

Aporia and Its Narrative Structure in the Novel *The Unnamable* by Samuel Beckett

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The article deals with the scientific framework of the less widespread stylistic device aporia, focusing on its definition, peculiarities, function and effect caused by it.

Aporia as a stylistic-phonetic device has gained a great power and a new mode of expression in the timeless example of 20th century prose – by Samuel Beckett.

The Unnamable is a stream-of-consciousness novel, but not like Joyce's Ulysses, where the sights, sounds, smells and human bustle of Dublin are evoked for us, in vivid specificity, through the sense- impressions, thoughts and memories of the chief characters. All we have is a narrative voice talking to itself, or transcribing its own thoughts as they occur, longing for extinction and silence, but condemned to go on narrating, though it has no story worth telling, and is certain of nothing, not even of its own position in space and time.

Beckett was a deconstructionist avant la lettre. "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" Aporia is a favorite trope of deconstructionist critics, because it epitomizes the way in which all texts undermine their own claims to a determinate meaning; but the narrator's later admission, "that I say aporia without knowing what it means", is a trumping of aporia.

What is extraordinary is that this bleakly pessimistic and skeptical text is not deeply depressing to read, but on the contrary funny, affecting, and in a surprising way affirmative of the survival of the human spirit in extremis. Its famous last words are: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on"

"A book neither begins nor ends; At most it pretends to."
J. Derrida, "Living on in Deconstruction and Criticism"

The Unnamable, the first published in French in 1952, is a stream-of-consciousness novel, but not like Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the sights, sounds, smells and human bustle of Dublin are evoked in vivid specificity, through the sense- impressions, thoughts, and memories of the main characters.

Beckett's outstanding achievements in prose during the period were the three novels: *Malloy* (1951); *Malony Dies* (1958); *The Unnamable* (1960). In these novels—sometimes referred to as a "trilogy"—*Molloy* still retains many of the characteristics of a conventional novel (time, place, movement, and plot) and it makes use of the structure of a detective novel.

Aporia is a Greek word meaning "difficulty, being at a loss," literally, "a pathless path," a track that gives out. The term is used in the theory of deconstruction to indicate a kind of impasse or an insoluble conflict between rhetoric and thought. Aporia suggests the 'gap' or lacuna between what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean. It is central to Jacques Derrida's theory of *differance*. Christopher Norris discusses the central feature of deconstruction as the seeking-out-of those "aporias," blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean.

Deconstruction, so far, has been the most influential feature of post-structuralism because it defines a new kind of reading practice which is a key application of post-structuralism. A deconstructive criticism of a text reveals that there is "nothing except the text". In *Of Grammatology* Derrida makes the now well-known axial proposition that one cannot evaluate, criticize or construe a meaning for a text by reference to anything external to it.

In classical rhetoric aporia denotes real or pretended doubt about an issue, uncertainty as to how to proceed in a discourse. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy is perhaps the best-known example in literature. In fiction, especially in texts that are framed by a storytelling situation, aporia is a favourite device of narrators to emphasize the extraordinary nature of the story. It is frequently combined with another stylistic devices like aposiopesis, the incomplete sentence or unfinished utterance, usually indicated by trials of dots.

The Unnamable consists of eighteen chapters, seventeen of which remind us the works of Derrida and Nietzsche, their abstract interpretation combined with long talks. We become witnesses of fragmented aphorisms of Nietzsche and taxonomic narration of Derrida. So far as eight-

eenth chapter is concerned, it is a quasi-paragraph consisting of 157 pages.

The anonymous narrator is sitting in some vague, murky space (jar), whose limits he can neither see nor touch, while dimly perceived figures, some of whom seem to be characters from Beckett's previous novels, move round him – or could it be that he is moving round him – or could it be that he is moving round them? Where is he? It could be hell. It could be senility. It could be the mind of a writer who has to go on writing though he has nothing to say because there is nothing worth saying any longer about the human condition. *The Unnamable* seems to fit Roland Barthes' description of "zero degree writing," in which "literature is vanquished, the problematic of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer becomes irretrievably honest."

"Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means."

All we have is a narrative voice talking to itself, or transcribing its own thoughts as they occur, longing for extinction and silence, but condemned to go on narrating, though it has no story worth telling, and is certain of nothing, not even of its position in space and time. This uncertainty is enhanced by means of incompatible lexis like affirm-negate, sooner-later, present-future, knowing-not knowing; contrast and polarization that highlights the exceptional discourse of the novel.

The discourse accretes rather than proceeds, by a kind of self-cancellation, one step forwards and one step back, contradictory statements separated only by commas, without the usual adversative *but* or *however*. "Keep going, going on"- the narrator urges himself, and immediately adds the derisive rejoinder, "Call that going, call that on?" How did he come to be where he is? Can it be that one day ... I simply stayed in. Immediately another question is raised-'in where?'- He drops the original question. "No matter how it happened.", But even this negative gesture presumes too much:" It, say it, not knowing what"

In metafictional narratives like *The Unnamable* aporia becomes a structural principle, as the authorial narrator wrestles with the insoluble problems of adequately representing life in art, or confesses his own hesitation about how to dispose of his fictional character.

Beckett was a deconstructionist writer. He anticipated Derrida's notion of the inevitable "difference" of verbal discourse: the "I" that speaks always being different from the "I" that is spoken of, the precise fitting of language to reality always being deferred."These few general remarks to begin with." That usually bland formula is blackly comic in this epistemological vacuum. How shall the narrator proceed, by affirmations and ne-

gations invalidated as uttered (by self-contradiction) or by aporia pure and simple?

“Help, help, if I could only describe this place, I who am so good at describing places, walls, ceilings, floors they are my speciality, doors, windows, what haven’t I imagines in the way of in my home, instead of any old thing, this place... if I could describe this place, portray it, I’ve tried, I feel no place, no place round me, there’s no end to me, I don’t know what it is, it isn’t flesh... it doesn’t end...”

Aporia is a favourite trope of deconstructionist critics because it epitomizes the way in which all texts undermine their own claims to a determinate meaning; but the narrator’s later admission “that I say aporia without knowing what it means,” is a trumping of aporia.

“There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless”. What is extraordinary is that this bleakly pessimistic and relentlessly skeptical text is not deeply depressing, but on the contrary funny, affecting, and in a surprising way affirmative of the survival of the human spirit in *extremis*. Its famous last words are: “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on”.

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