The World of Samuel Beckett

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Fixed in representation, I seek myself in Beckett's play. In Not I, at his invitation, I seek the outlines of my subjectivity, knowing that my "self" is always beyond my grasp, revealing itself only in the gaps of thought, in the intuition of presence. But the dream, the dream of Artaud, is always to mitigate this distance, to reforge "the chain" between "what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature" (Artaud 1958, 27). It is a wish to transgress the limits of representation, to make manifest what is beyond consciousness, to know the unknowable. But in this enunciation I confront another discourse, one that eschews the metaphysics of the immaterial and unveils the imprint of oppression on "materialized nature." It is the discourse of the "other," the discourse of the unconscious, that forces me to recognize the subtle slip between "my self" and "itself"—to understand that the desire to know the other is political. Within the distance that defines the differences between these two theories of the subject, the conscious subject and the subject of the unconscious, there is no center in which I can locate myself. Instead, there is the recognition that even if I were to circumscribe the infinite boundaries of these disparate discourses, I would not know myself.

I shall, nevertheless, attempt to define a strategy for talking about subjectivity, and in the process read Beckett's play. Onstage appears, in Beckett's writing, a disembodied mouth and a shrouded listener. The Mouth relates to me, and to the Auditor, a tale about a woman, "she," who has a catastrophic illness and attempts to recognize what she knows to be life. In the telling I hear a discourse of the subject
that resonates with certain Freudian concepts of psychic organization, that carries with it a certain existential angst. However, I hear another story as well. It is spoken more quietly, creating a context for the unfolding soñorities of being, providing the landmarks for navigating a world foreign to my perceptual experience. The problem is that those signposts are not innocent. They tell tales of difference, of margins and peripheries, of oppressions that define the "other." My wish is to amplify their voices by turning the play against itself, by using the theory of subjectivity defined in the play to explore the subjective values of the Mouth, the ideology of the speaking subject. The intent is not simply to critique Beckett but to raise questions about strategies used in theories of the subject, and to examine the costs exacted when, inadvertently, ideologies of repression are reenacted.

The surreal staging described by Beckett—the elevated and faintly lit mouth and the lower, shrouded Auditor—is sufficient to support the claim that *Not I* is located in an interior, a psychic landscape. Even if I were to read the speaker and the listener as discrete individuals, any interpretation based in perceptual verisimilitude or describing a system of external relationships would almost immediately be confronted with a host of insurmountable contradictions. The fragmentary, disembodied mouth and the occluded, desexualized body resist reference to a materiality, virtually proclaiming, instead, a metaphysics of alienation. A seemingly untransgressable distance separates the two beings, who attempt communication through gesture and the pause, but who are unable to make contact. They cannot span the gap that marks their existential isolation. A sufficiently desolate picture when conceptualized as pertaining to individuals, it gains in force when conceived of as a metaphor for an intrapersonal dynamic.

Beckett's vision of the subject, within this static staging, is an image of despair. The hopelessness implicit in this construction of the "I" is the effect of an ordering that creates in spatial terms a hierarchy of privilege. Dominant is the mouth, the speaking subject that, in its faltering, streaming insistence, tells of the woman and her catastrophic situation. The Auditor, the obscured hearing subject, can only receive the verbal onslaught and respond weakly with "a gesture of helpless compassion" (Beckett 1984, 215). This vertical relationship within a basically horizontal composition defines a simple modernist model of decentered subjectivity—that is, I seek myself in the imaginary distance between what I say and what I hear myself say.

It is not, however, a matter of splitting that distance, of geometrically bisecting a line constructed between two points. For the question of subjectivity, even within the modernist framework, is not one
of symmetry, but of asymmetries. Imbalances continually subvert the reassuring formulation of subjectivity as a cyclical, dialectical unity of mouth and ear. The ear is not simply a conduit for the passive transmission of vibrations but a chamber that can resonate sympathetically. And the authority of the mouth is continually betrayed by the intrusions of its antecedents and the projection of its eloquent self-conceptions. Who is it who interrupts the ellipsis-ridden flow of words? Who challenges the integrity of the voice, repeatedly forcing a denial of subjective complicity: "what?...who?...no!...she!" (217)? Is it the same "I" that demands consideration of all the possibilities? "she did not know...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?" (217). And are those the same "I's" that laugh at the thought of a merciful God, or scream in the dreaded hope of help? And at the other end of the temporal sequence, who is "she"? Is she, as seems likely, the objectified self? The "I"/"not I"? the self conceptualized as other? The interruptions, on the one hand, and the description of "she," on the other, make a simple conception of the subject untenable. Beckett has effectively undermined the apparent significance of his own powerful stage image—as if in calling into question the "I," he is also challenging the authority and privilege granted to the eye.

Disrupting the dualist concept of subjectivity does not eliminate the question of the subject, however. In naming the play Not I, Beckett does not negate the existence of the "I"; he reasserts it. The subjective pronoun functions in the linguistic semiotic as a shifter: a signifier that can be appropriated by any number of signifieds. It can be used by all conscious subjects with equal authority. But every assertion of the shifter has the simultaneous effect of litigating all previous claims, authorizing the "not I." This does not mean that every claim to subjectivity is meaningless. Each articulation of the self constellates particular contents that bear a specific relation to the "I," defining the limits of an affirmation of the self.

In fact, the indeterminacy of the pronoun does not lessen its signifying force; rather it enhances its power. Each content brought into relation with the dominant signifier becomes a sign in its own right, even if it only signifies "not I." The effect is an interrelated field of signs arranged around the "I" or, in the formulations of Deleuze and Guattari, a spiraling chain moving away from the signifier (1987, 113). Although the potential for leaping to any point on the chain exists, the potential for infinite extension is not paralleled by a similar drift toward the center. "The jumps are not made at random, they are not
without rules. Not only are they regulated, but some are prohibited: Do not overstep the outermost circle, do not approach the innermost circle" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 113). The prohibition does not indicate a void separating the central signifier from subsidiary signs, but the authority of the dominant to determine their position within the chain. A system is established that is determined not by identities or difference, but by similarities, by affinities of *significance*.

Therefore, although I cannot know myself, I can gather indications of subjectivity under the auspices of the "I." This sleight of hand does not limit my self-understanding; instead it provides an environment for the infinite proliferation of self-knowledge, further enhancing the force of the dominant signifier.

The signifying regime is not simply faced with the task of organizing into circles signs emitted from every direction; it must constantly assure the expansion of the circles of spiral, it must provide the center with more signifiers to overcome the entropy inherent in the system and to make new circles blossom or replenish the old. [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 114]

Therefore, the "I" with which I nominate myself is a symbol not for the network of signs implicated in my experience—which are always insufficient to the task—but for the aggregate of *significance* that links the sign to the dominant signifier. This excess that proclaims similarity nevertheless resists objectification, providing me only with the intuition of a presence beyond knowledge. Ironically, the ever-increasing number of signs I used to define myself fragments myself, indicating the distance I have moved from myself. Far from a stable term through which I can claim identity, this "I" is nothing but an illusory anchor to which I cling while I "sense" my disappearance in the interstices of an ever-fragmenting, ever-disseminating articulation of subjectivity.

As I resist this slippage, I imagine a shrouded Beckett raising his arms "in a gesture of helpless compassion," or perhaps grimly shaking his head and pointing to the Mouth. After all, I am only disappearing in words, in a semiotic of subjectivity. There is still my body, which is here, now, and which I recognize is moving inexorably into a silence greater than that separating the dissipating intonations of thought.

Yet, the semiotic model has helped to define the ground of an argument. The initial concept of a referent, decentered subjectivity is effectively discredited through the absorption of the speaking and hearing subjects into the plane of signification. The Mouth and the Auditor become two signs among many and, within this context, deserve no special privilege. Temporality is introduced as a factor in an
otherwise synchronic configuration. The plane of signification, at first glance, appears to describe a spatial relationship in which signs of the greatest intensity occupy positions in the spiral nearest to the dominant sign. But fluctuations within the relationships between associated signs and the dominant adds a diachronic factor that accounts for jumps between signs, the creation of new signs, and the entropy of others. Implicit in this semiotic model is the existence of a force prior to the representation of “being” in language, indicating the need to conceptualize the dynamics of an energetics of presence. However, in seeming contradiction, the emphasis on signification renders considerations of ontology and teleology unimportant to the conceptualization of the subject. Ontological concerns lose relevance because it is not necessary to know the origins of the energetics required to fuel the signifying process—it is sufficient that the force is there. Similarly, subjectivity is defined by the dynamics of the signification process without recourse to an ultimate purpose. It is on this basis that the dynamics of an energetics of presence in the formulation of representations can be investigated.

**Embodied Intensities**

Presence describes, in the last analysis, not a metaphysics but a materiality: it is only as long as the body is. So when the Auditor raises its arms, I am not seeing an empty signifier, but the evocation of a sonority that resonates beyond the veil of signification. The material mouth of the actor dimly lit upon the stage acknowledges a deeper, unrepresented corporeality: the reality of the body expunged of metaphysics, defining the vehicle that exists prior to, and that makes possible, thought.

Identifying the body in Beckett’s work is made difficult by the seemingly conscious effort to erase it from consideration at every conceivable opportunity. The fragmentary mouth and the shrouded figure are the obvious examples, but more significant is “she,” the other described in the Mouth’s narrative. Walking through a field in April, picking cowslips, she has a catastrophic experience. Her return to consciousness is partial; she is effectively paralyzed, unable to sense her physicality. “she did not know...what position she was in...imagine...what position she was in!...whether standing...or sitting...but the brain” (216). The continually functioning brain and the absence of physical sensation appear to place limits on the field of investigation, but the body refuses exclusion. Its negation becomes the source of its affirmation. Ironically, the mind must affirm the existence of the body—
consider all the possible positions, standing, sitting, kneeling, lying—in order to reaffirm the dominance of thought. The insistence of the physical, its precedence over consciousness, its necessity as the vehicle of thought, make it central to defining the material reality of Beckett's vision. The corporeal debased, reduced to its most fundamental contradictions, allows Beckett to conceive of the body as the indeterminant center of two bipolar oppositions: one temporal, one spatial.

The onset of the catastrophe that leaves the “she” of Not I in a state of paralysis is preceded by a description of her movements, which seem, initially to be an ominous forewarning of what is about to occur. “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” (216). These phrases evoke the signals sent by the body to announce the onset of disruption, the footfalls of her impending death. But this reading is disputed when her life is described in exactly the same terms. “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” (220). Life becomes a metaphor for death, and death for life. They are commensurate, and Bob Dylan's lyric, “Those not busy being born are busy dying,” must be rewritten: “Those busy being born are busy dying.”

Nor can solace be found in the cyclical vacillations between the inhalation and exhalation of Breath, with its mythical moment of transfer from one action to another. The optimism of life and the pessimism of death create a false dichotomy. Life and death have no turning points; the life of the body is the death of the body. It is a continuum, an unvarying, uninterruptable movement that appears segmentable only in the stolen breath of thought.

If difference, within its phenomenon, is the sign of theft or of the purloined breath [souffle], it is primarily, if not in itself, the total dispossession which constitutes me as the deprivation of myself, the elusion of my existence; and this makes difference the simultaneous theft of both my body and my mind: my flesh. If my speech is not my breath [souffle], if my letter is not my speech, this is so because my spirit was already no longer my body, my body no longer my gestures, my gestures no longer my life. [Derrida 1978, 179]

Nor is it any longer my death, but my death stolen from me at the same moment my life is spirited away. It is the integrity of my body that is subsumed in the optimism of being.

Her state of paralysis not only denies her awareness of physical
posture but also negates emotional states. "as she suddenly realized... gradually realized...she was not suffering...imagine!...no suffering!...indeed could not remember...off-hand...when she had suffered less" (217). The fact that I am asked to imagine the absence of suffering indicates, for Beckett, that it is a generalized state of being. Or it at least predominates over the alternative: "just as the odd time...in her life...when clearly intended to be having pleasure...she was in fact... having none...not the slightest" (217). The concepts of pleasure and suffering are used to describe two distinctly opposite physical sensations. They do not describe a continuum, however, in which the absence of pleasure indicates a plenitude of suffering, or vice versa. Rather they are different responses to particular excitations that play across the body, which are not necessary to life but inevitable consequences of it.

My body is, in the last instance, corporeality without differentiated intensities. But it is subject to excitations that result in sensations that I interpret as pleasure or suffering.

We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension—that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. [Freud, S.E 18:7]

As Freud implies, not all tensions are necessarily unpleasurable. That the release of certain tensions may cause suffering and that certain tensions may be pleasurable are claims that can be made without assumptions of masochism. Rather, it is the interpretations of the increases and decreases of excitation that define pleasure and suffering: "but the brain still...still sufficiently...oh very much so!...at this stage... in control...under control" (218). This is not to deny the function of the body in conveying shifting intensities or in influencing interpretation, since the sensitivity of the perceptual system to excitations plays an informational role in the interpretative process. Instead, it is to claim that the body relays information in terms of magnitudes, and that the processes of the mind translate them into qualities.

This contextualization of physicality deromanticizes the body as a miracle of nature, an object of divine creation, and refigures it as an imperfect, material object for the conveyance of sensory impulses, reproduction, and life-sustaining functions. Nevertheless, it is the vehicle, the vessel of subjectivity; indeed, it is a necessary condition of consciousness, of the mind's control. The image of a (dys)functional corporeality is a palliative that authorizes metaphysical speculations
on the operations of conscious thought. But the body is, to borrow a metaphor from another material discourse, the base on which is built the superstructure of subjectivity. It is the fragile and unstable foundation that makes possible an ideology of the self. I am always and only the body, and in the final analysis, there is nothing else. And yet, the play continues to insist, it is "not I."

Then where am I to find myself? How am I to understand my ability to act upon the world in what is arguably a consistent manner? There must be another movement, process, procedure within the sensate body that makes it possible for me, however feebly and inaccurately, to codify these thoughts—that made it possible for someone named Beckett to write "this" play. "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 not...spared that...the mouth alone" (219–20). But if I must imagine the return of feeling, if I have forgotten how my body feels and yet I am, then subjectivity must be found in what need not be imagined, the machinations of the mouth; and in what is felt, the sense of the voice. I am not conceiving of a cyclical paradox that, ironically, locates subjectivity in the active articulations of the alienated Mouth. Therefore I must shift my focus from the speaking Mouth to the spoken of "she," the voice of the other, to her voices—or more accurately, her sonorities.

Three distinct sonorities are acknowledged in the Mouth's description of her catastrophic experience: the speaking voice, the streaming, and the buzzing. It is in the irreversible movement between them that I can glimpse the outlines of a pragmatic theory of the subject.

She knows she is alive when she regains consciousness because of the buzzing. "found herself in the dark...and if not exactly...insentient...insentient...for she could still hear the buzzing...so-called...in the ears" (217). The continuation of life is signaled; and the vibrations, Beckett's mental sentience, may affect the ears, but its undefined, uncertain, unimportant origins are within the mind. "in the ears...though of course actually...not in the ears at all...in the skull...dull roar in the skull" (218). The paradoxical description—it is a buzzing, a dull roar—underlines its indefinability and insists upon its metaphorical status. Neither she nor the Mouth know what it is, but they recognize its insistence. "what?...the buzzing?...yes...all silent but for the buzzing...so called" (218). The relentless buzzing represents the boundary beyond which lies absolute silence, the limit that begins from before birth and finds closure only in death. It connotes the energetics of the body, the determining factor of presence, what Freud identifies as the
instinct. "An instinct ... never operates as a force giving a momentary impact but always as a constant one. Moreover, since it impinges not from without but from within the organism, no flight can avail against it. A better term for an instinctual stimulus is a 'need'" (S.E. 14: 118–19).

The persistence of the demand, in Freud's definition of the instincts, and the inability to construct a line of flight that can escape its continuity establish a sympathetic resonance with the seeming hopelessness of Beckett's work: "in every instance satisfaction, which can only be obtained by removing the state of stimulation at the source of the instinct. But although the ultimate aim of each instinct remains unchangeable, there may yet be different paths leading to the same ultimate aim" (S.E. 14:122). The only means of defining an instinct, therefore, is through identifying the object chosen for the release of energy. But the creation of a cathexis is also subject to variations, since "the object ... is what is most variable about an instinct and is not originally connected with it, but becomes assigned to it only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible" (S.E. 14:122). The naming of an instinct, therefore, including Freud's cautious demarcation of the ego and sexual drives (S.E. 14:124), is a posteriori and subject to extrinsic systems of valuation. Therefore, the instincts in Freud have, perhaps, more in common with the buzzing, so-called, of Beckett than the teleological image of discrete functions.

Freud's conceptualization of the instinct and its movement within the psyche is of value, in addition to its usefulness in psychoanalytic discourses, to understanding the ordering process that results in consciousness. "Instinct," "need" and "demand" as concepts mark the culmination of a movement of energy from the undifferentiated field of force to the surface of language, which for Beckett's "she" is the articulation "God is love... tender mercies... new every morning" (221–22).

My knowledge of an instinct is possible only when the object cathexed is identified and, through an act of deconstruction, the need hypothesized. The ordering process, therefore, involves the translation of an unknowable quantity (force) into a differentiated quality (the instinct). In Not I, the differentiating activity occurs within the remaining two sonorizations.

The smooth surface of the buzzing, disrupted only by the cyclical movements of the sound waves, is distinctly differentiated from the sonority of streaming. The plane of streaming has limits, banks and a bed, and lacks the multidimensional timelessness of presence. It is inflected and bears the traces of language. "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” (219). Her voice, but not a language she understands, “mouth on fire...stream of words...in 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” (220). She has become possessed by these unfamiliar sounds, the biblical tongues of fire, the syntax of spirit. She hears only vowels, sounds created by the vibrated and distorted but otherwise unrestricted column of air that is her breath. But it lacks the rhythmic pattern of inhalation and exhalation; it is the aspiration of a voice that is unceasing and uncontrollable. “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” (220). 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.

Freud, as I read him through Derrida, uses the metaphor of breaching to describe the translation of the energy of presence into desire. “Breaching, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to effraction” (Derrida 1978, 200). The inhibition, resulting in an incomplete release, will leave an excess that ensures the persistence of the instinct and creates a difference between breaches.

It is the difference between breaches which is the true origin of memory, and thus of the psyche.... We then must not say that breaching without difference is insufficient for memory; it must be stipulated that there is no pure breaching without difference. Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be reappropriated at any time as simple presence; it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between breaches. We thus already know that psychic life is neither the transparency of meaning nor the opacity of force but the difference within the exertion of forces. [Derrida 1978, 201]

Resistances transgressed by the instincts define a motivation determined by the pathway effracted and, implicitly, offer the promise of an object that can be cathected. The teleological aspect projects neither a privileged object nor even the vaguest outlines of what the "other" may be, and it does not guarantee that a suitable object will be found. Rather, the pathway that has been facilitated will admit, by exclusion, a range of potential modes of expression. An instinct will also be codified as an intensity, the magnitude of which will depend on the degree of facilitation and, coextensively, by the spacing be-
tween repetitions of the effraction. That repetitions will occur is ensured by the inability of the breach to accommodate the full force of the instinct and the demand of the deferred energy for release. What was an undifferentiated pressure is thus canalized and spaced—giving it, metaphorically, a linear trajectory.

This re-presentation of the originary energetics, in “edited” form, defines for Derrida a “primary” writing that

cannot be read in terms of any code. It works, no doubt, with a mass of elements which have been codified in the course of an individual or collective history. But in its operations, lexicon, and syntax a purely idiomatic residue is irreducible and is made to bear the burden of interpretation in the communication between unconsciousnesses. [Derrida 1978, 209]

The idiomatic codification is likened by Derrida, through Warburton and Freud, to hieroglyphs, “pictographic, ideogrammatic, and phonetic elements” (Derrida 1978, 209). This image is principally spatial, however, and in being static loses the fluid dynamic of shifting forces; therefore, it does not acknowledge the complex system of relationships established “in the communication between unconsciousnesses.”

Instincts are not univocal. Numerous transgressions, of unequal force but related to the same need, occur simultaneously along a finite number of pathways; and the conduits exploited may motivate contradictory responses within the organism. Moreover, effractions of more than one instinct will occur at the same time, similarly utilizing a variety of openings, at differing magnitudes, and with the same potential for self-contradiction. These streamings are not autonomous but flow together, creating dynamic networks based on affinities and resistances that may result in the linking of contradictory impulses.

The force of the instinct is no longer an amorphous energetics but an element in the stream of fluctuating intensities that define desire. It is the unrelenting pressure, of unknowable origin, that refuses to be silenced and yet is so frustratingly incomprehensible:

no idea what she's saying...imagine!...no idea what she's saying!...and can't stop...no stopping it [...] can't stop the stream...and the whole brain begging...something 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. [Beckett 1984, 220]

The mouth of desire cannot be responsive to the demands of the brain—the whole brain or something in it—because the mouth is not an ear.
There are, nevertheless, moments when it seems possible, if not to know the I, at least to know the desire to know. "straining to hear...the odd word...make some sense of it" (221). She believes that in that word lies the meaning of her struggle. "something that would tell...how it was...how she...what?...had been?...yes...something that would tell how it had been...how she has lived...lived on and on" (221). But to achieve that end she must hear the stream, and glean from it its signification. "so intent one is...on what one is saying...the whole being...hanging on its words" (219). But she cannot know "something she didn't know herself...wouldn't know if she heard" (221). She cannot know because it is in the wrong language—the glyphics of intensities rather than the syntax of words.

What she can understand, her speaking voice, the third sonority, is heard only three times. When she speaks it is the result of a struggle to organize a coherent statement that will express the turmoil and uncertainty she is experiencing. "or grabbing at straw...the brain...there...on to the next...bad as the voice...worse...as little sense...all that together...can't [...] can't go on...God is love" (221). The three-word phrase, "God is love," is insufficient to the task; it lacks adequate correspondence to the internal movement she is experiencing. "what she was trying...what to try...no matter...keep on [...]hit on it in the end...then back...God is love...tender mercies...new every morning" (223). Three words are expanded to three phrases, which in some labyrinthine way summarize for her the force of her existence—at least insofar as language is able to articulate that force in speech.

A further process of differentiation is required in the movement into speech: an already displaced energetics must seek in language what has been denied it externally, the promised object. The project remains utopian because complete satisfaction lies only in those words that provide absolute proximity between the pure language of desire and the structures of verbal syntax. Desire undergoes another process of translation from the dynamic of hieroglyph, as a fluid totality, into the spaced linearity of language. Implicit in the process are systems of deferral and resistance that impede and frustrate the movement of expression. The inability of language to accommodate the plenitude of desire and its continually shifting intensities disrupts the flow of language—signalings, through the ellipses, the difference between force and release, indicating not a reduction in pressure but a surplus that admits to failure.

In addition to effractions that result in language, there are accompanying breaches that lack the authority of the word but which find expression through pathways incompatible with the privileged sign.
They do not go unheeded, however; they are heard. They surround the word and encase its phonology; they flood the gaps with their complaints. Once in the ear, in the valuation of the word, they trace differences that challenge the integrity of the signifier and the signified appropriated by it. They call into question and critique the system of facilitations and resistances that finds inadequate resolution in a particular word, a particular syntax. And so the process continues.

Subjectivity, as imagined through the metaphor of sonorities, resists concretization because it is inscribed within the dynamic movement of fluctuating intensities. Nevertheless, the outlines of a subject position are engraved in the system of resisted and encouraged pathways that permit, for the moment, the use of specific modes of expression. Insofar as I can know myself, it is through the object, the words, used to express my self; but these representations of desire lack consistency and will be altered in response to fluctuating intensities, the availability of desired objects, and the interpretation of the response to my actions. Implicit in this formulation is the idea that permutations in external and internal circumstances can alter, if only to a degree, the practices in which I engage. But in order to understand my potential for change, I must explore how patterns of repression and facilitation are constituted.

**Material Conditions of Subjectivity**

Insofar as there are innate resistances to the expression of the energetics of desire, they must function by gross generalization. They can define neither a motive nor an object but exclude paths that are detrimental to the survival of the preconscious being. Learned inhibitions, and the consequent displacements and condensations, are specifically related to the determination of motives and objects, if only in terms of categories. The selection of the object is not made autonomously, however. Desire is polyvocal and the expenditure of energy occurs continuously through a multiplicity of cathexes. The dominant expenditure and return will be determined by the magnitude of the force required to effect the effraction. Simultaneous but subsidiary expressions (those necessitating lesser intensities) will interweave a context within which the primary return is valued. Moreover, the privileged discharge will not necessarily determine the outcome of the evaluation. Although secondary breaches require less energy to effect discharge, this does not mean that less energy is expressed. A facilitated path, with its virtual guarantee of release and promise of "easy" repetition, may provide greater, though less noticeable, releases of en-
ergy. Breaches, however pleasurable, that threaten such a habitual path with inhibition may be interpreted negatively—as painful—and repetitions of the effraction more forcibly resisted. Moreover, shifts in external circumstances can result in very different interpretations of an event, giving rise to inconsistent behavior or behavioral relativity.

At the core of this inconsistency, however, are habitual practices, defined both as strongly facilitated modes of expression that promise regular releases of excitation and as strongly held resistances to specific effractions. Consistent behavior evolves through patterns of return that define an action as, most simply, pleasure or pain. Knowledge of myself is founded on the resulting pattern—that is, the regular repetition of specific facilitations and resistances. Indeed, the ordering process that allows me to perceive this organization is the effect of such repetitions. Another determining factor in habitual practices is the evaluation of responses to the expression in a variety of contexts. Limits placed on my subjectivity result from successful and unsuccessful interactions with specific objects of desire. These interactions occur in circumstances organized according to reinforced patterns of expression; these facilitated avenues are established through the interpretation of responses received from external, material contexts.

It is the same for her. "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" (216). Repeated absence of an object of desire, and the attendant pleasurable return, creates a negative expectation—that is, the intensification of resistance, signaling a limit on consciousness. Acceptable modes of social behavior, for her and the society that repeatedly proffers a negative return, will be defined by these limits. Outcast at birth, she remains outcast and the conditions of her existential solitude are defined; but simultaneously boundaries are established that indicate the limits of the community.

Social systems require a periphery, margins of opposition that reinforce an ideological hegemony, that conserve structures of power within the community. She is, for the community, a passive reminder of the threat posed by antisocial elements—her humiliation becoming a reification of the limits on acceptable behavior. It falls to her (though it only seems to be her fate) to live on the margins, at the negative limits of society; and there she must try, and largely fails, to construct her subjectivity. However, it is a symbiotic rather than parasitic relationship. She is defined by her placement in circumstances that encourage negative behavior; but these imposed limits provide positive canalizations of desire as well. Unable to defend herself when accused
of committing a crime, she satisfies the social need to reinforce moral behavior, "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" (221), and her need for human contact, "glad of the hand on her arm" (221). Her inability to communicate in banal, everyday situations describes a negative image of social propriety, while freeing her from experiencing the rejection of interpersonal contact.

even shopping...out shopping...busy shopping centre...supermart...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...then pay and go...not as much as good-bye. [219]

Inscribed as society's "other," she embodies the inverse of the dominant ideology.

Margins are marked by patterns of inclusion as well as exclusion. Her complicity with the ideological system that marks her oppression is affirmed by the significant investment she makes in religion. "she fixing with her eye...a distant bell...as she hastened towards it...fixing it with her eye...lest it elude her" (218). Her fixation on the bell, her fear of losing it, acknowledges its status as an object of desire that implicitly promises expenditure. The connection between faith in God and the return of love was made at the same time, and in the same circumstances, that cathexes with other people as positive objects of desire were repressed. "brought up as she had been to believe ...with the other waifs...in a merciful [...] God" (217). The displacement, encouraged in childhood, offers up the promise of nothing less than salvation—not as a metaphysical potential but as a very real and physical liberation. "God is love...tender mercies...new every morning" (221–22). Implicit in the promise is renewal, a rebirth distanced from the frustration and suffering imposed on her by a callous and indifferent society.

But the "tender mercies," the privileged release, come at a cost. To be saved she must willingly embrace a further system of resistances that places strict limitations on her behavior. "The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that [she] shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e., in order that [she] shall (freely) accept [her] subjection... There are no subjects except by and for their subjection" (Althusser 1971, 182; emphasis in original). Explicit within the ideology of salvation is the codification of the law that makes the satisfactory release of desire contingent upon the valuation of certain modes of behavior. Acquired resistance to the selec-
tion of certain objects of desire is a condition that must be met if she can hope to find ultimate release. Failure to make the correct choices threatens the loss of the Subject, forcing her to interpret negatively otherwise positive effractions, causing an inversion of what may be pleasurable into what is painful. “that notion of punishment...for some sin or other...or for the lot...or no particular reasons...for its own sake...thing she understood perfectly...that notion of punishment” (217). Suffering as a way of life, as the appropriate definition of her “lot in life,” perpetually postpones the expenditure, or allows its release only through the anticipation of a future satisfaction. The pathways effracted that lead her to move toward the bell—the fetishized substitute for the promised-but-never-present object of desire—activate an expression of energy of such magnitude that it is equaled only by the dread that an inhibition will be imposed, that the metonymic symbol will be spirited away, that punishment for some sin—real or imaginary—will be exacted.

The resistances that constrict her social behavior also place limits on her ability to experience herself. She is able neither to experience pleasure nor to find release through tears.

one evening on the way home [...] 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. [220–21]

The uncertainty she experiences when confronted with tears—her insensate body and the detachment with which she observes the event—serves Beckett’s seeming desire to negate the body, but it also describes the effects on subjectivity of social patterns that define marginality. But the excess of frustration resulting from the extreme repression of desire eventually creates a force of such magnitude that normal patterns of resistance are disrupted. “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” (222). The intensity of her frustration forces a breach—a defecation of desire—in a language known only to herself but understood by no one. The experience becomes excruciatingly painful after the release of effraction, with the return of the prohibition. “till she saw the stare she was getting...then die of shame...crawl back in” (222). Violation of the resistance to interpersonal communication, expended on an unsympathetic object, strengthens the repression and reinforces the belief that life is suffering. The restoration of the inhibition produces a pain far more acute than the emotional discomfort
of embarrassment because it cannot be localized. It can only be con-
ceived of as an intensification of the buzzing, the streaming that can-
not be stopped.

Further articulations of desire are impossible, in part because of the
paucity of language, but also because forms of signification are always
secondary modes of release. That which makes known the objects of
desire and their opposites, that which allows us to speak of desire and
its repression, has already been denied more immediate and satisfac-
tory expression. Yet even this mode of displacement is denied her; but
it is not refused the Mouth, or me. It is through language that I con-
struct a narrative for her, that I understand the poignancy of her
situation, acknowledge her as an object of my desire. Through her
I recognize the manifestations of my subjectivity. But I am not
alone in constructing her. As you are creating her in terms of my dis-
course, so I create her through the discourse of the Mouth. Therefore,
to understand the Mouth as an ideological subject, I must return
to its language, its description of her, recognizing I cannot know
the intensities of desire but can only know contaminated representa-
tions.

**Subjection**

The Mouth does not name her but generalizes her identity through
the use of the pronomial shifter, "she." An ambiguous dichotomy is
established between the "I" of the Mouth and the third-person pro-
noun. On the one hand, the difference initiates a play of meaning be-
tween the two terms: "I" am not "she"; therefore, "she" is "not I." This
tautology is destabilized, ironically, by the insistence on separation:
"what?...who?...no!...she!" (220). The emphatic denial and its repeti-
tion can be read as a resistance to acknowledging identity, making the
inverse tautology equally possible: "I" am "she"; "she" is "I." The play
becomes more dangerous as a result of the denial because a new con-
figuration arises: I am not I. Metaphysically there is no problem be-
cause the configuration supports the analytic of the sonorities: I am
what I cannot know; therefore, what I know is not I. But that is only
part of the difficulty, because it does not confront the processes that
deny self-knowledge, that determine how the self is experienced. It is
the discourse of the body, scarred by the imprint of power, of force
and resistance, that disrupts the eloquent simplicity of the metaphys-
ical assertion. The shift in focus does not invalidate the metaphysical
model, but it dislodges from the background adjacent discourses that
frame the representation of the unknowable. It is through an exami-
nation of this context, of the "she," that the outlines of the Mouth as subject begin to appear.

She is someone who picks flowers and goes shopping, who follows the sound of a bell, who speaks uncontrollably, who is accused of committing crimes, who is unable to feel pleasure, and who finds it difficult to cry. She is a victim, deserted by her parents, unloved in the home, imprisoned for a crime she may not have committed. She is irrational, breaking into incomprehensible diatribes in front of strangers. She is frigid, unable to feel pleasure or pain. She is passive, needing to be aroused to experience pleasure, following the object of her desire rather than seeking it out. She is the "other" who is acted upon but is not an agent on her own behalf. She is what the Mouth needs her to be, an object on which it can release the intensities of its desire.

A satisfactory conclusion to the Mouth's cathexis can be guaranteed because the "other" is not an object but an object in language. The attributes selected, the signs activated to specify the "she," create a narrative that defines her. This context indicates patterns of facilitation within the speaking subject that ensure minimal resistance, habits of consciousness that privilege particular scenarios. In fact, the actual, material existence of the "she" is inconsequential because the image is sufficiently vivid to satisfy the requirements for effraction.

The privilege granted her is, however, a ruse, because the Mouth does not need her for herself: the dialectic, in the final analysis, is not between "I" and "she," but between "I" and "not I." The context she creates vouchsafes the solipsistic cathexis between the I and the not I. She is the landscape on which the analytic of sonorities is played out, in which the struggle for subjectivity takes place. Like the body and material reality in Not I, she is negated, relegated to the peripheries of the discourse, subjected but not subject.

She is the key to unraveling a mystery, to locating a missing person: the I. Or those aspects of the self that I cannot know. This reading echoes the tendency in postmodern thought from Nietzsche onward to feminize the unknowable in subjectivity.

Right across the spectrum of contemporary Continental and especially French philosophy the "feminine" functions as a powerful vehicle to convey the critical attempts to redefine human subjectivity. ... the feminization of thought seems to be prescribed as a fundamental step in the general programme of anti-humanism which marks our era. [Braidotti 1987, 236]

The appropriation of the female to represent the other-that-is-I parallels the use of "she" as a landscape against which the problem of the
subject is argued. She is an image that is defined only to be absorbed as the background. The face, critiqued by Deleuze and Guattari as the despotic construction of *signifiance* and subjectivity, is transcribed within all landscapes.

All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape; all landscapes are populated by a loved or dreamed-of face, develop a face to come or already past. What face has not called upon the landscapes it amalgamated, sea and hill; what landscape has not evoked the face that would have completed it, providing an unexpected complement for its lines and traits? [Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 172-73]

As the “other,” “she” does not define the limits of subjectivity but inscribes the parameters, the closure of representation within which the subject must be conceived. She is the mirror in which I seek my lost self.

My desire to return to undifferentiated being is, necessarily, enwrapped in representation, in images of differentiation. In defining the goal I become entrapped in a spatial topography of here and there, in the trope of the “other.” To describe myself I must create a mystery that embodies that which I have lost and wish to repossess. And I name it the “other.” In so nominating it, I invoke another chain of signifiers, and in *Not I* I name it “she.” I invest her with the mystery, and through her hope to possess myself. But in the feminization of the other, I engage another discourse, embrace another ideology. The virtue of the dream is compromised by an investment in sexual differentiation.

I am not the landscape “she” is; I do not lack a body. I can act through my agency, or the illusion of it, which mitigates the impact of the despair I encounter in Beckett, though it also defines it. This position is not available to her, nor to the female reader. In the definition of the subject, “she” is equated with both the “I” and the “not I,” without difference or distinction. She represents but is neither the mystery I cannot unravel nor the material body. There is no room for her within this configuration to define a subject position, since she is merely a figure in the discourse of the self. “The enigma that is woman will therefore constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which, ultimately, she is not supposed to know anything about” (Irigaray 1985, 13).

For me it is different because I constitute a fourth term in the process: “he.” Instead of being ensnared in the triadic equation I = she = not I, I can construct a line of flight through the masculine shifter
and, with the knowledge gained, assess my own subjectivity as a response to the existential dilemma posited by Beckett. I am the authorized reader, spectator, because, and only because, I am "he," "having vanished...thin air...no sooner buttoned up his breeches" (Beckett 1984, 216). She is not so fortunate; she is trapped within the text without the right of refusal. "A reserve supply of negativity sustaining the articulation of their moves, or refusals to move, in a partly fictional progress toward the mastery of power. Of knowledge. In which she will have no part. Off-stage, off-side, beyond selfhood" (Irigaray 1985, 22).

If the pain I feel in Not I is real, then so is the pleasure I receive, which arises, at least in part, from the images of an abused woman used to evoke my despair. But my pleasure lies not in her violation but in her marginalization. It is acceptable to me because it defines a community of subjects from which she is excluded, and I am not. It limits a discourse in which she appears but in which she cannot participate. It reinforces my belief that I can exercise the power of agency within a dominant, if not hegemonic, male structure.

Is there a way in which I can represent myself to myself, talk about my subjectivity without the objectification of the "other"? I see no easy answer. It is not simply a question of sensitizing Beckett to the problem, or rewriting or deconstructing Not I as a text, in performance—though it would be a step. Rather the tendency to oppress the other in the process of defining the self questions the systems of power and representation within a patriarchal society: calling into question practices, making manifest practices that reinforce limits on community, that guarantee limited distribution of power. It cannot be simply a negative project, however, but must be one that alters the construction of environments, that creates circumstances that facilitate, rather than resist, patterns of behavior conducive to the self-determination of identity. As a very first step, this project requires the initial recognition that "she" is not the other-that-I-speak, but that she is a subject to whom I must listen.

Note

1. The desire to transgress implies a boundary between the knowable self and the unknowable other, with the latter figured, from Nietzsche onward, as the mystery, the feminine. Luce Irigaray, among others, quite rightly asserts that these metaphors are not innocent but represent real practices, that they validate ideologies of rape and violation. This paper is, in part, an investigation
of the effects of feminized images on the subjective and material existence of those appropriated by the metaphor.

References


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