

# Narrative Voice as a Performance and the Visual Effect on Stage in Samuel Beckett's *Not I* and *A Piece of Monologue*

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## I. Introduction

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the works of an Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett (1906-89), increased the tendency of minimalist plays. These later short plays are collectively called 'dramaticules', and one of the features that characterize the 'dramaticules' includes Beckett's effective exploitation of a tape recorder as a technical device in theater.<sup>1</sup> Beckett exploited this device, playing the recorded voice in the theatrical space during the performance as a way to express a haunting memory of the past on stage. Beckett successfully exhibits the mind condition of characters as in such plays as *That Time* and *Footfalls*, letting the audience hear the recorded voice of characters separated from their physical images on stage.

However, among these 'dramaticules', *Not I* (written in English in 1972) and *A Piece of Monologue* (written in English in 1979) are not included in the group of works where the tape recorder is used, due to the narrative recited by only one speaker with his/her actual voice as a performance without using recorded voice.<sup>2</sup> Both plays, like other 'dramaticules', appear extremely brief, fragmentary, repetitive and incoherent in the narrative, but unlike other 'dramaticules', the two plays are of a style almost convertible into a soliloquy. In other words, Beckett sets aside any technical device for *Not I* and *A Piece of Monologue* and applies the real voice in its place. What this offers in effect to the audience is the undeniable fact that they

actually see the act of narrating as a performance and, at the same time, hear the story that the narrator tells on stage.

In addition, the narrator in each play has no action, instead standing without motion and staying in the same spot telling about a character in the narrative using the third person singular. However, the narrative that the narrator tells sounds quite self-referential and becomes exactly analogous to the condition of the narrator on stage. Accordingly, the narrator seems to be gradually identified with the character in the narrative in both plays, making it difficult for the audience to say whether the narrative they are listening to is about the character in the narrative or the narrator on stage. In other words, this analogy brings about the perceptual confusion of the audience.

Then it would be significant to explore what Beckett attempts to achieve in these peculiar monologues, and to what extent he exploits this perceptual confusion in each monologue. Thus I will discuss how Beckett develops this style of monologue in *Not I* and *A Piece of Monologue* respectively, focusing on the visual imagery that the text creates and also the stage images the audience actually sees. Then, I will examine the effect of using an actual voice as a performance on stage.

## II. *Not I*

*Not I* originally presents two strange figures on stage. One is a compulsively throbbing and hovering mouth of the character/narrator named Mouth, which is radically disembodied and faintly illuminated in darkness. The other is a tall, standing figure of Auditor, shrouded in a full-length black gown and faintly lit. The juxtaposition of these two figures onstage brings a striking contrast in size, action and mobility. Whereas the extremely small mouth of Mouth rapidly utters words with ceaseless movement, Auditor, standing on an invisible raised platform, remains silent without any movement except for four occasional movements of the raising and dropping back of arms after Mouth's fervent insistence on clinging on third person.

This enigmatic existence of Auditor has provoked great controversy among critics because of the character's ambiguous nature: its uncertain sex, its hooded

figure, the attitude of being earnest over the utterances of Mouth, and the gesture as if showing 'helpless compassion' (215). Keir Elam interestingly expands the argument on Auditor's role into a Dantean context, and Katharine Worth, paying special attention to the function of the listener, argues the significance of Auditor in Beckett's work.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, considering the fact that Beckett forwent this Auditor in the French première in Paris in 1975 and in the BBC production by reason of technical difficulties, S. E. Gontarski places little importance on Auditor's role.<sup>4</sup> However, this Auditor's existence cannot be easily ignored since it is also a fact that Beckett did not quite eliminate this figure from the text even after those occasions. According to James Knowlson, after the French première in 1975, the role of Auditor was given greater prominence in Paris, and directed by Beckett himself in April 1978.<sup>5</sup> Auditor was intended by the author to be present from the beginning as it interrupts Mouth's speech by its movements and its very existence.

Regarding the role of Auditor, most critics seem to be in general accord on the point that the figure is a metaphor for a listener and can be seen as a representative of the theatrical audience.<sup>6</sup> If we take it into consideration that Beckett, though temporarily, changed the third person pronouns into the first person pronouns in the speech of Mouth, the original intention of bringing Auditor into the text might be to establish the speaker/listener relationship between Mouth and Auditor, and in so doing, to produce a dynamic conflict or tension between the two.<sup>7</sup> The result of the total elimination of Auditor's utterances from the text is that Mouth's speech internalizes the conflict originally intended and effectively brings about dynamics showing the mental suffering from the schismatic self and its inability to identify as 'I' in narrating itself. On this point, however, we can only make conjectures about what Beckett left undone; everything is uncertain about Auditor's role.

Nevertheless, Auditor's presence is inevitably certain, enhanced by the exaggeration of its height and by the obvious contrast with the figure of Mouth. This unbalance of certainty and uncertainty throws temptation to the audience or reader in the search for connection or disconnection of Auditor's existence to Mouth. Given a hint from what is certain visually and literally, we are inclined to create something stable or coherent in order to supply what is uncertain and

absent, and accordingly become involved in the consciousness of the character/narrator of Mouth.

Most importantly, the text of *Not I* is theatrically self-referential and this becomes increasingly effective in confusing the audience when the play exploits Mouth's confessional tone. Most of the story that Mouth tells is of the speechless life of an old woman. However, the text continually hints that it could be synonymous with what the audience sees in the theatrical space, while it is not quite the same as what happens on stage.

First of all, the text occasionally offers to the audience the clues that Mouth depicts its own state and, in so doing, explains what the audience is currently seeing; Mouth is a visual presence, a 'tinny little thing', 'drifting around' in the black on stage, its 'whole body like gone ... just the mouth' (216). In this sense, Mouth is literally a never closed hole, existing as a pit, with the ceaseless movement of 'pouring it out' in a 'steady stream' (222) of words from the very beginning of rise of the curtain until the curtain falls fully down. Seen from the surrealistic aspect, this hovering mouth, apparently without ears, is not supposed to have the function of listening; even if 'something begging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop ... pause a moment ... if only for a moment', it has 'no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't' (220).

Even so, there are recurrent references to the other parts of the body such as eyes, ears and brain, and to their functions of staring and hearing. These inevitably require the audience to presume the whole body is concealed in the darkness onstage. Then Mouth actually gives voice to this insight of audience into the visual fact on stage; 'she didn't know ... what position she was in', 'whether standing ... or sitting ... or kneeling ... or lying', being '*meant* to be suffering' and '*thought* to be suffering' (217), and receiving 'all the time this ray or beam' 'at this stage ... in control ... under control' (218). In this case, Mouth becomes a metonymic 'hole' standing for the whole body. Consequently, these two aspects of Mouth can be considered together, with Mouth as 'both a presence, and an enclosing absence', as Steven Conner puts it.<sup>8</sup> With regard to this antithesis, the opening words are highly suggestive: Mouth came '*out ... into* this world' of theatre (216, Italics mine).

More often than not, the text possibly reflects the condition of the audience, too; we are 'straining to hear ... make something of it', and 'stare at her uncomprehending', being 'speechless' and 'all silent as the grave', but 'never got the message', 'not catching the half ... not the quarter ... no idea what she's saying' (220). It might be easy to imagine that the torrent of Mouth's speech gradually sounds like 'the buzzing' or rather some kind of music with rhythm in the ears of audience.<sup>9</sup>

With seductively theatrical connotations including the title *'Not I'*, all of these analyses suggest that the text creates the possibility of designating anybody in the theatre as the unspecified character in the narrative, 'she': the literal mouth on stage, Mouth as a character performed by an actress, or even the audience insofar as he/she shares the space of theatre. These possible designations are based on a hypothetical assumption that they are possible due to the obscure quality of the text. Actually these designations are predicted in the text: 'all that ... vain reasonings ... till another thought'.

Yet, the imperative form of the word 'imagine!', which occurs nine times in the text, has a strong control and influence over the audience, interposed in the middle of the rapid staccato utterances and with the frequently appearing word 'on'. It easily arouses the speculation that Mouth is the character explained in the narrative. Ironically, the more furiously Mouth insists on the use of the third person pronouns, the less the narrator gains reliance on its words. In this case, the actual voice from stage reinforces such a speculation and directly demands the spectator to create the whole body for Mouth in imagination, leading us to the temptation to identify Mouth with the character 'she' in the narrative; 'the whole being ... hanging on its words' (219).

In relation to this inclination of the audience towards identifying Mouth with 'she', there is a strategically crucial moment in the text, in which the narrator and the character 'she' almost coalesce, with use of visual position as if seen through the camera eye and with references to the physical parts of the body as an object to be seen:

where was it? ...Croker's Acres ...one evening on the way home ...home!

... a little mound in Croker's Acres ...dusk ...sitting staring at her hand ... there in her lap ... palm upward ... suddenly saw it wet ... the palm ... tears presumably ... hers presumably ... no one else for miles ... no sound ... just the tears ... sat and watched them dry ... all over in a second ... (220-221)

The incident described here is quite simple; while the old woman is sitting and watching at her palm, her tears drop from her eyes and make the palm wet. However, if we carefully read this quotation, we notice that, in spite of the detailed descriptions of the incident, Beckett subtly avoids directly depicting the woman's eyes from which the tears drop. By only mentioning the woman's 'hand', 'lap', 'palm', and dropped 'tears', this scene is described as if seen through the camera eye, using its limitation that it can project anything but itself onto the screen, which is the technique Beckett exploited in another 'dramaticule' entitled *Film*. Beckett skillfully manipulates the position and direction of the eyes and connects the subject to see and the object to be seen, making the tears dropping from the eyes as a medium between the two. In so doing, he situates the eyes of the old woman and those of the narrator in the same position facing the same direction. In consequence, this scene gives us visual information enough to identify Mouth the narrator with the character of 'she', and, for the audience, Mouth becomes indistinguishable from this old woman.

In this respect, the topographical reference to 'Croker's Acres' in the above quotation, which appears only here, might be suggestive since it shows an autobiographical potentiality according to Gontarski.<sup>10</sup> Beckett intentionally but carefully puts emphasis on the scene which depicts the moment of coalescence between the narrator Mouth and the character of 'she', and he places the scene in parallel with the recognizable topography which results from his autobiographical background.

### III. *A Piece of Monologue*

Unlike *Not I*, *A Piece of Monologue* presents only one figure on stage: a white-haired man named Speaker who stands downstage to the left of the audience, wearing a white nightgown and white socks. This single character/narrator just

recites the text full of descriptions of actions and different scenes, but remains motionless throughout the play. In other words, the performance the audience can see on stage is only the Speaker's recital of a prose-like text or rather a text like stage direction.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of setting up any other figure, Beckett places two objects with Speaker on stage: one is a floor lamp with a skull-sized white globe about the same height as Speaker, which is placed two meters to Speaker's left; the other is the white foot of a pallet bed, just visible to the extreme right. Although the character/narrator appears as an entire human body onstage and there is no direct visual dismemberment of the body as in *Not I*, the lamp and the foot of the bed, both being white, have at least the possibility of being considered as counterparts of the parts of Speaker's motionless body.<sup>12</sup>

One of the technical features of the text is the mixture of past and present tenses. Speaker begins his recital with the paradoxical words in the past tense: 'Birth was the death of him' (265). Along with the use of the third person pronoun, the direct link between the images of birth and death suggests that Speaker is talking about the life of a character in the narrative, not about himself. However, as the text progresses, the past tense is substituted with present tense, and also the number of past or present participles at the beginning of a sentence increases. Another feature of the text is that the fragmentary sentences tend to omit the subject. Typically, along with these textual features, the text that includes many stage directions and is quite self-referential causes strong doubts about whether Speaker is actually talking about a character in the narrative or the condition of himself.

Even so, in *A Piece of Monologue*, there are several moments in which the text subtly but purposefully hints to correct this illusionary concurrence of the stage and the narrative. One such occasion can be found in the part in which Speaker corrects his narration from the present tense to the past tense in the description of the lamp, and this occurs twice in the text:

Stands there staring out. Stock still staring out. Nothing stirring in that black vast. Gropes back in the end to where the lamp is standing. Was

standing. When last went out. (265)

This correction of the tense deliberately directs the attention of the audience away from the hallucination and makes them aware of the undeniable fact that Speaker is just narrating the text before their eyes without moving around on stage. Also, there are several moments in which he directs the attention of the audience to the fact that he is telling the story about the character and not himself by clearly stating the subject in the third person occasionally:

Two and a half billion seconds. Again. Two and a half billion seconds. Hard to believe so few. From funeral to funeral. Funerals of ... he all but said of loved ones. (265)

Accordingly, the narration begins to sound as if it confuses the story narrated by Speaker with the description of the stage condition. In other words, it becomes unclear whether Speaker is just telling the text which describes some incidents experienced by a character in the narrative in the past, or if Speaker is describing his present condition on stage since this is also suggested in the description of time as present 'now':

From mammy to nanny and back. All the way. Bandied back and forth. So ghastly grinning on. From funeral to funeral. To now. This night. (265)

The phrases 'To now' and 'This night' seductively lead the audience to recognizing the theatrical time and space as where the narrator stands at present. Hence the central issue of the play: does Speaker identify with the character in the narrative as in *Not I*?

Regarding the structure, the text of *A Piece of Monologue* repetitively evokes the ritualistic pattern of the movements involved in striking a match as well as in images of the same kinds of funeral scenes by describing them in detail, as if they are Speaker's memories. Nevertheless, unlike in *Not I*, it is not so easy to assimilate Speaker into the character in the narrative completely.<sup>13</sup> Although Gontarski



states that 'what we hear from the narrator of *A Piece of Monologue* is nearly memory', it seems to me that whether it is Speaker's memory or not does not matter very much.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, as for the memory, there are surely some modest demands on us to memorize the described actions in the very narrative using such words as 'as before' or 'as described'. Even Speaker's question, 'Where is he now?' possibly serves as such, as if he forgot the plot in the middle of reciting.

However, the fundamental role of Speaker is not to confess his past experiences or memories to the audience, but rather to deliver the words in the text to the audience; he is 'the mask language wears', in Enoch Brater's words.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in my opinion, this Speaker takes on a crucial role in the light of vision; he serves to the spectator as a visual prototype from which the character in the narrative emerges. In other words, Speaker is, as it were, the place where the character begins to move around and come back 'after the various motions described'. Significantly, this indicates that the visual outline of Speaker functions as the womb and the tomb simultaneously; 'Birth was the death of him'. In this respect, the phrase 'From mammy to nanny and back' is also suggestive. By changing only one letter in the nouns from 'm' to 'n', the phrase implies the movement of forward and then backward in the light of the alphabetical order as well as the semantics.

From the view point of strategy, Beckett carefully manipulates the textual perspective using the limited perspective of a camera as in *Not I*, but this time in a different way; he subtly creates and keeps a distance between Speaker and the character in the narrative. Among several descriptions of the ritualistic act of lighting the light, there is one scene that stands out from the others: a strange scene in which two hands appear and disappear as if seen through the camera lens focusing only on lighted space:<sup>16</sup>

There in the end slowly a faint hand. Holding aloft a lighted spill. In the light of spill faintly the hand and milkwhite globe. Then second hand. In the light of spill. Takes off globe and disappears. Reappears empty. Takes off chimney. Two hands and chimney in the light of spill. Spill to wick. Chimney back on hand with spill disappears. Second hand disappears. Chimney alone in gloom. Hand reappears with globe. Globe back on. Turns wick low.

Disappears. Pale globe alone in gloom. Glimmer of brass bedrail. Fade.  
(267)

Compared to the scene in *Not I*, in which Mouth and the character coalesce through the use of the camera eye as discussed above, this scene does not allow us to see in the same way. Exploiting the space of light like the space within the frame of a camera's viewfinder which confines our sight, Beckett makes the perspective of the witness to the ritual act keep away from the body as an object to be seen. Two hands, presumably of the character in the narrative, are seen from somebody else, not the person to whom the hands belong; the subject to see is never identified with the object to be seen. In short, the tendency of dissimulation underlies *A Piece of Monologue* in order to sustain a certain distance between the subject and the object, whereas assimilation is the dominant power in *Not I*.

At the literal level, these two hands are described as if grotesquely dismembered as is often the case with Beckett's works. However, here he without casting away such major characteristics, beautifully and exquisitely creates the cinematographic vision by dramatic language that exploits the lighted space surrounded by darkness, and keeps a distance between Speaker and the character in the narrative in effect.

In spite of the dark theme of death, *A Piece of Monologue* skilfully avoids becoming pathetic. Beckett's major concern in this play is with the elements of theatrical self-reference as in *Not I*, but he goes further than that and expands into the stage direction. As Brater points out, what we find in the stage direction is contextually inserted in the very text.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, *A Piece of Monologue* could be a play intended to be read under the hypothesis that it is to be performed, rather than to be actually performed on stage. However, it is this direct application of the stage direction that results in undercutting such pathos and even sustains the detachment between Speaker and the character in the narrative with such words as 'Seen from above'.

'Thirty seconds' is one such direct application of stage direction into the text. With regard to references to the number, there are other phrases in the text: 'Two and a half billion seconds' and 'Thirty thousand nights'. Typically, both of them do

not work precisely (79 years of seconds and 82 years of nights).<sup>18</sup> If we pay attention not to the calculation but to the words used in the references, 'seconds' and 'Thirty', this set of references serves as a kind of preparation or signal for the later reference to the stage direction: 'Thirty seconds'. In accordance with the impassive impression of the play and with the descriptions of the preparation for the utterance of the word, 'Birth', this strategy prevents the later reference from standing out.

Although in *Not I*, Mouth's furious refusal of the first person pronouns and her answer to abrupt hypothetical questions work as a clue for cutting the immediate statements and repeating the same speech again, there is no such emotional or urgent clue in *A Piece of Monologue*. Instead, more impassive and typical stage directions such as 'Fade' and 'Gone' make the created images recede silently, and in so doing, the text repeats the pattern of images: 'Again and again. Again and again gone'. However, the recurrent word 'Gone', in spite of its meaning of death, keeps ringing in our ears like an echo, including in itself both the sounds of 'go' and 'on'. In addition, the accumulated images of rituals, which we never see on stage, are impressed on our memory as a performance. In the play *A Piece of Monologue*, it is the language we hear from the stage that remains as a vision in our mind like a hallucination.

### Notes

- 1 As for the word 'dramaticule', Keir Elam noted that Beckett actually used the word for the subtitle of *Come and Go* and intended to create a peculiar genre of its own. See Elam 146.
- 2 Andrew Kennedy discusses *Not I* in terms of the soliloquy. See Kennedy 30-35.
- 3 See Elam 154-55; Worth 168-92.
- 4 See Gontarski 141-42.
- 5 See Knowlson and Pilling 198.
- 6 See Knowlson and Pilling 197-200.
- 7 For Beckett's temporal exchange of the first and third person pronouns, see Gontarski 145.
- 8 Conner 162.
- 9 Ruby Cohn indicates this point, discussing the convergence of fictional and theatre situation and place in the play with use of his neologism, 'theatreality'. See Cohn 29-30.
- 10 See Gontarski 148-49. From the aspect of sound, Elam points out the poetic function of the

- words. See Elam 133.
- 11 'Beckett himself', Brater noted, 'wondered whether he had written a piece of prose or a piece of monologue'. See Brater 113.
  - 12 Kristin Morrison actually sees the lamp as 'visual counterpart' to Speaker's physical presence. See Morrison 351.
  - 13 Karen L. Laughlin remarks that Speaker is linked to the character through his actual speech situation with aid of stage settings from the viewpoint of theatrical communication. See Laughlin 23-25.
  - 14 Gontarski 174.
  - 15 Brater 112. Similarly, Linda Ben-Zvi, while approaching to this play from the aspect of the schismatic nature of man, reaches the conclusion that Speaker is 'the inner me'. See Ben-Zvi.
  - 16 Ben-Zvi, carefully observing the juxtaposition of two lights and two darknesses in the play, remarks that 'The image provides a reinforcement of the theme of brief thought (light) capturing some insight, albeit temporary, which fades back again into darkness but it still there, if unperceived'. See Ben-Zvi.
  - 17 Brater 111.
  - 18 From these references, Morrison calculates Speaker's age is eighty-two. Ben-Zvi regards them as 'a typically Beckettian calibration that doesn't quite work'. In the same way, Brater takes them as a time reference 'out of joint'. See Morrison 349, Ben-Zvi, and Brater 118.

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