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Silence nowhen

Late Modernism, Minimalism, and Silence in the Work of Samuel Beckett

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INTRODUCTION

Give up, but it's all given up, it's nothing new, I'm nothing new.
Beckett, *Text for Nothing* # 10

To talk and to write about silence is what produces the most obnoxious chatter…
Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*[1]

Heedless of the wise advice in these two epigraphs, an industry of sorts has sprung up to fill the silence about silence with a great deal of chatter. Likewise, an industry of Beckett studies provides us with new titles every season and by now has treated almost every aspect of Beckett's *œuvre* including, recently, raiding obscure notebooks, juvenilia, and other extra-literary arcana. Wary of this doubly-planted minefield, I nevertheless feel compelled to add my bit of noise into the vast echo of influence of Beckett's work. Beckett seems to me to be an indispensable voice in the Western literary tradition at the moment of its end. His late modern, minimalizing, abstracting efforts completely undermined the modern novel and stage drama. This importance is hardly contested, so I need not defend it too wordily, but it is often misunderstood. I believe this study is warranted because none to date has focused on the role of *silence*—such a key aspect of Beckett's work—as a way of assessing his accomplishment (I mean by this his major works from the "Trilogy" and *Godot* in the late 40s and early 50s to the late trilogy in the late 70s and early 80s—although I will be obliged to make reference to earlier novels, minor works, and some of the marginal material).

Silence does not mean any one particular thing in Beckett any more than it does in discourse or in life more generally. To put it one way, "there is

silence, and there is not silence" (*Texts for Nothing* # 13, 139). There is in fact a gamut of silence: situated pauses and rhetorical gaps; a minimalizing silencing of the garrulous early style; a silence of negation (e.g. words we can no longer say because they no longer have any referent in the world); even a silence of acceptance (whether warm, irritable, exhausted, or even vaguely hopeful) in shared conversational quiet. This is not as simple as the difference between the prose and dramatic works, though a kind of typology can be attempted. Rather, silence is one of the resources, like repetition, permutation, exhaustion, self-correction, and comic self-contradiction, that contribute to Beckett's style and are used contextually as appropriate. Ultimately silence is asymptotic, as a final rest—of the mouth, of the mind, of the pen—ardently desired and infinitely deferred, but a countervailing impulse is constantly at odds with this urge, namely that to plod on, to keep going, keep writing, keep talking, a sort of heroic, corporeal resistance (including an embodied mind). The struggle that results has well known comic consequences, but we must never lose sight of the dead seriousness of it as well.

Beckett inherits a tradition that is no longer viable and must be silenced in himself—who was so babblingly cultured as a young man—yet at the same time he felt an unavoidable need to write. From this arises his ever-negating, ever-minimalizing style. Likewise, Beckett felt that the moral-religious tradition of Ireland and Europe was bankrupt, yet one had to find ways to go on getting along with others in "the silence of God." Finally, Beckett himself, though by all accounts a caring and affable friend, felt fundamentally alienated not only from his homeland, but indeed from regular human commerce, it seems, and escaped often to Ussy almost always into the silent, sullen shell of himself. In a letter to Georges Duthuit in April 1951, Beckett characteristically wrote, "Fifteen to twenty years of silence and solitude, brightened up by gardening and walks, shorter and shorter, I feel this evening that that would suit me, and suit me the least badly possible" (Letters II 232). The biographers have done a good job documenting Beckett's silences in his relationship to his mother and to Ireland in the 1920s; in his time in France and participation in the Resistance; in his odd relationship with Suzanne and in his semi-reclusive later years, including hiding from the Nobel Prize. I will focus here instead on silence in Beckett's works literally and more allegorically with respect to minimalism and ethics.

By hearkening to silence in the works of Samuel Beckett we understand his artistic accomplishment better, as well as perceive his role in late Modernism more clearly. Beckett represents a strand of abstracting minimalism. His work

constantly approaches silence, death, and meaninglessness, yet always persists in minimal form and meaning. This is an aesthetic impulse essential to (one strand of) Modernism: to reject as no longer meaningful all the conventions of a given form and yet to maintain the increasingly impossible obligation to creation, to art. But it is not merely formal. As Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, correcting his (in)famous statement about art after Auschwitz,[2] "suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream" (ND 362), although the tools of expression, beyond the mere scream, are all compromised as trash, making this *right*, which can easily be seen even in Adorno's terms as an *obligation*, very difficult to realize. In the wake of the horror of the war, which Beckett experienced first-hand, and in the continued pain—physical, psychological, moral and philosophical—what can one say? In slightly different terms, a certain silence is forced on the artist in the post-war era, who no longer has the resources of a realist or even representational tradition to draw upon and for whom Modernist experiments in abstraction, above all Cubism and Surrealism, no longer hold much validity either. Yet despite this context of silence, something can and must be said (painted, composed) lest one concede a death of art very much different from that announced by Hegel. It is Beckett's achievement to face up to this silence in the most uncompromising manner and repeatedly find ways to go on—over four decades of his mature work (from *Molloy*, 1951, on). Silence is a multivalent quality in Beckett. It is not consistently negative or positive, but rather a key category in understanding the functioning of Beckett's texts. This is related to contemporary movements in the visual arts and in music, in a general late modern impulse of minimalism which needs to be distinguished from, but related to, Minimalism as a 60s movement in American sculpture and art. If Beckett's gloom is not exactly that of the Adorno of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Minima Moralia*, and if his creative impulse does not correspond precisely to that theorized by Blanchot, these two thinkers nonetheless provide powerful models for making sense of Beckett's work (or, of course, registering its non-sense). By adding to the critical social and philosophical reading of Adorno and the existential-aesthetic reading of Blanchot, the formalist, modernist account recently offered by Pascale Casanova (1997), and by paying particular attention to the role of silence in Beckett's work, I provide a new reading that addresses on-going questions about Modernism, late Modernism and Postmodernism, and link Beckett to contemporary movements in the sister arts, while trying to come to a new overall assessment of his mature work.

In the first part of the first chapter ("Reticence, Ellipsis, Sigetics"), I review briefly different approaches to silence, gesturing towards studies in linguistics, pragmatics, and other disciplines but focusing most on poetic and rhetorical approaches. I want to delineate what can be called, after a suggestion in Heidegger, a *sigetics*—a discourse of silence whose main strategies in Beckett will be reticence and ellipsis.

The Beckett of importance to literary history is born during the war years and the subsequent frenzy of writing in French, the "siege in the room" (equivalent to Descartes' retreat in the *poêle* in Germany in 1619) during which he tried his best to exorcize the Cartesian ghosts that still haunted the mad *Watt*. I want briefly to explore in the second section of the opening chapter "Silence and War," something one can only do indirectly with Beckett. To this end I will place him alongside Vercors, with whom Beckett is forever allied through the Éditions de Minuit, as through the French Resistance. *Le silence de la mer*/*The Silence of the Sea* stages one experience of war and silence. In his own way, Beckett presents another in his most famous work, *Waiting for Godot*, where he develops perhaps his most optimistic ethics of *being together* in the obdurate dialogue of *Leidensgefährte* ("fellow sufferers" in one of Beckett's favorite sayings from Schopenhauer).

In the second chapter ("Silence Nowhen") I hearken back once again to Beckett's literary and philosophical sources from Dante to Proust but with an ear as much to silence as to the din of tradition. It is important to review what Beckett learned from tradition, and negated, in becoming Beckett, but the writing and thought of this tradition always involved a complex play of silence and speech, disclosure and reticence, which has not been thoroughly charted in this respect. I will focus on the main precursors, Dante, Descartes-Geulincx, Schopenhauer, Proust, and Joyce. A brief two-part Excursus also assesses the silence of the Irish tradition in Beckett's mature work.

In chapter three ("The Abstract, the Incessant, the Neutral") I respond to a powerful reading by Pascal Casanova of Beckett as the "Abstractor," the proponent in prose of the modernist abstraction we see readily in the visual arts but which has been more difficult to plot in literature, especially prose. I take up what is most compelling in Casanova's argument—that Beckett's is a formal and not "existential" achievement – and try to reconcile it to a degree with the ostensible object of her polemic, Maurice Blanchot's influential reading of Beckett, and then historicize both readings to understand Beckett's works as formally modernist in their relation to, and silencing of, tradition at a very specific historical moment. The full development of this argument will in fact

take up much of chapter five as well. Here I assess Casanova's argument and her reading of *Worstward Ho* and *Le Dépeupleur* and then return to Blanchot and the trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L'Innommable*) to temper Casanova's overly formalist reading and tease out the main claims of Blanchot's idiosyncratic but intriguing reading of Beckett and silence, above all that Beckett's labor of subtraction is exemplary of (modern) writing the goal of which is an arduous silencing of the self so that the greater silence of being can "speak."

In chapter four ("Beckett, Minimalism, and the Question of Postmodernism") I try to further historicize Beckett by placing his works in lateral connection to his contemporaries in the visual arts in a more specific way than Casanova. Beckett's writing and "interviews" on art in the 1930s and 40s are well known, and he can certainly be linked to various strands in early twentieth-century European art. However, I want to make a conceptual link, rather than a strictly historical one in terms of influence, connecting Beckett during the period he reaches artistic maturity with the contemporary movement of minimalism, fairly narrowly defined, in the sister arts. I am not aware of specific interest in or knowledge of the movement on Beckett's part, but I want to show how Beckett and certain minimalists and minimalizers respond to similar crises in their respective media in the 1950s and early 60s. I argue that Beckett's works remain true, to the end, to a minimalist impulse that is essentially modernist or late modernist, and that Beckett's aesthetic resists giving over to the postmodernism to which he was famously and originally linked by scholars such as Ihab Hassan. All the same, silence in Beckett's work is related to contemporary aesthetic practice associated with minimalizing movements in the visual arts and music.

Having linked silence, abstraction, and minimalism, I then turn in the final chapter ("Meremost Minimal Moralia") to the ethical consequences or complements of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies in Beckett. I do this by reading Beckett in tandem with Theodor Adorno, specifically with respect to what J.M. Bernstein has called "ethical modernism." Here I study some of Beckett's dramatic works, attuned to silence as much as dialogue and interaction, to tease out a Beckettian minimal ethics in which the sigetics and the reading of *Godot* of the first chapter will play a significant part. In brief glimmers in his texts, as in the aesthetic example of his work in general, Beckett provides proleptic hints at reconciliation and the possibility of ethical life that are neither theological nor mystical, but which minimally hold to an alternate rationality from that of the reified world of *Tauschverhältnis* (exchange relationship) and catastrophe.

While the on-going influence of Beckett's work, prose and theater, words and silences, will have to be the subject of a subsequent study, it is clear that Beckett has left no form or topic that he explored unaffected. His power of subtraction and quieting, made possible by a tremendous ingurgitation and synthesis during his precocious, youthful Joycean years, constitutes one of the major aesthetic achievements of the past century and is in some ways the best evidence for the aesthetic category of the "late modern." I do not think it is productive to understand Beckett in terms of postmodernism, and I believe we do so at risk of falling deaf to the deeply social-critical aspects of Beckett's work. By drawing attention to his silences, I hope to serve the on-going reassessment of the accomplishment of Beckett that has intensified since his centennial in 2006, but I also hope to draw Beckett away, to a certain degree, from the clutches of the Beckett Industry towards larger concerns with late modernism and art's relationship to the disasters of the last century.

> How many hours to go before the next silence, they are not hours, it will not be silence, how many hours still, before the next silence? Ah to know for sure, to know that this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words.—*Texts for Nothing* #6[3]