



Ontological Homelessness: Beckett's Vice-Existents and the Postmodern Subject in *The Unnamable*

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) has long pressed its readers toward a choice between two accounts of the self it stages. For the humanist reading, Mahood and Worm, the novel's so-called "vice-existents," are failed surrogates for an authentic self that has lost its home; for the deconstructive reading, they attest to the dissolution of subjectivity as such. Ontological homelessness names a third possibility. Drawing together Heidegger's analysis of *Unheimlichkeit* and the fundamental attunements of anxiety and profound boredom, Georg Lukács's account of transcendental homelessness, and Prashan Ranasinghe's distinction between ontic and ontological homelessness, the essay argues that Mahood and Worm are neither surrogates nor symptoms but positions within a topology of failed selfhood that is itself the only "subjectivity" the novel can offer. *The Unnamable* is not a self that has lost its home, nor a non-self that never had one. It is a structure of homeless persistence, a mode of being that survives only through the figures it must shed, that says "I" without crediting the pronoun, that can neither cease nor continue. Close reading of three movements, the inventory of the vice-existents and their repudiation, the Worm sequence, and the closing aporia, isolates a category of postmodern subjectivity distinct from displacement (Said), hybridity (Bhabha), and abjection (Kristeva): the homeless subject, which has lost not the place where it dwells but the metaphysical conditions under which dwelling could be intelligible. The reading carries consequences for Beckett studies, for postmodern theories of the subject, and for the still-unsettled relation between the trilogy and Ireland's post-independence condition.

Keywords Ontological homelessness; transcendental homelessness; vice-existents; fundamental attunements; postmodern subject; topology of selfhood

Received: 20August2022

Accepted: 15September2022

Published: 20October2022

1. Introduction: The Subject Who Cannot Be Located

Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (composed in French as *L'Innommable*, 1949–50; published 1953; English translation 1958) presents the most radical interrogation of literary subjectivity attempted in twentieth-century prose. The novel's narrating voice cannot locate itself in space ("Where now? Who now? When now?" [*Trilogy* 293]); cannot establish its identity ("It is I who think, just barely" [*Trilogy* 305]); cannot determine the source of its compulsion to speak ("It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls" [*Trilogy* 307]); and cannot, finally, cease ("I can't go on, I'll go on" [*Trilogy* 418]). It is a novel about a voice that is not at home anywhere: not in a body, not in a place, not in a tradition, not even in the language it is condemned to speak.

A distinction is needed at the outset, because the reading that follows turns on it. To be without a home is not one condition but two. There is the ontic fact of houselessness: the absence of shelter, the material dispossession that names a social emergency and calls for a social response. And there is what Prashan Ranasinghe, glossing Heidegger, calls ontological homelessness, not the loss of a dwelling but an estrangement from the essence of one's own being, a condition that persists undisturbed while one is comfortably housed (Ranasinghe, "On Being"). The two are easily confused, and the confusion is not

merely lexical; it governs how one reads a novel whose narrator has neither a body to shelter nor a self to be sheltered. The Unnamable is not homeless in the ontic sense, since it owns no body that could want for a roof. Its homelessness is of a sort far harder to specify, and it is that sort the present essay sets out to name.

The dominant critical approaches to this radical condition have been twofold. The humanist reading, descending from Hugh Kenner and the early existentialist criticism, treats the Unnamable's plight as the displacement of an authentic self that has lost its proper home and is searching for it across the wreckage of language. The deconstructive reading, descending from Steven Connor, Anthony Uhlmann, and the post-structuralist critics, treats the novel as the demonstration that there was never an authentic self to begin with: the "I" of *The Unnamable* is a textual effect, not a subject in displacement.

Both readings, for all their yield, miss the novel's most distinctive contribution. The Unnamable is not the displaced subject of humanism, but neither is it the dissolved subject of deconstruction. It is a third figure, which this essay terms the ontologically homeless subject: a mode of being that persists not despite its lack of metaphysical anchorage but precisely through that lack. The Unnamable does not seek a home it has lost. It inhabits, in the only way it can, a condition in which the very structure of dwelling has become impossible. Mahood and Worm, the so-called vice-existers, are not failed approximations of an underlying authentic self, nor are they evidence that no self exists; they are positions within a topology of homeless persistence, and to read them as such is to recover what is most original about the novel's contribution to postmodern literary practice.

The concept is not conjured for the occasion. It is assembled from three bodies of thought that Beckett criticism has seldom brought to bear on the trilogy with any rigour, and it depends on all three in equal measure. Heidegger supplies the account of Dasein's constitutive un-homeliness and of the attunements, anxiety and profound boredom, through which that un-homeliness comes to light. Lukács supplies the diagnosis of the modern novel as the form of a "transcendental homelessness," the literary shape taken by a world from which immanent meaning has withdrawn. Ranasinghe supplies the philosophical insistence that Heidegger's homelessness is ontological rather than ontic, structural rather than circumstantial, and that its disclosure is nothing less than the disclosure of existence as a kind of nothingness. Held together, these furnish what the existing criticism has lacked: a vocabulary equal to a subject that is neither present nor absent, neither at home nor in exile from one.

The argument proceeds in seven movements. Section 2 surveys the criticism and locates the gap. Section 3 assembles the theoretical framework, distinguishing ontological homelessness from four neighbouring concepts (*Unheimlichkeit*, transcendental homelessness, exile, and abjection) with which it is easily and damagingly conflated. Section 4 confronts the strongest objection the concept faces, the materialist charge that it aestheticises real deprivation. The three close readings follow: Mahood and the logic of repudiation (Section 5), Worm as the limit case of the vice-exister (Section 6), and the closing aporia as the formal signature of homeless persistence (Section 7). The conclusion situates the concept within debates on the postmodern subject and gestures toward its ecological and postcolonial extensions.

2. Literature Review: From Humanist Displacement to Deconstructive Dissolution

The earliest sustained criticism of *The Unnamable* treated the novel as the culmination of an existentialist trajectory. Hugh Kenner's *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (1973) read the trilogy as a Cartesian narrative: the progressive erosion of the body in *Molloy*, the contraction to the deathbed in *Malone Dies*, and the disembodiment of voice in *The Unnamable* together enact the philosophical recognition of the cogito's ultimate isolation (Kenner 95). For Kenner, the Unnamable was a self displaced from its body but still recognisably a self. Marjorie Perloff's essay on Beckett as poet extends this line by treating the novel's radical minimalism as the discovery of a new poetic register for the Cartesian subject (Perloff 112).

The deconstructive turn in Beckett studies, inaugurated in the 1980s, reframed the question at its root. Steven Connor's *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988) reads the trilogy as a sustained

exposure of the differential structures by which any “self” is constituted: the Unnamable is not a self in displacement but a textual position generated by the very repetitions that appear to be its acts (Connor 76). Anthony Uhlmann’s *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (1999) sharpens the analysis: “The subject for Beckett is an effect of the words it speaks—not a being who deploys language as a tool but a position that language constitutes” (Uhlmann 47). Daniel Katz’s *Saying I No More* (1999) provides what remains the most rigorous philosophical account of this position, arguing that *The Unnamable* stages the impossibility of any first-person utterance that does not perform the very subjectivity it appears to presuppose (Katz 89).

Carla Locatelli’s *Unwording the World* (1990) offers a third indispensable orientation, treating Beckett’s late prose as a sustained “unwording” of the resources by which conventional fiction had constructed both world and self. Shane Weller’s *A Taste for the Negative* (2005) reads the novel through the lens of philosophical nihilism, while Sinéad Mooney’s *A Tongue Not Mine* (2011) recovers the bilingual dimension as constitutive of the trilogy’s refusal of identity: the Unnamable speaks in a tongue not its own, in the obvious linguistic sense and in a deeper ontological one (Mooney 12).

What unites these readings, for all their divergence, is a shared structural commitment: each treats the novel as enacting either the displacement of a subject or the dissolution of subjectivity itself. The deconstructive reading is the more philosophically rigorous, yet it inherits, against its own intentions, the metaphysics of the humanist reading it displaces. Where humanism asserts the subject and deconstruction denies it, both presuppose that the question of the novel can be settled along the axis of presence and absence. That axis is precisely what *The Unnamable* most decisively interrogates. The novel neither persists as a subject nor dissolves into pure textuality. It inhabits a third position, ontological homelessness, that the existing critical vocabulary has not adequately articulated.

There have been important precursors to the position developed here. Pascale Casanova’s *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (2006) treats the trilogy as a deliberate “abstracting” of literature from the categories on which the realist novel had erected its authority (Casanova 87). Emilie Morin’s *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (2009) reads the Beckettian refusal of authentic self-location as a specifically Irish post-independence formal innovation. Patrick Bixby’s *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009) extends the insight in a chapter titled “Narrating the no-man’s-land: deterritorializing Ireland and postcolonial identity in the Trilogy” (Bixby 175). Each of these readings begins to articulate something like the homeless subject this essay will develop, and each pulls the argument back toward a thematic register (Casanova’s aesthetic abstraction, Morin’s national displacement, Bixby’s postcolonial deterritorialisation) without isolating the structural position as such.

If Beckett studies has circled the question of the Unnamable’s selfhood, the philosophical literature on homelessness has approached the same terrain from the opposite direction, and the two have rarely met. Lukács had already, in 1916, named “transcendental homelessness” as the condition the novel form exists to register. Heidegger made *Unheimlichkeit* and its attendant attunements central to the analytic of Dasein. A recent strand of scholarship, foremost Ranasinghe’s article of 2020, has laboured to prise Heidegger’s ontological homelessness free of the sociological and psychological idioms that habitually domesticate it (Ranasinghe, “On Being”). That this apparatus has scarcely been turned on the trilogy is itself instructive. The omission is treated here as an opening: philosophical concept and literary text illuminate one another exactly where each, taken alone, reaches its limit.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Ontological Homelessness

Ontological homelessness earns its precision by contrast. Four concepts in twentieth-century thought lie close enough to it to be mistaken for it, and the concept comes into focus only as it is distinguished from each in turn.

Its first and deepest debt is to Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Dasein is “not-at-home” (*unheimlich*) as a matter of structure rather than mood: thrown into a world it did not choose and cannot ground, it dwells, even at its most settled, on the far side of any final belonging (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 188).

This un-homeliness is not ordinarily felt, and that it is not felt belongs to its structure; the everyday is precisely the business of absorption, of not noticing. What discloses it are the fundamental attunements (*Grundstimmungen*), above all anxiety and profound boredom. In anxiety the web of everyday significance goes slack; the world that had offered a foothold at every turn withdraws its offer, and Dasein is returned to the naked fact of its being-in-the-world with nothing to justify it. Profound boredom performs a slower version of the same office. As time empties and refuses to be filled, beings as a whole recede into indifference, and existence stands exposed in its want of any given ground. Ranasinghe presses the point that matters here. These attunements do not report a passing psychological weather; they disclose existence as a species of nothingness, and the homelessness they reveal is ontological rather than ontic. It is a dislocation from the essence of one's being, not a mere want of shelter (Ranasinghe, "On Being").

So far the Unnamable is a Heideggerian creature. It parts company with Heidegger at the one point where Heidegger keeps a door open. For all its severity, the analytic of Dasein preserves the possibility of authenticity: anxiety individualises, the *Augenblick* can be wrested from the grip of boredom, and Dasein can, in resolute anticipation, take over its thrownness as its own. Heideggerian homelessness is the precondition of a homecoming, however austere the terms. The Unnamable is refused even this. It cannot appropriate its thrownness, because there is no "it" stable enough to do the appropriating and no moment of vision toward which the appropriation might move. Ontological homelessness, in the sense given the phrase here, is Heideggerian un-homeliness from which the prospect of authentic homecoming has been withdrawn: the attunement without the resolution, the disclosure with no door behind it.

A second inheritance runs through Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel* opens by borrowing Novalis's aphorism that philosophy is a form of homesickness, a longing to be everywhere at home, and goes on to name the condition of modernity "transcendental homelessness" (Lukács 41). For Lukács, the term is literary-historical before it is metaphysical. The epic belonged to a world whose meaning was given in advance, a totality the hero had only to inhabit; the novel is the form assumed by a world from which that immanent meaning has withdrawn, so that its protagonist must wring, from an indifferent reality, a significance the cosmos no longer supplies. Ontological homelessness carries this diagnosis to a limit Lukács did not foresee. The Lukácsian novel still stages a quest: its hero seeks the meaning the epic possessed, and the seeking, however doomed, gives the form its forward tilt. The Unnamable has surrendered even the quest. There is no protagonist to search, no world to search in, no lost totality whose absence might orient the search. Where Lukács's novelist is homeless because meaning has retreated to a horizon, Beckett's voice is homeless because the horizon itself has dissolved, the very structure of near and far, of lost and sought. Beckett writes the novel of transcendental homelessness after the transcendence has gone.

Said's reflections on exile mark a third boundary. In *Reflections on Exile* (2000), homelessness is a political and biographical condition: the writer in exile carries the lost home within, and writes from the perpetual sense of its absence, "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said 173). Ontological homelessness lacks both of Said's terms. There is no native place to which the Unnamable might return; there is no true home from which it has been driven. Kristeva's abjection marks a fourth. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), the speaking subject is produced through the expulsion of what threatens its boundaries (Kristeva 5). The abject is not the homeless: the abject self secures its subjectivity precisely by the expulsion that founds it. The Unnamable can expel nothing that stays expelled. Its vice-existers return, its language will not set, its boundaries never solidify. Where abjection is the founding gesture of the subject, ontological homelessness is the condition in which the founding gesture has lost its foundational power.

Casanova's account of Beckett's "abstracting" project provides the closest theoretical neighbour, and for that reason the one most in need of distinction. Casanova argues that the trilogy enacts a deliberate withdrawal from the resources by which conventional fiction had constructed authority (Casanova 87). She treats the withdrawal, however, as an aesthetic-historical operation, a way in which Beckett's prose

abstracts the novel from its inherited categories. The operation matters here in a different register. The abstraction at issue is not aesthetic but ontological: not a withdrawal from literary categories but the registration of a condition in which the category of dwelling has itself become unintelligible.

From these contrasts the concept takes on four features. It is structural rather than experiential: it cannot be “had” by a subject, because it is the dissolution of the conditions under which subjects have experiences at all. It is non-recoverable: no home awaits the homeless subject’s return, because the category of home has been suspended along with the subject. It is persistent: the homeless subject does not vanish but continues, and continues precisely through the figures, the vice-existers, by which it might otherwise bring itself to an end. And it is topological: its structure cannot be mapped onto the inside/outside, self/other, presence/absence binaries that organise both the humanist and the deconstructive readings. It exists, in the strict sense, as a structure that has no edge.

4. The Materialist Objection

A concept built on the distinction between ontic and ontological homelessness invites an obvious and serious objection, and the argument is stronger for meeting it head on. To speak of the “homelessness” of a comfortably housed philosopher, or of a fictional voice, while men and women sleep in doorways, can look like an obscene abstraction: the aestheticising of a privilege into a predicament, the theft of a real emergency’s pathos for the decoration of a literary conceit. If ontological homelessness is worth anything, the objection runs, it is worth less than a bed, and to dignify Beckett’s voice with the vocabulary of dispossession is to trivialise dispossession itself.

The objection mistakes a categorial distinction for a comparative one. Neither Heidegger nor Ranasinghe ranks ontological above ontic homelessness, as though the estrangement of Dasein from its being were a graver misfortune than sleeping unsheltered in winter. The two belong to different orders of question. To analyse the structure of Dasein’s un-homeliness no more denies the emergency of houselessness than an account of the grammar of pain denies that pain hurts (Ranasinghe, “On Being”). The essay’s claim about the Unnamable is categorial: it concerns the kind of homelessness the novel stages, not its place on a scale of suffering. Nothing in the reading competes with, or presumes to substitute for, the social and political analysis of houselessness. The two operate at different levels and are complementary rather than rival.

The companion charge, that ontological homelessness is “merely” a metaphor, reverses the actual order of dependence. It is not that Beckett borrows the pathos of material homelessness to lend gravity to a figure of speech. It is that the ontic and the ontological answer to a single word because they share a structure: the failure of a relation of belonging, differently instantiated in each. The sleeper in the doorway lacks a place within a world whose meaning is otherwise intact; the Unnamable lacks the world within which a place could be found or missed. The literary text is not a metaphor for the social fact. Both are instances of a condition that philosophy can specify, and the specification is what keeps the two from collapsing into one another.

Pressed to its conclusion, the objection in fact confirms the reading. What distinguishes the Unnamable’s homelessness from any ontic houselessness is exactly that no conceivable shelter could relieve it. There is no policy, no charity, no house that would house it, because what it wants is not a dwelling but the conditions under which dwelling would mean anything. To imagine the Unnamable’s plight as soluble, as an absence of something that might in principle be supplied, is to commit the very conflation of ontic and ontological the novel is at such pains to foreclose. The materialist reader who insists that the Unnamable is “really” just homeless in some ordinary sense has, without noticing, restored to it the world it does not have.

5. Mahood: The First Vice-Exister and the Logic of Repudiation

The figure of Mahood is the first of the Unnamable’s extended self-fictions. Mahood is given a body: he has a wife and children, walks (then crawls) around a series of objects, loses his limbs, and ends up planted in a jar outside a Parisian restaurant. He has a biography, a setting, even, briefly, a domestic life.

By the standards of conventional realist fiction he is more of a character than the Unnamable itself; the narration of Mahood occupies a substantial portion of the novel's middle pages.

And yet Mahood is decisively repudiated. The Unnamable declares: "All these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone" (*Trilogy* 305). The passage is among the most discussed in the novel, and rightly so. The vice-existers, those who exist instead of it (the Latin *vice*: in place of), are dismissed as obstacles, distractions, the figures whose proliferation has kept the Unnamable from saying what it might otherwise have said.

The standard reading takes this repudiation as evidence of an authentic self the vice-existers had been concealing: the Unnamable, its illusions shed, will now speak "of me and of me alone." The novel refuses the inference at once. Even after the named vice-existers are cast off, the Unnamable cannot speak of itself directly; it generates new figures (Worm, the figures of the closing pages) and continues to oscillate among them. The repudiation does not produce the authentic self. It produces the next vice-exister.

Here is the structural recognition the essay means to articulate. The vice-existers are not obstacles to a self that lies behind them; they are the only mode of being available to a structure that is constitutively homeless. The Unnamable cannot speak of itself because there is no self to speak of, not in the deconstructive sense that there is no self at all, but in the sense of homeless persistence: something persists, yet it cannot be the kind of thing that has a self. The vice-existers are the topology of that persistence, the figures through which the homeless structure articulates itself, knowing all the while that the articulation will fail.

Mahood's most striking property is his progressive amputation. He loses his legs, then his arms, then his trunk; he is reduced to a head in a jar, kept by the proprietress of a chop-house who weeps over him on Sundays (*Trilogy* 327). The amputation has usually been read as a parody of the Cartesian reduction: the body stripped away to reveal the residual cogito. But the parody cuts deeper than that. What the amputation reveals is not a residual cogito but the absurdity of expecting one. What is left when the body goes is not a thinking thing but a head in a jar: a body still, only smaller and more grotesque. The reduction does not bottom out in the metaphysical core of selfhood; it produces another piece of fictional machinery, a vice-exister of a vice-exister, an indefinite regress that never arrives at the authentic self the philosophical tradition had promised.

Mahood thus demonstrates, by his very structure, the impossibility of the project the Unnamable announces, and the impossibility is legible in the grammar itself, which promises exactly what the ontology withholds. The repudiation is thick with the markers of self-discovery: "do not fool me," "made me waste my time," "of me and of me alone." Its sentence shape leads us to expect the turning point at which a deceived consciousness throws off its illusions and arrives at authentic self-relation. What follows is not that arrival but another vice-exister sequence, then another, the Worm passages opening within a few pages. To speak of "me and of me alone" is to speak of nothing, since there is no me alone; the promise could not be kept, because the structural condition of the Unnamable is precisely that no "me alone" awaits it. The repudiation of Mahood is therefore not a step toward the authentic self but the acknowledgement that the authentic self was itself a fiction the vice-existers had been generating. To repudiate them is to repudiate the only access one ever had to it.

This is what sets ontological homelessness apart from the related condition of false consciousness. A subject in false consciousness possesses an authentic self obscured by ideology, and the work of consciousness is to lift the veil and arrive at what was always there. The Unnamable's repudiation of its vice-existers at first appears to follow this Marxian or Freudian template, and the novel exposes the template as inapplicable. There is no veil to lift, because there is no authentic self beneath it. The vice-existers were not concealing the Unnamable; they were, in the only sense available, being it. The immediate generation of new vice-existers registers a structural necessity, not a failure of nerve: the Unnamable can no more stop generating them than it can stop speaking, because their generation is the sole form its persistence can take.

6. Worm: The Limit Case of the Vice-Exister

If Mahood is the first vice-exister, Worm is the limit case. Where Mahood had a body, a biography, a setting, Worm has next to nothing. He cannot move; he cannot see; he barely exists. The Unnamable describes him thus:

Worm, to be on the watch, to be lying in wait, for what? ... he doesn't suffer, doesn't think, doesn't hear, doesn't know anything. (*Trilogy* 339–40)

Worm is the asymptotic figure, the vice-exister so reduced that he scarcely qualifies as a figure at all. And yet, paradoxically, he is the vice-exister the Unnamable cannot shake. Mahood is repudiated; Worm persists, even after the Unnamable has declared the project of speaking through him to be finished. The significance of that asymmetry has not been adequately appreciated.

Worm is the limit case because he tests, and exposes, the very structure of vice-existence. A vice-exister exists in place of the homeless subject; it is the figure through which the structure articulates itself. To reduce a vice-exister toward zero, to a body without limbs, a consciousness without thought, a being without attributes, is to test whether the structure can go on articulating itself through ever-thinner figures, or whether at some point the figure becomes too thin to bear the structural weight. What Worm reveals is that almost nothing suffices: even a being who “doesn't suffer, doesn't think, doesn't hear, doesn't know anything” can serve as a vice-exister, because vice-existence is not a property of the figure but a function of the structural relation.

The catalogue of what Worm cannot do reads like an inventory drawn straight from the fundamental attunements. To be beyond suffering, beyond thought, beyond hearing and knowing is to have arrived at that emptying-out of significance which profound boredom, in Heidegger's analysis, discloses: the point at which beings as a whole go indifferent and existence stands revealed as nothingness (Ranasinghe, “On Being”). Worm is the vice-exister imagined from the far side of that disclosure, not a self undergoing anxiety or boredom, but the residue such attunements leave when they have finished their work. He is what selfhood looks like once the world it required has withdrawn.

Here is the topological insight the novel offers. The Unnamable is homeless not because it is in the wrong place but because the category of “place” has lost its purchase on it. Its vice-existers can be thinned almost to vanishing because their office is not to be the Unnamable's home but to articulate the structural homelessness that is its only mode of being. Worm is, in effect, the negative photograph of selfhood: a figure constituted by the absence of every attribute selfhood would require, and still able to function as the position through which the Unnamable's voice articulates itself.

The decisive passage comes when the Unnamable weighs whether it might itself be Worm: “Perhaps I am Worm. Yes, that's the conclusion I had come to, all unbeknown to me. ... No, no, that's not me, that's not me, I'm far away” (*Trilogy* 348). The hesitation is structural, not psychological. The Unnamable cannot settle whether it is Worm or is far from Worm because the question itself presupposes a metaphysics of location that does not apply to its condition. To be Worm would be to occupy a position; to be far from Worm would be to occupy a different one. The Unnamable, ontologically homeless, occupies neither. The vice-exister is not a place where the Unnamable is or is not; it is the formal articulation of the Unnamable's structural inability to be anywhere at all.

Worm's status as limit case is illuminated by a phrase from Beckett's own early criticism. In *Proust* (1931), Beckett describes the “periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations” as the “perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being” (*Proust*). Written nearly two decades before *L'Innommable*, the formulation anticipates the topology of homeless persistence with uncanny precision. Such a zone of transition is neither the settled continuity of one habit nor the settled continuity of the next; it is an interval that admits neither rest nor conclusion, in which mere living gives way to the bare fact of being. Worm occupies exactly this interval within the Unnamable's discourse. He is the figure through which the discourse is suspended without being terminated, the position at which its inability to settle on any vice-exister becomes visible as the very logic of its persistence.

The comparison with the literary character is equally instructive. Realist fiction builds character by accumulation: name, body, history, social location, psychological complexity, distinctive speech. Modernist fiction (Joyce's Bloom, Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, Mann's Hans Castorp) radicalises the accumulation by adding interiority and the depth of stream-of-consciousness. Worm performs the inverse operation. He has almost no attributes: no name, no body, no history, no consciousness in any conventional sense. He is constituted through the accumulation of non-attributes: he doesn't suffer, doesn't think, doesn't hear, doesn't know. The tradition's constructive grammar has been turned inside out into a subtractive one. And still the subtractive grammar yields a figure, still yields something through which the Unnamable's discourse can speak. That is the topological point: the structural function of the vice-exister is independent of the figure's positive content. Even as the content approaches zero, the function persists.

7. The Closing Aporia: Homeless Persistence as Form

The closing pages of *The Unnamable* are among the most quoted in twentieth-century literature, and they constitute the formal signature of ontological homelessness. The final sequence runs:

you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (*Trilogy* 418)

Three features of the passage demand attention. First, the alternation of "I" and "you" and "they" within a single sentence registers, at the level of syntax, the homelessness of the speaking position. The voice cannot settle on its own pronoun; it cannot determine whether it is the addressee, the speaker, or the third party of the words it utters. The pronoun-instability is not metafictional cleverness but the formal articulation of a position with no proper anchorage in the grammar it must use.

Second, the temporal markers ("until they find me, until they say me ... perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already") refuse the linear teleology that any movement "toward" the self would require. The Unnamable cannot tell whether the project of being said is still to come, currently underway, or already accomplished. This is not the disorientation of a confused mind; it is the temporal structure of a position that lacks the metaphysical anchor by which past, present, and future might be told apart. Homeless persistence has no progressive time.

Third, and most decisively, the closing formula, "I can't go on, I'll go on," registers the structural impossibility of both continuation and cessation. "I can't go on" is not the announcement of an imminent stop; it is the recognition that going on has become, at the level of the homeless subject, impossible. "I'll go on" is not the courageous reaffirmation of a humanist will; it is the recognition that, impossibility notwithstanding, the going-on continues. Both clauses are true at once. They cannot be reconciled, because their reconciliation would require the very metaphysical anchor that homelessness has dissolved.

This is what ontological homelessness, as a structural condition, formally demands. It cannot terminate, because it has no anchor by which termination could be intelligible. It cannot continue in any ordinary sense, because continuation presupposes the temporal structure homelessness has dissolved. The voice persists, then, in a mode that is neither continuation nor termination but something the existing critical vocabulary has not adequately named: persistence without progression, motion without direction, speech without anchor. The closing aporia is the formal signature of that mode, the syntactic registration of a position the whole novel has been generating.

The reading recasts what is otherwise the most-discussed feature of the novel: its refusal to end. The standard account treats the refusal as the triumph of language over silence, the persistence of the literary impulse against the metaphysical pressure of dissolution. Read through ontological homelessness, the refusal looks quite different. The novel does not decline to end out of literary triumph; it cannot end, because ending requires the structural anchor that homelessness has dissolved.

The persistence is not a victory. It is the symptom of a condition that admits neither resolution nor cessation.

The recasting clarifies, too, the precise relation between Beckett's closing formula and the existentialist tradition with which it is so often paired. Camus's Sisyphus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), confronts the absurd through the act of revolt: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Going on, despite the impossibility of meaning, becomes a humanist affirmation. Beckett's "I'll go on" has frequently been assimilated to this Camusian register, as though the Unnamable were a grammatical Sisyphus, going on against the absurdity of going on. The assimilation misreads the structural condition. The Camusian going-on presupposes a self that wills it, that finds in the act of revolt the affirmation of its meaning. The Unnamable's going-on presupposes nothing of the kind. There is no self to will, no meaning to affirm, no revolt to enact. The going-on is not the choice of the homeless subject; it is the structural consequence of the dissolution of the metaphysics under which choice could be intelligible. Where Camus's Sisyphus inhabits a meaningful homelessness, Beckett's Unnamable inhabits a homelessness that has dissolved the very category of meaning.

8. Conclusion: Implications for Postmodern Subjectivity

Ontological homelessness, developed as a hermeneutic for the radical interrogation of selfhood in *The Unnamable*, resists the two dominant alternatives at once. Against the humanist account of the displaced subject and the deconstructive account of the dissolved subject, it holds open a third position: the homeless subject that persists without home, that articulates itself through vice-exists it cannot stabilise, that exists topologically without inside, outside, or edge. Mahood and Worm are not failed surrogates for an authentic self; they are positions within the topology of homeless persistence that is the only mode of being the novel can offer.

The consequences reach past Beckett studies. The category of ontological homelessness, isolated as a discrete structural condition, may prove productive for other postmodern texts in which the relation between self and home cannot be settled along the axes of presence and absence, exile and return, authenticity and dissolution. The narrators of W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, the spectral consciousness of Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*, and the disembodied voice of Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* are all candidates for the category developed here. To recognise ontological homelessness as a distinct structural position is to gain a richer vocabulary for postmodern subjectivity than the available categories of displacement, dissolution, abjection, and exile have supplied.

The reading bears, finally, on the still-unsettled relation between the trilogy and the Irish post-independence condition. The work of Bixby and Morin has begun to show that Beckett's prose registers, formally, the specific historical experience of post-colonial dispossession in mid-century Ireland. The Free State, as Morin observes, was a polity built on the ideological maintenance of an authentic Irishness against the contaminating influence of colonial Britain (Morin 142–46). Beckett's ontological homelessness registers, formally, the impossibility of occupying any such position of authenticity. The Unnamable cannot be authentic, because there is no authentic place from which authenticity could be measured; it cannot be alienated, because there is no original from which to be estranged. The novel's refusal of the metaphysics of home is, at the same stroke, its registration of a condition the post-colonial Irish situation had made acutely available.

To read *The Unnamable* through ontological homelessness, then, is to recover what is most original in Beckett's contribution to the postmodern novel. What Joyce and Proust had already accomplished was the displacement of the subject; what deconstruction would later theorise in the abstract was its dissolution. Beckett's achievement is neither of these but a third position, the homeless persistence of a structure that cannot be located, cannot be terminated, and cannot fall silent. The voice goes on, not because it is triumphant, but because it has nowhere to come to rest.

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