

Beckettian Reading of Levinas's Existence: Praxis of Ethics in Beckett's Metonymic Language

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to investigate the paradox of “absurdly obtrusive” meaning in Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. It explores how Beckett dismantles conventional conscious narratives and stable forms of “existents” to present a raw, dynamic immersion in “mere existence” through a radical shift in linguistic structure.

Methods: Utilizing a structural and post-structural literary framework, the study analyzes Beckett’s theatricalization of the absurd by focusing on the “here is/there is” instants of being. Specifically, it applies Jakobson’s concepts of the “axis of selection and substitution” versus the “axis of combination,” examining how the text employs metonymic language to bypass hegemonic linguistic appropriation.

Results: The analysis reveals that *The Unnamable* functions by surrendering intentional authorial appropriation in favor of a polysemic combination of unintentional voices. By deploying an “unconditional language” that avoids traditional narrative boundaries, the text successfully presents characters that are “unsaid, unread, or unbeen.” This linguistic strategy creates a state of immersion that penetrates the reader’s consciousness by refusing to provide a fixed, stable subject.

Conclusions: The study concludes that the absurdity in Beckett’s work is not a lack of meaning, but rather an obtrusive linguistic presence that shifts the target of language from “modes of being” to “mere existence.” Through metonymic expansion and the dismantling of the hegemonic axis of selection, Beckett transforms the absurd into a dynamic space where the unnamable is experienced rather than categorized.

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I. Introduction

Absurdity is the key term that is synonymous with Beckett's works; nevertheless, his displays have always been a melting pot of many critical studies. And this fact hammers into a paradox that, on the one hand, exhibits absurdity and, on the other hand, it is so absurdly obtrusive that penetrates into one's consciousness. *The Unnamable*, for instance, dismantles one's conscious forms and narratives in favor of the *here is/there is* instants of *existence*; simply put, it *presents* characters unsaid, unread, or unbeen, the ones that our memory archive within its own retrospective does not find any correspondent to: A dynamic immersion in point of view by deploying an unconditional language beyond the boundaries of hegemonic axis of selection and substitution to ethically surrender intentional appropriation in favor of a polysemic combination of unintentional voices through a metonymic language. In other words, Beckett in *The Unnamable* unconditionally commits the unknown – the unnamable – narrator to an open-referential monologue that resists tautology by extending its limited *existents* – mental preservations and classification – to the open realm of intersubjectivity, or the immediacy or proximity of *existence*, what Levinas calls the “the social relationship with the Other” and he argues that it only occurs when one achieves a sense of *disinterestedness* by the “deposition of the sovereignty” and “the responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other” (*Ethics* 52). In fact Beckett's metonymic language does not name anything, it actually resists naming. For instance, *The Unnamable* artistically *presents* language against itself, in other words, it portrays language's otherness – the language unsaid – the language that disseminates, and escapes the realm of intelligibility, it is merely language *as such/as it is*. Therefore, *The Unnamable* exhibits the exhaustion of meaning.

The most important aspect of Beckett's language probably is his attention to the matter of time and space, two key elements that condition our *existence*. Like most of his works *The Unnamable* takes place in zero-time and zero-space, the confluence of which has left the unknown narrator in a state of undecidability and an extreme aporia. It is in Blanchot's point of view a “disaster” (Levinas, *Ethics* 50), it is called a *disaster* for the limits of one's intention to catch a glimpse of the *infinity* of the *other* before its its sovereignty, and it is the same disaster resides in Beckett's the unknown narrator; for the narrator does not know where it is, when it is, or who it is; essentially, the narrator is a nobody, doing nothing, in nowhere, at no time: the narrator is merely a pure *existence* disseminating in an open-referential metonymic language. So what takes course in

Beckett's *The Unnamable* is the event – not the phenomenon – of unnamability itself that prevails along the novel: “it will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don't know, I'll never know: in the silence you don't know. You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on” (103).

II. The Unnamable, a Zero-novel, a Novel of *Existence*

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), 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. You think you are simply resting (the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason) and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again. No matter how it happened. (It, say it, not knowing what.) Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. (But I did nothing.) I seem to speak (it is not I) about me (it is not me). (1)

They are the beginning words of Beckett in *The Unnamable*; the unknown narrator of the story straightaway problematizes the notions of time, space, and being: actually no time, no space, no being, nothing! And what distinguishes *The Unnamable* from other literary works that fall into the sand box of literature of absurd is its attempt to *present* nothingness as an event, not a phenomenon represented through words. As Kenner holds “the theme of the book is heroism without drama,” then he continues, “Flaubert envisioned a book which should be about Nothing, a book with no content, held together by the sheer style; [...]. The Unnamable is far from self-indulgent, if only because the calm excellence of the writing shows no trace of narcissism; he accords himself no such pleasure” (113). Accordingly, as Kenner affirms Beckett's zero-novel is far beyond narcissicism since nothingness itself is the end not the means to represent something else; in other words, Beckett as an iconic figure of the literature of absurd does not aim to explore life as nothingness, but quite the opposite way around, nothingness as *existence/life*: he has his sights on *existence* of one's Being rather than different modes of one's intentionalised and instrumentalised definition of one's *existents*, that is why *The Unnamable* is a critique of the Cartesian “I think therefore I am,” for Beckett believes intentional thinking is rather *naming* or reducing than attaining one's *existence*. Regarding that point, the unknown first person narrator of this story resists knowing: it withstands “I know therefore I am,” and welcomes “I don't know therefore I am;” simply put, the I-narrator of the story finds its meaning and Being through awareness of the

nothingness of its own *existence*: a sort of *infinity* that resists the totality of one's identity, what Levinas at best theorizes in his *Existence and Existents* as "the upsurge of an existent into existence" (19), the unnamability of one's Being and identity: an infinite one-instants of zero-beginning in time and space: "about myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric" (Beckett 5), here Beckett exhibits a language or rhetoric of nothingness: a "pure act" of "fatigue" or "indolence" in Levinas's language:

An existent, a term or a subject of existence, is not just a segment of the flow of being; it has existence as an attribute, as its own. It does not just exist with its existence; it takes up a position with regard to it. An existent is constituted in a movement of taking on the existing with which it finds itself affected. This movement becomes palpable in the hesitation or aversion before one's own existence which makes up the inner meaning of indolence. One is held to being, held to be. (5)

As the unknown narrator of Beckett in *The Unnamable* "is held to being" without any prior or anterior *existents*, its language gets more and more oxymoronic and unintelligible; very much like a metonymic language that anti-hierarchically and open-referentially juxtaposes words together without constraining them to some pre-conditional or logocentric paradigms of selection or substitution. It actually openly and disinterestedly disseminates meaning through the language of nothingness, the language of *existence*. As in the preface to Beckett's *The Unnamable* it is mentioned that Blanchot asserts "*The Unnamable* gets to the heart of things by pressing through, beyond or behind the first person, to the anonymous, tormented space of writing itself, which animates all literature," and he "assimilates the text to his own philosophy, of the *neutral*, or the *indifferent*" (xxi). This notion as aforesaid overlaps with what Levinas considers to be a disinterested sensibility to the *existence* of all things and beings. Alain Badiou seeing Beckett's *The Unnamable* as a climax of his works also contends "this work that is no longer skewered on the unresolvable excruciations of what the subject is and how it is to be spoken, but deals instead with what he calls the *occurrences* of the subject, most notably in its encounters with otherness" (xxii): "Others come towards me, pass before me, wheel about me. And no doubt others still, invisible so far. I repeat they do not disturb me. But in the long run it might become wearisome. I don't see how. But the possibility must be taken into account" (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 10).

Actually, it is the very instant when one's *existents* turn into *existence* through indolence. And Beckett's zero-novel is full of these one-instants of indolence, where Beckett and Levinas concerned with the notion of the other, one metonymically in his language and the other anti-ontologically in his ethical investigations, aim to foreground the possibility of openness to intersubjectivity or *sociality* with the *other*. Therefore, Fifield in *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emanuel Levinas* maintains:

Levinas's thought is developed as an opposition to what he sees as the tendency of Western thought toward the reduction of all otherness to sameness: to cognition, recognition, and identification. The most basic form of intellectual violence, what Levinas characterizes—with Heidegger in mind—as “ontology,” ensures that what is beyond me is in a constant process of perceptual and intellectual consumption. The world is habitually transformed into an object of the subject's thought and use so as to seem posited by that very subject. In contrast, Levinas asserts the possibility of a nonviolent encounter with this radical otherness, which would allow the other to remain uncontaminated by the subject. Levinas posits that this more fundamental relationship is manifest in the face-to-face encounter, and so claims that before ontology is possible, there must be ethics. (50-51)

So for ethics in order to manifest itself, the medium of language is required through which this ethical approach can be embodied and embedded. And Beckett artistically foregrounds these immediate moments of nearness with the *other* through the formidable feelings of fatigue and indolence or instances of an obtrusive silence, when the narrator resists against naming or better to say possessing the *other*, where the narrator unsays or unspeaks what it sees, a pure *existence*; in other words, the narrator does not try to capture and then create contained or contaminated representations of things, it is the *experience/existence* itself:

It brings into play what is perhaps the key initiative of the Bataille–Blanchot partnership: the notion of ‘inner experience.’ [...] [it] is neither interior nor subjective, but the experience of its relation to an incommensurable outside. This puts it at odds with the tradition of self-formation known as *Bildung*, where experience teaches and instructs, and launches a teleology whose end-point is knowledge. (Houppermans 118)

Indeed, this bare presentation of nothing or praxis of *seeing existence* rather than the representation of *making existents* is what for Beckett begins with silence and indolence when one's intention is evacuated by the face of the exteriority of the other, a state of *encounterment* prior to time, space, and intentionality, the moment when metaphysics of absence or the traces of the *other* haunts one's ontology of being and the sovereignty of one's self. It is hauntology at hand, on the brink of a metamorphosis or becoming, a metonymic juxtaposition of the known and familiar with the unknown and the unfamiliar, it is language on the precipice of collapse and disintegration: "I feel something, they say I feel something, I don't know what it is, I don't know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I'll tell you who I am, they'll tell me who I am, I won't understand, but the thing will be said, they'll have said who I am, and I'll have heard," (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 100). It is an instance of untethering the texture of reason and the history of ergo cogito sum to triumph over the specters of *existents* to reach *existence* by undoing the conditional constraints of rational-intentional thinking:

The unnamable (taking the form of Mahood in this case and thus a gendered pronoun) feels that he has been taught to reason according to such a differential mechanism: in response to his self-addressed question—how to proceed—he plans: "First I'll say what I am not, that's how they taught me to proceed, then what I am" (299). Mahood, then, has a dim memory of the procedure required to "humanise" himself—that is to become a creature of reason sufficient to enable him to ascend to the upper ranks of the hierarchy of being. (Dowd 149-150)

This embedded conflict of the unknown narrator in the story is a parody on reason, rationality, and intelligibility, it is a rally against the foundation of equivalency of thoughts and language with the existing reality that eitherizes everything to make it intelligible for itself, an act of possession or appropriation. And Beckett masterfully caricaturizes this blasphemous habituation by undoing language through an unnamable – irreducible or unintelligible – narrator.

III. The Metonymic Praxis of *Existence* Through Silence

As formerly discussed, Beckett's zero-novel is full of one-instants of *existence* through which the unknown narrator of *The Unnamable* enacts life via an extreme verbiage of oxymoronic expressions; in other words, it is not a novel about nothingness, but *existence* itself, in all its indefinable and unnamable being as a whole, unknown, unfamiliar, and unsaid before the

reductionist axe of consciousness, it is a metaphysics of absence that haunts the sovereignty of self, it is a trace that transcends the boundaries of ontology and teleology. Beckett himself words it in as a *murmurous* silence:

It will be the same silence, the same as ever, murmurous with muted lamentation, [...] Long or short, the same silence. Then I resurrect and begin again. That's what I'll have got for my pains. Unless this time it's the real silence at last. Perhaps I've said the thing that had to be said, that gives me the right to be done with speech, done with listening, done with hearing, without my knowing it. I'm listening already, I'm going silent. The next time I won't go to such Pains, [...]. (*The Unnamable* 111-112)

Therefore, it is a vigilant silence that gives pain, nevertheless, it is different from Heidegger's *angst* since it is not a pain that comes out of an anxiety over nothingness, but "there is a pain in Being," for as Levinas maintains "Being is essentially alien and strikes against us" (*Existence* 11), so does Beckett's *The Unnamable* because it is a zero-book of *existence*: it is a melting pot of different impersonal voices out of which the unnamable voice of nothingness (*existence*) emerges: a perpetual struggle between the I-know (the namable) and the I-do-not-know (the unnamable).

In fact, in Beckett's metonymic language *silences* and *pauses* are among the most indispensable iconic features of his verbiage, a revolt against one's consciousness, intentionality, and identity. As abovementioned, according to Levinas *existence* signifies "being in general," and by the same token Beckett tries to exhibit the absurdity of being in particular to reach the very one-instants of infinity and nothingness in general: it is not nothingness for the sake of nothingness, but nothingness as pure *existence*: a radical silence or passivity: "That way for an instant to be is to be present. The present is an ignorance of history. In it the infinity of time or of eternity is interrupted and starts up again. The present is then a situation in being where there is not only being in general, but there is a being, a subject" (Levinas, *Existence* 43). Here, what both the Beckettian and Levinasian subjects share is a "hypostasis" of *existence*, "it sets out to approach the idea of Being in general in its impersonality so as to then be able to analyze the notion of the present and of position, in which a being, a subject, an existent, arises in impersonal Being, though a hypostasis" (Levinas, *Existence* 9); And this radical subjection to *existence* as an impersonal subject devoid of intention and identity restores the preeminence of life back in one's self through imminent silences that are presented by the unknown narrator of Beckett's metonymic dramatization. This very event

is what we clearly notice in intermittent intervals of silences that the unknown narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* experiences, an amalgam of different impersonal voices – Malone, Murphy, Molloy, Basil, Mahood: "I'm like Worm, without voice or reason: I'm Worm. No, if I were Worm I wouldn't know it. But I don't say anything, I don't know anything. These voices are not mine, nor these thoughts," (*The Unnamable* 61). Elsewhere, again, Beckett emphasizes and this time directly presents silence as the key element towards the infinity of impersonal voices:

[...] he is made of silence, there's a pretty analysis, he's in the silence, he's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can't speak, then I could stop, I'd be he, I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn't matter, the attempt must be made, in the old stories incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his, I'll recognise it, in the end I'll recognise it, the story of the silence that he never left, that I should never have left, that I may never find again [...]. (133)

This short piece of texture from Beckett's language of nothingness demonstrates the deep-seated defiance of human archive to name and possess everything against the unknown, the unsaid, and the unfamiliar, notwithstanding the very fact that the narrator's resistance and its inability to name itself and the things around it finds full embodiment in intermittent moments of silences that present an ethical openness to *see* and *listen* to the *other*. As Levinas regarding the function of these spasmodic silences elaborating on the notion of *existence without existents* argues "it is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us, but this silence; the voice of this silence understood and frightens like the silence of those infinite spaces Pascal speaks of," he then continues, "*There is*, in general, without it mattering there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is* is an impersonal form, [...]. Its anonymity is essential. The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior — if one insists on the term — remains uncorrelated with an interior" (*Existence and Existents* 33). It is the true sense of confession by one's self to abandon its own sovereignty over the subjectivity and exteriority of the other. In other words, unintelligibility, meaninglessness, or nothingness are traces – better to say voices – of an *existence* that are yet to be said, known, and explored before they are reduced by

the principle of sameness through naming. And what silence does is to nullify this malady of namability and unravel “the rigidity of the relations of compatibility and order” (Gibson 180) which tend to reduce everything to a singular object devoid of any life, *existence* and subjectivity. As we can notice in Beckett the primary elements of identification and differentiation fall short of naming an object – especially when silence prevails. In fact, everything in its own impersonal and disinterested *existence* becomes useless or “inutilisable” (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 43) since it “resists both the general logic and all specific logics of appearance” (Ibid 188) to regain openness and alterity with its fully committed and limitless resistance to the logic of sameness and resemblance: “Beckett’s self-deconstructing works become sites of resistance. In short, they become the most ethical form of textual production, ethical precisely through their inexhaustible resistance to what are taken to be the totalitarian threats of meaning, stability, fixity, and identity, each of which is predicated on a negation of alterity” (Weller 27-28).

IV. Conclusions

Beckett and the Theatre of *Existence/Life*

Beckett’s metonymic language apparently looks strange for it does not yield to one’s consciousness, but it actually *presents* nothingness, it luminously renders *existence/life*:

Darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. There is not a “something” that remains. There is the atmosphere of presence, which can, to be sure, appear later as a content, but originally is the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night [nothingness] and the *there is*. It is like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces. ... We want to call attention to this being a density, an atmosphere, a field, [...]. We want to call attention to the existential density of the void itself, devoid of all being, empty even of void, whatever be the power of negation applied to itself. (37)

Similarly, Beckett exhibits *there is* without predicates in order not to reduce that event or situation to a phenomenon. He actually foregrounds this ambivalence by depicting the nothingness of *existents* and our being into *fatigue* and *indolence*, two key terms in Levinas’s language that according to him would splash life back into the canvass of *existence*, a radical passivity or neutral activity, a pure praxis of presentation/life. Therefore, It exposes our intentionality to an infinite *existence* that impenetrably infiltrates our consciousness: it makes us succumb to its nothingness:

“The Unnamable began by getting dispossessed of time past and future, of space as extension, of a name (as focus of a stable consciousness linked to circumstance and identity, body and movement); it went through the very much more painful process of dispossessing itself of the pronoun I” (Kennedy 151); in other words, the unnamable I itself – devoid of its intentionality – becomes the subject of *existence*: an I subjected to *existence*: a praxis of pure life, a full sensation of life prior to the intelligibility of human archive, an imminence of zero-experience before it is reduced to a utilizable and consumable concept. Given that, the nature of nothingness or *existence* discussed here is in no way parallel with that of nothing as no *existence* or nothing as no content; on the contrary, it is nothingness as an infinite abundance of life, meaning, and content which has not been selectively disembodied or hegemonically amputated – reduced to a name. Accordingly, Levinas in *Ethics And Infinity* argues that for that infinite *existence* to be grasped, one has to escape from the realm of knowledge[/naming] since “sociality cannot have the same structure as knowledge” (60), and he maintains “sociality will be a way of escaping being otherwise than through knowledge” (61) since knowledge working based on the principle of sameness “dominates, or absorbs, or includes the other” (62) which is contrary to the nature of communication – with the unknown, the unfamiliar and the unsaid – sought in Beckett’s oxymoronic soliloquies, where the unnamable narrator of the story unname time, place, action, and even the identity of itself. It is an upsurge of life and *existence* against *the original sin of naming/killing*, in as much as, proximity prevents dichotomization and prevails over knowledge, thence, “The immediacy of the sensible is an event of proximity and not of knowledge” (Levinas, *Collected* 116); meanwhile, Levinas retains:

The sensible is superficial only in its role being cognition. In the ethical relationship with the real, that is, in the relationship of proximity which the sensible establishes, the essential is committed. Life is there. Sight is, to be sure, an openness and a consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as a consciousness, is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. One sees and one hears like one touches. In reality, the caress of the sensible awakens in a contact and tenderness, that is, proximity, awakens in the touched only starting with the human skin, a face, only with the approach of a neighbor. (Ibid 118).

So, language as a medium of proximity here plays a significant role since it presents the sensible beyond the constraints and limits of the intelligible, an irreducible and unpremeditated proximity with no prior condition or arbitrary alternation that breaks the solitude of I think therefore I am to a social self-dispossession of I see therefore we are. Actually, this anti-Cartesian approach to language defies the solipsistic structure of logocentrism to present an ethical and unconditional praxis of proximity with the exteriority of the other; as for Levinas this intersubjective proximity signifies a responsibility for the other: "Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another" (*Ethics* 96-97). Likewise, Beckett in his magnum opus *The Unnamable* foregrounds the responsibility for the other through his open-referential metonymic language of proximity, an ethical and unconditional commitment to the exteriority of the other unadulterated by the totality of one's intention, it is an ethical attempt to see life, existence:

Beckett has other ways of creating meanings. His prose, especially in the stories without punctuation, often creates a vague beckoning of words before which the reader must find a way to some meaning that is obscurely expressed or expressed to suggest other equally compelling meanings. [...] For what he creates, especially in his late works, involves indeterminate atmospherics of words, what in "Quant au livre" Mallarmé will describe as "centers of vibratory suspense," words without any punctuation that require the reader's hermeneutical engagement in the construction of meaning. (Kleinberg-Levin 45)

And for Beckett this meaning – *existence/life* – manifests itself in his anti-hierarchical and metonymic language of nothingness. It is a zero-novel that is alien to one's intention and strikes one's consciousness and knowledge of being for it does not give itself easily to interpretation or subjection, yet it rather is subjected to nothingness – nothingness as an abundance of *existence* and experience – that is why *The Unnamable* does not represent modes of *existents*, or human knowledge. In fact, it foregrounds that very moment of the interval between one's *existence* and its *existents*, "the upsurge of existents into existence" in Levinas's words, and, simply put, *The Unnamable* itself, an event not a phenomenon, in Beckettian verbiage. As David Kleinberg-Levin in his *Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in the Time of Mourning* referring to Nietzsche maintains "naming, Nietzsche would say, is always the enactment of the will to power. When

authors name their characters, they assume that control—lending their support to the paradigm of absolute knowledge, absolutely sovereign authority. Beckett would not want to encourage such claims” (64); he then continues “In “Letter on Humanism” (1946), published seven years before Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, Heidegger urged us to consider: if we are to venture the redeeming fulfillment of our finest potentialities as human beings, “we must first learn to exist in the nameless.” In Beckett’s 1953 story, we are indeed thrown into an uncanny world of unnamable voices, unnamable characters. And in this world, where the words that are needed fail to come or fail to mean, we must learn to exist with nothingness” (64), nevertheless, a nothingness that is full of *life* and possibilities for *existence* irreducible to the malady of naming.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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