

Árpád Mibály:

THE NARRATIVE IN DANGER — ENDANGERED  
NARRATORS  
OR  
FOUR SCEPTICAL NARRATIVES

Laurence Sterne: *Tristram Shandy*  
&  
Samuel Beckett: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*

The main and the subtitle should be considered together, for one explains the other. What I mean is that these novels are sceptical not only by virtue of the systematic uncertainty expressed in their thought, but by the narratives themselves; by their form, if you will.

These sceptical narratives make us reevaluate much of what we take to be reality and the role language plays in its construction.

Prose fiction is especially suitable to illustrate these concerns because the world the narrative creates is nothing but words, yet we — or at least the narrators — find it habitable. These pieces of fiction point out the impossibility of the fictional world — and through it that of ours — by undermining the conventions of the traditional novel. How they deal with this impossibility constitutes one of the great differences between the two authors.

RIDDLES AND MYSTERIES

The emphatic *bookness* of *Tristram Shandy* and the narrator's fascination with gesture (both bodily and typographical) seem to manifest a profound scepticism

about language, its capability of conveying emotions or thoughts without a considerable loss. Continuous failure of communication — a major theme in the novel — also calls attention to the shortcomings of a system we so much rely upon.

Sterne's linguistic scepticism — a motif we shall return to — seems to be a sign or even part of a whole, greater uncertainty. Tristram leaves little room for doubt as for his general standpoint: his remarks vary from the light-hearted and mocking (418) through the cautiously reserved (361) to the downright pessimistic (40). And of course, there is Tristram's whole life. A life whose troubles had started "nine months before he ever came into the world" (37), and which is constantly endangered by forceps, sash-windows and what not. Even its very conception was accompanied by ill fortune:

... my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up, - but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head - & *vice versa*: - which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious Locke, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all the other sources of prejudice whatsoever.  
But all this by the bye.

(39)

Locke's epithet turns out to be more ironic than complementary. In fact, Sterne much more abuses Locke's notions than uses them (Day, 1984: 75-83); his ideas Sterne finds pretentious and void of understanding human nature, so the philosopher cannot avoid the fate of the doctors of the Sorbonne. Sterne's audience read and knew Locke, so they understood the joke, but if not, there were some unambiguous enough remarks to make them take heed.

...for that wit and judgement in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east from west. — So, says Locke, — so are farting and hickuping, say I.  
(202-3)

All the jokes about scientific theories — rendering them ridiculous partly by the context they are set into (Tristram's mother makes her important remark during intercourse) —, the often 'learned' language and name-dropping all seem to aim at mocking man's desire for a complete comprehension of the world and the pretension of having achieved one. Mr Shandy's methodical pursuit of the nose

problem backed by the accumulated wisdom of learned men of all nationalities is a powerful image of the futility of science and pursuit of knowledge in a broader sense. Not to mention the *nose* itself, a symbol of prying and curiosity, which Tristram thrusts into everything that comes his way. Although, the fact that it was crushed so early in his life should have taught him a good lesson.

Tristram's basic experience of the world is that it is "beset on all sides with mysteries and riddles" (596), that is, unfathomable.

...-But mark, Madam, we live amongst riddles and mysteries, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sights cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understanding among us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works: so that this, like a thousand other things, falls out for us in a way, which though we cannot reason upon it, —yet we find the good of it, may it please your worships — and that's enough for us.

(292)

Sterne and his work are in a great tradition of scepticism, whose closest representative to him was Montaigne, whom he read and cherished. The above passage is in great harmony with the following quote from the French autobiographer-philosopher:

Men do not recognise the natural infirmity of the mind; it does nothing but ferret and search, and is all the time turning, contriving, and entangling itself in its own work, like a silk-worm; and there it suffocates, "a mouse in pitch". It thinks it observes afar off some gleam of light and imaginary truth; but while it is running towards it, so many difficulties cross its path, so many obstacles and so many new quests, that it is driven astray and bewildered.

(Montaigne, 1958:347)

However, Sterne is less elegiac about this "natural infirmity of the mind"; in fact, he hopes we may "find the good of it", which is "enough for us". His characters *love* to implore and ferret: the world is full of challenge, objects are heavy with meaning, that asks to be uncovered — which is no mean occupation for a human mind, and good fun, too! The very choice of words ("riddles and mysteries") is suggestive of an exciting game. And if one's mind is "entangling itself in its own work", one need not despair but "take his teeth or fingers" to the knots, much rather than "whip out his penknife and cut through them" (180).

One of the objects most weighted with 'meaning' in *Tristram Shandy* is the nose. Mr Shandy's search for a solution is futile, but it entertains his mind, gives *meaning* to his life. Slawkenbergius's tale, which is entirely spun around the 'mystery' of a nose, is a fine treatise on how people *make* meaning. Indeed, the primary preoccupation of *Tristram Shandy* as a whole seems to be with the striving of the mind for sense, the construction of meaning. And though trivial are the subject matters these minds deal with, futile is the pursuit itself, Sterne's judgement is as light-hearted as the following passage from Slawkenbergius's tale:

Whilst the unlearned, through these conduits of intelligence, were all busied in getting down to the bottom of the well, where TRUTH keeps her little court — were the learned in their way as busy as pumping her up through the conduits of dialect induction — they concerned themselves not with facts — they reasoned —  
(260)

### INCURIOUS SEEKERS

The preoccupation of Beckett's narrators and the primary subject of their scepticism or uncertainty undergo a profound change in the course of the trilogy. Nothing marks it more aptly than the shrinking of their worlds, the contraction of the field from which their sensory impressions derive. No small part of the narrative is actually the narrators' trying to validate these impressions, with decreasing success.

There is something disturbing in the way Molloy (and every one of the other M's) mulls over these problems; as if he was doing it out of duty, without the least interest. Sometimes he gives voice to fear or disgust, like when he relates the arrangement of his sucking stones:

But not to go over the heartbreaking stages through which I passed before I came to it [the solution], here it is, in all its hideousness.  
(66)

The only occasions when signs of enthusiasm appear and his tone becomes almost passionate are those when he describes objects or incidents he knows he will never understand. For instance a piece of silver, possibly a knife-rest:

This strange instrument I think I still have somewhere, ... for a certain time it inspired me with a certain kind of veneration for there was no doubt in my mind that it was not an object of virtue, but that it had a most specific function always to be hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk. For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.

(59)

While the Shandies are happy to seek patterns which they can impose on the material world, for Beckett's characters meaning is a source of apprehension.

As Rosen points out (Rosen, 1976:74), this praise of meaninglessness and imperturbability places the M's in a long tradition, namely, that of *sages*.<sup>1</sup> The inheritors of Pythagoras, Zeno and Heraclitus searched for peace of mind through detachment from the outer world and endorsement of inner life. The paradigmatic sage, of course, is Socrates, with his "I know that I know nothing", which Molloy repeats verbatim (25). Beckett shares many of his views, among them the condemnation of desire and the need to 'contract the spirit', but differs from him as for the result of this intellectual asceticism. Socrates hopes to attain freedom and a sense of reality — for Beckett such hope is ungrounded. This explains the strange opening of the last sentence in the above quotation: "to know nothing is nothing" — nothing in the sense of no great achievement. The *non plus ultra* of imperturbability would be "to be beyond knowing anything", to be utterly desireless, and to know that nothing is left to be desired: "to know you are beyond knowing anything". The only character in the *Trilogy* who achieves this ultimate triumph of not knowing is Worm<sup>2</sup>; the fact that he is so obviously a *creature*, so weak in his ontological status, shows the possibilities of attaining such peace of mind.

Moran's "report" is the record of a sage's development. A knower and believer initially, he becomes ignorant and faithless by the end. He started out as a man, "who prided [himself] on being a sensible man" (104). He looks back at those times with amazement: "I found it painful at that period not to understand" (94). He arrives at a state where he is "strong enough at last to act no more" (149) and is able to derive pleasure from ignorance (See, for instance, his enchantment at the dance of his bees (156)).

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1 And the M's are aware of this. See, for instance Moran: "Ah those *old craftsmen*, their race is extinct and the mold is broken" (100;my italics)

2 "What he does not know is that there is anything to know" (333)

Molloy and Co.'s search for meaning is incurious because there is no meaning to be found. Sisyphuses of the mind, they carry out their task of imploring ambitionless, with the only hope of never having to hope again.

But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places. And it may even be they are not too particular about the route he takes provided it gets him to his destination safely and on time. And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, *hellish hope*. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction.

(123; my italics)

Hope in the M's vocabulary equals aspiration for frustration, for all desire and craving for meaning is *necessarily* thwarted. Hope is hellish because it continuously exposes the soul to frustration and makes imperturbability unattainable.

There is another reason for the M's reluctance to assign meaning to things: absence of meaning is the absence of consoling explanations (Rosen, 1976: Chapter 2). A sage takes pride in rejecting and demolishing consolations. Rosen points out how Beckett attacks all the traditional consolations mankind has come up with to soothe the anxiety of existence<sup>3</sup>.

There is a purpose in these rejections, however, which Rosen feels to be the need to point out the futility of *any* statement or judgement about life (1976:34).

Also, by refusing to be consoled, one can maintain a sense of integrity, can avoid admitting defeat. On the other hand, consolation is a *threat* to complaint and suffering. And there is a long European tradition, from Dostoevsky to Camus, that realises suffering as a source of consciousness, and which finds the benefits of unconsolated pessimism. By being a pessimist, one can avoid 'annoying trivialities', can simplify in his judgements, can avoid oscillating moods by being moody all the time, and, perhaps most important of all, can ignore fear of death.

Beckett, characteristically, goes beyond this tradition. He rejects consolations *and* the consolation deriving from rejecting them (Rosen, 1976:47). His characters do dread death, including even the Unnamable, who, most probably, *is* dead.

Is Beckett's vision absolutely bleak then, without the least hope? Strangely, it is his *scepticism* that counterpoises his pessimism. And *having* a counterpoise is a

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<sup>3</sup> The cruel humour with which Beckett attacks optimism puts him in the tradition of Swift, Rousseau, Conrad's *The Secret Agent*.

kind of consolation, however weak. Tone, style and context very often undermine the characters' primarily pessimistic statements. True scepticism is critical about everything; nothing is sacred, not even scepticism. "I do not wish to prove anything. Or so I say", Malone declares (201).

The other important source of a sense of balance is the equal weight of alternatives — Molloy's "mania for symmetry" (59). By levelling life and death, pain is taken out of the latter. If all alternatives are equally bad, none is really so. Hence Molloy's fear of having to come to a conclusion: choosing one alternative is losing all the others.

But one is bound to choose: Beckett's sages fail in their attempt to attain tranquillity. "I shall be neutral and inert", says Malone at the very beginning (165). He promises new sorts of stories, "neither beautiful nor ugly ... almost lifeless, like the teller" (165).

And he manages for a while. But towards the end, in the shadow of impending death, he loses his heart. A typical exclamation amidst one of the last stories:

[Talking about the garden of the asylum.] A stream at long intervals bestrid — but to hell with this fucking scenery. Where could it have risen anyway, tell me that. Underground perhaps. In a word a little Paradise for those who like their nature sloven.

(254)

And the stories themselves cannot help being beautiful or ugly: Pat's cruelty towards MacMann, or Lumier's unmotivated murder of the sailors is anything but "lifeless".

Beckett's scepticism, thus, is similar to Sterne's as far as the futility of the pursuit of knowledge is concerned. They both know that the pursuit is ceaseless — but they differ in their attitude towards this futility. In the long run, that is. Because Molloy, Moran and even Malone receive a sense of heroism out of their never-ending toil. And this sense gives them satisfaction, and however scarce, some consolation. But in *The Unnamable* this consolation is not to be found: suffering is inevitable and futility is only pathetic (Rosen, 1976:104).

We began this part of the discussion by saying that the main concern of Molloy and Co.'s narrative undergoes a change in the trilogy. Beckett verbalises minds coping with phenomena (Szanto, 1972:72), which is a classically

epistemological facet of his preoccupation. What McHale suggests is that this preoccupation turns ontological during *Malone Dies* and is primarily concerned with being in *The Unnamable* (1987:12-3).

This concern is expressed by both content and theme. For the former see, for instance, Malone, who among many other questions brings up that of his own existence:

But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, not knowing what is it I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am.

(207)

The Unnamable's narrative is entirely spun around the problem of his being — or rather the indeterminacy of whether he exists at all. Here logic fails:

... it is certain I was grievously mistaken in supposing that death in itself could be regarded as evidence, or even a strong presumption, in support of a preliminary life.

(314-5)

For the theme expressing ontological uncertainty, we must turn to the question of possibility. According to Heidegger, man is an amalgam of facticities and possibilities (St. John Butler, 1984:15). In other words, one's existence is determined by his past and the potentialities hidden in his future. And this is precisely how the M's exist: they build up their present life from past facts and endless possibilities. They even attempt to smuggle these possibilities into the past: they try to undo choices by restoring the original environment of potentialities and the safe position of not-having-chosen.

*Angst*, man's anxiety about existence, is defined by Heidegger as apprehension in the face of possibilities (St. John Butler, 1984:46). From *Angst* man flees to *inauthentic existence*, a state in which he is under the influence of others, 'They'. To put it crudely, in this state he acts according to others' standards and expectations, not according to the call of his own Self. *Angst* is the condition of authentic existence: it discloses man to himself. The *Trilogy*, in many respects, is the search for the Self, the struggle between authentic and inauthentic existence. Introspection, conscious ignorance, desire for imperturbability all serve this purpose. And the voice Moran becomes aware of is probably the call of his own self, whereas those



the Unnamable can hear might belong to 'They'. His narrative is partly about the tragic impossibility of authentic existence.

Another characteristic of human existence, according to Heidegger, is its being a state preliminary to death (St. John Butler, 1984:51). Death is the moment of truth in the sense that it reveals the totality of man's possibilities. It also exerts pressure on man to exist authentically. It is only in his death that man can totally be himself, without the presence of 'They'.

Beckett's narrators define life relative to death. Malone is, to use Heidegger's term, in the state of *Being-towards-death*. Though it characterises the existence of *all* men, Malone's being is totally subordinated to it. He recognises (or has recognised by the time his narrative begins) that he has to suffer *as long as* he lives. What he attempts, is to escape this condition by 'entertaining' himself, by telling stories. He creates vice-existers, a group of 'They', to lose sight of his own Self.

I have had a visit. Things were going too well. I had forgotten myself, lost myself. I exaggerate. Things were not going too badly. I was elsewhere. Another was suffering. Then I had the visit. To bring me back to dying.

(246)

Advancing in the *Trilogy*, it is increasingly problematic to talk about a preoccupation or a main concern without actually considering the narration, that is, not only what is said but also how it is said. The more so, as the narrative gradually acquires a new subject matter — itself —, assuming more and more reality, and finally becoming the one and only reality.

The uncertainty or scepticism (whether ontological or epistemological) characteristic of both Sterne's and Beckett's worlds is aptly represented in the course the narrative moves on and the dangers the narrator and the text are liable to meet on the way.

#### DIGRESSIONS, THE SUNSHINE OF READING

The Shandian world is a perilous one. The blue waters of merry carelessness hide lethal reefs. Toby is wounded, Tristram is almost castrated by a sash-window, his brother is killed. This world is beset not only with "riddles and

mysteries" but also with wars, diseases, stupid midwives, negligent maids, etc. Life is in danger, why should the narrative not be?

[It] shows plainly, that when a man sits down to write a history, — though it be but the history of Jack Hickathrift, to Tom Thumb, he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet with in his way, — or what a dance he may be led, by one excursion or another, before all is over.

(64)

One of the dangers the narrative and the narrator have to face is that it might free itself from the control of its creator and assume a life of its own. Tristram at one point is claiming to be writing a passage "much against my will" (125). On other occasions it is an inexplicable whim that brings the story astray.

... for aught I know, as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour, there may be as many chapters as steps; — let that be as it will, Sir, I can no more help it than my destiny: — A sudden impulse comes across me - drop the curtain, Shandy - I drop it - Strike a line across the paper, Tristram - I strike it - and hey for a new chapter!

(282)

This is no omniscient narrator: he is the prey of his own caprice and outer forces — very much like the reader.

Necessity is turned into virtue: *Tristram Shandy* would not be what it is without the digressions.

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; - they are the life, the soul of reading; ... [it] brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail.

(95)

Digression is the art of discovering new patterns and coincidences (Rosenblau, 1977:242). If the world is full of circumstances so should the narrative be. If the mind is fascinated with them and wants to explore them, the narrative should join in the big game of constructing meaning.

In story-telling, in traditional forms of fiction, cause and effect are important organising principles. We love plots — these marvellously constructed causal links — and are quite willing to impose them on our own lives. Now, as life in

*Tristram Shandy* — in uncle Toby's words — is a "matter of contingency" (541), so are cause and effect substituted by *chance* (Rosenblaum, 1977:241). (See Vol. IV, Ch. 9) Contingency means possibilities, in which, we have seen, the Shandies relish. They are unwilling to miss an opportunity for a chat and they dive into the midst of any perplexity enthusiastically. Similarly, Tristram has the sufficient courage and interest to try in his narrative every path that comes his way (See, for instance, p.589). If he sometimes loses his heart, it is all the funnier.

Frustration is an important theme in *Tristram Shandy*. Trim sets out to relate the story of the king of Bohemia and his seven castles a number of times — and never gets further than the first sentence. Tristram is constantly distressed about the accumulation of material and the shortage of time. Mr Shandy's *Tristrapaedia* is a great memento of futility — the masterpiece never to be finished and put to use. It is not hard to recognise this "INSTITUTE for the government of my youth and adolescence" as a brother of *Tristram Shandy* (Ricks, 1967:26) and in the latter the frustration of never-getting-there — in the sense that the *story* proper starts only on page 332 and the book ends several years before Tristram's birth: slight achievement by a professed autobiography.

We must not forget that *Tristram Shandy* is also a parody of traditional novel forms. And as all good parody, it heavily relies on the exploitation and *frustration* of readerly expectations. Not a single story is finished properly and no conversation can reach its peak without interruption. As for the central narrative, it suffers continuous delay due to other, for Tristram equally important, causes. This is why Patricia Waugh sees "retardation through incompleteness" as the novel's basic strategy (1984:70). Retardation — digression, in other words — is what replaces the causal narrative. Such replacement calls attention to the difference between the raw material, i.e. the story, and the way it is shaped, the plot. Waugh suggests that *Tristram Shandy* is a novel about the transformation of its story into plot (1984:70).

Or, rather, plots. Because the current story, with its endless possibilities for continuation offers an infinite number of new plots. Which, in their turn, breed new stories. For Tristram this is a source of both exhilaration and distress. For he can follow only one plot at a time, but in order to make the plot complete and *credible* he has to introduce new stories.

I declare, I do not recollect any one opinion or passage of my life, where my understanding was more at a loss to make ends meet, and torture

the chapter I had been writing, to service of the chapter following it, than in the present case: one would think I took a pleasure in running into difficulties of this kind, merely to make fresh experiments of getting out of 'em - Inconsiderate soul thou art! What! are not the unavoidable distresses with which, as an author and a man, thou art hemmed in on every side of thee - are they, Tristram not sufficient, but thou must entangle thyself still more?

(520)

Most probably, he *does* "take a pleasure in running into difficulties". He loves the challenge of freedom, even if it is dangerous — to the coherence of the narrative, that is. Nevertheless, his shaggy dog story is readable (what is more, enjoyable), and contingency is not carried to an extreme. He often returns to the main narrative, the story of his birth and childhood, resisting the desire to wander off completely. Or, at least, he keeps the main narrative as a starting point for his wanderings. And the reader is invited to accompany him on his tours, to help him in his ferreting:

The truest aspect that you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

(127)

However, these invitations are often withdrawn — that is, he declares his/the narrative's independence in meaning construction.

In books of strict morality and close reasoning, such as this I am engaged in, - the neglect [not to define the meaning of the word *nose*] is inexcusable; and heaven is witness, how the world has revenged itself upon me for leaving so many openings to equivocal strictures, - and for depending so much as I have done, all along, upon the cleanliness of my readers' imaginations.

(225)

This, incidentally, is in many ways a typically Tristramesque sentence: it is about writing; it is addressed to the reader; it is sceptical — even the meanings of single words have to be backed by definitions to avoid dubiousness —; and last but not least, it is funny. Especially, when glancing back from the end of the chapter, where the definition is given:

For by the word *Nose*, throughout this long chapter on noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs, - I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less.  
(225)

A definition that makes us laugh and tells us how unwilling Tristram/Sterne is to do away with uncertainties. Or how incapable.

### APORIA PURE AND SIMPLE

Beckett's narrators are all writing stories — either about themselves or others. And when there are no stories left, there is still the story of writing. Indeed, the *Trilogy*, as a whole is the story of the narrative turning on itself, the snake swallowing its tail (Kenner, 1968:79).

For Molloy and Moran there is ample subject matter: their worlds abound in incidents and objects. So much so, that they feel quite at a loss making sense of them. Their distress is eased only when the object or incident is out of the confines of the graspable. Then they relish in the act of description: inventories are drawn up and actions are minutely detailed. If the strategy of *Tristram Shandy* is retardation through incompleteness then the trilogy's is extreme repetition and non-assertiveness.

For the non-fulfilment of generic requirements, *Molloy* offers the best examples. After all, both parts are in the form of an autobiographical novel. The plot (tracing the path that has led to the present activity of tracing the path that...) is given beforehand in both cases and is observed rigorously. What the form is filled with, we have seen: the incurious rattling of wretches craving for ataraxy. Inadequately filled form is parody, and to enhance the effect, the M's do employ remnants of the language used in the autobiographies of happier ages. Moran's narrative abounds in these: "but it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature" (139), he writes after relating the murder of the stranger.

Of the *Trilogy*, perhaps *Malone Dies* is closest to *Tristram Shandy* in its handling of the narrative process. Malone prepares a plan, sets out to fulfil it, is discouraged, loses interest, changes the plan, sets out again, kills off characters, introduces new ones, becomes bored ("What tedium!") or enthusiastic ("We are getting on, getting on"). His fitful alterations of the plot make him similar to

Tristram. Even his "fear of not finishing in time" (181) resembles Tristram's distress. However, there is one plot the existence of which he realises only late: that of his own life:

With my distant hand I count the pages that remain. They will do. This exercise book is my life, this big child's exercise book, it has taken me a long time to resign myself to that. And yet I shall not throw it away. For I want to put down in it, for the last time, those I have called to my help, but ill, so that they did not understand, so that they may cease with me. Now rest.

(252)

The ultimate in uncertainty in the trilogy is represented by the Unnamable. His very 'name' goes against our expectations of a narrator. If he is to tell a story, he should know something, at last about his identity. And who is it that cannot name him? Has he not the power to give himself a name, if only for sake of convenience?

His narrative is a mass gradually taking shape, solidifying itself for a minute, then losing firmness and melting back into formlessness. Or, rather, like a wave rising out of the sea of words, assuming a new, temporary, third dimension — becoming speech — and then submerging again.

The first few lines are like guidelines, along which the mass could solidify itself, or a set of definitions — in the non-assertive. But definitions are by their nature assertive; how can one say something about a phenomenon without saying *anything*? What the Unnamable attempts is to define things in both ways: stating something and at the same time stating its opposite: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me". Another way of achieving non-assertiveness is questioning. "Where now? Who now? When now?" Three questions form the overture, which, were they answered, would serve in any 'good, honest' narrative, stating place, person, time — three basic ingredients of a fictional situation. Here, instead, remaining unanswered, they create utter insecurity. The fictional world they define, paradoxically by its very dissimilarity, questions the notions we hold of our own.

*The Unnamable's* strategy is *aporia*, the art of doubt. Literally "a pathless path", it becomes the organising principle even at the level of the sentence. The Unnamable's sentences are paths winding out from nowhere and leading

nowhere. The second half of his narrative is a vast verbal maze, expressing the chaos in his mind and intended to confound the reader.

The way this labyrinth is being built, the fact that a statement can be negated or rendered ineffective so easily, calls our attention to the source of the text's vulnerability and the status of the created world.

### NARRATIVE DISCOMFORT

The ontological status of fictional worlds is largely determined by the fact that they are entirely verbal constructs. Though our own reality is more and more often seen as just another order of discourse, the presence of a material environment is hardly denied in everyday circumstances. But what is taken for granted in life, has to be constructed in fiction, and through solely verbal processes. This is what Sterne exploits so ingenuously and with so much humour: his blank page description of the Widow Wadman "serves to draw the attention to the fact that what is described in the real world exists before its description. In fiction, if there is no description, there can be no existence" (Waugh, p.96). Or take the following:

This inn [where he would want to have his death-bed] should not be the inn at Abbeville — if there was not another inn in the universe, I would strike that inn out of the capitulation: so [sic!]  
(471)

Losing its name, the inn (on which Tristram bears a grudge) becomes non-existent. But the process works in the other way, as well: words in fiction project things. The use of names is especially characteristic of what Waugh calls the description/creation paradox of fiction: utterance (description) equals existence (creation) (1984:88). Quite unlike in real life: "A proper name can only be a proper name if there is a genuine difference between the name and the thing named. If they are the same, the notion of naming and referring can have no application" (John Searle, quoted in Waugh, 1984:93).

Some words — and names seem to belong here — project more than mere things; they create whole worlds by means of the connotational field we attach to them. As the Unnamable puts it:

Where there are people, it is said, there are things. Does this mean that when you admit the former you must also admit the latter? Time will tell.

(268)

And time indeed does tell. He tries to keep his world as bare as possible, but he fails: having admitted a human being into it he has to admit things:

Sometimes I wonder if it is not Molloy. Perhaps it is Molloy, wearing Malone's hat. But it is more reasonable to suppose it is Malone, wearing his own hat. Oh, look, there is the first thing, Malone's hat.

(268)

There are other differences between the real and the fictional world, in terms of linguistic possibility. McHale points out that there are three "global semantic restraints" which we impose on our sentences: the restraint of necessity, possibility and impossibility (1987:123). In other words, these restraints prescribe the relation between the state of affairs and the sentence. Propositions about our own reality are determined by necessity (things exist in a certain way, which determines description), whereas possible propositions describe fictional worlds (things exist in a certain, but not necessary, way, which facilitates a description.) Does this mean that propositions restrained by impossibility refer to impossible worlds? Umberto Eco prefers to call them *antiworlds*:

...the proper effect of such narrative constructions [...] is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort. So they arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and effect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopaedia. They *undermine* the world of our encyclopaedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world.

(from *Lector in Fabula*, in: *The Role of the Reader*, quoted in McHale, 1987:33)

The Unnamable's "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" (267) create such an antiworld: they are not merely the signs of extreme scepticism — they attack the very foundations of fiction; credibility and self-sustenance.

By credibility I mean the plausibility of the interrelation of creative fictional elements: place, time and character. The resulting world has to be self-sustaining — integral in ontological terms. Realistic fiction, as a rule, observes these principles, the latter especially by emulating our own world. But should the



world be a different one — as in fairy tales, or science fiction — the narrative could still be referred to as realistic, provided the world's ontological integrity is not disturbed.

What self-conscious, or metafiction does is exactly interfere with this integrity. Foregrounding the act of fictionalising is pointing out the created aspect of the fictional world. A narrator reflecting upon writing necessarily calls attention to the different — weaker — ontological status of his creation.. This is the case of *Tristram Shandy* and *Malone*. This display of power is from the latter:

The living. They were always more than I could bear, all, no, I don't mean that, but groaning with tedium I watched them come and go, then I killed them, or took their place, or fled. ... I stop everything and wait. Sapo stands on one leg, motionless, his strange eyes closed. The turmoil of the day freezes in a thousand absurd postures. The little cloud drifting before their glorious sun will darken the earth as long as I please.

(179)

Another interesting possibility of raising *ontological awareness* in the reader is when the narrator himself is a character in his fiction. Such is the case when Tristram tells about his journey in France. He gives it a double twist by relating this digression to another one and to the main narrative.

... I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner - and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chase broke into a thousand pieces - and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavillion built by Pringello, upon the banks of the Garonne, Which Mons. Sligniac has lent me, and where I now sit rhapsodizing all these affairs.

-Let me collect myself, and pursue my journey.

(492)

For the reader the most disturbing of all techniques which violate the principle of self-sustenance is when the narrator realises himself to *be narrated*, in someone else's fiction. This weakens the status of two worlds at the same time: his own and his creation's. The Unnamable comes across this possibility very early

and his — is it *his* then? — narrative is partly a struggle to free himself from any influence of the "masters".

But why is it disturbing? Why do we feel affected by something that happens in another world, obviously so unreal?

Questioning not only the notion of the novelist as God, through the flaunting of the author's godlike role, but also the authority of consciousness, of the mind, metafiction establishes the categorisation of the world through the arbitrary system of language.

(Waugh, 1984:24)

"The world", says Waugh, and she probably means both the fictional one and ours. Metafiction makes us conscious of the role language plays in our categorisation of the world and of the vulnerability of this "arbitrary" system. Here is Malone's contribution to the problem: "... words, they are no shoddier than what they peddle" (179). And the Unnamable's:

But it seems impossible to speak and yet to say something, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook a little something, a little yes, a little no, enough to exterminate a regiment of dragoons.

(277)

So far we have avoided the question whether *Tristram Shandy* has any concerns with being. Although, as we have seen, metafiction, by its very nature, calls attention to the ontological status of fiction and through it that of the real world.

A most prominent example of raising existential awareness in the reader is the continuous juxtaposition of the novel's and the reader's chronology.

It is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my uncle Toby rung the bell, when Obadiah was ordered to saddle the horse, and go for Dr Slop, the man-midwife; — so that no one can say, with reason that I have not allowed Obadiah time enough ...

(122)

Thus begins Chapter 7 of Vol.II — and the whole chapter would be worth while quoting as a convincing and characteristically Shandean treatise on the nature of time. With the conclusion that it will after all depend on the reader what he will accept as possible.

The internal chronology of the novel would deserve an essay on its own. Suffice it to say here, however, that it is intimately related to the digressions and is a great source of amusement. See, for instance, the part, where Tristram is at three places simultaneously (Vol. VII, Ch.28). There is a definite purpose in this technique, which we shall discuss later.

As for the play with levels of being it is mostly their actual existence rather than the transgression of their borders that signals ontological concerns in *Tristram Shandy*. For instance, "Uncle Toby's apologetical oration" is 'thrice removed' from our level: having been recorded by Mr Shandy and "published" by Tristram. Or, rather, four times, when we consider the mysterious editor who appears only on a handful of occasions. Such an occasion is the following quotation, although it might as well be the translator's (Tristram's) note in the midst of Slawkenbergius's tale.

<sup>1</sup> Mr Shandy's compliment to orators — is very sensible that Slawkenbergius has here changed his metaphor — which he is very guilty of; — that as a translator, Mr Shandy has all along done what he could do to make him stick to it — but that here 'twas impossible.

(258)

This is not only a funny admittance of the narrator's limitations ("but that here 'twas impossible") but also a laying bare of existential levels. For the reader knows that Slawkenbergius is a creation but being reminded of it by somebody who is one level closer to our reality creates a curious effect. The *Tale* has some little, innocent-looking remarks like "says Slawkenbergius" — planted in the most vulnerable places. They are vulnerable, because through the holes these remarks bear on Slawkenbergius's world its ontological filling leaks away, and they show who has the power to stop the leakage. The joke, of course, is that it is not Tristram — but Sterne.

This is one of the striking differences between Sterne and Beckett — their attitude towards their creations. At no point is Tristram's authority and ontological status questioned, let alone pointed out to him. We have no difficulty in identifying Tristram as Sterne's voice. Malone and especially the Unnamable are discernibly creations, who are made aware of their status.

Though most hints at the narrator's status in *Malone Dies* might be explained away by the topos of the unreliable narrator, or Malone's scepticism, the following can be best accounted for by the notion of levels of existence.

I fear I must have fallen asleep again. In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise book. But I still have the pencil in my hand. I shall have to wait for the day to break. God knows what am I going to do till then. I have just *written*, I fear I must have fallen, etc. I hope this is not too great distortion of the truth. I now add these few lines before I depart from myself again.

(191, my italics)

His apology reinforces and calls attention to the oddity of the previous paragraph. If it *was* written and *is* part of the text in the exercise book, and moreover Malone claims himself unable to have committed it, then somebody else must have done it. His authorial mask cracks and we see somebody else peeping from behind it: we sense the narrator being narrated. The ontological barriers are blurred, the levels overlap.

There is a dissimilarity between *Tristram Shandy* and *Malone* in terms of the narrator's attitude towards *their* creations, as well. Tristram obviously *loves* the world he forms and its inhabitants. There is always affection in his tone when he talks about his father or uncle Toby, even if their folly is being pointed out. Malone's failure to achieve ataraxy is best seen in his struggle with his creation. He cannot help getting involved in his characters and stories, has to develop some emotion towards them, has to *do* something to annihilate them: all a menace to his imperturbability. He shows his gratitude by being contemptuous or hateful towards them.

He takes advantage of his authorial freedom: he retroactively changes the status of Molloy and Moran's world by claiming its authorship, and he changes Sapo's name arbitrarily. However, the death of the narrator on the weaker level of his creatures has disturbing effects on his own.

We are invited (by the novel's title, if nothing else) to construe this [Malone's death] as a sign of the author's (Malone's) death *in medias res*, so to speak; nevertheless, an ambiguity lingers over this ending, leaving us to wonder, which was the "more real", the world in which Malone lives and (presumably) dies, or the world which he has projected, and within which the text ends.

(McHale, 1987:12)

Although, dying with his creatures is quite in accordance with Malone's desires:

It does not depend on me, my lead is not inexhaustable, nor my exercise-book, nor Macmann, nor myself in spite of appearances. That all may be wiped out at same instant is all I ask, for the moment.

(246-7)

In view of the agonising last words of his narrative, his creation expires rather than is "wiped out".

There is less ambiguity in the narrator's ontological status in *The Unnamable*. He well knows himself to be the character in someone else's fiction and this only adds to his misery, which is further deepened when he realises the uselessness of resistance, of "mutilation".

Considering this, it is little wonder that the Unnamable lacks a definite identity. He often confounds himself with his "hero", who apparently becomes the teller.

At the particular moment I am referring to, I mean when I took myself for Mahood, ...

According to Mahood, I never reached them...

... I recall it I find myself wondering again if I was not in fact the creature revolving in the yard, as Mahood assured me.

(291-2-4)

Tristram's jumbling of chronology, Malone's death wish, and the Unnamable's impossible situation as a narrator all bring us to the question: Why narrate?

## THE BIG ESCAPE

[Read, dear Reader, do read Vol. VI, Ch. 13 of *Tristram Shandy*]

As Tristram/Sterne<sup>4</sup> observes earlier, life and writing are essentially the same for him — and let me add, for most writers. By multiplying his fictional lives he hopes to lengthen his real one. By mixing past, present and future he stops the motion of time, or, rather, creates a private time-dimension. So his being unborn at the end of his autobiography is a great achievement: death has to wait three

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I think, we can assume a total identity.

more years at least. Cause to live and live, Tristram seems to say. Build worlds, create lives and mock death from the inside. Tristram/Sterne's world glitters with the enjoyment of this grand hide-and-seek, this game of the Big Escape. And reading this "book of books" one has the feeling (a most gratifying one, too) that the loser cannot be but death.

Malone's motives for writing are similar: to create vice-existers and be lost in the midst of them. He does not hope to evade death — all he wants is to abate his fear of death, to forget about his *Angst*. "If I start trying to think again I shall make a mess of my decease" (168), he says, with characteristically bitter irony. But he fails in his attempt:

For my stories are all in vain, deep down I never doubted, even the days  
abounding in proof to the contrary, that I was still alive and breathing  
in and out the air of earth.

(214)

And the air of earth (as opposed to the air of his worlds) is infected with fear of death. To live is to dread the end.

For the Unnamable the narrative is not simply a means to explore the boundaries of human knowledge and existence — the narrative *is* his knowledge and existence. He does not exist outside language, which is true of all fictional characters — but he is also aware of it. He realises that he is confined into someone else's speech and he tries to escape by relapsing into silence. Why silence? Why not a discourse of his own (as he himself suggests at one point)? Because language belongs to 'Them', it is the very means by which he is held captive.

If Beckett's narrators so obviously abhor the activity they are engaged in, why do they not put an end to "that bitter folly" (276)? Why keep on imploring, if meaning is to be avoided and there is no meaning in the first place? Why not keep silent if silence is so longed for? For a possible answer we might want to turn back to Heidegger.

Man's essential experience in the world is his sense of *thrownness-into-being*. This situation — which in stylised form constitutes the starting point for many of Beckett's plays and novels — continuously spurs his mind to examine this predicament. Inquiry is man's way of being (St. John Butler, 1984:12). He implores — because he is human. Man is in the world, and this condition of *being-in-there* necessitates his being involved. Man is Care (St. John Butler, 1984:30).

To this inevitability of inquiry Beckett appends the necessity of declaration:

[I prefer] the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.  
(Beckett, 1983:139)

Both *Malone* and *The Unnamable* embrace this futility, as we have seen earlier. For the M's this awareness of futility is coupled with an acute sense of the limitations of language. They realise that language is our only means to approach reality and the self — and also a bar to them (St.John Butler, 1984:55). Man's real self (Heidegger's *authentic* self) calls man upon *authentic existence* by *being silent*. The clamour of discourse, in the language of the others (*They*), makes this call inaudible. Hence the M's aspiration for silence.

...it is his turn again, he who neither speaks nor listens, who has neither body nor soul, it's something else he has, he must have something, he must be somewhere, 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 ...

(380)

But the discourse must go on, and one's own voice is added to the general turmoil, in which it is impossible to talk about being.

The goal of ontological speech is not discourse about being, but the revelation of Being. Since speech is in itself an emanation of, rather than ... identical with Being — i.e. since speech, as discursive, necessarily 'runs through' or is bound to the disjunctive multiplicity of things — speech necessarily separates us from Being.  
(Rosen quoted in St.John Butler, 1984:56)

To this let me add: doubled is the problem when 'one' exists only in discourse. The Unnamable's discourse is a paradoxical realisation, and at the same time refutation, of Rosen's claim. For him speech *is* being, the one and only. But he *is* separated from his Self (from *authentic being*) by his own speech. The Unnamable realises that the 'I' of language is different from the 'I' of the self. In the light of this we may gain a better comprehension of one of the enigmatic opening sentences: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me".

There can be no valid discourse about the Self, about Me, due to the very nature of discourse. Man can be himself only in silence.

...you don't know why, you don't know whose, you don't know against whom, someone says you; it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that ...

(372)

Real freedom is existence in silence, *in the nameless*. Riddled with the necessity to express, to talk, man's soul can only aspire for that freedom. The narrator's task is to let silence in to the world of discourse, to break the surface created by discourse over the abyss, to "speak of the silence before going into it" (375).

As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it — be it something or nothing — begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.

(Beckett, 1983:??)

The whole point, I think, is best summarised by Malone:

What I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always, who needed me and whom I needed, who took me in his arms and told me to stay with him always, who gave me his place and watched over me, who suffered every time I left him, whom I have often made suffer and seldom contented, whom I have never seen.

(179)

Despite their claim of hating their occupation, Beckett's narrators find a black pleasure in writing. Their grammar is impeccable and they pick their words with great care. The dark humour in no small part derives from their extreme consciousness of the human tongue. Language not only helps them explore their scepticism, it also presents an impenetrable obstacle on the way towards the Self and reality. It well deserves to be mocked.



*Tristram Shandy* is in many ways a flirtation with silence and death — which for a novelist is the same (175). And Tristram is fond of his life, endangered as it is. So it is all the more daring when he omits a whole chapter (on the grounds that it was too perfect) and leans over the crater created in the surface of the text — without Malone's "rapture of vertigo". He does not feel giddy either; he simply wants to call our attention to the surface and what is under it. So chapters 18 and 19 in Vol. IX are kindly "replaced" a few chapters after they were removed. For although

I look upon a chapter which has *only nothing in it*, with respect; and considering what worse things there are in the world — That it is no way a proper substitute for satire —  
 [...] all I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories their own way.'

(602, NOT my italics!)

Tristram puts more faith into language than silence ("it is no way a proper substitute for satire"), even though he has no illusions about its capacities. For the most beautiful tales remain untold:

This tale, crieth Slawkenbergius, somewhat exultingly, has been reserved by me for the concluding tale of my whole work; knowing right well, that when I shall have told it, and my reader shall have read it through - 'twould be even high time for both of us to shut up the book; inasmuch, continues Slawkenbergius, as I know of no tale which could possibly ever go down after it.

(274)

Slawkenbergius's last tale will never be read in English (or in any language for that matter) — on account of its being untranslatable. Or perhaps to allow other stories to exist: Tristram/Sterne arrives at the border of the narrative but will not cross it. Live and let live, he seems to say, and the story (his story) keeps on rolling for several hundred more pages.

And one has the feeling that Slawkenbergius's tale is not in Latin either or in any other known language. It is not want of knowledge on the translator's part that forbids a readable rendering — it is the impotence of the human tongue.

... how this can be translated into good English, I have no sort of conception. [...] I can make nothing of it, - unless, may it please your worships, the voice, in that case being little more than a whisper,

unavoidably forces the eyes to approach not only within six inches of each other - but to look into the pupils - is not that dangerous? - but it can't be avoided - for to look up to the ceiling, in that case the two chins unavoidably meet, and to look down into each other's laps, the foreheads come into immediate contact, which at once puts an end to the conference - I mean to the sentimental part of it. - What is left, Madam, is not worth stooping for.

(274-5)

"Is not that dangerous?" Stranded between the divine (cf. ceiling) and the animal (laps), behind man's eyes unspeakable horrors loom. But the feeble whisper of *Tristram Shandy* defeats silence and creates the surface on which we can safely cross this valley of horrors. And though the craters are numerous, we are never overcome by vertigo.

So even though Sterne is not uncritical about language, he does not reach the point where it is considered a barricade, on the other side of which truth would hide. It is far from being perfect — if only for its incapability of following life's current. "The more I write, the more I shall have to write" — but its only for the better. And the joys to be had from it are by no means black.

... there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in it. The first sort employs structural undermining of convention, or parody, using a previous specific text or system for its base because language is so pre-eminently the instrument which maintains the everyday. The second is represented by those writers who conduct their fictional experiments even at the level of the sign [...] and therefore disturb the 'everyday'.

(Waugh, 1984:53)

*Tristram Shandy* obviously falls into the first category. The Shandies' ideas seem mad or funny against an existing divine order (Rosenblum, 1977:245). Trust in God gives Tristram his stance in the face of riddles and mysteries. And it is trust in God that makes uncle Toby's simple-mindedness so charming — especially when compared to the ferreting mind of his brother (See, for instance, p.280).

Love of God and the love of his creatures make Sterne's world cosy and habitable. And it is no mean prospect for a writer who wants to lose himself in

the midst of his creation. This is no mere metaphor: as McHale argues, love between authors and characters bridges the gap between their different ontological levels (McHale, 1987:222). And texts and readers can maintain a similar 'relationship'. At any rate, among the loving voices of *Tristram Shandy* the call of death is less discernible.

Without exactly suggesting that Beckett does not like his characters we must observe how curiously void of love their worlds are. Whenever it is present, however, it seems to soothe the pangs of existence. In fact, the presence of the other seems to be the only consolation.

And if I tell of me and of that other who is my little one, it is as always  
for want of love, well, I'll be buggered I wasn't expecting that, want of a  
homoncule, I can't stop.

(207)

But, as we have seen, consolation is not to be had — or only temporarily: see Macmann and Molly's short-lived romance. Beckett's interest lies in the lonely soul and its struggle with the mystery and misery of being. Taking pride in this struggle in *Molloy* and *Malone*, disgusted with it — or rather with the need to talk about it — in *The Unnamable*.

Both Sterne and Beckett undertook the task of undermining the novel as a genre, which originally set out to be an extension or emulation of Reality. Their doubt in the form was paralleled with a profound scepticism about the human condition. The result is texts which both scorn and celebrate the novel. Instead of reflections *of* life, they are reflections *on* life. And instead of pretending to be reality, they become reality — for Sterne an alternative one, the one and only for Beckett.

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