



*COLIN  
PARTCH*

---

Aberrant Voices:  
Stuttering, Orality,  
and the  
Performance of Self

1

Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.

Stuttering occurs in 1 percent of the population, roughly seventy million people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Yet most stutterers are judged according to fictitious representations of stuttering, from cartoon characters like Porky Pig to Academy Award-winning films like *The King's Speech*. In such representations, stutterers are vehicles for crisis, bodies invested with metaphorical meanings such as instability, fear, or doubt. These characters invariably do one of two things: they transcend their disability or caricature it to the point that it ceases to resemble reality. Meanwhile, medical professionals have categorized stuttering, also referred to as dysfluency, as a communicative disorder with a distinct biological basis. But what if dysfluency was understood as being constructed by *multiple* individuals? Due to the dialogical nature of stuttering—there needs be a listener for it to take place—its dysfluency is arguably constructed by both speaker *and* hearer. This apparent fact of speech, that it requires two to exist, is universally recognized during most verbal acts but is curiously suspended during the act of stuttering.<sup>2</sup>

2

Research into the potential causes of stuttering is often geared toward developing a cure, examples of which include the pharmaceutical drug Pagoclone and prosthetic “second-speech signal” devices such as SpeechEasy. These developments are evidence of the desire to manage or, ideally, cure stuttering, understanding it to be something that can be objectively measured and treated apart from the stutterer.

Speech continues to exist as the most basic method for the communication of information and is closely tied to human agency. As such, stuttering, among other communicative disorders, is also framed as a “distinctly *moral* failure: the failure of a stutterer’s will and self-discipline...”<sup>3</sup> The failure to speak “normally” becomes a failure of intention and of will. Perhaps because stutterers are occasionally fluent aside from the frequent prolongations, hesitations, and repetitions characteristic of stuttering, theirs is framed as a liminal condition, neither fully abled nor disabled. It is not merely the interruption of speech that makes stuttering unacceptable but that its interruption is not absolute, and thus unwilling to support the abled vs. disabled binary that privileges abled bodies.

3

Ibid., 3.

Stuttering interrupts rhythms of speech that have become deeply ingrained in normalized speech. One need only consider how conspicuous and uncomfortable long pauses or hesitations feel during rapid-fire conversations—or that such conversations are even perceived as normal—to get a sense of the degree to which rapidity and fluency have become idealized norms. Unable to conform, stutterers are effectively denied the permission to speak, which, beyond the feelings of inadequacy attendant to the failure to perform an essential social task like engaging in conversation, compromises their ability to announce themselves or even participate within the social

field. Yet rapidity and fluency are only natural as far as they are conventional and, as I will argue later, are equally prone to lapses of unintelligibility.

In this vein, Joshua St. Pierre, a scholar interested in the sociopolitical production of speech, observes that the medical model effectively shapes stuttering into an individual issue. He writes:

What is both significant and troubling about the management of stuttering is not that it occurs but rather that management prompts stutterers to objectify their own body—specifically the speech production system—and treat it as shameful, while also extracting stuttering from its social, cultural and economic contexts...<sup>4</sup>

4

Joshua St. Pierre, “The Construction of the Disabled Speaker,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 2.

The stutter is transformed into an object that is both integral to their identity and threateningly foreign, so that the pressure to manage an aspect of one’s speech is internalized by the stutterer through a process of self-alienation. That stuttering *could* be extracted from the dialogic structure of speaker and hearer is evidence of the cultural ambivalence exercised toward stuttering, which is understood to be at once too minor for thorough consideration while also too serious to be tolerated. In other words, the stutter is taken out of its social context while the stutterer remains.

Underlying this social paradigm privileging fluent speech is the assumption that hearers should occupy a passive position during dialogue. When the hearer experiences difficulty in understanding the speaker’s message, as in the case of stuttering, the stutterer is held responsible. Yet speech is a highly deliberative action, as one directs their speech toward an interlocutor with the assumption that they will be *actively* listening and will respond in turn. The fact that hearing becomes passive only once the speaker is perceived to be dysfluent suggests that stuttering disrupts convention rather than meaning. Along these lines, St. Pierre writes:

If hearing is not a passive process, but the active *collection of information* based upon expectations and former experience, then hearing cannot retain the position of a neutral recorder but is implicated in the highly politicized practice of defining and enforcing

normalcy of speech based upon normalized expectations of hearing.

What if the stutter does not actually exist as an individual defect but is instead merely one position among many within a dialogic structure? If the voice is a projection of the body, thus embodied, but also stands as a physical object in itself, with unique cultural value apart from the body, then the speaker—like an author—only takes partial responsibility for the voice within dialogical exchange. In receiving the voice of the speaker, the hearer is wholly active in the performance of dialogue, the result of which transforms the voice from a vocal emission into an object of meaning making.

In this essay I argue that dysfluency is constructed in the manner of theater: a collaboratively staged performance produced by actors, directed at passive audience members who receive the performance collectively. Yet this performance ultimately fails. Rather than acting as a docile site onto which the stutter is deposited and condemned to collective estrangement, the body of the stutterer rears against idealized norms of speech, informing us that the body is not a transparent vehicle for language but a site of interference. To implicate the hearer, again: what if dysfluency was understood as being constructed by *multiple* individuals? To quote poet and essayist Craig Dworkin, “[S]tuttering...is less a condition that does or does not exist than a rate at which one aspect of the normal mechanism of speech can no longer be overlooked or ignored.”<sup>5</sup> To this end, Samuel Beckett’s brief masterpiece *Not I* (1972) serves as an exemplary case. The work calls into question the role of speech in the construction of the silent and passive hearer, as the very distinction between performance and spectatorship becomes unraveled in a play that is as unsettling as it is revolutionary.

Toward the end of his career, Beckett became invested in a radically minimalist approach to theater, one that would stretch the limits of monologue and dialogue. Beckett arrived at this form, minuscule dramas the author dubbed “dramaticules,” after spending decades writing novels and longer plays. His second dramaticule, *Not I*, considered by many to be his greatest dramatic text, is arguably a succinct manifestation of his lifelong artistic endeavor, characterized by “truncation, darkness, repetition, concealment, evasion, [and] circularity”<sup>6</sup>—qualities that are notably similar to the internal experience of stuttering. The play’s formal construction is highly

5

Craig Dworkin, “The Stutter of Form,” in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 166.

6

Keir Elam, “Dead Heads: Damnation-Narration in the ‘Dramaticules,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 150.

7

Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1984), 214.

8

*Saccade* is the French word for “jerk.” The term was coined by French ophthalmologist Louis Émile Javal in the 1880s. More recent studies have observed the role saccades play in facial recognition, during which the eye rapidly shifts between facial features, the eyes, nose, and mouth being prominent targets. Unable to coordinate Mouth’s image within a facial structure, my eyes hopelessly scan the darkness to complete the face, dragging Mouth along and giving it the appearance of darting motion. Mouth is literally everywhere I look.

innovative: only two characters occupy the darkened stage, Mouth and Auditor, and of the two, only Mouth speaks. Auditor’s involvement is restricted to “a gesture of helpless compassion” and may only be seen by the ambient light reflecting off of Mouth.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the only thing Mouth does is speak, as the actor’s entire face beyond the border of her lips is painted black, her body and head restrained by a harness and clamp (fig. 1) behind a wall; the audience sees only a moving mouth. To the audience, Mouth appears to be a disembodied mouth—one that vents a paratactic and elliptical narrative in the third person. Behind this mouth the actor’s body writhes against its restraints, the invisible vehicle for the performance, haunting Mouth in the same way that Mouth haunts the narrative it delivers.

On October 12, 2014, I sit down at the Brooklyn Academy of Music eagerly anticipating actress Lisa Dwan’s final performance of Beckett’s *Not I*. The theater is cast in falling darkness; even the emergency exits have been turned off. After ten seconds of pitch black the performance has not yet started. A faint groaning emanates from somewhere before me, still unrevealed. Mouth suddenly appears, hovering at eye level. Approximately eight feet off the stage and at an oblique angle, Mouth is an undulating red circle in the darkness venting frenzied, nearly incomprehensible speech (fig. 2). Peeking through a hole cut behind the stage, it appears to be a tiny red bird chirping out the words of a narrative that is at times musical and other times terrifying. The theater is so dark I cannot see my own hands. The extreme diminishment of Mouth’s size is complicated by its unusual height and off-center location, and in my disorientation the awareness that there must be a body attached to this mouth behind the stage is lost. It is at once truly disembodied and eminently present, and I am caught in its tractor beam of light and language, the voice twittering and faltering, erring from cohesion completely. The darkness in the theater makes focusing on such a small point very difficult, as the eye cannot concentrate on one point for very long without shifting its area of focus. These saccades<sup>8</sup> cut afterburns across the all-encompassing darkness. I desperately want to marshal all my concentration but find that I cannot fully experience the performance. Mouth is too diminutive, her voice too alien to fully follow. The performance drags on; nine minutes feel like thrice as many. I anticipate the performance will end soon, and I want so badly to capture an *experience*, a thing that I can take

away with me. What presence am I steeling myself against in vivid anticipation?

Mouth speaks of a seventy-year-old woman from Ireland who was abandoned by her parents as a child and lived her life in near silence. On few occasions, the woman would experience the sudden urge to speak "...once or twice a year... always winter some strange reason [...] sudden urge to...tell... then rush out stop the first she saw...nearest lavatory...start pouring it out...steady stream...mad stuff...half the vowels wrong...no one could follow..."<sup>9</sup> It tells the story of a person without speech, without the ability to communicate in the social field, who suddenly finds an unknown voice emanating from her. One April morning, while wandering afield, Mouth "found herself in the dark...and if not exactly...insentient...for she could still hear the buzzing...so-called...in the ears...and a ray of light came and went...came and went...but so dulled...feeling so dulled...she did not know what position she was in!"<sup>10</sup> The silent character of the narrative undergoes a traumatic event, some phenomenological catastrophe, in which the nascent voice that has been brimming under the surface of her consciousness suddenly takes over, such that the character and the audience become privy to the character's consciousness through the same voice.

Then, a flash of self-consciousness occurs in the lightless theater: my own foundering awareness is itself an element of the play. It is as though the integral components of drama—plot, character, *mise-en-scène*—were in the process of breaking down. The uncomfortable laughing and shuffling of the crowd is an attempt to presence itself in response to the absurd and increasingly disturbing being that is in front of us, but it is not in conversation with that presence—which is of course only a fraction of the actor's body. Mouth speaks regardless of our engagement, whether or not we "get it." Further, Mouth is not the only mouth present. It is merely the only one that we can see, and this fact is perhaps the play's guiding principle: to be on the stage renders one unable to comment on one's own situation, consigns one to be reading a script, to be watched in the midst of a performance.

As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that Mouth is in fact engaged in a one-sided dialogue with an unheard voice (presumably Auditor's) that inaudibly guides Mouth toward the realization that "she" is, in fact, telling the story of Mouth's own life. But this moment of recognition, the identification of



FIGURE 1.

Lisa Dwan harnessed to a board eight feet off the ground while performing *Not I*, which ran at the Brooklyn Academy of Music October 7–12, 2014. (Photo: Finn Beales)

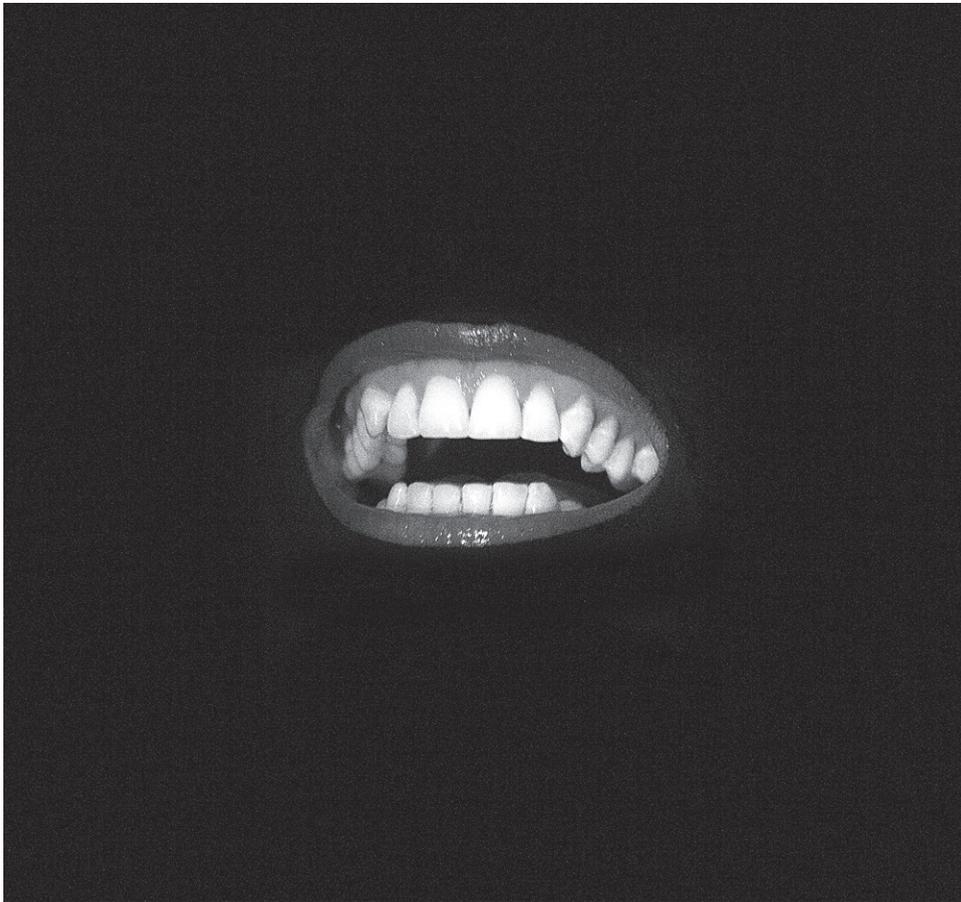


FIGURE 2.

Lisa Dwan in *Not I*. (Photo: Richard Termine; Courtesy Brooklyn Academy of Music)

11

Beckett, 216.

12

Elam, 155.

the narrator as the subject of the narrative, is endlessly deferred; at the end of each one-sided exchange, Mouth exclaims “what?... who?...no!...she!”<sup>11</sup> Mouth’s refusal, the vehemently voiced “She!” is not simply denial: it is an outright *refusal* to identify with the individual for whom she speaks. What is so unacceptable for Mouth is the idea that it is of *her* own life that it speaks, that her voice and body converge within the act of speaking, that the voice itself originates from a body that has a history. It is, then, not the events of the narrative, but the disidentification between narrator and character, Mouth and “she,” that constitutes the play’s central conflict. To quote Keir Elam, professor of English drama at the University of Florence, “The verbal discharge overheard by the Auditor and the audience is, therefore, both an attempt to probe, describe, even explain various features of that event, while being itself an important element in that experience.”<sup>12</sup> Further, this event, the dark space full of light and buzzing, is strikingly similar to the visual and auditory conditions that *Not I* establishes within the theater space. The story that Mouth tells is not only of an elderly woman wandering the Irish countryside but of *this* event, the performance of the play itself. For Mouth, speech is not a declaration of presence but of absence: what is declared are the thoughts of a self who never speaks, performed by a voice that will never take ownership of those thoughts.

Beckett’s choice of form is self-reflexive, as it centers on the audience’s interpretive struggle to make sense of the performance. The social fabric that situates all speech, the verbal markers differentiating “here” from “there,” “us” from “them,” “I” from “me,” has been pierced by Mouth. This puncture extends beyond the edge of the stage: the audience, craning in or rearing back from the virulent mouth venting logorrheic speech, constitutes the other half of the speech act. In many ways the text of *Not I* is the story of the *watching* of the play: a consciousness accustomed to passively taking in its surroundings is suddenly met by the pure immanence of voice, and finds itself at once transfixed and repulsed. *Not I* hinges on its audience’s bewilderment, and as such causes one to experience drama from the midst of the action, rather than from the safety of the balcony. In doing so, a new sense of drama emerges, one that disallows a sense of being removed, even *spectatorship* in the traditional sense. Only by turning the eye—and the “I”—in on itself does the play become available in all of its depth.

Mouth is more—and less—than a character that one can “play.” Mouth is an *effect*, a perceptual aberration of speech

Sarah West, *Say It: The Performative Voice in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 316.

Ibid.

Billie Whitelaw (1932–2014) passed away in December of 2014. Although this chapter focuses on Beckett's authorship of the piece, as well as a performance of *Not I* by Lisa Dwan, it should be stated that Whitelaw's performance of the role was the definitive one, Beckett having designed it specifically for her. Therefore, any discussion of the work should naturally bear her influence in mind.

"Interview with Billie Whitelaw, for the University of London Audio-Visual Centre, 1 Feb. 1977," *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 86.

St. Pierre, 11.

Elam, 151.

that simultaneously insists its presence while also disavowing any ties to identity and embodiment. In a conversation with Deirdre Bair concerning the inspiration for *Mouth*, Beckett stated, "I knew that woman in Ireland...I knew who she was—not 'she' specifically, [not] one single woman...I heard 'her' saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it."<sup>13</sup> From there Beckett purportedly "transcribed" what he heard in his head, writing down this voice's narrative. He then subjected the script to a process of reduction, editing out conjunctions, punctuation, and inferences—anything that would afford the reader or listener a sense of cohesion or closure.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, actor Billie Whitelaw<sup>15</sup> described the jarring experience of performing *Mouth* in early productions of the play: "The very first time I did it, I went to pieces. I felt I had no body; I could not relate to where I was; and, going at that speed, I was becoming very dizzy and felt like an astronaut tumbling into space...I swore to God I was falling, falling..."<sup>16</sup> Whitelaw, in effect, was as disoriented as the audience, and suffered the same vertiginous lack of stability as those whom she was addressing. The self-talk was not her own to possess.

Mouth's refusal of the first person is the stutter's refusal of reference, of conflating the object of speech with the subject of its speaking. Mouth is the stutter, the voice that is synonymous with the self but that is not identical to the self. Like a recording of one's voice played back to them, Mouth is an imprint of an individual that will never be that individual, a vocal ghost that haunts the present. Further, the paradox of *Not I* is identical to that of the stutterer, that an abstract principle such as dysfluency, which is necessarily divorced from its situational context, is forced onto the speaker, who "cannot be cognized as an ahistorical and non-particular entity, a simple medium of communication, but must be conceived as a *body* situated in a historical context."<sup>17</sup> The stutterer is thus both frozen in time and in the stutter, becoming ahistorical and set apart from the hearer who audits their speech from an objectifying remove. Elam observes this non-coincidence in *Not I* as the limit condition of gesture: "Mouth refuses life but her mouth mimes its decisive aspects."<sup>18</sup> By this he is referring to the multifarious ways in which the mouth as an orifice comes to stand in metonymically for the body's defining acts—speech, eating, defecation, sex. This gestural vocabulary writhes alongside Mouth's frenzied monologue, a type of speech without communication that becomes the undoing of language.

Hearing is by no means passive in *Not I*; it is all one has to make sense of this "godforsaken hole," a repeated phrase that Mouth uses to describe its location periodically throughout the play. Indeed, it is truly the ability to *appear* passively receptive to speech that is the position of the hearer, all the while able to situate oneself as being safely removed from the speaker, free from being implicated in their struggle to communicate.

St. Pierre poignantly articulates the absurdity of this one-sided struggle:

The stutterer must continually wrestle (often in vain) with her body to subdue it and bring it back under control. In this way, the vulnerability of the stutterer's body troubles the cultural fantasy of the body as a 'stable, neutral instrument of the individual will' for, though significant, it is not the stutterer's relative inability to control her body that is most troubling. Rather, it is the fact that her body is not docile, that it obtrudes *at all*, which marks it as deviant.<sup>19</sup>

The body as deviant; the body as hostile; the body as aberrant: these bodily personas threaten an ideology of instrumental will, supported by the Cartesian logic of the mind's mastery over the body. But where the body is not the instrument of the will, it is the instrument of the voice. And the voice is anything but the pure expression of intent. Stuttering—as a metaphor, a concept, a diagnosis—is pathologized as such not simply because it is understood to be a disorder, but because to not do so would allow the stutter to challenge the body's status as a neutral medium of communication. Pathology literally translates from the Greek as "an account of suffering." *Not I* could be understood as the dramatic manifestation of the self's errant quest to discover the origins of its own turmoil, which are in this case tragically performative. Stuttering, too, is pathological insofar as the stutterer performs the cause of their disorder with each instance of dysfluency.

Michael Petrunik and Clifford D. Shearing, two sociologists who stutter, performed a study designed to examine the stutterer's internal experience of stuttering, specifically its effect on the structure of consciousness. Operating under the methodology of symbolic interactionism, they posit that subjective experience is structured in two parts: the "I" that

St. Pierre, 15.

is the active aspect of the person, and the “Me” that is the socialized aspect. Agency is not inherent to the “I” but is the result of socially mediated codes of conduct, and is thus an expression of how one interprets and interacts with the world around them.

The study involved questions focusing on the participants’ self-perception, including how they make sense of their speech behaviors, how they manage the awareness of others, and the tools they use to avoid stuttering. The vast majority of stutterers reported that “as *experience*, stuttering’s most fundamental feature is its unintentionality: stutterers experience stuttering as something that happens to them rather than as something they do.” In order to explain the unintentionality of stuttering, stutterers understand it as an inner subjective force that temporarily interrupts the self. The authors identified this force as a new component in the structure of consciousness, the “It”; a subjective locus that is “not-I”:

By noting that people can and do *experience* an interior source of action and locus of control that is “not-I” and that is in conflict with “I”...the “It” is given a conceptual status similar to the “I.” Both are viewed as sources of action. What differentiates the “I” and the “It” is the experience of the “It” as an alien source of action that struggles with the “I.”<sup>20</sup>

In most cases, stutterers wrestle with this internal force, the “It,” in order to alter the “Me,” which is influenced by the visible and audible effects of stuttering. The “I” then finds itself always in a position of negotiating between a “Me” that it constantly wants to protect, and an “It” that is hostile, alien, and unknowable. Because the “It” is experienced by the stutterer internally as inaudible and invisible, the hearer instead reacts to the “Me,” which is itself a projection, a persona that the stutterer has cultivated. This triple structure of consciousness put forth by Petrunik and Shearing is by no means a symptom of stuttering as such, but is rather evidence of the internalization of an impossible external ideal: fluency.

*Not I* effectively stages Petrunik and Shearing’s “not-I” by placing it in the spotlight, transforming the theater into a spatialization of consciousness. During the performance, Auditor occupies the position of the “I,” the audience is the “Me,” and Mouth is the “It.” As with the stutterer’s self-perception, the

“I” and the “It” are locked in a struggle to wrest control of the “Me.” Auditor feels compassion toward Mouth as though it were an aspect of the “I” locked in language. Yet with every attempt to console Mouth, to consolidate the distance between its voice and its identity, Mouth rears against the suggestion and strikes back at its compassioning interlocutor. Thus, Mouth’s monologue could be read as a dramatization of the stutterer, a presence that is decidedly *not* the self but that cannot be disentangled from the self. Auditor’s struggle to communicate with Mouth is thus one of pure identification, the moment wherein the suffering of others is recognized as the suffering of the self. Yet, the only way that one gives up suffering is by giving up the self, which is why Auditor’s gestures diminish with each interaction with Mouth. Beckett further problematizes Auditor’s plight by making it unable to give up the self, unable to get out of the conflict. Auditor is the “I” made silent, hopelessly gesturing in the midst of voice run rampant.

The problem with drawing analogies between the structure of consciousness and that of Beckett’s theater is that it is incomplete: Auditor and Mouth are not full characters but *components*. For Beckett, Mouth was a “stage entity,” not a true character. Similarly, qualifying Auditor as the thinking subject falls short since it cannot exist beyond the confines of its perpetual dialogue with Mouth. During Dwan’s performance, my attention was invested in contending with the play’s sensory deprivation, and I was unable to consciously process the subtle geometry of Beckett’s formalism. Thus, my implication in the play and its text was total. In straining to make sense of the performance, I occupied the position of the passive hearer while also functioning as the play’s central object. Like the “Me” of symbolic interactionism, my presence was the infinitely thin surface that the voice and the self struggle over in an attempt to reify their existence. Upon leaving the performance, the whole picture came flooding into view: the play was a diorama in which I could see myself as one among three—a self, a stutterer, and a listener. All three components were necessary to produce one consciousness, one individual. Mouth is that ceaseless voice in the mind that may never be consoled. Perhaps what makes the stutter so threatening is that it evidences the essential aberrance of embodied language.

Fluency seeks to collapse what *Not I* unfolds. By identifying the stutterer as deviant, the cohesion of the individual is protected. Individuation serves those who take their individuality for granted, who may exist within society’s neatly

demarcated slots, where each is allowed a limited space and time but enjoys the belief that with enough control and mastery the self can be managed to the utmost degree. This ideal of the contained self relies upon a fractured and compromised other—the disabled body—to set itself apart from, to contour its limits. In this way, dysfluent speakers are not only islands of biological and moral defection, but staged entities that allow fluent hearers to occupy the position of neutral and mute observer. The irony here is tragic: stutterers, socially marginalized for their inability to speak within verbal codes designed to founder them, are observed as such from the *silent* and privileged position of the hearer. Stuttering, then, becomes the verbal performance of the failure to speak. Stutterers are nothing if not fluent at stuttering.

It is worth mentioning that with few exceptions Beckett's texts are highly satirical in nature. One could argue that any reading of *Not I* that suggests productive potential is missing the point, given that the play's conflict spirals around the basic inability for the self to be reconciled with the voice due to the catastrophic failure of language. I believe that such an interpretation, though accurate in some respects, fails to consider that, above and beyond language and identity, *fluency* is being challenged by the play's existential dilemma. This is expressed best in Beckett's *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."<sup>21</sup> Speaking, living, all the while yearning for silence could serve as the basic premise for fluency: an ideology of continuous, unabated speech that is always moving but never arrives anywhere. Thus the play's satire can be understood as two-part. First, it exists at the level of irony, a nearly incomprehensible play that is, on the surface, about the incomprehensibility of trying to make sense of one's life. Second, it functions at the level of experience, where the unspoken premise of spectatorship, the possibility that the audience can be separate from the drama, is challenged by its very exaggeration. Thus, much of the play's strength comes from its ability to give its participants the freedom to bring their perceptual processes to bear within the darkness of the theater space—and to be shocked by what they find there.

In this understanding, stuttering prompts a new form of community, a community of speakers and hearers that no longer places the burden of communication unequally onto the speaker, and no longer demands that stutterers perform speech

within a narrowly defined modality and time frame. To this end, Craig Dworkin figures stuttering as a distinct effect of language that is highly productive, as a (re)turn to the body from the deferential slide of the signification:

Strained to its limits, the communicative sounds of any particular speech (*la parole*) are silenced, but even at that inaudible limit language (*la langue*) continues to tell us something. All language is referential, but it need not reflect concepts; when language instead refers back to the material circumstances of its own production, we can hear the murmur of its materials. When speech continues without communicating anything, when speech intransitively reaches the limit at which its communication becomes silent, we can hear the body speak.<sup>22</sup>

Stuttering is language stretched to its limit condition. At this point, *everything* resonates with energy, and the boundaries between form and content are revealed to be wholly ideological. Stuttering necessarily implicates the hearer in its enunciation, as it is by reaching past language that the body may be understood as truly present on its own terms. Stuttering is both the suspension of meaning and its outpouring.

Brandon LaBelle writes that self-talk allows one "to suddenly become two, as speaker *and* listener, so as to expose and explore one's singularity. . . It is how *I* exist, yet I am always already more than one."<sup>23</sup> Beckett takes this splitting of the self that occurs within pre-aural speech to its extreme in *Not I*. As viewers, we too are split by Mouth's performance of absence, as we rely on a present object, a voice, to situate ourselves as one among many. Our disorientation, our splitting, becomes part and parcel of the play: Mouth's incompleteness is enacted in our own inability to identify with the character. Our sensory deprivation allows identity to recede against the force of furious, unremitting speech. Speech, like vision, can be a consolidating force when placed within a social context. But there is a responsibility on the part of the listener or viewer to take into account their participation in all aspects of embodiment. Like Auditor, all we can do in the midst of chaos is compassionately gesture. It is a sense of accountability—or lack of—that is ultimately so disturbing in *Not I*: the body and the voice, the self and its other, never fully coinciding, but nonetheless arcing forth together into an embodied field of cohabitation.

22

Dworkin, 167.

23

Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 94.

21

Beckett, "Tat Coat," in *Proust [and three dialogues with Georges Duthuit]* (New York: Grove, 1970), 103.