WRITING TOWARD THE WORD

WRITING TOWARD THE WORD:
Deconstruction and Negative Theology
in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*

by

ANNETTE CORINNE ABMA, B.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

MASTER OF ARTS (1992)   McMASTER UNIVERSITY
(English)   Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Writing Toward the Word: Deconstruction and
           Negative Theology in Samuel Beckett's *The*
           Unnamable

AUTHOR: Annette Corinne Abma, B.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. David Clark

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 99

ABSTRACT

This study examines Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* with respect to deconstructive literary theory and negative theology, exploring a possible homology between these two discursive stategies. My reading involves a three-part investigation into Beckett's text as an aporetic discourse which simultaneously promises "meaning" while rendering such "meaning" impossible. The study begins with a close examination of indexical forms of language which serve to dislocate the speaking subject. In order to situate the Unnamable, I undertake an examination of the narrator's "position" with respect to the Mahood/Worm, I/not-I opposition in which each figure acts as a supplement for the Unnamable. My second reading moves beyond the question of the subject to a question of language's play. This chapter is largely theoretical, examining the indexical language of time and space in *The Unnamable* with respect to Derridean terms such as *différance, bricolage* and the supplement. The third chapter involves an exploration of the theological possibilites and impossibilites effected by the "concept" of *différance* as a possible "name" for the Unnamable as well as the "God" of negative theology. This final reading studies *The Unnamable* as anti-theological in its resistance to a totalizing ground or

presence, yet theo-logical in that it does not deny a belief or faith in an innocent and unnamable "God." My motivation is that writing is always a writing towards the Word which writing always already displaces and defers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

All the permanent -- that is only a parable. And the
poets lie too much...It is of time and becoming that
the best parables should speak: let them be a praise
and a justification of all impermanence...there must
be much bitter dying in your life, you creators. Thus
are you advocates and justifiers of all impermanence.
To be the child who is newly born, the creator
must also want to be the mother who gives birth.
-- Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, the final novel of his
trilogy, is a difficult and perplexing text. Alfred Alvarez
notes that, "however inexhaustible a mother lode for quarrying
academics the book may be, for the ordinary, even devoted
reader, *The Unnamable* gets perilously close to being the
Unreadable" (Bair 402). Undoubtedly, many would agree with
Alvarez's assertion. But what is it about *The Unnamable* that
renders it virtually unreadable? Why are there so many
conflicting readings of such an "unreadable" text? What does
the "unreadability" of a text imply? Certainly, Beckett's
text *can* be read in that it contains the appropriate nouns,
verbs, adjectives and other conventions of language. The
sentences are readable; it is the larger overall *meaning* which
seems groundless and arbitrary. In other words, the textual
threads resist being gathered and woven into a consistent
pattern, a whole cloth, so to speak. *The Unnamable* is
suggestive of various readings, wherein each one calls the

1

other into question. In our search for a *meaning*, we seek a ground upon which to build various (hypo)theses; a method of reading wherein all the various elements will fall into place (the "place" of the thesis). Beckett's text denies such unification in that we can find no large frame of reference of which the book is a mimesis. *The Unnamable* is "unreadable" as a *book* in that it resists totalization in the sense of a unifying signified, yet it is "readable" as a *text* which questions the possibility of intentional meaning. How does a Text differ from a Work or Book?

In "From Work to Text," Roland Barthes addresses the opposition between the notion of a "work" and that of a "text". "The Text," contends Barthes, "must not be thought of as a defined object," but as a "methodological field" (Barthes 74). The text exists as discourse, as a "traversal" which "can cut across...several works" (75). As such, the text is, in a sense, unreadable or rendered readable only as it addresses and questions certain foundations. Such foundations are assumed in a Work (or book), whether this foundation is "secret" and must be sought through a hermeneutical analysis, or "obvious" in that the meaning is explicitly stated and explored. But the Text, according to Barthes, "practices the infinite deferral of the signified" wherein the "field is that of the signifier" (76). The logic of the Text does not seek to

define "what the work means". Textual logic dislocates and disseminates. The Text is "restored to language: like language, it is structured but decentred, without closure" (76).

This thesis, therefore, must also be read as an antithesis in that I assume no "position" with respect to the readability of *The Unnamable* as a Work or, as will be discussed later, the Derridean sense of a "book". Or rather, the position(s) assumed are dis-located through the textuality, the traversal of Beckett's text. If, as Barthes contends, "the text is plural," this plurality must be viewed as irreducible. "When it is compared with the work," Barthes claims, "the text might well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by devils: 'My name is legion, for we are many' (Mark 5:9)" (77). As the narrator of *The Unnamable* claims, "these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me" (T 319). *The Unnamable* may be read as a plurality of "voices" which "often...all speak at once,...so perfectly together that one would take it for a single voice" (T 327). I shall attempt to discern the various "voices" of *The Unnamable*.

In order to grapple with the difficulties of Beckett's text, many critics have argued that the central thesis of *The Unnamable* is a deliberate attempt to disrupt conventional

literary expectations. Others contend that this text deals with the creative process and the search for the voice of creation. Still others read this text as the ultimate statement concerning the meaningless existence of humankind. Regardless of which reading we favour, or which seems best "fit" to the text, all readings attempt to establish a ground or centre: all seek to unify the explicit contradictions under a guiding thesis or position. But what if *The Unnamable* resists such totalization, not simply in the sense of disrupting literary conventions (which it does), but also in the larger, epistemological sense of questioning the possibilities of a ground or a signified? What if, instead of a unified reading, Beckett's text invites a reading of difference, of signifiers "with no ground for their settling" (T 356)? And if this is indeed the case, how do we read the unreadability of such a text? Any reading, we may contend, is an attempt at totalization; hence, a reading of difference is no less an attempt at establishing a ground than that of unification. In other words, *any* attempt to understand a text pre-supposes a central ground of argumentation. My reading is no exception.

What I find intriguing about *The Unnamable* is its very resistance to totalization and, thus, its possibilities for traversal. Beckett's text is aporetic, leaving the reader in

a state of undecidability. Now, we can agree with Alvarez and "decide" that the text is virtually unreadable, perhaps toss it aside and get on with more serious literature, or we can accept the challenge of this "meaningless" text and render it "meaningful". In other words, we can respond to *The Unnamable* in a meaningful way. Or, more precisely, we can search for the "place" where the meaningful/meaningless opposition falls away. Many have rendered this text "meaningful" (even to claim that this text represents meaninglessness is a "meaning-ful" interpretation) and the results are various. My thesis, on the other hand, is an attempt to understand *why* such contradictory readings are both possible and yet impossible. This search is based upon *The Unnamable* as a text which deals with the possibilities of language *as* language. *The Unnamable* is a text which both resists and invites meaning. It resists meaning in that it offers no central ground and yet it, simultaneously, invites meaning through the infinite play of language, through *The Unnamable's* textual *effects*.

Many critics contend that Beckett's art concerns the existence of humankind and the search for identity. These readings associate Beckett's works with the existentialist writings of Sartre and Heidegger on the philosophy of existence, the philosophy of humankind. In post-modern philosophy, especially in the writings of Derrida, the

philosophy of existence becomes a philosophy of language. Or, the questions of existence *become* questions of language. *The Unnamable,* it seems to me, concerns language rather than existence, although the two are often intertwined in our *reading* of this text. There are no "humans" in Beckett's text, only characters or figures; unstable and -- to deploy the title of Cynthia Chase's text -- "decomposing figures"[1] at that. If we read Beckett's *The Unnamable* as a text "about" textuality, we may come to understand how the play of language invites various, and often contradictory, readings in our attempts at totalization.

The reading(s) which I shall undertake are "centred" on the theories of language developed by Derrida through his deconstructive readings of philosophy. This term, deconstruction, already hints at the double nature of such a reading. Firstly, I shall de-struct this text through a detailed examination of the impossibility of totalization, the impossibility of reading *The Unnamable* as a *book* or Work which may be totalized. Yet this de-structive reading, I contend, is implicit in *The Unnamable* if it is read as a contemplation of the possibilities and impossibilities of reading (signifieds) which are produced through the play of language. Hence, I

---

[1]*Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition.* (John Hopkins, 1986)

shall not de-struct in the sense of destroying a unity which, however tenuous, is found in *The Unnamable*; rather, I shall show how this text resists *structure*. In this way, *The Unnamable* is already a de-structive text. This analysis begins with a study of indexical forms of language which situate the speaker in terms of person, place and time. In Beckett's text, the deictics are extremely slippery and the speaking subject or the unnamable narrator (if these two "voices" are even comparable) is difficult to identify. In order to situate the Unnamable, I shall undertake an examination of this figure's position (or non-position) with respect to the characters of Mahood and Worm. Although I shall begin by speaking of the "subject," this term is used merely as a method of examining the multiplication and decomposition of figures. There is no "subject" in *The Unnamable*, but I deploy the subject/object duality as a method of moving toward the problematics of language as language. As we shall see, the split between subject and object calls all "meaning" into question and yet it is the play of language which drives us to posit a subject of discourse.

The second chapter of this study is concerned with the space and time of written discourse. My argument stems from the idea that the play of language serves to con-struct a desire for totalization (beginning, centre, end), for an

intended meaning. Language is both de-structive and con-structive in the sense that its *play* both resists and invites totalization. It is this play of language (a *serious* form of play) which produces concepts of totalization and presence. This chapter is largely theoretical, moving through the indexical language of *The Unnamable* in order to contemplate the relationship between language and meaning and the desire for an origin of discourse. Here, I shall examine Derrida's theory of *différance*, *bricolage* and the supplement with respect to the subject/object duality discussed in Chapter One. From this reading, I shall examine the possibilities of language in greater detail, setting the "ground" for a more or less con-structive reading of *The Unnamable* undertaken in the following chapter.

The third chapter is a return to *The Unnamable* as a theological text, a text which invites a theological reading. Derrida contends that *any* reading which strives for totalization is a theological reading, in that it assumes a ground or a centre as presence. "We do not need 'God' in a discourse," notes Kevin Hart" for it to be 'theological' in Derrida's sense; all we need is something which *functions* as an agent of totalisation" (Hart's emphasis, 32). For Derrida, the distinction between philosophy and theology falls away when viewed as a search for presence. Both rely upon

metaphysics as a ground; hence, both are prey to deconstruction. As chapter one will have shown, Beckett's text fails to speak the origin of its own discourse, however fictional such an origin may be. Yet it is this very failure which compels the narrator to "go on." Hence, my reading will derive from the play of language and its *possibilities* for con-structing a theory of "God" through Beckett's text. This theory is anti-theological in that it resists totalization and yet theo-logical in that it contemplates the (im)possibility of absolute presence. Hence, this final chapter will involve a reading of *The Unnamable* as a de-construction of theology which does not deny a belief in God, but denies the possibility of *naming* and hence, *totalizing* God. Such a reading is negatively theological in the sense that negative theology is, as Kevin Hart argues, "the *discourse* which reflects upon positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God" (Hart 176). Beckett's text, as discourse, denies the possibility of *naming* "God," hence inviting a reading of a godless and meaningless existence; yet this text also invites a more hopeful reading of possibility through that which always already remains unsaid. There is, I contend, hope in *The Unnamable*, or at least in our response to such a text.

None of these readings are entirely "new." The

"newness," perhaps, derives from an investigation into our response to that which appears "meaningless" (and, for various reasons, many contend that Derrida, Beckett and negative theology are "meaningless"). We can read *The Unnamable* as a statement of humankind's existence in a godless universe and, simultaneously, we can read this *same* text (from a different angle) as a mystic quest for the "real silence" of God, as an affirmation of faith. My study is a study of possibility, of response and *responsibility* when faced with the "meaninglessness" of language as language. I have chosen Beckett's *The Unnamable* as the re-presentation of literature's *task, pensum or lesson*. We may speak of the "task" in the sense that de Man speaks of *Aufgabe* in the work of Walter Benjamin[2], a project which is also its own giving up: here, the task is to name the unnamable, to totalize, to speak the origin and a task which *must* fail, whose failure is the very possibility of hope, the very possibility of literature. As Kevin Hart notes, "the condition of possibility for metaphysics also enables the deconstruction of metaphysics" (Hart 137). Writing is a writing toward the Word (the "key-word to the whole business" [T 339]) which writing always already displaces and defers. Derrida claims that all

---

[2]*Resistance to Theory*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), p. 80.

philosophy is "logocentric" in that it "signifies any attempt to determine a unique master-word which could serve as...ground" (Hart 92). The narrator of *The Unnamable* seeks such a Word, but continually fails. The failure of *The Unnamable* to be totalized suggests the unavoidable failure of finding this "master-word" and the unavoidable faith in that which cannot be spoken. This study is a study of aporia, of undecidability and, hence, a study of possibility.

CHAPTER ONE: Speaking the Shade

SPEAK, YOU ALSO

Speak, you also,
speak as the last,
have your say.

Speak -
But keep yes and no unsplit.
And give your say this meaning:
give it the shade.

Give it shade enough,
give it as much
as you know has been dealt out between
midnight and midday and midnight.

Look around:
look how it all leaps alive -
where death is! Alive!
He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

But now shrinks the place where you stand:
Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?
Upward. Grope your way up.
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.
Finer: a thread by which
it wants to be lowered, the star:
to float farther down, down below
where it sees itself gleam: in the swell
of wandering words.
                    --Paul Celan[3]

---

[3]The poems of Paul Celan used in this thesis are translated
from the German by Michael Hamburger, taken from *Poems of Paul
Celan*. New York: Persea Books, 1988.

When we attempt to identify and situate fictional characters within a narrative, we do so through indexical forms of language, called deictics, which situate person, place and time with respect to the speaker. Angela Moorjani, in her essay, "Beckett's Devious Deictics," explains that "deictic terms include personal pronouns, such as Molloy's *I*, temporary forms, such as *now* and verb tense (*am*), and spatial terms (*there*)" (Moorjani 20). Deictics, or shifters, are signifiers whose reference shifts according to the person, place and time of their use. Throughout *The Unnamable*, these indexical forms of language, rather than situating the speaker, serve to dislocate or *shift* the speaking subject as well as the time and space of the utterance. Moorjani argues that Beckett's opening questions -- "Where now? Who now? When now?" -- "[toy] with the narrative convention that demands that at the beginning of stories narrators orientate their audience in respect to time, place, and person" (Moorjani 20). The reader of *The Unnamable* is immediately, and subsequently, dis-oriented. Is Beckett simply "toying" with convention or do his "shifty shifters" (Moorjani 20) refer to a specific person, place and time? And if so, who, where and when *is* the Unnamable? The following analysis addresses these questions, not only in relation to *The Unnamable*, but also *as questions* which writing posits and which posit writing.

BETWEEN A AND C LIES B

Who now?
　　--*The Unnamable*

Vox et praeterea nihil
　　　　--Anonymous

Identifying the narrator of *The Unnamable* is, perhaps, the most challenging task in a reading of Beckett's trilogy. To claim, simply, that It[4] (the narrator/narrated) is unnamable is to avoid the implicit challenge of this text. Many critics have argued that the Unnamable is Beckett himself, but this is to name, and I would argue, to misname. As Charlotte Renner contends, any autobiographical details within Beckett's text are transferred to "a series of fictional avatars" who are consequently "deprived of *their* histories, properties and families. In this way, the implied author of the trilogy reverses the autobiographical process, by stripping the historical novelist of his historicity" (Renner 97).

In "Autobiography as De-Facement," Paul de Man

---

[4]I shall hereby refer to the Unnamable as "It" in order to avoid a gender-based "name," ("It, say it, not knowing what"[267]) as I work toward possible "names" for the "what" to which the text refers. The reader must be aware, however, that the capitalization of the I (the "I" of "it") is used merely to avoid confusion. It is <u>not</u> a proper name.

convincingly argues that "autobiography...is...a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree in all texts" because "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is...undecidable" (RR 70) Every student of literature has learned that the "I" of a text must not be confused with its author unless this is made explicit. Yet, even an autobiographical work creates a split between the teller and the told. To speak of oneself is to create a fiction, an object of discourse. As Nietzsche argues, "our grammatical custom...adds a doer to every deed" (WP 484), but it is through the deed that one arrives at a concept of the doer, thus "both the doer and the deed are fictions" (WP 477). Although doer and deed, speaker and speech are separate, they are inescapably bound in an endless oscillation. While *The Unnamable* cannot be said to be about Beckett *per se*, it does raise some intriguing questions about "the self" in general. If this text is "about" Beckett, it is equally "about" all beings who use language or, more specifically, "about" language and our custom of assuming an origin of language.

What, precisely, is language's origin? On the one hand, the origin of speech is always outside of the speaker, in the sense that no subject invents an absolutely idiosyncratic or personal language. The narrator of *The Unnamable* must use the words which precede and exceed him in order to tell "his own

story," a "story" which he claims, "must have been mine, before being his" (T 380). This "story" is "the story of the silence," of the "self" beyond language. The Self as the ground of utterance, as that which is both revealed and concealed by language, is in a state of constant deferral. In other words, the source of the discourse is never present within the discourse itself: it is the always absent *possibility* produced through the play of language.

In his essay, "What is an Author?", Michel Foucault contends that "the essential basis of...writing is not...the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (Foucault 116). One could say: where the text *is*, the author *is not*. Foucault notes that "a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author" such as "personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and the conjugation of verbs" (Foucault 129). But Foucault continues by noting that such indexical forms of language often "stand for a 'second self' whose similarity to the author is never fixed" (129). In *The Unnamable*, these "selves" are multiplied to such an extent that "there might be a hundred of us," we are told, "and still we'd lack the hundred and first, we'll always be short of me" (T 311). The writing subject disappears beneath the narration and will always disappear. We cannot be

certain of the "author" as a function within this discourse.

Paul de Man argues that "to the extent that language is figure (or metaphor or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but a representation" (RR 80). The narrating "I" conceals (or masks) the source of its utterance. While all texts are implicitly concerned with the disappearing subject of speech, Beckett's trilogy explicitly (though enigmatically) attempts to write (towards) the Origin of language or Self. As I shall argue, the subject which disappears, which is forgotten, is the "subject" which haunts *The Unnamable*. This "subject" is the subject *as* disappearing, *as* forgetting which is always disappearing, never to be disappeared: "Is this not rather the place," asks the narrator, "where one finishes vanishing?" (T 269). The trilogy's final novel is most challenging because its title allows no frame of reference, signifying nothing but the inability to signify. How, then, can we identify the final "character" of Beckett's trilogy? Who is narrating *The Unnamable*? We have been given Molloy and Malone in the previous novels, but "who now" are we given?

Both of the preceding novels of the trilogy are narrated in the first-person singular where the "I" of each novel corresponds with the title or, in the case of Moran, is explicitly associated with a proper name. Although many "minor" characters are encountered, invented, dismissed or

destroyed, we may justifiably assume that each novel is narrated by the title character[5]. The final novel, however, opens by questioning the three aspects of place, person and time ("Where now? Who now? When now?" [T 267]), and immediately settles on first-person narration ("I, say I" [T 267]). Yet the pronoun "I" is used as an arbitrary signifier for the always absent source of signification which is concealed beneath the discourse: "I, say I. Unbelieving ....I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" (T 267). Immediately, we are presented with the inevitable duality of subject and object. The "I" who speaks, we are told, is not "I" while the subject of speech, "me", is not "me". Thus, "I" strives toward that which remains after all creations have been named and destroyed but it cannot be given a proper name itself: "All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them, when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone" (T 278). Yet, the "me" of the text cannot be approached through words. As Stephen Barker notes, the narrator attempts to become that which is inescapably absent from its own discourse; "not

---

[5]One may argue that the entire trilogy is "narrated" by the Unnamable, but this is not suggested until the final novel. Until *The Unnamable*, the title of each novel serves as a point of reference for the narrating "I" or "second self".

missing, not non-existent -- absent" (Barker 181). Though it attempts to speak itself, the speech effects, or creates, a pseudo-self which results in a deferral of the originary speaker: "I knew it, there might be a hundred of us and still we'd lack the hundred and first, we'll always be short of me" (T 311). The narrator warns us that "this cursed first person...is really too red a herring" and that "any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it" (T 315). The Unnamable is not simply *not named* by choice (as in the literary signature, "Anonymous"); rather, it remains nameless because it is *unable* to be named. Once named, it becomes a fictional object, thereby submerging the absolute subject beneath a wave of discourse. In an attempt to arrive at its Origin, the *unnamed*[6] narrator "goes on" naming in order to be done with the necessity of speaking: "There's no getting rid of them without naming them and their contraptions, that's the thing to keep in mind" (T 299). The narrator attempts to arrive at the Unnamable through the process of *elimination*: "With the yeses and noes it is different, they will come back

---

[6]The narrator of the novel, although unnamed should not be confused with the Unnamable itself. The narrator can, and indeed is, named throughout the narration (Mahood, Worm, I, he, they, etc.). The narrator, as fiction(s), is the narrated *seeking* the source of narration which is always already absent from the text in which he (I use "he" arbitrarily) finds himself. Hence, the Unnamable *is* the narrator, but as absolute narrator, It cannot be manifested within the text.

to me as I go along and now, like a bird, to shit on them all without exception (T 267)....it's like shit, there we have it at last,...the right word,...it's a question of elimination" (T 336). As we shall see, even the process of elimination is, in a certain sense, *creative*. How, then, do we proceed to speak of that which is unnamable? And, more importantly, how can absence become presence within its own text? The narrator of this novel is painfully aware of this difficulty:

> What am I to do, what shall I do, what should
> I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia
> pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations
> invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?
> Generally speaking. (T 267)

The narrator, in an attempt to speak its Origin, can only do so through an aporetic discourse. To affirm (name) itself is to become an object of discourse, while to negate itself would require absolute cessation of discourse, thereby to remain unknown. The Unnamable seems trapped between the absent signified (not-I) and the present signifier (the narrating I): permanent undecidability. The narration opens the possibility of a speaker who may only be represented as the absence of the signified. As Roland Barthes contends, "The Text...practices the infinite deferral of the signified...; its field is that of the signifier" (Barthes 76). Thus, to affirm that the narrator of *The Unnamable* is the Origin would be to mistake the end (beginning?) for the means. The Unnamable is neither

end nor beginning, inside nor outside. It is, to use some of Derrida's compelling terms for irreducible undecidability, *différance*, preface, border, hymen, supplement, tympan, frame, margin. Derrida claims that,

> by means of the work done on one side and the other of the limit the field inside is modified, and a transgression is produced that consequently is nowhere present as a *fait accompli*. One is never installed within transgression, one never lives elsewhere....there is no sure opposition between outside and inside. (P 12)

Similarly, the narrator of *The Unnamable* states,

> I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either...(T 352)

The Unnamable, therefore, can be understood as the means towards an ever deferred closure, a ceaselessly murmuring "voice". All affirmation and negation must be read as a writing under erasure.

I shall return to a fuller explication of Derrida's theoretical writings in the following sections. For now we must return to Beckett's text in order to clarify The Unnamable's "identity" with respect to the characters of Mahood and Worm. Departing from[7] Charlotte Renner's study of "Self-Multiplying Narrators" in Beckett's trilogy, I shall

---

[7]Although I depart from Renner's central thesis, her essay must be acknowledged as the firm basis from which I embark.

examine the recurring figures of A and C as possible paradigms for the figures of Mahood and Worm.

In order to "arrive" at a possible reading of Mahood and Worm, we must circle back to the beginning of Beckett's entire trilogy. The figures of A and C will be deployed as a possible opening for our reading of Mahood and Worm, but I do not intend to argue that my reading of *The Unnamable* provides a reading of the entire trilogy. We may use the figures in *Molloy* as a kind of scaffolding in order to arrive at an understanding of the Mahood/Worm opposition. In the opening pages of *Molloy*, we are presented with an image of

> A and C going slowly towards each other,
> unconscious of what they were doing....
> They couldn't have seen each other, even
> had they raised their heads and looked about,
> because of this wide space, and then because
> of the undulating land, which caused the road
> to be in waves, not high, but high enough,
> high enough. But the moment came when together
> they went down into the same trough and in this
> trough finally met. (T 10-11)

After halting "face to face," A and C depart in opposite directions,

> A back towards the town, C on by ways he seemed
> hardly to know, or not at all, for he went with
> uncertain step and often stopped to look about
> him,like someone trying to fix landmarks in his
> mind, for one day perhaps he may have to retrace
> his steps, you never know. (T 11)

Molloy's description of C's departure is one of the few remarkably moving sections within the trilogy, conveying a

sense of tragic longing and bitter renunciation. This
departing image has such a profound effect on Molloy that he
is tempted to follow but laments, "In spite of my soul's leap
out to him, at the end of its elastic, I saw him only darkly"
(T 12). Molloy immediately forgets whether it was C or A he
longed to follow, confusing these two figures. Although Molloy
claims that he never saw A and C again, he immediately asks,
"But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to
recognize them? And am I sure I never saw them again?" (T 16).
Whether or not Molloy encounters them again, these two figures
(or ones strikingly similar) re-emerge in *The Unnamable*.

Near the beginning of this final novel, the narrator
describes the collision and fall of

> Two shapes then, oblong like man....They fell and
> I saw them no more...The next time they enter the
> field, moving slowly towards each other, I shall
> know they are going to collide, fall and disappear,
> and this will perhaps enable me to observe them
> better. Wrong. *I continue to see Malone as darkly
> as the first time.* (272, my emphasis)

Here, we are given a curious variation of tenses and a
splitting between the narrator narrating and the narrator who
will narrate. The narrator contends that he *will* "know they
are going to collide" when he "next" sees them and yet negates
this assertion in the present tense by stating that he
"continue[s] to see Malone as darkly as the first time." This
last reference suggests that Malone is (or was) a re-

presentation of the "dark" figure whom Molloy longed to
follow.[8] The narrator continues by claiming that "the other
advances full upon me." This "other," (originally named Basil,
but later renamed Mahood) is described as "stooping ... and
...dragging invisible burdens (T 273)," wearing a tattered hat
much like that of the other figure of the A/C pair. If we view
these recurring dualities (and there are many throughout the
trilogy) as representations of the subject/object dichotomy,
the narrator's desire to witness their collision and fall
takes on added significance:

> I cannot tell if I shall ever have the good
> fortune to see the two of them at once. But I
> am inclined to think I shall....I am inclined to
> think, because of this erratic interval, that my
> two visitors may some day meet before my eyes,
> collide and perhaps even knock each other down...
> And I shall perhaps be delivered of Malone and
> the other, not that they disturb me, the day
> I see the two of them at one and the same time,
> that is to say in collision. (T 274)

The narrator's desire for collision results from "the interest
of a possible deliverance" (T 275), not only of Malone and the
other, but also of the Unnamable source of these figures. Just
as Molloy longs for the receding figure of the first novel,
the narrator strives toward the position which Malone now

---

[8]Given Molloy's confusion, we cannot be certain which is which
and The Unnamable also confuses Malone with Molloy in his
description: "But I am certainly not at the circumference. For if
I were it would follow that *Molloy*...would issue from the enceinte
at every revolution....It is equally possible...that I too am in
perpetual motion, accompanied by Malone" (270).

occupies: "Yes I will say it, and of me alone. Impassive, still and mute, Malone revolves, a stranger forever to my infirmities, one who is not as I can never not be" (T 275). While Malone is able to "not be," as the result of his death, the Unnamable is (trapped on) the threshold between death and life or between the past and the future: It can "never not be," (in the future) nor can It ever merge with absolute Being (in the past). An object of knowledge may be defined as dead, one can see it die, but *as subject* one can never *know* one's own death. The Unnamable seems to dwell in the eternal present. We shall examine the question of time and space in greater detail in the following chapters but we may already glimpse the problematics of locating the source of narration. The absolute "I" -- unnamable, yet that which opens the possibility of naming -- relentlessly marks and remarks the absence of origin and end.

If A and C are read as representations of subject and object, we can place the Unnamable (B for Beckett?) between them. One of these figures -- who may only be seen "as through a glass 'darkly,'"-- represents the unattainable Other or the primordial Self which language continually fails to name (the theological allusions, here, should not be overlooked). The other figure can be read as representing the endless representations themselves: the nameable objects,

before they are lost, killed or abandoned. The latter moves towards the world of the known ("back towards town"); the former towards the unknown ("by ways he seemed hardly to know, or not at all"). A and C mark the split between the world and the self, object and subject, the knowable and unknowable. B, as unnamable (and absent), is the possibility of the subject/object duality but is always deferred through their manifestation.

This Subject/Object dichotomy is further developed through the other characters of *The Unnamable*, namely, Basil/Mahood and Worm. Mahood is a ceaselessly transforming figure while Worm remains relatively unchanging and unreachable. Because the absolute narrator is unnamable, It may only be "known" in relation to the characters of Mahood and Worm. While speaking of Mahood, the narrator reveals its method of self-description by claiming, "First I'll say what I am not, that's how they taught me to proceed, then what I am, it's already under way" (T 299). Unable to say what it *is*, The Unnamable may only be defined through negation. What It is is revealed through what It is not. Let us proceed by the same method of apophasis, the trope of denial.

Mahood may be read as a representation of all fictional characters, or "vice-exister[s]" (T 289), which supplement the unspeakable "true-exister" who is never manifested. While

these characters issue forth from the Unnamable, they prevent
It from self-revelation:

> Decidedly Basil is becoming important. I'll call
> him Mahood instead, I prefer that, I'm queer. It
> was he told me stories about me, lived in my stead,
> issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back
> into me, heaped stories on my head. I don't know how
> it was done. I always liked not knowing....It is his
> voice which has often, always, mingled with mine,
> and sometimes drowned it completely. (T 283)

Although Mahood is spontaneously invented, all references to
him are written in the past tense, signifying all the "others"
who issue forth from the Unnamable: "Before him there were
others, taking themselves for me....Mahood is no worse than
his predecessors" (T 288-289). These "others" represent the
multiplication of subjects, who simultaneously reveal and
conceal the absolute presence of self, the source of these
various representatives. "The voice" which tells "Mahood's
stories" is not the narrator's voice, but neither is the
"voice" which instigates these "stories":

> 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....*Then
> my voice, the voice,* would say, That's an idea,
> now I'll tell one of Mahood's Stories, I need
> a rest....And it would say, Then refreshed, sort
> about the truth again, with redoubled vigour...*But
> it would not be my voice, not even in part*...Or
> quietly, stealthily, the story would begin, as if
> nothing had happened and I still the teller and
> the told. (T 283-284, my emphasis)

Although the Unnamable is both teller and told, the voice which instigates the stories of Mahood cannot be identified with the voice of the narrator: both of these voices are fictions. Each time a "vice-exister" is manifested, its story must be told and then abandoned in order to "sort about the truth again". Yet, the search for "truth" inevitably results in further fictions, concealing "truth" beneath objects of discourse. These "vice-existers" act as supplements for the true "exister," for that which exists in and for itself.

While speaking of Mahood, the narrator notes that the "next vice exister will be a billy in the bowl, that's final, with his bowl on his head and his arse in the dust" (T 289). And, indeed, we are soon introduced to such a character who seemingly lives in a jar filled with sawdust. The narrator's later reference to this figure confirms the hypothesis that it and Mahood are the same: "...and the other, what is his name, what was his name, in his jar, I can see him still, better than I can see me...Mahood, he was called Mahood" (T 364). Hence, Mahood is the name assigned, in *The Unnamable*, to several different figures who are given a narrative existence, a story. This further explains why many characters of the trilogy are so similar and often confused with one another: they are all one in that they are all "vice-existers." As Lance Butler argues, "whoever is telling the story, it is the

same to us....We can only be sure that these others have stolen Beckett's world from him" (Butler 104). If we replace "Beckett" with the "Unnamable," Butler's argument certainly applies. The narrator strives to tell his *own* (i.e. The Unnamable's) story, but the voices of "others" are all we are able to hear. Through these voices, the narrator imagines The Unnamable's existence (since It is the imagined source), yet these same voices prevent him from defining, what Butler calls, "the indefinable silence of the subjective" (Butler 96). Hence, the "characters" are all one, as it were, subsumed under the name of Mahood:

> I may therefore perhaps legitimately suppose
> that the one-armed one-legged wayfarer of a
> moment ago [recalling Basil] and the wedge-headed
> trunk in which I am now marooned [the "second"
> Mahood] are simply two phases of the same carnal
> envelope, the soul being notoriously immune
> from deterioration and dismemberment. (T 303)

Heidegger argues that the spirit "wins its truth only when, in utter *dismemberment*, it finds itself" (Taylor 9, my emphasis). Each transformation of character is a signifier, a body, an envelope, which conceals the origin or "soul" of narration (the signified). Even though these characters deteriorate and de-compose, the origin remains unreached and unreachable, though "notoriously" present as a continuous "voice." This dismemberment of body, this de-composition of text, is a striving toward the origin: the essence of body and text.

Although Mahood's story comes to be narrated in the first-person, the "I" of the story is never the true "I": "I felt the cang, the flies, the sawdust under my stumps, the tarpaulin on my skull, when they were mentioned to me. But can that be called a life which vanishes when the subject is changed? I don't see why not" (T 325). The narrator cannot "see why not" and yet he is aware that the "subject" continually changes and multiplies. The Unnamable, as creator, is the originator of these fictional lives, yet unable to narrate the "story" of itself: "Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking? That's theirs too. To make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs. Another trap to snap me up among the living..." (T 317). The narrator asks, "how can they be represented, a life, how could that be made clear to me, here...?" (T 375). Mahood represents the endless attempts towards a "truth" which must inevitably result in fictions. "He" and "they" are the Unnamable's creatures, borne in the attempt to name itself; a "self" which ceaselessly fails to be presented. It (as the unnamable narrator) is the inexpressible origin of the expressed.

Worm, on the other hand, is "the first of his kind" (T 310). In order to understand the figure of Worm with respect to the Unnamable, we should note the narrator's statement of method: "I have to speak in a certain way...first of the

creature I am not, as if I were he, and then, as if I were he, of the creature I am" (T 308). Mahood, spoken of first, is *not* the Unnamable; but should we conclude, therefore, that the second creature is? And if so, how can that which is unnamable be named Worm? Let us sort through this confusion with a careful reading of Worm's attributes.

Worm, like Mahood, is a figure through whom the Unnamable attempts to know itself. Yet, whereas Mahood is described by what he *is*, Worm is most often described by what he *is not*. While speaking of "Pupil Mahood," who must learn his "lessons" about mammals, the narrator exclaims

> Quick, give me a mother and let me suck her
> white, pinching my tits. But it's time I gave
> this solitary a name, nothing doing without
> proper names. I therefore baptize him Worm....
> It will be my name too, when the time comes, when
> I needn't be called Mahood any more, if that happy
> time ever comes. Before Mahood there were others
> like him, of the same breed and creed, armed with
> the same prong. But Worm is the first of his kind
> ...I must not forget I don't know him. Perhaps he
> too will weary, renounce the task of forming me
> and make way for another....I have not ceased to
> hear his murmur, all the while the others discoursed.
> He has survived them all, Mahood too, if Mahood is
> dead. I can hear him yet, faithful, begging me to
> still this dead tongue of the living. (T 310)

Worm, according to this description, represents the other extreme, the creator or origin (mother) of the narrating "I". Yet, as creator, Worm is also bound to his creature: both that from which the narrator issues forth and that to which he longs to arrive ("let me suck *her* white, pinching *my* tits").

Worm is "the one outside of life we always were in the end" (T 318). Unlike Mahood, Worm is incapable of thought or reason and the narrator, when speaking of him, seldom adopts the first-person.

> Worm, to say he does not know what he is,
> where he is, what is happening, is to
> underestimate him. What he does not know is that
> there is anything to know. His senses tell him
> nothing, he exists neverthe-less, but not for
> himself, for others, others conceive him and say,
> Worm is, since we conceive him, as if there
> could be no being but being conceived, if only
> by the beer [read as be-er]. (T 318)

> Worm hears, though hear is not the word, but it
> will do, it will have to do...They don't know
> what to say, to be able to believe in him, what
> to invent, to be reassured, they see nothing....
> (T 330)

> The mistake they make of course is to speak of
> him as if he really existed, in a special place,
> whereas the whole thing is no more than a project
> for the moment. (T 342)

Having been conceived (thought of and thus created), Worm does indeed "exist" but this existence is the "existence" of a concept or idea brought about through the search for an origin. Worm is unknowable, like the "other" figure of the A/C pair whom Molloy could only see "darkly". Both Worm and Mahood "exist" as fictions of the "not-I"/"I" opposition. This helps us to understand the narrator's assertion, "I [the unnamable "I"] alone am man and all the rest divine" (T 275). If the Unnamable were alone, without others (either A or C), he would B(e). That is to say, the unnamable has no definitive "place"

within the discourse, either positive (Mahood) or negative (Worm). Creatures and creators exist as fictions which are produced by the Unnamable. They are both, so to speak, meta-physical.

Though Mahood and Worm seem opposed, the narrator realizes that this opposition is tentative at best:

> But perhaps I have been too hasty in opposing
> these two fomenters of fiasco. Is it not the
> fault of one that I cannot be the other?...Or
> is one to postulate a tertius gaudens, meaning
> myself, responsible for the double failure? Shall
> I come upon my true countenance at last, bathing
> in a smile? I have the feeling I shall be spared
> the spectacle. At no moment do I know what I'm
> talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor
> how, nor why, but I could employ fifty wretches
> for this sinister operation and still be short
> of a fifty-first to close the circuit. (T 310-311)

Once the narrator attempts to speak of Worm, another fiction is created and the Self is once more deferred: "The rascal, he's getting humanized, he's going to lose if he doesn't watch out" (T 331). Although the narrator attempts to de-scribe Worm through negation, this act of de-scription humanizes that which seems other than human. The source of language is given "life" through the attempt at description: "Poor Worm, who thought he was different, there he is in the madhouse for life. Where am I? That's my first question..." (T 321). The narrator is seeking that which is "responsible for the double failure." This double failure results from the infinite play of language. Although the "vice-existers" "set great store on

Worm, to coax [the Unnamable] out (T 348)," no amount of negation can prevent Worm from becoming a fiction: "I knew I had only to try and talk of Worm to begin talking of Mahood" (T 312). The Unnamable, therefore, is absent once again: "Equate me, without pity or scruple, with him who exists, somehow, no matter how, no finicking, with him whose story this story had the brief ambition to be" (T 359). Although the Unnamable is not Worm, in the attempt to arrive at the origin, Worm represents that which the narrator strives to name. Worm is̶ conceived as both beginning and end while the Unnamable still dwells on the margin: "no need to go any further, it is not he, it's I, or another, or others, what does it matter...it is not he, he who I know I am, that's all I know, who I cannot say I am" (T 370). Although Worm is absent, the discourse of the narrator seeks an original "voice" which dictates the narration. Worm "cannot note" nor speak (T 312). The narrator, on the other hand, is prey to incessant voices. Although it "knows" that it *is* Worm (the name is arbitrary), language prevents It from *being* Worm: "I'll speak of me when I speak no more" (T 361), hence, It will never be capable of speaking (of) Itself. Worm i̶s̶ without essence, is nothing: the nothing that the narrator strives to encounter. "Where there are people, it is said, there are things" (T 268-269). Through the process of decomposition and dismemberment of fictional

characters -- the multiple "I"s -- the narrator strives to become Worm. As Sartre contends, "Nothingness [no-thing-ness] "lies coiled in the heart of being--*like a worm*" (Sartre 21, my emphasis).

Who, then, *is* the Unnamable? Who is this "I" who is "not I"? Who cannot be "not I" nor "I"? Along with the narrator, we are forced to conclude 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, to recall only two of the hypotheses launched in this connection, though silence to tell the truth does not appear to have been very conspicuous up to now....(T 358)

Although we are unable to define the Unnamable "with any degree of accuracy," we have succeeded in establishing what It is *not*. The Unnamable is neither Mahood ("words among words") nor Worm ("silence in the midst of silence"). Using the words of Paul Celan, the Unnamable "gleams in the swell of wandering words" and yet it, simultaneously, is "less knowable." Let us call this progress.

CHAPTER TWO: The Variable Key

WITH A VARIABLE KEY

With a variable key
you unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.
Always what key you choose
depends on the blood that spurts
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary the word
that is free to drift with the flakes.
What snowball will form round the word
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.

                              --Paul Celan

In Chapter One, I have used the subject/object duality as a means of introducing the double nature of language. First, through the play of language, we assume a source, an origin and yet as soon as we attempt to name this source, another object of discourse (in the form of a "fictional character") is manifested. Although I have employed such pronouns as "I", "he," and "it," these pronouns should not be read as referring to various characters, but as signifying the multiplication of figures, of objects. All the pronouns, in a certain sense, refer to The Unnamable: "they" are all products of the unnamable play of language. Now, I shall delve further into the problematics of language and its play of possibility by relating The Unnamable to Derrida's "concepts" of *différance*, *bricolage* and the supplement. To begin, let us examine the space-time of writing and the concepts of beginning, end and centre which are posited in attempts at totalization.

FICTIONAL SPACE-TIME

Where now? When now?
         --*The Unnamable*

In time's absence what is new renews nothing; what
is present is not contemporary; what is present presents
nothing, but represents itself and belongs henceforth
and always to return, it isn't, but comes back again.
                                        --Maurice Blanchot

In our discussion thus far, we have attempted to discern
the (non)identity of the Unnamable with limited success: we
have merely arrived (through theoretically winding pathways)
at the obvious conclusion that It is Unnamable. Yet the
Unnamable is not so simply because it cannot be identified; It
is simply (simply?) *not there* to begin (or end) with. Where is
It? Here. When is It? Now. The Here-Now of the Unnamable is in
the space of presence, the time of the present. Yet, precisely
because of the Here-Now-ness of Its space-time, the Unnamable
cannot be written. It "exists" in (and through) the space-time
of writing: that of pure anteriority, or as Blanchot calls it,
"the dreadfully ancient" which "is always lacking the present"
(Taylor 30). Here-Now-ness, in the space-time of writing, is
relegated to There-then-ness.

Hegel considers the slipperiness of deictical language
significant enough to begin *The Phenomenology of Mind* with a
discussion of "here" and "now":

The Now is pointed out; this Now. "Now"; it has

>already ceased to be when it is pointed out. The
>Now that is, is other than the one indicated, and
>we see that the Now is just this -- to be no longer
>the very time when it is. The Now as it is shown to
>us is one that *has been*, and that is its truth; it
>does not have the truth of being, of something that
>*is*. No doubt this is true, that it *has* been; but
>what *has* been is in point of fact not genuinely real,
>it is *not*, and the point in question concerned what
>is, concerned being. (Hegel's emphasis, 156)

That which *is, is not* as soon as it is uttered. Deictics are

problematical in that they can be used to refer to any

particular person, time or place and yet they always refer to

what is "radically general" (Chase 91). For example, "now" and

"here" may refer to *any* time and space at *any* particular

moment, yet "this" is always "not this" in the time-space of

discourse. It is not "genuinely real" space-time but always

already a "vice"-existence.

As a means of explication, let us return to the Derridean

"concepts" of trace, *différance*, tympan etc., to which I

briefly alluded above. For our purposes, we shall concentrate

on the "concept" of *différance* in order to explicate the

question of space-time in *The Unnamable*. This term was

introduced in our attempt to *identify* the Unnamable, to

discern its *identity*. However, as we discovered, the Unnamable

has no ident-ity, no absolute sameness with Itself within the

text. The text of *The Unnamable* presents an irreducible

plurality of figures. The Unnamable, as the absent source of

presence, is *different* from Mahood and Worm. "This difference, irreducible to identity -- this other, irreducible to same," is an alter-ity exceeding both presence and absence (Taylor 33).

The language which Derrida uses to "describe" *différance* is certainly comparable to the title of Beckett's text:

> "Older" than Being itself,...différance has no name in our language. But we "already know" that if it is unnameable, it is not provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we would have to seek it in another language, outside the finite system of our own. It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all, not even the name of essence or of Being [or Worm], not even that of "differance," which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions....This unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects.... (MP 26, Derrida's emphasis)

Let us briefly sketch a correlation between Derrida's "concept" of *différance* and The Unnamable of Beckett's text which we shall examine in more detail as we "progress". In *Positions*, Derrida explains the "concept" of *différance* through four "positions" of thought. Firstly, "*différance* refers to the (active *and* passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving" (P 8). *Différance* is not preceded by identity, by absolute presence; rather, it defers presence on the "very basis on which presence is announced or

desired in what represents it" (P 8). *Différance* is neither absence nor presence. In *The Unnamable*, the narrator refers to Worm as no-thing, non-present. The Unnamable, as *différance*, opens the possibility of no-thing-ness by revealing the groundlessness of all positive or negative grounds. Secondly, "the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language" (P 9). One such "oppositional concept" is that of subject/object duality (or multiplicity). *Différance* is the "common root" of these differences, "the element of the *same*," but not of the identical. Hence, Mahood and Worm (positive/negative) have the common root of *différance,* but are not, therefore, identical. Thirdly, "*différance* is also the production, if it can still be put this way, of these differences" (P 9). The Unnamable is not only the "root" of such manifestations as Mahood and Worm, It is *the* manifestation of them. It is both the cause and effect of the subject/object duality. As a method of illustration, *différance* could be "read" as the slash (/) which both separates and unites differences: "...perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be

as thin as foil"[9] (T 352). And finally, Derrida contends that *différance* "would name provisionally this unfolding of difference" (P 10). Although It is, itself, unnamable, It is nevertheless the possibility of naming.

In order to speak (of) the Unnamable, we -- through the forces of grammar -- have assigned It a certain identity, a certain presence in space and time. But we must be wary (and aware) of this grammatical custom and recall that *différance* defers as it differentiates. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida writes,

> Differer in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of 'desire' or 'will,' and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. (MP 8)

The narrator of *The Unnamable* engages in endless storytelling to "pass the time" (T 358), endlessly waiting for the end: "...the attempt must be made, in the old stories

---

[9]Beckett's use of the word "foil" invites an interesting correlation between The Unnamable and Derrida's theories. Rodolphe Gasché, in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, informs us that the tain of a mirror, "refers to the tinfoil, the silver lining, the lustreless back of the mirror" (6). Derrida's philosophy, Gasché contends, "is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play" (6). The unnamable, as "foil" has a similar function as that which has no "place" and yet is the possibility of reflection.

incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere,...the story of the silence that he never left" (T 380). The Unnamable "I" is in a constant "state" of deferral: "there I am far again, there I am the absentee again...he's the one to be sought, the one to be" (T 380). Although the narrator desires to arrive at the end of his "story," this very attempt postpones this arrival:

> And the simplest therefore is to say that what
> I say, what I shall say, if I can, relates to
> the place where I am, to me who am there, in
> spite of my inability to think of these, or to
> speak of them, because of the compulsion I am
> under to speak of them...(T 276)

In the attempt to speak of the Unnamable's "place," arrival is always relegated to the unattainable future or past through the play of language. This deferral is not active; but, neither is it passive. "We must consider," Derrida cautions, "that in the usage of our language the ending -*ance* remains undecided *between* the active and passive" (MP 9, Derrida's emphasis). The Unnamable is the effecting cause and causal effect of language itself. Hence, when we speak of It as a *thing*, as a "what," we do so only provisionally. As Derrida contends, "Being has never had a 'meaning,' has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings" (MP 22). All pronouns, in *The Unnamable* must be qualified:

> ...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...our
> concern is with someone, or our concern is with
> something, now we're getting it, someone or
> something that is not there, or that is not anywhere,
> or that is there, here, why not, after all, and
> our concern is with speaking of that, but there it
> is, you can't speak of that, no one can speak of
> that, you speak of yourself, someone speaks of
> himself... (T 372)

The Unnamable, as *différance*, is not "this, that or the other

thing" -- It is no *thing*. The Unnamable does not exist, not

even as a character in the fictional domain -- it cannot be

found in Beckett's text and yet it belongs to *all* texts, all

textual effects.

Now, the space-time of *The Unnamable* (as text), and the

Unnamable (as absent presence) may be explored with respect to

the "concept" of *différance*. We have already suggested that

the space-time of the Unnamable is that of a deferred

presence, but this requires further investigation with respect

to Beckett's text. To begin (or rather, "to go on"), let us

examine the very question of beginning. Where does *The

Unnamable* begin? Here, so to speak:

> Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I,
> say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call
> them that. Keep going, going on, call that going,
> call that on. Can it be that one day, off it goes
> on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where,
> instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend
> day and night as far away as possible, it wasn't
> far. Perhaps that is how it began. (T 267)

The Unnamable begins without a beginning, questioning the very

possibility of beginning. This "story" does not merely begin *in media res*, in the conventional sense; *The Unnamable* is an anti-story, a prolonged meditation within the middle of things. The narrator seeks the beginning, but "goes on." The novel begins and ends by going on, without beginning, without ending: "The best would be not to begin. But I have to begin. That is to say I have to go on" (T 268). Yet the "fact" that The Unnamable is "here" and "now" presupposes a beginning, an origin which is attributed to the figure of Worm:

> And yet it seems to me I remember, and shall
> never forget, what I was like when I was he,
> before all became confused. But that is of
> course impossible, since Worm could not know
> what he was like, or who he was, that's how they
> want me to reason. And it seems to me too, which
> is even more deplorable, that I could become
> Worm again, if I were left in peace. (T 323)

Worm, as the absolute beginning-end of space-time, is conceived by the Unnamable's active/passive production as *différance*. The present (Here-Now-ness) can never be presented. In being re-presented, it is always already the past. The future is postponed, the past is re-collected. How does one find the origin of the "now" except through a past which is ever becoming "dreadfully ancient"? While the absolute present is always passing, such a passing is *written* in literature. The narrator informs us quite precisely of this past-ness: "what I say, what I may say, on this subject...of me and my abode, has already been said, since, having always

been here, I am here still" (T 276). Writing is always already the inscription of the past. Language exposes the impossibility of presen(t)(ce). This is why, in *The Unnamable*, each utterance produces a new fiction (Mahood/Worm), a fiction that re-presents the present as that which has already happened. Now has always already slipped into then. Mark Taylor, with reference to the writings of Levinas, explains the time-space of writing this way:

> This transcendent "beyond" is *radically* other or "absolutely heteronomous." As a past that can never be re-collected, Levinas's other is an absolute exterior that cannot be interiorized. This other, which is forever beyond being and nonbeing, constitutes subjectivity. (Taylor 25)

Hence, the Unnamable cannot be named; for, in giving voice to itself, it becomes a fictional object. There-then-ness opposes, yet pro-poses, the Here-Now-ness which is always absent, completely other. "Literary space-time is a space without presence and a time without the present. This ungraspable space and incomprehensible time are the space and time of the other" (Taylor 29-30). The narrator of *The Unnamable* contends,

> These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little,

> sufficiently, I don't know how....But I have never
> been elsewhere, however uncertain the future. And
> the simplest therefore is to say that what I say
> ...relates to the place where I am, to me who am
> there...(T 276)

The Unnamable is "here" and "now," yet the written text, the force of language places it "there" and "then." The time-space of the Unnamable "I" is always elsewhere with respect to the multiple narrators. Each story is an attempt to speak the "I" of pure subjectivity: "I'll try in another present, even though it be not yet mine" (T 281). Nor will it ever be. Death -- the end of individual space-time -- is the "real silence;" a silence that the narrating "I" will never "hear."

We have seen how *The Unnamable* may be read as a textual exploration of the impossibility of presence. This presence is de-posited as the source or origin of the discourse. In both space and time, the absolute vocative or absolute narrator is displaced and deferred. When we refer to the origin or source, we assume the existence of a centre; however, the play of *différance* dislocates (actively and passively) the possibility of the absolute centre. The centre of a structure is presumed to be self-contained; "it is," claims Derrida, "the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible" (WD 279). This centre has been thought as that which governs the structure while escaping structurality. "The center is at the center of totality, and yet, since the

center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center" (WD 279, Derrida's emphasis). Hence, the centre can be thought of as inside and outside of the structure, as origin and end. To think the centre is to be caught in a double bind. For Derrida, the attempt to think about the structurality of structure created a "rupture" in the history of the concept of structure: "it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence" (WD 280). This central presence is then thought of as that "which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute" (WD 280).

The Unnamable can be read as a tortuous investigation into the structurality of structure, the desire -- and, ineluctably, a certain betrayal of that desire -- for an absolute centre. Worm, as we have noted, represents the absolute origin. This figure is posited as the beginning and end, as the Self, Origin, Truth, etc., which can never be presented: "Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace" (T 285). Strange, indeed; yet this very task, this very hope and

Aufgabe is the ground and goal of Western metaphysics.

The difficulty of "placing" the Unnamable derives from the difficulty of thinking the centre. In the attempt to assign itself a "place," the narrator proposes several hypotheses:

> Are there other pits, deeper down? To which one accedes by mine? Stupid obsession with depth. Are there other places set aside for us and this one where I am, with Malone, merely their narthex? (T 268)

Here, the deferral of the Unnamable is evident. Although there may be "places set aside," he and Malone are also in a place which is set aside (their narthex). Each position shifts the position of the others and no absolute, central position is possible. Yet, in an attempt to situate the source, the narrator, through the forces of language, assumes an existence at the centre, a central position for the Unnamable source of narration. The narrator claims that

> All is possible, or almost. But the best is to think of myself [my Self as Origin] as fixed and at the centre of this place, whatever its shape and extent may be. This is also probably the most pleasing to me....Hell itself, although eternal, dates from the revolt of Lucifer. It is therefore permissible, in the light of this distant analogy, to think of myself as being here forever, but not as having been here forever....I shall say therefore that our beginnings coincide, that this place was made for me, and I for it, at the same instant. (T 271-272)

The Unnamable, as the absent source of utterance, must be given a central position, yet this position, as centre, is

displaced because it is not part of the structure: it is both inside and outside of the structure. The narrator has been elsewhere (through the figures of Mahood and Worm) and yet these figures must have a source, a source (here) which is displaced by the narration. The narrating "I" is a supplement and that which it supplements -- the Unnamable -- is displaced. Hence, the narrator *is* at the centre only as a substitute for the absolute centre. "One can be," argues the narrator, "before beginning" (T 324). In other words, the narrator must 'receive' the ideas or voices from some source other than himself and yet this source is equally created by the narrator's discourse:

> 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? (T 326)

> I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust
> of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky
> for their dispersing. (T 355)

The words, the utterance drives the narrator to find the absolute source and each "I" that is encountered is a supplement to the absolute "I". Through the play of signifiers, the narrator assumes an origin (or signified) and attempts to situate this origin through various hypotheses. What do we make of all these hypotheses? Are any of them true? Do any of them speak the Unnamable? All that we can justifiably assert is that *The Unnamable* explores the

(im)possibility of presenting presence. If we read *The
Unnamable* as an attempt to write towards the centre
(beginning/end) of discourse, we arrive at the conclusion that
this attempt *fails*, utterly. We do not arrive at the end; for
in the end the narrator "can't go on" and yet, simultaneously,
"must go on" (T 381). We are left in the continuing aporia
with nowhere to go but "on" and no way of going.

WRITING AS FAILURE

But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
    To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again.
                              --Robert Browning

I can't forget, but I don't remember what.
                              --Leonard Cohen

    Why is Beckett's text a failed text? And why, then,
should we bother reading such a text? In order to address
these questions, let us first examine the possibility of
success, and what this possibility entails. In order to
measure the "success" of literature, we often assume some
understanding of the author's intention. We read with the hope
of arriving at the intended "meaning" of a text. As every
student of literature comes to realize, a text's "meaning" is
never absolute. The "meaning" is not something we extract from
a work, but something we *create* or compose through a reading

of that text. A reading is a type of dialogue between the text and the reading subject which produces "meaning". A text does not "mean" in and of itself. *The Unnamable* says the same thing, the same words, over and over, yet the "meaning" of these words is never absolute, never static. Each reading of a text is a failed reading in that we can never be certain of arriving at the "true meaning," whether that meaning is attributed to the author's intention, the society in which s/he writes, the unconscious impulses or countless other factors. As Paul de Man argues, each "insight" into a work of literature produces a "blindness." Something is always missing. And this is no less true of my own reading of *The Unnamable*. Nor is my reading "truer" because I am aware of the possibility of error. But I do not mention this as an apology for my own reading; rather, this very question of failure, of blindness, is thematized in *The Unnamable*.

The narrator often writes of a lesson to be learned, a pensum to be discharged and a task to be performed. What is this task of narration? Thus far, we have speculated that this task consists of saying the unsayable, naming the unnamable. But *why* is this considered an obligation? Why must the narration "go on" when it "can't go on"? What is it to go on with no hope of beginning or end? One method of understanding this obligation is through Heidegger's notion of

Besorgen (concern).

In his Heideggerian reading of Beckett's texts, Lance Butler points out that "care is the 'basic' difference between men and other things. Because man cares," Butler writes, "he is in the world" (Butler 29). Man's "being-in-the-world" is not the same as, say, a chair's: a chair does not *exist* in the sense that man does in that a chair has no temporal existence, no awareness of its situation as radically finite. To exist (ex-sistere: to stand out from), is to be "set over against [the] world not simply in the subject-object relation ...but also in a dynamic relationship that takes into account [the] past and [the] future" (Butler 14). Unlike a chair, humans are aware of their past embeddedness in time (facticity) and their future (possibility). As we discerned in the previous section, the time-space of existence has always already slipped into the past, into facticity, while the future is always already an unattainable possibility. The present, the "now" is *not* in that it *is* only in relation to memory and hope. Furthermore, the facticity of existence *limits* the possibility of a future existence. Although man has choice, his choices are limited by the facticity of his existence and this facticity conditions the possible. As Lance Butler explains,

> It is a fact that man cannot simply extend his
> arms and fly; and it is a fact that I cannot afford
> to hire a helicopter; which means that my
> possibilities of getting to the top of a building

> are limited to the stairs or the lift. In a sense
> this example shows how facticity is in the future --
> I must choose between the stairs or the lift by
> which I *shall* go up to the top of the building
> because I *shall* not be able to go up another way.
> But it is easier to think of this as belonging to
> the past: the building and all the conditions
> of getting to the top of it are already 'in
> position' before I make any choices. My situation
> is always already factical. (Butler's emphasis, 14-15)

In the "world" of literature, one might argue, the possibilities are endless. In *The Unnamable*, the narration may change from that of Mahood to Worm, from "I" to "he" to "they" to "you." The narrator may move from existing in a jar outside of a restaurant to being nowhere and nothing. But even in literature there are limits: these are the limits of language, the facticity of words. All that we are, we are through the limits of language. Language is our means of knowing, of understanding. It is through language that we "know" of our past and contemplate our future. The possibility of language is always already dependant upon its facticity: language precedes us. Just as we are limited by the fact that we cannot fly, we are limited by our means of understanding ourselves and the world. Just as I have no choice in the fact that my arms prevent me from flying, I equally have no choice in the fact that I am a product and producer of language. If I wish to ascend the building, I must take the lift or use the stairs; if I wish to communicate, to understand, I must use

some form of language. De Man -- whose complex relationship with Heidegger extends back to his earliest academic essays -- contends that "the way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not...made by me...[and]...if we obey the law, if we function within language...there can be no intent; there may be an intent of meaning, but there is no intent in the purely formal way in which we will use language independently of the sense or the meaning" (RT 87).

Heidegger's notion of *Besorgen* (concern) is, I think, necessarily tied in with facticity and possibility, and therefore, with language. According to Butler's reading of Heidegger, concern *is* existence. Just as the chair does not exist, the chair does not *care*. Whatever one does to the chair, it cannot "care." One could argue that man, too, may "not care" but this indifference is *ontologically* different than that of the chair. Not caring is man's *reaction* to something and this reaction is based on his existence *as* "care". Butler contends that

> because man cares he exists. That is to say,
> because I 'care' I can project myself into
> my possibilities. Tables [and chairs] have
> no possibilities, no future, no existence. And
> because man cares there is facticity. That is
> to say, my world and my existence inevitably
> already include the factical, and the factical
> only *is* factical because I can care about it.
> Care, in other words, is the basic condition for
> there being such a thing as Dasein [Being-There]

existing in a factical world. (Butler's emphasis, 29) Heidegger's *Besorgen* should not be confused with our usual sense of "caring" as that of kindness. A person may not care at all, but this not caring is a result of existence, an existence wherein "care is the 'basic' difference between men and other things" (Butler 29).

How, then, does Heidegger's *Besorgen* relate to our reading of the task, lesson and pensum so often referred to in the narration of *The Unnamable*? Firstly, we might simply argue, with Butler, that "Beckett must be working within the framework of something like care" in the sense that all literature is concerned with existence, with Dasein (Butler 29). But how is 'care' explicitly emphasized and thematized in *The Unnamable*? In his Heideggerian reading of Beckett, Butler argues that 'care' is emphasized in the compulsion to speak (or write). The narrator of *The Unnamable* strives to reach the silence, to end, and yet the narration "must go on." But surely, we might argue, if he wishes to stop speaking, he need only fall silent. According to Butler's reading, such objections to the narrator's inability "are too obvious not to have been considered and dismissed as irrelevant" (30). Such objections "have no force" (30) on the ontological plane:

> Being-there already means being involved with.
> Dasein *is* care. Not prescriptively, of course;
> that is where we make our mistake when we try
> to 'explain' the 'obligation to express'. It is

> not a prescriptive law 'handed down', it is a
> descriptive law, like gravity. Man is obliged to
> care by being man and this is symbolized in
> literature by the obligation to express.
> (Butler 30-31)

Although Butler's argument is convincing, my reading of *The Unnamable* suggests a "task" which is both descriptive *and* prescriptive. Or, rather, the de-scriptive obligation opens the possibility and the pursuit of the pre-scriptive agent of expressibility. This agent of expression has been given several "names" throughout this study: Self, Origin, Source, Subject, Being etc., yet this possibility of expression is unnamable in that it cannot be located, it does not exist. Literature does not merely "symbolize" the obligation to express, it expresses the obligation to re-present something; something which is always absent. Ian Balfour writes: "[O]ne...has to recognize that before language means, language *promises* meaning" (Balfour 44). For Balfour, *pace* De Man[10], this is "the law of language" (44). The narration "must go on" even though it "can't go on" and it "can't go on" because it "must go on". In other words, the obligation is both prescriptive and descriptive. It "goes on" even when the pen is lifted from the page, when the last page is printed, because language both precedes and exceeds the text. Hence,

---

[10]De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), esp. pp 246-277.

the "obligation" to speak implies that there is something to say, a meaning to be found: "...I have to say, when I speak, Who speaks, and seek, and so on and similarly for all the other things that happen to me and for which someone must be found..." (T 360). The words precede the "I" who speaks but it is only through the speaking "I" that the words are given utterance, given meaning: "I go on as best I can, if it begins to mean something I can't help it" (T 368). Although the narrator claims that "no one compels [him]" to speak, the facticity of language ("it's an accident, a fact" [T 288]), keeps the discourse going.

The "meaning" of the Unnamable is always absent, always deferred. The narrator, in seeking his "lesson" seeks the words which will put an end to all discourse. He has an obligation to express the unexpressable source of narration. The fact that the discourse "must go on" implies that the narrator has failed. But what does this failure imply? Why write (about) the inability to finish writing?

One method of understanding the impossible task of narration may be found in Derrida's arguments concerning the ways in which "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (WD 284). In an analysis of Levi-Strauss's discourse, Derrida examines the concept of the *bricolage*, where he contends that all discourse is *bricoleur*. Levi-

Strauss deploys the idea of the *bricoleur* as "someone who uses 'the means at hand,' that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him," yet is prepared to abandon or manipulate such "tools" whenever necessary (WD 285). We can see such a method being adopted in *The Unnamable*, wherein the narrator must use "others' words" (T 355) in order to arrive at the "unimaginable, unspeakable" origin or "exordia" [beginning of discourse]. There is always a "certain confusion in the exordia" (T 277) because the narrator is unable to present (and *name*) the "engineer" of the *bricoleur*. Derrida contends that

> if one calls *bricolage* the necessity of
> borrowing one's concepts from the text of
> a heritage which is more or less coherent
> or ruined, it must be said that every
> discourse is *bricoleur*. The engineer...should
> be the one to construct the totality of his
> language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense
> the engineer is a myth. A subject who supposedly
> would be the absolute origin of his own discourse
> and supposedly would construct it "out of nothing"
> ... would be the creator of the verb, the verb
> itself. The notion of the engineer who supposedly
> breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore
> a theological idea; and since Levi-Strauss tells
> us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the
> odds are that the engineer is a myth produced
> by the *bricoleur*. (WD 285)

We shall return to the question of theology later, but for now, Derrida's reading of Levi-Strauss may help us to understand why the failure of *The Unnamable* is an unavoidable failure which results from the nature of finite language. For

Levi-Strauss, a myth lacks a center in the sense that "the absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author" (WD 287). But, as we have argued above, *all* discourse can be read as lacking a centre, and *The Unnamable* repeatedly reaffirms this lack. The narrator continually remembers the forgotten element of discourse, yet is unable to re-member it as presence, as totalization: the centre is always already substituted by the narrator himself who marks the centre's absence ("It all boils down to a question of words, I must not forget this" [T 308]). Hence, totalization is impossible, not because the field of language is too large but because of the very nature of the field itself:

> If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is
> not because the infiniteness of a field cannot
> be covered by a finite glance or a finite
> discourse, but because the nature of the field --
> that is, language and a finite language -- excludes
> totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*,
> that is to say, a field of finite substitutions
> only because it is finite, that is to say, because
> instead of being an inexhaustible field...there is
> something missing from it: a center which arrests
> and grounds the play of substitutions.(WD 289)

In *The Unnamable*, the sign (narrator) which replaces the centre (the unnamable) is a supplement: "The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function" (WD 289). In

Beckett's text, we can see how the supplement serves to displace totalization, not because the discourse *increases* with each supplementary "character," but because of the nature of the field in which it "plays":

> ...they can find nothing, nothing else to say
> but the thing that prevents them from finding,
> they'd do better to think of what they're saying,
> at least to vary its presentation....(T 344)

Each "vice-exister" adds to the discourse while simultaneously replacing the absent signified, the absolute "I". "Nothing," claims the narrator, "can lessen what remains to say" (T 288). As Derrida contends, "The *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*" (WD 290, Derrida's emphasis).

When we consider the nature of language, we come to understand how the origin is "conceived" as an idea, but never *born* as presence: "...I shall never get born, having failed to be conceived" (T 324). "Come into the world unborn, abiding there unliving, with no hope of death, epicentre of joys, of griefs, of calm..." (T 318). The centre is always already the epi-centre, signifying a centre which is always absent, always displaced, always supplementary ("epi" - over, above, in addition to). The attempt to arrive at the end of discourse *must* fail: "I am doing my best, and failing again, yet again. I don't mind failing, it's a pleasure, but I want to go

silent" (T 284). The desire to end, to go silent ("Not as just now...but peacefully, victorious, without ulterior object" [T 284]) is the desire to arrive at the end of speech, the end of language. In other words, it is the desire the *name* the centre, the "key-word to the whole business" (T 339). This "key-word" is a variable key, impossible to locate. The words uttered do not permit access to the Unnamable, they simultaneously lock as they open, so to speak. Hence, "the search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue" (T 274). In this way, the "obligation, once rid of them [the supplements], to begin again" (T 277) may be understood as *descriptive* as a result of the play of language. Each supplement is further supplemented. Yet the play of language, when viewed as a *loss* of the centre, implies the *loss* of a *prescriptive* agent for which (whom?) the search "goes on". The infinite play of language is the basis of the possibility of an origin or centre and yet it marks the impossibility of *presenting* this centre. The narrator laments,

> ...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, for one
> bereft of purpose, not to look forward to his end,
> and bereft of all reason to exist, back to a time
> he did not. (T 354)

Reason, or language, compels us to seek an origin and an end

which reason simultaneously forbids us to present, to name. We "must go on," yet to continue *without* reason is too difficult; hence we "can't go on."

Beckett's text is a *failed* text in the special sense that *all* texts fail to present a centre; hence the continuing discourse. Unlike many texts, *The Unnamable* writes (of) this failure: a failure which implies an infinite play of discourse. Derrida argues that

> play is always play of absence and presence, but
> if it is to be thought radically, play must be
> conceived of before the alternative of presence
> and absence. Being must be conceived as presence
> or absence on the basis of the possibility of play
> and not the other way around. (WD 292)

Play, then, is the possibility of interpretation, of meaning. Yet this "meaning" is never static, never whole. The centre, in the words of Yeats, "cannot hold"; *things*, presences, "fall apart." In the conclusion of his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play," Derrida proposes two interpretations of interpretation:

> The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering
> a truth or an origin which escapes play and the
> order of the sign, and which lives the necessity
> of interpretations as an exile. The other, which
> is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms
> play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism,
> the name of man being the name of that being
> who, throughout the history of metaphysics or
> of ontotheology...has dreamed of full presence,
> the reassuring foundation, the origin and the
> end of play. (WD 292)

Can we escape the "nostalgic, guilty...side of the thinking of play" (WD 292) wherein the centre is conceived as a *loss*?

Does *The Unnamable* overcome the nostalgia for an origin or does it celebrate its demise? These are the questions which provoke the (non)theological reading of *The Unnamable* which I propose in the final chapter of this study: a reading which, I hope to convince, is a response and a complement to the (im)possibilities of the play of language.

CHAPTER THREE: Praising No One

PSALM

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.

With our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which sang
over, O over
the thorn.

                    --Paul Celan

Let us retrace our steps. In Chapter One of this study, I have attempted a reading of *The Unnamable* based on the play of language, especially the deictical language of literature which calls into question the certainty of subject. As we have seen, Beckett's text can be read as a continual search for the "lost" or absent origin of expression. This origin may be interpreted in several ways: as the absolute Self, Being, Other, Presence, Ground, etc., but we further discovered that this ground's possibility is unnamable because it is (dis)placed through the play of language. In Chapter Two, The Unnamable of Beckett's text has been compared with the Derridean "concept" of *différance* which may be understood as both "producer" and "product" (both active and passive) of difference and differentiation. And we have thought through the implications of the "task," wherein the infinite play of finite language results in a failure to end, to totalize. We also noted, in passing, that "the notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is...a theological idea" (WD 285), a myth produced by the *bricoleur*. This is the thread I now wish to pursue: a thread which has been dangling, as it were, from my textual material thus far.

Throughout this study, the name "God" has been conspicuously absent. Or has it merely been displaced? To what

do we refer when we speak of presence, ground, origin or self?
We refer to concepts which are made possible, yet impossible
to present, through the play of language. In our attempts to
fix an origin and an end, we seek a meaning for existence
(whether this existence is fictional or "real"). We seek a
creator or author, and in our attempts to understand our
existence, we seek to understand this author's (or Author's)
intention. In other words, the idea of totalization is a
theological idea. As Kevin Hart contends

> We do not need 'God' in a discourse for it
> to be 'theological' in Derrida's sense; all
> we need is something which *functions* as an
> agent of totalisation, and that can be
> 'man', 'Being', 'substance',...'Form' and so
> forth. (Hart's emphasis, 32)

The term 'theological' implies a *desire* for totality; hence,
a discourse which resists totalisation could be read as 'non-
theological'. For Derrida, all metaphysical language is
synonymous with theological language in that it marks the
desire for presence, for an Absolute centre. But does
Derrida's "concept" of différance imply that God is an *effect*
of the trace, of language's play? Not necessarily; rather, it
implies that the *concept* of God is an effect of the trace.
This is an important distinction. May *The Unnamable* be read as
a discourse which denies totalisation and yet affirms *faith* in
God?

Since we have shown the correlation between Derrida's

"concept" of *différance* and The Unnamable, we must be wary of assuming the possibility of presenting any agent of totalization. Yet, Kevin Hart argues that

> if deconstruction puts into question all systematic knowledge of the highest being and affirms the play of the groundless in the positing of any ground, then it is in point of fact close to the reflections of many mystical theologians. There may be no thematic link between deconstruction and mystical theology, but there may well be a structural link, in that mystical theology might be a mode of deconstruction. (Hart 45)

With this argument in mind, I want to examine the possibility of reading *The Unnamable* as an allegory of the *via negativa* or the negative way towards union with God. I also hope to suggest, in the process, the ways in which the language of negative theology and Derridean deconstruction are homologous.

SPEAKING AS RESPONSE-ABILITY

Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only
saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them
off the ground; yet they kept on, impossibly,
kneeling and didn't notice at all:
so complete was their listening. Not that you could endure
God's voice -- far from it.
> --Rainer Maria Rilke,
> from "The First Elegy"

In much of this study, we have confronted the limits of
language as revealed in *The Unnamable*. The absolute "I" cannot
be named, cannot be manifested through the narration. Although
many attempts are made to speak of his (unnamable) Self, the
narrator only succeeds in creating further fictions. The
centre and end of the discourse cannot be located. The play of
language posits a subject or centre while simultaneously
concealing this centre with a supplement. This supplement acts
as both a replacement *and* an addition to this absent centre.
The field of language is a finite and limited field, a field
where that which arrests and grounds the *infinite* play of
substitutions is missing; yet, in speaking of limits, we must
note that limits are not ends. Once the narrator of *The
Unnamable* reaches his limit -- and he does this throughout the
text -- he is yet unable to come to an end. He "ends" by going
on. This going on is posited as an obligation to speak and, as
we discerned, this obligation arises out of the facticity of
language. The words which the narrator uses have always

already preceded him. We may read the narrator's task as that of naming the origin of discourse, but this origin is not, necessarily, the narrating "I" of *The Unnamable*. Or, at least, this "I" could represent something other than the speaking subject. The narrator suggests another possibility:

> Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice,
> it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation
> has been swallowed, that I should interpret it
> as an obligation to say something. But is it
> possible?....That seems a reasonable assumption.
> But thence to infer that the something required
> is something about me suddenly strikes me as
> unwarranted. Might it not rather be the praise
> of my master, intoned, in order to obtain his
> forgiveness? (T 285)

"The voice," endlessly murmuring, could be the voice of the "master." Or, at least, this voice compels the narrator to say "something that is not to be found in all [he has] said up to now" (T 285). Something is left unsaid within the discourse. Each saying, it seems, is an unsaying, an inability to speak and an inability to stop speaking. In order to explicate this passage, it might be helpful to turn to Mark Taylor's remarks on language and responsibility.

In his reading of Derrida's essay on negative theology, Taylor speaks of the "lack" which is always revealed within language. We have discussed this "lack" as the unfulfilled possibility of presence and centre in our discussion of *différance* and the play of language. From this, we discerned that the narrator's obligation to speak is both descriptive

and prescriptive. Although the narrator contends that "no one compels [him]...to speak" and that "nothing can ever exempt [him] from it," this "nothing" suggests a force of some kind (T 288). The play of language simultaneously permits the possibility of a centre while forbidding its manifestation. This centre is "nothing" but seems to have a "place" in the discourse none the less. In Taylor's words, "language is constituted by *not saying* the trace. Such not saying," he contends, "is necessary rather than contingent" (Taylor 4). That which is not said, which cannot be said, compels us to speak. "Language," Taylor notes, "implies a debt that entails an impossible responsibility" (Taylor 5). The narrator of *The Unnamable* goes on speaking as a response to this "call" of language, or "the voice" (and we must keep in mind the narrator's contention that "all this business about voices requires to be revised, corrected and then abandoned" [T 308]). Derrida contends that "at the moment when the question 'how to avoid speaking?' arises, it is already too late....Language has started without us, in us and before us" (HAS 27). Although the narrator of *The Unnamable* wishes to stop speaking, he cannot avoid speaking: the voice goes on. The narrator of *The Unnamable* strives to respond to this voice, even if he has to respond with "their language" (T 299). "For beyond them," claims the narrator, "is that other

who will not give me quittance until they have abandoned me as inutilizable and restored me to myself....But who is he, if my guess is right, who is waiting for that, from me?" (T 304). This is the very question we must address: "Who is he?" To whom may we attribute this "voice" which is not a voice? Who is speaking?

Throughout *The Unnamable*, the narrator informs us that he is listening, listening. To what *is* he listening? And for what purpose? This voice is "heard" when the narrator is involved with speech, with language; yet as soon as he attempts to concentrate on this voice, it seems to fade away:

> For if I could hear such a music at such a
> time, I mean while floundering through a
> ponderous chronicle of moribunds in their
> courses, moving, clashing, writhing or fallen
> in short-lived swoons, with how much more
> reason should I not hear it now, when supposedly
> I am burdened with myself alone. (T 282-283)

The voice, it seems, is both the product and producer of language. While telling the stories of Mahood and Worm, the narrator hears this voice and yet this voice does not issue from himself so much as from that which he narrates. And it is language, not simply noise, through which this voice murmurs. The narrator wonders if "it would not be better" merely to utter "babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true function of this venerable organ" from which this "music" emanates, but concludes that he must "speak, speak" in order

to reach the "real silence" (T 283). The play of language simultaneously reveals and conceals "the voice". Yet, paradoxically, this voice is often said to vanish when the discourse begins, when another story unfolds.

Hélène Baldwin, in her mystical reading of *The Unnamable*, contends that the voice is Beckett's, to which the "characters" listen and respond. Consequently, Beckett's "voice" is usurped by the voice of his creatures, his fictions. But Baldwin goes on to argue that "the narrator speaks of his master (obviously Beckett) in terms which are analogous to those we use of God" (Baldwin 72). This idea of "the voice" is suggestive of a "divine calling." On a secular level, we might contend that such a calling is that of the creative impulse, the obligation to create. Yet, if Beckett is the creator, could we not read *The Unnamable* as an allegorical representation of humankind's relation to God the Creator? Could the discourse of the narrator be read as a discourse concerning the search for God? The question remains: from where does this inspiration, this obligation to speak emanate? One hypotheses is that of "the master" and this suggests the possibility of a divine voice:

> My master then, assuming he is solitary, in my
> image, wishes me well, poor devil, wishes my
> good, and if he does not seem to do very much
> in order not to be disappointed it is because
> there is not very much to be done, or, better
> still, because there is nothing to be done,

> otherwise he would have done it, my great and
> good master....(T 286)

> I want all to be well with you, do you hear me,
> that's what he keeps dinning at me. To which I
> reply, in a respectful attitude, I too, your
> Lordship....No, we have no conversation, never a
> mum of his mouth to me. (T 287)

The narrator creates a fictional discourse based upon this
voice which he is unable to understand and yet admits that no
such conversation takes place between them. The narrator longs
for direction, which is forever concealed from him:

> He is capable of wanting me to be happy, such
> a thing has been known, it appears. Or to serve
> a purpose. Or the two at once! A little more
> explicitness on his part, since the initiative
> belongs to him, might be a help, as well from his
> point of view as from the one he attributes to me.
> Let the man explain himself and have done with it.
> It's none of my business to ask him questions,
> even if I knew how to reach him. (T 287)

That which "is known" is merely appearance, never certain. The
narrator contends that if he does have a task to perform, he
should be informed of its nature; not only for his own good,
but for the good of his master as well. A reasonable request.
Yet, the narrator seeks this presence, not in order to offer
praise but blame as well. The Creator of such uncertainty
should be viewed as a criminal:

> Passing by at the right distance, the right
> level, say once a month, that's not exorbitant,
> full face and profile,like criminals. It might
> even pause, open its mouth, raise its eyebrows,
> bless its soul, stutter, mutter, howl, groan and
> finally shut up....That would be nice. A presence
> at last. (T 333)

A presence at last! Yet a presence which may only be imagined and anticipated, made manifest in the hopes that it may "finally shut up" and leave the narrator in peace.

The voice, simply by being "heard," compels the narrator to imagine a speaker; a speaker to whom the narrator has never spoken and who is ignorant of the narrator's existence. The voice is *not* imagined, it is there within the discourse; yet the speaker or source is unspeakable, unapproachable through language. As Taylor argues, "the subject's responsibility is actualized in response-ability, that is, in the ability to respond to the provocation of the other" (Taylor 6).

If we attribute this voice to divine intervention -- God's calling, so to speak -- we encounter complications. If the source of the call is impossible to find, how are we to respond? In *The Unnamable*, the narrator responds to this voice through the language of aporia, of utter undecidability. On the one hand, the voice *is* the voice of the other and, as such, demands recognition; on the other hand, this other is impossible to present and is only imagined or *effected* through the play of language. The narrator, as translator, must simultaneously listen *and* interpret. The narrator's task is to respond to "the voice" which is simultaneously heard and silenced when the narrator begins speaking.

The narrator's task, pensum and lesson may be compared

to Derrida's discussion of "the promise" in his essay, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," to which I referred above. This essay serves a two-fold purpose for my argument: Derrida "speaks" about both the (im)possibility of speaking as well as the relationship between deconstruction and negative theology. Mark Taylor notes that Derrida's argument consists in saying the "not-saying" which is always already implicit in the act of speech. "This saying *without* saying," Taylor writes, "is an unsaying that is, in effect, the denegation of language" (Taylor's emphasis, 4). This "denegation" both negates and augments the promise implicit within speech. The narrator of *The Unnamable* is unable to recite the lesson which is simultaneously promised and retracted within the act of speaking. He laments, "Let them put into my mouth at last the words that will save me, damn me, and no more talk about it" (T 339). The act of speaking both saves and damns him: his "crime is [his] punishment" (T 339). In other words -- and, as the narrator notes, "they like other words" (T 336) -- the narrator promises to speak the unnamable, and yet this promise is rendered impossible through the play of language. He must use words to say that which words prevent him from saying, hence the promise is never met. The narrator advises us to "evoke at painful junctures, when discouragement threatens to raise its head, the image of a vast cretinous

mouth,...extruding indefatigably,...the words that obstruct it" (T 359). This painful juncture is the place where the voice is joined with its source; painful in that this source is obstructed by the words which produce it. The source is promised and "presented" in its very absence just as a letter signifies the very absence of the sender. The narrator's search is a "supreme aberration" (T 354), an endless straying wherein the promise is never delivered to the right address. Or is this promise delivered to a different address? Can it be that in all that the narrator says, the not-saying has a destination of its own? We are informed that "what doesn't come to me from me has come to the wrong address" (T 322). All the discourse seems to "come to the wrong address," but where is the true origin and destination?

Mark Taylor's questions concerning Derrida's "promise" to speak about negative theology may be applied to our own investigation into the relationship between the study of language and theology. With Taylor, we must ask, "What if 'fulfilling' a promise means not fulfilling it? What if to talk or write 'directly' is to talk or write indirectly?" (Taylor 1). What if the narrator of *The Unnamable* fulfils his promise by being unable to fulfil it? What would be the result of a fulfilment of this promise? With these questions in mind, let us now return to a reading of *The Unnamable* as a

negative(ly) theological discourse.

THE NAMEABLE AND UNNAMABLE GOD(S)

The only excuse for God is that he doesn't exist.
                                        --Stendhal

It is easier to raise a shrine than bring a deity
down to haunt it.
                    --*The Unnamable*

To begin this investigation, we should re-examine Derrida's "concept" (which, as we noted, is not a concept) of *différance*, which opens the possibility of a negative (or deconstructive) theological reading of *The Unnamable*. *Différance*, we noted, must be thought of as "prior" to presence and absence: "Being," cautions Derrida, "must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around" (WD 292). Likewise, "God" "must be conceived as presence or absence" in the same way. Elsewhere, Derrida contends that "language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls god, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary to speak" (HAS 27). For Derrida, God is a metaphysical concept produced, both actively and passively, by *différance*. This leads us to ask if that which exceeds and precedes us is similar to the Unnamable or, is the Unnamable that which opens

the possibility of concepts such as "God"? Are "God" and the "Unnamable" comparable on an allegorical level of reading?

The Unnamable, as an allegorical discourse, is suggestive of a quest for the Absolute through negation and denial. In *Trespass of the Sign*, Kevin Hart argues that "the deconstruction of metaphysics is accomplished in showing that the ground of metaphysical discourse is linked systematically to a non-ground, held to be *prior* to the ground" (103, Hart's emphasis). As we have seen, *The Unnamable* also shows that the ground of its discourse ("I"/"Mahood") is linked systematically to a non-ground ("not-I"/"Worm"), which is held to be prior to the ground. We must be wary, however, of assuming that a negation is equivalent to a "non-ground". As we have seen, a deconstructive reading of metaphysics reveals how *both* positive and negative statements are linked through the play of *différance*. Hart goes on to contend that "a non-metaphysical theology would accordingly be one which would show that metaphysics obliges us to take God as a ground; it would uncover a sense in which God could be apprehended as a non-ground; and it would show that the conceptions are systematically related" (Hart 104). Both ground and non-ground are "conceptions" which are related by *différance*. Using Hart's discussion of negative theology as a paradigm, we may investigate *The Unnamable* as a non-metaphysical theological

allegory.

How does "God" comes into a reading of *The Unnamable*? Although such readings seem counter-intuitive, given the attenuated worlds of Beckett's fiction, many critics have read Beckett's texts theologically, examining the religious allusions or direct references to God. Harold Bloom's reading of Beckett centres upon gnostic theology, while Hélène Baldwin argues that Beckett's work symbolizes the mystical quest for divine union with God. Richard Coe, in his essay "God and Samuel Beckett," contends that Beckett's universe is "precariously balanced between opposing forces -- between positive and negative -- and whenever we examine the structure too attentively, positive and negative quietly cancel each other out and leave a Void" (Coe 91). These readings, although not explicitly stated, may be related to the strategies of both negative theology and deconstruction. I believe that the deconstructive strategies outlined in the preceding chapters may help us to understand why Beckett's texts invite such a negatively theological reading and why such a reading is suggested or promised, yet remains undecided, in *The Unnamable*.

It is important to note that the unsaid -- the deferred promise or task -- is as important as the said. Richard Coe's reading offers insight into both the said and the unsaid.

There is a radical difference between the concept(ion)s of God and the God which Beckett's characters strive to "know". In a universe where humans are unable to know themselves, Coe contends that the God of Beckett's texts is unforgivable. And His cruelty comes not merely from His existence, but from His non-existence as well: "If He does not exist, whose fault is it? Not man's, certainly; therefore God's," Coe argues; "God is unforgivable" (Coe 93). Yet Coe goes on to note that, nevertheless, Beckettian characters do *seek* God. They are, in fact, "God-obsessed" and *The Unnamable* is certainly no exception to such readings. This search for the "Void of their inner selves," may be read as a search for "some sort of correlation between this microcosmic self and the macrocosm outside themselves" (Coe 106). In seeking the absolute "I" of narration, the narrator is seeking the absolute "I" ("I am I") of creation: the "I" that is present to itself, whose discourse is delivered "from me to me" rather than to the "wrong address." If "all scripture is inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16), then God is the absolute beginning of all discourse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Let us recall Derrida's description of the engineer: "A subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse...*would be the creator of the verb, the verb itself*"

(WD 285, my emphasis). The engineer, therefore, is a theological idea. The engineer precedes and invents language.

The Unnamable, if read as a search for the origin of discourse, is a theological text. Yet, this text is also non-theological in that it resists totalization: the origin is never presented, remains unnamed. *The Unnamable* is, therefore, theological *as text*, yet non-theological in its resistance to totalization. We are never certain of the source. We have seen how Beckett's text is comparable to the deconstructive strategies of Derrida; now, I want to examine how this text is comparable to the deconstructive strategies of the negative theologians.

In its negative rhetoric, the description of Worm is comparable to the negative theologians' description of God. The figure of Worm is approached, in *The Unnamable*, through apophasis, the trope of denial. As Kevin Hart notes, apophasis also names the way to God through the process of negation. In the discourse of negative theology, God is approached through a denial of all positive statements describing the Absolute. For example, in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, "God" is "described" according to what It is not:

> It is not substance, nor is it eternity or
> time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding
> since It is neither knowledge nor truth. It is
> not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one
> nor oneness, divinity nor goodness....It falls
> neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor

> of being. Existing beings do not know it as
> it actually is and it does not know them as
> they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name
> nor knowledge of it....(Pseudo-Dionysius 141)

As we may recall, Worm "cannot note," hear, speak nor move:
"The mistake they make," argues the narrator, "is to speak of
him as if he really existed" (T 342). In the attempts to
describe Worm, "they" bring him to life, although Worm
"abid[es] unliving" (T 318). And just as "they" cannot know
Worm, Worm is incapable of knowing "them" as well: The
narrator informs us that Worm's "strength" comes from the fact
"that he understands nothing, can't take thought, doesn't know
what they want, doesn't know they are there" (T 331). Although
Worm does not exist, the narrator realizes that to speak of
him is to "execute" him (and both senses of this word apply
here), just as Mahood is "executed" through the process of
description. Although the process of describing Worm is
similar to Pseudo-Dionysius' "description" of God, more
evidence is required in order to persuade us to read Worm as
representative of God.

Not only is the process of description reminiscent of a
theological discourse, but the actions of those who attempt to
"believe in him" lead us to conclude that Worm is involved in
"their" existence. The fact that "they describe him...without
knowing" leads the narrator to assume that "they need him" (T
331). Furthermore, we are told that "they" are praying,

"praying for Worm, praying to Worm, to have pity, pity on them, pity on Worm..." (T 333). The narrator claims that he "sometimes remembers what [he] was like when [he] was Worm" (T 322), but concludes that "that is of course impossible, since Worm could not know what he was like, or who he was" (T 323). Worm is described as the non-entity, the nothing which precedes the narrator and, as such, could be read as a god. But which god? Is Worm comparable to the "God" which the narrator seeks, or the one which he rejects? Ultimately, we must assume that Worm, as the very name connotes, becomes another "vice exister" which supplements the "true God".

As we noted in our earlier discussion of Worm, although the narrator attempts to describe Worm through negation, this act of description humanizes him, nonetheless. It is through the act of speaking about him, that that which is unnamable is able to be named Worm. As Richard Coe contends,

> to *name* God..., to define his attributes, to
> circumscribe his essential Not-Being as though it
> were a positive phenomenon which could be imprisoned
> in words and in the logic of time and space, is to
> distort the Absolute into a false-absolute,
> or pseudo-God, just as logic and language...create
> out of the ultimate self a "pseudo-self" called "I"
> or..."Mahood" or "Worm." (Coe 107)

The cruel facts of existence, the suffering and absurdity, argues Coe, "can only have been ordained by...a 'God' who is himself of the same element -- words -- and who understands what he is inflicting" (Coe 107). Worm is a concept of God,

described through words and thus, a reflection of humankind,
another "vice-exister," a lowly worm with respect to the True
God. "Vice," in this context, has a double meaning: both
depravity or serious fault as well as that which is in
succession to or in place of the true "exister". These two
meanings coincide in the figure of Worm in that he acts as a
supplement (vice) for the true exister and, as such, is a
pseudo-power. Worm is only given a place in the absence of a
"true God". Something is "prior" to such conceptions of God,
something which cannot be approached, even through the most
apophatic rhetoric: That which is unnamable and continually
promising that which is "on his way" (T 324):

> Agreed, agreed, I who am on my way, words
> bellying out my sails, am also that
> unthinkable ancestor of whom nothing can be
> said. But perhaps I shall speak of him some day,
> and of the impenetrable age when I was he, some
> day when they fall silent, convinced at last
> I shall never get born, having failed to be
> conceived. (T 324)

In all that is said, something remains unsaid. This remainder
is always already displaced and deferred: it is always on its
way and never arrives. The de-scription of Worm, as
nothingness, is a method of speaking "about" God (as creator)
and hence a failure. As Richard Coe contends, "that which is
a lie (and *all* words are lies) is unendurable" (Coe 107). The
narrator of *The Unnamable* asks, "how can you not tell a lie,
what an idea, a voice like this, who can check it, it tries

everything..."? (T 378). Something *worms* its way into and out of the discourse, which cannot be apprehended: something which has "come into the world unborn....Who seems the truest possession, because the most unchanging" (T 318). Worm represents that which remains unsaid, the non-saying which insinuates itself into the discourse.[11] Yet, in apprehending him, in attempting to speak of him, Worm no longer is:

> Yes, now that I've forgotten who Worm is, where he is I'll begin to be he...Quick, a place. With no way in, no way out, a safe place. Not like Eden. And Worm inside. Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing. Until the instant he hears the sound that will never stop. Then it's the end, Worm no longer is. We know it, but we don't say it, we say it's the awakening, the beginning of Worm, for now we must speak, and speak of Worm. It's no longer he, but let us proceed as if it were still he, he at last, who hears, and trembles, and is delivered over....
> (T 320)

Worm is that which is forgotten. In the attempt to remember this forgotten element which speaks through language, Worm becomes that which the name (in the very act of naming) connotes.

---

[11]The Oxford dictionary gives the following definitions for worm which are extremely suggestive for our discussion of *The Unnamable*:

as noun: 1. invertebrate limbless or apparently limbless slender burrowing or creeping animal, esp. segmented in rings or parasitic in intestines or tissues. 2. abject or insignificant or contemptible person.

as verb: 1. insinuate one*self* or oneself *into* (favour, person's confidence, etc.). 2. convey one*self*, progress, made one's way, with crawling motion. 3. draw (secret etc.) by crafty persistence *out* (*of* person) or *from* (person).

The narrator implicitly contends that the true "God" is, in the words of Coe, "an absolute-unnamable, whose reality is radically distorted as soon as a name or a concept is attached to him" (Coe 107). If we compare Coe's "de-scription" of Beckett's "God" to Derrida's "de-scription" of *différance*, the rhetoric is strikingly similar: Derrida contends that

> there is no *name* for it at all, not even the
> name of essence or of Being, not even that
> of *"différance*," which is not a name, which is
> not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly
> dislocates itself in a chain of differing and
> deferring substitutions. (MP 26)

Is Derrida's *différance* comparable to Beckett's Unnamable? And, if so, are they both comparable to the Unnamable God of the negative theologians? This requires further investigation.

At the end of Chapter Two, I deployed Derrida's two interpretations of interpretation, wherein "one seeks to decipher...an origin which escapes play" and the other "affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (WD 292). This is our point of return: how shall we interpret Beckett's *The Unnamable*? We have seen that the discourse may be read as seeking an origin which escapes the play of language; yet we may also see, in *The Unnamable*, an affirmation of play and an attempt to overcome human existence, or vice-existing. The narrator seems to seek a true exister, a "real" existence beyond the endless fictions in

which he finds (and loses) himself:

> Me, utter me, in the same foul breath as my
> creatures? Say of me that I see this, feel
> that, fear, hope, know and do not know? Yes,
> I will say it, and of me alone. (T 275)

All such saying suggests a non-saying, a denial of the ability
to speak (of) the Unnamable; yet such denials simultaneously
affirm the "presence" of the Unnamable implicit within
language. Something compels the narrator to speak and this
"something" begins to vanish or fade when speech "happens":

> And what it seemed to me I heard then, concerning
> what I should do, and say, in order to have
> nothing further to do, nothing further to say,
> it seemed to me I only barely heard it, because
> of the noise I was engaged in making elsewhere,
> in obedience to the unintelligible terms of an
> incomprehensible damnation. (T 282)

Such statements suggest that the Unnamable does not precede
and exceed language; rather, it is always already implicit
within language. The play of language produces the concept of
"God" and not the other way around. Such saying both affirms
the play of language while seeking that which may ground this
play.

In Chapters One and Two, we discerned that the Unnamable
is comparable to Derrida's "concept" of *différance* as a
threshold or tympan: in other words, this non-concept is
"prior" to all concepts but is not a concept itself. This
threshold is that which links and yet separates: the "fatal
concatenation" (T 323). Yet, to claim "priority" is not to

assume a position "before" language. As Kevin Hart notes, "*Différance* enables metaphysics yet disables the totalisation of a text by metaphysics" (Hart 230). The unnamable in *The Unnamable* may be read as that which enables the possibility of the concept "God," yet disables the totalisation of the discourse by such conceptions. Although Derrida contends that *différance* is unnameable, he cautions that

> this unnameable is not an ineffable Being
> which no name could approach: God, for
> example. This unnameable is the play which
> makes possible nominal effects, the relatively
> unitary and atomic structures that are called
> names, the chains of substitutions of names
> in which, for example, the nominal effects of
> *différance* is itself *enmeshed*, carried off,
> reinscribed, just as a false entry or a false
> exit is still part of the game, a function
> of the system. (MP 27)

If "God" is read as equal to the Unnamable as *différance*, then "God" only speaks through language: Language speaks the unspeakable. On an allegorical level, the Unnamable may be compared to "God" as that which cannot be said, as that which remains hidden behind the Word. The homology between deconstruction and negative theology is a rhetorical homology, where the discursive tactics are difficult to distinguish. *The Unnamable* presents a crossing of these two discourses which is highly suggestive of a faith in that which language proves to be impossible. *Différance*, as quasi-transcendental, functions as transcendental term in negative theology yet is claimed not

to be a transcendental term. *Différance* is a function or "place" which cannot be grounded outside of language; a "place" which reveals itself in texts but is never fully revealed as such because there is no such thing as "*différance* as such*" (Hart 124). As Kevin Hart notes, "one may hold that there *is* a God but that there is no *concept* of God to which one can appeal that can ground one's discourse about God or the world" (Hart 28). Likewise, there is no concept of *différance* that can ground one's discourse about *différance*. Deconstructive tactics enable us to glimpse "the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure" (G 14). Allegorically, *The Unnamable* signifies that which reveals itself by concealing itself in that which it is not. What this text signifies remains undecidable. These words of Augustine could very well be spoken by the narrator of *The Unnamable*: "Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God?...Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak; If I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say" (Augustine 10-11).

MAKING BELIEVE: CONCLUSIONS

Longing is the nameless, but this always seeks
precisely the Word.
                    -- Martin Heidegger,
                        "Lectures on *Philosophical Inquiries
                        into the Nature of Human Freedom*"

The two directions -- When we try to examine the
mirror in itself we discover...nothing but things
upon it. If we want to grasp the things we...get
hold of nothing but the mirror.
                    -- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*

What, then, do we do with Beckett's *The Unnamable*? How do
we speak of the unspoken, the unspeakable? Where is the
"place" of aporia -- which Derrida calls the "tropic of
negativity" (HAS 39) -- where positive and negative cancel
each other out and leave a void? Coe contends that Beckett's
philosophy

> is at bottom that of the mystic: *Credo quia
> impossibile est*; only he happens to be a
> rationalist for whom "the impossible" is not
> the alternative to a logic which has failed,
> but the inevitable conclusion of a logic which
> has succeeded. (Coe 112)

The logic of language succeeds by its very failure to present
the impossible; the impossible made possible through the play
of language. It is only by speaking that the impossible is
addressed by that which remains unsaid. "Impossible
situations," claims the narrator, "cannot be

91

prolonged,...either they disperse, or else they turn out to be possible after all" (T 332). But that which is impossible is that which keeps the discourse going: "I too have the right to be shown impossible" (T 345), claims the narrator, and he succeeds in "showing" this impossibility. The narrator struggles to fail ("I like failing, its a pleasure") in order to be proven impossible, so that he may believe. Language always already makes possible the impossible; produces the impossible through the play of *différance*. The narrator's assertion that "all is possible, or almost" (T 271), suggests that the "almost" is what keeps the discourse going. If all were possible then the discourse would come to an end, the "real silence" would be found. Although he longs for this "real silence," he realizes that such a promise is "invented" through the discourse. Language is the link between the possible and the impossible in *The Unnamable*.

Which brings us back to the question of faith. *The Unnamable* suggests a faith in "God;" a faith in that which is always on its way while simultaneously proving that such a possibility is rendered impossible. That which cannot be proven, which is left unsaid, is that which requires faith. To speak, to invent, to create, is to have faith. If we interpret "the voice" as that of the author, the self, God or the Absolute we assume the possibility of totalization. But, as we

have seen, such a totalizing presence is never manifested: it is impossible. Yet, "the moment one can say, Someone is on his way, all is well" (T 324). Only the impossible needs to be justified. All of Beckett's work hangs upon the word "perhaps". To decide, once and for all, is to end, to totalize, to finish[12]. Though the narrator of *The Unnamable* seeks the "real silence," it is the endless search which keeps him going on. "Can one be ephectic," asks the narrator, "otherwise than unawares?" (T 267). As soon as one decides to suspend judgement, a judgement has been made. The Unnamable represents that forgotten, unknowable, mysterious, unspeakable force of undecidability: the failure to totalize, the failure to end. When we re-examine the two interpretations of interpretation, we come to the realization that we cannot choose. This is not the same as *choosing* not to choose. In other words, the narrator of *The Unnamable can* be ephectic by proving the impossibility of choosing between two undecidable interpretations. As Derrida contends, "although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*" (WD 293). We

---

[12]Christ's last words upon the cross -- "It is finished"-- may be invoked here to suggest that, on a theological level, the narrator's desire to "finish" is a desire for union with God as the "real silence."

still seek a "reading" of Beckett's text. The impossibility of choosing is shown in the impossibility of reading Beckett's *The Unnamable* as either Text or Work: *The textual effects "promise" a Work while the Work resists totalization.*

"And in the meantime the conclusion to be drawn?" (T 327). All we are able to do is gather the threads which are woven through this reading of *The Unnamable*. We are presented with a tortuous investigation into the impossible, proven impossible through the logic of language. Mahood/Worm, I/not-I are linked through an unnamable voice which is not a voice. That which the narrator "knows" is always already unknown, unreachable and yet continually addressed through his discourse. The discourse fails to find the "key word," and yet the discourse goes on. In the attempt to name the unknown and unknowable remainder, the narrator must "build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another" (T 342). In his essay, "Différance," Derrida states, "What we know, or what we would know if it were simply a question here of something to know, is that there never has been, never will be, a unique word, a master-name" (MP 27). That much has been shown. But that which remains unsaid, that which remains absent should not be forgotten. There is, I believe, hope in *The Unnamable* in that which is shown impossible. This text remains undecidable. Let us give the last say -- to speak *as* the last -- to the

narrator of *The Unnamable*:

> I'm mute, what do they want, what have I done
> to them, what have I done to God, what have
> they done to God, what has God done to us,
> nothing, and we've done nothing to him, you can't
> do anything to him, he can't do anything to us,
> we're innocent, he's innocent, it's nobody's fault,
> what's nobody's fault, this state of affairs, what
> state of affairs, so it is, so be it, don't fret,
> so it will be...(T 355).

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

Augustine. *On Christian doctrine*. Trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1958.

Baldwin, Hélène L. *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981.

Barnstone, Willis, ed. *The Other Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1984.

Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. New York: Summit Books, 1990.

Balfour, Ian. "Promises, Promises: Social and Other Contracts in the English Jacobins (Godwin / Inchbald)." *New Romanticisms: Theory and Critical Practice*. Clark, David L and Goellnicht, Donald C eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming 1993.

Barker, Stephen. "Conspicuous Absence: *Trace* and Power in Beckett's Drama." *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Butler, Lance St John and Davis, Robin J., eds. New York: St Martin's Press, 1990. 181-206.

Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Harari, Josue ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979.

---. *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

Beckett, Samuel. *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. London: Picador, 1979. (T)

Bloom, Harold. "Introduction" to *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett's Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Bloom, Harold ed. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. 1-12.

Brogan, Walter. "The Original Difference: *Differance*." *Derrida and Differance*. Wood, David and Bernasconi, Robert eds. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

Budick, Sanford and Iser, Wolfgang eds. *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Butler, Lance St. John. *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being: A Study in Ontological Parable*. London: Macmillan, 1984.

Chase, Cynthia. *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979

---. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Universtiy of Minnesota Press, 1983.

---. *Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. (RT)

---. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. (RR)

Derrida, Jacques. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. Budick, Sanford and Iser, Wolfgang eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. pp 3-69. (HAS)

---. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The Universtiy of Chicago Press, 1982. (MP)

---. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Universtiy Press, 1976. (G)

---. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972. (P)

---. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The Universtiy of Chicago Press, 1978. (WD)

Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews.* Bouchard, Donald ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 113-188.

Hart, Kevin. *The trespass of the sign: Deconstruction, theology and philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Hegel, G.W.F. *The · Phenomenology of Mind.* Trans. J.B. Baillie. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity.* Second edition, revised. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

Moorjani, Angela. "Beckett's Devious Deictics." *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Butler and Davis, eds. New York: St Martin's Press, 20-30.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power.* Kaufmann, Walter ed. New York: Random House, 1968

O'Hara, J.D. ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works. Trans. Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Renner, Charlotte. "The Self-Multiplying Narrators of *Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable.*" *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett's Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable.* Bloom, Harold ed. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. 95-114.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness.* Trans. Hacel D. Barnes. London: Methuen University Paperback, 1969. (BN)

Steiner, George. *Martin Heidegger.* Chicago: The Universtity of Chicago Press, 1989.

Taylor, Mark C. ed. *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy. Chicago*: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

---. "Non-Negative Negative Atheology," *Diacritics* 20.4 (1990): 2-16.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.