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NOT I: An Existentialist Statement on the Human Condition

A. Deniz Bozer

In his seminal work, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin distinguishes between the dictionary definition of “absurd,” that is “strange,” and the understanding of absurd in drama: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (23). In this sense, Esslin further defines “absurd” as “out of harmony, without reason, incongruous, illogical” (23). “Out of harmony,” an expression commonly used in the musical sense, in the Theatre of the Absurd refers to the microcosmos being out of harmony with the macrocosmos – in other words, man being in conflict with his environment and the universe at large. It is no coincidence that the Theatre of the Absurd came into being after the Second World War, reflecting the meaninglessness of post-war life which resulted in man’s feeling alienated in a cruel, indifferent and even hostile world. Furthermore, since socio-political and economic constructs changed as a result of the war, in the post-war scene man is observed to have lost his values and his faith in all institutions social, political, and religious alike, and hence is left disillusioned.

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The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with existentialist philosophy which originated in the aftermath of the First World War and flourished in the wake of the Second World War, basically asserting that life is essentially without meaning. Albert Camus's existentialist essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is of utmost importance in illustrating this meaninglessness of life. In his essay, Camus reveals his philosophy through Sisyphus's situation which illustrates the futility of man's search for a purpose and meaning in life. Although human beings are aware of their mortality, they try to render their existence on earth meaningful through their ironically much valued accomplishment. Condemned to a meaningless task, Sisyphus realises the futility of his endeavour, thereof yielding into a content state of acceptance. Camus underlines in the last lines of his essay that, "[t]he struggle itself [...] is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). Despite being aware of his cursed fate, each man like Sisyphus, keeps pushing his own rock to make his life meaningful by setting it a purpose. Moreover, man does not hesitate to start all over again each time the rock rolls back down the mountain because he has hope that next time maybe he might succeed. Moreover, as Camus states this myth "is tragic only at the rare moments it becomes conscious" (121), as the metaphysical state of the conscious human being is absurd. Camus's essay inspired contemporary dramatists; the works of playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett are widely considered as the dramatic expressions of this essay. The Theatre of the Absurd, "castigates, satirically the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious of ultimate reality. This is the feeling of deadness and mechanical senselessness of half conscious lives [...] which Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*" (Esslin 390).

Although existentialism was the philosophical background to the post-war universe, the most prominent British representative of the Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, declared that he was not familiar with the philosophical jargon employed by the existentialists. "Beckett said that he did not understand the distinction Heidegger and Sartre had made between existence and being; their language

was too philosophical for him” (qtd. in Murphy 236). Beckett did not acknowledge that he was an existentialist or that he subscribed to any other philosophy. However, an explicit link can be observed between existential theory and Beckett’s dramatic work as all his plays are explicitly reflective of characteristics of existentialist thought, and ironically challenge the reader/audience to make sense of the meaninglessness presented to them. His later play *Not I* (1972) is no exception.

Not I was first performed in November 1972 at the Lincoln Center in New York and later in January 1973 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Thus, January 2013 marked the 40th anniversary of *Not I*’s UK premiere. *Not I* was written in English “in twelve days from 20 March to 1 April” (Bair 661), on “five single-spaced typed pages” (Bair 663) and was expected to be recited at a fast speed, preferably in about fifteen minutes.¹ In accordance with most of Beckett’s other short plays referred to by himself as “dramaticules,”² in *Not I*, too, he has minimised the fundamental dramatic elements of action, character, dialogue and setting to such an extent that, for many scholars, the piece almost ceases to be a play. Thereby, Lawley categorises it as “a dramatic poem-in-prose” (325).

As *Not I* opens, the house lights go down and the audience hears for about ten seconds unintelligible words coming from behind the curtain. When the curtain rises, in the total darkness of the stage, upstage to audience right is viewed Mouth which has been placed “*about 8 feet about 2 and a half meters above stage-level and faintly lit*

1 Beckett was displeased when Jessica Tandy, who played Mouth in *Not I*’s world premiere in New York in 1972, delivered the story too slowly, in 22 minutes. So, when he himself was directing *Not I*’s first British performance at the Royal Court Theatre in London, he insisted that Billie Whitelaw, who was playing Mouth, recite the story in 15 minutes (Bair 670), creating an intensity that would captivate the audience.

2 *Not I* “belongs to a group of brief fragmentary texts that are best defined by a term that Beckett himself first coined in the subtitle to *Come and Go* [1965]: ‘dramaticule’ (literally ‘playlet’)” (Elam 146).

from close-up and below" (NI 376). The dark void in which Mouth is placed may be a metaphor for the dark and hostile universe with its indifference to the uncertain condition of man. Also, the uncertainty of the time and place in the play marks the universality of the setting, positing the universality of the absurdity of the human condition. A spotlight lights up a disembodied Mouth with a female voice. This "one-mouth play" as it has been referred to (Lisa Dwan), comprises the fragmented story of an elderly woman who, "dissociat[ing] herself from her agonizing past" (Brater 1974 193), refuses to use the personal pronoun "I."³ It is common to come across fragmented identities and/or bodies especially in Beckett's later work; however, the reduction of a human being to a mouth is a most extreme example of fragmentation indeed. The woman whose story Mouth recounts only occasionally refers to her body, and then only as a "machine" (NI 378, 380) which seems to be disconnected from her brain and soul.

"Mouth's voice suggests a female gender, but her mouth itself does not do so, the mouth being a human organ in which genderisation is not marked" (Bryden 120). In addition, there seems to be no particular female discourse employed as the story is being told. This woman who has remained silent most of her life, occasionally and then only in winter, bursts into talking, displaying a disconnected stream of consciousness. As she disjointedly recollects past incidents and recounts them in a disorganised manner, words pour out of her mouth like a wild stream. Interestingly, quite a few of these words are negations. Brater draws attention to the frequent use of these negations such as, "no matter," "no love," "no moon," "no screaming," "no part," "no idea," "no speech," "no stopping," "no sound," "no response," "no feeling;" Brater also marks the endless "nots," "nevers," and "nothings" (1987 33). Correspondingly, parents are unknown, unheard of and

3 In this sense, Vivian Mercier has stated that Not I recalls *The Unnamable* (1960; *L'innommable*, 1953), a Beckettian novel where the protagonist, this time not a woman but a man, refrains from using the first person pronoun (117) by stating, "I shall not say I again, ever again" [Beckett 1994, 358] (117).

prayers unanswered. In addition to Camus, another existentialist contributing to the philosophical background of the Theatre of the Absurd, Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that because man's expectations of a meaning and purpose in an indifferent universe are not fulfilled in life, there is nothingness, a negation. For negation is a refusal of existence (Sartre 43). And again as Sartre posits "nothingness provides the ground for negation (52). Henceforth, in Mouth's monologue these negations are functional in that they allude to existential nihilism positing that life has no intrinsic meaning or value and that all existence is nothingness, and is futile.

In addition to Mouth, downstage to audience left, on an invisible podium, diagonally facing Mouth stands the Auditor, a tall figure who is dressed "*in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully, faintly lit*" (NI 376). Although the Auditor is of "*undeterminable sex,*" the djellaba he/she is wearing is an outer garment commonly worn by (Arabic) men. The Auditor, never utters a word, merely raises his/her arms from the sides and lets them fall back in "*helpless compassion*" (NI 377, 379, 381, 382) each of the four times, also expressing reluctance in succumbing to the woman who cannot acknowledge herself by using the first person pronoun "I. In many productions the directors, including Beckett himself, choose to remove the Auditor for the reason that it causes technical difficulties in staging. However, it is worth taking into consideration Brater's remark on this point: "Remove the Auditor from the stage [...] and the dramatic conflict is gone" (1987 34).

As a characteristic feature of Absurd drama, in *Not I* there is no story line in the traditional sense. The plot seems to be a linear one with an open-ending. Yet as another feature of Absurd drama, language seems to have lost its function as a means of communication as the woman continues her senseless prattle. She cannot tell the story in an ordered manner; she employs nonsensical and disconnected phrases full of "incoherent babblings," a phrase actually used by Esslin (21-22) in relation to language utilised in the Theatre of the Absurd. This technical feature is even more significant in this playlet as the broken sentences and fragmented utterances functionally resemble

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the fragmentation of Mouth from its body, and the fragmentation in the woman's identity. Moreover, Mouth's utterances do not follow a chronological order; and there are repetitions which create a cyclical narration. It is noteworthy that while reciting the story, Mouth occasionally seems to stop for an instant as if listening to an inner voice; this is most probably the woman's own conscious. Therefore it is understandably marked by a reviewer in the *Guardian* that the inner drama of this woman who borders on old age "is as close as the theatre will ever get to representing a mental interior" (Lezard).

In this play which mainly constitutes a series of images, Mouth recounts in an elliptical manner five fragmented scenes from the life of a woman who is reaching seventy. In Mouth's story, the first intelligible word uttered by Mouth is "out" (NI 376), and the first incident is birth. Eight months after a casual sexual encounter, a baby girl is prematurely born. Birth is not considered a joyous event in Beckett as man is believed to experience frustration as a result of having been cruelly thrust into the world, henceforth being exposed to the cruel indifference of the universe. On this account, Heidegger, whose influence on Sartre and other existentialists cannot be denied, discusses *facticity* (factuality) as "thrownness" (*geworfenheit*), suggesting that man has been "thrown into the world" (See Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Part One, V, 38). The baby girl's unloving parents both abandon her, resulting in her being raised in an orphanage. Here, too, she is brought up without any love, "no love of any kind...at any subsequent stage..." (NI 376). This lovelessness is a "typical affair" (NI 376) reflecting the indifference of the macrocosm. Later, even as "a tiny little girl" (NI 376) she cannot expect her desires to be fulfilled. Whatever her desires were, they were probably never fulfilled and she faced, using Lacan's terminology, "a lack." The lack referred here, is not in terms of *manque*, the lack of something --- mainly a biological organ like the phallus, but rather as Lacan originally designated, *manque-a-être*, that is lack of being which can also be translated as "not-being" and "failure to be" (595-614, 716). The second incident is about when the woman shops in silence at the supermarket. While shopping, she would silently buy whatever she needed. Although throughout her life

she had remained speechless except for when “once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason” (*NI* 379) she erupted into torrents of unintelligible babble. At the supermarket, strangers stared at her as she uttered nonsense. The third incident takes place during one of her silent walks at Croker’s Acres, near Leopardstown a few miles South of Dublin, and close to Beckett’s childhood home (Brater 1987 33; Beja 160). Sitting on a mound, the woman notices tears in the palm of her hand and realises that they are her own. She has been silently weeping; as far as she can remember this is the first time in her life since she was a baby. In the fourth incident, she is seen in a courtroom, being charged with some unspecified crime and asked by the judge to say something for herself. Nevertheless, she is unable to stand up and say a few words in defense of herself despite the judges orders: “stand up woman,” “speak up woman” (*NI* 381). She does not choose to defend herself, and remains silent. Her making this life choice corresponds with existentialism’s foregrounding the freedom of choice. According to existential thought, man freely makes his choices in life and guides his/her life towards a certain project s/he has chosen (Sartre 623, 629). Sartre further argues that despite external circumstances limiting man (facticity), human beings still have the power to be free in making their own choices. And this freedom cannot be isolated from the responsibility that comes with it (637). Human beings have to endure the consequences of the choices they make. At this point, the woman’s fate as a result of her choice remains unknown. Moreover, as she remains silent, she is reduced to a state of voicelessness, hence becomes non-existent. The fifth and final incident recounted by Mouth occurs on an April morning. As she is “looking aimlessly for cowslips” (*NI* 376), she seems to experience a brief blackout. She falls face down on the grass. She incomprehensibly “found herself in the dark” (*NI* 377). She felt no pain but only numbness. As she lay on the ground half conscious, she becomes aware of an intermittent flash of light in her head, together with a continuous buzzing sound. Her collecting cowslips is of importance in the interpretation of this highly ambiguous scene. Why would she be collecting these earliest of spring flowers? One answer could simply be to put these pretty, yellow,

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fragrant flowers in her room to enjoy them. Or, more significantly, she could be seeking remedy in nature for ailments mainly resulting from age. As an herbal medicine cowslip (*primula veris*) is known to have valuable therapeutic properties in treating coughs, sleeplessness, muscle spasms, gout, skin complaints and rheumatism (“Cowslip”). Furthermore, this healing plant is defined as “relaxing and sedative for migraines, tension headaches [...] Anti-rheumatic. Provid[ing] protection from strokes --- prevent[ing] blood from clotting” (Rawlings 112; “Cowslip”). If not used carefully, “[t]here is some concern that cowslip might interfere with blood pressure control,” resulting in hypotension or hypertension (“Cowslip”). Thus, bearing in mind the flashing light and the constant buzzing in her head, her blackout may have been caused by high blood pressure. Shortly after this brief incident of passing out, once she partly regains her self conscious, she, unusually, for it is spring, starts to utter senseless words. It can at first be thought that the buzzing in her head may be the sound of these words. However, Mouth earlier marks that the woman was not exactly insentient “for she could *still* hear the buzzing” (*NI* 377, italics mine) all along. Thus, it is understood that the buzzing must have already been there even before she collapsed, as a sign of the approaching threat of rising blood pressure, resulting in her briefly passing out.

Although very short, *Not I* is remarkably ambiguous and lends itself to more than one interpretation. However, among multiple interpretations Beckett emphatically protested that of Jessica Tandy’s, who was to play Mouth when *Not I* was to be performed for the first time. One night in Paris, Tandy, the director, Alan Schneider, Hume Cronyn who was to play the Auditor, met with Beckett for dinner. Beckett presented his new play and they all read this short piece at the dinner table. “When they finished, there was a puzzled but positive emotional reaction, although no one was to respond to the play intellectually. Beckett seemed pleased by this, especially when all agreed they could not understand it. Tandy pertinently asked Beckett, ‘What happened to the woman in the field? Was she raped?’ He answered, ‘No, no, not at all – it wasn’t that at all. How could you think of such a thing!’”

(Bair 663-664). Although what happened to the woman is obscure, the first thought to come to her mind when she regained her conscious was that she was being punished for her sins. Only one of her sins is specified in the text, and that is her loss of faith in God. In the orphanage she was brought up to believe in a merciful God. However, as time passed she lost her belief in God and religion, and grew into a person referring to God and His tender mercies in a mocking manner. At this point in the play, in compliance with existentialist thought, Nietzsche's statement "God is dead. We have killed God" (see *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) appropriately resonates. During and after the war, feeling deserted by God, man not only lost his belief in religion as an institution but also grew cynical about God's existence and His mercifulness. In the post-war universe, "God [who] is [supposed to be] love" (*NI* 381, 383) ceased to bestow His tender mercies upon humanity which resulted in a nihilistic society as posited by Nietzsche.

Another ambiguity in the text is the "godforsaken hole" (*NI* 376, 381, 382) which can be interpreted in a few different ways. In addition to possibly being a mouth, the "god forsaken hole" could also be Croker's Acres, referring to a sense of stuckness and the apparent impossibility of a happy and prosperous future in this remote corner of the world due to, among other things, economic drawbacks. Moreover, the "god forsaken hole" could be a vagina as the woman "pres[es] out her words with difficulty, in spurts or spasms; one can compare the production of the words to the childbirth the words speak of" (Astro 179). Beckett himself has noted that the illumination of the contracting and expanding mouth alone makes it resemble a vagina (qtd. in Astro 179 n 6). Yet, in compliance with existentialism, "the godforsaken hole" could be the world or universe which is "called ...no matter" (*NI* 376), a nothing, a void.

Man is ultimately "confronted by nothingness at the core of [his/her] existence" (Roubiczek 39). The woman was born into an irrational world where the condition of human existence is not only absurd but also tragic. Hence, Mouth recounts a sterile existence where there has been no pleasure or pain; the woman seems to have gone through life in a state of numbness. There was "nothing of any note till coming up

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to sixty" (*NI* 376), or "seventy" for that matter. Unlike Sisyphus who had, no matter how futile, an aim in life, this woman is merely "drifting around" (*NI* 376, 380). Thus, her life can be considered to have been a meaningless existence in a vacuum. She was born, she suffered, and now she is probably dying. Therefore, the whole play can be read as the disembodied consciousness of an elderly woman on the brink of death.

In this manner, reflecting "the inability of the consciousness to conceptualise itself in its totality" (Oppenheim 42), this woman whose story is recounted by Mouth cannot bring herself to say "I." The Theatre of the Absurd maintains that the microcosm's/the self's being out of harmony with the macrocosm/the universe, results in chaos, disorder, lack of unity, all of which ultimately lead to fragmentation. Correspondingly, the fragmented speech in *Not I* reflects the narrator's fragmented consciousness. The uncontrollable discharge of words underlines the decay in the brain. She has "no idea of what she's saying" (*NI* 379, 380) as she repeatedly recites the traumatic events in her life. Indeed, with her "mouth half-open as usual" (*NI* 379, 381) and always silent except for occasional babblings, the woman seems almost mad. In fact, the minimum use of the personal pronoun may be a sign of insanity as discussed by psychiatrist R. D. Laing in his book *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1959) which covers his work on schizophrenia. Laing draws attention to a patient who avoided using "I'- statements" which he explains as "an intentional project of self-annihilation [...]" (qtd. in Kennedy 32). After having experienced certain traumas, the woman in *Not I* is no longer a unified subject; she no longer has a unified conscious. Mouth voices the fragmented conscious of this old woman who refuses to accept that she herself is the main character in the events narrated as she emphatically protests, "what?...who?...no!...she!" (*NI* 377, 379, 381, 382, 382), each of the five times she is interrupted by her inner voice.

In his essay "Why Are Identity Disorders Interesting for Philosophers?," Metzinger not only refers to identity disorders resulting in a "bodiless" state of self consciousness (1), but also to the existential

denial referred to as the Cotard syndrome after the French psychiatrist Jules Cotard, who, in 1880, “introduced the term *délire de négation* to refer to a specific kind of ‘nihilistic’ delusion, the central defining characteristic of which consists in the fact that patients deny their own existence, and frequently even that of the external world” (10). In the opinion of this German philosopher, the neurophenomenological state of the speaker’s not using the pronoun ‘I’ underlines that “this person would experience herself as non-existent --- the phenomenal property of selfhood is not instantiated anymore” (Metzinger 21). Henceforth, there is no self as subject any more. Similarly, the woman in *Not I* is denying her own identity by not acknowledging ‘I.’ Therefore, she is a no-thing, nothing, a non-subjectivity, corresponding with Sartre’s argument in *Being and Nothingness* that “[n]othingness stands at the origin of the negative judgment because it is itself negation” (52).

As for the Auditor who remains quiet throughout the play, s/he carries different interpretative possibilities. Interestingly, the Auditor is in a *djellaba*. As Acheson suggests, if Beckett had said “robe,” it would be “reminiscent of a priest in confessional,” and Beckett wished to stir clear from religious connotations (178). The Auditor could also be “a psychiatrist, as various critics have suggested [...] and that his gestures of ‘helpless compassion’ are meant to suggest she is incurably insane” (Acheson 179). On the other hand, besides being a different person, the Auditor could be associated with the woman/Mouth as her alter ego, her other half, participating only by showing his/her feeling of “helpless compassion,” as the woman repeatedly denies that the story is hers. In Jungian terms, the presence of a second self could be a sign of Dissociative Identity Disorder, also known as Multiple Personality Disorder. The woman could also be bordering on schizophrenia. In addition, being silent like the woman’s former self, the Auditor could be the subconscious of the woman, helplessly yielding to her as she is not able to establish a harmonious whole in herself. Katherine Worth supportingly argues that, “[t]he Auditor cannot be seen as a figure separate and utterly distinct from Mouth. There is also an impression that [...] the Auditor has to be located within the psyche which has split up” (qtd. in Bryden 119). Throughout the play, it seems like the

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woman is holding a silent conversation with this second self as she asks and answers questions such as, “what? ...kneeling? ... yes” (*NI* 377), “what? the buzzing ... yes” (*NI* 378)”, or uses expressions like “oh very much so” (*NI* 378) as if agreeing with her interlocutor , or “on the contrary” (*NI* 379) expressing opposition. As Katherine Worth further marks, “[i]t is even possible that they are the sundered parts of a single being” (qtd. in Bryden 119). Therefore, the ‘I’ should not only include the self but also the other. However, at this point, at the end of her life, the woman does not seem to make an attempt to bridge the gap between her self and the other. Thus, a gap continues to remain between the speaking subject and her silent former self.

It is a well-known fact that Beckett employs biographical elements in his work. In *Not I*, disregarding gender, this woman who has no name could very well be Beckett himself for at the time this play was written the writer was sixty-six years old, “coming up to [...] seventy” (*NI* 376) just like her. Thus, it can safely be suggested that *Not I* may be viewed as an elderly man’s need to piece together the miscellaneous bits in his own life, to be able to create at least towards the end of his days a harmonious and meaningful whole challenging the absurdity of the human condition.

Correspondingly, to make her own life meaningful, the elderly protagonist in *Not I*, needs to have a purpose. In this case, it can be argued that the woman’s burden is to tell whatever it is that she has to tell: “something she had to tell” (*NI* 381), “thinking...oh long after... sudden flash...perhaps something she had to...had to...tell...could that be it? ...something she had to tell?” (*NI* 381). The “something” she has to tell could very well be the absurdity of the human condition. Although she is not quite sure what she has to tell, she must continue tirelessly with her efforts to tell it as suggested by the last phrase of the text, “pick it up” (*NI* 382) - “it” possibly being her undertaking, her burden. And like Sisyphus she should continue to push her own rock up the hill, trying “to make sense of it” (*NI* 380) all by “piece[ing] it together” (*NI* 380). In order to bring meaning along with harmony into her existence, she needs to seal the breaches in the chasms not only within her body but also between her body, between her soul and

mind, as well as her self and the macrocosm. Yet, as the play ends after the curtain falls, and unintelligible words uttered by the woman continue to be heard, the impossibility of challenging the absurdity of the human condition is realised. It is further understood that not just in this particular case, the woman's, but also in general, humanity's metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of life will not come to an end, and existential damnation will continue.

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