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Valentina Pagnan



CATCHING THE COLLAPSE OF TIME.
 READING ORNYTUS IN STATIUS' *THEBAID* 12
 THROUGH MALONE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S
THE UNNAMABLE

TIM NOENS

ABSTRACT · This article aims to propose an alternative strategy of reading Latin literature, which is based on theories recently developed by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. Haraway and Barad suggest a research practice in which texts are caused to interact beyond any obvious genealogy, studying them not only together but also one through another. The reading technique which they propose may be considered as a more 'aggressive form' of the intertextual approach used already throughout the study of Latin literature. Apart from a theoretical reflection, this article also wants to offer a first and preliminary attempt to illustrate the potential and value of the reading strategy. It works out a brief case study in which the Argive soldier Ornytus, who is introduced in Statius' *Thebaid* 12, is 'read through' a character named Malone in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*.

KEYWORDS: Literary Theory, Intertextuality, Karen Barad, Statius, Samuel Beckett.

INTRODUCTION: CATCHING THE COLLAPSE OF LINEAR TIME

IN chapter 10 of his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1967), Vladimir Nabokov tells about his experiences with *The Headless Horseman*, a Wild West novel by Captain Mayne Reid. As a child, he was very fond of the book that, as he willingly admits, has kept on enjoying him at later age. With a sense of nostalgia, he reminiscences about the arousal he felt as a young boy, when reading the book's colorful depiction of Louise, a *femme fatale*, whom he considered as his ideal woman. Looking up a specific passage in the novel, Nabokov re-reads how she stands "upon the edge of the *azotea*, (...), her twin breasts (...), sinking and swelling, her lorgnette directed ...". At this point, he abruptly pauses his reading and, surprisingly, mentions that the same "lorgnette" can be found "in the hands of Madame Bovary", suddenly "Anna Karenina has it" and then it comes "into the possession of Chekhov's Lady with the Lapdog and is lost by her on the pier at Yalta". The image of these three women, well-known for their tragic love affairs, consequently

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lead him to “Queen Guinevere, Isolda, a not quite merciless *belle dame*, another man’s wife, proud and docile, fashionable and fast”. Only thereafter, he continues with Louise (whose lorgnette is directed to the “horseman of her choice”, chatting with another lady ...).¹

Nabokov thus remarkably interrupts Louise’s story, triggered off by her pince-nez, to ‘ramble’ from a Wild West novel over 19th century realism and early modernism to medieval romances. Perhaps, these relations could be explained from the point of view of reception-aesthetics, but I do not believe that here Nabokov is primarily concerned with concrete *textual* connections. His rambling rather perfectly illustrates what we, more generally, can understand by his “*art of memory*”.²

Contrary to most (of the innumerable) memoirs published nowadays, *Speak, Memory* does not picture Nabokov’s life by chronologically listing up its main events. Especially within the individual chapters, he does not recoil from “violating linear continuity” and from putting “distant moments (in time) in contact”. An anecdote about his childhood in Russia, for example, reminds him of a man he met in America in the late 1930s, from where he jumps back to his adulthood which he partly spent in Berlin. Explicitly “blending remote periods in his life”, Nabokov underlines that, for him, the act/art of remembering relies on association, which enables him to see and “to create new patterns” and perspectives that would be kept concealed when simply respecting the course of time.³

As his reading of *The Headless Horseman* shows, the same principle governs the ‘literary part’ of his memory: Louise’s pince-nez evokes a (quite random) range of notorious female characters, who are associatively correlated in his mind regardless the literary-historical period or generic category to which they (originally) belong(ed). By merging Reid’s lady with other diverse figures derived from his memory, Nabokov succeeds at integrating a broad time span of literary texts into *one moment*. This illustrates his “refusal to believe in [linear] time” which, if we follow his reasoning, completely collapses during the act of reading.⁴ For Nabokov, reading, just as remembering in general, thus is a *process of association* during which we may not ‘rapidly walk’ through a text, only thinking of the ‘finish line’. We should, as Nabokov metaphorically expresses, pay attention to the many ‘in-

¹ Nabokov 1967, 293.

² Foster 1993 discusses ‘the art of memory’ in Nabokov’s entire oeuvre. He explores the close relation between writing and memory, focusing on the author’s “deliberate oscillation between fictive invention and mnemonic truth” (11).

³ Foster 1993, 186. He adds: “The very impossibility [of most events in his autobiography] as actual experience does express the autobiographer’s power to move (...) through remembered time”.

⁴ Foster 1993, 185.

triguing and miscellaneous butterflies' (mnemonic images) as well, which unexpectedly pop up on our way.¹

Nabokov's art of memory perfectly illustrates and formulates the central idea that lies behind the reading strategy which this article aims to propose.² I want to suggest a method of reading in which several texts are placed into a dialogue and interpreted one through another – not because there are any ties of reception between them but rather since they are connected through association by an individual reader (in this case, me). Instead of (comparatively) examining literary texts within their different literary-historical contexts, I seek to grasp the *one moment* they come together in my memory, so trying, as Nabokov continuously does throughout his autobiography, *to catch the collapse of linear time*.³

Taking the relations I establish, as individual reader as the starting point for the act of interpretation might seem in conflict with the conventions of academic discourse, which have encouraged (or obliged) us to avoid an (overly) explicit personal voice in our research. Literary philosopher William Irwin, for example, has warned us of “accidental associations” by the reader. He has concluded that they do not belong to the domain of science, implying that they should be ignored (he is one of the hikers, Nabokov would say, that walks through a mountain trail full of butterflies without seeing or wanting to see any of them).⁴ Recently, however, these conventions have been challenged. A sharp criticism has – maybe quite surprisingly – been formulated within the natural sciences where theorists Donna Haraway and Karen Barad have pleaded for an alternative (view on) research

¹ Foster 1993, 183-188. In *Speak Memory*, Nabokov is fascinated by a multifarious range of butterflies, which serves as a metaphor for the mnemonic images that show up while writing his autobiography. One of the butterflies he sees, for example, is called the *Parnassius Mnemosyne*, a butterfly, as Foster says (183), “whose name allusively combines artistic inspiration with memory”.

² I am well aware that *Speak Memory* is a ‘literary text’ and that Nabokov in the passage described above does ‘much more’ than simply ‘applying the art of memory’. Nevertheless, the way he uses mnemonic techniques (in an artistic mode) helps me thinking about what I am doing as reader (and scholar).

³ Whereas Nabokov immediately offers an extensive range of reminiscences, I will limit myself, as my title has already disclosed, in the third paragraph to one association (namely between *Theb. 12* and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*), which I will discuss in depth and see how it can become a fruitful tool of analysis. I aim to use the associative mechanisms that lie behind Nabokov's (autobiographic) writing technique as an interpretation strategy for (historical) literary texts. In the next paragraph, I will explain how this can work in practice.

⁴ Irwin 2001. Although Irwin admits that “accidental associations may certainly enhance our reading experience”, in the end he places them within the “creativity of art”, while “an allusion [in his view, references intended by the author] demands the precision of science” (297).

practice. Instead of neglecting or hiding the presumptions scholars irrevocably have, they should overtly recognize the role they play within the interpretative process. One way to do so, Barad and Haraway have interestingly suggested, is by “reading one text through another”, causing them to interact beyond any obvious genealogy.¹ Confronting, as 21st century scientists, texts and ideas from different historical periods and domains with each other, they have adapted Nabokov’s disbelief in linear time to academic research.² In a sense, Haraway’s and Barad’s proposed reading strategy can be considered as an attempt to dramatically open up the scope of intertextual studies, along the lines already suggested by, for instance, Don Fowler, when he asked: “Are our views of the opposition between rationality and emotion in the *Aeneid* really the same after Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock?”³

The value of this reading strategy is that it both provokes conventional ideas and attracts our attention to the text(s) itself (themselves). Just as Nabokov constantly blends memories to “create new patterns”, Haraway and Barad bring together diverse discourses in order “to produce something new, new patterns of thinking, while at the same time being very attentive to what it is that [the text] is trying to say to us”.⁴ The fact that Louise wears a lorgnette, for example, would probably remain unnoticed, if it would not have reminded Nabokov to Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, etc. Now, the associations give, at least, rise to the question why the narrator believes it is necessary to mention such a triviality, encouraging us to look at the pince-nez “with the utmost attention and interest” (as Sherlock Holmes phrases it in Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story ‘The golden pince-nez’).⁵

¹ Barad 2007, 28. See also Haraway 1994.

² Donna Haraway and Karen Barad respectively obtained their PhD in biology and quantum physics. Rather than doing experiments themselves, they were much more interested in the metaphors used by other scientists working in their fields. Analyzing the discourses within their research domains, they showed that scientific ‘writing’, ‘experiments’ and ‘methodologies’ are not as neutral or arbitrary as they sometimes are pretended to be. The scientist must understand, Haraway and Barad argued, that (s)he is part of what (s)he is doing and consider research as a ‘knowledge-making practice’. How “reading one text through another”, as Barad 2007 frequently calls it, precisely contributes to the recognition of the scholar’s role will be explained below.

³ Fowler 1997, 28. A similar thought has been suggested by Lowell Edmunds (2000) in the last chapter of his book *Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry*. He elaborates upon an essay written by Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and his Precursors’, in which Borges argues that Kafka’s works help us to understand texts by previous writers. Edmunds concludes that our modern interpretations of Roman poetry are inevitably ‘influenced’ by literary works that were written much later.

⁴ Interview with Karen Barad, included in the volume *New Materialism. Interviews and Cartographies*, edited by Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012.

⁵ Doyle 1928, 791.

THE ART OF MEMORY AS AN ACT OF MASTERY

But how does a reading strategy based on associations work in practice? What do Haraway and Barad exactly mean when stimulating us ‘to read one text through another’?¹ In what way does the personal voice of a scholar precisely fit within the requirements of academic research?

Contrary to what might be expected from a reading method that ‘simply’ relies on association, it does not plead for pure randomness, arbitrariness and chaotic rambling. Instead, turning the reminiscences I have as a reader into a useful tool of analysis requires a great amount of self-control and the willingness to *master my own memory*. Just as Nabokov, throughout his autobiography, obsessively attempts to catch the butterflies he sees in order to examine and categorize them,² I aspire to oversee the associations I make and comprehend the logical structure that lies behind them. Remembering is, thereby, not something that ‘just happens’, but turns out to be a measured act that spurs me to skillfully grasp the order where, at first sight, there was none.

Defining the exact ground of an association (mostly) demands attention for “fine details” (e.g. the lorgnette mentioned above). Two or more texts, as Karen Barad extensively argues, do never completely overlap (unless we reduce them to caricatures of themselves), but can only be said to be linked to each other when looking at very specific aspects of each of them. Poetically visualizing her focus on textual details, she compares it to ripples in a pond, which are caused by throwing two stones in it at the same moment: when the stones hit the water surface at some distance from one another, each of them creates circular waves that travel outward. Most of the waves simply extend without disturbing one another, while only at a few points the patterns produced by the fallen stones interfere. Barad recurrently returns to this physical phenomenon throughout her work to make metaphorically

¹ In what follows, I will especially discuss the work by Karen Barad 2007, who has methodologically elaborated and developed Haraway’s primary ideas (1997; 2004) about the reading method. The ‘texts’ to which she refers are mostly philosophical or theoretical works, placing ‘insights’ from different historical periods and research domains (e.g. natural and social sciences) into dialogue with each other, while I will exclusively work with ‘literary texts’. Though, regardless of which types of texts are used, the principles that lie behind the reading method remain the same.

² In his autobiography, Nabokov does not just ‘wait’ until ‘a reminiscence shows up’, afterwards ‘being glad that he has seen one’. He aims to comprehend why exactly two or more mnemonic images appear correlated and seeks to take control over his own memory. Hence, Foster 1993 (see p. 158 n. 3) speaks of the “autobiographer’s *power* to move through remembered time”, which quite strongly underlines Nabokov’s desire to understand and govern the mechanisms of his own memory.



clear that ‘reading one text through another’ does not mean that we should look for as many resemblances between them as possible. Just as most waves in the pond do not intersect, she openly admits that the texts she combines usually have very little in common. For her methodology, it is much more productive, she explains, to attentively concentrate on the one (or few) place(s)/moment(s) where they come together by precisely delineating the nature of their entanglement: why does an aspect of one text exactly remind one of a feature of another one?¹

Specifying what connects two or more texts only forms the point of departure in the reading strategy that Barad proposes. To explain the next step in her method, she draws once again the parallel with the stones landing in the pond: as a physician, she says, she does not simply want to ‘record’ the interference of some waves, but she also aims to ‘analyze’ *the effects* the superposition has on each of them. Translated to research practice, this means that it does not suffice to just ‘register’ the correlation of two texts and point out what aspects trigger the association. We should wonder in which way they (might) inform each other’s interpretation as well.

For, as soon as she has grasped the ground of the relation, Barad starts reading the textual details on which she focuses in the light of each other. She explicitly considers a specific element in one text as an interpretive frame that “helps her thinking” about some features in the other text. In practice, this entails that the questions she asks and the (hypothetical) answers she gives about one text are determined (and even shaped) by (her thoughts on) the other text. Barad realizes that many of these questions and hypotheses are often provocative – especially to herself as a scholar. By stimulating a dialogue between texts from different historical periods and domains, she forces herself to think ‘out of the box’, as she is suddenly compelled to examine a (textual) object in terms that are – semantically – totally alien to it. She sees herself paying attention to aspects that she apparently neglected during previous readings and suggesting meanings which she has not considered previously.²

¹ Barad 2007, 93: “Importantly, it is crucial that (...) one is attentive to fine details (...). What is needed are respectful engagements, not coarsegrained (*sic*) portrayals that make caricatures”.

² Barad 2007 sees the reading method as a self-confrontation. Forcing ourselves to approach a text from a different and unusual perspective, we start doubting the assumptions we have so far taken for granted and realize that the knowledge we have considered as ‘true and reliable’ has often been conventionally *made up or shaped* by the discourse, customs and practices within our research field. Reading texts through another is a way to ‘deconstruct’ our own prejudices and reveal, at the same time, alternative viewpoints and new interpretations. As Barad 2012, using a quite (or too?) aggressive metaphor, states it: “Knowing is (...) a cutting-together apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework [the text]”.



Following the – at first sight sometimes bizarre – associative paths that our memory maps out thus can possibly offer new and surprising perspectives on a text(ual detail) that generate alternative interpretations. Of course, this does not mean that we can just lump everything together, simply stating that ‘it is all the same thing’. On the contrary, aspects of each text are engaged in a dynamic relationality in which we explicitly define the correlation of the details on which we are focusing, being very attentive to what unites *and* separates them.¹ Not randomness and simplification, but *self-control, textual concentration* and *mastery* is, then, what the art of memory can add to research practice.

SHADES OF THE LITERARY PAST:
STATIUS’ ORNYTUS AND SAMUEL BECKETT’S MALONE

In the remainder of this article, I want to illustrate this reading strategy by elaborating upon a short passage from the final book of Statius’ *Thebaid*. Restricting my analysis to only a few verses will enable me to set out the mnemonic associations which these verses have triggered during the process of interpretation as systematically as possible.

As point of departure, I take the encounter between the Argive widows and Ornytus at the beginning of the twelfth book of Statius’ *Thebaid*. After the death of Polynices and Eteocles and the consequent end of the Theban war, the Argive women receive the terrible news that almost none of their husbands has survived. Desiring to grant their spouses a funeral, they decide to leave behind their homes and travel to the Theban battlefield themselves. The first person they meet on their journey is the – for the reader totally unknown – Argive soldier Ornytus, who is on his way back to Argos. He warns the women of the dangers they would face when pursuing their plans and strongly advises them to take the road to Athens, where they should ask king Theseus for help.

The encounter only lasts thirty verses and Ornytus disappears as abruptly as he showed up. Yet, his meeting with the Argive widows, as I will argue, sets the tone for the final book. It touches upon one of its central narrative issues: the (dis)continuity with the cruelty of the past.² Emerging as an em-

¹ Barad 2007, 92 emphasizes that, in order to successfully apply the reading method, we may not place the texts we are reading through another in a “static (...) relation to the other, or set one up as the other’s unmovable and unyielding foil”. She combines texts with the aim of reading them in the light of each other, but without denying that each of them keeps its own borders.

² The final book of the *Thebaid* is quite ambiguous, not precisely delineating whether we should read it as a reconciliation, that puts an end to the violence of the past, or rather as a



bodiment of the violence that happened before, Ornytus' presence immediately suggests that the pains, sufferings and horror of the previous books are not over yet. He confronts the women, thereby, with the savagery that the narrator had (implicitly) hoped they would make the readers forget.

As my title already revealed, I am going to work out this argument by reading the Ornytus passage through Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*.¹ This novel is the third part of a trilogy which begins with *Molloy* followed by *Malone dies*. Considered as a prototype of postmodern fiction, I probably could not have chosen a work that is more alien to the epic genre as this one: instead of notorious mythological heroes, it stages a first-person narrator whose name is never disclosed, so (presumably) being the unnamable of the title. Additionally, whereas the main theme of the *Thebaid's* narrative is immediately announced in the first verse (*fraternas acies*; the strife of brothers),² the reader does never know what *The Unnamable* is actually talking about, since (s)he is faced with an intangible literary universe that lacks a clear plotline.³ Nevertheless, I will argue that Beckett's novel, especially the first character that the unnamable encounters in the text, proves to be

continuation of the madness. This ambiguity, which seems to be anchored in the text itself, has caused an intensive debate in scholarship. While Vessey 1973 and to a certain extent Delarue 2000 and Pagan 2000 consider the last part of the text as a redemption, Ahl 1986; Dietrich 1999; Ganiban 2007; Hardie 1997; McNelis 2006 and, particularly, Hershkowitz 1998 and Henderson 2000 point out narrative elements that suggest the persuasive continuity of *nefas*.

¹ It is important to refer within this context to an illuminating chapter by Gervais 2013, 'Viewing Violence in Statius' *Thebaid* and the Films of Quentin Tarantino'. Therein, Gervais reads three episodes from the *Thebaid* in parallel with some scenes from films of Quentin Tarantino. Although Gervais' approach certainly shows similarities to mine, there are some crucial differences that should be pointed out (not because I think one approach is better than the other but to understand the different theoretical grounds that underlie both interpretations). First, Gervais is led to Tarantino via a theoretical framework ("cognitive film theory") through which he interprets the *Thebaid*; he sees similarities between Statius' epic and Tarantino-examples used by the theorists. In my case, the relation between Statius' epic and Beckett's novel will be unmediated, except by me as reader. This makes my approach more exclusively reader-centered than Gervais'. Secondly, and more importantly, Gervais defines and represents the relation between Statius and Tarantino merely as "a comparison", as if he wants to illustrate the 'filmic principles' within the *Thebaid* by way of a clarifying example from recent times. For me, by contrast, the relation is more profound, as Beckett will become a kind of 'interlocutor' of Statius within the dialogical process that reading is, that will determine the sort of questions I will ask the *Thebaid*.

² All translations are copied from A. D. Melville, Oxford 1992.

³ Josipovici 2015, 29 describes his experience when reading *The Unnamable* as follows: "It suddenly strikes us forcibly that something else has been going on, that at a more primitive level than that of plot and narrative, anecdote and character, something much more immediate and yet much more difficult to describe has been unfolding". For an extensive discussion of *The Unnamable*, see Kenner 1961.



stimulating to think about and impose meaning on Ornytus' function in Statius' epic.¹

The first question I must answer is why Beckett? What element in the final book of the *Thebaid* does trigger my association with *The Unnamable*?

To explain my reminiscence, we should depart, as Barad argues, from a specific aspect in Statius' epic, which is in my case the one verse and a half describing Ornytus noticing the group of Argive women for the first time (12, 145-146): *isque ubi mota novo stupuit loca sola tumultu / femineumque gregem* ("he was amazed / by a strange tumult in that lonely place, / a flock of women"). The Argive soldier is said to be stupefied (*stupuit*) by the "new tumult" (*novo ... tumultu*) that disturbs the entire place. His reaction, I believe, is completely understandable, since he is travelling via hidden roads (12, 143: *secreta per avia*) and had not expected to see anyone on his way, especially not a group of lamenting and panicking widows far from home. As a soldier, he is not used to 'female presence' outside the city walls, which makes the appearance ('the tumult') of the Argive women indeed surprising and 'new' to him.

But Ornytus is not the only one who is stunned by the arrival of the women. His astonishment might be shared by the reader, who has several reasons to consider the journey of the Argive spouses as a 'novelty' (cf. a *novus tumultus* in the epic) that goes against the running of the story and the mythological tradition. One reason, situated within the context of the narrative, is that their dominant role in the first half of the twelfth book seems to break with the until now by men monopolized plot. After five books mainly centered around male heroism (and violence) on the battlefield, the last part of the text begins with a storyline constructed around female characters from Argos who have played, so far, a relatively marginal role in the epic. This shift in gender (apparently) goes hand in hand with a 'new tone' that emerges in the narration: brutality, ambition and cruelty from the warfare episode seem to make space for sadness, forgiveness and love driving the widows' actions (e.g. 12, 120-121: *sed cuncta iacenti / infelix ignoscit amor*; yet love, ill-starred, could pardon everything).² The replacement of (male) hate by (female) mourning might be the positive element, the 'new sound', the narrator was hoping for in the eleventh book,³ where he wishes Poly-

¹ All the quotations from Statius' *Thebaid* follow the Teubner edition by A. Klotz - T. Klinckert 1973. Those from Samuel Beckett are copied from the edition published by the Everyman's Library 2015.

² For love as the mainspring for the widows' actions in the *Thebaid*, see Korneeva 2011.

³ Augoustakis 2010; Fantham 1999 and Pagán 2000 argue that female lament sometimes structurally interrupts the male voice of violence in the epic. Victoria Pagán records that the depiction of a war episode can be followed by what she calls an "aftermath narrative",

nices and Eteocles to vanish into oblivion after their fratricide,¹ so declaredly trying to let his readers ‘forget’ the horror to which the entire narrative had proceeded (11, 574-579).²

It is precisely this ‘newness’ in the last part of the text, astonishingly perceived by Ornytus *and* the reader, that strongly reminds me of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, particularly of the opening of the work. This novel begins with the unnamable narrator immediately making clear that the story he is about to create, though he does not know yet on what topic, will certainly be a ‘new’ one.³ The unnamable allegedly aims to break with the narratives which precede his in the trilogy, *i.e.* *Molloy* and *Malone dies*. He does not only recurrently emphasize to be embedded in the “now” (a word that

i.e. a “picture of the battlefield strewn with decaying corpses, weapons, horses, etc.” (424). These narratives are often dominated by female lament and mourning that offer a meaningful contrast to the previous instances of war. The narrator, surviving characters and readers get the opportunity to look back and ‘recover’ from what just happened. Pagan’s interpretation, considering female lament as a moment of reconciliation of/in the narrative, follows Vessey’s 1973 more positive reading of the final book, in which the widows’ actions symbolize “that evil is powerless when challenged by good” (133). A similar interpretation can be found in d’Espèrey 1999 who sees women in the *Thebaid* as “des figures de non-violence, dans la mesure où elles sont à la fois ‘pieuses’ et courageuses. Elles sont aussi un élément majeur de la redemption finale” (319). By contrast, Augoustakis 2010 and Fantham 1999, inclining towards a rather pessimistic reading of the epic, argue that female mourning sometimes can trigger even more violence and go hand in hand with feelings of revenge. In any case, at the moment the Argive widows meet Ornytus in the beginning of the twelfth book, it is not clear yet whether their actions will eventually reconcile the epic’s cruel warfare episodes, as the narrator seems to hope, or function as a catalyst of more madness. They are presented as a ‘new tumult’, which makes the reader wonder whether the narrative will take a ‘new’ direction (or not?).

¹ Walter 2014, 143: “Dafür markiert er das Ende des Kampfes umso nachdrücklicher mit einer wahren Anti-Musenandrufung, in der er nicht um Inspiration durch die Töchter der Mnemosyne, sondern um deren Gegenteil bittet: das Vergessen”. For the complex theme of remembrance/oblivion in Statius’ epic, see also Bessone 2011, 75-80; Ganiban 2007, 199-206; Henderson 1998.

² A second reason to be surprised by the appearance of the Argive women is because their arrival deviates from the traditional version of the myth. Of course, the desire to bury a beloved, fallen in war, is a common motive in the Theban cycle, but it normally concerns only Antigone, who is resolute to grant her brother the last rituals. Although Oedipus’ daughter, also later in the final book, searches for Polynices’ corpse, the narrator almost exclusively concentrates on the Argive widows (especially on Argia, Polynices’ wife), whose trip has no precedent in the mythological tradition (see Anzinger 2007, 301). For an extensive discussion of the narrative function of Antigone and Argia in the epic, see Bessone 2011, 210-213; Korneeva 2011, 184-193 and the chapter by Maniotti 2016b who discusses Argia’s and Antigone’s ‘sisterly appearance’ further on in the twelfth book.

³ Josipovici 2015, 31: “[The opening of *The Unnamable* makes clear] that it is time to start again, with a new voice, a new tone”.

frequently turns up in the first sentences of the novel), as if he and his story exist independently of the literary past; stating that he can only tell in the present tense, he even appears to exclude events that occurred before grammatically from his narrative. Also, he pretends to suffer from amnesia, which, he declares, disables him to insert 'reminiscences' to the first two parts of the trilogy in his narration (e.g. "Past happiness in any case has clean gone from my memory, assuming it was ever there", 334).

Obviously, the claims the unnamable makes about his narrative function in the trilogy are much more radical than the comments of the *Thebaid's* narrator on the appearance of the Argive women. Beckett's narrator really wants *Mollo* and *Malone dies* to be wiped out and declaredly seeks to build up a completely new narrative from the scratch.¹ Statius' widows, by contrast, are said to be returning to the Theban battlefield, a place the reader is already familiar with, and desire to bury their husbands, a deed that may be understood as an act of commemoration and memorialization. Yet, since the burial intends to reconcile the spirits of their husbands and grant them forgiveness for what they have done, the women's journey, in a sense, can be interpreted as a response to the narrator's hope of oblivion in the eleventh book. Just as the unnamable sees himself as an alternative that should erase what happened before, the widows are represented as a new tone/direction/tumult in the final book that could possibly 'modify' or 'rehabilitate' our memory of the epic's violence and, perhaps, 'overwrite' the cruelty that previously occurred with a 'happy end'.²

Now I have defined the ground of the entanglement, I can start reading *Theb. 12* in the light of *The Unnamable*. To understand Ornytus' role in the final book of the epic, a figure that is right away positioned vis-à-vis the new element, I believe I must first make a detour via Beckett's novel and

¹ Josipovici 2015, 32: "The unnamable finds himself speaking of 'having no memory of anything, (...) no knowledge of anything, no history'".

² The idea that the narrator wants to 'overwrite' the cruelty that happened during the warfare-episodes was already suggested at the end of the eleventh book, where the blinded Oedipus turns up again. The old Theban king is maybe the most notorious character in Statius' epic, especially because he evokes the fury Tisiphone in the first book and demands her to punish his sons, thereby instigating the fraternal war. At the end of the eleventh book, he comes forward again, yet this time addressing *Pietas*, asking the goddess clemency for what he did. In this way, the narrative seems to be re-started, as if the narrator wants to offer us, at the end of his epic, an entirely 'new', more 'peaceful' version of the Theban myth. For an extensive discussion of the speech dedicated to *Pietas* (and of the elements that make us immediately doubt whether the new version will be free of violence), see Anzinger 2007, 286-287; Dominik 1994, 134; Fantham 1997, 174.

examine the relation between the unnamable and other characters that turn up in the narrative.

Already on the second page of the novel, it becomes clear that it will not be as easy to dissociate his story from the past as the unnamable had hoped. There he meets for the first time another character wandering in his fictional universe. To his frustration, it is not a 'new person' that suddenly shows up in his literary reality, but 'someone old' – namely Malone, the chief narrator of *Malone dies* ("Malone is there", 332). Being the protagonist of the previous part of the trilogy, his appearance seems to go against the ambition the unnamable formulated at the opening of his novel: instead of encountering an innovatively and originally created character, the unnamable (and the reader with him) continues being lumbered with figures from the past, unable to leave the already known behind.

Remarkably, Malone does not turn up in *The Unnamable* as the constantly complaining and chattering hospital patient he used to be in his own novel. The unnamable perceives him as a vague and intangible image that floats around in complete silence and passes at regular intervals. Rather than a character of flesh and blood, Malone is pictured as a shade: "of his mortal liveliness little trace remains" (332). This unlucky condition can be interpreted as emphasizing his 'pastness': Malone belongs to a story that is – literally – already told and can be considered – to say it with a Beckett metaphor – as 'over' or 'dead'.¹ Integrating him in the part of the trilogy that succeeds his, therefore, means bringing in an element from the past, a 'ghost', that, in theory, can and should not be there. Although his own narrative has been completed, Malone still continues to 'haunt' the literary reality of the unnamable. Of course, it is too early to conclude that the unnamable fails in his purpose to exclude the past from his narration, only based on this first encounter. Nevertheless, his meeting with Malone makes the reader doubt whether his story will be that original and independent of what happened before as he pretends.

The question now arises if the same is true for the beginning of the final book of the *Thebaid*. Does the first encounter of the Argive widows, similarly to the first meeting of the unnamable, slightly subvert the 'new path' in the narrative which the reader considers to be the point of departure? Is

¹ *Malone dies*, the second part of the trilogy, tells the story of the dying hospital patient Malone, who is the first person narrator of the novel as well. Being sick of telling tales, he desires to end his life as soon as possible, because this would result in the closure of his narration. Since the existence of the narrative is explicitly correlated to the life of the narrator, the last page of the novel, not coincidentally, portrays the death of Malone. Therefore, Malone's appearance as a ghost in *The Unnamable* is not surprising, since he and his stories literally passed away at the end of the second part of the trilogy.

Ornytus then, just like Malone, the 'old' element, strongly embedded in the past, which immediately opposes the 'innovation' of the women?

At first sight, the answer is simply 'no'. The Argive soldier seems to share very little with the unnamable's predecessor and might even carry the 'newness' Beckett's narrator is looking for (in vain?). Contrary to Malone, Ornytus turns up in the twelfth book for the first time in the text and, not having a notorious mythological background,¹ is totally unknown to the reader. (We even have the impression that we only get to know him, because his path coincidentally crosses the one of the Argive widows. Since he travels via hidden roads, he shows not at all the ambition to start playing a more prominent or heroic role in the epic; so, he would probably have remained unnoticed, if he would not have been caught by the gaze of the women [12, 141: *ecce*]). Furthermore, extensively warning the women for the consequences of their plans, Ornytus attempts to influence the further progress of the narrative, rather concerned with the future than with the past. His speech, which lasts twenty-two verses, does not report on events which occurred during the warfare episode. But, using many verbs in future simple,² it predicts the cruel reaction of Creon and the 'humanity' of the Athenian king Theseus on whose feeling for justice he recommends the women to appeal. Since the Argive widows (except Argia, Polynices' wife) will follow his advice, scholars as Pollman and Joyce compare Ornytus to a divine or (Greek) tragic messenger, whose intervention is crucial for the further events in the narrative (rather than recalling the previous ones).³

I do not intend here to refute Pollman's and Joyce's interpretations: although some objections could be made,⁴ their overall argumentation seems

¹ We do not know from which literary or mythological tradition Statius derived him. Pollmann 2004, 126 suggests that he "may have taken the name from the same sources as Plut. *Thes.* 8.3". Joyce 2008, 444 ponders that the soldier is "perhaps the father of the Ornytus of Teuthis in Arcadia, known to Pausanias (8.28.4), who will wound Athena (Minerva) in the thigh as he withdraws his troops from Aulis, where they wait to embark for the Trojan war". According to Hubbard 1998, Ornytus "may represent Statius' appropriation of the same marginal figure in Vergil [*i.e.* *Aen.* 11, 677-689, an Etruscan ally of Aeneas, slain by Camilla] to create his own marginal epic personality".

² *E.g.*: *dabit* (155); *licebit* (156); *rapiet* (157); *mactabit* (159).

³ Pollman 2004, 126: "Ornytus occupies the function of Iris, who urged Priam to go to Achilles (*Il.* 24.159-87), and of Hermes who in the disguise of a young man helps Priam to get safely to Achilles (*Il.* 24.339-467)". Joyce 2008, 444: "Ornytus has something about him of the Messenger of Greek drama".

⁴ Joyce's 2008 indirect and somewhat hesitant way of portraying Ornytus' resemblance to a Greek messenger (see p. 000 n. 000) illustrates the difficulty of precisely defining the narrative function of the Argive soldier. Although his intervention strongly influences the further progress of the narrative, he is an insignificant human being (not a deity), who suddenly shows up in the narrative and does not follow a heavenly demand, as *e.g.* Iris in the

plausible and engages with the (typically) epic and tragic aspects which the *Thebaid* contains.¹ Nevertheless, being alerted by Karen Barad for readings that (at first sight) appear to be ‘plausible’ or ‘convincing’, I believe I must be careful to not take the Argive soldier’s narrative function henceforth for granted and wonder whether I have not overlooked something. Ascribing a ‘newness’ / ‘futureness’ to Ornytus might be persuasive when approaching him from the perspective of epical and tragic generic features. But does it remain true when examining him *more closely* from the viewpoint of Malone in *The Unnamable*? Or does the un-Statian interpretative frame that Beckett’s novel forms, call my attention to aspects of the Argive soldier which slipped away in previous readings that have mainly tried to fit him into a ‘Greco-Roman semantic structure’?

It is quite remarkable that in academic debate on the figure of Ornytus, the focus has always been on the speech with which he warns the widows,¹ while the few verses that describe *him*, as a soldier, have been neglected hitherto. Yet, precisely in these verses, one can catch a glimpse of the ‘pastness’ that completely defines Malone in Beckett’s novel (12, 141-144):

squalidus ecce genas et inani vulnere pallens
Ornytus – hic socio desertus ab agmine, tardat
plaga recens – timido secreta per avia furto
debile carpit iter fractaeque innititur hastae.

Pale from a yawning wound, his face befouled, / Ornytus (separated from his friends / and slowed by his fresh hurt) made his weak way, / propped on a broken spear, in timid stealth / through pathless solitudes.

Ornytus is visualized (*ecce*) by the Argive widows and the reader as stumbling home, moving slowly (*tardat; debile ... iter*) and leaning on his broken spear (*fractaeque innititur hastae*). The entire description radiates a sphere of loneliness (*desertus*), anxiety (*timido*) and, especially, pain. Even before we get to know his name, we record that the Argive soldier is seriously injured and suffers from a gaping wound (*inani vulnere*), caused by a recent stroke

Iliad does, obeying Zeus’ orders. Furthermore, whereas the messenger in Greek drama traditionally reports events that occurred offstage (Mackinnon 1986, 26; Baret 2002, 14-22), Ornytus rather predicts what will actually happen later in the epic. So, the Argive soldier certainly shows some characteristics similar to those of a divine (Pollmann) or a tragic (Joyce) messenger, but, in both cases, the comparison does not completely suffice.

¹ Bessone 2011, 75-102; 200-225 extensively discusses the tragic aspects that inform the *Thebaid*’s epic narrative, especially the final (‘female’) book.

² Cf. Pollmann 2004 and Joyce 2008. Also Vessey 1973, 131; McNelis 2006, 160 and Frings 1991, 141-143 almost exclusively discuss the speech. They respectively concentrate on Ornytus’ depiction of Creon’s cruelty, Theseus’ humanity and the women’s response to his warnings.

(*plaga recens*). As he (probably) suffered this injury during the battles narrated in books 7-11, he thus is explicitly introduced as a war victim.

Although there is nothing odd about a harmed soldier after a period of war, the portrait of Ornytus becomes particularly significant when taking into account that he is the first human being the widows see on their way to Thebes. For them, his wound forms the first tangible proof of the cruelty that happened during the Theban war about which they had heard, so far, only some vague rumors (12, 106). Whereas he perceives them as a “new tumult”, their attention (and that of the reader) is right away (in the first verse) diverted to his injury, a visual mark of the violence that occurred before. Hence, his gash seems to ascribe a ‘pastness’ to him, similar to the one that can be identified in Beckett’s *Malone*: just like the first person the unnamable encounters, Ornytus is somehow connected to events that happened in the previous part of the narrative (*recens*). Although he did not play a prominent or heroic role in there, the *inane vulnus*, by which he is immediately typified, serves as an emblem that includes the epic’s literary past into his character (despite the ‘futureness’ later on in his speech). His way of appearance results, thereby, in a narrative situation that strongly resembles the one in *The Unnamable*: the first meeting in the last part of the text immediately evokes a tension between innovation, embodied by the widows and the unnamable, and continuity, which is generated by ‘figures from the past’, such as Ornytus and Malone. Like the latter, the Argive soldier reminds the readers of the previous horror the narrator had hoped the widows would make them forget. Against the wish of the narrator, it is as if the past keeps on ‘haunting’ throughout (the beginning of) the final book.

Evidently, my choice for the verb ‘to haunt’ in the latter sentence is no coincidence. Not only is it dictated by the parallel with Malone in *The Unnamable* whose appearance as a ‘ghost of the past’ influences the *terms in which I think and write about the Thebaid* (I used the same verb before when discussing Malone’s condition as a shade). Also, precisely because Statius’ epic is read with Beckett’s novel in mind, I am struck by the somewhat ‘gloomy vocabulary’ by which Ornytus seems to be described as well. Especially the adjective *inanis*, that characterizes his *vulnus*, stands out: this term does not simply mean ‘empty’ or ‘gaping’ (in the context of a cut). The word also bears the connotation of ‘cloudiness’ or ‘vanity’ and is frequently used throughout the narrative to portray the shades and the underworld.¹ The

¹ The word turns up for the first time in the first book of Statius’ epic, when Oedipus, fluctuating between the living and dead, hits the *inane solum* (1, 55), the ‘shadowy ground’, just before he addresses the underworld. Evoked by his speech, the fury Tisiphone leaves the underworld, forcing the *inane / vulgus* (1, 93-94) to give way before her. The adjective,

Argive soldier thus has been stricken by an 'open' wound that seems to relate him, in a certain sense, to the dead as well. Not accidentally, this injury is said to make him pale (*pallens*), as if the narrator wants to imply that there is not much life left in the Argive soldier. To be clear: Ornytus has not really passed away and returns now in the shape of a ghost. He is certainly not as 'shady' as Malone who lost his "mortal liveliness" and floats around in complete silence. His appearance rather seems to be surrounded by a 'gloomy semantic mist', which I am seduced to recognize by adapting *The Unnamable* as interpretative frame.

Below, a second argument for the relation between the Argive soldier and the dead will be offered, based on intratextual relations. But, for now, it suffices to observe that, semantically speaking, Ornytus' appearance seems to be clouded in a somewhat 'ghostly sphere', containing some terms that tie him to the underworld. Just like in the case of Malone in *The Unnamable*, this characterization stresses the 'pastness' of the Argive soldier. What must be concluded still plagues the beginning of the final book, which questions the power of the 'new tumult' brought in by the Argive widows. The first person they meet is not simply a messenger (a necessary need for the further progression of the narrative) but symbolizes the violence they (and their by love-driven actions) should make us forget. This confrontation makes the reader wonder whether or not they will succeed at erasing the previous violence later on in the epic. This resembles my doubts about the success rate of the unnamable's ambitions in the third novel of the trilogy. Will the arrival of 'new characters' really drive out the literary past which, in the shape of Ornytus/Malone, still haunts the beginning of the last part of the text?

The limited scope of this article makes it impossible to answer the latter question and discuss the development of the theme continuity/innovation further in the narrative(s).¹ Hence, by way of conclusion, I want to linger a little more over Ornytus' narrative function and ponder how far the 'pastness' ascribed to him actually reaches. Until now, it has been argued that the wounded soldier reminds the reader of the violence of the warfare episode, so incorporating the recent narrative past. It can be asked whether there are reasons to assume that his appearance leads us even further back in time, maybe even beyond the starting border of the epic.

moreover, is also used by Ornytus himself when advising the widows to lament the *inana busta* (*Theb.* 12, 162) of their husbands at home (so again appearing within a 'context of death'). For other occurrences, see e.g. 8, 100; 9, 654; 9, 599 (*TLL*).

¹ As I said (see p. 000 n. 000), an intensive scholarly debate has been going on about the final book as being a continuation or redemption of the epic's cruelty.

Supposedly, it seems as if this question comes out of the blue. But, once again, it has been given form in interaction with Beckett's novel. Recovered from the initial disappointment, the unnamable begins to observe the shade dwelling in his universe intensively. The more he looks at the ghost floating around, the more he starts doubting whether the one he is watching really is Malone: "I wonder if it is not Molloy. Perhaps it is Molloy, wearing Malone's hat. (...) To tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on" (333). The identity of the image is not pinpointed: from the eyes of the unnamable, the shape that he initially recognized as Malone could also be the one of Molloy, who is the narrator of the first part of the trilogy (*Molloy*). Consequently, this confusion makes him assume that he might perceive in the shade others as well, cautiously putting 'Murphy' as a terminus, i.e. the main character of Beckett's first (published) novel. So, whereas in first instance the unnamable seemed to be exclusively confronted with Malone, now he surprisingly indicates to notice in the ghost the existence of a whole range of predecessors, which even goes back to the author's first steps in the world of literature.¹ This observation further increases the tension between past and novelty that was discussed above: the unnamable is not only faced with a shady narrator whose story directly precedes his. The ghost, apparently taking on the shape of all the main characters Beckett ever invented, also makes the remote past present in the universe (one that reaches back far beyond the limits of the trilogy).

Like above, we can ask whether the same is true for the *Thebaid*. Does Ornytus' arrival in the final book establish a link to events that occurred before the warfare episode (i.e. to a moment he did not even exist yet in the narrative)? Though more subtly than in *The Unnamable*, we could say that it certainly does by slightly reminding the reader of a passage that (s)he has read earlier in the epic. Visualizing the Argive soldier suffering from his 'shadowy injury' triggers a reminiscence to a scene in the beginning of the second book, where the 'injured shadow' of Laius shows up. On demand of Jupiter, Oedipus' father is summoned by Mercury to leave the underworld and go to Thebes. There, he must incite his grandson Eteocles and convince him to start a war against his brother Polynices. The way Laius is presented bears some striking similarities to the manner we visualized Ornytus for the first time:²

¹ Josipovici 2015, 30: "But each time he tries to see or imagine it more clearly, the image fades or turns into something else".

² I restrict myself here to a brief enumeration of the elements the former Theban king seems to share with Ornytus. For a more elaborate discussion of the ghost of Laius, see Vessey 1973, 230-235; Walter 2014, 181-190; Ahl 1986.

- (1) when we first meet them, both the old king and the Argive soldier are told to be on their way back home, respectively returning to Thebes and Argos;
- (2) more importantly, like Ornytus (*inane vulnere; tardat*), Laius is slowed down by a wound which he caught during a fight in his past and that still bothers him (2.8: *vulnere tardus adhuc*; still halting from / his wound) (as it is well-known, he was killed by his own son (2.9: *cognatis ictibus ensis / impius*; his kinsman's impious sword had pierced him));
- (3) thereby, both can only move forward by resting on a spear (*fractae innititur hastae*) or stick (2.11: *firmit vestigia virga*; his footsteps strengthened by / the healing wand);
- (4) their intervention, moreover, has a great impact on the further course of the narrative (both resulting in a battle). Following Ornytus' advice, the Argive widows (except Argia, Polynices wife) will join the Athenian king Theseus who will be resolute to punish Creon. Laius' visit formed the incentive Eteocles needed to declare war to his own brother.

These four elements seduce the reader to recognize a glimpse of Laius' shade in Ornytus (shade-likeness), which constitutes an intratextual relation between the beginning and end of Statius' epic. Evidently, this does not mean that we really start doubting in the final book whether it is the Argive soldier or the former Theban king that has showed up, as is the case in Beckett's novel where the narrator wonders if Malone or Molloy is passing by. Rather, this extends the reach of the pastness of Ornytus, who, similarly to Malone that might be Molloy, incorporates a figure that pre-dates him in the narrative.

Yet, when taking the role he plays in the epic into account, Laius seems to open a gate to a much more remote (mythological) past as well. In the narrative, the former Theban king fulfils a function similar (or more correctly: complementary) to the one of Ornytus in the final book. Apart from being a sort of messenger that instigates the Theban war (see (4)), he also brings the past into the epic, which is visualized by the injury by which he is scarred and the fact, of course, that he actually is a ghost. Whereas Ornytus' cut recalls the cruelty that occurred within the warfare episode, Laius' injuries lead the reader back to violent actions that lie beyond the scope of the narrative and belong to the (remote) mythological tradition. Not only does the wounded king remind one of the unfortunate patricide by Oedipus about which he keeps on complaining. The way Laius 'actively uses' his gash also turns him into an emblem of *furor* that has characterized the Theban family from its very origins.

Being the protagonist in a scene iconic for the *Thebaid's* cruelty, the king visits Eteocles and chooses a horrible way to incite him against his brother.

After a short speech in which he portrays Polynices' royal ambitions as a threat, he decides to turn to a strategy much more effective and hate spreading than words: he sprinkles his grandson with blood from his open wound (2, 120-127). Thereby, he connects Eteocles to the brutal violence recently committed by his father Oedipus as well as he seems to infect him literally with the rage from which no member of the Theban family has been able to escape. By 'baptizing' him with his own blood, Laius, as Walter has argued, visually pictures the passing of the *Erbfluch* from generation to generation in Theban history. In the house of Cadmus, madness has always been hereditary, inherent to each one's blood.¹

The short detour via Laius and the *Erbfluch* is necessary to understand the extent of the pastness ascribed to Ornytus. Seeing him in the final book generates an effect that resembles the unnamable's perception of the ghost wandering in his universe. Just as the shade in Beckett's novel contains all the unnamable's novelistic predecessors, the ghostly wounded soldier recalls a tradition that goes far back in (mythological) time: apart from the pain of the warfare books, his injury evokes the Laius scene which, in its turn, brings crimes to mind that lie beyond the borders of the epic narrative. By connecting his wound to the one of the former king, Ornytus is somehow related to the Theban mythological cycle, in which, from the start, madness has continued (being passed from generation to generation) and to which he has previously been fallen victim himself.

Similarly to the ghost in *The Unnamable*, the Argive soldier thus serves as an 'emblem of (recent and remote) 'pastness'. At the beginning of the last part of the text, both make what was over or concluded present again and function, thereby, as a memory to events the narrator hoped to be forgotten. Their appearance as a shade (or at least, semantically shade-like) emphasizes the violation of chronology which their arrival brings along: they are a point or a moment in the narrative in which everything that happened before is concentrated or even absorbed. Not a concrete scene but the entire past haunts the 'new stories' initiated by the Argive women and the unnamable. Immediately at their first encounter, what must be obliterated and must be kept concealed (*secreta per avia?*) is (paradoxically through their own gaze) revealed again.

¹ Walter 2015, 192. See also Taisne 1994 and Vessey 1973, 235: "Laius is an embodiment of the congenital *furor* to which he fell victim". For an extensive discussion of the heredity of madness, see Bernstein 2008 and the volume edited by Maniotti 2016a.

CONCLUSION

This article has proposed an alternative strategy of reading based on the theories by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. This method does not depart from conventionally pre-existing connections between texts but relies on a technique of mnemonic associations that are established by an individual reader. Instead of hiding the role I play within the interpretative process, I have encouraged, as Nabokov would say, my memory to speak and violated the linear way of thinking that still determinates scholarship. This reading practice requires to openly follow the at first sight sometimes surprising paths that are mapped out by memory. Triggered by the innovation with which they start, I have read the opening of *Theb.* 12 through the opening of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. This has resulted in a story about the 'pastness' of Ornytus being 'present' in the new narrative of the Argive widows, rather than one about his 'futureness'. As I said, I have not intended to refute the latter interpretation. Rather, approaching the Argive soldier from an un-Statian frame draws my attention to aspects that have been neglected so far. Thinking in terms of the ghost of Malone makes one realize that the past in Statius' epic shows itself to be more persistent and explicit than expected, since it, right away at the first encounter with the Argive widows, reveals itself in the ghostly shape of Ornytus.

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