

**Marie-Chantal Killeen. *Essai sur l'indicible: Jabès, Duras, Blanchot*. Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2004.**

**ISBN: 2-84292-140-2**

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In 1949, enmeshed in the web of words that would later secure his fame, Samuel Beckett brought forth a novel-length prose work of unparalleled extremity. Originally entitled *Mahood*, in keeping with the “serial selves” that populate his earlier fiction (Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran and Malone), the book is “voiced” by a self-eliminating narrator, ever on the verge of syntactical meltdown but somehow persisting, bound by the determining rigours of grammatical form. Now lost in the abyss of language, now disoriented by the vertigo of identity, the voice presses inexorably on, through the unbending imperative of a double negation: the “inability to speak,” and the “inability to be silent.” The title Beckett finally assigns to this unsettling work, *L'Innomable* (*The Unnamable*) turns on a similar paradox, giving both name and description to what otherwise cannot be identified or explained.

Reviewing *L'Innomable* in 1953, Maurice Blanchot conjectured: “What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears into it?” The Unnamable, he suggests, is “a being without being who can neither live nor die, cannot cease or begin, the empty place in which the listlessness of an empty speech speaks, one that with great difficulty regains a porous and agonizing I” (BC 210, 213). The paradox of the title deepens still further given that, roughly since Heidegger, the unnamable and its surrogates – the unspeakable, the unthinkable, the inexpressible, and, by extension, the abject, the irremediable, the impossible – have become potent philosophical themes. Far from bringing about the ruination

of discourse, as they might seem to promise, these terms have abetted its endless proliferation, providing long-lasting fuel sources for Continental philosophy and critical theory.

The most recent venture into this well-ploughed terrain is Marie-Chantal Killeen's ambitious study, *Essai sur l'indicible: Jabès, Duras, Blanchot*. Following the trail back to the nineteenth century, she argues that the direct progenitor of the unnamable, or *indicible*, is an even more ambitious undertaking – the quest for origins, totality, the absolute. Traditionally associated with Romantic or symbolist poetics (from Novalis and Blake to Rimbaud), the search for the myth of origins rises up most conspicuously in the Mallarméan Book, the undeclared “sequel” to the Jena Romantics' desire for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total oeuvre or infinite Work that aimed to link philosophy and literature to myths of foundation. In spiritual support of these two projects is a dizzying rollcall of nineteenth-century figures – Hegel, Spencer, Renan, Darwin, Marx, Wagner, Balzac, Zola – all supposedly embarked upon the same grand narrative, the same enigmatic search for origins.

In the twentieth century, by contrast, the errors of this way of thinking become paramount. The writing of the *indicible* is the translation of the earlier task, and its coeval concepts of unity, teleology and totality, into a more specific and astringent theoretical language. Distinct from both the “un-avowable” (as in a Foucauldian techniques of power) and the “ineffable” of the mystical tradition, this postmodern *indicible* is first and foremost concerned with making apparent an “original nothingness.” In Heidegger, it is articulated as the ontological difference between beings and Being; structuralist linguistics deploys it in terms of the linguistic difference whereby meaning is produced; and for psychoanalysis, it figures as the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject. Now, the task of writing no longer seeks to celebrate a mythic Origin, but rather to reveal, through the *interruption* of myth, something unrevealable: the non-coincidence of the subject with herself, with the community, with the word.

Over the past forty years, *la question de l'indicible* has occupied another formidable line-up of European thinkers, namely Barthes, Derrida, Eco, Foucault, Kristeva, Levinas, Nancy and Sollers. These figures write the *indicible* by means of fragments, constituted and gathered around juxtapositions, ruptures, repetitions and contradictions. Such writerly practices lend themselves, in turn, to non-linear ways of reading, taking us away from the traditional novel towards the more elliptical and dispersive modes of poetry. The characteristics of this postmodern *indicible* can be identified as vulnerability, availability (spareness) and humility; everything, in short, that causes us to *doubt*.

So far, so familiar. These are standard moves in the genesis of theoretical discourse – the turn from aesthetics to theory, from form to formlessness, from work to *désœuvrement*. Does Killeen have anything new to add to this already overworked field of enquiry? No doubt beguiled by Beckett's imposing example, she anchors the discussion in *fiction*, rather than in theory or philosophy. Approaching it in this manner, she contends that the works of Blanchot, Edmond Jabès and Marguerite Duras mark a major turning point. They adumbrate the unnamable as a place for an encounter with impossibility, silence and alterity. In addition, says Killeen, these writers see the aesthetic as inescapably a question of ethics; their works reaffirm our limits and reopen gaps, recounting and illustrating the fact that there is no direct apprehension of the world or of language.

This concern with the "limit" indicates, for Jabès, Blanchot and Duras, not the *end* of writing as such, but its veritable *origin*, and its most pressing demand. Focused not on communication, one of literature's traditional goals, but on the incommunicable, they produce a literature of involution, fascinated by its own conditions of production. Language functions here not as an instrument that keeps faith with representation, but as *matter*, and so these writings present sustained reflections on their own material substance.

Jabès identifies two unnamables, "God" and "Auschwitz," incarnated through a Judaic reinscription of Mallarmé's Book of books. Judaic thought itself operates as a "fiction" in this writing, and the *indicible* becomes a religious trope; thus, to say God is to speak his absence (the Hebraic reinscription of YWVH, for "Yahweh", is a form of *sous rature*). For Blanchot, the *indicible* is apparent in the unnarratable *récit*, affirming nothing other than its own limit, where death appears as the infinitely other. And in Duras' writing, *indicibilité* manifests itself as radically incompatible sexual difference, an *immanent* unnamability between beings. To speak this relation to the other sex, which is a relation to the impossible, constitutes for Duras a challenge that lies at the source of all things, and all writing.

In her Blanchot chapter, Killeen devotes the first half to a discussion of death, the second to a sustained analysis of Blanchot's 1948 *récit*, *L'Arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence*). The earlier section usefully outlines some key differences between Blanchot and Heidegger. The zero-sum game of Being and beings, suggests Killeen, can also be seen in Blanchot's animadversions on Death and dying. Thus, being-towards-death – resolute Dasein anticipating its end-point – is refigured into death as radically other, hence absolutely unknowable. Blanchot stresses the *anonymous* character of dying, in order to depersonalise the humanistic conception of the "proper" death that attempts to incorporate death into existence, to make it a part of

life and experience. Blanchotian death withdraws us from the tranquil assurance of death as something that preserves our individuality, our unique and indivisible selves, right to the very end. Far from empowering us, the “end” of death is *le très mauvais infini*, an end that can never be surmounted. In contradistinction to Heidegger, Blanchot renounces death as *possibility* – as mastery, as comprehension, as the work of time. It exposes us to a radical reversal, an about-turn that is the “original experience” the work must touch.

A further refiguration concerns the status of the work of art. Heidegger gives it a privileged relation to truth – as unconcealment of being, simultaneously *revealing* and *withdrawing* itself. Blanchot, however, contends that the work of art has no relation to truth; rather, it unveils itself to *itself* alone. Being is thus irreducible to the double manoeuvre of concealment and unconcealment. For Blanchot, seeking to escape the logic of presence and absence, visible and invisible, the *neutre* – his substitute for Heideggerian Being – precedes the understanding of such categories. This then opens onto Killeen’s main area of discussion. Through the *neutre*, she says, which is synonymous with the *indicible* origin, Blanchot demands that we imagine death – or “the other night” – as an *origin*, by way of the return it enacts to the undivided and undifferentiated. The two terms, beginning and end, are figured as *recommencement* and the *interminable*, a beginning that has always already begun, and an end that is always “to come.” “Death” and “existence” are not two opposed states perfectly distinct and separate, but two sides of a limit, manifested as fault-lines.

All of these qualities are discernible in Blanchot’s fiction, says Killeen, which recounts nothing except the impossibility of writing. Locating the postmodern *indicible* in the structure of the double bind, she considers *Death Sentence* to be one of the pivotal works that conveys this. (In its most incisive moment, a dying woman says to her doctor: “If you don’t kill me, then you’re a murderer”, *DS* 141.) The way of the *indicible* is to proceed via error, digression, analogy, and so too with *Death Sentence*. Death eludes *everything*, including narration, and so it “organizes” the *récit* negatively, playing the same role as the unnamable does in its structuring of language.

In analysing *Death Sentence*, Killeen recognizes two modes of repetition, in the form(s) of those theoretical stand-bys, *mise-en-abyme* and palimpsest. Where a *mise-en-abyme* erases the differences between the parts, confounding the Whole, a palimpsest necessarily maintains and accentuates the differences – heterogeneous parts inscribing themselves *outside* a Whole that they exceed. Thus, instead of reabsorption into the One, the palimpsest is composed of supplements and interruptions, of

repetition without end, in a vertigo of division. The notion of an “original” text is thus made untenable by the combination of heterogeneous materials. The palimpsest pulverizes textual unity and the stability of sense, creating an infinite chain of signification. As different textual strata emerge, the Derridean *trace* can be glimpsed, made legible by *écriture* that blocks *écriture*.

Killeen considers the characters in *Death Sentence as palimpsestes faits chair* (125; “palimpsests made flesh”), living bodies in the process of becoming cadavers. The statue-like states into which the characters enter signifies the “petrification of matter.” Furthermore, the emphasis on repetition, self-differentiation and non-coincidence makes paramount the “original nothingness” on which everything is founded. The *arrêt de mort*, or *suspension of death*, thus makes manifest a *distance* at the heart of language, vision, social interaction, and everyday life itself. Like a palimpsest, it compels people and things to appear and disappear, depriving them of presence and prompting interruptions of being.

Killeen’s reading of *Death Sentence* is persuasive, as are her discussions of Jabès and Duras. But the book is best seen as a guide to some of the theoretical debates surrounding these three writers, rather than as an original intervention in a congested field. Killeen acknowledges Leslie Hill’s seminal critical study, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (and the earlier *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*) but appears to be unaware of his more recent Blanchotian foray, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (2001); a lamentable oversight, given the close proximity (as the title indicates) of Hill’s concerns and her own. Perhaps most regrettably, at two instances she raises, then immediately drops, the question of poetry and the *indicible*. All the claims made on behalf of the latter would seem to coalesce in the elliptical, intuitive, non-declarative phenomena that are poetic language and poetic form. The focus on fiction provides welcome relief from yet more “theory about theory,” but it also misses an opportune moment to explore a more exigent and compelling route to the unnamable. Half a century after Beckett’s intrepid foray, this ever-elusive (non)concept can seem as distant and ungraspable as ever.

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