
Stanley E. Gontarski

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
e-mail: sgontarski@fsu.edu
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2899-4209>

On Fragments: A Piece of Art and the “I” – or Not

Abstract

This essay explores the philosophical implications inherent in Samuel Beckett’s most enigmatic and metonymic late theater work, *Not I*, even as he frequently abjured any interest in philosophy, which he claimed neither to read nor to understand. The play is profoundly ontological, however, and its metonymic stage image engages the classical philosophical conundrum of the relationship of the part, a piece or fragment, say, to the whole, an issue with which Beckett has at least been intrigued for most of his creative life.

Key words: fragments, Modernism, Romanticism, ontology, metonymy, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Immanuel Kant, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek

Parole chiave: frammenti, Modernismo, Romanticismo, ontologia, metonimia, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Immanuel Kant, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek

With much confidence and tranquility, Whitman states that writing is fragmentary, and that the American writer has to devote himself to writing in fragments. [...] America brings together extracts, it presents samples from all ages, all lands, all nations.

Gilles Deleuze

Prelude

On 16 February 1961 Samuel Beckett was interviewed by French novelist and critic Gabriel D'Aubarède. The exchange went as follows:

Gabriel D'Aubarède: "Have contemporary philosophers had any influence on your thought?"

Samuel Beckett: "I never read philosophers."

GD: "Why not?"

SB: "I never understand anything they write."

GD: "All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works."

SB: "There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels [or plays, we might add]¹ if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms."

GD: "What was your reason then?"

SB: "I haven't the slightest idea. I'm no intellectual. All I am is feeling. Molloy and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel." (Graver and Federman 1979: 219)

What Beckett is resisting in this exchange seems to be the quest for totality, unity, wholeness or foundations, the historical concerns of philosophy. He is not dismissing philosophical issues, or thought in general, however. Art exists at the intersection of emotion and thought, and Beckett's leanings tend toward the former – without, however, dismissing the latter. He is, after all, as he insists, an artist, but not without intellectual interests, and even those of philosophy. Certainly, his concerns have dealt with aesthetics, epistemology and ontology, three of the five fields of philosophy (I'm leaving out, for now, philosophy's other traditional fields of logic and

¹ All comments within quotations enclosed in square brackets are mine, SG.

ethics), and those three overlapping fields of interest are shared between philosophers and artists, Beckett included. What Beckett seems to be suggesting is that he is not out to solve philosophical issues, nor to present them in philosophical language, but he does engage them, at least piecemeal. He presents them as felt. The mode is affect not reason. He offers images of absent solutions, of the crisis of ontology, say, the nature of being included, what it means to be – and some, Gabriel D'Aubarède, for instance, might consider those existential issues.

I will deal with roughly two issues in the following essay, although they tend to bleed into one another:

- 1) Fragments, or parts, or pieces – which may be a matter of aesthetics, or aesthetic theory – and their relationship to wholes, unities, totalities, and the like; and
- 2) Being, or ontology, coupled with epistemology, or how we know what we think we know.

The Part and the Whole

Can we approach and understand what appears to be only a piece of something – a scrap of text, a portion of a body, a slice of a life – as somehow complete in itself, its own whole, say? One Beckett theater piece is called *A Piece of Monologue* (Beckett 1984a: 263–270), for instance, but they are all what we call pieces of art. What are the implications if art can only ever be a piece of something or someone, a fragment – that is, the whole, of a story, of a life, say, would take a lifetime to present, and that life could never be complete, whole, say, until it ended. Until then life, and so art, since art has no other subject, is an unstable, elusive entity, a work in progress. If we posit that the necessary condition of art is the fragment or that art itself can only be achieved, perceived or witnessed as fragmented, an entity with missing parts, perhaps, and so includes or is based on an *absence*, it offers, thereby, the presence of absence – or art as making absence present – most often through an image. This is especially the case with theater during which we witness a presentation, the presentness of absence, since art entails the condition of incompleteness rather than completion; a completion, on the other hand, tends to arrest or stop, to shut down possibilities. A brash, youthful Samuel Beckett put the matter thus: “[...] art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear, does not make clear [...]” (Beckett 1984b: 94) or “whole,” we might add.

But if art is a fragment or a piece, what precisely might it be a fragment or piece of? In the chapter *Art, a Fragment* from *The Sense of the World*, the late French

philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–2021) opens that question of art’s presentness, its “presentification,” in the awkward terminology of the German Romantics, or the concept of “liveness” in contemporary theater theory, and its relation to a broader totality, the notion that it fits comfortably into some broader biographical, political, theological, or philosophical system. “In short, this is Hegel’s thesis on the aesthetic religion of ancient Athens: the notion that particular art forms (notably tragedy and statuary in the Hellenic world) must be understood in the context of their roles in establishing and maintaining a civic religion,” but our contemporary culture has witnessed a breakdown of such metaphysical concerns and social systems as such generally unifying systems vanish. As critic John McKeane puts it, citing Nancy from *The Sense of the World*:

“Hegel *delivers* art for itself: he delivers it from service to transcendence in immanence, and he delivers it to detached, fragmentary truth. Hegel [...] registers and salutes in fact *the birth of art*.” [...] But in freeing, liberating, or delivering art from this role, Hegel is thought by Nancy to be enacting the *deliverance* of art. We can understand this term as a liberation, but also as a delivery lacking any given end or destination, a destiny that is also an errancy [...]. Its connection to a broader totality of aesthetic religion having been severed, and it therefore having become a fragment, art is not stripped of its role, but instead [is] set free, or indeed—like a baby—delivered. (McKeane 2023: 266)

So one question we can ask of art is what is the relationship between the piece, the fragment to the whole? That connection may be part of the traditional process of constructing meaning and understanding. But we now might ask, which whole – that may be what is at issue. The whole body? The whole landscape, much of which we cannot see? The world? The universe? But art does not explain and as such even verbal art is similar to painting in that it presents an image or images but without what Beckett calls “clarity,” without explanation or discourse from even its creator, because art always comprises or constitutes a gap, an absence. “Notice,” Nancy tells us, “that by drawing sense out of absence, by making *absense* [absence] *a presense* [presence], the image does not do away with the impalpable nature of absence.” And so, for Nancy, attempts at a solidification of identity (or presence), say, are an intrusion and so constitute an act of violence: “The *unity of the thing* [the artwork, say], of presence and of the subject, is itself violent” (Nancy 2005: 2). Art then has nothing to reveal, a point that Samuel Beckett has been making at least since the breakthrough success of *Waiting for Godot*. As he told Gabriel D’Aubarède in 1961, “There’s no key or problem.” In his plays, Beckett seems consistently to have urged us to take his characters and their situations at face value and this in isolation, unrelated to larger systems that Hegel called “aesthetic religion,” or to systems of any

kind, and he seemed perplexed by what he considered perpetual misunderstanding of his work in terms of implications beyond itself. In a letter to Pamela Mitchell of 18 August 1955 (Beckett 2011: 540), Beckett notes, “I am really very tired of *Godot* and the endless misunderstanding it seems to provoke. How anything so skeleton simple can be complicated as it has been is beyond me” (Beckett 2011: 540). Beckett liked the remark well enough to repeat it to Mary Manning Howe that same day, on 18 August, which letter does not appear in *The Collected Letters*. He would punctuate this view to D’Aubarrède in 1961: “There’s no key or problem.” Or, rather, what Beckett was suggesting, as he often had, is that what problem exists, may be of our own making, and much of that is trying to link his work to what Hegel called “aesthetic religion” or to some sort of transcendental truth external to the work. If we then suspend our need for transcendence, for solutions, for *presence*, for a completeness or totality, and its accompanying failures, what remains? – perhaps only an incompleteness, and so an ungrounding as we are left with the fact that all thought (that is, philosophy itself), all art is fragment. What is left, however, remains an event, a presentation, an experience. This thread may lead us to issue #2, ontology, or being, or particularly self-consciousness, the experience of the self, which is central to what we might call the Modern or contemporary encounter with art.

Let us look at some further manifestations of this thread.

French philosopher Roland Barthes connects “the pleasure of the text,” or what he calls “a jouissance of meaning” (Kristeva 2000: 188), less with a linear reading for plot than with a concern for history (against accusations of being a mere structuralist who treats language in isolation), and he sees writing, what he calls *écriture*, “as a negativity, a movement that questions all ‘identity’ (whether linguistic, corporeal, or historical)” (Kristeva 2000: 193). This entails reading more like a writer than a traditional reader who may not take an active role in meaning creation. This thread resonated with Julia Kristeva’s thinking, her interest in meaning production as a combined effort between affects and drives on one side (which she calls the semiotic) and the larger system of symbolic law on the other (society, history), Hegel’s “aesthetic religion.” All being and its thoughts are thus fragments. Being, the I, say, or its “me,” is divided at least, more likely multiple, so fragmented, and so can be accurately presented or represented only as a fragment. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it in his essay-length *Foreword* to Friedrich Schlegel’s *Philosophical Fragments* (University of Minnesota, 1991), and Schlegel has as much impact on literary criticism as he did on philosophy:

Whether the very concept of the fragment, as well as its history, is indeed sufficient to describe the form of the more significant literary experiments from the late nineteenth century up to the present, as well as to conceptualize the intrinsic difference(s), heterogeneity, plurality, and so forth, of the text, has to

my knowledge never been attended to explicitly. What should be obvious is that if the fragment, or rather its notion, is to bring out the radical atotality of writing, or the text, it must be a notion of fragment thoroughly distinct from its (historically) prevailing notion(s). A concept of the fragment that merely emphasizes incompleteness, residualness, detachment, or brokenness will not serve here. A piece struck by incompleteness, a detached piece, a piece left over from a broken whole, or even an erratic piece, is structurally linked with the whole or totality of which it would have been, or of which it has been, a part. (Gasché 1991: vii)

Gasché goes on to trace a genealogy of the fragment:

[...] it is well established that Friedrich Schlegel introduced the form of the fragment into German literature after the strong impression he received from the publication in 1795 of Chamfort's *Pensées, maximes et anecdotes*—the Romantic fragment is not a *pensée*, maxim, saying, opinion, anecdote, or remark, all of which are marked by only relative incompleteness, and which receive their unity from the subject who has authored them [and this is a solution Beckett has resisted throughout his creative career]. Although Friedrich Schlegel refers to it as the “Chamfortian form,” the Romantic fragment is, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have shown, “a determinate and deliberate statement, assuming or transfiguring the accidental and involuntary aspects of fragmentation.” The Romantic fragment “aims at fragmentation for its own sake.” (Gasché 1991: viii)

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, picks up the thread:

The fragment is among the most characteristic figures of the Romantic movement. Although it has predecessors in writers like Chamfort (and earlier in the aphoristic styles of moralists like Pascal and La Rochefoucauld), the fragment as employed by Schlegel and the Romantics is distinctive in both its form (as a collection of pieces by several different authors) and its purpose. For Schlegel, a fragment as a particular has a certain unity (“[a] fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog,” *Athenaeumsfragment* 206), but remains nonetheless fragmentary in the perspective it opens up and in its opposition to other fragments. Its “unity” thus reflects Schlegel’s view of the whole of things not as a totality but rather as a “chaotic universality” of infinite opposing stances. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel/>)

Samuel Beckett takes up the issue directly in 1975–1976 with his translations, rather transformations or adaptations called, *Long after Chamfort*, that is, both of a time long gone and very far from Chamfort's versions, which are themselves often re-renderings. In his scathing review of *Samuel Beckett: Poems 1930–1989*, Christopher Ricks puts the matter in *The Guardian* on 31 May 2002,

A sequence of translations from Chamfort – not “After Chamfort” but “Long After Chamfort”, and that is not just a historical insistence – includes the Indian proverb upon which Chamfort muses: “Il vaut mieux être assis que debout, couché qu’assis, mort que tout cela.” In Beckett’s calloused, workaday hands, this becomes:

Better on your arse than on your feet,

Flat on your back than either, dead than the lot.

(Ricks 2002: n.p.)

Such radical concision and metonymy are manifest in other work of this period, the poem *Something there* (1974), for instance, whose metonym is the eye (as it was earlier in his *Film*):

something there
where
out there
out where
outside what
the head what else
something there somewhere outside
the head

at the faint sound so brief
it is gone and the whole globe
not yet bare
the eye
opens wide
wide
till in the end
nothing more
shutters it again

so the odd time
out there
somewhere out there
like as if
as if
something
not life
necessarily

Example 1, Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce's *Ulysses*

As Stephen Dedalus contemplates trying to evade paying his outstanding debts in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he has a flash of insight: "Wait. Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound" (9.205–06). As he reviews moments from his own history as past versions of himself, other I's, he rather elegantly expresses the conundrum in terms of punctuation: "I, I and I. I." (9.212). The person who borrowed the money, that is, is not "I" any longer, as "I" am now other than he who borrowed, since he, the other I, exists "under everchanging forms." By the time he says "I," he is already other amid his "everchanging forms."

But a certain consistency of forms remains if not constant at least stable, and hence recognizable, he continues, "But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms." What continuity exists between "I and I" or "I" and "I as other," is a function of memory that appears inescapable since always present, but what if memory falters, fails for some reason as in some form of illness – amnesia, dementia or Alzheimer's, say, disruptions of the body's neural connections, all. The I and the no longer I, the not I, say, are linked by a fragile neural bridge of memory, which, while always part of the present, is not always available and retrievable, at least at will, what French novelist Marcel Proust would call – and Beckett would explore – "voluntary memory," the ability to retrieve and so connect with the past at will.

Stephen's memory returns him playfully to the money he owes to an Irish mystical poet named George Russel, or to his pen name "Aeon." He goes by and published under its shortened version of AE, and so Stephen recalls "AEIOU," and so Stephen has, as Adam Piette phrases it, "the inability to forget" (Piette 1996: 146), as memory ties him to his past self, his other I that Stephen willfully tries to forget – his (and Ireland's) inseparably bound history, which is written memory, in Stephen's case personal, familial, cultural and religious, but he fails to forget. That nexus of history is – as he tells his employer, the headmaster of the school that employs him, Mr Deasy in the "Proteus" chapter of *Ulysses* – "a nightmare from which I am trying to awaken."

That is, as Stephen attempts to evade, outmaneuver, ignore or simply deny the constraints of his past – his consubstantial family, his conflicted, divided and dominated nation, his religious training (and indoctrination, it turns out) – he thinks through the meaning of “I,” what or who am “I,” and, what is as central since always connected, the denial, the “not I.” Somehow, however, the “not I” always seems centrally part of and so connected to the I. That is how definitions work, of course, by opposites, inclusions and exclusions, Aristotle tells us – and Stephen is very Aristotelian – what is in the category and, just as important, what is not – what is “I” and what is outside of, other than “I.” The not I then is not simply a denial of being or ontological identity, but its alterity, its otherness against which – and only against which – we can know the “I.” “Not” is thus a constituent part of “I,” the “I” unthinkable without the “not I,” a key component of the definition, and of being itself.

That split in, or the multiplicity of “I” that Stephen posits, is something of a fairly recent problem for humanity, for the human species. It is, of course, inscribed in language grammatically in a double pronominal form, an “I” and a “me,” as being, the self can be both subject, “I,” and object “me,” in discourse or conversation. The split has inflected philosophical thought, however, only since René Descartes (1596–1650), often considered the first “modern” philosopher since he acknowledged a split in being, the self, between, a thinking feature and an acting feature, between, say, mind and body. He famously elided the rift with a constant, “I,” however, *cogito ergo sum* he proclaimed in the academic language of the day, Latin, “I think therefore I am,” in translation. He got there through what he calls his *Discourse upon Method*, which was to doubt everything until one reached a point or a proposition that one could no longer doubt. For Descartes that was the existence of the thinker, the self, “I” itself, which was for Descartes an irrefutable certainty. It became a foundation for philosophy, a platform on which Descartes could build other premises and propositions.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), on the other hand, would take issue with what amounts to a tautology in Descartes’ thinking since the “I” is already present in the first part of the equation as he restated the disjunction, the split in something we might call “self” or “being.” That is, Descartes had already assumed what he was trying to prove. Russell Sbriglia explains Kant’s opposition thus:

Whereas Descartes presumed that the act of the *cogito* renders self-present and self-transparent the *res cogitans* [that is, the category ‘thinking thing’], Kant reveals the impossibility of these two entities, Descartes’ “radical dualism” [the thinking thing and the thing thought, matter, *res extensa*] ever coinciding or overlapping. [That is, the thing thought must always be other than the thing thinking.] In Kant’s idealist nomenclature, the “I” of “transcendental apperception” [that is, seeing a self from outside the self] and the “I or he or it (the

thing) which thinks” [that is, what that transcendental self sees] are forever incommensurable; the former, what is seen, can only ever be a “simple, and in itself completely empty, representation” of the latter, that which is doing the seeing, an emptiness, which Kant designates via an “X” [Kant, 1929, 331]. The “I” as “simple [...] completely empty, representation” is an “X,” an unknown and hence a “not I.” What the “I” is perceiving itself in an act of apperception can never also be coeval with what is doing the perceiving – they must needs be separate and different entities – the one not the other, the one perhaps empty, an empty signifier, the I trying to perceive itself views an “X,” an emptiness, a not “I”. (Sbriglia 2022: 222–225)

Slovoj Žižek explains that “the ‘I’ exists only as ex-sisting, at a distance from the ‘thing’ that it is” (Žižek 2019: 66). This is the paradox of self-consciousness with which Kant confronts us, that, as Žižek phrases it, “I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself *qua* the real kernel of my being [‘I’ or he or it (the thing) which thinks],” that “I cannot acquire consciousness of myself in my capacity of the ‘Thing which thinks’” (Kant cited by Žižek 2009: 15). But what is the relationship between this empty “X” and the subject itself, the “I”? The point here is not to solve such disjunctions, the conflicted nature of the I. Žižek’s point is that such disjunction is insoluble and yet central to the illusory nature of being. While such issues remain a perpetual feature of ontological philosophy, that enigma itself can be explored creatively.

But the self, or what we generally call the “I,” is evidently a fairly recent invention, what the German philosopher Johanne Gottlieb Fichte, an intellectual descendent from Immanuel Kant, would call the “Ich,” the “I.” Like his predecessors Kant and Descartes, he was interested in subjectivity, consciousness, or more particularly self-awareness or self-consciousness, our sense of ourselves, not in and of itself, but as the center of everything, and we can pretty much date the invention of the “I,” not only in Germany but the tiny university town of Jena, and at a particular time, at the end of the 18th century, roughly 1789. Goethe was there, as were the Schlegels, August Wilhelm and his wife Caroline, who were translating Shakespeare into German verse, and Friedrich Schelling’s *naturphilosophy*, or *Romantische Naturphilosophie*, would see the self as one with everything living. This would extend German idealism but develop Romanticism as well, and art, literary or plastic, that is, imaginative or material, was its expression and union. Creating what we generally call Modernism, James Joyce was fascinated with German idealism, and with Goethe in particular, as were T. S. Eliot and, our subject in the present text, Samuel Beckett. Those issues dominated his post-War series of French novels, loosely called the trilogy. Between their writing, he wrote plays, and the stage offered Beckett alternate possibilities for exploring such issues.

So, if we follow Slavoj Žižek, the most contemporary of our cited philosophers, what we perceive as our self, what Kant called apperception, can only be an empty cipher, an “X,” a nothing, since what we are is separate and doing the perceiving. Transfer such theorizing to the stage, as Beckett often did. That is, Beckett has always been less interested in telling stories with traditional conflicts and resolutions than in exploring problems that involve human existence as the felt experience of life: what appears on stage, for instance, is self-evidently such an appearance as well – and thus not a real something; even as it may appear in the guise of the real, it is empty of significance; at best it is an appearance of the real, so all theatre at least, if not all art, entails a philosophical problem beyond the story it tells or the world it tries to represent – what is real and what is not, is something else, or where do we find the real – outside the artwork, outside the theater, perhaps, or within, inside the characters, inside ourselves. But what if the appearance does not coincide with or denies the story being told, the story not that of the appearance we witness, the story that of another, which, nonetheless, is connected with the teller.

Example 2, Mouth and the *Not I*

Beckett was uncertain about whether or not this piece he conceived for theater was theater at all, whether it was theater or something else. His American director Alan Schneider was equally unsure and puzzled for its world premiere scheduled for the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, New York, 22 November 1972, with Jessica Tandy as Mouth and Henderson Forsythe as Auditor (Hume Cronyn is mistakenly listed as Auditor in the Grove Press edition).

American actress Jessica Tandy experienced enormous difficulties in the role. Schneider wrote to Beckett on 3 September 1972: “Because Jessie having great psychological problem with learning lines in *Happy Days* and *Not I* at same time, we have been working with small ‘teleprompter,’ which has her *Not I* lines printed on roller controlled by stage mgr. She’ll be using this until quite sure of lines; this mechanism, of course unseen by audience” (Harmon 1998: 279). Tandy was never quite weaned from the technology and found the experience of following Beckett’s theatrical dictates exasperating. When she complained directly to Beckett that the running time of 23 minutes rendered the work unintelligible to audiences, Beckett telegraphed back his famous (but oft misinterpreted) injunction: “I’m not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience” (cited in Gontarski 1997: 91). The play worked on the nerves of one other actress, Billie Whitelaw: “*Not I* came through the letter-box. I opened it, read it, and burst into tears, floods of tears. It had a tremendous emotional impact on me. I knew then that it had to go at great speed” (Whitelaw 1978: 86). Her work on *Play* a decade

earlier had prepared her for the extraordinary ordeal of *Not I*. The experience was nerve-wracking. Blindfolded with yet another hood secured over her face, she suffered sensory deprivation in performance: "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" (Whitelaw 1978: 86).

Schneider's ten questions to Beckett in his letter of 3 September suggest yet again how baffled he was by this new (in all senses) play; that is, as was often the case, Schneider was asking the wrong questions: "Hate to be too specific because I know how you are about defining meanings. I think she's dead, can't believe it, refuses to believe it, accept it, pushed thought away, can only deal with it in terms of someone else, cannot imagine it for herself" (Harmon 1998: 283–284). In his response on 16 October Beckett reminded Schneider that he was not a traditional or a Realist playwright: "I no more know where she is or why thus than she does. All I know is in the text. 'She' is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is Ibsen." To one of Schneider's questions about the play Beckett responded bluntly: "This is complete misunderstanding"; and concluded his letter with a cutting assessment: "The remains of some convention seems to lie between us" (Harmon 1998: 283–284).

Part of what puzzled Schneider, Tandy, and most early audiences was the neo-surrealist, metonymic stage image, a pair of spotlight lips some eight feet above stage level (Mouth), all that is left of a body Mouth calls the machine, and a ghostly, shadowy, silent figure who makes four brief movements "of helpless compassion" (Auditor). That is, Mouth has an audience within the play as written, but it is often performed without that representation of an audience whose actions may mimic our own. The audience experiences some 23 minutes not of comprehensible monologue but of linguistic ejaculation, logorrhea, language as machine gun, say. Mouth's speech, Beckett said, is "purely a buccal phenomenon" (Harmon 1998: 283). Mouth is apparently possessed by a voice whose story recounts a loveless childhood and life for some 70 years when inexplicably she blacks out. Conscious and sentient she first thinks she is being punished for her sins, but she is not suffering. In addition to the buzzing she hears in her skull, there is a light, meant to torment, as in *Play*. She feels no pain, as in life she felt no pleasure, even when she was supposed to. At best she could perform a scream, like Winnie in *Happy Days*, but the "she" recognizes that after years of speechlessness, even in the supermarket or the courtroom, words were now flowing from her. She recognizes the voice as her own by vowel sounds "she had never heard [...] elsewhere." Beckett's suggestions for pronunciation (which he reminded Schneider has nothing to do with an Irish accent) were: baby as "babby," any as "anny," either as "eether," etc. Her reasonable thought is that she must have something to tell but never knows what. In addition to this

enigma is the tension between the speaking voice and the “I” of identity or consciousness, of a unified character that Mouth continues to resist despite the prodings of some force, on occasion represented by an Auditor on stage. To this refusal of Mouth to acknowledge that she is one with the voice and so might use the first person pronoun, the Auditor responds with his four gestures. He alone has any apprehension of the text, according to Beckett, the audience sharing Mouth’s confusion (Harmon 1998: 283).

We have what appears to be a monologue presented by a body part, a fragment, a Mouth. Is this body part, this fragment of being attached to anything? What, in short, is it a fragment of? The lips we see need to be attached to other systems if they are to function, to neural and circulatory machinery, but can we, or should we imagine such a larger apparatus, since even that would be a fragment, a part of something else, which, in turn, would be a part of something else. That is, the lips we see illuminated high on a platform, a stage, so called, are part of a system of communication in at least two senses, or part of at least two systems, the neuro-electrical bio system that allows muscle movement and the system of communication, a semiotic system that allows art to speak. That is a literary practice, which, according to Julia Kristeva, channeling Roland Barthes, is a “located literary practice at the intersection of subject and history.” Barthes could study “this practice as symptom of the ideological tearings in the social fabric” (Kristeva 1980: 93). Barthes’ connecting “the pleasure of the text” or “a jouissance of meaning” (Kristeva 2000: 188) with a definition of writing (*écriture*) “as a negativity, a movement that questions all ‘identity’ (whether linguistic, corporeal, or historical)” (Kristeva 2000: 193) resonated with Kristeva’s interest in meaning production as a combined effort between affects and drives on one side (the semiotic) and the symbolic law on the other (society, history). All these theoretical affinities between Kristeva’s and Barthes’ work are held together by his challenge of meaning itself which he relates to a conception of the subject as non-unified, shifting and dispersed. Questioning “a unity – an ‘I’, a ‘we’ – that can have meaning or seek meaning,” Barthes encounters the limits of “*the possibility of meaning itself*” and offers instead “the abyss of a polyvalence of meaning, as well as a polyphony internal to subjects investigating meaning” (Kristeva 2000: 189).

But theater has traditionally offered another sort of presence, an embodiment of text which entails something of a co-presence in theater, performers and observers, listeners, auditors who function like readers. Beckett has mimicked this theatrical co-presence within the play itself as monologue becomes something of a dialogue, or duologue, a mouth, functioning as text, and an auditor or Listener functioning as reader – at least as written. Whether or not contemporary directors choose to stage such an echo of the theatrical experience, is open to directorial choice, even according to Beckett.

By way of conclusion, and in short, I would posit that Mouth in *Not I* becomes on stage a pressing emblem for Modern literature, theater, and philosophy.

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Abstrakt

O fragmentach. Dzieło sztuki i „ja” – albo nie

W eseju badane są implikacje filozoficzne obecne w późnym, najbardziej enigmatycznym i metonimicznym dziele teatralnym Samuela Becketta *Nie ja*. Implikacje te są bezsprzeczne, mimo że autor *Czekając na Godota* często zaprzeczał swym (sugerowanym przez krytyków) zainteresowaniom filozofią, której – jak twierdził – ani nie czytał, ani nie rozumiał. Wspomniana sztuka jest jednak dziełem głęboko ontologicznym, a metonimia w jego obrazie scenicznym przywołuje klasyczną filozoficzną zagadkę, dotyczącą relacji części (tu: utworu lub jego fragmentu) do całości. Jest to kwestia, która Becketta intrygowała przez większą część jego twórczego życia.

Słowa kluczowe: fragmenty, modernizm, romantyzm, ontologia, metonimia, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Immanuel Kant, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek