

Zen and the Art of Self-Negation in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*

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and the brain...raving away on its own...trying to make sense of it...or make it stop...or in the past...dragging up the past...flashes from all over...

—Samuel Beckett, *Not I*

Set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest...Be mindful of the passing of time, and engage yourself in *zazen* as though you are saving your head from fire.

—Eihei Dogen

Samuel Beckett's late plays stage minimal images of body and mind: a woman sits in an autonomously-moving rocking chair listening to her recorded voice (*Rockaby*); a disembodied head breathes audibly while three recordings of his voice play (*That Time*); a mouth suspended in the dark speaks a rapid outpouring of disjointed phrases (*Not I*). As the actor Donald Davis put it, *Not I's* visual and aural minimalism (like many of Beckett's plays from the 1970s and 80s) makes *Waiting for Godot* look "like an MGM musical."¹ Devoid of whole characters and dynamic action, these brief pieces stage streams of thought and physically restrained human figures surrounded by dark voids.

Critics have framed these pieces' baffling simplicity and suffering within European literary and philosophical paradigms ranging from the "psychographic landscapes" of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, to the psychoanalytic thinking of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan, to Gilles Deleuze's notions of the "exhausted" in language and image.² Some of these paradigms touch on the ways Beckett pushes to the limits of subjectivity and discursive thought itself, but they tend to do so from within conceptual and metaphysical frameworks.

As an alternative lens through which to read these late plays, Japanese Zen Buddhism also suggests the limits of subjectivity and discursive thought but offers a far more concrete paradigm for contextualizing these plays within a tradition of mental and physical practice.³ Several scholars have noted deep affinities between Beckett's writing and Zen philosophy, from Buddhism's influence on Arthur Schopenhauer, whose philosophical pessimism influenced Beckett, to the formal similarities between Beckett's theater and Japanese Noh plays.⁴ Paul Foster's *Beckett and Zen* suggests that Beckett's novels distill the dilemma of existence that Buddhism recognizes as a fundamental human condition but that Beckett fails to find a way out.⁵ Combining the enigmatic illogic of Zen with chaos theory, John Kundert-Gibbs's *No-Thing is Left to Tell* reads Beckett's plays as visual and conceptual riddles that, like *koans*, baffle the dualistic mind, defeating discursive thought from within.⁶

Extending this work beyond Zen ideas to Zen practice, the enigmatic figures who sparsely populate Beckett's late stages appear not as symbolic tropes in the representational and metaphysical traditions of European art, but instead look like ritual enactments of the mind's basic nature. Instead of Dante's damned half-buried in ice, the immobilized figures of *That Time* and *Rockaby* begin to look like the meditator in *zazen* (seated meditation), observing thoughts and perceptions arise in the present moment through restrained bodies. Instead of a spirit condemned forever to pace her own level of Hell, or Jung's example of a woman with the feeling of never having been born, May's prescribed and tightly choreographed pacing in *Footfalls* begins to resemble a monk in *kinhin* (walking meditation), repeating slow steps around a cyclical path as deliberate practice. Mouth's refusal to articulate a first-person subject position in *Not I*, as I will posit here, may even suggest a liberating rather than pathological negation of self.

Beneath these surface affinities lies a deeper connection between Beckett's gestures of self-negation and their embodied thought. Beckett's 1973 play *Not I* in particular, this essay suggests, fleshes out the mental suffering that Buddhism cites as being caused by grasping thoughts or sensations and clinging to the delusion of a persistent self.⁷ Beyond that, this play in performance, like the Zen practitioner in *zazen*, establishes a distinctively embodied empty space through which the very notion of a subject is radically emptied of intrinsic value.

I. “whole body like gone”

In the stage directions at the beginning of *Not I*, Beckett calls for an image defined largely by absence. Most of the body is gone: “*Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow*” (216). The simplicity of the stage image fosters the spectator’s focus and concentration. As Enoch Brater notes in *Beyond Minimalism*, “what we watch in the theater is a play of the tortured mind, as vivid as a hallucination.”⁸ This magnification cuts two ways: the “tortured mind” extends outward in a hallucinatory intensification while at the same time the spectator’s visual world is minimized and wiped nearly blank. The vast swath of negative space, the stage in darkness, becomes a void that provides something like a neutral platform or tabula rasa for the spectator’s perception.

Compare this black space to the white wall in front of the Zen practitioner. Without any particular methodology for achieving specific states of consciousness, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen, Eihei Dogen, advises the meditator to “just sit” with crossed legs, facing a wall, and to notice phenomena and thoughts arising in the present moment, letting them transform and fade away as they will. The stillness of sitting and the blankness of the wall provide a nothingness that can foreground at first the activity of thinking and ultimately a recognition of the emptiness of mind. This practice, however, is far from a Cartesian division between mental activity and corporeal presence. Focusing on her own breath, the one who meditates becomes more than usually conscious of the body; through that hyperawareness she connects to the present moment and the real that verbal and imagistic thoughts typically mask.

As a fragment of the body, the image of a mouth isolated from even eyes or nose presents Beckett’s audience with a “rioting, rambling hole” that simultaneously reduces the human figure to the void-like organ of speech and draws attention to the strange physicality of oral communication. Through its performed and embodied nature, this play enacts what Herbert Blau characterizes as “blooded thought”: mental activity made material, physiological, and visceral.⁹ Without visual signs of emotion or thought, the spectator is reminded that speaking and language occur through a shockingly physiological dance of breath, tongue, lips, and teeth.

Even the monologue itself reminds us that words are a concrete production of the body's muscular contractions rather than an abstraction of textual relations: "whole body like gone...just the mouth...lips...cheeks...jaws" (220). The distinctly embodied and fragmented orifice, in Brater's words, "cannot be easily rationalized. Yet onstage it is agonizingly real."¹⁰ Mouth's fragmented presence as a mouth offers a physical paradox, simultaneously removed from the everyday material world and unusually emphatic of corporeality. As Garner notes from a phenomenological perspective,

The diminished figures of late Beckett (like Mouth), seemingly abstracted from the conditions of materiality and embodiment, continue to play out this fearful ambiguity of corporeal self-presence, the urgent flight from a subjectivity that represents the impossibility of its own identity. The fact that the body seems to recede in plays like *Not I* and *That Time*—that it is fragmented, decentered, often deanimated, and that many of its regions are characterized by absence—does not obscure its place in the play of ambiguity and dispossession.¹¹

Far from it; the fragment of Mouth largely defined by absence draws attention to the body as the site of a subjectivity that is untenable and fragmented. Giving voice to the elusive phrases—which themselves refer back to the fragmented physicality that produces them—undermines a dualistic split between abstraction and embodiment. The physical paradox corporealizes the subject's inability to identify as a subject.

Closer to the stage floor stands the Auditor, "*sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba*" (216), who faces Mouth and remains still except for four moments in which the figure raises its arms in "a gesture of helpless compassion" (215). While the gesture does little to intervene in Mouth's relentless monologue, it also reaches toward a kind of empathy that admits the impossibility of the task. According to James Knowlson, Beckett apparently identified with the Auditor figure most prominently, based on a figure he saw from a café in Morocco.¹² The sexless Auditor, cloaked in a garment that Beckett borrowed from a Moroccan woman waiting for her daughter, may look to some spectators not unlike a Japanese Zen monk, swathed in the robes of renunciation and embodying a position of compassion. In Zen, compassion features prominently: the ideal of the Bodhisattva emphasizes putting others first and renouncing all attachments to worldly possessions. The first vow chanted after dharma talks is "beings are numberless; I vow to save

them.”¹³ But this “saving” manifests not evangelically so much as it does helplessly: for the Bodhisattva, a person who has glimpsed enlightenment but returned to the world of delusion to help others, to be there for another means not to convert but to empathize, to bear witness, and to suffer alongside while maintaining a core of equanimity.¹⁴ The compassion here operates not from a position of magnanimity, which presumes a persistent, charitable self, but instead from nonduality, the recognition of interdependence and rejection of separateness.

II. “and the brain ... raving away on its own”

Mouth’s monologue offers plenty of suffering to compel the Auditor/Audience’s compassion; it flows forth repetitively, doubling back on itself, and always evades the first person singular “I” just as the subject position might emerge. Instead, Mouth refers to herself in the third person and describes events that seem quite traumatic but are difficult to pin down. She speaks of a birth “out...into this...this world...tiny little thing...before her time” (216) and parents who “spared” her love, leaving her alone from the beginning. She relates torments, despair, a devastating court trial, and a maddening rush of thoughts and speech after many decades of silence.

While the words perform their own excessive flowing, they require of the actress playing Mouth a nearly athletic feat. The rapid and breathless pace puts her breath and speaking apparatus to the test, facing the spectator not with a calm representation but an intense performance of logorrhea. Spoken in the theater, the monologue bears some resemblance to *sutras* chanted in Zen monasteries. While these chanted teachings are drawn from translations of the Pali canon of Buddha’s words and those of later Indian, Chinese, and Japanese teachers, it is not so much the meaning but the sounds of the words that perform their *primary* function. The monotonous but intensive act of chanting strikes the ear as viscerally relentless after hours of silent sitting and walking meditation; it suddenly fills the space with full-bodied voices. Even in the San Francisco Zen Center and North American monasteries, priests regularly chant in Japanese and Pali, although most of them do not speak those languages as daily modes of communication. By chanting together, practitioners connect to breath and the physicality of speech as a community, creating an affective rather than coherent experience.

Beckett seemed after something more like this affective experience when he telegraphed the actress Jessica Tandy, who was concerned about the pace of the monologue and its consequent coherence, to say that “I’m not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience.”¹⁵ A more intelligible monologue might invite rational involvement with it, a logically positivist attempt to figure it out and assign it meaning. Instead of a problem laid out for us to become involved in, Beckett gives us the sensation of thinking in all its relentlessness. Mouth describes an experience that Brater notes mirrors the audience’s: “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” (218). Indeed, the form of the monologue continues this track, giving the “dull roar in the skull” a constant, relentless sensation in delivery. But Mouth situates the “dull roar” as “in the skull” instead of “in the ears”—in other words, as thought instead of something heard externally.

Other late Beckett plays share a similar image of staged thought. In *That Time*, a head in a void listens to three voices that are “his own” as they recount memories from different stages of life. His eyes “are open” and his breath is “audible, slow, and regular,” like the meditator who notices thoughts and memories arise while focusing on her breath. The “thinker” is staged visually but not given words to say live and is surrounded by a void that admits no objective reality of an external world. In both *That Time* and *Not I*, there is no world to speak of, only an empty darkness. Whatever images might arise in the spectator’s imagination or as suggested by Beckett’s monologues, they are manifestly mental phenomena; the head (or mouth) seems to perform the world through clearly immaterial verbal images.

The inner monologue of thoughts, relentless and repetitive: Buddha noted that while ignoring the present reality, one is prone to think of reactions to it, stray anxieties, memories, and conceptualizations. Many sects of Buddhism hold that mind is all we have, and its clinging to dualistic thought patterns composes the realm of *samsara*, or delusion. The degree to which thought patterns surge unstoppably, compelling the attention to follow, causes suffering. Mouth: “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” (220). In one sense, the desire Mouth voices to “stop the stream” is precisely the point of Zen practice, to get to a vast emptiness beyond the chattering involvements of *samsara*.

Certainly Mouth’s thoughts appear as a nonstop, repetitive, and tormenting phenomenon she does not have the ability to control. The Zen master Bassui advises a release or dismissal rather than the struggle Mouth invokes: “Do not try to prevent thoughts from arising and do not cling to any that have arisen. Let them appear and disappear as they will; don’t struggle with them. You need only unremittingly and with all your heart ask yourself, ‘What is my own Mind?’”¹⁶ It is not the goal of *zazen* to clear away all thoughts but instead neither to cling to nor reject them as if they were real. *Zazen* provides the still point against which the activity of the mind appears conspicuously repetitive and unreal. By allowing thoughts to arise without judgment, the meditator can see how they arise and thereby observe the nature of mind.

From this perspective, Mouth’s suffering in the present comes not from the thoughts themselves—which Shunryu Suzuki notes are only as natural to mind as waves are to water¹⁷—but from her desire for or aversion to them. It is her agonizing need (which spectators, listening, may share) to get them to cease that constitutes her suffering and continues their repetition. Corollary to this attempt to cease thought is a desire for it to lead somewhere: “and the brain...raving away on its own...trying to make sense of it...or make it stop...or in the past...dragging up the past...flashes from all over” (220). Between “trying to make sense of it” and trying to “make it stop,” “the brain” involves itself in the stream of thoughts, grasping and following it.

The play itself, however, refrains from fostering this grasping in the spectator. Both in form and content, *Not I* refuses spectators any rational and dualistic path to thinking through Mouth’s situation to conclusive answers. Even as the mind is engaged in “dragging up the past” and suffers “flashes from all over,” Beckett’s play allows that process of memory and mentation to go on without rendering it into a narrative or clear parable. Indeed, Mouth so little seems to recognize any coherent meaning in her own voice (“...no idea what she’s saying!...”) that it takes on an affective life of its own.

Reading *Not I* through Jacques Derrida's reading of Sigmund Freud, John Lutterbie suggests that this "unceasing, incomprehensible voice, the implacable voice within us, is not the syntax of speech but the current of desire. Desire: the channeled and incomprehensible force that speaks but which I cannot understand."¹⁸ Desire as a striving, as a clinging, a force that possesses and propels us, is predicated on lack in psychoanalytic terms and in Zen terms lies at the root of suffering. This lack, for Freud, connects craving to a propulsion beyond the merely pleasurable to the zombie-like possession of the death drive. The fact that desire persists despite its whiff of the death drive places it outside the knowable, outside that which can be catalogued and reasoned with. Desire propels us to act and to think, and it establishes predilections that Buddhist thought says calcify into identity. Yet Dogen, Suzuki, and generations of Zen masters hold that through *zazen*, the meditator can observe desire. While she can never "know" it in the sense of apprehension, she can at least recognize that its clinging and aversions are predicated on ignorance, on the ego's delusional separateness from the object it "lacks."

Recognizing desire and the lack upon which it depends as constructed by clinging to agreeable thoughts and sensory phenomena and avoiding unpleasant concepts or sensations, Zen calls not for rational solutions, but for letting go. Mouth herself suggests a possible liberation through dismissal: "this thought dismissed...as she suddenly realized...gradually realized...she was not suffering...imagine!...not suffering!...indeed could not remember...off-hand...when she had suffered less" (217). To let go of thoughts is to return to the present, to the here and now, liberated of the delusions that according to Zen constitute suffering.

Mouth's awakening to the present moment and its lack of suffering—whether "suddenly realized" (as in Rinzai Zen) or "gradually realized" (as in Soto Zen)—replaces being caught up in thoughts with a profound awareness of the now: "and a ray of light came and went...came and went...such as the moon might cast...drifting...in and out of cloud" (217). The description of this moonlight is both evocative and based on transience coupled with repetition—like breath. The "drifting" and the moonlight's "flickering" suggest a recognition of the tide-like nature of being in the world. Mouth goes on to make repeated reference to the moon, its apparent motion, and to moonlight throughout the monologue.

For Dogen, the moonlight also had special significance. He notes that “when clouds fly the moon moves,” meaning that “clouds and moon travel at the same time, walk together, with no beginning or end, no before or after.”¹⁹ The moon becomes Dogen’s primary way of describing a theory of relative motion that recognizes the timelessness of the present moment and the interdependence of all phenomena. In “Actualizing the Fundamental Point,” Dogen uses the image of the moon reflected in a dewdrop to depict the simultaneous smallness and vastness of enlightenment: “The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky.”²⁰ To see enlightenment like moonlight, as something that connects one dewdrop’s reflection to boundlessness, is to dissolve the illusion of a separate self, the illusion that Dogen holds as the central source of suffering.

Of course, Mouth’s stream of words does not deliver visually that of which it speaks. Its moonlight remains invisible to the audience, who may only experience it as a mental formation. As Dogen notes, that is the only way any image of it manifests: like a reflection in the dewdrop. The moonlight itself is as ungraspable as it is immortal. Dogen says that to see the moonlight reflected the water must be still, free of ripples. The way to still the mind, according to generations of Zen masters, is first to still the body.

III. The Practice of Beckett

For the actress playing Mouth, the role is a study in intimacy bound up not in the freedom to make bold choices but in severe restriction and focus. James Knowlson notes that the actress Billie Whitelaw had to have her head “clamped firmly between two pieces of sponge rubber” to keep her mouth in the tiny spotlights.²¹ In her autobiography, Whitelaw describes her work in *Not I* as “taking an audience into one’s most private, unformed, semi-conscious, uncensored thoughts.”²² These “unformed” thoughts, unlike the formed thoughts that the ego produces and communicates, are closer to the moment of arising, not yet filtered through sophisticated layers of preference, desire, and self-consciousness. This kind of performance depends on a sort of intimacy that can come only from a deep unmasking of the self below all ego-driven ideas:

Often, when one is sent a play, the first thing that occurs to you is: 'what can I do with this to make it different?' With Beckett I learned that *you don't do anything with it*, you don't try to make it 'different,' you simply allow your own core to make contact with what comes off the page. Eventually everything then falls into place, the material takes off on its own. If you allow the words to breathe through your body, if you become a conduit, something magical *may* happen.²³

The "core" Whitelaw refers to resembles in its restraint from doing anything to make a particular performance different the capacious true self, the "original face before your parents were born" of Zen. The "I" that is "not" becomes, if you will, Whitelaw's own. She excelled not as an ego but as a conduit.

Whitelaw was forced by production demands to sit upright and to surrender any ego-driven concept of character. While the task was daunting, claustrophobic, and even terrifying, Whitelaw's idea that "something magical *may* happen" when the words make contact with her core suggests a profound liberation precisely through a stripping away of ego-based masks or a reduction to "original mind." Significantly, sitting upright without moving provided the physical support for this to happen. In 1243, Dogen influentially taught the assembly at Yoshimine Monastery how to meditate with a distinctly pragmatic and physical orientation: "Straighten your body and sit erect. Do not lean to the left or right; do not bend forward or backward. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, and your nose in line with your navel."²⁴ According to the Zen tradition, this simple posture is already enlightenment and can facilitate a release of individual separateness. After a particularly challenging rehearsal process, Whitelaw noted a dizzying dropping away that mirrored Mouth's own reference to the sensation "whole body like gone": "I went to pieces. I felt I had no body; I could not relate to where I was; and, going at that speed, I was becoming very dizzy and felt like an astronaut tumbling into space. I swore to God I was falling."²⁵

Through the extreme physical restraint and repetitive performance prescribed by Beckett's play, Whitelaw found something empty of her own inherent attempts to construct identity. They performed a negation of self deeply related to the negation of self that upright sitting facilitates in *zendo*s (meditation halls) across China, Japan, and elsewhere. Though Dogen and the Soto Zen lineage that arose in his wake produced texts and dharma talks that could be called philosophical, what mattered most to Soto Zen in particular was the *practice* of *zazen*, which is fundamentally not a tool

but a performative enactment. The purpose of practice in Zen monasteries, as Dan Leighton notes, “is to enact the meaning of the teachings in actualized practice, and the whole praxis, including meditation, may thus be viewed as ritual, ceremonial expressions of the teaching, rather than as means to discover and attain some understanding of it.”²⁶ In some ways, Zen was a reaction against the increasingly philosophical and representational practices of Buddhism in China and India, which tended to render the Buddha as a figure whose enlightenment could be represented through writing, iconographic sculpture, and the words of great masters. Zen (Ch’an in Chinese), influenced not only by Mahayana Buddhism from India but also Chinese Taoism, attempted to return the performative dimension of practice that Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, engaged in: the practice of sitting upright, in silence, and paying attention. *Zazen* is fundamentally performative, in a sense close to J. L. Austin’s notion of “performative utterances” which, like “I promise,” “I beg you,” and “I do (take you to be my spouse)” enact that of which they speak.²⁷ Dogen emphasizes that sitting neither represents nor leads to but *is* enlightenment in (non)action.²⁸

Similarly, what Beckett once said of Joyce’s writing is applicable to Beckett’s own work too, and particularly his late plays: they are not about something; they *are* that something. As Whitelaw says, “you don’t do anything to make it different” (118). Not only is there little room for actorly interpretation, there is not even much of a character. The mouth is only called Mouth, and the “she” she refers to, though she occupies the third person, refers constantly back to Mouth’s own logorrhea, which refers to little but itself. The fact that it negates the very “self” it ostensibly performs (*not* I) embraces erasure alongside performativity, manifesting (like *zazen* practice) the impermanence of things through the singularity of performance. “Performance,” in Peggy Phelan’s formulation, “becomes itself through disappearance,” and therefore mirrors the “ontology of subjectivity” she lays out in *Unmarked*.²⁹ Deeply related to Phelan’s notion of subjectivity as performative and vanishing, Mouth magnifies the disappearing act that constitutes being in the world. However, she does so in the form of an image that seems for all its fragmentation and abstraction like a permanent fixture in a surreal dreamscape. This seeming permanence belies her half hour upon the stage: much as the lights rise on the isolated speech organ and the words arise from incoherence, the lights fade down and Mouth passes into darkness and silence at the end. Yet the

stillness of Mouth does highlight the transience of her verbal outpouring by contrast, much in the way a Zen practitioner recognizes the transient operations of mind by sitting still and not reacting. Simultaneously subject to her own self-absence and distilled into a fleshy organ of speech, Mouth performs thought itself as a constantly transforming unfolding. From a Zen sensibility, this impermanence of self, fully realized, disavows a notion of “I” that persists.

IV. “what?...who?...no!...she!”

From this Zen perspective, Mouth’s very refusal (or inability) to articulate “I” can be read in terms of liberation instead of pathology. Brater offers the dominant and self-evident pathological reading when he suggests that “Mouth’s repeated refusal to identify with the first-person singular demonstrates self-immolation in the process of self-recognition, not self-probing, but self-mutilation.”³⁰ But this “self-immolation” is only negative or hellish when read against a notion of “self” as inherently important—a definition of subjectivity inherited by post-Renaissance art and philosophy in Western Europe. From a Zen perspective, the most painful clinging lies in the idea of a consistent and persistent identity. Enlightenment comes by a dropping away of the egotistical “I.” For Kundert-Gibbs, Mouth’s refusal to refer to herself “forces to the front the insupportability of the concept of the ‘I,’ and at the same time reveals the strength of this concept.”³¹ This stubbornly powerful “I,” which Dogen equates with the “small self,” is composed of delusion: namely, that “I” have some independent existence and that my subjectivity can be objectified as a stable (if accumulating) identity.

The Buddhist concept of nonduality emphasizes that any “I” is composed of five *skandhas* or aggregates: form (external phenomena as observed), sensation (the interpretation or “spin” of forms as pleasant or unpleasant, harsh or gentle), perception (recognition of sensations and forms as known objects), formation (mental habits or thoughts triggered by these known objects), and consciousness (the experience of subjectivity). The canonical *Sandokai* by the eighth-century Chinese Chan (Zen) ancestor Sekito Kisen notes the fundamental interdependence of “eye and sight, ear and sound/nose and smell, tongue and taste”

and expresses the arising of forms as transient and interdependent: “Phenomena exist like box and cover joining.”³² To realize fully the nature of interdependence is deeply associated with the dropping away of ego and realization of *kensho* or glimpse of enlightenment.

In the face of *kensho*, the separation between subject and object dissolves and a nondualistic recognition of the arising of phenomena can occur. This interdependence extends to relations among people as well. Reb Anderson notes that everyone makes each other anew in each moment, but the ways we do so are so subtle and ever-shifting that whatever image we may have of interdependence (father/daughter, wife/husband, employee/employer; strangers sharing a subway seat; or even an image that models a dynamic interchange of ideas, gestures, and perceived reality) does not even begin to touch the intimacy and indeterminacy of interdependence.³³ This fact connects the fundamental nature of reality, with its negation of an independent ego, to the need for compassion. Compassion is not that which one subject does for another out of a self-centered notion of charity but rather is fundamental to the intersubjectivity that arises from the erasure between self and other.

Seemingly binary pairs emerge all over Beckett’s dramaturgy, from his earlier, more “mainstream” plays—Didi/Gogo and Pozzo/Lucky (*Waiting for Godot*), Hamm/Clov and Nagg/Nell (*Endgame*), Winnie/Willie (*Happy Days*)—to the less recognizably human doubles of the late plays: Mouth/Auditor (*Not I*), Woman/Voice (*Rockaby*), Reader/Listener (*Ohio Impromptu*). The pairs of the late plays tend to be distilled to the functions of their interrelation. Though Didi and Gogo define each other and riff on each other as codependent opposites, they still maintain some characteristics that may seem (like most theatrical characters) to exceed the specific registers of their relationship. It would not be impossible to imagine extrapolating Estragon’s life beyond the universe of his interactions onstage—for instance, to his sleeping place and the people who beat him, apparently, nightly.³⁴

Ohio Impromptu’s Reader and Listener, in contrast, are unimaginable outside the action of reading and the table they share. As Kundert-Gibbs notes, that play frustrates the conceptual categorization of separate egos, eliminating Listener’s and Reader’s individual consciousnesses and merging them:

What occurs at the end of the narrative, then, is a final 'mindless' union of the two into a whole—not a whole where there are no longer protagonist and reader (for that would be to make an absolute distinction) but a dynamic one in which the two are 'without-separation.' In other words, the two are still individual, but their categorical individuality has been destabilized by the koan that is the play.³⁵

The destabilization that this *koan* enacts undermines the very duality that Cartesian conceptions of subjectivity and therefore character take for granted. Similarly, what is the inhuman Auditor without Mouth to listen to? The speaking, the listening, arise in their encounter; neither Auditor nor Mouth have any independent existence outside of this arising. Beckett's late doubles define one another in each moment, and are not necessarily distinguishable as separate human figures. They make each other, distilling the ways in which, according to Anderson, we all make each other anew in each moment.³⁶

V. "speechless all her days"

Significantly, the nondualistic empathy that Beckett distills in Auditor's "gesture of helpless compassion" arises each time Mouth comes close to forming the word "I." Letting go of the sense of inherent separate existence can lead to a letting go of subjectivity itself, a "Not I." Part of this relinquishing of the dualistic ego-self and recognizing the emptiness of aggregates depends on a letting go of language's inherent separations between subjects and objects. The subject position and Mouth's linguistic (and physiological) refusal of it has been taken up by Lacanian psychoanalytic readings in such a way that bears on this notion of relinquishing the small self. Elin Diamond reads Beckett's *Not I* as conducive to a "feminine," even "hysterical" performative subversive of the patriarchal "Law of the Logos." Diamond sees in French feminism's discourse of the feminine two (anti)concepts theorized as resistant to the patriarchal symbolic: the hysteric and the presymbolic maternal. Both, she demonstrates, play out actively in Mouth's monologue, and both as physical incarnations of alternatives to patriarchal subject formation.

According to Diamond, Mouth's physical presence as a mouth (and substitute vagina), along with the stream of fragmented words and phrases she spews forth, embodies hysteria as a performative resistance to the symbolic order:

Beckett's Mouth, both organ of speech and (with its "*fully, faintly lit*" lips) organ of sex, is also the body's metonymic reduction, a pulsing muscle that spews words like excrement, "pouring it out" in a gasping, spitting deformation of the Father's logos.³⁷

Formally, the immediate organic materiality of the speaking organ already resists the words that shape thought in terms of a distinctly masculine language. The words Mouth utters also recall memories that mirror psychoanalysis's symptomology of hysteria. Diamond posits this as the feminine hysteric, the presymbolic maternal, put on trial by the patriarchal symbolic. Hysteria both becomes the victim of the symbolic order and formally resists it by deconstructing language's internal logic.

While this gendered perspective obviously pertains to Mouth's situation as a woman marginalized by the "Law of the Father," it also suggests a notion of the signifier and its attendant subject formation as harmful and generative of suffering. From a Zen perspective, the notion that Mouth resists or refuses a subject position can be read as a profound denial of the logocentric notion of subjectivity that causes delusion by converting experience into concepts. If Mouth resists this "conversion" it is not only a rejection of that in a language-dominated culture that is structurally masculine (which is, arguably, everything); it is also a rejection, therefore, of language and narrative per se.

VI. *Mu I*

Mouth, of course, has nothing positive to offer. This is not a value judgment but a formal necessity. She is not "I," but neither is she something other than "I," for which there is no word. That something else would not be definable within language, which depends syntactically upon subjects and objects. Certainly on the sentence level "she" takes the grammatical subject position, but the fact that she refers to herself as "she"—along with the fact that the only "she" we see is objectified as "Mouth"—suggests a deliberate confusion between subjects and objects. Significantly, this "not" negates both verbal representation *and* the truth-claim of verisimilar images. For Zen, images and words are both representations of the world, necessarily empty of that which they represent. So Mouth is neither "I" nor some positive alternative to "I"; rather, she is "not."

This negative definition (*not I*) is crucial to Zen philosophy and practice, which are frequently at pains to remind practitioners that the

imagery used to describe or even see that which is beyond images does not touch that “beyond” it refers to. Zen masters consequently depend a great deal on the notion of “*mu*,” often translated as “no” or “not” in English, though both of these translations are a bit misleading. A more complete sense of *mu* depends on understanding the negative not as a question’s potential answer but as a negation of the question’s underlying assumptions.³⁸ In some ways *Mu I* might be a more apt title than *Not I*, because to the degree that Beckett’s play negates the logically constructed “I” in a Zen fashion it must also negate the I’s opposite, the other, the object, the “not-I.” This negation presents itself with a blunt concreteness based both on simplicity and inscrutability: a stage that negates visual richness; a mouth that negates the wholeness of a body; a monologue that negates a comfortable subject-object relationship.

Philip Kapleau notes that “[b]ecause *Mu* is utterly impervious to logic and reason, and in addition is easy to voice, it has proven itself an exceptionally wieldy scalpel for extirpating from the deepest unconscious the malignant growth of ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ which poisons the Mind’s inherent purity and impairs its fundamental wholeness.”³⁹ The imagery here of “I” and “not-I” as a sort of brain tumor that bifurcates reality has an appropriately medical feel. There is something fundamentally pragmatic about *mu* and its ability to “extirpate” the disease of dualistic subject/object and self/other binaries. The idea is not mystical but simple, direct, concrete, and real. Thus the Chinese founder of the Rinzai school extended *mu* to Buddhism itself, famously suggesting that if a practitioner were to meet the Buddha on the road, he or she should kill him. The Zen student must not hold any image of a holy enlightened one sacred as if outside herself; to worship the Buddha or to imagine enlightenment itself as an exalted state is to reduce it to a concept or an image that breeds attachment, thus undermining its essential ontology as being beyond all attachments. The Heart Sutra emphasizes emptiness and its fundamental negation:

in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no memory and no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind; no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, no feeling, and no thought; no element of perception, from eye to conceptual consciousness; no causal link, from ignorance to old age and death, and no end of causal link, from ignorance to old age and death; no suffering, no source, no relief, no path; no knowledge, no attainment and no non-attainment.⁴⁰

The Heart Sutra negates all cognitive and sensory phenomena, and even the basic tenets of Buddhist teaching (the extinguishing of suffering,

the Eightfold Path, and so forth). Knowledge, even the knowledge of enlightenment, must be let go just as much as perceptions and formations because all are transient and constructed.

Not I, like so much in late Beckett, shares a fundamental negation with Zen in that it rejects even itself. No explanation goes out to the audience to do the work of meaning for them. Each spectator is left to her own devices. Like the Heart Sutra, what Mouth's monologue offers depends heavily on the negative: "no matter" (216); "no love of any kind" (216); "not the slightest" (217); "not in the ears at all" (218); "probably not" (218); "no sound of any kind" (218); "never got the message" (218); "not catching the half of it" (219); "no stopping it" (220); "nothing she could think" (222), and so on.

Even more forcefully, the physical figure of Mouth visually offers a form of *mu*: neither a whole person nor something other than human, neither bodied nor disembodied, neither a subject nor an object, neither stuck in a dualistic "I" nor free from suffering. Instead, the singularity of the human body and subjectivity as categories are negated. Both suffering and freedom from suffering are negated. The black void that surrounds Mouth negates the visual potential of theatrical space. The repetitive quality of her monologue, emerging from and returning to the void without an inciting beginning or concluding end, negates the teleology of narrative accumulation and the play's own temporal unfolding. Auditor's "gesture of helpless compassion" negates both dialectical interaction and dualistic separateness.

With this visual, aural, verbal, and performative negation of self, Beckett puts the spectator in the position of a witness to a subject that invalidates its own presence. While neither Mouth nor Auditor suggests an enlightened figure, the piece itself performs absence, questioning and undermining the conceptual frameworks wherein dualistic thinking arises. The "I" that is "Not" belongs simultaneously to Mouth, Beckett, the actress, and the audience; at the same time, it slips away from all of them. With no positive formation of an essential self, we are left only with the "Not." Through presence and negation of presence, and through the negation of a split between the two, Beckett promises nothing, and delivers. From a Zen perspective, this nothing points up the emptiness of forms, sensations, perceptions, formations, and consciousness, and thereby suggests the possibility of liberation from the suffering of attachment.

NOTES

¹ Donald Davis, quoted in Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 36.

² For a survey of scholarship about Dante's influence, see Michael Robinson, "From Purgatory to Inferno: Beckett and Dante Reconsidered," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 5 (1979): 69–82. Critics have also framed these pieces within the artistic legacies of dada and surrealism (Brater's *Beyond Minimalism*, for example, compares Mouth of *Not I* to the personified facial features of Tristan Tzara's *The Gas Heart*). Philosophically, a whole genre of criticism has situated Beckett within the ontological assertions of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism, psychoanalytic models formulated by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalytically inflected French feminism of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida's linguistic deconstructions of subjectivity, Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "exhausted" in language and image, and the ethical philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Alain Badiou, to name just a few.

³ That is not to say Zen directly informed Beckett's plays in the way that Dante, Jung, and Joyce did. Quite the contrary, according to Lawrence Shainberg, who relates Beckett's response to a woman who inquired if Buddhism influenced *Act Without Words*. After Beckett claimed no familiarity, the woman pressed him to consider "the possibility of unconscious predilection," suggesting that the character who is left at the end without hope is "finally liberated." Beckett's response was both polite and final: "Oh, no," he said quietly. "He's finished." Lawrence Shainberg, "Exorcising Beckett," *The Paris Review* 104 (Fall 1987): 100–36.

⁴ In Richard Coe's early survey—*Beckett* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964)—Coe notes several Buddhist elements in Beckett's work. Many critics, particularly Steven Rosen, have analyzed Beckett's debt to the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism, which Schopenhauer at least nominally took from his readings of Buddhist thought. See Steven Rosen, *Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976). (However, as the Japanese Zen philosopher Nishitani Keiji has noted, much of what passes for Buddhism in Schopenhauer is based on misreading and may have been drawn from Hindu ideas that preceded and informed Buddhist thought.) Yasunari Takahashi has compared what he calls Beckett's "Theatre of Mind" to Japanese Noh plays, which have deep ties to Zen. See Takahashi, "The Theatre of Mind: Samuel Beckett and the Noh," *Encounter* 58 (1982): 66–73. Most prominently, two books—Paul Foster, *Beckett and Zen: A Study of Dilemma in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Wisdom, 1989) and John Kundert-Gibbs, *No-Thing is Left to Tell: Zen/Chaos Theory in the Dramatic Art of Samuel Beckett* (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Presses, 1999)—offer serious in-depth Zen readings of Beckett's work. Foster focuses primarily on the novels while Kundert-Gibbs focuses on the plays. Mario Faraone picks up on Kundert-Gibbs' paradigm, analyzing *Waiting for Godot's* Didi and Gogo in Zen terms. See Faraone, "'Pity we haven't a piece of rope': Beckett, Zen and the Lack of a Piece of Rope," in *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett: Beckett in Rome, 17-19 April 2008*, ed. Daniela Guardamagna and Rossana M. Sebellin (Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma, 2009): 156–76. None of these critics offers a prolonged examination of *Not I*, a play that perhaps more than any other performs a negation of self that resonates with Zen practice.

⁵ Paul Foster: "The dilemma that we speak of is made up of, first, the desire to be free from the limiting ego . . . and, second, the sense of failure that this futile desire evokes, the frustration that failure, in turn, instigates, and a longing for death. The net result of these interacting forces is impotence" (192). While I will not argue that Beckett "succeeds"—a term at which Beckett would no doubt balk—his "failure" and impotence may be the feature that most directly aligns him with a fundamental tenet of Zen practice. Rather than striving for enlightenment, Dogen (the Japanese founder of the Soto lineage of Zen Buddhism) insisted that there is "nothing to attain," and in that lack of trying to attain comes the possibility for enlightenment. Dogen also famously referred to the Zen master's life as "one continuous mistake."

⁶ Both Kundert-Gibbs and Faraone depend largely on the Rinzai school of Zen that preceded Dogen and emphasized the power of koans and enigmatic illogic to defeat the discursive mind. I will for the most part (though not exclusively) look here through a more Soto lens. Making a distinction is ironic, considering that Dogen himself first approached Zen through a Rinzai teacher and that he later admonished his students not even to identify themselves as particularly Zen, to say nothing of Soto. Still, the distinction is temporarily useful to emphasize the embodied, perceptual, and performative nature of what *Not I* touches.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (1973), in *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), 213–24.

⁸ Brater, 37–38.

⁹ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre and Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1991). See also Blau's chapter "The Bloody Show and the Eye of Prey" in his book of essays on Beckett's work, *Sails of the Herring Fleet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 77–93.

¹⁰ Brater, 38.

¹¹ Stanton Garner, "'Still Living Flesh': Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body," *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 443–60 (451).

¹² James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹³ For a thorough exploration of Dogen's writings on Bodhisattva vows and the precepts, see Reb Anderson, *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts* (Berkeley: Rodmell, 2001).

¹⁴ A few centuries after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Mahayana reformation (out of which Zen emerged) shifted Buddhism's focus from becoming an Arhat (a being who has realized her own enlightenment beyond all suffering) to becoming a Bodhisattva, one who has decided to return to the realm of *samsara* (delusion) to help others become liberated.

¹⁵ See C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, "Not I," in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove, 2004), 410–12 (411).

¹⁶ The fourteenth-century Rinzai Zen master Bassui Tokusho wrote this in a letter to the Abbess of Shinryu-Ji, translated and reproduced in *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, ed. Philip Kapleau (New York: Anchor, 1989), 189.

¹⁷ See Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Boston: Shambala, 2006).

¹⁸ John Lutterbie, "'Tender Mercies': Subjectivity and Subjection in *Not I*," in *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph Smith (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991), 86–106 (95).

¹⁹ Eihei Dogen, "The Moon," trans. Mel Weitsman and Kazuaki Tanahashi, in *Moon in a Dewdrop* (New York: North Point, 1985), 132.

²⁰ Eihei Dogen, "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 71.

²¹ Knowlson, 528.

²² Billie Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw ... Who He?* (London: St. Martin's, 1996), 118.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Dogen, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 30.

²⁵ Billie Whitelaw, quoted in Ackerley and Gontarski, 411.

²⁶ Dan Leighton, "Zazen as Enactment Ritual," in *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167–84 (169).

²⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

²⁸ See Dogen, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 30.

²⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

³⁰ Brater, 23.

³¹ Kundert-Gibbs, *No-Thing is Left to Tell*, 30.

³² For commentary on the *Sandokai*, see Shunryu Suzuki's dharma talks collected in *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³³ Reb Anderson, *Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains: Dharma Talks on Zen Meditation* (Berkeley: Rodmell, 2005), 50.

³⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove, 1954).

³⁵ John Kundert-Gibbs, "What is a birth astride a grave?: 'Ohio Impromptu' as Zen Koan," *Modern Drama* 40 (1997): 38–56.

³⁶ See Anderson, *Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains*, 50.

³⁷ Elin Diamond, "Speaking Parisian: Beckett and French Feminism," in *Women in Beckett: Performance in Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 208–16 (210).

³⁸ A popular Zen koan tells of the Chinese Ch'an master (Chao-Chu, or Joshu in Japanese) answering a student who asks, "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" with "Mu!" Joshu does not suggest that the dog does not have Buddha nature but instead rejects the question itself. Buddha himself notes that all is Buddha nature. To say anyone or anything "has" it is to define it as an object that can be had. See the Zen master Yasutani's commentary on the koan in Kapleau, 75–94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, translated from the Sanskrit and with commentary by Red Pine, *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 2–3.

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