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Introduction

This paper discusses the construction of identity in Samuel Beckett’s The Unnamable. It is argued that identity, as represented in Beckett’s novel (which is part of the Trilogy Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable), conforms to a poetics of representation of identity which can be described by the neologism (coined by the author): I/eye-dentity. This term reflects the split subject represented in Beckett’s work and the two forces which are complicit in the shaping of identity: the Self (ego) and the “eye” (how the self is perceived by others and how it perceives).

Samuel Beckett was undoubtedly one of the stars of twentieth-century literature and theatre. After more than two decades of obscurity, he became equally famous in both French and English, translating himself regularly from one language into the other. His four major plays, Waiting for Godot (1952) and Endgame (1957) (first written in French), Krapp’s Last Tape (1959) and Happy

1. Samuel Beckett, Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable. (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 303. All quotations are from this edition, which is shortened to The Unnamable, plus page number.

2. I am grateful to Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover for sharing her views on Beckett and phenomenological criticism with me. Our discussion had a decisive impact on my revision of the views I held in an earlier version of this paper.

3. The term was coined by the author (MHA), to reflect Beckett’s “split” subject. Taylor’s critique of the sociological analysis of the Self, which was consulted subsequently by MHA, supported the concept captured by this neologism. Compare Taylor’s model of the Ego and the Self as the underpinning of the concept of the split subject:

“The Ego or Self also enters psychology and sociology in another way, in connection with the observation that people have a ‘self-image’ which matters to them; that they strive to appear in a good light in the eyes of those they come in contact with as well as in their own. Here there is indeed a sense of self which goes beyond neutral self-observation and calculations of benefits. But in the way this is usually conceived, the importance of image bears no connection to identity. It is seen as a fact about human beings that they care that their image matches up to certain standards, generally socially induced. But this is not seen as something which is essential to human personhood. On the contrary, what is usually studied under this head is what we can identify, outside the sterilized, ‘value-free’ language of social science, as the all-too-human weakness of ‘ego’ and ‘image’ in the everyday sense of these terms (themselves, of course, incorporated into the vernacular from social science). The ideally strong character would be maximally free of them, would not be deterred by the adverse opinions of others, and would be able to face unflinchingly the truth about himself or herself.” (Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity [Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989], p. 33.)
Days (1961) (first written in English), as well as his novels More Pricks than Kicks (1934) and the trilogy of Molloy (1951), Malone Dies (1951) and The Unnamable (1953) (first written in French), with their translations into dozens of languages, made him a key figure on the world literary stage.

Beckett was awarded several prestigious international awards, the most distinguished of which were the International Publishers’ Prize in 1961 (shared with Jorge Luis Borges) and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Few writers have been more celebrated during their lifetime; yet he disliked the trappings of fame. His craggy, deeply furrowed face became instantly recognizable; yet he hated to be recognized. He loathed all forms of self-exposure or self-promotion and gave a polite but firm ‘no’ whenever he was asked to give an interview or to speak in public or on the radio and television. As a result, he retained an exceptional air of mystery and myths naturally accrued around him.

Beckett overlooked the traditional convention of writing, which shows that a play or a novel must have a beginning, a middle and an end, and a work is written about a subject. The classic realist novel takes place in a specific time and place; its characters are integrated at least enough for us to recognize that they have histories, cultures, and backgrounds. By contrast, Beckett dismantles the presuppositions of the conventional novel. Instead of giving us the traditional novelistic markers of temporality and identity, Beckett “dismantles the stability of identity.”

He does this by abolishing “the logic of oppositional thinking.” Not only have his works been regarded as Modernist literature, but the starting point of postmodern movements. Thus, Gary Kose diagnoses correctly: “Beckett’s move [is] from the concerns of Modernism to the fragmenting problems of Postmodernism.”

Beckett is probably more widely known for his plays, above all for Waiting for Godot, than for his prose. However, as McDonald finds correctly, “the three novels that make up the trilogy have come to be regarded as among the prose masterpieces of the twentieth century.” As Boutler points out, “Beckett himself considered the three novels comprising the so-called first trilogy, Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable, to be among his most important works.”

In these novels, Beckett subverts the conventional technique of novel writing. What is significant in this regarding about the last novel of the Trilogy is that The Unnamable is “reduced to a disembodied voice, indefinite and indefinable in terms of ordinary human identity, deprived of specific time, place, function and purpose.” The Unnamable thus becomes a novel of acute self-

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