

1995

## Beyond Irony: The Unnamable's Appropriation of Its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text

Jennifer Jeffers

Cleveland State University, [j.m.jeffers53@csuohio.edu](mailto:j.m.jeffers53@csuohio.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng\\_facpub](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub)

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

### *Publisher's Statement*

This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: "Beyond Irony: The Unnamable's Appropriation of Its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* (The Journal of Narrative Theory). Vol. 25, No. 1, 1995, 47-66, which has been published in final form at <https://www.emich.edu/english/jnt/vol25.html>.

---

### Recommended Citation

Jeffers, Jennifer, "Beyond Irony: The Unnamable's Appropriation of Its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text" (1995). *English Faculty Publications*. 64.

[https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng\\_facpub/64](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/64)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

## Beyond Irony: *The Unnamable's* Appropriation of its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text

Jennifer Jeffers

. . . truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

In traditional Beckett criticism, the most conventional interpretation of the narrator's activity in *The Unnamable* posits that the narrative is attempting to establish "his" own self-identity but "[h]is search for self-knowledge has failed because it has produced only fiction" (Solomon 83). Another variety of this interpretation poses the Unnamable's dilemma in Existential language: "Existence affirms merely that something is; essence denotes what it is. . . . By the time we reach *The Unnamable*, the collapse of essence is virtually complete; the voice is a mere existence crying out that it exists" (Levy 104). As Dennis A. Foster argues in his Lacanian reading of *The Unnamable*, which includes an evaluation of the critical exegesis surrounding the text, the traditional critic produces an image of narrative authority and then, identifying with that textual authority, (the critic) transfers and assumes the text's struggles as her own interpretative difficulties. In other words, the critic creates in her reading a "coherent subjectivity" that allows her to "find in Beckett's works that the difficulty, even impossibility, of telling a story makes his refusal to lapse into a despairing silence only further evidence of his heroic humanity, makes Beckett the paragon of modernist man" (Foster 96). While traditional critics have produced viable and certainly pedagogically practical readings of the novel, Paul Bové, in "The Image of the Creator in Beckett's Postmodern Writing," has identified the difficulty in such writing: ". . . the fundamental

Modern aesthetic literary impulse . . . *simply does not work* in a Postmodern world. It is hopelessly out-of-date. It is disclosed as merely another strategy to reify and evade the pain of contemporary existence and not a positive creative response" (Bové 62). In this reification, the Humanist or traditionalist, according to Bové "Modernist," perspective covers over diversity and difference in an effort to make the "meaning" of the text live up to a preconceived, acceptable universal.

It is my contention that Beckett's text cannot be adequately read for irony by the Humanist or the Romantic critic. *The Unnamable* always already escapes the confines of a traditional reading produced by the ironic critic who attempts to appropriate—reduce—the text to a stable sense-making machine. For Beckett's text, following its own lines of escape, simply refuses to be rendered the exemplar of the reductive paradigm of a traditional concept of irony. What we see occur is that irony reduces the text to a "failure" concerning its sense-making capabilities, while it simultaneously allows the critic to (ironically) "fail" in her task of textual interpreter; in other words, Beckett's text "fails," and so the critic's text must also "fail." The idea of post-modern humor slips the noose of the "aesthetic of failure" by opening up textual interpretation that permits the reader to enjoy the text without the burden of representation and an aesthetic of universalized meaning. In order to be in a position to read post-Humanist humor in *The Unnamable*, we must first peel away two layers of critical residue that have been gradually deposited on the text over time in Beckett scholarship: one, that of stable irony, which promotes the Humanistic rational world view, and two, that of Romantic irony, which exemplifies the quest for identity.

One of the most common perspectives that critics adopt in their reading of *The Unnamable* is a reading that interprets the text as an ironic narrative discourse. In the Humanist literary tradition, reading for irony allows the critic *a priori* the right to investigate the privileged concept of identity or the self: "Irony has, since Plato, been indissociable from the problems of self-knowledge and of self-expression, along with all the ontological and epistemological questions attendant thereon" (Lang 37). Indeed, with the example of Socrates Western thought has plotted its points of intersection and divergence carefully on its ontological and epistemological mappings: Socrates may be ironic in relation to being and knowledge, but, in its interpretation of Socrates, the West never allows Socrates to relinquish a foundational principle that renders them stable. In the history of ideas, the figure of Socrates is the source for both a Humanist view of irony and the Romantic rendering of

irony. Humanist irony relies on an undisguised correspondence between the not-said and the said that is a reflection of Socrates denying he is wise (when apparently he is wise). Romantic irony relies more on an abstract form of irony that is a counterpart to the so-called Socratic maxim, "Know thyself": through a dialectical denial of the self, one negates and then affirms images of the self in a seemingly *ad infinitum* process. But the first principle of the process is the self which is founded upon a stable ontology, and so, the process is finite.

Both of these forms of irony have been employed by critics in their readings of Beckett. The first reading of irony is produced by the Humanist critic; her reading of irony functions as a way to know her world in relation to herself by showing herself both sides of her own statements. In relation to the world, irony is a means to challenge and "adjust" the existing order, but always with the fixed idea of the preservation and improvement of the existing order. The second reading of irony is produced by the Romantic critic; her reading of irony functions as a means to explore her world, which for the Romantic is the subjective self. Each approach relies upon a traditional interpretation of Socratic irony that is characterized by "saying the opposite of what you mean" and relies on a stable and overt reading of a text. In other words, the author has endowed the text with meaning—even if she has said precisely the opposite of what she means—and the "smart" reader will understand the "said" to not be the meaning and the "not said" as the true meaning. For a traditional interpretation of Socratic irony, the power and beauty of irony lie in the reader's clever matching of the opposite of what is said with the meaning of what is not said.

Romantic irony may be read as a curious mixture of Humanist irony with a more sophisticated irony that borders, at times, on postmodern humor because it flirts ever so dangerously with the dissolution of the self. Romantic irony's primary link with Humanist irony is that it functions in much the same way as "saying the opposite of what you mean." The important difference, however, between Humanist irony and Romantic irony is that Romantic irony promotes an image of itself that is not characterized by stability; Romantic irony tends to recoil from the material world into an abstract realm that Kierkegaard so criticized in the German Romantics. According to Kierkegaard, this posture in Romanticism leads to a negative ironic retreat on the part of the ironist: "The producing ego is the same as the produced ego; I=I is the abstract identity. . . . But this infinity of thought in Fichte is like every other Fichtian infinity, that is, a negative infinity, an infinity with-

out finitude, an infinity void of all content" (Kierkegaard 290). Kierkegaard's critique of the "negative infinity" of Fichte points to Kierkegaard's overall problem with Hegelian abstraction which, by its very nature, is unable to affect action in the empirical world. Instead, "void of all content," it universalizes what it cannot empirically know and reduces all difference to *negativity* (non-being). The Romantic's solipsism coupled with a sophisticated ironic recoiling from the material world would seem to suggest an ideal interpretative strategy with which to read *The Unnamable*. The Unnamable appears to resemble the Romantic ironist in that the text "speaks" incessantly of "himself," breaking this narrative impulse only to fabricate a story told in traditional representational form. But Romantic irony never truly leaves the realm of meaning or sense, no matter how abstract it aspires to become because of its stable ontological foundation.

Samuel Beckett begins *The Unnamable* with the questions: "Where now? Who now? When now?" (Beckett 291), which are then supposedly answered at the end of the text with a rambling four-page sentence that begins: "The place, I'll make it all the same . . . I'll make myself a memory . . . I'm not the first, I won't be the first, it will best me in the end . . ." (411). The apparent circularity of the text actually belies the impression of a stable beginning and end. If a circle has no beginning or end, there is no certain or stable point of entry. It would seem that the narrative, then, may not actually begin at the beginning and whether it does or not we have no way of knowing. We enter the loop of narrative at the "beginning" of the book but given this text we cannot be positive that it is the beginning. The narrative refuses to give any definite answers, as the text's final words are ambiguous and open-ended: ". . . 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" (414).

The traditional reading of the end of the novel reads the "voice's" "I'll go on" in terms of human subjectivity, and hence, as a brave humanist stance that does not flinch in the face of the "void" of "nothingness." This view is discussed by Wayne Booth, for example, in *A Rhetoric of Irony* in relation to *The Unnamable*. Booth relates *The Unnamable* to the dire problem of "man" in the "modern age": ". . . [because] many modern men have seen themselves teetering perilously on that borderline, unable to be sure either that the universe is meaningless or that they can discern any meaning, it is not surprising that many poems and novels hover, as it were, between limited ironies and the ultimate ironic denial" (*Rhetoric* 253). A limited irony is, of course, an irony in which there is an explicit correspondence between the not-said and

the said. "Ultimate ironic denial," however, is a vague term Booth employs for all types of literature that seem to manifest irony but do not evidence a stable relationship between overt and covert meanings. Ironic denial is beyond "overt" irony and falls into Booth's category of "Unstable-Covert-Infinite" irony; this irony is of the obtuse variety: "... many modern authors will refuse even this degree of open declaration, leaving us to infer the depths of their ironies from superficial and deliberately ambiguous signs" (257).

Citing nearly the entire first page of the *The Unnamable*, Booth offers the following summary of Beckett's calculated "failure":

It would seem obvious that to attempt an interpretation of such a passage is to invite ridicule. Beyond grammatical analysis, looking up *ephectic* and *aporia*, if necessary, or noting the stylistic devices imitating drift and despair, what can be said? To find meaning where meaninglessness is asserted, to seek an art of interpretation of a passage so clearly against interpretation is to risk appearing like one of Beckett's own characters. The passage seems to challenge every notion on which this book is based, and indeed every concept of any kind. . . . (258)

This passage is the prototypic enactment—"imitating drift and despair"—of the "failure" or "impotence" syndrome that Dennis A. Foster attributes to the modernist critic. If Booth cannot read Beckett, it is because Beckett's text is "so clearly against interpretation": if one ventures an interpretation one "risk[s] appearing like one of Beckett's own characters." Booth's text, however, would never be mistaken for one of Beckett's texts *unless* Beckett decided to infiltrate the discourse of Booth's text—for Booth's text lacks the duplicity that characterizes Beckett's text. What is apparent is that Beckett's texts only "fail" from a Humanist point of view, and this perspective never resists succumbing to its own self-imposed theoretical cul-de-sac.

A Romantic reading of *The Unnamable* would read the text as one that continuously seeks stability all the while it decenters itself by refusing to produce any form of center or outer edge. The Romantic posture is one in which irony seems continually to move the subject being ironized farther and farther away from the centered self; yet, the self is the contriver of this solipsistic fantasy, and so, irony never goes beyond the self and never becomes anything else but the self—no matter how many disguises the ironist dons. According to a Romantic reading of the *The Unnamable*, the text con-

tinuously creates narrative strategies whereby it may move away from the self, detach itself from its own narrative, whereas all the while it is in fact attempting to move toward the self, to attach or reattach to its own stable identity. In other words, the text poses, postures and plays games with itself in order to “know” itself more fully. If we were to enact a reading of the novel as an example of Romantic irony, we would read for all of the ways in which the self of the text seeks to know itself. This inability to come into self-knowledge is amplified by the text in its difficulty locating itself in time: “I say years, though there are no years. What matter how long? Years is one of Basil’s ideas. A short time, a long time it’s all the same” (308-9). The concept of time in the text is in fact completely discarded by the narrative: “Hell itself, although eternal, dates from the revolt of Lucifer. It is therefore permissible, in the light of this distant analogy, to think of myself as being here forever, but not as having been here forever” (295-96). Since it is impossible to “date” the revolt of Lucifer, the text plays it “safe” by calling it “eternal” anyway; the text actually dates itself in infinity because it refuses to date itself at all, as “not as having been here forever.” The text contradicts itself into a timelessness as the power of the “lie” indicates that the text is not able to render a plausible representation of a stable identity.

In a recent rereading of Romantic irony that includes a reading of Beckett, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*, Gary J. Handwerk attempts to revive Schlegel via Lacan in an effort to put forth an “ethical irony” that will produce a responsible being in society. Nevertheless, the focus is still centered on the solipsistic self, although it has been renamed the “subject” and the search is for “identity”: “Ethical irony thus implies a holistic view of identity, a possible reintegration beyond incompatibles” (Handwerk 3). For Handwerk, irony’s work and “force” is to “undermine the integrity of the subject it seem[s] to imply existed. It attacks the notion of the subject as equivalent to a conscious intentionality or a personal self-consciousness” (3). In regard to Beckett, Handwerk wishes to show the ultimate breakdown of the “subject” and its connection to the “social gesture”:

The breakdown of the subject, seen in the fragmentation of the narrative presence throughout Beckett’s work, liberates only at the cost of a heightened anxiety in the subject. Beckett forces us to confront the potential emptiness of the social gesture, the dislocation that results from ironic abstraction detached from historical grounding. He returns us to the funda-

mental incoherencies that we cannot and dare not ignore for too long. . . . (17)

It would seem that Handwerk is merely reiterating in terms of social consciousness the traditional concerns of the Romantic ironist: the self/subject. Despite Handwerk's twentieth century Lacanian language, the currency of his theoretical economy is still fundamentally Romantic, relying on the foundational principle of identity.

As we witnessed in our Romantic reading of *The Unnamable*, the text struggles against the "fact" that it will never establish an origin or gain an identity. This struggle is a parody of the Romantic quest; irony slips into postmodern humor. Even Handwerk's updated Romantic irony cannot allow a reading that "threatens to become infinite" (*Ethics* 191). In the same way, Handwerk's reading of *How It Is* (Beckett's next novel after *The Unnamable*) must *stop* the infinity of the text, and relies on the narrator of *How It Is* to "recount" the text for a final reading of identity, even if this identity is polyvalent:

Close examination reveals that what we really have here is a triple-selved narrator. . . . The narrator is our last refuge of meaning. Yet that narrator's narrative reveals an insistent divorce of the mental faculties, of the modes of selfhood, that corrodes the certainty of the synthesizing power of subjective consciousness. . . . Beckett here shows how the breakdown of the subject is a function of the incoherence of language, of the multiple, but not interdependent, ways of articulation that constitute language. (187-88)

Yet, to first say that the text has a "triple-selved narrator" is to state that the text is actually a schizophrenic sense-producing machine and not a stable sense-producing identity-of-one. For speaking of the "corrode[d]" "certainty of the synthesizing power of subjective consciousness" and the "breakdown of the subject" does not constitute a claim that subjectivity will rebound and reconstitute the identity of a narrator. If anything, Handwerk's reading of Romantic irony in Beckett ironically points to the very impossibility of a recuperation of the subject.

Thinking beyond irony is our first step toward a humorous interpretation of *The Unnamable*. Both of the traditional critics of irony that we have read here write with the goal of *translating* Beckett's text into a meaningful, sense-producing discourse on topics privileged in their respective critical para-



digms. But the problem with *The Unnamable* and many of Beckett's texts is that they do not "make sense" in what is traditionally accepted as "good sense" or "common sense"; it is for this reason that the traditional critic cannot adequately *read* Beckett. Irony is translatable because it plays inside of the existing language game—it follows the rules of representation and operates within the confines of "good sense." Humor, however, is that which plays on the surface of signification before, or at the point of, sense or meaning. Gilles Deleuze theorizes that we have passed beyond the order that privileges representation and the individual—subjectivity being a pre-condition for both tragedy and irony. According to Deleuze, the transvaluation (to use Nietzsche's term) has occurred and it is no longer possible to create texts that enact the tragic and the ironic. That is not to say, however, that these texts have ceased production; these texts, both literary and critical, continue to be produced long after the devaluation of the economy of representation. The former order "give[s] way" to humor, which does not rely on representation and privileges neither subjectivity nor objectivity, for this new "sense" does not prioritize on a model of hierarchy or the Ideal:

The tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor. For if irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with non-sense. Humor is the art of the surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always displaced aleatory point. . . . (*Logic* 141)

In other words, irony is dependent upon a correspondence theory of language which insures that the "not said" will always be identified by the reader because the "not said" is merely the negation of the "said." As long as everyone using a particular language "agrees" that meaning lies *under* the surface of language then the correspondence or representational mode of language functions. Deleuze employs a metaphor of the horizontal to define humor: sense moves on the surface of language, horizontally in different directions, manifesting a rhizomatic discourse. The horizontal movement is opposed to a vertical movement downward that retrieves the meaning *underneath* the signification. If it is the case, as Nietzsche suggests in the passage taken as our opening epigram, that truths which we believe to lie underneath language are actually "illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions" (Nietzsche 180)—and this is always already the condition of language—then sense lies on the surface of language *before* the sense-making operation has taken place;

in Deleuzian terms, “sense is not to be confused with signification” (*Logic* 51). In other words, signification is neutral, without negation or affirmation—and ultramoral in the Nietzschean sense of beyond or outside moral consideration, until a sense-making capability is imposed upon it and meaning rendered.

A humorous reading is possible when the “good” sense of truth and representation is no longer an acceptable currency—like Nietzsche’s “. . . coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal”—and non-sense suddenly appears in its place. In a humorous reading, “non-sense” is not lack of sense but merely a different sense than what the order of representation recognizes as sense or “good” sense. Non-sense or the absurd are expressions used in existentialism or in “the philosophy of the absurd” in which the sense they speak of is dependent upon one stable rendering of sense, “good sense,” but that one sense is *lacking* in the world; therefore, the existentialist mourns the absence of, loss of, the decline of or the “essential” deficiency of sense in the world. A working definition of Deleuzian non-sense, on the other hand, would indicate the overabundance of sense in any given signification. There is never too little sense, there is always too much sense produced:

From the point of view of the structure, on the contrary, there is always too much sense; an excess produced and over-produced by non-sense as a lack of itself. . . . Likewise, non-sense does not have any particular sense, but is opposed to the absence of sense rather than to the sense that it produces in excess—without ever maintaining with its product the simple relation of exclusion to which some people would like to reduce them. Nonsense is that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense. (*Logic* 71)

We will see that the text of *The Unnamable* mimics the act of creation of sense and in that enactment creates not sense in the realm of representation or the “good” copy, but does not create non-sense in terms of *lack* of sense, either. The humorous text mimics the role of the ironist in order to create a *different* sense—in order to create difference—the difference between “good” sense and a lack of sense.

When too little sense is the problem, as posited generally by traditional critics in their reading of *The Unnamable*, then one can be certain that one is

caught inside the realm of representation; for representation always insists upon a faithful resemblance that does not offer more than the original or primary object. In order for a code of representation to exist there must be a primary object that is representable and the identity of the represented object is of paramount importance. The concept of primacy insures that there is an original identity—for the Platonists an Ideal or the original Idea—that the “good” copy faithfully and accurately represents. Such a concept also lies behind Western culture’s repression of difference: from philosophical to economical, political and cultural difference, as well as difference in terms of racial, sexual and religious alterity. If difference “escapes” the control of the “good copy” the order is threatened, and when the order is threatened we revert to re-telling the common story of the West: “It is a question of assuring the triumph of the copies over simulacra, of repressing simulacra, keeping them completely submerged, preventing them from climbing to the surface, and ‘insinuating themselves’ everywhere” (*Logic* 257). A certain amount of discrepancy, however, steals into the good copy *because* the simulacrum is able to produce an *effect* of the good copy. According to Deleuze, even “Plato discovers, in a flash of an instant, that the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it places in question the very notations of copy and model” (*Logic* 256). Indeed, Socrates cannot be differentiated from the sophists, especially in the early dialogues. Fortunately, “good sense” saves representation and indeed we have built a tradition on “common” or “good” sense. According to Deleuze, there is no original identity, universal or model, only copies (simulacra) producing themselves in a non-hierarchical system of difference and singularities.

In *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze employs a metaphor of the mask as a way to depict the difference, the excess, between the representation of identity and the humorous enactment, or repetition, of that identity.<sup>1</sup> Humor does re-present the identity in terms of identity, but it *masks over* the “original” identity and in that masking, or repetition, creates Other, creates difference. Foucault, commenting on Deleuze’s *Différence et répétition*, characterizes aptly and succinctly the role of “good” sense and difference in “the philosophy of representation”:

Good sense is the world’s most effective agent of division in its recognitions, its establishment of equivalences, its sensitivity to gaps, its gauging of distances, as it assimilates and separates. And it is good sense that reigns in the philosophy of

representation. Let us pervert good sense and allow thought to play outside the ordered table of resemblances; then it will appear as the vertical dimension of intensities, because intensity, well before its gradation by representation, is in itself difference: difference that displaces and repeats itself. . . . (*Language* 183)

In our culture “good sense” has an undefeated record in its “establishment of equivalences” and in its ability to “assimilate” and “separate”; “good sense” acts in this manner so that it may quickly close off the negotiation of singularities and the negotiation of the space between singularities which constitute difference. Language is not simply a sign for truth, signification evoking “good sense” as the vertical model of language posits, but a code of signification that must be rendered meaningful. It is the *act* of rendering—the negotiation of singularities and the space between the singularities—that creates or produces meaning. Therefore, if we could “pervert good sense and allow thought to play outside the ordered table of resemblances,” then, as Foucault suggests, we could perceive the structure (of representation) that manipulates our perspective in such a manner that we always already think and see in terms of order, gradation and recognition: “it will then appear as the vertical dimension of intensities, because intensity, well before its gradation by representation, is in itself difference.”

Reading against, though not in opposition to the tradition, we see that humor has stolen into a text when the language no longer re-presents the “good” copy of the Idea or original, but presents instead the “bad” copy or simulacrum. Humor enacts representation from an “inauthentic” position—for humor does not wish to produce the “good” copy or valid good sense—but produces difference and *Other* sense not based on the foundation of representation. The Unnamable perverts the traditional concept of representation and meaning through a fastidiously accurate parodying of the ironic search for identity and knowledge, just as Deleuze’s Sacher-Masoch perverts the law through a precisely controlled adherence to the letter of the law. The enactment of humor presents a subtle and surreptitious repetition of the category of representation: making the gesture of resemblance in the very act of discrediting and dismantling the representational order. This movement, of course, is not naively conceived and we should keep in mind that there is an “element of contempt in the submission” to representation and that the text’s “apparent obedience conceals a criticism and a provocation”

(Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch* 77). Similar to the enemy infiltrating the military headquarters, humor let loose in the realm of representation spells the eventual loss of power or even the downfall of the regime. Furthermore, even the *suspicion* that the Unnamable is playing the role of pretender to the throne of representation in a humorous enactment of traditional irony puts into question the very idea of the feasibility of representation. For the “rumor” that the enemy *could* infiltrate and dismantle the power structure, in this instance irony and the epistemology that informs it, casts enough doubt on the structure to weaken its credibility.

To return to *The Unnamable*, one of the most evident aspects of the text is the Unnamable’s acknowledgment of reiterating the words, the codes, and epistemology of the tradition. The text admits the infiltration of “their voices,” their system of language and their hierarchy of ideas into its own signification: “They’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse, it’s them I hear. . . . the little murmur of unconsenting man, to murmur what it is their humanity stifles. . . . I won’t say it, I can’t say it, I have no language but theirs . . . ” (325). The Unnamable is not naive concerning the fact that the system has infiltrated its text, nor is it naive in relation to its own ability to produce a text: this text, any text, is always already a product of an over-determined culture whose sole mark of distinction is its vast, yet simple, ability to monitor difference. To acknowledge that “They’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon,” is to be aware that one must operate in the system, according to the system, knowing that to openly challenge the system will put an end to one’s ability to speak. With this knowledge, then, the Unnamable could choose to be “silent,” and the text speaks often of going silent; or, with this knowledge, the text could repeat the tradition, it could mimic the language it has been taught not in an effort to produce resemblance, but in order to produce humor.

A humorous interpretation of the text recognizes the slippage in the text’s stories. The slippage is the space, or as Foucault phrases it, the “non-place,” that opens up between “good sense” and non-sense or different sense. The Unnamable exists in the opening, the “non-place,” between sense and non-sense and in this way, the text exposes a double logic: the logic with which we read and affirm representation is the very same logic with which we read and affirm difference. In other words, the very logic that upholds the representational order is the same logic that will deconstruct that order. The logic of the text that says it *lacks* sense—all the while operating under the guises

of “good” sense—is the same logic that produces a humorous reading by producing too much sense:

At no moment do I know what I’m talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why, but I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit, that I know, without knowing what it means. . . . Nothing to do but stretch out comfortably on the rack, in the blissful knowledge you are nobody for all eternity. . . . I knew it, there might be a hundred of us and still we’d lack the hundred and first, we’ll always be short of me. (338-39)

In the text’s double movement, it plays at one level the ironist who has the “knowledge you are nobody for all eternity” all the while it “knows” it is the subjectively important writer of this text. At another level, it is the humorist who in this claim merely repeats what cannot be represented, that there is no way to reach a “knowledge you are nobody for all eternity” and yet the mimicking of the master’s voice produces an odd sense of sincerity. In the claim that the text “could employ fifty wretches” but “still be short of a fifty-first,” then “a hundred” but “lack the hundred and first,” is a repetition that produces an excess of meaning. No matter how many dupes may be “employed” by the text, the text will always have *more* than it needs, “an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself” (*Logic* 71). For the claim, itself, does not lack sense; rather “it enacts the donation of sense” in the movement of the “bad” copy of representation, and it is this movement, this surreptitious enactment, that produces humor and undermines the “good” sense of representation. When the authority of order of representation is usurped by repetition, then the “bad” copy—the simulacrum that does not correspond to the so-called original—produces difference and difference generates multiplicities unheeded. Therefore, no matter how many wretches are employed there is no way “to close the circuit,” no way to stop proliferation of difference once the order of representation has been infiltrated by the “bad” copy.

The text’s narrative is most “believable,” and hence most subversive, when it makes the meta-narrative move of distinguishing itself from the “stories” that it creates. The traditionalist reads irony in this move as the distinction between “self” and the stories that the narrative creates in order to come into “self-knowledge” or in order to “go on.” The text makes this distinction doz-

ens of times during the course of its narrative: "But who are these maniacs let loose on me from on high for what they call my good, let us first try and throw a little light on that. To tell the truth—no, first the story" (326). The "maniacs" or "troop of lunatics" are, of course, the so-called narrators—Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone, Mahood, Worm—that the text claims to have created at some point in its "narrative life." Yet, the very idea that one could differentiate hierarchically between the "truth" concerning the different narrators and the story—"no, first the story"—should be a clue for the reader of the text concerning the text's ability to forget that truth is merely an "illusion" or a "worn-out metaphor." From the perspective of representation we recognize that the story's "content" is unlikely to be "true"; but what we do assume to be true is that the language of the text will be "true" to the idea of "good" sense. But slippage occurs because the text does not forget and it does not challenge. In its complicity with the tradition, it makes the silent movement of repetition, for the text is well aware that it is masking over the ability to faithfully re-present a "good" copy: "Did they ever get Mahood to speak? It seems to me not. I think Murphy spoke now and then, the others too perhaps, I don't remember, but it was clumsily done, you could see the ventriloquist" (348). Indeed, the ventriloquist both speaks and does not speak—dividing sense, yet creating "too much" sense, and creating a double logic where all things and no things make "good" sense. The double logic moves in such a way that the Unnamable places the order of representation under suspicion through its own move to appropriate "their" words:

Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets of vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with. And I'll be myself at last, as a starvling belches his odourless wind, before the bliss of coma. . . . (324-25)

Although one may be tempted to read "ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded

as belonging to their breed” as mere irony—as mere railing against the established order—it would seem that in this instance humor has the upper hand and is parodying the style and sentiment of irony to point toward a deeper and more fundamental problem: the inability to represent the Western tradition in any other manner than through parody. The accusation of “the lies they have glutted me with” is not read as irony on the part of the humanist ironic critics. In fact, as we have seen, the statement would not be “read” at all. The “lies” must be suppressed by the order because when one “lies” one in effect produces “bad” copies, or simulacra which proliferate unheeded, leading us ever farther and farther away from the “Truth.” When a narrative bases its entire narrative production on “lies,” the Western tradition cannot accept it, cannot read it, and cannot see its own reflection in the image presented in the accusation.

What the traditional readership reads as the delightfully playful element in *The Unnamable*—the text’s irony and irascibility—is often the point at which the Unnamable is at its most subversive. For example, the text begins by appearing ironic about almost everything it comments upon; a critic of irony, Booth or Handwerk, could have picked up on the extremely ironic and critical tone at the beginning of the novel:

Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day? It seems to me it was none of my doing. We won’t go into that now. I can see them still, my delegates. The things they have told me! About men, the light of day. I refused to believe them. But some of it has stuck. . . . Innate knowledge of my mother, for example, is that conceivable? Not for me. She was one of their favourite subjects, of conversation. They also gave me the low-down on God. They told me I depended on him, in the last analysis. . . . I remember little or nothing of these lectures. I cannot have understood a great deal. But I seem to have retained certain descriptions, in spite of myself. They gave me courses on love, on intelligence, most precious, most precious. Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don’t deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen if they had left me in peace. I use it still, to scratch my arse with. . . . (297-98)

Let us here briefly reinsert the ironic readings in the midst of our humorous reading, for the purpose of witnessing the surreptitious movement of humor as it glides ineffably across the surface of the text. For Booth, this passage



gives ample reference to the material world, representing the major tenets of a civilized and even a loving Humanism: knowledge, the maternal, God and love. Even better, the Unnamable of the text seems to be deriding them in an ironic manner: saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Although the Unnamable may be critical of the Western tradition, "he" would never completely denounce it; instead, the Unnamable criticizes experience as a way of pointing out its discrepancies and, hence, improving the system. According to the Humanist reading, the Unnamable definitely "plays within" the power structure.

For a critic sympathetic to Handwerk's project, this passage once again affords a reading of irony that is more sophisticated than the Humanist's reading. In this passage we see the Unnamable shifting "his" roles and donning a new facade when it pleases "him." The text seems to double back on itself: "I cannot have understood a great deal," then "[b]ut I seem to have retained certain descriptions, in spite of myself." Though there is irony in the text's retracting, in part, its first statement, the irony for the Romantic critic is contained in the fact that the "person" in the text, the pseudo Romantic, is suspended above this entire discourse watching "himself" shift into one mode of irony ("Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen if they had left me in peace"), then shift into yet another mode as the paragraph ends ("No no, here I am in safety, amusing myself wondering who can have dealt me these insignificant wounds"). According to the Romantic reading, the Unnamable wants to complain about the fact that "the inestimable gift of life had been rammed down my gullet" (298), then turn back to a position of amusement and nonchalance by "wondering who can have dealt me these *insignificant* wounds."

From the point of view of humor, the above passage immediately puts into question the politics of representation: "Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day?" The Unnamable responds that "[i]t seems to me it was none of my doing," which is only partially the case. The structure that affirms representation never gives one the opportunity to choose if one would like to be "represented." The Unnamable is fully aware that it is completely inscribed by the structure that constitutes representation, and so, the text seems to be up to some sort of game playing or parodying that points to a more profound reason for its perversion. If we recall that Deleuze's Sacher-Masoch in order to pervert the law and push it to its "furtherest consequences"—punishment—obeyed the law to the most extreme detail, then perhaps we can see that the Unnamable, too, plays Masoch in its effort to

pervert and push to its “furthest consequences” the traditional ironic rendering of the text. When the Unnamable states that “I seem to have retained certain descriptions, in spite of myself,” it is not being ironic; for the words that uphold the tradition are the very words that precipitate its downfall. The Unnamable has “retained certain descriptions” partly because it knows that it cannot escape “proclaiming them” even if it were to attempt to denounce them and “their breed.” The Unnamable also has “retained certain descriptions” so that it may “fix their gibberish for them,” so that it may produce the “bad” copy, and so that it may unravel “good” sense through the very enactment of the order of representation. If punishment is the delight of Masoch, then playing outside of the restricted category of sense in an effort to effect the collapse of the tradition is the delight of the Unnamable.

Movement to effect this collapse is evident in the exposé of another “carrot” that never fails to arouse great admiration on the part of the Humanist, that is, the ontological search for origins founded on a principle of non-being—based on an entirely abstract concept of negation—an ontology that reduces all difference into a category of non-being. The Unnamable humorously introduces the topic of ontology into its narrative of identity when it proffers: “First I’ll say what I’m not, that’s how they taught me to proceed, then what I am . . .” (326). Employing the Hegelian dialectic the Unnamable “proceeds” to *name* itself against those it believes itself *not* to be: “I am neither, I needn’t say, Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier, nor—no, I can’t even bring myself to name them . . .” (326). Of course, the naming in this passage, similar to so many other passages in the text, results in the narrative remaining *unnamable*. This game of naming the unnamable works against the tradition—for the system is unable to name because of its own principle of negation. However, the problem that the Unnamable presents in reading for the name (identity) in the tradition of negative ontology is that it, the Unnamable, will never be named all the while it has a name: the Unnamable.

This situation depicts Deleuze’s definition of paradox: “Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time” (*Logic* 1); also paradoxes “always have the characteristic of going in both directions at once, and of rendering identification impossible . . .” (*Logic* 75). As the text affirms two directions of sense simultaneously, it affirms the production of simulacra that multiply heedless of the model. Without the ability to recuperate identity, the text constitutes difference—the only unaccountable entity in any system of totalization. Playing on the system that

tries to envelop it, the Unnamable humorously covers over the tradition, clothing it with its own "execration and disbelief":

There is no use denying, no use harping on the same old thing I know so well, and so easy to say, and which simply amounts in the end to speaking yet again in the way they intend me to speak, that is say about them, even with execration and disbelief. Perhaps they exist in the way they have decreed will be mine, it's possible. I don't know and I'm not interested. If they had taught me how to wish I'd wish they did. There's no getting rid of them without naming them and their contraptions, that's the thing to keep in mind. (326)

Grid-locked—" [t]here's no getting rid of them without naming them and their contraptions"—the text names (that is, plays in the existing language game), but does not promote clarification, identity or verify the ontology of non-being, but divides "good" sense and produces a humorous reading in "speaking yet again in the way they intend me to speak."

Lastly, the novel's concluding sentence might be a parody of the paragon of the brave Humanist's struggle to "go on" no matter how pointless "going on" seems: ". . . the words that remain, my old story, which I've forgotten . . . 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" (413-14). The more traditional reading interprets this passage in one of two ways: either in terms of the Sisyphus complex—going on in life, persevering despite all odds; or in terms of the incessant "murmuring"—going on in language, persevering in spite of the "silence." Usually these two readings are intertwined. Out of these readings also arises the aesthetic of failure that gloomily holds onto its reductive corner of critical exegesis—never "failing" to render Beckett's texts in terms of impotence and negativity. Yet, as we have come to understand, these readings, limited by their epistemological and interpretative biases, rarely *read* the text. Humor, on the other hand, initiates a reading—this present reading functions primarily as a departure point for future readings—that allows for multiplicity and liberates *The Unnamable* from the critical appropriation in which it has been inscribed.

*Emory University*  
*Atlanta, Georgia*

## Notes

1. See Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* 29: "Partout c'est le masque, c'est le travesti, c'est le vêtu, la vérité du nu. C'est le masque, le véritable sujet de la répétition. C'est parce que la répétition diffère en nature de la représentation, que le répété ne peut être représenté, mais doit toujours être signifié, masqué par ce qui le signifie, masquant lui-même ce qu'il signifie."

("Everywhere the mask, the disguise, the covering is the truth of the uncovered [naked]. It is the mask which is the true subject of repetition. It is because repetition differs in kind [in nature] from representation, that what is repeated cannot be represented, but it must always be signified, masked by what signifies it, itself masking what it signifies." My translation.)

## Works Cited

- Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.
- Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974.
- Bové, Paul A. "The Image of the Creator in Beckett's Postmodern Writing." *Philosophy and Literature* 4.1 (1980): 47-65.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Différence et répétition*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester. New York: Columbia, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sacher-Masoch*. Trans. Jean McNeil. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.
- Foster, Dennis A. "All Here Is Sin: The Obligation in *The Unnamable*." *boundary 2* 12.1 (1983): 81-99.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Handwerk, Gary J. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Lee M. Capel. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Lang, Candace D. *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Levy, Eric P. "Existence Searching Essence: The Plight of the Unnamable." *Mosaic* 10 (1976): 103-13.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense." *Various Prose Essays*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1911.

Solomon, Philip Howard. "Samuel Beckett's *L'Innomable*: The Space of Fiction." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 7.1 (1971): 83-91.