Is Narrative Fundamental? Beckett’s Levinasian Question in *Malone Dies*

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*In Malone Dies, Beckett introduces narrative contingency into the heart of the ethical relation between self and other, which complicates Levinas’s concept of the other’s precise, irreplaceable singularity. Beckett shows how narrating to and about others involves ethical binding and responsibility, but only ironically, within the explicitly thematized contingency and exchangeability of narrative decisions that undermine the committed specificity of ethical relations. Beckett thereby develops a narrative poetics of ethical frustration that engages the reader’s desire to banish the irreducible contingency of elements within a narrative system.***

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*One for the other—* but how does somebody become someone?
—Bernhard Waldenfels,
“*Levinas on the Saying and the Said,*” 90

The beings I love are creatures. They were born by chance. My meeting with them was also by chance. They will die. What they think, do and say is limited and is a mixture of good and evil.

I have to know this with all my soul and not love them the less.
—Simone Weil,
*Gravity and Grace*, 107

. . . I have high hopes, a little story, with living creatures coming and going on a habitable earth crammed with the dead . . .
—Samuel Beckett,
*Texts for Nothing* 6, 126
unsurprisingly, Samuel Beckett’s fiction can be described as “singular,” according to Derek Attridge’s criterion: “The singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations” (63). But Beckett’s peculiar and resistant writing, so inexplicable according to any “general determination” of the cultural marketplaces in which it emerged, is such precisely for its linguistic and thematic hostility to singularization, the new, the other. Ann Banfield has traced in vivid terms his saturating logic of generative sameness, his “reduplication ad infinitum” at both linguistic and thematic levels of interchangeable elements (6). Beckett, she writes, “reduces language largely to the productive processes for the coining of new words, plus a few minimal rules of syntax generating elemental constructions... The reduction is intended to show that language only repeats ‘the nothing new’ by making radically apparent its repetitive nature in carrying these processes to absurd lengths” (15). If the singularity of Beckett’s writing — its incommensurability with the cultural given — derives from its vertiginous reproduction of sameness, we are confronted with a few questions about the strange implication of singularity and interchangeability (alterity and sameness, event and repetition) in narrative. These are questions concerned with the ethical stakes of the emergence of the singular within a regime of homogeneity: how does a narrative system, as system, generate elements of alterity? How are we to conceptualize ethical relations in the context of ontological abstraction or generalization? And, following Weil’s reflection above, how does narrative affiliate chance, the random, with the precision and specificity of the subject’s ethical summons?

These questions can be elaborated in terms of an unlikely conversation. In 1951, the same year that Beckett published the first two of his Three Novels, Emmanuel Levinas published an early, important essay challenging Heidegger’s philosophical focus on ontology, on the Being of beings. Levinas’s essay, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” anticipates his turn from ontology to ethics as first philosophy — his turn, in other words, from the problematic of Being to that of the Other. He questions whether Heidegger’s investigation of “being in general”— “fundamental ontology”— is philosophy’s primary story (1). Levinas claims that, for all the power of Heidegger’s analysis of truth, not as an epistemological adequation between subject and object but as the disclosure of Dasein’s being upon the horizon of Being, his mode of understanding still “rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy” in one disabling way: by subsuming every particular to abstraction (5). Levinas explains that Heidegger makes universal Being the referent of every singular being, interpreting “our concrete existence... in function of its entrance into the ‘openness’ of being in general” (4). In Heidegger’s thought, according to Levinas, “[t]he immediate is not an object of understanding. An immediate datum of consciousness is a contradiction in terms. To be given is to be exposed to the ruse of understanding, to be grasped by the mediation of the concept, by the light
of being in general, indirectly, in a roundabout way; to be given is to mean in terms of what one is not” (10). Levinas's concern is that such a model of understanding fails to describe our encounter with another person, whom we do not “understand” in the same way that we understand an object: “this relation exceeds the confines of understanding . . . because, in our relation to the other, the latter does not affect us by means of a concept”; with the other, “I have overlooked the universal being he incarnates in order to confine myself to the particular being he is” (5, 7). These early versions of his radical thought about alterity, still moving toward the claims in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974) that the essential meaning of the other is beyond ontology, hinge on a valuation of being in its singular instance, immanent with its own meaning and value before its absorption into the field of Being.

There is a curious passage in “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in which Levinas levies another critique against the way Heidegger’s thought makes Being, in its totality, the ultimate referent of each singular being: the unavoidable accidents entailed in being-in-the-world, the inevitable clumsiness of our immersion and participation in everyday life. While grounding philosophy in this pre-theoretical situation gives Heidegger radically new terms for analyzing Being as a primordial experience rather than an object, Levinas also notes that it removes Dasein from a position of mastery over itself:

> The comedy begins with our simplest gestures. They all entail an inevitable awkwardness. Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor, and dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did a thousand and one things I hadn’t willed to do. The act was not pure; I left traces. Wiping away these traces, I left others. Sherlock Holmes will apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives, and thus the comedy may take a tragic turn. (3)

This attention to our bumbling, to the unforeseen by-products of our intentions that can fall toward either comedy or tragedy, approaches the question of singularity from another angle: as contingency. It is as if the inevitable contingency of our acts while being-in-the-world (or stumbling-through-the-world) saved us from the totality of being, even if this contingency leads to pain. Our actions necessarily exceed us, making us responsible for more than we intend, and therefore rendering us irreducible to being as a homogeneity.

But there is ambivalence to the idea that our singular being is also by nature contingent, randomly beside itself. What appears as singular under one light becomes exchangeable under another: the contingent is not only unique and unpredictable, but also non-essential, replaceable. In “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas introduces a subtle tension between singularity and contingency within the relation between self and other. This early meditation on the inadequacy of ontology for thinking the singularity of the other, as we approach the other in an awkward ethical stumble, makes ethics a question of reconciling irreducible singularity with contingency — with a contingency, it may be, that is irreducible in its own way.
In this fraught negotiation, we see in Levinas’s essay an issue that I will argue also animates Beckett’s fiction: that identity is provisional, accidental while also implicated in essential ethical demands; that identity is both comically haphazard and ethically precise. It is the ambivalence connoted by Levinas’s central term “substitution” in *Otherwise than Being*: “For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution”; “No one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all” (112, 126). In *Proust*, his essay on *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Beckett identifies “the inconsequence of any given me” in “the comedy of substitution” (16). Likewise for Levinas, for whom the self’s singular ethical assignation inevitably, accidentally encounters a random mass; but it is the drama in his thought to delineate specificity within this encounter: “One approaches the other perhaps in contingency, but henceforth one is not free to move away from him” (*Otherwise* 128). Levinas’s stark dedication of *Otherwise than Being* is itself to a quantity, impassioned in quantification: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” Ethical obligation is the self’s non-subsumable individuation, but this irreplaceable selfhood articulates itself in a context of ontological abstraction. Beckett, we will see, reckons with this articulation indirectly and ironically, deploying a narrative technique that enacts Levinas’s ethical encounter as one that can never satisfy ethical desire. He uses what we might call a narrative poetics of ethical frustration.

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, an exploration of, among other things, Levinasian ethics and identity, Maurice Blanchot considers this balance — this ambivalent play — between ethical singularity and ontological abstraction at its most precarious extreme:

> It is the other who exposes me to “unity,” causing me to believe in an irreplaceable singularity, for I feel I must not fail him; and at the same time he withdraws me from what would make me unique: I am not indispensable; in me anyone at all is called by the other — anyone at all as the one who owes him aid. The un-unique, always the substitute. The other is, for his part too, always other, lending himself, however, to unity; he is neither this one nor that one, and nonetheless it is to him alone that, each time, I owe everything, including the loss of myself.

The responsibility with which I am charged is not mine, and because of it I am no longer myself. (13)

Blanchot, like Levinas, describes the encounter with the other as the origin of the unified, discrete self, but emphasizes the instability of the transaction. The self may be irreplaceable, Blanchot suggests, but only to the extent that it is not a self at all: its singularity is its very unraveling. “His is a borrowed, happenstance singularity—that, in fact, of the hostage (as Levinas says). The hostage is the non-consenting, the unchosen guarantee of a promise he hasn’t made, the irreplaceable one who is not in his own place” (18). Irreplaceable in its placelessness, the
self-bound-to-the-other experiences contingency as a necessity, its irreducible self-
hood as an accidental binding to the available other. It is not simply a numerical
paradox between singularity and multiplicity, nor a causal paradox between neces-
sity and contingency, but an ethical paradox between obligation and freedom: the
sovereign, autonomous self is founded by its binding in responsibility to the other.
The freedom of a being inhabiting its own identity is always already derived from
its implication in alterity.

It is considering this challenge to the self’s singularity in an ethical assignation
that always threatens to be arbitrary, a challenge to ethics itself to accommodate
not just the arbitrary but also our awkwardness and stumbling, that helps us read
Beckett’s narrative extremity in *Malone Dies*. As I will also suggest, it is through
Beckett’s unlikely narrative construction of responsibility that we can better under-
stand the tension between ethical specificity and contingency in Levinas’s thought.

An encounter between Levinas and Beckett may itself seem contingent. At first
 glance, there is little obviously to suggest Beckett’s exploration of the problemat-
ics of ethical responsibility and obligation. Beckett’s narrators are vertiginously
solipsistic, repelled by the presence of others (and even more by communication
with them), self-absorbed to the point of embarrassed self-dissolution. It is hard
to imagine Levinas’s earnest, religiously-inflected meta-ethics achieving any kind
of intelligibility in Beckett’s world. That Blanchot is fascinated with both writers
is an initial clue, however, to their involvement in similar concerns. Blanchot will
help mediate this encounter between Levinas and Beckett, in which we approach
the narrative dynamics of *Malone Dies* as a frustrating, but potent, ethical situa-
tion. *Malone Dies*, I hope to show, is meta-narrative in a way that complements
Levinas’s meta-ethics. Beckett shows how narration can be an attempt to approach
the other ethically within abstraction and contingency, to take responsibility even
for the other’s responsibility in the network of narrative relations, and that at stake
is the ability to negotiate the tension between the contingency of one’s origins
and the necessity of one’s speech about them. It is the simultaneous evocation and
frustration of Levinasian ethics in Beckett’s work, I suggest, that creates its strange
narrative momentum. It is driven by a precise and irreducible responsibility for the
other that is always on the verge of narrative intelligibility, but never able to redeem
the contingency and abstraction by which narrative approaches the other.

**ORDERING FILTH**

*Malone Dies*, the second of *Three Novels*, binds us for the duration to the bed-ridden
and dying Malone who, as narrator, impatiently passes his remaining time telling
fictions and taking inventory of his few possessions. In the middle of his long,
frequently interrupted story about his character named Macmann — the principal
invention of his imagination — Malone describes Macmann’s professional incom-
petence. It is a return to Levinas’s scene of the self’s stumbling, a small parable of
the self’s non-mastery over its own being:
And even with such humble occupations as street-cleaning to which with hopefulness he had sometimes turned, on the off chance of his being a born scavenger, he did not succeed any better. And even he himself was compelled to admit that the place swept by him looked dirtier at his departure than on his arrival, as if a demon had driven him to collect, with the broom, shovel, and barrow placed gratis at his disposal by the corporation, all the dirt and filth which chance had withdrawn from the sight of the tax-payer and add them thus recovered to those already visible and which he was employed to remove. With the result that at the end of the day, throughout the sector consigned to him, one could see the peels of oranges and bananas, cigarette-butts, unspeakable scraps of paper, dogs’ and horses’ excrement and other muck, carefully concentrated all along the sidewalk or distributed on the crown of the street, as though in order to inspire the greatest possible number of accidents, some fatal, by means of the slip. But it was truly as if he were not the master of his movements and did not know what he was doing, while he was doing it, nor what he had done, once he had done it. For someone had to say to him, Look at what you have done, sticking his nose in it so to speak, otherwise he did not realize, but thought he had done as any man of good will would have done in his place and with very much the same results, in spite of his lack of experience. (278)

Beckett makes Levinas’s ethical lament, that one’s actions are beyond one’s intention and control, a narrative event, part of a narrative relation. Malone is narrating the other’s ontological non-mastery, bringing into story-form the other’s inevitable awkwardness and impure acts. Macmann tries to clean the street, but covers it with piles of filth. It is a comedy until the moment that Macmann is forced by another to see what he has done, at which point our pleasure in his Chaplinesque disorder is interrupted by his accountability for his actions. But Beckett poses this moment of accountability as a more ambivalent negotiation between order and disorder. While Macmann’s acts are accidental, they bring the street’s filth to visible order, assembling what has been scattered by chance into a “carefully concentrated” pattern. This moment of accountability, which is a function of Malone’s narration, is a recognition of one’s unintentional ordering, of the design governing one’s accidents. Beckett suggests that narrative is that which reveals, or constructs, the order and design in the contingency of another’s being, the singularity that informs another’s ontology. We make others less contingent with our stories about them. And, in so doing, we are involved in their ability to be accountable for their actions: narrative makes us accountable for their accountability.

This approaches an especially ambitious dimension of Levinas’s thought, in which ethical responsibility for the other demands that we “bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me” (Otherwise 117). This asymmetricality of the ethical relation between self and other, the quality by which Levinas most forcefully breaks with the universality of Kant’s moral reason and the symmetry of Buber’s I–Thou relation, entails obligation without reciprocity, obligation in excess of an intersubjective economy based on equivalence and exchange. “To be oneself . . . is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other” (117).
Levinas's concept of ethical subjectivity involves responsibility as an unconditional, absolute demand that is always and only made on the self. Even the demand made on the other by the self is intelligible to the ethical subject only as the self’s second degree of responsibility.

We might think of this ethical excess, in which the self assumes even the other’s ethicality, in terms of the various asymmetries and excesses that structure relations among narrator, narrated and audience. In Narrative Ethics, Adam Zachary Newton uses Levinasian concepts to reveal this ethical excess in narrative acts. He analyzes the “armature of intersubjective relation accomplished through story” as a set of ethical relations instantiated as “human connectivity . . . ; narrative as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price” (7). Emphasizing the alogical power of narrative—the way it “cut[s] athwart the mediatory role of reason”—he describes its ability to “create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (13). Newton's idea of a narrative binding that functions according to a non-rational demand and non-economic principle of ethical excess helps us better understand how telling a story reduces the other’s contingency and even gives us responsibility for the other’s responsibility. This transformative binding is the event that singularizes an anonymous, replaceable reader, listener or interlocutor as a necessary one.

Newton begins his book with a discussion of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in which the mariner picks out of three passing wedding guests, one to hear his story:

I pass, like night, from land to land
I have strange power of speech
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me
To him my tale I teach. (Coleridge 827, ll. 586–590)

Newton remarks that, once in this narrative relation, this passing wedding guest is “given, or rather subjected to, gesture, performance, relation, whose energy and effect quite overflow the interrogative cupped hand held out for response’s small coin” (3). This responsive excess and singular choseness coincide; it is the asymmetricality of the relation that gives the arbitrarily chosen guest his singular necessity. Just as Beckett suggests that telling a story about someone—Malone about Macmann— involves taking responsibility for the accidental dimension of the other’s being, Newton shows how telling a story to someone—the mariner to the wedding guest—confers a singular identity on the other by demanding an excessive responsibility. Although Levinas does not write about the ethical capacities of narrative form, as such, we might consider his occasional use of plot tropes for his philosophical discourse as a subtle attraction to the ethical stakes under investigation: “This responsibility appears as a plot without beginning, anarchic”; “One is tempted to call this plot religious”; “this is the temporality in which the plots of being and ontology are unraveled in ethics” (Otherwise 135, 147; “Ontology” 147).
MEMORY OF SHIPWRECK

While Coleridge, as described by Newton, helps us appreciate the ethical energies of narrative responsiveness, *Malone Dies* is most useful in helping us understand the fragility, even absurdity, of this ethical potential in the asymmetry of narrative relations. On the face of it, *Malone Dies* dramatizes less a vivid narrative binding than a set of desultory narrative exercises based on tedium, resentment and neglect. Before Malone changes his main character’s name to Macmann, he calls him Sapo. Relatively early in his story, Malone tells us, or himself, that

> Sapo’s phlegm, his silent ways, were not of a nature to please. In the midst of tumult, at school and at home, he remained motionless in his place, often standing, and gazed straight before him with eyes as pale and unwavering as a gull’s. . . . I don’t like those gull’s eyes. They remind me of an old shipwreck, I forget which. (218)

We can hear in these lines an uneasy, unwilling return to Coleridge’s albatross-haunted mariner and the ethico-narrative scenario he represents. With his narrator’s resistance to a paradigmatic, canonical transaction in narrative ethics, Beckett emphasizes the difficulty of moving from Levinas’s originary ethical dyad — self and other — to the narrative triangle — narrator, narrated, audience — with ethics intact. While Levinas, in the course of his thought, eventually complicates the self-other relation with the figure of the third in order to bring ethics into broader social and political life, he so emphatically values the self’s primordial encounter with the singular other that narrative triangulation risks a refraction of ethical responsibility along irretrievable paths. In other words, we cannot simply equate the ethical meaning of speaking about someone, in a story, with telling a story to someone. In “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas makes speaking to the other the act by which one moves from epistemology and ontology to ethics, approaching the other not as a being to understand but as an alterity to acknowledge. He writes:

> the other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other. To understand a person is already to speak to him. . . . Speech delineates an original relation. (5)

This dyadic form of spoken contact, which he develops in *Otherwise than Being* in terms of the Saying and the Said, cannot serve as a model for the triadic form of narrative relations, in which we both understand the other by speaking about and address another other by speaking to. The ethical drama of Beckett’s novel about a man, as he dies, telling us a story about another, is the drama of taking responsibility in the context of narrative irony and refraction. It is the drama of negotiating who has to take responsibility for whom when no single one has been assigned responsibility for any single other.

Beckett figures the ethical uncertainty of this narrative triangle in Malone’s long meditation on horses bound to carriages by drivers, carrying passengers. It is
a meditation on the cruelty and loss of dignity in this relational triangle. Imagine this as an allegory for storytelling:

Furious and livid perhaps from want of passengers, the least fare seems to excite him to a frenzy. Then with his huge exasperated hands he tears at the reins or, half rising and leaning out over his horse, brings them down with a crack all along its back. And he launches his equipage blindly through the dark thronging streets, his mouth full of curses. But the passenger, having named the place he wants to go and knowing himself as helpless to act on the course of events as the dark box that encloses him, abandons himself to the pleasant feeling of being freed from responsibility, or he ponders what lies before him, or on what lies behind him, saying, Twill not ever be thus, and then in the same breath, But twas ever thus, for there are not five hundred different kinds of passengers. And so they hasten, the horse, the driver and the passenger, towards the appointed place, by the shortest route or deviously, through the press of other misplaced persons. And each one has his reasons, while wondering from time to time what they are worth, and if they are the true ones, for going where he is going rather than somewhere else, and the horse hardly less darkly than the men, though as a rule it will not know where it is going until it gets there, and not always even then. (262)

The trip is a common project, momentarily binding horse, passenger and driver, but only by virtue of a network of mutual dependencies. The driver activates the horses on behalf of the paying passenger: narrator, character, reader. As the driver carries his passenger forward, dragged by the compelled labor of the horse, the only responsibility is the one from which the passenger frees himself in order to benefit from the driver’s aggression. Each figure questions the reliability of its own private motives in the same way that Malone earlier questions his own narration: “Decidedly this evening I shall say nothing that is not false, I mean nothing that is not calculated to leave me in doubt as to my real intentions” (235). The carriage—the story itself—manages to arrive at an appointed destination. But it is clear that there is no necessity in the destinations that are appointed, emphasizing the arbitrariness that undermines claims of value in narrative acts. And that there “are not five hundred different kinds of passengers” disabuses us of any claim to a singularity that is not “a particular case of the universal” but “unique in my genus” (Otherwise 139). Beckett returns us, again and again, to the moment of exchangeability in the field of Being. He is both narrating contingency itself and providing an allegory for this contingency. Yet this creates the obscure ethical possibility that animates the writing’s tedium into its strange force. Beckett’s reader is always on the verge of assuming responsibility for the responsibility of the narrator, of constructing narrative necessity and ethical obligation from the narration of contingency. That we can never know if we have accomplished this—that there is no epistemological register for this ethical condition—propels Malone’s voice forward, exhausted but unfinished, generating narrative tension from an inevitably frustrated ethical desire.
NARRATOLOGY, CONTINGENCY, AND ETHICAL DESIRE

This story is no good, I’m beginning almost to believe it.

—SAMUEL BECKETT,
THE UNNAMABLE, 376

Narrative reduces the contingency of the narrated other and binds the audience in singular responsibility to a compelling voice; narrative is the loss of every singularity subsumed by abstraction and made absurd by contingency, frustrating the audience with responsibility not taken. The irony of the gull’s eyes reminiscent of shipwreck and the horse-drawn carriage rushing toward its arbitrary destination is produced by the tension between speaking to and speaking about. It is the irony of obligation failing to coincide with necessity, and the failure to make them coincide with some kind of intentional, active ethical agency. We see Levinas’s sense of the essential passivity—a “passivity more passive than all passivity”; “passivity more passive than all patience”—of ethical subjectivity in Malone’s inability to make his character anything more than arbitrary by deciding to make it so (Otherwise 14, 15). The ethical relation is passive, in Levinas’s thought, because it is the precondition to the emergence of a subjectivity capable of making decisions; the ethical relation emerges in the passivity of the self’s primordial response to the other before every possible decision. Yet a narrator must always make decisions, relating to the narrated other in intentionality, with the grasping and calculating force of a consciousness identified with itself. Beckett has Malone begin his own fiction by picking his way through various options:

The man’s name is Saposcat. Like his father’s. Christian name? I don’t know. He will not need one. His friends call him Sapo. What friends? I don’t know. A few words about the boy. This cannot be avoided. (211)

As Beckett dramatizes the story’s casual randomness, he brings Malone to a note of obligation: this work “cannot be avoided.” This obligation arrives, paradoxically, in the narration of the other as contingent—in the narration of the contingency that haunts every narrative relation and that it is the project of narrative to banish or efface. Beckett helps us understand narrative desire as fundamentally the desire to transform the contingent relation, the arbitrary decision, into an event of precise obligation and ethical meaning. And his narrative poetics of contingency—a narrative poetics that is both quintessentially modern, in its austerity, and an inauguration of the meta-fictional play of postmodernism—summons the audience to assume the narrator’s responsibility for doing so.

A narrator must always make decisions. These decisions are irreducibly arbitrary, excluding others that would function equally well in a narrative system that has no stake in realizing any particular narrative. Malone interrupts one of his stories to wonder: “Perhaps I had better abandon this story and go on to the second, or even the third, the one about the stone. No, it would be the same thing” (214). Beckett reveals the very narrative dynamics by which the self encounters the
other—brings the other into ethical intelligibility—to be based on the abstraction of both self and other. His narration of contingency refers in the last instance to abstraction, to narrative as an abstract form that uses particulars as exchangeable examples of established categories. Malone describes Sapo:

Often he stopped, stood tottering a moment, then suddenly was off again, in a new direction. So he went, limp, drifting, as though tossed by the earth. And when, after a halt, he started off again, it was like a big thistledown plucked by the wind from the place where it had settled. There is a choice of images. (222)

This final meta-narrative aside makes the meaning of the image simply that it is an example of an image, reinforcing the contingency in Sapo's aimless and passive drifting. By making particulars refer to the abstract categories that subsume them, as if inscribing formalist, narratological description in narration itself, Beckett reduces responsibility as an event of singular relation to a sarcastic memory or joke. Or simply to forgettability: such abstraction resembles Levinas's description of the price paid by particulars in Hegel's system, in which “[t]he multiplicity of unique subjects, entities immediately, empirically, encountered, would proceed from this universal self-consciousness of the Mind: bits of dust collected by its movement or drops of sweat glistening on its forehead because of the labor of the negative it will have accomplished. They would be forgettable moments of which what counts is only their identities due to their positions in the system, which are reabsorbed into the whole of the system” (Otherwise 103–04). Narrative achieves the condition, with Beckett, of this indefatigably exhausted system, each singular being absorbed endlessly into the linguistic and cognitive machinery that produces its intelligibility.

In Narratology, Mieke Bal lists six elements that must be organized into a story. It is the earnest critical description of the narrative decisions that engender Beckett's meta-narrative irony:

1. The events are arranged in a sequence which can differ from the chronological sequence.
2. The amount of time which is allotted in the story to the various elements of the fabula is determined with respect to the amount of time which these elements take up in the fabula.
3. The actors are provided with distinct traits. In this manner, they are individualized and transformed into characters.
4. The locations where events occur are also given distinct characteristics and are thus transformed into specific places.
5. In addition to the necessary relationships among actors, events, locations, and time, all of which are already describable in the layer of the fabula, other relationships (symbolic, allusive, traditional, etc.) may exist among the various elements.
6. A choice is made from among the various “points of view” from which the elements can be presented. The resulting focalization, the relation between “who perceives” and what is perceived, “colours” the story with subjectivity. (Bal 8)
For each element, there are equally suitable, and therefore arbitrary, narrative options. Number three, in which the narrator applies “distinct traits” to “actors” to make them “characters,” is especially relevant for our questions about the ethical capacities of narrative, about the possibility of narrating responsibility for another whom we always encounter in contingency. Characters, understood as functions in a narrative system, lose their singularity as the price for entering into this system. Malone insists on exacting this price explicitly, at the level of narration itself, transforming an actor into a character before our eyes:

Sapo had no friends — no, that won’t do.
Sapo was on good terms with his little friends, though they did not exactly love him.
The dolt was seldom solitary. He boxed and wrestled well, was fleet of foot, sneered at his teachers and sometimes even gave them impertinent answers. Fleet of foot? Well well. (215)

Beckett stages this narrative transformation in order to de-naturalize it, to make narrative relations strange enough to reveal them as a problem. It is Levinas’s insight, in his thought about singularity, that the nature of this kind of problem is ethical—that narrative stages an ethical problem in its complex relations. In “Where Now? Who Now?”, Blanchot complains that Malone Dies is too corrupted by narrative problems to earn the reader’s “belief”:

Malone . . . is a name and a face, and also a series of narratives, but these narratives are not self-sufficient, are not told to win the reader’s belief; on the contrary, their artifice is immediately exposed—the stories are invented. . . . With what purpose? To fill the void into which Malone feels he is falling; to silence that empty time (which will become the infinite time of death), and the only way to silence it is to say something at any cost, to tell a story. (95–96)

Blanchot is surely right about the purposeless invention behind Malone’s stories. But he misses the point: Beckett dramatizes this purposelessness of the narrated to make a narrative poetics of ethical frustration, a poetics that binds the reader to the narrator as one seeking to realize and redeem the narrator’s ethical passivity against its narrative intentionality.6 In other words, the reader’s ethical intuition of singular obligation remains immanent within Beckett’s narrative contingency, animating it into order and meaning, even as this contingency haunts every intuited ethical relation.

ORIGIN STORIES

And the poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my father’s father’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s mother’s and my father’s father’s and my mother’s father’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s mother’s and my father’s father’s and my father’s father’s and
Beckett’s staging of the tension between ethical obligation and the contingency implied by narratological abstraction — in other words, the paradox of a passively assumed responsibility for the singular other that can manifest only through intentional decisions relating to the other’s replaceable dimensions — arrives, sooner or later, at the question of origins. It is in claiming an origin that one makes a claim about one’s distinctive essence and singular identity, and therefore about one’s ethical capacity, but origins are necessarily fictions reconstructed in naïveté or bad faith. Beckett has Malone describe a second family in Sapo’s world, in which

The father was known as Big Lambert, and big he was indeed. He had married his young cousin and was still with her. This was his third or fourth marriage. He had other children here and there, grown men and women imbedded deep in life, hoping for nothing more, from themselves or from others. They helped him, each one according to his means, or the humour of the moment, out of gratitude towards him but for whom they had never seen the light of day, or saying, with indulgence, If it had not been he it would have been someone else. (226)

That Big Lambert replaces his wives is surely less strange than that his children, in their sense of obligation, find him to be a replaceable progenitor. This idea reverses cause and effect to problematize origin, making it contingent while maintaining the necessity of its consequence. It is as if their responsibility for their father redeems their contingency, or as if their father assumes their contingency himself in a kind of martyrdom. The logical incoherence of the children’s thought grapples with the paradox of contingency and necessity in retroactively constructed origins in a way that brings to mind Simone Weil’s startling reflection:

Meditation on chance which led to the meeting of my father and mother is even more salutary than meditation on death. Is there a single thing in me of which the origin is not to be found in that meeting? Only God. And yet again, my thought of God has its origin in that meeting. (Anthology 297)

That we originate in chance and retroactively construct our necessity — or borrow it from the divine — is not news; that we might, in some capacity for the absurd, construct our necessity by claiming the power to make our origin contingent achieves an acutely modern irony, a Nietzschean genealogical aggression by which
origins prove their offspring by falling into contingency. Towards the end of the novel, Malone remembers a childhood incident with his mother, and remarks:

My mother? Perhaps it is just another story, told me by someone who found it funny. The stories I was told, at one time! And all funny, not one not funny. In any case, here I am back in the shit. (306)

Maternity-as-definitive-origin is vulnerable to the same skepticism as paternity. Beckett suggests that no origin can be established until it has been dismantled by its offspring. To constitute the knowledge of one’s origin as its deconstruction creates a pointed narrative dilemma: the more one narrates oneself and one’s origins, the less one has of oneself. Beckett suggests the paradox by which the self is less accountable for itself the more it exercises narrative intention.

Judith Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, approaches the tension between the contingency of one’s origins and the necessity of our accounts of them as the problem of singularity and abstraction that has framed our discussion of Beckett. She describes the impossibility of the subject’s knowledge of its own subjectivization, showing a constitutive element of subjectivity to be this frustrated blindness to its own origin. Because our ability to conceive of our origin is necessarily belated to its event, and because we have only the general and shared terms of public discourse for representing its private singularity, “the ‘I’ who is introduced in the opening line as a narrative voice cannot give an account of how it came to be an ‘I’ who might narrate itself of this story in particular. . . . The one story that the ‘I’ cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an ‘I’ who not only speaks but comes to give an account of oneself” (Butler 66). Accountability, or responsibility, evades our active, intentional construction even as there is pressed upon us the need to undertake this construction. It is the bind that motivates narrative, that drives it to even Beckettian excess. Butler makes this bind a negotiation between singularity and the general terms that grant intelligibility:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life. But this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story. (37)

The substitutable self — and, Butler suggests, the self involved in its project of narrative self-representation is always substitutable — is the self that recurs in Beckett to the point of ethical vertigo, in which responsibility is known only by the irony of its meta-fictionally staged unnarratability.

This vertigo, the paradox of narrating the self’s ethical irreplaceability in common language and generalizable storytelling forms, has a linguistic counterpart. In her study of Beckett’s syntax, Banfield makes the fascinating point that linguistics, as a science, separates language from subjects and therefore “ignores what makes a particular language maternal [i.e., native], for any natural language can be
someone’s mother tongue. . . . Its familiar particularity, existing only for the speaker for whom it was ‘maternal,’ is entirely subjective and, so, unrepresentable within a science of language” (11–12). We might think of this as a linguistic register of the narratological dilemma that Beckett seizes as a generative principle. Narratological description has no simple way of marking a story’s “familiar particularity,” or intimate personal involvement, as felt by the narrator; it has no descriptive category for a story’s quality as an origin story with the self’s ethicality at stake. Just as linguistics does not distinguish between a language being experienced as a mother and foreign tongue, narratology does not distinguish between a story being experienced as one’s “own” essential and singular story and a story that one tells arbitrarily, without the subject’s ethical singularization.

Beckett’s unforgiving attention to this formal indistinguishability, by which the subjective experience of ethical binding or interpellation (to use Hale’s terms) does not coincide with any perspective from the outside, leaves us in an acute uncertainty about the ethical valence of narrative acts. The self, narrating its origins, never arrives at its singular position of accountability. It is my speculation that, in Beckett’s work, this task falls to the reader to assume. This assumption happens without discernibly happening, in a passivity without relation to agency or intention. Yet, as Levinas tells us, it happens in speech: “It is to be an undeclinable One, speaking, that is, exposing one’s very exposedness. The act of speaking is the passivity in passivity” (Otherwise 92). We speak because we have to speak to the other, and thereby come to precise responsibility. Our stories about the other reckon with the contingency of this responsibility, which we can not stop telling because it is never eliminated.

Notes

1. This approach to Beckett’s fiction as an investigation into the irreducibility of contingency in ethical responsibility—which is to say, the randomness of the particular other for which one nevertheless takes precise responsibility—takes up, in an odd way, Dorothy Hale’s recent description of the ethical position of the novel reader. Following “the new ethical theorists” influenced by post-structuralism, deconstruction and other critical theoretical positions, Hale conceptualizes the “voluntary self-binding” of the novel reader who puts herself in the position of committing to “moral judgments” that are “unverifiable,” “a leap in the dark,” based on the will to believe in alterity in the form of “a law that is outside and different than the self” (201). I see my question about Beckett’s ethics in the context of irreducible contingency as relevant to Hale’s thought in two ways. First, I hope to illuminate the sheer contingency that precedes the act of “voluntary self-binding,” or ethical interpellation, that Hale describes. This act is all the more dramatic, I would suggest, for the randomness it overcomes in settling into a particular position of judgment. Second, I see my description of the structural interchangeability of narrative elements as a rough analogue to Hale’s experience of committing to a judgment that is unverifiable by any standard beyond its own act of commitment.

2. This gloss on Blanchot reformulates, in different terms, Derrida’s thought about ethical subjectivity as it is (dis)organized by alterity: “There is no ‘I’ that ethically makes room for the other, but rather an ‘I’ that is structured by the alterity within it, an ‘I’ that is itself in a state of self-deconstruction, of dislocation” (qtd. in Weller 17).
3. Shane Weller, in *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity*, surveys many of the ways in which Beckett thematically forecloses alterity in his work (24–25), then goes on to discuss an encounter with alterity as nevertheless a crucial quality in Beckett. Levinas — along with Blanchot, Adorno, Badiou and other thinkers of alterity — plays a major role for Weller, but not in terms of Beckett’s narrative (and meta-narrative) technique, which I see as central to understanding the tension between singularity and exchangeability. Weller focuses on alterity more pointedly at the level of Beckett’s thematics.

4. In *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*, Thomas Trezise briefly discusses Beckett in terms of the passivity of Levinasian ethical relations. In a series of helpful associations, he notes how “the very effort to assume responsibility increases the responsibility to be assumed — just as, in Bataille, expenditure or transgression increases in accordance with the effort to contain or restrict it, and as, in Beckett, the increasingly compulsive attempt to impose silence becomes, itself, ever noisier” (147–48, note 19; cf. 150–51). This ethical paradox between passivity and intention, including the impossibility of speaking towards silence, is the “aporia of responsibility” that Derrida discussion in *The Gift of Death*. He formulates it as an aporia in which responsibility “demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-one’self with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, non-repetition, silence and secrecy” (61). In other words, we are confronted with a conceptual problem in which “absolute responsibility” is so “exceptional” and “extraordinary” that it defies even the “concept of responsibility and therefore . . . it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable,” and therefore, we might add, unnarratable (61).

5. This narrative abstraction also brings to mind Wittgenstein. He considers the oscillation between uniqueness and replaceability in writing at the level of the sentence:

> We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another that says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem). (§531)

Translating the particular into the general, he helps us see, creates both understanding and non-understanding. It is in the sustained encounter based on something other than understanding that Levinas (and Derrida, as discussed in note 2) locates ethics.

6. In this, Beckett’s strategy for engaging, by generating frustration in failing to fully achieve, the reader’s pre-intentional passivity with which one encounters the other in primordial responsibility contrasts with Blanchot’s own representation of this passivity in his fiction and criticism. In his essay “The Narrative Voice (the ‘he,’ the neuter),” Blanchot describes a quality of narration (with reference to Kafka and Duras, in particular) in which “the speech of the tale always lets us feel that what is being told is not being told by anyone: it speaks in the neuter”; it is how “the other speaks” (140, 141). We can read this description of the neuter speaking “from nowhere, suspended in the tale as a whole” as a conceptualization of the Levinasian passivity that interests Beckett more in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* than in *Malone Dies*, where such passive neutrality is overwhelmed by the narrator’s intentioned voice (“The Narrative Voice” 142; cf. Weller 12–13).

7. See Foucault for a robust critique of historical thought as a search for the discoverable origins of what happens to be. His methodological description of genealogy in this essay, drawing heavily from Nietzsche, animates contingency and the deconstruction of teleological narrative as primary values in historical understanding. This echoes Beckett in a very different register and represents the situation that Levinas seeks to approach ethically — that is to say, attuned to the alterity of the other as an absolute value.

8. Regarding Hale’s discussion in “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” please see note 1.
Beckett's Levinasian Question in *Malone Dies*

**Works Cited**


