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Vain Reasonings: *Not I*

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Not I is Beckett's most searing and intense dramatic work. Though it lasts only thirteen minutes, this play explores the key issue of the relationship between voice, body and subjectivity which lies at the heart of Beckett's writing. Steven Connor draws our attention to the power and importance of Beckett's theatre when he writes:

To challenge the prestige of dramatic speech, as Beckett's theatre does, is also to challenge one of the most powerful and recurrent oppositions between drama and writing—that opposition between the living, the embodied, the concrete on the one hand, and the abstract, the symbolic and the intangible on the other. (140)

It is precisely this opposition between the concrete and the abstract, between the body and the voice, which Beckett interrogates in *Not I*. Central to this opposition, as it is elaborated in the play, lies the question of subjectivity.

Connor argues that the "phonic immediacy" and the "physicality" of theatre are intrinsically linked to "the sense of origin of the voice in the body." He concludes that if the "language of the written book is distant and immaterial, then the language of the performed drama is conceived to be living and potent because it is physical" (140). Writing for the theatre allowed Beckett to explore the relationship between language and the body by presenting that relationship on stage rather than representing it in prose. The stage

allows Beckett to present the speaking body to a listening audience. Or, as we see in *Not I*, to place the speaking body on stage and then efface it, leaving only the voice.

This paper examines the way in which Beckett refigures the relationship between voice, body and subjectivity in *Not I*. It explores the implications of the disjunction between voice and body for the construction of subjectivity and shows how *Not I* is located at the intersection between gender and genre.

Not I features a single mouth, "upstage audience right" (376), which gives voice to a stream of speech at a speed which renders the individual words almost incomprehensible to the listener. This mouth is witnessed by the "tall standing figure" of the Auditor who remains silent throughout the play. The difficulty of understanding the spoken text of *Mouth* is emphasised by James Knowlson:

The text came through with searing power, a harsh shriek of anguish, all the more powerful because it demanded total concentration for the spectator to catch the words. (598)

Beckett emphasised the sonority of the text over its signification in a comment to Jessica Tandy, who was rehearsing *Not I* for the New York première in 1972, saying that the incessant stream of words should "work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (Knowlson and Pilling 195). In her autobiography Billie Whitelaw, who was chosen by Beckett to play *Not I* in its first British production at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1973, describes her understanding of *Not I* on first reading: "All I knew was that it would have to go faster than anything I'd ever heard in the theatre, if possible as fast as the speed of thought, and that of course is impossible" (118). Beckett concurs with this view when he recounts his discussions with the director of the first British production of *Not I*: "Anthony Page said it was too fast and wanted to make it comprehensible. Billie and I won" (Courtney 87). The speed at which Beckett has directed that *Not*

I be played renders the individual sentences hard for the listening ear to grasp. In the *Sunday Times* Billie Whitelaw described her preparation for the role: "I've been practising saying words at a tenth of a second. . . . No one can possibly follow the text at that speed but Beckett insists that I speak it precisely."¹

In *Not I* speech is a product of the body. It is an involuntary and uncontrollable corporeal excretion. The physicality of speech is emphasised by the speed of its delivery, a pace which emphasises the sonority of the word over its signification. The monologue of *Not I* is spoken at a speed which removes it from ordinary speech and makes it difficult for the audience to comprehend. In a review of the opening run of *Not I* in the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, New York, Edith Oliver of the *New Yorker* remarks that the voice of *Not I* speaks "so quickly that one can barely distinguish the words." She describes the play as "an aural mosaic of words, which come pell-mell but not always helter-skelter, and that once it is over, a life, emotions, and a state of mind have been made manifest, with literally stunning impact upon the audience" (124). It is described by Beckett as an "outburst" (Courtney 87).

The mouth which speaks is without a body, and no body can be posited by the audience since the location of the mouth, placed about eight feet above stage level, in no way approximates the location of the mouth of a speaking body. All that can be seen by the audience are the lips and tongue which work furiously to produce the monologue. The Auditor, whose gender is indeterminable, remains still throughout the play except for four brief movements which lessen at each instance until the last movement is barely perceptible to the audience. *Not I* has no definitive beginning or ending. The voice of *Mouth* is to be heard indistinctly before the curtain rises on the play. At the close of the play this voice "continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up" (383).

The tall shrouded figure of the Auditor stands silently "downstage audience left" (376). This figure stands on a podium raised four feet high and faces diagonally across the stage, "intent on *Mouth*" (376). The Auditor is the antithesis of *Mouth*. The latter speaks while the former is silent. The latter is a disembodied mouth while the former

is a "tall standing figure" (*Complete* 376). The latter is immobile while the former is capable of "four brief movements" (*Complete* 376). The Auditor is always other to the Mouth. The otherness which separates Auditor from Mouth is the otherness in speech. It is from this alterity that the voice of Mouth speaks. The Auditor is described in the stage directions as being of indeterminable sex, but many scholars have assigned this figure a masculine gender. This assignation often results from a reading of this play as an enactment of the tension between two aspects of language, the symbolic and the semiotic. The former is represented by the figure of the Auditor who stands in the place of the Law, the latter is represented by the Mouth the speech of whom approximates the undifferentiated somatic language which undermines the symbolic language of the Law. This Kristevan reading of *Not I* which places Auditor and Mouth in an antagonistic relationship which is described in terms of a polarisation of the masculine and the feminine does not acknowledge the bond between Auditor and Mouth which prefigures that between Listener and Reader in *Ohio Impromptu* who are "as alike in appearance as possible" (445).

Why is this disembodied voice who refuses, or is unable, to say "I" a female voice? Why is this voice taking place on stage rather than recounting itself on the page? An approach to these questions of gender and genre is found in the figure of the hymen, conceived by Derrida in terms of the law of genre which "includes within its reach the gender":

The question of the literary genre is not a formal one: it covers the motif of the law in general, of generation in the natural and symbolic senses, of birth in the natural and symbolic senses, of the generation difference, sexual difference between the feminine and masculine genre/gender, of the hymen between the two, of a relentless relation between the two, of an identity and difference between the feminine and masculine. (221)

Derrida's elaboration of the aspects of gender and genre which he

writes under the sign of the "hymen" draws into focus key elements of *Not I* such as the old woman's subjection to the law which requires her to confess, the scene of generation and birth with which the play opens and the generation gap between the "tiny little girl" and the woman "coming up to seventy" (376).

Not I must be understood on three levels simultaneously. The first of these levels is that of the story which tells of the old woman who, speechless for most of her life, suddenly becomes the conduit for a speech over which she has no control. The second level is that of performance which features a single isolated mouth who refuses to acknowledge her own speech and refuses to refer to herself in the first person. The third level is that of enactment. This is the level of the acting body who presents the speech of one who is without body, the actor who performs the play. Speaking at an intense speed without break or pause, this female body undergoes an anguish and evisceration which underwrites the circumstance of the subject of the story and the performance. In order to enact this play on stage she has to "get to the point where" as Billie Whitelaw describes, "I opened my mouth, and this stuff just poured out of me, like some sort of verbal diarrhoea" (122). During the presentation of *Not I* these three levels of story, performance and enactment become one.

Mouth tells a story of a seventy-year-old woman whose intermittent aphasia—she speaks "once or twice a year . . . always winter . . . some strange reason" (382)—is suddenly interrupted by an unstoppable flow of speech. This speech is less of a power than an affliction. The speaker has no control over her speech. It pours forth from her mouth like a violent excretion of the body. Speech erupts as a "sudden urge" unbidden and uncontrollable (382). It flows like vomit ". . . nearest lavatory . . . start pouring it out . . . steady stream. . ." (382). The old woman does not recognise the words she hears as her own speech: "when suddenly she realized [. . .] words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognise . . . at first . . . so long since it had sounded" (379). She denies ownership of the voice: ". . . till she began trying to delude herself . . . it was not hers at all . . . not her voice at all . . ." (379), but is forced to acknowledge the voice she hears as her own when she feels the physical movements of the mouth with which

speech is produced:

... suddenly she felt ... gradually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! ... her lips moving! ... as of course till then she had not ... (379)

The story which Mouth tells echoes and intersects with the speech of Mouth herself.

Like the speech of the old woman, Mouth's speech is characterised by uncontrollability, unintelligibility and speed. Mouth refuses to acknowledge the noise she hears in her ears as the sound of her own voice: "what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears" (378). This buzzing can be read as the sound of her own frenetic speech because each reference to it occurs at a break in the monologue caused by the unheard interjection of some other. But this interjection by the other can also be read as a reference to a part of the story which must not be forgotten—the buzzing may describe the sound of the speech of the old woman. However, since the buzzing is said to occur "all the time" (378), and the monologue explicitly states that the old woman was "practically speechless ... all her days" (379), it can be argued that the buzzing refers to the speech of Mouth, and her awareness of her own speech without recognising it as such. The buzzing also refers to the voice of the actress on stage as she strives to enunciate the text at great speed. This is the buzzing which the audience hears, at first unintelligible behind the curtain, and then barely comprehensible on stage. At this moment *Not I* cuts across the levels of story, performance and enactment, confounding each with the other to create a dramatic work which operates on the level of presentation rather than representation.

In *Not I* there is no "I" who speaks. With the rejection of the "I" Beckett's play goes beyond the "law of genre" as Jacques Derrida conceives it in his paper of the same name. The voice of *Not I* is no longer "the one who says 'I'":

this one who says "I" tells his inquisitors that he cannot manage to constitute himself as narrator [...], and tells them that he cannot manage to identify

with himself sufficiently, or to remember himself well enough to gather the story and récit that are demanded of him—which the [...] law require[s] of him. (215)

The law which demands a narrative account, which demands that she "tell," is perverted by the speaker of *Not I*, who refuses to assume the position of the narrator even as she speaks.

The speaker of *Not I* is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciating. She speaks and is spoken about. As the subject of the enunciating the speaker of *Not I* is unmistakably present in the torrent of sound which emanates from her mouth on stage. As the subject of the enunciation she is inevitably absent, for, being spoken about, she must be other to the speaker. The speaker of *Not I* is at once present and absent in the monologue which issues from her. The simultaneous presence and absence of the subject generates a tension in the monologue between the subject as "I," the one who speaks, and the subject as "she," the one who is spoken about. However the one who speaks, the supposed "I," is never present in the monologue. The one who speaks places herself in the position of the other in the very act of speaking. She refuses to recognise the sounds she hears as those of her own voice, and she refuses to recognise the subject of her story as herself. This double refusal, of the act of her own enunciation and of her place within that enunciation, is concentrated in the fourfold refusal which cuts the text of *Not I*:

... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... [Pause and movement I]

In this "vehement refusal to relinquish third person" (375), Mouth rejects the position of subjectivity and the accession into language. As Émile Benveniste emphasizes, subjectivity is constituent upon the utterance of the first person pronoun (260). She who says "I" becomes that "I." Therefore, she who refuses to move from the third person to the first person in her utterance rejects subjectivity and undermines language (259-60). By refusing to say "I," Mouth both denies her position as a speaking subject within language and denies the

possibility of language.

The simultaneous disjunction and conjunction of the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciating is further emphasised when the speaker screams. Mouth's scream is preceded by the story of the old woman's inability to move or give voice. This inability is described in terms of a disconnection between that which instigates and that which enacts a particular directive. That which enacts the directive is described as a machine which either does not receive the message from the instigator or is incapable of responding to the message:

... or the machine ... more likely the machine ...
so disconnected ... never got the message ... or
powerless to respond ... like numbed ... (378)

This mechanistic description of the failure of the body to produce the required scream or groan, or even to writhe, is directly contradicted at the very moment of its enunciation when Mouth, from whom the audience receives this story, does scream:

... couldn't make the sound ... not any sound ...
no sound of any kind ... no screaming for help for
example ... should she feel so inclined ... scream
... [Screams] ... then listen ... [Silence] ...
scream again ... [Screams again] ... then listen
again ... [Silence.] ... no spared that ... all silent as
the grave ... (378)

The scream which the subject of the story is unable to produce is produced by the teller of the story. The scream to which Mouth gives voice undercuts the silence which surrounds the old woman of the story, but this scream also puts in question the veracity of the old woman's assertion. If Mouth screams but does not recognise her own scream, perhaps the old woman also screams and is unable to recognise her own voice. The disconnection in the machine which prevents the scream, the groan or the writhe is not a disconnection which results in lack of production, but a disconnection which results in lack of

recognition. The voice which is spoken is not recognised by the one who speaks.

In the monologue of *Not I* there are 22 interruptions from a voice which is unheard by the audience. These interruptions, or prompts, attempt to correct or modify the story being told by Mouth. They can be grouped into six segments, each divided by Mouth's "vehement refusal to relinquish third person" (375). The first segment concerns itself with the birth and life of the old woman who is the subject of the monologue. The second section concerns the old woman's loss of body and awareness of punishment. The third section focuses on the emergence of speech. The fourth section concerns her obligation to tell. The fifth section deals with the viscerality of speech and the sixth section returns to the concerns of the first section.

The two interruptions contained in the first section concern themselves with the gender and age of the subject. The "tiny little thing" (376) who enters the world unloved is specified by the interruptive voice as a "tiny little girl" (376). For seventy years, as the voice insists, the "speechless infant" (376) exists on the margins of society. This segment of the monologue closes with Mouth's first refusal of the "I." This refusal comes as a result of a possible attempt to change the subject of the story from the third to the first person:

... all that early April morning light ... and she
found herself in the— ... what? ... who? ... no! ..
she! [...] ... found herself in the dark ... (376-
7)

The vehemence with which Mouth refuses this correction is in stark contrast to her acceptance of the corrections to the story in the first two instances outlined above.

The second section of *Not I* focuses on a moment of corporeal awareness which is intimately linked with an awareness of otherness conceived as suffering and punishment. The first two interruptions of this section concern themselves with the physical position of the old woman. Mouth's suggestion that the woman is either standing or sitting or kneeling is augmented by the interruptive suggestions that

she may also be lying. The old woman's inability to determine the position of her own body is exacerbated by almost total sensory deprivation. She is insentient except for a dulled awareness of a buzzing in the ears and a dim ray of light in the eyes. The old woman's assumption that her transposition from the light of a field in the early April morning to the dark of an indeterminable place or state is a punishment for sins committed is immediately contradicted by her realisation that without a body, without corporeal awareness, punishment is not possible. If she cannot suffer then she cannot be punished. In this passage suffering and pleasure are confounded. The body can no longer be relied upon to distinguish between the two. Without these poles of opposition the idea of punishment underwritten by a merciful God is impossible. The "she" who is referred to as an old woman of seventy at the beginning of the monologue is transformed into a series of discrete body parts. The eyes and the ears give access to the skull in which resounds the "dull roar" (378) of the buzzing. Each of these are disconnected from the brain which is described as being "at this stage . . . in control . . . under control . . ." (378) even though it cannot communicate with the sensory organs which collectively make up what Mouth refers to as the machine (378).

The third section of *Not I* tells of the emergence of speech. The brain does not recognise the words which push forth from the woman's mouth. The sounds of these words do not elicit recognition or response from the woman until she becomes physically aware of their emergence from her mouth:

. . . and not alone the lips . . . the cheeks . . . the jaws
. . . the whole face . . . all those— . . . what? . . . the
tongue? . . . yes . . . the tongue in the mouth . . . all
those contortions without which . . . no speech
possible . . . (*Complete* 379)

The speaker only claims the voice which she hears as her own when she feels it pushing itself through her body. The sonority of this voice subsumes its signification. Like the eponymous protagonist of *Watt*, the speaker of *Not I* has "no idea . . . what she was saying . . . imagine!

. . . no idea what she was saying!" (379). Speech is experienced as a sensation of the same order as the buzzing in the ears or the ray of light in the eyes. It imposes itself upon the body. But this imposition must be disowned:

. . . till she began trying to . . . delude herself . . . that
it was not hers at all . . . not her voice at all . . . and
no doubt would have . . . vital she should . . . was on
the point . . . after long efforts . . . (379)

It is vital that the speaker delude herself that the voice she hears is not her voice because without a voice there is no possibility that she can posit her self as a subject in discourse. Without speech there is no possibility of saying "I." But the interruptive voice insists that this speaking voice originates in the old woman's body:

all those— . . . what? . . . the tongue? . . . yes . . . the
tongue in the mouth . . . all those contortions without
which . . . no speech possible . . . (379)

The interruptions which punctuate this third section alternate between an insistence on the tongue of the woman as the necessary element in the production of speech and on the audition of that speech in the form of buzzing. There is a tension between the interruptive voice's insistence on the ownership of the voice and the old woman's denial of the voice. With the realisation that the voice she hears is in fact her own comes the fear of the reimposition of corporeal sensation. The production of speech is intimately linked with the body. In order to give voice, one must have a tongue to shape the words and ears with which to hear the sound of one's own voice. The logic according to which the old woman reasons dictates that if the voice is hers then she must have a body to produce it. But the body is to be feared for it is the means through which the suffering of punishment is possible.

It is the voice as it is embodied which becomes the agent of suffering. The uncontrollable stream of words sear the old woman's body until "lips . . . cheeks . . . jaws . . . tongue . . . never still a second . . . mouth on fire . . . stream of words . . . in her ear . . ." (380). The

brain, trying to make sense of, or put an end to, this linguistic outpouring, is "like maddened," "raving away on its own" (380) until brain and voice are working in an equally frenzied manner:

. . . the brain . . . flickering away on its own . . .
quick grab and on . . . nothing there . . . on to the
next . . . bad as the voice . . . worse . . . as little sense
. . . (381)

The speech of *Not I* is characterised by ellipsis. The flickering of the brain described by Mouth provides a referential parallel with the disjointed and discontinuous verbalisation of the play. It produces a stammering speech which obstructs understanding and brings the voice nearer to a cry.

In *The Dissimulating Harmony* Carol Jacobs points out that "the etymological meaning of the word 'stammer' is 'to knock against, to be obstructed': this is detailed through the word's relationship with 'dumb, silent'—to be inhibited in speech, incapable of speaking" (20). In *Not I* ellipsis and absence become extreme. The ellipses of *Not I* refuse the possibility of breathing. As Billie Whitelaw remarks of *Not I*: "there is no time to breathe" (Knowlson 598). In order to speak the text at the speed desired by Beckett, Whitelaw had to go "into training, practising verbal sprints and time trials (sometimes using the time clock as in athletic meetings on television) until she could build up the required speed" (Knowlson 598).

Not I presents us with a contradiction: a voice without a body, presented on-stage through the body of an actress which gives voice. This contradiction between the embodied and disembodied voice produces a stammer which "menaces the definitive distinction between identity and discrepancy, between repetition and contradiction. . . ." (Jacobs 21-2). Elision marks the absence of the distinction between addresser and addressee. It is the "syntactic recognition of an impossible object, the disappearance not only of the addressee (*you*), but of all topic of discourse" (Kristeva 153). The impossibility of the subject, marked as "*Not I*," undermines the discourse which turns upon itself in the act of questioning. The question introduces a movement

beyond discourse to a posited other from whom an answer is required:

Questioning is the supreme judicial act, for the *I* who asks the questions, through the very act of asking these questions (apart from the meaning of the request) postulates the existence of the other. (Kristeva 152-3)

However, in *Not I* the dichotomy between self and other no longer holds. The dualistic construct of addresser and addressee on which discourse is founded becomes undone in a spoken and written text which refuses to take either side. To speak of the other presumes a self from which that other is defined. This is a presumption which Beckett repeatedly denies. The other who is marked by "She" in *Not I* is not other to any self. She is the self who is made other in discourse.

Mouth's attempt to explain the reason for the old woman's maddened unstoppable speech is interrupted by the correction of her use of the third person pronoun. This correction prompts Mouth's third "vehement refusal to relinquish third person." The second time she attempts an explanation she is interrupted by a correction which draws her attention back to the dull roar of the buzzing and the beam of light in the old woman's skull. Mouth's third attempt is successful. She suggests that the impetus behind the old woman's intense stream of speech is the obligation to tell: "perhaps something she had to . . . had to . . . tell . . . could that be it?" (381). Anna McMullan notes how the staging of *Not I* reinforces a reading of Mouth's obligation to tell in terms of a trial, "Yet Mouth is suspended in the space of the stage, watched by the shadowy figure of the Auditor and, as in a trial, apparently required to give an account of herself and her life" and notes that there "is therefore an opposition between this framework of authority and Mouth's failure or refusal to conform . . ." (McMullan 75).

The fourth section of *Not I* speaks of this obligation to "speak up" (381). Like the protagonists of Beckett's *What Where*, the old woman is on trial for an unknown transgression. There is "something she had to tell . . . could that be it? . . . something that would tell . . .

how it was . . . " (*Complete* 381). Hélène Baldwin draws our attention to the biblical resonances of *Not I*. She reads the play as "a picture of judgement and of judgement difficult to divorce from a religious context" by making a connection between the title of the play and the response of the disciples to Christ's statement "One of you that eateth with me shall betray me" (Mark 14: 18):

In the King James version of the Bible, the disciples answer, "Is it I?" However, the sense of the original Greek . . . is "*Not I*, surely." Thus for those who understand it, the play is a picture of judgement and of judgement difficult to divorce from a religious context. (137-8)

The speaker can only prove her innocence if she tells the story of her life, "how it had been . . . how she had lived . . . lived on and on . . ." (381). The obligation to tell her story is an impossible obligation since she does not know herself. The phrases ". . . something she didn't know herself . . . wouldn't know if she had heard . . ." (381) can be read as referring to the element of the story which must be told. However they can also be read as her inability to know herself and her inability to recognise her own voice if she heard it. How can she tell the story of the self if she does not know that self and does not know if she is speaking? The two interruptions with which this section ends refer specifically to the old woman's inability to tell what needs to be told, and her inability to think. The vital thing which must be told in order to be absolved of guilt can be neither told nor thought; there is "nothing she could tell" and "nothing she could think" (382).

The fifth section of *Not I* returns to the concerns of the second and third section in which the circumstances of the old woman's entrance into the world and into language are rehearsed. Both entrances are ill-timed and uncontrolled. The mouth is maddened by the speech which pours forth. The skull resonates with the "dull roar" of the buzzing and the beam of light continues "poking around" (382). Mouth is subjected to language without ever being the subject of language. She is forced to speak the words of another and it is to this

other that she begs for silence:

. . . all the time something begging . . . something in her begging . . . begging it all to stop . . . unanswered . . . prayer unanswered . . . or unheard . . . (382)

But her words are "too faint" (382) and her supplication is in vain. This section ends with a double assertion of the third person. The interjection which prompts this fifth refusal to relinquish the third person divides a series of phrases and in the division multiplies their meaning:

. . . keep on . . . not knowing what . . . what she was— . . . what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she! . . . SHE!
. . . [Pause.] . . . what she was trying . . . what to try
. . . no matter . . . keep on . . . [Curtain starts down.]
. . . (282-3)

Knowing what one is and knowing what one says are intimately linked. For without saying "I" one cannot know oneself, one cannot know who one is. With the double denial of subjectivity, Mouth banishes the Auditor who has so far been responding to her refusal with a brief movement which "consists in simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion. It lessens with each recurrence till scarcely perceptible at third" (375).² Mouth's fifth refusal elicits no response from the Auditor and the play ends with the voice of *Not I* continuing "unintelligible" behind the curtain.

In Beckett's writing, saying "I" does not mark the emergence of the subject in language. On the contrary, it immediately distances the speaker from herself and perpetuates the infinite deferral in which "I" is always "she." The voice of the other interrupts her text, correcting details of her, or its, story, and trying to persuade her to say "I." Mouth accedes to the minor corrections but vigorously refuses to substitute for the interruptive voice. The "she" who is the main character of the story Mouth tells remains in the third person. By refusing to speak for the other as a means of speaking for the self, Mouth remains the voice of

alterity.

Though involuntary and uncontrollable within the text, the speech of the play demands extraordinary levels of control and concentration from the body which gives it voice. This body is physically constrained and obliterated in the staging of the play. In her autobiography Billie Whitelaw describes the pain and rigour of reciting this text which allows for no breath: "The work was painful; my ribcage protested at having to take such little breaths. Like a singer, I had to work out exactly where I was going to snatch breath. I was hyper-ventilating like mad and often became dizzy, staggering round and round the stage. My jaws ached" (122).

In order to produce the image of the single mouth eight feet above stage level, lit by a single beam, the body of the actress who plays the mouth must be restrained. Whitelaw found it impossible to deliver the monologue standing up:

when I tried to speak standing in the pitch dark I got raging vertigo and sensory deprivation and began to hyperventilate. I tried to keep going but suddenly I stepped outside myself and couldn't control what my body was doing any more. I was convinced I was tumbling over and over in space like an astronaut, and then I broke down. I was dizzy and blacked out. (Courtney 87)

For this production the body of the actress had to be strapped into a purposely built chair, described by the stage designer as "an electric chair" (Courtney 87). The energy which enunciating the monologue produced in the body of the actress caused Whitelaw's head to shudder violently, moving in and out of the precise beam which illuminated her mouth. As a result, her head was restrained between two clamps. This constrained body, incarcerated within a structure which prevented all movement, was then blackened and shrouded from head to toe leaving only the mouth visible:

My face was blacked out all round my nose; a couple of my teeth were blacked out, the rest stained. [. . .]

An eye mask . . . was placed across my eyes. [. . .] I wore the executioner's hood over my head and shoulders. My body was covered with a black practice leotard and black tights, and, as a final touch of invisibility, I wore a great black Dracula-like cape, and on my feet little black pumps. (Whitelaw 124)

The intention was to obliterate the body so that "no flesh was visible at all" (Whitelaw 124). Similarly, in the New York production, Jessica Tandy was dressed "entirely in black with a black cloth mask or shroud on her head. At first her head was held during rehearsals by a tight strap which she found unbearable and unnecessary" (Knowlson 592).

In order to speak the words of *Not I*, the body of the actor must be constrained and obliterated. It must not be seen. It must not move. The body is reduced to a mouth, the lips and tongue of which rage in linguistic fury. This stripping away of the body which gives voice occurs on the physical and mental levels. The body of the actor must be a conduit for the words of the text, she must "allow the words to breathe through [her] body" (Whitelaw 120). The text is translated from the words written on the page to the words spoken on the stage by the body of the actor, but this translation is not an interpretation, it is "not the acting out of an internal thought, but the internal thought itself" (Whitelaw 120). In order to achieve this the actor must strip her self of her body so that nothing but the voice emerges:

Strapped into the chair, I said to myself: "Right, let your skin fall off, let your flesh fall off, let the muscles fall off, let the bones fall off, let everything fall off." I wanted to be left with nothing but my centre, my core (Whitelaw 127-8).

The physical obliteration and imaginative flaying of the body of the actor necessary for the enactment of *Not I* produce the disembodied mouth of the play. The voice of *Not I* speaks from a place which is divorced from the body. This voice is the voice of a woman, but, in terms of the dramatic image, it does not speak from a female body.

This voice is also a performed voice, not a written voice. It speaks in the temporal immediacy of the theatre rather than from the temporal duration of the printed page.

The voice of *Not I* issues from the interim space of the mouth which, though circumscribed by the lips of the body, is properly the space of the outside.³ Without a body from which to speak there is no place in which the deictic "I" can be located. Not only is there no physical location from which the voice issues, there is also no body from which to say "I." Without a body the speaker cannot take her place as a subject within discourse for, as Jean-François Lyotard emphasises in *The Differend*, the deictic "I" presumes a speaking body (50). Without a body the voice of Mouth is unable to say "I." However, by writing *Not I* as a dramatic rather than a prose piece, Beckett makes a paradox of this impossibility. This voice which emerges from the emptiness of the darkened stage can only be heard because it is given voice by the body of an actor, a body which is denied and effaced. It is only in the theatre that this interim space can be fully realised, as Helga Finter emphasizes:

The voice is par excellence the "object" of theatricalization because of its status as between: inscribed in a text, the voice indicates a carrying externality [. . .] by that which links it to the singular body or to a disposition of the subject. But at the same time the voice is a part of language; it is body, but as product of body it manifests the separation of the two. (505)

Given the radically eviscerated nature of the piece, Beckett's choice of drama rather than prose, and his decision to have the text spoken by a body rather than a tape recording gain even greater importance. Similarly the decision that the speaking body be female rather than male when that body is stripped to the barest fragment draws attention to the importance of gender even when that gender is elided.

Not I is written from the juncture between gender and genre. The play occupies a liminal space between inside and out. The space of

Mouth marks both a presence and an absence. By writing a play which, linguistically and dramatically, denies its every assertion, Beckett creates a work which speaks from the position of both the "I" and of the other; a text in which, in the words of Hélène Cixous:

It is me, I, within the other, the other within me, it's one gender going into the other, one language going through the other. (14)

NOTES

1. Whitelaw, *Sunday Times*, 14 January, 1973, quoted in Knowlson 1996, p. 598.
2. Because of technical difficulties the figure of the Auditor was removed for the 1975 production of *Not I* in Paris. The Auditor was restored to the 1978 Paris production and, as James Knowlson notes, the gesture of the Auditor was developed to include "an actual covering of the ears with the hands, as if the figure were unable to bear any longer the flood of sound issuing from Mouth." Knowlson 1996, p. 814 n. 88.
3. For parallels between the image of the mouth in *Not I* and orifices such as the anus or the vagina, see Elam 146, Knowlson and Pilling 200, Connor 162, and Lawley 407. For a criticism of the above analyses see O'Gorman 77-94.

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