

Duncan McColl Chesney

SILENCE NOWHEN

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



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ABBREVIATIONS

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973. [ND]
- . *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1978. [MM]
- . “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” in *Notes to Literature*. Vol 1. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia UP, 1991, 241-275. [TUE]
- . *Aesthetic Theory*. Eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. [AT]
- . *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. [B]
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- . *Molloy*. Paris: Minuit, 1951. [M]
- . *Malone meurt*. Paris: Minuit, 1951. [Malone]
- . *En attendant Godot*. Paris: Minuit, 1952. [Godot]
- . *L'Innommable*. Paris: Minuit, 1953. [I]
- . *Fin de partie*. Paris: Minuit, 1957. [FdP]
- . *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*. Paris: Minuit, 1958. [NTR]
- . *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. London: Calder, 1959. [T]
- . *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. New York: Grove, 1967. [STN]

- . *Le dépeupleur*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970. [DP]
- . *The Lost Ones*. New York: Grove Press, 1972. [LO]
- . *Company*. New York: Grove, 1980. [C]
- . *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London, Calder, 1983. [D]
- . *Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press, 1983. [WH]
- . *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber, 1986. [CDW]
- . *Endgame* in *Complete Dramatic Works*. [E]
- . *The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989*. Ed. S.E. Gontarski. New York: Grove, 1995. [CSP]
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- . *La part du feu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949. [PF]
- . *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955. [EL]
- . *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959. [LV]
- . *L'entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. [EI]
- . *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982. [SL]
- . *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. [IC]
- . *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995. [WF]
- . *Faux Pas*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. [FPE]
- . *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. [BC]
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- . *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969. [TIE]
- . *Autrement qu'être ou au delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974. [AQE]
- . *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. [LR]
- . *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991. [OTB]
- Proust, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. 4 volumes. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié. Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89. [RTP]
- . *Finding Time Again*. Trans. Ian Patterson. London: Penguin, 2002. [FTA]

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 glimpses 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* #6³

TALK ABOUT SILENCE

Reticence, Ellipsis, Sigetics

- J: Der Gang eines [eigentlichen] Gespraches mute einen eigenen Charakter haben, demgema mehr geschwiegen als geredet wurde.
- F: Geschwiegen vor allem ber das Schweigen . . .
- J: weil das Reden und Schreiben ber das Schweigen das verderblichste Gerede veranlat . . .
- F: Wer vermochte es, einfach vom Schweigen zu schweigen?¹

How can we understand the significance of silence and the unsaid in literature, and more broadly in aesthetic practice, particularly as it approaches ethical or political dimensions? The question has occupied me for some time as I seek to assess the role of silence in late Modernism. Within the present scope, I will try to condense and focus my exploration so far into this issue. To start with, it is helpful to look backwards. Classical rhetoric developed a number of ways of treating, and thereby accommodating, silence which are useful for the inquiry. In a longer study it would be interesting to review all of the figures and tropes of silence in classical rhetorical thought, but for my purposes here I will focus on the key figures of reticentia/aposiopesis and ellipsis.² To motivate that focus let me retrace my steps very briefly.

In the fourth book of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* [86–82 BC], once attributed to Cicero, several relevant figures are discussed. In §XXVII, *occultatio* (or *paralipsis*, var. *paralepsis* [omission], 321) is defined as a manner of suggesting what you are not going to state outright. “Of these things [that have just been intimated—past crimes, bad character, etc.] I shall say nothing . . .” Such a silence is far from incommunicative. Indeed its rhetorical effect derives from a complete clarity of meaning in the ostensibly passed over speech, or at least, when clarity is not defensible or desirable, a definite sense of accusation arousing suspicion. *Occultatio* is a figure of emphasis, of suspicion. In the midst of a number of related figures, the author also mentions *praecisio* (cutting off). This, the Ciceronian version of the Greek *aposiopesis*, is defined (in §XXX) as a phrase begun but left unfinished (331). The related *reticentia*, or relapse into silence, is also discussed very briefly in *De Oratore* (3.53.205), where again the effect of such a strategy is to raise suspicion on the part of the crowd or interlocutor.

Aposiopesis is defined by Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* Book IX [AD 95]) as cutting short speech suggestively, and is “used to indicate passion or anger” (407). The *locus classicus*, cited by Quintilian, is Neptune’s “Quos ego . . .” from *Aeneid* I. 135 (184). What Neptune will do to the East and South winds that have caused a storm against Aeneas and the Trojans is not stated, but we can (and must) readily imagine it is frightful! Quintilian continues, writing that this figure may be used in transition or to introduce a digression, thus highlighting the following discursive development (a pause that emphasizes what follows). But more generally, Quintilian extends Cicero’s sense of the figure’s quality of raising suspicion to the more powerful effect of threat. Leaving a threat, such as Neptune’s, to the imagination of the listener is a powerfully effective form of reticence. Such a figure is really a form of ellipsis,³ which later, in the *Peri Hupsous* (*On the Sublime* written some time before AD 100 and once ascribed to Longinus), becomes a key figure in the discourse of the sublime. In chapter 9 the silence of poor Ajax in the Kingdom of the Dead, still impassioned at his loss of Achilles’ armor, in *Odyssey* 11.617–649 is cited as an example of a *σιωπή* (also *σιγή*—silence) “more sublime than any speech” (185). It should be kept in mind that the sublimity here is ascribed not to Ajax, who remains a bit of a simpleton as he always was in the *Iliad*, especially in contrast to the clever, loquacious Odysseus, but to Homer, whose noble mind has fitted natural grandeur of deed to its appropriate expression (or lack of expression) in poetic speech.

In highlighting these figures of silence, I want to indicate a conceptual development (or what looks like on in retrospect). *Occultatio*—one device

among so many others by which the orator refrains from saying (or distorts) something he could just as easily say (or say otherwise)—shifts as a figure towards *reticentia*—something we cannot say but only suggest, though perhaps for accidental reasons, in order to raise suspicions—and thence, by way of threat, that is, force expressed in language, towards a sublime inability of saying at all, at the limits of human speech and of representation (but I anticipate here the modern history of the concept of the sublime, and the poetic and rhetorical devices at its service, from its reassessment by Boileau and others in the seventeenth century and its subsequent philosophical development in Burke and Kant to its preeminent status in Romantic thought and art, a narrative I cannot review here). Certain figures like *reticentia* are made more important as serving the high or sublime style, on the path to breaking from a merely rhetorical repertoire towards greater philosophical or mystical import. One can likewise point to specific strategies of a given writer, like negative particles and prepositions in the development of a sublime negative mystical theology in Meister Eckhart (McGinn, 32),⁴ and to a whole range of rhetorical devices employed by him—“accumulation, antithesis, parallelism, and hyperbole” (Tobin, 87).⁵ Here we see the rhetorical arsenal of the legal, oratorical, and poetic traditions meeting the sublime and the limits of expression in mystical writing/speech. Theological discourse is indeed a key site for the exploration of meaningful silence within language, but one that falls outside of the scope of the present study.⁶ Although rhetoric alone cannot account for the multiple examples and effects of silence (or the sublime) in the Western tradition, it can show the eloquent potential of *situated silence*—in order to cause suspicion where direct accusation cannot be sustained; in order to leave threats nascent and undefined; in order to mimic the overwhelming of speech by great emotion or passion; and so on.

Post-classical rhetoric, combined with the popular manuals of comportment in the tradition of Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528) and Gracián’s *Oráculo* (1647), confronts the issue of silence most directly in *L’Art de se taire* (1771) by the Abbé Dinouart. To Castiglione’s *summum oratorem fingere*, serving with *bontà, cortesia, ingegno*, and *prudenzia* in the *virtù* of the *cortegiano* (5), the Abbé Dinouart adds a much more nuanced semiotics of the *tacita significatio*.⁷ He also provides a typology of silence with didactic import, so that one may best learn which to display, which to control or repress. “Il est un silence prudent, et un silence artificieux. Un silence complaisant, et un silence moqueur. Un silence spirituel, et un silence stupide. Un silence d’approbation, et un silence de mépris. Un silence de politique. Un silence d’humeur et de

caprice" (69).⁸ The Abbé is particularly interested in describing and teaching the *langages du visage* that endow these various silences with their often quite unambiguous meaning in the tacit codes of courtly and religious behavior and conversation. He develops a whole descriptive paralinguistics or pragmatics of silent communication that completely undermines any simple notion of the univocity of silence, at least in eighteenth-century France.

What does modern linguistics add to this understanding of silence? There has been a great deal of research in the various branches of linguistics on silence. For instance, in his book *The Power of Silence* sociolinguist Adam Jaworski sums up a number of meanings of silence in a communicative situation. (1) Silence accompanied by non-verbal (e.g. visual, kinesic or proxemic) behavior; (2) formulaic silence; (3) active silence, as in "implicatures, undifferentiated repetition (non-formulaic), refraining from speaking," and some of the rhetorical devices mentioned above, e.g. *reticentia* (78). Jaworski points out, in addition, that absence of speech in a conversational or communicative setting is not necessarily registered as silence—quite obviously, since remaining quiet while awaiting one's turn is a fundamental rule of (polite) effective conversation. This means that silence is, in a sense, primarily defined by, or meaningful for, a dialogic partner (the questioner, the listener, etc.) with specific expectations.⁹ For sociolinguistics silence is always an interactive phenomenon, and thus, when perceived as silence, always communicative—however open to ambiguity and misunderstanding (79).

In other words, silence is, as Muriel Saville-Troike writes, even "more context-embedded than speech" (Saville-Troike, 11). As such, and somewhat counter-intuitively, silence, like speech, has to be acquired in the socialization into a given language/culture. As Pascal Quignard writes in a very different context, "Il n'y a pas de langage commun aux différentes langues. Il n'y a pas de silence commun aux différentes langues" (Quignard 1990, 239; "There is no language common to different tongues, nor any common silence."). Whether or not there is any language as such, the Abbé Dinouart shows us precisely how un-common silence is at a particular historical period for a particular social group in France, and the very existence of his book proves the difficulty of acculturation to the complexities of French silence. Saville-Troike proceeds to offer her own tentative taxonomy of silences, dividing the phenomenon into three main categories: (1) institutionally determined silences, e.g. ritual, taboo; (2) group-determined silences, e.g. a symbolic, public protest; and (3) individually determined/negotiated silences. This last category is most interesting and is schematized as follows (Saville-Troike 16–17):

- Individually determined/negotiated silence
1. Interactive
 - a) Socio-contextual
 - 1) role indicative (e.g. auditor in conversation)
 - 2) status indicative (e.g. deference, superiority)
 - 3) situation indicative (e.g. context structuring, tension-management, social control)
 - 4) tactical-symbolic/attitudinal (nonparticipation, anger, sorrow, respect, disapproval, dislike, indifference, alienation, avoidance, mitigation, concealment, mystification, dissimulation, image manipulation)
 - b) Linguistic
 - 1) discursive (prayer, fantasizing, rehearsing)
 - 2) propositional (negation, affirmation, consent, agreement, refusal, acknowledgment)
 - 3) didactic ('fill in the blank')
 - c) Psychological (timidity, embarrassment, fear, neurosis)
 2. Non-interactive
 - a) Contemplative/meditative
 - b) Inactive

Figure 1

These dialogic-interactive forms of meaningful silence can be added to the rhetorical devices of cutting short speech, passing over details, and the like in a more complex account of discursive silence.

Dennis Kurzon, in *Discourse of Silence*, adds a further element to this discussion in his schema, even if his literary and cultural interpretations of silence leave something to be desired. For a modified version see Figure 2.

The roles adopted and modalities implied in various discourses overlap depending on the given discursive frame and, as Jaworski shows, can be pragmatically supplemented, involving—if cooperation is assumed—Gricean implicatures (of quantity, quality, and manner), illocutionary effects, perlocutionary effects, and so forth,¹⁰ enacting (or merely mimicking) prudence, artifice, agreeableness, mockery, spirituality, stupidity, approval, contempt, humor, caprice, or even deafness! Going any further into the (socio-) linguistic study of silence would perhaps take us too far afield, but we will see all of

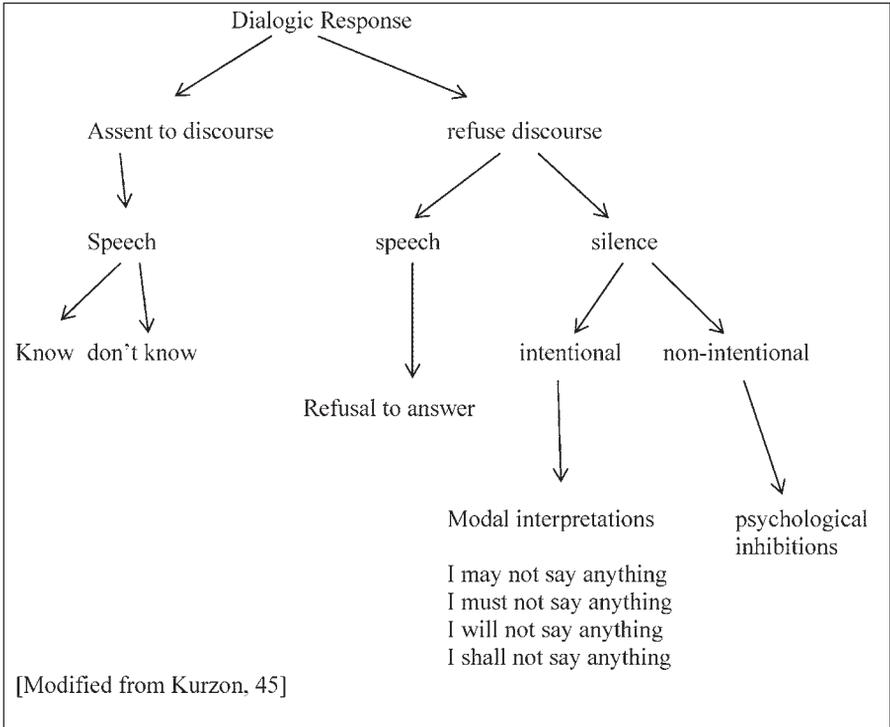


Figure 2

these forms of silence in Beckett’s dramatic works, just as the rhetorical forms of silence appear there and in his prose works, so a preliminary typology of what to expect will be useful.

In a classic essay Susan Sontag discusses the “Aesthetics of Silence” (1967) within the contemporary arts. She is interested in defending the best (and at least explaining the rest) of contemporary art against the cultural pessimism of, say, a George Steiner (“The Retreat of the Word”). The silence of and in a work should be seen as a historically conscious response to vision and language highly mediated and degraded and in need of a purge. Maybe we can see better if we impoverish the visual. “Perhaps the quality of the attention one brings to bear on something will be better . . . the less one is offered. Furnished with impoverished art, purged by silence, one might then be able to begin to transcend the frustrating selectivity of attention, with its inevitable distortions of experience. Ideally, one should be able to pay attention to everything” (Sontag, 13). Maybe language can be revived as we pass through this phase of subtraction, negation and silence.

Explicitly in revolt against what is deemed the desiccated, categorized life of the ordinary mind, the artist issues his own call for a revision of language. A good deal of contemporary art is motivated by this quest for a consciousness purified of contaminated language and, in some versions, of the distortions produced by conceiving the world exclusively in conventional (in their debased sense, 'rational' or 'logical') terms. Art itself becomes a kind of counterviolence, seeking to loosen the grip upon consciousness of the habits of lifeless, static verbalization, presenting models of 'sensual speech.' (22)

In other words, Sontag offers here a dialectical account of contemporary art of the 1960s (which will be relevant in Chapter 4), whereby this tonic response to degradation is recuperated from those who would blame the cure for the sickness of the patient, so to speak.¹¹ She also offers some thoughts about silence within individual works. First, silence is always in dialectical relation to sound, form, and meaning. "If a work exists at all, its silence is only one element in it" (10). Silence is always situated, always takes place, and thus derives some of its meaning in relation to the place or space—as in John Cage's famous 4'33" (1952). Silence in the work of art must be understood formally and situationally, the latter especially because of the performative and situational turn of contemporary art.

Sontag is also quick to caution against the linking of silence in the artwork and the "ineffable". Beckett would doubtless have said something to the effect that his works sought to "eff" the "ineffable", and the mystical-spiritual dimension of most of the work on silence (Picard, Greene, Kalamaras, and so on) is quite foreign to his world.¹² Sontag writes, "The fact that contemporary artists are concerned with silence—and, therefore, in one extension, with the ineffable—must be understood historically, as a consequence of the contemporary myth of the 'absoluteness' of art. The value placed on silence doesn't arise by virtue of the *nature* of art, but derives from the contemporary ascription of certain 'absolute' qualities to the art object and to the activity of the artist." (31) This strikes me as a very smart thing to say in 1967, indicating an understanding of the way in which art autonomy, developed over long historical period, and an aesthetics of genius are transformed in the Modernist period as art takes on too much—to restore metaphysical, spiritual, communal-political meaning—at the moment of its own collapse in the loss of tradition, the loss of an audience, and so forth. In any case, this absoluteness ascribed to the artwork is something Beckett will inherit from the earlier Moderns and seek to undermine in his work of the 50s and 60s.

In *La musique et l'ineffable*, Vladimir Jankélévitch makes a distinction I will use against him in this context, between the *indicible* (unsayable) and the *ineffable*:

C'est la nuit noire de la mort qui est l'indicible, parce qu'elle est ténébre impénétrable et désespérant non-être, et parce qu'un mur infranchissable nous barre de son mystère: est indicible..ce dont il n'y a absolument rien à dire, et qui rend l'homme muet en accablant sa raison et en médusant son discours. Et l'ineffable, tout à l'inverse, est inexprimable parce qu'il y a sur lui infiniment, interminablement à dire: tel est l'insondable mystère de Dieu, tel l'inépuisable mystère d'amour, qui est mystère poétique par excellence . . . (93)¹³

In Beckett's world this distinction collapses: the *ineffable* is nothing but the *indicible* misperceived, yet gives rise all the same to a *dire interminable*. There are, I will argue, brief moments of a potentially utopian silence in Beckett, but for the most part mystical silence is absent from the gamut of silences in his work. Figures of silence are ubiquitous in Beckett. For example in *Malone meurt*, we can document a whole range of silence-related tropes (most of which occur multiple times and many of which overlap to a certain extent).

- *Occultatio/paralepsis* (concealment): “Je me détourne donc vivement de cette extraordinaire chaleur, pour ne mentionner qu'elle, qui s'est emparée de certaines parties de ma machine, je ne dirai pas lesquelles” (Malone 143); “So I hasten to turn aside from this extraordinary heat, to mention only it, which has seized on certain parts of my economy, I will not specify which” (T 261).
- *Praecisio* (cutting off): “Ah oui, j'ai mes petites distractions et elles devraient Quel Malheur, le crayon a dû me tomber des mains . . .” (Malone 79); “Ah yes, I have my little pastimes and they What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers . . .” (T 222).
- *Obtinentia* (pause or sudden break): “L'air pur Je vais quand même essayer de continuer. L'air pur du plateau” (172). [Not as effective in the English, T 278]
- *Parasiopesis* (omission, passing over in silence, e.g. because of overwhelming emotion): “Sapo aimait la nature, s'intéressait Quelle misère” (Malone 27); “Sapo loved nature, took an interest This is awful” (T 191).
- *Praeteritio* (passing over): “Mais avant d'en arriver là que de marivaudages, des frayeurs et de farouches attouchements, dont il importe seulement de