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Herausgegeben von Wolfgang G. Müller und Rainer Thiel

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Jørgen Veisland (Gdańsk)

The breathless discourse. Narrating death in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "Death on Credit," Samuel Beckett's "The Unnamable" and Paul Auster's "4321"

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The article analyzes three modernist novels, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "Death on Credit," Samuel Beckett's "The Unnamable," and Paul Auster's "4321". The texts examined manifest radical discursive changes that are connected with epistemological and ontological conceptions of mind and being. Modern conceptions of being are seen as being based on the non-concepts of *exaiphnes*, the timeless instant, as developed by Parmenides, *sunyata* as defined in Buddhist thought, and the indeterminacy of particles as discovered by quantum physics. The idea of being as a state of infinite potentiality impacts the discourse and the form of the modern novel as it moves in the direction of formlessness, thus mirroring the non-substantiality of the human subject. The narrators of the three novels speak at a breathless pace that punctuates and disrupts the narrative and that inserts death as the agent of the negation of meaning.

Keywords: 'Exaiphnes', 'sunyata', timeless, breathless, death.



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Being and time. 'Sunyata' and 'exaiphnes'.

An instantaneous fusion coupled with an instantaneous diffusion, the two of them occurring simultaneously, constitutes the paradox of the uninterrupted, never static and never arrested flow of things physical and psychical. The process is captured by Heraclitus when he expands his river metaphor (the same person cannot swim in the same river twice), stating that everything comes together and moves apart at one and the same time. Thus the philosopher extrapolates time from time, as the moment of fusion and diffusion is lifted out of a teleologically determined temporality and becomes a different time, *exaiphnes*, a singular moment approximating the eternal yet not anchored in eternity.

Heraclitus' unique grasp of the way things are, as opposed to what things are, in nature and in the mind, is nothing less than a preemptive deconstruction of Aquinas' *quidditas* and it makes up a new insight into Being and time. The focus on the moment and of the relational rather than essential structure of nature and of Being is an epistemological characteristic common to early Greek philosophy, notably Heraclitus and Parmenides, Buddhist thought, and quantum physics. The common cognitive orientation produces a revision, indeed a disruption of identity and temporality that is to have profound aesthetic and rhetorical implications that I will explore when I examine the three literary texts selected.

In Heraclitus' thought temporal succession is eliminated since there is no 'before' and 'after', 'again' and 'later'. Eternity which comes before time in Plato and in all subsequent Western metaphysics does not need to be re-presented in time the way it is in the narrative, for example, where it occurs as a re-lived, repeated experience of the past. Heraclitus erases the borderline between time and eternity, past and present, thus making a powerful argument in favor of the non-representable nature of Being. Being is change but change that is standing still, paradoxically, captured as it is in a fleeting 'wink of the eye' (Kierkegaard's *øieblik*). This moment, named *exaiphnes* by Parmenides, epitomizes the metamorphosis of time into space. Further, according to Heraclitus Reason cannot grasp anything that is really real – in other words, thought cannot have any objects outside itself for such objects are unreal. The fusion and diffusion occurring simultaneously in Being, in mind and in nature is beyond the real-unreal dichotomy and may not be called real since that would amount to representing it, and that is impossible according to Heraclitus and Parmenides.

Plato constructed a dialogue entitled *Parmenides* where he has his predecessor speculate on *exaiphnes*, arriving at the conclusion that this instant which is both movement and standstill does not exist in any time. The problem of time has an ontological as well as an aesthetic dimension. Representing eternity as past time repeated, and representing Being as mediated in poetry, drama and narrative is a

procedure that is nullified in Heraclitus' and Parmenides' thought which focuses on immediacy not on mediation. *Exaiphnes* is a non-concept just as the instant in Kierkegaard's work "Repetition" where that which is repeated is different from what it was rather than being the same. The philosopher's pseudonym Constantin Constantius states: "The dialectic of repetition is easy; because what is repeated, has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but the fact that it has been, makes repetition into the new". (Kierkegaard 1983: 149) Perceiving each moment to be different, Parmenides grasps Being as empty in a positive sense: infinitely open and limitless, poised in a state of potentiality.

Buddhist thought embraces a similar view of Being. The Third Karmapa Ranjung Dorje, a Tibetan Buddhist Lama about 1300 A. D., expresses an epistemological approach similar to the idea of Being as infinite potentiality in verse 10 of the "Mahamudra, The Great Seal":

Mind's self-expression, which has never existed as such, is mistaken for an object;

Due to ignorance, self-awareness is mistaken for an 'I'.

Clinging to this duality causes one to wander within the conditioned world.

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May ignorance, the root of illusion, be cut away. (Nydahl 2004: 82)

The epistemological convergence of essence and emptiness, i. e. potentiality, mind's clear awareness, and the aesthetic confluence of form and the formless transforms dualism. Dialectical reflection is turned into complementarity in Tibetan Buddhist thought. The literal translation of the Buddhist *Dharma* is 'the way things are' – emphasizing the manner of things rather than the essence or *quidditas*, the 'whatness' of things. Nature and mind do not emanate from a substance. They are non-substantial and may be described as existing in a state of infinitely open potentiality, containing the simultaneous presence of all possibilities at once. This state is the *sunyata*, limitless Being. The non-concept of *sunyata* erases the dual oppositions of Western metaphysics as things are yet are not at the same time, present but not as substance and therefore non-representable. The notion of ego or self is annulled. As Christian Thomas Kohl points out in his illuminating work „Buddhismus und Quantenphysik“, Parmenides ascertained that it was false to maintain the separateness of phenomena – being/non-being, life/death, solid/non-solid etc. He pointed to the interdependence and the exchangeability of contradictory phenomena. Parmenides alerts us to the fact that everything is complementary.

The non-concept of infinite potentiality finds its equivalent in quantum physics, a science initiated by experiments by Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger and Niels Bohr. The experiments led new insight into the nature and behavior of photons and electrons, insight that has been confirmed and expanded today. Photons and electrons make up quantum units, packages of

energy. The quanta are not confined to one location in the universe. They exist ‘here’ and ‘there’ at the same time and exhibit no specific features prior to being observed. In other words, quanta exist in many potential states and may assume any given ‘real’ state *only* when observed. They pass from non-existence into existence, so to speak. As energy packages the quanta do not exist in isolation. Each quantum carries with it an amount of exchange energy: forces that work between the quanta. The energy package of the quantum and the energy exchange between quanta make up a cloud surrounding the quanta and creating the entire quantum field. The quanta thus exist in a state of potentiality and indeterminacy.

In his recent work “Reality Is Not What It Seems” the Italian theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli provides a lucid definition of the quantum, stating that quantum mechanics “has revealed three aspects of the nature of things: granularity, indeterminacy and the relational structure of the world”. (Rovelli 2017: 111) Outlining the first aspect Rovelli says that the “granularity of matter and light is at the heart of quantum theory. It isn’t the same granularity intuited by Democritus, however. For Democritus, atoms were like little pebbles whereas in quantum mechanics particles vanish and reappear”. (loc. cit.) Moreover, scientific research indicates that particles not only vanish and reappear: when they ‘vanish’ they cease to exist! They pass from non-existence to existence, as noted earlier.

The second aspect of the nature of things is indeterminacy. Rovelli writes:

An electron, a quantum of a field or a photon does not follow a trajectory in space but appears in a given place and at a given time when colliding with something else. When and where will it appear? There is no way of knowing with certainty. Quantum mechanics introduces an elementary *indeterminacy* to the heart of the world. The future is genuinely unpredictable. (112)

The third aspect of the nature of things is relationality which Rovelli describes as follows:

The theory does not describe things as they *are*: it describes how things *occur* and how they *interact with one another*. It doesn’t describe where there is a particle but how the particle *shows itself to others*. The world of existent things is reduced to a realm of possible interactions. Reality is reduced to interaction. Reality is reduced to relation. (115)

Furthermore, research on quantum gravity, Rovelli states, has been focused on spatial equations but has recently gone on to confront time. Research on space has established the following, Rovelli writes:

Things (the quanta) do not inhabit space. They dwell one over the other, and space is the fabric of their neighbouring relations. As we abandon the idea of space as an inert container, similarly, we must abandon the idea of time as an inert flow along which reality unfolds. Just as the idea of the space continuum containing things disappears, so, too, does the idea of a flowing continuum ‘time’ during the course of which phenomena happen. (151)

This does not mean that everything is immobile or that change is not occurring. As Rovelli states:

On the contrary, it means that change is ubiquitous. Only: elementary processes cannot be ordered along a common succession of instants. At the extremely small scale of the quanta of space, the dance of nature does not develop to the rhythm kept by the baton of a single orchestral conductor: every process dances independently with its neighbors, following its own rhythm. The passing of time is intrinsic to the world, it is born of the world itself, out of the relations between quantum events which *are* the world and which themselves generate their own time. (154)

Time as we are used to think of it does not exist. Space is a fabric of relations. Thus quantum physics confirms the non-substantiality of things elucidated by early Greek philosophy and by Buddhist thought. Put together, these three approaches to nature and the mind corroborate and enhance the singular rhetorical practice evident in the literary texts selected: the textual fabric is broken down to fragments interspersed with dots in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "Death on Credit", and with commas and periods that divide and disrupt the stream of words in Samuel Beckett's "The Unnamable" and Paul Auster's "4321". The texts are written, or told in a staccato rhythm produced by a certain breathlessness in the narrative voices. The breathless voices of the narrators are suspended in a state between life and death. Conceptions of Being as found in early Greek philosophy, Buddhist thought and quantum physics provide the theoretical framework for the analysis of the three novels. The novels share a common motif, the motif of death. Viewing life from the perspective of death not only deepens the understanding of human existence; it causes literary language to gravitate in the direction of silence, the transcendence of speech.

Deferring death

Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel "Death on Credit" (« Mort à crédit »; 1936) is a first-person narrative told by the adolescent Ferdinand and may be said to be partly autobiographical. The text is a blend of the real and surreal, a fusion of conscious thought and dream. It is a six hundred page long explosion divided into brief fragments separated by dots. There is no transition between desire, sensation, experience and narration; they appear to be one. Reality is a fantastic space manifesting no linearity or chronology. The explosive force of an uninhibited rebellion against the father *is* the text. This explosive force is also a negation of any attempt by Ferdinand's parents who own a small linen shop in a Paris passageway to define him and raise him in *petit bourgeois* fashion. Ferdinand escapes parental control and, unlike Oedipus, he is not subject to a pre-determined fate. He is anti-Oedipus and he retains his energetic rebellion

throughout the narrative despite being treated unfairly by his parents and a number of employers that accuse him of laxity as a way of asserting their own status and power. Ferdinand's response to the concerted effort to pin him down and make him something he is not is the impetus that creates the anti-authoritarian, anti-totalitarian drive of the text. Plot, and with it time, is eliminated as a result of this psychic and rhetorical drive. The discursive manifestation is dual: an explosion and an implosion the target of which is the father figure.

The sidewalk outside the shop run by Ferdinand's parents is covered with spit and dog excrements so that it is always sticky. The father cleans it every day but has a hard time keeping the muck at bay. He is prone to anger and flies in a rage one day and pursues the boy and his mother around the house when he discovers that a customer has stolen a handkerchief from the shop:

He bellows, he rushes, he explodes, he bombards the kitchen. There's nothing left on the nails... pots, pans, dishes, crash, bang, everything goes... my mother on her knees implores heaven for mercy... He overturns the table with one big kick... it lands on top of her...

[...]

I come part of the way down to look... He's dragging her along the banister. She hangs on... she clutches his neck... That's what saves her. It's he who pulls loose... He pushes her over. She somersaults... She bounces down the stairs... I can hear the dull thuds... (Céline 1989: 67)

The physical explosion occurring in this scene is the effect of an implosion, the break-down of the father as a dominating, repressive figure. Ferdinand's rebellion against the father is aided by the father's own disintegration, resulting in a travesty of the father figure. Céline penetrates the deeper layers of the human psyche, uncovering an energy that is naturally, spontaneously rebellious. The travesty-like, both real and surreal depiction of family relations culminate in a scene where Ferdinand is ill and feverish:

I finally stopped vomiting... I was baked in heat... I was terribly interested... I'd never suspected that so much stuff could fit inside my noodle... fantasies... weird sensations. At first everything looked red... Like a cloud all swollen with blood... right in the middle of the sky... Then it disintegrated... and took the form of a Lady Customer ... enormous... gigantic... She began to order us about... up there in the sky... She was waiting for us ... hanging in midair... she commanded us to get busy ... she made signs... (88)

The phantasmagorias expand as if by an internal dynamics of its own:

The Lady, our Customer, had all the money, all the shopkeeper's cash, stashed away on her... She was going to treat us... It was getting hotter and hotter, and we were still wedged against the Lady ... In among the drapery, next to the lining, I saw thousands of things hanging. All the stolen goods in the world... as we galloped, the little "Byzantine" looking glass, the one we'd looking for for months on the rue de Montorgueil, fell on my head ... it left a bump... (92)

The inner dynamics of images that increase in complexity throughout this scene has to do with simultaneity in time, a form of timelessness, and with a certain vertical, even vertiginous dimension in the imagery as opposed to a horizontal, linear language. Ferdinand's mind which *is* the discourse, is non-hegemonic. The dense accumulation of imagery creates an effect similar to a Freudian condensation of dreams, images put on top of one another in a montage. The imagery is also symbolic as it involves flying through the air, escaping the restrictions of a paternalistic *petite bourgeoisie* and its preoccupation with money, property and sales profits. There are no distinct borders in Ferdinand's mind. The inside and the outside merge as surreal fantasies blend with reflection and narration. Time in the form of the "Byzantine" looking glass falls through the air and makes a bump on Ferdinand's head, signifying the collapse of temporal and spatial order. The result is a textual vertigo – a verbal dizziness and breathlessness that transcend *logos*. The discourse becomes a project of liberation as it foregrounds the instantaneous image appearing in the formless form of the text.

In a scene at the beach paternal authority is literally turned upside down in the water: "... My father in a striped bathing suit, between two roaring mountains, is shouting like mad. He bobs up in front of me... he belches, thrashes about, makes wisecracks. A roller knocks him over too, turns him upside down, there he is with his feet in the air... (122)

A combination of sexual licentiousness and sexual repression characterize family relations in Ferdinand's home: "... He looks at my mother too, stretched out on the bed... "Good Lord, Clémence, cover yourself ..." he bellows at her, furious on account of her leg ... Here we go again... He motions at her. He thinks I'm looking at her bare legs..." (312)

The father vents his anger at Ferdinand and his mother both in a dispute about domestic finances: "... you hand him your purse! Why not give him everything? Give him the whole house. Why not?... Ah! Ah! I predicted it, didn't I!... He'll shit in your hand! Ah! Ah! He's drunk it all up! He's guzzled it all down! ... (313)

Ferdinand assaults the father in the next scene:

... He comes back blowing up my nose... more insults... more and more of them... I feel things coming up in me too... And the heat besides... I pass my two hands over my face... Suddenly everything looks cock-eyed!... I can't see straight... Just one jump... I'm over him! I lift up the big heavy machine... I lift it way up. And wham! ... I give it to him full in the face! (316)

Ferdinand feels sick after the attack on his father:

... I have a lousy sick feeling, a panic in my kidneys... like everything was falling apart, coming off in shreds... like a hurricane was shaking me... My whole carcass is rattling, my teeth are shattering... I'm dead to the world... I've got a spasm in my asshole... I shit in my pants... My heart's pounding so hard I can't hear what's going on... (318)

The scene amounts to a parody of the Freudian Oedipal triangle. The rhetoric of parody tends to subvert the pathos while also preserving it as the father's abuse is highlighted. Paternal prohibition causes filial revolt, and the revolt is extended into a discourse that is subversive of the hegemony of language. Thus the text demonstrates the intimate relation between repression and the creative process.

The last words of the novel are an ambiguous reply to his uncle who wants Ferdinand to put on an overcoat: "But if you get up, put on an overcoat... Just reach into the pile, it doesn't matter which ... You'd catch your death out in the hall ... There's no shortage of coats ..." (588) Ferdinand replies, "No, Uncle". (loc. cit.) It is uncertain whether Ferdinand's response is meant to affirm the fact that there is no shortage of overcoats or whether the 'no' signifies a refusal to put on a coat. It may well be the latter. The uncle is overly protective and Ferdinand is the exact opposite of T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock who has spent a lifetime guarding himself against the vicissitudes of human existence. Even the uncle's admonition that Ferdinand may catch his death if he does not wear a coat falls on deaf ears. Ferdinand's 'no' is the culmination of his revolt. Prior to the stay with his uncle Ferdinand attempted a career in sales which failed. Parents subsequently sent him to a boarding school in England where he refused to learn English. His revolt is total and is even extended into a revolt against death at the end. He will not catch his death if he is not wearing an overcoat. Paradoxically, Ferdinand challenges death as he expresses a death wish at the end by asking his uncle to enlist him in the army. Yet death is deferred even as it occurs. Death appears in the story of Gwendor, one of the many stories Ferdinand makes up in adult life when he is a practicing physician:

"O, Death, give me a little time... a day or two. I must find out who betrayed me...

"Everything betrays, Gwendor... The passions belong to no one, even love is only the flower of life in the garden of youth.

"And very gently Death gathers up the prince... he has ceased to resist... his weight has left him... and then a beautiful dream takes possession of his soul... (27)

Death is deferred as a 'beautiful dream takes possession of his soul'. The prince has obtained death on credit in the fairy tale. The tale is an allegory of the narrative itself where death is continuously postponed owing to the fantastic, dream-like discursive fabric that lifts Ferdinand out of the prison of the Self and out of the prison-house of language by releasing psychic and aesthetic energies that turn Ferdinand's mind into the open space where all possibilities are present at the same time. The mind is the counteractive force that arises not only as a negation of death but as an affirmation of death. Death is life-giving as it prompts the narrator to create images that not only signify but *carry within them* the transformation of the Self. The narrative attains ontological and aesthetic congruity.

Images carrying within them the transformation of the Self are emblematic of the simultaneous fusion and diffusion conceived by Heraclitus. The discourse

of the son, which *is* the narrative, in surrealistic fashion exceeds and explodes the narrative of the father. Parmenides' thought, which nullifies mediation and representation, finds its fictional complement in Ferdinand's fantasies and sensations which at one and the same time regress and progress to a pre-verbal state as in the scene where a red, swollen cloud disintegrates and assumes the form of a Lady Customer. Ferdinand's fantasies are the incipient forms of the formless, constituting the simultaneous presence of all possibilities and causing Ferdinand to be dead to the world. The narrative imitates and simulates, in its own subtle manner, particles which, according to quantum mechanics, vanish and reappear. Vanishing and reappearing is, indeed, the modus of the narrative, punctuated as it is by dots.

Truth in fiction

A modernist poetics emerges with the emphasis on *exaiphnes*, the instant. In his essay "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" Ezra Pound writes: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". (Pound 1913: 200) Pound relates the instantaneous nature of this aesthetic process to liberation: "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art" (loc. cit). Pound's definition of the image reads like a continuation and an affirmation of Parmenides' concept of *exaiphnes* and Kierkegaard's *øjeblik*. As we have seen in our examination of "Death on Credit" the transcendence of time and space sets the narrator free. The liberation of the narrative voice is also connected with an epistemological project the aim of which is to determine the role of fiction in the search for truth. In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Wallace Stevens states that our access to reality is enhanced by the poetic imagination. He adds that current research in science and philosophy has dispensed with the notion of substance and replaced it with a detection of change, movement and vibration. Stevens calls for a new conception of the artwork, claiming that there is confluence between the world and the work of art and that "a firm grasp of reality is eliminated from the aesthetic field". (Stevens 1942: 50) The poet withdraws himself and withdraws reality by placing it in the imagination. Thus the poet creates the world giving "to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it". (31)

Truth is discovered in fiction, then, and the discovery is accompanied by the sense of liberation Pound calls attention to in his essay. Stevens' comment on the orientation in science and philosophy on change and vibration prompts a look at William James' "The Stream of Consciousness". (1892) Here James notes: "The

traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water”. (James 2000: 183) Opposing this view of things James states:

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it, - or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.

Let us call the consciousness of this halo of relations around the image by the name of ‘psychic overtone’ or ‘fringe’. (loc. cit.)

James’ fringe around the image expands the meaning of the image, making it into that complex Pound refers to in his essay. The fringe also endows the image with a relative indeterminacy. The fringe contains multiple possibilities and the idea of potential presences and movements is taken up in current scientific experiments concerned with the trajectory of electrons. Rovelli notes that Epicurus “introduces into atomism the notion of indeterminacy” as the philosopher claims that “atoms can on occasion deviate by chance from their course”. (Rovelli 2017: 113). This has been confirmed by quantum physics. In observing the trajectory of electrons the following has been established: “it is as if the electron, in order to go from A to B passed through ‘all possible trajectories’, or, in other words, unfurled into a cloud in order then to converge mysteriously on point B” (114).

Science, philosophy, and aesthetics concur in the detection of a ‘cloud’, a ‘fringe’ and a ‘complex’. Meaning and truth become manifest as substance is eliminated. All potential ‘trajectories’ in fiction lead to the discovery of reality.

The voices of the narrators in Samuel Beckett’s novel “The Unnamable” (1955) and in Paul Auster’s novel “4321” (2017) exemplify non-substantiality, potentiality and instantaneousness as they engage in a precipitous narrative pace, a kind of breathless discourse that may be described as a race towards death and as a suspension of identity in a state of being in-between I and Not-I. More often than not, the text is unpunctuated, leaving the impression that a constant flux within and without is an immediate, non-stop giving in to an overwhelming change that defies permanence and, indeed, precludes language as an agent and a medium of expression and conception.

Commenting on Beckett’s trilogy of novels in the article “Three novels and four *nouvelles*: giving up the ghost be born at last”, Paul Davies notes: “Anguish closes in on the person who, hypnotized by positivism, cut off from the living mystery, feels himself to be nothing more than an isolated thinking machine”. (Davies 1994: 46) The narrator of “The Unnamable” captures the suspension

between Cartesian thought and ‘the living mystery’ in an on-going ceaseless voice that is suspended between I and Not-I and between life and death:

This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too abased ever to succeed in saying the words that would be its last, knowing itself useless and its uselessness in vain, not listening to itself but to the silence that it breaks and whence perhaps one day will come stealing the long clear sigh of advent and farewell, is it one? I’ll ask no more questions, there are no more questions, I know none anymore. It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, its round I must revolve, of that I must speak, [...] (Beckett 1955: 307)

The unnamable speaks on without ceasing, like a machine or carousel going round, longing to stop but not being able to. It goes on at a pace that reminds one of Jean-Luc Godard’s film “A bout de souffle”. (Breathless; 1960) It is a voice suspended between I and not-I, between truth and lying, between sense and nonsense, issuing from a uterus-like vase where the unnamed and unnamable narrator is stuck, much like Hamm’s parents in “Endgame”, his head curiously growing out of an enormous ear forced to listen to the voices of others that never cease. The unnamable has no legs, only stumps resting on the bottom of the vase or trunk filled with sawdust, and around his neck is a cement collar that keeps his face turned permanently in one direction. The paradox of being stuck facing forwards and revolving ceaselessly indicates a geometric necessity that conditions perception, limiting it to a narrow epistemological perspective that is perpetuated in spite of itself.

In Paul Auster’s “4321” (2017) the narrator is equally nameless, unnamable, one might say, or perhaps rather possessing a fictive name given to him by chance. Archie Ferguson has inherited his name from his grandfather, a Russian Jew who, while going through immigration on Ellis Island, tells the immigration officer in Yiddish that he has forgotten his name, *Ikh hob fargessen*, whereupon the officer assigns him the name Ichabod Ferguson, so he becomes *Archie Ferguson*. As Archie Ferguson he decides to write a story about four identical but different people with the same name. One of these four assumed identities is “himself” as narrator and writer of life stories that go on at a breakneck pace similar to the pace of the Unnamable’s voice. Page after page in Auster’s novel consists of paragraphs whose sentences are interspersed with commas rather than periods. Two of the other three Fergusons – one dies in an accident at the age of thirteen – are also writers; one of them is composing “The Scarlet Notebook” the seventh entry of which reads: “When I turn the pages of the scarlet notebook, I often see things I thought I had forgotten, and suddenly I find myself back in the past”. (Auster 2017: 725) In the ninth entry Ferguson notes that in the notebook there are “left-wing political tracts, boiled beets, and hunks of raw steak. There is fire. There is blood”. (726) Like the novel in its entirety, the

fragment called *The Scarlet Notebook* piles miscellaneous objects on top of one another to make an impression of a profusion of fragments without cohesion, a technique very much like Beckett's. Three of the Fergusons in the novel die on the way, one as a pre-adolescent, and two in their early twenties, all three by accident, death in the midst of life, leaving the narrator alone at the end. The death of the three Fergusons may be called accidental or it may be seen as propelled by the breathless discourse that not only portrays but is one with precipitous change. Auster's discourse is different from Beckett's in that the suspension between life and death, truth and fiction, is conceived as a passionate suspension of the two that almost equates truth and fiction, and as a passionate involvement in life culminating in death; by contrast the Unnamable's interest in life is dispassionate and his discourse focuses on an epistemological dismantling of a voice that is not his own.

The title of "*The Scarlet Notebook*" of course implies a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "*The Scarlet Letter*" whose narrator engages in a narrative form of adultery that aligns him with Hester, wearer of the letter embroidered on her jacket. The narrative discourse is adulterous in the sense that it manifests an ethically grounded uncertainty and an aesthetic and epistemological indeterminacy as to its own voice, a circumstance that tempts one to situate Hawthorne squarely within modernism. The narrator has to break rules in order to get at the truth. The same uncertainty as to how to compose diary entries enfolds the author of "*The Scarlet Notebook*" – an allusion, also, to the torn up, discarded "*Red Notebook*" in Auster's "*The New York Trilogy*" – as he reflects on the vicissitudes of composition that mirror the vicissitudes of life:

There are days when a person who owns a scarlet notebook must do nothing but read it. On other days, it is necessary for him to write in it. This can be troublesome, and on some mornings when I sit down to work I am not certain which activity is the correct one to pursue. It seems to depend on which page you have come to at that moment, but as the pages are unnumbered, it is difficult to know in advance. That explains why I have spent so many fruitless hours staring at blank pages. (loc. cit.)

The phrase "staring at blank pages" leads to Ferguson the narrator's decision to a tongue in cheek pinning down of identity: "Ferguson, whose name was not Ferguson, found it intriguing to imagine himself having been born a Ferguson or a Rockefeller, some one with a different name from the X that had been attached to him when he was pulled from his mother's womb on March 3rd, 1947." (862) He fulfills the idea of naming fictive characters in accordance with a reversal or an inversion of identities so that in the novel "4321" the narrator does not "pursue the notion of one person with three names"; instead he admits:

[...] he would invent three other versions of himself and tell their stories along with his own story (more or less his own story, since he too would become a fictionalized version of himself), and write a book about four identical but different people with the same name: Ferguson.

A name born out of a joke about names. The punch line to a joke about the Jews from Poland and Russia who had boarded ships and come to America. Without question a Jewish joke about America – and the enormous statue that stood in New York Harbor.

Mother of exiles.

Father of strife.

Bestower of misbegotten names. (862-863)

Archie's mother Rose Ferguson becomes a photographer and the creation of photographic portraits made from snapshots indicate the significance of the visual dimension in the narrator's discourse. The passage describing Rose Ferguson's photo store may also serve as an example of the rhetorical breathlessness characteristic of the narrative in its entirety:

[...] Ferguson's mother knew the days of studio photography were nearly done, and for some time she had been reducing the number of hours she kept the studio open, from five ten-hour days in 1953 to four eight-hour days in 1959 to four six-hour days in 1961 to three six-hour days in 1962 to three four-hour days in 1963, devoting more and more of her energies to photo work for Imhoff at the "Montclair Times", where she had been put on salary as the paper's chief photographer, [...] (395)

The socioeconomic and general cultural conditions governing artistic activity deteriorate progressively, forcing Archie's mother to seek employment at a commercial enterprise. But the snapshot image persists as it invades the narrative discourse and becomes one with it. Thus the narrator, and Auster himself, turns a potentially negative mechanism around, endowing it with a positive, innovative artistic effect. Breathlessness does not imply superficiality or negligence; on the contrary, it is the modern mode of composition, reflected in snapshot photography and imbued with a pregnant life and liveliness.

The Unnamable nearly approximates a similar liveliness and that is exactly the central paradox of the dying, or rather the unborn voice emanating from Beckett's narrative. The Unnamable is balanced in between a giving in to the voice that fills him and rejecting it:

The place, I'll make it all the same, I'll make it in my head, I'll make myself a memory, I have only to listen, the voice will tell me everything, tell it to me again, everything I need, in dribs and drabs, breathless, it's like a confession, a last confession, you think it's finished, then it starts off again, there were so many sins, the memory is so bad, the words don't come, the words fail, the breath fails, no it's something else, it's an indictment, a dying voice accusing, accusing me, a culprit is indispensable, it speaks of my sins, it speaks of my head, it says it's mine, [...] (Beckett 1955: 411)

The Unnamable speculates on his identity, referring to himself as possibly being Mahood, alternatively Worm, calling his other selves not only fictional but "vice-existers":

Mahood. Before him there were others, taking themselves of me, it must be a sinecure handed down from generation to generation, to judge by their family air. Mahood is no worse than his predecessors, [...] But before executing his portrait, full length on his surviving leg, let me note that my next vice-exister will be a billy in the bowl, that's final, with his bowl on his head, and his arse in the dust, plump down on thousand-breasted Tellus, it'll be softer for him. (315)

Mahood's vice-existers include, of course, Malone, Molloy, Murphy etc. But Mahood is not him:

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 he left in peace. Having won, shall I be left in peace? It doesn't look like it, I seem to be going on talking. (345)

The narrator reflects sarcastically on his own creations, his vice-existers, and on Mahood, exclaiming "to think I saw in him, if not me, a step towards me! To get me to be he, the anti-Mahood, [...]" and his reflections culminate in the evocation of Worm: "Worm, to say he does not know what he is, where he is, what is happening, is to underestimate him. What he does not know is that there is anything to know." (346) And finally:

Worm is, since we conceive him, as if there could be no being but being conceived, if only by the beer. Others. One alone, then others. One alone turned towards the all-impotent, all-nescient, that haunts him, then others. Towards him whom he would nourish, he the famished one, and who, having nothing human, has nothing else, has nothing, is nothing. Come into the world unborn, abiding there unliving, with no hope of death, epicentre of joys, of grief, of calm. (loc. cit.)

The calm would be a respite evoked by the cessation of words but there is no stopping the words for he does not know where they come from: "Where do these words come from that pour out of my mouth, and what do they mean, no, saying nothing, for the words don't carry any more, if one can call that waiting, when there's no reason for it [...]" (370)

The "me" the Unnamable is looking for, the one to be sought, is something else:

[...] it's something else he has, he must have something, he must be somewhere, he is made of silence, there's a pretty analysis, he's in the silence, he's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can't speak, then I could stop, I'd be he, I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in the story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, [...] (413)

Applying certain concepts from Søren Kierkegaard's "Either-Or" (1843) and "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" (1849) to the two narratives we are examining may serve to elucidate a few points. Like Beckett and like Auster, Kierkegaard places himself outside the frame of his works, as the reader of his own works. He does so because the metaphysical longing – a desire for life and death both – is immanent to or immanently present within a silence

that causes the narrative distance to be inserted as a primary moving force, so to speak, within the discourse of multiple pseudonyms. The fictive authors of Kierkegaard's works fill the silence, much like the omnipresent voice that speaks on in the "Unnamable" and in "4321." Like Beckett, Kierkegaard points out that reason, thought, are the opposite of existing. The paradox of thought and existence culminates in Kierkegaard's conclusion that the difference between thinking and existing is in itself a product of thought! The difference between them is a *thought* difference and thus reminds us of the dilemma confronting the Unnamable. The paradox guides Kierkegaard's reflections further on as he elaborates his concept of existence. It is paramount that the subject reflects on his existence and is aware of the difficulty of existence. Existing means becoming and becoming is preconditioned on a difference from oneself. This difference is present in the subjective consciousness and manifests itself as an *interest* in living. The root of the word interest is *inter-esse*, being between, and this heightens the paradox because this inter-esse is literally that which comes between the subject and himself. He cannot be One and he cannot be Other. He is in-between. And in like manner The Unnamable and Archie Ferguson are different from themselves, speaking and reading their voices from a distance. Through a variety of fictional trajectories, the Fergusons and the 'names' of the Unnamable, truth is approximated.

The approximation of truth receives its impetus from the in-between state that eliminates identity. Erasing identity in Auster's and Beckett's novels liberates the mind of the narrator, endowing his consciousness with what William James calls a 'psychic overtone' and creating narratives replete with images immersed in a 'halo of relations'. The geometric necessity of a fixed perspective gives way to a suspension between 'I' and 'not-I'. The lines from the "Mahamudra", 'Mind's self-expression, which has never existed as such, is mistaken for an object', and 'self-awareness is mistaken for an "I"' constitute the epistemological basis for artworks that attempt to transcend the limits of language and representation by creating fiction whose narrative voices emanate an intense desire to escape 'the conditioned world' by not clinging to the duality of subject and object. Subject, object and action are one according to the insight offered by the "Mahamudra". This insight occupies the minds of the narrators of the two novels examined, turning identity and character into a *play* of identities. Fiction becomes the playground of interchangeable relations whose ultimate objective is the cutting away of 'the root of illusion'.

The scytheman and the bullskrit

In Paul Auster's novel "The Book of Illusions" the artist Hector Mann who has been making films living in isolation in the New Mexico desert dies in old age and his wife Frieda decides to burn all his films to prevent them from reaching an audience. The narrator comments on Frieda's decision speculating that Hector's work was not about making films: "It was about making something in order to destroy it. That was the work, and until all evidence of the work had been destroyed, the work would not exist. It would come into being only at the moment of its annihilation –" (Auster 2002: 279-280). For Frieda the act of creation and the act of destruction constitute a unified process. The dual act of creation and destruction applies to the work of art and it also applies to human existence. In "4321" the thirteen-year old Archie Ferguson dies in a thunderstorm while at summer camp. Exhilarated by the rain and the thunder he runs out into the storm and stops under a big tree, ignoring the counselor's admonition to return to camp:

[...] Ferguson couldn't hear a word he was saying, not with the noise of the rain and the thunder, and especially not when Ferguson himself began to howl, no longer George on his mission to save Lennie but simply Ferguson himself, a thirteen-year old boy wailing in exaltation at the thought of being alive in such a world as the one he had been given that morning. [...] (Auster 2017: 184).

Lightning strikes a branch of the tree. It crashes down on Archie's head, killing him. Death is an effect of the life-giving force of rain. Death occurs as a culmination of life, life in ecstasy, *ek-stasis*, a state of being beside oneself. In his essay Stevens refers to the radical experiments with form in modernist literature, calling them a violence within and claiming that it is "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without". (Stevens 1942: 36) Here Stevens is talking about the ubiquitous presence of destruction and violence in the midst of World War II. In "Death on Credit" we observed how Ferdinand responded to the violent outbursts of his father by pushing back against it with an equal power of revolt. This counteractive psychic force becomes one with the power of the artist to create images that exceed ontological and aesthetic limitations. Archie's jubilation in the death scene exceeds these limitations as well. Moreover, death-bound and life-giving forces coalesce in a singular fashion as they inform the creative process by re-orienting it. The creative process is impelled towards a formlessness that is a *mimesis* of the formlessness and non-substantiality of Being.

The contradictory discourse of Beckett's "The Unnamable" posits affirmations and negations in the search for a voice that can say something and mean something: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me". (Beckett 1955: 291) He wonders how to proceed: "By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?" (loc. cit.) The immediate invalidation of speech, utterance signifies the nadir of thought and of

writing itself. The sense of the senselessness of speaking and hence of writing is enhanced as the Unnamable's staccato voice goes on: "I know no more questions and they keep on pouring out of my mouth. I think I know what it is, it's to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable nearer silence [...]" (307).

The Unnamable has tried on a number of fictional identities, among them Mahood and Worm: "Mahood I couldn't die. Worm will I ever get born?" (352) Suspended between life and death, neither dying nor being born, the Unnamable invokes the scytheman: "The scytheman will tell, it's all one to him". (loc.cit.) From the perspective of death living and dying and the voice that never stops yet cannot speak are 'all one'. The scytheman 'will tell'. Death invades the discourse as the voice and the writing that ultimately negate yet curiously affirm the narrative impulse and the compulsion to speak while one knows one cannot speak. The Unnamable invokes a third one, possibly someone like him, at least someone with a tenuous identity. This third one who is purportedly different from Mahood and Worm would be with him but the two of them would be unknown to one another. The existence of this third voice is "a darling dream I've been having, a broth of a dream" (378), he admits. Even another one may appear in a futile attempt to generate a voice. This new one will ceaselessly emit more stories:

[...] and tales like this of wombs and cribs, diapers beppised and the first long trousers, love's young dream and life's old lech, blood and tears and skin and bones and tossing in the grave, and so coax him out, as he me, that's right, pidgin bullskrit, and in the end, having lived his life, no, before, but you've got my meaning, and there we are the three of us, it's cosier, perpetual dream, you have merely to sleep, not even that, it's like the old jingle. (378-379)

He has found it to be impossible to remain motionless and fixed:

[...] if I could put myself in a room, that would be the end of the wordy-gurdy, even doorless, even windowless, nothing but the four surfaces, the six surfaces, if I could shut myself up, it would be a mine, it could be black dark, I could be motionless and fixed, I'd find a way to explore it, I'd listen to the echo, I'd get to know it, I'd get to remember it, I'd be home, I'd say what it's like, in my home, [...] (399).

He is forced to conclude: "I've tried, I feel no place, no place around me, there's no end to me, I don't know what it is, it isn't flesh, it doesn't end, it's like air, ..." (loc. cit). Living in a familiar place, a home that is geometrically fixed in squares, the Unnamable would be able to define precisely where he is and what it is that surrounds him. His description of things would be constantly corroborated and confirmed by the echo, the sound of stable meanings emitted from him and thrown back at him in a perpetual process of mutual affirmation. Knowledge would be projected outward and received inward, creating a harmonious epistemological and existential balance. However, that would be the end of 'the

wordy-gurdy' which is his speech. It is a speech and a writing that spirals downward in an unstoppable movement of negation. The Unnamable cannot be named and must discard the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, the fictional attempts to pin himself down. The Unnamable is also the one who cannot be named because he is repulsive, or rather repellent like an unmentionable piece of clothing. He is repellent and he repels sense and drives meaning away from himself. He is compelled to give himself over to the wordy-gurdy, making his voice into bullskrit. Ultimately it is the scytheman that will tell. Death consciousness orders or rather disorders the voice of the Unnamable. Death's narrative is a negation of substance and an affirmation of non-substantiality. There is no end to the Unnamable.

The endlessness of the Unnamable is a manifestation of a discourse whose major rhetorical feature is the staccato rhythm. As noted above, this rhythm is the product of a breathlessness that suspends the narrative voice in a state between life and death. Nature is emulated here. As Rovelli states, the 'dance of nature' does not occur in response to 'the baton of a single orchestral conductor'. The Unnamable's invocation of a third voice, different from Mahood and Worm, is the calling forth of the independent natural processes Rovelli calls attention to. The relation between the Unnamable and the third voice is the ontological and aesthetic equivalence of relations between quantum events, the relationality of nature itself. Strangely but logically, the figure of Death, the scytheman, is instrumental in bringing about the dual act of creation and destruction that demolishes the hegemonic discourse and produces the unnamable voice: the silence surpassing voice.

Conclusion

Disordering speech is the narrative function of death, then. Death is inserted as the immanent *telos* of artistic creativity. The paradox inherent in the destruction from within of the artwork is to be understood as an indispensable ingredient of the creative impulse. In this manner the artist protects her/himself from the violence of the world by engaging in a violence within. That internal, immanent violence is a formal kind of violence as it disrupts narrative structure. It is also a metaphysical violence as it disrupts thought and, indeed, Being itself. The disruption of thought precedes and pre-conditions the innovative, radical metaphysical conception of Being as non-essential and non-substantial, a Being not grasped by thought or by language, speech, but envisioned in silence and approximated in death.

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