

“Certain Vowel Sounds”: Beckett’s *Not I* and Lacanian Phonemics

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Structuralist interpretations of language characteristically focus on the systems in which speech sounds emerge rather than on the existence of such sounds as acoustic particles. Neither are such interpretations typically interested in the vocal machineries which body the individual speech particles forth. The real breakthrough of Ferdinand de Saussure in this regard was, as Danny Nobus makes clear, the linguist’s zeroing in “more on the meaningful function of sounds than on their anatomico-physiological basis.”¹ Where the domain of *parole* is a raw hubbub of noises and spittle, we may say that that of *langue* is relatively frictionless and quiet. Structuralist linguistics distances itself from involvement with a history of particular acoustic collisions which would otherwise abort the attention given to language *per se*. “The linguistic sign,” as Richard Boothby notes, “must evacuate its own status as an image in order to fulfil its signifying function. The perceptual body of the sign is merely a point of entrance, a kind of jumping-off point for structured reverberation across the network of relations that constitutes the sign system.”² Saussure’s groundwork on the linguistic sign can thus be understood, in part, in terms of its displacement and marginalisation within the field of inquiry of the individual speech sound. Equally downplayed in the structuralist account is the “locus of emission” of these singular vocalisations, namely the speech apparatus itself.³ What matters is the abstract network; certainly, the acoustic mark is recognised as *leading to* that network, but it does not become a meaningful unit of language until (in

logical time) it reaches that zone of abstraction.⁴

Theories of language and subjectivity that build upon structuralist foundations in linguistics can be examined very suggestively in terms of this principled de-emphasis upon physical speech sound and origin. In this paper I would like to interrogate such a theory (that of the Lacanian “science of the subject”⁵) by deploying it in a reading of a dramatic text that constitutes a strong thematisation of precisely those local, fleshly mechanics of speech that the Saussurean account has relegated to being of secondary linguistic importance. That text is Samuel Beckett’s *Not I*. In its dramatisation of a crisis of subjectivity, Beckett’s play foregrounds the organs of speech working frantically to constitute the subject in language; to that extent the text lingers with striking intensity at the coalface of acoustic production. Given this, *Not I* encourages critical inspection of that site associated with Mladen Dolar’s identification of “the voice [which] appears as the link which ties the signifier to the body [and which] indicates that the signifier, however purely logical and differential, must have a point of origin and emission in the body.”⁶ By focusing on *Not I*’s sustained disclosure of speech’s being physically formed in the production of a subjectivity, I wish to explore the extent to which the vocal body (i.e. phonic utterance together with speech apparatus) contributes to linguistic meaningfulness and dramatised social being. In approaching Jacques Lacan’s development of linguistic ontology with Beckett’s play in mind, furthermore, I confront a post-Saussurean project that stretches the abstraction of signification to breaking point with the material particulars of a staged mouth fixedly illuminated. This juxtaposing of the intricate logic of Lacanian signification with the bright glare of what we might call Beckettian phonetic empiricism provides the opportunity for a precise reading of the acoustic mark’s influence within the realm of linguistic subjectivity.

Lacan’s construal of the sign’s relationship to the subject needs to be further specified, however, in order within this context to flesh out a reading of the phonetic mark. It is only a first step to say, for example, that the Lacanian reading treats “subjectivity as constituted in and by language, understood not simply as signification but as temporal chains of signifiers.”⁷ For a radical move is undertaken at this point that, as Tony Thwaites writes, empties the Saussurean sign of *all* content, leaving only the brute mark (the unary trait): “Lacan does indeed abandon and dismantle the very idea of a sign, as something which represents something else ([f]or a subject) and he offers the more cryptic definition of a signifier which represents the subject for another signifier.”⁸ Jettisoned in the Lacanian treatment is thus *the sign itself* as much as whatever perceptual (or ideational) content Saussure may have smuggled into that sign to give it traction. Traction

(meaning), for Lacan, comes with the signifier alone “not because it has recourse to any signified whatsoever, but because it is now in relation with an indefinite and potentially endless [number of] signifiers within the system.”⁹ And signifiers now relate to each other only insofar as they are *bare* signifiers, for they bear no other properties save that they *are* such.¹⁰ Neither the acoustic profile, the graphic qualities, nor the mental correlates (if they exist) of these signifiers play a decisive role within the Lacanian schema;¹¹ the subject is not built out of such materials; all that is needed for the ontology are the marks and the logical gaps between the marks.¹²

For Lacan then, the physical content of the speech sound is bracketed off from the main inquiry into language and subjectivity.¹³ It is just as bracketed off as Saussure's *signified* is (but no more so). The signifier which represents the subject to another signifier may well boast a suite of acoustic particles, but those particles do not partake logically in that relation of representation; it is not in its capacity as a string of sounds that speech (either for Lacan or Saussure) is able to make a *linguistic* difference. If we were to seek a phonemically relevant example of how subjectivity is fashioned in the Lacanian account, we could do worse than revisit Slavoj Žižek's parsing of how the subject Roger O. Thornhill is mistaken by Russian spies for “a nonexistent [CIA] agent named George Kaplan” in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.¹⁴ Gesturing “by pure coincidence” to a hotel clerk at the same time as said clerk announces “Phone call for Mr. Kaplan,” Thornhill is taken *for Kaplan* by the onlooking Russians.¹⁵ Žižek takes this sequence as an exemplary case of interpellation, arguing that

the subject is always fastened, pinned to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersymbolic network of symbolic relations. The point is that this mandate is ultimately always arbitrary: since its nature is performative, it cannot be accounted for by reference to the ‘real’ properties and capacities of the subject.¹⁶

Now it would seem to make a difference to the logic of this interpellation if the signifying chain of the hotel clerk read (in the air) “Phone call for Mr. Gaplan,” or “Phone call for Mr. Chaplan,” or even “Phone call for Mrs. Kaplan.” The Russian agents could overhear such signifying chains and not necessarily misrecognise Thornhill as *George Kaplan* as a result. Their hearing of “Phone call for Mr. Gaplan” (not “Kaplan”) might put them off the chase. These agents may not be motivated so powerfully (so seamlessly) thereafter to pursue Thornhill (as Kaplan) because of this slightly off-kilter segment of clerkly speech. The clerk's phonetic realisation of [kæplən] as

the signifier “Kaplan” does therefore seem to participate in the *pinning* of “Kaplan” onto Thornhill; the realisation of the /k/ of “Kaplan” as [k] (and not as, say, [g] or [ʃ]) makes a *phonemic* difference to the interpellation, which is to say that it supports the misrecognition at hand and does not obstruct it.

Does this case provide us with a defeater for the Lacanian claim that the acoustic/perceptual content of speech does not partake of the signifier’s charge of representing a subject to another signifier? Well, we have to be careful here, for it would be easy to draw conclusions from the Kaplan interpellation that are from the Lacanian point of view in no way radical enough. While it is true that structuralist linguistics attempts in its theoretical descriptions to take full account of the functional relationships holding between *phones* (i.e. speech segments measured in terms of their acoustic properties: the likes of [k], [g] and [ʃ]) and *phonemes* (speech segments measured in terms of their contribution to linguistic meanings: the likes of the /k/ of the “Kaplan” that the Russian spies are waiting for), it is clear that Lacan wishes to leave these “levels of representation” behind.¹⁷ It is not that Lacan favours the phoneme over the phone (as Saussure does), but that he wishes to collapse such distinctions altogether and replace them with the featureless singularity of the unary trait. That /kæplən/ is realised as [kæplən] (and not, say, as [gæplən], or [ʃæplən]) would not, strictly speaking, be accorded explanatory weight in the Hitchcockian case-study. What matters, for Lacan, is that there be a signifier (in this case “Kaplan”) succeeded by another signifier (in this case the hotel clerk’s “Kaplan”) and a gap between them (in logical time). Whether or not the second “Kaplan” is phonemically acceptable as phonetically (acoustically) near-identical to the first “Kaplan” is irrelevant. To reiterate, what matters is there be a mark followed by a second mark; in the Lacanian schema, everything follows from the line of traitless signifiers.

If we are looking for an explication of linguistic “content” (or difference) in the Lacanian reading, we really need to turn our attention to the register of the symbolic. When Lacan states that “what is omitted in the platitudes of modern information theory is the fact that one cannot even speak of a code without it already being the Other’s code,” this can be taken as a rebuke to those who hold signification to be of necessity *internally* complex.¹⁸ Insofar as it is directed to Saussureans, this rebuke attends to whatever ideational detritus linguists long to graft onto the *sign*. Equally vulnerable to this rebuke, however, are those who wish to locate complexity within the signifier itself (at the phonetic level) or within the signifying network as a whole (whether at the phonological or at the grammatical level).¹⁹ Lacan redirects our attention from a complexity attributed to language as code to a logical

complexity established by virtue of the signifier's always coming (at speakers, at subjects) from outside, from a third position (neither signifier nor subject).²⁰ The sovereign logic of the Lacanian Other is "th[e] negativity it introduces, th[e] distance from the supposed immediacy of experience."²¹ "The signifier," as Lacan remarks, "requires another locus—the locus of the Other ...—for Speech borne by the signifier to be able to lie, that is, posit itself as Truth."²² The key feature of the complexity that language introduces for the subject is therefore not that that complexity is brokered by the information with which signifiers are endowed, but that it discloses an apparently endless series of gaps within which the subject emerges piecemeal. Complexity arrives not with the likes of "Phone call for Mr. Kaplan" being unpacked from elements that include [kæplən] rather than [gæplən], but with that retinue of signifiers inaugurating a predicament where the subject (in this case Roger O. Thornhill) is interpellated in (necessarily) contradictory fashion. "Thornhill" will thus be contested by "Kaplan" and "Kaplan" (thanks to "Thornhill" and to every other signifier which qualifies as *not-Kaplan*) by *not-Kaplan*. The subject is confronted with a logical bind which grooms for self-identificatory gestures along the lines of Žižek's imagined "Why am I what you're telling me that I am?"²³ The compulsive and baffling qualities of this subject-fashioning logic derives from its being an interpellation, rather than its being a code.

Within the Lacanian account of linguistic subjectivity the following features have been identified that are of present significance: (1) the signifier is a mark and is *only* a mark; (2) the signifier's arriving from an indeterminate position introduces the complexity necessary to produce the subject in such binding (and unresolvable) questions as *Why am I (Kaplan)-and-not-(Kaplan)-for-you?* Both features of the system downplay the complexity that may be highlighted either at linguistic surface (phonetic matters) or linguistic depth (phonology, semantics, grammar). The account may be said to *flatten* the linguistic insofar as questions of matter (phone), abstract representation (phoneme), and network (language) are transformed into questions of the bare signifier and its negatively tracked positions in logical space. That flattening might also serviceably be read as the degnostification of signification, as a Lacanian positing that, with the signifier, nothing lies hidden.²⁴ Despite this evident argument against linguistic secrecy and multilayeredness, I would like to persist with an interrogation of the bodily phonetic, and thus of the organs of speech and the sounds that are summoned forth through that fleshly apparatus. There is something at the level of the production of the subject in Beckett's *Not I* that remains thoroughly *phonetic* and that we miss something if we do not account for this. With this return to the vocal body, I continue to work through certain as-

pects of the Lacanian ontology of the subject concerning the performance of material speech and its residues. By focusing on *Not I* from this point forth, moreover, I plug away with the question of whether the speech sound and its production make a difference to our account of linguistic subjectivity.

The first thing to note concerning *Not I* is how pronouncedly the work foregrounds linguisticity over subjectivity. In one sense, the play is all speakerly apparatus (plus staccato vocal emission) and no speaker. The playwright himself described this as his “face play,” but, in truth, we scarcely get even a face—rather what we are presented with, “on stage, [is] a mouth which pours out words that are barely intelligible.”²⁵ For its part, Jennifer M. Jeffers’s argument that *Not I*, “written in English in 1972, ... is a twenty-minute monologue that furthers Beckett’s fascination [with] the staged disembodied voice,” also needs to be qualified by noting that the piece dramatises a very precise embodiment of the voice in question.²⁶ Or at least by our making the case that a very precise embodiment *accompanies* the voice underscored. For we must grant, logically, with Mladen Dolar, that “the source of [a] voice can never be seen, [that] it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, [and that] it cannot possibly match what we see.”²⁷ *Not I* confronts us with a mouth (with almost only a mouth), with lips, tongue, frenulum, and rogue collocations of spittle. The play also discharges in the audience’s direction a “gush of ‘wordshit,’” a stream of signifiers that clothe the voice and give it shape and acoustic parameter.²⁸ But the mouth in question need not be said to *belong* to the voice, nor the voice to the overlabouring cavity of gristle. What we have therefore, minimally, is a mouth (plus immediate fleshly surrounds) and a litany of speech segments which (for us) radiate out from that mouth. What we do not necessarily have is a voice (or even any number of voices). Partly responsible for this not-necessarily-having-a-voice, as Anthony Uhlmann points out, is the dislocation instituted by the play’s overwhelming dramatic focus on the *physical cause* of speech: “the mouth in *Not I* ... is recognised as a mouth, but the context within which mouths are usually represented is now missing. There is a gap, in this case a gap in context, which forces us to interpret this mouth as ‘a mouth.’”²⁹ What we also do not have is a subject. We have a mouth (and a batch of signifiers), but not an “I” to which we might be tempted to attribute such.

The environment framing this *not-an-“I”* at the beginning of the play may be sketched briefly. The dramatic subject “Mouth” occupies a central and elevated position, the theatrical lights concentrating almost wholly on Mouth’s mouth, with the “*rest of face in shadow*.”³⁰ The only competing point of focus on the stage is the dimly lit “Auditor” who is positioned “*downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, envel-*

*oped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood.*³¹ Auditor's contribution to the play is restricted to its shrouded epicene presence and the mobilisation of three "helpless gesture[s] of compassion" that coincide with particularly stressed moments within Mouth's monologue. *Not I*'s dramatic schema therefore insists throughout on the domination of the speakerly apparatus, with a *mouth* dominating the stage. That mouth's domination of the play's *logical* architecture is nevertheless a precarious one. For one thing, *Not I*'s mouth must somehow accommodate the subject "Mouth" without being identical to it (to her). Something of this tension between character ("Mouth") and Mouth's body (*mouth*) is captured in Beckett's remark that "Mouth's speech [is] 'a purely buccal phenomenon. Organ running away with function.'"³² Beckett's stress here falls upon the physical details of Mouth's speech needing to be dramatised *locally* ahead of whatever demand for communication, or signification, may run alongside the specific machineries of utterance.

The organs of speech in *Not I* thus contain the speech extant in the play by virtue of their materiality. Equally restricting are the mouth's pressures upon the performer who plays Mouth such that Mouth be dramatised first and foremost as "buccal." As Sarah West records, when Billie Whitelaw played the role in the BBC's filmed version she

accepted total immobility and blackout and relied on her visual memory to remember her lines. The traumatic situation described in Mouth's narrative seemed to have been matched by the conditions under which the actress had to perform. She sat strapped into a chair on a tall podium, her body draped in black, her face covered with black gauze, her head clamped between two pieces of sponge rubber.³³

The price of Mouth's being dramatised as *mouth* becomes clear in the restrictions I am highlighting here. To accentuate the locus of speech emission in the monologue, the monologist's body is tightly fixed in place. That there is something attached to the externally visible (illuminable) organs of speech (something behind them, some "structurally concealed interior"³⁴—that there is a neck, a torso, *another* body) is powerfully de-emphasised. This disciplined restriction placed upon the body (other than the mouth) may be said to afforce an equal pressure upon whatever mental correlates would characteristically be associated with Mouth's outflowing speech. At times, Mouth does speak of being more than *mouth*—complaints arise in the monologue for instance of "buzzing" noises "so-called" that are registered "in the ears" and a "dull roar in the skull"³⁵—but the play counterposes this (slightly) more expansive diegetic identification with the theatrical over-

determination of the speechly flesh. Empirically, Mouth, for us, is *mouth*; while we may search for subject-positions that extend this correlation, the phenomenology of the staged text constantly undercuts such interpretative movements. The temptation to interpret Mouth's speech as more than a *purely buccal phenomenon* is itself restricted; the dramatology encourages readings of the monologue that see it as the work of a speakerly apparatus over and above that of a speaker. Where Lacan consistently underscores the fact that the signifier in itself is enough to produce the subject, *Not I* privileges the immediate producer (cause) of the signifier such that the subject becomes displaced (or dispersed) in that linguistic production.

In response to such a reading, the Lacanian may well argue that in *Not I*'s dramatising of *mouth*'s trumping of Mouth, the speech organ theatrically disclosed therein automatically becomes a signifier. Language strings and speech sounds "emerge from" this mouth, but (the argument might run) there seems no more justification for saying that *mouth* causes these signifiers than for saying that some interior self or mind causes them. Indeed, why valorise the cause relation at all in this context? Would it even matter, for example, were *mouth* feasibly to be said to cause the likes of Mouth's "... yes ... all the time the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ... in the skull ... the dull roar in the skull ..."?³⁶ I think this objection is sound. Sound enough, in fact, to favour a reading of Beckett's ploy in bringing *mouth* to a position of such prominence in *Not I* that emphasises the role of *defamiliarisation* over that of local, signification-cause. Our being "forced to interpret [*Not I*'s] mouth as 'a mouth'" is constituted by our coming to terms with *mouth* simply being there all the time when speech is going on but without it (*mouth*) becoming a subject as a consequence of that utterly basic com-presence.³⁷ Beckett's bringing mouth forward, and isolating it, may thus be understood as negating in one grisly *putsch* both the agency of *mouth* and the agency of subject. We are perfectly familiar with speech and mouth appearing together in daily life. That does not cause us any particular problems. We neither think that mouth is speaking nor that speech has nothing to do with mouth as a result of our noting this inductive juxtapositional fact. But when mouth comes forward (and almost everything else is bracketed off) as it does in *Not I*, then we start to have difficulties. We begin to think that either the mouth we see is wholly responsible for speaking (i.e. that mouth is a subject) or that what we hear is not speech at all. The defamiliarisation at work with *Not I*'s focus-dominating mouth leads to conclusions that either overload subjectivity at the expense of language, or the reverse.

The logical structure of *Not I*'s dramatisation of speakerly subjectivity has thus far revealed itself to consist of a mouth fixed in place that it may cohabit with other signifiers (the likes of "... all the time the buzzing ... so-

called ... in the ears ..."). That mouth so fixed that it may *join* these signifiers (dramatically and ontologically) is not a subject when it is "speaking," and it is not speaking when it is taken to be a subject. But the mouth's *joining* that which it was formerly thought to produce (the likes of "... all the time the buzzing ...") as a signifier has implications for our analysis of mouth as a *phonetic* operator. If mouth is not to be studied in terms of its being the *cause* of a constellation of speech sounds, then it may no longer be taken to stand in a phonetic relation to them. There is no phonetic relation if mouth is a signifier, and "buzzing" is a signifier, and "so-called" another. In a sense, there is no relation at all—other than that which holds between logical objects (signifiers) whose sole (albeit world-exhausting) contribution is to *mark* logical space such that the way be cleared for yet another mark. The phonetic has no more traction here than does the linguistic in general, or the subjective. To map, for instance, the precise coalition of articulatory gestures that might match one phonetic realisation of "buzzing" ([b_{AZ}ɪŋ]) remains unmotivated as a linguistic project if the coalition in question is not to be held physically responsible for the speech sound targeted for investigation. We can no longer speak of precision (or even of investigation) when the causal role of the organs of speech is withdrawn, or suspended. In terms of his science of the subject, Lacan would have to respond by saying that *this* abandonment of precision is justified given the improved explanatory power of his account of the *negative* constructive force of the signifier. What explains language's subject-fashioning yield is, for Lacan, not that [b_{AZ}ɪŋ], say, stands in some positive relation to tongue-lip-and-palatal-coalition X, but that *qua* signifier it opens the way for an infinite series of *nots*. "Buzzing" ([b_{AZ}ɪŋ]) is *not* almost everything; it is not "Kaplan," it is not "so-called," it is not "signifier," it is not "colourless green ideas sleep furiously," and so on. The obdurate fertility of these *nots* is something that is unavailable to phonetic, or even phonemic, analysis. Yet it is their logical charge which structures the background of the interpellations calling the subject endlessly forth.

And *Not I* dramatises this calling in some intriguing ways given the aphonological Lacanian lens through which I am interrogating the play. For there are occasions when the *sounds* of the speech constituting Mouth's monologue do prompt one's interest in determining the conditions of subjectivity disclosed in the play according to phonetic criteria. I would like to examine these cases in some depth before making some conclusions as to where all this metaphysics of speech leaves us with respect to subjectivity. To discover where we are with the monologue in the first place, however, it is important to establish something of the performative grammar of Mouth's speech. The word-strings that constitute that speech resonate in musicality

and colour with a good many of the pulsed tropes that make up the mid-late Beckettian canon: "... coming up to seventy ... wandering in a field ... looking aimlessly for cowslips ... to make a ball ..." etc.³⁸ Initially, what is most important to note of the language outflow as a whole is whose speech (or at least whose story) it is taken *not* to be. The refuser (the disowner) of the speech appears to be Mouth herself, its speaker. Mouth's distancing of herself from "her own" speech (story) betrays a narratological posture endorsed by the playwright himself with his note as to Mouth's "vehement refusal to relinquish third person."³⁹ In keeping with this authorial prescription, Mouth's disowning of this speech may be tracked as it runs through various chains of deixis—"... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... even to herself ... something in her begging ... begging it all to stop ... unanswered ..." etc.⁴⁰ Tensions become acute when this distancing strategy appears to be challenged in the repeated and hostile interjection of "... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ..." which occasions, separately, the three responsive movements of Auditor, a "*simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion. It lessens with each recurrence till scarcely perceptible at third.*"⁴¹ At these junctures, Mouth's concession of doubt concerning the subjectivity in crisis ("... what? ... who? ...") is promptly overridden by the sharp defensive insistence on the third person ("... no! ... she! ..."). An interpolation from an unidentified logical position—something along the lines of—"The woman whose life you speak of is none other than yourself"—is perchance anticipated by Mouth (or by someone [the "she" of the monologue]), and resisted ahead of time. Auditor's increasingly attenuated expression of "helpless compassion" would constitute, in this reading of events, an acknowledgement both that Mouth's acceptance of the narrative as pertaining to *her* life is both necessary and (increasingly) unlikely to occur. But I don't know that we are fully justified in identifying the "she" of Mouth's narrative with Mouth on this evidence alone. It is certainly plausible to imagine, after all, the "not I" subject exposed in Mouth's speech to reverse her position, and, within that monologue, to accept *first person*, and yet still not to be Mouth. That subject would then be an "I"—and might thereafter be flagged in the monologue with an "I" rather than a "she"—but we need not necessarily equate that "I" with Mouth on that basis.

The aporetic nature of this strand of *Not I*s subject-attribution can be further examined by paying attention to a case where a provisional acceptance of *first person* is dramatised by means of a phonetic linkage to that subject's past. Analysis of the speech sounds thematised in this acceptance provides another useful opportunity to tease open some of the linguistic conditions of subjectivity disclosed in the play. What is particularly

suggestive in the case concerned is the openly phonetic nature of the memory linked to the concession as to *first person*. While noises, sounds, cries, and murmurs are, after all, standard fare in the *oeuvre*, the thematisation of phonetic qualities is less obviously frequent. *Not I* is, for its part, also richly endowed with noises—"birth cr[ies] to get her going ... breathing ...," "vent[ing]," "buzzing[s]" galore, and the "dull roar in the skull."⁴² Where these are associated *broadly* (i.e. non-phonetically) with speech, then it is typically as the "buzzing" and the "dull roar[s] like falls" that underscore the "... steady stream[s] ..." of "language" that afflict the "she" of Mouth's narrative. The speaker is *afflicted* by both language and prelanguage; the *buzzings* (and suchlike) capture the range and intensity of this felt burden—they act as choric precursors to the more defined "gush[es] of 'wordshit'" that also flow.⁴³ But with words *as such* come word-segments, and the accents and tones inflecting them. Thus, when it is relayed by (or through) the monologist that "... words were coming ... imagine! ... words were coming ..." to the subject *not-I*, the "voice" in question can only be disavowed up to a point. After that a unique phonetic affiliation rings true:

... words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... at first ... so long since it had sounded ... so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit ... could be none other than her own ... certain vowel sounds ... she had never heard ... elsewhere ... so that people would stare ... the rare occasions ... once or twice a year ... always winter for some strange reason ...⁴⁴

As we have seen, hitherto "she" has been dramatised (within the monologue) as powerfully resistant to the notion that the "... steady streams ..." that constitute this narrative correspond to an account of *her* life. Now, within that narrative, the "she" is led to confront the fact that the "... words [that] were coming ..." to her are *her* words. And that confrontation is characterised by the truth induced from empirical phonetic evidence: the "... certain vowel sounds ..." she hears can only be hers because "... she had never heard [them] ... elsewhere...." It is the phonetic individuality of these vowel sounds that, for her, make them hers, that betray *her* to her (speaking) self. Qualities she hears (and singles out) in those speech sounds ground her tentative movement *away* from the refusal to accept that words heard ("imagine!") in this stream of language pertain to a *not-I*.

What interests me in this point of *not-I's* (*she's*) acceptance that the speech encountered is her own, is whether the pieces of evidence used to ground that admission (i.e. *certain vowel sounds*) can be treated as signifiers or not. Further to this, I would ask whether we understand the phonetic values indexed to such vowel sounds in the linguistic procedures of the

speaker (“she”; *not-I*) to function such that they represent the subject (“she”; *not-I*) to another signifier. On the face of it, the Lacanian slant of such questions leads to their not applying in the present case. In order to explicate this we could frame the narratological sequence outlined in the *vowel-sound* recognition dramatisation as follows: a speaker hears speaking going on and then comes to the realisation that it *is* herself (and no one else) speaking when that speaking is going on because the speech sounds she hears in that speech boast phonetic values A, B, or C. These phonetic values, moreover, belong to her speech (and none hereabouts have been known to speak her speech [i.e. the speech of her speech community]). To qualify as a Lacanian signifier, however, the *certain vowel sounds* at issue could boast no values (traits) whatsoever, *a fortiori* they could boast no phonetic ones. Now, while this unpacking of the argument may be meta-physically scrupulous, I think our understanding of the linguistic situation is better advanced by letting the Lacanian logic loose on the subjectivity settings implicated herein rather than simply on the relevant phonetic markers. The predicament into which *not-I* (“she”) is drawn by such paradoxical queries as “Is that me speaking right now?” (“What criterion might I use to decide this?”) seems to be one ripe for Lacanian investigation. Given this, might we not be better off seeking a more productive dismissal of the possibility of the speaker identifying herself (both as speaker and as herself) by means of phonetic induction? I believe that we might be.

The claim that “Is that me speaking right now?” can lead to clear-cut *gains* for the subject asking the question is one that, I believe, both Beckett and Lacan would dismiss. While Auditor’s gestures *may* be used, as I have suggested, as evidence that such approaches to the truth of *third person* actually being *first person* are compassion-worthy, there is little sign (in *Not I* or anywhere else in Beckett) that questions of the self will be settled thanks to this line of self-directed inquiry. Lacan’s great insight in this regard, meanwhile, is surely that *all* speech acts (all signifiers) perform the work of *preceding other speech acts*. That is all, for him, that they can (and need) to perform for the subject to emerge. Therefore, even if we grant that the distinctly local phonetic variation of a particular speech sound may function as a signifier, that signifier’s force will nonetheless primarily derive from its being the simple precursor of other, later marks than from any other considerations. As a provident linguistic example, we may take the case of the “striking Irishism” of [æ] displacing [ɛ] such that (in Dublin speech) the word “many” sounds the same as “Annie.”⁴⁵ If the focus on this case is moved back somewhat from its narrowly phonetic context, we can see that with [æ] displacing [ɛ] it is evident that the work the signifiers will perform here to build upon a specific acoustic particle gain significant lev-

erage through *deferral*. Where, for instance, Speaker A overhears Speaker B producing “many” and “Annie” as homophones in a particular chunk of discourse, she may comment to Speaker C that “I think B is from Dublin,” then this would tend to open questions of subjectivity up rather than close them off. The questions that may spin off from A’s observation (the likes of C’s “Then I wonder why she moved from Dublin to here?” and/or A’s (to C, or even D) “Why do you think she mentioned my coming from Dublin?” etc.) will inevitably splinter off into multiple tangents that nourish, but also undercut, the subjectivities of those language-users concerned and more besides. The arising (in speech) of the phonetic difference ([æ] *not* contrasting with [ɛ] in Speaker B’s speech, where it (feasibly) does so contrast in that of speakers A and C) is never going to resolve such tangents, even when it may be said to have contributed to the triggering of Speaker A’s initial “I think B is from Dublin.” The comments and the open questions will radiate out regardless of the penetrations into discourse of such linguistic properties manifesting themselves (or not) in speech; if there were no phonetic (or phonemic) values at all, then (in the Lacanian reading) the signifiers could still do their job fashioning and unfashioning subjectivity.

Granted, this argument as to the wholesale dispensability of the phonological rather overstates the case. But it does usefully underscore the fact that with respect to the logic of the signifier (and of the subject) the phonemic domain will never be Lacan’s first port of analytical call. For the project he is involved with when it comes to the signifier is an ontology; it thus constitutes much less a linguistics in itself than a *foundation* of linguistics. The enormously fertile query that motivates so much of the Lacanian research programme—namely: “Once the structure of language is recognized in the unconscious, what sort of subject can we conceive of for it?”⁴⁶—becomes clearer (as a project) when the structure it points to is made plain. To reiterate, it is that structure that furnished the subject where the signifier operates, clearing the way for *other* signifiers. Taken at the “grander” level of the subject working to make sense of the interpellations which endlessly nourish them, endlessly undercut them, this structure may be analysed in terms of how its logic of deferral fashions a hole where the subject feels they should be. As Sheldon R. Brivic notes, “supposedly if one knows the truth, one will operate rationally; but Lacan points out that the truth can only be known in part ... and the part that one does not know is generally what motivates a person insofar as they have the power to decide.”⁴⁷ The “she” (*not-I*) of *Not I* is motivated (or compelled) to rehearse a life story in which “she” insists “I” need play no part. Analytically, the predicament of this subject becomes something we can tease out more constructively when we recognise (in Lacanian fashion) that both these signifi-

ers (“she,” “I,” “not I”) are presenting the subject to another signifier (perchance “she,” “I,” “not I” once more) such that the *subject* becomes a function of the gaps, the slippages, between the signifiers. It is consequently not the case that “she” *knows* (or discovers thanks to a phonetic induction) that “I” is (or is not) “her” and that this knowledge (or discovery) will lead “her” forth to Beckettian peace and ataraxic contentment. It is rather what is not known that produces the subject’s ceaseless movement through the space opened up by speech. More precisely, it is what is *negated by virtue of speech* that produces the subject. The monologue is comprised of a truckload of “she’s” and “I’s” among many other signifiers: that “she” is *not* “I” and that “I” is *not* “she” is *part* of what represents the subject. The subject might best be understood, in fact, as that which is represented by an open-ended amalgam of all of these logical-linguistic *nots*. The dramatisation of the subject in Beckett’s *Not I* captures, I submit, a good deal of this construction-through-endless-negation.

A plausible illustration of this point arrives where the monologue’s “she” recalls some of her encounters within particular social contexts. On “her” part, for a long time these encounters are “... practically speechless ...” such as that marked at the “... supermart ... just hand in the list ... with the bag ... old black shopping bag ... motionless ... staring into space ... mouth half open as usual ...”⁴⁸ But there have always been language-strings at least *overheard* (by “she”), even before the critical moment of “... words were coming ... imagine! ... words were coming ...” upon which I have already elaborated.⁴⁹ Abandoned at birth (“... parents unknown ...”⁵⁰), the infant “she” is “... brought up [...] to believe ... with the other waifs ... in a merciful ... [*Brief laugh.*] ... God ... [*Good laugh.*] ...”⁵¹ A constituent part of that *being-brought-up-to-believe* is the performative stimulus of the time-honoured trigrammaton “... God is love ...”⁵² Such signifiers wash against “her” (through “her”) with all the others, making space for more. Even more forceful as a speech act is one indexing speech itself in (for “her”) pointedly judgemental circumstances, where the “she” faces (mysteriously) “... that time in court ...”: “... what had she to say for herself ...”⁵³ In court, facing the magistrate, for some reason the subject is recounted being forced to deal with this piece of language: *what had she to say for herself*. The sentence is a beautifully nonchalant and at the same time weighty utterance; it reeks of juridicality’s sovereign malice. Performatively complex, it nonetheless demonstrates how the logic of the signifier unfolds in action.

What had she to say for herself. We are encouraged to imagine this language-string originally emanating from the judge, on high. This judge is asking for speech (“say[ing]”), but the inflection of that asking makes the

request formidably dismissive. If we translate the request into the present tense and fiddle with the deixis to suit we still get a taste of that dismissiveness—*What have you to say for yourself?* (Note also that I have inserted a question mark.) The implication even here is that the spoken-to (the accused “she” in this position) has nothing (important, binding, relevant) to say. And one reason for the drawing of this implication is, I believe, that the request—*What have you to say for yourself?*—makes awkwardly salient the fact that what is to come as a reply to the request (if it is to come at all), will inevitably have to come in the form of *speech that begins from the position of defending the speaker*. It is not an invitation to speak on a subject; it is rather the positing of a next-to-impossible obligation (*what have you to say?*) to *speak for oneself*. All forms of request can be analysed as restrictive, of course, but this request is especially so, given its performative grammar. Making the restriction even tighter (and more foreboding), naturally, is the discursive context in which it is set—“... that time in court ... what had she to say for herself ... guilty or not guilty ... stand up woman ... speak up woman” Adding to the unforgiving nature of the prerogative to speak is the erasure of the question mark (from my comparison sentence), the limitation of possible reply-contents (“... guilty or not guilty ...”), and finally the transformation of the request into the bluntest of orders (“... stand up woman ... speak up woman ...”).⁵⁴ Being told to speak *simpliciter* (and to speak *up*, to boot) plainly exposes, I submit, the Lacanian logic of the relationship between these speakers (albeit one speechless *again*, “... waiting to be led away ... glad of the hand on her arm ...”).⁵⁵ To be asked to speak (“Speak!”) is in this context to be put on the defensive there and then; it places an impossible burden on the spoken-to, and *what is said* (whatever it may be; it may be nothing) in reply to “Speak!” can do nothing to meet the requirement tabled.

I believe it is axiomatic to the Lacanian reading of linguistic exchange that all speech ultimately decomposes into the off-loading of such impossible demands from one “speaker” to another (even where and when that “another” is oneself). Once the signifiers are up and running (which “once” is *always-already*) there really is only the obligation to speak, the impossibility not to speak, and the fundamental logical irrelevance of the content of speech. This logical irrelevance applies to the domain of phonetic/phonemic content as much as anything else. The brute marks of language simply need to be made, and the subjects will thereafter appear in between the marks (the unary traits); there is nothing the subjects can do with language (or to language) that is not *in itself* constituted by means of the measurely stampede of the signifiers. The language-world of Beckett's *Not I* is by no means a hundred million miles away from this excoriating

metaphysical account of what it is that takes place when speech “meets” the subject. Nested within this play are, after all, complex narratological strands of “voice” and of an “I” that insists that it is not the speaking subject. Moreover, the work qualifies very much as the treating of a subject who is thematised on the basis of her being a product (even a side-effect) of speech. “Mouth” *speaks* that subject. And “Mouth” is theatrically realised (almost) stage-exhaustively as *mouth*. While it is the empirically linguistic which is dramatised most emphatically, however, what I have illustrated is how boldly it is the *logic* of linguistic subjectivity that the play above all stages. And core insights drawn from a Lacanian ontology have enabled us to see this to be the case.

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NOTES

- ¹ Danny Nobus, “Lacan’s Science of the Subject,” in *Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 50.
- ² Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 156.
- ³ Nobus, “Lacan’s Science,” 62.
- ⁴ Where Saussure himself cashed out the signifier’s net physical yield in terms of its phonetic value, later structuralist linguists (from Jakobson and Trubetzkoy onwards) preferred elegantly to dissolve this value into a constellation of abstract features of articulation. The phoneme for Chomsky and Halle thus decomposes analytically into *anterior*, *coronal*, *high*, *low*, *back*, *strident*, *consonantal*, and so forth. These features can either be *on* or *off* in the case of a particular actualised speech sound. A minimal unit of speech will then be phonologically stored and processed (for speakers and auditors) in terms of these abstract distinctive features. A sound will make a *phonemic* difference—which is to say it will contribute as a linguistic unit—whenever it actualises a unique matrix of these features; see Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991). To give an example: English /s/ (for “slobber”) decomposes into -voiced; +continuant; +strident; +distributed; +anterior; -labial; +coronal; -high; -back; -constricted (glottis); -spread (glottis); see Francis Katamba, *An Introduction to Phonology* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1989), 55. Only /s/ (in English) will have exactly this set of articulative features (for English), which is why, when they are realised in speech together, they are phonologically authorised (minimally) to contribute to English meanings.
- ⁵ Nobus, “Lacan’s Science,” 50.
- ⁶ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press,

2006), 59.

⁷ Catherine Russell, "The Figure in the Monitor: Beckett, Lacan, and Video," *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 4 (1989): 20.

⁸ Tony Thwaites, "Lacan, Krauss, and the Unconscious: Some Notes of Rosalind Krauss's "Welcome to the Cultural Revolution," *Illiteracy, Psychoanalysis, and Topology*, accessed August 17, 2012, http://www.liturerre.org/Illiteracy-Lacan's_version_of_the_Signifier.htm. Lacan explores the logic of this positioning of subject between signifier and signifier in a variety of ways over the course of his work. In Seminar VII, for instance, he picks up on C. S. Peirce's notion that "the sign ... is that which is in the place of something else for someone." Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960* (London: Routledge, 1992), 91. It is in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, meanwhile, where this idea is revisited and developed to its bluntest effect: "Any node in which signs are concentrated, in so far as they represent something, may be taken for a someone. What must be stressed at the outset is that a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier." Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1981), 207.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁰ This relation (of signifier to signifier) remains something nonetheless which must be *marked* in order that subjectivity come into play: "There is appropriate use of the signifier whenever, at the level of the receiver, what is important is not the effect of the content of the message, nor the triggering in the organ of a given reaction ... but this—that at the message's point of arrival one makes a note of it." Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Norton: New York, 1993), 188.

¹¹ "The signifier is to be thought of initially as distinct from meaning. It's characterized by not in itself possessing a literal meaning [*signification propre*]" (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 199); "Experience proves it—the more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is" (*Ibid.*, 185).

¹² Lorenzo Chiesa's discussion of the fact that "[t]he linguistic structure of the unconscious is often defined by Lacan in terms of the "letter" actually leads us, rather suggestively, to acknowledge that there do exist alternative readings of the ontology (of the signifier) in question here:

"What is a letter, and how does it differentiate itself from a signifier? As Lacan states, a letter must always be taken literally, and if one takes it so, one immediately realizes that a letter is material, it is the 'material support that concrete discourse borrows from language.' On an initial level, a letter thus corresponds to the written materialization of a phoneme (e.g. the ink that occupies a certain space and is taken to represent a sound). More importantly, on a second, broader level, *a letter is nothing but a signifier as it materially exists per se in the unconscious, independently of its effects of (conscious) signification.*" Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 2007), 57.

¹³ It is bracketed off from the ontology, but by no means necessarily from the psychoanalytical treatment. Phonetic linkages may, it seems, be followed through with when and where it is felt that relevantly idiosyncratic speech segments have come up in the analysis.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁷ Chomsky argues persuasively in his *Syntactic Structures* for such a heuristic division of labours, first by defining a language as a set of utterances and then by asking us to

“think of each sentence of this set [of utterances] as a sequence of phonemes of finite length. A language is then an enormously involved system, and it is quite obvious that any attempt to present directly the set of grammatical phoneme sequences would lead to a grammar so complex that it would be practically useless. For this reason (among others), linguistic description proceeds in terms of “levels of representations.” Instead of stating the phonemic structure of sentences directly, the linguist sets up such ‘higher level’ elements as morphemes, and states separately the morphemic structure of sentences and the phonemic structure of morphemes. It can easily be seen that the joint description of these two levels will be much simpler than a direct description of the phonemic structure of sentences.” Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (New York: de Gruyter, 2002), 13.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 683.

¹⁹ Such a reading of internal complexity patently applies to the Chomskyan programme where, in Jaroslav Peregrin’s words, “theory occasion[s] the reconstruction of language as a formal algebraic structure. Chomsky proposed to account for a language via a set of formal generative rules, the recursive application of which to a given initial symbol generates all and only syntactically well-formed sentences of the language.” Jaroslav Peregrin, “Structural Linguistics and Formal Semantics,” *Prague Linguistics Circle Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Eva Hajičova et al. (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1995), 87.

²⁰ “There is no question for a subject without another to whom he has addressed it” (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 202).

²¹ Darian Leader, *What is Madness?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), 51.

²² Lacan, *Écrits*, 683.

²³ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 113.

²⁴ Cf. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 208.

²⁵ Sarah West, *Say It: The Performative Voice in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 129.

²⁶ Jennifer M. Jeffers, *Beckett’s Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 144.

²⁷ Dolar, *Voice*, 69.

- ²⁸ Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 49.
- ²⁹ Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53.
- ³⁰ Samuel Beckett, "Not I," in *Samuel Beckett. The Grove Centenary Edition*, vol. 3, *Dramatic Works*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 405.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 405.
- ³² West, *Say It*, 146.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ³⁴ Dolar, *Voice*, 69.
- ³⁵ Beckett, "Not I," 406, 407.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 407.
- ³⁷ Uhlmann, *Philosophical Image*, 53.
- ³⁸ Beckett, "Not I," 406.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 405.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 412.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 406, 408, 411, 405.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 410, 406, 406–8, 407.
- ⁴³ Tajiri, *Prosthetic Body*, 49.
- ⁴⁴ Beckett, "Not I," 408.
- ⁴⁵ J. C. Wells, *Accents of English, 2: The British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 423.
- ⁴⁶ Lacan, *Écrits*, 677.
- ⁴⁷ Sheldon R. Brivic, *Joyce through Lacan and Žižek: Explorations* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 5.
- ⁴⁸ Beckett, "Not I," 408.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 408.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 406.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 407.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 411.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 411.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.