



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Chaos as a Mode of Living in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*

Author(s): Mihaela P. Harper

Source: *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Summer 2012), pp. 151-162

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.35.4.151>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.35.4.151?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Modern Literature*

JSTOR

Chaos as a Mode of Living in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*

Mihaela P. Harper

Bilkent University, Turkey

In this article, I examine the deployment of chaos as a textual practice in Samuel Beckett's The Unnamable. My contention is that, in its endeavor to wrest chaos from the appropriative gestures of order and make room for newness, the text breaks with grammatical frames and conceptual systems that organize subjectivity. The Unnamable "squirms" involuntarily and willfully at the same time, in-between paradoxical turns, multiplying "I"-s, and stream-of-consciousness eruptions. Its squirming undermines stability, identity, and order, inviting into them the unborn, the unthought, chaos. Every proposition that the speaking voice utters subverts the premises upon which subjectivity is constructed and, thus, endeavors to turn the self into a site of chaos. Through its syntactic and semantic movements, The Unnamable inhabits the impossibility of "pure silence" as pure chaos and locates in it an impetus for self-transformation.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett / chaos / subjectivity / language / ethics

The *Unnamable* concludes Beckett's famous *Trilogy*. It complements *Molloy* (1951) and *Malone Dies* (1951), marked, as they are, according to Daniel Albright, "by a pronounced tendency to write and unwrite at the same time" (28). First written in French, *L'Innommable* (1953) was translated into English by Beckett five years later, its "bilingualism" underscoring the incessant doubling of positions that transpires in the text and endows it with the qualities of a paradox—a vital instability and a turning of reason against itself. For Beckett, to write in French was a singular opportunity: "*C'était ma chance d'être plus pauvre*" ("This was my chance to be poorer," qtd. in Szafraniec 93). It was a chance (at impoverishment) in the sense not only of an occasion but also, and necessarily, of risk and danger. This conception is at the foundation of Gilles Deleuze's theory of the exhaustion of the possible that he proposes in his eminent essay "The Exhausted" (1995). By "the possible," against which Beckett deploys his stratagems, Deleuze broadly nominates order. As Sarah Gendron explains,

What is "possible" is manageable, believable, even "permissible". . . . It is the privileged seat of centered structures, fixed limits, transcendental signifiers, and origins

and copies. It is all that we know: the namable and the conceivable — the conceivable precisely because namable. In literary terms, “the possible” translates to teleological story telling, singular beginnings, conclusive ends, and clearly defined subjects. . . . (27–28)

In this sense, by writing in a language other than his native tongue, Beckett sought to circumvent origin, familiarity, and the structural order of English.

While in “The Exhausted” Deleuze focuses on becoming *pauvre* ‘poor,’ I find particularly interesting the comparative form *plus* ‘more’ that Beckett uses. *Plus* bespeaks the paradoxical richness in becoming “more” impoverished—that is, adding *more* in order to *be* less—an interminable activity of disarraying an order of poverty already in language.¹ Its interminability lies in the comparative form of “more,” negotiating between “many” and the superlative “most” that it never seems to reach. But *plus* also points to the voluntary conjoining of writing and risk and of an affirmative danger. To Maurice Blanchot, this impoverishment constitutes the richness of a transformation that “cannot find its starting point in the familiar” and instead looks for “what has never yet been thought, or heard, or seen” (216). *Plus* is thus a quest for what has not yet been thought, for “more” of what has not yet been ordered, for chaos as a mode of living open to newness. This article contends that *The Unnamable* extracts chaos from order by isolating and endeavoring to violently disrupt laws of genre, grammar, and literary convention, as well as to undermine the premises of unity and totality that organize identity and the self. To sustain its complex relations with chaos, Beckett’s text “squirms” against the limits of the possible, refracting into multiple disoriented “I”-s.

In his foreword to *Beckett’s Books* (2006), Shane Weller captures the significance of *The Unnamable* by noting that Beckett’s “entire oeuvre might even be seen as an attempt to respond adequately to the three questions with which *The Unnamable* opens: ‘Where now? Who now? When now?’” (vii). The three questions appear to emerge amidst confusion or chaos, posed in a sequence that does not indicate a pause, and thus does not suggest that a response is either anticipated or necessarily sought. Instead, the questions seem to point to a radically uncertain future, opening breathlessly upon unforeseeable and as-of-yet unseen forms. At the same time, however, these are questions that bear in themselves the resonance of a paradoxical “now” that draws together space (where) and time (when)—suspending subjectivity (who) in-between them—into an endless present continuous. It is a questioning that fuels and, at the same time, announces an activity, as if to offset an ontology based on a “there *was* once upon a time” and dislocate it instead into a “now” with its ontological “is-ness” under investigation. Thus, from the very beginning of the text (which is perhaps already not a beginning in that *The Unnamable* is a part of a sequence), chaos enters implicitly. With a look to the unexpected, to newness, it complicates chronology, especially in its relation to the construction and stability of the self.

Having disposed of plotline, *The Unnamable* is difficult if not impossible to summarize. Part stream-of-consciousness, part dialogue (with self, imagined

and remembered, or with another/others, whose existence is continuously placed in doubt), the text questions the parameters of subjectivity and the ordering principles of reality, primarily space and time. The multiple proposition that the speaking voice utters disrupts the premises upon which the stability of subjectivity is constructed, and thus steepes the self further into chaos, or rather turns the self into a site of chaotic activity. Placing the “I” of the self in perpetual motion makes visible not only its failure to constitute and stabilize itself as *one*, but also that it cannot be an “I” in the conventional sense—an individual, unique, stable “I.”

Similarly, the maneuvers of the voice reveal that for an “I” to know itself is impossible, since the “I” would need to know the incessant flux of everything that passes through it in order to attain complete knowledge of itself. Thus, in order to let the “I” speak its self, the voice endeavors to speak all. But, speaking *about* itself as a particular construct, this “I” seeks an interstice between what is arbitrary in it and what is determined, between the chaotic and the ordered. In speaking/seeking its self, it fragments and, therefore, speaks what appear as contradictions, nonsense, questions without answers, all that is outside of it, folding in and back out in the same gesture. As a “tympanum” (134)—the speaker’s description of his self—the “I” resonates between inside and outside, bringing them together while still keeping them apart. This perpetual movement doubles at the end of the text into an “I” that is simultaneously precluded—*can’t go on* but will, involuntarily impelled onward—and an “I” that rationalizes its own disability or inability and decision to go on. The latter is propelled forward in language in order to “think a little” (18) of the unthought, of chaos.

COMMATIC ACTIVITIES

Even more prominent than the question marks with which *The Unnamable* starts and which persist throughout the text are the commas. Swarming the lines of the text, commas often compose segments that continue for pages, particularly in the second half of the novel, as if the text were ceaselessly accelerating toward an end. The end, however, is subverted not only by *The Unnamable*’s well-known final sequence of comma-bound phrases—“where am I, 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” (179)—but also by the compulsion it elicits, both logical and visceral, to turn again to the questions with which the text begins. The long, periodless passages, wrought from discrete and mostly contradictory phrases, however, can hardly be dubbed “sentences.” In them, dependent and independent clauses are usually no longer distinguishable. What is at stake in these phrases (and arguably the texture of the text) is not information—which is why they appear instead stripped down, atomic—but rather the very mobility of acceleration, fueled by emerging paradoxes. According to David Weisberg, “In *The Unnamable* the single comma-bound phrase becomes the monad of meaning; even the attempt to fit together the phrases within a single sentence becomes a problem in configuring single events into a meaningful whole” (109). Their assemblage into molecular segments as well

as the elimination of the hierarchical distinction between the phrases (dependent and independent) exposes, nevertheless, the capacity of the phrases to sustain their status of clauses as such. They remain self-contained provisos of a singular arrangement precisely because of the commas that isolate them. In this sense, the comma becomes critical to sustaining the internal difference between the phrases, the swarming mobility of the text itself, its chaos made of returning fragments.

While deploying their primary task of disambiguation and separation, commas in *The Unnamable* also complicate and draw together: “I speak of evening, someone speaks of evening, perhaps it’s still morning, perhaps it’s still night, personally I have no opinion” (167). Splicing disparate and seemingly irreconcilable utterances—I/someone, morning/night, speak/no opinion—the comma appears between them in the shape of an ear, tuned into the frequency of their tension. Not surprisingly, then, as Ulrika Maude also observes, “in the final part of the novel, [the unnamable] experiences itself as an ear that grows itself a body” (21). As an ear, the comma becomes a point of disappearance and emergence of clauses and syntactic order. Dispossessed of its capacity to mark the hierarchy in a sentence, the comma enacts the locus of the tension between one clause and another. Nevertheless, a speaking voice in the text claims that “the comma will come where I’ll drown for good,” in a stream of “vomited” words, to which “the voice listens, as when it speaks, listens to its silence” (171). Similar to the pause that takes its place in speech, the comma in writing promises the “I” a kind of end. But when the comma arrives, it only temporarily drowns the “I” in silence. Though only fleeing intermissions, however, the commas in the text do not indicate that there is no end. Rather, they constitute the simultaneity of the end of one clause and the beginning of another. They enact the infinity of an end, “the ending end” (170), or rather an endless chaos of self de-creation from one clause to another.

In this sense, the commas endow the text with what might be dubbed a com-matic (concise, but also controlled, sharp and rigorous) dynamism, the dynamism of a self-induced hyperventilation in which the comma “breathes with me” (170). The breath of the comma—or rather the accelerated breathing pattern that the commas sustain—invokes the breathlessness of exertion and struggle, which, in the case of the speaker in *The Unnamable*, is with a speaking that is paradoxically his own and not of him. Along a similar line, but in terms of the effect of the text’s structure on the reader, Steven Connor suggests that the “desperation of the reader, faced with an unparagraphed block of repetitious prose . . . involves a particularly acute sense of the weary impenetrability of words; as she struggles down the page, she is likely to lose her place, lose the sense, and to become, like the disembodied voice of *The Unnamable*, adrift in the words which speak remorselessly through her” (32). In its hyperventilation, the text’s “becoming adrift” (the drownings of the text—Connor’s articulation of the textual mobility) bears a double passivity—once in the reader’s and again in the speaker’s being spoken through. The breathlessness to which I point is impelled by the nexus of voluntary and involuntary (activity and passivity), of listening and hearing, of speaking and breathing—a chaotic blurring. It is the turn of the comma and the

confluence where the transformation of the self into chaos, its slippage between clauses, takes place.

The commas thus oscillate uncertainly and (dis)continuously in *The Unnamable* between going onward and turning back. They introduce into the process a disbandment of grammatical rules and syntactic structures as well as a revolt against pronouns and names. A state of chaos emerges that simultaneously strips the speaker of his namability and occasions self-transformation. “There’s no getting rid of them without naming them and their contraptions, that’s the thing to keep in mind” (53), the speaker asserts, opening “they” to interpretation, where “they” could refer to inhabited and now haunting selves (Mahood or all others, anyone at all), or to words themselves. Thus, he names incessantly (Mahood, Worm, Basil, they, you, I), as if in spite of himself: “I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway” (36). Although he claims that speaking is “an accident, a fact” (36), he directs it in order to create movement, attempting to empty out the namable in himself, to empty his self into chaos.

Pursuing unnamability in this way threatens to subsume all sense, however, as the speaker notes early on in the text: “Dear incomprehension, it’s thanks to you I’ll be myself, in the end” (51). The comment appears to acknowledge the impossibility of absolute unnamability or chaos, of complete autonomy, while there is still a subject that comprehends itself as such. Some of the danger of unnamability is evident, too, in the famous final splice—“I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (179)—in which inheres a suicide that is difficult to ascribe to just one of the two clauses. It is a part of both capitulating and proceeding, and especially of the two together, immanent to their confluence as an art of self-reconstitution. Gary Adelman appositely calls this activity “the paradoxical killing of the self by the self in order to keep the self alive” (81). In this sense, while the comma disrupts, it also creates an instant and singular in-betweenness that enables new conceptual relations among self and others, self and time, memory and space, accelerating the movement of the text into chaos.

Interestingly, activating commas takes the form of an incessantly refracting voice, “an aporia pure and simple” (3). Mladen Dolar claims with regard to the voice in *The Unnamable* that, “Without hierarchy and usual punctuation, multitude of diverse subjectivities flock together. . . . Voice is the anti-cogito. It is at the far end of a clear and distinct reasoning, it is quite its opposite, since its point is precisely to undo the distinctions and to introduce the indistinct” (58). The very undoing of the distinctions enables chaos to emerge as what Richard Begam dubs “a language of the unword that stands beyond or in-between those organizing concepts that have traditionally ordered the world: concepts like subject and object, inside and outside, narrator and narrated, center and circumference” (174). Notably, in *The Unnamable*, subjectivity is activated through different levels and forms of disruption or subversion of the concept of subject,

including the namelessness of the narrator: "The subject doesn't matter, there is none" (102).

PURE CHAOS

The speaker in *The Unnamable* distinguishes between self and old instant/old meaning, between unnamable and namable. He notes that he will make sense of matter in relation to himself involuntarily, "something else will be there, another instant of my old instant, there it is, the old meaning that I'll give myself, that I won't be able to give myself" (158–159). But the old meaning will not allow him to recognize, know, or even be his self, for "how can I recognize myself who never made my acquaintance" (156). This chaotic misrecognition or unrecognizability, nevertheless, impels self-transformation. The voice gathers Mahood, Worm and Basil, identifying and misrecognizing them, making their acquaintance repeatedly. The commas indicate their insistent simultaneity, their interrelatedness and heterogeneity at the same time. In doing this, the speaker finds that he can neither know them nor not know them, and that they both obstruct any direct access to his self and serve as "detours" that enable self-constitution. According to Connor, this mobility, "the movement of play between the different versions of itself," the sense of "being-between" (76–77), produces an ontological voice. It lives because of chaos, as chaos. This is, in a sense, the "positive annihilation" that Erik Tonning discusses in "Beckett's Unholy Dying" as "a perpetual dissolution of identity" (119). It is an emergence that also necessarily involves a dissolution of language,² swarms of words: "the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me" (Beckett 139).

What is interminable in *The Unnamable* is precisely the dissolution of familiar conceptions, beliefs, forms of thought, language—a dissolution that itself takes the shape of chaos, of a chaotic acceleration against the structural linearity, the order of writing. As if seeking to break with each stable position, to become pure chaos, the speaking voice searches for an autonomous location, a location from whence to be "ephectic otherwise than unawares" (4):

I wanted myself, in my own land for a brief space, I didn't want to die a stranger in my own midst, surrounded by invaders, no, I don't know what I wanted, I don't know what I thought, I must have wanted so many things, imagined so many things, while I was talking, without knowing exactly what, enough to go blind with longings and visions, mingling and merging in one another, I'd have been better employed minding what I was saying. (154)

Still, the speaker inevitably "minds" what he is saying, as voicing and hearing go through him in a two-way current, an emptying out that is always also a filling up, a turning to chaos as a returning to order. A flap, "flapping" his way through convention, the immobility of boredom, and the paralysis of purposelessness, the narrator constructs an ethos of self-contradiction, contingent upon the ceaseless implementation of subversion and chaos.

He endeavors to be more than a membrane, a tympanum, involuntarily moved by currents. He fosters awareness, a vigilance that would enable him to practice a certain intensity and become unpredictable, novel, even for an instant—that is to say, to change something, to have an impact by becoming incalculable, nameless. “Is it possible certain things change on their passage through me, in a way they can’t prevent?” (81), the speaker asks. He takes a series of steps of removal or degrees of detachment, so as to keep himself apart from each (reasonable) stance, even from the implications in a question such as this one (for instance, that he is porous). To take this endeavor to the end is impossible—he can neither attain complete detachment nor apprehend himself by himself directly—but he struggles to operate on this extreme frequency, unreasoning in chaos, regardless: “if only they’d stop committing reason, on them, on me, on the purpose to be achieved and simply go on, with no illusion about having begun one day or ever being able to conclude, but it’s too difficult, too difficult” (137).

Yet, what does it mean to “simply go on?” Maude argues that *The Unnamable* constructs an amorphous body as an undecidable site, “an independent space over which conceptual thought loses its hold. Whilst the body’s resistance to preconceived categories threatens the subject’s autonomy, it simultaneously forms the precondition of sovereign subjectivity” (103). Her suggestion is crucial to conceptualizing the mode of living that *The Unnamable* enacts as chaos, which, in a double gesture, disposes with the familiar framework or order of subjectivity and occasions self-transformation. This chaos is fueled by mobility, which must be sustained not by suffering but by the unthought—though one is asked “simply to suffer, always in the same way, without hope of diminution, without hope of dissolution” (112)—and by its interminability, “never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere” (71). “Anywhere” can be read here precisely as identity, a stable position, opinion or stance, in response to which, as Terry Eagleton proposes, Beckett makes a political move, invoking the word “perhaps” as “an anti-fascist weapon” (xxv). Endeavoring to turn determinism (order) against itself, the speaker in *The Unnamable*, asks “where,” goes “on,” acknowledges the positionality of any position (even the position of not taking or having a position), and practices self-transformation in between positions. This mobility is of an accelerating intensity, indicated by the proliferating commas and the rapidly forming and disbanding amalgams of contradictory positions.

The movement of transformation, sustained by the chaos that *The Unnamable* composes as a mode of living, also pertains to one of the most prominent and widely discussed aspects of the text, namely the speaker’s quest for a “real” or “pure silence” and his confrontation with the paradoxical imperative to speak in order to better pursue it. It is a silence that remains unnamable and distinct from a linguistic silence, and necessarily so. As Carla Locatelli points out, “As soon as silence is thought or named it invariably becomes the *idea* of silence, the concept of silence, the meaning of silence, or even the various meanings of specific situational instances of silence (the variable meanings of a pause)” (23), which suggests why the speaker discerns two kinds of silence. The aporia of pure silence is akin

to death, a finitude that marks life and inheres in language precisely as chaos: "it's the end, the ending end, it's the silence" (170). I extend this reading further to propose that *The Unnamable* invokes "pure silence" as what may be dubbed pure chaos, an ultimate intensity in which language (meaning, sense, reason) breaks down completely, but which the speaking voice, never fully reaching, invites as an interminable activity of self transformation, as "drops of silence through the silence" (133).

Although the distinction made between the two kinds of silence in *The Unnamable*—their forms, roles, and effects—appears fairly clear at times, the two often blur in their interdependence, "Long or short, the same silence. Then I resurrect and begin again. That's what I'll have got for all my pains. Unless this time it's the real silence at last" (149). Troubled by the impossibility to circumvent language or to exist outside of it, the speaking voice attempts to locate and, thus, to secure a space that cannot be infiltrated by sound and especially by the order of speaking. In the process of this endeavor, the voice recognizes the duality of silence: "For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps" (28). The form of the text folds upon itself, disoriented and disorienting, uncertain whether it is composed of one consciousness or many, or whether it is a stream or a series of intervals and interruptions, disparate in their fusion. Aesthetically, the form mimics, with irony and precision, the sentiment that "with regard to me, that it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence" (142). It also resists disambiguating whether something returns to real silence or invents it.

The speaker articulates one kind of silence as "the one that doesn't last" (178), its persistence and use so pervasive, in his observation, as to make the possibility of the existence of another kind of silence both questionable and necessary. Moreover, he relates this silence to chronological time, finite measurements, symbolic and linguistic. This is the kind of silence that subsists in-between letters and words, the framed or conventional silence that functions in a way similar to the grammatical and syntactical law of the spoken and the written word. This silence is "not worth having, that's all I know, it's not I, that's all I know, it's not mine" (178). "Having" silence thus emerges as valuable only when silence does not constrain or contribute to the constraining power of the word, since only an infinite silence can provide sufficient space for the "I." "I am walled around with vociferations" (52), announces the narrator, accomplishing a turn of the phrase against himself, as he further encloses his self by speaking. "I'll speak of me when I speak no more" (147), states the voice, challenging not only the constitutive but the performative utterance as well, denying both a capacity to contain or fully mobilize the life of the self. Perhaps the statement could also suggest that the self is spoken by pure silence, by chaos. The possibility makes the constant testing of the limits of sound and probing of the surface of the word in an attempt to disintegrate its ordering law indispensable and urgent:

it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on . . . 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. (179)

At the end of *The Unnamable*, the resistance to the law of the word reaches the moment of impasse without which all would be subsumed by insanity. It exposes the impossibility of complete silencing as well as the practices of invoking the generative force of chaos.

The Unnamable confirms that there is no way out, completely outside of the order of the word. The text, nevertheless, unfolds chaos as an occasion for endless resistance, a mode of living of non-arrival, of "squirming forever at the end of the line" (71). "Squirming" is crucial here, not only because of the connotations of the verb "to squirm," but also because an especially interesting sense emerges if the verb is read along with the statement that one must consider what kind of silence one keeps. It becomes a question of *how* to squirm, since the kind of squirming that the speaker in *The Unnamable* undertakes is not any squirming whatever but a movement that operates with a particular intensity. Like the movement of worms (of Worm), squirming is here at the nexus of involuntary movement and voluntary practices, of being produced by others and producing one's self, of the unborn, which is also to say the unthought, of chaos. The squirming that the speaking voice enacts is subversive and violent in the ways in which it interrogates suppositions, assumptions and conclusions, in its very awareness of the discomfort, even pain of "unbelieving" (3). As Gabriele Schwab contends, the "assertion 'I'll practice' makes it clear that the unnamable does not produce linguistic nonsense in a spontaneous game with words and sounds" (53). Instead, the speaker is attentive to the formalizing capacity of the word, to the convention and habit of language, where "things are only beginning, though long since begun" (Beckett 110). He adds brief segments ceaselessly—to draw on Deleuze—"to the interior of the phrase, in order to lead to the complete breaking of the surface of words" (Deleuze 22), and does this with a chaotic intensity, interminably becoming "a stranger in my own midst" (Beckett 154).

Adelman articulates the practice of the speaking voice as a vulnerability, when he writes that the speaker "cannot survive tight in a corner weaving like a spider. He must be on his toes, dancing, so to say, on the edge. No hideaway corners, no fortifications. His strength to go on lies in his being vulnerable" (15). In keeping with a Nietzschean allusion, indeed, like a tightrope-walker, the voice seeks out and navigates an intensity (fewer periods and separate utterances, more commas and interpenetrating segments), though not necessarily to survive, unless to survive is to "say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me" (179). Directed to a "you," the statement bespeaks an ethical imperative to compose a self in language, to say words but also to think—which is also to draw on the pure silence or pure chaos in them—to have the courage to squirm

chaotically, to make an attempt. "Air, air, I'll seek air, air in time, the air of time, and in space, in my head, that's how I'll go on" (148), the voice asserts, implying in the confluence of air and space a frequency that would enable him to think, to live. He confirms yet again an imperative to speak, speaking constituting the mode of the quest itself, the movement of the voice, and the paradox of an incessant mobility that appears to be in perpetual stasis, omnipresent but without presence, invisible and yet enabling vision.

My reading of *The Unnamable* suggests that the text de-creates itself on multiple levels to expose chaos (dissolution, uncertainty, and restlessness, their movements and practices) as an ethical commitment. In the intensity with which the text endeavors to empty itself of order, subverts values, breaks with grammatical and semantic convention, and challenges common sense conceptions of self, it enacts a dynamism that both excepts it from convention and constitutes its revolt. As Maude claims, moreover, *The Unnamable* undermines not only identities, but also the very notion of subjectivity based on the familiar and the identifiable (101). Even the "I" speaking in the final segment is left ambiguously open. It is unclear whether in the final exchange one "I" states its inability to go on and another "I" that it will (a will itself doubled as involuntary and decisive), considering that the sequence prior had involved a second person singular pronoun—"in the silence *you* don't know, *you* must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (179, emphasis mine). It is also uncertain whether, at the nexus of capacity and will, the text makes visible, in interminable contradiction and fragmentation, the multiplicity of an "I" that enables and necessitates going on ethically.

Though enacting dissolutions, *The Unnamable* is particularly concerned with interminability, with ethics as practices and movements of self de-creation. Thus, ethics is not a matter of act but of activity, a mobility that interrogates the formative, self-producing procedures in and of language. Furthermore, in this activity inheres repetition that, in turn, transforms practices into a mode of living. Connor articulates this repetition as "difference without force—or without force to guarantee identity—and therefore a principle which can force identity apart" (7).³ The ethical commitment of the text, then, may be located in its extracting of chaos from order and in its inversion of the question "What kind of self does chaos produce?" to "What kind of chaos do we create in order to transform our selves?"

Notes

1. Hannah Case Copeland's claim that the "works of Samuel Beckett are dominated by an obsession with the creative act" (11) is relevant to this point.

2. I draw here both on Deleuze's essay, "The Exhausted," in which he articulates three languages in Beckett's writing, and on Jean-Jacques Lecercle's work with Deleuze, Beckett, and language in *Deleuze and Language*. Reading Deleuze, Lecercle suggests that "style means an original syntactic treatment of language, called stuttering or stammering, and the capacity to take language to its frontiers with silence, but also with other media" and that reaching the acme of style is tantamount to the dissolution of language (222).

3. Bruce Kawin positions “continuing time” against repetition in Beckett’s work, which he equates with habit. I instead read the present continuous in *The Unnamable* as invoking repetition in its simultaneous continuity and discontinuity, its incessance and its subversive operation. Working through a related problem, Steven Barfield and Philip Tew assert that “The juxtaposition of birth and of death remains one of Beckett’s favorite comic tropes. And if it undermines the very idea of any substantial difference between birth and death, it also mirthfully obscures the difference between a living death and a dying life, or say dying as a singular event of difference or living as a continual repetition of the same” (2).

Works Cited

- Adelman, Gary. *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 2004. Print.
- Albright, Daniel. *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- Barfield, Steven, and Philip Tew. “Critical Foreword: Beckett and Death.” Barfield, Tew and Feldman 1–8.
- Barfield, Steven, Philip Tew and Matthew Feldman, eds. *Beckett and Death*. London: Continuum, 2009. Print.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Unnamable*. Trans. Samuel Beckett. New York: Grove, 1978. Print.
- Begam, Richard. *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996. Print.
- Blanchot, Maurice. “Where now? Who now?” *The Book to Come*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. 210–217. Print.
- Caselli, Daniela, ed. *Beckett and Nothing*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Print.
- Connor, Steven. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988. Print.
- Copeland, Hannah Case. *Art and the Artist in the Works of Samuel Beckett*. Netherlands: Mouton, 1975. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles. “The Exhausted.” *SubStance* 24.3 78 (1995): 3–28. Web. JSTOR. 27 May 2011.
- Dolar, Mladen. “Nothing has changed.” Caselli 48–64.
- Eagleton, Terry. “Foreword: Nothing New.” Caselli xiv–xxvi.
- Gendron, Sarah. *Repetition, Difference, and Knowledge in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
- Kawin, Bruce. *Telling It Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1972. Print.
- Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *Deleuze and Language*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Print.
- Locatelli, Carla. “Unwording beyond Negation, Erasures, and *Reticentia*.” Sussman and Devenney 19–41.
- Maude, Ulrika. *Beckett, Technology and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.
- Schwab, Gabriele. “The Politics of Small Differences.” Sussman and Devenney 42–57.
- Sussman, Henry, and Christopher Devenney, eds. *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political*. New York: State U of New York P, 2001. Print.
- Szafraniec, Asja. *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007. Print.
- Tonning, Erik. “Beckett’s Unholy Dying: From Malone Dies to *The Unnamable*.” Barfield, Tew and Feldman 106–27.

Weisberg, David. *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel*. New York: State U of New York P, 2000. Print.

Weller, Shane. Foreword. *Beckett's Books*. By Matthew Feldman. New York: Continuum, 2006. vii–x. Print.