HOW IT IS:  
The Epical Call to Voice  
at the Limits of Experience  

Curt G Willits

The voiceless voice and a subject-less – yet still (although barely) human – scribe: these two literary figures designating Blanchot’s ‘primal scene of the writer’ are the subject for a reading of Beckett’s How It Is. In analyzing a script that parodies an imperceptible, unrealizable speech uttered by no one to no one, the following article focuses upon the conundrum of narration; how ‘light’ suggests the involuntary, yet compulsory, mnemonic and phantasmal faculties of the demented witness/writer; and how the “coupling” in “part two” of the novel discloses the linguistically tormented limit-experience between self and unself – human and inhuman – toward neither.

To contend that the origin of literature derives not from the foundational positivism of epistemological verities but from the foundationless vagaries of ontological liminality necessitates testing the threshold of the il y a – i.e., engaging what there is, as Maurice Blanchot indicates, after every thing has been annihilated, “when there is no more world, when there is no world yet” (1982, 33). Blanchot summons the writer toward the limit-experience of the eternal return of naught anterior to language – of “my consciousness without me” (1981, 47) – the naught without which the playful, ambiguous, protean nature of language could not exist. Imagine, therefore, the writer’s consciousness in the throes of an unrelieved solitude void of subjectivity, a consciousness deprived of signifying, mediating powers, having thought without thinking, having heard without hearing, having said without saying. Such ontological exile, opening upon an oppressive, schizoid wandering – as Beckett depicts in neither, “from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither” (129) – forces the writer to submit to the neutral worklessness of language, to
a silence that speaks. In *How It Is* the composite interplay of this speechless speech, which Blanchot calls the “narrative voice”, and the estranged humanity of the witless writer discovers both its appropriate epic form and its apposite epic material.

Leslie Hill indicates that “the theme of the journey [...] which sustains the novel’s overall narrative structure is quite clearly exploited as a metaphor for the act of writing”. Hill points out that the West to East movement of “bodies crawling through the mud” suggests “the words themselves crossing the page”; that the movement of “ten yards fifteen yards” at the novel’s beginning shifts to “ten words fifteen words” by its conclusion; and that “the major event in the epic is an act of inscription: the writing of a text on the body of another (by the name of Pim, just as one’s own name is Pim) [...]” (137).¹ The ever present “mud”, in conjunction with this writerly theme – tempting the mouth to open so that the tongue may come out and loll in it, thereby abating thirst while restoring humanity (1964, 27) – assumes both the familiar nature of human waste, parole, and the alien nature of linguistic waste, langue.

Susan D. Brienza notes a similar play upon fecal effusion and linguistic egestion, one that converts subject-object confusion into a subjectless-objectless voidness. Citing the line “world for me from the murmurs of my mother shat into the incredible tohu-bohu” (1964, 42), Brienza indicates that Beckett’s punning of the Hebrew word “tohu-bohu” has more to it than the toilet humor it suggests; for “tohu-bohu” translates as “emptiness and desolation” [...], rendered in the King James version as “without form, and void”, and in the “*Oxford English Dictionary* [...] as ‘chaos; utter confusion’” (1987, 99). Brienza further points out that “the latter phrase [i.e., “utter confusion”] surfaces in the coupling [episode]: ‘YOUR LIFE HERE BEFORE ME utter confusion’ [1964, 73-74]” (99) – a phrase that we are no doubt to equate with YOUR LIFE HERE BEFORE ME tohu-bohu, that is, as just so much ‘utter’-ed ‘shit’, “without form, and void”, in a word ‘impenetrable’, and ultimately ‘unnamable’, for *How It Is* turns essentially upon “YOUR LIFE HERE in a word my voice otherwise nothing therefore nothing [...]” (1964, 95).

What remains on Beckett’s page, punctuated only by blank gaps that separate the verbal fragments, is the perpetual contestation toward effacement between sense and sound – between the transparent idea and the opaque materiality of language – represented by shards of a