

Not I in *Rockaby***Daniel Davy**

It, say it, not knowing what . . . But I did nothing. I seem
to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.

—*The Unnamable*

This signification is formed only within the hollow of
differance, of discontinuity and discreteness, of the
diversion and of the reserve of what does not appear.

— Jacques Derrida

One other living soul.

— *Rockaby*

The motif of the fragmented, absent, or in some way “negated” subject has long played a significant role in the work of Samuel Beckett. The following passages, extracted from a variety of works, appearing at different times in Beckett’s career, illustrate this recurring theme:

. . . you feel nothing, strange, you don’t feel a mouth on you,
you don’t feel your mouth any more, no need of a mouth, the
words are everywhere, inside me, outside me, well well, a minute
ago I had no thickness, I hear them, no need to hear them, no
need of a head, impossible to stop them, impossible to stop, I’m
in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place
too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole
world is here with me, I’m the air, the walls, the walled-in one
. . .¹

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Your mind never active at any time is now even less than ever so. This is the type of assertion he does not question. You saw the light on such and such a day and your mind never active at any time is now even less than ever so. Yet a certain activity of mind however slight is a necessary adjunct of company. That is why the voice does not say, You are on your back in the dark and have no mental activity of any kind. The voice alone is company but not enough.²

In the skull all gone. All? No. All cannot go. Till dim go. Say then but the two gone. In the skull one and two gone. From the void. From the stare. In the skull all save the skull gone.³

(sic) in me that were without when the panting stops scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine (sic)⁴

When I think, no, that won't work . . .⁵

This “problem of the subject” becomes problematic in another sense as we turn from the prose work to drama, where the objective nature of the form—lines spoken by actors in the theater, and the necessity for graphic representation of the entire play—renders interior scenes within the mind exceptionally difficult. Given the prominence of this motif of the “negated subject” throughout Beckett’s career, it is perhaps no accident that the “objective scenes” of many of Beckett’s earlier and famous works for the theater are themselves in the manner of fragments, strange half worlds without directly expressive, perhaps, of the strange half worlds within of the characters that inhabit them—“Not I’s” in the “Nowheres” of *Godot*, *Happy Days*, and *Endgame*. The explicit reference to “Not I” will of course come later in the theater in the “dramaticules,” as they have been called,⁶ where progressively diminished “subjects” inhabit the progressively diminished “objects” of what remains of the worlds of their respective plays. This theme and relationship seems quite consistent in Beckett, but in a larger sense consistent as well within the fabric of modern drama in which Beckett’s work plays so important a role. “Objects” recede in significance in many of the early masterpieces of the late nineteenth century because of their perceived irrelevance, their denial of affective significance; one thinks of Hedda Gabler’s indifferent contempt for her comfortable and proper “home,” and the solipsism and introspective turn within of so many of Chekhov’s characters. But, as the outer world dwindles so does the inner, initiating that stereotypically modern “quest for meaning” in *any* world as the sharp distinctions between subject and object also recede: the talismanic “Moscow” evolves—or devolves—into the enigmatic “Godot” later in Beckett, and finally contracts into

merely “somewhere,” “there,” in the beautiful and appalling rhythms of *Rockaby*.

What is the essential nature of the dilemma of the protagonist in this play? Although various alternative interpretations have been suggested, I would agree with those who have argued that the presentation of a single protagonist, despite the theatrical division between “W” (“Woman” in Rocker) and “V” (offstage, recorded “Voice”), is clearly Beckett’s intention in the play. Hersh Zeifman notes Beckett’s ambiguous presentation of protagonists as both “subjects” and projected “objects” of—or within—themselves (“pseudocouples,” as he calls them) in *Not I*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *Footfalls*, but declares: “The significant shift in this pattern in *Rockaby* is that both speaker and listener are the same person—literally, and not just perhaps symbolically as in other Beckett plays.” “They” are one and yet divided, a predicament in common with so many other subjects in the Beckett canon. What divides them? Charles Lyons, in the process of describing and clarifying some of the essential relationships in the play, identifies, in my view, the essence of the problem:

The fragments that constitute *Rockaby* imply but do not confirm certain relationships between parts. For example, we assume that the voice, V, is the inner voice of the woman, W, and that the *she* of the narrative is the woman, W, who rocks in the chair invoking the story-telling voice. The published text of the play indicates that W and V are played by the same actress so that we assume that V is the recorded voice of the actress performing W. We also know that in his later plays Beckett divides the physical presence of the character from a voice that tells a story. *We assume that this division represents, theatrically, the character’s perception—and ours—of the difference between speaking or telling and the self-conscious awareness of that speech as memory, invention, or at least, sound.*⁸ (my final emphasis)

How innocent and natural it sounds, this “difference!” One “speaks”, and one is “aware” that one does so as one does so. As a human “action” such a depiction seems almost absurdly commonplace, and, yet, it is the very mundaneness of its fundamental nature that conceals its near apocalyptic implications, at least within the sensibility of this play. The difficulty lies in the “movement” of consciousness from the unity of “one” (who speaks) to the duality of “speaking” and the concurrent “awareness” that the act is in process. The precise or at least stable configuration of mind or identity within—a kind of “noun”—mutates via this “process”—a kind of “verb”—that connects the self to the outside world. Even as one “reaches out to touch someone” (“Someone there . . .”), one loses “one”—subject, “self”—in

the quest for another—an “other,” an object.⁹ We see variations of this dilemma implied in Beckett’s earlier drama. As Charles Lyons observes, “In *Happy Days* we witness the epistemological struggle of Winnie who cannot sustain a coherent image of herself in time apart from the moment by moment invention of herself as an object in her own consciousness.”¹⁰ One must “invent” because the reality of self is forever self-obsured. Thus the general “problem of the subject” with which we began would seem to be clearly identified, as Lyons will go on to say of the *Rockaby* protagonist:

What we see (and hear) in *Rockaby* appears to be the self-objectification of a character. In this play the *I* is reduced to the equivocal perception of the Woman who revolves a recitation in her mind as the story of another, not herself, and yet herself.¹¹

This formulation, however accurate it may be, seems subtly flawed and incomplete. The “problem” within the self or human consciousness dramatized by Beckett would appear to lie in the interface of the subject-object relationship. Insofar as one is “out,” the integrity of “in” is violated; insofar as one stays “in”—mute and still like “Worm”¹² in *The Unnamable*—contact with “out” is entirely severed. Hence the weirdly “improvised” feeling of both subjective and objective environments in a play such as *Happy Days*, where a kind of perpetual, half successful, half collapsed sort of “compromise” seems to be in place.

But within this conception, if the day is not “happy,” neither is it altogether unhappy: one can have either “subject,” or “object,” or fragments of both at the same time. But what if one could have nothing at all? I would argue that this is precisely the dilemma of the *Rockaby* protagonist (and arguably, that which is central in other “late” Beckett dramatic works as well), one that engenders both the unique “theatricalist” frame constructed by Beckett to express this dilemma, and also the sense of savage alienation that pervades the entire play.

This notion of an *absolute* loss of self has been articulated in the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida; Derrida’s concept of *differance* functions, in my view, as a remarkably accurate paradigm and formula describing the dilemma of the protagonist in *Rockaby*. The concept of *differance*—pivotal to Derrida’s entire philosophy—is in a sense quite simple, while at the same time remarkably complex and adept at eluding clear definition.¹³ One way of grasping the basic dynamic of this idea as it operates in the mind is to compare it to another famous dramatic example of a “problem of the subject”: that featured in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.¹⁵ The Father’s well-known speech in this play which calls into question the nature of human identity is disturbing enough, but it pales before the abyss of *differance*.¹⁴ Pirandello’s vision of the mind’s interior landscape is one in which the subject suffers constant, gradual mutation,

eventually issuing forth in a “self” bearing little or no resemblance to an earlier or original version. But in Pirandello, a “self” nevertheless exists, even though subject to perpetual erosion. Pirandello thus postulates an implicit hierarchy: self/mutation. Self exists prior to mutation and establishes the ground of mutation’s operation. Derrida’s *differance* reverses this hierarchy. Mutation is prior to self. As this unceasing process is co-terminus with (human) life itself (the primordial and initial illusory phenomenon of “self consciousness”), the self never “arrives,” as it were, and is thus revealed as illusory, never having existed in the first place (or any other place).¹⁶

One of the obvious derivatives of Derrida’s argument is simply that of another voice in the old “idealism vs. materialism” debate, with Derrida’s analysis leading emphatically to the latter view. Yet another affirmation of philosophical materialism is not particularly consequential; what is significant with reference to Beckett and *Rockaby* is the specific “intrapsychic” logic that leads to this conclusion, and the medium of that logic, which is language.¹⁷ It is a commonplace of criticism that Beckett uses language in distinctive and unique ways, and it is equally commonplace to observe that Derrida deconstructs language “texts” previously regarded as embodying stable meaning. However, it would seem to me most useful to apply Derrida to Beckett from a parallel rather than a dialectical perspective. As I will argue, “character” in *Rockaby* has already undergone artistic “deconstruction” via a logic that parallels Derrida’s critical theory. Therefore, “text” as such, or “language” as text, is not really the primary issue in *Rockaby* in the usual implied sense of the gradual construction of “character,” but is rather only a kind of symptomatic derivative, the residual but superbly articulated “print” left behind of the playwright’s effort to manifest “consciousness/self” and its dilemma as immediately and as acutely as possible. Following Derrida, therefore, we should approach the text of *Rockaby* not as the “expression” of the subject (subject as *something*: “noun”), but as the there/not there manifestation of “subjectivity” itself (simply “energy”: subject as “verb”), a phenomenon that can only be expressed or “recorded” indirectly, rather like the quanta in particle physics, or “red shift” data in astronomy measuring the velocity of distant objects.

There are a number of general elements in the play that are directly suggestive of the energy of *differance* as “subject” in the manner indicated by Derrida. The basic rhythm of the play, the continual “movement” of the text—the absence of punctuation¹⁸ and the constant repetition, as though always doubling back, circling, searching—seems almost a replica of the concept of *differance* in aesthetic form. The textual subject cannot “rest” as it is engendered and constituted only by and in itself—“textuality,” the constant movement of *differance*. In the same fashion, if the text does not seem to even temporarily conclude or rest, neither does it “begin” despite “starting,” in a sense, not once but twice via Beckett’s theatrically bifurcated protagonist: W’s “More” is followed by V’s “till in the end/

the day came . . .” and so forth. But “more” obviously implies a prior process of some sort—“more” of the same—and thus the origin or “beginning” of the dramatic process we are given to witness is conspicuously absent. V’s second “beginning” is equally absent;¹⁹ as Charles Lyons has pointed out, V’s opening narrative “constitutes an extended subordinate clause that, if it were housed in a complete sentence, would delimit some statement of activity that we do not hear.”²⁰ V, like W, is thus already “in process” from the very outset of the play; the dramatic subject of *Rockaby* is indeed a “subordinate clause” within not simply a sentence, but an identity without beginning or end, origin or closure. In a lesser, but still significant, fashion, the form or “image” of the text—a narrow column surrounded by blank space—together with its brevity, is also suggestive of the constraint of *differance*: the “energy” of the text, and subject, inhabits only a kind of crawlspace of the psyche, originating nowhere and leading to nothing.

In theatrical terms, *differance* is also strongly implied by the sole physical action of the play: rocking. “Rocking” as an action is non-linear in the same fashion as the textual structure of the play. Textually, the “self” does not express or “transact” with the world, and thus is forever “moving” “to and fro,” and so also in purely theatrical terms: “rocking” goes nowhere; it only “circles,” as it were, like the text, and is as a physical action only a kind of “energy,” the pure “vibration” that constitutes the sole existence of the protagonist. It is also highly significant that Beckett does not even allow W to “rock herself,” for this would suggest the very “transaction” that both the textual structure and theatrical “rocking” seem designed to negate: protagonist rocks, noun expresses verb, and the self authenticates its autonomous existence. Katherine Worth points out that the rocking of the chair is “a force that is moving . . . (W)”²¹; it is thus an agency external to “self-expression,” a disjunction engineered by Beckett’s simple stage direction: “*Rock: Slight. Slow. Controlled mechanically without assistance from W.*”²² The audience witnesses this external power, but through a glass darkly as it were, as the initial stage direction reads: “*Light: Subdued on chair. Rest of stage dark.*” (273) The audience thus sees that W is not rocking “herself,” but the peripheral focus—at the “bottom” of the stage image, and dimly lit—creates only a kind of impressionistic sense of the point; equally impressionistically, the audience senses or is made to feel that W *is* rocking herself, simply because the image and the relationship it implies is logical, and inherently commonplace and natural. Thus W, in theatrical terms, both “is” and “is not” rocking herself, a differential fluctuation of “subject”ivity that is perfectly expressive of the logic of *differance*.²³

However, there would appear to be an obvious contradiction of this point. “Rocking” is clearly initiated by W as “she” rather than V articulates the “More” at the outset of the play, and of each section, immediately prior to the onset of rocking and the speech of V. W, at least at these junctures, appears unambiguously in command, “acting,” and thus authenticating herself as “actor”: subject. This point

is, in my view, central to the meaning and significance of the entire play and also legitimizes *Rockaby* as a play rather than simply a “dramatic poem,” as a number of commentators have suggested. For the protagonist of *Rockaby*, trapped not “in” but “as” the mechanism of *differance*, is, via that very dilemma, “self conscious,” a reality of “subjectivity” if but an illusion of “subject.” And Beckett has given her, as the very first condition of the play, a kind of awareness of her condition. This awareness is of a piece with the entire fabric of the play—it fluctuates, it is there/not there, but it drives the action of the play every bit as vigorously as the ambition of Macbeth, or the eroticism of Phaedra: *W/V desires*. But what is the object of her desire? The great majority of answers to this question revolve around the simple naturalistic scenario of an isolated and acutely lonely old woman attempting to make meaningful human contact. As Jane Hale puts it, “This woman has spent her entire life trying to see and be seen by another.”²⁴ In all such cases, the sought after “other” is, quite obviously, another human being, an entity external to the identity and consciousness of the protagonist. This basic perspective seems obvious enough, but perhaps too obvious in a play otherwise characterized by numerous striking theatrical and dramaturgical innovations in traditional dramatic form. Bert States has pointed out that the overall trend of Beckett’s dramatic work progressively “reduce(s) the social nature of dramatic mimesis,” and that the late “voice” plays give us “some idea of what might happen to solid social drama if you bled away everything but the spectacle of consciousness at its center.”²⁵ I would argue that the implied social dimension in *Rockaby* is illusory, that the real content and focus of the play lies within rather than without, and that the sought after “other” with whom *W/V* desires vital human contact, “another living soul” as she later puts it, is her own.

The protagonist of *Rockaby* seeks this goal not only entirely within consciousness, but *as* consciousness, a matrix both brought into being and wholly formed by the “process” stream of ideations, expressed as language—*subjectivity*—that constitutes her sole existence. She is conscious of her “self” only as this content, “self conscious” only as these objectifications projected against a wholly nebulous ground (“somewhere there”), but objects, not subject, not I.²⁶ And she knows it. Hence the search for the “other” which forms the “action,” conflict and drama of the play. What is this “other?” By its very nature it cannot be known, and yet is intimately sensed or intuited—its presence yearned for, its absence mourned. It is the *logos* of subjectivity, the thinker beyond or “behind” the thought with whom the protagonist seeks union and completion. But it is the very proximity and intuition of this ‘other’ that generates its distance and obscurity; “known” only *as* ‘other,’ the very word in the play operates in a kind of uncanny harmony with the principle of *differance*. It not only generates a host of derivative “others”—another, (m)other, own other, etc—but its very meaning changes, as we shall see, in a kind of “anti-zen,” yin and yang correspondence with the protagonist as she

moves through the play.

One element in the play, however, is quite consistent with traditional dramatic form: it features a late point of attack. W/V's quest has apparently been going on for a very long time. The invocation "More", which opens the play, is almost immediately followed by the exhortation to "stop," a relationship which of course continues throughout the play. As these contradictory injunctions refer to an "action" so intimately tied to the principle of identity—indeed, "within" that sphere—they tend to continually nullify that identity, an operation consistent with the function of *differance*. Also consistent is the use of the double third person pronoun ("when she said/ to herself . . ." 275) as a stand in for "I"—identity as object, "other"—and the verb "stopped" which suggests an arbitrary point on a continuum, rather than an invocation of closure. Let us also consider the odd, idiomatic language used to initially describe the quest: "going to and fro/ all eyes/ all sides/ high and low . . ." (275). There is a suggestion of formlessness in this expression which is much more evocative of the kind of free-form "roaming" one conducts in the mind rather than of the kind of activity conducted in the necessarily more structured and constrained outer world. The implication is thus once again of an internal dramatic focus and action, rather than an objective one.

All of these motifs occur in rapid succession in the first section of the play, prior to the initial description of the protagonist's objective: "for another/ another like herself/ another creature like herself/ a little like/ . . ." (275). The "other" is thus initially designated "another," in section one, and derivative terms—other, mother, own other—will be consecutively introduced in sections two through four respectively. This deployment, along with subtle changes in emphasis and a series of strategically introduced new terms duly employed as the play proceeds—"window," "blind," "pane," "living soul," and others, very specifically suggests a constantly intensifying internal drama in which the protagonist grapples with the ground of her own being in an effort to transcend its limitations, fails repeatedly and emotionally responds to this failure, and finally surrenders and subsides into a defeated silence.

The constant stress in the play that the "other" must be "like herself" implies some near duplicate of W/V's own identity rather than a second "other" human being; however, if loneliness or isolation in a conventional naturalistic sense is the issue here, would not almost any "other" type of sympathetic mind, heart or ear do? The oft quoted line of another famous "searcher" of modern drama, Blanche Dubois—"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"—did not additionally specify that anonymous compassion or empathy would be welcome only from a second Blanche DuBois. Such a caveat would not be—emotionally—logical, and it is not logical here to assume this demand. But with "another" as her internal object W/V expresses a degree of emotional optimism at the outset of the play: "another," a replica, *like* me, close to me, perhaps success is

possible!

Thus, in section two there is an indication of an intensification of action and its direction as expressed in a single line, “went back in,” which is then followed by a whole cluster of material conspicuously new (as is “went back in”) in the lyrical stream of harmony and repetition that precedes it: “window,” “quiet at her window,” “let up the blind,” “only window,” “another living soul,” and the term “other,” introduced for the first time in conjunction with “living soul.” The most significant of these new elements is the term “living soul.” If this language is indeed projecting a naturalistic scenario, with “another living soul” as a “second human” to put alongside the protagonist, then clearly W/V is indirectly describing herself as a “living soul” in the same phrase as her sought after object. “Living soul” would thus function as a passively assumed synonym for “I.” But such an interpretation—in which the protagonist automatically assumes her own identity in terms which imply belief in an autonomous ground of being, ultimately based in a transcendent, spiritual dimension—seems remarkably complacent given the acute and pervasive sense of alienation projected by the entire play. I would argue that Beckett is using the phrase not in terms which imply an assumed identification with “I,” but as a deeply ironic “spiritual” label designating the absent “other” self that W/V struggles to locate, “somewhere there,” within herself.

The quest for the “living soul” is conducted in a very close correspondence with, or through, the protagonist’s “window,” perhaps the most prominent term or element in the play appearing to lend credence to a naturalistic interpretation of the play’s basic scenario. But what exactly is a “window” in this context? Objectively, it is the window in the house within which the lonely woman sits, peering out to connect with humankind. But, this very image calls attention to the subtle theatricalization inherent in this relationship: a “window,” like a proscenium arch, is a framing device enabling the viewer to perceive the scene it encloses. “Scene,” in the theater, is of course “unreal,” fictional; it is only an artful representation of the larger reality the theatrical imagery seeks to convey. Void of its representations the theater reverts to its true status as an “empty space”; in like fashion, a “window” without reference to content frames vacancy. A window is a mediumless medium; it is both there and not there, the very dilemma of “self” as *differance*. Is the protagonist of *Rockaby* only a “window” unto herself? Considered both as medium and content, “window” as synonym for “I” is nothing—no “thing”—but reflects only an image of the reality it seeks in vain to capture.

But, the strategy for the pursuit of subjective reality has narrowed and intensified in section two; no longer going “to and fro,” W/V now “sits,” “quiet,” at her window, as she has gone further “back in” to herself in pursuit of herself. Both the action to “sit” in juxtaposition with the earlier “to and fro,” and the explicit “quiet”—repeated numerous times throughout the play—imply a more concentrated effort, a stilling of the psyche as the protagonist seeks to probe more deeply within

her own interior. Then who—or what—continues to “speak” even as “quiet” is invoked? The issue of language assuming a life of its own even when placed in the mouths or minds of “characters” is of course a commonplace of Beckett criticism. With reference to *Rockaby*, Steven Connor asserts that the protagonist “cannot control” the recorded voice, and Katherine Worth observes that “the recorded voice streams on along with the rocking motion: it is all bearing her along . . .”²⁷ Here is the very dilemma of *differance*: “it” is “bearing her along,” rather than “she”—“I” from her perspective—“bearing *it* along,” a relationship in which the self articulates itself and thus legitimizes its autonomous existence. W/V as identity is thus only the product—or by-product—of a “process” wholly extrinsic to her sense of “I.” And what is this process but simply “nature,” consciousness and its activity considered only as the objective function of the physical nervous system. There is an additional echo here of the central metaphor of “rocking,” with its sense of rhythmic implacability suggesting the fundamental interior rhythms of nature—respiration and heartbeat—that are also “not I,” but are so intimately involved with the life of the self. It is this sense of the implacable and inevitable in the play that seems to me to raise *Rockaby* to the stature of tragedy, a status not born of the Gods and their mystery or of ironic “mistakes” of the will, but simply of existence itself. The play’s allusion to tragedy seems clearly intended given the terms “blind” and “pane” (introduced in section three) so closely associated with “window” (as subject), with the obvious reference to tragic “blindness” interacting with “pane,” a term that functions as an almost perfect metaphor for “self” in this context, as it simultaneously interpenetrates the notions of clarity of perception, vacancy, and suffering in a single image.

The fourth and climactic section of *Rockaby* evokes an “other” far more concrete than any we have yet seen, “mother,” a figure that is once again generally interpreted “naturalistically” as the protagonist’s literal mother—an eerie, earlier replica of W/V and, possibly, W/V’s dilemma. The particular manner in which “mother” is evoked, however, once again raises the question if a subjective rather than objective referent is not the real issue here:

in the end went down
 down the steep stair
 let down the blind and down
 right down
 into the old rocker
 mother rocker
 where mother rocked
 all the years
 all in black
 best black

sat and rocked
rocked
till her end came
in the end came
off her head they said
gone off her head
but harmless
no harm in her
dead one day
no
night
dead one night
in the rocker
in her best black
head fallen
and the rocker rocking
rocking away
so in the end.... (280)

On a “naturalistic” level it is simply peculiar that “mother” should be so strikingly similar to “daughter” in so many respects, particularly given the relatively exotic nature of the dilemma they seem to share.²⁸ However, their near identical status is entirely appropriate if we consider “mother” as the alter ego of W/V, the not quite “I” of the protagonist’s own identity. In this sense, “mother” would represent the totality of the psychic space inhabited by W/V—“consciousness”—the site or “home” of the paradoxical self that becomes “self” conscious only as process. The intimate yet disjunctive nature of this relationship recalls the uniquely intimate relationship of mother and child, with “mother” as the literal “home” of the “other” when they are biologically “one” and yet apart, a relationship which is also replicated as pure “text”—“(m)other” contains “other.” This “natural” intimacy is explicitly evoked in the line “mother rocker,” which immediately precedes and is closely associated with the first reference to “mother” as ostensible parent. The allusion to “mother nature” seems clearly intended, particularly as coupled with “rocker,” which is itself arguably the most powerful theatrical element in the play suggesting the objective mechanism of natural forces. This relationship is then additionally reinforced by M/V’s anticipation of her own death, a natural event, but of no significance in the larger continuum of nature as “rocking” continues, absorbing the energy of (not) “I” within its larger rhythm:

dead one night
in the rocker

in her best black
 head fallen
 and the rocker rocking
 rocking away (280)

Finally, “mother’s” characterization as having “gone off her head” is virtually a literal statement of M/V’s dilemma as I have described it: she is “in” her head but “off” it; she is “not herself,” not I.

The “memory of mother” constitutes a conscious and deliberate recall of the long duration of W/V’s struggle (“all the years/ all in black/....”), and marks a transition to the play’s final movement into resignation and surrender. “Rocking” has constituted the “natural” matrix of W/V’s effort; in so struggling, she has in effect resisted this force even as it has engaged her. Now, however, “rocking” and its significance is consciously evoked via its articulation *as* language—the old rocker—rather than simply functioning as the passive/active theatrical site of self “process,” as exhibited in the text and language of the play. Thus, W/V, rather than merging the “process” and “site” aspects of consciousness in a new unity of “I,” approaches, instead, only a more grotesque kind of “union” of both textual and theatrical aspects of “process” alone. In this context, such a coalescence seems a clear signal of surrender, particularly as the “rocker” is so immediately linked to death (“dead one day/ no/ night/ dead one night”)²⁹, a reference which would seem to be openly affirmed in the line, “those arms at last.” This process of surrender climaxes in the lines, “was her own other/own other living soul” (281), where the final union with the “other” occurs only in the terms indicated above—“subject *ivity*” comes to final rest and resignation only as that “other” status. This “reversal” of the significance of the key term “other” finds an additional emphasis in the remarkable clumsiness of the verbal construction employed—(not) I speaks in the “first” person as “she” which becomes the “other” of her “own” self—an awkwardness, a fundamental lack of viability, that parallels W/V’s self-alienated condition.

The final “note” of this beautifully musical play perhaps occurs not with the concluding “rock her off,” but in the stillness which follows. As Linda Ben-Zvi has observed, “The unsaid ‘more’ is palpable in the silence.”³⁰ This “palpability” of nothing or emptiness, so characteristic of Beckett’s work in a general sense, calls to mind another body of work in which the “search for the self” is also paramount, the Vedic tradition of ancient India. Here also consciousness, as it is customarily experienced, is regarded only as the seat of *maya* or illusion, an illusion which persists until a condition known as “enlightenment” occurs. This condition, which is said to incorporate *ananada* or “bliss,” “expansion” of the mind in some way, and even “union with God,” is certainly radically at variance with the vision of Samuel Beckett.³¹ And yet there are a number of intriguing parallels between the

transcendental “light” of this Eastern tradition, and the dark void indwelling in *Rockaby*. In the Eastern vision, “emptiness” or absence is also “palpable,” as it is believed that ultimate wisdom is expressible only as “silence”; any particularity of speech would only “break” this wholeness and define the finite. Hence, many of the Vedic texts are as austere in their verbal economy as are so many of Beckett’s writings, and in like fashion frequently “express” only indirectly or even through negation. “Opposites converge,” as Kierkegaard remarked, and it is arguably true that both the seers of the Veda and Samuel Beckett seek to approach the fundamental mystery of the human condition. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, one who seeks the ultimate “truth” approaches a seer with a series of questions and possibilities, and to all of these the seer responds, “Neti, neti, neti . . .” (“Not that, not that, not that . . .”).

Then what? “More.”

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1958) 139.
2. Samuel Beckett, *Company* (New York: Grove, 1980) 9.
3. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove, 1983) 26.
4. Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (New York: Grove, 1970) 31.
5. Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974) 66.
6. Beckett used the term originally as the sub-title for *Come and Go*; Keir Elam extends it to apply to the whole group of brief, late Beckett works for the theater. See Keir Elam, “Dead Heads: Damnation-Narration in the ‘Dramaticules,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 145-166.
7. Hersh Zeifman, “‘The Core of the Eddy’: *Rockaby* and Dramatic Genre,” in *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman & Dina Sherzer (University Park & London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1987) 141. The “other Beckett plays” referred to are of course other “dramaticules,” and closely related in theme and form to *Rockaby*.
8. Charles R. Lyons, “Perceiving *Rockaby*—As a Text, As a Text by Samuel Beckett, As a Text for Performance,” *Comparative Drama* 16:4 (Winter, 1982-83) 303.
9. I would thus disagree with those who formulate the problem on a traditionally cognitive or “intellectual” basis. Lois Oppenheim, for example, speaking of both the *Not I* and *Rockaby* protagonists, asserts: “Mouth’s refusal to don the ‘I,’ like the old woman’s quest in *Rockaby*...reveals not only the insufficient appropriation of the transcendental consciousness in the first-person pronoun, but that inability of consciousness to conceptualize itself in its totality of which we spoke a moment ago.” Lois Oppenheim, “Anonymity and Individuation: The Interrelation of Two Linguistic Functions in *Not I* and *Rockaby*,” in *Make Sense Who May”: Essays on Samuel Beckett’s Later Works*, ed. Robin J. Davis & Lance St. John Butler (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, Colin Smythe, 1988) 42. Despite the problem as defined here, one can still “conceptualize”

oneself because it is precisely such a habitual operation of self presentation, even if fashioned on a highly “cerebral” level, that conceals the deeper nature of the dilemma. The eye cannot see itself, and the mind, perhaps, cannot know itself, but it can *imagine*, or “conceive,” its own nature.

10. Lyons 300. The key idea here is “time” which implies consciousness of relative measure, an ideational “processing” which is ultimately grounded in “world” rather than “self.” In “time” the mind is “out”; “in” mutates (“noun” dissolves in “verb”), and thus one must “invent” it.

11. Lyons 302. Essentially the same point has been echoed by other critics as well. Jane Hale, for example, refers to Beckett’s repeated theatrical strategy (in *Rockaby*, *Eh Joe*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *That Time*) of deploying a single character “listening” to a “voice” external to itself—as expressed in theatrical terms—as a “technique (that) serves both to indicate to the spectators that we are penetrating the consciousness of the mute character on stage and to dramatize the dual nature of human perception—the division of every consciousness into a perceiving subject and a perceived object that can never coincide with each other . . .” Jane Alison Hale, *The Broken Window: Beckett’s Dramatic Perspective* (West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue UP, 1987) 135.

12. “Worm,” along with “Basil” and “Mahood,” is one of the many “selves,” “levels” of self, or “not” selves in Beckett’s famous novel.

13. Derrida himself puts the term “under erasure,” a notion that is perhaps captured in the duality of its critical importance to his theory on the one hand, but on the other: “. . . *différance* is *not*, does not exist, is not a present-being . . . in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence” (Derrida’s emphasis). Jacques Derrida, “*Différance*,” in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 6.

14. The Father has questioned the reality of the Stage Manager’s identity; the Stage Manger responds impatiently as to the point of “asking these questions,” and the Father rejoins:

FATHER: [I ask them] . . . only in order to know if you, as you really are now, see yourself as you once were with all the illusions that were yours then, with all the things both inside and outside of you as they seemed to you—as they were then indeed for you. Well sir, if you think of all those illusions that mean nothing to you now, of all those things which don’t even *seem* to you to exist any more, while once they *were* for you, don’t you feel that—I won’t say these boards—but the very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that in the same way this *you* as you feel it today—all this present reality of yours—is fated to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?

(Pirandello’s emphasis)

15. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in Luigi Pirandello, *Naked Masks, Five Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Dutton, 1922) 265.

16. The basic cluster of ideas comprising Derrida's wider philosophy, and which lead to such a conclusion and the concept of *differance*, are by now well known and will be summarized here only very briefly. Derrida's strategy is essentially as follows: he begins by arguing that "writing" is prior to speech, as language cannot exist without first being inscribed within the social collective that uses it. The utility of this move lies with the point that it enables Derrida to decouple "meaning" (the "signified" element of a sign as opposed to its "signifying" component—the phonic or graphic label that allows it to be spoken or written and communication to occur) from a cognitive act within the mind (and "self") as the origin of thought and communication. Derrida further argues that the most fundamental cognitive act of "self consciousness" (as in Descartes: "I think, therefore I am") is constituted in the signing, "writing" function ("I" cannot exist without thought which cannot exist without language). But as language—and "meaning," hence "thought"—is now derived from without rather than created originally from within, the "I" of the mind must acquire its ability to "think" and "be" from the meaning inscribed in the external exchange of language occurring within the social collective. But what is the source of meaning if all *other* minds—"I"s—are so engaged? For Derrida, it exists only in what he calls the "trace"—that which is inscribed in all signs which enable their signifying function to occur. The trace is pure difference. The signifier "cat," for example, can only mean the small domestic animal of our awareness because it does *not* mean—is *different* from—all the other words of the English language ("*not* dog, *not* horse, *not* tree, *not* phenomenology," etc.). The trace is thus the purely negative implicit inscription within all signifiers of all other signifiers. At this juncture, *differance* is born. If all meaning is *purely* relative (not that some "thing" is relative to some "thing" else—which would ground the system—but that *everything* is relative to everything else), then meaning can never be fully present, but must always continue to "refer," "move," in an endless chain of "nots" beyond itself. We thus arrive at the "meaning" (explaining why Derrida says it does and does not exist) of *differance*, a hybrid term conflating "differ" and "defer." As "I" cannot exist without thought and language, which always "differs" from itself, the presence of "I" is endlessly deferred—"not" present, not I. Derrida's logic is thus an exact reversal of Descartes: "I think, therefore I'm not."

17. With respect to the first point, here is a passage from *The Unnamable* which could almost have been written by Derrida as an exegesis of *differance*:

"I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either."

Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1958) 134.

18. The only punctuation in the play consists of the four periods following the four

“mores,” spoken by W, that initiate each of the four sections or “acts” of the play. Even the conclusion of each section lacks punctuation but simply “stops,” an apparently deliberate ironic juxtaposition with the “stopping” period following each of the “mores.” “More” initiates action but immediately “stops”; the “action” that follows “stops” in fact but not in form with a period. This relationship implies a kind of inherent “self”-contradiction, a condition entirely in harmony with *differance*.

19. It thus constitutes a kind of grim Beckett paraphrase of the colloquial spiritual affirmation: “Stillborn again.”

20. Lyons 303.

21. Katherine Worth, “Beckett’s Auditors: *Not I* to *Ohio Impromptu*,” in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 178.

22. Samuel Beckett, *Rockaby*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1984) 274. All subsequent citations from the play are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

23. Beckett’s strategic bifurcation of his protagonist into human presence and recorded voice generates a similar implication on the level of hearing. As Enoch Brater has noted, V’s “eerie tone, modulated but always metallic, is never entirely human.” The recorded voice is thus parallel to the rocked body, never “entirely” the possession of the protagonist, always “not” her’s, even while seeming to be so. Enoch Brater, “Light, Sound, Movement, and Action in Beckett’s *Rockaby*,” in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1986) 391. With reference to the rocking, Peter Gidal has observed that “the rocking movement . . . (is) given as a mechanism automatically rocking the rocking chair by an unseen machine, outside of any *body* movement,” and S. E. Gontarski refers to “the unaided, almost supernatural movement of the rocker.” Peter Gidal, *Understanding Beckett: A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett* (London, Macmillan, 1986) 147. S. E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett’s Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1985) 179.

24. Hale 140. This basic scenario forms the predicate for a chorus of critical “theme and variations” on an essentially identical perspective. These range from the relatively straightforward, such as Charles Lyons—“The visual image of *Rockaby*, the woman in her elaborate black dress . . . in combination with the sparse details of her search and its locale stimulate us to situate her in an alienating bourgeois urban environment. We organize these segments of information to create the context for the narrative of a woman’s futile search for another like herself and her gradual abandoning of that effort, and ultimately—her use of her own image as a substitute for that other” (Lyons 309)—to more complex interpretations, such as Anna McMullan’s: “The narrative summarizes its subject’s existence as a perpetual search for an other . . . The desired other, however, is an other ‘like’ the self, whose need in turn for an other would reflect the need of the self, . . . The desire to perceive the other seems to be the desire for a reflection of the self, or rather, the desire to recognize the desire of the “self” in the desire of the other. Should this other be found, the need of each, instead of circulating endlessly, would respond to the other, each becoming simultaneously subject and object of desire in a completed

cycle . . . ” Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) 105.

25. Bert States, “Playing in Lyric Time: Beckett’s Voice Plays,” *Theatre Journal* 40:4 (December, 1988) 455.

26. That is to say, the mind perceives “itself” as simply this—perceived, an *object* of conscious attention within consciousness; the *per ceiver* continually dissolves into the objects—thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.—of internal perception.

27. Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 133. Worth 177.

28. I am of course using the term “naturalistic” only in the most general sense of some sort of rudimentary “real world” scenario seemingly implied by the text. As Charles Lyons says, “The visual image of *Rockaby*, the woman in her elaborate black dress and head piece, in combination with the sparse details of her search and its locale stimulate us to situate her in an alienating bourgeois urban environment.” Lyons 309.

29. Both W/V and “mother” are dressed in black; the death of “mother” is indicated to be at night rather than the daytime. This double “darkness” seems clearly suggestive of the darkness within, with “dressed in black” also indicating a kind of perpetual mourning for this condition. “Death” in this context would thus signify the death of the self, or the possibility of self. Subjective death precedes objective death, which makes the latter, as in so many tragic conclusions, almost irrelevant.

30. Linda Ben-Zvi, *Samuel Beckett* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 179.

31. For a comprehensive overview of Vedic philosophy, including selections from the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*, see *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnam and Charles A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) xvii-xxxi, 3-223.

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