Matthew Wilson Smith

Beckett's Wasted Breath

Abject breath, running over with its own refuse and yet refusing to stop breathing, forms a gasping undertone to Beckett's oeuvre. To give a sense of the longevity and development of Beckettian respiration, this article examines passages across the range of his career, paying attention to several prose works – the short story 'Dante and the Lobster' (1934) and the novels *Murphy* (1938) and *Molloy* (1951/55) – and two brief plays: *Breath* (1969) and *Not I* (1972). While there is no simple development of Beckett's writing on the breath, an ambiguous movement can be traced from an initial rejection of a conception of the breath as immaculate and easeful to a deeper exploration of breath as polluted and broken, and to a final, insistent association of respiration with rubbish, and life with death. If there is hope to be found in the Beckettian breath, it lies not on the page but in the breath-carried conversations of the rehearsal room, exemplified above all by his collaboration with Billie Whitelaw on *Not I*.

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Air, the air, is there anything to be squeezed from that old chestnut?

The Unnamable[1]

IF AIR IS an old chestnut and surely half rotten, then breath might seem a spirit diminished to a wheeze. And yet recent years have seen humanities scholars turning their attention to such hoary ordinaries as atmosphere and respiration. Meanwhile, other humanists have been sorting through another grand mundanity: garbage. While the range of these diverse investigations resists summary, two imperatives arise from the recent literature with particular force. The first is the need to pay attention to breath's interruption, and the second is the need to pay attention to waste's modernity.[2]

Breath's interruption and waste's modernity: the two are connected. Growing up in coal-fired Dublin, Beckett would have known the effects of an industry largely responsible for the infamous pea-soup fogs of London, Liverpool, and other industrial cities – effects including the gasping respiration of so many of his characters.[3] Entering his teens in the immediate wake of the First World War, Beckett would have known, too, of the traumatic pulmonary damage of toxic gas suffered by returning veterans. And as a passionate reader of Dante, Beckett also understood the more ancient theological connotations – *pneuma*, *spiritus* – of these interrupted modern breaths.

David Lloyd has recently written that 'breath is not a notably recurrent motif in Beckett's works and certainly not the focus of many critical readings'.[4] This article argues against Lloyd's thesis of breath's importance for Beckett, and in doing so joins a small but growing body of critics attending to breath in Beckett.[5] None of these critics, however, connects Beckett's conception of breath to his conception of waste, and yet Beckett's breath is best understood through his poetics and politics of detritus.

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In this time of pulmonary pandemics, airborne toxic events, and the literal and figurative strangulation of those considered human debris, breath's interruption and waste's modernity invite a return to the works of Samuel Beckett. For his work attends to the breath, not the gentle or vitalizing breath, not the breath that channels spirit between human and nature or human and the divine, but the breath that is hacking and choked. It is an abject breath that runs over with its own refuse and yet refuses to stop breathing.

This wasted breath forms a gasping undertone to Beckett's work throughout his career. To give a sense of its longevity and development, this article examines passages across the range of his oeuvre, from the early published work through to the late microdramas. More precisely, it traces the theme of the breath across several prose works – the short story 'Dante and the Lobster' (1934) and the novels *Murphy* (1938) and *Molloy* (1951/55) – and two brief plays, *Breath* (1969) and *Not I* (1972). While there is no simple development of Beckett's writing on the breath, an ambiguous movement can be traced from an initial rejection of a conception of the breath as immaculate and easeful, to a deeper exploration of breath as polluted and broken, to a final, insistent association of respiration with rubbish and life with death.

'Take into the air my quiet breath'

'Dante and the Lobster', one of the first works Beckett published, ends with the titular crustacean awaiting the drop to the pot. The protagonist is troubled. 'Now it was going alive into scalding water,' he tells himself, and then, 'Take into the air my quiet breath'.[6]

The reference may be familiar: it is to Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', a poem Beckett referenced numerous times in his writings in the 1930s.[7] More specifically, Beckett repeatedly returned to the line 'To take into the air my quiet breath', as well as the 'mused rhyme' of breath and death. One finds such references in the novels *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Murphy*, and *Watt* – as well as 'Dante and the Lobster'. Here the protagonist subsequently reassures himself that 'it's a quick death' – though he tells the reader, in the story's last line, that 'It is not'.

To understand Beckett's use of this line from Keats, it may help to recall the relevant stanza. Here it is in full:

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath;
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!
> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem become a sod.[8]

Let us linger a little with 'Ode to a Nightingale' before coming back to Beckett. This is a death poem; it is also a breath poem, one whose breathiness might appear to validate the portrait of Keats as ethereal Romantic. The poem as a whole, and this stanza in particular, seem to welcome death as quiet dissolution, 'easeful' and 'soft', a matter of mere cessation 'with no pain', accompanied by an 'ecstasy' of birdsong. This 'rich' transformation is captured in the rhyme with 'breath', as though death were as easy and natural as respiration – easier, even, as it entails nothing more than letting go.[9]

This gentle resolution of breath into air may be dubbed the 'breath-to-air trope', and it depicts death without remainder. No corpses, no fluids, no graves. None of the violence, either, that so frequently marks mortality, the terror of nature's remoulding of the living into the dead, or the obscenity of all that which must be disposed of *en route* to the underworld and after crossing over. Mary Douglas famously described dirt as 'matter out of place', by which definition there is no dirt in this trope.

But the trope is not the poem's last word, for this immaculateness is countered by the stanza's end. The speaker, 'become a sod', is now absent from the 'high requiem' of the nightingale's song. The stanza thus hovers unreconciled between the ethereal desire to transform breath into air, and air into song, and the realization that the former transformation would make it impossible for the poet to witness the latter. Put another way, the ethereal transformations envisioned by the poet (breath to air, air to song) rely upon another, earthly transformation (breath to sod) that cannot be incorporated

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into the earlier aesthetic atmosphere. Hence the poem's ambiguous melancholy, for even this most poetic death wish cannot shake the knowledge that death brings with it no clean vaporization but a sodden externality.

Sodden and *solid*, and even *sullied*. For one may hear, in this melancholy, echoes of Hamlet's soliloquy of Act 1, scene 2: 'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!' There is a well-known textual confusion here, with early printings variously rendering Hamlet's 'flesh' either as 'solid' or 'sallied' (emended by editors to 'sullied'). The matter is undecidable in part because both renderings are appropriate, and each puns revealingly on the other. For Hamlet, after all, the solid *is* the sullied, a vile body that longs for liquefication, evaporation, and disappearance. Much like Hamlet, the poet of the 'Nightingale' ode longs for a metamorphosis into something fluid and immaterial; unlike the Hamlet of this soliloquy, however, Keats worries that death might bring with it precisely the opposite of that desire. In this respect Keats cannot quite succumb to the promise of immaculate oblivion.

There is, in other words, a recalcitrant earthiness to Keats that lives in tension with his 'Bright Star' reputation. And this is precisely the quality that Beckett admired in him. As he writes in a 1930 letter to the poet Thomas MacGreevy:

> I like that crouching brooding quality in Keats – squatting on the moss, crushing a pebble, licking his lips & rubbing his hands, 'counting the last oozings, hours by hours'. . . . I like that awful sweetness and thick soft damp green sickness. And weariness. 'Take into the air my quiet breath'.[10]

This Keats – the Keats who dressed wounds and coughed up blood and hymned the 'slippery blisses' of a woman's lips – this sublunary poet is less well known than the rarefied one, but Beckett knew him. Here Beckett (mis) quotes from 'To Autumn' (which actually reads 'Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours'), as well as 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Both citations, as James Little points out, 'emphasize the interdependence between . . . fictional selves and the environment they inhabit'.[11]

But while distinctions between nature and self are blurred in these lines (as they are, more complexly, in the poems from which they are drawn), the way Beckett introduces them in this letter suggests that this blurring comes less from inspiration than from exhaustion. The 'last oozings' of the first citation refer to the slow work of a cider press – an image of the resistance of nature to harvest that Helen Vendler refers to as 'pathetic'.[12] Pathetic too, even with an 'awful sweetness', is the combination of 'sickness' and 'weariness' with which Beckett then segues to the breath-to-air trope from 'Ode to a Nightingale.' As in 'Dante and the Lobster', Beckett drops the initial word of Keats's original line, truncating 'To take into the air my quiet breath' to 'Take into the air my quiet breath'. While the resulting phrase could be taken as a command or request, the pathos of the segue suggests something whimpered and wan, a weak entreaty.

Like Keats's turn from air to sod, Beckett regularly introduces the breath-to-air trope with its vision of an easeful dissolution into death, only to subvert it. This was discussed above with 'Dante and the Lobster' (in which the narrator tries to reassure himself that 'it's a quick death' only to realize that 'It is not'), and Beckett draws a similar contrast in the early novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. There the protagonist attempts to avoid being 'pawed and slabbered on' by his lover; Beckett writes that 'All he wanted was to know a few good prods of compunction and consider how best his quiet breath, or, better still, his and hers mingled, might be taken into the air'.[13] On the one hand, the fantasy of quiet breath; on the other, the pawing and the slobbering and the prods.

Beckett occasionally sets the breath-to-air trope within a landscape so sullied and sodden that the trope appears as desperate longing for the world's negation. In the novel *Murphy*, for example, the character of Celia (Murphy's lover, and a 'prostitute', as she calls herself)[14] unwinds in a rocking chair. For the only time in the novel, she is alone, and she is almost at her ease. She removes her clothes, gets into a rocking chair, and finds herself, 'no longer strangled', in a 'silence not of vacuum but of plenum, not of breath taken but of quiet air'.[15] The travails of

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her life resume shortly thereafter, and the allusion too returns, as Celia remarks that she has been 'seeking the rime, the panting syllable to rime with breath'.[16] All of which prefigures the death of Murphy himself, most likely by suicide, in the very same rocking chair. It is a death by respiration, and it is at once ethereal and grotesque:

> Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free.
>
> The gas went on in the w.c., excellent gas, superfine chaos.
>
> Soon his body was quiet.[17]

Celia and Murphy find release (temporary in her case, permanent in his) through the transformation of breath into air.

There is a common thread in all these allusions to the trope. The allusion in 'Dante and the Lobster' expresses the narrator's desire to imagine the animal's death as painless. The allusion in *Dream* connects to the protagonist's desire to avoid the excesses of sullied flesh (pawing, slobbering) and experience a *petit mort* without such beastliness. And the allusions in *Murphy* evoke the dream of death as a pleasant dissipation. In short, Beckett's use of the trope points to a recurring, troubled desire for breath and death to be coupled in a 'mused rhyme' in which each term is affirmed and harmonized with the other.

This desire is repeatedly invoked in Beckett's work – invoked, frustrated, and upended. Where the breath-to-air trope depicts purity, Beckett's work lingers on pollution. Where the trope depicts transformation, Beckett's work lingers on repetition. And where the trope rhymes breath with death, Beckett's work points to an undead condition in which the rhyme suggests not poetic harmony but uncanny identity.

'The true portal of our being'

Breath in Beckett is a laboured thing. Thinking just of the plays, one may recall the sighs, gasps, coughs, and throat-clearings of *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the 'low, panting' Voice of *Cascando* (1962), or Gorman's 'frequent pauses for breath even in the middle of a word' in *The Old Tune* (1963).[18] Turning to the novels, Malone aims to 'live long enough to get acquainted with free carbonic gas, then say thanks for the nice time and go'[19] – which is no gentle process but one in which we 'Choke, go down, come up, choke' (*Malone Dies*), and are altogether 'panting towards the grand apnoea' (*Texts for Nothing*).[20]

And then there is Beckett's Molloy, from the novel of that title (1951/55). Spewing forth words with regurgitative force, Molloy describes asthmatic difficulties that lead him to thoughts of self-strangulation and cutting his own throat. He relates how:

> The idea of strangulation in particular, however tempting, I always overcame, after a short struggle. And between you and me there was never anything wrong with my respiratory tracts, apart of course from the agonies intrinsic to that system. Yes, I could count the days when I could neither breathe in the blessed air with its life-giving oxygen nor, when I had breathed it in, breathe out the bloody stuff, I could have counted them. Ah yes, my asthma, how often I was tempted to put an end to it, by cutting my throat. But I never succumbed. . . . And I wrapped my head in my cloak, to stifle the obscene noise of choking, or I disguised it as a fit of coughing, universally accepted and approved and whose only disadvantage is this, that it is liable to let you in for pity.[21]

Molloy here draws a firm line between acceptable and unacceptable performances of respiratory distress, with the urgency of his condition hovering between thoughts of throat-slitting and the mask of genteel coughing. Obscenely inexpressible is his desperate state of being unable to inhale or exhale – the emergency of choking. (Choking even on the 'bloody stuff' he breathes out: the air, of course, but perhaps also the sanguinary exhalations of the consumptive, with a further echo of Keats.) This urgency buried, he endures 'the agonies intrinsic to that system', even 'overcame' them, for of course 'there was never anything wrong with my respiratory tracts'.

All these agonies contribute to the sense that the mouth might as well be replaced with the 'arsehole' and the breath with passed gas. (Orifices are regularly confused in the novel; Molloy speaks on another occasion of his mother, 'who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is

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correct'.)[22] Molloy may breathe with difficulty but he farts with ease: 'I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext.'[23] And he is inspired to speak about his 'lewd orifice', for his 'muse will have it so'. The matter compels him to wax poetic:

> Perhaps it is less to be thought of as the eyesore he called by its name than as the symbol of those passed over in silence, a distinction due perhaps to its centrality and its air of being a link between me and the other excrement. We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arsehole and affect to despise it. But is it not rather the true portal of our being and the celebrated mouth no more than the kitchen-door. Nothing goes in, or so little, that is not rejected on the spot, or very nearly. Almost everything revolts it that comes from without and what comes from within does not seem to receive a very warm welcome either.[24]

What Molloy calls 'this little hole' is a kind of anti-mouth, and for all that a better mouth, taking little or nothing from without and expelling all within. Or as the narrator of *The Unnamable* describes it: 'Two holes and me in the middle, slightly choked. Or a single one, entrance and exit . . .'[25]

This mouth–anus inversion continues in the second half of *Molloy*, when the narrator Moran (who, as it turns out, may also be Molloy) reminds his son to put a thermometer in the right orifice. 'As he went out . . . I added jocosely, You know which mouth to put it in?' Thinking back on the remark a few lines later, Moran reconsiders his word choice: 'But I had turned my phrase badly, mouth was not the word I should have used.'[26] Where the mouth is no more than the hole through which the vittles get shuttled, the anus reveals itself as the gateway to our ontology and the key to our 'wordshit'.[27] Moran's missing *bon mot*, in other words, is 'hole'.

This hole is the gateway to anontology – and to a kind of ethics. After all, Molloy encourages the reader to interpret the 'lewd orifice' as a 'symbol of those passed over in silence'. Thus the fart replaces the breath as a symbol of life, life now understood as spiritless residue. Molloy himself is a shameful waste, a reject, who rejects ('They paid no attention to me and I repaid the compliment').[28] In this respect he is one of many Beckett characters who, as Rachelle Dini puts it, 'resist the productivist paradigm by embarking on useless narrative quests, commencing interminable inventory projects, or accruing useless objects; by leaving these self-imposed tasks unfinished; and by choosing to dwell in landfills and subsist on waste, thus abstaining from participation in the market economy'.[29]

In Paul Davies's account of Beckett's work, 'the shit' becomes 'the apotheosis of the unwanted. It shows up everywhere.'[30] The faecal breath of Molloy and other Beckettian wastrels is quite different from a celebration of the irrational, animalistic, or demonic, and far closer to Bartleby's refusal and the ragpicker's eye. As Beckett once remarked, contrasting his own work with Joyce's, 'My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.'[31]

Molloy leaves the reader with a sense of respiration as incurable condition, even as bad habit. 'Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit,' Beckett writes in his 'Proust' essay of 1931. 'Breathing is habit.'[32] And 'habit', as Vladimir says in *Waiting for Godot*, 'is a great deadener'.[33] No wonder, then, that Murphy hopes to buy a machine to take care of the whole damned business for him: '"The last time I saw him," said Neary, "he was saving up for a Drinker artificial respiration machine to get into when he was fed up breathing."'[34] An artificial respiration machine to sustain life – life *as* an artificial respiration machine: is this breath or air?

The Endless Breathing Machine

First staged in 1969, *Breath* is the shortest of Beckett's dramaticules.[35] In production, it lasts about thirty-five seconds. The script consists of three numbered stage directions, prefaced and concluded by a curtain:

> 1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.

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2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.

3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.

Only slightly briefer is the set of accompanying notes describing the *rubbish* ('No verticals, all scattered and lying'), the *cry* ('Instant of recorded vagitus. Important that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath'), the *breath* ('Amplified recording'), and the 'maximum light' ('Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back').[36]

Seen through the lens of Beckett's concentration of style from the mid-1960s onwards, *Breath* can be read as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of formal compression. It marks this extreme not only by virtue of its simplicity and brevity, but also by encompassing so much in so little. One of the things it encompasses is conventional European dramatic form itself. Beckett referred to the work as a 'farce in five acts',[37] and its almost ludicrously symmetrical structure would seem to echo, even travesty, the form of the well-made play. William Hutchings elaborates on this point by noting the work's conformity with 'the pyramidical structure which was postulated by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas* in 1863'.[38] Freytag's dramatic sequence, which has exhibited enormous sway over western (and not only western) dramatic form since the late nineteenth century, describes the ideal dramatic structure as a five-part sequence: an *inciting moment* produces a *rising action*, which culminates in a *climax*, which gives way to a *falling action*, ending in a *catastrophe.* The way this structure maps onto *Breath* is clear enough, with the reiterated cry marking the inciting moment and its catastrophe, the inhalation and exhalation standing for the rising and falling actions, and the breath-pause the climax.

Not only is the well-made play bound within the nutshell of this work, so too is the infinite space of the self. If there were some alchemy by which the microcosm of the stage might capture the macrocosm of existence, *Breath* might seem to display it. Beckett himself noted the birth-to-death arc of the work in a letter from 1969: 'I realized when too late to repent,' he wrote, 'that it is not unconnected with *On entre, on crie / Et c'est la vie. / On crie, on sort, / Et c'est la mort* [One enters, one cries / And that's life. / One cries, one exits / And that's death].'[39] Implicit in this little ditty is the tangle of etymological, cultural, and religious strands connecting breath, life, and the divine. The concept of 'breath', after all, contains multitudes. For the breath bears with it a peculiar metaphysical weight: it is, and has long been, widely seen as a sign and source of something vital, mysterious, sacred – the intangible line between the animate and the inanimate. The Greek *pneuma* signifies at once breath and vital energy, as in various ways does the Latin *spiritus*, the Hebrew *ruach*, and for that matter the Sanskrit *prana*, the Chinese *qi*, and so forth.

With these connotations in mind, *Breath* would seem to offer itself as a capsule summary of some supposedly Beckettian philosophy: spirit as rubbish heap. To make this absence yet more present, the dramaticule offers not a living but a recorded breath. In the terms of Peggy Phelan's famous definition of performance as 'representation without reproduction', *Breath* is less anti-dramatic than anti-performative. As such, it contrasts sharply with a work from roughly the same period, Marina Abramović and Ulay's *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977), in which the couple locked mouths to the point of mutual asphyxiation. Like so much of their work, the Abramović/Ulay piece drew attention to the embodied liveness of the event, as the two sweated and writhed together in response to their growing oxygen depletion. The electronic apparatus they incorporated – a microphone attached to each of their chests – only heightened the sense of corporeal presence through the amplification of their breaths and heartbeats. Beckett's *Breath*, on the other hand, offers only reproduced breath and reproduced cries, all synchronized to a theatrical apparatus. Bodily speaking, there is nothing in play here, and the whole thing is

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governed by a script as unambiguous and inflexible as an algorithmic code. Though it lacks a single word of dialogue, *Breath* renders spirit as text, and it all could be, perhaps should be, performed by a machine.

The piece eschews liveness in another way as well. It does so, despite Beckett's ditty, by not depicting death. Occasionally missed by critics is the fact that the second cry is not a death rattle but an 'identical' 'instant of recorded vagitus': in other words, a *life* rattle.[40] This also means that Hutchings's well-taken reference to the five-part structure too must be amended, for the ending here is no 'catastrophe', at least not in the sense that that word is employed by theorists from Donatus onwards – that is, as dramatic resolution – but rather a return of the same. This is not a staging of breath as birth-life-death but as birth-life-birth, less Freytag's arc than Nietzsche's cycle, an eternal breathing machine that recalls the narrator of *The Unnamable*, who laments that 'the breath fails, it's nearly the end, the breath stops, it's the end, short-lived, I hear someone calling me, it begins again'.[41] Or else the delicious paradox expressed in *Texts for Nothing*: 'nothing like breathing your last to put new life into you'.[42]

The words Beckett chooses to describe the movement of the breath in *Breath* are 'inspiration' and 'expiration'. In a literal sense, both occur, but in a figurative sense, neither does. One hears (recorded) breath inhale and exhale, but nothing inspires here, nothing creates or imagines, nothing animates or witnesses to truth ('all [is] scattered and lying'), and the exhalation yields not the possibility of new beginning but only the same old beginning, again. This inspiration and expiration, in other words, tells of no inspiration and no expiration.

This uninspiring and unexpiring landscape is 'littered with miscellaneous rubbish'. Here again Beckett elaborates on the theme already witnessed in the subversion of the breath-to-air trope and the musings of Molloy: the theme of breath as waste. Viewed one way, *Breath* offers a tableau of life as waste, infinitely recycled. Viewed another, it foregrounds all that which is unwanted and passed over in silence, all that refuses and is refused. As such, it is a staging ground for the discarded, evoking not only commodity garbage, but also what Zygmunt Bauman has called '"human waste", or more correctly wasted humans', whose production 'is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity'.[43] The scenography of *Breath* has been compared with a Dutch baroque *vanitas* painting, but today it might more easily recall the Gramacho garbage dump of Rio de Janeiro, or indeed any one of countless trashlands that increasingly constitute modernity's lifeworlds.[44] Things don't disappear when swallowed by the hole; they only change form and value to reappear in another orifice.

Emission without Purgation

'Hole' (or more precisely, 'Godforsaken Hole') could serve as a title for Beckett's best-known dramaticule, the ten-to-fifteen-minute stream-of-consciousness monologue *Not I* (1972). The piece presents the audience with a '*Stage in darkness but for* MOUTH, *upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow*'. Downstage audience left from Mouth is the Auditor, a '*tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on* MOUTH, *dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated*'.[45] The audience hears the Mouth speaking, without quite being able to make out its words, as the curtain rises.

What follows is a torrent of verbiage. The speaker is a seventy-year-old woman, born and lived unloved, the audience is told, from orphanhood onwards, who seems to have barely spoken for most of her life before, at some point, starting to speak and not stopping. In an echo of *Breath*, the audience hears of two cries: one at birth and a second at a breaking point in her life. Perhaps the only two times that she ever has cried. As she relates in her fragmentary way:

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. . . or that time she cried . . . the one time she could remember . . . since she was a baby . . . must have cried as a baby . . . perhaps not . . . not essential to life . . . just the birth cry to get her going . . . breathing . . .[46]

The Times reviewer of the London premiere described a performance in which 'language becomes dislocated in short staccato phrases, punctuated with screams and exhausted gasps for breath'.[47]

Like *Breath*, *Not I* begins at the beginning, with a birth from and into a hole. The words that the audience first makes out are:

. . . out . . . into this world . . . this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time . . . in a godfor— . . . what? . . . girl? . . . yes . . . tiny little girl . . . into this . . . out into this . . . before her time . . . godforsaken hole called . . . called . . . no matter . . .

Mouth never says what the 'godforsaken hole' of the world is called, unless of course it is called 'no matter', which is after all a fit description of a hole. But this 'no matter' is precisely the opposite of the 'no matter' of the breath-to-air trope, with its resonant ethereality. This is a No Matter of absence and inconsequence.

If the hole is womb and world, it is also Mouth herself, which is the whole of the speaker but also interchangeable, as in *Molloy*, with other orifices. Mouth is mouth but also vagina and anus – triple portals of excretion. For *The Times* drama critic, Mouth 'in isolation could be any bodily orifice; only the torrent of panic-stricken speech defines it as a human mouth'.[48] This interchangeability became only more pronounced with the translation of stage to film. In the version made for BBC television, an extreme close-up of Whitelaw's mouth, surrounded by darkness, fills the entire centre of the screen, which it seems at times close to swallowing. The result is that this object takes on an uncanny life of its own, suggesting at once multiple other orifices and something yet more alien. In Whitelaw's account, 'It looked strangely sexual and glutinous, slimy and weird, like a crazed, oversexed jellyfish.'[49] James Knowlson and James Pilling report that 'Beckett displayed no sense of displeasure as, watching the BBC television version, he realized that Mouth had the appearance of a large, gaping vagina'.[50]

Mouth, anus, and vagina are regularly confused in the monologue, as when Mouth speaks of her 'sudden urge to . . . tell . . . then rush out stop the first she saw . . . nearest lavatory . . . start pouring it out . . . steady stream . . .'[51] The ambiguous pronoun in 'start pouring it [*sic*] out' indicates the doubling of words and waste in the memory of the lavatory and the present reality of the theatre. The 'steady stream' exiting Mouth and entering the audience's eyes and ears is after all speech and also detritus, even of the most literal and corporeal kind. Here the issue is fluids not of the bowels but the mouth. The common actor's problem of what to do with spittle is wildly exacerbated in *Not I* due to the fact that the monologue is intended to be performed uninterrupted with extraordinary rapidity and precise enunciation.

In a letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett described the speech as 'breathless, urgent, feverish, rhythmic, panting along'.[52] The phrase evokes the undead quality of all bodily excretions, which hover between vitality and matter, self and other. 'Panting' in particular is a word Beckett occasionally uses to indicate a deathly breath (as in 'the panting syllable to rime with breath' above, from *Murphy*, or 'panting toward the great apnoea', also above, from *Texts for Nothing*), and the 'breathless [ness]' of Mouth's 'panting' would similarly suggest once more a breath which is also its opposite.

More practically, this breathlessness creates problems familiar to any professional actor. Indeed, one cannot speak much further about Beckett and breath, at least when it comes to the plays, without considering the actor. Many of Beckett's roles require extraordinary breath control: consider *Happy Days*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Cascando*, each of which stages an extended monologue that demands volume, endurance, and delicate touch from the voice of the performer, and each of which features moments in which the breath itself becomes an object of attention. But of all these works, none demands such a level of pneumatic virtuosity as *Not I*. And in order to understand this demand better, it will be

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helpful to turn to the performer most closely associated with that role: Billie Whitelaw.

Whitelaw developed her performance through extensive conversation and rehearsal with Beckett, and she performed the work in its European premiere in 1973. Though hardly their only collaboration, it remains the one that most defines Whitelaw's career and, in many ways, the work itself. Its influence is particularly pronounced thanks to the 1977 BBC adaptation, which introduced new audiences to Beckett's work, and continues (at least at the time of writing) to be widely available on the internet, extending its reach incalculably. In her memoir, Whitelaw describes the experience of acting Mouth as 'the most telling event of my professional life'.[53]

'What Sam was after,' writes Whitelaw, 'was to find out how far you can remove the body altogether from the stage, yet still end up with an intensely dramatic situation. The only way I could help was to try to eliminate Billie Whitelaw's body, then deal with what was left.'[54] This elimination of the body was accomplished by means of a rather brutal theatrical apparatus. It consisted of a ten-foot podium with a chair to which Whitelaw was strapped with a waistbelt, while 'her head was clamped firmly between two pieces of sponge rubber, so that her mouth could not move out of the spotlight, and the top part of her face was covered with black gauze, with a black transparent strip for the eyes'.[55] Once strapped and clamped into this immobilization device, very little was left of Whitelaw's body other than her mouth and all that it emitted.

Alongside these physical restraints, *Not I* makes vocal demands that combine extreme precision with extraordinary speed. 'I felt it had to go very fast,' commented Whitelaw, upon reading the script for the first time.[56] It was an impression that only strengthened during rehearsal: 'All I knew was that it would have to go faster than anything I'd ever heard in the theatre, if possible as fast as the speed of thought, and that of course is impossible.'[57] Beckett concurred, and the two of them fought together for this tempo against the director, Anthony Page. 'Anthony Page said it was too fast and wanted to make it comprehensible,' recalled Beckett of the first British production. 'Billie and I won.'[58] But Page was right to worry that the audience might not be able to make out the words if they were delivered at such breakneck pace, for the price of speed was indeed comprehensibility.[59] With a loss of verbal meaning, audience attention may have shifted, for better or worse, to non-verbal aspects of the performance.[60]

Whitelaw trained herself for the challenge by counting very quickly – from one to ten every second – with articulation.[61] 'I've been practising saying words at a tenth of a second,' Whitelaw told *The Sunday Times* in 1973. 'No one can possibly follow the text at that speed but Beckett insists that I speak it precisely.'[62] In her memoir, Whitelaw relates the breath work that this demanded of her. 'The work was painful; my ribcage protested at having to take such little breaths. Like a singer, I had to work out exactly where I was going to snatch breath. I was hyperventilating like mad and often became dizzy, staggering round and round the stage. My jaws ached.'[63] This exhaustion of breath through controlled breathlessness ('there is not time to breathe,' she told Knowlson) reached a crisis point in dress rehearsal.[64] Whitelaw recalls that:

> After about a page and a half, I felt myself starting to tumble over the edge of the rostrum. I clung on to the bar because I thought I was going to pass out. I remained convinced as I spoke my lines that I was tumbling off the edge of the rostrum and into the void of the theatre.[65]

Hyperventilation contributed to vertigo; it also produced a problem of salivation. Whitelaw recalls having to

> sort out was what to do with all the spit that was collecting in my mouth. There didn't seem to be time to swallow my spittle. I ended up feeling like a pelican. At the beginning, until I found 'spit-swallowing places', the spit just trickled out of my mouth. I must have sprayed the first few stalls at every performance.[66]

This difficulty echoes Whitelaw's first impression of the work itself as a kind of vulgar emission – 'Something akin to verbal vomit', as she described the work to Anthony Page, and elsewhere as 'verbal diarrhoea'.[67] Beyond this, the centre-stage performance of salivation

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in *Not I* recalls Beckett's image of Keats, 'licking his lips' and '"counting the last oozings"' – a dripping bodily poetics.

The godforsakenness of this Mouth, these orifices, is more hellish than purgatorial. Not that purgation is not a hope here, a hope that Mouth recalls from an earlier time, depicted in bucolic terms: '. . . back in the field . . . morning sun . . . April . . . sink face down in the grass . . . nothing but the larks . . .' It is there and then, in that April field, apparently, that Mouth cried again, for the first time since birth, her tears wetting her palm. 'God is love . . .' she recollects, 'she'll be purged . . .'[68] But what all this emission – the cry, the tears, the spit, the vomit, and the rest – produces is continuation rather than elimination, and the curtain closes on Mouth still chattering away in the dark. This logorrhoeic condition echoes the narrator of *The Unnamable*, who conjures up the thought of a voice inside its own head:

> the voice will tell me everything, tell it to me again, everything I need, in dribs and drabs, breathless, it's like a confession, a last confession, you think it's finished, then it starts off again, there were so many sins, the memory is so bad, the words don't come, the words fail, the breath fails, no it's something else.[69]

That Beckett's work enacts a terminal condition of the word is well understood; attention to the breath suggests that it equally enacts a terminal condition of the spirit.

There is a danger here that Mouth's breathlessness may underscore, and may only be made performable by, the total subordination of the actor to the authorial word. In this respect, the extraordinary physical restraints necessary for performance of the role may be read as another way of immobilizing and even pacifying the actor so as better to serve as a conduit for the text. It is telling that, while Jessica Tandy (who premiered the role in New York in 1972) continued to rely on a teleprompter for her lines (a reliance that introduced its own set of technical problems, as any reflected light from the teleprompter had to be hidden from the audience), Whitelaw insisted on memorizing the text so as better to deliver it at the proper speed – a speed at which all contemplation had to be shut off in order that the words could issue forth unimpeded. The result was that Whitelaw transformed herself into a Mouth for a breath not her own. 'If you allow the words to breathe through your body,' she remarked, 'if you become a conduit, something magical may happen.'[70] Even Beckett may have considered this text as more transmitted than produced; he told Deirdre Bair that 'I heard "her" saying what I wrote in *Not I.* I actually heard it.'[71] Voiced by Whitelaw as actor, this is the 'breathed word' (*parole soufflée*) that Jacques Derrida, inspired by Antonin Artaud, deconstructs in *Writing and Difference* – that is, the word as authorial voice channelled through the performer, perhaps with the aid of a prompter (*souffleur*).[72]

But there is another side of this collaboration as well – one that did not involve Whitelaw serving as a portal for the authorial spirit. Whitelaw recalls it this way:

> Sam, by the way, thought he knew his *Not I* inside out. If I got some lines mixed up, it was like a knife going through his body. I'd hear him groan: 'Oh no . . .' quite audibly. I remember catching him out once. He had said: 'No, no, that's wrong'.
>
> I replied: 'No, it's you who are wrong, you don't know your own play.' We both laughed. . . . That's the way Sam and I worked together for the next fifteen years. We would sit opposite each other and speak the words in unison, he in a whisper and me out loud, while we 'conducted' each other, eyeball to eyeball.[73]

Against the backdrop of an undead terrain, in which neither expiration nor inspiration occurs, Whitelaw describes a scene of mutual groans and whispers that stands in stark relief. And the subject of these conversations was not textual interpretation, but rather 'rhythm, stress on the screams, the panting and so on', in the words of one interview with Whitelaw.[74] The interruptions of speech here indicate not communicative breakdown but mutual encounter.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator speaks of the unstoppable outpouring of words as at least containing some desire for encounter ('In the frenzy of utterance the concern with truth. Hence the interest of a possible deliverance by means of encounter').[75] But such an event

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does not, apparently cannot, arrive through language, if only because there is no other in the novel who might listen and respond. In *Not I*, similarly, Mouth also occasionally emits something like an urge for encounter (her 'sudden urge to . . . tell'), but this does not occur, and perhaps cannot occur unless and until Mouth is able to utter the 'I' that she is unable to utter.[76] In this respect the figure of the Auditor, who wordlessly listens to the flow of speech and occasionally offers a 'gesture of helpless compassion' in response, may suggest the possibility or at least the hope of a transformative recognition that never takes place.[77]

In the rehearsal room, however, something different emerges, something like what Paul Celan once called a 'breath-carried conversation with the Other'.[78] It is not necessarily limited to Beckett's creative dialogues with Whitelaw. This form of searching, vulnerable conversation, familiar to all collaborative theatre-makers, may arise whenever the crucible of *Not I* is entered into by an actor and a director in mutual brokenness and discovery. It points to the shared nature of breath, the ways in which, to quote Hartmut Rosa, it 'does not belong to us alone, but rather is something that plays out between our consciousness, our body, and the world'.[79]

Conclusion: The Right To Breathe – and Not To

There was a man in another ward, dying of throat cancer. In the silence I could hear his screams continually. That's the only kind of form my work has.
Samuel Beckett, in conversation with Harold Pinter[80]

The air is full of our cries.
Vladimir, *Waiting for Godot*[81]

On 4 June 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe posted an essay online titled 'La droit universel à la respiration', subsequently translated and published as 'The Universal Right to Breathe'. Pointing to 'energy-intensive extraction, agricultural expansion, predatory sales of land, and destruction of forests', Mbembe claimed that 'All of these wars on life begin by taking away breath'.[82] In this sense Covid 'shares this same tendency' with other geopolitical systems, as, like them, 'it impedes breathing and blocks the resuscitation of human bodies and tissues' – and does so in profoundly unequal ways.[83] Problems of breath, moreover, are inextricably connected to problems of waste – above all, the supposed waste of bodies, which must be separated out, confined apart, or spirited away through digitization. For ours is a 'pathogenic but also the catabolic period *par excellence*, with the decomposition of bodies, the sorting and expulsion of all sorts of human waste – the "great separation" and great confinement caused by the stunning spread of the virus – and along with it, the widespread digitization of the world'.[84] Unless these new containments are confronted and replaced with a universal right to breathe, 'humanity has no future', and may well be drawing its 'dying breath'.[85]

Beckett refuses to separate out breath from its materiality – which is to say, from the body, from bodily waste, and from bodies regarded as waste. While this puts him at odds with a certain ethereal strain of Romanticism, it puts him in accord with contemporary philosophers such as Mbembe. Unlike Mbembe, however, Beckett's infernal vision is not of the possibility but the impossibility of humanity's dying breath, not the thought that humanity might be extinguished but that it might be unkillable and yet unable to live. Beckett's endless breathing machine, most fully dramatized in *Breath*, is a vision yet more hellish than Mbembe's in that it prohibits even that last comfort of expiration, the hope of new birth. This is the hope that waste might become compost rather than a forever substance, like some chemicals and some characters. The fact that this undead foreverness mirrors the indefatigability of Beckett's protagonists, their insistence that they can't go on and will go on, makes it difficult to read such perseverance in even the most minimally heroic terms.

If there is something like hope to be found in Beckett's breath, it does not lie in the mere continuity of respiration. To find this thing,

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this something-like-hope, one must broaden one's view to include not only Beckett's work, but also elements of his artistic process exemplified by his dialogic collaboration with Billie Whitelaw. These two once breathed life into *Not I*, and yet their breath-carried conversations must not be imagined as something complete or resolved, some new masterpiece to be channelled and inscribed. The air has taken their breaths, not quiet, and the sod their deaths, not easeful, and has made of the residue something rich.

Notes and References

1. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 300.

2. In *The Poetics of Breathing: Modern Literature's Syncope* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), Stefanie Heine attends to breath's 'movements of syncopnea' – that is, to breathing's fluttering, rupture, syncopation, or blackout. Drawing from Catherine Clément, who claims that 'breathing *is* the art of rupture', Heine is interested in those periods 'when the autonomous, conscious being is overtaken by a bodily rupture: a suspended breath, for example, or "a cough, that banal everyday suffocation; banal, yes, but it is spasmodic, and as such provokes a little suspension of being" ' (p. 4–5). This attention has counterparts in recent scholarly literature around the ways in which breathing and the inability to breathe indexes the Black body, particularly in the wake of the murders of Eric Garner and George Floyd, among others; see, for example, Romi Crawford, 'Connecting Breaths', *Critical Inquiry*, XLVII, No. S2 (Winter 2021), p. S119–120, and Jean-Thomas Tremblay, *Breathing Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022). Studies of the modernity of waste include Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York and London: New Press, 2005) and Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: The Other Side of Consumption* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1992).

3. See <https://irelandenergy2050.ie/past/coal/>.

4. 'Breath Crystals: A Vestigial Poetics of Breath in Beckett, Celan, and Arikha', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, XXX, No. 2 (September 2018), p. 179–95 (p. 189).

5. See, for example, Fergal Gaynor, ' "When the Panting Stops": Breath and Breathing in Beckett and *How It Is*', *Mosaic*, LIII, No. 3 (September 2020), p. 57–70; Sozita Goudouna, *Beckett's 'Breath': Antitheatricality and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); and Yan Tang, 'Atmospheric Violence: Samuel Beckett's Aesthetics of Respiration', *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, XXX, No. 2 (2019), p. 103–19.

6. Beckett, 'Dante and the Lobster', in *The Grove Centenary Edition* (New York: Grove, 2006), Vol. 4, p. 88.

7. Mark Nixon, 'Beckett and Romanticism in the 1930s', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, XVIII (2007), p. 61–76 (p. 70–71). See also James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 58, 121, 550; Elizabeth Barry, ' "Take into the air my quiet breath": Samuel Beckett and English Romanticism', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, X, Nos. 1–2, p. 207–21, is also informative on this topic although, despite the title, the essay is almost entirely on Beckett's relationship to Wordsworth (and to some degree Schopenhauer).

8. John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 208.

9. Recent scholars have argued for a more corporeal Keats than has traditionally been understood. This entails, among other things, a new attention to his physical condition (including the pulmonary ravages of his consumption), his medical practice, and the fact that he was living through the beginnings of industrialism's atmospheric effects. The ethereal desires of 'Ode to a Nightingale', then, should be read against the backdrop of the very earthly travails of respiration that Keats knew intimately and all too well. See, for example, Andrew Kay, 'Conspiring with Keats: Toward a Poetics of Breathing', *European Romantic Review*, XXVII, No. 5 (2016), p. 563–81 (p. 564 and 567).

10. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett I: 1929–1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 21.

11. James Little, ' "First the Place, Then I'll Find Me in It": *The Unnamable*'s Pronouns and the Politics of Confinement', in *Beckett and Politics*, ed. William Davies and Helen Bailey (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 69–85 (p. 75).

12. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 282.

13. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1992), p. 107.

14. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove, 1970), p. 233.

15. Ibid., p. 148.

16. Ibid., p. 229.

17. Ibid., p. 253.

18. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 215, 216, 219, 221, 222, 223 [*Krapp's Last Tape*]; 297 [*Cascando*]; 337 [*The Old Tune*].

19. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 225.

20. Ibid., p. 210; Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), p. 134.

21. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 79.

22. Ibid., p. 16. See also *Texts for Nothing*: 'the head has fallen behind, all the rest has gone on, the head and its anus the mouth, or else it has gone on alone, all alone on its old prowls, slobbering its shit' (Beckett, *Complete Short Prose*, p. 141).

23. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 30.

24. Ibid., p. 79–80.

25. Ibid., p. 355.

26. Ibid., p. 117–18.

27. 'Wordshit' comes from *Texts for Nothing* ('wordshit, bury me, avalanche': *Complete Short Prose*, p. 137) and corresponds with Beckett's many descriptions of his own writing as crap. The anality of Beckett's writing has been commented on by a number of critics. See Phil Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), p. 48–63; Jonathan Boulter, ' "Wordshit, Bury Me": The Waste of Narrative in Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, XI, No. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 1–19; Will Broadway, 'Holes, Orifices, and Porous Subjectivity in Beckett's *Molloy*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, XXVII, No. 1 (2018), p. 83–94 (especially p. 83–4 for Beckett on his own writing as suited for toilet paper); Julie Campbell, 'The Semantic Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, VI, No. 1 (1997) p. 63–70; Keir Elam, 'World's End: West

Brompton, Turdy, and Other Godforsaken Holes', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, VI, No. 1 (1997), p. 165–80; Brian Macaskill, 'The Logic of Coprophilia: Mathematics and Beckett's *Molloy*', *SubStance*, XVII, No. 3 (January 1988), p. 13–21; and Shane Weller, 'Staging Psychoanalysis: Endgame and the Freudian Theory of the Anal-Sadistic Phase', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, XXII, No. 1 (October 2010), p. 135–47.

28. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 23.

29. Rachelle Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 68.

30. Paul Davies, 'Three Novels and Four *Nouvelles*: Giving up the Ghost Be Born at Last', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 43–66 (p. 49).

31. Israel Shenker, 'An Interview with Beckett', *New York Times*, 5 May 1956, in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 146–9.

32. Samuel Beckett, 'Proust', *Grove Centenary Edition*, Vol. 4, p. 515.

33. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 84.

34. Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 49.

35. In 1969, the drama critic Kenneth Tynan asked Samuel Beckett to contribute a piece for a theatrical revue. The revue, comprised largely of sex-comedy sketches and nudity, would go on to become the wildly successful *Oh! Calcutta!* The piece, which Beckett would insist be removed from the production (on account of Tynan's adding naked bodies to its landscape), was titled *Breath*. After its premiere with *Oh! Calcutta!*, *Breath* was performed as written for the first time at the Close Theatre Club in Glasgow in October 1969 and published in *Gambit* the same year. It has been occasionally revived since, with the most famous production in this century being a video directed by Damien Hirst for the *Beckett on Film* project in 2001.

36. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 371.

37. James Knowlson and James Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1979), p. 127.

38. William Hutchings, 'Abated Drama: Samuel Beckett's Unbated "Breath"', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, XVII, No. 1 (1986), p. 85–95 (p. 87–8).

39. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett IV: 1966–1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 207–8 [my translation of the French].

40. For an account of critics who see this as a death rattle, see Hutchings, 'Abated Drama', p. 88.

41. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 394.

42. Beckett, *Complete Short Prose*, p. 103. Consider also the narrator of *Malone Dies*: 'It will never have been given to me to finish anything, except perhaps breathing'; note the 'perhaps'.

43. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Oxford: Polity, 2003), p. 5.

44. Claire Lozier, '*Breath* as *Vanitas*: Beckett's Debt to a Baroque Genre', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, XXII (2010), p. 241–51.

45. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 376.

46. Ibid., p. 380.

47. Irving Wardle, '*Krapp's Last Tape* / *Not I*', *The Times*, 17 January 1973, p. 10 (*The Times* Digital Archive, accessed 6 March 2023).

48. Ibid.

49. Billie Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw . . . Who He?* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 132.

50. Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull*, p. 200.

51. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 382.

52. Beckett, *Letters IV*, p. 311.

53. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 132.

54. Ibid., p. 123.

55. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 528.

56. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 116.

57. Ibid., p. 118.

58. Quoted in Derval Tubridy, 'Vain Reasonings: *Not I*', in *Samuel Beckett: A Casebook*, ed. Jennifer M. Jeffers (New York and London: Garland, 1998), p. 111–31 (p. 112).

59. Edith Oliver, writing on the Lincoln Center premiere of the piece for the *New Yorker* in 1972, commented that Mouth speaks 'so quickly that one can barely distinguish the words' (quoted in ibid., p. 113).

60. For the premiere of *Not I* in New York City, Alan Schneider was in line with Beckett (with whom he regularly corresponded) in his direction of Jessica Tandy, whom he encouraged to emphasize speed and urgency over comprehensibility. The prominent drama critic Martin Gottfried disparaged Schneider's direction on this account. See Schneider's letter to Beckett of 9 December 1972, in *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 283.

61. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 122–3.

62. Quoted in Tubridy, 'Vain Reasonings', p. 113.

63. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 122.

64. James Knowlson, 'Practical Aspects of Theatre, Radio, and Television: Extracts from an Interview with Billie Whitelaw', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, III (Summer 1978), p. 85–90 (p. 86).

65. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 124.

66. Ibid., p. 122.

67. Ibid., p. 116.

68. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 381.

69. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 411. According to Knowlson, 'Asked further about the sources of *Not I*, Beckett referred questioners back to his own novel *The Unnamable*' (*Damned to Fame*, p. 522); see also Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull*, p. 235.

70. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 120. Whitelaw offered a similar account of her relationship with Beckett in an interview with Jonathan Kalb. 'I feel that I place myself totally at his disposal,' she told him, 'and I can be a tube of paint or a musical instrument or whatever. I won't argue. I won't argue, because I trust him totally, and have absolute respect for his integrity and his artistic vision. So really I just do as I'm told' (Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 235).

71. Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 622.

72. Jacques Derrida, 'La parole soufflée', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 169–95.

73. Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 127.

74. Knowlson, 'Practical Aspects', p. 87.

75. Beckett, *Three Novels*, p. 300.

76. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 382.

77. Ibid., p. 375.

78. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 119 (my translation).
79. Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 56.
80. Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 528.
81. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 84.
82. Achille Mbembe, 'The Universal Right to Breathe', trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry*, XLVII, No. S2 (Winter 2021), p. S58–62 (p. S61).
83. Ibid., p. S61.
84. Ibid., p. S59.
85. Ibid., p. S62.

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