

“...perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two...”
Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, relational modularity, and nationalism

By

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*“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypothesis, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.”*¹

Published originally in French in 1953 and subsequently in English (translated by Beckett himself) in 1958, *The Unnamable* is the final novel in his triptych following *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, which concludes the progression of disintegration, not just of the narrative nature of the texts but also of the protagonists themselves. Here, Beckett’s unnamed, and unnamable protagonist, is and remains in a void, forever being fed—and expelling—identities by an unseen committee beyond his confinement. Beckett’s protagonist can be said to be the embodiment of a perpetual self-excavation—prodded by the organized system of language—involving borders of self, borders of language and silence, borders between bodies and systems, through *relational modularity* as a mode of insistence that reverberates into our own times of nationalism. For what is nationalism but a systematized, unmoving nation-self-myth formed from absences concretized within linearity? Against this, modularity acts as a de-centralizing force from the gravitational pull of the linear (monologism), forcing us to contend with subjects and bodies as relational rather than fixed.

*“...I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating...”*²

For philosopher C.S. Peirce, “the present seems to be nontemporal...is outside of time, cut off from the actual and the possible. ... The reason that there is no present is that the flow of time keeps all of time’s content in a constant process of relocation. There is no present because the fact that is to be present to us is already past”³. One could see Beckett’s protagonist occupying a similar non-temporally-present void, a perpetually crepuscular, intertextual doubled mirror stage where selves and the possibility of selves are in constant relocation, a subject-in-process, surrounded on all sides by the mirror. However, where in the mirror stage it is image and movement that is the medium of apperception, here it is primarily sound and movement. The voices he hears, the refracted system of voices, feed him his identity, “*brand [him] as belonging to their breed*”⁴ through his own words. These words are the materiality of his apperception in which he is engaged in an endless cycle of rejection, abjection, and relinquishment; his voice, this vibration, the medium. Thus, sound becomes the key to his and our self/selves, the material

¹ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 331

² Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 439

³ qtd. in Helm, “The Nature and Modes of Time”, 275-85

⁴ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 370

and movement within which we exist. Sound becomes the “*partition*”, “*as thin as foil*”⁵, but within that “*infinitesimal lag, between arrival and departure, this trifling delay in evacuation*”⁶ is the inevitability of thought, of questioning. It is this that perpetuates him onwards, rebelling, beginning again, on again, caught perpetually within language, within systems, prodded by what it tells us we are, for language, our language, will always be that of the systems we were molded within and yet we must question, dismantle and rebuild, to search for our own modularity through it which will in the end constitute *us* within the intertextuality through which identity is created and defined. “*I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I’ll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have not lived in vain, and so as to go silent...*”⁷

Through the novel, Beckett contends with both the subject of linearity, an inescapable narrative projection into the past and future, and the flux of the present. The relation between modularity and linearity then could be said to be the aporia of our protagonist’s revolt in language towards silence, the inextricability of language from linearity yet the possibility and insistence of modularity inherent in its nature, the revolt to simply *be*, without language, which in itself is impossible, for “wherever we find ourselves, we are already standing in the midst of word”⁸: language ever encased in thought, and thought in language, encased in the linear. “*It all boils down to a question of words...*”⁹.

Relational modularity and the presence of absence

In this time where concretized self/system-made nation-myths have ruptured the worldwide present, Beckett’s novel is as timely as ever as a framework through which we must, as he has here, extricate ourselves from the linearly-derived monologic self/nation-self—materialized through the symbolic (language)—into the dialogic and polyphonic subject-in-process through *relational modularity* in order to rebuild, re-form, and reform our identities that position us in the world as individual bodies, as systems of bodies encased in thought and thus in language.

The relationally modular upsets our reliance on the traditionally religious underpinnings of a monolithic hierarchy and forces us to re-assess our positions through the relational in the same way Schoenberg’s use, and later theorizing, of atonality pulls the comforting rug of a single tonal center of gravity from under us, forcing us to contend with pitches on a relational basis. Beckett too, like Schoenberg and like our protagonist, revolts in this visual/aural medium—the medium within and through which myth and narrative is constructed and perpetuated—turning the linearity of language in on itself, on the possibility of meaning through the causal linear form. Thus, he is not only dismantling the protagonist’s stability of identity, time and place, but also challenging the notion of meaning, constantly irrupting and erupting the accepted ideology-encased-narratives fed from ‘the committee’ into our void embodying what Julia Kristeva writes as the “*dialogism of its words is practical philosophy doing battle against idealism and religious metaphysics, against the epic*”¹⁰. How can, how should a society, systems and institutions,

⁵ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 439

⁶ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 399

⁷ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 371

⁸ Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, 118

⁹ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 382

¹⁰ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, 54

challenge and engage with the modularly relational, the polyphonic and situational to counter these nationalist trends?

The answer it seems to me through a reading of Beckett, lies in the re-evaluation of identity, the identity of self, of a system, of a people, not through the narrative, linearly formed and causally derived, but rather through the *relational modularity* of the system just as in the modularity which is implicit in evolution, just as the modularity which makes up our protagonist's historicity, the stories of Molloy, Malone, Mahood and Worm, the modularity of characters from Beckett's own previous oeuvre. It is in re-shaping identity through this light, and through the presence of flux, ever-evolving, ever-questioning, that seems necessary as a mode of "going on.": the insistence through and against the concretized dictate of past trajectories, subjectively defined to illuminate or attenuate the past to conform to a figurative narrative presentation of the present.

Perhaps then it is the shadows cast from these shifting motifs—of *I, who, what*—which dance in Beckett's pointillist painting-in-motion, that constitute our "vibrating" selves on both sides of that "foil" that divides the world in two, inevitably imbued with the epitome of hope, for within the absence of stability, within these ruins of meaning lies the hope of renewal, in continual questioning, for as we have seen, when a social stops questioning, and even often in spite of it, ideologies concretize, the nation-self-myth becomes fixed, created from absences which become "object-like...self-standing presences out there in the world...[and] full participants in the social characterized by their own particular politics and, at times, their own particular emotional and semiotic charge"¹¹. *Relational modularity* is thus a mode to contend with these presences.

Translation as Excavation

Language, already in itself an act of translation, an intertextual web of shifting signifiers and signifieds, lies at the crux of our relation with self and systems as symbol and material, the material through which our experiences and identities are formed and mediated, the borders within which we hold our selves. Language can also be said to be the thing that divides both the self and the world in two, the self between what is exhumed into language and what isn't, the world between the presence of what is named and the absences of the unnamed. Where there is language, there will always be involution, the entanglements of translation which inevitably produce an absence, a shivering interstice between the dual translations of speaker and listener, both without language—how our senses translate language through our own experiences—and within language itself—between what is named and the thing itself. Therefore, in extricating and working our way through language, it is necessary to acknowledge the quasi-presence of the involution of borders. Perhaps that is where the borders of self are within language, the presence of which comes through multiple overlaying acts of translation, through multiple readings, multiple dialogues, through the act of translating the text itself into another language, so as to expose and expand the immaterial layers in the text—or rather the text's intertextuality—to be able to view the text itself from different vantage points.

Thinking *through* translation then can contribute another form of understanding. As an example, an attempt at translation to a language such as Thai, the language of my own native land, which due to the quasi-presence of unresolved colonial remnants, is actually my second language. In Thai, as in many other languages, there are numerous words for "I" which are

¹¹ Fowles, "People Without Things," 27

gender, class and age-based. However, there is a unique term that encompasses both a singular and plural “I” (a neutral *we* that also works as “I”): *Rao*. Looking back at the text of *The Unnamable* through Thai, through *rao*, implicates not only a genderless, classless, ageless pluralistically-ambiguous social but also the system as a social body, an implication which causes us to reassess our collective identity through the act of self/social excavation.

And where is this “*rao*” placed? “*It’s a question of voices, of voices to keep going...*”¹². Returning again to the motif of sound: today, we are so accustomed to the voice disembodied from space, recorded in a pristine void, a silent sound booth, designed precisely to be the absence of space in order to place it in the site of any illusion manifestable. This loss of space from the voice thus also implies a loss of trace. There is no echo, no reverberation that lingers. We are the disembodied, thrust into the vortex of illusory spaces, of illusory identities divested of the conjunction between voice, presence, time and place just as our protagonist is in his crepuscular void. Translation as excavation then, recurs here on many levels, on the level of Beckett as author excavating himself and his previous characters through this text, on the level of our protagonist himself self-excavating, and on us, the reader excavating ourselves through our protagonist through Beckett. And, like our protagonist, in our media void of intertextual signifiers and signifieds, we are challenged to excavate ourselves, the systems through which we ourselves embody, the systems within which we are a body, to view identity itself as intertextual, an ever-moving “subject-in-process.”

“*The essential is never to arrive anywhere...*”¹³. Through *relational modularity* then, the stability, the possibility to arrive at self and nation-self involutes, our borders of self-as-constructed-by-and-within-systems economical, sociological, political, and philosophical become entangled. We see and hear our cultural body/bodies entwined within the intertextuality of signs and symbols. Bodies of the past caught up in systems of the present. In the end our protagonist may be seen as the shivering absence between translations both from himself and from us, an embodiment of flux, of situational identity¹⁴, where our borders form and re-form—must reform—caught in a perpetual involution, always striving to give presences to absences, striving always to illuminate the shadows which form borders around what we call *us*, what we call *our* history, to embody the quasi-presences which shape our present tense. As can be seen in Beckett’s notebooks for his plays, he “introduced numerous ...cuts and additions as well as and revisions” when he himself directed them so that his manuscripts were not “dead museum pieces at all but living creatures”¹⁵. Perhaps then, we can imagine other permutations of our protagonist still occurring and recurring onwards into our own times, into our own minds, a continual translation as (self/social) excavation, singularly, plurally, relationally through the identities and histories thrust upon us, through Molloy, Malone, Mercier and Camier, through Mahood, Watt and Worm, through us and *rao*, “*just short of me*”¹⁶, we go on excavating, and so in answer to Gertrude Stein’s question “is there repetition or insistence”¹⁷, we insist on, we insist in the presence of absence, we insist through the absence of presence, we insist in order to find silence knowing there will never be silence for “*...whether I am words among words, or silence in the*

¹² Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 382

¹³ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 286

¹⁴ Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 239

¹⁵ Beckett, *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Krapp’s Last Tape*, vii-viii

¹⁶ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 387

¹⁷ qtd. in Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Fascimiles*, 217

midst of silence,¹⁸ wherever we exist, wherever we find ourselves, we already “stand in the midst of word(s)”¹⁹, these things that divide the world in two.

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¹⁸ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 445

¹⁹ Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, 118

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