

The Darkness Within: First-person Speakers and the Unrepresentable*

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If there is union of all the faculties, the soul cannot communicate the fact, even if it so desires (when actually experiencing it, I mean): if it can communicate it, then it is not a union.¹

He lies not who speaks of unity with images, dreams and faces—he who stutters of unity.²

Many genres that favor first-person narration are described, somewhat routinely, as presenting a first-person *speaker* even if that same agent may also be the (only) receiver of the utterance. To this group belong solitary speeches or intrapersonal communication such as the private diary, talking to oneself or sub-vocalizing, (internal) praying or repeating what one hears—as well as literature that simulates or parodies these situations and speeches, that is, adopts aspects of “solitary” discourse in texts addressed to an audience. Since God and other spiritual beings have been unfashionable addressees in secular modern communication models, the rough scheme *the speaker* “I”—*the message—the receiver* “I” (or an “I—I” model) has been suggested as a way of describing such private discourses that do not add to the information we already have but serve other functions.³ This paradoxical scheme seems particularly interesting with respect to medieval, early modern and modern texts where the first-person speakers often emphasize the obscurity of the material that they—and they alone—have experienced, or their limited skills or understanding in approaching it.

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¹ *The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus*, in *The Complete Works*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Allison Peers (London: Burns & Oates, 2002), 105.

² Martin Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, changed new edition (orig. 1909; Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1921), 21.

³ E.g., Yuri M. Lotman, “Autocommunication: ‘I’ and ‘Other’ as Addressees,” in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 20–35, esp. 22.

Such genres—to be discussed in more detail in the second part of the article—do not fit well into the influential schema underlying Cicero's discussion on speaking well and *obscuritas* in *De inventione* (c. 84 BCE), a small treatise on rhetorical invention later embellished by medieval commentators. Cicero takes up an (already then) old topic as he explores the different kinds of court cases. The obscure case, *genus obscurum*, is one "in which either the auditors are slow of wit, or the case involves matters which are rather difficult to grasp."⁴ The communication model implied by this observation is strikingly minimalist as it mentions only the message itself (or the difficulty of "things") and the receiver—not the speaker—as possible sources of obscurity. This ideal of a good speaker served the aims of public speech and Roman education, but did not work quite as well in the later Christian culture of *humilitas* and its literary forms. In the medieval commentaries on *De inventione*, the short-comings in the communication model were augmented and the classical myth of the perfect speaker discredited. Commentators from Victorinus and Grillius in the fourth and fifth centuries to Thierry of Chartres in the twelfth century added a third component of obscurity: *imbecillitas loquentis*, that is, speakers who do not understand what they are saying.⁵ Such speakers may curtail a presentation excessively, fall into inchoate verbosity or offer extremely convoluted arguments.

Although obscurity is treated as a vice in these discussions, many authoritative writers participated in cultivating it as a virtue. This is not just the legacy of the early Christian confessional practices—Saint Augustine famously excavating the "dark areas" of memory images in the mind (e.g., *Confessiones*, Book 10);⁶ such themes and forms of literature also

⁴ Cicero, *De inventione. De optimo genere oratorum. Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (1947; London: Heinemann and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.15.20.

⁵ Thierry of Chartres, *Comm. S. De inv.* 1.15.20, in *The Latin Rhetorical Commentaries*, ed. K. M. Fredborg (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988), 110. See Päivi M. Mehtonen, *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature* (Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2003), 77–79, for a discussion of the other mentioned sources.

⁶ On the vaguer concepts of "self" and "identity," see, for instance, Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1997). It has been suggested that the early Middle Ages "introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity" (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 131); and that the medieval confessional practices supported strong "techniques of the self" as individual sinners were required to employ various means of publicizing their inner

leaned on classical *topoi* in presenting the speaking consciousness and body.⁷ Moreover, the notion of a "sender I – receiver I" communication is an interesting case within the *obscuritas* tradition. Consider: a vague prayer, not understood by the one who prays? An obscure diary, not grasped by the diarist him or herself? Indeed, this is in a nutshell a feature not uncommon in mystical literature and the modern novel was influenced by it (from Robert Musil to Samuel Beckett). While genuinely solitary and personal voices remain private and unshared in real life, I will suggest that much first-person literature that balances between narrative and non-narrative forms (e.g., meditative essays, "descriptions" of an inner state, and fiction that adopts such forms) in fact emulates such "I–I" communication.

The links between first-person speech and difficult or obscure language also exist in modern theory (without references to medieval or early modern material). Yuri Lotman's discussion of "autocommunication" or "I–I" system is an extension and critique of an old-school communication model that assumed, according to Lotman, that before the act of communication there exists information or a message known to "me" (the sender) and not to "you" (the receiver). However, in autocommunication the subject is transmitting a message to itself. Such communication is at work, for instance, in diary jottings ("which are made not in order to remember certain things but to elucidate the writer's inner state"), a prayer,⁸ or a second reading of a familiar text. In all these cases, the message is reformulated and acquires new meanings in the process. Particularly interesting here is Lotman's observation that such autocommunication often tends to be condensed and difficult, even cryptographic, as it does not have to be explained in detail but may still foster a sense of individual existence and self-discovery.⁹ Likewise, some lin-

thoughts and desires (Foucault, discussed in Kim Atkins, ed., *Self and Subjectivity* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], 208). Such views are stimulating but also so general that they do not lend themselves to the exploration of the ultimate difficulty and construction of the textual I, in its individual occasions and their diverse practices.

⁷ See, for example, Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁸ Although a prayer "may be thought of as a message to an external powerful force rather than a message to oneself," it is discussed by Lotman as an "I–I" communication. It does not require vocalization to be communicated and it does not add to the information we already have; its functions serve other ends (Lotman, "Autocommunication," 30).

⁹ Lotman, "Autocommunication," 20–21, 32.

guists have suggested that related phenomena such as intrapersonal communication or inner speech are often radically elliptic; inner speech "does not possess any separate, idiosyncratic, logical and grammatical structure."¹⁰

These features lend themselves readily to stylization in what could be called pseudo-autocommunication, which emulates the unstructured and unclear features of "private" discourse even when it is addressed to an audience. In the Middle Ages to such difficult and obscure material, in both Cicero's and Lotman's sense, belonged the attempts to speak of spiritual inner states that were known to the speaker alone but were under strong cultural and communal pressure to be made public for the benefit of a religious or other cause (to meet, for instance, the demand for hagiographic heroes or role models). Much early mystical literature was close to obscure oral speech and "I-I" communication whereas in the later Middle Ages and early modern period the forms of first-person narration had gone through a process of *letterarizzazione*, becoming established *topoi* and devices of a particular poetics.¹¹ While focusing strictly on first-person narration—and leaving aside such vaguer concepts as "self" or "subject"—this essay takes liberty in detecting evolving forms and manifestations of obscure presentation in both medieval and modern material, the latter directly influenced by the former.

The first part of this chapter illustrates cases of the "framed I," where the first-person voice is typically presented speaking in direct discourse embedded in a narrative frame. The second part then discusses more

¹⁰ Roman Jakobson, "The Sound Shape of Language," in *Selected Writings VIII* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), 82. See H. Porter Abbott's definition of (Samuel Beckett's) autography or autographical reading as responding to "writing not as a mode of recovery or reconstruction or even fictionalizing of the past but as a mode of action taken in the moment of writing" (*Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1996], x). Such prose invites the reader to think of autobiography, yet repeatedly sabotages both the narrative character and historical authority of autobiography (2, 11).

¹¹ This is vast claim that cannot be documented in the limited space available here. For related work with different materials, see Päivi M. Mehtonen, "The Apophatic First-Person Speaker in Eckhart's Sermons," in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Ranković et al. (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies Press, 2012), 79–96; and eadem, "Speak Fiction: Rhetorical Fabrication of Narrative in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britannie*," in *Medieval Narratives Between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe, c. 1100–1400*, ed. Panagiotis A. Agapitos and Lars Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2012), 81–101.

complex examples of the "unframed I," where the first-person narration—stressing the difficulty of its construction—dominates the text. The seemingly small word *ego-ich-I* thus evokes a bundle of issues regarding the content, form and the speaker in a text, from the allegedly difficult *materia* to the self-proclaimed *imbecillitas loquentis*. How does the (re-presented) mind think of and express itself and its inner states? What is "I" and how did it become such?

The Framed "I": Interior and Exterior Action

In early and high medieval long narrative literature—from romance to mystical texts—the first-person speech is often framed as direct discourse embedded in a third-person (or combined third and first-person) context. There is a significant division of work in romance structure: in the embedded direct discourse the first-person narration works as a medium for handling vaguer materials of inner action, fantasy and vision than are allowed in the frame narrative. However, even in the frame narrative the "I" can be an elusive category. In the historical romance, a shift of narrator may serve as a stylistic effect when the writer is processing and interpolating pre-existing material. For instance, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia regum Britanniae*, c. 1135–1138), the main teller is referred to with "I," "Geoffrey of Monmouth," and "he." The seemingly simple and pseudo-chronological plot offers various cases of first-person narration, sometimes interrupted with epic interventions in the third person.

... as *I said*... Geoffrey of Monmouth will not be silent even about this [the adulterous relation of Mordred, king Arthur's nephew, with Queen Ganhumara], most noble earl, but, just as *he found it* written in the British book and heard from Walter of Oxford, a man very familiar with many histories, he will tell, in his poor style, but briefly, of the battles the famous king fought against his nephew, when he returned to Britain after his victory.¹²

¹² "... dixi ... Ne hoc quidem, consul auguste, Galfridus Monemutensis tacebit, sed ut in praefato Britannico sermone inuenit et a Waltero Oxenefordensi, in multis historiis peritissimo uiro, audiuit, uili licet stilo, breuiter tamen propalabit, quae proelia inclitus ille rex post uictoriam istam in Britanniam reuersus cum nepote suo commiserit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* [*De gestis Britonum* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*)], ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright [Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007], 246–49; emphasis added).

On the one hand, shifts from the first to the third person may serve stylistic purposes as when the narrator concedes his own poor or clear style. On the other, they may follow from the fact that the writer is reworking pre-existing material; he may simply substitute his own ego for that of his source, or he "inherits" the first-person narration with the older *materia* he is using.¹³

In addition to such shifts at the main level of narration, Geoffrey's *Historia* also contains embedded speeches and letters where the characters speak in the first person. Thus the narrator's task is to manage two modes of *materia*, the (pseudo)historical chronology of the British kings and the embedded direct speech acts of the characters. For my gradually evolving argument it is important to observe that it is this level of embedded speech acts that contains the most fabulous tales, future tenses, obscure prophecies and hypothetical events. In other words, verbatim speeches, letters or dialogues introduce present-tense discourse into a past-tense frame narrative. Thus the narrator of Geoffrey's *Historia* is only partly reliable when he (repeatedly) mentions that he is using unsophisticated, brief and clear narration, claiming to omit material that some of his predecessors have treated "with sufficient prolixity."¹⁴ In the *Historia*, this prolixity and ambiguity is the privilege of the characters' direct discourse. The characters that speak and write directly are freer to produce the kinds of verbal prolixity, lofty style, lies and *irrealis narratio* that are unrepresentable in the main narrative of Geoffrey's history.¹⁵ Nowhere is this as obvious as in Merlin's obscure prophecies and the "ambiguity of his words" (*ambiguitas uerborum*), which form the longest reported verbatim speech in the work and depict destruction, bloodshed, new worlds, speaking forests and stones and dragons carrying the naked giant.

¹³ Cf. Leo Spitzer, "Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors," *Traditio* 4 (1946): 414–22; and Mehtonen, "The Apophatic First-Person Speaker," 79–96.

¹⁴ "satis prolixè" (*The History of the Kings of Britain*, 15, 47, 129–30).

¹⁵ *Irrealis narratio* consists of verbalizations of experience that is unrealized "either because it is predicated as taking place in the future or because it is in some sense hypothetical." Dreams and visions also belong to the realm of *irrealis* (unreal) narration (Suzanne Fleischman, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990], 104–05, 112). In Geoffrey's *History*, hypothetical sequences of events also occur in speeches reported indirectly by the narrator, but hardly ever otherwise in the first-level narration. See Mehtonen "Speak Fiction."

In the Middle Ages there were, of course, authoritative models for such narration in the prophets of the Old Testament or the Book of Revelation of the New Testament. These were often referred to in medieval commentaries as prime examples of *obscuritas*. In his commentaries on Ezekiel and Hosea, for instance, Saint Jerome (c. 348–420) uses the Ciceronian division of *genus obscurum* to point out the forms of obscurity in the Book of Ezekiel—a text that deals with visions that excite and perturb the prophet's imagination: a ball of fire encircled by radiance, strange creatures half man, half beast, the eating of a scroll, godlessness. The commentator nonetheless emphasizes that it is the reader's duty to attain a true awareness of what the things described are in fact intended to convey.¹⁶ What Jerome does *not* mention is that the Old Testament prophets—Ezekiel and Hosea included—are good examples of obscure first-person narration and shifting points of view between "I" and "he." In the Bible, too, fabulous and obscure narration is often the province of the first-person singular.

Just as in Merlin's speech in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, the first-person speaker is (usually) presented as the sole witness to the narrated events in religious vision literature. Their reporting becomes a sort of stylized autocommunication as the "I" is not communicating a paraphrasable narrative of action or a considered message but pieces of something it attempts (or presents itself as attempting) to decode while presenting it. For instance, the *Frauenmystik* of the high Middle Ages often presents a frame narrative where somebody—repeatedly—poses the visionary a question; then the answer (the "content" of the vision) is presented in first-person narration, as in this dialogue between Anna von Munzingen and Else von Neustadt:

Then the Sister asked her whether she could recall anyone. She answered: "I cannot even recall myself well. I don't know where the mind and heart go, except simply in him. My soul rests in God and knows all things in him, and then I see the purity of my soul and that it is without blemish." . . . The Sister asked again what he would look like if she saw him with her outer vision. She said: "He appears as a beautiful and gentle young man, and the room is full of angels and saints. He sits next to me and looks at me compassionately."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Comm. in Hiez.* 13, Praef., CCSL 75:1, 606; *Comm. in Osee* 1.ii.16, 17, CCSL 76, 29.

¹⁷ "Da fragte sie die Schwester, ob sie dann jemand's gedenken könnte. Da sprach sie: 'Ich kann dann meiner selbst nicht gut gedenken. Wohin Sinn oder Herz komme, als allein in ihn, das weiß ich nicht. Meine Seele legt sich dann in Gott und weiß alle Dinge in ihm, und dann sehe ich die Lauterkeit meiner Seele und daß sie ohne alle Flecken ist' . . . Da fragte wieder die Schwester, wie der wäre, den sie mit äußerem Gesicht sähe. Da sprach sie: 'Er erscheint wie ein schöner liebevoller

Here the alleged uncertainty and hesitation of the speaker is an important part of the message, together with the "plot" of the vision. Whereas the frame narrative focuses on the *vita exterior* of the characters or their communities, the *vita interior* as presented by the first-person narrators bustles with the fuzzier activity of allegedly ineffable visions, obscure fantasies and (either physical or intellectual) difficulties in describing these. This is evident in the following report by Alpais of Cudot (1150–1211), embedded in the "editor's" narrative frame of her life; the speaker proceeds repetitively in the process of seeing inner things.

But it seems to me that I report to you the visions I see in my repose as happening in the manner I report them. But what they refer to or what they mean or what most of them want and whether they have occurred . . . or been established in the manner or order in which they appear to me to have occurred or been established, this I do not know well. But whatever the truth of this thing may be, this one thing I know, that I am not deceived or deceiving; for what I say to you, I see as I say it, and I say as I see it.¹⁸

The processes of reporting, experiencing and interpreting in the first-person narration mingle, as if these deeds simultaneously legitimate each other.

The self-conscious use of such materials and rhetoric deviates from both ancient and medieval ideals of truthfulness in discourse. In the old controversy about whether speeches should be accepted in historical writing or not, the negative answer is interesting for a student of first-person speech: if history explores the sequences of cause and effect—as for instance the Greek historian Polybius (c. 200–118 B.C.E.) claimed it should—then speeches should be excluded from historical accounts because they are obviously invented, displays of the historian's oratorical

Jungling, und die Kammer wird voll von Engeln und Heiligen. Er sitzt bei mir und sieht mich gar gütig an," (Anna von Munzingen, "Die Chronik der Anna von Munzingen," ed. J. König, *Freiburger Diözesan Archiv* 13 [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1880], cited in Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 105; my translation).

¹⁸ "Visiones quidem, quas vobis refero, sicut michi videtur, sic in requie mea fieri video, sicut eas refero. Set quid pretendant aut quid significant vel quid sibi velint plures earum et utrum eo modo vel ordine fiant . . . aut administrentur, quomodo vel ordine michi fieri vel administrari videntur, non satis agnosco. Quomodocumque autem se rei veritas habeat, hoc unum scio, quod nec fallor nec fallo, quin ea, que vobis dico, sic videam sicut et dico, et sic dicam sicut et video" (Alpais von Cudot [IV.xvii, in Elisabeth Stein, ed., *Leben und Visionen der Alpais von Cudot [1150–1211]* [Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1995], 215; my translation).

skills rather than the transcription of words actually spoken.¹⁹ This attitude was already contested in medieval historical narrative (e.g. Geoffrey of Monmouth), and in mystical treatises: the first-person narration becomes an authoritative form for the description of things seen in visions and relating to the interior person as a space where the narrative rule of cause and effect does not hold.

First person narration also offered latitude and license for modes of imagination which were seen as excessive in the traditional education of the *trivium*: visions, fantasies and utopias. In medieval school rhetoric and arts of poetry, the topic of *obscuritas* was often mentioned. The aspiring writer was warned against the pitfalls of vices that ran counter to the rule of clarity: lying (i.e., excessive fiction), discontinuity, inconsistency, prolixity and obscurity in writing.²⁰ Some of these features became virtues and markers of authenticity or spiritual clarity, however, in literature depicting inner states of mind and events that might appear inexplicable to the speakers themselves.

The examples cited above from the *Chronicle of Anna von Munzingen* and the visions of Alpais of Cudot belong to the genre of *Gnadenvita* and are fluent in depicting the godhead, yet repetitive to the point of hyperbole in expressing the "I." In other words, not God but the "I" is the ultimate unrepresentable. The first-person speaker remains something that modern textual theory calls "supranarratable": something that defies narrative, as for instance in the specifics of highly charged emotional scenes—or even "the antinarratable": something that transgresses social laws or taboos and for that reason remains unspoken. The medieval mystical "I" is a similar phenomenon; the pronoun is ubiquitous on the surface of the texts but as soon as one starts focusing on it, it begins to appear as a repetitive act that tells less about the person or "self" and more about the metaphysical quest of a community that acknowledges the limits of language and understanding. This was also pointed out by later mystics such as Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582): human beings go about "like silly little shepherd-boys, thinking we are learning to know something of Thee when the very most we can know amounts to nothing

¹⁹ See Eric MacPhail, "The Plot of History from Antiquity to the Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001): 7–8.

²⁰ John of Garland, *Parisiana poetria* 5.301–302, ed. and trans. T. Lawler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); cf. Mehtonen, *Obscure Language*, 103–22.

at all, for even in ourselves there are deep secrets which we cannot fathom."²¹

Herein lies an important difference between mysticisms. The written "I" in the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart or John of the Cross is "rationalist" in its methods of disseminating the spiritual message. Although mystical obscurities, states of unknowing and transcendent silences beyond the capacities of human language are constantly evoked, the writers themselves proceed like scholars and masters of their topic. When Eckhart preaches the limited possibilities of human language to capture spiritual realms in his sermons, the first-person speakers therein are nevertheless able to muster up coherent (logical and rhetorical) paradoxes in elegant and uninterrupted narration. The sublime themes and issues are not narrated as radically interrupting the speaking "I." To put it succinctly, aberration is not among the devices favoured by these prose writers.

In the women mystics, states of unknowing that contaminate the very act of speaking and the (rhetorical) presentation of the *imbecillitas loquentis* as a virtue are more common. The language of the excerpt from the *Chronicle of Anna von Munzingen* cited above, for example, is lucid although the passage develops the theme of uncertainty. The style of the passage from the visions of Alpais of Cudot likewise resonates with the theme, and is effective even when it is repetitive and tautological. The later phases of mystical discourse emphasised these aspects even more.

The Unframed I

However clearly I may wish to describe these matters which concern prayer, they will be very obscure to anyone who has no experience of it.²²

Remarkably, the issues of first-person narration and the legitimization of obscure literary forms lie at the heart of modern medievalism and the

²¹ "Y andamos acá como unos pastorcillos bobos, que nos parece alcanzamos algo de Vos, y debe ser tanto como nonada, pues en nosotros mismos están grandes secretos que no entendemos" (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 4.2, trans. E. Allison Peers [New York: Image Books, 1989], 82; Santa Teresa, *Las moradas*, Colección Austral (1939; Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1985) 4.2, 54).

²² "Por claro que yo quiera decir estas cosas de oración, será bien oscuro para quien no tuviere espiriencia" (Teresa of Avila [Teresa de Jesús], in *The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus*, in *The Complete Works*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Allison Peers [London: Burns & Oates, 2002], 62; *Libro de la Vida* 10.9, ed. Dámaso Chicharro, 7th ed. [Catedra: Letras Hispánicas, 1987], 189).

reception of medieval mysticism in the earliest avant-garde circles of the 1900s in central Europe. Mysticism fits well with the agenda of anti-realism and the search for an anti-Cartesian expression of inner states, as part of the critical scrutiny of language (*Sprachkritik*) and linguistic experimentation. The edition of Meister Eckhart's texts (1903) by the cultural critic and anarchist Gustav Landauer, for instance, and the anthology of mystical texts (1909) published by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, philosopher or theologian of secularism, were related to such projects near the circles of early German-speaking expressionism. Buber presents his edition and translation of *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (*Ecstatic Confessions*), which includes many chapters on woman mystics from Hildegard of Bingen to Teresa of Avila and Anna Katharina Emmerich, as bringing together "entirely forgotten documents" and the Middle Ages are well represented by the mostly first-person texts of the German, Italian, English, Swedish, Dutch and Spanish mystics. These writers, says Buber, undertake "a work on the impossible, a creation in the dark."²³ Buber's interest stemmed from Jewish mystical literature (Hassidism) as well as contemporary Austrian-German *Sprachkritik* (as exemplified in the work of Fritz Mauthner and Buber's good friend Landauer); in his doctoral dissertation of 1904 Buber had addressed the problem of individuation in Nikolaus of Cusa and Jakob Böhme, late medieval and early modern thinkers and mystics who had, according to Buber, founded the new metaphysics of the individual.

The anti-realist and anti-narrative ethos emerging from this background and pre-Freudian empiricist psychology at the turn of the century kindled an interest in Europe in old narrative forms of presenting the "I."²⁴ The vast literature of medieval and early modern inner visions represented a combination of inwardness and the supernatural (or hypernatural), without the burden of coherent plots or detailed description

²³ "eine Arbeit am Unmöglichen, eine Schöpfung im Dunkel" (Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 21).

²⁴ Judith Ryan has explored the influence of empiricist psychology and captures well its literary consequences (with reference to later writers such as Franz Kafka, Gertrude Stein and Robert Musil): "In response to the empiricists' dissolution of familiar categories of thought, they invent new linguistic techniques and experiment with new literary structures. If there is no subject in the conventional [i.e. post-Cartesian] sense, there can be no conventional language; similarly, if there is no self, there can be no traditional plot, no familiar character development" (*The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991], 3).

of events and places. For instance, in the introduction to the *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, Buber claims that the mystic's "creation in the dark" is not a divinely ordered act of unity but consists of something more immanent and valuable: the utterances of a singular human being transmitted in language to another human being. No trans-human unity legitimates these speeches; they are unique and unified in themselves. In the text of a mystic we simply receive "the word of the I."²⁵ Conscious that the mystical texts were seldom actually *written* by the speaking "I," the early Buber—anticipating his later dialogic philosophy—emphasizes the linguistic and intersubjective nature of this transmission.

This early twentieth-century reception of medieval and modern mysticism and appreciation of the ways it cherishes the unrepresentable (or its "attempt to say the unsayable"²⁶) influenced European linguistic literature in the decades to come; apart from German literature, the works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are eminent examples.²⁷ The late medieval and early modern mystical discourses provided Beckett, especially, with models of autocommunication for further stylization. To the forms of the "framed I," presented in the first part of this essay, must be added influential examples of an "unframed I" where the uncertainty and obscurity of the first-person speaker becomes the dominant mode.

Unspeakers

"I am straining every nerve, sisters, to explain to you this operation of love, yet I do not know any way of doing so."²⁸ Resembling a Beckettian sentence in its bareness and negation, this sentence could have been

²⁵ "das Wort des Ich" (Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 6).

²⁶ "Versuch, das Unsagbare zu sagen" (Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, 18).

²⁷ For "godless mysticism" in German literature (Robert Musil, Heinrich Mann, Gerhart Hauptmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, etc.), see Uwe Spörl, *Gottlose Mystik in der deutschen Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997). On the direct connections of *Sprachkritik*, Joyce and Beckett, see, for example, Linda Ben-Zvi, "Biographical, Textual, and Historical Origins," in *Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 137. The attraction especially of the young Beckett to medieval writers was obvious: his early prose and poetry were inspired by the complex forms of the mystics, troubadour poetry, Dante, and Chaucer.

²⁸ "Deshaciéndome estoy, hermanas, por daros a entender esta operación de amor, y no se como" (Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle* 6.2, 135; Santa Teresa, *Las moradas* 6.2, 96).

spoken by Molloy, in the first part of the Beckett trilogy (1951–1953), whose language gradually becomes a peculiar autocommunicative exercise while the reader follows his monologue; it could also have been spoken by the even more fragmented narrator of the third part of the trilogy, *The Unnamable* (1953), who is constantly bothered by the bodily pain of speaking and understanding: "I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot rise my hand from my knee."²⁹

However, the author of the above-cited sentence is a woman and a mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila, who presents herself struggling with narration in her well-known spiritual works *Interior Castle* (*Moradas*, 1577) and *Life* (*Vida*, 1562–1566), where the spiritual quest is presented by a first-person autobiographer who frequently describes herself in states of anamnesis and epistemological doubt. Although the comparison of Teresa and Beckett may at first seem mutually unfruitful, neither of them here represents just herself or himself; they stand rather for two distinct yet interrelated traditions of pseudo-autocommunication: the critique of conventional language in mysticism and in avant-garde literature.³⁰

The stylization of the "I–I" discourse is evident in the ways in which communication itself is thematized, beginning with doubting the reasons for speaking and the existence of an external audience. Thus Teresa orients herself towards her community as an audience: "I do not know why I have said this, sisters, nor to what purpose, for I have not understood it

²⁹ Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," in S. Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy*. *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (Picador: Pan Books, 1979), 276.

³⁰ The vast Beckett scholarship somewhat surprisingly links his writing specifically to Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Meister Eckart, John of the Cross or Angelus Silesius. See for instance the contributions in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 90–134; and John D. Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 196–97. In discussions of negative theology as well as postmodern philosophy and fiction, the only (cursory) reference to medieval woman mystics known to me is by Joy Morny "Conclusion. Divine Reservations," in Coward and Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 255–57. In Beckett studies St. Teresa's name is briefly mentioned by Mary Bryden, "Beckett and Religion," in *Samuel Beckett Studies*, 166.

all myself."³¹ Teresa often refers explicitly to things described in *mística teología* but concedes her inability to use or understand "the proper terms" therein; instead, she sometimes finds it a help to "utter foolishness."³² Beckett's Molloy likewise feels "like a fool who knows neither where he is going nor why he is going there" and takes the authorial suspicion a step further: "Sometimes you would think I was writing for the public. [...] And I said, with rapture, here is something I can study all my life, and never understand."³³ Not only is the existence of a clear message and audience questioned; at times the speaking I appears radically plural: Teresa's speaker suffers from noises in the head whereas in the Beckett trilogy the speaker conducts internal arguments with himself as for instance happens at the end of *The Unnamable*. As Lyons and others have observed, such a division of voices or a "super-voice" characterises Beckett's heroes: one part of the speaking consciousness wants to halt and "to lose himself in darkness and silence"; the other voice within him urges him to continue.³⁴

The doubting, seemingly reluctant and uncannily plural first-person speakers frequently refer to the indefinite parties commissioning or even pressing them to move from meditation to text production. "Only those who have commanded me to write this," reveals Teresa in her *Life* about the reverend spiritual fathers who asked her to write it, "know that I am doing so, and at the moment they are not here."³⁵ The motives for and processes of writing are constantly reflected, and in terms of inspiration and invention the motives could not be further from the romanticist inner spark which guides the poet-genius's hand. Both Teresa's and Beckett's I's write because they are told to do so. Teresa complains that it is hard for a woman who is writing simply what she has been commanded to use spiritual language: "Your Reverence will be amused to see

³¹ "No sé a qué propósito he dicho esto, hermanas, ni para qué, que no me he entendido" (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* 6.6.5, 171; Santa Teresa, *Las moradas* 6.6, 120).

³² "Con decir disbarates me remedio algunas veces" (*Life* 18.2, 106; *Libro de la Vida* 18.2, 247-48).

³³ Samuel Beckett, "Molloy," in *The Beckett Trilogy*, 156.

³⁴ Charles R. Lyons, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 104; Andrew K. Kennedy, *Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 145.

³⁵ "solos los que me lo mandan escribir saben que lo escribo, y al presente no está aquí" (*Life* 10, 67; *Libro de la Vida* 10.7, 188).

how stupid I am."³⁶ The demand for "published" reports of inner visions is expressed with acerbic irony:

I have done what Your Reverence commanded me, and written at length, on the condition that Your Reverence will do as you promised me and tear up anything that seems to you wrong. I had not finished reading through what I had written when Your Reverence sent for it.³⁷

The commissioner is given permission to erase or add freely³⁸ and readers are left to wonder what may have been altered or censored and, ultimately, whose text they are reading. The atmosphere of the beginning of Beckett's *Molloy* is similar, albeit slightly more depressing. The protagonist is in a room where somebody comes to take away the pages written by the first-person speaker.³⁹ The writer's anxieties with respect to his autocommunication—he does not know whether he is writing for the public or not—resemble those of the mystic.

Modern language theory and linguistics associate certain stylistic characteristics—repetition, obscurity, ungrammaticality and so forth—with autocommunication and inner speech, which raises the question of whether or not these characteristics also exist in the self-consciously stylized autocommunication of Teresa and Beckett. In comparing the tasks of translating the complete works Saint John of the Cross and his teacher Teresa, E. Allison Peers noted John's "crystal-clear expression" and his "logical and orderly mind," as well as "great objectivity." Whatever the last qualification may mean in the realm of mysticism, John's prose nevertheless has little in common with Teresa's Spanish prose, which, according to Peers, consists of inflammatory phrases; "outbursts of sanctified commonsense, humour and irony"; disjointed, elliptical, parenthetical and "gaily ungrammatical" sentences; repetition; semiphonetic transliterations of Latin texts; breathless sentences; disconnected observations, transpositions, ellipses as well as sudden suspension of

³⁶ "servirá de dar recreación a vuesa merced de ver tanta torpeza" (*Life* 11, 64; cf. 65, 204; *Libro de la Vida* 11, 193).

³⁷ *Life*, Letter, 299. This letter is not printed in the Spanish edition of *Vida* used here.

³⁸ *Life* 7, 47; 17, 100; *Libro de la Vida* 7.22, 168.

³⁹ The figure of "they" featured already in Beckett's early prose such as *The Expelled* and *Mercier and Camier*. On philosophical and existentialist interpretations of this figure as Heideggerian "lostness in the 'they'" (*Verlorenheit in das Man*), see Raili Eiovaara, *The Problem of Identity in Samuel Beckett's Prose: An Approach from Philosophies of Existence* (Helsinki: Arnales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 1976), 79, 126–34, 199; also Anthony Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 162–65.

thought.⁴⁰

Similar stylistic and compositional devices are at work in Beckett's prose, including the "grimly weighted precision" of its language, a reliance on the rhetorical figure of aposiopesis (an unexplained break into silence⁴¹), as well as the narrator's "difficulty organising his documentation."⁴² These features of mystical and literary first-person prose not only hyperbolize some features of autocommunication; they also continue traditional rhetorical strategies of *imbecillitas loquentis* such as pleading one's incapacity to handle the matter in order to capture the good will of the audience. In *De inventione*, moreover, Cicero recommended two options for beginning the speech if the speaker anticipates an obscure case: either particularly clearly—*perspicue*—by elucidating matters down to the last detail, or by employing the tactics of *insinuation* rather than a straightforward opening, thus winning the audience and the judge over not *perspicue* but *obscure*, by way of obfuscation and digression. In literature, such license to downright obscurity (or statements of obscurity) was not left unused. Both Teresa and Beckett combine stylistic obscurity and perspicuity in a masterful way; Stanley Cavell, for instance, has observed Beckett's *hidden literacy*:

The words strew obscurities across our path and seem willfully to thwart comprehension; and then time after time we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare—totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view.⁴³

What emerges is first-person prose that is both meditative and ironic in some way. Under the watchful control of some absent and non-visible "they," the first-person speakers in both Teresa and Beckett exaggerate their humility and ignorance in a way that contradicts their skill and egoism so blatantly that the result is irony and laughter: "I confess that others have written about it much better elsewhere, and I have felt great confusion and shame in writing of it, though less than I should."⁴⁴ A similar effect is produced by a narration of inner experience that is (alleged-

⁴⁰ Preface, in Teresa, *Life*, xiv, xviii, xxxvii–xxxviii.

⁴¹ See H. Porter Abbott, "Narrative," in *Samuel Beckett Studies*, 8, 15.

⁴² Susan Brienza, *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1987), 50, on *Murphy*.

⁴³ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119.

⁴⁴ "y habránlos escrito en otras parte muy mejor, yo lo confieso, y que con harta confusión y vergüenza lo he escrito, aunque no tanta como había de tener" (*Life* 12, 73; *Libro de la Vida* 12.7, 204–05).

ly) interrupted by lapses of poor memory and inoperative mnemotechnique.⁴⁵ This representation and fictionalizing of obscurity and the primal difficulty of speaking is so frequent in Teresa's work that it becomes both a theme and a technique. In terms of poetics, it resembles the "figure of evasion" Wolosky has found in Beckett's figure of the self as a challenge of representation. What emerges is not unitary essence but "a scene of intrarelation between the self and its images of itself."⁴⁶

Conclusion

The foregrounding of language in the representations of writing and speaking discussed here produces a *relative* ineffability and obscurity in certain modes of expression. Although it is possible to define *obscuritas* as a stylistic device,⁴⁷ it also appears as a vaguer effect of themes and forms such as pseudo-autocommunication. Further exploration of more material might reveal interplay between cases where the result actually is gibberish or "an unknown language" to the reader (for instance, Hildegard of Bingen's *lingua ignota*) and those where the speaker merely claims to be uttering nonsense, as in the cases discussed here.

Each new era up-dates its obscurity canons, and the avant-garde period of the early 1900s was no exception. Martin Buber, the admirer of world mysticisms in *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, was praised by a contemporary critic and fellow expressionist, Hermann Bahr, for his obscure language, his *dunkle Rede*, and the way he expresses the non-conceptual and silence in language—something that nineteenth-century positivist science and realistic literature had completely neglected and lost sight of.⁴⁸ Bahr wonders: why does a writer who has so much to say to his contemporaries say it in such a way that the reader must first translate the

⁴⁵ E.g., *Life* 11, 64–65; *Libro de la Vida* 11.6, 192–93. See also books 10 and 34 of the *Life/Libro de la Vida*.

⁴⁶ Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, 71, 74, 81.

⁴⁷ See Jan Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996): 101–70; John T. Hamilton, *Soliciting Darkness: Pindar, Obscurity, and the Classical Tradition*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 47 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Mehtonen, *Obscure Language*.

⁴⁸ The titles of the works of Buber's fellow expressionists included "The last I," "The self cannot be saved" (Bahr), and so forth. See Andreas Berlage, *Empfindung, Ich und Sprache um 1900. Ernst Mach, Hermann Bahr und Fritz Mauthner im Zusammenhang* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994).

words into *other words* in order to understand them? In reading Buber, even a native speaker of German must translate Buber's German prose before he or she can understand it.⁴⁹ Why bother? This question was tackled in medieval texts: why in the first place should one believe that obscure visions or incomprehensible texts are worth reporting and the effort of reading? The pleasure, excitement and humor involved in pseudo-autocommunication lead to an aesthetics of obscurity that deserves an independent exploration.

⁴⁹ Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus* (1916; München: Delphin-Verlag, 1920), 40–43.



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Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider,
and Alessandro Zironi

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