ON VOICES AND MEDIUMSHIP IN THE TRILOGY

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In this piece I suggest that Beckett’s trilogy deliberately invokes mediumship in the recurring trope of voices. Beckett was familiar with mediumship through Hester Dowden, whom Thomas MacGreevy lived with briefly. I want to emphasise the spiritualist and occult overtones of the trilogy’s voices, with the caveat that Beckett uses mediumship in a way analogous to mysticism; that is, he refuses any transcendent validation or explanation for these mysterious voices. If these voices seem, at times, to be the voices of the dead, this interpretation is never wholeheartedly endorsed by the text. Nonetheless, the suggestion that there is a form of mediumship at work, that there is a gap or difference between the voice’s source and the instrument of utterance, is central to the uncanny affect of the trilogy.

*my sane and ordinary inner speech is itself likely to be a swarm of quotations, often from anonymous and vanished others. The dead chatter away as the inner speech of the living.*

Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language*

All the dead voices.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

What follows is not an attempt to avoid or plug the “epistemological vortex” of *The Unnamable* (Connor 2010, xix-xx), but to think about mediumship’s role in forming this vortex. Voices are extremely important in the trilogy – indeed, C. J. Ackerley suggests that the “mystery of the voice” may be Beckett’s “most profound literary creation” (40) – and these acousmatic and disembodied voices often defy explanation. Yet, there are numerous references to voices in Beckett’s work that could be interpreted as forms of mediumistic channelling (that is, when a person channels the voice of the dead), such as in the late television play *Eh Joe*. I want to suggest that this later exploration of mediumship is already present in a more obscured,
vague, and spectral form in the trilogy. Peter Fifield has analysed references to voices that persist after death, specifically the protagonists of *The Unnamable*, *Malone Dies* and “The Calmative,” in terms of Cotard’s syndrome; as a supplement to this insightful neuropsychological analysis, I want to suggest that mediumship might also offer an appropriate frame for Beckett’s use of the voice in these texts. Beckett was interested in the possibility that strange, unknown, foreign voices might end up in one’s brain; the trilogy is testament to this enduring fascination.

Numerous critics have linked writing to occultism, with varying degrees of playfulness. In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes suggests that writing itself begins when “the voice loses its origin [and] the author enters his own death” (49). Although Barthes doesn’t push this metaphor, it skirts close to what we might term the *au delà* – literally the *beyond*, the land of the dead. Beckett is quite willing, where Barthes is not, to engage with these occult associations. Beyond Barthes, Nicholas Royle’s *Telepathy and Literature* has suggested that literature and telepathy are deeply interdependent. As Pamela Thurschwell puts it, the telepathic question *par excellence* is: whose thoughts are these, inhabiting my inner world (125)? This a question *The Unnamable* asks with frantic urgency. Telepathy shares with mediumship an inexplicable transference of knowledge and voices, but of the living rather than the dead – and the transferred content often remains internal rather than being externally channelled or performed through the voice or automatic writing. Leon Surette has compellingly argued that occultism had an important influence on modernism, suggesting that Ezra Pound read T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) as a text which shared certain traits (its seemingly random jumps in time and space as well as across multiple disembodied voices) with séances (69). But the most prominent modernist with an interest in mediumship is W. B. Yeats, as evidenced in *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1934).

Beckett’s voices raise many issues, as critics have long been aware. As Wilma Siccama observes: “Beckett’s characters hardly ever speak ‘themselves’: voices come to them, or they say it as they hear it” (175). Anthony Cordingley adds that: “the narrators and characters of Beckett’s novels are increasingly haunted by the sense that their voices are the legacy of not only ‘their’ past selves/characters in earlier works by Samuel Beckett, but also of an estranged voice or voices inside them” (135). Extending the trope to the author himself, Siccama