

Beckett's Fatal(istic) Silence

1a. "*Silence! (Pause.) Where was I? (Pause. Gloomily.) It's finished, we're finished. (Pause.) Nearly finished. (Pause.) There'll be no more speech. (Pause.)*" (p.35)

1b. "*this... this... thing*" (p.13 & 33)

2. "*No. (Pause.)*"

(pp.18-21 nine times; passim)

The obscure absurdity of *Endgame* evidences a world of decay, gloom and inertial pessimism. The last, tired laughs are few and far between, and real merriment has been decreasing unstopably in intensity and conviction. After all that has happened to the characters and the world - of which we get to know very little (except that it is not good) - what remains is pedestrian chatter, unjoyous play, purposeless day-by-day routines and persistent miscommunication punctuated - and crowned - by silence. Silence, as death and meaninglessness, is that which precedes, intercedes and succeeds the faltering actions and words of Beckett's characters, who personify Macbeth's depiction of life as a "*tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*". These "poor players", these "walking candles" - Hamm, Clov, Nell and Nagg - are unable to conquer (moments of) silence, and so are conquered *by* it. Silence, the arbiter who knows no just or unjust, is both the thematic gist and the teleological end result of Beckett's depiction of the absurd in the everyday. I will show that this ideology and metaphysics of Silence operates on the levels both of **style** (e.g. deixis) and **lexicon**.

There are two approaches to silence in theatrical diction: Sometimes silence is marked down as such - e.g. "*(silence)*" or "*(pause)*"; on other occasions, silence is presupposed or abstracted from the context - e.g. a protracted sequence of movement/action without any dialogue. These two are complemented by a third aspect of stage production, which is improvisation and extra-scriptural interpretation. I will leave this third aspect aside as an extra-textual unknown, and treat *Endgame* as a stage blueprint which contains all the relevant information on Silence and Pauses. In treating the play as a text, as a combination of its dialogue and stage directions, we may lose something of the power of *experienced* silence (as in a theatre) but we simultaneously have direct access to *silence as a positive sign*, as an explicated entity. Silence is not simply absence but a present condition; it stands for (the concrete experience of) hesitation/inertia/amnesia/pessimism/fatalism/death/etc...

For, as it happens, Beckett's *Endgame* utilizes considerable intratextual stage direction (deixis of sorts), at the very centre of which stands the exceedingly omnipresent marker "*(Pause)*", whose very simplicity masks its indubitable power as a narrative tool. While not an invention of Beckett's, it stands as a re-appropriated, re-invented device in Beckett's theatre. His pause-markers most often separate consecutive (half-)sentences in a character's lines, indicating - as in Beckett's plays on the whole - a sense of incompleteness, procrastination, directionlessness, pervasive lethargy, indecision (Hamlet's dilemma), absurdity and, overall, a kind of lazy miasma of bad faith. A simple word-frequency count reveals that *Endgame* contains a total of 379 uses of the word "pause" (that's an average of more than 7 per page!), practically all of them in the context of pacing the dialogue in chunks punctuated by *the deafening silence of inertia*: "**part A** (*Pause.*) **part B**". Observe 1a., itself simply a portion of a lengthy monologue by Hamm, the Hamletian central character of the play - whose manner of delivery is nonetheless far removed from the poetic elegance of Shakespeare: "*Silence. (Pause.) Where was I? (Pause. Gloomily.)*". This is indecision worsened by forgetfulness. One demands silence but only in order to supplant the silence of others by one's "own" silence! Here, the explicated and necessitated "*(Pause)*" serves to underline *and* undermine the dialogue. The effect of silence, or rupture, is to intoxicate and toxify the clear, logical language of words.

Secondly, the play has 74 instances of "..." (triple dots) as a marker of silence, more than one per page. Take, for example, 1b: "*this... this... thing.*": This very wording is attested twice in the play. Here we have 1) silence as the ultimate deictic pointer ("*this...*" = "*this silence*"), and 2) silence as the unnameable Monster; Doom personified ("[The] *thing*"). Further, "*this...*" implies hesitation and lack of clarity, while "*thing*", an abstract catch-all term and a hazy choice of words, manifests the inability of the characters to accurately or wilfully name and denote (i.e. to conquer silence by harnessing the powers of language). "Triple dots" often denote fragmentary, hesitant but logically continuous thought - as in 1b above. In comparison, "*(Pause)*" denotes either forgetfulness or ("illogical") changes of focus/pace/direction - as in 1a., where Hamm's monologue, itself obviously an act of *anti-silence*, works *for* the abyss of silence, by claiming that "*There'll be no more speech.*" Why does he punctuate silence with his words? For the purpose of, in vain and in bad faith, attempting to conquer it. Silence is almost like a dialogue partner for Beckett's characters, with its own demands... In the end, silence always wins. Consider example 2., Nell's conspicuously repeated line (pp. 18-21): "*No. (Pause.)*". Sometimes attested with an exclamation mark and a few times without the pause-marker, this line is significant because repeated over and over again. Just on pages 20-21, the very form "*No. (Pause.)*" occurs four times. This coupling of "No" and "Pause" accentuates the connection between linguistic negation and emptiness-as-negation: "No" means both active negation *and* Bartleby-style "I'd rather not" indecisive self-contradiction, as in Nell's

equivocal answer to Nagg's request for a scratch: "No. (Pause.) Where?" (p.20). Triple dots, pauses and hesitations interact in creating the Beckettian universe of *silenced action* and *loud silence*.

On the statistical level of vocabulary, the dialogue references the word "silence" altogether 5 times, the word "nothing" 22 times (every other page), the word "dead" 13 times, the word "finished" 11 times (including the opening lines; also in 1a) and the word "more" 40 times (often in the sense of "any longer" or "no more" i.e. fatalism). Also, the very common word "no" occurs at a frequency of twice per page (101 entries), which is perhaps not statistically significant, except that its antonym, "yes", occurs only half as many times (55 times), which perhaps - just perhaps - buttresses the argument that this play focuses on negation rather than affirmation. Vocabulary is rife and overflowing with words denoting and connoting silence/negation/fatalism. So, both in its stage directions and in its vocabulary choices, Beckett's *Endgame* exemplifies the continuity between the "higher" and the "lower" levels of text analysis. Even the most abstract of ideas, like existential pessimism or Hamletian hesitation, can be analyzed as a purely linguistic phenomenon, with vocabulary attestations and deictic markers that bespeak the ideology of the text. Hamm's very Hamletian last words beckon Silence as his swansong: "(Pause.) You... remain" (p.53).

The following example, lifted out of an earlier soliloquy by Hamm, exemplifies the way these ideas tend to manifest: clearly, profusely and spread all over the text. In the following, the near-synonyms for silence and quietude abound (vocabulary), while both the triple-dot technique and the use of stage directions (deixis, style) are used to signify *the presence of silence*.

3. "There I'll be, in the old shelter, **alone** against the **silence** and... (he **hesitates**) ...the **stillness**. If I can hold my **peace**, and sit **quiet**, it will be all over with sound, and motion, **all over and done with**." (p.45, my emphasis; highlighting semiotic continuity)

Here, "(he *hesitates*)" should be seen as nearly interchangeable - tellingly and interestingly - with the more common interjection "(Pause)". After all, to pause is to hesitate and... the rest is silence.

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(page numbers refer to Faber paperback edition, London 1963)