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Editors

Voice and Discourse in the Irish Context

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Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Carolina P. Amador-Moreno and Diana Villanueva Romero</i>	
Voicing the ‘Knacker’: Analysing the Comedy of the Rubberbandits	13
<i>Elaine Vaughan and Máiréad Moriarty</i>	
He’s After Getting Up a Load of Wind: A Corpus-Based Exploration of <i>be + after + V-ing</i> Constructions in Spoken and Written Corpora	47
<i>Carolina P. Amador-Moreno and Anne O’Keeffe</i>	
‘I Intend to Try Some Other Part of the World’: Evidence of Schwa-Epenthesis in the Historical Letters of Irish Emigrants	75
<i>Persijn M. de Rijke</i>	
NEG/AUX Contraction in Eighteenth-Century Irish English Emigrant Letters	105
<i>Dania Jovanna Bonness</i>	

A Corpus-Based Approach to <i>Waiting for Godot's</i> Stage Directions: A Comparison between the French and the English Version	139
<i>Pablo Ruano San Segundo</i>	
Samuel Beckett's Irish Voice in <i>Not I</i>	169
<i>José Francisco Fernández</i>	
Bernard Shaw and the Subtextual Irish Question	187
<i>Gustavo A. Rodríguez Martín</i>	
Voices from War, a Privileged Fado	209
<i>Daniel de Zubía Fernández</i>	
A Century Apart: Intimacy, Love and Desire from James Joyce to Emma Donoghue	235
<i>Teresa Casal</i>	
Foreign Voices and the Troubles: Northern Irish Fiction in French, German and Spanish Translation	265
<i>Stephanie Schwerter</i>	
Index	291

List of Figures

Voicing the 'Knacker': Analysing the Comedy of the Rubberbandits	
Image 1	19
The Rubberbandits (reprinted by permission). L: Blind Boy Boat Club; R: Mr. Chrome	
Fig. 1	29
Orthographic reification of 'Limerick/Rubberbandits' English'. Source: Extracted comments from Facebook page: www.facebook.com/TheRubberbandits	
Image 2	30
(authors' own)	
He's After Getting Up a Load of Wind: A Corpus-Based Exploration of <i>be + after + V-ing</i> Constructions in Spoken and Written Corpora	
Image 1	52
Concordance lines from Roddy Doyle's novel <i>The Snapper</i>	
Fig. 1	57
Past and present reference forms in contemporary writing	
'I Intend to Try Some Other Part of the World': Evidence of Schwa-Epenthesis in the Historical Letters of Irish Emigrants	
Fig. 1	80
Words (n) in CORIECOR per decade	
Fig. 2	86
Words (n; left y-axis) and epenthesis (n; right y-axis) in CORIECOR	
Fig. 3	90
Distribution of epenthesis (n) in expected environments for IrE	
Fig. 4	91
Distribution of epenthesis (n) in unexpected environments for IrE	

Samuel Beckett's Irish Voice in *Not I*

José Francisco Fernández

All Beckett's plays destabilise common assumptions about theatre, escaping from conventional plots, interaction of characters and the traditional exposition of a situation, but few of them are as mesmerising, hypnotic and enigmatic as *Not I* (1972). Here, the spectator is denied everything: plot, delineation of characters, beginning, closure, even acting in the conventional sense. It is also an extremely demanding play for the actress who plays Mouth as she has to cover herself in black paint and let herself be blinded by a cloth so that only her mouth appears on stage. She will then vomit a chain of almost unintelligible words for around 15 minutes in utter darkness.

There is not a single aspect of *Not I* that isn't difficult. As with all Beckett's work, there are strict stage directions that must be adhered to. He was a holistic artist, and the visual, textual and sensory elements of

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the performance are of equal importance. Included in this, I might add, is the actor's terror. Every performance is knife-edge stuff.¹

Irish actress Lisa Dwan, who went on tour with *Not I* in 2013 and 2014, is the most recent in a long list of actresses (including Billie Whitelaw, Jessica Tandy, Jude Kelly and Kate Somerby, among others) who have experienced first-hand the aridity of Beckett's anti-play and the strenuous physical effort that is demanded from them: 'I know now how an athlete feels when his muscles become over-tired', said Billie Whitelaw remembering her performance in *Not I*.² The main difficulty lies in the fact that, more than in any other of his pieces for the theatre, a voice is virtually the only protagonist: 'Beckett's play concentrates remorselessly on the act of telling to the exclusion of the rich variety of action and response characteristic of other forms of life, and which inform other styles of dramatic action (...) In *Not I*, the act of telling, not the told story, is the subject of the play.'³

Although the author made it clear that the play was not meant to be understood, but felt, that it had to appeal to the spectators' emotions, not to their intellect,⁴ this has not deterred scholars from offering multiple interpretations to explain this unparalleled theatrical event. *Not I* has been studied from a wide range of viewpoints: from a psychoanalytic approach,⁵ from the perspectives of literary translation and bilingualism,⁶ from a spatio-geographical consideration⁷ and even from the perspective of Japanese Zen Buddhism,⁸ to name but a few. The aim of this essay is to examine the ideological implications concerning Beckett's feelings for Ireland that are hinted at in *Not I*. My contention is that this particular dramatic piece contains traces of an Irish context, the recovery of which can inform a deeper understanding of the play's cultural and historical interpretative possibilities. In this sense, the essay aligns itself with the growing trend over the last decade to historicise Beckett's work in relation to Ireland and Irishness.

Anyone interested in ascertaining Beckett's idea of Ireland, as glimpsed for example through the labyrinth of words in *Not I*, cannot afford to overlook the change of approach that has recently taken place in Beckett studies. What can be seen in the work of scholars such as Sinéad Mooney, Seán Kennedy or James McNaughton, to mention but a few, is that the

myth that was so pervasive in the study of Beckett's *oeuvre* for decades, namely, the idea of Samuel Beckett being an author who only addressed eternal truths, has been dismantled.⁹ Beckett was supposed to be beyond any specificity as regards geographical locations, national identities or historical events; he was said to speak to no one in particular but to all mankind in general. Samuel Beckett only confronted timeless issues and this was the reason why anyone at any time could identify with his work. A suspicion that Beckett might be referring to actual, concrete events and places (however filtered and modified by his art) has been voiced by Andrew Gibson when he writes that Beckett's works 'are frequently marked [...] by a biographically rooted historical consciousness, if often sporadically, fleetingly or here and there'.¹⁰

I am not suggesting, of course, that Beckett has been misread or misunderstood by legions of critics in the past. Leading Beckett scholars of what could be loosely termed as the first generation, including Ruby Cohn, John Pilling, Enoch Brater and Raymond Federman, have laid the foundations for the understanding of Beckett's writing for future generations. They have made extremely valuable contributions and their work is based on erudition, academic rigour, depth of analysis and informed devotion to the author. If the dominant current within Beckett studies in the 1990s was underpinned by readings inspired by poststructuralism,¹¹ the recent, historicist perspective has simply widened a new line of investigation that had already been hinted at in the 1980s by pioneering articles and books such as those by J. C. C. Mays and Eoin O'Brien,¹² although James Knowlson's biography of Samuel Beckett, *Damned to Fame*, 'gave a major fillip to anyone wishing to locate Beckett's work in history'.¹³ This new approach, which has contributed to the revitalisation of Beckett studies, coexists with other contemporary currents such as genetic studies or Beckett and bilingualism.

The first intellectuals who initiated the discussion on Beckett were, naturally, French critics in the 1950s, when the Irish author became a noticeable figure thanks to the success of *En attendant Godot* (1953). France in the post-war years was experiencing a painful process of introspection, trying to assimilate what had happened in the previous decade: a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Nazis, the years of occupation, the shame of acquiescence—in many cases—with a regime of terror, the

brutal trials of collaborationists after the war. As Richard Seaver has put it: 'the occupation brought out the worst in many—as it brought the best in some—and for those who survived with their lives, if not their consciences, intact, a whole new world of hardship and deprivation awaited them after the momentary euphoria of the liberation had worn off'.¹⁴ The memories of war were so embarrassing that 'it was preferable to read Beckett as addressing man's alienation and the human condition rather than anything as specific as everyday life in the years of the Resistance'.¹⁵ Other critics have put forward the idea that an image of a 'sanitised' Beckett was maintained because many feared that if their revered author were brought down to earth they would be introducing adulterated elements into their analysis, 'tainting an otherwise pure art form',¹⁶ showing him too close to worldly matters that may prove uncomfortable: 'And Beckett's critics, or rather his admirers, jealously guard his reputation against contextual readings that bring nation and religion too close to the individual artist.'¹⁷ More recently, Anthony Uhlmann has taken up the issue of Beckett's apparent divorce from the period in which he lived, drawing attention to Beckett's 'strategy of negation' in his works.¹⁸ After confirming that in his private papers (personal writings and letters) Beckett showed himself to be very much engaged with the intellectual issues of his time, Uhlmann notes that in his literary production he cultivated an aesthetics where the absence of a direct link to external events is blatantly significant. The context, writes Uhlmann, is there but the connection has been severed:

This process of occlusion gives the works much of their power and allows them to generate a sense of abstraction that reconnects them with any place, any people, any time, rather than tying them once and forever to particular times and places. Yet, paradoxically, this is possible for Beckett because of the coherence and depth of analysis that have gone into the use of contexts and sources that he has then hidden.¹⁹

What has emerged thanks to Beckett criticism in the twenty-first century is that an apolitical, ahistorical and atemporal reading of Beckett is today untenable: 'The claim that Beckett's writing emerges from, and contains a certain nostalgic reference to, a white, male, Protestant, Irish, impoverished

bourgeois culture, is recognised and undisputed by the majority of his critics.²⁰ In recent years, too, the Irish aspect of his work has been foregrounded, with scholars claiming for Beckett an indirect but nevertheless distinguishable concern for Ireland that had traditionally been ignored or dismissed.²¹

So what are the Irish elements, however blurred and hazy, that can be perceived in *Not I*? What clues do they provide about what the author wanted to do with them and the significance they might have for Beckett's concern for Ireland? Before addressing these questions, let us first consider a brief description of the play in order to contextualise the critical discussion that will ensue in the following pages. *Not I* is a clear example of avant-garde theatre in which everything associated with conventional acting is excised. On a blacked-out stage, a spotlight focuses on a woman's mouth. This mouth, in a stream of almost unintelligible speech, tells a story of dispossession: an old female tramp, in her seventies, after a life of misery which began in an orphanage and continued in permanent solitude, one day explodes and speaks out, emptying herself, virtually vomiting out words in a bout of 'logorrhoea', very much in the style of Lucky in his famous monologue in *Waiting for Godot*: 'when suddenly she realized ... words were —... what?... who?... no!... she!... [...] realized ... words were coming ... imagine!... words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... at first ... so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit ... could be none other ... than her own'.²² The main difference with Lucky's speech is that Mouth repeatedly denies being the same person she is talking about. The effect on the spectators is devastating. They receive disconnected bits of information, fragments of a life in ruins, which should be codified and put in order: 'The audience cannot imagine Mouth's story without becoming fictionalisers.'²³ But this is not possible because of the speed at which the whole affair is carried out.

There is only one other person on stage, a hooded figure called the Auditor who listens to Mouth and hopelessly shrugs his/her shoulders. According to Hersh Zeifman, the Auditor seems to be saying to Mouth: 'Look, start by acknowledging that it is *you* you are talking about, that it is *your* terror, *your* suffering. And then admit that redemption from that suffering is impossible; perhaps in that very admission there is a kind of redemption, the only redemption man is capable of achieving.'²⁴

I suggest that there are at least two elements in *Not I* that are unmistakably Irish. First, despite the lack of information in the play itself, the character of the woman referred to by 'Mouth', a semi-vagrant who spends her days in and out of town, living in solitude, obsessed with her own story, is based on an Irish stereotype, as Beckett himself admitted: 'I knew that woman in Ireland. I knew who she was—not "she" specifically, one single woman, but there were many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedgerows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard "her" saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it.'²⁵ In other instances, however, when describing the same destitute individual, Beckett omitted any reference to the woman's birthplace. This is how he defined his creation in the synopsis of the play:

1. Premature birth

Parents unknown

No love at any time

At age of 70 in a field picking cowslips suddenly finds herself in the dark

2. No feeling apart from buzzing in her head and awareness of a ray of light

Mind still active in a way

First thought: she is being punished for her sins

Dismissed as she realises she is not suffering

Second thought: perhaps she should groan (to please tormentor)

Failure to utter a sound

All silent but for the buzzing

Motionless but for eyes opening and shutting

Mind questions this in view of life scene 1 (field)

Hears a voice largely unintelligible²⁶

Scholars have elaborated on this rudimentary sketch of a person, trying to fill in the gaps left by the author. This is how theatre critic and professor Rosette C. Lamont builds her own image of the character referred to by Mouth: 'Born prematurely and out of wedlock, Mouth may be a kind of halfwit, surviving somehow in the countryside by running small errands for people, or perhaps cleaning houses. Most probably she depends on charity. She seems to have been arrested briefly, then

released. We do not find out why, nor does "she", separate or severed from "I".²⁷ The question of nationality, therefore, is often absent in critical commentaries, probably because Irishness has not traditionally been a matter of concern when discussing the play, but there can be little doubt that the source for the main character is based on 'remembered voices of aged Irish women'.²⁸

Secondly, the woman finds herself at one point in a concrete Irish location, an open field near Beckett's house in Foxrock, where she has a moment of revelation: 'Then no more till this ... old hag already ... sitting staring at her hand ... where was it? ... Croker's Acres ... one evening on the way home ... home! ... a little mound in Croker's Acres ... dusk ... sitting staring at her hand ... there in her lap ... palm upward ... suddenly saw it wet ... the palm ... tears presumably ... hers presumably ... no one else for miles ...'.²⁹ The place will be familiar to Beckett's readers, just like the Dublin mountains, the South Eastern Railway Terminus or the Ballyogan Road, landscapes of his early life that appear frequently in his writings. In 'the peaceful pastoral atmosphere of Croker's acres' Beckett as a child had one of his favourite hideouts.³⁰

Apart from these references, there is an additional trait in *Not I* that may be located in an Irish context. The institution where the woman was taken care of as an orphan brings to mind images of asylums or homes that were traditionally run by the Catholic Church in Ireland: 'for her first thought was ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... 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'.³¹ Although there is no specific mention in the text of a particular religious order, it is difficult to imagine an organisation other than the Catholic Church in early independent Ireland dealing with these issues, being an institution at the time 'strongly committed to retaining its dominant influence in matters of health and welfare'.³²

A tension can be detected from the start between the Ireland that is evoked and the negation of that presence. The same ambivalence can be observed in the use of language. On the one hand, the ceaseless speech produced by Mouth recalls the stereotype of blarney or Irish banter. On the other hand, Beckett in *Not I*, as in other dramatic pieces

from about roughly the same time (*Eh Joe*, *That Time* and *Footfalls*), took pains to remove any traces of Irishness.³³ It is well known that Beckett demanded that the actress who played Mouth maintain a flat, unemotional tone. In this he followed a pattern presented in many other of his plays; Joan Plowright, who was the first actress to be offered the role of Winnie in *Happy Days*, said about Beckett's instructions: 'He wanted it performed as he heard it in his head; and did not want any delineation of character or any emotional depth.'³⁴ The general rule was to keep their voices flat: "too much colour, Billie, too much colour", meaning to leave off acting, and instead to transmit the structure of the sentence, the pace and musicality of the words themselves, the power of what was being said or left unsaid, made to function like pauses in music'.³⁵ He wanted to place the linguistic act in the central position of the performance (as Katharine Worth wrote: 'Mouth in *Not I* is no more than a speech organ functioning weirdly in a dark void')³⁶ thereby banishing any elements that might be considered a distraction, to the extent of accepting that the Auditor might be removed from the performance.

Beckett certainly insisted on disregarding any hint of an accent in the act of speaking by Mouth: 'No Irishness intended' he wrote to Alan Schneider discussing an aspect on pronunciation for the 1972 American production.³⁷ In this sense it can be said that the shape of the play stems from the same impulse that made him turn to the French language in the 1940s, to write with no style, but taken to its limit: by spewing a cascade of almost disconnected words, style would be equally reduced to zero: 'Their content [the memories recalled by Mouth] is unimportant, their realness is irrelevant: what matters is simply the act of telling them, their verbalisation here and now.'³⁸

Throughout his development as a playwright and fiction writer, Beckett always subjected Ireland to a continuous process of detachment, an evolution that has been studied in detail by J. C. C. Mays. In his opinion, Beckett moved from the Ireland he had been acquainted with as a young man in his first writings, to the landscape of his childhood in the *Trilogy*. But even in the last book of the series, *The Unnamable* (first published in 1953, in French), he strove to put further distance between himself and his background, in an effort to remove any aspect of the landscape that

might be too close to him (and therefore prone to falsification and over-sentimentalisation): 'He wrote it [*The Unnamable*] in order to break through the simplest, earliest, most instinctive (Irish) form in which he knew himself.'³⁹ Further on, Beckett made use of a strict pattern of language to increase the gap from his subject matter, and *Not I* would find its place here, as Mouth's memories and the verbalisation of them seem to come from an Ireland of the past, a general background noise of former times so that 'Words pour from Mouth only to leave Mouth surrounded with sound; Mouth ... comes to be *over*-heard.'⁴⁰ This may explain Beckett's precise reference in the play to Croker's Acres; the landscape had been sanitised and cleared of personal recollections, it was safe therefore to refer to Ireland without compromising his emotions. The connection with his place of birth is so indirectly conjured up (consisting of overheard words by a 'bag-lady' figure of the past) that the evocation of the place can appear clear of sentimental debris. Ireland is there but it is not possible to apprehend its contours.

The fragmented sense of identity of the voice in the play may also be consonant with Beckett's contradictory and ambiguous engagement with Ireland. George O'Brien has identified a number of Irish themes which are echoed in essential works of the Beckettian canon, including a 'moribund sense of agency', together with 'an arguably Anglo-Irish sensitivity to decline and fall'.⁴¹ A voice that remembers episodes from the past but which avoids any identification with the character being described is a motif that could easily fit into a reflection on the problem of Irish identity typically characterised by 'a continually projected utopianism',⁴² or a continuous delay of the very act of definition of the national story. Liam de Paor writes that, when attempting to locate an '*identifiable* Irish identity', we find ambiguity, and an insistence on the part of many Irish writers 'that we in Ireland are not what we seem on the surface to be, but something else, older, wiser, truer; to be found not here and now but only in the past and in the future'.⁴³ In that respect, the voice in *Not I* could be taken as an imperfect, but strangely genuine, emblem for a protracted definition of Irishness because of its insistence on not being the protagonist of one's history: 'if Mouth could recognise or accept that she is telling her own story it is possible that she too would be allowed to stop repeating it'.⁴⁴ It comes as no surprise that the disembodied mouth

and the desexualised body of the Auditor proclaim 'a metaphysics of alienation' as defined by John H. Lutterbie and, incidentally, it is difficult to imagine a more appropriate concept for the representation of an utopian 'no-place', as Declan Kiberd describes the absence of Ireland in English texts, than a literary work which denies itself the right of identity in its very title.⁴⁵

There are other subtle ways in which the text in *Not I* may be indicative of Beckett's interest in the problem of what constitutes Irishness. I am referring to the frequent mentions of a murmur, the presence of distant voices so characteristic of Beckett's work, which in *Not I* takes the form of a buzzing: 'yes ... all the time the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ... though of course actually ... not in the ears at all ... in the skull ... dull roar in the skull'.⁴⁶ The presence of alien voices in Beckett's texts is a recurrent feature: the murmurs heard by Molloy in the forest; 'all the dead voices' heard by Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*;⁴⁷ the rattling of chains in *Texts for Nothing* or the singing that Camier hears in the distance: 'For all the world is a mixed choir'.⁴⁸ Voices, murmurs, distant singing, buzzing ... One is tempted to define Beckett's landscapes as populated by ghosts, as if the author were reaching for an Ireland of the past that he could not apprehend but which manifested itself in this evanescent manner. Along this line, Shane Weller defines Beckett's work as an almost uninterrupted 'memento mori', characterising his work as 'elegiac', because he comes to see art in mourning for its object 'and because the voices that find expression in literature are increasingly, for Beckett, in a certain sense the voices of the dead'.⁴⁹

Andrew Gibson has convincingly explained the abundance of remote voices in Beckett's works as the attempt to overcome the distance that traditionally separated his social class, the Protestant bourgeoisie, from the Catholic masses, those who suffered the iniquities of Irish history: 'His own class', writes Gibson, 'had commonly refused to assume any historical responsibility for the other Ireland. But the other Ireland nags away pervasively and insidiously within his characters' monologues and speeches'.⁵⁰ Beckett did not fall into the delusion that he could identify with the vast Catholic layer of the population, but at least he left the testimony of their existence, lurking in the margins of history, imploring to be listened to and cared for. The figure of the Auditor might introduce

in this particular context the kind of supportive, although ineffectual, companionship that someone of Beckett's background might provide to a complaining and desperate voice: 'Most clearly in the intensity of its interest and the silent helplessness of its gestures, Auditor embodies the watching, listening and "auditing" functions of an audience, while at the same time it supplies the observer or the witness to another's presence and suffering that for so long has seemed indispensable to Beckett's stage world'.⁵¹

A significant variation as regards the presentation of other voices in *Not I* lies in the voice of Mouth being accompanied by a beam of light: 'and all the time this ray or beam ... like moonbeam ... but probably not ... certainly not ...'.⁵² The pictorial, visual symbol of a flash, perhaps opening through the sky, is a marked difference from other similar examples in his plays and novels. A beam of light in a dark atmosphere is of course a symbol of hope, of every cloud having a silver lining, of a light at the end of the tunnel. But the fact that this ray is being described by a mouth with no eyes cannot be but a self-deflated image, a representation of confidence that annuls itself, adding anxiety rather than relief from despair. Besides, as the moonbeam is repeated throughout the discourse by Mouth, its force becomes diluted each time it is depicted. The first time, it is 'a ray of light [that] came and went [...] such as the moon might cast ... drifting ... in and out of cloud',⁵³ then it is 'this ray or beam ... like moonbeam ... but probably not ... certainly not',⁵⁴ next it is referred to as 'the beam ... flickering on and off ... starting to move around ... like moonbeam but not'⁵⁵ and finally as 'the beam ... poking around ... painless ... so far ... ha!'⁵⁶ Mouth has been defined by Katherine Weiss as a 'black hole' which both absorbs and rejects the textual material of the play.⁵⁷ The profound irony of a black hole longing for a ray of light is nothing but another element of discomfort for the self-deprecating image of the individual described by Mouth, and in the end is perfectly coherent with the whole atmosphere of hopelessness that acts as a background to the play. Additionally, this orifice which ejects verbal waste, 'so that speech becomes equated with other bodily expulsions',⁵⁸ recalls other excremental images in Beckett's prose, like 'history's ancient faeces' of 'First Love' by which he mockingly referred to the remnants of a distant past revered by Irish nationalists.⁵⁹

Not I by Samuel Beckett, as stated at the beginning of this essay, can be approached from different interpretative angles. This stunning theatrical event, devised by the author in his mature years, encapsulated the obsessions and motives of a lifetime. What this essay has set out to demonstrate is that hidden within the fabric of Mouth's demented words there are precise references to Ireland (Irish women as the original source for the voice and the mention of a particular location near Dublin), together with some vague outlines reminiscent of an Irish setting, and that these textual elements contribute to the creation of an evocative background in *Not I*. What emerges from these allusions is that Beckett never abandoned a preoccupation with Ireland that, flickering and intermittent as it was, like the beam of light which is somehow perceived but not seen by Mouth, was nevertheless a haunting matter of concern for Beckett, finding its way even into the most emotionally charged of his plays.

Notes

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