

אוניברסיטת בר אילן
המחלקה לאנגלית
הצעת מחקר לתואר שני

אלוהים לסמואל בקט – קולו של הנביא

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022852149

המנחה: פרופ' וויליאם קולברנר

Bar Ilan University
The English Department
Thesis Proposal

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* – The Voice of the Prophet

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Submission date: July 23, 2018

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"There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms"

(Samuel Beckett)

Introduction

Since its publication in 1953, criticism of *The Unnamable* provided in the most part analysis and interpretation of Beckett's literary and linguistic techniques. Consequently, *The Unnamable* was generally regarded as the extreme end of language, logic and philosophy. The result – a literary dead-end – a gray, desolate "limbo", a world without form or purpose, a chronicle of a self-defeating process. This century, however, is heralding new criticism of the trilogy (Jacob Hovind and Matthew Feldman are two intriguing examples) that expresses dissatisfaction with criticism of the previous century and uncovers deeper layers and meaning in Beckett's work. I wish to join this new wave, by arguing that *The Unnamable* is Beckett's ultimate resistance to philosophy and to the assertion that the limit of language is the limit of art. I suggest, therefore, that Beckett's ultimate willingness to engage in philosophy and language games is a ploy of a master insurgent to exhaust them and leave them behind. While doing that, I further suggest, Beckett is weaving a compelling emotional narrative in *The Unnamable*, not previously discussed, of a narrator that emotes beyond silence.

Aims and General Description

My aim, therefore, is to suggest, contrary to prevalent criticism, that in *The Unnamable* Beckett provides us with a speaker that is not remotely fragmentary, but a human voice under great

oppression and in great suffering. I will outline and describe such voice building upon Anthony Cronin's idea that the pronoun "the Unnamable" in *The Unnamable* is a plural pronoun, denoting, in fact, not the speaker, but the Others, those that compel the speaker to engage in speech. I will describe, developing this idea, the speaker's relationship with the Others and the suffering they inflict upon him. I will describe the coherent, consistent and pervasive agony and mental anguish of the speaker as Beckett's ingenious way of forming a human speaker, with emotions and dreams, amongst the debris of philosophy and language. Bearing in mind Beckett's ends in *The Unnamable*, I will suggest that the "humanness" that Beckett creates in *The Unnamable* is exactly not of the kind Aristotle had in mind (emerging from his sense of man as a '*zoon logon echon*',- *reason and language having animal*), so suitable for philosophy. Rather, what endows this emotive being its "rich emotive meaning" (a term coined by Charles Leslie Stevenson to describe what we search for as human essence), what gives it essential human charge, is its suffering; suffering that is emotively rich and complex; suffering of a high order that we readily identify as suffering of a human mind afflicted with the burden of others and deprived of himself. Beckett, I will suggest, transposes Aristotle's philosophical definition of the human to an emotional one – man as the 'suffering animal' –perfectly suitable for Beckett's art.

I will further suggest, through a study of the Bible as well as studies of Bible scholars such as Andre Neher, Gerhard von Rad (describing the prophet Jeremiah and his relationship with God), an astounding similarity between the speaker in *The Unnamable* and the prophet Jeremiah in terms of their state of mind, their suffering, their hopes, dreams and relationship with their respective principals. This similarity, I will argue, suggests a deep Old Testament undercurrent in Beckett's writing, with an Old Testament biblical emblematic sufferer at its heart, complementing similar, widely identified, Christian allusions, with Christ as the emblematic

sufferer (noted by Hersh Zeifman and Chris Ackerley among others). I will further suggest that the homology with Jeremiah is another iteration of Beckett's oppressor – oppressed duos (listed for his other works by Zeifman). Beckett, I will go on to argue, employs this duo modelled on the God-prophet relationship as a means to discuss his idiosyncratic conception of artist and Muse in which the artist is a powerless puppet in the hands of a harsh uncaring Muse that quashes his agency, as well as any expression of personal content. Elaborating this severe sense of oppression, not previously identified in *The Unnamable*, allows for a new insight into the speaker's relentless desire to be free of his tormentors – as longing for agency and personal expression. I will assert that this desire arises in the speaker beyond language, beyond silence. I will further suggest in brief, that Beckett, therefore, provides an alternative metaphysical model of subjectivity that is inconsistent with philosophy (with partial exception, perhaps, of the 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger), to complete the triumph of art over philosophy that is *The Unnamable*.

Scholarly and Critical Background

Maurice Blanchot provided the definitive previous mid-century critical review of *The Unnamable*, and set the tone of such criticism for more than fifty years. His imaginative analysis of narrator, narrative and world-view in *The Unnamable* is principally derived from intuitive analysis of Beckett's complex literary techniques. Blanchot appropriated *The Unnamable* for his own critical project, in particular for support of his ideas on 'subjectivity without a subject', thereby opening the floodgate to criticism of Beckett's writing as a destabilizing response or antagonism, with its implied negative, even nihilistic, world-view. Consequently, Beckett's writing was interpreted as manifesting *agon* to any precursor, to use Bloom's terminology,

thereby perpetually positioning Beckett as a 'liminal author', between Modernism and Post-modernism, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism *et cetera*. For the same reasons, “many authors understand *the Unnamable* by placing its main character in a liminal space”, notes Michael Flatt, “either physical, metaphysical, or philosophical”. This perceived liminality and aporia produced some unusual critical takes on the narrator in *The Unnamable*: “a homeomorphism or topological isomorphism” (Elizabeth Effinger); a “type of posthuman” (Ruben Borg) that “lacks any sense of definition”, doggedly refuting “his...statements about himself and the world” (Brian McHale). Others, such as Flatt, have described the narrator as “what is left once the human beings...have died”; as a state of “not being alive and not being dead simultaneously”. The narrator in *The Unnamable* has even been described as “having and not having a body”, and as an “undead partial object”.

In this critical discourse, narrative did not fare any better: Borg describes it as a “limbo purged of desire”, a *locus* in which “time itself is pressed into a state of pure hesitation [and] reality... [is] suspended in a state of in-betweenness”. Debra Melina sees the narrative in *The Unnamable* as a “violent and cyclical metaleptic construction”, while Pius I. Duggan sees Beckett’s narrative vision as a vision of “utter chaos...without structure or purpose... [that] lack[s]...causality”. As a result, from Blanchot going forward, in the seeming absence of much else to explore, criticism of *The Unnamable* became a probe of Beckett's logical conundrums, topological repetitions, linguistic and mathematical puzzles and regressions, discussion of infinity loops, and such other elaborate Beckettian games and traps (as Shira Wolosky's excellent analysis of these games demonstrates).

In addition, and in effect dismissing Beckett’s express statements in the matter (among which the epigraph of this work), criticism has affiliated myriad philosophers to *The Unnamable*.

Some critics (for example Flatt) consider the state of the narrator in *The Unnamable* to be Cartesian, others (for example Geuling) view it as anti-Cartesian, yet others (Butler) find similarities to Hegel, Husserel, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Sartre, while yet others (Trezise and Blanchot himself) see in *The Unnamable* similarity to the philosophies of Blanchot, Bataille, Deleuze and Derrida.

This century, however, has seen a wave of new critical works, discarding Blanchot's template and acknowledging Beckett's resistance to philosophy. Hovind, for example, expresses dissatisfaction with the "critical commonplace [practice]", as established by Blanchot, "to read Beckett's novels as inquiries into the unstable nature of selfhood amidst 20th-century onslaughts on the notion of the self". Hovind suggests exploring the "novelistic character" of *The Unnamable* and the trilogy, and "how it [*the narrator SP*] lives, just as he [*Beckett SP*] seems to be dismantling it entirely". Feldman adds another layer to Hovind's criticism by noting "recurring inconsistencies inherent in [the] methodologies [of] dominant paradigms within the field - namely existential humanism and post-structuralism". Feldman keenly observes that more than fifty years of criticism were unable to find much literary significance in *The Unnamable*, other than an elaborate representation of the logical arguments that 'what is not is actually a form of what is', and that 'lack of essence is actually a form of essence', methodical arguments typical of the philosophy of Blanchot and other philosophers of difference. In this thesis I will join Hovind and Feldman in removing *The Unnamable*, and implicitly the trilogy, from philosophical discussion, by suggesting criticism of *The Unnamable* in the tradition of classic criticism of the novel. I will present an emoting, suffering, narrator entangled in a dramatic, complex relationship with his Muse, in perpetual longing for agency and self-expression. I will present his emotional turbulence, anxieties, and personal insecurities. I will assert that he and the prophet

Jeremiah have much in common, to uncover a new link between *The Unnamable*, and Beckett's writing, and the Old Testament. By doing this I wish to provide a point of view of *The Unnamable* that is more in tune with Beckett's personal aspiration to take his *oeuvre* beyond philosophy, beyond words, beyond silence.

Chapters Outline

Chapter One – Scholarly and Critical Background

In this chapter I will discuss the critical review of *The Unnamable*, essentially a discussion of linguistic and literary techniques in *The Unnamable* and of Beckett's take on philosophical failure. This chapter will point out to the problematics of current criticism (focusing on extreme philosophical arguments and not on literary content) and will set the ground for the presentation of my reading as new literary criticism of the novel.

Chapter Two – Narrative beyond Philosophy

In this chapter I will introduce my critical literary discussion of *The Unnamable*, to show how Beckett indeed discards with philosophy but goes beyond it into narrator and narrative in the best tradition of the novel. This chapter will present a human narrator in great suffering and the homology between the narrator and Jeremiah, to provide a richer criticism of *The Unnamable*.

Conclusion

This chapter will offer closing remarks on Beckett's achievement in *The Unnamable*, in taking his writing beyond philosophy, into the realm of the ever present human. I will further propose in this chapter Beckett's pertinent legacy to us, the readers of the 21st century.

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