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CARLA LOCATELLI*

“The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes”: Reading Beckett’s *Not I* as the (non)End of Tragedy

Abstract

Beckett challenges received notions of ‘classical’ tragedy in all of his works. In particular, in *Not I* the very possibility of tragedy is at stake in relation to the construction of subjectivity and agency. The play points to a state of human infirmity, and to a series of “tupenny aches over life and death” which seem to ridicule the notion of tragedy while representing it. Is it a (non)tragedy that life and death are “tupenny aches”? Can the being of being find a tragic representation in the theatre? Can a linguistically determined subject acknowledge and inscribe his/her being with his/her suffering? If we define postmodernism as the age of the end of “master-narratives” (Lyotard 1984 [1979]), we might be limited to the illustration of particular examples of experience, so that the archetypal value of a human condition becomes a problematic issue. But, can there be tragedy without some form of ‘universality’? How can the individual subject be representative of a general human condition? These are the issues raised and developed in this essay, which discusses narrative possibilities, linguistic economy and dialogical performance also in relation to an Aristotelean dramatic tradition.

KEYWORDS: tragedy; ontology; catharsis; action/narration; alienation; agency; universality/particularity; consciousness; logocentrism

1. “The trouble with tragedy”

“The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes / Over life and death and other tupenny aches” (qtd in Knowlson 1996: 100).¹ This quotation from Beckett highlights his knowledge and tongue in cheek parody of Nicolas Chamfort, as well as a cultural condition that is not typical of just one depressed subject (possibly the biographical Beckett, for some readers), nor distinctive of one specific character in Beckett’s plays. The quotation can be taken as a

¹ James Knowlson highlights the fact that Beckett makes a doggerel of a Chamfort’s maxim. Sébastien Roch-Nicolas Chamfort’s maxim reads: “Tragedy has the great moral defect of giving too much importance to life and death” (qtd Douglas 1917: 1809). See also Chamfort 1824-25.

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comment or confirmation of the end of “grand narratives” described by Lyotard as a feature of Postmodernity (1979). So, these are the ‘postmodernist’ terms in which tragedy can be conceived, albeit not just in Beckett.

The quotation in my title points to a ‘general’ human state of frailty and disability, with nothing particularly “grand” about it, a discomfort shown and performed by a varied series of “aches” troubling humans “over life and death”. It is worth noticing that “*over* life and death” means both ‘about’ and ‘during’ life and death, so as to indicate that the ensuing “fuss” is both a lasting condition and the result of an object of worry. Life and death, throughout a lifetime, become the objects of a “fuss”, i.e. not only a concern, but also a constant display of fret and hassle, which, in traditional notions of tragedy, through an intensification of commotion, become a profound affliction and a dramatic woe for tragic characters.

So we can ask: are life and death just “tupenny aches”, or are they endowed with enormousness and importance, so that the “fuss” tragedy makes about life and death is logical and acceptable? There is no simple answer to this question. As a matter of fact, the minimal size of “tupenny aches” is related to the maximal existential horizon of human reality (“life and death”). Thus, the issue remains an open question: is it a tragedy, or not a tragedy, that life and death (both on the same level in Beckett), are among the many (other) “tupenny aches” of human infirmity? Are life and death unimportant aches, not worthy of “fuss”? And are they comparable pains? So, would a “fuss” about life “and” death make sense? To what extent is it meaningful? Is it a tragic fuss, or a silly one? Ultimately, these interrogatives question the potential issue of meaning ‘in’ life, and the meaning ‘of’ life.

Consequently, we can ask if the ontological condition of suffering and dying can still find a ‘tragic’ representation in our Eurocentric postmodern world.

All of the above are the basic questions I propose to address in this essay while focusing on *Not I*.

2. Tragic Potential and Possibilities (also in *Not I*)

Strictly speaking, ‘tragedy’ is not just a dramatic form, but it is both ‘the tragic’ of a dramatic ontology, and the tragic possibility enacted and illustrated by dramatic forms. This semantic overlapping of ontology and form helps highlighting differences and similarities between traditional and postmodernist conceptions of both tragedy as ontology, and as dramatic form.

I believe that the very possibility of ‘the tragic’ (i.e. tragedy as both ontology and form), is ultimately at stake in all of Beckett’s plays, including *Not I*, but not in the way in which tragedy is traditionally understood, i.e.

as the consequence of human decisive errors or sin, or as a specific punishment from the gods. Rather, in Beckett tragedy is a general and unavoidable reality, and therefore a very ordinary and expected certainty. Can we still call it 'tragedy' if it is the norm of human predicament? Its general quality problematizes the terrible, the appalling, the catastrophic dimensions that tragedy is usually endowed with in its traditionally established definitions.

In other words: if the appalling is normal, can it still be tragic?

Not I does not provide an immediate answer, but takes the reader-spectator through the labyrinth of some of the most recurrent human questions: i.e. is tragedy the common 'human normal', or is it specific of an individual (e.g. of the woman protagonist of *Not I*)? A number of related questions are also overtly posed in this play: does human suffering have a cause, such as the sins committed? How does God relate to humans (and vice-versa)? Why do Christians teach that God is merciful?

These reflections, uttered or implied by MOUTH in the play, indicate at first a sort of dreadful nemesis which explains human grief: humans suffer because of a punishment from God for their sins. It is a thought formulated by a "speechless infant"² as soon as she speaks, but a thought that is eventually "dismissed as foolish" ("... brought up as she had been to believe ... with the other waifs ... in a merciful ... [*Brief laugh.*] ... God ... [*Good laugh.*] ... first thought was ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... she was being punished ... for her sins ...", Beckett 1990: 377).³ Through the ironical "[*b*]rief laugh" Beckett denounces the indoctrination of orphans, but, most importantly, ridicules the notion of punishment from the gods (central to traditional tragedy). Furthermore the play shows no sin nor error in the protagonist's life, which could perhaps motivate such punishment. Besides, the mental state of the protagonist is so compromised that issues of responsibility, and therefore of sin, are problematic, if not altogether out of question.

Furthermore, it is worth noticing that, ironically, "waifs" (children with no parents), who could be freed from the 'Law of the Father', are on the contrary trapped into an absolute version of it, the one implicating 'God the Father'.⁴ Paternity is clearly not so compelling in being biological, as in being pervasively cultural as 'the Law of the Father' in its multiple versions.⁵

² Beckett 1990: 376. All quotations are from this edition.

³ For two religious readings with reference to the Gospels and Psalms, see Howard 1993 and Gontarski 1980.

⁴ "A third idol . . . is the God who is the Judge of 'sin', who confirms the rightness of the rules and roles of the reigning system, . . ." (Daly 1973: 31).

⁵ For a sociological background particularly focusing on abused mothers and children, see Sakauchi 2008.

3. Dramatic Structures of Tragedy (Aristotle and Beckett)

Beckett's parody of Chamfort's quotation indicates that tragedy is so real 'in' life and death, and that it is such an unavoidable component 'of' life and death, that adding meaning to it is just a production of "fuss".

What logically follows is that a customary tragic quality (of life and death) is likely to make a high notion of tragedy risible, as defined by Aristotle in these terms: "Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech . . . by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions" (1987: 2.1448a7).⁶ A literal reading of Aristotle's definition would include the following features: 1) serious and complete action; 2) magnitude; 3) embellished speech; 4) action rather than narration; 5) catharsis of emotions "by means of pity and terror".

Based on these elements, I will conduct my analysis of *Not I*, showing that one could deduce that *Not I* is, and is not, a tragedy.

a) *Rhetorical Features*

The play is not "in embellished speech", and certainly not in verse, even though it displays a highly structured use of language, and a lucid economy of speech. There is very little magnitude in it, apart from the huge wretchedness of the protagonist; it is a referential and a connotative 'magnitude' putting value at stake. Furthermore, the only 'action' in/of the play is a speech act (articulating the narration of a lifetime; see Bigliuzzi 2012).

b) *Action or Narration?*

Aristotle indicates that tragedy is characterized by "people acting and not by narration". *Not I* interrogates what qualifies as "acting", and specifically, if a narrative act can succeed as "acting". In fact, its dramatic action is a narration. MOUTH's story (thus a narration) is a theatrical speech 'act', because of the dramatic setting: narration is always a performance in the theatre, so it is a sort of Aristotelian "acting", but not necessarily opposed to "narration".

The presence of two characters, i.e. a speaker and a listener (MOUTH and AUDITOR) meets the requirements of "acting" in relation to the audience, but their acting is, paradoxically, just a heard monologue by another character, a monologic speech act.⁷ MOUTH's solipsistic narra-

⁶ Chapter divisions are the conventional ones introduced by Renaissance editors, and the Bekker numbers are used to refer to page number, columns and lines of his 1831 edition.

⁷ AUDITOR was not included in the videotaped production for BBC TV (1977). This structural change abidingly transforms the script (1972) and the play (first produced in New York at the Lincoln Center in 1972, and in London at the Royal Court in 1973). Beckett himself eliminated AUDITOR in the *Pas moi* staging at the Théâtre d'Orsay in 1978.

tion pre-empties the possibility of a classical dialogue or even monologue, which would be conducive to action. This is also demonstrated by the absence of AUDITOR in the videotaped production for BBC TV (1977), and in the staging of *Pas moi* in Paris in 1978.

We could say that AUDITOR ("tall standing figure, sex undeterminable", Beckett 1990: 376) is 'acting', based on Beckett's introductory *Note*: "Movement: this consists in simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back" (375). But do MOUTH's "contortions" (379) qualify as 'acting' (focus would be on MOUTH as character), or is it just a mouth moving? "[G]radually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! .. her lips moving! . . . and not alone the lips ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ..." (ibid.)? Apart from the irony of not seeing a face but only a mouth as MOUTH on a "[s]tage in darkness" (376), we have to conclude that 'acting' is performed by the "not felt at all" (379) contortions of lips and cheeks and jaws. Can acting not have an agent? Is it only a passive acting out? But, even if we consider this minimal movements as 'acting', we cannot ignore the intrusion of narration (through the use of the past tense) 'about' the movement of her lips: "gradually *she felt* ... her lips moving ..." (my emphasis). So, ultimately, the acting is a speech act of constative narration, but with some unidentified addressee, prompted to imagine by that very speech act: "gradually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! ..".

Ultimately, in *Not I* the opposition of "acting" and "narrating" is challenged, and the very notion of their conflict is warped.

c) *Catharsis*

All of the features of the play discussed so far seem to question and rework (but certainly not dismiss), Aristotle's definition of 'tragedy', and yet, one can see *Not I* as a cathartic play, not only arousing pity and terror, but also representing pity as indicated by the Beckettian *Note* referring to AUDITOR: "sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion" (Beckett 1990: 375). Compassion can also be interpreted as the modern psychological form of a traditional purging (of moral and burdensome feelings facing human helplessness), but the play also seems to suggest that a human intellectual understanding can be purged. Such 'feeling' would be the habitual ignorance of the role of language in human life: "not felt at all ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ..." that one ignores "the whole being ... hanging on its words ..." (379). Do humans need to purge their oblivion of the omnipresence of language? This seems to me the most innovative 'postmodern' appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis as 'purging'.

However, in *Not I* the Aristotelian conception of catharsis comes back foremost in all its ambivalent complexity: not only are the objects of catharsis hard to define, but, more importantly, the question is open regard-

ing who the subjects of catharsis are. Is it the public, or the characters, or both? And are the two characters equally or similarly experiencing and producing catharsis?

I think both AUDITOR and audience are cathartic subjects inasmuch as the AUDITOR re-presents the public, in developing a scopic 'magnetic chain' of interpretation of the object of their gaze. The idea of a 'magnetic chain' of interpretation derives from Plato's *Ion*.⁸ I think it fits well in relation to the empathy of *Not I* if AUDITOR expresses "helpless compassion", that would presumably be the feeling shared by the audience seeing the same spectacle. But would that be the one and only feeling the audience also feels, just because it hears and sees the same spectacle? I do not think so. For one thing, no one knows for sure that AUDITOR sees exactly what the audience sees; in fact, the audience sees AUDITOR seeing something but what s/he sees is undetermined. Thus, ultimately, what is at stake is the possibility of a projective identification: AUDITOR with MOUTH, and of audience with AUDITOR and MOUTH, but with no guarantee of the preservation of an 'original' spectacle, and of the outcome of similar projective feelings.

Because s/he is called AUDITOR (in the script) it is plausible that MOUTH and 'AUD'-ITOR hear the same things, i.e. the same story, and so would the 'aud'-ience. Does it follow that they share the same cathartic process? There is no verifiable answer. There could not be one, nor does it appear anywhere that they see the same thing.

Furthermore, granted that MOUTH is a full character, in spite of her metonymical body (a human body reduced to a mouth, and a body defined as "machine", 380), does MOUTH experience cathartically her helplessness and compulsion to speak?

Before answering we should remember that the reduction of the human body to a mouth does not signify the abolition of corporeality (as can be argued for *The Unnamable*), but reproduces the symbolism of a traditional interpretation of speech as the distinctive feature of 'humanness', and alludes to an interpretation of 'mouth' as 'vagina'.

⁸ While talking to Ion, the rhapsode, Socrates explains: ". . . this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power, which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet, but most people call 'Heraclea Stone'. For this stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone, and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone. In the same manner also the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain" (Plato 2014: 421).

There is no indication that MOUTH interprets her condition with compassion or terror, nor with any other feeling; she just feels, albeit sometimes "insentient" and "feeling so dulled" (377); she 'talks', with no cathartic transformation of feeling, no purging of emotions. However, her story might be cathartic, inasmuch as she reflects on the process of speaking while she delivers her speech: "when suddenly she realized ... words were ... what? . . . realized ... words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit ... could be none other ... than her own ..." (379).

So, MOUTH is definitely dramatic, but is she cathartically tragic? I think she is purely dramatic because she does not perceive herself (as AUDITOR and audience do – to some extent, at least), nor does she question or understand the cause of her being helpless: she just 'is' helpless. It is for the audience to investigate the nature of such disquieting helplessness (and I will provide some interpretations of it in what follows). The onlookers, audience and AUDITOR (the latter designated by way of a proper name as a listener in the script), are exposed to the unstoppable uttering of a 'pure' narrative emotion, plausibly MOUTH's.

Does her lack of awareness arouse compassion in the audience and the AUDITOR? Or is not the audience just startled (both surprised and frightened) by the sustained verbal flow of the protagonist's speech act? Catharsis is for all of them a strong dramatic possibility, albeit different, and fuelled by her story content, and by her speech performance. The audience probably feels more of a desire to assess when the verbal flow will finally stop, than compassion, and is mesmerized by the contortions of the mouth, and is irritated, as Beckett himself suggested: "I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience" (qtd in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 411). Irritation may correspond to a form of purging; in fact it could be an emotional mechanism producing the reconfiguration of the audience's understanding of MOUTH's words and identity. Note that, the proper name (MOUTH) is constructed on a descriptive naming (mouth), so it is not really a 'proper' name. In this way, the audience can become another character in the play, as AUDIENCE.

Catharsis becomes problematic, because the cathartic feeling is irritation (a sort of ironical purging from indifference and boredom). Also the scopic pleasure of the seers (AUDITOR and AUDIENCE) is tricky; in the long run, their voyeurism is turned into a curse: seeing MOUTH, and the audience's seeing AUDITOR's seeing, is an 'obligation' to see. That is why voyeurism is irritating. AUDITOR might not see,⁹ both literally and psychologically, but

⁹ Readers do not exactly know what the AUDITOR sees: a full body or just the mouth? At any rate, what s/he sees (and understands) remains unspecified.

he certainly hears, and thus “visualizes” a character-subject. This obligation to see is somewhat similar to the Beckettian “obligation to express” defined in *Three Dialogues*: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett 1984: 139). Is there a cathartic possibility in an unavoidable obligation?

The public sees the AUDITOR seeing something, and cannot avoid seeing mouth/MOUTH. Is there catharsis with no freedom? And, if so, is there a liberation presumably connected to this catharsis?

Strictly speaking, AUDITOR, with his/her feeling of “helpless compassion” (Beckett 1990: 375) is not a tragic character, nor is MOUTH, an “insentient” (377) protagonist of her own tragedy. Her lack of identity, i.e. her ‘not I’ poses the question: can a character lacking identity be tragic for herself? Kathleen O’Gorman has suggested that “the theatrical frame . . . constructs the spectator as a voyeur” (1993: 36). To what extent is this a cathartic condition? AUDITOR and audience are on the same level of theatricality; they are caught in a scopic performance of dramatic proportions, but MOUTH is the ultimate character, a powerful one, in which the very distinction between tragedy and its representation becomes evident.

In this sense, the tragedy of a dramatic ontology can for a cathartic minute be suggested to the audience as being different from a theatrical form.

d) *Structures of Plot*

With regard to the structural components of the tragic plot in terms of beginning, middle and end, it is worth recalling again an Aristotelian definition:

Tragedy is the representation of a complete i.e. whole action which has some magnitude (for there can be a whole with no magnitude). A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion. . . . Well-constructed plots, then, should neither begin from a random point nor conclude at a random point. (Aristotle 1987: 1448a.7)

Furthermore, Aristotle defines beginning and conclusion as follows: “A beginning is that which itself does not of necessity follow something else . . . A conclusion, conversely, is that which itself naturally follows something else, either of necessity or for the most part, but has nothing else after it” (ibid.).

Not I clearly dismisses these imperatives: as I noted, there is no magnitude of heroic actions, nor a high tone of narration, and, furthermore, there is no beginning, no middle and no end prescribed by the script, but just an unstoppable flow of words. Salivation, the last vestige of corporeality, remains the minimal residue of the link between body and language in the play.

Beckett’s stage directions indicate a non-beginning and a non-end, but prescribe the continuing of a voice, even beyond intelligibility: “*As house*

lights down MOUTH's voice continues unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds" (Beckett 1990: 376).

This structural feature of a non-ending verbal flow, as opposed to the actual end of the play in the theatre, highlights the implications of theatrical and dramatic components of any play. In *Not I* there is an end: when the light comes on, it signals that people may leave the theatre, so this is a theatrical ending. But there is no dramatic ending to the play since the monologue could continue till the death of the protagonist. This poses a tragic question: does death contain life or does life contain death?

Regarding the beginning ("With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient into: // MOUTH: ... out ... into this world ...", *ibid.*), we should note that the diacritic marks preceding the word "out" reiterate the presence of a breath-voice 'before' the first understandable word is uttered. In other words, the beginning has begun before the beginning. So: what is a Beckettian beginning?

At the level of plot, the word "out" indicates some sort of Heideggerian being 'thrown into the world', a being flung out of a preceding, albeit unknowable world. Thus we could talk of a pseudo-beginning, and, in post-modern terms we can call it a beginning with no origin, and not even *in medias res* (which could be understood if the subsequent 'acts' would explain the origin of the plot). As I will argue in the following paragraph, this beginning with no origin prepares the audience to understand "the buzzing" felt by MOUTH "all the time" (378).

A perfect specular parallelism links the above-mentioned "beginning-with-no-beginning", to an ending-with-no-end ("*Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up*", 383). The 'end' is not in the play, but in the theatre "as house lights up".

It is worth noticing that "*attention sufficient*" (376) is the feeling set by the script for Audience, before any other feeling is mentioned in the play, and before Audience can perceive in AUDITOR his/her "helpless compassion" (375). Attention is the condition required for perceiving a plot in an action with no beginning.

Somewhat ironically, the play accomplishes a major transgression of the Aristotelian definition of a "complete i.e. whole action", unless life is understood as a whole with no plot, as suggested by Barthes (1968) against the mythologies of bourgeois representation which make life into a destiny, or at least into an ordered plot. The lack of a beginning and of an end, indicates that life *per se* will always be an un-representable whole; as Derrida pointed out: "life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation" (1978: 234).

4. The Ordinariness of Beckettian Tragedy

It is now time to return to the question implied in my opening quotation. In what sense, according to Beckett, can we say: “The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes”? The most plausible answer, albeit not fully explicative, seems to point to the fact that in all of the Beckettian works tragedy is an ‘everyday normal’, something inevitable and familiar, and, as such, not worthy of a special “fuss”.

However, for most people, tragedy is understood as pertaining to some honourable and magnificent character stricken by some unforeseeable set of events; thus, it would not apply to the chronically deranged, nor to the full series of Beckettian characters, or, specifically, to the Irish lady protagonist of the story in *Not I*.¹⁰ In Beckett life itself is tragic, but this is not a particularly original thought given that it has been developed since ancient Greece (by cynics and sceptics), and in Jewish wisdom (for example in *Qohelet*), and subsequently up to and beyond Leopardi, who is mentioned, more or less explicitly, by Beckett himself.¹¹

In short: it is the very condition of living that brings about tragedy, doom and “aches”, and making a “fuss” about it would not change a thing. Tragedy is simply the lifelong atonement for being born.

No doubt all humans are afflicted by “tupenny aches”, but some are severely aggrieved, such as MOUTH; their condition does not differ, except in degree, from the general tragic reality of human life. In other words, tragedy is actually a general human condition, but some are more affected than others. In his essay on Bram van Velde Beckett summarized it (ironically) as follows: “There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemed commodities” (Beckett 1984: 143).

¹⁰ Most critics of *Not I* do not express a sustained sympathetic compassion for the woman of the tale; the many levels of her deprivation (physical, psychological, social, etc.), are usually highlighted but not as having a specifically personal or dominant importance in the play. Interestingly, discussions of aesthetic features, formal and symbolic, locate the focus of attention away from ‘the tragic’ itself in the story, or away from the discussion of this play as ‘tragedy’. See the important contributions by Enoch Brater about minimalism in the theatre in Brater 1987 and 1974; Lawley 1983 (about mouth as metonymy); Zeifman 1976 (AUDITOR as a double of Mouth); Worth 1986 (Auditor as judge); Gontarski 1985 (Auditor as internal addressee); Knowlson and Pilling 1980 (AUDITOR as representing the audience); Critchley 1998; Locatelli 2008.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett alludes to, and quotes Leopardi in his essays *Dante... Bruno... Vico... Joyce* and in *Proust*; he also refers to him in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, in *Molloy* and in *How it is*. For an accurate and critical mapping see Caselli 1996.

The difference between "being short of" and "being without" seems particularly interesting in relation to *Not I*, a play that represents a twofold understanding of tragedy: the general (life itself, ending with the achievement of the "without", i.e. with death), and the specific ("the being short of" characteristic of all human lives). The theatre, however, even more than a script, cannot represent or perform the pure "without", as much as one's own death is 'the un-representable' to its subject.¹² In other words, language cannot register (beyond a collective and symbolic conceptualisation), a pure "without", and is bound to the "being short of" in its spectacles.

a) *Is 'the Ordinary' General or Particular?*

Can language represent suffering apart from conceptualizations (i.e. generalizations)? Can it display a human suffering subjectively unique?

Basically, we can understand suffering in general, and MOUTH's suffering in particular, but only as an instance or an example of previously verbalized notions of suffering (including those in relation to the intra-psychic verbalization of our own suffering). Catharsis would then be, in a postmodern sense, not a purging of feeling, but the possibility of transforming our conceptualizations of suffering.

Furthermore, if suffering cannot show itself without a linguistic statement, then tragedy is a representation of an inevitable pain ordinarily belonging to the unutterable and inexpressible process of living and dying, understood by a 'pessimistic' tradition as an inevitable pain.

On a formal level, the variance between universality and particularity also brings back an old set of different questions: can there be tragedy without some form of universality? How could possibly the particularized subject and his/her ailments be representative of 'the tragic'? And: can specific ailments be tragic, and not just more spectacular than life?

In facing these questions today, we realize that if we classify *Not I* as a postmodernist play we should recall Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as the age of the end of "master-narratives", and consequently abolish or restrict a universal notion of tragedy, and make it applicable only to the particularity of infirmities, so that the representative (i.e. potentially universal) value of a personal doleful condition is impossible or unjustified.

And yet, we should also remember Antonin Artaud's defence of dramatic universality in his anti-bourgeois resistance to naturalistic representation: "The theater must make itself the equal of life – not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which CHARACTERS triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man

¹² Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida raise the question of what it means to write about death, that is, about a non-experience of the I, see Blanchot and Derrida 2000.

is only a reflection” (1958: 116). Should tragedy be the play (both theatrical and ontological) of a “life which sweeps away human individuality”? Is “individual life” a non-object of tragedy? Once more, an artist’s voice denounces a ‘bourgeois’ aesthetics, but more importantly, I think that Artaud’s defence of universality must be understood as an anticipation of a post-human *episteme*, one in which the anthropocene is deeply challenged, if not altogether displaced as central to life in the universe. The particular human “tupenny aches” have to disappear in order for life as tragedy to appear. No space for ‘master narratives’ and no space for ‘individual life’: so where is the space for tragedy?

b) *Ordinary “I” = Ordinary Alienation.*

In *Not I* there is some form of generalized human empathy galvanized by MOUTH’s story, even if the audience resists a projective identification with a character who is hardly representative of a universal human experience because of her particularly wretched situation. MOUTH is a deranged character, but her de-personalized utterances convey a deep philosophical questioning regarding how human subjectivity and consciousness are constructed.

Her insensate logorrhea, which bans her from acknowledging herself, simultaneously expresses for the onlookers her state of being ‘alienated’ but also the pervasiveness of logocentrism.

Both extremely powerless and lucid, MOUTH refuses “to relinquish third person” (Beckett 1990: 375); that means that she will not erase the insurmountable abyss that separates her from her words, her brain from her speech. As we have seen, corporeality produces speech: “her lips moving . . . and not alone the lips ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ...” (379), but the linguistic use of an ‘I’ would create an ‘I’ only as pure spectacle, as a grammatical ‘person’, and she utterly resists this universal form of identifying solidification. The price she pays for this extra-ordinary resistance is being unreservedly dysfunctional; she wins by showing the emptiness of the ‘I’, but she loses in denoting herself for AUDITOR and audience as an ‘I’ of no use, and ultimately as a literal ‘not I’. The double bind of her condition exacerbates the social gravity of her refusal “to relinquish third person”. Her refusal is simultaneously assertive and self-effacing and tragic; it is an ontological double bind: not using the ‘I’ is somehow a choice, but a choice that dissolves her into a ‘Not-I’.

MOUTH is incapable of appropriating her own ‘I’, in spite of her unstoppable talking (“what? ... who? .. no! .. she!”, 375). The audience is provoked when they see the discrepancy between linguistic designation and performance because of the failure of the sustained attempt to bridge the gap in MOUTH’s speech. She shows that breath and speech (corporeality and language) are not enough to establish the consciousness of a self, nor

to grant linguistic mastery and control; she has no apparent power over what she says, but it is the power of language that speaks through her. This is the cathartic revelation: the audience sees her spoken by her speech and is profoundly upset in acknowledging that this is a general condition and not just her particular one.

Her verbal discharge is a vain attempt to put an end to the pervasiveness of linguistic inevitability which would design her as an 'I' to herself. In this case: "The master tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984: 112), that is: logocentrism cannot be put to an end by speech. This explains why her speech cannot stop.

MOUTH's resistance to the torturing condition of hearing a "buzzing" (Beckett 1990: 377ff.) which does not stop with her speech, is indicated by her narration: "whole brain begging ... something begging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop ... pause a moment ... if only for a moment ... and no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't ..." (380). In this passage, very clearly, desire ("begging") and language are breached: there is "no response", because the begging cannot be heard by the language that formulates it, and also because the brain cannot "make sense of it" (ibid.). Can the audience "make sense", i.e. understand, the pervasiveness of logocentrism? Can the audience make the logocentric buzzing stop? The required understanding can happen only through the refinement of attention, i.e. through a shift from the attention to what is said to the conditions of its saying. The attention to the conditions of possibility of speech highlights the inevitability of logocentrism beyond the contingency of utterance. This also reveals that the "buzzing" cannot stop, even if unheeded.

5. Who is the Author of the Words? The Tragedy of Logocentrism

The coexistence of resistance and passivity in the speech of a 'Not I' shows the tragedy of linguistic pervasiveness, and explains the ordinariness of a specific aspect of human tragedy. This is the conclusion of my reading of the play.

In my opinion, *Not I* illustrates the double bind of using language to defeat language, thus implying tragedy as a human linguistic condition, both ontological and existential. Tragedy, inscribed in the human predicament, is not a meta-physical state, but it is a concrete and linguistic condition (i.e. the way we understand our very existence and name feelings, sensations and thoughts). It is specific in the content of the tragic stories that the protagonist of *Not I* tells about her life of deprivation, of lack of love and comfort, of absence of faith. She tells the story of a life marked by poverty, illness and marginalization. Her pain is so abysmal that she can survive

only “drifting ... in and out of cloud ... but so dulled ... feeling ... feeling so dulled ...” (Beckett 1990: 377). Dullness is the only poison-remedy to soothe her pain: “she suddenly realized ... gradually realized ... she was not suffering ... imagine! .. not suffering! ..” (ibid.).

As Linda Ben-Zvi has noted, *Not I* is “a fifteen minute *tale* of birth, solitude, silence, fear, guilt, and loss”, but the tragedy is in “the image that underlies all other Beckett works: a mouth, unable to stop, unable to get ‘It right or ‘I’ acknowledged, attempting to talk itself – in this case herself – into sense, attempting in the process to find an author of the words and of the self, and failing both endeavors” (1992: 243; my emphasis). The impossibility of ‘talking herself into sense’ reveals not only her lack of agency, but also the failure of the search of “an author of the words”. There is no way of ‘talking anyone into sense’ because ‘a mouth’ (itself) and ‘MOUTH’ (herself) are displacing each other “in the process to find an author of the words”.

Is MOUTH’s logorrhea in search of an author tragic, or is it insensate? It bans her from acknowledging herself in the umbrella-figure of an ‘I’, but also expresses an astonishing resistance to the hegemony of the linguistic system. For the audience she is both a disturbed character within a pitiful tale, as well as the wrestling agonist relentlessly resisting the unseen linguistic force determining identity. And yet, through MOUTH’s verbal discharge, articulating both the impossibility to express and the obligation to express, the audience can come to acknowledge the pervasiveness of logocentrism.

Her particular logorrhea reflects a general human unavoidable condition: the one of being spoken by language, a language preceding us as an inarticulate “buzzing”: “for she could still hear the buzzing ... so-called ...” (Beckett 1990: 377). MOUTH’s words talk about the “buzzing” as something “so-called”. So what is a “so-called buzzing” (my emphasis)? I believe that this warning designation (“the buzzing ... so-called”), restricts the power of description, and ultimately exposes the simultaneously universal and particular condition of being condemned to speak while spoken by language, once humans are thrown into life.

Language says too much and too little simultaneously (MOUTH’s speech shows it); it works apart from a self-expression, and in her case it evades the subject and provides no remedy for human “tupenny aches”. Actually, the compulsion to speak is itself one of the many aches.

In his reading of Artaud’s work Derrida highlights philosophically what MOUTH theatrically tells us: “Consciousness of speech, that is to say, consciousness in general is not knowing who speaks at the moment when, and in the place where, I proffer my speech” (Derrida 1978: 176). This consciousness of “not knowing who speaks” in the speech of an ‘I-speaking subject’ is expressed in *Not I* by showing the fact that the grammatical subject al-

ways forecloses the possibility of access to the phenomenological subject. The recurrence of a series of tragic repetitions: "... what? .. who? .. no! .. she!" illustrates a pattern of questioning progressively beyond the contingent and the referential.

After obsessively returning to these compelling questions and radical negation ("what? .. who? .. no!"), MOUTH shows us that we "slip into the nothing that separates me from my words . . . so that having found them, I am certain that I have always already been of them" (Derrida 1978: 177). So the 'I' is a 'she!' always dissociated by the determination of speech. This radical quality of dispossession and withdrawal is not exclusively typical of MOUTH, but inscribes all human verbal interaction. Communication works because no 'without' (no absence of language) can interrogate it. Even if communication is a staging of the unsaid in what is being said, the attention to the content of what one says usually prevents the vision of "speech as it eludes itself" (ibid.).

As we have seen, we can read the very first words of *Not I* as the beginning of life and as the beginning of speech ("... out ... into this world ...", Beckett 1990: 376). The dots, *qua* diacritic marks (i.e. "..."), compounded with the Beckettian stage directions, are not only a sign of the fact that something has already started (as I said), but they also highlight the material and verbal texture of the utterance. The dots translate into breath/voice, so that glossopoeia appears in all its signifying force: "Glossopoeia, which is neither an imitative language nor a creation of names, takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet discourse" (Derrida 1978: 240). In the oscillation between "shout" and "discourse" lies the locus of the telling: "[she] ... found herself in the dark ... and if not exactly ... insentient ... insentient ... for she could still hear the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ..." (Beckett 1990: 377). The "buzzing" is the discerning residuum that makes her "not exactly ... insentient". Thus, the spectator-reader is made to realise that the beginning of the story and of the play is a tragic verbal *incipit*, not quite a tale "full of sound and fury", and yet one "told by an idiot" (Shakespeare 1988: 5.5.25-6).

Tragedy is real and ordinary, and language makes it so: "... all that ... vain reasonings ... till another thought ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but- ... what? .. the buzzing? .. yes .. all the time the buzzing ... so-called in the ears ... though of course actually ... not in the ears at all ..." (Beckett 1990: 377-8). The "buzzing" is and is not corporeal; logocentrism is and is not in the ears and in the brain; it is ontological.

Tragedy is so normal that the protagonist "indeed could not remember ... off-hand ...when she had suffered less ..." (377), and yet, the "fuss" is about the unstoppable verbal flow over which there is no human control: "... and now this stream ... not catching the half of it ... not the quarter ...

no idea ... what she was saying ... imagine! .. no idea what she was saying!” (379). Language comes before the I can be recognized as appropriate to the self: “... all dead still but for the buzzing . . . who? .. no! .. she! . . . realized ... words were coming ... imagine!.. words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... at first ...” (ibid.). “Words are coming” regardless of their use: “... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... even to herself ... never out loud ... but not completely” (382).

The tragedy resides in the wrestling with logocentrism, illustrated as a corporeal reality but also as the condition of being human: “... the tongue in the mouth ... all those contortions without which ... no speech possible ... and yet in the ordinary way ... not felt at all ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ... the whole being hanging on its words ...” (379).

Even when one speaks without intention or purpose (“[words] not felt at all ...”), i.e. without adhering to, or comprehending what one is saying, the verbal flow speaks. If logocentrism is made visible through the cracks of speech, it speaks a ‘not-I’, i.e. a subject displaced because no longer “... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ...”. Rather, this ‘not-I’ sees its “whole being ... hanging on its words ...” (ibid.). The visibility of logocentrism is the birth of the ‘not-I’. As Lévinas pointed out: “The ‘I’ is the very crisis of the being of a being [*l’être de l’étant*] in the human” (1999: 28).

Beckett gives many names to logocentrism: “buzzing” in *Not I*; “voice” in *Company* (“a voice comes to one in the dark”, 1996: 3), and in *The Unnamable* he illustrates it as “it”: “[I]t issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I cannot prevent it, from rearing me, racking me, assailing me” (Beckett 1960: 358).¹³ Logocentrism is the not-I dilemma; it is the quandary of linguistic hegemony, which is unavoidable, even when there is “nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett 1984: 139).

Expiration and inspiration (signalled by the suspension dots, i.e. diacritic marks, in the script, and by breath in the performance), are indispensable in the production of speech, but they are also expiations, i.e. they are both punishment and compensations for a linguistic ontology (a human condition) that cannot be repaired. If being born is ‘seeing the light’ (MOUTH is exposed to “a ray of light [that] came and went ... came and went”, Beckett 1990: 217), hearing the “buzzing” is the awareness of having accessed language, and never to leave it. “Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’entrate”.¹⁴

¹³ On the development of this theme in Beckett’s “Second Trilogy” (i.e. *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstword Ho*), see Locatelli 1990.

¹⁴ “Abandon hope all ye who enter here” (Alighieri 1888, Third Canto, l. 9, and 1988: 57).

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