

Impossible Voices, Unmakeable Beings

Gregory Whitehead (1997)

In his 13th text for nothing, a text whose title already doubles the threat, promise, or possibly even the relief, of authorial oblivion, Beckett writes:

And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place, born of the impossible voice the unmakeable being, and a gleam of light, still all would be silent and empty and dark, as now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs.

In the spirit of celebrating this irresistible, irrepressible murmur, sounding, against all odds, on this day when there are no days, a day that celebrates the no place, silent, and empty and dark: *impossible voices*, that is, voices that do not stand up to reason, nor do they amount to anything beyond what they are: throbbing, vibrating, immaterial castaways, destination uncertain, on the way to no place. *Unmakeable beings*: misarticulated nervous systems caught, at loose ends, in the wrong place at the wrong time, stop time, deep time, drive time; beings driven by the will to communicate with some distant, unnamable and perhaps unspeakable other; beings who, like Hamlet, spin out into the fathomless headache unleashed by that most simple, and yet most terrifying question, who *is* there?

The answer, now as before, remains --- nobody but a ghost. Or, perhaps, a whole gang of ghosted nobodies, molecules of thought, speaking in the deeply ciphered language of the no place. But where is "*there*"? For even if we find a way to decrypt the ciphered ghost, whose names might turn out to be something dead simple, like dot-dot-dot, or Victor Charlie, or double-

one/double-two, can we ever grasp the no place of the sounding, occluded, fogbound, full of cults and curses, and superfast talk, all a vibrating cover for the most radical voice, the voice of catastrophe, that bass line drone tone, the Emergency Broadcast System, this is not a test? Beckett writes in the Unnameable:

Air, the air, is there anything to be squeezed from that old chestnut? Close to me it is gray, dimly transparent, and beyond that charmed circle deepens and spreads its fine impenetrable veils.

Radio art: Is there anything, left, to be squeezed from that old chestnut? And, once squeezed, who would ever want to drink such bitter juice?

THE ENTOMOLOGIST: Yes, well, the thing about bugs, you can't kill them all, there are too many.....

There are too many species of bugs, too many members within each species, their larvae, their habitat, is everywhere. To eliminate all of the bugs, you would have to eliminate their habitat, and this would mean incinerating your house, your belongings, your pets, your loved ones, and finally to set fire to your own body.

There are, there are an *infinity*, the number of bugs beyond the ability of all the computers to count. I would defy the most sophisticated supercomputer the attempt, you may as well attempt to count the stars in the universe. The infinity of stars in the cosmos is mirrored by the infinity of bugs beneath our feet. And we fear the infinity of bugs beneath our feet as much as we... *fear* the infinity of the cosmos above our heads.

(telephone)

HOMEOWNER: to exterminate for the last two weeks, and different exterminators all the time.

PEST CONTROL OPERATOR: Well, I'll tell you what, you get some insects in a bottle there, and bring them up to this office, and we'll identify them.

HOMEOWNER: But you see, I don't have any bugs.

PEST CONTROL OPERATOR: Well, then I can't help you.

HOMEOWNER: No, but I want you to come and exterminate my house, even though I don't have any bugs.

PEST CONTROL OPERATOR: No, we don't do that.

(solo chant with voice/tape fragments)

True Bug mottoes.

True Bug codes of behavior.

The Bug must ruminate all.

The True Bug.

Must exterminate all competition.

Humans must undergo psychological warfare, developing extended feelers, oozing techniques and speed.

True Bug is relentless, pointless and thoughtless.

That is its strengths.

Enjoy the face of fear.

True Bug touches you *in ways you don't want to be touched.*

True Bug plan of attack is more, more, more.

True Bug battle cries----

-excerpt from ***The Thing About Bugs***

In Kafka's parable of The Imperial Message, the Kaiser, on his deathbed, sends a message intended only for you, you who inhabit the most remote corner of his kingdom. He whispers the message to his most trusted messenger, who confirms its content by whispering it back to the dying Kaiser. The Kaiser nods his approval, and the messenger sets forth - "a strong man, an indefatigable man" - pushing his way through the mobs of subjects who have assembled to witness the Kaiser's death.

The symbol of the Imperial Sun radiates from his breast: and if only he could reach the open fields, "how quickly would he fly". But the multitudes are too vast, their number knows no end. The imperial palace is built from circle after circle of mediation, each with its own obstacles and exhaustions, rules of access and exit. Stairs, courts, walls, palaces, then more stairs, walls, courts and palaces: "and so on, through the turning of the millennium". And even then, beyond the outermost gate, remains the Imperial city, filled with its own crush of bodies, all going, it seems, in the wrong direction. Nobody could ever get through, "above all, with the message of a dead man".

So it is that the only ears who ever hear the Kaiser's last gasp are those of the messenger and the Kaiser, producing a charmed circle that collapses into a closed feedback loop. The urgent message, the last words from the mouth of power, confronts the degrading, humbling, reductive reality of communications entropy, the diminution of legendary significance by the untamed frictions of material reality.

There are many who predict that the radiomaker in the year 2000, wearing the blazing emblem of the Rundfunksonne, will be left in the same position as Kafka's Kaiser: propped up in death's bed, plugged into an artificial respirator, pronouncing dramatic Last Urgent Messages cast out into endless rings of multimedia interference, culminating in dead air, a last gasp transmitted only to the medium itself, our trusted messenger, old mother radio, a medium which is, herself, by all accounts, on the fade.

It was not so long ago that radio was listed as one of the so-called "new media" and yet, inevitably, there is a subsequent and very highly capitalized body of newer media, and thus we are subjected to endless solemn pronouncements of what must die - or at least undergo radical organ transplantation - if the new body is to reach its full investment value, all of which is compounded, of course, by the ancient millenarian craving for an absolute erasure, world degree zero, year 2000.

And so the self-appointed prophets of cybertopia declare their litanies of the dead: the death of the body, the death of sensation, the death of philosophy, the death of narrativity, and, most certainly, by implication, the death and decay of the radiophonic art of the hearplay, if not from outright competition, than from PLAIN OLD, OLD AGE, just too many ancient echoes, too many dull and deadly vibrations, too many layers of past power, too many rings of resistance, entropy and decay, above all with the message of a dead man.

But the bad news is also the good news, since radio has, after all, been shot through with the dead for a very long time, and an old corpse is hard to kill. In fact, when left to its own devices, such a dead weight will soon begin to transform itself, whether by chemistry or magic, into something other than a corpse, *as now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs.*

(voice over fogscape):

Fog, or loss of visibility, puts the coastal navigator to the supreme test, and requires precautions at sea that are all too often neglected.

Fog fills the most experienced mariner with uneasiness and may paralyze a beginner with unwarranted panic.

Fog may thicken gradually, but it is more likely to approach as a low, gray bank of clouds that may blot out landmarks before it envelops the ship. Cut out social chatter, sound the foghorn regularly and examine the chart for bell or whistle buoys. Advise passengers that foggy conditions are normal. Panic is not permitted in any quarter of the vessel, above all when the need to communicate remains acute.

When fog deepens, the nervous system reaches what is known as condition VICTOR CHARLIE. Expel waste.

Discharge passengers.

Refrain from smoking cigarettes until you get to the Hotel.

To hear is to obey, but to obey, you must learn to believe your compass.

The compass points only in one direction while the ship revolves about the card.

The bell sings fear while the buoy sings pleasure.

Thank you for your attention.

-excerpt from **Nothing But Fog**

In *The Book of Sand*, Borges unfolds the disquieting tale of a man who trades his Wiclif family Bible and his pension check for a Bombay book of Holy Writ whose pages multiplied to infinity. He soon becomes a prisoner of possibility, eliminating everything from his life save from the attempt to get to the bottom of the black hole of the Bombay book. But because the book is infinite, and he is finite, he quickly realizes that he is the one who will, inevitably, be terminated.

Almost ten years of nethead fever has left me with the creepy, sick feeling that the newest of the new media are Books of Sand, media that purchase individuality in exchange for the promise of infinity, and yet deliver oblivion. For when technology becomes the play, we are left with a stage full of highly articulate ciphers, ciphers that know how to give a good buzz, but that move --- nobody.

Against the impulse to surf the big, sexy wave to its big, sexy conclusion, perhaps now is the time to swim against the current, and quietly dive down once again into the darkness, inside and out, to defend the autonomy of radiophonic space, to celebrate the madly seductive tango between invisible Eros and insatiable Thanatos, to search for the most resonant sounds and words, some of them loud and terrible, that rush through us from out of the past, or bounce back, bugged out, from the future: *who is there?*

Possibly, and only possibly, because I am searching for an art of radio I have yet to hear, the future of broadcast radiophony is not to beat the tribal drum, or even one of the drums, for the branded electronic village, but rather to recompose, one by one, all those countless voices and ears, including our own, that have, for so many good reasons, gone to pieces; radiophony not as an art of direct transmission, but rather as the journey of an acoustic nobody that produces silence through echolocation, an art of

listening through the dark, of knowing where you are, who you are, when there is nothing to see, nobody at home: listen.... and repeat.

As the air thickens with the buzz of cyberhype and cyberwar, the play of these bodies that have already gone to pieces, that have already been to the other side of oblivion, one by one, nobody by nobody, is the only play that can clear the air of the insufferable drone tones. Such a play was surely inhabiting Beckett's character MOUTH, when MOUTH says:

and all dead still ... sweet silent as the grave when suddenly gradually she realiz- what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all dead still but for the buzzing when suddenly she realized ... imagine! words were coming a voice she did not recognize ... at first so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit could be none other than ... than her own ...