

Enunciation, Subjectivity, and Neutrality — Artistic Experience in Samuel Beckett

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The ethical subject is the subject who
bears witness to desubjectification.
Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*

An investigation of artistic experience must necessarily take into account the subject of this experience. But what if the experience consists in the absence and expropriation of the experiencing subject? If the experience of the subject is an experience of the limit of experience itself?

In the preface to his book *Infancy and History*, subtitled *The Destruction of Experience*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes of “an experience which is undergone only within language, an experimentum linguae in the true meaning of the words, in which what is experienced is language itself [...] without language experienced as this or that signifying proposition, but as the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists”.¹ “The pure fact of the existence of language” meaning that there exists a medium in which communication takes place, and that what is communicated in this medium is not one thing or another, not something in common, but, first of all, communicability itself.² This communication of communicability without anything or anyone represented — the neutral impersonality and materiality of language — is, in my view, a main theme in Samuel Beckett, whom in an often quoted dialogue with art critic Georges Duthuit from 1949

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 4-5.

² See Giorgio Agamben, “Form-of-Life”, in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 10, and Editor’s Introduction, “To Read What Was Never Written”, in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 23.

defines his artistic credo: “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.”³

The Unnamable

“I say I. Unbelieving”, we read at the beginning of Samuel Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*, written in French and published in 1953.⁴ This short sentence sums up the problem of subjectivity central to the whole *œuvre* of Samuel Beckett: The human relation to language and the impossibility of directly expressing the speaking subject — it is impossible in narrative to create a statement in which the subject of the enunciation is completely co-extensive and congruent with the subject of the utterance and vice versa.⁵ In actualizing language the subject of enunciation is expropriated by what becomes the subject of the utterance. The linguistic pro-noun, the word “I”, takes the place of the existential non-linguistic subject of the enunciation, which is why the narrating voice towards the end has to say: “I say I, knowing it’s not I.” (U, 408).

The sentence “I, say I. Unbelieving” inscribes a traditional first person, an I, as the subject of the text, that is, the one who speaks, but this I-subject cannot appropriate the sentence and is the moment after transformed into an I-object as a the second person, the one spoken to, is inscribed, “say I”. The unity of the first person is disintegrated and there is no longer any deictic location of an “I”, no source of the speaking voice, nor a subject of the enunciation. The situation is characterised by an uncertainty as regards to who is speaking. It is not the experiencing subject of enunciation who tries to express him or herself (the unnamable narrator is genderless) through an actualization of language, “Unbelieving”, but some unspecified other. The subject of enunciation is in its inscription

³ *Three Dialogues*, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn, (London: Calder, 1983), 139.

⁴ *The Unnamable*, in *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), 293. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text, (U, 293).

⁵ See Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works After the Nobel Prize* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 180.

in language denied its self, its personal being, and cannot occupy the place as subject of the utterance. A hundred pages further on the “I” of the beginning is thus replaced by an impersonal “someone”: “Someone says I, unbelieving.” (U, 406).

The I is a paradox. The linguistic I, to which I refer by the concept of the subject of utterance, is at the same time a non-I in that the narrator not only uses the personal pronoun to refer to him or herself but also to mark the distance to his or her self. This contradiction in the I-term is made explicit in the title of the play called *Not I*, that describes the doublebind in the grammatical first person, which on one side serves as possibility for the I or subject of enunciation to express him/herself and on the other side prevents this because the neutrality and generality of language effaces the self-identity of the I. How can I be “I” if “I” refers to anyone who utters it? The “I” that one imagines to signify oneself is the signifier with which everyone “signifies” him/herself. It is a marker of the subject only as long as that subject is in the process of enunciating.⁶ The central paradox is the absence of subjectivity, of expressed content, expressing consciousness and expressive signification together with the presence of the linguistic expression:

I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical. I shall put in it's [sic!] place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. Anything to please them. It will make no difference. Where I am there is no one but me, who am not. So much for that. Words, he says he knows they are words. But how can he know, who has never heard anything else? (U, 358).

The unnamability of the unnamable can be read as a refusal to comply with the alienating demand to identify with the “empty” signifier “I”:

But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even less. Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. (U, 345).

In the meantime no sense in bickering about pronouns and other parts of blather. The subject doesn't matter, there is none. Worm being in the singular, as it turned out, they are in the plural, to avoid confusion, confusion is better avoided, pending the great confounding. (U, 363-64).

⁶ See David Watson, *Paradox and Desire in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 43.

... someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it's a kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either, let us leave all that. (U, 408).

In the article "The nature of the pronouns" the French linguist Émile Benveniste notes that in contrast to common nouns: "the instances of the use of *I* do not constitute a class of reference since there is no 'object' definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in an identical fashion."⁷ The reality to which the word "I" refers is therefore not a real but a discursive reality, and subjectivity comes to depend on enunciation: "*I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of discourse containing *I*'."⁸ Elsewhere, in "Subjectivity in Language", Benveniste explains that subjectivity is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as subject: "'Ego' is he who says 'ego'",⁹ implying that the "I" is not referring to a pre-existing subjective substance, but rather to its own saying, whereby it itself becomes the referent it is meant to signify — I am the I that *I* am saying, we could say. It is thus literally in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject. The personal pronoun is an "empty" signifier; a shifter that does not refer to an exterior reality but, being always available, is "filled" by whoever utters it.

In Giorgio Agamben's reading of Émile Benveniste the proper meaning of pronouns — as shifters and *indicateurs* of the enunciation — cannot be dissociated from a reference to the event of discourse. The shifting that they effect is not from the nonlinguistic to the linguistic, but from *langue* to *parole*; from the language system to its use; from the code to the message. Indication, or *deixis*, does not simply point out an unnamed object, the individual speaker, but first of all the very instance of discourse, its taking place. The place pointed out by indication, and from which only every other indication is possible, is a place of language. Indication is thus that through which language refers to its own taking place.¹⁰ In accordance with this Maurice Blanchot maintains that the "I" of *The*

⁷ Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 218.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 25.

Unnamable cannot be referred to the author, Samuel Beckett, since that would be an attempt to relate it to, what he calls, a “real tragedy of a real existence” and “something actually experienced”. An attempt “to reassure ourselves with a name, to situate the book’s ‘contents’ on that personal level where someone is responsible for all that happens in a world where we are spared the ultimate disaster which is to have lost the right to say I. But *The Unnamable* is precisely experience experienced under the threat of impersonality, a neutral speech speaking in a vacuum, passing through he who hears it, unfamiliar, excluding the familiar”.¹¹ Reinforced by a simplistic interpretation of the Derrida of *De la grammatologie*, this reading of Beckett, as an almost subjectless expression of impersonality, has played a leading role in the criticism for the last two decades. What I am aiming at, however, is *the actual experience of this neutrality of language, of hearing the unfamiliar, a personal experience of the impersonality* of the linguistic pronoun by which we should be able to express our singular being, but in a certain sense is expropriated and expresses nothing, nothing but language itself. Maybe this is how we should read the lines quoted at the beginning: “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.”

Blanchot notes that Kafka experienced the vigour of literature when he sensed that literature is the passage from “Ich” to “Er”, from “I” to “He”.¹² In this transformation, “[t]he writer belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no centre, and which reveals nothing. He may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self. [. . .] Where he is, only being speaks — which means that language doesn’t speak any more, but is. It devotes itself to the pure passivity of being”.¹³ This applies to Beckett as well, but in a certain sense his artistic experience also forms a contrast to Kafka. He does not simply give up

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, “Where now? Who now?”, in *The Siren’s Song: Selected Essays of Maurice Blanchot* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 194 (translation modified).

¹² See Maurice Blanchot, “Kafka et la littérature”, in *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 28-29.

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude”, in *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 26-27.

saying “I”. When he wrote *The Unnamable*, he had, in fact, abandoned third in favour of first person narration a few years earlier; thereby intensifying the insistence on communicating the expropriation in language, the experience of being expropriated by language — and underscoring that, in the pure functioning of language, in its self-representing image, there is still someone experiencing, someone who gives voice to language.

In taking place language necessarily decomposes the thing it announces into a being *about which one speaks* and a quality and a determination *that one says of it*. Language sup-poses and conceals what it brings to appear, in the very act of bringing it to appear.¹⁴ This is why Beckett’s unnamable protagonist talks about “the fault of the pronouns” and claims there is no name for him. But the personal pronoun cannot simply be omitted; it has to be affirmed in order to be negated and to define the quality of what is absent from it: “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.” (U, 293). It is always already the subject of utterance, the I or rather non-I of language that speaks, such is the experience of the foreclosed subject of enunciation, an *experimentum linguae*:

But his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine, preventing me from saying who I was, what I was, so as to have done with saying, done with listening. And still today, as he would say, though he plagues me no more his voice is there, in mine, but less, less. And being no longer renewed it will disappear one day, I hope, from mine, completely. But in order for that to happen I must speak, speak. And at the same time, I do not deceive myself, he may come back again, or go away again and then come back again. Then my voice, the voice, would say, That’s an idea, now I’ll tell one of Mahood’s stories, I need a rest. But it would not be my voice, not even in part. That is how it would be done. Or quietly, stealthily, the story would begin, as if nothing had happened and I still the teller and the told. [...] But now, is it I now, I on me? (U, 311).

But at the same time it is only through language that the subject of enunciation can experience the non-congruence with the subject of utterance that replaced it in the actualization of language, and thereby its own non-linguistic quality.¹⁵ It seems that the

¹⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, “The Thing Itself”, in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 33.

¹⁵ In Beckett’s posthumous first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932, the Belacqua hero intends to write a book and muses: “The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement” (Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 1993 (London: Calder,

subject's self-consciousness, its self-experience, is constituted as the difference in the relationship between an existential subject of enunciation and a linguistic subject of utterance, between the personal and the impersonal. But, how is it possible for an already constituted subject to relate to an experience that has been constitutive of that very subject? What is the relationship between experience and subject?

Worstward Ho

The I, the personal pronoun or subject of utterance, which in language should take the place and be the agent of the one who actualized language, the subject of enunciation, is in contrast to *The Unnamable* completely abandoned in *Worstward Ho*, written in English some thirty years later and published in 1983. What substitutes for the unappropriable substituting first person pronoun? According to Lawrence Harvey, Beckett has described "life on the surface [as] 'existence by proxy'. [. . .] Along with this sense of existence by proxy goes 'an unconquerable intuition that being is so unlike what one is standing up', an intuition of 'a presence, embryonic, undeveloped, of a self that might have been but never got born, an être manqué'"¹⁶ Some years later, in a conversation with Charles Juliet towards the end of the sixties, he spoke again of this absent being: "I have always felt that there was within me a murdered being. Murdered before my birth. I had to find this murdered being again. To try to bring him back to life . . ."¹⁷ The nostalgic, somewhat sentimental and, to Beckett, extraordinary description of this absent or murdered being points to the experiencing subject of enunciation that can never be born in language in which it is transformed into subject of utterance; an "existence by proxy", in the neutrality of the consciousness-creating language always already absent, always already murdered. The absent being — in *The Unnamable* described as "a wordless thing in an empty space" (U, 390) — is situated in a non-deictic place to which neither symbolic naming, indexical

1996), 138).

¹⁶ Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), 247.

¹⁷ Charles Juliet, *Rencontre avec Samuel Beckett* (Paris: Editions P.O.L, 1999), 15.

or deictic pointing, nor iconic likenesses can properly refer.¹⁸ To refer to it Beckett must unsay all that is said and fade out all that is shown.¹⁹

The first page of *Worstward Ho* reads as follows:

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.

Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid.

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still.

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.²⁰

And continues for forty pages in the same commaless, elliptic and iterative manner only to end as it begins, with the word on: "Said nohow on." (WH, 47).

The beginning takes over where *The Unnamable* left off: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (U, 418), while at the same time repeating its beginning: "I. Say I", substituting an "on" for the "I". Given the fact that Beckett wrote more than half of his output — including *The Unnamable* — in French, it should be noted that the word "on" is not only the English preposition but also the French pronoun "on" signifying an indefinite "one", as in the German "man". The text begins the work of constructing another fiction but then simultaneously begins to deconstruct it, negating itself in the very process of affirming its fiction. Through a progressive reduction of representational components to what the text calls a "[m]erest minimum" (WH, 9), representation and the "essence" of language itself is what is being represented. In the first paragraph, the

¹⁸ This "wordless thing" is very close to Agamben's concept of *infans*, referred to at the beginning, that is, the possibility of an experience prior to the subject, and thereby prior to language; a wordless experience in the literal sense of the term: a human *in-fancy*. On the figure of infancy in Blanchot and Lacan, see Christopher Fynsk, *Infant Figures: The Death of the Infans and Other Scenes of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 49-130.

¹⁹ See Angela Moorjani, "Beckett's Devious Deictics", in *Rethinking Beckett*, eds. Lance St John Butler & Robin J. Davis (London: Macmillan, 1990), 21.

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1983), 7. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text, (WH, 7).

text, having said “on”, says that it says “on”, then it switches from “say” to “be said”, displacing the origin of that saying somewhere else. The second paragraph — “Say for be said. Missaid”— seems to clarify the first and instruct us to read “say” not as someone saying but rather something “being said”, or more precisely “being missaid”, as if the words were saying themselves.²¹ But the fact that the word “say” is still allowed to appear suggests that inevitably there has to be a “saying”, an enunciation which cannot be revoked by a statement that denies it. The narrative constantly points to this “saying” which exceeds the “said”; for instance, in a sentence like: “No place but the one. None but the one where none.” (WH, 11). Because of the apparent semantic contradiction we become aware of the narrative enunciation itself.

Thus, in paragraph three, the text begins its abortive story; but it is not a representation, because what it represents does not exist: “Say a body. Where none.” etc. At the same time it cannot abolish representation since it necessarily must represent something; it has to say in order to un-say. The narrative movement worstward deconstructs designation, which brings the working of the text and the event of its communication to the fore. Language constitutes both the instrument and the object of investigation — or, put differently, language is, once again, made the story and not the vehicle for a story. It is, as paragraph four tells us, “all of old. Nothing else ever.” The old enunciator “tries again”. “On in. Still”, “to have done with saying” as was wished for in *The Unnamable*, “in utmost dim to unutter leastmost all” (WH, 33). “Longing that all go. Dim go. Void go. Longing go. Vain longing that vain longing go.” (WH, 36).

In an impossible attempt to make the subject of enunciation appear, to show what is saying and not what is said, the pronoun is now absent: “Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words.” (WH, 19). This suggests that there is some kind of unrepresentable subjectivity struggling with and within

²¹ This instruction is even more apparent in one of Beckett’s early typescripts of the text, in which can be found several crossed-out occurrences of the word “short”, e.g. “Say short for be said”. See *MS 2602/2* at the The Beckett Manuscript Collection, The Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading, England.

language, rather than simply being expressed by it — this is the unnamable, the being in language of the non-linguistic as Agamben might say (the being named, the name itself, remains without name). In order for the subject of enunciation to be subject of enunciation it has to enunciate, to become subject of utterance: “No words for what when words gone. For what when nohow on.” (WH, 28). But it cannot say its own saying, its own enunciation, “No saying. No saying what it all is they somehow say” (WH, 30). When it stops, between the paragraphs, there is nothing: “Blanks for nohow on [. . .] All gone when nohow on” (WH, 31). “Nohow on” is a wordless state, the end of the worstward journey home but, paradoxically, it can only be said in words. Go on. “Fail again. Fail better”. The experiencing subject is that which “exists” only as always already hollowed out by representation.²²

The Beckettian Tone

The experiencing subject of enunciation is never completely absent or disintegrated in Beckett. It is that which in the enunciation undergoes a specific artistic experience of the limit of experience itself, of what is prior to the subject, the neutral impersonal, what is not “me” but on the background of which “I” have appeared: language itself. An experience remains when all experience has been expropriated, and that is the experience of the expropriation itself, of language. An artistic *experimentum linguae*. By going on, “unbelievng” but “with the obligation to express”, the Beckettian expropriated subject of enunciation thus somehow appropriates its own expropriation. As the unnamable protagonist says, “it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps” (U, 311). The silence — “On in. Still” — that the experiencing subject Samuel Barclay Beckett keeps throughout his *œuvre* is his *personal* tone, in the way it is described by Blanchot: “The tone is not the writer’s voice, but the intimacy of the silence he imposes upon the word. This implies that the silence is still *his* — what remains of him in the discretion that sets him aside. [. . .] [H]e maintains the authoritative though silent affirmation of the effaced ‘I’. He keeps the cutting edge, the violent

²² See Thomas Carl Wall’s reading of Agamben in *Radical Passivity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 132.

swiftness of active time, of the instant. Thus he preserves himself within the work; where there is no more restraint, he contains himself.”²³

²³ Maurice Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude”, 27-8.