

A MATTER OF FUNDAMENTALS: SOUND AND SILENCE IN THE RADIO DRAMA OF SAMUEL BECKETT

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett was arguably one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Known for his stage plays, including the renowned *En attendant Godot* (1948), Beckett's contribution to the field of radio drama is often overlooked. His corpus of radio dramas included some of the most innovative radio works of the post-World War II period. For Beckett, radio drama was not exclusively verbocentric, for he always maintained that his work was "a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible" (Frost 362). His (radio) drama aesthetics defined a strict hierarchy of sound whereby the dramatist balances sound effects, music and the characters' dialogue – and the use of silence. In this essay, I examine the juxtaposition of sound and silence in Samuel Beckett's most influential radio dramas: *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music* and *Cascando*. In the end, this essay will show that the sounds and silence employed in Beckett's radio dramatic works were inextricably linked, which added to the overall meaning of his dramas.

Keywords: Beckett, juxtaposition, music, pause, sound, silence

Résumé:

Samuel Beckett a été sans doute l'un des écrivains les plus influents du 20^e siècle. Connu pour ses pièces de théâtre, surtout le célèbre *En attendant Godot* (1948), la contribution de Beckett dans le domaine du théâtre radiophonique reste souvent négligée. Son corpus de pièces radiophoniques comprend certaines des œuvres radiophoniques les plus modernes de la période après-guerre. Pour Beckett, le théâtre radiophonique n'était pas exclusivement verbocentrique, car celui-ci a toujours maintenu que son travail était "a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible" (Frost 362). Son esthétique dramatique (radiophonique) a montré une stricte hiérarchie de sons dans laquelle le dramaturge équilibre les effets sonores, la musique et le dialogue des personnages – l'utilisation du silence. Dans cet essai, j'analyse la juxtaposition du son et du silence dans les pièces radiophoniques les plus importantes de Samuel Beckett: *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music* et *Cascando*. Finalement, cet essai montre que les sons et le silence employés dans les pièces radiophoniques de Beckett étaient inextricablement liés les uns aux autres ce qui a contribué à la signification de ses pièces de théâtre.

Mots-clés: Beckett, juxtaposition, musique, pause, son, silence

Radio plays are too often packed with words, as if the writer is desperate to fit in as much information as possible to compensate for not having pictures....But one of the sounds you need in radio drama is silence. Radio is very much like film in its perspective and depth of focus - you can zoom in to things and then leave it quiet (Karpf "The Sound of Silence").

I. Introduction

Samuel Beckett was arguably one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Certainly well known for his stage plays, including the renowned *En attendant Godot* (1948), Beckett's contribution to the field of radio drama is often overlooked. His corpus of radio dramas included some of the most innovative radio works of the post-World War II period. For Beckett, radio drama was not exclusively verbocentric, for he always maintained that his work was "a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible" (Frost 362). His radio drama aesthetics defined a strict hierarchy of sound whereby sound effects and music – and the use of silence – were balanced in importance with the characters' dialogue.¹ In characterizing Beckett's sound poetics, Adrienne Janus notes that "listening to murmurs and babble at the limits of silence and noise moves Beckettian poetics through a rhythm of acoustic control and release beyond mind and world, subject and object. This mode of poetic attention allows Beckett to capture both the anxiety, and the playfulness, of being caught at the limits of language..." (180). Further, Lucy MacGregor, Martin Corley and David Donaldson argue that "silences can be deliberate: for example, speakers may use silence as a rhetorical device, or to maintain the prosodic structure of an utterance. Equally, however, silences can reflect linguistic performance factors such as difficulty in planning or retrieving upcoming words" (3982). In this essay, I examine the juxtaposition of sound and silence in Beckett's most important radio dramas: *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music* and *Cascando*. In the end, this essay will show that the sounds and silence employed in Beckett's radio dramatic works were inextricably linked, which both added to the overall signification of his dramas and well as provided, through silence, a means of expressing the inexpressible.

Beckett's first radio drama, *All That Fall* (BBC Third Programme, January 13, 1957), ushered in a new era of radio drama evolution in which sound and silence permeated the very essence of the drama. Production of Beckett's *All That Fall* redefined radiophonic creation and contributed to the formation of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. Beckett followed his first radio drama with more than two dozen works for radio. The complete body of Samuel Beckett's radio works consisted of the following works: *All That Fall* (In English, BBC Third Programme, January 13, 1957; In French as *Tous ceux qui tombent* on ORTF, February 25, 1963), *Embers* (BBC Third Programme, June 24, 1959), *Words and Music* (In English, BBC Third Programme, November 13, 1962; In French as *Paroles*

¹ Beckett insisted that certain of his radio plays not be performed on stage, which gives evidence to the distinction that he made between radio and stage drama aesthetics.

et musique in 1963), *Cascando* (In French, ORTF, October 13, 1963; In English, BBC Third Programme, October 6, 1964), *The Old Tune* (BBC Third Programme 1963; RTE Ireland 1963), *Rough for Radio II* (BBC Radio 3, April 13, 1976). *Rough for Radio I* (never broadcast), written first in French in 1961 as *Esquisse radiophonique*, remained an unfinished draft that ultimately evolved into *Cascando*.²

Inspired by the Irish people he knew as a boy, Beckett created *All That Fall*, a mystery tale full of Irish humour and pathos in which Maddy Rooney heads toward the train station to pick up her blind husband on his birthday.³ The Saturday morning sun shone brightly as she headed along a country road to Boghill railway station. En route, Maddy met a variety of gentlemen, each heading her way at varying speeds. We do not know why, but her husband's train had been delayed. When the train finally arrived, Maddy's husband Dan failed to explain the delay to Maddy's satisfaction. As the couple slowly walked home, Dan tapped his walking stick on the ground, and Maddy stepped with her noisy, heavy feet. The sun no longer shone as clouds overtook the skies. Rain began to fall when Jerry, the station boy, caught up to them carrying an object that he claimed Dan had forgotten at the rail station. The station boy informed Maddy of the reason for the delay: a child had had a fateful accident and had been killed. Dan and Maddy disappeared into a tempest of wind and rain and the background filled with accusations and classic Beckettian comic banter.

In Beckett's second radio drama, *Embers*, Henry, the protagonist, sat on the strand tormented by the sound of the sea (Killiney Beach, near the Foxrock house in which Beckett spent his childhood). The entire drama took place in the mind of Henry, a lonely, old man who contemplated the absurdity of life. He continually talked to himself to drown out the sound of the sea, which reminded him of the passage of time and his inevitable death. Sometimes, he directed his monologue to his dead father; sometimes he spoke with his dead wife, Ada; occasionally he recounted stories to himself, none of which he ever finished. The main theme of *Embers* was the dramatic contrast between the burning fire (embers), symbol of life, and the sea, symbol of death. Although Beckett mentioned the sea only in the stage directions – "Sea...audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated" (253), the listener heard the sea in the background and in Henry's mind's eye as the latter paused to reflect on his life and on his stories.

In Beckett's third radio drama, *Words and Music*, the two characters, appropriately called "Words" and "Music," were asked by a third character, Croak, to express certain

2 Beckett is "hors catégorie" as the French say. Thus, I work with the English version when it is the first production: *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music*. *All That Fall* and *Words and Music* were also broadcast in French. All references come from Beckett's *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986). I work with the French text for *Cascando*, which comes from Beckett's *Comédie et actes divers* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1985).

3 The title of this radio drama comes from Psalm 145 v.14: "The LORD upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all [those that be] bowed down.

traditional Beckettian themes. “Words” attempted to use the spoken language to communicate and “Music” employed the language of music to express his feelings. The themes of love and age permeated the text as Beckett underscored the inadequacies of the use of spoken language alone. Beckett’s fourth main radio drama, *Cascando*, observed the same basic structure as *Words and Music*. The radio sketch centred on a character named Opener, who opened and closed the never-ending stream of words of the other characters on the one hand and on the other, produced an unending spring of individual musical phrases and motifs composed in a “stream of consciousness” style monologue. In both *Cascando* and *Words and Music*, Beckett isolated “the essential elements of radio art, the background noise of civilization” (Monaco 430).

The four radio dramas that I examine in this essay share one important characteristic: that dialogue is often of secondary importance to that of sound and silence. Silence, in particular, has the capacity to produce a host of meaningless utterances, which is a significant feature of Beckett’s work:

European modernists, for example, tend to hear Beckettian silence and babble [as] haunting moments of crisis which turn about a lack of subject. Silence, as the fundamental marker of this lack, is conceived as a function of the metaphysics of absence.... This silence, in turn, acts as the productive agent for the flow of compensatory babble which make up the voices of Beckettian narration (Janus 183).

As stasis implies (potential) movement, so also the presence of silence holds a meaning in Beckett’s radio work that one has yet to fully explore. Thus, for this reason a study of Beckett’s juxtaposition of sound and silence in his main radio dramas is relevant.

II. *All That Fall*: Rhythm and Pause

In creating *All That Fall* (1957), Beckett organized sound and silence as an aural narrative in which one could extract the main themes while at the same time one could perceive a central sound-based structure which, according to Donald McWhinnie who produced the first BBC production in 1957, offered “a mixture of realism and poetry, frustration and farce” (133). *All That Fall* became the first of Beckett’s truly musical radio dramas; in essence, it was a sonata containing a prelude and three movements. Though the verbal component served an important function within the drama itself, the true richness of the drama emerged through the manipulation of the soundscape.⁴ Beginning with

4 Alan Beck generalizes that “radio drama characters are more likely to operate on each other verbally than physically. This is especially so as the sound effects of bodily motion in themselves - mostly rustling of clothing, and paralinguistic grunts and squeals... - fail to signify unambiguously and unaided by description, for the most part.” See Beck’s “The “Death of Radio? An Essay in Radio-Philosophy,” *Sound Journal*, 2002. < <http://www.savoyhill.co.uk/deathofradio/> >

the prelude, Beckett employed a four-beat-rhythm throughout the length of the drama which appeared for the first time in the sound of Maddy Rooney's dragging feet. To this beat Beckett blended other sounds, starting with Maddy Rooney's panting, which struck on the first and third beats of the measure. Beckett then employed music that played on an old gramophone, which emanated from a house as Maddy passed by; the music faded in and eventually consumed her footsteps. Her husband Dan's voice blended with the sound of the music: "Poor woman. All alone in that ruinous old house" (172). With Dan's speech finished, the music continued a few seconds and then the sound of the footsteps repeated. As the music faded out, Maddy Rooney started to hum to the music that she heard, as she followed Beckett's four-beat-rhythm. This cadence set the tone for the remainder of the drama (1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, etc.). During the first movement of Beckett's sonata, he introduced a range of sounds: carts, bicycles, automobiles, the tapping on the ground of Dan Rooney's cane, culminating in the sound of an approaching steam train. The sounds of automobiles became increasingly more intricate, creating a crescendo with the arrival of the train at the rail station, cutting out all other noises with the sound of its whistle. The "vehicles" of the other characters of the drama played an important role in Beckett's sonata; Christy's cart, Mr. Tyler's bicycle, Connolly's van and Mr. Slocum's car foreshadowed the arrival of the powerful train. Beckett clearly organized the succession of sounds representing the vehicles in the first movement of the drama in a logical progression of increasing loudness and danger: Christy walked quietly beside the cart and mule, the bell on Mr. Tyler's bicycle alarmed Maddy, and then Connolly's van suddenly "passes with thunderous rattles," almost knocking them all over (175). Finally, Mr. Slocum offered Maddy a ride in his car. She accepted and we heard the sound effects describing the difficulty involved in starting the car and Mr. Slocum ultimately running over a hen.

MR. SLOCUM: [Dreamily.] All morning she went like a dream and now she is dead. That's what you get for a good deed. [Pause. Hopefully.] Perhaps if I were to choke her. [He does so, presses the starter. The engine roars. Roaring to make himself heard.] She was getting too much air! [He throttles down, grinds in his first gear, moves off, changes up in a grinding of gears.]

MRS. ROONEY: [In anguish,] Mind the hen! [Scream of brakes. Squawk of hen.] Oh, mother, you have squashed her, drive on, drive on! (178-9)

All of these sounds – and pauses – served to indicate progression or movement in the work (Miller 19, 24). Like a musical composition complete with crescendos and decre-

scendos, Beckett's fading in and fading out of vehicular sounds specified the rising and falling of the dramatic action.

The sound of the first train rushing through the station, which became quieter as the down train arrived with its own hissing of steam and the sound of its turning metal parts, created a greater impact than words alone. At the end of the drama, the train reached full strength when we learned that it had run over and killed a child. To this din of the whistle that signalled the high point of the movement, Beckett contrasted the quiet tapping of Dan's cane (1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4), which highlighted Dan's handicap and made him the complete antithesis of the powerful train. It also created a counterpoint to the "clickety-clack" of a train on the tracks. The sound effects made by Maddy Rooney's panting and the slow, regular 1-2-3-4 rhythm of her dragging feet filled the first movement with melancholy. The use of silence in the form of pauses and musical rests remained of utmost importance, as Beckett filled his drama with descriptions indicating stasis (Miller 17, 38): Maddy stopped to listen to the music from the nearby house, and stopped again whenever she met other characters, the mule refused to walk, Mr. Tyler's flat bicycle tyre slowed him down and Mr. Slocum's car would not start.⁵ Maddy Rooney's thoughts further slowed down the tempo of the work, which delayed her arrival at the train station. According to Alan Beck, "silence is full of signification and replicates, for the listener, the position of the audience in the performance venue. It is part of what I call 'listening to the listening.' ... Radio has a fear of stasis, of a silence that could almost signify death..." (6.19). Beck's words are particularly appropriate when they are applied to an analysis of *All That Fall*. The silence exhibited by all characters, their lack of movement, so to speak, indicated each character's reluctance to address the central question of death in the story. Further, Tim Crook suggests that "subtext can be generated with silence" (177). Thus, the silence of Beckett's characters in *All That Fall* signified the desperation that they felt when they were forced to confront the central problem of life: How can we cope with death?

In order to establish that his drama would have a tragic theme, Beckett employed Schubert's musical piece entitled *Death and the Maiden* in the opening sequence. He underscored the theme of death again at the beginning of the drama when Maddy Rooney had an encounter with Christy, whose mule glared at her incessantly, making her think (in silence) about herself and her own preoccupation; she would never have a child of her own. Now elderly, the hope of bearing her own offspring had vanished; "What have I done to deserve all this, what, what?" (174) Maddy created a comic image of herself, provoked by a stare from the mule: "Oh I am just a hysterical old hag I know, destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and church-going and fat and rheumatism and childlessness. [Pause. Brokenly.] Minnie! Little Minnie!" (174).⁶ Beckett addressed the theme of death with a similar tone at the end of the drama. Prior to the appearance of Jerry,

5 The pauses in Beckett's work functioned like the musical quarter rest, or crotchet rest.



6 Like Maddy, the mule was a creature that could never reproduce on its own.

the young boy who delivered the news about the child's death, Maddy and Dan Rooney passed by the house whose music the listener recognized from the opening of the drama; Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*. There was a brief silence. Maddy Rooney broke this silence by noting that Dan was crying. Jerry arrived to deliver the news of the child's death.

MRS ROONEY: What was it, Jerry?

JERRY: It was a little child, Ma'am.

[MR ROONEY groans.]

MRS ROONEY: What do you mean, it was a little child?

JERRY: It was a child fell out of the carriage, Ma'am. [Pause.] On to the line, Ma'am. [Pause.] Under the wheels, Ma'am. [Silence. JERRY runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. Tempest of wind and rain.] (199)

Despite the pain that they felt, the couple remained trapped in the Beckettian obligation to go on, indicated by the sound of their dragging feet. Whether Dan Rooney had caused the child's death was inconsequential. As shown by the pauses of the characters' dialogue, the silence that ended the drama underscored Beckett's classic theme of man's helplessness and the necessity to persevere despite an apparent lack of hope. As Adrienne Janus notes, "silence marks a fundamental lack in subjective consciousness which in turn produces a torrent of meaningless babble to defer recognition of that ultimate silence, death" (Janus 183).

III. *Embers*: The Silence of the Sea

In his next radio drama entitled *Embers* (1959), Beckett's radio art became progressively more conceptual. The term "embers" represented the sound of silence, or as Beckett writes, "...silence in the house, not a sound, only the fire, no flames now, embers. [Pause.] Embers. [Pause.]...not a sound, only the embers, sound of dying, dying glow..." (255). From the beginning of *Embers*, the listener "saw" Henry, the protagonist, sitting on the strand, tormented by the clamour of the sea. Henry could not escape the sounds that faded in and out. None of what he heard was real, as the sounds and images depicted by Beckett existed only in Henry's imagination. Henry's own voice was the only one that he heard and the only voice that could counter the sound of the sea. *Embers* was a "drama of the mind" which reflected the psychoses of its protagonist.⁷ "The universe which the radio audience is confronted with," said Clas Zilliacus, "is a totally subjective one: it is one

⁷ This label referred to the radio drama genre as a whole as well, upon which several articles bearing a similar title appeared such as Martin Esslin's "The Mind as a Stage," *Theatre Quarterly* 1:3 (1971): 5-11, and Elissa Guaralnick's "The Stage of the Mind," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 61 (1995): 79-94.

man's world. The interplay between Henry and other characters takes place in Henry's mind" (*Beckett and Broadcasting* 82). Martin Esslin offered a similar assessment:

The background--a background of sound, the sea, Henry's boots on the shingle--is still real, but the voices are all internal: Henry's internal monologue as he tries unsuccessfully to conjure up his dead father's presence, and later the voices of his wife and daughter and her instructors, which materialize in his memory (*On Beckett: Essays and Criticism* 368). And in a survey of Beckett's radio and television dramas published in the *Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Jonathan Kalb noted that *Embers* "has no surface narrative other than that of a haunted man talking about talking to himself, telling stories that he never finishes, and sometimes experiencing (along with us) the ghostly people and things in his story" (129). Therefore, it is the voice of the sea, this eternal nothingness, which dominated in *Embers*. In contrast to this endless drone of the sea, Beckett juxtaposed the sound of silence most evident in Henry's reflective pauses. Henry's internal voice (the sea) asked about his father: "Can he hear me? [Pause.] Yes, he must hear me. [Pause.] To answer me [Pause.] No, he doesn't answer me [Pause] Just be with me" (253). Addressing himself to the audience, Henry remarks: "That sound you hear is the sea. [Pause. Louder.] I say that sound you hear is the sea; we are sitting on the strand. [Pause.] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was" [Pause.] (253).

From the beginning of *Embers*, the audience inferred that the sea represented the setting of Henry's father's suicide: "We never found your body, you know, that held up probate an unconscionable time, they said there was nothing to prove you hadn't run away from us all and alive and well under a false name in the Argentine for example, that grieved mother greatly. [Pause]" (253-4). The sound of the sea, the voice of his dead father that rebounded off the walls of his mind, became Henry's lasting obsession. He began to recount endless stories to himself, which he never finished, in an attempt to drown out the voice of the sea/his dead father. Henry's wife Ada failed to understand why he remained so tormented by the sound of the sea; "It's only on the surface, you know. Underneath all is as quiet as a grave. Not a sound. All day, all night, not a sound. [Pause]" (261). This is the sound of silence; the sound of death, like the embers of a fire that will soon fade. The sound of the sea symbolized the passage of time, our inescapable destiny. The silence of the embers reflected man's helplessness when facing an imminent death.

The central sequence of the radio drama centred on a dialogue between Henry and Ada, which evoked specific memories from Henry's past. The listener lived Henry's memories as three flashbacks; the first focusing on Addie, the couple's daughter, in a scene with her music master; the second concerning Addie with her riding teacher; a third with Henry and Ada engaged in intimate relations on the strand, some twenty years

earlier. Sound, silence and music structured the work. First, we heard notes played on a piano (in the first episode with Addie), next we heard a horse's hooves (in the second episode with Addie), juxtaposed with the sound of the sea (which becomes increasingly louder), ending in Ada bursting into tears. Forgetting about Ada, Henry continued to recount stories to erase the sounds and voices from his mind, focusing now on his Bolton story. Before the drama ended, Henry read from his diary:

This evening . . . [Pause.] Nothing this evening. [Pause.] Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . plumber at nine, then nothing. [Pause. Puzzled.] Plumber at nine? [Pause.] Ah, yes, the waste. [Pause.] Words. [Pause.] Saturday . . . nothing. Sunday . . . Sunday . . . nothing all day. [Pause.] Nothing, nothing all day nothing. [Pause.] All day all night nothing. [Pause.] Not a sound (264, ellipses included in Beckett's original text).

Embers closed without any definite resolution other than the assurance that Henry would remain trapped in a typical Beckettian cycle. Henry's reflective pauses – and the ellipses employed by Beckett to reflect a silence indicative of a personal struggle – showed his hesitancy, his uncertainty, and a lack of preparedness for the next phase of his life: death. Like many of Beckett's protagonists, Henry remained caught in the notion of the necessity to venture forward, without having any real sense of why one had to carry on.

In *Embers*, we *heard* the ennui of Henry's life; the waves that continually struck the seashore created a rhythm that became the aural backdrop of the text. Consistently audible throughout the drama, the din of the sea blended with the voices in Henry's head and the sound of the burning embers to create a visual image. While the sound remained the same throughout the drama, its representational functions varied. Within the inner narrative that Henry told in order to drown out the voice of the sea, the sound became the sound of the dying embers. He imagined it as the sound of light: "listen to the light now, you always loved light," he said to his father (253). Later in the drama, the absence of sound, the "not a sound" or silence, haunted Henry as well (258). With all these sounds and silences in the foreground, the din of the sea became a constant background murmur that created a cacophonous symphony in Henry's mind:

HENRY: And I live on the brink of it! Why? Professional obligations?
[Brief laugh.] Reasons of health? [Brief laugh.] Family ties?
[Brief laugh.] A woman? [Laugh in which she (Ada) joins.] Some old grave
I cannot tear myself away from? (258)

Henry felt that since the sea was the source of his problems, the sea may offer solutions.

Like the music in *All That Fall* that Beckett permitted to explain itself, in *Embers* Beckett alluded to the symbolic meaning of the sea to underscore the fact that we often

use sounds and silence to represent concepts that we do not fully comprehend. Beckett emphasized the importance of manipulating the soundscape to paint an image of his descriptions, as the sound of the sea and the voices repeated so many times in Henry's head expressed his chaotic state of mind in such a way that the listener "saw" the chaos filling the character's mind. Silence – through reflective pauses – could express the inexpressible.

IV. *Words and Music* / *Cascando*: A Symphony of Sound and Silence

English novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley, famous for his dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), once said: "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music" (Bedford 10). After *Embers*, Beckett created two radio dramas in collaboration with musical composers: *Words and Music* (1962), developed with his cousin John Beckett, and *Cascando* (1963), produced with his friend Marcel Mihalovici. Innovative in its use of juxtaposed character voices, the voices of the characters named "Words" and "Music" formed a musical duet. The maestro of the dialogue, "Croak," commanded "Words" and "Music," whom he called "Joe" and "Bob" respectively, to engage in a dialogue on a range of topics including "Love," "Age," and a description of "the Face." "Words" and "Music" did not get along at all, and as Croak forced the two to work together, they found that the only means by which they could express their feelings was in song and silence. As Beckett painted a picture of "the Face," the character of Croak recused himself and fell silent. With Croak's departure, "Words" and "Music" struggled to express their feelings without the presence of the maestro to direct the performance. In *Words and Music*, Beckett achieved meaning through the manipulation of the soundscape, as silence, sound effects, voices and music found their way to the forefront. In contrast to *All That Fall* and *Embers*, which lacked a comedic subtext, *Words and Music* focused on the characters' farcical utterances as they sang and chanted their way to a better understanding of their existence. Like the sea in *Embers*, music became a character that engaged in a meaningful dialogue with words. "Words" defined these themes through verbal expression, consisting of definitions recited from the dictionary, whereas "Music" defined or interpreted these same terms through the language of music. The theme of sloth became one of the most important themes evoked in the drama; sloth suggested a laziness – a silence – that functioned in direct opposition to the Beckettian notion of perseverance that remained prevalent in his play *En attendant Godot*.⁸ In his dictionary definition-like soliloquy, *Words* underscored the danger of sloth for humanity:

Sloth is of all the passions the most powerful passion and indeed no passion is more powerful than the passion of sloth. This is the mode in which the mind is

8 Beckett condemned sloth, a sin of waste, because it impeded one from reaching a solution.

most affected and indeed - [Burst of tuning. Loud, imploring.] Please! [Tuning dies away. As before.] The mode in which the mind is most affected and indeed in no mode is the mind more affected than in this (287).

“Word’s” speech was music itself; circular and repetitive. His repetition revealed a struggle to reach meaning and self-expression, which inevitably became farcical when “Words” attempted to express old age:

Age is . . . age is when . . . old age I mean . . . if that is what my Lord means . . . is when . . . if you’re a . . . man . . . were a man . . . huddled . . . nodding . . . the ingle . . . waiting- [*violent thump of club*] (289).

The struggle to define old age revealed the type of confusion that one might experience during old age: dementia or an Alzheimer’s-like state. Beckett’s use of ellipses underscored the character’s silence, the necessity to pause for reflection, and most importantly, the difficulty in expressing oneself through the use of verbal language alone.

In *Words and Music*, Beckett’s themes remained monosyllabic (sloth, age, etc.). Croak’s thumping club was another example of Beckett’s use of rhythm to explain his themes. The sounds that Croak made with his club echoed the monosyllabic themes themselves, hammered out by Beckett in monotone fashion:

WORDS: [As before.] Of all these movements then who can number them
and they are legion sloth is the LOVE is the most urgent and
indeed by no manner of movement is the soul more urged than by
this, to and- [*Violent thump of club.*]
CROAK: Bob.
WORDS: From. [*Violent thump of club.*]
CROAK: Bob!
MUSIC: As before.
CROAK: Love!
MUSIC: Rap of baton on stand. Soft music worthy of foregoing (288).

Beckett succeeded in reconciling the disparity that existed between his compositions, particularly those of *Words and Music*. In a sense, Beckett approached his themes from two angles, the verbal and the non-verbal. When “Music” later made suggestions for how “Words” should structure his verbiage and “Words” followed this advice, they reached an equilibrium which permitted the listener to better understand the absurdity that Beckett created.

Cascando, Beckett’s next radio drama, shared a parallel radio dramatic structure to that of *Words and Music*. In *Cascando*, Beckett employed three main characters, Voice (Voix), Music (Musique) and Opener (Ouvreur) to tell the story. Unlike the three charac-

ters in *Words and Music*, the characters in *Cascando* operated more independently from each other. Like Croak, Opener controlled when Voice and Music spoke, though he did not influence what they said, as the two performed their monologues in isolation from one another. In a sense, Croak directed the discourse of *Words and Music* from within the drama, whereas Opener directed the discourse of *Cascando* from the exterior. In *Cascando*, Voice spoke with a “stream of consciousness” appropriate for the radio medium, though Beckett frequently interrupted Voice’s speech at predetermined intervals.⁹ Like the conductor of an orchestra, Opener directed Voice and Music to perform at specific moments, establishing distinctive, harmonizing voices with a steady tone and tempo. Opener balanced the parts of Voice with Music to create two independent melodies, which, in the end, formed a complete blend. Opener first cued Voice, then Music, and then cued both of them to “play” together, as they joined voice and music in harmony. Voice and Music perform a symphonic function: Voice spoke, silence, music alone, silence, and then both together, this time without being prompted. The fact that Voice and Music ultimately “performed” together without being prompted by Opener signified that the process had succeeded: the two disparate sounds of voice and music had united to form a complete harmony. When a musical phrase ended, that was when Opener said “Et je re-ferme. [Silence.] Et recommence,” his utterance being like the musical repeat sign at the



end of the phrase (49).¹⁰ Opener’s structural role served to create a harmony between Voice and Music by facilitating the necessary solos, pauses (silence), and blends of their two distinctive sounds. Unlike in *All That Fall* and *Embers*, in *Cascando* (nor in *Words and Music* for that matter), Beckett did not give the listener the tools to permit the development of a complete visualization of the characters. The listener relied on a strange voice, calculated moments of silence and unusual music, which Beckett used to emphasize the fact that his characters were not real humans, but simply creatures that possessed human-like qualities. According to Tim Crook, “the musician as artist makes the very silence speak and express ideas by feelings...” (93). This notion is certainly evident in *Cascando*.

Cascando presented the culmination of Beckett’s principal radiophonic works. Even the title had an important meaning within the work as a whole. “*Cascando*” is a musical term that refers to the end of a musical composition, which suggested a story with a conclusion. Voice alternated between a discussion of the story-telling process, narrating the story, and the hope to find “the mother of all stories,” which Beckett called “the Maunu story.”¹¹ Opener opened and Voice began in mid-sentence:

9 Voice’s speech was pre-recorded. As for the composition of the radio drama, Beckett first wrote the complete part for Opener and inserted the spaces for Voice and Music, before writing out the complete part for Voice. The music was composed separately by Marcel Mihalovici, who used the radio text to guide him.

10 *Cascando* appeared in Beckett’s *Comédie et actes divers*. (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1978).

11 In the English version of *Cascando*, Beckett called this “character” Woburn.

- histoire ... si tu pouvais la finir... tu serais tranquille ... pourrais dormir... pas avant... oh je sais... j'en ai fini... des mille et des une... fait que ça... ça ma vie... en me disant... finis celle-ci... c'est la bonne... après tu seras tranquille... pourrais dormir... plus d'histoires... plus de mots... et la finissais... et pas la bonne... pas tranquille... tout de suite une autre... à commencer... (47).

Ultimately, Voice introduced the story itself, which concerned a character named Maunu, an unhappy man who waited for night to fall so that he could leave his shed “pour sortir... aller ailleurs... dormir ailleurs” (48). As the drama proceeded, Maunu navigated through a familiar deserted Beckettian landscape, advancing towards the sea (as in *Embers*), where he boarded his boat with “ni bancs... ni barre... ni rames... à flot... d'un bond... s'éloigne... Maunu...,” eventually losing sight of the land and drifting tirelessly onward into uncertainty and despair (silence), venturing deeper into the Beckettian sea of doubt (as in *Embers*, once again), while Voice seemed assured that he himself would succeed in recounting a story that he would effectively finish (56). This idea is most clearly indicated through Beckett's frequent use of ellipses, which he employed, once again, to indicate the use of silence as a reflective pause of his characters' thoughts. The narrative further underscored this reality by insisting on an irregular rhythm as Maunu tripped, stumbled, and fell on his way into the unknown, first “le visage dans la boue (50),” then “le visage dans le sable (51),” and ending up, “...visage... dans les galets (54).”¹² At this moment, the narrative slowed, leading towards a description of the contrasts of the open sea:

...Maunu...tenir bon...ne pas lâcher...lumières...de la terre...quelques-unes...presque plus...trop loin...trop tard...du ciel...celles-là...si l'on veut...quoi que l'on dise...qu'à se mettre...sur le dos...il les verrait...l'éclairer...mais non...il s'agrippe...Maunu... (58).

Voice's Maunu story slowly disappeared only to begin once again as he stuttered and stammered to recount it.

Cascando was the shortest of Beckett's principal radio dramas, simple in its character development, yet complex in meaning. *Cascando* featured the disembodied voice which echoed the Beckettian need to persist, the need to stand up after falling on your face. His drama also illustrated the necessity of filling silence with something; anything at all. The story that Opener recounted, the Maunu story, was our story, the story of humankind, trapped in the desire for resolution, but unable to persevere or to finish anything. Like Opener, we also trip over our own thoughts, our reflective moments of silence which truly reveal our state of hopelessness and despair. Moreover, in *Cascando*, Beckett por-

12 This is the “face” of which Beckett spoke and to which I referred during the introduction of this work. It was the face of humanity, dragged along the ground, marked by the hardships of our existence.

trayed the wonder of radio drama in which pure musical sound rose to the forefront of the soundscape. Music itself is based upon a calculated balance of sounds and silence; the rests (the silence) in music have both a practical as well as a systematic function. This silence gives both musician and listener a moment to reflect upon what has just occurred and to prepare for what is to come. “It is truly a matter of fundamental sounds... made as fully as possible” (Frost 362).

V. Conclusion

In the field of radio drama composition, Beckett was one of the first true sound architects. He understood that audio is a process that involves aural input that moves from aural source to the listener and then back to the aural source (Ferrington 61, 62). Aural input includes silence, sound effects, voices, and music. These elements were Beckett’s “tools of the trade.” Beckett certainly knew the limitations of aural imagery and he worked to facilitate the listener’s capacity to interpret the aural input that he constructed. For Beckett, sound architecture increased human experience through the brain’s capacity to create visual representations based on a composite of images produced by an individual’s senses. Richer than dialogue in its potential to paint images within the listener’s mind, the juxtaposition of sound and silence was the central to Beckett’s radio dramatic works. Until Beckett’s foray into radio drama, the significance of the juxtaposition of sound and silence had yet to be fully realized.

The death of Samuel Beckett on December 22, 1989 signalled both the peak and the decline of the radio drama genre. More than twenty years after his death, Beckett’s radio dramas continue to find their way onto the airwaves and they continue to appear in other forms as well. Beckett’s legacy to radio writing was his ability to express the inner conflict found within each and every one of us: the necessity to venture forward, without having any real sense of why we must carry on. Beckett’s radio dramas highlighted man’s need to fill the silence of his life with sound – with anything that is meaningful. During the post-World War II period, outside of the work of Beckett (and Antonin Artaud in France), there were relatively few attempts to fully cultivate the qualities of radio dramatic composition: silence, sound effects, voices, and music. Beckett understood how the juxtaposition of sound and silence allowed the radio dramatist to express the inexpressible. In short, he brought radio dramatic composition to the pinnacle of excellence and assured its heritage.

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