

Samuel Beckett

Not I

Written in English in spring 1972. First performed at the Forum Theater of the Lincoln Center, New York, in September 1972. First published by Faber and Faber, London, in 1973. First performed in Britain at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 16 January 1973.

Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8' above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone.

AUDITOR, downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4' high, shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated. See Note.

As house lights down MOUTH's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds. With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient into:

MOUTH: ... out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little thing ... before its time ... in a godfor ... what? ... girl? ... yes ... tiny little girl ... into this ... out into this ... before her time ... godforsaken hole called ... called ... no matter ... parents unknown ... unheard of ... he having vanished ... thin air ... no sooner buttoned up his breeches ... she similarly ... eight months later ... almost to the tick ... so no love ... spared that ... no love such as normally vented on the ... speechless infant ... in the home ... no ... nor indeed for that matter any of any kind ... no love of any kind ... at any subsequent stage ... so typical affair ... nothing of any note till coming up to sixty when ... what? ... seventy? ... good God! ... coming up to seventy ... wandering in a field ... looking aimlessly for cowslips ... to make a ball ... a few steps then stop ... stare into space ... then on ... a few more ... stop and stare again ... so on ... drifting around ... when suddenly ... gradually ... all went out ... all that early April morning light ... and she found herself in the ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... (*pause and movement 1*) ... found herself in the dark ... and if not exactly ... insentient ... insentient ... for she could still hear the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ... and a ray of light came and went ... came and went ... such as the moon might cast ... drifting ... in and out of cloud ... but so dulled ... feeling ... feeling so dulled ... she did not know ... what position she was in ... imagine! ... what position she was in! ... whether standing ... or sitting ... but the brain ... what? ... kneeling? ... yes ... whether standing ... or sitting ... or kneeling . but the brain ... what? ... lying? ... yes ... whether standing ... or sitting ... or kneeling ... or lying ... but the brain still ... still. . in a way ... for her first thought was ... oh long after ... sudden flash . brought up as she had been to believe ... with the other waifs ... in a merciful ... (*brief laugh*) ... God ... (*good laugh*) ... first thought was ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... she was being punished ... for her sins ... a number of which then ... further proof if proof were needed ... flashed through her mind ... one after another ... then dismissed as foolish ... oh long after ... this thought dismissed ... as she suddenly realized ... gradually realized ... she was not suffering ... imagine! ... not suffering! ... indeed could not remember ... offhand ... when she had suffered less ... unless of course she was . *meant* to be suffering ... ha! ... *thought* to be suffering ... just as the odd time ... in her life

... when clearly intended to be having pleasure ... she was in fact ... having none ... not the slightest ... in which case of course ... that notion of punishment ... for some sin or other ... or for the lot ... or no particular reason ... for its own sake ... thing she understood perfectly ... that notion of punishment ... which had first occurred to her ... brought up as she had been to believe ... with other waifs ... in a merciful ... (*brief laugh*) ... God ... (*good laugh*) ... *first* occurred to her ... then dismissed ... as foolish ... was perhaps not so foolish ... after all ... so on ... all that ... vain reasonings ... till another thought ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ... though of course actually ... not in the ears at all ... in the skull ... dull roar in the skull ... and all the time this ray or beam ... like moonbeam ... but probably not ... certainly not ... always the same spot ... now bright ... now shrouded ... but always the same spot ... as no moon could ... no ... no moon... just all part of the same wish to ... torment ... though actually in point of fact ... not in the least ... twinge ... so far ... ha! ... so far ... this other thought then . not a ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but so like her ... in a way ... that she might do well to ... groan ... on and off ... writhe she could not ... as if in actual ... agony ... but could not ... could not bring herself ... some flaw in her make-up ... incapable of deceit ... or the machine ... more likely the machine ... so disconnected ... never got the message ... or powerless to respond ... like numbed ... 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 ... no part ... what? ... yes ... all silent but for the buzzing ... so-called moving ... that she could feel ... just the eyelids ... the buzzing? . no part of her presumably ... on and off ... shut out the light ... reflex they call it ... no feeling of any kind ... but the lids ... even best of times ... who feels them? ... opening ... shutting ... all that moisture ... but the brain still ... still sufficiently ... oh very much so! ... at this stage ... in control ... under control ... to question even this ... for on that April morning ... so it reasoned ... that April morning ... she fixing with her eye ... a distant bell ... as she hastened towards it ... fixing it with her eye ... lest it elude her ... had not all gone out ... all that light ... of itself ... without any ... any ... on her part ... so on ... so on it reasoned ... vain questionings ... and all dead still ... sweet silent as the grave ... when suddenly ... gradually ... she realiz ... what?... the buzzing? ... yes ... all dead still but for the buzzing ... when suddenly she realized ... words were ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... (*pause and movement 2*) ... realized ... words were coming ... imagine! ... words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... at first ... so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit ... could be none other ... than her own ... certain vowel sounds ... she had never heard ... elsewhere ... so that people would stare ... the rare occasions ... once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason ... stare at her uncomprehending ... and now this stream ... steady stream ... she who had never ... on the contrary ... practically speechless ... all her days ... how she survived! ... even shopping ... out shopping ... busy shopping centre ... supermarket ... just hand in the list ... with the bag ... old black shopping bag ... then stand there waiting ... any length of time ... middle of the throng ... motionless ... staring into space ... mouth half open as usual ... till it was back in her hand ... the bag back in her hand ... then pay and go ... not as much as good-bye ... how she survived! ... and now this stream ... not catching the half of it ... not the quarter ... no idea ... what she was saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she was saying! ... till she began trying to ... delude herself ... 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 ... when suddenly she felt ... gradually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! ... her lips moving! ... as of course till then she had not ... 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 touch which ... no speech possible ... and yet in the ordinary way ... not felt at all ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ... the whole being ... hanging on its words ... so that not only she had ... had she ... not only had she ... to give up ... admit hers alone ... her voice alone ... but this other awful thought ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... even more awful if possible ... that feeling was coming back . imagine! ... feeling coming back! ... starting at the top ... then working down ... the whole machine ... but no ... spared that ... the mouth alone ... oh long after ... so far ... ha! ... so far ... then thinking sudden flash ... it can't go on ... all this ... all that ... steady stream ... straining to hear ... make something of it ... and her own thoughts ... make something of them ... all ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... so-called ... all that together ... imagine! ... whole body like gone ... just the mouth ... lips ... cheeks ... jaws ... never ... what? ... tongue? ... yes ... lips ... cheeks ... jaws ... tongue ... never still a second ...

mouth on fire ... stream of words ... her ear ... practically in her ear ... not catching the half ... not the quarter ... no idea what she's saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she's saying! ... and can't stop ... no stopping it ... she who but a moment before ... but a moment! ... could not make a sound ... no sound of any kind ... now can't stop ... imagine! ... can't stop the stream ... and the whole brain begging ... something begging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop ... pause a moment ... if only for a moment ... and no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't ... couldn't pause a second ... like maddened ... all that together ... straining to hear ... piece it together ... and the brain ... raving away on its own ... trying to make sense of it ... of make it stop ... or in the past ... dragging up the past ... flashes from all over ... walks mostly ... walking all her days ... day after day ... a few steps then stop ... stare into space ... then on ... a few more ... stop and stare again ... so on ... drifting around ... day after day ... or that time she cried ... the one time she could remember ... since she was a baby ... must have cried as a baby ... perhaps not ... not essential to life ... just the birth cry to get her going ... breathing ... then no more till this ... old hag already ... sitting staring at her hand ... where was it? ... Croker's Acres ... one evening on the way home ... home! ... a little mound in Croker's Acres ... dusk ... sitting staring at her hand ... there in her lap ... palm upward ... suddenly saw it wet ... the palm ... tears presumably ... hers presumably ... no one else for miles ... no sound ... just the tears ... sat and watched them dry ... all over in a second ... or grabbing at the straw ... 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 ... all that together ... can't . . what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing . . dull roar like falls ... and the beam ... flickering on and off ... starting to move around ... like moonbeam but not ... all part of the same ... keep an eye on that too ... corner of the eye ... all that together ... can't go on ... God is love ... she'll be purged ... back in the field ... morning sun ... April ... sink face down in the grass ... nothing but the larks ... so on ... grabbing at the straw ... straining to hear ... the odd word ... make some sense of it ... whole body like gone ... just the mouth ... like maddened ... and can't stop ... no stopping it ... something she ... something she had to ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... (*pause and movement 3*) ... something she had to ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes... all the time the buzzing ... dull roar ... in the skull ... and the beam ... ferreting around ... painless ... so far ... ha! ... so far ... then thinking ... oh long after... sudden flash ... perhaps something she had to ... had to ... tell ... could that be it? ... something she had to ... tell ... tiny little thing ... before its time ... godforsaken hole ... no love ... spared that ... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... how she survived! ... that time in court ... what had she to say for herself ... guilty or not guilty ... stand up woman ... speak up woman ... stood there staring into space ... mouth half open as usual ... waiting to be led away ... glad of the hand on her arm ... now this ... something she had to tell ... could that be it? ... something that would tell ... how it was ... how she ... what? ... had been? ... yes ... something that would tell how it had been ... how she had lived ... lived on and on ... guilty or not ... on and on ... to be sixty ... something she . what? ... seventy? ... good God! ... on and on to be seventy ... something she didn't know herself ... wouldn't know if she heard ... then forgiven ... God is love ... tender mercies ... new every morning ... back in the field ... April morning, ... face in the grass ... nothing but the larks ... pick it up there ... get on with it from there ... another few ... what? ... not that? ... nothing to do with that? ... nothing she could tell? ... all right ... nothing she could tell try something else ... think of something else ... oh long after . . sudden flash ... not that either ... all right ... something else again ... so on hit on it in the end ... think everything keep on long enough then forgiven ... back in the ... what? ... not that either nothing to do with that either? ... nothing she could think? all right ... nothing she could tell ... nothing she could think nothing she ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... (*pause and movement 4*) ... tiny little thing ... out before its time ... godforsaken hole ... no love ... spared that ... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... even to herself ... never out loud ... but not completely ... sometimes sudden urge ... once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason ... the long evenings ... hours of darkness ... sudden urge to ... tell ... then rush out stop the first she saw ... nearest lavatory ... start pouring it out ... steady stream ... mad stuff ... half the vowels wrong ... no one could follow ... till she saw the stare she was getting ... then die of shame ... crawl back in ... once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason ... long hours of darkness ... now this ... this ... quicker and quicker ... the words ... the brain ... flickering away like mad ... quick grab and on ... nothing there ... on somewhere else ... try somewhere else ... all the time something begging ... something in her begging ... begging it all to stop ... unanswered ... prayer unanswered ... or unheard ... too faint ... so on ... keep on ... trying ... not knowing what ... what she was trying ... what to try ... whole body like gone ... just the mouth ... like maddened ... so on ... keep ...

what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... dull roar like falls ... in the skull ... and the beam ... poking around ... painless ... so far ... ha! ... so far ... all that ... 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*) ... hit on it in the end ... then back ... God is love ... tender mercies ... new every morning ... back in the field ... April morning ... face in the grass ... nothing but the larks ... pick it up ...

(*Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up*)

Note. Movement: this consists in simple sideways raising of arms from sides and they're falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion. It lessens with each recurrence till scarcely perceptible at third. There are just enough pauses to contain it as MOUTH recovers from vehement refusal to relinquish third person.

[End.]

[Note that the phrase 'not I' does not occur in text, but see extract from *The Unnamable*]

The Unnamable (1958; Trilogy, Picador Edn. 1976): '[...] it's not I speaking, it's [370] not I hearing, let us not go into that, let us go on as if I were the only one in the world, whereas I'm the only one absent from it, or with others, what difference does it make, others present, others absent, they are not obliged to make themselves manifest, all that is needed is to wander and let wander, be this slow boundless whirlwind and every particle of its dust, it's impossible. Someone speaks, someone hears, no need to go any further, it is not he, it's I, or another, or others, what does it matter, the case is clear, it is not he, he who I know I am, that's all I know, who I cannot say I am, I can't say anything, I've tried, I'm trying, he knows nothing, knows of nothing, neither what it is to speak, nor what it is to hear, to know nothing, to be capable of nothing, and to have to try, you don't try any more, no need to try, it goes on by itself, it drags on by itself, from word to word, a labouring whirl, you are in it somewhere, everywhere, not he, if only I could forget him, have one second of this noise that carries me away, without having to say, I don't, I haven't time, It's not I, I am he, after all, why not, why not say it, I must have said it, as well that as any thing else, it's not I, not I, I can't say it, it came like that, it comes like that, it's not I, if only it could be about him, if only it could come about him, I'd deny him, with pleasure, if that could help, it's I, here it's I, speak to me of him, let me speak of him, that's all I ask, I never asked for anything, make me speak of him, what a mess, now there is no one left, long may it last. In the end it comes to that, to the survival of that alone, then the words come back, someone says I, unbelieving. (pp. 370-71.)