

**Meaning and Function of the Empty Space  
in Samuel Beckett's *Not I***

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### Meaning and Function of the Empty Space in Samuel Beckett's *Not I* \_\_\_\_\_

At the basis of the empty space (Yohaku) of the Japanese Suiboku-ga lies the idea of silent acceptance of all things as they are ; things seen and unseen. The selflessness gives to the work that detachment which is essentially necessary for the spiritual quality of a work of art. In Beckett's plays of the latter period, the same kind of empty space is effected on the stage, revealing the fact that he too was aware of the same kind of quality. In *Not I*, the empty space is effected by the truncation of the mouth from its body and the placing of a figure in a cloak in assymetrical positioning on a darkened stage. But the 'she' in *Not I* will not allow that detachment by refusing to acknowledge that 'she' is the 'I'. Therefore silence could not have existed in the empty space in *Not I*. However, Beckett was able to effect an ascetic detachment not from a moral, religious nor metaphysical detachment but from his adamant moral notion of the artist.

*Not I* is an ingenious rendering of a poet's notion of the human condition. The play was written in 1972, which is considered a late period in Beckett's literary career, but even then there seemed to be no limit to his experimenting on new styles and forms to express the 'shape' of his idea of the human condition. However, he had no intention whatsoever of exhibiting his dexterity in the art of the theatre. In fact, one could say that he was utterly devoid of the nimbleness with which clever playwrights could demonstrate their skills. The value of Beckett's theatre comes from his poetic integrity. That he was able to produce what seemed to us such an innovative method might have been new to the theatre, but to Beckett himself, it was a thing with which he had been living for a long while since the time he began writing his trilogy. We are definitely able to trace the art of fragmentation and suspension of the body to *The Unnamable*. The urge to mount his poetic vision on to the stage, to see the image of his creativity materialize, was his sole intention. It was pure and immediate. That he preferred the theatre for this particular image of the incessant talking machine shows how sharp his sense of theatrical histrionicity was in complicity with the inevitable urge to express. The poet as absolute made him push the theatre as medium to its limits. However, even he, the formidable artist that he was, had doubts and had to question experts of that field whether it was possible to ". . . stage a mouth? Just a moving mouth, with the rest of the face in darkness" (Beckett, quoted by Gontarski, p. 132).

By the time he was writing *Not I*, with such works as, for example, *How It Is*, *Lessness*, *Come and Go*, *Breath*, *Eh Joe*, already published or performed, Beckett's writing had acquired a refined subtlety of style partly but significantly developed from a controlled and disciplined handling of the art of discarding.

Thus, the cutting off of the mouth from the body could be said to be the most striking method he could ever have thought of for a stark approach to a Cartesian demonstration. One can even say that *Not I* is

more bleak than *Breath*, although the latter has deprived from the stage the human body itself and left only the sound of breathing and a faint cry. *Not I* gives the effect of utter deprivation because we are made to actually confront the dismembered mouth, not only from the torso but from the face itself, floating midway in empty space of the darkened stage. Gontarski suggests that the initial impetus for the play could have been "the prophetic (or mock-prophetic) bodiless head, the voice crying in the wilderness" of a painting by Caravaggio titled "Beheading of St John the Baptist" which Beckett saw in Malta in 1971. Later, Beckett did confirm James Knowlson that he mentioned that to the painter Avigdor Arikha (Gontarski, p. 132). Katharine Worth underlines the significance of the art of diminution seen in this play thus: "One might have thought after *Play* that no shock of equal power could be generated from those same limited materials: dark, light and speaking, heads" (*Beckett the Shape Changer*, p. 205).

Impersonality can function for the effect of diminution also. The figure that stands on a lower level and away from the mouth is actually deprived of all personal distinction as sex, age, or social identity. Although the figure stands stooping in full length, we cannot tell whether it is properly equipped with limbs or has a face because it is robed in a long loose djellaba with a big hood, and since it stands at a diagonal angle to the mouth we assume that it is keeping vigil of the mouth, and therefore has eyes. The outline of its figure is blurred because the garment is black against a dark background, and because the figure is seen in faint light. In the stage direction, Beckett names the figure 'the Auditor'. It does not talk nor move, except for its gesture of raising its hands both sideways at regular intervals "in a gesture of helpless compassion". This gesture is in response to the mouth's denial of 'she' of the mouth's narrative being identical to 'I', the mouth. As the mouth's denial becomes more unconceding, the shrug of the Auditor becomes less noticeable, "till scarcely perceptible." Its gesture is both a critical comment on the mouth's attitude and sympathy toward it for its helpless condition for being thrown into this 'godforsaken hole' whether she liked it or not.

Diminution had already set in the mouth's narrative before the play had begun. There is little left of the events of her life to tell, and the amount of vocabulary is not much in the telling. According to Beckett, he said himself that the works written after *How It Is* ". . . are residual . . . in relation to whole body of previous work" (quoted by Butler, p. 158). A decreasing takes place as the play proceeds also in events and vocabulary, measured out in a patterned form but not as noticeable as it is in the stark minimizing pattern of Lucky's tirade in *Waiting for Godot*. Therefore the "blubbing" monologue which continues throughout the performance (about twenty minutes at the 1972 English premier in London) is sustained only on a very limited subject matter and vocabulary. A destitute birth and childhood; life probably terminated while picking cowslips in April at the age of sixty or seventy; speechless mostly but suddenly talking unable to stop; shopping at the supermarket and being tried at court; walking or sitting at Croker's Acres—there are not many that come floating into her "brains" with which the mouth can play, but all of them are crucial moments that fill up the time between birth and death. Inserted arbitrarily, it seems, but worked into regularity of pattern, are other topics of thematic significance, as lack of love, sense of guilt, the buzzing within the skull. As the events are repeated, they are ever more fragmented and dislocated from regular sequence. Words appear repeatedly in a variety of ways such as ellipsis, reversal, transposition, fragmented phrases, and often words are juxtaposed out of meaning. The short clipped phrases that hardly make a sentence, or single words are cut off from each other indicated by three dots assumed to be performed in a staccato rhythm. This can be interpreted as a natural tone and attitude for a mouth which has been unable to speak since birth but suddenly given speech at sixty or thereabouts. Jessica Tandy's complaint to Beckett on the speed of the speech indicates that he wanted it to be delivered with a considerable speed (Gontarski, p. 148). It mattered more for Beckett that the talking of the mouth touch the nerves of the audience than for them to understand the words intellectually. This method effects a thinning out.

The events in the narrative have a biographical element which Beckett

wanted to be rid of as a creative artist. Therefore, Beckett had to undo the events. He reconstructed them, or deconstructed them into an entirely new context that evaded any reference to his personal experiences. He impersonalized himself out.

The lessening of light bears a great importance in this play. Apart from the necessity of distinctly outlining the movement of the lips, the function of lighting is to efface itself. The Auditor must receive only a faint light, and utmost care should be taken to ward off any streak or faint light to produce a darkened vacuum on the stage and in the auditorium. The sense of darkness and emptiness should pervade and embrace the audience.

Beckett's attitude as a meticulous and fastidious craftsman has never faltered. His building on the 'residua' in rich variation is evidence of his being an architectonicist of the first degree. Thus, the intent of clearing away the debris and clearing the path for a serious quest was met with the meticulous artisan who served and followed the guidance of his poetic vision.

However, there is a movement in the play which runs counter to the movement of diminution. The spill of words that flows out of the mouth is contrary to the diminutive process in ratio. The mouth stutters and sputters for its being unused all these years. Even so, it deems it necessary to emit as many words as possible, and it is frustrated. Its sole concern is to keep on talking uninhibited. Some consciousness residing in the brain or thereabouts is feeling embarrassed because this flow of words is blurting out things that should be kept quiet. This 'brain' cannot control the mouth. ". . . the whole brain begging . . . begging the mouth to stop". At sixty, or seventy, there is little left to tell, and the words are few, but one must keep on talking incessantly in order to keep out what is to be feared. Such a scene as an aged gabbling away is no metaphoric gesture but based on fact. As early as 1962, Beckett was telling others that he had noticed such crones down in the streets of Dublin: "I knew a woman in Ireland, I knew who she was—not 'she' especially, one single woman, but there were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside

the hedgerows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard 'her' saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it" (quoted by Gontarski, p. 32). This attempt to fill the whole space with words is then a counter-movement to the simplifying of it. There is the cutting down of events in the narrative and the vocabulary, but in order to continue talking, there is increase in variation in the ordering of them.

In the counter-movement, there is also the expansion and deepening of vacuum, the empty space, as things and objects recede. But in *Not I* the removal has already taken place and the vast emptiness is ruffled only by an occasional raising of the Auditor's hands, and the constant sounds of the voice that fill the vacuum but which soon peter out.

There is constant counter-movement in the literature also. No sooner than the mouth begins telling her story by the account of her birth than the account of death follows. In "all that early April morning light", she finds herself "suddenly . . . gradually" "in the dark". The text abounds in words that cut short the previous one.

The force that pulls the other to the opposite brings with it convolution. Such a shape in *Not I* is the cause of a *da capo* ending.

Thus, such features of diminution and its counteract, as has been discussed, function as material for the architectonics for the making of this play. They are the theatrical representation of two opposing thematic issues. First, this opposition is seen within the character of whom the mouth is talking about. On a fine sunny April morning when ineluctably all is abudding (April being a crucial month for Beckett), she, at the age of sixty or seventy or thereabouts when ineluctably one begins to wane, "found herself in the dark . . . and if not exactly . . . insentient". Her brain is constantly "buzzing" and in dull roar. She realizes then that "words were coming" after having been "practically speechless . . . all her days . . . and now this stream . . . steady stream . . . she who had never . . ." Whether she fell dead, or in purgatory, or in the dark night of the soul, we are not told, but it is certain that she has been transported to a world beyond (or below) human comprehension. There in the buzzing skull, fragments of the past float up. She was thrown into this "godforsaken hole"

"before her time" of "parents unknown"— the father "vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches" and the mother having forsaken "the . . . speechless infant" (remaining speechless because of it, probably). The child grew up "in the home". The style is crisp and dry. Beckett's sense of humour was cutting, often thrown in at a tragic instance of this kind to effect a tone of detachment. Although the mouth states that there was "nothing of any note till coming up to sixty", the life of the character was a distressing one. She was in the company of waifs; she survived by shopping in supermarkets by a written order; she had been tried at court "guilty or not guilty" and punished. These experiences are recounted in fragments and in repetition mingled with accounts of metaphysical agonies such as the want of love, the sense of guilt and sin. As the play proceeds the audience is made aware that the mouth is talking and telling the tale of itself that is, of herself. She is divided between the feeling of guilt in having sinned and the denial of it. It is not made clear, but she most probably was driven to committing crimes in order to survive, perhaps in the supermarkets. However, there is in the tone of the mouth, a repulsion against what might have been an unjust verdict imposed upon her. What else could she have done in her destitution? Furthermore, this aversion can be traced to its roots of a more metaphysical nature: the sin of having been born. How could the woman be responsible for her being conceived as the result of an irresponsible affair?

Secondly, there is opposition between a force working within herself but beyond her control, and her conscious self. The world she has entered after being thrown into the "dark" is a world of vacuum, therefore free— herself freed from the fetters of the body and its consequences. But this freedom is had only in exchange for "hard money", so to say. That is, she must undertake the task of confronting 'herself' to know her 'self' (thus the Self). She then tells of herself, her past, to know her 'self'. However, it is against her will that the mouth should talk so much of what she would have preferred to conceal. For her sins, for her sin of being born, she fears to face her 'self', her reality. Therefore her gabble works in reverse to protect her from facing reality. The tone of her monologue

reveals that she is more intent on escaping her task. As she rejects and *prolongs the moment of confrontation with her reality*, there is this "something" from somewhere reminding her of what she must do. This "something" is a goad to force her back on to the important quest, a 'hypothetical imperative'. Its demand is never articulated but its importunity is caught as it necessarily interrupts the narrator at the climactic point of her tale. The mouth would retaliate nervously ". . . what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she! . . ." The "something" insists on the fact that the 'she' which is talked about is the 'I', and thus the mouth is the 'I', the 'self' which the mouth must confront. That the 'she' is the 'I', can be easily decoded within the text, Beckett's technique of intimation by the above four words being highly skilled, but there is actual evidence to indicate that the author had meant it to be so. (There is in the original holograph fragment, places where Beckett changed the third-person pronouns to the first and then back again. For example: "*She found herself*" to "*I found myself*" [Gontarski, p. 145]). She rejects the demand of the force most strongly at the fifth occasion where the mouth screams in frenzy "SHE!", as much as to say 'Not I'. She will not assume any responsibility for her 'being'. She is "the disclaimer of responsibility" (Baldwin, p.142). The conflict is then between this mysterious "something" which claims that the 'she' is the 'I', and the 'she'. This "something" is then what Heidegger would call man's innate urge for Truth.

In this feud it seems that the mouth has its way and the opponent suffocated, but words toward the end of the play as "no matter . . . keep on . . . then back . . ." will imply the oscillation of the alternatives. The hypothetical imperative will persevere and 'she' will be obstinate. In works since *The Unnamable*, the use of 'I', 'you' and 'she' become thematic game, but it is only in *Not I* that the 'I' does not appear in the text but only in the title. The unknown regions of reality is a fearful chasm and therefore there is all the reason for her to refuse the invitation to it.

The auditor is a witness to this feud and the corrective commentator. It will keep vigil for the only thing it is concerned about is when the mouth will articulate the 'I'. Yet, it is understanding, and knows how it is

more painful to confront the 'self' than to suffer the lack of it. Its gesture is articulate of that attitude. As it stands downstage of the mouth, it appears to be much a part of the dark vacuum.

It is into this vacuum that the mouth flings her words to fill it with her "blubberings". This empty space is the gap between the two opposing forces. Every word resounds and vainly peters out so that the mouth must continue to talk and fill it with more sounds as protection from coming face to face with the reality.

To mount on stage two live talking lips separated from the rest of its body and suspended in mid-stage is by all means bizarre. Still further, to place a standing figure in a mantle sans face, sans voice, except for intermittent shrugs, a distance away from the mouth is a surrealist method. But they are not the only parts that make up the stage for *Not I*. The empty space must be taken into consideration as another 'seen' element, occupying a distinct place 'in space'. Furthermore, it is not just a part of the setting, but has a theme of its own. Its existence is as independent and significant as are the other two 'bodies'; and at the same time an indispensable component.

Beckett's use of the space left empty has always drawn attention. One wanders how Beckett, almost knowing nothing of theatre technique when he began writing plays, had conjured up such an effective device. Being uninhibited could be the reason for being able to make use of it to mount his poetic vision in a most ideal condition. Whether bright light, or hazy, or pitch dark, he created an evacuated space in almost all his plays, endowing it with significant meaning and function hitherto unknown before in the theatre. Space in *Not I* was even more significant. It gives a cosmic effect, and a hollow nothing where mouth and Auditor are like lonely constellations. The vacated area assists in giving to his stage the effect of austere harmony and depth.

The experience of *Not I* is a unique one. When the auditorium is darkened and the lips and the figure appear before you, the sense of height, distance and depth still remain in your vision so that you are able to discern the location of the things on the stage, and the darkened area is

merely a background. However, it does not take long before you realize that you have lost the sense of distance and gravitation. The mouth and figure can appear to you very near or very far, high or low, for you are floating in the vacuum of darkness as the mouth and figure float before you. Moreover, the voice is heard from afar, from near, and from all angles which adds to the feeling of existing in cosmic vacuum, or within a skull listening to the "buzzing". Thus this play plays magic on the audience. Beckett's poetic vision is well answered. According to Butler, this method is "flouting the human dimension" (Butler, p. 33). Beckett's creative instinct, coupled with innate histrionicity for stage business had made him a fastidious director very soon after he started writing plays. Thus he needs to have his plays in the exact way he has planned. A poet requires much—Beckett is not an artisan writing for sensationalism on the stage. What is more exacting of Beckett is that he requires a poetic representation to his metaphysical probings. It is like mounting an abstract painting on stage against the background of time. Katharine Worth has pointed out that "Like a painter, Beckett expresses himself through spatial arrangements, drawing suggestive, often deeply troubling effects from unexpected or asymmetrical relationships" (*The Irish Drama*, Worth, p. 246).

To compare a work of art of one culture to another of a different culture, and to a different genre, is to expose them to the danger of misapprehension, especially when there is no factual relationship between the two. On the other hand, comparison may lead to a deeper understanding if the works are of superb quality for there would always be a strain of universality of high value beneath the particular. Similarity in the function of space in Beckett's play, *Not I* and Suiboku-ga can be traced to intrinsic characteristic of man's aspirations. The truncation of the mouth from its body swimming in vacuum and the isolated figure of the Auditor is a style akin to the drawings of the Suiboku-ga of the Far East. The gap between the mouth and the figure is akin to the space on the paper left untouched.

The Suiboku-ga was originated in China, brought to Japan during the middle ages, and completed to a style of Japanese notion of austerity and beauty by the artist Sesshū in the sixteenth century. It is a drawing which

grew out of calligraphy in the Zen style, so that it is conducted with the use of brush and India-ink (black) drawn on Japanese paper of white or China white. The brush is manipulated by a rhythmical movement with a bold stroke that cannot be undone once it is done. Different shading of black ink is made as the brush traces the lines or area with the differences of pressure put upon the brush. The number of strokes of the brush is cut down to the minimum, so that, for example, the profile of the heron's head by Tan'an of the sixteenth century was superbly created in just three brief strokes and a dot for the eye. In this art, not the appearance but the essence of the thing is captured. The drawing of the heron is a realistic intensification, whereas, Beckett's mouth is a "metonymic intensity" (Connor, p.111). Another feature of this monochrome is how the major part of the subject is drawn in the location where the object has its rightful place without so much as attempting to fill the white space. It is taken as granted that the viewer can fill the empty space with his 'mind's eye' by abandoning himself into the cosmic space on the Japanese canvas. Interestingly enough, the approach is similar to audience participation for *Not I*, as discussed above. Looking at one part of a vast landscape painting by Sesshū titled "Autumn and Winter Landscape", we see a high rocky crag toward the upper left corner and a humble thatched cottage on the shores of a lake (undrawn but presumed) a little toward the lower right hand corner. The crags are situated above and away from the hut and there is an empty space between. A perspective is effected but at the same time the foreground and the background meet to give a flattened effect also. The distancing is gone and yet is still there. As a result, the crags will approach the viewer to verify itself for its own sake and yet will remain as part of the landscape in relation to the hut, and the hut will also be viewed in the same way. Such an effect is possible because this space exists. The little that is drawn is poignant, truncated from its surroundings whose invisibility is 'seen'. On the one dimensional canvas, a four dimension is effected. In *Not I* also, such an effect is brought about. In both cases in *Not I* and in Sesshū's monochrome, a vast and deep richness is born of the little there is to say, the little there is to draw.

There is a great difference of culture and age in the two art works. At the basis of the empty space in Sesshū's work lies the idea of silent acceptance of all things as they are; things seen and unseen. This is accompanied by giving up of self-will. It becomes the very basis of the great serenity and harmony seen in the crags, the hut and the whole vastness of the landscape. The selflessness gives the work of art that detachment which is so essentially necessary for the spiritual quality of a work of art. Who is not more aware of that than Beckett? Yet, 'she' in *Not I* will not give in to acknowledging that she is 'I', the self, which she must come to know in the process of the ultimate quest. Therefore silence cannot exist in the empty space of *Not I*. 'She' is clearly aware that she is shutting out all possibilities. Then, logic has it that she is trapped in her self-concocted impasse, and so she can only reiterate her tragic situation of being born into this "godforsaken hole". Such self-pitying cannot possibly bring about detachment like that of Sesshū's. However, Beckett somehow is able to effect an ascetic detachment not of the mouth but of the work as a whole. How was he able to do it? There existed an intent of having to reconstruct the experience of his own life since there was only those on which he could write. He had to 'undo' the actuality and in order to do it, the emphasis on the making of this play was put on "structure, formal patterns, artifice, structural attempts to undercut pathos" (Gontarski, p. 147). His was not brought about by a moral, religious nor metaphysical detachment like that of Sesshū, but a detachment brought about from the moral notion of an artist. The detachment was the result of artistic integrity. Beckett's attitude as seeker of Truth has been cut short by such characters as the 'she' of *Not I*. Thence, the discipline and control needed to produce the effect of detachment was carried on by the artist in Beckett.