *The Unnamable* was assimilated, *Molloy*, is—on the surface—much more concerned with the female parent than our text. The title character, and narrator of the first half, may in fact have killed his mother. Throughout his analeptically narrated account, Molloy returns to some undefined

business that he has to settle with her. The act of narration begins at a later point, and by then his mother is dead and he is using her old room. Whether he has actually killed her or not, a sudden burst interrupting an enumeration of his former female loves certainly spells out a compelling incestuous temptation:

And there are days, like this evening, when my memory confuses them [i.e. his old loves] and I am tempted to think of them as one and the same old hag, flattened and crazed by love. And God forgive me to tell you the horrible truth, my mother's image sometimes mingles with theirs, which is literally unendurable, like being crucified, I don't know why and I don't want to.²¹

There are few references to the mother in *The Unnamable*, but most are aggressive and in the nature of "I'm looking for my mother to kill her" (360). The scarcity of such references, though, indicates that *The Unnamable*, in the main, no longer has any truck with the concrete mother of Oedipal struggles—this mother (an object relation) having been done away with in *Molloy*—but is instead concerned in following the trail of the death drive all the way to the pre-objective, abject mother. The narrator is, after all, in the outer limits of a process which was so prominent in *Malone Dies* (the second novel of the trilogy), namely of withdrawing his libidinal cathexes²² from all object relations: "I never desired, never sought, never suffered, never partook in any of that" (299).

The relationship to the unnamable and abject mother are now indicated by the narrator's relations to silence, that "little hole" (363), instead of any given references to a mother-signified. On one occasion, the narrator refers to "my horror of silence," imputed to him by his interrogators (320). This indication of a retreat from the unnamable, is soon after strengthened by his granting that only "terror" and "a longing to be in safety" can induce him to claim that he is in a head (322): silence and nothingness are terrifying in their

²¹ Cited from *Molloy*, in Beckett 1976, 55.

²² The speaker of the text uses the word "adhesion" (see pages 290, 296, and 303).

consequences. The other side of this ambivalent relationship, one of attraction, reveals itself in the many returns to "the true silence, the one I'll never have to break any more" (362) as his only true aim. Thus one could postulate that this silence is indeed the mother's body, that simultaneously desirable and repulsive locus which Kristeva's abjects weave their discourses around. The narrator would be half inside it (his "true" self), and half outside it (in the outside world of his interrogators and masks), straddling this border uneasily. So wrenching is the tension between these two sides, that at one point the narrator even tries to identify himself with the border itself: "an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two" (352). But there is no rest in this limit-realm of stirrings still. The mother's body remains a restless and unspeakable locus for the death drive's trajectory into nothingness—the beyond of both life and death, the "wombtomb."²³ Mahood's fate illustrates the inability to fully give in to that drive to die (to follow the death drive to oceanic unity), while Worm's vicissitudes exemplify the opposite inability to be born (to achieve subject status, apart from the mother): "Mahood I couldn't die. Worm will I ever get born?" (323)

The meaninglessness of language, so often mentioned or implied by the narrator, can also be accounted for by Kristeva's model. Since the mother's body is literally the beyond of speech, all affective charge is removed from the spurious signifieds of an empty language (cf. Kristeva 1982, 50). The fear of this body can therefore be bracketed out (cf. *ibid.*, 6), hence hiding the narrator's previously cited "horror of silence"—a horror which almost never explicitly surfaces in Beckett's text, since the narrator is both possessed by and safe from the abject as long as he is within the protective castle of language. The speech of *The Unnamable*, seen in the light of Kristeva's theory, is that of a walled-in and obsessive narcissism that wants to disavow the symbolic (language, the interrogators) yet is too wary of the unnamable to face it—to turn and face the music of the "'primal' pulsation" of the chora (Kristeva

²³ This coinage of Beckett's is often used in other of his fictions. See for instance p. 121 of Beckett 1993.

1982, 14). Only seldom does the narrator find that privileged instant, which Kristeva calls "the moment when revelation bursts forth" (ibid., 9). Such examples of the *nunc stans* common to both the sublime and mysticism—moments when "ceasing to be, I ceased to see. Delicious instant truly..." (312)—can only happen outside the present of speech. For the present of speech is never immediate it is inexorably mediate to the differentiated codes and conventions of the symbolic. The unspeakable mother inhabits even speech, though. She is subliminally present in the names of the narrator's many predecessors and "spurious egos" (Kristeva 1982, 47). Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran, Malone: The capital "M," the big "M," is repeated in the names of Beckett's protagonists, almost all of which are enumerated in *The Unnamable*. Mother ("M") is the start, the never to be repeated beginning, which they all set off from, aim to return to, and are necessarily in excess of. A hood covering the body of "Ma": one of the last of Ma's alliterative litter is the aptly named "Mahood."

The Depositions of Poetic Language

The pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic experience of the mother's body, then, is the unnamable. Indeed, it strikes one as surprising that Kristeva omits mention of Beckett among her examples of "Great modern literature" (Kristeva 1982, 18), since the word "unnamable" recurs so often in *Powers of Horror*. This omission is, however, not simply a forgetful lapse. An earlier essay of Kristeva's on Beckett, "The Father, Love, and Banishment,"²⁴ purports to grasp and circumscribe all of the "writer's known novels and plays"²⁵ through an analysis of two short texts ("Not I" and "First Love"). Beckett's writings, she claims, are centred on the "unnamable domain of the father" and *not* that of the mother.²⁶ Kristeva's conclusion is largely based on two premises: Firstly, a thematic analysis of the two texts in

²⁴ The English translation is included in Kristeva 1980, 148-158.

²⁵ Ibid., 148.

²⁶ Ibid., 153.

question, and secondly, the claim that Beckett's writing (unlike Joyce's) is not a "'poetic' endeavour."²⁷

The Unnamable, despite such a surprising claim, is also a text marked by what Kristeva calls "Poetic language" (Kristeva 1982, 61). The thesis, orthetic authority, of the symbolic, speaking subject is undermined by Beckett's text. The hypo-thesis (cf. discussions of it on pages 372 and 378 of the novel) is a privileged category of statement throughout. It often surfaces in the guise of tentative answers to unanswerable questions, such as those that open the text: "Where now? Who now? When now?" (267) This is, however, neither a juridical type of questioning,²⁸ nor a scientific hypothetical-deductive method, nor a version of philosophy's inaugural "*Ti esti?*" For the answer to the aforementioned string of questions is, typically, less than an answer: "Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that" (267). The question, and the entire authority it seeks to establish in the name of knowledge, is undermined. This is a process of hypo-theses: we are beyond—*hypsous* in Longinus' terminology—any stable positioning of the subject. The subject is *en process*: in process, or on trial.²⁹ The law itself is on trial. The law's demand for a subject who belongs to community based on knowledge and on judgement, is challenged by the unnamable which is ignorant—"in the silence you don't know" (382)—and "ephectic" (267).³⁰ Furthermore, *The Unnamable* demonstrates this subversive non-dialogue with the law by giving the

²⁷ Ibid., 152.

²⁸ I beg to differ with Kristeva's claim, in "The Father, Love, and Banishment" (ibid., 152-153), that "Questioning is the supreme juridical act, for the I who asks the questions, through the very act of asking these questions (apart from the meaning of the request) postulates the existence of the other. Here, since it is 'not I', not you either, there must be a He beyond communication." In *The Unnamable* we often find the third person pronoun "he" adopted, yet it is always dropped again—just like "I" (see Beckett 1976, 326). The text explicitly denies any privilege to any of the positions of enunciation represented by pronouns: "Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it" (ibid., 315).

²⁹ For more on the "subject in process/on trial," see Kristeva 1984.

³⁰ "'Law,' which derives etymologically from *lex*, necessarily implies the act of judgment whose role in safeguarding society was first developed by the Roman law courts" (ibid., note 15, page 240).

interrogated victim the ability to whisk away his interrogators. This is not through an act of will, it is not *his* doing—nothing proper to the subject is at work here—hence the bemused exclamation: "I notice one thing, the others have vanished, completely, I don't like it" (368).

But "the others"—all those representatives for the Other that is the symbolic law—never completely go away. To speak, to write is to be within the symbolic order. But this speech has cracks, crevices, through which that hidden core—the "chora"—fleetingly indicates the fluid unworkings of the unnamable. Despite being renounced on one important occasion (cf. 281) the voice, or voices, remains throughout a privileged "metaphor" (298). On the one hand what is wanted is a pure signifier: "If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? Then I might escape [...]" (277). This would be a pure performative, completely devoid of constative force, an act which Kristeva compares to the "material, active, translinguistic, magical impact" (Kristeva 1982, 74) of religious rituals. But more insistently in *The Unnamable* there is a tendency to equate the unnamable with the silence in between sentences. The long, chopped-up sentences, encountered increasingly often towards the end of the text, try to let silence be heard in between enunciations. This would be death itself: "the comma will come where I drown for good, then the silence" (376). A returning prothesis, both funeral and dangerous supplement of the thesis, silence thus intimates the unnamable throughout speech, by virtue of every comma, every withdrawing of breath. It sentences the sentences to alterity, to an unlawfulness akin to the line break of poetry in the way it detours the tail end needed for the standard tales of prose:

Enormous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals,
never anything else any more, from this time forth, and
in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner,
how can he be found, how false this space is, what
falseness instantly, to want to draw that round you, to
want to put a being there, a cell would be plenty, if I
gave up, if only I could give up, before beginning,

before beginning again, what breathlessness, that's right, ejaculations, that helps you on, that puts off the fatal hour, no, the reverse, I don't know, start again[...]. (377)

The story is not told, a narrative is never fully pieced together—not simply because of a denial of the narrative stance, but also because the narrative voice is traversed and sabotaged, throughout, by "gaps" (339). These gaps poetically indicate a "*heterogeneity of signification*" (Kristeva 1982, 51)—echoing, from afar, the irrepressible semiotic motility of the mother's body.

Yet another manner in which the de-positioning of the enunciating position is accomplished is, quite simply, by equating speaking with defecation: "I'll let down my trousers and shit stories on them" (350). Words are here not seen as the symbolic carriers of meaning, but rather as the unsettling deposits—material, repulsive—of the body, the improper body. Elsewhere they are compared to "ants" (326), and the narrator himself temporarily takes the name "Worm." Thought itself is also transformed into that very despicable matter it attempts to repress: "the blessed pus of reason" (325). Are these eruptions impossible to assimilate? Or is writing here functioning as a "second level rite" (Kristeva 1982, 75), a purification of waste? *Powers of Horror* grants a lot of space to theories of sublimation. The ambivalence of the abject depositions by *The Unnamable* cannot easily be enclosed by such theories, though. The word, the "repulsive gift" (ibid., 9) proffered by Beckett's narrator remains a *pharmakon* resistant to any decision which would make it choose between "sublimation and perversion" (ibid., 89). Although Kristeva repeatedly poses the choice between such alternatives, Beckett's text resists being equated with an analysand. The text's ability to "go on," as stated in its last words, bears witness to a terminability—i.e. it is neither terminable nor interminable, as a psychoanalytical case is. The text is not a patient, not even a human being—there's no "cure" for *The Unnamable*.

Rereading the Unreadable

We have interrogated Beckett's text long enough, now it is time to absolve it from our reading. A unifying reading, such as the one we've been tending towards, cannot quite rid itself of the suspicion that the supreme pointlessness of the text evinces something that is not amenable to any analysis whatsoever. For *The Unnamable* is without a central point, without a *point de capiton* which could structure the text. We have used the term "the narrator," as if we were sure that it was the same "I" that was pitted between the interrogators and silence, throughout the text. The radical transitions of narrative voice do, however, imperil this thesis.³¹ For instance, on page 321, after a long section of an "I" narrating, there is the startling interruption: "Where am I? That's my first question, after an age of listening." Is this one narrative level relieving another one, and if so: which level is relieving which? A few pages on, we witness the following juggling of I's: "I am far, do you hear him, he says I'm far, [...] I am far, do you hear him, he seeks me I don't know why" (371). Our centring the text in a body (the mother's) as opposed to the suprasensible, can also easily be contradicted by the text's repeated claim that "I don't feel a body on me" (379). Hence critical idealism and psychoanalysis both find their explanatory power foiled by this text that insists "I deny nothing, I admit nothing" (380).

The text pivots around countless other such undecidable interruptions, and even undermines the fundamental value we have been granting to silence, finding it "full of murmurs" (381). These murmurs on occasion reveal that they really belong to his interrogators. Silence, then, would be the truth to be revealed by the law. The mother, on the other hand, is precisely the opposite of that silence, precisely what he is denying: "what can be worse than this, a

³¹ Blanchot's "Where Now? Who Now?" (see Blanchot 1982) points to this anomaly of Beckett's text. We might add that not only is the thesis of there being one speaker disturbed by the text, but the supremacy of speech altogether is placed into question. Not only does the speaker on one occasion claim that "I have no voice" (Beckett 1976, 281), but there is also an earlier reference to "the manual aspect" of writing (ibid., 276).

woman's voice perhaps" (335). The ambivalence of this text thus reveals why Kristeva could find the locus of Beckett's work in the dead father instead of in the abject mother. The text uses these dichotomies, but overturns and plays with them: the mother is the father, and vice versa. What is at play here is a process of infection, whereby identities become their other through displacement: "some tiny subsidence or upheaval, that would start things off, the whole fabric would be infected, the ball would start a-rolling, the disturbance would spread to every part" (353).

Hence we are returned to something like a mathematical sublime of reading. If reading must be a *Sammlung*,³² or a comprehension of disparate elements into a unity, what can one do with a text that seems to necessarily resist that process? The reading "recoils upon itself" (Kant 1952, 100), and must question its own questioning. But *The Unnamable* is not so much quantitatively overpowering—as is the case of the mathematical sublime—as fundamentally undecidable. The text indicates this, by giving us an allegory of reading where every reader is an interrogator who really want to know who or what the unnamable is. If, in the words of Beckett's novel, "a decision must be reached" (329), then this decision does not belong to the text but to the powers of the reader: "I'm ready to be whatever they want" (319). It is not the sheer mass of information that is unsettling, but rather the text's wisp-like elusions—"bringing nothing, taking nothing, too light to leave a mark" (326). Thus the text is not a power—it is *in between* the power invested by the reader in the warring dyads (father and mother, the sensory and the suprasensible, psychoanalysis and idealism, etc.). It is not a hidden cause, with determinate effects, as is Kant's *Noumenon*. Neither "bringing" nor "taking," the gift of the text cannot be completely couched in the terms belonging to the limited economy of psychoanalysis, either: it does not obey the law of the home (the *oikonomia*). It is heterogeneous, and hence other to this economy which always returns to the same, through regressions to the truly homogeneous—to the same genesis (Oedipal or, for Kristeva, pre-Oedipal). Both the abject and the sublime are fundamentally narratives:

³² See "Was heißt Lesen?" in Heidegger 1981.

a triangular story of mother, father, and child, on the one hand, and a (pre-Hegelian) slave and master struggle, on the other. They want to tell the truth, but stumble over the scandal of Beckett's text: "To tell the truth—no, first the story" (300). Hence their stories cannot tell the truth of the fiction (there is none), but the fiction can reveal the fiction of their truth.³³ The text gives nothing to narrative, and therefore gives almost anything. A founding fiction, *The Unnamable* is the helpless echolalia of the lessons prescribed to it by the reveries of the solitary reader—the echo fading even as we speak, unreadable, unnamable.

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³³ For more on this fictionality, see for instance Derrida 1992, 190-191. Kristeva is adamantly committed to some kind of truth. She refers to "truth-effects" (Kristeva 1982, 88) stemming from the unnamable. She is even more explicit elsewhere: "what is truth, if not the unspoken of the spoken?" (Kristeva 1986, 153). For Kant, as we have shown, the unveiling of the suprasensible reveals the truth of the sublime.

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