

# S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

11:2 2025

*What is the Word:*

Late Beckett Throbbing Between Drama and Poetry

Edited by Rosy Colombo

---

## SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

<i>Executive Editor</i>	Sandra Borghini.
<i>General Editors</i>	Silvia Bigliuzzi, Gherardo Ugolini.
<i>Editorial Board</i>	Chiara Battisti, Anton F.H. Bierl, Simona Brunetti, Camilla Caporicci, Sidia Fiorato, Sotera Fornaro, Massimo Fusillo, Felice Gambin, Alessandro Grilli, Chiara Lombardi, Leonardo Mancini, Michele Marrapodi, Stefania Onesti, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Antonietta Provenza, Susan Payne, Cristiano Ragni, Antonio Sánchez Jiménez, Alessandra Squeo, Alessandro Stavru, Emanuel Stelzer, Savina Stevanato, Martina Treu, Gherardo Ugolini, Antonio Ziosi.
<i>Managing Editors</i>	Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer.
<i>Assistant Managing Editors</i>	Marco Duranti, Roberta Zanoni.
<i>Editorial Staff</i>	Chiara Battisti, Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Serena Demichelis, Carina Fernandes, Sidia Fiorato, Beatrice Righetti, Carla Suthren.
<i>Typesetting</i>	Cristiano Ragni, Lara Rossetti.
<i>Advisory Board</i>	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Richard Allen Cave, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Anna Giust, Mark Griffith, Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2025 S K E N È.  
The Journal is a CC-BY 4.0 publication  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)  
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>  
[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Edizioni ETS  
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa  
[info@edizioniets.com](mailto:info@edizioniets.com)  
[www.edizioniets.com](http://www.edizioniets.com)

Distribuzione  
Messaggerie Libri SPA  
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione  
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL  
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN: 9788-8467-7463-7  
ISBN (pdf): 9788-8467-7462-0  
ISSN 2421-4353

## Contents

What is the Word:

*Late Beckett Throbbing Between Drama and Poetry*

Edited by Rosy Colombo

ROSY COLOMBO – <i>Introduction</i>	5
CARLA LOCATELLI – <i>Loosening Linearity and Normalising the Breaches: Notes on Beckett’s Poems and Poetry, and Play-scripts and Dramatic Works</i>	15
STANLEY E. GONTARSKI – <i>Who Wrote Godot?, or Beckett’s Bad Quartos</i>	39
DAVIDE CROSARA – <i>Beckett’s “Imbedded Poetry” and the Challenge to Verse Drama</i>	55
ROSSANA SEBELLIN – <i>“I say it as I hear it”: Fundamental Sounds in Beckett’s Later Texts</i>	79
BARRY A. SPENCE – <i>Juxtaposition Through Sundering: Beckett’s Exilic Body</i>	95
STEFANO GENETTI – <i>Choreographic Readings of Late Beckett. Al Segno by François Raffinot and Compagnie</i>	121

### Miscellany

MAVROEIDIS-ANDREAS VYRIDIS – <i>This Stranger, My Son. The Ironic ξένος and δοῦλος in Euripides’ Ion</i>	141
GAIA BENAMATI – <i>The Breaking Wave. Trikymia and the Poetics of Natural Disaster in Euripides’ Drama</i>	171
LISA MARIE HAASBROEK – <i>The Influence of Greek Theatre on Biblical Literature: Further Implications for the Study of Hellenistic Theatre</i>	187
ALESSANDRO GRILLI – <i>Digesting Aristophanes: the Assimilation of Attic Old Comedy in Jonson’s The Alchemist</i>	205

### Special Section and Critical Notes

GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>Mourning Becomes Electra and Also the Old Oedipus. Two Sophoclean Tragedies on Stage at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse</i>	229
SIMONA LAGHI – <i>Anne-Madeleine Goulet and Michela Berti, eds. Noble Magnificence. Culture of the Performing Arts in Rome 1644-1470. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2024.</i>	241
ELISA BIZZOTTO – <i>Francesco Marroni, Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale. Chieti: Solfanelli, 2022.</i>	249



ROSSANA MARIA SEBELLIN\*

# “I say it as I hear it”: Fundamental Sounds in Beckett’s Later Texts

Abstract

This essay explores how Samuel Beckett’s later work systematically unsettles traditional genre boundaries through his pursuit of “fundamental sounds” and linguistic precision. Beckett’s meticulous search for the *mot juste* – a process intensified by his practice of self-translation – accelerates a dissolution of genres already latent in his early writings. In his late prose, drama, and radio texts, this impulse produces increasingly hybrid forms: prose acquires overtly performative traits; stage plays migrate into poetic contexts; radio compositions generate unexpectedly vivid visual worlds. Such movements expose the instability of genre categories and invite reflection on what remains of drama when dialogue disappears, on how prose functions when stripped to rhythmic or aural essentials, and on the capacity of ostensibly auditory works to transcend their medium. Through close textual analysis, the paper examines how Beckett’s attention to sound, rhythm, and aural resonance shapes the ontology of his works, revealing a poetics grounded in indeterminacy. Rather than a stylistic refinement alone, Beckett’s fidelity to linguistic exactness emerges as a form of resistance to aesthetic categorisation. Ultimately, the study argues that Beckett’s late œuvre exemplifies a sustained interrogation of medium and mode, in which the sound of the word becomes the site of genre’s ongoing unmaking.

KEYWORDS: Samuel Beckett; sound; aurality; genre

## 1. Introduction

On 29 December 1957, Samuel Beckett wrote a now-famous letter to his American director Alan Schneider:

My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, nec tecum nec sine te [*sic*], in such a place, and in such a world, that’s all I can manage, more than I could. (Beckett 2014a, 82 and Harmon 1998, 24)

\* University of Rome “Tor Vergata” - sebellin@lettere.uniroma2.it

Few documents encapsulate so powerfully Beckett's conception of writing as fundamentally aural, a theatre of sounds more than of narrative or character. This remark is no passing provocation but a principle to which he would return throughout his career, as observed, for example, years later, in October 1972, when discussing *Not I*: "I hear it breathless, feverish, rhythmic, panting along, without undue concern for intelligibility. Addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience which should in a sense share her bewilderment [*sic*]" (Beckett 2014b, 311, and in Harmon 1998, 283).

The emphasis here is clearly not on meaning but on sonic affect: a feverish pulse of language, a breathless rush, sound physically addressing itself to the nerves of an audience asked not primarily to understand but to feel, to vibrate, to resonate. Beckett's texts – whether prose, drama, poetry, radio, or television – persistently stage this tension between word and sound, semantic content and sheer acoustic presence, utterance and silence.

Deirdre Bair reports another telling testimony in which Beckett described the origin of *Not I*:

I knew that woman in Ireland . . . I knew who she was – not 'she' specifically, one single woman, but there were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedgerows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard 'her' saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it. (1990, 662)

As the incipit of *How It Is* goes, "I say it as I hear it" (1964).

Once again the emphasis is on hearing. Beckett hears before he writes, and what he hears is fragmented, feverish, unassimilable speech. The Joycean inheritance is clear: apart from the acoustic experimental journey of *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce, as we know, filled his notebooks with snatches of overheard conversations, "epiphanies" culled from the noise of daily life. But Beckett pushes further, dramatizing not the speech act itself but its acoustic dimension, treating language less as communication than as a sort of vibration, a disturbance in silence and goes towards desiccation, impoverishment.<sup>1</sup>

What I wish to argue is that this orientation towards sound has two major consequences for Beckett's oeuvre. First, it leads to a systematic crossing of fences: the dismantling of genre boundaries, the refusal to confine writing to prose, drama, poetry, or indeed to literature in any conventional sense. Second, it exposes a paradoxical dynamic: Beckett's obsessive quest for the

<sup>1</sup> Interview with James Knowlson on 27 October 1989: "I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (qtd in Knowlson 1997, 352).

“right word” (“mot juste”) coincides with his conviction that words ultimately dissolve into sound, silence, or pure rhythm. The “right word” is one that reveals the impossibility, the inadequacy of the word itself.

Thus sound emerges as a structural principle in Beckett's poetics: his texts resist encapsulation, the very form dramatising a fundamental ambiguity, the word as both signifier and interference, sense and nonsense, speech and noise.

## 2. Beckett, Multilingualism, and the Foreignness of Words

A crucial part of such resistance lies in Beckett's multilingualism. Writing in English and French (and collaborating on his German translations), he forces words to oscillate between transparency and opacity. A foreign language is first encountered as pure sound, as Beckett himself knew firsthand from his experience as a student of foreign languages, and then from his years in Paris and Germany. Before we understand, we hear; before we read, we listen. In this sense, multilingualism becomes a strategy for exposing words as sound-bodies rather than carriers of meaning. Sound and silence become the foundation of Beckett's work, the sound of words perhaps devoid of meaning, words as white noise, or better – since we are speaking of Beckett – words as grey noise, since “for Beckett the colour of his character's reality is grey, given the impossibility of affirming or denying anything” (Rosell 2019, 115).

Neither black nor white, grey is neither silence nor noise, but an indeterminate aural atmosphere, a neutral zone where affirmation and negation, sense and nonsense, dissolve. Beckett's works inhabit precisely this space, where words hover between meaning and sound, presence and absence.

Aurality and rhythm in Beckett, therefore, undermine any stable notion of medium or mode, not being confined to theatre or radio but seeping into prose and poetry to break down the formal distinctions that the literary system seeks to preserve; and it appears all the more relevant that this crossing of boundaries occurs because, for Beckett himself, literary creation stems from aural memory, framed as a quote or even as translation: “The artist has acquired his text: the artisan translates it. ‘The duty and the task of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator’” (1931, 64).

The above does not only mean that speaking becomes an act of resistance: it is a deeper mapping of an aural dimension which overcomes and crosses, or better transgresses the limits of genre. Beckett's characters repeatedly use speech as a form of resistance: Winnie in *Happy Days* with her bag, her paraphernalia of words, quotes and misquotes; Mouth in *Not I* with her torrential monologue; May in *Footfalls* with her spectral third-person narration. These are not just instances of verbal excess but acts of survival against silence, gestures of existence performed through sound, so that the

very core of their narratives (however fragmented or self-aware) remains a sonic prompt, an aural object on a bare stage.

Yet such resistance is double-edged. Beckett's characters speak compulsively even while knowing that speech is futile, in a desperate attempt to keep silence at bay while acknowledging the inevitability of its return. Therefore, the soundscape of Beckett's theatre is one of both defiance and surrender, of endless beginnings cut short, of voices that cannot cease but also cannot conclude, trapped in an "obligation to express" (Beckett 1949, 139) which overcomes paralysis and impotence.

This tension between the need to speak and the inadequacy of speech destabilises genre itself, which in Beckett is permanently "under stress" (Brater 1987, 3-17), his drama brimming with clusters of narrative whose meaning often slips beyond the characters' control, as in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), where Krapp's 'memories' are estranged to the point he needs a dictionary to interpret his own words. An unfinished work in every sense of the word.

### 3. All Art Aspires to Music (Walter Pater)

Music is also an important element to consider when approaching Beckett stance towards sound: in his work, the dissolution of genre boundaries can be said to arise also from an engagement with music as both model and method, a way of thinking through sound that transcends the fixities of form. From his early dramatic works to the late television plays, Beckett transforms language into an acoustic medium: as Linda Ben-Zvi argues, in his writing the verbal economy of *Watt*, *Texts for Nothing*, or *Not I* operates like composition: repetition, variation, tempo, and silence replace narrative development. "His writings, like musical compositions, provide an auditory experience, through the consummate use of tempos, rhythms, cadences, echoes, as well as alliterative phoneme repetitions" (Ben-Zvi 2021, 26), the "ear often usurping eye" (ibid.). Converting prose and drama into aural events, in Beckett rhythm and breath mark the true movement of thought. Julie Campbell (2021) locates the origins of this poetics in the inward audition of *Watt*, where the act of writing becomes one of listening. Beckett's creative process, she observes, depends upon hearing the inner voice ("layering of voices", Campbell 2021, 20) that will later find embodiment in *Mouth*, *Krapp*, or *May*. His narrators, like his actors, are conductors of their own dissolution: the text becomes a score for the performing consciousness.

If music offers Beckett a formal principle, it also provides a metaphysical analogue. As Mary Bryden (1997) has shown, Beckett's aural landscapes re-imagine silence not as absence but as an active field of resonance. His theatre and prose enact a poetics of attenuation, in which language aspires to the

condition of music, where the voice becomes the pivot between being and nothingness. Beckett's experiments in radio and tape recordings (*All That Fall*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Embers*) materialise the spectral condition of sound detached from source, body as a source of vibration. The voice is heard but unseen, the persistence of what is no longer present, the return of sound after speech. As the directing *Ghost Trio* reveals, Beckett's attention to tone, timbre, and rhythm aligns his practice with musical composition (Körte and Moorjani, 2016). Beckett's late short plays (*Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *That Time*, *Ohio Impromptu*) realise this ambition most fully. They inhabit liminal zone between genres, where dramatic form approaches the lullaby or the prose poem. The pacing of *May*, the murmuring of the recorded voice, the rocking chair's tempo: each transforms theatrical space into a chamber composition, a choreography of sound and stillness.

This conception of the music of words owes much to the French Symbolist tradition (Beckett studied them in Trinity College under Rudmose-Brown), in particular to Mallarmé and Verlaine, whose influence may well have shaped his understanding of language as rhythm and resonance. For Mallarmé, poetry achieves meaning not through statement but through its musical structure, its cadence, breath, and silences. Mallarmé's "presence of song, submerged in the poetic text like a silent idea" (Callet 2003, 42), redefines language as an acoustic architecture, where words are arranged like notes in a score and sense arises from the interplay of sound, spacing, and pause. This understanding of the poem as composition profoundly informs Beckett's prose and theatre: his syntactic repetitions, rhythmic stammerings, and silences all act as structural equivalents of Mallarméan music.<sup>2</sup> Like in Mallarmé, Beckett's works expose the hidden music beneath language, a "performative voice" (Callet 2003) that reveals hidden, internal rhythm: poetry, prose, and performance coalesce into one sonorous gesture. In this sense, Beckett's overcoming of genre is not an abstraction but an acoustic fact: his texts sound their way beyond form, turning language into music.

<sup>2</sup> Mallarmé's letter to Edmond Gosse on 10 January 1893: "Je fais de la Musique, et appelle ainsi non celle qu'on peut tirer du rapprochement euphonique des mots, cette première condition va de soi; mais l'au-delà magiquement produit par certaines dispositions de la parole, où celle-ci ne reste qu'à l'état de moyen de communication matérielle avec le lecteur comme les touches du piano. Vraiment entre les lignes et au-dessus du regard cela se passe, en toute pureté, sans l'entremise de cordes à boyaux et de pistons comme à l'orchestre, qui est déjà industriel; mais c'est la même chose que l'orchestre, sauf que littérairement ou silencieusement. Les poètes de tous les temps n'ont jamais fait autrement et il est aujourd'hui, voilà tout, amusant d'en avoir conscience. Employez Musique dans le sens grec, au fond signifiant Idée ou rythme entre des rapports; là, plus divine que dans son expression publique ou symphonique" (qtd in Mallarmé, 1998, 807.)

From Verlaine, Beckett absorbed a different but complementary aspect of musicality: the expressive fluidity of tone and the primacy of sound over sense (“De la musique avant toute chose” is the first line in the poem *Art poétique*). Verlaine’s lilting sonorities of *Romances sans paroles* embody a poetics of murmuring and dissolution, where meaning trembles within sound. The very title of Beckett’s *Acte sans paroles*<sup>3</sup> echoes Verlaine’s *sans paroles*, suggesting an art that aspires to pure expression beyond words. Both writers transform absence into resonance. The Symbolist legacy thus offers Beckett a model for overcoming genre and medium alike: the musicality of structure derived from Mallarmé joins the musicality of sound inherited from Verlaine, both distant suggestions that inform Beckett’s own poetics.

#### 4. Towards a Poetics of Sound

Throughout his career (from early prose to late dramaticules), Beckett constructs a poetics of sound that cuts across genres and destabilises textual ontology. Beginning with his early works (*Echo’s Bones*, 1935, *Mercier and Camier*, 1974, but composed in French in the 1940s, are apt examples), where he experiments with echo, repetition, and dialogue as sound devices. In his major plays (*Endgame*, 1958, *Happy Days*, 1961, *Not I*, 1973, *Footfalls*, 1976, *Rockaby*, 1982) he develops characters whose identities dissolve into verbal rhythms and sonic flows, and then extends into radio and television works (*Words and Music*, 1962, *Cascando*, 1963, *Eh Joe*, 1967, *Quad*, 1984), in which sound itself becomes the protagonist, displacing both character and plot. In the late prose and poems (*How It Is*, 1964, *Neither*, 1977, *What is the Word*, 1989) he finally pushes towards a limit where words verge on silence, collapsing genre distinctions and affirming sound as the ultimate residue of language.

Beckett’s “fundamental sounds” are not only formal devices but a philosophical stance: they enact a resistance to categorisation and a fidelity to the *mot juste* understood not only as semantic precision but as sonic necessity, so that words are never merely a vehicle of meaning but an event of sound that constitutes as well as dissolves genre.

In *Echo’s Bones* (1935, in Beckett 2012), fragments of dialogue and echoic repetitions announce a poetics of sound before meaning, the title itself invoking the mythological Echo, the nymph condemned to repeat only the words of others. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Echo embodies the fate of

<sup>3</sup> A further echo can be traced in *Sans*, the title of a brief prose text published in 1969 (later included in the Minuit edition of *Têtes mortes*, 1972) and self-translated as *Lessness* in 1970. Performed for the BBC in 1971 (broadcast 25 February), *Lessness* itself “explores the common ground between narrative and theatrical monologue” (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 317).

sound detached from origin, the spectral reverberation of speech without agency. In Beckett's hands, instead, Echo becomes less a mythological figure than a structural principle; voices proliferate without narrative necessity, utterances appear as if overheard rather than invented, and words echo themselves into emptiness.

The repetition of sounds in this early work undermines narrative authority by emptying itself of semantic value, each iteration eroding rather than reinforcing meaning, in so far as repetition is never identical but always marked by deferral and difference, and words return as echoes haunting the page with the sound of their own insufficiency.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even in such early poetic efforts, there is a dialogic core which defies and resists genre categorisation and already hints at drama to come, as in *Enueg I*:

A child fidgeting at the gate called up:  
 'Would we be let in Mister?'  
 'Certainly' I said 'you would'.  
 But afraid, he set off down the road.  
 'Well' I called after him 'why wouldn't you go in?'  
 'Oh' he said, knowingly,  
 'I was in that field before and I got put out'.  
 (37-43; in Beckett 2012)

In the parodic lamentation (enueg is a Provençal type of poetry consisting of a litany of complaints) one can read this brief exchange between the speaker and a child. In this parodic lamentation – a micro-narration with the markings of direct speech – what will become of Beckett's characteristic dramaturgy is already evident.

This phenomenon of mixing genre, echo, and repetition carries into *Mercier and Camier* (written 1946, published in French in 1970 and in English in 1974), ostensibly a novel of two tramps wandering through an undefined landscape, but actually a study in the rhythm of dialogue. The exchanges between Mercier and Camier, full of hesitation, contradiction, and interruption, resist narrative progression and are intrinsically dramatic. Though the novel is an early effort and Beckett's first attempt at a long narrative in French, the text "offers vaudeville dialogue, slapstick, and sporadic comic highlights" (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 367) in what already appear as dramatic exchanges. Examples are literally present in any page, but a reading of the novel's opening shows this very clearly. When Mercier and Camier discuss whether to set out, their debate stretches over pages of circular argumentation, ending almost where it began, performing

<sup>4</sup> Beckett's *Echo* anticipates Derrida's insistence that signification is always contaminated by delay, by the impossibility of presence (Derrida 1968).

aurality rather than progression: the text reads as a score, with cadences and pauses as important as words: writing becomes inseparable from its imagined sound, from the auditory experience of its rhythm and pacing. Already, Beckett's prose performs as theatre, with voices as protagonists.

In these early experiments, Beckett is already dismantling genre through sound. Prose dissolves into dialogue, dialogue into echo, and echo into rhythm. Meaning is secondary, if not irrelevant. Beckett's efforts, even in the 1930s and 1940s and before his overt turn to drama, are the reduction of writing to its sonic core.

### 5. Drama as Soundscape: From Monologue to Verbal Torrent

When Beckett turns to the stage, the orientation towards sound becomes unmistakable. In *Endgame* (1957), the relationship between Hamm and Clov is constructed less as psychological conflict than as contrapuntal rhythm. Their exchanges are ritualistic, more incantations than dialogue. Hamm's repeated calls for Clov, Clov's mechanical responses, Nagg and Nell's interruptions from their dustbins – all contribute to a sound pattern that replaces narrative with rhythm.

Hamm's long monologues, especially his so-called "chronicle", resemble prose (and a metanarrative one) inserted into drama, yet their placement within *Endgame* turns them into sound-objects whose effect depends less on content than on delivery: the stops, the cadences, the crescendos and diminuendos. Adorno's reflections on music are helpful here: music, he argues, is a useful comparison to try to understand Beckett. As such, *Endgame* can be read as unfolding like a musical composition built on two interwoven themes, the longing for an end and the persistence of life – with Hamm, both conductor and instrument, embodying this paradox as he oscillates between a Schopenhauerian desire for extinction and an anxious vigilance against the faintest sign of renewal or hope (see Adorno 1982).

Music, like Beckett's drama, is rhythm-structured time, the organisation of sound into form, and Beckett's plays operate in the same way, their repetitions and cadences shaping temporality. Hamm's voice becomes an instrument, modulating the play's tempo. And yet there is narration in Beckett's drama, there is "storytelling" in virtually all his plays (Hugo Bowles did take several examples from Beckett in his *Storytelling and Drama*, 2010), but the act of narrating here collapses into a recursive structure in which words circle back on themselves and are only useful as long as they fill up the void in time or activity, like the unfinished fake dog or the half-extermiated rat; another object or occurrence, built with a voice now fainter, now stronger, always ephemeral even when mechanically reproduced.

In *Happy Days* (1961), the sound dimension is even clearer. Winnie, buried first to the waist and then to the neck, speaks herself into existence. Her survival depends on words, on the ability to fill silence with sound as she rummages in her bag for objects and her brains for quotations, deploying fragments of remembered culture as if they were talismans. Yet what matters is not what she says but that she speaks at all. Her performance is a sonic act of resistance, and words are – truthfully – her bag of tricks. Reducing and later eliminating movement, as the protagonist is sucked down the mound of earth, the audience's attention is painfully and entirely drawn to the grain of Winnie's speech, to its corporeal quality, its resistance to meaning. Winnie's voice, trembling between cheerfulness and despair, produces precisely this verbal/aural object, as spectators hear not simply language but breath, intonation, anguish, hope, despair: the fragile vibration of survival. *Happy Days* dramatises voice as texture, the sonic surface of existence. Winnie's stories evoke perturbing images where narrated soundscape merges with visual and aural enactments on stage: "Suddenly a mouse ran up het little thigh and Mildred, dropping Dolly in her fright, began to scream – [WINNIE gives suddenly a piercing scream] – and screamed and screamed [WINNIE screams twice]" (Beckett 2006, 165). Interestingly, in a letter to George Reavey dated 22 September 1961, Beckett wrote that he "did not write with such things in mind – far too preoccupied with *seeing and hearing it in its mere particularity* . . . I'm afraid for me *it is no more than another dramatic object*" (2014a, 443; emphasis added).

*Footfalls* (1976) continues this emphasis on rhythm. May paces the stage in measured steps, her movement creating a sound pattern as important as her words. Her voice, often narrating in the third person, is both hers and not hers: it merges with the voice of her mother, disembodied, spectral. Here Beckett stages a ghost, recalling what Derrida (1994) would later call *hauntology*: the presence of an absence. May's footsteps and voice haunt the stage, creating an acoustic space where identity and narrative dissolve. Alternating dialogue and narrating voices Beckett builds an exchange between aural presence, physical absence and the merging of the two. Through this oscillation, he transforms the stage into an acoustic space of haunting, where being is registered not through visibility but through the echo, the repetition, and the fading cadence of the voice and the steps.

*Not I* (1972) radicalises this tendency. Mouth's torrent of words pours forth at breakneck speed, with little concern for syntax or intelligibility. The performance overwhelms comprehension, addressing itself, as Beckett put it, to the "nerves" rather than the understanding. The audience experiences language as pure sound, a feverish pulsation of syllables that bypasses cognition and strikes directly at the body. Meaning flickers only intermittently within this torrent: fragments of narration can be enucleated

from the stream of consciousness poured forth by Mouth, yet they are so pulverised that they survive merely as ghosts of a story, splinters of a tale — the institutionalised childhood of an orphan, a rigidly religious upbringing, a life marked by silence, loneliness, and the small mechanical gestures of habit: shopping, standing trial, waiting. These fragments, continually submerged and re-emerging, form the residue of narrative within pure vocalisation, glimpses of a desperate existence gleaned from an enormous and unbreakable flux. What remains is not a story told, but the act of telling, itself disintegrating under pressure, a voice that testifies to experience even as it erases it.

Across these plays, theatre becomes soundscape. Characters are voices, often more than bodies; dialogue is rhythm rather than exchange. Beckett's drama insists that theatre is fundamentally an art of listening.

## 6. Radio and Television: Sound as Protagonist

Beckett's experiments with radio and television further dismantle traditional dramatic elements, foregrounding sound as protagonist. Since his very first attempt at radio plays, Beckett builds an aural dimension that is both familiar and uncanny. *All That Fall* (1957) pursues natural sounds as unrealistically as an abstract scenery or setting: the characters are visually present via their voices and their meta-narrative awareness makes their charm irresistible. After she has remained silent for a few moments, Mrs Rooney draws attention to herself talking herself into existence: "Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on . . . Do not flatter yourselves for one moment, because I hold aloof, that my sufferings have ceased. No" (*All That Fall* in Beckett 2006, 185). *Words and Music* (1961 in Beckett 2006) owes much less to 'realism', and it stages a contest between two personifications: the character of Words and the character of Music. Words attempts to articulate emotions such as love and age but fails to move the audience or the conductor, the despotic character of Croak. The rivalry culminates in Music's triumph, reducing Words to a sigh. The play enacts the idea that music is the 'other' of language, capable of expressing what words cannot. Yet Beckett does not grant Music total victory: the sigh of Words suggests that even music falls short. Instead, he dramatises the mutual insufficiency of sound and language, their perpetual incompleteness. In *Cascando*, another radio play (1963), three voices dominate: Opener, Voice, and Music. The absence of a visual dimension makes the audience hyper-aware of the sound's texture. Voice struggles to narrate a story, interrupted and propelled by Opener, while Music underscores, contradicts, and supplements. The result is an aural material in which sound is not

accompaniment but the very medium of drama. The play becomes a composition for ears alone.

Television allows Beckett to pursue similar effects visually, but always with sound at its core. *Quad* (1981, in Beckett 2006) consists of four figures pacing geometric paths across a stage, their footsteps forming the primary sound. No words are spoken, but the rhythm of footfalls creates an acoustic composition. Silence, too, is foregrounded: when the pacing halts, the absence of sound resonates as strongly as its presence. In *Quad* words are annihilated.

Across these radio and television pieces, Beckett stages sound as protagonist: music, voice, silence, and noise carry dramatic weight, displacing character and plot. The ontology of the text itself is stretched, as sound becomes not medium but material, substance, matter.

## 7. Late Prose and Poetic Fragments: Arci-genre and Grey Noise

Beckett's late works further conflate prose, poetry, and drama, collapsing genre distinctions into what may be called a sort of an *arci-*, *super-*, or *over-genre*.

*How It Is* (1961) is prose reduced to rhythmic fragments, lacking punctuation, arranged in breathless sequences. The tripartite structure, built on and parodying trinity and liturgical triple repetitions ("before Pim, with Pim and after Pim" is reminiscent of the doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer), enacts a narration that is intrinsically aural and dramatic; a sort of self-reflecting interior monologue. The effect is incantatory, like a chant or litany: "the arrangement is musical, as themes and motives couple and abandon in a complex orchestration" (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 260). The narrator, anticipated in the earlier *Texts for Nothing* (1959-1967, in Beckett 1995), crawls through mud, recounting in broken syntax his fragmented experiences and deluded yet apparently rational reasonings. Reading the text aloud stresses its sonic construction: again, it is less a narrative than a vocal score. Beckett strips prose of its grammar and meaning to expose its rhythm, its grey noise.

*Neither* (1976), a piece to be set in music yet published as prose because Beckett refused to have it included in a poetry collection, exemplifies this indeterminacy. Its opening line, "to and fro in shadow", sets the tone: a rhythm of oscillation, minimal yet resonant. The text can be read silently as poetry, spoken as monologue, or staged as performance. Even the layout is neither prose nor poetry, in its alternating shorter lines to one longer sentence spanning two lines. *Neither*, as the title announces, resists categorisation, existing as pure sound-structure.

As a further testimony to the muddling of genre in pursuit of the rhythmic lullaby of poetry, two texts strike the reader for similarity and converging

effect: *Rockaby* (1981) and *Roundelay* (1976), which similarly blur distinctions. *Roundelay* was published as poetry (and is included in the *Collected Poems*) but it can also be performed as drama. Its form is circular, repetitive, minimal, ridden with sibilants and alliterations (“steps sole sounds”; Beckett 2012, 205). *Rockaby*, on the other hand, with its rocking chair and recorded voice, is almost indistinguishable from prose-poetry in performance, so much so that in 1999 Gabriele Frasca included the play (*Dondola*) in the Einaudi edition of Beckett’s poetry (Beckett 1999), and later in the volume for *I Meridiani*. These pieces inhabit the grey zone between genres, privileging rhythm and sound over form. In both of them, Beckett seems to pursue a poetics of attenuation, where language is pared down to its musical core, its pulse and breath. The boundaries between poem, play, and monologue dissolve into a single sonorous gesture, a murmured cadence that is neither spoken nor sung, an echo of presence that persists at the edge of silence.

Theoretical perspectives illuminate that the late works enact a poetics of indeterminacy – words reduced to rhythm, texts reduced to sound. Their colour is indeed – again – grey, as Rosell suggests, neither silence nor noise but the indeterminate hum of being. The voice, “S[amuel] B[eckett]’s most profound literary creation” (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 607), and its mystery drives not only his fiction, but also his drama: its origin is impossible to grasp and it erupts from both within and without the character’s mind and body. *Esse est percipi* involves not only vision but also sound: to exist is to be heard, not only perceived visually.

## 8. *What is the Word* and the Fidelity to Sound

Beckett’s final text, *What is the Word* (1989), written after his stroke and subsequent aphasia, crystallises his lifelong preoccupation with sound, with language and its limits, basically referring to what he had announced to Alan Schneider more than thirty years earlier: that his work was “a matter of fundamental sounds”. Aphasia, the inability to find words, literalises this credo into a personal condition and an artistic theme: the struggle to speak, and the attempt to retrieve the last word, is itself the foundation of a creative act. The text obsessively repeats the phrase “what is the word”, surrounding it with fragments and false starts. The repetition functions as mantra so that rhythm replaces meaning, sound replaces articulation, the “right word” always deferred, always absent. Yet the persistence of the question asserts fidelity to the search, even in the face of impossibility.

Read aloud, the text reveals its sonic power. The cadence of “what is the word” rises and falls, creating an echo that lingers beyond semantic failure. The audience or reader is left not with clarity but with resonance. Beckett’s

radical fidelity to sound persists to the very end: even when words fail, sound remains.

In this final gesture, Beckett confirms the core principle announced to Alan Schneider decades earlier: his work is truly “a matter of fundamental sounds.” Across prose, drama, radio, television, and poetry, Beckett pursued sound as the essence of writing. This pursuit entailed the crossing of fences, the undoing of genres, the collapse of distinctions, the emergence of what may be named an over-genre. It also entailed a philosophical stance: a pursuit of the *mot juste* as the acknowledgement that the “right word” may never come, but its sound, its rhythm, its echo, is already literature.

Beckett's poetics of sound is thus not only aesthetic but ontological. To listen to Beckett is to hear literature transgressing its own limits in a perpetual quest:

afaint afar away over there what –  
 ...  
 what is the word –  
 what is the word

The search for the right word, the right sound, becomes a theme in itself: it is both a spiritual testament and an ever-living poetics. Yet in *What Is the Word*, the very insistence on repetition discloses that the quest itself is the response. Void, together with the resonance of the questioning voice, emerges as a sonorous abyss in its own right, a primal soundscape, the foundation of sound itself.

This closing suspension brings Beckett's experimental journey full circle. Rather than the origin of language, sound now stands as its reminder.

## Works Cited

- Ackerley, Chris J., and Stanley E. Gontarski. 2004. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press.
- Adorno, Theodore W. 1982, “Trying to understand *Endgame*”. *New German Critique* 26: 119-50.
- Bair, Deirdre. 1990. *Samuel Beckett. A Biography* (1978). London: Vintage.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2023. *Beckett. Romanzi, Teatro e televisione*. A cura di Gabriele Frasca. Milano: I Meridiani Mondadori.
- 2014a. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Vol. 3: 1957-1965*. Edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gurr, and Lois More Overbeck. 4 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2014b. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Vol. 4 1966-1989*. Edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gurr, and Lois More Overbeck. 4 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 2012. *Collected Poems*. Edited by John Pilling and Seán Lawlor. London: Faber.
- 2006. *The Complete Dramatic Works* (1986). London: Faber.
- 1999. *Le poesie*. Translated by Gabriele Frasca. Torino: Einaudi.
- 1995. *The Complete Short Prose. 1929-1989*. Edited by Stanley E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press.
- 1983. *Three Dialogues*. In *Disjecta* (1949), edited by Ruby Cohn. London: John Calder.
- 1964. *How It Is*. New York: Grove Press.
- 1931. *Proust* (1957). Grove Press, New York, n.d.
- Ben-Zvi, Linda. 2021. “Sound Matters in Beckett”. In *Beckett’s Voices / Voicing Beckett*, edited by Laurens De Vos, Mariko Hori Tanaka, and Nicholas E. Johnson, 25-41. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Brater, Enoch, 1994. *The Drama in the Text. Beckett’s Late Fiction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- 1987. *Beyond Minimalism. Beckett’s late Style in the Theater*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryden, Mary. 1997. “Sounds and Silence: Beckett’s Music”. *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, vol. 6, Samuel Beckett: Crossroads and Borderlines / L’oeuvre carrefour/l’oeuvre limite (1997), 279-88.
- Bowles, Hugo. 2010. *Storytelling and Drama. Exploring Narrative Episodes in Plays*. Amsterdam and New York: John Benjamins.
- Callet, Jeannette Lei. 2003. “The Performative Voice in Mallarmé’s Poetic Reverie”. *French Forum* 28 (3): 41-58.
- Campbell, Julie. 2021. “Listening to the Inner Voice in *Watt*: Innovations in Narrative Form”. In *Beckett’s Voices / Voicing Beckett*, edited by Laurens De Vos, Mariko Hori Tanaka, and Nicholas E. Johnson, 11-22. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Cohn, Ruby, ed. 1983. *Disjecta*. London: John Calder.
- Connor, Steven. 2003. “Beckett’s Atmospheres”. <https://stevenconnor.com/atmospheres-2.html> (Accessed 2 December 2025).
- 2007. “Whisper Music” available online at <https://stevenconnor.com/whisper-music.html> (Accessed 2 December 2025)
- Dennis Amanda. 2017. “A Theatre of the Nerves: Samuel Beckett’s Non-Representational Art”. *Journal of Modern Literature* 40 (4): 134-43.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1968. “Difference”. <https://mforbes.sites.gettysburg.edu/cims226/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Week-5a-Jacques-Derrida.pdf> (Accessed 2 Decembre 2025).
- 1994. *Specters of Marx*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge.
- De Vos, Laurens, Mariko Hori Tanaka, and Nicholas E. Johnson, eds. 2021. *Beckett’s Voices / Voicing Beckett*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Harmon, Maurice. 1998. *No Author Better Served. The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Körte, Konrad, and Angela Moorjani. 2016. “Beckett Listens”. *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, Special Issue of *Beckett in Conversation*, “yet again” / *Rencontres avec Beckett*, “encore” 28 (1): 107-15.
- Knowlson, James. 1997. *Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett* (1996). London:

- Bloomsbury.
- Laws, Catherine. 1966. *Music and Language in the Works of Samuel Beckett*, University of New York, Department of Music. <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/2507/1/DX202704.pdf> (Accessed 2 December 2025).
- Mallarmé, Stephan. 1998. *OEuvres complètes*, edited by Bertrand Marchal. Paris: Gallimard.
- McGrath, John. 2018. *Samuel Beckett, Repetition and Music*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Rosell, Teresa. 2019. "Samuel Beckett and Linguistic Exile". *Knjizevna istorija* 51 (169): 109-21. <https://doi.org/10.18485/kis.2019.51.169.6> (Accessed 2 December 2025).

