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Samuel Beckett : Drama as philosophical endgame ?

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Hostaged to the Voice of the Other: Beckett's *Play* and *Not I*.

Tram Nguyen

- 1 After the Second World War, Beckett moves away from the modernist concern with interiority, striving¹, albeit ironically, in his late plays for a “porous” language (Beckett 1983, 172). In *Play* and *Not I*, characters are reduced to heads and mouths; they utter their despair and confusion with visceral gusto, and yet there is no interiority to ground their pain. Their words are spoken from a place that is pre-ontological, pre-subjective. Through the spoken word, the summoning voice, language becomes ethical, foregrounding the heteronomy of the “I” and the Other. According to Levinas, the primordial, pre-personalized nature of the Other requires that we think “the ethical relation beyond being”, for the Other is “the ethical excess” to which “I” am bound (Marder). Ethics and singularity usurp ontology, which re-installs at its heart the centrality of the “I”. For Beckett, the acting “I” no longer signifies except to indicate the approach to ethics, to the Other. Drilling into language, Beckett arrives at a site of intersubjectivity that sustains the exteriority of the Other. Levinas calls this approach the freedom of the Other, for it is a freedom that liberates the “I” from its mastering impulse (1969, 39). In returning to Levinas's ethics and theory of metaphysical desire, we see that Beckett's rendering of fatigue and the speaking voice achieves an aesthetics infused with the ethics of infinity and surplus.²
- 2 A student of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas developed a first philosophy of ethics that sets out the condition for the possibility of an engagement with an Other. This Other is not simply physically and spatially dissimilar to the “I”, but rather asymmetrically exterior (Perpich 106). Levinas coins the term alterity to designate the singularity and absolute otherness of the Other which can never be reduced to our alter ego. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins with a critique of “feeding”, the prevailing attitude that the world, its objects, and its people are made available for our consumption (1969, 33). Though we “need” to consume the other, this does not fill us; these desires are not “pure”, not ethical (1969, 34). For Levinas, the most honest desire is not about lack, but generosity. It is a desire that “desires beyond everything that can simply complete it”

(1969, 34). The desire for the Other provides no opportunity for self-reward or satisfaction. The Other is not constituted by my knowledge of him, or by my intentionality, but by my respect for his infinity and absolute otherness. Levinas separates himself from Husserl's phenomenology by clarifying that the intentional operation "is always the same that determines the other" (1969, 124). To make the exterior world intelligible, the "I" assumes the position of "mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes" (1969, 123-4). This "adequation" is fundamentally contrary to Levinas's suppositions about the foundational core of ethics. In proposing that the Other is a cold Stranger who "disturbs the being at home with oneself", Levinas emphasizes that "over him I have no power" (1969, 38-39). The non-attendance of power founds the condition of an ethical intersubjective event. The recognition of the Other's "irreducibility to the I" marks his irreducible exteriority or non-coincidence, which summons the best in me (Levinas 1969, 43). He calls me into an infinite ethical event that predates history and time.

- 3 Infinity is central to Levinas's ethics: as the overflow of being, infinity provides the "optics" for ethics, teaching us that there is being prior to inscription and apprehension (1969, 23).³ Without infinity the "I" falls prey to adequation, thinking those exterior to it are simply versions of itself, of the same (1969, 27). This is most troubling for Levinas, and much of *Totality and Infinity* redresses the premises upon which the "I" and intersubjective experiences are thought. The destruction of the "I" inhering in the face to face encounter, an irreducible relation of separated existences, creates a habitat for ethics: "the 'face to face' position is not a modification of the 'along side of ...'" but an acceptance of the multitudinous formlessness of lived affectivity (1969, 79-80). Not simply a passive acceptance, the face to face thesis speaks about a call from the Other that must be answered—because the presence of the Other guarantees the "I" 's freedom. Lingis notes that the face "is not so much a mode of appearing of the other, as a 'trace' where alterity passes" (xxi). This trace is infinitely expressive, perpetually interrogative, summoning the ethical and compassionate desires of the "I". In essence, the face and its expansiveness refuse totalization, or external inscription (1969, 66). Levinas demands that the "I" always be in the labor of the Other and the Other's Others, "where the face of the Other becomes a passageway to all the other Others" (Marder).
- 4 The transcendental face to face relation resonates in Beckett's critique of the expressive power of the artist, who, face to face with his object, imposes his dominance over it. Objecting to the notion that art is "expression", by which he means mimesis or representational bonds between the artist and the object, Beckett says, "All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes" (1983, 145). Asking art to represent and to address itself to the "occasions" of life obscures two things: 1.) the failure of representation, and 2.) the obligation to act in the face of this failure. Here we see that Beckett's terse formulation of the artist and the object reverberates with a Levinasian notion of desire as beyond what can complete or make whole the "I" who acts. In a helpless gesture similar to Levinas's, Beckett describes an infinite obligation that transcends subjectivity. The ethical turn for Beckett is in "submitting" to the new understanding of "relation"—that is, in embracing "this [new] fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an

expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (1983, 142). These words are particularly foreknowing in light of Beckett's increasing involvement with the staging of his plays, particularly. The obligation to act—as director or as actor on a stage with his back against an inevitable failure—highlights a performance ethic that moves beyond “self-indulgent fierceness and ... in-your-face political and erotic righteousness” embodied by a certain strain of “political theatre” (Erickson 10-11). The responsibility for an Other, be it the audience or even the void beyond the stage, carves out a theatrical imperative to broker the best nuanced understanding of freedom.⁴

- 5 By immobilizing his performers in their bodies or objects and by isolating them from all context (as early as *Murphy* and as late as *Rockaby*), Beckett alters the relationship between space, movement, light, and sound. On the stage, without the crutch of gestures to capture the audience's attention, the restricted, broken body “introduces force and dramatic tension, if only by contrast with the uselessness and insignificance of movements in most plays” (Chabert 25). For instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky's physical exertions dramatize the body's burden and make his speech all the more astounding. When, after his speech, Lucky collapses as though emptied of life—and is only revived when his basket and bag are placed back in his hands—we sense that he makes meaning out of the failures of his body (1986, 44). Language, rather than matter or organs, sustains the body.⁵ Beckett's characters face the difficulty of their bodily restrictions with dark humour and ontological earnestness; their twitches, blinks, flapping, flailing, flinches and shudders take on the forcefulness of tectonic shifts so that when they do speak, words offer up “salvation [...] sought in a different experimentum linguae” (Deranty 175). The “implacable logic” of these constrained body, according to Chabert, brings words “back to its vital organ: the mouth in a face which utters words” (28).
- 6 While the body fails, language and ethics speak on. Beckett seemingly divines the ethical call of voices in *Play* and *Not I*—as the characters' voices drift upward, their sound, meaning, and invocation disperse into our own lungs and enter our own organs. Their monologues depend upon the aural staging of language, become what Deleuze calls “soundings” rather than voice (1995, 10). These soundings, these voices, are not a guarantee of individuality, but an indication that the work of signification is taking place. Dialogue is a labor that presupposes the co-existence of the “I” and the Other. This co-existence is foremost in the logic of language which “accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus” of the self (Levinas 1969, 195). In doing so, language disrupts hierarchical ordering and “announces the ethical inviolability of the Other” (Levinas 1969, 195.) When words are said, spoken, uttered as a gift from one being to another, speaking “solicits the Other. Speech cuts across vision” (Levinas 1969, 195). For Levinas as much as for Beckett, the Other is an interlocutor who escapes perceptual apprehension. In a medium married to vision, Beckett opts instead for a darkness that would spotlight the inadequacies of vision. His is a theatre against visual satisfaction. He reveals to us in the darkness of stage and theatre the “obligation to act”, to listen to the ethical summoning of the “stuttering” voice (Deleuze 1994, 28).
- 7 The importance of speech accounts for Beckett's preoccupation with plays and the theater after the Second World War. In his important genetic reading of *Play*, Gontarski judges that *Play* delineates a shift in Beckett's aesthetics and understanding of the artistic relation (1999, 442-3). Beckett's numerous revisions signal a battle with

traditional conceptions of the work of art and the exigencies of staging words for an audience. Dissatisfied with the German premiere of *Play* in 1963, Beckett worked closely with George Devine on the English production, which debuted in April 1964. Though Beckett wanted to set the “standard of fidelity”, his own collaborations with directors or with himself (his published texts) brought changes to original, already finalized texts (Gontarski 1999, 443, 447). Besides meticulous instructions about the size of the grey urns and the intensity of the spotlight Inquirer, revisions to the play included the volume, speed, and order of interrogation in the second act. As Gontarski surmises, Beckett “was prepared to change and even at times substantially to rewrite a published text based on the practicalities, the realities, the insights that working in a stage space literally brought to light” (1999, 445). Beckett would continue to make changes to the text of the play until 1978, altering the *da capo* ending to allow the Inquirer to disrupt the order of the inquiry (1999, 445, 448). The “standard of fidelity”, then, was one established in conjunction with the vocalization of texts rather than measured against the “objectivity” of published works. Changes to the rhythm, textual order, and tone of the play came from Beckett’s re-newed understanding of the speaking voice as processual.

- 8 *Play* commences with a description of “Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns about one yard high” (Beckett 1990, 307). Though the play kick-starts with the idea of touching, it reveals itself in opposition to contiguity and more in tune with asymmetrical co-existence. The trapped figures of *Play* deliver their monologues with unceasing rapidity; they speak tonelessly about their romantic entanglement. There is obviously pain, but their words are marked largely by the need to speak, as though speaking would enact a flight from their bodies, from their selves. They respond when the Inquirer “interrogates” them, and they speak immediately. Their delivery is staccato, pared down. Individually they re-tell the climactic events of an indefinite moment, their faces “gone to age”, suggesting that this dilemma is old and eternal (1990, 307).
- 9 The heads do not turn, do not address one another. Their words seem to emerge from a place that is pre-ontological, rooted rhizomatically in the earth as they are rooted in the grey urns. Each character re-lives his or her memories over and over again, unheeding the imperative of response or reciprocity, voice rising “to the ghostly dimension of an impersonal indefinite” (Deleuze 1995, 16). Elizabeth Barry, following H. Porter Abbott, claims that this is the nature of the “middle voice”, which births “agentless sentenceless” (Barry 116). Marjorie Perloff argues that Beckett’s texts are usually closed off in terms of sound and rhythm, causing a disintegration of order and referentiality (Perloff 204). Though their fragmented utterances broach nonsense, nonsense is not simply the lack of sense; it is an attack on the imperatives of rationality and order of everyday language. This is the making of Deleuze’s third phase of language, one rooted in the “force” of the Image (Deleuze 1995, 8).⁶ The language of the “pure” Image counters the burden of reason, memories, and stories, “appear[ing] in all its singularity, retaining nothing of the personal, nor of the rational, and ascending into the indefinite as into a celestial state” (Deleuze 1995, 10, 9). All subjectivity is abolished, but voicing remains as the drive of dialogue.⁷ And, according to Enoch Brater, “to be is to be heard” (1987, 67). Echoing Berkeley’s dictum “to be is to be perceived” (*esse est percipi*), Brater’s comment speaks to Beckett’s addendum to the notion that reality is conceived through sense perception received by the mind (Levy 225). On the stage, though Beckett’s characters come to life when called upon by a

spotlight and the audience's expectation, they articulate to us their being through the force of their voices.

- 10 The closed loop of words and utterances and the rapidity with which the heads utter their thoughts or memories beg the listener (audience and Inquirer) to *face*, to host the Other's pain. While there is little to ground our understanding: no time markers, no continuous action, no social coordinates, the voice guides us (Deleuze 1995, 16). The Voice that speaks reveals to us the necessity of engaging with the Other, calling upon us to be listener rather than judge. As listener, we embody a "boundary condition" of ethics and comprehension (Rayner 6). Rayner argues that "Like the syntax of the pronoun, the "audience" is a shifter, changing both in what body it designates and in what position: variously operating as an 'I,' a 'you,' an 'it,' 'we' or 'they'" (Rayner 7). Beckett tests us at these liminal edges of sense and forces us to work to understand without violently imposing our own intentions.
- 11 Against all appearances, the audience and the spotlight Inquirer of *Play* act as hostage to the speakers' voices. The Inquirer shines a faint light on their three faces and they are compelled to speak their fragments. They speak for three seconds, and are then plunged into near blackout. Five seconds later the Inquirer's light summons all three faces again, as though it were experimenting with listening, with a new form of dialogue. Unable to understand the three voices when together, the Inquirer begins to train its spotlight on the faces individually: Woman 1, Woman 2, Man, and so on, in varying orders. Beckett's Inquirer has the function of the interrogator, but it is also the listener and the "victim" of the voices, the voice's Other (Gontarski 1999, 444). Through the Inquirer, we are confronted with the face to face relation that transports us into the ethical realm. Beckett generously positions us alternately as "I" and the Other's Others.⁸ The voices inflict upon us and the Inquirer their speech, their alterity, and we/it must attempt to decipher and to answer the call; the Inquirer is the "I" here and the audience is the Other's Others. The voices, our Others, seem to carry on their stories even when the Inquirer is not on them, for when the light calls them to life they speak more and more in fragments. "I said to him", W1 utters, "Give her up. I swore by all I held most sacred—"; on her second turn, she says, "Though I had him dogged for months by a first-rate man, no shadow of proof was forthcoming ..." (Beckett 1990, 308). In turn, W2 says, "Her parting words, as he could testify, if he is still living, and has not forgotten" (1990, 309). But there is no testimony, no answer from the other characters that matters. Indeed, all the characters inhabit a solipsistic existence: though M is next to her, W2 only hears herself.
- 12 The Inquirer trains its light in the manner of a child learning to operate a new toy, clumsily and curiously, employing the spotlight to verify and to fill in gaps of understanding:

W1: I confess my first feeling was one of wonderment. What a male!
[Spot from W1 to M. He opens his mouth to speak. Spot from M to W2.] (Beckett 1990, 309)
- 13 Indeed, the Inquirer exercises its power with humour and wit. The Inquirer attempts to give each figure its due in the first half of the first act, which is still narratively driven, with the three voices composing a sensible history of the trio. This triadic narration becomes impossible after the climatic bonfire of M's things (1990, 311). The Inquirer at this point plunges the heads into darkness and the play begins again with the three voices speaking in unison, as in the beginning. However, the heads speak in shorter fragments as the Inquirer loses patience, or loses the ability to listen with compassion

and sincerity. W2 says with desperation, "Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me? Is anyone looking at me? Is anyone bothering about me at all?" (1990, 314). Meanwhile, M thinks, "I know now, all that was just ... play. And all this? When will all this—" ... "have been just play" (1990, 313). At this point, the audience's obligation to the voices is stretched to a maximum; Beckett tests our generosity. The audience as listeners must prick up their ears to the "murmurs of past voices not entirely absent and the babble of presences which do not yet have a language in which to speak" (Janus 186).

- 14 As the voices and their words get more desperate and the pace of the inquiry escalates, the audience is compelled, summoned doubly to respond, to take the place of the "I" that is hostage to the voices, which, in their desperation to be heard, lose their ability to act or re-act towards one another: W1 despairs, "And that all is falling, all fallen, from the beginning, on empty air. Nothing being asked at all. No one asking me for anything at all" (1990, 314). Trapped in their solipsism, their utterances become enervated and nonsensical. However, nonsense works to threaten the orderly habits of logic. Sense and intelligibility do damage to the "I": "Clarity is the disappearance of what could shock", of anything that moves or enlivens the "I" (Levinas 1969, 124). Beckett himself says, "My writing is pre-logical writing. I don't ask people to understand it logically, only to accept it" (quoted in Knowlson 2006, 109). According to Patrick Bowles, Beckett talked "of his books as if they were written by someone else. He said that it was the voice to which he listened, the voice one should listen to" (quoted in Knowlson 2006, 109).
- 15 In the intersubjective experience staged by the play, wherein the audience and the Inquirer complete the linguistic triad, a metaphysical ethics is established as paramount to being. Called to witness the rare instance of someone risking him/herself, we experience not the call to empathy, but responsibility to the Other. The ethical relation here is one of listening and answering, if silently, the call of the Other. The irreducibility of the Other's voice drives the urgency of *Play* and reveals the infinite "pleating" of ethics (Marder). Through a razing of context and sense, of social coordinates and individuated memories, Beckett is thus able to achieve what he wanted: language as a divining, "mantic instrument" (cited in Brater 1987, 194). The characters' utterings create for the listening audience the double folding of the voices' individuality and generality. In a propulsive rhythm of words rising and descending like crashing waves—W 1 asking if she should "Bite off my tongue and swallow it? Spit it out? Would that placate you?"; W2 demanding in quick succession, "What do you do when you go out? Sift?"; and M pondering, "Have I lost ... the thing that you want? Why go out? Why go—" (1990, 315), the heads call upon the listener to awaken to the singularity of each voice. Likewise, in *Not I*, Mouth's fragmentary cataclysm of words exceeds subjective containment and advances a singularity that is heteronomous but also universal and characteristic of all beings. It is not simply words, codified and signifying, that speak to us but the act of sounding. M's uncontrollable hiccupping throughout the play arouses a kind of visceral reaction related to a sensing of bodily discomfort. Hiccups, which are the result of an unbalance in the diaphragm, represent the convulsive imbalance of a distinct and irreducible being. Similarly, Mouth's distress forces us to confront the asymmetry and exteriority of an Other. As Meir argues, "Face to face with the Other, the priority and tranquillity of the same is put into question" (Meir 262).

- 16 In *Not I*, the image of Mouth, first served by Jessica Tandy, then by Billie Whitelaw, is projected against a dark background.⁹ Reciting in the third person the details of a life from birth till death, Mouth speaks in hyperventilating bursts, “mouth on fire” (Beckett 1990, 378). Mouth is haunted continually by a self-correcting mechanism that repeatedly interrupts her outbursts, causing her to pause and exclaim “what?” and to deny another impulse (1990, 377). With great excitement, Mouth narrates the change to one who “had never ... on the contrary ... practically speechless ... all her days”, concluding “how she had survived!” (1990, 379). The voice, the act of speaking, the way one forms “certain vowel sounds”, the “lips moving ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ... the tongue in the mouth” are experienced as fundamental and primordial, above the actual words, or “what one is saying” (1990, 380).¹⁰ Beckett's wonderful and deliberate rejection of sense in favour of the “contortions” and “machine” of speaking, of voicing, with painful abandon, celebrates the body's capacity to labor, to *do*. While the brain “begs” Mouth to stop in order to “make sense of it all”, Mouth cannot because it was something she “had to do” (1990, 381). Following Levinas, Marder argues that “labor, as well as noisy monotony of non-sense and the element, challenge and ultimately flatten the subjective, conceptual, and ontological borders” to reveal the site of ethical responsibility to the Other as well as the Other's Others.
- 17 Mouth's parents are “unknown”, the father having “vanished ... no sooner buttoned up his breeches” (1990, 376). She is “spared love”—as though love was punishing and necessitated submitting one's self to another (Beckett 1990, 376). Beckett reasons that “There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without” (1983, 143). Here Beckett points to a radical asceticism, for “being without” denotes being-without-lack or covetous needs. Beckett's sense that “being without” is not an impoverishment transforms our understanding of Mouth's late linguistic development. At an age between sixty and seventy, near death or a stroke, she hears buzzing and “realized words were coming” (1990, 377). Unable in the past to speak in court, when she is judged and stared at, censured for getting “half the vowels wrong”, Mouth is able to speak—finally—when crippled, near death, faced down on the grass one April morning (1990, 376, 381). And through the deluge of her words, she produces a rupture in the fabric of sense, a rupture which forces us to confront our ethical convictions about the masterful speaking subject. Here is the “indication that language takes place”, that sounding is an event which colludes to make the subject part of an intersubjective, ethical network (Agamben 32).
- 18 Mary Catanzaro observes that the speaking voice is “external to Mouth” because of a dis-identification with her femaleness (36, 41). In the language of Kristevan *jouissance*, Catanzaro argues that after being “condemned to silence” by the symbolic order, “Mouth's text is not fantasy, it is desire, the surplus unaccounted for” (42, 40). Catanzaro suggests that excessive desire is particular to the feminine, one that is suppressed by patriarchy. However, in Beckett, desire is not the desire to be initiated into the social symbolic, even as excess, but, rather, to act even in the knowledge of failure; and, perhaps, to merge with the Infinity of the ethical. In fact, Mouth can be seen as pre-eminently ethical, for, having been systematically alienated and disenfranchised, she rises to a radical impersonality through the labor and force of her voicing. The darkness which surrounds Mouth structures the audience's encounter with her mainly as sound rather than figure, as “the anonymous rustling of the *there is*” (1969, 159-160). The *there is*, according to Marder, “announces the anonymity of the one

who labors" in favour of the singularity of that which she creates. Her voice is a point of convergence and divergence, of folding and enfolding; in the instance that Mouth voices, she initiates an event of ethics and being, sounding the "pure indication that language is taking place" (Agamben 34). According to Agamben, "Being is in the voice (*esse in voce*) as an unveiling and demonstration of the taking place of language" (35). However, metaphysics has hollowed out the voice of mere sounds in order to turn it into Voice. This hollowed Voice "goes to *the ground* and disappears in order for being and language to take place" (35). The grounding of the animal voice as "*the originary articulation (the arthron) of human language*" creates a fundamental negativity and violence in the heart of being (32).¹¹ For Agamben, uncovering the "mystery" of the grounding of the Voice makes the violence of the originary moment surface, and, in doing so, neutralizes the "*sacrificial mythogeme and [...] the ideas of nature and culture, of the unspeakable and the speakable, which are grounded in it*" (106). Agamben ends *Language and Death* with the joyous proclamation, "So, language is our voice, our language. As you now speak, that is ethics" (108). Agamben and Levinas both judge the praxis of speaking to be the ethical cartilage between "I" and the Other. In the instance that one voices, one enters into ethics and being with the Other.

- 19 Indeed, Beckett raises the promise that every speech act, every voice produces and necessitates an ethical response, which requires tearing down the assumptions about the I and the Other. His "orphanic" conceit, for Daniel Katz, "give[s] voice to something that is *constitutionally* mute, to give a body to that which is incorporeal" (Katz 12). And though Herbert Blau may be right in saying that Beckett champions a "tradition of sometimes disdainful sometimes disconcerted ambivalence toward the audience", why is it the case that audiences do not turn away (34)? It is because Beckett's disembodied voices crack the calm façade of language and show us the infinity of the Other. They summon "a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that he is created" a moral being not by God, necessarily, but by his relation to the Other (Levinas 1969, 260). Levinas suggests that "we are not free to distance ourselves from him or her" because our primordial responsibility for him or her generates "the impossibility of evading the neighbor's call" (1996, 95).
- 20 The built-in Auditor in *Not I*, a facet on which Beckett wavered (in published texts leaving its presence, but in performances removing it),¹² suggests the importance of the speaker-voice-listener triad. With the Auditor removed in productions, it is the audience who hear the summons of the Other and they prepare themselves to respond (Atterton 190). The Auditor, an indeterminate figure draped in black "downstage audience left", watches Mouth intently and raises its arms at four crucial moments in "helpless compassion" (Beckett 1990, 375). These four moments occur when Mouth must stop her verbal onslaught in order to answer the interior-other who seemingly challenges her about the third person pronoun she employs: "she found herself in the —...what? .. who? .. no! ... she! ..." (1990, 377). The challenge from the inside and the compassionate reception from the outside subvert the normative expectation that the unified subject must defend herself from the outside world, that the Other is the hostile enemy. The audience and the Auditor, like the Inquirer of *Play* assume crucial roles as hostages to the speaker. Levinas deems this "hospitality", in the sense that the "I" must, in the face of the other, create space for the alterity of the Other. Instead of submerging the Other into the "I", Levinas invites us to let the Other escape and to allow the infinity of our responsibility to guide us, because "*The absolute experience is not*

disclosure but revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of a face over and beyond form" (1969, 27, 67).

- 21 According to Levinas, in an oft quoted interview

The best way of encountering the other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. (1985, 85-86).

- 22 Furthermore, he clarifies that the subject is bound by the double logic whereby it comes into being and devolves on its responsibility for the Other and "it answers to the point of expiating for others" (Levinas 1985, 100). In the darkness that surrounds Mouth, we are indeed hostaged to her alterity. She escapes us, but she reveals to us the ethical relation. Revelation through the face to face relation is a form of teaching that does not depend upon vision—the traditional mode of accessing the Other which maintains the Other under my domain or reference. And of course this is singularly compelling: Beckett's characters risk exposing their vulnerabilities and voicing their basest instincts and actions. While Daniel Albright argues that Beckett's "characters [...] aren't images of human beings, but flimsy, jury-rigged theatrical conveniences, all dreck and bricolage", they not only represent some of the most memorable characters in literature, but also some of the most empathetic and compassionate (Albright 25).
- 23 In the iconic Beckettian phrase, "I can't go on. I'll go on" (expressed in both *The Unnameable* and *Waiting for Godot*), we see that the desire to give up versus the necessity of persisting stages a primordial wrestle with responsibility—to the "I" and to the Other. Beckett's writing emerges from the tension between the characters' knowing and unknowing recognition of this responsibility. This pre-cognitive knowing opens out into the face of the Other and comes into being in the very staging of Beckett's plays. Beckett's desire for directorial involvement puts into practice this ethic and constitutes another fold in the creation of the voice in his work. In productions, Beckett's voice fascinated actors and yet he abhorred having it recorded and played back to him. He thought his voice too sentimental (Knowlson 2006, 150). But whenever he gave in to pleas from his actors to read a certain passage from his plays, they were invariably mesmerized by his intonation, pacing, timber, and delivery (Knowlson 2006, 188, 210). It wasn't simply a matter of authoritative versions. It was because Beckett's words came from his voice and hearing Beckett's voice gave the actors a glimpse into the work of the voice not only to communicate sense but to speak the unsayable, the naked word.¹³

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NOTES

1. H. Porter Abbott has shown in *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author and the Autograph* that the rhetoric of "onwardness" and "striving" is deployed with much skepticism in Beckett's writing (36, 38, 39). Abbott judges that as early as *Malone Dies*, "Beckett introduces the trope almost as if to signal his own emergent sense of an oeuvre" that would feel the Victorian drive for progress "as a whip" (36).

2. Deleuze speaks of this fatigue as an exhaustion of means, a depletion of cultural modes of meaning and of saying. He says, "To exhaust words, one must relate them to the Others who pronounce them—or rather, emit them, secrete them—following the flows that alternately intermingle and become distinct" (1995, 7). In evacuating words of sense and subjectivity, Beckett bores "one hole after another" in language to get to formlessness (1983, 172).

3. Critiquing Heidegger's subordination of "the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing)", Levinas instead argues for ethical justice. This justice "involves obligations with regard to an existent that refuses to give itself, the Other, who in this sense would be an existent *par excellence*" (1969, 45). In other words, Levinas opposes the neutralization of the Other in the aid of conquering or thematizing it.

4. My reading is in opposition to a line of interpretation which sees Beckett's work as punishing the audience. For example, Davies argues that "Destabilizing his audience also allowed Beckett to wield greater control, to impose his authority both on and off stage" (82). Davies's judgment seems to suggest a sado-masochistic relation between the director and the audience which contradicts Beckett's desire to produce primordial connectivity.
5. This is more visible in narrative works such as *Texts for Nothing*, in which the narrator says, "I say to the body, up to you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up" (Beckett 1997, 100). Beckett's bodies fight their decrepitude in order to make meaning beyond symbolic signification.
6. The three stages of language in Beckett's writing advance from 1.) the enumerative language of *The Unnamable*, 2.) the atomic language of middle texts like *How It Is*, 3.) the ceaseless, impersonal flow of *Worstward Ho* and *Not I* (Deleuze 1995, 8). In the face of this incessant, criss-crossing flow of language, the Other and the I "are the same person, the same dead foreign language" that can only play witness or pay homage to the expansion of a pre-ontological moment (Deleuze 1995, 8).
7. In *Endgame*, Clov and Hamm consider: "Clov. What is there to keep me here? Hamm. The dialogue" (Beckett 1986, 135). However, unlike Davies, who observes that "Driving the dialogue is the characters' terror that they are becoming invisible, unattended", this moment signals to me the centrality of sounding oneself into being (Davies 80).
8. Careful not to allow the reduction of exteriority into a single, totalized Other, Levinas increasingly formulates Other (*l'Autre*) as Other's Others (*l'Autrui*), but not consistently, thus creating much difficulty for his translators (see Critchley, Bernasconi, and Peperzak's "Preface" to *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, xiv).
9. See Knowlson and Knowlson's *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett*, 169-171.
10. In *Breath*, a play which Beckett wrote in a fury when provoked by a question about the progress of his writing, a cry of "recorded vagitus" is heard when curtains open (Beckett 1986, 72). Besides "miscellaneous rubbish" scattered on the stage, no figure or character appears, only this primordial recorded voice.
11. Agamben's desire to correct a tradition of metaphysical violence challenges Hegel and Heidegger equally. He remarks that the Hegelian dialectical process of negation conceives of being, "inasmuch as it always takes place in a having-been, in *Gewesen*, ... [as] a pure nothing" (37). On the other hand, Heideggerian separation of language and voice, of "the living being" and *Dasein*, results in a paradox, "that the very absence of voice in *Dasein*, the very 'empty silence' that *Stimmung* revealed, now reverses itself into a Voice" and shows itself as inextricable from death (59). In other words, ontology is governed by a negativity from which it attempts to hide and recover.
12. See Gontarski's "Beckett's Play, In Extensio", 445.
13. My favourite anecdote about Beckett's voice is one included in Knowlson and Knowlson's *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett*. When charged by an American academic of not caring about people, about his audience, Beckett, retelling the incident in a quiet tea room in an elegant old hotel in Paris shouted, "But I do give a fuck about people! I do give a fuck!" (cited in Knowlson 2006, 206). And that is Beckett's voice.

ABSTRACTS

In his later theatre works, Beckett denudes language of the physical body in order to spotlight the singularity of the voice. Reduced to heads and mouths in *Play* and *Not I*, Beckett's figures utter their despair and confusion with visceral gusto, yet there is no interiority to ground their pain. As the voices drift upward and enter our own lungs and organs, the vocalization of their pain summons us to a moment of ethical exchange, for Beckett obliges our compassionate listening. We witness the rare instance of someone risking him/herself and exposing vulnerabilities. And, in witnessing, we embrace our ethical responsibility to the Other. Employing the "optics" of Levinasian ethics, I will argue that Beckett recuperates an intersubjectivity grounded in a radical responsibility to an Other's humanity.

Dans ses œuvres dramatiques publiées à la fin des années 1960s, Beckett sépare la langue du corps physique pour mettre en lumière la singularité de la voix. Dans *Play* et *Not I*, des personnages réduits à des têtes et à des bouches expriment leur désespoir, leur confusion avec une force viscérale bien qu'ils n'aient pas de corps physiques pour enraciner leur douleur. Quand les voix montent et pénètrent nos organes, leur douleur devient un moment d'échange moral car Beckett nous contraint à une écoute compatissante. Nous sommes les témoins privilégiés d'un individu qui prend des risques et devient volontairement vulnérable. Au travers de ce témoignage, nous acceptons notre responsabilité morale envers l'Autre. A cet égard, nous nous servirons de Levinas pour montrer que Beckett s'approprie une intersubjectivité fondée sur la responsabilité radicale envers l'Autre.

INDEX

Keywords: play, *Not I*, philosophy of ethics, voice, humanism of the other

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