

“Abiding there unliving” death and bare life in the unnamable

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“Abiding there Unliving” *Death and Bare Life in The Unnamable*

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Abstract

Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* proposes that the public display of power over life and death that Foucault restricts to the 18th century were not displaced by the new disciplinary structures associated with the hospital and the asylum, but remained contemporary with them. This notion of the simultaneity of surveillance and spectacle can be helpful in thinking about Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*. Agamben’s work can also demonstrate the centrality of the character of Worm. In this way the broader notion of biopolitics can usefully illuminate the historical and political contexts of the book.

Résumé

Giorgio Agamben propose que la démonstration publique du pouvoir que Foucault limite au XVIII^e siècle, n'a pas été déplacée par les nouvelles structures disciplinaires associées à l'hôpital et à l'asile, mais qu'elle leur est restée contemporaine. Cette notion de simultanéité de la surveillance et du spectacle peut être utile pour réfléchir au roman de Beckett *L'Innommable*. L'œuvre d'Agamben peut également démontrer la centralité du personnage de Worm. De cette manière, la notion de biopolitique peut éclairer les contextes historiques et politiques du livre.

Keywords:

Beckett – Agamben – Biopolitics
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Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* proposes that the public displays of power over life and death that Foucault restricts to the 18th century were not displaced by the new disciplinary structures associated with the hospital and the asylum, but remained contemporary with them (Agamben 1998). This notion of the simultaneity of surveillance and spectacle can be helpful in thinking about Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*.

We can begin by comparing the stories of Mahood and Worm in terms of Foucault’s two regimes of vision. Mahood’s narrative concerns spectacle: the gruesome creature in the transparent jar is a monitory presence. At once ignored by passersby and yet overtly displayed and decorated, from his position outside the restaurant he seems to condense and concentrate the carnival of blood, slaughter and consumption in the area of the horse market on Rue Brancion (Beckett 1979, 315).

In contrast to Mahood’s display, Worm is a hidden, recessed figure. Inhabiting a carceral architecture, he is the object on which a panel of what Beckett calls “specialists” endlessly experiment at the behest of their “Master” (Beckett 1979, 340). Although Worm will never be definitively isolated and formulated, his onlookers report upon and continually attempt to discipline him by recruiting him to normative forms of existence. In this sense Worm’s story is characterised by surveillance rather than spectacle.

As with Agamben, Beckett maps these two biopolitical paradigms onto each other, rendering them at times indistinguishable through their shared engagement with a notion of ‘life,’ a mode of being at once oppressively present (Mahood) and frustratingly ungraspable (Worm). In the process Beckett also comes close to describing an Agambenian notion of “bare life,” seen as a particularly volatile zone of being, one that harbours the potential for other ways of existence but which is vulnerable also to the most dreadful exploitation.

Before examining these claims in detail, some historical context will be useful. The decades after 1930 saw two major social transformations relevant to this essay. The first is the institutionalization and medicalization of death. It was the French historian Philippe Ariès’ book *Western Attitudes Toward*

Death from the Middle Ages to the Present that first noted this change: “[B]etween 1930 and 1950 the evolution accelerated markedly” (Ariès 1976, 87). This was due to an important material shift: the displacement of the site of death. One no longer died at home, in the bosom of one’s family, but in the hospital (*ibid.*). Beckett’s novel registers this change in many ways, most obviously in the narrator’s use of a precise vocabulary of medical care: succedanea, painkillers, anodynes, palliation, coma, visiting times, witnessing, testimony and so on. What is more, the book’s concern with what looks like a kind of suspension between life and death parallels the development of anaesthetics and mechanical ventilation, which will eventually lead to the establishment of intensive care, a phenomenon which Agamben attends to closely in *Homo Sacer*. Indeed the novel’s insistent references to “breath” summon images of the technology of artificial respiration.

The second social transformation is the expansion of the media industries in the West. Death is omnipresent in this visual culture, whether in the news media, film or television (Noys 2005, 122-124).

In this way, while death was tabooed and privatized in the post-war period, it was also relentlessly aestheticized. In *The Unnamable*, a visualized, aestheticized suffering is clearly present in the very public nature of Mahood’s display. It is present too, however, in Worm’s fable, where his strange death-in-life is laid open to a gaze which is at once that of a theatrical or cinematic audience and some kind of professional caste. Significantly, the novel often explicitly figures this kind of spectacle in terms of “the news”: “it is Worm’s voice beginning, I pass on the news, for what it’s worth” (Beckett 1979, 317). Such references inevitably conjure up the news media, and Beckett also resorts to associated imagery of broadcasting: “I shall transmit the words as received”; “this transmission is really excellent” (Beckett 1979, 321, 323).

We can now turn to a closer analysis of the text itself. One major way in which *The Unnamable* maps the medicalization of death onto its aestheticization is through the motif of systematicity. Early on in the book we read the following: “The thing to avoid, I don’t know why, is the spirit of system” (Beckett 1979, 268). As with so much of what the narrator tells us, this early eschewal of system is deceptive. In truth, images of rudimentary, self-contained systems proliferate throughout the book. For example the narrator and other characters are often depicted in terms of automation and mechanism: “when I have failed to be Worm, I’ll be Mahood, automatically, on the rebound”; “it [Mahood’s weeping] doesn’t relieve him in the slightest … it’s purely mechanical”; and finally, of the narrator himself: “This obligation … engrossed me in a purely mechanical way, excluding notably the free play of the intelligence and sensibility” (Beckett 1979, 319, 343, 293).

The Kantian reference to free play in the last quotation suggests that these passages can be understood as referring to the distinction between the empirical world of cause and effect, as opposed to the aesthetic, or to the ethical realm of freedom. But they also reinforce the sense that we are, at some level, dealing with a kind of self-contained, impersonal, regulatory apparatus.

Having noted this, and recalling Agamben’s integration of the spectacular and the disciplinary, we should also recognise that the various systems in *The Unnamable* are strongly associated with the control and maintenance of ‘life.’ The most obvious example of this governmentality is the system of substitution – what Beckett calls, using a medical term, “succedanea” – through which the narrator takes on a series of determinate forms, if that is not too strong a phrase. These forms include the aforementioned Mahood and Worm, but also the “I” of the closing sections. Despite these changes in personnel, it is notable that a clear continuity of tone and perspective is maintained, and ‘life’ flows on through the novel, following a well-worn circuit of grooves and channels. As the narrator says in what seems an Aristotelian claim: “can that be called a life which vanishes when the subject is changed? I don’t see why not” (Beckett 1979, 320).

Elsewhere he seems more pessimistic about the process: “I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit … The essential is never to arrive anywhere” (Beckett 1979, 311). Yet if the aim is “never to be anywhere” the absence of “a fifty-first” that prevents “arrival” is therefore essential, a necessary part of the system. And indeed, as we shall see when we consider Worm in detail, it is as absence and impossibility that he is figured in the text. Furthermore, when the narrator addresses the difficulty of grasping Worm, he arrives at an image of system that recalls *Murphy* and the idea of desire as an endlessly circulating “quantum of wantum”: “Perhaps it’s by trying to be Worm that I’ll finally succeed in being Mahood, I hadn’t thought of that. Then all I’ll have to do is be Worm. Which no doubt I shall achieve by trying to be Jones. Then all I’ll have to do is be Jones” (Beckett 1993, 36, 112; Beckett 1979, 311-12). Throughout *The Unnamable* the

narrator returns to this idea of what he calls “circumvolutionization,” describing it as “this tedious equipoise,” an endless “ascending, descending, flowing, eddying, seeking exit, finding none” (Beckett 1979, 327, 333, 351).

At one point the narrator finds solace in imagining a physical, active version of the state of equilibrium in which he finds himself, this time recalling *Murphy*’s hydraulic imagery of system:

I’d go and draw it [ie water] from one container and then I’d go and pour it into another, or there would be four, or a hundred, half of them to be filled, the other half to be emptied … to be emptied, and filled, in a certain way, a certain order … always showing the same level Beckett 1979, 366

That *The Unnamable*’s concern with death is inseparable from such an attitude to system is apparent in its understanding of life. In the book the latter is conceived in substantialist terms as an unindividuated material force, what the narrator calls the “great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans” (Beckett 1979, 295). This is sometimes an imposition, sometimes a goal. At times the narrator is prey to it, and at others he seems beyond it. Hence we learn of the town of “Bally,” where the “inestimable gift of life [was] rammed down my gullet” (Beckett 1979, 273). Here there seems no choice in the matter of life, so that speech is “the little murmur of unconsenting man … the little gasp of the condemned to life,” with the narrator wondering “ah misery, will I never stop wanting a life for myself?” (Beckett 1979, 298, 361). Yet elsewhere we are told that “They could clap an artificial anus in the hollow of my hand and still I wouldn’t be there, alive with their life” (Beckett 1979, 289). This seems mere braggadocio, however, or wishful thinking, for the overwhelming sense throughout the book is of life as a compulsion that cannot be gainsaid: a “life-warrant,” a “turn of the life-screw” (Beckett 1979, 329, 379).

Mahood is an exemplary manifestation of the novel’s sense of life as a rude, indomitable vitalism, with his pungent language, unsavoury habits and association with blood, meat and gustation. Beckett insists that he is ignored by passersby, and therefore doubts his own empirical existence (Beckett 1979, 313). Yet he is sure of one authoritative gaze at least, that of the proprietor of the restaurant he advertises with his grotesque body. What is more, Beckett makes it very clear that Mahood has an uncomplicated perceptual relationship with the world around him. The narrator calls this “noting”:

Can Mahood note? … Yes, it is the characteristic, among others, of Mahood to note, even if he does not always succeed in doing so, certain things, perhaps I should say all things, so as to turn them to account, for his governance.

Beckett 1979, 312

Beckett’s description stresses that Mahood is able to appropriate his specific surroundings, master them through describing them, and in so doing shore up his own sovereignty, his “governance.” In explicit contrast, when Worm is first introduced, we are told that he “cannot note” (Beckett 1979, 312). Furthermore this assertion is repeated throughout the book (Beckett 1979, 318). As we shall see Worm’s inability to note, or the condition that is responsible for this inability, renders him, or his life, resistant to representation. Significantly, however, Beckett chooses to again link this withdrawal to Worm’s role within a broader system of the maintenance of life: “Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, he exists nevertheless, but not for himself, for others, others conceive him and say, Worm is here, since we conceive him, as if there could be no life but life conceived, if only by him who lives it” (Beckett 1979, 318).

Worm’s inability to “note,” to perceive either himself or others, renders him “not for himself,” though he remains available “for others,” and thus continues to exist, in some form. His own cognitive apparatus – or lack of it – is described in more detail here than earlier: as well as a lack of empirical sensation or noting, he is also devoid of the standard categories or faculties of “conceiving.” “Others” may conceive him, according to their own lights, but in doing so they do not catch his specific mode of life, which neither itself conceives, nor is amenable to conceptualization by others. But what exactly is the nature of the relationship between the “life” of the unresponsive, seemingly a-cognitive Worm and the suite of “others” that surround him? The strange fulcrum around which this relationship turns is beautifully described in a passage that begins: “One alone [ie Worm] turned towards the all-impotent, all-nescient, that haunts him, then others” (Beckett 1979, 318).

The sentence following this develops Worm's role still further, in one of the novel's most lyrical moments:

Come into the world unborn, abiding there unliving, with no hope of death, epicentre of joys, of griefs, of calm. Who seems the truest possession, because the most unchanging. The one outside of life we always were in the end, all our long vain life long. (Beckett, 1979, 318)

The slippage from the "others" of the previous sentence to the "we" here is crucial, marking as it does the moment when the narrator joins the collective of those who direct their attention towards Worm. It must be the "joys, griefs and calms" of this "we" that are being referred to, projected onto Worm as "epicentre," for we've already been told that he himself is incapable of such affects or indeed any kind of knowledge. What is more, the last sentence implies that Worm is understood by all as an ever-present and universal element, and this revelation is powerfully reinforced a moment later: "The one ignorant of himself ... Who crouches in their midst who see themselves in him" (Beckett 1979, 318-9).

In summary: Worm's life is the kind of life that cannot be conceived. Others may recognise his "existence," but they cannot really conceive of his life, cannot find the tools to grasp it. This despite the fact that "they see themselves in him." For these others life must be amenable to conceptualisation, even if the subject of that life – "him who lives it" – is sole agent of that conceptualization. But the narrator, and we as readers, know that even Worm himself cannot conceptualise the life he lives. This, crucially, is his strength.

Worm, in his existence beyond conceptualization, thus occupies a completely self-contained space: "a place. With no way in, no way out, a safe place. Not like Eden. And Worm inside. Feeling nothing, knowing nothing" (Beckett 1979, 320). He is in a "state before the beginning of his prehistory," and this is what haunts and attracts both the others and the narrator. The a-conceptual, "unborn" nature of his life fascinates and provokes their gaze.

It is here that we can begin to draw a parallel with Agamben's notion of a bare life. Bare life can be thought of as the difference between sheer instinctual functioning, what Aristotle termed *zoe*, and fully human, symbolically marked, political life, what Aristotle called *bios* (Agamben 1998, 6). As such a borderline condition bare life is necessarily obscure and involuted, continuous with and inextricable from the two forms of existence that Agamben derives it from. As such, any attempt to isolate, investigate or channel this limit-state has the potential to be extremely violent.

This tendency to violence is markedly present in Worm's story. As the novel continues it becomes increasingly clear that the fascinated gaze of the "others," as it encroaches upon and battens onto Worm's "safe space," threatens to destroy it. In such circumstances, safety is replaced by suffering, and it is the "others" who inflict it. The sound of their incessant address to him brings Worm to a form of consciousness where he can again conceive and perceive, a condition he experiences in terms of "affliction":

[...] he hears the sound that will never stop. Then it's the end, Worm no longer is ... and is delivered over, to affliction and the struggle to withstand it, the starting eye, the labouring mind. Yes, let us call that thing Worm, so as to exclaim, the sleight of hand accomplished, Oh look, life again (Beckett 1979, 320-1).

Here the "we," or the "us" has a relation to Worm very different from the ritualistic or mythic comportment when he was the "epicentre" of "joys, griefs and calms." The structure is no longer that of a rapport with an aporetic absent presence, but rather with the representation of that absence in speech: "the sound that will never stop," or the bringing of that absence into the light, through a specially designed architecture of surveillance and exposure that is clearly panoptic: "their powerful lamps, lit and trained on the within, to make him think they are still there" (Beckett 1979, 336).

Now, in other words, it is the "they" who are *conceiving* Worm. And it is this conceiving, this accession to the concept and the understanding, that transforms him, ensuring his "end," by which the narrator seems to mean his conceptual, linguistic and visual representation and therefore his return to "life." It is in the specific apparatus of lamps and surveillance here that we can see how the desire to

grasp Worm's bare life, initially described in lyrical and indeed spiritual terms, gives way to an institutional architecture of abuse, exploitation and coercion.

It seems then that we have to distinguish between two versions, or realms, of life when we are considering Worm's role in the novel. First there is the life that is beyond conceptualization, even by Worm himself, who nevertheless exists "unborn, abiding there unliving, with no hope of death" (Beckett 1979, 318). Then there is the life that Worm is forcibly returned to, or born into, due to the actions of the "they": "life again, life everywhere and always, the life that's on every tongue, the only possible!" (Beckett 1979, 321). It is the former mode of life that is the "epicentre of joys, of griefs, of calm" to which the "they" initially gravitate. And yet crucially, they seem unable to grasp Worm under this aspect, seeing him solely in terms of the second, more conventional and conceptualizable form, "the only possible."

It is here that we can return to the notion of the simultaneous erasure and hypostasis of death and dying within the systems of modernity. Foucault's architecture of clinic, hospital, school and prison emphasizes the way bodies are sequestered and observed in buildings that are themselves self-contained systems designed to operate even when unmanned. There is something of this in the "specialists" use of the lamp: they can leave it shining on Worm and depart. But Beckett's account of the "they," and their relationship to Worm's life also describes a highly theatrical process, a system of aestheticization and spectacularization. Thus Worm seems to lie on a kind of stage, surrounded by a circular wall pierced with a "peephole." The "they" are on the other side of the wall, circling around it (Beckett 1979, 327-8). And although they are never given a geographical location, in the way that Mahood is, they seem to share his ability to "note." Hence:

While one speaks another peeps, the one no doubt whose voice is next due and whose remarks may possibly have reference to what he may possibly have seen

Beckett 1979, 328

The passage goes on to refer here to the status of the "they" as "specialists" and the rhetoric of regular observation and record-keeping brings the practice described close to some form of symptomatology or surveillance. But the theatrical, spectacular aspect is also clearly present, and is made explicit from the narrator's own point-of-view later on: "well well, so there's an audience, it's a public show, you buy your seat and you wait" (Beckett 1979, 351).

Medical and theatrical discourses are thereby conflated in a way that suggests the double valency of 20th century death and dying, both sequestered and exposed, occulted and aestheticized. As the novel goes on, however, the gaze undergoes another shift, as the role of the "they" becomes much more active, assuming an air of callous experimentation, if not deliberate cruelty.

For it transpires that the sounds and lights through which "they" have been observing and reporting upon Worm are being wielded precisely in order to stimulate perception, and so dislodge him from his a-conceptual zone. As Beckett writes: "they are doing the best they can, with the miserable means at their disposal, a voice, a little light" (Beckett 1979, 338). It is through this suffering that the "specialists" aim to "decoy him [Worm] into" some form of determinate "life" (Beckett 1979, 331). Beckett imagines this in physical terms, so that the blind, undifferentiated body suggested by the name Worm will be endowed "with their ears, their eyes, their tears and a brainpan." (Beckett 1979, 331). Sometimes ontology appears to recapitulate phylogeny, and Worm's birth throes are expanded into an evolutionary leap, though a grotesque and surreal one: "These millions of different sounds ... are all one requires to sprout a head, a bud to begin with, finally huge"; "a head has grown out of his ear" (Beckett 1979, 325, 327). The suffering caused by this procedure of "reporting" on Worm seems able to trigger Worm's own assumption of sensation, perception and reflection. Yet how this might work is unclear, given that Worm must be already perceptually aware in order to suffer from the lights and voices. The process is circular, in other words. In this sense there persists an antinomy between the specialists' spectacular, mechanical eliciting of Worm's alleged suffering, and therefore his "life," and Worm's actual mode of being. For the question of how Worm is dislodged or emerges from his withdrawal, though raised on various occasions, is never resolved.

We will return to this crucial issue of the distinction between Worm's being and his "life." For the moment, we should note a further detail with regard to the continued maintenance of Worm's supposed suffering. The systematic violence of the "they" must be kept at a carefully calibrated level in order to

keep worm alive, if that is the right word, without destroying him: “The problem is delicate. The dulling effect of habit, how do they deal with that?” (Beckett 1979, 337-338). The reference to “habit” here sees Beckett turn to a subject that has been a major preoccupation since at least *Proust*. It is not the only time it is raised in *The Unnamable*. When the specialists call on the “bright boy of the class” to intervene, we are told “he puts all to rights again, invoking the celebrated notions of quantity, habit-formation, wear and tear” (Beckett 1979, 346). These concepts suggest measurement and regulation, not to mention the legalistic, contractual language of depreciation. It is homeostasis that seems to be the ultimate aim. That is to say, the specialists decide that a standard single level of suffering, without peaks and troughs, is the ideal: “Agreed then on monotony, it’s more stimulating … No sign of hardening, no sign of softening, impossible to say, no matter, it’s a good average” (Beckett 1979, 338).

At this point it is important to remember the incommensurability between this notion of an even, stable, regulated system of pain, and the occulted state in which Worm is said to be plunged. Although the specialists’ principle of mechanized suffering does not need to be intelligible to its objects to function, its regularities do need to be experienced sensuously, as suffering. And the specialists clearly see Worm’s experience of pain as the means to recruit him to their brand of “life.” This possibility is figured in Eckhartian terms as a spark of potential: “for them the spark is present, ready to burst into flame, all it needs is preaching on, to become a living torch” (Beckett 1979, 332). But note the “for them” here. There is no evidence from Worm himself of this “spark,” given that he is “silent, ignorant of his silence and silent” (Beckett 1979, 318). How can anyone really know if Worm does or does not register the sounds and visions that are addressed to him? The narrator initially assumes that he does not, but crucially sees this as an advantage: “That’s his strength … that he understands nothing … doesn’t know they are there, feels nothing” (Beckett 1979, 331). And yet this is no sooner said than Beckett doubles back: “ah but just a moment, he feels, he suffers, the noise makes him suffer, and he knows … and he understands.” Then this too is superseded by the thought that: “it’s they describe him thus, without knowing, thus because they need him thus, perhaps he hears nothing, suffers nothing” (Beckett 1979, 331).

The last statement emphasizes the way the spectacular system that turns around Worm and attempts to revive him is to some degree at least a charade. The whole system of the specialists can never really batten onto the reserve and withdrawal of Worm’s “unspeakable” life. In effect, if Worm is immune to external stimuli, then the whole project of his retrieval through such administered pain is doomed. It seems that Worm subsists in a completely monadic state, with no prospect of actualization. This is admitted in the important image where Worm’s life is figured as completely self-contained, so that any change in it would have to be self-generated, akin to the process of pulling yourself up by your own boot-straps. As Beckett wryly puts it, “they” are asking Worm “to imitate the hussar who gets up on a chair the better to adjust the plume of his busby” (Beckett 1979, 338). Worm cannot adjust or palliate himself, because his confinement means he cannot gain the kind of external vantage-point – imaged here as a chair to step up on – necessary to intervene into his own existence.

As we approach the end of the book, and the narrator himself begins to occupy the central role in the “system,” it is useful to hold Worm’s position in mind. By contrast to the latter, the narrator himself clearly does “note” and feel pain, despite the many moments when he claims to be just as void of sense-experience as Worm is: “Notice, I notice nothing, I go on best I can”; or again “there’s nothing here, nothing to see, nothing to see with … No spectator then, and better still no spectacle, good riddance” (Beckett 1979, 368, 345). Despite the latter overt denial of visual spectacle, it is strongly implied that the narrator is himself trapped in the spectacular system of suffering devised by the “they.” One token of this is his curious, much-remarked, inability to die. The strong implication is that he cannot die because he is being continually prodded into experience through the manipulation of stimuli by the “They.” This is stated most obviously when the narrator tells us that “my understanding is not yet sufficiently well-oiled to function without the pressure of some critical circumstance, such as a violent pain felt for the first time” (Beckett 1979, 322). What is more the narrator admits that those responsible for the pain he suffers aim to administer it in carefully planned doses. Referring to his “tempters,” he says that they desire “that I should exist and at the same time be only moderately, or perhaps I should say finitely pained.” This obviously repeats the specialists’ concern to maintain Worm at a strictly regulated, strictly monitored level of suffering. And yet what they don’t know is that the narrator is, as he himself puts it: “there to be pained,” capable of enduring “for all eternity, whistling a merry tune” (Beckett 1979, 296).

In this way then, both Worm and the narrator exist in a manner that frustrates the designs of the specialists. In neither case will the carefully tended system of suffering achieve its goal of returning the patient to normative experience. But the reason for this is different in each case. In Worm's case it is because he is too weak to achieve the requisite, as the specialists' put it, "spasm" (Beckett 1979, 338). In the narrator's case this is because he is strong beyond the specialist's imagination. As so often in Beckett's work, the two qualities of weakness and strength turn out to be one and the same.

It is the nature of this elision between weakness and strength, as it is played out around the figure of Worm and the narrator, that is at the heart of any notion of politics to be found in *The Unnamable*. Even so, it is imperative that the two dispositions be kept apart. Throughout the novel Worm occupies – or is assumed to occupy – an occult zone beyond the spectacular systems of sound and image that are tended by the specialists. The narrator, for his part, is himself subject to the latter biopolitical system, and never achieves his goal of becoming what he can only imagine Worm to be. For he too, in the very act of grasping Worm's distant world, simply supplants it with his own "conceiving." This is made clear at many points: "I'm Worm, that is to say. I am no longer he, since I hear" (Beckett 1979, 319, 321).

To be clear, the novel's major ontological distinctions are three: Worm's realm; the realm occupied by the narrator and the specialists; and Mahood's realm. As argued earlier, the latter is an excessive, somaticized world, characterized by an intense and spectacular empiricism. The systemic world of the narrator and the specialists, meanwhile, though it aspires to the status of the Mahood world, is complicated by what we learn of the role that Worm, or the image of Worm, plays in it. Worm's weakness generates a form of life that is antithetical to the one the system exists to foster. Worm's world itself is, as we have seen, "unspeakable," and this is why his weakness is unavailable to the narrator as a resource. Being inextricably caught up in the specialists' system, the narrator's only recourse is "endurance." It is through endurance that he achieves a degree of freedom from the normative demands of the "They," refusing to conform to their modes of perception or "reporting." Having said that, the irony is that it is the demands of the "they" that the narrator stand in for Worm and suffer in his stead, so giving them the proof that their system has a purchase on "life," that provides the narrator with this opening. Beckett puts it as follows:

they want me to be Worm, but I was, I was, what's wrong, I was, but ill, it must be that, it can only be that, what else can it be, but that, I didn't report in the light, the light of day, in their midst, to hear them say, Didn't we tell you you were alive and kicking? I have endured, that must be it, I shouldn't have endured.

Beckett 1979, 335

The reference to "endurance" here harks back to the moment where the narrator scoffs at the thought that his endurance might have a limit: "The end of my endurance! It was one second they should have schooled me to endure, after that I would have held out for all eternity" (Beckett 1979, 296). Hence the narrator stands in for Worm, as requested, endures the pain of sensation but, crucially, does not go so far as to "report" it, and in this sense does not accede to the specialists' normative demands of standard experience. Like Worm, the narrator remains mute before the "They," giving no account of his suffering. He cannot be Worm, cannot inhabit the weakness that allows Worm to simply not register sensation. Nevertheless he mimics Worm's mode of resistance through its obverse, the strength to endure sensation without converting it to perception or understanding according to conventional modes of cognition.

If Worm figures an aspect of biopolitical life that might be thought of as akin to the messianic or redemptive, it is only apt that it is figured in *The Unnamable* as always out of reach. Indeed *The Unnamable*, to a great extent, can only presuppose Worm's weak messianism from the point of view of bodies and consciousnesses immersed in the biopolitical systems – both spectacular and disciplinary – of the mid-twentieth-century. This is why the novel's final third concentrates instead on the actuality of the narrator's struggle to endure in the moment, culminating in the famous last words of the book. As I have been arguing, however, the figure of Worm lies somewhere behind those words, as their hidden reverse, a fleeting trace of another "form-of-life," to use a key term from Agamben. As he puts it in

Means Without Ends this is a “life that can never be separated from its form” (Agamben 2000, 3-4). And further:

Only if I am not always already and solely enacted, but rather delivered to a possibility and a power, only if living and intending and apprehending themselves are at stake each time in what I live and intend and apprehend ... only then can a form of life become, in its own factness and thingness, form-of-life, in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked [i.e. bare] life. Agamben 2000, 9

It is the idea of *potentia* implicit in this quotation that I want to stress. Seen in this light Worm is an image of “possibility” or potential rather than something “enacted” or actualized, in the way that both Mahood and the narrator are actualized. Agamben uses the phrase “perfect potential” to describe this capacity. It is a refusal to become determinate, a refusal to assume the predicates that will define one, and this seems to tally with Worm’s mute weakness. The kinds of ideas Agamben mentions in the quotation – “living,” “intending,” “apprehending” – are all at stake in Worm’s form-of-life, in that they are called into question by his withdrawal from sense and understanding, by his “not being able” (Beckett 1979, 340).

It is as a result of this that the specialists cannot reach him – in Agamben’s terms cannot “isolate his naked life” – and must instead limit themselves to the narrator, whose naked or bare life is fully exposed to the biopolitical circuits the novel describes. And yet the narrator himself still seems to be in some form of communion with Worm’s weak form-of-life, and it is from here that he derives the strength to go on.

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