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"(*silence*)"
Scripting [It], Staging [It] on the Page, for the Stage

Clark Lunberry

Our pages
burn themselves
as theater
        awaiting an extinguishing
mist
I sang my name but it sounded strange
I sang the trace then

without a sound,
then erased it.
—Michael Palmer, "Sun"

The stage is no place for silence. The silence is no place for a stage. Like a white page upon which it is inscribed, presented as dramatic instruction—"(*silence*)"—the word is made into a mark, made into a bracketed moment, only to be instantly, noisily transformed into utterance. Mouths closed; the word erased but still seen, fully present and intended to form and function, to speak breathlessly. The speakers stop, pause, silent. On the page or on the stage, this instructed silence nevertheless stealthily expands and fills as a signified absence, inflating into a deliberately, paradoxically evacuated dimension; ink absorbed onto paper, always echoing. Jacques Derrida, commenting on Bataille, accurately diagnosed the dilemma of trying to represent silence,

> If the word *silence* 'among all words', is 'the most perverse or the most poetic,' it is because in pretending to silence meaning, it says nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences *itself*, not as silence, but as speech.[1]

Silencing itself as speech, saying the spacings, preparing the pause, the

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actor and the director mark, measure the extended moments before, between, following the words (as well as within them; Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*, "No, all is a— / (*he yawns*) / —bsolute"). How long before the mouth is to move, (the yawn to endure), the words to resume, the sounds of the stage to reengage? And how to effectively create and form what Antonin Artaud spoke of as the "well-calculated silence . . . , silence solidified by thought."[2]

The spectators in their seats, the curtain up, the props in place, the characters abruptly appearing—everyone, everything poised and present. The action is about to begin; the silence about to be broken, must be broken, lips parted, throats contracted, words on the tip of the tongue. Shaping the breath and filling the stage with layers and layers of prompted, prepared language, filaments cast upon the expectant, exigent audience. Laying it on the line, narrating the clock's progression, the story will be told (even when there is none, especially when there is none). *This happens*, and *then this*, and *then this—(silence)—I said, she said, he said—(silence)*. The momentary pause, the space between the lines. How long can these be held? [ ] Holding the silences. [ ] (What is being bracketed?) Tension (or terror) between intakes. Rest. Inhale, exhale, preparation to begin again . . . and then again. Departure. Final words, parting comments. As another of Beckett's character's, in *Play*, frustratedly exclaims, "Bite off my tongue and swallow it? Spit it out? Would that placate you? How the mind works still to be sure!"[3]

". . . mind works still . . ."

Evoking the term, writing it on the page, silence as "*silence*" presents itself as a peculiar, uncertain substance (here understood as primarily an absence of language, language absented). An inevitably unwieldy, equivocal theatrical instruction, silence has nonetheless been frequently investigated and experimented with in various instances of modern and postmodern drama and performance. From Bertolt Brecht to Samuel Beckett, Antonin Artaud to Gertrude Stein, John Cage to Robert Wilson . . . each of these figures, often in very different ways, has attempted to rewrite and reimagine the silences and soundings of the stage, to leverage the language into alternative dimensions from those that were often perceived as being so ponderously inherited.

Strategies of silence have included (among, no doubt, numerous others) the following:

1. Stopping or slowing the insistences of language, either pausing the rush of words or trying to eliminate them entirely (while seeking variations of articulation in other forms, for instance, Brechtian *gestus*—Mother Courage purposefully biting the half guilder; or innovations in the stagecrafting in a theater of images—Robert Wilson's letting the lighting, the protracted movements and

gestures "speak"; or numerous instances of the anti-verbal experimental theater of the 1960's and early 1970's).

2. Painstakingly wielding the silence as the "silence" of stage instruction, applying it almost surgically to puncture a performance, open an aporia onto the page and onto the stage (Beckett's deliberate, yawning pauses in *Endgame*, Brecht's Baal suddenly ceasing to speak at the very edge of the unspeakable).

3. Accelerating the language and proliferating its moist and grainy *material* presence to the point where the language itself begins to stutter and stammer, "to make the whole confront silence," as Gilles Deleuze has written, "make it topple into silence,"[4] lost in its own velocity—a body without (vocal) organs (again, Robert Wilson's aphasic language of Christopher Knowles merging with the rapid-fire music of Philip Glass; Richard Foreman's manic dialogue delivered seemingly at the speed of light, the speed of rushing bodies).

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet aptly remarks to her nurse who has rushed into the room with news of Romeo's perilous fate, "How art thou out of breath when thou has breath / To say to me that thou art out of breath?"[5] Here, the signifying words collide with the signified body, breathlessly breathing still. Silence speaking of silence, the words, like the nurse's breath, echo beyond their promised cessation, their always deferred absence. And in various instances to be discussed in greater detail in the pages that follow—from John Cage in his anechoic chamber to Bertolt Brecht and his very early play *Baal* to Samuel Beckett and *Endgame*, the staging and scripting of silence, no matter the method, no matter the arrangements and rearrangements, remains a difficult, almost breathless, dilemma: how is the silence to sound, how is the silence to be sounded? And perhaps the most troublesomely recurring concern of all, why can't the silence simply be silent, simply? For as a character in Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* astutely remarks, "Silence, yes, but what silence! For it is all very well to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps."[6]

What we require is silence;
but what silence requires is that I go on talking.
—John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"

Instance; an initial silence, initially silent; America 1949: John Cage (famously) entered the anechoic chamber expecting to hear nothing, expecting to encounter silence in itself, only to be startled by the mysterious and unexpected continuation of sounds, the absence of absence; the internal coursings and rumblings of the blood of the body, the incessant whirrings and ringings of the nervous system. Cage's subsequent apotheosis: there is no silence, but instead, inescapably, the constant, polymorphous variations of noise always already filling the ear or

preceding *even* the ear's finest receptions, hearing before the ear has even heard—the soundings of a self dissolving into the particled flux of its own dispersions.

As a revelation recounted, recollected (linguistically) in tranquility, Cage's anechoic chamber was from the very beginning a theoretical, theatrical space, a private stage for an initially internalized audience in which not only the body was discovered unexpectedly resonating, but the words of the mind (perhaps even more noisily) continued to frame and formulate the echoless event in its very unfolding, narrating the absence of narration through its calculated, recuperated description. Though this experience in the anechoic chamber preceded Cage's eventual involvement with Zen Buddhism and his subsequent study with Daisetz Suzuki, its discoveries nonetheless obliquely anticipated some of Zen's meditative aims and methods—the body's deliberate breathing, the silencing of the self in order to facilitate a listening of listening, a thinking of thought at the moment of thought's emergence; the sound of one hand clapping.

There, within the anechoic chamber, was dramatically enacted the non-silence, the murmuring demonstration that when the sounds from without are withheld, then the sounds from within abruptly emerge, like unseen characters entering onto a previously crowded (or empty) stage—chattering, chattering away, the return of the body's repressed resoundings. For, as Herbert Blau has noted with regard to "the regenerative illusion of an *empty space* . . . in which the actor has been seeking immediacy, usually missing its point . . . , no sooner is it looked at with anything like performance in mind, the empty space is the space of consciousness."[7] As is the *silent* space, consciousness, the sounds of consciousness always returning, never having left. For Cage, from the moment of that moment's pivotal realization, this story of silence's absence was then told again and again as "the story of silence," from stage to stage, framed compactly in language, language becoming legend, each time charmingly recounted, establishing itself for him (and others) as a mantra-like narrative of an imaginative project defined, and redefined, around a very noisy silence indeed.

The silence that was a non-silence simultaneously inscribed itself onto an even *less* silent text of description, a field of imminent suggestion and interpretation. Words invisibly fly all around, instantly, irrepressibly sounding and signifying—language like a physiological substance entangling itself within the coursing blood, the humming and buzzing nervous system. Cage cast in the chamber (like an actor cast in a play, performing upon a stage), the story forms of the silent man listening to the listening (watching himself listening, and later, being watched listening); a spectator unto his own non-silence; told and retold; printed, bound and performed.

—death rattle—

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.

—Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

The long-reported post-structural death of the author has not, for all its suggested silence and finality, stopped the author from still somehow speaking. Indeed, what remains after such a death sounds, if anything, noisier than ever, with words suddenly resounding from all angles, filling every conceivable space, and coming seemingly from out of nowhere. And silence, a speaker's imagined potential for silence, once presumed as an alternative for the speaking subject, would appear to have been abruptly withdrawn or eliminated entirely as an option of behavior; for the speaker, like Cage's enchambered listener, is now utterly surrounded by those more chronic dimensions of sound, echoing forever and always. As Cage encountered it and confirmed, silence does not exist and is no longer a conceivable recourse or remedy to life's noisy and incessant demands—the monk or the ascetic's silent resignation and exile have been interrupted and must perhaps now be rethought and reimagined. However, the non-silences of post-structuralism are distinct from Cage's in that the sounds encountered in their theoretical formulation are not simply the internal rumblings of the body—its blood, its nervous system—but instead an intricately interconnected network of external cultural references, all simultaneously sounding and structuring the perpetual listener who is, in a manner of speaking, all ears.

From this crowded and chaotic post-structural vantage, the voice of the speaker would thus appear to have been confiscated and cast into a larger, more amorphous dimension. Here, in place of the autonomous voice authoritatively speaking, the space of the speaker has been vastly, almost promiscuously, expanded into a field of multiple, overlapping, anonymous voices forever in-forming, a reconceived stage upon which the stage itself would seem to be doing most (if not all) of the speaking. This redefined and reconstituted speaker appears now merely to be awkwardly mouthing the words already spoken, lip syncing lines earlier, unknowingly memorized. The only voices that remain are the voices emanating from absent others, *sounding* like absent others, "woven entirely," as Roland Barthes seminally noted, "with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony . . . , the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*, they are quotations with inverted commas."[8]

Here, Barthes' silencing of the singular speaker, his dispersing of the individual voice, would seem to give rise to very different non-singular voices, voices not of the "person" but of the citated "subject," plural voices in which language itself would seem to be chattering ceaselessly away, the multiple voices unstoppable, unignorable, like the "something dripping in my head" that Hamm in *Endgame* so woefully cannot escape. This fractured and fragmented voice has become the site and the sound of the person's dispersal into subject, which in turn entails the person's dispersal into a kind of silence. As Barthes has powerfully described it in his essay on the Japanese Bunraku, detailing the consequences of the voice's scattering dispersal, and presenting the voice as a kind of material trace of historical reconfiguration, "The voice is what is really at stake in modernity, the voice as specific substance of language everywhere triumphantly pushed forward."[9]

But as these voices of modernity have been noisily "pushed forward," the speaking "person" transformed into the spoken "subject," what are those vague vestiges of *a kind of* silence that are still somehow faintly discernible in this otherwise crowded and clamorous space? Is there not a variation of silence that might still be contingently posited or imagined, perhaps emerging only by default from within the very interstices of this stereophonic sounding of voices? For behind the miming of the prompted lines is there not exhibited still the silently scattered speaker, puppet-like upon the stage, "empty outside of the very enunciation which defines [him or her]?"[10] This hollowed figure, relegated now to an almost mechanical moving of the mouth, will itself necessarily remain silent while mouthing the prompted words spoken for it. For the prerequisite for such mouthing, the key to effective puppeting and puppeteering, is that that which is visible on the stage will remain mute while simultaneously trying to time the movement of the mouth to coincide with the language that is being prompted. Like Barthes' Bunraku, conceived by him as a kind of "silent writing" that separates the act from the gesture, "the voice is folded into an immense volume of silence,"[11] exhausting language, silencing it in the very act of mouthing it. Here evoking an (almost Eastern) absence upon the stage, a (Buddhist[12]) depletion of presence, we hear again Barthes' telling description of the stakes involved, the consequences for the speaking subject: "*I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*. "[13]

And yet what remains of the body of the "speaker" so utterly evacuated, of a language so entirely exhausted? How are the dispersed voices still to be sounded, the fractured sights still to be seen? And how are the remaining silences to be timed and properly tuned and textured? Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett may provide two instances of possible response.

It was at first a study. I wrote out silences and the nights.
I recorded the inexpressible. I described frenzies.
—Arthur Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"

Instance; a hovering silence of sky; Germany 1918: In Bertolt Brecht's early play *Baal*, the proudly degenerate, admirably despicable main character Baal—a poet, a man of words—often finds himself upon his back, momentarily speechless, either in drunken collapse or in meditative musings (or frequently a combination of both), looking up through trees at the starry expanse above, ruminating, charting the distances, taking "the sky with him below."[14] Like Cage in his anechoic chamber, Baal stares into the darkness, listening, listening, trying to discern the dimensions of a receding depth, sounding a diminishing sky; however, unlike Cage, the darkness for Baal seems far darker and more dense, the nothing that is heard more vacant and deadening, its subsequent narrations more troublingly told; as Baal himself caustically describes his condition, sitting down at the table to write a poem, "I'll give my inner man a try. I'm quite hollowed out" (42).

In the second scene of this play, silence as a carefully (but uncertainly) applied stage instruction immediately follows the brief, opening exchange between Baal and the young Johannes. Both of them are looking from the window of Baal's attic, staring up at the sky as Baal begins to ponder aloud:

Baal: When you lie stretched out in the grass at night you feel in your bones that the earth is a sphere and that we are flying and that there are animals on this star eating up the plants. It is one of smaller stars.
Johannes: You know something of astronomy?
Baal: No.

Silence

(26)

"No" . . . "*Silence*," Baal's response to Johannes (knowing nothing of astronomy—what's *there* to know?), followed by Baal's barren reply to Baal (knowing nothing of nothing); "silence." And here, as always, (but here, in particular) a particular kind of silence. *But what is it*? How is this instructed silence to be held, to be heard? For *this silence* sounds especially mordant and hollow, following as it does the negation of Baal's "No" and thus resonating as a kind of double negative to Johannes' simple question. The silence following Baal's response seems neither pregnant (echoing with some kind of undefined, emerging, Cage-like musicated hope) nor even permanent (offering some form of fixed rest or final respite), but instead another kind of silence that is something vastly (or

perhaps minutely) other, a silence somehow linked (contiguously, if nothing else) with the empty night sky just described by Baal; a silence less heard than *felt* "in your bones," a kind of flying emptiness, vacant in its very velocity. And if, momentarily, anything at all is to be heard, perhaps it would be only the "animals . . . eating up the plants," a tearing, chewing, munching sound—life mindlessly, mechanistically perpetuating itself.[15]

And pragmatically, technically—performed or read—how long is *this* "silence" to be held? How painfully long, how precisely short, in order for it to adequately "speak" in the various ways that one might imagine *it* speaking, effectively echoing before the dialogue reengages, the written words once again fill the emptied space. Perhaps the silence should last just long enough for the void of the described empty sky to seep in between Baal and Johannes, puncture the dialogic moment, stain the surface of selves, as Ekart later describes "a dumpling that will one day leave the sky marked with grease stains" (54). For this silence between Baal and Johannes does not seem in any way an inviting silence of some comforting, cosmic abyss (for nothing is known of that), no music of the spheres echoing lyrically here. And besides, such expansive articulations, illuminations of a darkness, in the very act of naming and illuminating it (and because one presumes that it *can be* named and illuminated) becomes something almost constituting and consoling in nature, a silence, an absence that is instantly transformed into an encompassing, reified presence and therefore *not* nothing, not silent.

But no, Baal's silence opening this scene (and numerous other "silent" moments in the play that *sound* just like it) seems to reverberate dissonantly within a more harrowingly depleted space. Psychically, spiritually imploded in upon itself, this silence cannot be named, for in its very naming, it would be defined, determined, and ultimately probably denied—(as it has undoubtedly just been denied in the very writing of these two preceding sentences, in the attempt to speak of this silence as "harrowingly depleted," "imploded," "dissonant," named nonetheless and thus fixed and enframed, however negatively). Scanning the sky as he so frequently does, Baal is not searching for signs of life, or evidence of a black hole from out of the diminishing distances of the space above him. For from Baal's dark vantage, there are no signs of life above *or* below, and as for the black hole we are already within it, our own private black hole, its dense matter silently collapsing all around us. And at this heavily muted, laden moment, we find ourselves perhaps in vague vicinities suggested by Arthur Rimbaud (a poet who the young Brecht much admired, a poet who in numerous ways resembles the poet Baal) when he wrote in *A Season in Hell*, "I understand, and not knowing how to explain this without using pagan words, I prefer to be silent."[16]

But as this second scene progresses, moving from that initial, almost immediate interruption by "silence" (*however* long it is held), Johannes finally breaks the silence by speaking to Baal of love and lust, and his innocent mistress

Johanna. Trenchantly, Baal's immediate response to these reported transports of love is to speak as if hearing and reporting from within an anechoic chamber, describing an almost abject physiology of lovers entwined, unsilently coupling, in which "your hearts beat in your breasts and the blood flows in your veins" (27). The animals on the small planet "eating up the plants," are now presented by Baal as the lovers eating up each other, like Heinrich von Kleist's Penthesilea ravenously ripping at the chest of Achilles. "One must have teeth," Baal insists, "Then love's like biting into an orange when the juice squirts in your teeth" (27).

Further silences, further echoing absences . . . in this second scene, following additional stage instructions, in the midst of character's speaking, Baal reaches for his guitar, plays some "*harsh chords*," some "*glissandos*," and finally throws the musical instrument onto the floor. Abruptly exclaiming, "But enough of this aria" (28). Baal deviously counsels Johannes to avoid the delusions of love: "So, you think," Johannes asks, "I should go ahead, if it's so beautiful," and Baal darkly (and probably self-servingly) responds, "I think *you* should steer clear, my dear Johannes" (28).

No comfort, no consolation, no music is to be offered here by Baal, nothing to break the silence/the non-silence, transform it soothingly into something lyrical or lovely, moving or meaningful. No . . . no more arias; instead, only *"silence"* and the sound of biting, chewing, swallowing; animals all around.

Much later, in scene 14, Baal and Ekart are *"sitting among the leaves,"* once more looking up at the sky. Here again, Brecht inscribes a stage instruction:

> Baal: Did you see the clouds just now?
> Ekart: Yes. They have no shame.
> *Silence*
> A moment ago a woman went by.
> Baal: I have no further need of women . . .
> (76)

The clouds, the women, each passing by, both shameless (in their beauty; or *was* it beauty that was seen?); "no further need"; *s-i-l-e-n-c-e.* Time given, time taken; driving a wedge between thoughts, a further silent widening of scripted separations. However, *this* silence is likely to be heard in a distinctly different manner than the earlier astronomical one between Baal and Johannes of scene two. Here it would seem that the silence is intended to function more as a deliberate pause, temporally sustaining, allowing a sufficient moment to pass for the spoken cloud of shame to form and dissipate, to be somehow imagined. In addition, the word "*Silence*" itself hangs cloud-like upon the page, suspended between and separating the beginning and the ending of Ekart's seemingly non sequitured observations.

This brief exchange between Ekart and Baal then abruptly ends with the uncertain sense of the ellipsis extending off from the written women (". . . ."). Here, another kind of silence is typographically inscribed, tapped out as if upon a telegraph ". . ." resonating out from the completed scene, into diminished air.

And yet, for all the scripted "silences" written into this remarkable play, *Baal* is, through most of its scenes, a very noisy play indeed. From beginning to end, there are the numerous additional stage instructions for the gusting winds that are nearly constantly blowing, winds "screaming overhead," making the forest "roar" and the "trees tremble," causing Baal to remark at one point that his "skull's inflated by the wind" (54). Other noises include the barroom songs that are sung by Baal, the guitar strummed "*out of tune*," and Baal whistling frequently through his decayed teeth. Looking above, as if to confirm a continuing presence, or conversely an imminent absence, Baal sings in a song that he takes the roaring "sky with him below" (20), bringing it down to earth to merge with the fallen leaves upon the fallen ground, anticipating in cheery verse his own composting corpse. And the clamorous sky that Baal is constantly peering up into (and that he again and again tries to describe) is presented not as some ineffable space of stillness encompassing all from above, but rather as a stormy, perilous place inhabited most distinctly, most immediately, by the awaiting "well-fed vultures" (90). Indeed, any celestially imagined distances of the sky, offering some kind of metaphysical hope in its seemingly infinite and tranquil expanses, has been radically reduced or entirely eliminated by the diminishing eyes of Baal, pulled down, space compacted, the sky extending only just above the trees. Here, in this noisy and turbulent sky, the stars of the night occupy the same reduced space as the vultures flying above, with the vultures themselves presenting another, more ominous kind of silence that can be clearly seen, a silence that is hovering and predatory just overhead.

Of course, as is now well known, the hollow resonances and predatory silences of *Baal* were not at all in keeping with that which was to come in the theatrical, intellectual, political formulations of an older Bertolt Brecht. For Brecht was very soon to disavow what may have seemed to him as the tragic vision embodied in Baal's stinking corpse and his smothering sky, the theatrical manifestation of a grim disempowerment that discouraged or disavowed the political commitment that Brecht came to believe was necessary for effective social change. And consequently, for Brecht, it must have seemed that silence, like tragedy, could only be understood as equally disempowering, or more accurately, that silence was born of a relinquishment, an acquiescence to the tragedy that has already[17] disempowered. In his play *The Measures Taken*, at one point the chorus sings, "Who would not do great things for glory; but who / Would do them for silence?"[18]

Silence could only thus be construed as an empty and debilitating gesture of impotence and resignation, inspiring no "great things," something to be resisted

and overcome. One must find a voice, learn to speak . . . to speak out, like Kattrina in *Mother Courage and her Children*.[19] A character embodying silence in her very "dumbness," at the end of the play Kattrin does indeed find a way to momentarily make herself heard, to overcome her own silence and get her message across, climbing upon the roof, banging upon the drum, signaling noisily to the distant soldiers. As Brecht wrote in the preface to this well-known scene, heralding a triumphant end to silence, "*The stone begins to speak*" (103). And yet, Kattrin is, of course, quickly silenced by the enemy soldiers firing upon her, the drumming stops, the stone ceases to speak. "That's an end to the noise" (109), the Lieutenant says. But it was too late, the drumming was heard, her message was received, the liberating forces were now on their way.

Roland Barthes wrote in his essay, "The Brechtian Revolution," that it is precisely the silence of resignation that Brecht would have us reject, or overcome. Brecht was, in a manner of speaking, giving a call to arms to repudiate any inclinations to silence and "dumbness," to climb up on the roof and begin to bang the drum. "We must renounce our silence," Barthes wrote, "and face up to Brecht."[20] And in facing up to him, it would seem that we must speak, we must act, engage; looking neither up at the sky nor down at the ground (as Baal so frequently did), but training our vision instead laterally on events unfolding around us, social and political events that can be changed, modified, improved.

In a characteristic essay written by Brecht himself, ten years after *Baal*, "On Form and Subject Matter," Brecht makes specific reference to the subject of silence, the impulse to silence, in the opening line of his essay, when he writes, "Difficulties are not mastered by keeping silent about them."[21] He ends this essay by calling for a "new purpose" in theater, a theater of "pedagogics." With such a call to "purpose" and pedagogy, Brecht has clearly attempted to distance himself from the dark and harrowing vision presented in *Baal*, where silence as a stage instruction is repeatedly encountered, and perhaps more forcefully, where silence as a cumulative consequence and existential response often seems the only possible, sane or sacred, sound that can be made.

What must I be,
I who think and who am thought,
in order to be what I do not think,
in order for my thought to be what I am not.
—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

Incident; a play of pauses; France 1957: Inside the anechoic chamber,[22] one notices, at least as provocatively as the sound of coursing blood or the humming nervous system, the peculiar phenomenon (unmentioned by John Cage) of trying

to speak and finding that any sound that is made stays almost entirely confined inside the mouth, creating the eerie, perhaps Beckettian sensation of speaking from within one's own skull. The lips part, the throat contracts, breath upon moist breath, but strangely, the words remain stuck to the tongue, vibrations of the voice unprojecting. For, with the diminishment of echo created within the chamber, any words or sounds that are made cannot resonantly, *fully* leave the mouth because of the absence of a sustaining atmosphere, the evacuated space lacking the necessary densities and textures upon (or within) which the words can pass and extend. Instead, when speaking, it's almost as if there were some kind of invisible barrier covering the lips, muffling the mouth, preventing the language from leaving, making the words sound either dulled or deadened, echoing only from within the bound enclosure of one's own hardened head.

In Samuel Becket's *Endgame*, the actions of the play unfold haltingly, painstakingly, in a space that brings to mind in various ways the confining, claustrophobic condition of an anechoic chamber. Though there are curtained windows high above, and the bricks of the walls are reported by Hamm to be hollow, the staged enclosure seems nonetheless hermetic and impenetrable, a vacant, deadened space in which again there can be no silence (precisely *because* of the silence), and from which, again, sounds can be heard emerging from within, ". . . something dripping in my head. / (*Pause.*) / A heart, a heart in my head."[23]

From inside this emptied chamber, the characters of *Endgame* speak their lines as if the words that they were uttering were nearly stuck to the surface of their tongues, the language barely able to escape from their opened mouths; there is nothing, it would seem, in the echoless air upon which the words might hang and extend. And yet, ringing as if from within their own narrowly enclosed skulls, the voices of Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are incessantly speaking, calling out, complaining, describing, demanding as if to finally, fully get the language from out of their mouths, to stop the talking, to be done with words, to at last be entirely silent.

However, the sounds that are heard within the vacant space of *Endgame*, the words that are repeatedly spoken by the characters, seem all the more troubling not only because they cannot be stopped, but because they cannot even be accounted for. Who's there? Who's speaking? From where are the noises emerging? Like Antonin Artaud's insidious, invisible prompter, a prompter described by Derrida as "the force of a void, the cyclonic breath . . . who draws his breath in, and thereby robs me of that which he first allowed to approach me and which I believed I could say in my own name,"[24] the words are whispered surreptitiously into receptive ears (and even more covertly, whispered from somewhere *within* the head itself, rather than being positioned at the shadowy edge of some stage). Indeed, the language for both Hamm and Clov seems somehow rheologically, spastically in control of them, monitoring and measuring their every movement, every utterance made.

With the words mutating like a virus, the language spreads and enlarges as it parasitically feeds upon (while symbiotically sustaining) the one speaking. Hamm and Clov's desire for silence is a desire for the stealthy prompter to cease the story's whispering, to stop the constant dripping inside the head. ". . . Babble, babble, words," Hamm says, as if describing the prompter prompting, "like the solitary child that turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark" (70).

The blinded Hamm, his hearing no doubt made even more acute by the darkness, the "zero" before his shrouded eyes, often speaks longingly, ferociously of this yearning for silence and stillness, hoping to end all stories, imagining a time when the whispering words have ceased and "There'll be no more speech" (50). Berating Clov to be quiet and listen, to follow along as he speaks and speaks, to obey his often mindless, sadomasochistic instructions, Hamm can scarcely finish a sentence without needing to pause and collect himself, *breathe in* in order to *breathe out* the rush of words cluttering and clanging in his brain. His constant awkward pauses punctuate and accentuate the longing that he evokes, while disturbing and dispersing the words being spoken, the story being told. Again and again, Hamm halts and hesitates before moving on, trying to complete his wearied sentences, to complete his tortured thoughts, thoughts always engendering further thoughts, always interrupting and deferring the silence and the stillness that is forever and finally desired:

> Hamm:
>
> (*Pause.*)
> It will be the end and there I'll be, wondering what can have brought it on and wondering what can have . . .
> (*he hesitates*)
> . . . why it was so long in coming.
> (*Pause*)
> 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 all be over with sound, and motion, all over and done with.
> (*Pause.*)
>
> (69)

"If I can hold my peace . . . ," Hamm wistfully imagines. While of course, he clearly *can't*, and he never could, sit quietly and hold his peace—held as if between his hands like some tangible object to be nurtured and protected. For *he*

knows, *he* sees (regardless of his blindness) that the words are indeed tenaciously spread upon his brain, and that there will be no silence, because there *can* be no silence, not as long as he is there to hear it, to be the one obliged always to do the speaking, to do the hearing.

Hamm symptomatically, inescapably enacts the very condition that he so haltingly and painfully speaks of, like a patient diagnosing his own disease, his own disabling desires. He wants the words to end but he can only go on speaking them, saying them again and again, as if, said enough, the words might somehow collapse upon themselves. "Short of breath until they almost fall silent," Theodor Adorno wrote of the characters of *Endgame*, "they no longer manage the synthesis of linguistic phrases; they stammer in protocol sentences. . . . The words resound like merely make-shift ones because silence is not yet entirely successful, like voices accompanying and disturbing."[25]

Clov, of course, has his own desires for silence, his own vague and nostalgic imaginings of a stillness that might somehow be sustained. However, Clov's conception of such a silence appears to depend upon a necessary, preliminary silencing of Hamm. For Hamm, the whispering prompter would seem to have been entirely internalized and invisible, whispering from some dark perch within his skull, while for Clov the prompter seems instead to be corporeally present in the character of Hamm himself. Yes, Hamm *is* Clov's prompter, the one whispering the words into his ears (though, indeed, Hamm is far more likely to shout the words than whisper them). As Clov, at a moment of agonized lucidity, violently says to Hamm, "I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent" (44).

The inescapable, circular paradox is that Clov *cannot* silence Hamm because it is the very noise of Hamm, those tormenting words "taught" to Clov, that constitute and determine the parameters of Clov's own vague understandings of himself. Hamm's words are the only words—the only worlds—that Clov has ever known, and even more profoundly, the only words *by which* Clov has ever known.

> Clov: Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse.
> Why?
> Hamm: You're not able to.
> Clov: Soon I won't do it any more.
> Hamm: You won't be able to any more.
> (*Exit Clov*)
> Ah the creatures, the creatures, everything has to be explained to them.
>
> (43)

Clov would not be Clov without Hamm, without Hamm's prompted words, for he

and they are what enable him to be the one he is, to speak the way he does, to even wish for that which he wishes. And so he dreams (dreaming the dream of silence given him by Hamm): If only Hamm would be still, then somehow all, *all* would be still.

A final note, on a final play; silent cry: Years later, in what must be one of Beckett's sparest and briefest of plays, simply entitled *Breath*,[26] the silence that was so painstakingly investigated, so tortuously sought out in *Endgame* would seem to have almost entirely overtaken the presented performance. Here, not a word is spoken, and all that is heard in a play that lasts less than a minute is a "faint brief cry" held for about five seconds, followed by amplified recordings of breathing. Integrated in precise timing with these sounds is the carefully determined lighting and the "miscellaneous rubbish" scattered about the stage. The entire event is then sharply delineated by the raising and lowering of the curtain that cuts the scene open, and then only moments later, sutures it before our eyes.

Breath would seem to be the appropriate play to follow Hamm's closing lament to "speak no more about it . . . speak no more" (84). In this short play, the breath, the cry, have become simply additional phenomena of the play, equivalent features alongside the faint light and the rubbish scattered about. The voice, the body, are no longer foregrounded, center-staged (and indeed, there's no body at all to be seen), but instead the sounds have been absorbed as integrated components into the broader dramatic event. No story to tell, no events to be narrated.

Beckett once wrote that "To restore silence is the role of objects"[27] and in this astringent production, everything about the play—the lights, the breath, the rubbish, the cries—seems somehow flatly, equally present as parts of a minute entropic object, an object carefully cast in time. And in this manner the play itself exists for its brief unfolding as *a kind of* object, almost silent, decaying *into* silence, with nothing to say, speaking no more; seen, like a flash, heard, like an echo, only to then disperse and vanish before our eyes.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 262.

2. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958) 62.

3. Samuel Beckett, *Ends and Odds* (New York: Grove P, 1976) 154.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 72.

5. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Routledge, 1978) 28.

6. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 351.

7. Herbert Blau, *The Eye of Prey* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1987) 170.

8. Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 160.

9. 175.

10. 145.

11. 176.

12. As the 13th century Japanese Zen Buddhist patriarch, Dôgen, has written, "I have experienced the dropping away of body and mind," a "dropping away" that would presumably involve the disappearance of the personal pronoun itself, as it so frequently does in the Japanese language anyway. *Dôgen Zen*, trans. Okumura Shohaku (Kyoto: Kyoto Soto Zen Center, 1988).

13. Barthes 145.

14. Bertolt Brecht, *Baal/A Man's a Man & The Elephant Calf*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove P, 1964) 20.

15.This recalls for me George Eliot's vivid description, "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well-wadded with stupidity" George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Signet Classics, 1981) 191.

16. Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 177.

17. But certainly *not* always already.

18. Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken and other* Lehrstucke, trans. Carl R. Mueller (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977) 14.

19. Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1966).

20. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972) 38.

21. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 29.

22. Which I experienced in the mid-1980s in the basement of the psychology building on the campus of the University of Kansas.

23. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (New York: Grove P, 1958) 18.

24. Derrida 176.

25. Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," in *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 27.

26. Samuel Beckett, *Breath*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber, 1984).

27. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, MaloneDies, The Unnamable* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 10.