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**A SILENT BODY IN SEARCH OF A VOICE:  
A READING OF BECKETT'S *NOT I***

When in 1941, Thornton Wilder tried to differentiate drama from other forms of art, he stated some principles that have since then been regarded as constituting the essence of drama. In one of his claims, he forcefully associated dramatic language with self-presence. He professed that plays are able to represent «pure existing» whereby character is revealed through the use of speech in «an apparently pure spontaneity»<sup>1</sup>. This spontaneous self-revelation and presence have come to constitute the nature of drama which has long been understood as the art of vitality contrary to the unlively words of written literature. This dominant problematic has been seriously questioned by Beckett who resorted to the dramatic medium in order to serve precisely the opposite idea, that is, the concept of self - annihilation. He himself has claimed that he is searching for a play «in which there are no actors only the text»<sup>2</sup>, a belief that has been put into practice in the recurrent disembodiment noticed in his plays, unsettling common expectations concerning bodily presence and the use of speech as self - conveyor.

In this essay I would like to concentrate on *Not I* (1972) and to demonstrate that the conflict between Auditor and Mouth and the use of the conventionally undramatic technique of Mouth's disembodiment, only her lips are lit, have been effectively used to fulfil a twofold objective: to disturb the common use of language as a self - referential device and to suggest notions of subjectivity marked by absence. While studying the play, I will concentrate on two significant decisions that Beckett took to dramatize these ideas: the use of a female speaker, a choice that strengthens the disruption between self and speech since women have a particular repressive relationship to language<sup>3</sup>, and the subversion of the

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1. Thornton Wilder, «Some Thoughts on Playwriting», in *Playwrights on Playwriting: The Making of Modern Drama from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 114.

2. Samuel Beckett to Deirdre Bair, Letter dated June 19, 1973, quoted in Bair's, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 513.

3. Useful studies of the role of women in Beckett's work can be found in Peter Gidal, *Understanding Beckett: A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1986), and Linda Ben-Zvi (ed), *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

conventional function of the monologue which has for long been used as the most suitable convention to give voice to the self behind the speech.

To understand the interplay between subject, language and gender, it is necessary to delineate briefly the basic points of the approach adopted by psychoanalysis concerning these relationships. The interconnections between language acquisition and the gendered subject constitute the kernel of psychoanalysis and recent feminist theory. For Jacques Lacan the construction of subjectivity and language acquisition are both the outcome of the individual's entry into the symbolic order —the set of cultural signifying systems whose acceptance designates the child's proper socialization<sup>4</sup>. The entry into the symbolic corresponds with the resolution of the Oedipal crisis. This signifies the loss of the harmonious, pre - Oedipal cohabitation with the body of the mother to the symbolic world of the father in which the phallus dominates as representative of language, culture and authority. It is the father's appearance that initiates sexual difference since in the Oedipal crisis he separates mother from child and bans the possibility of ever gaining access to her again. This puts an end to the merging of the self with the others; the child differentiates «I» from «you» and is able to speak as a gendered subject since the pronouns always suggest «she» or «he» —the predetermined gender roles in the familial and social context. *Not I* dramatizes this radical experience of being born into language through the textualization of the body of a woman who, having spent seventy years of her life in a pre - linguistic state, suddenly acquires the skill of language and attempts to narrate her life.

The interest of the play lies in the dispute between the «I» Auditor repeatedly tries to enforce through inaudible to us interventions, and the «she» Mouth insists on maintaining as the grammatical subject of the story that recounts the woman's language acquisition process. Covered by a loose djellaba, «sex undeterminable»<sup>5</sup>, Auditor need not be identified with an actual biological male. The Other of Mouth, the area of the construction of the gendered subject in language - as power, this veiled figure requires to unify the speaker with the subject of the utterance. In other words, Auditor attempts to secure for Mouth a stable position in the symbolic, to make a coherent self emerge from the use of speech.

Auditor is also a constant reminder of the «buzzing», the sound of the

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4. The accounts of Lacan concerning the Oedipus complex and the Symbolic are taken from Jacqueline Rose's, «Introduction II», in Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, *Feminine Sexuality*, eds Juliet Mitchell and J. Rose, trans J. Rose (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1982), 27-57.

5. *Not I*, in *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 216. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be marked in the text.

spoken words, something that Mouth overlooks immersed in a pervading silence: «what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all dead still but for the buzzing ... steady stream ... straining to hear ... make something of it» (218-20). As long as sounds are identified with words and words can be attached to fixed meanings, something could be made of the stream of words, they could be made to signify. For Auditor, then, speech is thought of as able to give direct access to the self at the moment of speaking since signifier and signified seem to achieve a kind of unity. Such an instance of «s'entendre parler»<sup>6</sup>, the coincidence between hearing and understanding oneself, suggests a relationship between language and the self that presupposes the existence of a unified knowledgeable identity able to control language and use it to communicate thoughts, feelings and experiences. And nowhere is this more self-evident than in the dramatic monologue in which the audible personal voice seems to give access to the speaker on the stage, as Wilder contended. The physical presence of the individual speaker and the audible personal voice stemming from the visible body referring to itself as «I» provide evidence for the ability of language to achieve expressive self-presence. The speaker fully coincides with the subject of the utterance conveying the unified subject of humanist thought.

In *Not I*, though, Beckett subverts the conventional function of the monologue as self-conveyor and the first target of attack is the body of the actress. If our initial awareness of an ego-image is inferred from the reception of the body as a single unified unit, the visual absence that dominates the stage in this play invites questions concerning the identity hidden behind the speech. Even more the voice is distanced from its human source, the visible mouth, being mechanized through the use of a microphone as if the voice exists irrespective of the speaker<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, whom does the voice belong to? What we listen to cannot be innocently traced back to a stage image. Once the space so far occupied by the visibility of a unified speaker as the source of speech is troubled, the use of the body as the emblem of the immediate site of presence, the nucleus of the self, is undermined and its immediate relationship to language is

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6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), 20, 34-44.

7. The microphones amplified the voice, as it is mentioned in Bair, 625. The use of microphones to denaturalize the relation between actor and character is common practice nowadays in postmodernist drama. See, for example, Elinor Fuchs, «Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Rethinking Theatre after Derrida», *Performing Arts Journal*, 9, 2/3, (1985), 163-73, and Helga Finter, «Experimental Theatre and Semiology of Theatre: The Theatricalization of Voice», trans E. A. Walker and Kathryn Gardal, *Modern Drama*, 26, 4 (December 1983), 501-17.

disrupted. The play then frustrates the spectators' conventional expectations of meaning: the split and faintly lit stage image constructed of the veiled body of the speechless Auditor and bodiless Mouth subverts the plenitude of physical presence; there is no object to be securely appropriated, no center on which to rest the eye, no voice that signifies emerging from a recognizably human source.

Visual absence, though, is not the only one that permeates the play. Mouth's text, all repetitions, fragments and ambiguities, cannot affirm a fixed core of meaning. So despite the belief of «she» that the recently acquired skill of language can only be justified if she has something to tell, her life - story, the narrative cannot unfold itself. Her speech is indicative of the elusiveness of language. The brain is begging the mouth to stop talking, but it receives no response; the «maddened» (221) stream of words cannot cease. The unity between brain and words, signifier and signified, form and meaning is disrupted. The moment of «s' entendre parler» is an illusion and so is the self-presence it sustains. The monologue moves from phrase to phrase *ad infinitum* and can confirm nothing but the expectation of a meaningful narrative, whose fulfilment however, is always delayed.

Finally, as long as subjectivity is articulated in language, the semantic disorientation that marks Mouth's text makes up an elusive and decentered subject. In Beckett's play, the «I» cannot substitute for «she». It seems that the speaker is not the tormented woman and is actually ironic towards her, or maybe surprised by what has happened to her: «she did not know ... what position she was in ... imagine! ... what position she was in!» (217). The speaker is involved in activities «she» is not, like screaming, and also laughs at her belief in a merciful god. Nor is «she» a unified subject but instead dissolves into a series of fragmented images — a disconnected machine, a speechless infant, brain, hands, eyes. The spectator's eyes then moving from Mouth to Auditor wander in the dark, unrepresentable area in which the unuttered «I» resides unable to be fully present in the discourse about herself. The unified subject has been dismantled and the monologue has been deprived of its self-referential attributes.

Mouth's recurrent refusal to relinquish third person invites us to investigate the nature of «I» and what its adoption would involve. Auditor's invitation to Mouth to articulate herself, to take up a subject position, is offered as a kind of solution to her troubled existence. However, as psychoanalysis maintains, the female entrance into the symbolic is problematic since it is always marked with the disadvantage of *the lack*. In the resolution of the Oedipal crisis, the male child, to cope with castration, represses the desire for the mother to raise himself to the



symbolic position of the father who is related to the privileged signifier, the phallus. But the female child can be allotted a place in the symbolic only at the expense of her sexuality. By denouncing the use of «I», Mouth seems unwilling to accept this condition. Self-articulation does not allow self-determination since in Auditor's efforts to impose the «I», a specific image of the «I» has already been formulated. Although Auditor is described as a compassionate figure protective of Mouth, the adoption of his suggestion concerning the acceptance of the «I» would involve a cost. It would necessitate not only the release from the tension of the internal division produced by the incoherent «I», but also the consent to acts of submission, in other words, learning the language of subjugation and acting by it in a patriarchal society.

Is then controlled subjectivity what Mouth wants to avoid by refusing to relinquish third person? There is a lot in the play that points towards a positive answer<sup>8</sup>. The female subject that emerges from *Not I* is beyond any determined roles. Unable to be confined in the representations of patriarchal order, Mouth is situated beyond the limits of what is considered rational and intelligible; thus it can be claimed that she stands for a threat to disciplinary and orderly forces. This can hold true even if the subject of the discourse is «not I», a female negatively defined in relation to the phallic «I». After all, what threat can make the already underprivileged gender adopt the order of the father? Mouth aggressively disrupts symbolic logos: the movements of the mouth and the tongue are «contortions» (219), words are poured out in a lavatory like useless waste, and the brain, rational discourse, cannot control the disordered stream of words. Such instances underscore the difficulty of describing the mouth only as the representation of the castrated female that suffers a lack. This position, though, does not seem to involve any kind of resistance to the subordination of women to the patriarchal symbolic.

Refusing the submission involved in assuming subjectivity within the symbolic order, Mouth can only be inscribed and treated as «sick»<sup>9</sup>. The compassionate figure of Auditor who seems to hold the «truth» - Mouth consents to all his suggestions but one - has introduced Mouth into a corrective process whereby she is asked to speak herself and, if possible, to be cured. Her refusal to relinquish third person is an act of defiance against common-sense assumptions about subjectivity and meaning; however, the effects of its outcome are limited since her field of action has

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8. This is the position held by Gidal, 89-102.

9. See Elin Diamond who gives a brief account of the reasons why the discourse of Mouth is that of a hysteric and should not be attributed «heroic proportions», in her «Speaking Parisian: Beckett and French Feminism», in Ben-Zvi, ed., 211-12.

already been structured for her, depriving Mouth of the means to guide and control both her activities and their consequences. As Foucault has argued, when subjects are not «faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized», but instead are involved in a situation in which «the determining factors saturate the whole», the possibility of acting freely has been eliminated<sup>10</sup>. Mouth's troublesome entrance into the symbolic can always be controlled by being classified as an instance of madness, an attitude that guards the borders of rational discourse nullifying any possible productive effects of her refusal. The outcome of Mouth's defiance is always already assimilated by the «determining factors». Subjugated subjectivity or madness hardly constitutes a diverse field where numerous courses of action can be developed. At the end of the play, Mouth continues «behind curtain, unintelligible» (223), her position in language being attacked relegating her to powerlessness. Beckett's play questions and refuses dominant definitions of subjectivity, «not I», but cannot promote new forms.

*Not I* then offers itself as an extreme disruption of the process of theatrical signification that has long been founded on the binding interrelationship between self-presence and spontaneous dramatic speech. Once the nexus is broken, the area of subjectivity becomes inhabited by Mouth's disseminated identity. Self-expression, commonly thought of as a significant instance of freedom, is here permeated by absence effected through the demands of patriarchal repression. Needless to say, the inevitable outcome of such an approach is the production of a resistance to reified meanings. Beckett's discourse opposes the authoritarian and ideological aspects of the «natural self». But once liberated from determined meanings, the self can only reside in a tormented area where this release is experienced as agony and is assimilated as madness. This indicates not only the limits within which subjectivity is constructed in the era of the modern world but also the ideological constraints that define Beckett's own theatre. Its challenge of the coherent and autonomous subject has resulted in implying the total helplessness of the subject instead of suggesting its reinscription into a different form.

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10. Michel Foucault, «The Subject and Power», *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982), 790.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Μάρω Γερμανού, *Ένα Σιωπηλό Σώμα σε Αναζήτηση Φωνής: Μια Ανάγνωση του Not I του Μπέκετ*

Το άρθρο μελετά τη σχέση της γλώσσας και του γυναικείου υποκειμένου μέσα από την ανάλυση του έργου του Μπέκετ *Not I* (1972). Καταδεικνύεται πώς η απουσία του σώματος της ομιλήτριας, ο εννοιολογικός αποπροσανατολισμός που χαρακτηρίζει το κείμενο και η ανατροπή της κοινά αποδεκτής λειτουργίας του μονόλογου ως ένα μέσο αυτοαναφοράς χρησιμοποιούνται για να εισαγάγουν έννοιες της υποκειμενικότητας που ορίζονται από την απουσία και την αστάθεια της γλώσσας ως μέσου προσωπικής έκφρασης. Το έργο ακόμα αναλύεται και ως μια Μπεκετική αναίρεση της θεατρικής διαδικασίας παραγωγής νοημάτων που παραδοσιακά είχε στηριχτεί στην αμοιβαία σχέση μεταξύ της αυθόρμητης δραματικής γλώσσας και της έκφρασης του εγώ. Συμπερασματικά υποστηρίζεται ότι αν και η πρακτική του Μπέκετ αντιστέκεται στα κυρίαρχα νοήματα σχετικά με τη δόμηση του υποκειμένου, δεν μπορεί να δημιουργήσει τη δυνατότητα μορφών υποκειμενικότητας απελευθερωμένων από την τρέλλα, την αγωνία και την αδυναμία.