Real Mysteries
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CHAPTER 1

Apophatic Narrative

APOPHASIS

No form belongs to Him, not even one for the intellect. . . . What meaning can there be any longer in saying: “This and this property belong to Him?”

—Plotinus

And if He is neither goodness nor being nor truth. What is He then? He is nothing. He is neither this or that. Any thought you might still have of what He might be—He is not such at all.

—Meister Eckhart

For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; nay more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens?

—Clement of Alexandria

These kinds of questions have been asked for a long time. They belong to a larger set of expressive impossibilities that is still very much alive in many different modes of discourse—Buddhist, Romantic, Holocaust, poststructuralist,
quantum physical. It includes an endless diversity of what is called the *inef-fability topos*, which among other things is an ancient commonplace in protests-tions of love. You can find good examples on the lips of Goneril and Regan in Scene One of *King Lear* as they protest the unspeakability of their love for their father. In the long western tradition of mystical discourse, the pursuit in words of what is beyond words is referred to as *Apophasis*, literally “speaking away” or “unsaying,” and commonly understood as “self-negating discourse” or even “a total cessation of discourse” (Franke 2007: 1–2). Its development as a central philosophical idea can be traced back at least to the Neoplatonists, and its most influential deployment in the Christian tradition can be found in the apophatic, or negative, theology of the late-fifth century Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the thirteenth-century Dominican monk Meister Eckhart. Their work was richly redeveloped by many hands in Christian mysticism, and their influence is still very much alive in our own epoch and can be found in the work of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Derrida, and Samuel Beckett.

On the face of it, the issue of the breakdown of *narrative* in the face of the inexpressible would appear to be logically subsumed within apophatic discourse, since almost invariably apophatic discourse has focused on the failure of language itself, as, for example, in reference to the entity misnamed “God,” which precedes language and is therefore nameless.

If I have spoken of it, I have not spoken of it, for it is ineffable. (Meister Eckhart, cited in Clark 1957: 87)

God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said, something is said. . . . [T]hat is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. (Augustine, tr. Robertson 1958: 622–23)

Or, as Wittgenstein put it, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (2007: 27). So. No words, no narrative. Moreover, the words used most

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1. “Brahman has neither name nor form, transcends merit and demerit, is beyond time, space, and the objects of the sense-experience. . . . Supreme, beyond the power of speech to express” (Shankara, cited in Alston 1956: 506). “[T]he ultimate ‘objects’ of nonclassical theories [of physics are] inaccessible, unknowable, unrepresentable, inconceivable, untheorizable, indefinable, and so forth by any means that are or ever will be available to us, including, ultimately, as ‘objects’ in any conceivable sense of the term” (Plotnitsky 2002: 3).

2. In the Renaissance, the device would be recognized as a subclass of the trope of *ady-naton* (literally “without power”). Technically, this trope is not limited to the attempt through words or narrative to arrive at the unknowable (the subject of this chapter), since these two daughters profess to feel what it is they cannot express. I’ll take up a different class of the inexpressible in chapters 3 and 4.
commonly to describe, not the indescribable itself, but the outward condition of the mystical experience, are words like *cessation*, *stillness*, and *silence*. These would seem *a fortiori* to disqualify concepts like *narrative*, *narration*, and *narrativity*, not to mention the entire fourth dimension of time, without which, again, there is no narrative. As Clement of Alexandria writes, what is sought “is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens” (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, chap. 12; cited in Hawkins and Schotter 194: 2).

Apophatic theology accords with a commonplace in the Bible, that is, that God is neither to be named nor seen. According to Gregory of Nyssa, the Lord’s specific instruction to Moses in this regard was to forbid “that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God” (Gregory of Nyssa; cited in Franke 2007: 143). At best, one must settle for the four letters of the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*). Arguably, then, the extraordinary conception of Jesus as both God and man functioned to get around this prohibition. By providing an image of the unimaginable, complete with a powerful narrative, it accommodated the insistent narrative needs of human understanding—needs that would be most keenly felt when trying to understand what was more important than anything else. Certainly the stories of Mohammed, of Mary, and of all the saints serve as legitimate alternative foci of religious veneration that are both nameable and equipped with the intellectual and emotional resonances of story. But as a literal representation of God (Jesus is Lord) Christ and His story fall in a special class among the Abrahamic religions, one that by virtue of its seeming self-contradiction has unsurprisingly provoked an enduring intensity of theological controversy.

Milton boldly took this contradiction a step further in *Paradise Lost* when he portrayed not only the figurable Christ, but His unfigurable Father as well. In so doing, he made the absolutely unknowable a character in a story. God the Father appears in a pretty uninteresting segment of the larger story, as stories go, but He is still rendered in narrative form. In Book 3, we see Him, sitting “High Thron’d above all hight;” with his eye bent upon “His own works and their works at once to view” (Milton III: 57–59: 196). His eye then travels from point to point, first beholding “Our two first Parents, . . . / Reaping

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3. Silence of course can be time-bound and, as such, can play an important role in creating the narrative suspense of music. In this way and others, silence in music is arguably as important as sound. Similarly, silence plays a diversity of meaningful roles in the rhetoric of oral presentation and, for that matter, in the conversation of our daily lives. But dead silence, silence outside of time and without end, is a different thing altogether.
immortal fruits of joy and love” (65–67: 197); then surveying “Hell and the Gulf between, and Satan there / Coasting the wall of Heav’n on this side Night / In the dun Air sublime” (70–72); and finally, “to his onely Son foreseeing,” he proceeds to tell the story of the Fall of Man, responding at points to His Son’s queries and interjections. In the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysius, there is a role for a positive (kataphatic) as well as a negative (apophatic) theology. But Milton’s “accommodation” to our cognitive limitations, goes way beyond that role. By the standards, at least, of Dionysian discourse what Milton achieved was a displacement rather than an intimation of the Divine.  

Of course most of the action in this scene is talk, and in this, at least, Milton follows biblical precedent. If we are not allowed to see the God of the Old Testament, we certainly hear Him. As an oral presence, particularly in His engagement with Moses, He is a forceful and exacting character, playing His role in a dramatic, narratable interaction with His chosen emissary, cautioning, ordering, making promises. And in truth, it is hard to see any alternative to such narrativization of an unknowable and unspeakable entity if, that is, you are going to have any markers of divine authenticity in the complicated business of setting up a covenant with all its attendant rules and consequences. And surely there is much antecedent tradition of invisible deities speaking, either in their own voice or the oracular voice of a human agent. Gods, of course, can do anything they want to do, including interventions in our affairs with whatever accommodation our limited minds require. It is only when the issue of divine unknownness and its discursive consequences are at a premium that such interventions amount to a problematic trade-off.

This problem, I would argue, extends also to the indirect evidence of divine power through the narrativization of its effects (thunderbolts, plagues, floods). To read such effects is to invite a triangulation of qualities that may come to dominate one’s understanding and thus limit the unknowable with the contours of a divine thisness. Astronomers do the same thing when they triangulate the nature of an invisible planet through the subtle perturbations it causes in the star it circles. Reading this rhythmic dance, they infer limits of planetary thisness. When you think about it, this way of reading the divine nature through its effects can actually be applied to the full text of all

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4. Dionysian standards have not, of course, always been followed. In painting, God the Father has made frequent appearances in human form, most notably on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But narrativized, set in motion as it were, Milton’s God was also going to fill out as a character, revealing a personality, aspects of which have rankled critics from the start. In a subtle defense, Ralph Rader argues that this defect and others, though “definite and real . . . do not interfere with or disrupt our experience of the poem so much as they mark for us the limits of its perfection” (Rader 2011: 53).
the things in existence. You can’t make a world without inviting inferences as to what kind of an entity You are. Finding a language that both acknowledges and baffles such inferences is a challenge, one that is approached in the wonderful passage in the first book of Kings when Elijah stands upon Mount Horeb:

And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (I Kings 19:11–12)

I want to come back to this attempt to both say and unsay in narrative form, but first I want to acknowledge one way in which narrative most commonly works in relation to the unsayable, and that is in the life-writing about, and self-writing of, mystics. Here narrativization turns away from the effort to capture, directly or indirectly, what William James described as “states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (W. James, ed. Marti 1983: 380). Instead, it treats the process leading up to it and what happens afterward. As André Kukla observes, though Saint Theresa of Avila can write of this process “as a life-changing experience,” what she “cannot do, according to her own report, is state the content of her insight” (Kukla 2005: 10). In apophatic discourse, the story of Moses is especially important in this regard. In his Mystical Theology, Pseudo-Dionysius uses it as a central text, a story with a black hole through which Moses plunges into “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (Pseudo-Dionysius, tr. Luibheid 1987: 137). In terms of gap theory, which I will develop more fully in chapter 5, we are focusing here on permanent or unfillable gaps. But like the gap I isolated in Morrison’s Beloved and like many of the other gaps in the following chapters, they are of a special order: they are gaps the reader must be constrained not to fill, yet to feel their quality of unfilled unfillablleness.

5. Eyal Segal has informed me that in the original Hebrew, the sense of paradox is sustained even to “a still small voice,” for which, he writes, “a more literal translation would be ‘a voice of thin silence.’ An even more literal translation, which doesn’t take English grammar into account, would be ‘voice [kol] silence [demama] thin [daka],’ since the Hebrew has only three words (no indefinite article and no ‘of,’ which is only implied), and the adjective follows the noun” (email communication, 4-20-2010).

6. After more than a century, James’s chapter on “Mysticism” in his Varieties of Religious Experience remains one of the most useful and pleasurably readable overviews of the commonalities of mystical experience and what can or cannot be inferred from them.
For Pseudo-Dionysius, Moses’s ascent of Mount Sinai symbolized what Thomas Aquinas later called the via negativa, a negative way that culminates in seeing, not God, who is unseeable, but the clearing away of all else from Him. As such, it is a specialized form of self-consuming narrative that Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of as aphaeresis, “the process whereby the soul systematically negates itself along its mystical journey towards God. As an epistemology, it empties the clutter of the finite mind to clear a space for divine illumination” (Ludwin 2001: 123). In The Divine Names, Pseudo-Dionysius describes this space as a place that excludes the possibility of any kind of story. It is a place “not only as invisible and unencompassed, but also as at once unsearchable and untrackable; for, there is no path for those who penetrate into its infinite hiddenness” (Franke 2007: 163). The same idea guides Dante as he approaches the end of the Paradiso. A contemporary of Meister Eckhart, deeply influenced by the apophatic mysticism of poets like Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of Saint Victor (Franke 2007: 313), Dante created a narrative doomed to bring an end to its narratability.

Substance and accidents and their relations,
Are yet fused together in such a manner
That what I am talking of is a simple light. (Dante 33, tr. Sisson 1980: 89–91)

With no further possibility of “a flight for my wings,” he writes, “At this point high imagination failed” (Dante 33: 139–42).

APOPHATIC NARRATIVE

All of which brings me back to a point I made above: that there is no opportunity for narrative in the place the mystic yearns to get to. To misuse a term from the theory of black holes, there is an event horizon beyond which nothing can be seen and time is abolished. The whole process resonates with Peter Brooks’s analysis of the many ways in which the power of narrative derives from its condition as a journey governed by the magnetic pull of death. And yet for the mystic the termination of narrative once the event horizon of the unknowable is crossed is not a death but some kind of persistence of being out of time. It is very much like what happens in the transition from Malone Dies to The Unnamable in Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy where being seems to persist after the cessation of narrative in a space that is, as Pseudo-Dionysius described it, “unencompassed,” “unsearchable,” “untrackable”—or, as a voice
asks (and it is all a “question of voices now”), “Where now? Who now? When now?” (Beckett 1965: 291).

The almost perfect fit here between the fifth-century Syrian monk and the twentieth-century Irish protestant manqué is no accident. Beckett was strongly drawn to the work of the apophatic theologians, especially that of Meister Eckhart, whose sermons he read and reread throughout much of his adult life. Apophatic theology provides a highly suggestive frame for his work before the Trilogy, in which he can be seen gesturing toward a narrative structure governed by versions of a “negative way.” This is perhaps most notable in his first completed play, Eleuthéria, in which the central character, Victor Krap, could be described as a soul systematically divesting itself of everything that defines its life in this world to wind up at the end of the play curled up in bed in a state of complete, inert, inactivity, “his scrawny back turned on mankind” (Beckett, tr. Brodsky 1995: 191). The relentless and far more ambitious march of the Trilogy was begun immediately after the completion of Eleuthéria in the same year, 1947. It was broken only by the writing of Godot after Beckett had completed Malone Dies. In context, his most famous work appears to be a pause, or as he described it, a place of clarity and order where he could catch his breath before descending into The Unnamable.⁸

There are, however, two major differences between Beckett and his apophatic predecessors, of which the first is that he lacked the one certainty that comes with faith. Despite his enthusiasm for the sermons of Meister Eckhart, Beckett could not assume that there is anything lying or not lying on the other side of the knowable. What there is of any relevance lies on this side: the baffling sense of importance that attaches to being when being is self-aware—the feeling of somehow having been selected to be oneself with neither explanation nor prior consent. This is the engine that drove his periodic returns to an apophatic art. The other difference between Beckett and the theologians is that Beckett continued to draw on the resources of narrative for this endeavor. He did so despite the fact that in The Unnamable, as in his apophatic writing thereafter, narrative is a technical impossibility since there is neither the time nor the space to sustain a story, much less a beginning or an end.⁹ What

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⁸ “I turned to writing plays to relieve myself of the awful depression the prose led me into. . . . Life at that time was too demanding, too terrible, and I thought theater would be a diversion” (Bair 1978: 361); “Le travail du romancier est dur; on s’avance dans le noir. Au théâtre, on entre dans un jeu, avec ses règles, et on ne peut pas s’y soumettre” (Mignon 1964: 8).

⁹ Beckett’s formal experiments were anticipated by the experiments of apophatic theolo-
Beckett contrived was a way of straddling the event horizon of the unimagi-
nable unknown by driving narrative beyond its natural limits. This brings us
back to Elijah and the paradox of a self-cancelling narrative that took place
on Mount Horeb. In Beckett’s hands, the paradox of apophatic narrative takes
shape as an urgency of pursuit that resides in the language itself. This is still
action, indeed frenetic action—a headlong rush of words—but it is action that
draws much of its energy from the impossibility of narrative and the absolute
absence of a storyworld. Narrative in this state is a long way from the narra-
tive mode adopted by Pseudo-Dionysius when he represented the process of
*apphaeresis* in Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai. It lacks the distance enjoyed by
such an act of representation. It is instead experiential in the most immediate
way, a bizarre apophatic quest powered by a narrative yearning that draws the
acceptant reader into its struggle.

To relocate narrative excitement from a represented world to language
keyed to the absence of that world, Beckett was driven constantly to remake
the language of narration itself.

vast. How if not boundless bounded. Whence the dim. Not now. Know
better now. Unknow better now. Know only no out of. Into only. Hence
another. Another place where none. Whither once whence no return. No.
No place but the one. None but the one where none. Whence never once in.
Somehow in. Beyondless. Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless
thitherless there. (Beckett 1996: 92)

Here in *Worstward Ho*, the reader is made to float in a place that is no place,
where the coordinates of time and space have given way to an urgency of
directionless pursuit toward an unknowable end. What is left of story is the
adventures of a voice, unfolding from one word to the next. It is a voice in
the first-person present, yet without a person to go with the narration: “Say a

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gians as they struggled to achieve in language what Kierkegaard called “[t]he supreme paradox
of all thought,” that is, “the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think” (Kierke-
gaard, tr. Swenson 1936: 29). For example, one ingenious solution hit upon by the apophatic
thelogians to deal with the problem of saying without saying is the device of hyperphasis or
hyper-predication. One finds it in the writing of Pseudo-Dionysius and later in the “hyperphat-
ic theology” of the ninth-century Irish mystic Johannes Scotus Eriugena. It involved appending
the words “more than” (“super,” “plus quam”) when attributing traits to an unknowable God.
God is not, for example, merciful but “more-than-merciful,” not omnipotent but “more than
omnipotent.” In this way, one skirts the danger of limiting the divine nature by naming its
traits. God is “supersessentials,” more-than-being. Indeed, God is more-than-God (Franke
2007: 182). Whether Beckett had this and other necessarily odd apophatic locutions in mind
when, in *The Unnamable*, he found himself hovering at the edge of the sayable, I cannot say.
body. Where none” (89). What the voice yearns for is what the reader yearns for as well, what his or her neural circuits are designed for, a world, fictive or real, in which narrative action can take place. Instead, action is narration, beginning self-reflexively in the present imperative—“On. Say on. Be said on” (89)—and ending in the past tense—“Said nohow on” (116). The initial “On” tells us that it is not a true beginning but a continuation, while the last “on” tells us it is not a conclusion but, for now at least, a loss of energy. It is the non-existent end of what Gilles Deleuze called an art of “exhaustion.”10 The only thing that gives these words their minimal narrativity, their urgent pell-mell rush, seemingly in spurts, with no time for the little helper-words that ordinarily give sentences their clarity, is the yearning for a genuine narrativity in a genuine world. In short, there is no longer any possibility of “accommodating” the modes of human cognition, of allowing the reader to nestle into the kind of satisfying narrativity that Milton and his enthusiasts settled for. They, like the self-deceiving Devil himself, had only built themselves a Kingdom in “this hell of stories” (Beckett 1965: 380).

Deprived of certainties of any kind, such an experience of apophatic narrative is the experience of what, in this chapter and the next, I am calling the “cognitive sublime.” When I first hit upon the idea of a “cognitive sublime,” and used it in an essay (H. P. Abbott 2009), I was not aware of Alan Richardson’s happy coinage “the neural sublime,” now the title of a revisionist and provocative book on the English Romantics (2010).11 Richardson argues for greater recognition of the influence of Burke’s physiologically based concept of the sublime on Romantic poetry and thought as opposed to the influence of Kant’s transcendental concept of the sublime. The neural sublime is a strictly materialist concept of the sublime as “a corporeal experience that, in the last analysis, depends on changes in the central nervous system, a stretching and subsequent relaxation of the nerves” (A. Richardson: 26). As such, the concept allows me to differentiate the concept of a “cognitive sublime,” which I apply to the effects dealt with in this chapter and the next. In what I have chosen to examine in the work of Beckett and García Márquez, there is no materialist finality. If they achieve their effects by having some serious fun with our neural circuitry, it is not meant to limit wonderment in this way, since there is as yet no confirmation that matter is all there is. This, of course, also goes for the so-called spiritual, transcendental, noumenal, and like suppositions. But in Richardson’s reading, the absence of the immaterial is absolute. When

11. See also Cynthia A. Freeland’s cognitivist approach to the sublime in “The Sublime in Cinema” (1999), an essay which Richardson cites.
Shelley in his essay “On Life” takes us to “that verge where words abandon us, and . . . we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know,” Shelley, in Alan Richardson’s construction, offers “no compensation aside from that awful vacancy and accompanying dizziness . . . we are left blinking in the sublime darkness of an overtaxed brain” (32–33). By contrast, if Shelley describes what I am distinguishing as the cognitive sublime, the lack of knowledge is more acute, since there is always the possibility (for good, or ill, or whatever) that there is more going on in that abyss of darkness. In short, if readers read in the mode I am promoting, they experience a textual transaction that conveys the felt quality of extratextual unknowing.

THE DEICTIC MAZE

Once in the Q & A following a keynote address by Gerald Edelman, he was asked if he thought we could ever create a machine that was conscious. His answer was, Yes, in the next thousand years or so this could happen. Then someone else in the audience asked if Edelman thought we could create a machine that not only was conscious but also had that sense of its own unique particularity that we commonly refer to as the “I” or ego. After a pause, Edelman said, No, this we could not do. It was an interesting moment and resonated with the common intuition that even if we managed to find a way across the notorious “gap” between the brain and the mind, there would still be this additional gap referred to by philosophers as the problem of personal identity. It is a seemingly out-of-reach mystery with a distinction that chimes with that other august mystery: Why is there something rather than nothing? In the apophatic mystical tradition, the two questions often meld into one. In this tradition, however, there has been at least an answer to the question (God), however unspeakable that answer may be. For Beckett, as noted above, this confidence could no longer be maintained. Without it, he turned the mystery on an axis to focus on the listener, alone on an island in the great dark, hearing voices that may or may not be his own.

Consequently, when he set out in The Unnamable on his strange wanderings along the event horizon of the unimaginable unknown—wanderings that culminated in Worstward Ho—the baffling condition of being somehow

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13. There were shorter pieces by Beckett between 1983, when he published Worstward Ho, and his death in 1989. Notable in our context is his last work, the poem “What is the Word” (Beckett 1990: 131–34), written for his friend Joe Chaikin.
present works as a kind of black hole pulling at his sentences. As I have been arguing and will continue to argue with regard to Beckett and all the other writers featured in this book, what we feel in this kind of writing is only possible because the author took a big step, not only beyond analytical discourse (in this case, on the problem of personal identity), but also beyond the representational discourse of narrative. For readers who are willing (and “willing” is a key term here), he cut the distance between them and what is going on in the narrative to the point where they are no longer observing someone having a hard time, but having it themselves.

The stories of Mahood are ended. He has realized they could not be about me, he has abandoned, it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him, and be left in peace. Having won, shall I be left in peace? It doesn’t look like it, I seem to be going on talking. In any case all these suppositions are probably erroneous. I shall no doubt be launched again, girt with better arms, against the fortress of mortality. What is more important is that I should know what is going on now, in order to announce it, as my function requires. It must not be forgotten, sometimes I forget, that all is a question of voices. I say what I am told to say, in the hope that some day they will weary of talking at me. The trouble is I say it wrong, having no ear, no head, no memory. Now I seem to hear them say it is Worm’s voice beginning, I pass on the news, for what it is worth. (1965: 345)

Here is a passage like many in The Unnamable that is impossible to read. The problems of reading begin to mount with its third word, the modest preposition “of.” On the face of it, the stories of Mahood are the stories the narrating voice told of the creature he invented and named Basil and then renamed Mahood. And they are also stories of Mahood in the sense that they are stories told by Mahood. So far, the reader’s problem would be no more than a problem familiar to readers of any number of autobiographical narratives in which “the teller and the told” (310) are presumed to be the same person. But with the next sentence, we are told that an ostensible subject all along has been me: “He has realized they could not be about me. . . . ” The linguistic difference between “me” and “he” puts an impossible semantic burden on the preposition “of” with a simultaneous separation and inter-identification of he, me, I, him, and Mahood, which has in fact accompanied the reader for the preceding thirty-six pages, ever since the retroactive christening of Mahood. “It was he told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head. I don’t know how it was done” (309). Autobiographies have, it is true, been narrated in the
third person (The Education of Henry Adams, Norman Mailer’s Armies of the Night, Roland Barthes’s Roland Barthes, J. M. Coetzee’s Youth), but in such cases the narrating voice is usually stabilized as an implicit first-person entity who makes use of the third-person construction for a self now distanced by time from the one who narrates. What is unique in Beckett’s narrative are the ways in which grammatical references of subject and object are at once inter-identified and set in conflict—a conflict moreover that is unsought (“he has abandoned, it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him”) and that is fought by combatants who constantly betray their own cause by slipping into the enemy camp without even a change of pronoun (“I seem to be going on talking”).

In his book The Paradox of Self-Consciousness, Jose Luis Bermudez contends that one strand of the paradox of self-consciousness is demonstrated in the philosophical effort to “elucidate the capacity to think first-person thoughts through linguistic mastery of the first-person pronoun.” The effort, he argues, is doomed to “explanatory circularity” because what one is trying to explain is part of the explanation (“the explanandum is part of the explanans” [Bermudez 2000: 16]). It is precisely this circularity that Beckett embraces by continually transgressing the grammatical levels of the personal subject and the personal object. The blurring of these levels is a paradox that we live with throughout the ordinary course of our lives but keep as it were quarantined by the unconscious application of the rules of grammar. By crossing grammatical boundaries the way he does, Beckett not only exposes the paradox but immerses us in it. Moreover, as the grammatical levels of subject and object correspond to the narrative levels of first and third person narration, Beckett at the same time engages in what narratologists call metalepsis, the mixing together of narrative levels that are ordinarily kept separate simply in order to go about the business of telling a story (Malina 2000: 9; Risser 1997: 88). The effect of all this is a sustained sentence-by-sentence grammatical and narrative vertigo. And it gets worse.

By the end of this passage, two more personal pronouns have entered the referential mix for the same subject/object. On the one hand, I/he is they/them, for who else could be giving orders (“now I seem to hear them say”)? On the other hand, I/he/they is also an implicit you, for who else could be the one addressed (“in order to announce it,” “I pass on the news, for what it is worth”)? In grammatical terms, this whole mess is a crisis of “person deixis,” keyed to the necessary dependence of personal pronouns on context to determine their reference. Person deictics like he, him, me, I, they, you have no referential value in themselves but only in what can be determined from context. Perhaps Otto Jespersen’s term “shifters” works better to express the
fluid condition of these open lexical templates (Jespersen 1922). Once they are established, we rely on them in turn to let us know who is talking and who is being talked about. But if I am right in my reading of this passage, its abundance of shifters all have the same referent. Or more accurately, they do and they do not, given our propensity to keep subject and object distinct. And to make our reading experience even more dizzying, the voice has included two proper names, Worm and Mahood, that appear to share the same referential ambiguity as the personal pronouns in that they are similarly maintained as referential templates without content except as temporarily deployed.

It may help to see what is going on here as a kind of narrational opposite to what Ann Banfield first labeled an “empty deictic center” (1987). In the case of an empty deictic center, deictics, largely of time and place, strongly suggest a narrating “subjective center” within the storyworld but do not provide sufficient contextual clues to know whose voice it is—as for example in Katharine Mansfield’s “At the Bay”:

> Ah-Aah! sounded the sleepy sea. And from the bush there came the sound of little streams flowing, quickly, lightly, slipping between the smooth stones, gushing into ferny basins and out again; and there was the splashing of big drops on large leaves, and something else—what was it?—a faint stirring and shaking, the snapping of a twig and then such silence that it seemed someone was listening. (Mansfield 1991: 97)

The empty deictic center is a subjective center without a subject. But—and here is the point I want to emphasize—however unique, even disturbing, it may have first appeared, it is a condition most readers of modernist texts by authors like Mansfield and Woolf have learned to “naturalize” and thus accept without much strain. It has, in short, become a narrative convention. In stark contrast, Beckett has crammed the subjective center of *The Unnam-

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15. For an interesting critique that identifies the missing subject with the reader, see Fludernik (1996: 192–207).

16. Here and elsewhere in this study, I use the term “naturalize” in the sense that Jonathan Culler used it when he adapted it from Barthes: that is, as an “operation” on the text performed by readers in order “to recognize the common world which serves as a point of reference” (Culler 1975: 135). Monica Fludernik’s term for a somewhat broader version of the concept is “narrativize,” but the effect is basically the same: “By recuperating such texts, by narrativizing them, readers enforce a minimal holistic (cognitive) story shape on what is threatening to become unreadable, unshapable textual fluidity” (Fludernik 1996: 274).
able with a superabundance of personal deictics, a conflict of grammatical schemata that cannot be naturalized and thus never loses its power to disturb the reader. It is the case of Rimbaud’s oft-cited line, “Je est un autre” (“I is an other”), raised to the third or fourth power. In critical and philosophical discourse, Rimbaud’s one-liner has commonly been absorbed as an ambiguity of selfhood (e.g., “The self is experienced as an other to the self”), but what has been lost in the process of explication is the feeling of vertigo induced by his “bad” grammar.\textsuperscript{17}

Understandably, then, commentary on \textit{The Unnamable} has likewise fallen back on interpretive formulae such as “the inadequacy of subject reference” or “the incompatibility of self and narrative.” Whatever the accuracy of such analytical assessments (and they are often accurate), there is a risk in deploying them, since they can (and I think often do) serve as a refuge from the experience of what they purport to describe. This should be avoided because the very failures of language and narrative these formulae describe are tools that are essential for Beckett’s success. They allow him to generate direct experience of news from the interior, our own interior. Put simply, Beckett gives us experiential knowledge of our ignorance about who we are. He has devised textual mechanisms through which we experience individually specific consciousness as a moving point of self-presence in a constancy of self-absence. We experience it as neither one nor the other but both at once and thus, arguably, impossible to realize without our constantly flipping deictic orientations from sentence to sentence and even from phrase to phrase. This is the “impossibility” of reading this text that I referred to above. Still, it is through this felt impossibility that Beckett gets us as close perhaps as most of us are likely to get to the condition of nonunderstanding that evolutionary necessity and its agent, grammar, for good practical reasons have kept from our daily awareness. After all, burdened as we are with consciousness as no other animal before us, it helps enormously to believe that we are unitary beings with a coherent self well within the grasp of language. It confers a competitive advantage.

THE UNNARRATABLE SELF

The self as a narrative construct is now a widely distributed assumption across numerous fields in which human beings are the subject of study: autobi-
ography, social psychology, narratology, therapeutics, popular texts of self-improvement, and much of the sociocultural history of the self that flowed in the wake of Marcel Mauss’s 1938 lecture on “A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self.” A more recent landmark in thinking of the self as necessarily a narrative construct is Oliver Sack’s (1987) moving accounts of two cases in which narrative capability has been disabled. They are instances of Korsakov’s Syndrome, a cognitive deficit in which not only are all traces of one’s life story erased but none is allowed to take shape. The victim is “isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all round him” (29), and as a consequence can only, at best, engage in a bizarre project of constructing a new, situated, narratable self at every moment, “continually creating a world and self, to replace what was continually being forgotten and lost” (110). This necessary inclusion of narrative in the concept of selfhood was echoed by the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1991), and the psychologists Roger Schank (1990) and Jerome Bruner (1991), and provided with a neurobiological base in Young and Saver’s influential essay on the severe existential consequences of four types of “dysnarrativia” (2001). Drawing on Young and Saver in How our Lives become Stories: Making Selves, Paul John Eakin makes the connection mandatory: “Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narratives have lost their selves.”18 It remained for Antonio Damasio to extend the inevitability of narrative back into a self that takes shape before the self becomes autobiographical. Before the autobiographical self, even before language, in Damasio’s developmental paradigm, a “core self” emerges as little curlicues of voiceless narrative begin to organize sensations.19 All there is selfwise before the core self is the “protoself,” a self without

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18. In a kind of summation, Bruner (2003) wrote that without narrative there is “no such thing as selfhood”: “The emerging view is that dysnarrativia is deadly for selfhood. . . . The construction of selfhood it seems cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate” (86). Even Galen Strawson’s widely contested repost that “[s]elf-understanding does not have to take a narrative form, even implicitly” (Strawson 2004: 448) ends with a celebration of lives that are lived episodically—that is, lives that are lived in a kind of narrative suspense within an episodic narrative structure with its own distinct narrativity: “truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid blessed, profound” (Strawson 2004: 449). By 2008, both the concept of the narrativized self and the concept of dysnarrativia had found their way into the motivational words of high-end real estate broker Al Lewis: “Among those with dysnarrativia, selfhood virtually vanishes. The lesson is obvious: the construction of selfhood cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate: to make-up and tell stories about oneself.”


19. Susan Lohafer uses the term “neuroscenario” for something like this: “A hand reaches out, touches a flame, starts back in pain, and registers a meaning. Antiquity’s child and tomorrow’s infant are similarly equipped. Both have this built-in plot-making talent, although it takes several years before humans can recognize or tell a ‘story’” (Lohafer 2003: 3).
narrative, originating “at the level of the brain stem rather than the cerebral cortex” and making itself known in the production of “primordial feelings” (2010: 21).

Damasio’s still evolving (6) view of the cumulative interrelations of brain, body, and selfhood is complex. But the scheme of development that leads to the full orchestration of the adult human self is nonetheless a progression from primitive-to-fully-evolved human complexity, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. If we were to propose this paradigm of development as a frame for the focus of this chapter, then Beckett’s voices would enact a kind of progressive regression. That is, we experience in these voices a consciousness, richly endowed with resources of both language and narrative to an extent far exceeding those of most of us, yet seeking to disown both, or more accurately to abuse them (since they cannot be disowned) in such thorough and ingenious ways that the self behind the self—the self that knows itself only as an inexplicable persistence of individually distinct self-awareness—might at least be intimated.

So, ultimately, there is no place in Damasio’s paradigm for these voices. The acute, vivid self-awareness they express is not the awareness of oneself as a narratable, usually agential, being, but rather as a feeling of one’s distinctive one-of-a-kindness, of having been selected in the absence of any known selector or any identifiable purpose. It is a feeling of exclusive interiority, of having been gratuitously chosen to be oneself, rather than someone else, and to abide in a “hell of stories.” Having woken up to this condition Beckett’s protesting narrators suffer from a kind of failed Korsakov’s Syndrome in which the patient endures not the loss of life narrative but its continued insistence. The voice of The Unnamable may seem to yearn for a valid autobiographical self when it imagines being carried “to the threshold of my story” to wait “before the door that opens on my story.” But in the same breath it knows this is an impossibility since all stories of the self are merely fictions that mask the apophatic problem for which the word “self” is a hopelessly compromised place-holder. “[I]f it opens,” he says, “it will be I,” and then adds without a break in what has been a very long sentence, “it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know” (Beckett 1965: 414).

To return to Edelman’s response to the question of whether we could ever create not just consciousness but an ego to go with it, one could argue that an ego is, for all its impossibility, simply another evolutionary necessity. What evolution needs, evolution makes, regardless of our human inability to achieve the same thing. Therefore, at a certain level of consciousness the sensation of being an existential self, personal and immediate, is a logical necessity for
driving the conscious organic machines of beings like ourselves. And so, one might say, “Voilà: self-consciousness explained.” Yet such an explanation of self-consciousness is also a way of slipping past the conundrum of happening to be one of those conscious selves. It is another deployment of narrative to escape from feeling. It gives the ego a place in a story—the story of evolution. It is a story that introduces, at a certain point in its development, a new agential type, the ego-powered being, which in turn generates new complications in the narrative action.

And something like this move into an explanatory narrative can relieve Beckett’s reader, too. In the Introduction to this study, I referred to Michael Gazzaniga’s theory of an “interpreter” in the left brain that is constantly at work creating out of our sensory inputs the kind of coherences we require in order simply to get by in this life. Most readings of Beckett have tended by example to bear out Gazzaniga’s idea of a left-hemisphere interpreter to the extent that explication has neutralized the immediate effect of the inexplicable. This is not to argue that explication is a bad thing. But in the instances of these remarkable narrative texts, explication is often, I think, a response to an understandable, if unacknowledged, anxiety of losing interpretive control. Whatever terms are imported to explain why the mind is tempted to stand back while reading these texts, it is still the case that one cannot ignite them from the outside. What they have to offer lights up within the experience they catalyze. In this limited sense, these texts are no longer representations of life but the experience of life itself.

But, then, finally, to ask a question that has been hovering in the wings: Have I not been explicating? And the answer is, Of course I have. We can’t get very far in this business without trying to explain things. But, as promised in the introduction to this study, I have sought in this chapter to operate at a level of explication that leaves intact the experience of unknowing. To get to that experience, to let it do its work, is an art of abandonment. In Beckett’s terms, it is to experience “the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home” (Beckett 1965: 195). There can be deep knowledge in not knowing, but it is rarely attained. Our nature is set against it, since it means letting go even of one’s least attempt to understand what’s going on. As I have been arguing, the knowledge of explanation paradoxically cancels the knowledge freighted in the unexplained.

20. More recently, in The Ethical Brain, Gazzaniga has described how this hypothetical interpreter reflexively maintains the construction of a self in which the interpreter is presumed to reside: “[I]f the brain is modular, a part of the brain must be monitoring all the networks’ behaviors and trying to interpret their individual actions in order to create a unified idea of the self. Our best candidate for this brain area is the ‘left-hemisphere interpreter’” (2005: 148).
To appropriate the words of Molloy, knowledge enters in only when one is “beyond knowing anything.” One can talk around such knowledge, as I have been doing in this chapter, but the knowledge itself is not analytically convertible to other discourses without serious distortion. It is, to appropriate Pound’s epigram, “news that stays news” (Pound 1961: 29).