

## *Not I: An Aborted Autobiography*

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Beckett's drama creates a paradoxical situation. It invites a number of critical approaches which center on what it obstinately resists: the existence of meaning in the text associated with a "person" who, however fragmented, is still there as its originator. These approaches do not hesitate to read radical texts such as *Not I* in terms of the same theoretical and methodological premises locating a psychological "essence" in texts which call into question this very "essence." *Not I*, in this sense, provides a clear example of the pitfalls that are inherent in these essentially psychologistic readings precisely because it raises the problem of subjectivity and, specifically, of the subject's relation to language. Thus, it calls for a methodological approach which should take account of the subject's constitution in and by language as well as of the very nature of writing/speaking. Such an attempt can also explain the peculiarities of its stage representation in the context of the text's non-commitment to "person" and "meaning."

*Not I* explores the boundaries of Western discourse by attempting the dissolution of the subject as the locus of presence and the author of meaning. Crucial to the textual strategy employed is language as the very terrain of sociability. Can language which "teaches the definitions of Man" be used against itself? Can therefore the subject "be posited as the place, not only of structure . . . but especially of its loss, its outlay?"<sup>1</sup> *Not I*, accordingly, cannot be said to be a text "about" experiences meant to be dramatically represented, nor "about" itself as a text failing to represent. *Not I* is simply the text of its own writing. Moreover, it is the text of its writing for the theater; it questions the nature both of the medium as such and of writing for it.

In an interview to I. Shenker (*New York Times*, 6 May 1956) Beckett remarked that "anyone nowadays, who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er" demarcating his

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own terrain in the following way: "The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. . . . I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past."<sup>2</sup> *Not I* dramatically exposes the impotence of Beckett-as-an-author in the act of writing. At the same time, it testifies to the power of Beckett-as-a-writer, that is, of someone for whom language is a problem,<sup>3</sup> but, who, nevertheless, exists within the text. Beckett may be the originator of the text but he is not the authority to whom meaning can be traced or innocently restored. He is the subject of a discourse which cannot utter the linguistic instance "I." In the gap left by the author's disappearance, language takes over; freed from the constraints of the authorial text it continuously opens up towards a multiplicity of readings always deferring meaning. *Not I*, then, denies the possibility of meaning as a predicate of identity and presence, those parameters of personality designating the authorial discourse. Moreover, it exposes that state of lack and deprivation in which the writer finds himself in the act of writing. It is finally a text which eludes meaning by permanently pointing to its lack. The strategy employed to this end is precisely that of the denial of subjectivity. In *Not I* we are confronted with an impossible situation in which the subject of the narration will not recognise itself as the "she" of the utterance, nor will it surrender to the "I." Therefore it will obstinately refuse to assign the text to its author.

The subject of the narration (Mouth) loses itself in language and melts into speech as if in a flow of raw material. What insistently prevents her narration from closing upon itself and thus from becoming "meaningful" is language. Language constitutes a problem for Mouth precisely as it does for the modern writer, Beckett in this instance.<sup>4</sup> Language is experienced by the speaking subject in a traumatic way as a negativity since she has already been constituted by it in terms of a non-recuperative lack.

*Not I* is radically predicated upon a basic tension. Interestingly, this tension is not so much engendered by the dramatic text as such; it rather lies in its reception by the spectator/reader. It is released at the intersection of his/her desire to project an author upon a "writerly"<sup>5</sup> narration which contests the very nature of the sign, and of the text's resistance to commit itself to the notion of "author-ity." The audience's need to "make sense" of Mouth's narration through the imposition of a coherent interpretive text on her stream of words is the reverse side of its search for an author; somebody who would take the responsibility for the text by declaring "it is I who wrote (spoke) it."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, because the character's "mind" is seen "as the source and guarantee of the unitary sense of a given text,"<sup>7</sup> the audience's sense of a dramatic event derives from the character's perception of it.<sup>8</sup> In this case, however, Mouth's perception of the narrated events is simply non-existent since the originating

consciousness is not there. Mouth refuses the author-ity of both her life and text by obsessively holding onto the third person. According to Benveniste every language "organises person" in terms of a correlation of personality which opposes person (*I or thou*) to non-person (*he or it*), the sign of absence. The latter can never reverse itself into person contrary to what happens with the *I-thou* opposition.<sup>9</sup> Mouth, by attaching its narration to *she*, "refuses" to take up the position of "person." This would implicitly acknowledge a *thou* and therefore the possibility of communication. Beckett, caught in language in the act of writing denies art as communication. He realises that

there's complete disintegration. No 'I,' no 'have,' no 'being.' No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There is no way to go on. The very last thing I wrote—'Textes pour Rien'—was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed.<sup>10</sup>

This "attitude of disintegration" is not external to writing but is inherent in it and that is why Beckett was not able to get rid of it.<sup>11</sup> Insofar as language can no longer be considered a reflection of "necessary" connections between the signifier and the signified, it becomes the very space of its own disarticulation. Consequently, freed from its obligation to mirror a "meaningful unity" it is for Beckett-as-a-writer not a substitute for life but life itself.

But why is Mouth a "writer"? If a literary work is considered to be about language and its subject matter is the "process of speech itself," then Mouth's narration is a de-centered text with no meaning; or rather, it is a text which constructs its meaning as a process in "its telling itself, its speaking of its own existence."<sup>12</sup> According to Barthes the text is an activity going to "the limit of the rules of enunciation," "experienced in relation to the sign" and achieving "plurality of meaning." In contrast with the work it "is read without its father's [the author's] guarantee."<sup>13</sup> Mouth, like the narrator of Beckett's trilogy, exists only in the narration; she "effects" the narration in being "affected" by it. Therefore she "writes" in an absolute sense remaining always inside the act of narration. Beckett's stage directions at the beginning—"As house lights down Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out, Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain. 10 seconds"—and at the end of the piece—"Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up"<sup>14</sup>—draw our attention to narrating as a non-stop activity (symbolically) exceeding dramatic time ad infinitum. Here narration is a text which, reaching the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, comprehensibility etc.), refuses closure because this would signify the end, the death of Mouth-as-a-narrator.

Mouth repeatedly associates silence with death—"all silent as the grave" (218), "like numbed . . . couldn't make the sound" (218)—and sounds, words and their mental imprints on the mind, with life—"all dead still but the buzzing" (219), "practically speechless . . . all her days . . . how she survived! . . ." (219, 221), "the whole being . . . hanging on its words" (219), "or that time she cried . . . since she was a baby . . . must have cried as a baby . . . perhaps not . . . not essential to life . . . just the birth cry to get her going . . . breathing" (220). There are, however, two opposing forces in operation within the dramatic text. On the one hand, silence—"sweet silent as the grave" (210)—would seal up Mouth's narration as a closure of meaning. Consequently it would mark her as an author, as somebody who is in control of her work. On the other hand, for Mouth-as-a-writer the non-stop narrating in a permanent deferring of meaning is the only viable strategy for postponing the text's closing in on a privileged signified. That, by providing the key to its explanation, would silence the narrator. Mouth definitely hangs on to her narration, not in a relation of priority and externality to it but as a function within it. Yet, this does not necessarily imply the resolving of a certain tension between the process (speaking as such) as a self-referential activity and the end-product (meaning). Her text is not void of certain crucial signifieds to which the audience might refer so as to make 'sense' of her narration. Yet, these signifieds exist as a part of Beckett's strategy of seducing the audience into believing that this is after all a "personal" testimony of the "real" life of Mouth, however fragmented her identity might be.<sup>15</sup>

But, if this offering of partial sense is only a reduction, why is her activity an essentially autobiographical one, or, what is the meaning of writing her life-as-a-text? The author is usually considered to be "the principle of a certain unity of writing, all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation or influence."<sup>16</sup> He/she also represents that level on which various contradictions intrinsic to the work are reconciled. Transformations or distortions of certain events are "explained" through his/her biography. Thus, the life of the author still serves as the privileged guideline to the hermeneutics of the work by virtue of its promixity to the "essence." The relation between life and work is seen as homologous since the latter constitutes the mirror-image of the former, however distorted it may very often be. What the work reflects, in parts or as a whole, is the life of the author as an essential unity which inscribes in it certain biological characteristics (i.e. youth, maturation, old age). The work acquires the attributes of a living organism shaped in its Creator's image; it becomes a "physical" extension of the Authorial Body, that vast pool of meaning. The severing of the work from that body is equal to the amputation of the latter, that is to the dismemberment of the organical entity constituted by the dyad, author-work. The premises upon which

this entity rests are those of reflection/emanation which by definition exclude "process," i.e. the activity of writing. Language as a simple mediator of meaning conveyed from the author to the work remains subservient to that essentially passive relation.

Mouth's relation to her narration subverts all the above postulates by twisting them against themselves. Her story, instead of reflecting the subject as a biological and spiritual entity (the unity of which guarantees its "textual" coherence), de-constructs it in the act of speaking it. Mouth's narration provides certain biographical "facts," however sketchy and erratic, which could roughly correspond to phases of human life—birth: "out . . . into this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time . . . in a godforsaken hole" (216)—infancy and childhood: "no love such as normally vented on the . . . speechless infant . . . in the home . . . no love of any kind . . . at any subsequent stage" (216), "brought up as she had been to believe . . . with the other waifs . . . in a merciful . . . God" (217)—maturation and old age: "practically speechless. . . all her days . . . how she survived! . . . even shopping . . . supermart . . . middle of the throng . . . motionless" (219), "nothing of any note till coming up to sixty when—. . . what ? . . . seventy ? . . . good God!" (216). These biographical "facts," however, cannot function as the locus of the text's meaning on which its hermeneutics could be based because they do not act as a safe repository of information. The reason is that Mouth's "text" is radically predicated on a dominant ambiguity concerning the nature of subjectivity. Who is the old woman of the narration? What is her relation to Mouth? Are they one and the same "person"? And if so, why is Mouth violently denying identity? Why does she consign it to the third person? What finally constitutes subjectivity, and which is the role of language in the construction of the subject?

The textual contradictions cannot be resolved in reference to the psychological and biological person of the author of the specific discourse. Mouth constantly decenters her narration. The tactic employed by Beckett is the shifting of meaning from the points where it tends to congeal. These points coincide with the promising question "What?. . . Who?" but they are instantly refuted by the furious reply "no! . . . she!" (217, 219, 221, 222): a question and reply addressed to an imaginary Other or to Auditor. Auditor makes four movements in response to Mouth's vehement refusal to relinquish the third person. In this sense, Auditor's gestures of "helpless compassion" become the very signs of the audience's own helplessness in the face of such a denial. The attempted construction of a life story collapses at its nodal point: that of life as the origin of the text. Life, in this case, cannot function so since the truth of Mouth's discourse is not synonymous with subjectivity. It always lies somewhere else: in the language which is speaking about itself. Her life "is no longer the

origin of [her] fables, but a fable that runs concurrently with [her] work. . . . It is the work which affects the life, not the life which affects the work."<sup>17</sup> In this context, Mouth's narration allows us to read her life-as-a-text, and only in this sense can it be considered a "bio-graphy" in accordance with the etymology of the word.

Language writes life, Mouth's life as a deficiency, as a negativity. The lack of syntax, the elisions of the objects, the dissolution of speech, the repetitions of words do not simply reflect the fragmentation of the subject. They define the subject's relation to language as an inherently problematic one. At this point, Lacan's theory of the constitution of subjectivity in language could elucidate the crucial problem of Mouth's inscription in it as well as the "pathological" form of her discourse. Her discourse enacts the tragedy of the subject's entry into what Lacan calls the Symbolic order, the stage at which the child constructs its subjectivity by its appropriation of language.<sup>18</sup> The Symbolic is the linguistic system that precedes the subject but at the same time it is constitutive of it. In this sense, the child is subject to language as well as subject of it. Prior to accession to the Symbolic, however, the child identifies with the mother, or rather with the object of her desire, the phallus. The Symbolic father intervenes in the mother-child relationship as the representative of the phallus, revealing the mother's lack of it and "castrating" the child. Therefore the child's access to language is experienced by it as the recognition of its lack of the phallus, which, apart from being the object of desire, has also a signifying function. It fixes difference according to the symbolic interpretation the child fixes on its presence or absence in itself and in the figures of the father and mother. The discovery of the missing phallus establishes the child's relationship to absence which moves it to speak by seeking to fill in the gap left by the "lack of object" in the signifying chain.<sup>19</sup> Speech, therefore, is dependent on the notion of lack since it is "an attempt to fill the gaps without which speech could not be articulated."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the acquisition of language by the child is equal to the insertion of the subject into a structure which is by its nature in opposition to the emotional bond with the mother:

The experience of the mother is one of initial plenitude from which the infant is brusquely severed. Thus the separation from the mother results in a kind of primal lack . . . , a "gaping" and it is this traumatic experience which is customarily felt (by both girls and boys) as a castration.<sup>21</sup>

Castration used in a metaphorical sense here signifies any inhibition of the child's desire for that first essential plenitude. It is crucial therefore in that it

introduces absence in the mother-child bond. The child must learn how to deal with absence, and the strategy for doing so is the incorporation of absence into its life, the structuring of subjectivity on the basis of incompleteness. This is very important in another respect too. If we see language as a system organized around that "essential charged absence,"<sup>22</sup> which castration is, then the subject's acceptance of it becomes preconditional upon its entering into language and culture. Mouth's non-stop reiteration of the same events signifies her inability to do so by coming to terms with absence and loss as the painful but, nevertheless, essential conditions of sociability.

Her story pivots on three axes which organise narration on the basis of binary oppositions. These concern her birth—"out . . . into this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time . . . what? . . . girl ? . . . yes . . . tiny little girl . . . out into this godforsaken hole called . . . no matter . . . parent unknown . . . unheard of . . . he having vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches . . . she similarly . . . eight months later . . . so no love . . . no love such as normally vented on the speechless infant . . . no love of any kind" (216),—her collapse in the field—"coming up to seventy . . . wandering in a field . . . looking aimlessly for cowslips . . . to make a ball . . . when suddenly . . . all went out . . . all that early April morning light . . . found herself in the dark . . . insentient . . . she did not know . . . what position she was in!" (216-17)—and that time in court—"guilty or not guilty . . . stand up woman . . . speak up woman . . . stood there staring into space . . . something she had to tell . . . nothing she could tell" (221). All three events are in one way or another, connected with her inability to insert herself into language's structure. Speech always exists in relation to an(other). In this case the addressee is God. His absence is experienced by the subject as "lack," since he is the lost object which Mouth's desire cannot recover.<sup>23</sup> God as the third person articulates her narration as a tension of oppositions, presence versus absence, and lack versus plenitude, which are felt to be absolute and thus irreconcilable.

At first sight deprivation and negativity seem to occupy entirely Mouth's fragmented speech to the exclusion of other "positive" terms. It is predicated upon repeated negations—"no sound," "no matter," "no movement," "no screaming," "no idea,"—upon verbs in negative form or with a negative meaning—"she didn't know," "nothing she could tell," "nothing she could think," "doesn't recognize," "she can't stop," "disconnected," "vanished," "delude herself"—and finally upon words or phrases implying loss or deprivation—"speechless," "powerless," "motionless," "painless," "waifs," "unheard," "unknown," "thin air," "half-open mouth." However, Mouth's "text" literally hinges on the third person, God, who is "good," "merciful," who is love,

"God is love." The elision of the direct objects in Mouth's narration signifies "the syntactic recognition of an impossible object"<sup>24</sup> which in this case is God as *the* object of love. God may be love but for Mouth there is "no love," "no love of any kind." Therefore God (love) is the impossible object for the "speaking subject lacking any object of signification and/or love."<sup>25</sup> For Lacan the discovery of the lack of object is the condition and cause of desire. Yet the pathological search for the lost object lies at the root of neurosis which is the utopian quest for a lost plenitude.<sup>26</sup> Mouth's ironical references to God as love signify her inability to incorporate loss in the structuring of her desire and speech.

The third person to whom Mouth refers, therefore, does not coincide with the "she" of the narration, but it is "he" (God), the sign of absence. Indeed, Mouth's disavowal of identity can only be explained by the subject's deprivation of the desired object (God is no love for Mouth), who, in an effort to alleviate the pain caused by its absence—"brought up as she has been to believe . . . with the other waifs . . . in a merciful . . . (*brief laugh*) . . . God (*good laugh*)" (217)—ascribes it to a third person ("she"). The "she" of the narration, however, does not always conceal the "I" of Mouth; nor does it effectively screen the subject from suffering. If the strategy of the subject's concealment under the guise of "she" were entirely successful, then Beckett's direction as to Mouth's vehement refusal to abandon the third person would be out of place; so would be Mouth's scream at the painful memory of "she"'s collapse in the fields. The reason lies at a deeper level. Mouth's suffering is not of a psychological nature in that it does not originate in events external to her being constituted in language. On the contrary, it inheres in it and is reproduced by it through speaking as a painful but compulsive activity.

At the same time her position in language raises the problem of gender. She is constituted in it and by it as a female subject. Beckett's choice for the feminine is not accidental. Thus I would contest Vivian Mercier's statement that "by putting 'boy' for 'girl' and changing the gender of the pronouns, *Not I* could become a monologue for male voice" and its amendment that "technical considerations may have had more to do with the choice of sex: women do speak faster than men and scream more readily . . . while only a heavily made-up (and therefore feminine) mouth would be visible."<sup>27</sup> Beckett's choice, far from resulting from "technical considerations" such as the above (which, anyway, rely heavily on traditional notions of gender) is already inscribed in the logic of patriarchy. This identifies language with rationality as the very foundations of the discursive order. It also defines the feminine as a difference from the masculine norm which guarantees the coherence of structure: it becomes the locus of its loss. The image that Beckett employs implicitly associates Mouth with the vagina. Mouth as "a large, gaping vagina"<sup>28</sup> becomes the striking image of the



female subject's relation to language. Woman, reduced to her sex which is perceived as a "gap," can only utter her difference from the "norm."

The text draws our attention to the female genitals through an ambiguous reference to Mouth's birth into a "godforsaken hole." It associates femininity with a "hole," and projects the image of the mouth as its physical duplicate. Mouth talks about a "tiny little thing" and then corrects it for "tiny little girl" (girl as a thing) born "before her time" into a "godforsaken hole called . . . no matter" (hole is no matter<sup>29</sup>) by parents "unknown" (parents as absence). What follows soon after is the crucial reference to love and God as signifier of plenitude the absence of which fixes her into a state of lack. Here it is worth noting the linking of the absence of love with the inability to speak underlined by the tautological reference to the "speechless infant" (infans = speechless).

This results in dis-order at the level of language. Mouth's unfulfilled desire for God/love emerges as an interruption and fragmentation of ordered discourse. Yet her speech creates a different type of structure which takes the rhythm of her repressed desire. It is as if desire "writes" Mouth's text on the basis of quasi-musical structures which through repetition deny closure.<sup>30</sup> Words literally fall outside Mouth in an almost physical discharge: "sudden urge to . . . tell . . . then rush out stop the first she saw . . . nearest lavatory . . . start pouring it out . . . steady stream . . . mad stuff" (222). Words as a body discharge are associated with the image of Mouth-as-vagina and with the tears which wet her palm. Words therefore take up the quality of the female body and its secretions.<sup>31</sup> They inscribe femininity in language as the locus of heterogeneity and incoherence, the very loss of logocentric structure. Inevitably Mouth perceives her identity in language in negative terms as permanently incomplete, as other than what she is. Thus her displacement of identity is intrinsic to the constitution of her subjectivity. Since the latter is not "syntactically" organised the produced "text" cannot be either. It can only be fragmented, open-ended and fluid precisely like Mouth's body which exists in disarticulation and displacement.

Despite the disarticulation of the speaking subject Mouth's text remains autobiographical since the "she" of the narration could be replaced, at least theoretically, by the "I."<sup>32</sup> Even if the first person narrative were used, her "writing" would still be carried out on the basis of her splitting as a writer into the subject of enunciation (writer) and the subject of utterance (character). The "I," however, is rejected because it conceals effectively that splitting which is intrinsic to the act of writing (subject of utterance = subject of enunciation). The "she" is adopted precisely because it makes it more prominent by positing the writer in the domain of absence:

The subject of narration (S) is drawn in, and therefore reduced to a code, to a non-person, to an *anonymity* (as writer, subject of enunciation) mediated by a third person the *he/she* character, the subject of utterance.<sup>33</sup>

Mouth erases all the signs of her individuality through the use of "she" to which moreover she denies any relation. By doing so she takes up the subject's alienation, intrinsic to the verbal expression, to its utmost limits: to the absolute alienation of the subject from herself.

In this case, however, the disappearance of the subject of enunciation to the benefit of the third person calls into question the premises upon which narration rests: the speaking subject's unity and identity. And yet Mouth's text is not entirely consistent with its negativity. It contains a tension between its continuous references to God, as the "truth" of the subject and the subject's non-commitment to such a notion. Her vocabulary largely consists of words the use of which implies the identity between language and thought. She "thought," "realized," "understood," "reasoned," tried "to make sense" of "words," "message," "proof," "notion," "idea," "brain," "mind." "Suffering" is associated with the "notion of punishment" for a "sin" "She" might have committed, and shame with purgation, and all these notions with God as love. It is these fissures in the text which tempt the audience to impose a coherent narrative structure on it by projecting a psychological "person" on Mouth. The story that the audience may construct is one of sin, punishment and suffering of Mouth, who despite her fragmentation, is still there as the originator of meaning. Mouth's text, however, resists its assignment to an author because God cannot function as the truth of the subject. The punishment inflicted by Him for "no particular reason" disarticulates the attempted coherence from within. God is no reason since he cannot function as that absolute signified upon which the text could finally close. Thus Mouth's text remains open-ended recounting for ever the trauma, but at the same time the pleasure released upon her by the collapse of the Absolute.

*Not I*, the incomplete statement of a disintegrating subject, the solipsistic utterance of a language at a loss with itself, can only underscore the bankruptcy of the author's relation to his work. Failure, though, becomes a new occasion for the writer who, by putting his expressive means at stake, infringes upon the accepted artistic codes which rely on closure. Beckett, by making language not only the means, but the very object of his writing, focuses on the crisis of the subject's relation to language. The latter can no longer be synonymous with an "act" carried out by a unitary subject, prior and external to it. Mouth's inability to say "This is I" signifies the subject's impossible task to make predicative statements which express a certainty of meaning. Mouth's denial of identity can

therefore be understood in the light of Beckett's refusal to say "it is thus," that is, to consent to a meaning.

Yet meaning in the theatre is associated with presence. An object exists insofar as it presents itself to a subject; a subject exists insofar as it is present in itself. The positioning of the human body as a spatial entity is essential to a medium which identifies existence with presence. Dramatic persons exist to the extent that they are "seen" so as to establish relations between each other, or with the objects, or the stage as a space.<sup>34</sup> Beckett finds himself in the impossible position of trying to disentangle existence from presence using means already defined by the specificity of the theatre. He deals with it by attacking the two conditions upon which the theatrical code is structured: the visibility of human body on stage, and dialogue. He abolishes both of them and in their place he introduces a monologue uttered by a mouth suspended in the air. My argument, though, is that these two essential conditions reassert themselves in the end without destroying the metadramatic image that Beckett produces.

"Playing Mouth, the actress is strapped rigidly into a chair high above the stage, her head firmly anchored so that the spot can focus unswervingly on her mouth."<sup>35</sup> This description of the physical conditions under which the actress enacts Mouth's part draws attention to the dialectical relation between dramatic speech and performance. The actress has to be physically constrained from moving in order to deliver her monologue:

Gesture . . . materializes the dramatic subject and his world by asserting their identity with an actual body and an actual space. Without simultaneous kinesic markers, language would remain merely 'ideal' in the theatre . . . just as without the movements whereby he 'orchestrates' his utterances (Stern 1973, p.120) the actor cannot physically possess or control his own speech, but is rather determined by it (as a simple mouthpiece).<sup>36</sup>

This explains Beckett's impossible demand on the actress, that she should dispense with gestures so as to release language from materiality, in a medium which, by definition, involves the speaker's body in the speech act. The important point here is not whether the actress's body is visible or not. What counts is that language in the theater would remain "ideal" only on one condition: the physical confinement of body and the restriction of movement. That this procedure involves difficulties like the ones mentioned above, is pretty clear by now. However, Beckett tries to resolve the problem through recourse to certain tactics related to the nature of the dramatic language used. He erases all the "kinesic markers" which coordinate body and speech. These pertain to the active,

almost "dialogic" nature of dramatic language achieved through "references by the speakers to themselves as speakers, to their interlocutors as listener-addressees and to the spatiotemporal coordinates (the here-and-now) of the utterance itself by means of such deictic elements as demonstrative pronouns and spatial and temporal adverbs."<sup>37</sup>

By eliminating the body from the stage, Beckett destroys all the ostensive and spatial relations which could be established by its mere presence. This has a direct bearing on the use of demonstratives which cannot function in the void since they result from a state of presence and proximity. Demonstratives, by referring to objects and people of the actual world, firmly anchor dramatic speech in the here-and-now of the utterance. Beckett's text, however, radically opposes that discourse which postulates identity and presence as the essence of things. The proliferation of "that" and "there" in the place of "this" and "here" in the text points to an "elsewhere" other than the stage space and time.<sup>38</sup> In the the same way Mouth's use of the third person refuses the dramatic dialectic based on the "I" and "you" of the utterance. She introduces narrative in place of dialogue. Dramatic language, released from the constraints of identity and presence, cannot be contained within limits. It is pure in the sense that its body is free from the marks inscribed in it by structure. As a result this breakdown of surfaces gives rise to the language of schizophrenia. The body, experienced as a "gaping depth," has no surface, no limits. "Words . . . lose their meaning, their power . . . to express incorporeal effect . . . distinct from the body's actions and passions. All words become physical and affect the body immediately."<sup>39</sup>

Yet, Beckett' play, still bears within it the essentials of theater however vestigial or unobtrusive. These are inscribed in the theatrical image itself. Mouth may be delivering a monologue but this does not necessarily mean that the monologue does not contain the traces of a dialogue. These become obvious in the very act of questioning, since the latter postulates the existence of the Other. The "what" and "who" of Mouth might be directed to God. It might also be directed to Auditor who seems to listen to her narration precisely because he physically responds to it. It is certainly addressed to the audience by virtue of the fact that narrating, by definition, is structured in relation to another. What is significant here is the very presence of Auditor in the theatrical space. His existence completes the circuit of speech (speaker + message = addressee) through his physical participation in it. His gestures of "helpless compassion" in response to Mouth's narration therefore re-establish a vestigial form of dialogue.

At the same time, they orchestrate her speech by "punctuating" it. After each interruption by Auditor, Mouth resumes her speech in increasing speed and vehemence. Auditor's reaction has an emotional effect on Mouth. It is significant that the seat of emotion is located precisely in the human body, that

same body that Beckett reduced to invisibility and thus absence. The human body restores itself on stage through Auditor, who lacks what Mouth has (a mouth), but who provides what she does not possess (a body). The body may appear, not as whole, but in dismemberment, but it is still visible, it is still *there*: it exists. So, to Beckett's own question whether his play is still theater or not<sup>40</sup> the answer can only be affirmative. It is a drama radically predicated upon speech, a theater of a language which, unable to tell a story, enters its own destruction. It is finally a savage exploration of the limits of the dramatic code, the stretching of the structure to the breaking point. That this subversive practice might include the partial reassertion of elements of structure does not invalidate in the least its significance. On the contrary, it confirms that subversion can only be the result of a dialectic between acceptance and rejection, affirmation and denial.

*University of Athens*

## Notes

1. "Any attempt at reinserting the 'speaking subject,' whether under the guise of a Cartesian Subject or any other subject of enunciation more or less akin to the transcendental ego. . . . resolves nothing as long as that subject is not posited as the place, not only of structure and its regulated transformation, but especially of its loss, its outlay." Julia Kristeva, "The Ethics of Linguistics," in *Desire in Language*, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine and L. S. Roudiez, ed. L. S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 24.

2. Samuel Beckett comparing his work to that of Joyce in an interview to Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, sec. 2, as quoted in Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1979) 8.

3. See Roland Barthes' distinction between the Author as the psychological subject who precedes and exceeds his work serving permanently as the matrix of its meaning, and the writer (scripteur) who always remains inside the writing being affected by it, in "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977) 142-49, and in "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: John Hopkins U.P., 1970) 134-45. My future references to the above terms will be in connection with Barthes.

4. "The only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth. . . . And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles for communication." Beckett as quoted in Ronald Hayman, *Samuel Beckett*, 2nd ed., Contemporary Playwrights Series (London: Heinemann, 1974) 10.

5. Barthes argues that literature can be divided into that which reduces the reader into a simple consumer to the author's role as producer (readerly literature) and that which activates him/her by offering the pleasure of cooperation, co-authorship (writerly literature). The writerly text questions the relationship between signifier and signified, "plays" with codes, breaks down the "reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, and

brings to a crisis his relation with language." Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1976) 14.

6. "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin." Beckett in a letter to Alan Schneider (December 29, 1957) as quoted in Keir Elam, "Not I: Beckett's Mouth and the Ars(e) Rhetorica," in Enoch Brater, ed., *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, Enoch Brater ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1986) 124.

7. Elam, "Not I" 126.

8. Charles R. Lyons, "Happy Days and Dramatic Convention," *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context* 84-85.

9. Benveniste as quoted in Barthes' "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" 139.

10. Beckett as quoted in Mercier 6.

11. According to Elam, in *Not I*, this "attitude of disintegration" resists any "critical endeavor to unveil a full and integral . . . semantic substance lying as it were behind the scenes." (126)

12. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1974) 199-200.

13. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josue V. Harari (1979; London: Methuen, 1980) 73-78.

14. Samuel Beckett, "Not I" in *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber, 1984) 216, 223. All references, cited in parenthesis in the text, will be to this edition.

15. Elam, in *Not I*, draws attention to the way in which Beckett seduces his public into "decoding the text in terms of represented character" by providing certain clues which seem to justify such a reading (131-132).

16. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," *Textual Strategies* 151.

17. Barthes, "From Work to Text" 78-79

18. See Jacques Lacan, "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis" in *The Language of the Self*, trans. Anthony Wilden (New York: Delta, 1968) 9-156. See also Anthony Wilden's own chapter in this book, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other" 159-311.

19. Wilden 163-164.

20. 164.

21. Jameson 172.

22. Jameson sees in "Lacanian castration, a kind of zero degree of the psychic . . . around which the entire meaning -language-system necessarily organises itself" (173).

23. "Lack" refers to the Lacanian notion signifying "the impossibility for desire to recover the lost object." Wilden 218.

24. "The elision of the object is the syntactic recognition of an impossible object, the disappearance not only of the addressee (*you*), but of all topic of discourse." Julia Kristeva, "The Father, Love and Banishment" in *Desire in Language* 153.

25. Kristeva, "From One Identity to Another," in *Desire in Language* 142.

26. Wilden 166.

27. Mercier 224.

28. "Beckett displayed no trace of displeasure, as, watching the BBC television version, he realized that Mouth had the appearance of a large, gaping vagina." James Knowlson as quoted in Paul Lawley, "Counterpoint, Absence and the Medium in Beckett's *Not I*," *Modern Drama* 26 (December, 1983): 407.

29. Lawly 408.

30. Elam, in "Not I," notices that these quasi-musical patterns are not "simply poetic effects" but they in fact materialize the "speech continuum" thus making Mouth's voice signify "stage presence" (139-40).

31. I would disagree with Knowlson's characterization of Mouth's speech as an excremental discharge, as quoted in Lawley 409. The link that Beckett wants to establish is between the image of Mouth as vagina and her speech as a body discharge specific to her sex.

32. Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narrative," in *Image-Music-Text* 112.

33. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in *Desire in Language* 74.

34. Alessandro Serpieri as quoted in Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980) 113.

35. William B. Worthen, "Beckett's Actor," *Modern Drama* 26 (December 1983): 417. See also Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1987) 30-31 about the physical conditions of acting in *Not I*.

36. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre* 74-79.

37. 139.

38. Elam, in "*Not I*," points out that Mouth's "this world" is her first and last use of deixis. However, he notices that "even this modest referential concession is not as straightforward as it seems . . . for there is no represented physical context to which it can possibly be related" (132).

39. Gilles Deleuze, "The Schizophrenic and Language," in *Textual Strategies* 287.

40. Beckett's letter to a friend as quoted in Charles Lyons, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983) 154.

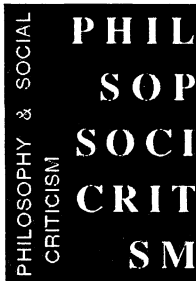
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