

**The melancholic unnamable:  
Kristeva and the question of subjectivity in  
Beckett's *The Unnamable***

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**Abstract**

The study of subjectivity is especially relevant to psychoanalysis since it avoids social and political qualifications, and focuses on the structure of the narrative voice. In this respect, Kristeva's innovative psychoanalytic notion of melancholia, as an incapacitating desire not to let go of the Real m/Other, is applied in the present article to the ontological impasse of the impoverished figure of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1958, 2003). It can be formulated as an ontological shade lingering within this precarious state, cast between life and death, and seeking the unnamable Thing which would be the real silence, corresponding at last to a voice of his own, the voice of voicelessness. Kristeva's solution for this suicidal predicament, adopted in this study, is an aesthetic resort to the poetical dimension of language retrieving traces of the dead m/Other, and the fundamental function of denegation at once affirming and rejecting the m/Other. A semiotic analysis of *The Unnamable*, considering,

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among others, the pronouns and commas will reveal a latent materiality in the text: formal derangement. We propose that, through the metaphorical dialectic of the semiotic process and the symbolic representation, the unnamable-reader achieves, on a trans-symbolic scale, a melancholy sublime, the *jouissance* of formlessness before the unrepresentable presence of the m/Other. This will yield our interpretation of the unnamable as an idealized subject-in-process (*sujet-en-process*) in terms of a pure flow of words: novel as mere 'going on.' Therefore, the study presented here is an attempt to bring together the Beckettian destitution of the novel and Kristeva's black sun through a *jouissant* dynamism of signs undermining the laws of the very language in which they are continuously generated.

**Keywords:** melancholia, denegation, subject-in-process, the semiotic, the sublime

## 1. Introduction

Demarcating the narrative voice, i.e. the subject, in modernist fiction is rather challenging for its experimental and unorthodox nature, its regular hybridity and heteroglossia, and its boundless manipulations of language. *Ulysses*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* are defining examples. Beckett's prose presents a different and unique dimension of this modernist iconoclasm, since his novels, rather than simply manipulating language, serve to undermine and subvert it, within the absurd moves and inexhaustible impoverishment of an antihero. *The Unnamable* is studied here as a text which transcends even this very definition. In this paper, Julia Kristeva's key notion of melancholia is discussed as a possible way to explain and bring to a psychoanalytic resolution the schizoid predicament of the unnamable.

The curious point about the ambivalent critical intersection of Kristeva and Beckett is that she never mentions *The Unnamable* in her few readings of Beckett's oeuvre, whereas the term unnamable (the Thing, the pre-Oedipal Real m/Other) is used frequently in her work with regard to the notions of the abject and melancholia. Kristeva offers no critical study of any of Beckett's texts as works

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of melancholia, whether in *Black Sun* or after, and no more than that Beckett, orchestrating the nothing, “refines a syntax that marks time or moves ahead by fits and starts, warding off the narrative’s flight forward” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 258). Furthermore, whenever there is a mourning subjectivity, it is immediately attributed to the (unnamable) father. In her essay on Beckett, “The Father, Love, and Banishment” (1980), Kristeva claims to interpret Beckett’s entire oeuvre through an analysis of two short texts, *Not I* and *First Love*. According to her, all of Beckett’s works are centred on the “unnamable domain of the father’ and not that of the mother” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 189): the symbolic father who is looming before Beckett’s characters as an immortal void leaving them in the state of the undead. We would like to suggest in what follows that a fairly satisfactory Kristevan reading of Beckett’s recalcitrant text is possible, particularly in the formulation of the unnamable as a melancholic.

Like any non-deconstructive critical project for untangling the subjectivity in *The Unnamable*, a psychoanalytic reading will have to deal with *the* elusive pronoun or voice of the text as a fake character such as the narrative voice or simply the unnamable ‘for the sake of convenience’ (Stewart, 2006, p. 101). Thus, in this paper, it is assumed, as a head start, that the unnamable pursues a well-defined purpose, that of attaining the liberating, lasting silence. According to the unnamable, the real silence would come when all the voices, or the single voice, speaking through him, and pouring into his world words that “macerate [him] up to the mouth” (Beckett, 2003, p. 412) will have ceased: “the hour when I must speak of me” (p. 306). The metaphor of the voice represents the unrelenting nature of the Symbolic order of basically pointless narratives effacing each other, and a multiplicity of characters which may or may not be imputable to the unnamable (Molloy, Mercier, Malone, Mahood, Worm, the narrators, the master, and so on ). The vain strife of the unnamable in order to be extends, or more precisely, is intended to extend, “before the beginning” (p. 360) and after the ending of history: the stories will never end, he ‘must go on.’ The beginning, from a (castrative) psychoanalytic view, is when the infant begins to release the holds of the maternal

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entity, the oceanic unity of the Real, as a violent abjectifying transition from object to subject, and gets ready to go through the mirror stage and identify with the imaginary father prior to entry into the linguistic realm of the Symbolic and becoming an adult subject constituted by discourse. Hence, the beginning is from the Real m/Other. Similarly, what lies after the ending is the death and nothingness of the Real, a restoration into the maternal embrace and the pure materiality of existence. The unnamable seeks his own voice which is voicelessness: he seeks himself, the Real mother of whom he was once, in distant past or future, a part in an unruptured oneness. Thus, the unnamable is an atemporal equivalent of the pre-Oedipal mother and strives, has always strived, and will always strive to become one with her(him)-self, inextricably, through the same, to use a Heideggerian term, inauthentic language of *them*, his fading “vice-existers” (p. 317) who may or may not exist in the first place.

This state is precisely what Kristeva names melancholia: an obsessive desire to unite with the Real mother, indicating an unsuccessful separation process and the failure of the subject to complete the mourning for an unnamable and impossible Thing which is not an object but an unattainable oceanic fullness, and leaves the melancholic with an “incomplete, empty, and wounded primitive ego” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 7). This unsignified mourning (which, nonetheless, belongs to the fictional discourse of the others) is metaphorized by Kristeva as a black sun, “a light without representation...an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time” (p. 13). According to the unnamable: “it is grey we need...made of bright and black: able to shed the former, or the latter, and be the latter or the former alone” (Beckett, 2003, p. 303). The unnamable experiences a relational disintegration with respect to the Others as a result of a much more profound separation from the originary m/Other: as Kristeva writes, melancholia is “the shadow cast on the fragile self, hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the loss of that essential other. The shadow of despair” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 5). The melancholic unnamable, haunted by this affective shadow, is at a precarious borderline condition, cast between life and death, meaning and non-meaning, at the thresholds

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of language and threatened by asymbolia. He wishes to be placed forever in the silence of the asymbolic middle, in between the unconscious mind and the torrent of language:

But how can you think and speak at the same time, without a special gift, your thoughts wander, your words too, far apart, no, that's an exaggeration, apart, between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing, that would be a blessed place to be, where you are. (Beckett, 2003, pp. 377-378)

The contrasting, or more precisely interlacing, stories of Worm and Mahood shed considerable light on the melancholia of the unnamable. Worm comes closest to our designation of the abject Real m/Other. Worm is seemingly unknowing and unheeding of everything: "his senses tell him nothing, nothing about himself, nothing about the rest" (p. 349). Thus, he stands for an entity absolutely dissociated from the reality of the world: the maternal entity. Yet, Worm, being Worm, is already an incipient characterization, an unfinished representation being installed in the syzygetic fabric of the symbolic since "feeling nothing, knowing nothing, he exists nevertheless, 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" (p. 349). Therefore, all through the narrative(s), Worm is being assimilated into the realm of language from the oceanic unity of the mother: "This fact of being established in the realm of linguistic semblances is what corresponds, in Beckett, to the motif of birth . . . which his characters are so often denied" (Brown, 2011, p. 177). This proves to be a futile process for he is too desensitized and demetaphorized for the symbolic order: the mourning for the Real m/Other is not completed. The castrative matricide necessary, in Kristeva's view, for transcending melancholia is crystallized in Worm's words "I'm looking for my mother to kill her" (p. 395), but this vital psychical murder is never carried out.

Mahood, on the other hand, is the pedagogic character who stands for the symbolic order of knowledge and signification. This

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knowledge, of course, in the fashion of what he recognizes at any moment as a trace of the real silence and the unnamable's exclusive voice, is trivial and conducive to no sublime release: "I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always" (p. 304). Mahood possesses no innate knowledge: "innate knowledge of my mother, for example, is that conceivable? Not for me" (p. 300). Elizabeth Barry in *Beckett and Authority* writes: "The Unnamable's brain is clean of innate ideas, including, he insists, the abiding painful memory that the trilogy tries to exorcise: that of the mother" (p. 87). Mahood bears witness to the failure of the signifying function of the symbolic father. This time, the mourning for the father is not completed. In a very enlightening passage which adds also to the equation Kristeva's problematic approach to gender concerning melancholia (in a sense, valuing Mahood's mourning over that of Worm), Weller (2006) writes:

According to Kristeva, Beckett's works enact an endless mourning for the father as the bestower of meaning. Irrespective of the speaker's gender, those works give us only the son's melancholia, fixated by the death of the father. As separation without liberation, this endless mourning leaves the son wandering helplessly through a cadaverous, degenerated realm, its materiality not that of the affirming feminine flesh – and the 'female word yes' – of Joyce's Molly Bloom, but rather that of the rotting paternal corpse and its impotent 'no'. As for the properly maternal in Beckett, it would remain untouched, pristine in its absolute heterogeneity. (pp. 165-166)

The fundamental Freudian desire to go back to the originary inorganic (the death drive) leads Mahood through narratives where he is put in exceedingly disintegrating conditions, as inside the jar at the butcher's, which prove inevitably hopeless since he, being Mahood, already belongs in the linguistic reality of the text, no matter how close he gets to the impossible Thing. Hence, Mahood's perpetual mourning.

Thus, Worm is unsuccessfully trying to come to life, out of the nothingness of the Real mother, while Mahood is endeavoring, equally in vain, to transcend the fragmented world of symbols and die into the maternal embrace. According to Armstrong (2002):

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“Mahood’s fate illustrates the inability to fully give in to that drive to die (to follow the death drive to oceanic unity), while Worm’s vicissitudes exemplify the opposite inability to be born (to achieve subject status, apart from the mother): ‘Mahood I couldn’t die. Worm will I ever get born?’” (p. 188). The melancholic state of the unnamable is this fluctuation, more precisely this *stirring still*, between Worm and Mahood, “from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither” (Beckett, 1995, p. 258) face to face with the real silence: “All this time on the brink of silence, I knew it, on a rock, lashed to a rock, in the midst of silence” (Beckett, 2003, p. 414). The unnamable has to choose between matricide and suicide and is bent under the burden: “Two holes and me in the middle, slightly choked” (p. 358). Thus, the unnamable is cast at the fading crossfire of life and death, a grey melancholic territory “where the Word is not yet my Being” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 15), where the Incarnation is held in cold suspension, and naming has malfunctioned. The analogy of inside and outside, depicting this membraneous condition, is a recurring theme in *The Unnamable*: “The narrator would be half inside it (his ‘true’ self), and half outside it (in the outside world of his interrogators and masks), straddling this border uneasily” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 188). The unnamable lies between the Real and the Symbolic, the mother and the father, the inside and outside, reduced to a minimal state which belongs to neither:

Perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, 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, 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. (Beckett, 2003, p. 386)

### The Semiotic Analysis

Kristeva suggests literary creation as a sublimatory practice for catharsizing melancholia: art transposes affect into signs, rhythms, and forms (hence the importance of the semiotic order). Overcoming melancholia, technically speaking, requires an identification with the Imaginary Father (or the father of personal prehistory), or the image of the logic of a symbolic identification, not with the lost object, but with father as form and semiosis. Language begins where the Real mother is both rejected and accepted in a dialectical *Aufhebung*, a negation or more precisely denegation. Language purifies melancholia through the signifying process of writing, approaching the Thing, through the semiotic, while simultaneously distancing it through the symbolic, so that the mother is at once affirmed and denied (at the arbitrary turn of the signifier) in a life-giving tension between writing and melancholia, a crisis of meaning “both enacting and completing the process of mourning” (Clark, 1991, p. 3). The functions of the semiotic and the symbolic are inseparable and the cathartic process of language constantly plays one off the other, forming a crucial dialectic between the two, between “the emotive and the cognitive” (Su, 2005, p. 183). However, since the semiotic, originating from the hidden core of the chora, is closer in its fluidal musicality, poetic form, polyvalence, and materiality to the Real and to the figure’s depressive discourse characteristically monosyllabic and fragmented, we would first need to deal with this psychosexual field and the formal semiotic features of *The Unnamable*.

The semiotic is characterized by “a free and fluid subjectivity” (Moi, 1986, p. 208) and the irrational, heterogeneous ‘poetic “distortions” of the symbolic chain’ (Kristeva, 1984, p. 49) like impulse and rhythm. It rejects the logic of binary oppositions, such as masculine / feminine, and transposes them into a Dionysiac or *jouissant*, bisexual writing (the writerly mode). The semiotic flow, like the abject, comes before any signification or a symbolic formation of a subject position, before any distinction between the Symbolic and the Real: the signifying process is “anterior to sign and syntax” (p. 29) that is, to signification. The following analysis

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argues that the dissociation of form is the most salient aspect of *The Unnamable*.

Particularly owing to the extensive use of commas, formal disintegration becomes at points virtually uncontrollable. For instance:

I see me, I see my place, there is nothing to show it, nothing to distinguish it, from all the other places, they are mine, all mine, if I wish, I wish none but mine, there is nothing to mark it, I am there so little, I see it, I feel it round me, it enfolds me, it covers me, if only this voice would stop, for a second, it would seem long to me, a second of silence... (Beckett, 2003, p. 367)

According to Armstrong, the comma, “akin to the line break of poetry,” functions as a gap representing “the irrepressible semiotic motility of the mother’s body” (p. 191) or the dynamism of the chora. The comma stands for the breath spared the reader and the unnamable in between sentences, the inauthentic silence which simultaneously links one utterance to the other and assures the continuity of the voice.<sup>1</sup> The comma signifies death and as a sign bordering on meaninglessness partially assumes the role of the Real m/Other: “The comma will come where I’ll drown for good, then the silence” (Beckett, 2003, p. 413). Thus the comma is a semiotic apparatus employed by Beckett to approach the primary oneness: it serve to expel the rigid laws of the symbolic order of language by “sentenc[ing] sentences to alterity, to an unlawfulness” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 191). Kristeva equates death “‘the hiatus, blank or spacing’ of writing” with “the dissociation of form itself, when the form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out: ultimate thresholds of inscribable dislocations and jouissance...” (Kristeva, 1989, pp. 26-27)

*The Unnamable* is characterized by an extensive use of epistemic modality with negative shading: this is not unprecedented since nearly all Beckettian texts manifest this stylistic property.<sup>2</sup> The alienation, undecidability and thus unreliability of Beckett’s narrators, and the extreme uncertainty of the narratives, reaches its climax with the unnamable. The text is rife with epistemic modal expressions strengthened by the general antitheticity of sentences,

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questions of the truth-value of the narrative elements with indeterminate source or addressee, sentences undermining each others' certainty, and persistent emphasis on everything being a collage of hypotheses. Consider this passage:

*I'm there already, I must be there already, perhaps I'm not alone, perhaps a whole people is here, and the voice its voice, coming to me fitfully, we would have lived, been free a moment, now we talk about it, each one to himself, each one out loud for himself, and we listen, a whole people, talking and listening, all together, that would ex, no, I'm alone, perhaps the first, or perhaps the last, talking alone, listening alone, alone alone, the others are gone, they have been stilled, their voices stilled, their listening stilled, one by one, at each new-coming, another will come, I won't be the last, I'll be with the others, I'll be as gone, in the silence, it won't be I, it's not I.* (Beckett, 2003, p. 413; emphasis added)

Beckett uses minimal figures of speech that, if used at all, are ironically acknowledged by the unnamable and rendered useless or redundant: "They have put you on the right road, led you by the hand to the very brink of the precipice, now it's up to you, with an unassisted last step, to show them your gratitude. I like this colourful language, these bold metaphors and apostrophe" (Beckett, 2003, p. 335).

There are few metaphors in the text and the only significant one is that of the voice: "but it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate" (Beckett, 2003, p. 327). In addition to commas, free-floating deictics, pronouns, and proper nouns occur within *The Unnamable*, but with more or less the same function. Kristeva, in her analysis of Nerval's sonnet "The Disinherited," formulates the meaningless deictic<sup>3</sup> *that* as the unnamable presence of the Real m/Other. The narratological indeterminacy immediately disturbs the pronominal system. There are no definite pronouns or at best they are interchangeable. The free play of pronouns, that is of voices, is a token of the inability of the narrator to die or to live: "a grammatical metaphor for what is in reality an ontological disaster" (Brater, p. 23). The result is a "babble of homeless mes and untenanted hims" (Beckett, 1995, p. 150). Furthermore, the unnamable regards the demonstrative *that* as another pronoun that

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has to be gotten rid of: “someone says you, it’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it’s a kind of pronoun too, it isn’t that either, I’m not that either” (Beckett, 2003, p. 408). Kristeva elaborates on the role of demonstratives, designating them as “metalinguistic and self-referential. Through the use of the many forms of enunciation which this linguistic category possesses, the subject can straddle several enunciative spaces. This explains the impact of demonstratives in those discourses where the identity of the speaking subject is in question” (Moi, 1986, p. 232). Thus, the unnamable, questions the specificity and stability of the narrative voice through an obsession with pronouns:<sup>4</sup> from an abrupt shift in the supposedly dominant pronoun and the reduction of ipseity to the status of logical fallacy in “but enough of this first person, it is really too red a herring” (Beckett, 2003, p. 345) through the recognition of the absurdity of all forms of identification in “what am I doing in Mahood’s story, and in Worm’s, or rather what are they doing in mine” (p. 380) to the total rejection of identity and its decline into indifferent words in “in the meantime no sense in bickering about pronouns and other parts of blather. The subject doesn’t matter, there is none” (p. 363). Subjectivity is expunged by the same language which constitutes it. Of course, this statement, like all critical remarks about *The Unnamable*, considering the ambivalent nature of this text and the figure’s “inadequate self-awareness” (Feldman 26), ought to be placed within a choral space of uncertainty. In other words, the unnamable is being erased as it is being created: a *sujet-en-process*.

Beckett’s concern with rhythm is indicative of his attention to the musical, poetic and semiotic aspects of language. An instance of the radical use of comma for prosodic effect and exhaustive rhythmicity (ironically situated immediately after the unnamable’s equating of comma with silence as cited above) and the buildup of phrases is worth reproducing here:

Enormous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals, never anything else any more, from this time forth, and in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner, how can he be found, how false this space ill, what falseness instantly, to want to draw that round you, to want to

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put a being there, a cell would be plenty, if I gave up, if only I could give up, before beginning, before beginning again, what breathlessness, that's right, ejaculations, that helps you on, that puts off the fatal hour, no, the reverse, I don't know, start again, in this immensity, this obscurity,... (Beckett, 2003, p. 413)

Proper names demonstrate another aspect of the unnamable's material play with language. The Real m/Other is "subliminally present in the names of the narrator's many predecessors and "spurious egos". Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran, Malone: The capital "M," the big "M"" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 189). As the mythological names in Nerval's "The Disinherited," the stories behind or the actual meanings of these proper names are irrelevant: they are devoid of signifieds, hence their truth-value is always problematic. They generally act to give the text an esoteric and highly symbolic quality; nevertheless, in *The Unnamable*, this mystical effect has been reduced to waste materials of fiction created, through naming, into the reality of language, in order to be disposed of: "There is no getting rid of them without naming them" (Beckett, 2003, p. 328). In other words, "this gallery of moribunds," (p. 138) his "delegates" (p. 299) are no more than his empty and partial actualizations in language: they belong to the Symbolic Other, to *them*. The unnamable asserts that "all these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me" (p. 305). However, these very fabrications, ceaseless and fragile, produce a semiotic dynamism<sup>5</sup> within the text and create, if only the illusion of, a centripetal multiplicity of narratives controlled by the psyche of the unnamable which merges the fractured characters together: the imagery of M-figures "inscribed" (Moi, p. 235) in one textual entity. Of course, the accuracy of this account is arguable since the unnamable is not capable of uniting anything: even if at times he might think he somehow possesses the exuberance and the acumen needed to blend these pseudo-identities into a Baudelairean metaphor of love, it is what *they* have made him to think so. It would be just another emasculated tale of alterity.

## 2. Subjectivity-in-Process

This semiotic analysis reveals a latent materiality in the unnamable's radically dissociated text. In *Beckett: L'increvable*, Badiou writes: "the novelistic form is still present in Molloy but already exhausted since *The Unnamable*; we still can't say that poetry has taken over, even though cadence, paragraph disposition, and the intrinsic value of visions reveal that the text is ruled by what we could call a "latent poem"" (Bellini, p. 2). Nevertheless, this materiality is relentlessly crude and works at the most extreme thresholds of language.<sup>6</sup> Through Beckett's schizophrenic textuality, constituting the unnamable's spurious project to find *his* voice, the flesh has been degenerated and disintegrated, not to pure nonexistence, to the slippery plane of *inexistence*, language: "it cannot be a simple negation of body or of life; if there were no body, there would simply be a ghost – if there were no life, there would be a corpse. What the author needs is an asymptotic reduction of the being broken down into its raw nature, a pure matrix of speech" (Bellini, p. 4). Words are all that there is, swarming like a battalion of furious but always patient bees everywhere and every time. Beckett's *cogito* consists not in Murphy's, at first purely Cartesian-sounding, mind as "a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without" (Beckett, 1957, p. 107) but in a "hive of words" (Feldman, p. 54) to be formulated, not accepted or rejected, in fictional discourses "by aporia pure and simple" (Beckett, 2003, p. 293). The following excerpt exemplifies the textual withering of the unnamable's mind and body in a self-destructive *cogito*:

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. Better, ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind. Speak of a world of my own, sometimes referred to as the inner, without choking. Doubt no more. Seek no more. Take advantage of the brand-new soul and substantiality to abandon, with the only possible abandon, deep down within. And finally, these and other decisions having been taken, carry on cheerfully as before. (p. 394)

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Kristeva regards art as a purifying process enabling the melancholy subject to experience the *jouissance* of imaginary identification with a specific, postmodernist sublime, formulated in terms of language, at once pleasurable and painful. Her view of the sublime, born in a defiant art following an irreducible schism or failure in the fabric of the psyche and language, resembles that of Lyotard's (1984) (which is based on Kant): the unrepresentable as an equivalent for Reason in its unfathomable and infinite nature forever sought by the free play of signifiers, the constant deferral and postponement of meaning through the principle of difference, which leads to an immanent sublimity, a combination of sublime form and sublime formlessness. Similarly, Kristeva explores in art, theorized as semiotically free as symbolically regulated, the *jouissant* revelation of the unrepresentable signified, truth, Thing, presence, or m/Other. Kristeva's critical endeavor is not to admit "the solace of good forms" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) but to search for works that elevate the sublime status of the unrepresentable m/Other: Celan, Proust, Joyce, Mallarme, Dostoevsky, to name a few. Here, form and iconoclastic violations of it in modernist art, as tokens of the unrepresentable, gain significance. Beckett once, in an interview with Tom Driver, mentioned that the artist's duty is "to find a form that would accommodate the mess" (Graver & Federman, p. 243). The major component of such a form, in Beckett's oeuvre, is generally understood to be the famous syntax of weakness: "a kind of verbal backsliding whereby the more words are said, the less meaning is communicated" (Barry, 2006, p. 60). Beckett creates this syntax through the use of joke, oxymoron, bull, the paucity of metaphors, the sentences losing their energy, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> The syntax of weakness exhausts the potentialities of the calculated, orthodox form. Hence, from Kristeva's postmodern vantage point, form turns into formlessness: *The Unnamable* is such a formless work of art, sublimatory albeit a little too psychoanalytically intractable in comparison with works like or *The Sound and The Fury* and even *Ulysses*.

In *The Unnamable*, the figure, authorial subjectivity and cognitive presence have vanished into thin "air" (Beckett, 2003, p. 403): "the question, and the entire authority it seeks to establish in

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the name of knowledge, are undermined” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 190). This is characteristic of the failure of theory, that is reason and systematicity, in the entire text. The unnamable asks: “How proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?” (Beckett, 2003, p. 293) Aporia substitutes the truth and *The Unnamable* becomes a parody of philosophical discourse in general. Truth is the inconceivable since truth and true silence belong in the maternal Real, the impossible: “how can you not tell a lie?” (p. 415). In this respect, the interrogators, with their voices speaking through the unnamable, “build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another” (p. 375) and turn the most trivial utterances into frustrating antithetic pairs: “as these scrambled locutions suggest, for every commonplace there is a contrary image or proposition that collapses the edifice of reason” (Barry, 2006, p. 143). In the Dionysian space of the chora, where the figure of the novel resides, causality, as the ruling principle of the Symbolic law, is overcome and *The Unnamable* emerges as “something rather unreasonable, full of causes apparently without effects, and effects apparently without causes; the whole, moreover, so motley and manifold that it could not but be repugnant to a sober mind,” (Nietzsche, p. 33) which would account for the exceedingly perverse effect of Beckett’s schizo-text, one example of which is severe chronological disjunction. As the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* mentions: “nothing prevents anything” (Beckett, 1995, p. 154). The notion of well-defined subject positions is banished for everything in the chora is subjected to “a continuum of deferral” (Stewart, 2006, p. 140) and the unnamable aspires towards a pure signifier: “If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing?” (Beckett, 2003, p. 305) in order to be listening to his hard-won silence alone. Hence, resisting the dogmas of phallic subjectivisation through the semiotic paradigm of formlessness, the unnamable-in-process is “not an instance of the death of the subject (in Schwab and many others’ sense), but a willed refusal to be one” (Gibson, 2006, p. 188).

The unnamable, in other words, seems to be there only to heap narratives and hypotheses on top of one another, and these seemingly irrelevant stories actually constitute his very life;

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memory and stories become one and the same for him. The unnamable-in-process, similar to the dead Christ in Hans Holbein's painting, is semiotically destitute, with the difference that in the unnamable's case, this destitution is not only the inadequacy of familiar semiotic features but the 'redundancy' of schizophrenic, unhealthy semiosis of which the extreme dislocation of form is one manifestation. The metaphorical version of this abject excess is the meaningless yet ineffaceable murmur (the essential semiotic feature, the only metaphor) which forever distances the unnamable from the dark nothingness of the Real: "this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere" (Beckett, 2003, p. 374).

The unnamable's alleged purpose is to attain a voice of his own, to speak the truth, to voice the knowledge that he at points suspects he already knows and has forgotten: "perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already" (Beckett, 2003, p. 418) and "perhaps I've said the thing that had to be said" (p. 397), the magic cathartic string of words that would be *him* and be conducive to the real silence, "if only I knew what I have been saying" (p. 337). And since the unnamable's memories consist but of the incessant inauthentic narratives, consubstantial with his inexistence, if there is any form of forgotten lesson, it would already be incorporated into the precarious grey zone separating fiction from nonfiction, characteristic of the whole text. In other words, even if he were, and he well may be, already in the R/real silence, the one that lasts, this would merely be another story told by and to the Other in the routine self-alienation of the pronoun *I* in *it*: "The silence, speak of the silence before going into it, was I there already, I don't know, at every instant I'm there, listen to me speaking of it, I knew it would come, I emerge from it to speak of it, I stay in it to speak of it, if it's I who speak, and it's not, I act as if I were, sometimes I act as if I were" (p. 411).

The unnamable observes: "Two holes and me in the middle, slightly choked, or a single one, entrance and exit, where the words swarm and jostle like ants, hasty, indifferent, bringing nothing, taking nothing away, too light to leave a mark" (Beckett, 2003, p. 358). It seems as if this perpetual torrent of words serves to 'trap'

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the melancholic unnamable at the borderline of the Symbolic and the Real. As the stories of Worm and Mahood suggest, the unnamable is caught up, through the function of the same words supposed to liberate him, at the grey juncture where his vain (in)existence lingers, “notoriously aphonic” (p. 376), “feel[ing] nothing,” about to be born and “getting humanized” (p. 363), that is, about to die. The birth and death that never take place, or already have taken place, since the modal adverb ‘perhaps’ immediately reveals the trace of alterity, and thus the irreversible uncertainty of this very proposition. We have come a long way from our primary critical objective of taking the unnamable from the inferno of the oceanic unity, through the semiotic, to the paradise of the symbolic world. Now, we have to find a solution in Kristeva’s castrative psychoanalysis to save this rotting non-character from the purgatory of the schizo-text.

It is evident that these synthetic stories are, after all, symbolic constructs, and their representational power in our Kristevan catharsis should not be underestimated. The semiotic features discussed above, such as the use of comma or the metaphor of the voice, are few but, according to what Kristeva claims for Holbein’s painting, not inadequate to lead us to the “threshold of nonmeaning” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 135) where the melancholic unnamable has “a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing,” (p. 97) and to experience the inseparability of life and death, suffering and love, faith and doubt, beauty and horror, meaning and nonmeaning: death, in its pure rawness, loses its fascination and is transcendentalized when we realize the symbolic nature of the text at the arbitrary turn or denegation of language. Beneath the flesh of the text, no matter how dissociated, there is always a proto-ontological voice enunciating that this is, after all, a text, and so constituted by the symbolic order. *The Unnamable* takes us, perhaps more insistently and more inexorably than any other literary text, to the dangerous territory where meaning is about to collapse into the Real, the death of logos, and ontology seized by language. Yet, reading it through Kristeva’s psychoanalysis, simultaneously, at the arbitrary turn of language, the representational nature of the same dysfunctional language saves

the reader-figure through channeling his perverse *idée fixe*: ‘I’ll go on...’ perpetually caught up with-in “this pell-mell babel of silence and words” (Beckett, 1955, p. 125) and ontologically guided by a singular gesture of representation, telling stories, pure and simple. And when one narrative is exhausted and fails, no matter, tell again, ‘fail again, fail better,’ for “an absence less vain than inexistence” (Beckett, 1995, p. 147) as the vague legacy of the textual catharsis of *The Unnamable*. The unnamable subject(-in-process) gains his non-causal, *jouissant* freedom in the endless play of signifiers and an immanent intertextuality turning him into the stuff his stories and memories are made of: words, words, words. Thus the subject sets out on a textual project to die, fails to die (having not been alive), starts another mission, fails again, and so on: he writes himself, erases himself, and then rewrites himself ad infinitum. In Derrida’s words in *Of Grammatology*: “the access to writing is the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and its own bondage” (p. 132). Kristeva’s solution, in other words, seems to be speaking words, being spoken through by others’ words, being words, and becoming words atermminably, while experiencing an exclusive aesthetic sublime before the irreducible nothingness of the Real m/Other.<sup>8</sup> She writes: “This is a survival of idealization\_ the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering: a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words... It affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity\_ the one that knows enough to speak until death comes” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 103).

### 3. Conclusion

The question of voice and subjectivity in the recalcitrant textuality of *The Unnamable* addresses issues that are best explored in psychoanalysis “as it offers us the means to understand the structure of the voice, without making us subservient to the constraints of sociological realism or communicational symmetries” (Brown, 2011, p. 176). In this respect, Kristeva’s innovative psychoanalytic notion of melancholia can be applied to the ontological impasse of

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the unnamable. This is possible due to what the reader partially infers, particularly considering the ontological incapacitation of Worm and Mahood, to be the unnamable's essential between-ness as an insubstantial tympanum through which the ceaseless words of the others (inauthentic voices that never present a voice of his own that would be conducive to the real silence he craves, that is, the Real m/Other) come and go. Hence, he is cast between life and death, inside and outside, light and dark, in a wordless and melancholy condition.

What Kristeva offers psycho-analyze this self-destructive mess of subjectivity is an aesthetics of the semiotic, that is, the poetical, musical, dynamic and dimension of language in which she gathers the feminine traces of the impossible m/Other within the free re-weavings of the texture of language. *Verneinung* or denegation marks the starting point of language through a metaphorical dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic, and at once commences and completes the mourning for the Real m/Other in a double function of negation and recognition. In this respect, a semiotic analysis, or semanalysis, of *The Unnamable* shows that there is a latent poem, an underlying materiality beneath the schizophrenia of the text: deictics (particularly *that*), the confusion of pronouns and the resulting ontological and narratological undecidability, the proper nouns and their reference to the m/Other, the epistemic modality with negative shading rendering the narrating voice totally unreliable, a strange textual rhythm created through the frequency of commas, the syntax of weakness and fidelity to failure undermining the possibilities of meaning, and above all the comma as the nothingness of the Real m/Other or the pause of death. A severe formal dissociation is the collective result of these semiotic features.

The vital dialectic of the semiotic, in its residual contact with the chaos and pure materiality of the Real, and the symbolic, in its representational function through negation of the m/Other at the arbitrary turn of the signifier, enables the unnamable and the reader, through this very melancholia, to experience the sublime as the endless play of the signifiers (fragments between commas that are false voices/silences) before the unrepresentable presence of the

m/Other as the signified. This is a maternal jouissance caused by the idealization of an ephemeral,<sup>9</sup> yet fluid, subjectivity. This reduces the novel to the pure novelistic action: 'I can't go on, I'll go on.' All that is left of the novel is a textual will to merely continue the discourse of formlessness which, precisely, constitutes the Beckettian jouissance of words/wordlessness: "This liminal experience of naught drives Beckett's "literature of the unword," his "aesthetics of failure"" (Willits, p. 258). Thus, the unnamable is a Kristevan subject-in-process (*sujet-en-process*) prior to the binary politics of signification or the stability caused by neatly-defined patterns of fiction, yet regulated by the laws of the very language it tries to undermine: the reciprocity of the semiotic and the symbolic.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Compare with the role of ellipses in Beckett's short but pivotal play *Not I*.

<sup>2</sup> For a (discourse) stylistic analysis of a passage from Molloy refer to *Language, Ideology, and Point of View* by Paul Simpson (pp. 45-9).

<sup>3</sup> Deictics (proximal or distal) link the text-world to the language and linguistic expression and are the connectors of world and words: here, the narrative voice, embedded in the deictic framework, is the fulcrum of the melancholic breakdown between the word and the world. The deictic 'that', like the comma, gets as close as possible to the Real through its minimal presence in language. However, after all, it is a word, a sign and thus a symbolic representation negating the m/Other in the arbitrary turn of the language: a word with a trace of the m/Other.

<sup>4</sup> "The distillation of the narrative adventure itself" (Brater, p. 21).

<sup>5</sup> "In this way the fragility of the proper name when it comes to fixing a signified identity is shown first of all in the multiplication of proper names. This explosion of identity ultimately confronts that

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same unnameable space of need which I have called semiotic and which is also bordered by the demonstrative - the site of the archaic mother” (Moi, p. 235).

<sup>6</sup> The reader of *The Unnamable*, sooner or later, comes to suspect that the materiality in this text, despite the seemingly triumphant conclusion of the Kristevan reading presented here, borders not on the neurotic music of *jouissant* art but on some textual manifestation of disorganized schizophrenia, and thus reveals this study to be, in fact, a ‘self-consuming artifact.’

<sup>7</sup> All these vain stories are told to ‘people’ the emptiness of death: the unruly syntax, consisting of a series of double inabilities and weak intensities, portrays a waning figure who is unable to stop ‘going on’ and to arrive at separation from the Other.

<sup>8</sup> The effect of the unnamable’s perpetual inability to stop is not despair, but rapture, characteristic of the *jouissance* of the sublime as the abortive accumulation of words bears witness to the intoxicating unattainability of the unrepresentable, the unutterable, the true silence, or the m/Other.

<sup>9</sup> The unnamable, occupying ontologically the role of the tympanum, tells us that he has “two surfaces and no thickness” (Beckett, 2003, 386) exposed to the indifferent flow of words. Hence, this subjectivity is a function of the words, of the stories the voices of the others relate (he has no voice of his own yet, or he thinks so) and, consequently, is founded on pure potentiality, prior to the fetishistic definitiveness of a permanent subject position.

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