Freedom in language from Beckett to Schreber: a study of the characters Lucky, the Unnamable, and the Delirious Judge

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Freedom in Language from Beckett to Schreber:

A Study of the Characters Lucky, the Unnamable, and the Delirious Judge

by

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Freedom in Language from Beckett to Schreber:

A Study of the Characters Lucky, the Unnamable, and the Delirious Judge

Abstract

Freedom in language is to Jacques Derrida a paradoxical concept, according to which the speaking subject must abide by the linguistic constraints before he can conduct a “freeplay” in language. The present study inquires into this freedom exercised by three characters: Lucky, from Samuel Beckett’s tragicomedy Waiting for Godot, the first-person narrator of Beckett’s novel The Unnamable, and Judge Schreber, in his Memoirs on his recovery from psychosis. Lucky, when urged to perform his “thinking,” speaks gibberish, a lampoon no less on philosophy. Lucky’s effort resonates with the pre-Socratic thinking on ontology, which has equated thinking to being. Rather than a philosopher, Beckett assumes the role of a poet to depict the abject state in which Lucky seeks to assert his existence. By speaking gibberish (loosening the linguistic constraints on him and losing thereby his freedom in language) he retrieves his ontology.

The Unnamable, by contrast, manages to exercise his freedom in language, but fails to attain a good life. His unending discursive act parallels Beckett’s own unfinished psychoanalysis with Wilfred Bion. Beckett’s anxiety, scholars have argued, is written into the Unnamable’s sorry state in which he is flooded by waves of words. Worse still, words
may turn into a “noise” which can be disturbing to him at times. He strives to keep his
sanity but is held captive by words.

The paranoia that confronts Schreber is nearly identical but, unlike the case of the
Unnamable, the intruding “noise” or “voice” is dispatched by God. Language had never
become available to him as a means to ward off God’s hostile act until November 1895,
when he suddenly discovered that he had been “unmanned.” By being transformed into a
woman, he accepted his destiny to become God’s Woman. Falling prey to a fantasy no
less, Schreber can now curb his psychosis and have recourse to language to put his life in
order. He has recuperated his freedom in language by being incarcerated by his castration
fantasy.

Each character—Lucky, the Unnamable, and Schreber—has received what each
bargains for by negotiating a deal with language, be it existence, sanity, or fantasy.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

One of the issues that recurs in the study of modern narratives concerns the freedom a writer owns, or can claim, in language. We keep witnessing how he or she wrestles with it, seeks to subdue it, and makes it stick to his or her agenda. Such is the struggle we detect in Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett. With this struggle, the role language plays is being highlighted, to the extent that we begin to wonder whether too much language or too little of it may impair one’s well-being.

In this research project, I propose a slightly different approach to study the struggle—which, in a nutshell, is the one between the human subject and language. When human subject is in question, psychoanalysis is one powerful approach we borrow, before we can establish the linkage between human subjectivity and language. My thesis will bring two authors as well as their works under scrutiny; one being Samuel Beckett, whose novel *The Unnamable* contains a narrative by a highly problematic narrator; the other, Dr. Daniel Schreber’s *Memoirs*, written by the psychotic judge who recounts his life and delusions of a paranoid patient. Both works contain disturbing aspects of subjectivity and language whose complexity can be best clarified under the Lacanian paradigm.
To begin with, both narratives have displayed a significant sign of psychotic thinking. Schreber’s narrative brings a further twist with the admission of his own castration (which he describes as “unmanning”) in exchange for his continuing access to the symbolic order, as a way to escape his own insanity. To put it simply, there is what Jacques Lacan describes as the “push-towards-the-Woman” (pousse-à-la-femme) in him that helps to push him back to the “normality” he has been long denied.

Regardless of what this “push” may signify for the moment, it is conspicuous that sexual difference is the issue we are unable to shun, when freedom in language is in question. In other words, freedom in language is not a sexless or genderless issue—that is, what a woman is, or whether she has to be the Perfect Woman as Schreber believes himself to be, should be taken into account.

It is from this point my thesis evolves further into three parts, consisting mainly of three comparisons. Firstly, I will compare Lucky, the character whose words take the form of gibberish in *Waiting for Godot*, with the narrator of *The Unnamable*, specifically their different approaches in attaining freedom in language. Secondly, I will compare the paranoiac disposition of the narrator in *The Unnamable* with the derangement Dr. Schreber recounts before he seeks his way back to “normality” by becoming God’s only woman to procreate. Both subjects are pathological, yet they differ in degree: with the admission of his own
“unmanning, “the case of Schreber goes one step further in involving the issue of sexual difference. Thirdly, I will compare the “Perfect Woman,” whom Dr. Schreber envisioned himself to be, with a normal feminine subject: the former, as in Schreber, is totally castrated, whereas the latter averts castration somehow but does not wholly escape from it. Such a discrepancy suggests also two distinct relations a human subject may assume with language. Schreber believes he has achieved his freedom by becoming a woman (which still originates from his pathological thinking), but a feminine subject can, in reality, attain more freedom without being entirely tethered to language.

Part I. In *The Unnamable*, where the narrative is rendered particularly disorienting via the narrator’s recurring problems with linear narrating, the narrator is in many aspects similar to Lucky. Both pursue the sublime idea of “absolute freedom,” only that Lucky pursues it by exerting complete freedom on his application of language while the narrator pursues it through numerous attempts to retreat into silence. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the repetition performed through Lucky is based solely on the character’s disregard for the existence of rules (grammar) and his free rein on language; but the repetition in *The Unnamable*, I will suggest, has the attribution far more complicated than the simple subversion of the dominance of grammar.

There is another contrast between Lucky and the Unnamable which is worth mentioning:
both characters form a contrast between ontology and philosophy. By ontology, we suggest that Lucky’s struggle with his erroneous “thinking” is in reality the one for him to assert his existence, his ontological being, which is not yet subjectivity with agency and will. Asserting so, he seems also to lampoon philosophy, which to the untrained ears sounds exactly like the gibberish he produces. Albeit the “absolute freedom” he exercises lands him only in a complete linguistic anarchy, Lucky nonetheless achieves his existence, which to him is more at stake than freedom. The Unnamable, by contrast, owns his subjectivity, but is mired in his linguistic web and frustrated by it. Worse still, words inundate him, nearly drowns him, and in some cases, turn into such a sharp object as an intruding “voice” or “noise.”

Part II. The Unnamable and Schreber’s Memoirs are comparable on account of the fact that both the narrator and Schreber suffer from an invasion of the voice (Beckett, The Unnamable 395; Schreber 232). And both, too, have tried very hard to stop this voice from talking to them, yet to no avail. Such is apparently a psychotic symptom suggesting that their subjectivity undergoes some sort of pathological disintegration. And language, paradoxically (as voice takes the form of language), is their only means to recoup themselves from this loss of reality (the voice they hear takes away their reality). Beckett’s narrator resorts to silence or to more talking, suppressing language altogether or bombarding his world with more words. In the meanwhile, the Unnamable also suffers from the pronoun problem, in which he is
constantly confounded by his own use of “I” and “he.” Phil Baker, among other critics, points out that this is no longer a philosophical problem the Unnamable is confronted with; rather, he has entered the realm of psychoanalysis. Baker even suggests that The Unnamable is a novel in which Beckett conducts his unfinished analysis with his analyst in absentia. So long as it is unfinished, the discourse of the Unnamable, being the stand-in for Beckett’s analysis, must enter an unending loop of solipsistic speech.

Part III. Schreber’s struggle and pursuit of freedom in language are even more dramatic. His relationship with language can be divided into three different phases based on the course of his illness: before his recovery and admission of “unmanning” during his psychosis, the sections where he hasn’t accepted “unmanning” in the Memoirs, and the sections after his admission of “unmanning” in the Memoirs. In other words, castration is to Schreber a matter of giving and taking. He makes a pact, or more precisely, a compromise with gods through the giving away of his masculine sex; he accepted what Lacan calls the “pousse-à-la-femme” and becomes gods’ love object. Doing so allows him to “recover” and to regain his power to signify, with which he could put down in writing his “emotion recollected in tranquility” (to parody Wordsworth).

Even in the nearly comic scenario in which Schreber turns into the Perfect Woman to achieve a different sort of “normality,” the tenor of his struggle continues to linger, as it is the
freedom one can collect from language—from being submitted to castration, on which the symbolic order is based. The meaning of “freedom in language” cannot but sound highly ironic. After all, why should a psychotic subject turn into a woman of his definition to rid himself of mental illnesses? Why should abandoning “having (the penis)” pave the way at all for one to reach the “being (the woman)”? The questions cannot be resolved without taking into account the actual relationship between a feminine subject and castration. According to Lacan, a feminine subject is not entirely subjected to castration (not all of her is under the phallic function), although none of her gender can escape from that function. This is opposite to what happens among men, in which there is only one (the primal father) who is not under the threat of castration, whereas all the rest of men are. In this light, Schreber belongs strictly to the side of man, where the Woman that he envisioned himself to be is still not a feminine subject we have come to perceive above.

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Fig. 1. Lacan, “Graph of Sexuation” (78); rpt. in Shepherdson (75).
In this light, can Schreber be considered as “free” in his relation with language, like all other subjects, especially the feminine subjects? If this “freedom” Schreber attains through his unmanning (castration) remains pathological (though it allows him to write and to ward off the invasion of voice), can we not further infer that even with castration, one cannot be guaranteed that he is not pathological? The reason behind this is that castration may lead one to the path of the Perfect Woman—cannot stop one from submitting to the “push towards woman.” The real freedom in language situates, perhaps, among the feminine subjects, who are both within and without the constraint of the phallic function. It is here that Schreber’s text reaches its limit, hitting on the kind of freedom he will never be able to configure.
Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, since its publication in 1953, has been widely discussed for its notorious complexity in the disjoint and promiscuity of language rendered in his narrative subject. Less frequently considered, though, is the relationship between the narrator and language and the narrator’s seemingly pathological psychological condition. From the monologue that exceeds a hundred pages, we can tell that the narrator is caught within some kind of struggle. Apparently he has problems when trying to term with language, but are his disarranged trains of thought and words merely a struggle with language, or is it in reality caused by a more profound reason but reified in his language? Language carries the symbolic function, and in psychoanalytic understanding, symbolic function determines at least two things: 1. Sanity and insanity. 2. Sexual difference. By bringing in the character Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* and *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* by Daniel Schreber, a paranoid, we will be able to fully perceive the symbolic dispositions in the narrator’s language. And if we consider these factors mentioned above in the contexts of *The Unnamable*, our scope of understanding in the positions and disparity of language will be widened. Furthermore, we will be able to ascertain the acknowledgement that the narrator in *The Unnamable* is a subject
with paranoid predisposition.

In addition, my research will also discuss how the advent of “unmanning” influences Schreber’s access to the symbolic power of language and how the issue of “sexual difference” differentiates one subject from the other, in particular in their relation with language, to further reify the complete picture of the narrator’s psychological condition, and more importantly, to question the value of the beneficial yet preposterous act of Schreber’s “unmanning”. At this moment, we have three closely related paradigms concerning the positions in language and with three cases. We will proceed further to explore the relation between language, writing and the subject, the possible position in the linguistic order, and different degrees of freedom each subject can possibly obtain within their positions in the realm of language.

Language as Lacan points out in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, “governs whatever may be made present of the subject”; it “is the field of that living being which the subject has to appear” (206). Being the medium to bring forth the constitution of the subject, the linguistic power is indispensable in the process of forming one’s subjectivity. However, an otherwise different relation to language is displayed through the character of Lucky, whose base existence is often associated with animals. This chapter will give a closer look at his relation with language—a relation which carries a profound implication of its own
and which, as I shall detail below, is tied to the distinction between ontology and philosophy, when Lucky’s freedom, as well as existence, in language is at stake.

A character of sheer peculiarity in Beckett’s celebrated play *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky is one of the rare examples among all the literary characters whose subjectivity is made vacuity of by his speech. The character seeks not only the freedom from the linguistic order, outside of which he can avoid becoming the “void,” the uncertainty and avert having “something essential lacking” as a subject “who expresses himself” with language (Blanchot 324), but also the sublime state of the absolute freedom, in other words, the consummation of his subjectivity. In his epic monologue—one of the two sentences he has uttered in the play:

“Given the existence of works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua […] tennis…the stones… so calm…Cunard…unfinished” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 28-29), he demonstrates a highly-experimental linguistic style unrestricted by any sort of form and rule through his free composition and assemblage of words. But as he exerts complete freedom on his employment of language, he loses his own freedom and his subjectivity as a speaking subject, which is, at certain degree, reflected through the plight of misery he is tethered within.

This paradoxical phenomenon can be understood by a description given by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, in which the disposition of language and play are inferred
to: “This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble” (236). That is, despite the infinite possibility and potentiality in the realm of language, the whole function of the linguistic order will only work smoothly within a closure, or on the grounds of the rules. To view it in a simpler way, the function of *freeplay* is similar to that of the basketball game. A basketball player has the obligation to comply with the rules so as to establish his subjectivity as a basketball player and be permitted to the game. If he does so, he exerts a multitude of strategies so long as his moves are performed within this finite closure. On the other hand, if he plays the game with the violation against the rules, he will otherwise lose his freedom (to participate) in the game and his subjectivity as a basketball player will thus be deracinated though his subjectivity as a human being will remain.

As described by Derrida, language (which functions normally) possesses the paradoxical nature in which we can see both its finitude and infinity; the latter can exist only within the former. It is only on the solid foundation of the finite closure can freedom be exerted and the infinity of language be expanded thereafter. In this light, we can thus perceive that when the paradoxical nature and the finite closure of language has lost in his pursuit of the “absolute freedom,” Lucky’s language then becomes that of a loop, an endless repetition, in which his subjectivity is unable to be manifested. In a sense, as he is imprisoned in the linguistic loop
(created by his own language) with his autonomy deprived, he has simultaneously lost his freedom as a speaking subject. We can therefore perceive that, this kind of relation between the subject and language with infinitesimal connection in-between is not amendable, like it is in the character of Lucky.

By highlighting the notion of “absolute freedom” which Lucky seeks to accomplish through his “discursive” effort, and by bringing this effort under the scrutiny of Derrida’s conceptualization of language and freeplay, we enter the territory of philosophy. We bring to ourselves this awareness that we are confined within philosophy, in order to highlight that freedom is equally a concept that must be defined on philosophical terms. If this is the case, then, the freedom that Lucky has lost does not axiomatically suggest the loss of his ontological self. (We will come to the issue of ontology in a moment.)

Let us resume our discussion from the problematic of freedom. Freedom, to begin with, has been a hotspot of contention in Western thoughts since the early modernity. When this freedom is conceived within the context of linguistic constraint to inquire how language has made freedom possible (or impossible), there are two questions involved: What is language, which has a stake in freedom? And what is freedom, which has to take language as one of its conditions of possibility? To be sure, Beckett’s approach to the questions is never philosophical, but ontological. By philosophy, we mean the Western system of thinking
ranging from Plato to Derrida, which has turned extremely sophisticated and even convoluted when reaching the modern times. By ontology, we mean rather the state of existence more “primordial” than philosophy. In our employment to fit Beckett’s writings, ontology, being a word coined together by the Greek “on” (being) and “logos” (discourse), is less “a study of existence” than a fundamental concern for how humans exist.

What is more “primordial” about this concern is that it came before philosophy (if by “philosophy” we mean the systematic inquiry launched first by early Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle). Along this line, pre-Socratic ontology is supposedly more “pristine” than post-Socratic philosophy. This seems to be what Martin Heidegger has in mind, when he deplores on the opening pages of his *Being and Time* that “the Question of Being” “has today been forgotten” (22). More specifically, Heidegger deplores the loss of this concern for Being given rise by the inception of Philosophy. That partly explains why Heidegger would later make inroads into such earlier thinkers as Heraclitus and Parmenides in his *Early Greek Thinking*. This effort made by Heidegger is part of the *ontological* project he started out from *Being and Time*.

However, by calling Beckett’s approach in *Waiting for Godot* “ontological,” we do not intend to collapse Beckett’s *literary* project onto Heidegger’s *philosophical* one. Despite Heidegger’s appropriation of the pre-Socratic thinkers, his lifework is essentially systematic
and discursive, whereas Beckett’s is not. Rather, he has stayed away from the philosophical enterprise in the way Aristophanes had from Socrates and Plato by sticking with the theater. And theater is precisely that which works as Beckett’s home base for him to make his ontological quest, which in our perspective is never philosophical.

Curiously enough, it is through the character Lucky that Beckett brings into existence one of the most poignant moments of his ontological quest. The play Waiting for Godot begins with Estragon’s line “Nothing to be done” (7). Yet the line does not necessarily endorse the view “nothing to be said”—quite unlike his Ohio Impromptu, where Beckett begins with “Little is left to tell” and ends with “Nothing is left to tell” (Worton 68). The two major characters Estragon and Vladimir are not eloquent speakers; they never give speeches. And yet, is there truly nothing to be said? Lucky is Beckett’s answer to that question.

In the play, Lucky steals the show when Pozzo commands him to “think,” or more precisely to “perform” thinking for Estragon and Vladimir, as if thinking is one of the antics which Lucky is capable of executing for public entertainment. When Lucky actually “thinks,” he “shouts his text,” which is a lengthy stretch of gibberish that irritates Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir, who are roused to extreme ire (28-29). To them, as well as the theater audience, Lucky’s performance of “thinking” may come as a surprise, not the least because thinking could hardly be performed, but also because, if it could, it would never take the form of
gibberish. Nonetheless, on stage (and in reading as well), this is the moment that sheds light for us (the audience or readers) on the inner depth of Lucky as a character. Inferentially, Lucky’s inner world must have been twisted and fractured as well; he could only pour out a collage of pseudo-philosophical quotes, in the manner in which he could only passively take orders from the equally senseless Pozzo.

Both acts—“thinking” and taking orders—are passive, which Lucky executes without his agency or will: he takes in whatever he has heard without digestion, and pours or acts out reflexively whenever he receives an order to do so. He “thinks” in the way he acts at Pozzo’s behest. The “meaning” of Lucky’s “thoughts”—if there is meaning at all—is the meaning of his life lorded over by Pozzo. Gibberish as meaninglessness is the meaning of Lucky’s existence, if we ever want to tease out any meaning from his gibberish.

It is perhaps not a coincidence when Lucky’s gibberish commences by summoning up a most pertinent concept regarding Lucky’s life: “existence.” As noted earlier, he begins his gibberish thus: “Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua…” (28). There are several ways to delineate the nature of this “existence” mentioned in the context of Lucky’s “thinking” as gibberish. First, the “existence” of his thinking as his inner life goes parallel with the one of his physical life under the power of Pozzo. If his life there with Pozzo is fractured, so is his inner life with or
without Pozzo. That both his inner life and physical life are meaningless is paradoxically the
meaning of his overall “existence.” Second, given that Lucky is performing “thinking,”
performance itself takes on the meaning of “existence,” or is elevated to the level of existence
despite his dubious ability to think. Lucky the character exists, or can only truly exist, in his
performance of thinking. It is as if he were a vessel or vehicle to hold up thinking itself: the
vessel may contain a putrid drink, but that does not vitiate its status as a vessel. Likewise, so
long as Lucky obtains his existence by his performance of thinking, he should not be
chastised if his thinking happens to be fraud.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Lucky’s performance of thinking is his inadvertent
lampoon of philosophy. This lampoon is Beckett’s modern-day answer to the attack by
Aristophanes’s comedy The Clouds launched against the bunch of philosophers that include
Socrates. In reality, Beckett himself is an avid reader of philosophy, especially Kant, who has
had an overwhelming influence on his novels Watt and Murphy.¹ Beckett of course is highly
familiar with how philosophical discourse functions and how bizarre it may sound when read
to a layman’s untrained ear. This is precisely the effect Beckett wishes to achieve by having

¹This is the argument P. J. Murphy brings forward and defends in the second half of his article
“Beckett and the Philosophers.” There Murphy also notes: “Kant’s influence on Beckett has
been almost totally underestimated. […] This is due partly to the fact that most critics were
not aware that Beckett went back to Kant throughout the formative decade of the 1930s”
(229).
Lucky perform “thinking” in public. Deep down, however, there is a much more profound and abstruse philosophical statement Beckett seeks to assert—and this is our fourth point—a statement leaning more to ontology than to philosophy. It is this *ontological* venture Lucky materializes—a venture embodied by his acts—that I will give a more detailed account below.

As is noted, Lucky’s “project” in his performance of “thinking” is ontological in nature. To define it so, we ought to trace back again to the pre-Socratic thinkers. Albeit no such reference is being made in *Waiting for Godot*, our conjecture that Lucky’s project is pre-Socratic is not groundless. According to Michael Worton, both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* present to us “an example of the circularity of existence which was proclaimed by the pre-Socratic philosophers (such as Heraclitus and Empedocles) whom Beckett admired”(70). In these two plays, Worton remarks, “being-in-time” is the most critical theme among the themes they explore, highlighting the question of “existence” more akin to the pre-Socratic conception of the term (Worton 70).

Along this line of argument, what I would like to inquire further is to survey how Lucky’s case presents to us a close affinity to the thoughts of another pre-Socratic thinker, Parmenides, whose views center mostly around the question of being and existence, around what is and is not. What appears to be unique in Parmenides is that “to be” and “to think” run parallel to
each other, as can be discerned in the following quotes of his words:\footnote{The quotes are all taken from the Wikipedia entry to “Parmenides.”}

“For to be aware and to be are the same.”

“Thinking and the thought that it is are the same; for you will not find thinking apart from what is, in relation to which it is uttered.”

“It is necessary to speak and to think what is; for being is, but nothing is not.”

The most pertinent place to start with is perhaps the first quote, “For to be aware and to be are the same.” Heidegger himself has given a slightly different translation of it, which goes: “For Thinking and Being are the same” \cite{Early Greek Thinking 79}. Despite the fact that his translation is not without his own \textit{philosophical} agenda (one that involves the destiny of \textit{Dasein}, for example), what he brings up can help us to affirm that “to be aware” is indeed “to be.” In this regard, Heidegger has helped us to make this leap from “to be aware” to “to be.” What happens here is not the later-day Cartesian \textit{cogito ergo sum} (I think, therefore I am), but an ontological foundation for \textit{being} to appear in the form of \textit{thinking}.

And therefore when Lucky performs “thinking,” despite the lampoon on philosophy that ensues, he is nonetheless making his \textit{ontological} effort to assert his \textit{being}. Lucky’s seriousness in performing “thinking” steals the limelight on stage, out of Beckett’s respect for this seriousness in making such an effort. In no way does Beckett seek to demean Lucky as a
character, let alone to demolish his inborn right to exist by “thinking.” If Lucky’s “thinking” is Beckett’s lampoon on philosophy at all, what happens here cannot be deemed as a Heideggerian project, despite the name of “ontology” which has been monopolized by Heidegger’s philosophy.

We make this distinction between Lucky’s “ontology” and Heidegger’s version, because we suspect that such a distinction has probably functioned as Beckett’s hidden agenda in writing Waiting for Godot. P. J. Murphy, though he does not allude to the play, makes nonetheless the following observation, which is worth quoting in full in our defense:

Beckett and Heidegger meet in a remarkably similar critique of Kant. The differences between the situations of the philosopher and the poet must also be noted: whereas Heidegger can affirm that temporality as the being of Dasein should replace Kant’s “pure reason,” Beckett cannot make such an essentially straightforward declaration. His fictional world is at least one stage removed from an existential situation; therefore, Beckett must seek the language which could mediate this distantiation between the would-be-self and would-be-world. Beckett said that he did not understand the distinction Heidegger and Sartre had made between existence and being; their language was “too philosophical” for him (a more polite version of the Unnamable’s
“They must consider me sufficiently stupefied with all their balls about being and existing,” T 320). (Murphy 236)

There is so much to unpack from this long quote. To properly do so, we must step back a little to capture the establishing shot of the contention involved above. First of all, Beckett knows only too well that his role is a “poet,” not a “philosopher” like Heidegger, and that Beckett’s “fictional world” falls within the proper realm of the literary, not the philosophical. Secondly, as Beckett’s mission is chiefly literary, his concern is solely on the role language plays, or in Worton’s words, on “what language can and cannot do” (68). Thirdly, when Beckett sees no point in demarcating existence from being, it is because, on his literary base and with his privilege as a “poet,” he sticks fast with his ontological ground before philosophy comes forward to distinguish existence and being. Such a distinction is useless to him (useful though to philosophy), and what occupies him more is the “distantiation” within the ontological realm between (the coming-into-being of) the self and (that of) the world. The literary, then, must be seemingly coextensive with the ontological in Beckett. This understanding should hold, so long as our reference point is the poet at work to craft his Waiting for Godot.

On this ground of the ontological, qua that of the literary, what matters most is the relation between the self who speaks in order to be (who makes use of language in order to exist) and the world in which the self does so to be. More precisely, the issue becomes now, mattering so
much to the ontological, how the self and the world can be linked up through language.

Perhaps no one can depict this literary/ontological project of Beckett’s better than P. J. Murphy, who writes: “Beckett’s abiding concern was for the problem of reference, of how language relates to reality, a question which was formerly the domain of the philosopher, but which, in our ‘end of philosophy’ era, has been taken up by others, perhaps most notably the creator of fictional worlds” (236). The venture Beckett makes in this regard, — being himself such a “creator of fictional worlds,” — is to reach the point in Waiting for Godot to create a character like Lucky, whose employment of language in his “thinking” is in close proximity to perfection in the sense that it is as if he were speaking a sort of pure language, by which we mean a language that has severed all referentiality and all its reference to reality. Interestingly enough, despite his faulty language and therefore his faulty thoughts, Lucky does not, by performing his faulty thinking, blot out his “existence.” Rather, he carries out quite successfully a skewed ontological project that has not only substantialized his existence, however fractured it may seem, but has in the meantime made it also to lampoon philosophy—the philosophical quest in general and that of Heidegger’s kind in particular about ontology.

We can at length obtain a better insight into another quote by Parmenides we have yet to discuss: “Thinking and the thought that it is are the same; for you will not find thinking apart
from what is, in relation to which it is uttered.” A slightly different rendering of Parmenides’s words by G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield in their chapter on him in *The Presocratic Philosophers* goes as follows: “What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not.” (247). In this quote, what is stated more saliently is the role speech and language play in laying the foundation for being and existence. If in the beginning was Being, it is because initially it had been, first and foremost, the Word (John 1:1), Logos, or Language. Before there was light, there had been this speech of Yahweh Elohim as “Let there be light.”

In this light, there is a valid reason for Beckett to entitle *Waiting for Godot* a “tragicomedy.” Lucky’s tragedy (if it is a tragedy) can be attributed to the lack of referentiality: that is, his speech does not produce any referentiality and does not function likewise as a referential discourse. His comedy (if it is a comedy), on the other hand, is his success in completing his *ontological* mission to assert his (fractured and crippled) existence. From the perspective of philosophy, Lucky achieves his freeplay at the expense of his freedom (a philosophical notion no less). His “revenge” is his lampoon on the philosophical discourse by producing gibberish in its face. Yet, this revenge is accompanied by a price, which is, to constrain him within the never-ending loop of discourse quite in the manner of Sisyphus’s laborious and futile effort to roll a boulder uphill. When Lucky appears on stage, he presents
himself as someone from the bygone era, because he is by definition a piece of antique which came before the age of philosophy. When he performs his thoughts, he can only present his anguish as someone who has no reference to philosophy, but one who possesses only ontology. Lucky, as a tragicomic character, fulfills his mission to substantialize Beckett’s view— the distinction between ontology and philosophy is crucial. With this distinction, Lucky steadfastly asserts to us: in his relation with language, his existence is more at stake than his freedom.
Chapter 3
The Subjectivity of *The Unnamable* in the Linguistic Slippage

From *Waiting for Godot* (1948–1949) to *The Unnamable* (1953), Beckett’s concept of freedom and his employment of language have evolved significantly in different courses. A rather different relation and position in language is displayed in the third novel of the well-known *Trilogy*. By first appearance, the narrator in *The Unnamable* appears to be a mere extension of Lucky as his seemingly endless monologue proffers nothing but complete disarray consisting of words as nonsensical as the words of Lucky. However, two characters’ diverging attitudes and methods toward their pursuits of “absolute freedom” characterize their linguistic dispositions and their repetitions in language in radically different ways.

In *The Unnamable*, where the narrative is rendered particularly disorienting via the narrator’s recurring problems with linear narrating, the narrator is in many aspects similar to Lucky. He imparts in his narrative a sense of imprisonment within language and of a desire to escape being produced through language, though this phenomenon is even more patent in Lucky’s narrative. Both of them pursue the sublime idea of “absolute freedom,” only that Lucky pursues it by exerting a complete freedom on his application of language while the narrator pursues it through numerous attempts to retreat into silence, in which he can dribble in his corner, (an act also shared by Lucky) his head gone, his tongue dead (Beckett, *The*
Unnamable 386-87). Contrary to Lucky, the narrator seeks for “the right to be done with speech, done with listening, done with hearing” (Beckett, The Unnamable 387), but both characters’ ultimate goal is to rid of the depriving power of language to reach the state of “absolute freedom.” They have been sharing this parallel until an epiphany mentioned below dawns upon the narrator and their paths bifurcates ever more: “you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me” (Beckett, The Unnamable 407). This acknowledgement of the impermissibility of the “absolute freedom” (the real silence) marks a clear-cut demarcation between the narrator and Lucky, and with this realization he (the narrator) has no other option but to “go on” repeating himself in his monologue.

Though in both works a repetition is included, they are of different dispositions and evolve rather differently, likewise the mire each of them is struggling within. As in Waiting for Godot, the repetition performed through Lucky is based solely on the character’s disregard for the existence of rules (grammar) and his free rein on language; but the repetition in The Unnamable, I will suggest, has the attribution far more complicated than the simple subversion of the dominance of grammar. Likewise, the struggle the narrator is caught within is of extreme complexity, it is essentially a psychological struggle existing only in psychosis, which, though strangely, shares a large resemblance with the famous Memoirs written by

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3 Hereafter, the pagination will be noted as T 387.
Daniel Schreber, one of the most notable paranoiacs in the history of psychoanalysis, and can be clarified through a research on his case history and the miraculous process of his recovery.

It is curious to compare Beckett’s idealistic pursuit of “silence” in *The Unnamable* to the much more deranged motive, that of giving birth to a new human race, in Schreber’s *Memoirs*. Yet unimaginable as they might be, the two texts share analogies in particular in their mutual possession of a repetition. They are comparable as in both subjects there is an invasion of the voice: “There they are again, we’ll have to start killing them again, I hear this horrible noise” (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 395).

The psychotic disposition of *The Unnamable* and its striking resemblance to Schreber’s narrative notwithstanding, we must pause for a moment to ask the following question in order to straighten up our line of argument: How would the path opened up by Lucky, a character in *Waiting for Godot*, lead us to Schreber via *The Unnamable*? In particular, what is the role played by language, which has created a trajectory in Beckett for him to commence from Lucky and terminate in *The Unnamable*, whose psychotic disposition overlaps nonetheless with that of Schreber’s? To tackle these questions, I will highlight two stages of transition in Beckett’s conception of language. First is the one from ontology to philosophy (from Lucky to *The Unnamable*). Next is from philosophy to psychoanalysis (from *The Unnamable* to Schreber).
A disclaimer is needed, however. Whether there is indeed a historical development in Western thinking that proceeds from ontology to philosophy, and later to psychoanalysis, is not the issue we wish to consider in our context; it is an issue which should be placed within the hermeneutical brackets for the moment. Rather, what carries more weight to us is that these stages of transition are detected in Beckett. Because of them, we are given a vantage point to link up Lucky and Schreber through *The Unnamable*.

With the two stages of transition in Beckett in mind, we can first begin by making a comparison between Lucky and the narrator in *The Unnamable*. As we stated in the last chapter, what is more at stake to Lucky is his existence (ontology), not his freedom, which remains a philosophical concept. When he exercises his “absolute freedom” in his performance of “thinking,” albeit speaking gibberish, Lucky’s act is not entirely meaningless. On the ontological plain, his *act* cannot be inane, which can find its resonance in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist proposition “existence precedes essence” (*l’existence précède l’essence*).\(^4\) What Lucky’s “project” seeks to accomplish is *to be*—to exist—without which no one can properly define what Lucky *is* (as his essence). His act (to perform “thinking”) means solely, in our ontological understanding, to affirm his existence.

However, an existence is not tantamount to subjectivity, which we do not yet perceive in

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\(^4\) See the Wikipedia entry to “Existence Precedes Essence.”
Lucky, who is destitute of agency and will. A mere existence (if this were possible) could accordingly be downright distressing, as we discern in Lucky, to whom “absolute freedom” may amount to “absolute nothingness.” In this light, if Lucky does exist, he does so as if he were a piece of refuse, a human waste.

By contrast, the nameless first-person narrator of the novel *The Unnamable*, possesses not only an existence but also subjectivity. He has entered language and joined the linguistic “freeplay.” Jacques Derrida’s definition of language as a field, which we cited in the last chapter, is worth repeating here: “This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble” (236). The relation between freedom and constraint, according to Derrida, is no more paradoxical than the one we encounter in language. Intriguingly enough (or not so intriguingly at all), the Unnamable, though he obtains his full-fledged subjectivity by acquiring his freedom and facing the linguistic constraint, is frustrated by both.

The morose situation the Unnamable is mired in can be likened to that of Hamlet’s, Prince of Denmark. On the one hand, what Hamlet reads from his book, in his response to Polonius’ inquiry, is “Words, words, words” (Shakespeare, *Ham. 2.2.192*). On the other, Hamlet, suffocated by his surroundings, voices also his depression by remarking, “Denmark’s a prison” (*Ham. 2.2.243*). Being fed up with so many words and so much imprisonment: this
seems to be also the major complaint lodged by the Unnamable. Surpassing Lucky to reach
the stage beyond existence and acquire subjectivity as well as freedom does not seem to
elevate the Unnamable to a better state—does not bring him happiness to fulfill a good life.

This is the moment we should approach psychoanalysis for a better insight. Let us
backtrack a little to discuss how the Unnamable and Lucky can be comparable in terms of
their employment of speech and language. What is reminiscent of Lucky in the discourse
wielded by the Unnamable is best depicted by Phil Baker’s perceptive observation here:

“Returning to the Unnamable’s ‘I must not try to think, simply utter’ [T.302], it suggests this
distinctive form of spontaneity to be generative principle of the text” (Baker 10). Such a
principle, Baker continues, is not without its *therapeutic* effect in the psychoanalytic sense of
the term. “Nonetheless,” he adds, “it is a therapeutic technique at a remove; the apparent
spontaneity of the Unnamable is not automatically produced. As in *From An Abandoned Work*,
Beckett’s monologues involve a depiction or ‘simulation’ of free association without being a
product of it” (Baker 10). If what the Unnamable emits can be understood in terms of “free
association,” of the “talking cure,” why is it still “a therapeutic technique at a remove”? Could
it be that, we venture to guess, Beckett is here producing a lampoon on psychoanalysis, as
what Lucky has done to philosophy?

Baker’s *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, being “the first full-length attempt
to consider the relation between Beckett’s work and psychoanalytic ideas” (xi), asserts that any piece of jumbled discourse produced by Beckett’s characters cannot be taken lightly and innocently. When the Unnamable believes, “I must not try to think, simply utter,” he cannot therefore be taken lightly as Lucky’s double, for the Unnamable has acquired not only an existence but also subjectivity. Given that Beckett is well-versed in psychoanalysis, we should be attentive to just any utterance produced by a character as a subject, without relegating it to Lucky’s kind of gibberish. As what Baker has observed, “Beckett’s earlier writing is littered with the debris of psychoanalytic discourse, and his acquaintance with this area is shown during the thirties by the kind of specialised vocabulary that he was to look back on as ‘dog vomit jargon’” (Baker xi). Baker offers more details:

It is now well known that Beckett experienced two years of psychoanalytic treatment with Wilfred Bion⁵ at the Tavistock, from early 1934 to late 1935 […]. He [Beckett] was in considerable distress, with “somatization” (boils, tremors, an anal abscess) and night terrors (pavor nocturnes, particularly associated with obsessionals). […] Both Beckett and Bion thought that his problems stemmed from his relationship with his mother, consolidating this as a theme in his life.

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⁵ For the uninformed, Bion is the greatest theorist in the field of clinical psychoanalysis after Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan.
Without a doubt, *The Unnamable* is a work fully saturated by the psychoanalytic assumption, as Baker pursues his argument further in the following:

The problematic discourse of *The Unnamable* is marked by the characteristic hopes and tropes of the [psycho]analytic project, and his involuted attempt to “unravel my tangle” [T.317] is again bound up with memory. The cathartic emphasis on trying to remember the material which will bring freedom and relief, coupled with a reluctance or inability to say it, trespasses heavily on the talking cure. (8)

What is striking in Baker’s finding is that *The Unnamable* is a piece of analytic work done to the analyst in absentia. He makes his case thus: “The idea that Beckett’s analysis directly influenced his work has been taken furthest by the eminent analyst Didier Anzieu. Anzieu argues that the impasse of Beckett’s analysis was later resolved into his writing, which constitutes an auto-analysis. The soliloquies of the Unnamable, for example, are therefore free associations addressed to a fictive analyst” (Baker 8).

Daniel Katz, commenting on *The Unnamable*, also points out that what is at stake in the novel is “the Beckettian project: namely, the dialectic of subjective positioning implied by ‘response structure’” (126). Namely, to Katz, the novel seeks in reality a response of some
kind from someone still unknown. As Katz does not make any reference to psychoanalysis, Baker’s elucidation that the novel seeks a response from “a fictive analyst” seems to hit closer to the mark.

In what follows, I will adhere to Baker’s findings to delineate how the Unnamable makes such a response, which is psychoanalytical in nature. Baker has pointed out largely three modes of the Unnamable’s “response structure.” First is the Unnamable’s “flight from self,” attributable to the “painful experience of introspection” during the analysis. This flight, and this is Baker’s second point, soon turns into the Unnamable’s “fraught inability to talk about” himself, an inability which is transformed into the “not I’ projection.” Thirdly, the Unnamable’s failure to talk about himself presents a more profound complexity which carries a great significance in psychoanalytic terms: the pronoun problem. Baker has a pertinent elucidation in the wake of Jacques Lacan:

The Unnamable’s version of this dilemma has an ontological aspect which keeps him even further from that self-coincidence suggested by Lacan as the end of the analysis: “The subject…begins the analysis by talking about himself without

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6 “Analysis would also have given Beckett a painful experience of introspection. Criticism has moved from the search for the self to the non-existence of the self, but Beckett’s comments emphasise the flight from self” (Baker 9).

7 “Several of the first-person narrators have a fraught inability to talk about themselves without angry or apologetic resistances such as denial and ‘not I’ projection” (Baker 9).
talking to you, or by talking to you without talking about himself. When he can talk to you about himself, then the analysis will be over.” (Baker 9)

The Unnamable’s pronoun problem lies in that he keeps talking about himself without talking to the Other, or he talks to the Other without talking about himself. So far as he cannot talk to the Other about himself, his analysis can never come to an end. And so The Unnamable is replete with “words, words, words” on end.

All three points above, being the result of Beckett’s interminable analysis, can be subsumed under one proposition, according to which the Unnamable is undergoing an infinite splitting of subjectivity. The theme of splitting can be observed in the modes of “the flight from self,” the “‘not I’ projection,” and the “dilemma” of an unending analysis. The “flight from self” tallies flawlessly with the Unnamable’s view of “the non-existence of self,” in which he casts a suspicious eye upon his existence after entering subjectivity. However, his subjectivity, as the Unnamable is keenly aware, hinges upon language, in particular the pronouns; the problem is that he is confounded by them. This confusion, in turn, paves the way for the suspicion he casts upon language, which alone sustains his subjectivity.

As the Unnamable cannot comment on himself properly—he is confused by the pronouns that may or may not refer to him—he fails to leave his analysis, as Lacan’s words suggest (Lacan’s comment is precisely the one on the use of pronouns), even though his (the
Unnamable’s) analysis, qua Beckett’s analysis with Bion, is long gone. Once he sees no end in the analysis, the Unnamable must “go on” in his speech without seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

In what follows, we will gather the textual evidence from Beckett’s *The Unnamable* to confirm Baker’s findings above. Afterward, we will bring up a new finding not mentioned by Baker, which is the Unnamable’s struggle between silence and the voice, a state most resembling Schreber’s struggle. To be sure, such a struggle hinges upon language as well—whether we need it or can do without it, or whether we can fend it off or live with it.

As noted above, the Unnamable’s “flight from self” is initiated by his suspicion on his non-existence. And this suspicion is in turn triggered by his sense of homelessness. He utters his distress thus, “I won’t seek my home any more, I don’t know what I’ll do, it would be occupied already, there would be someone already” (*T* 394). Coming home, the Unnamable will see a “he,” who occupies his home. It is here that *The Unnamable* first detects his own splitting: I am a “he,” “*je* est un autre. The existence of this “he” pesters me, obsesses me, and makes me live as if “he” were the purpose of the Unnamable’s existence in this world:

It’s not I, I am he, after all, why not, why not say it, I must have said it, as well

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8 “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, instead of any old thing, this place, if I could describe this place, portray it” (*T* 392).
that as anything else, it’s not I, not I, I can’t say it, it came like that, it comes like that, it’s not I, if only it could be about him, if only it could come about him, I’d deny him, with pleasure, if that could help, it’s I, here it’s I, speak to me of him, let me speak of him, that’s all I ask, I never asked for anything make me speak of him, what a mess, now there is no one left, long may it last. […] In the end it comes to that, to the survival of that alone, then the words came back, someone says I, unbelieving. (T 395)

To the Unnamable, the word “survival” is what is at stake. The splitting of one’s self would vitiate one’s “survival” cannot but bring to mind the perennial theme of the “double” in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide. In the following quote, the Unnamable goes on naming the process by calling it “splitting”: “He is ‘I.’ The ‘I’ is splitting, he’s splitting in his delusion. I am far, but he is here” (396). The Unnamable adds: “That proves my innocence, he says it, or they say it, yes, they who reason, they who believe… he spoke of me, as if I were he, as if I were not he, both, and as if I were others, […] he wants me to be he” (T 396). In a more severe degree: “He thinks he’s caught me, he feels me in him, then he says I, as if I were he, […] I never spoke, I seem to speak, that’s because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him” (T 396). Once “he’s caught me,” the Unnamable seems to be suggesting, I am done for, as I am being spoken of in the way I am being trampled.
Soon the Unnamable’s state of existence is worsening, to the extent that the “I” in him is being emptied out. When he uses the word “splitting” to describe his distressful stage, the Unnamable does not consider it an event in which his subjectivity is split in two, in the way cells proliferate. Rather, he regards it as just a problem of pronouns he is having, as he notes, “It’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it’s a kind of pronoun too” (T 397). That is, the Unnamable still keeps his subjectivity in one piece; the proliferation he confronts with is that of the pronouns, presently spinning out of control. In this light, we can attribute the pronoun problem he faces here to what P. J. Murphy described as “Beckett’s abiding concern” being “the problem of reference, of how language relates to reality” (236).

Nonetheless, we keep witnessing the pronouns proliferate in the Unnamable, almost like the cancer cells in the constant state of metastasis. There is perhaps not a piece of reality that can function as a measure to halt such a proliferation in language, whose result is an on-going utterance below that foresees no end: “You must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me” (T 407). And expectedly, the novel closes by repeating the mantra: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

However, how the Unnamable’s pronoun problem might have triggered his unending
proliferation of words is still indiscernible. Of all the comments we can collect, Katz’s comment seems to be a more appropriate elucidation on their causal relationship. His remark is worth quoting in full:

“I” no longer cleaves the crucial distance between self and other, but becomes simply one name or designating mark in a series of grammatical options. One can always say “I,” but one says it as Malone says “my pot” or “me.” The opening lines of The Unnamable make this clear: “I, say I. Unbelieving” (291). If one says I but is unbelieving, how does one refer to or name that agent of disbelief, or more to the point, how does that agent state the disbelief it entertains, without saying “I”? That is the impossible question the trilogy ends on. The trilogy also, however, ends on “on,” the question of going on within its own impossibility. If this question is tied to the first person and subjectivity, it is also linked to the entire range of teleological suppositions regarding “ending” in narratives, of arriving at literary or syntactic destinations which permit one to stop “going on.” The question of the “on” in Beckett, of movement without progress, of termination without finality, will be the subject of the reading of the late prose [in this book]. If the “on” has no destination, however, it is also because the subject, the “I” that “goes on,” is denied a place as origin of that
Katz’s words delineate gracefully how the pronoun problem can lend support to the
Unnamable’s “unending” discourse. Katz’s perspective is that the Unnamable’s discourse
must “go on” and on, albeit constricted to a “movement without progress,” as the “I” who
speaks has been “denied a place as origin of that movement.” The “I,” namely, can find no
place in that movement—which in our view is the movement of linguistic flow. The “I”
cannot, as it were, be anchored down to this flow. This explains why no pronoun can “anchor”
this “I,” and this “I,” in the meanwhile, finds himself alienated in the face of language. But
Katz’s finding can likewise be perceived simultaneously as attributing the cause to the subject
“I”: if he “is denied a place” in this “movement” as a linguistic flow, it might be because he
cannot yet swim in it. If such is also the view we can adopt—the view that the “I” has not yet
finished his “swimming lesson” with his coach—we should have recourse to psychoanalysis.

Despite his awareness of Beckett’s psychoanalytic sessions with Bion (Katz 123), Katz
fails to recognize what he so vividly captures about Beckett’s problem has so much to do with
Beckett’s own unending analysis on the couch. Baker’s quote of Lacan earlier gives a better
account: precisely because the Unnamable (as Beckett’s stand-in in his novel) cannot resolve
his pronoun problem, his discourse cannot find its exit, in the way Beckett has failed to do so
for his analysis.
In other words, when the Unnamable (and Beckett likewise) cannot use the pronouns congruously (namely, when he cannot talk to the Other about himself), both the analysis (Beckett's) and the struggle with pronouns (that of his narrator’s) happen to be interminable. This will also mean that the Unnamable will be pushed around and engulfed by language. In the extreme cases, he feels flooded and inundated by words. In the quote below, words or names that function like the deluge which nearly drowns him as a subject are worth our attention. Note in particular how he depicts the words as an entity in that “they keep coming back”:

I use them all, all the words they showed me, there were columns of them, oh the strange glow all of a sudden, they were on lists, with images opposite, I must have forgotten them, I must have mixed them up, […] but an instant, an hour, and so on, how can they be represented, a life, how could that be made clear to me, here, in the dark, I call that the dark, perhaps it’s azure, blank words, but I use them, they keep coming back, all those they showed me, all those I remember, I need them all, to be able to go on. (400)

These words can turn into a more antagonistic form, which is the noise or voice, prompting the Unnamable to constantly plead for silence: “Real Silence. He wants to go to Real Silence” (401). Another plea for silence is as follows: “I want it to go silent, it wants to
go silent, it can’t, it does for a second, then it starts again, that’s not the real silence, I don’t know, that I don’t know what it is, that there is no such thing, that perhaps there is such a thing, yes, that perhaps there is, somewhere, I’ll never know” (401). The silence can help the Unnamable to fend off the words (as “they”), which at the next moment can morph into a sharp object like a noise which harasses him: “There they are again, we’ll have to start killing them again, I hear this horrible noise” (395). Apparently, both silence and the noise can be disconcerting to him. “The silence, a word on the silence, it’s the silence, that’s the worst, to speak of silence, then lock me up, lock someone up, that is to say, what is that to say, calm, calm, I’m calm, I’m locked up, I’m in something” (398). Eventually, both “silence” and “Words” can be menacing and constricting: “Is silence a prison? Or Words (They)?” (402-3) Worse still, silence and words succeed each other in the form of relay, both pestering the narrator, as he depicts the situation thus:

that’s all words, they’re all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it, I know that well, it will be the silence, full of murmurs, distant cries, the usual silence, spent listening, spent waiting, waiting for the voice, the cries abate, like all cries, that is to say they stop, the murmurs cease, they give up, the voice begins again, it begins trying again, quick now before there is none left, no voice left, nothing left but the core of murmurs, distant
cries, quick now and try again. (406)

What continues unendingly as conundrum that drowns the narrator is what he cannot put to a halt. Therefore, he must go on, but he cannot go on. It is both “Words, words, words” and “Denmark’s a prison” that take turns to encapsulate him.

Our ground is that language and words, in psychoanalysis, are supposed to protect the subject in maintaining his subjectivity and keeping him from dwindling to a mere existence. At this point, language and words have turned ferocious and assailed the subject himself. Language has become the means of an unfriendly unknown other, such as the voice, to torment the subject. Where is this menacing object from? If we still take psychoanalysis as our point of reference, we cannot rule out the role played by a parental figure in forming this unfriendly object. As stated earlier by Baker, “Both Beckett and Bion thought that his problems stemmed from his relationship with his mother, consolidating this as a theme in his life” (6). A parental figure, like a mother to the infant Beckett or a father to the infant Schreber (see the next chapter), can be a formidable presence, whose effect can be carried over to the infant’s adult life to take the form of a gaze or a voice to put him under threat.

When Beckett’s analysis is incomplete, his narrator in The Unnamable may likewise be encased within its pronoun problems. Language and words soon fail to shelter him; instead, they are turned into a means employed by the parental gaze and voice to whelm the subject.
Being thus informed, we attain a new perception of the Unnamable’s psychological picture. The rich and informative quote below can attest to this: “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” (406). We can probably venture the following interpretation: in his analytic session (“a pretty analysis”), in his analytic session, the analysand is both the person “to speak” and “to be spoken of.” And yet he is blocked by an immense “silence” and gradually realizes that “He is made of silence,” “he’s in silence.” If “he’s the one to be sought” in the analysis as the analysand, it is because, as in Katz’s words, Beckett’s “analysis with W. R. Bion” has worked as an exercise “crucial for his intellectual orientation” (123). Aside from being intellectual, the analysis may also be “a painful experience of introspection” (Baker 9; emphasis added). This awareness tallies with Beckett’s “exploration of the mind’s eye in the later works,” which finds its resonance also in The Unnamable (Baker 72). However, when what the Unnamable discovers is silence, we may regard this silence as his resistance to analysis—his recalcitrant defense against it. He retreats to language and takes language as his defensive loop. Yet by doing so, he misses the opportunity which psychoanalysis can offer to avert his pronoun problem, as Lacan has envisaged it to be the termination of analysis.
At this point, the Unnamable (as Beckett’s surrogate) and Schreber are seemingly a pair of twin brothers of suffering. Despite that Schreber appears to be a severer psychotic, Beckett’s neurosis, as can be seen from the mental state of the Unnamable, has at times turned viral—bordering on paranoia—when some nondescript voice or noise intrudes into the world of his narrator. The Unnamable clings to speech and language nonetheless, but his slippage in language (as exemplified by his pronoun problem) is indicative of is his symptom, not his cure. It awaits Schreber to attain a solution which the Unnamable could never have envisaged—or which someone like Beckett (who did not reach the proper termination of his psychoanalysis) could ever envision. This “solution” is castration, and Schreber designates it as “unmanning”—a measure devised and adopted by him to overcome the intruding language (as voice) to harness it, so to put an end to its intrusion.
Chapter 4
The Tragicomedy of Daniel Paul Schreber’s Unmanning

The famous madness of Daniel Paul Schreber is a tragicomedy that, for the moment, still eludes the grasp of theorists and critics alike. The madness takes the form of a tragedy, when being a Senatspräsident, Schreber falls from grace and winds up leading an abject life in an asylum owing to his psychosis (paranoia). Nevertheless, his illness also carries a comic aspect of its own, when he is “cured” more or less by accepting the fate of “unmanning” and turns therefore into a woman (the “therefore” here is problematic, to which we shall come back momentarily). He is soon released from his asylum and goes on to write his Memoirs of My Nervous Illness, both of which amount no less to a happy ending.

Amid the unique disposition we discerned in Schreber’s psychotic illness, there is one crucial yet perplexing feature throughout Schreber’s recovery: his acceptance of his own “unmanning,” which bolsters his conviction that he has undergone gender transformation, is at the same time a decision which helps him retrieve his ability to write. His access to the symbolic power reclaimed after his unmanning seems to be the result of a bargain with his fearsome God with the outcome that he is willing to accept the severest punishment from Him in the form of castration.
The Schreber case allows us to explore the power language has to maintain the sanity of the subject—from falling ill and into the dark night in which the access to consciousness is denied. I started out from my reading of Beckett: first from the famous play *Waiting for Godot* and followed by the third installment of his *poioumena* trilogy, whose storyline is centered on the nameless first-person narrator who endeavors to preserve his sanity with his unending monologue. Like the narrator in *The Unnamable*, in *Waiting for Godot*, “a tragic comedy in two acts,” as Beckett subtitles it, there is one character, Lucky, who talks when forced by his master Pozzo. Yet unlike the narrator in *The Unnamable*, Lucky speaks only gibberish, producing the most comical moment on stage, to offset the overall murky mood of the play that verges on tragedy. By speaking nonsensically, Lucky, though assuming (and parodying the fact) that he can think, ends up proving he actually lacks the ability to think. We can thus perceive that the access to language and the employment of it do not automatically guarantee that a subject can keep his sanity intact.

The third section of Beckett’s *Trilogy*, meanwhile, shares a more compatible parallel with Daniel Schreber’s *Memoirs*. As we mentioned earlier, the trilogy falls into the category of “poioumena” (Greek for “product”), as it is a set of meta-fictions about the creation of
them, much in the vein of Vladimir Nabokov’s work, *Pale Fire*. Daniel Schreber’s work, likewise, is the one in which he records his struggle to recover, his gradual ability to access language, and his determination to write a memoir—also a work on the process of creating this work. The narrator of each author’s work has put in a great effort to maintain his sanity. In the case of Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, language happens to be the means for the narrator to stay afloat, in the way language functions for Lucky, whose existence is confirmed by his speech performance of “thinking,” whereas in Schreber, his access to language is the turning point in his story that allows him to eventually be discharged from the asylum.

Yet on top of the similarities they bear, there is a vital distinction between Beckett and Schreber which we should pay heed to. It never happens to Beckett’s narrator that, access or no access to language, he might also encounter problems that are sexual in nature. In particular, his possession of language or lack thereof does not affect his identity as a man (or a woman). Sexual identity never appears as an issue in Beckett’s trilogy. On the contrary, Dr. Schreber’s access to language and his gender crisis are closely associated. The progress of his illness takes a sharp turn when in November 1895, he was certain that he was transformed into a woman, having been unmanned by God (Schreber 163). Miraculously, this was also the moment he resumed his power to write (Schreber 179-80).

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9 See the entry to Wikipedia, “Postmodern Literature.”
In comparison to *The Unnamable*, what is new in Schreber’s case is the involvement of sexual identity, or in Lacanian terminology, of *sexuation*, which is pivotal for one to have access to his symbolic power at the same time. It is in Schreber, rather than in Beckett, that we can perceive the fact that sexual difference must be taken into account in the (for lack of a better word) “stabilization” or “consolidation” of one’s subjectivity. “We are accustomed to saying,” Charles Shepherdson points out, “that the neutral subject of philosophy (the “cogito”) is a metaphysical construction that obliterates the difference between man and woman.” He puts forward a query: “Are we equally prepared to consider that sexual difference—‘man or woman’—and with it the name of woman, belongs to metaphysics?” (24). The answer he proffers, in the wake of Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray in particular, cannot but be this: “Perhaps sexual difference is indeed as fundamental as ontological difference” (66).

In what follows, I hope to further delve into Schreber’s case, his “tragicomedy,” to support the perspective Shepherdson brings forward here: in the Lacanian paradigm, “sexual difference is indeed as fundamental as ontological difference.”

On Dr. Schreber’s Certainty

Let us backtrack a little to the issue of certainty Schreber has about his transformation into a woman. At the beginning of chapter 13 of his *Memoirs* he has this stunning discovery to
The month of November 1895 marks an important time in the history of my life and in particular in my own ideas of the possible shaping of my future. [...] During that time the signs of a transformation into a woman became so marked on my body [...] and my male sexual organ might actually have been retracted had I not resolutely set my will against it. [...] Soul-voluptuousness had become so strong that I myself received the impression of a female body, first on my arms and hands, later on my legs, bosom, buttocks and other parts of my body. (163)

Note in the following passage, Schreber uses the phrases “beyond doubt” and “of course” to confirm the sort of certainty he seeks to come across:

I could see beyond doubt that the Order of the World imperiously demanded my unmanning, whether I personally liked it or not, and that therefore it was common sense that nothing was left to me but reconcile myself to the thought of being transformed into a woman. Nothing of course could be envisaged as a further consequence of unmanning but fertilization by divine rays for the purpose of creating new human beings. (164)

Schreber has already noted the alteration on him at this point as something beyond
doubt. But intriguing as it is, he remains imprisoned in his own “fantasy of sex” from the
Lacanian perspective (Shepherdson 106). On the imaginary level, Schreber is analogous to
those who demand their own sexual surgery, yet in reality, he cannot sustain such a surgery, as
what he expects to become is not an ordinary woman, but The Woman who procreates a new
generation of human being. Nonetheless, those who believe in surgery are so certain that such
an operation must take place, on which Shepherdson offers this illuminating comment:

This identification is marked by certainty, by a demand to eliminate the
symbolic ambiguity that accompanies sexual difference, replacing it with the
immobility of a “perfected” body, one that would put an end to the difficulties
of historical existence, and bring itself to a halt, as it did in the case of
Schreber’s apocalyptic narrative. (106)

The second quote from Schreber’s Memoirs above (“I could see beyond doubt”) centers
precisely on this “apocalyptic narrative,” on which Shepherdson has the following comment
to make:

For Schreber too, it is the absolute jouissance of God that Schreber’s
transformation [into a woman] is supposed to satisfy, as though he himself
were being offered up as a divine sacrifice, which has become necessary in
order to fill the void that threatens to appear in the universe, and that Schreber
alone is able to circumvent. (105)

On that note (Schreber’s “divine sacrifice”), interestingly, Schreber himself has the following to say:

When I think of my sacrifices through loss of an honorable professional position, a happy marriage practically dissolved, deprived of all the pleasures of life, subjected to bodily pain, mental torture and terrors of a hitherto unknown kind, the picture emerges of a martyrdom which all in all I can only compare with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. (258; emphasis added)

All in all, Schreber’s response to the divine calling — by transforming into a woman — is not a delightful event, as he considered it a sacrifice. Nonetheless, if we step back a little and observe the bigger picture, we cannot stop short at perceiving this event as a mere tragedy. What is “tragic” about it is the “surgery” part, and yet it is simultaneously accompanied by an “optimistic” side — that is, his eventual recovery. Schreber’s comeback, however comical it may seem, has in reality extenuated the excruciating interference from God through the “divine rays” and toned down the jouissance (“soul-voluptuousness”) he suffers from, as he reclaims his access to the symbolic power to make sense of his own condition in his
At this point, what remains insufficiently discussed is the power castration (Schreber’s “unmanning”) wields in assisting his recovery. This castration must carry some symbolic power of its own and be linked to the symbolic order which permits the advent of his recovery. This aspect of castration, which has “stabilized” or “consolidated” Schreber’s subjectivity, is what I will analyze further in attempt to assert that “what is ontological is also sexual.”

The Role of Castration *apropos* Dr. Schreber

One extraordinary *merit*, however quaint this word may sound, of Schreber’s conviction of being unmanned is that his fear of castration is now conclusively settled—a *fait accompli*, no more and no less. The status of castration is no longer something up in the air. There is no ambiguity, no misgivings, no aftermath regarding the issue of castration. He can henceforth settle the account without any worry of its gruesome possibility. Along with this peace of mind comes the second merit: what a woman is, or what the transformation into a woman is, can no longer appall Schreber. Namely, the question of *what a woman is* can be left behind for the moment. The unconscious “push to the woman,” as an incidental perk to this second merit,

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10 It is also on this note that Freud ascribes Dr. Schreber’s illness to his resistance to homosexuality. By accepting “surgery” as his “fantasy of a sex,” Dr. Schreber, Freud is saying, takes his transformation into a woman as his defense against becoming a gay man (see Freud 1911c).
can also be laid to rest forever. Last but not least, there is another critical merit: that is, the worry about the ferocious Other can now be set aside, for the battle with it is already lost.

All of the above are tied to the following functions, consequences, and therefore “merits” of castration. Castration offers considerable aid in constructing a fantasy—it is quite often for the fantasy to appear in the form of anxiety. If woman is also man’s fantasy, she naturally provokes his anxiety. By the same logic, Dr. Schreber’s transformation into a woman serves only to consolidate his fantasy about woman but not to dissolve it. In comparison to delirium, fantasy appears to be a real bargain. It is a better choice than the one in which a subject fails to build up a functional relation with reality. Note that a “normal” subject is one whose relation with reality is structured by fantasy. By submitting himself to castration, Schreber can suddenly perceive the reality his lives in by building up his fantasy with it, including women.

Nonetheless, the disposition of castration still remains imaginary in our discussion to this point. It is thus a visual representation, such as the dramatic incision of the male member, as Schreber perceives it in some of the quotes above (163, 164). We must come to terms with castration in a more precise delineation, without which we cannot explain why the function of castration is chiefly symbolic, rather than imaginary. We know that prior to the turning point of November 1895, Schreber was in the abject period, during which he was inundated by all sorts of voices and noises, and sat alone in his solitary confinement. Occasionally, he would
sit in the garden throughout the day without any interaction with others. At this moment, when
the access to language remained denied (he could recite poetry to himself later), the only
means at his disposal to fight the thoughts storming in his head was music and physical
exercise. As he recalls in his *Memoirs*:

> During piano-playing the nonsensical twaddle of the voices which talk to
> me is drowned. Next to physical exercises it is one of the most efficient
> forms of the so-called not-thinking-of-anything-thought. (158)

To be sure, Schreber is stymied in a situation which can be better rendered in the Lacanian
terms below in the way Shepherdson handles it:

> When the lack in the Other first shows itself, then, the child will be only too
> happy to offer itself up in sacrifice, as if to say, “let me be the one object that
> will satisfy this *jouissance* of the Other.” In a similar way, Schreber sacrificed
> himself to becoming the object of divine *jouissance*, in a delirious unfolding
> of pleasure and suffering that entailed the foreclosure of sexual difference.

(71)

In other words, if we observe from Shepherdson’s perspective, Schreber has to be perceived
as a helpless child who was literally devoured alive by his own parent (his real and physical
father), as Rosemary Dinnage describes it in her introduction to the *Memoirs*: “If much of the
delusional world that Paul Schreber describes in the *Memoirs* reflects the real world around him, behind that we can see the structure of his upbringing within the Mortiz Schreber children system” (xv-xvi).

As we can discern, that perception alone is not yet enough. Schreber must also be seen as a child to be born (again) into the world of the symbolic in his struggle to recover. Shepherdson calls this initial contact with the symbolic “the cry of the child”: “When the child cries out, not from need, but in a manifestation of demand, an appeal for recognition from the Other, this cry is also a recognition of the Other, a recognition that the Other is lacking” (71). Yet, even at this stage, when the “correlation” “between demand and *jouissance*” (in parallel with the relation between the Other and the child) remains “consuming, non-dialectical, and timeless,” “the cry of the child simultaneously testifies to the fact that the Other now emerges as lacking” (71), giving this Other a chink in the armor for this Other to crack still further to the extent that it can no longer maintain as a plenitude. In “the cry of the child,” we can detect that “the symbolic order, the order of desire, sets a limit to *jouissance*, providing a point of reference, and localizing what will otherwise be the overwhelming and sacrificial cycle of *jouissance* and demand. This limit is what Lacan designates as “the paternal metaphor” (Shepherdson 71-72). As such, “the order of *jouissance*” is transformed into “the order of desire,” whereby “the child’s cry might […] emerge at the level of speech”
How can this Lacanian insight shed light on Schreber’s situation? To be certain, Schreber still remains within his God’s tight grip before and after his “unmanning.” The “divine rays” incessantly intrude his body and always leave him in a heightened state of “soul-voluptuousness” (*jouissance*). Nevertheless, there is a distinction that comes with the advent of unmanning, when his first awareness of it sets in. He is conscious of such a drastic alteration in his body, as if he had undergone a philosophical process of *alienation*—which gives him the thought that the body was not his when he looked at it anew. Alienation, as Hegel and Marx understand it, is the result of reciprocity, of a dialectical process. Initially, Schreber and his God were One, locked up in a non-dialectical nonrelation. Now, this “incision” into his body, which he calls unmanning, makes him aware of the new relation he assumes with his God, a relation that is dialectical.

Where did he procure this awareness to conjure up his sense of *alienation*? I can only venture a theoretical guess. Schreber heard the demand of copulation repeatedly when he suffered from the ray penetration from God. “The choice of the word ‘f…g’ is not due to my liking for vulgar terms, but having had to listen to the words ‘f…k’ and ‘f…g’ thousands of times, I have used the term for short in this little note to indicate the behavior of rays […]” (Schreber 175). In November 1895, Schreber came to a realization which significantly altered...
his role amid his interaction with God: That is, God wants him to be His woman. This realization, — which switch his place from being forced to copulate with the ferocious Other without knowing why, to being aware that this Other wants him to be His Royal Consort,— is indeed a great leap forward. In the former (before November 1985), Schreber’s relation with God is in fact a non-relation: it is not a relation between the “Two,” but a relation within a “One.” In that “non-relation,” Schreber suffers from a mindless penetration of rays sent from God and cannot distinguish himself from Him. In the latter (after November 1895), Schreber’s relation with God is “Two,” which involves alienation in one’s body (unmanning) and a dialectical to-and-fro relation, in which one is Man, the other, Woman. As Lacan has asserted, “Woman only encounters Man in psychosis” (qtd. in Shepherdson 82), Schreber, though having developed a meaningful dialectical relation between Man and Woman in himself, still remains tethered to his psychosis. Yet, in the development of Schreber’s clinical picture, being able to move from a nonrelation to a relation is already a commendable progress.

Certainly, this awareness in Schreber must have taken a long time to form. Reading his Memoirs, the readers have to take a seemingly endless and torturous journey before they arrive at chapter 13 to obtain this awareness in tandem with Schreber. It must be long in preparation, whose exact details we are not privy to unfortunately and may likewise be obscure to Schreber himself. When the poet Allen Ginsberg “was asked if there was a moment
when he consciously decided to become a poet,” the answer he gave is, “It wasn’t quite a choice—it was a realization” (Zinsser 244). The same can probably account for Schreber’s condition.

Nevertheless, there is still this price to pay for Schreber’s “realization.” Let us venture to ask: firstly, with this awareness of his own unmanning, has Schreber recovered? Categorically speaking, the answer is no. As the quote from Lacan we mentioned earlier suggests, Schreber still remains stranded in the world where “Woman only encounters Man,” the world which is aptly dubbed psychosis. Yet, and this is our second point, the stormy thoughts (noises and voices) which inundated Schreber earlier have now dramatically subsided; that is to say, Schreber now claims a greater autonomy of himself by virtue of his increasing control over these disturbances. Initially, he had only two means—piano-playing and physical exercise—as his leverage to do so, and at present he also has recourse to words:

Playing the piano and reading books and newspaper is—as far as the state of my head allows—my main defense, which makes even the most drawn-out voices finally perish; […] I usually found committing poems to memory a successful remedy. I learned a great number of poems by heart particularly Schiller’s ballads, long sections of Schiller’s and Goethe’s dramas. (203; emphasis added)

All in all, we have to admit, with the evidence we have gathered so far, reclaiming his
linguistic ability is the biggest award Schreber has received since his “unmanning” in

November 1895. The passage below is how he depicts the alteration in his lifestyle:

    I started to make written notes as I had been provided with some colored
    pencils and later with other writing material [...]. My note-taking consisted at
    first only of a few unconnected thoughts or words which I put down;
    later—beginning with the year 1897—I started to keep regular diaries, in which
    I entered all my experiences; earlier—but still in 1896—I was limited to
    meager entries in a small calendar. But I also started to sketch my future
    ‘Memoirs,’ which I had already planned. (179-80)

Had he not been “unmanned,” he would not have been able to write his Memoirs!

    Even though his general condition has improved, his outlook on life remains distorted.

He believes that Dr. Paul Flechsig, one of his physicians at the asylum, still persecutes him
(conspiracy theory), and that God wants him to produce a new kind of human race
(megalomania). What is even more intriguing is, he firmly believes that he is God’s Woman,
and that physically he is a woman. As we noted earlier, his perspective on Woman and women
is his fantasy: for a man to become a woman, there is only one incision away—if this is not
castration fantasy, what is?

    It is with this fantasy about unmanning that Schreber falls back into the register of
masculine subjectivity. This, from the psychoanalytic perspective, is in reality a tremendous
gain made by him. If we observe the matter from Lacan’s Graph of Sexuation (Lacan 78; rpt.
in Shepherdson 75), we can find that Schreber is now safely lodged at the top left corner,
where “There is one who is not castrated” as a father “of an absolute and unlimited
jouissance,” who rules supreme, but in the meantime all sons, Schreber included, are castrated.

One of the “fallouts” of this castrating act is that women are transformed into object of desire
in man’s fantasy ($ \rightarrow a$). In Schreber’s case, the emergence of this woman in his fantasy is
given birth to by his unmanning. Thanks to his castration, he can now form a fantasy of
himself being a woman caused by his own castration.

However, what about Lacan’s thesis that “Woman only encounters Man in psychosis”? Is not Schreber the Woman for his Man as God? Significantly, by stating that Schreber has
regained his normal subjectivity through castration does not address the whole story. There is
the flip side of it, which must bring us back to the big picture of Schreber’s illness as the one
intertwined with tragedy and comedy.

We started out by asserting what Schreber undergoes is in reality a tragicomedy. Let us
revisit this proposition by looking again into both the tragic and comic sides of Schreber’s
drama of unmanning. First of all, he falls ill and falls thereby from grace. Even after his
realization that he is God’s Woman, he cannot evade the psychotic state of believing that he is
being raped and penetrated by Him against his will. As he narrates it in his own words after his awareness (that he has been unmanned): “Fancy a person who was a Senatspräsident allowing himself to be f…d” (164), which sounds bitter to read. This is the tragic side of Schreber’s drama; it sees no hope of any end (and does not end even at the time he is discharged from the asylum). In this grand tragedy, to quote Lacan again, “Woman only encounters Man in psychosis,” and here and elsewhere Schreber remains as he is the resident psychotic in the psychoanalytic universe.

Nonetheless, there is the other strain in this tragic drama that has been assisting in keeping Schreber’s sanity back within the fold of fantasy, not psychosis. This other strain is comical, triggered by the symbolic power of an incision called castration. Castration has exerted its power by bringing alienation and separation to Schreber, triggering the dialectical movement which was not there to function in him and, eventually, between his God and him, between the incessant copulation, between a one and a two. Shepherdson’s mentioning of the comic playwright Aristophanes is most pertinent here, as it forms a great note for us to end on. He writes:

As Aristophanes says, desire is only born with an incision, a cut of separation that is painful, and leaves something wanting. That cut is also a story of sexual difference, arising from a mythical origin in which, “once
upon a time,” it did not exist, and therefore had to be produced in a uniquely human suffering, a division that even in Aristophanes left its mark upon the flesh. (70)

Interestingly enough, it is Schreber who offers a new interpretation of Aristophanes’s finding. According to Schreber, this comical “cut of separation” “upon the flesh,” that gives rise to “a story of sexual difference,” happens to be unmanning, known otherwise as castration.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The present thesis has commenced from the conviction that freedom in language—the freedom a subject is able to enjoy vis-à-vis language—is an entity that cannot be taken for granted. Instead, there are terms and conditions the language user must abide by, and the freedom he can attain in language often may come with a price. None has delineated this paradoxical state of language—as a field that allows freedom but also imposes limit—better than Derrida, who writes, “This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble” (236). As has been expostulated in our chapter above on Waiting for Godot, there in this field are a closure (such as the confine set by the basketball court) and also rules (such as those observed in a ball game) to set a limit to any subject who “plays” therein, but they also grant an unlimited possibility of ways for him to play his game (“freeplay”) as a player. There is accordingly no freedom without constriction, and no possibility without limit in language. The present thesis has attempted to inquire into such a paradoxical theory on language shared by most poststructuralists, and to bring this theory to task by offering an attentive reading of Beckett and Schreber.

From the two writers, we single out three characters or personae (Lucky, the Unnamable, and Schreber the delirious judge depicted by his own Memoirs), each of whom represents a
different stage of the linguistic “freeplay” he is located at in exercising his autonomy. Lucky, a character in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, happens to enjoy the least autonomy among the three, as when he speaks, he emits only gibberish. The Unnamable fares much better: even if he rambles most of the time, he has a clear message to impart, which is mostly the excruciation he suffers from the endless loop of words he cannot (and is not willing to) divorce. Hearing voices and being flooded by words are the painful state equally shared by Schreber during the most abject moment of his paranoia. Schreber, however, makes it to break loose from the loop by obtaining the awareness that he has been “unmanned” by God and has turned into the female sex. He reclaims his command of language thereafter and eventually writes his *Memoirs* on his struggle to sanity. All three figures have each in his own way struggled for his freedom in language with some dubious success.

Freedom, as is well known, has been one of the motifs pivotal to the philosophical debate since the early modernity. And yet, when language is implicated, freedom no longer appears to be axiomatic, for it is not the condition of language, nor is it its product. Freedom in language, despite being a valid object of study for philosophy, involves matters that may slip beyond the horizon of philosophy. This freedom under discussion cannot hence be explained or resolved solely on the philosophical ground. We on our part adopt a different approach in our study of Lucky, the Unnamable, and Schreber: we backtrack to the
pre-Socratic thinkers before the inception of philosophy and fast-forward in the meanwhile to a new science of our modern time, psychoanalysis, which is strictly speaking not a philosophy. Freedom in language is then a topic dealt with by us in the ontological and psychoanalytical terms, as well as philosophical terms.

As we proceed, we are first confronted by the fact that freedom, being a philosophical concept, cannot but look jarringly unfit when applied to Lucky. In the play Waiting for Godot, Lucky falls short of being a subject of autonomy, one who possesses his full agency and free will. “All of Beckett’s pairs,” Michael Worton adamantly argues, “are bound in friendships that are essentially power relationships,” and the case of Pozzo and Lucky is of no exception (Worton71). If Lucky looks stronger, he is so only by appearance: “Lucky is stronger than Pozzo because his apparent servility and inadequacy provide the crutch on which Pozzo constantly leans in order to create or, rather, to proclaim, a sense of authority” (Worton 71). And so long as Pozzo maintains his authority, Lucky can never escape his doomed fate of being servile. And being “inadequate” is another trait in Lucky that is most manifest when ordered by Pozzo to perform the antic called “thinking.” When Lucky “performs” it, he writhes to produce sheer gibberish, whose only message (if there is a message) is that he is in pain. The seriousness he takes in producing his rambling cannot but give the impression that Beckett is here lampooning philosophy. Beckett proceeds, in our view, by grounding himself
on the ontology, by which we mean the state of existence, as *being*, that to Heidegger, has been forgotten by philosophy (22). We venture further into Parmenides, one of the most prominent pre-Socratic thinkers, to retrieve his idea which equates *to think* with *to be*. To think is not necessarily an act to cogitate in a systematic manner as later-day philosophy would dictate, but an act of being aware of one’s own state as existence—of one’s *being-in-time*. Lucky’s thinking, we argue, strives to accomplish that, with some success and more failure. If there is success at all, it is because Lucky presents to us how a mere existence itself, as well as the awareness of it, must call for a cerebral effort, despite the perennial brain damage Lucky seems to painfully sustain.

We have also excavated textual evidence to confirm Beckett’s indebtedness to pre-Socratic thinking and his incidental reluctance to agree with Heidegger’s ontological project, which is essentially that of the philosophical one (Murphy 236). In P. J. Murphy’s view, too, Beckett has chosen to work as a poet than a philosopher (Murphy 236), a playwright for theater rather than an academic, to produce a character such as Lucky to vouch for the ontology which is not yet philosophy, which is forgotten by it, and if not forgotten, which has been co-opted by it. Beckett seems to suggest, ontology proper, as embodied in

11 “Being-in-time” is one of the themes Worton singles out for *Waiting for Godot* (Worton 70).
Lucky, can only exist in the realm called the literary.

It becomes indispensable for us to highlight the two stages of transition in Beckett’s conception of language. First is the one from ontology to philosophy (from Lucky to the Unnamable). Next is from philosophy to psychoanalysis (from the Unnamable to Schreber). In the first stage, we have Lucky, whose existence (ontology) is more at stake than his freedom. After all, he has exercised his “absolute freedom” in his performance of “thinking.” We know clearly that his wayward use of language goes beyond the pale, whose result has him block outside language. This is the abject state which amounts no less to imprisonment. Still it appears to be a bargain for Lucky, as he attains his existence, asserting thereby his being, without which we cannot define what Lucky is (as his essence).

However, existence is not yet subjectivity, which the Unnamable, the first-person narrator of Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*, has acquired. With his subjectivity in place, the Unnamable must have supposedly attained his freedom, including the one in language. And yet he seems to be distressed by both freedom and language, as he is overwhelmed by excessive words and freedom. In particular, the Unnamable loses track of himself in a sea of pronouns: Is he an “I” or a “he”? After all, who am “I,” and who is “he”? The questions raised here can no longer be those that philosophy is able to answer. They have their “unconscious” side, which calls for psychoanalysis to unearth and resolve.
Through the evidence gathered by Phil Baker, we learn that Beckett is well versed in psychoanalytic literature and even went into analysis himself with Wilfred Bion in the early 1930s (Baker 6). Citing Didier Anzieu, Baker suggests that Beckett’s analysis remains unfinished; *The Unnamable* happens to be a novel he wrote to address his analyst in absentia (Baker 8). In this auto-analysis which takes the form of a novel, Beckett has his narrator deliver a long stretch of speech in which the Unnamable is entangled by his pronoun problem.

As Lacan comments: “The subject… begins the analysis by talking about himself without talking to you, or by talking to you without talking about himself. When he can talk to you about himself, then the analysis will be over” (qtd. in Baker 9). In this light, we now realize, by virtue of his failure to converse with the Other about himself, the Unnamable can hardly put a halt to his protracted speech.

His struggle with language does not stop short at pronouns: words keep inundating him and at their most unfriendly moment would transform into a sharp object like a voice or a noise to pester the Unnamable, causing him to plead repeatedly for silence in his incessant utterance. We suspect that behind this overpowering voice stands an overpowering figure, which could be Beckett’s mother as he acknowledged it to Bion, his analyst (Baker 6). It is this clinical picture that parallels Schreber’s, the delirious judge, behind whom there is also a harrowing parental figure as his father Mortiz Schreber (Dinnage xv-xvi).
Schreber’s case resembles a tragicomedy, calling to mind *Waiting for Godot*, which Beckett himself designates as a tragicomedy. It is a play where Lucky offers a comic relief to the murky state of two tragic tramps, Estragon and Vladimir. Schreber’s “tragedy” lies in the fact that he believes he is fulfilling the destiny by being castrated, in order to turn into a woman under God and become His Woman. This event is in turn followed by a happy ending which befits a comedy, in which Schreber slowly regains his command of language to eventually write his *Memoirs*.

To the Unnamable, language happens to be the means for him to stay afloat, in the way language functions for Lucky, whose existence is confirmed by his speech performance of “thinking.” For Schreber, his access to language is the turning point in his story to be discharged from the asylum. Each of the three figures is granted something in return, including an iota of freedom in the case of the Unnamable and Schreber. However, Schreber’s life story has taken an unexpected turn and twist. The deal he negotiates with God has demanded his unmanning as a debt he pays to God. Such a deal would go beyond what philosophy could ever imagine, as metaphysics has been ill-prepared in accommodating sexual difference (Shepherdson 24), without being informed that this difference can also be an ontological difference (Shepherdson 66).

Schreber’s most dramatic moment took place in November, 1895. He came to the
awareness all of a sudden that his body had been transformed into that of a woman’s, and
slightly afterward the command of language returned to him, with which he could now take
notes and keep his diary. Most importantly, he reclaimed his power to read to himself poetry
and passages to fend off the intruding voice or noise and achieved a momentary peaceful state
of mind (Schreber 203). Nonetheless, he remains incarcerated by his fantasy about the female
sex, according to which a he can become a she, and now he is her. In parallel to this, his
identity as God’s Woman remains as it is a deep conviction he subscribes to. If according to
Lacan, “Woman only encounters Man in psychosis” (qtd. in Shepherdson 82), Schreber’s
conviction that he is indeed the Woman for his God as Man must remain a psychotic faith. In
this light, Schreber has not fully recovered from his psychosis. Even so, the bargain he makes
with God that he accepts his castration has allowed him to generate the fantasy about women
that only a normal subject can harbor. He can henceforth function as any other subject free of
psychosis by keeping this fantasy in him to go about his daily routines, including writing his
Memoirs.

Such is the insight only psychoanalysis can bestow, an insight about freedom in
language achieved through castration, whose result is the fantasy about sexual difference. The
freedom achieved thus is not liberated from its own ironic twist, as an incision of one’s bodily
organ is needed for one like Schreber to achieve freedom.
All in all, we observe that all three figures we have discussed to the moment—Lucky, the Unnamable, and Schreber—suffer immensely. They are either barred outside of language (Lucky), enmeshed in the signifying web as language (the Unnamable), or tormented by the speech from the Other, only to conquer this torture by sustaining another torture as castration (Schreber). Each has paid a considerable price to receive so little a reward as Lucky’s existence, the Unnamable’s sanity, and Schreber’s fantasy to curb his psychosis. If Schreber’s wayward fantasy and the Unnamable’s faulty sanity, as well as Lucky’s abject existence that has *freed* him from becoming nothingness, can all be regarded as instances of freedom in language, it is no longer the impeccable freedom assumed by philosophy that we now allude to, but the freedom only a poet can depict in the downtrodden life of the deplorable. Freedom in language, in our perspective, possibly resides alone in the realm of the literary, created by one like Beckett and long revered by psychoanalysis—in a captivating piece of writing such as a memoir, a tragedy, a comedy, or a tragicomedy.
Works Cited


