

Dramatic Silence: Poetic Voice and Absence in the Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter

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Abstract

This article argues that, for Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, silence is neither a mere vacuum nor an antithesis to language but a generative medium with its own eloquence, positivity, and dramaturgical complexity. Building on actorly and directorial testimony that pauses only signify when charged with intention and on accounts of the unspoken as meaningful, the study treats silence as an active signifying practice. Through comparative close reading and performance-semiotic analysis of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Homecoming*, it shows how Beckett transmutes a metaphysical "flight from language" into viscerally unsettling, speech-replacing silences, while Pinter roots silence in everyday English speech and social geographies as an interactional tactic of dominance, evasion, and masking. Using Peter Hall's performance "grammar" of dots, pauses, and silences as an interpretive lens, the article demonstrates that both dramatists elevate silence to parity with speech, transforming absence into a poetic voice that structures dramatic action and spectatorship. The contribution is a two-axis framework, metaphysical↔interactional and speech-replacement↔speech-Interstitial, that clarifies convergences and divergences and supports practice-oriented analysis of how meanings of silence remain context-dependent, never identical, and irreducible to speech.

Keywords: *Beckett; Pinter; silence; pause; poetics of absence; Peter Hall's performance.*

الصمت الدرامي: الصوت الشعري والغياب في مسرحيات صموئيل بيكيت وهارولد بنتر

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المخلص

ت argument ت هذه المقالة بأن الصمت لدى صموئيل بيكيت وهارولد بنتر ليس مجرد فراغ ولا نقيضاً للغة، بل هو وسط إبداعي له بلاغته الخاصة وإيجابيته وتعقيده الدرامي. بناءً على شهادات ممثلين ومخرجين تفيد بأن التوقفات تعني شيئاً فقط عندما تكون مشحونة بالنية، وعلى الانطباعات عن اللامقال فيه بمعناه، تعالج الدراسة الصمت كمارسة تعبيرية نشطة من خلال القراءة المقارنة الدقيقة والتحليل الدرامي السيميائي لمسرحيات مثل "بانتظار غودو"، "النهاية"، "تسجيل كراب الأخير"، "حفلة عيد الميلاد"، "النادل الأبكم"، و"العودة إلى الوطن"، تظهر كيف يحول بيكيت "الهروب الميتافيزيقي من اللغة" إلى صمت مقلق جسدياً، يحل محل الكلام، بينما يركز بنتر الصمت في اللغة الإنجليزية اليومية

والجغرافيات الاجتماعية كتكتيك تفاعلي للسيطرة، والإفلات، والتخفي. باستخدام "قواعد" الأداء لبيتر هول، التي تتضمن النقاط، والتوقفات، والصمت، كعدسة تفسيرية، تُظهر المقالة أن كلا الكاتبين الدراميين يرفعان الصمت إلى مستوى يعادل الكلام، محولين الغياب إلى صوت شعري يُشكل العمل الدرامي ومشاهدة الجمهور. تساهم الدراسة بإطار عمل ثنائي المحاور، متافيزيقي ← تفاعلي وبدليل للكلام ← بين الكلمات، الذي يوضح التقاربات والاختلافات ويدعم التحليل الموجه نحو الممارسة حول كيفية بقاء معاني الصمت معتمدة على السياق، غير متطابقة، وغير قابلة للاختزال إلى الكلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بيكيت؛ بنتر؛ الصمت؛ التوقف؛ شعرية الغياب؛ أداء بيتر هول.

1. Introduction

“Don’t look for the meaning in the words. Listen to the silences,” Beckett reportedly advised when pressed to explain his plays (Grumbach, 1994). Pinter similarly counseled theatregoers and practitioners to “keep your sights on the place where the characters are silent and in hiding,” insisting that “it is in the silence that they are most evident to me” (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii). Taking these authorial prompts seriously, this article contends that silence in the drama of Beckett and Pinter is not the binary opposite of language, an empty pause that merely interrupts meaning, but rather a distinct, positive medium that speaks. Their silences carry intention and texture; they can be plenum and void at once, capable of expressing “the invisible, the inexpressible, the unintelligible” (Kane, 1984, p. 19) and thereby affirming “a realm of experience that escapes language” (Loevlie, 2003, p. 11; Chesney, 2003, p. 26).

This reframing draws support from performance testimony. From the actor’s vantage, no two pauses are identical; each only “has meaning if it is filled with imagination, tension, or thought” (Shaw, 2007). Sir Ralph Richardson’s dictum, “The most precious things in speech are pauses” (Mars, 2013, p. 161), invites us to hear pauses not as lack but as articulations that amplify or even supplant dialogue. Both playwrights write and score these articulations with meticulous care: Beckett’s scripts specify “full value to silence,” “longer,” “embarrassed,” or silences “between long silences,” while Pinter’s pages famously calibrate ellipses, pauses, and silences into a performable hierarchy (Morin, 2017; Pinter, 1989). Peter Hall, a principal interpreter of both dramatists, formalized this into a working grammar: ellipses as momentary pressure, pauses as nonverbal speech, and silences as crisis points that reconfigure a character’s attitude (Hall, 2009, p. 163).

The thesis of this literature article is twofold. First, in Beckett the poetics of silence emerges from a metaphysical impasse: language fails, yet the desire for silence remains paradoxically inexpressible, pursued via ever-pared-down dramaturgies that culminate in mime and muteness, even as residual “murmurings” persist (Beckett, 1956/1989; Molloy, p. 116). Second, in Pinter silence is less ontological trauma and more interactional strategy: speech and silence function as instruments of concealment, coercion, and resistance within quotidian English settings, where characters wage battles of dominance and

subservience through what Pinter called the “two silences”, one of no words, another beneath a torrent of words (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii; Esslin, 1970, 2001).

Positioning this study within broader discourse on silence clarifies what is at stake. Philosophers from Cicero to Wittgenstein and Heidegger have explored silence as an art of conversation, a boundary of sayability, and a mode of “accomplishing something by keeping silent” (Ephratt, 2008; Kockelmans, 1980; Pattie, 2000). Aesthetic accounts likewise resist reducing silence to lack: Steiner (2010) argues that language meaningfully addresses only a “restricted segment of reality,” leaving the larger part to silence; Sontag (2002) and Bindeman (2017) treat silence as a polyvalent practice that both frames and exceeds discourse. Theatre history provides deep precedent, from Aeschylus’s speech-replacing silences to Shakespeare’s charged muteness, underscoring that silence can carry dramatic meaning rather than negate it (Rosenmeyer, 1982; Taplin, 1972).

Within this lineage, Beckett and Pinter inaugurate a modern prioritization of silence over speech: silence becomes not a failure of craft but a central dramaturgical resource. Beckett’s stages, “A country road. A tree. Evening.”, strip away reference to expose what remains when language cannot suffice; characters talk to stave off the abyss, then fall into silences that manifest inner turmoil (Beckett, 1956). Pinter, by contrast, saturates domestic spaces with invisible tensions: intruders weaponize utterance and silence, while “victims” deploy evasive chatter as a mask, their pauses betraying fear of exposure (Esslin, 1970; Pinter, 1989). In both, silence is written: it punctuates rhythm like music (Kalb, 1991; Hall, 2009), it reorganizes audience attention, and it can be “the still centre of the storm” around which action crystallizes (Esslin, 1970, p. 238). The article proceeds as follows. A literature review synthesizes philosophical, linguistic, theatrical, and performance-practice accounts of silence relevant to Beckett and Pinter, distinguishing between auditory and verbal silences, and between silence that fills interstices and silence that replaces speech (Ephratt, 2008; Rosenmeyer, 1982). A theoretical framework then aligns “negative aesthetics,” language-philosophy limits, and performance semiotics with the playwrights’ own metacommentary. Subsequent sections offer focused analyses: Beckett’s trajectory from novelistic “unsayability” to stagecraft of silence and Pinter’s “comedies of menace,” where pauses and silences are codified, rehearsed, and played as dramatic meaning. A comparative synthesis clarifies convergences (silence as outer sign of inner turbulence; music-like structuring) and divergences (metaphysical vs. interactional emphasis; universalized abstraction vs. classed geographies). The conclusion reframes silence in both oeuvres as a poetic voice—a concrete reality that cannot be exhausted by words yet continuously reshapes them (Chesney, 2003; Loevlie, 2003; Sontag, 2002).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Silence Beyond Negation

Across philosophy and linguistics, silence has been treated not merely as the negation of language but as a heterogeneous practice with functions that range from ethical tact to epistemic limit. Classical rhetoric already credits silence as “one of the great arts of conversation,” reframing it as pragmatic choice rather than lack (Ephratt, 2008). At the boundaries of sayability, Wittgenstein’s dictum, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”—locates silence as a logical horizon (Pattie, 2000, p. 120), while Heidegger’s “sigeitics” (*schweigen*) conceives silence as an active modality of disclosure, “accomplishing something by keeping silent” (Kockelmans, 1980, p. 115). Twentieth-century aesthetic theory deepens this positive turn: Steiner (2010) argues language can meaningfully address only a restricted slice of reality, leaving “the much larger part” to silence (p. 30); Sontag (2002) treats silence as both a stance and a structural element in artworks; Bindeman (2017) underscores its paradoxical doubleness, absence/presence, emptiness/fullness, and its capacity to perform “a myriad of functions” in and around language (pp. 1–3).

Linguistically, silence is not inherently inferior to speech. Against the view that it “does not function referentially and metalinguistically” (Ephratt, 2008, p. 1926), Ephratt (2008) demonstrates that silence participates in conversation management, politeness, face-work, and affect transmission, supporting the crucial insight, central to Beckett and Pinter, that there is “meaningless speech and meaningful silence” (p. 1918). A useful analytic distinction here is between auditory silence (no sound) and verbal silence (no words), as well as between silence that fills the interstices of speech and silence that replaces speech (Rosenmeyer, 1982, p. 190). The latter, speech-replacement silence, proves especially germane to postwar drama.

2.2. From Antiquity to Shakespeare

Theatre has long mobilized silence as dramatic resource. Aeschylus’s mute or withholding figures, Niobe, Achilles (in lost tragedies), Prometheus in bondage, and especially Cassandra in Agamemnon, illustrate how extended refusal to speak generates suspense, power dynamics, and turning points; as Taplin (1972) notes, “it is not the silence which is important, but the ending of it” (pp. 57–97). Pantomime and, later, commedia dell’arte extend this lineage by foregrounding non-verbal gesture as translingual communication. Shakespeare further complicates silence’s valence: Virgilia’s “gracious silence” in Coriolanus counters martial rhetoric; the physician in Macbeth admits, “I think but dare not speak,” staging knowledge that cannot be uttered. These precedents anticipate modern dramaturgies in which silence carries narrative weight, character psychology, and ethical charge without relying on declarative speech.

2.3. The Poetics of Absence

Beckett and Pinter inherit and radicalize modernism’s suspicion of language. For Beckett, the predicament is metaphysical and compositional: a lifelong “flight from language” seeks to express the desire for silence through the very medium that thwarts it (Finney, 1994). His early novels thematize unsayability; the

theatre transposes this into bodily, time-scored pauses that audiences feel as pressure (Bryden, 1998; Kane, 1984). Pinter, indebted to Beckett yet distinct, embeds silence within the social acoustics of English speech, classed idioms, domestic spaces, regional markers, producing “comedies of menace” where talk and taciturnity weaponize dominance and subservience (Esslin, 1970; Copeland, 2001).

Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd* (2001) famously yoked Beckett and Pinter, not to homogenize them but to mark a shared poetics of limits and a dramaturgical prioritization of silence. Hollis (1970) captures the ambition succinctly: rediscovering “the wordless quality of our language,” forging “a poetic out of the silence that surrounds us” (pp. 17, 30). In this frame, silence is no longer decorative pause; it is a structural principle that organizes action, meaning, and spectatorship.

2.4. Beckett’s Silence

Critics repeatedly identify Beckett as “the great poet of silence” (Knowlson, 2010, p. 19). His characters strain toward an impossible quiet, “a whisper... of that final music, or that silence that underlies All”, yet encounter only broken silences populated by “murmurings,” “rustle,” and “all the dead voices” (*Waiting for Godot*; Beckett, 1956/1989, pp. 58, 116). In Molloy, the desire to quell inner noise yields “fatuous clamour” (p. 116), a formulation the theatre literalizes as compulsive dialogue alternating with dread-filled stillness.

Beckett composes silence as material. Stage directions elaborate qualitative nuance: “full value to silence,” “longer,” “embarrassed,” “more anguished,” or lines delivered “out of silence” and “between long silences” (Morin, 2017, p. 36). The scripts’ bilingual history underscores how scoring silence is inseparable from language choice and translation. Writing first in French to “write without style,” then producing English versions that are often re-versions (Finney, 1994), Beckett re-names and re-measures silent units, *repos*, *un temps*, “silence,” “long silence,” “grand silence”, and adjusts cultural references and even whole exchanges across languages (e.g., “Normandie” → “Connemara”; *En attendant Godot*, pp. 37, 41, 57, 62; *Godot*, pp. 43, 61). The result is not an ineffable nothingbut, as Brînzeu (1993) argues, a “structural complexity” that grants silence positive value, letting words “reverberate within the blank space of the pause” (p. 229).

Performance testimony amplifies this. Roger Blin warns that no pause has an absolute length; each is relational (Branigan, 2008, p. 247). Knowlson records Beckett’s own metaphor: act “as if you are in a boat with a hole in it,” where cycles of activity and sinking generate the rhythm of speech and silence (Knowlson & Knowlson, 2006, p. 181). Billie Whitelaw recalls Beckett’s micro-precision, “will you make those three dots, two dots?”, underscoring the almost musical calibration of hush (Kalb, 1991, p. 77). Indeed, Beckett’s admiration for Beethoven’s “enormous pauses” suggests an aspiration to compose with silence as with sound (van Hulle, 2005, p. 52).

Crucially, Beckett's silence is metaphysical pressure made audible. It is the terrifying alternative to "fatuous clamour," the abyss that talk staves off but never cancels. Hence the Sisyphean alternation: when there is nothing left to say, his characters fall silent; when the silence becomes unbearable, they speak again. The silence is not emptiness; it is presence felt as dread, stasis, and the approach of death, yet never totalized, never finally attained.

2.5. Pinter's Silence

Pinter acknowledged a profound debt to Beckett, "the greatest writer of our time" (Prentice, 2000, p. xxxviii), and shared a "nausea" toward words (Pinter, 1989, p. xi). But his dramaturgy relocates silence from metaphysical impasse to social combat. In Pinter's rooms, language and silence are tactical: intruders manipulate them to assert territory; "victims" deploy evasive chatter to avoid exposure (Esslin, 1970; Bensky, 1967). The plays teem with English realia—brands, snacks, bus routes—anchoring silence in "life as lived" (Copeland, 2001, p. 130).

Pinter's celebrated distinction between "two silences", one of no words, one beneath a torrent of words, posits speech as a "constant stratagem to cover nakedness," such that the audible line indexes an inaudible, locked language (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii). Directors and actors have converted this poetics into practice. Peter Hall formulates a grammar: ellipses (three dots) as momentary pressure or search for a word; pause as non-verbal speech, a threat; silence as crisis, after which a character's attitude may be transformed (Hall, 2009, p. 163). Crucially, "one pause is quite unlike another," and audiences must be able to follow the hidden emotion through the gap (Hall, 2009, p. 164).

Pinter himself could be both meticulous and mischievous about punctuation marks, "dots are more popular than dashes", but the jocular only heightens the insight: the score of hesitations is an audible structure in performance even if the typographic signs are not (Pinter, 2013, p. 58; Herman, 1998, p. 112). As Hall puts it, the pause is a bridge: we see the character on one riverbank before the gap, and on the other when speech resumes (Hall, 1974-1975, p. 10). Music again serves as analogy: "listen to his rhythms"; a silence functions "like a musical pause" (Hall, 2009, p. 162; Salem, 1986, p. 79).

If Beckett stages silence as ontological pressure, Pinter stages it as relational threat, the precipice under "everyday prattle" (Taylor-Batty, 2014, p. 1). The pauses are "the still centre of the storm," nuclei around which menace and comic unease coalesce (Esslin, 1970, p. 238). What is unsaid is not nothing; it is the content that matters most.

2.6. Distinguishing Functions

A first distinction concerns metaphysical versus interactional silence. In Beckett, silence signals the collapse of language and the drive toward a null state that can never quite be reached; his pauses register ontological pressure as characters circle the limits of sayability (Hammond, 1977; Simard, 1984). Pinter's silences, by contrast, are embedded in social exchange. They are tactical moves in

contests of dominance and self-protection, where withholding or flooding speech conceals what characters refuse to disclose (Esslin, 1970; Pinter, 1989).

A second axis separates speech-interstitial from speech-replacement silence. Both playwrights deploy micro-hesitations that punctuate utterance as well as larger stoppages that displace speech altogether. It is the latter, the silence that replaces speech, that often bears the greatest dramaturgical weight, functioning as an event in its own right rather than a mere lull (Rosenmeyer, 1982).

A third distinction clarifies auditory versus verbal silence. Stages may be sonically quiet yet verbally saturated (Pinter's "torrent of language"), or verbally mute yet aurally alive with ambient sound, rhythm, or embodied stillness (Kane, 1984; Ephratt, 2008). Attending to this difference prevents conflating the absence of words with the absence of theatrical signal.

Finally, the scripts' qualitative notation and performance grammar underscore that silence is authored and must be intentioned in rehearsal. Ellipses, dashes, "pause," and "silence," often modified ("long," "embarrassed," "more anguished"), are not interchangeable marks; they invite actors to charge each gap with motivation so that, as practitioners note, a pause "has meaning" only when filled with thought, tension, or imaginative action (Shaw, 2007; Hall, 2009; Morin, 2017). Taken together, these distinctions justify the premise that no pause or silence is identical: each is context-dependent, relationally timed, and functionally plural, operating as a poetic voice rather than a mere absence.

2.7. Synthesis

Taken together, the philosophical, linguistic, and performance-oriented scholarship reframes silence as a discursive medium: authored on the page, rehearsed in bodies, heard and construed by audiences. Beckett and Pinter elevate silence to parity with speech, yet with different emphases. Beckett's paring-down toward mime and muteness, the "literature of self-erasure" (Pattie, 2000, p. 168), turns silence into the condition that speech violates; Pinter's domestically situated pauses turn silence into the condition that speech conceals. Both rely on musical analogies, meticulous notation, and actorly craft; both treat silence as an outer manifestation of inner turmoil (Boulter, 2013; Hall, 2009).

This review therefore motivates the article's comparative analyses: to trace how each playwright composes silence as meaning, how performers realize its "grammar," and how spectators are made to listen, to pauses as climaxes, to silences as turning points, and to the uneasy eloquence of what remains unsaid (Esslin, 1970; Hollis, 1970).

2.8. Theoretical Framework

2.8.1. Phenomenology of Silence

A phenomenological lens treats silence not as mere subtraction of sound but as a mode of appearance that reorganizes attention, embodiment, and temporality. In performance, silences are felt as pressure, expectancy, or exposure; they solicit a spectator's bodily anticipation (breath, stillness), producing meaning through

perception rather than paraphrase. Bindeman (2017) characterizes silence as simultaneously absence and presence, emptiness and fullness, an ambivalence that maps onto Beckett's charged stillness and Pinter's watchful gaps (pp. 1–3). Onstage, this phenomenological doubleness becomes experiential: the audience hears “what is unsaid” in the pause, encounters the characters' inwardness as an outward hush, and undergoes silence as event rather than deficit.

2.8.2. Negative Aesthetics: Saying by Not Saying

Modernist “negative aesthetics” reframes withholding as production. For Steiner (2010), language addresses only a restricted segment of reality; the larger remainder is consigned to silence (p. 30). Sontag (2002) similarly reads silence as an artistic stance and structural device, not the absence of form. Beckett's paring-down, toward “a literature of self-erasure” (Pattie, 2000, p. 168), and Pinter's dramaturgical prioritizing of pauses exemplify this apophatic logic: what is removed (explanation, psychological exposition, fluent talk) becomes the locus of signification. In this frame, a pause is not a *hole* in the discourse but the *site* where discourse happens.

2.8.3. Language and Philosophical Limits

Wittgenstein's boundary formula, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”, positions silence as a logical horizon that disciplines what can be said (Pattie, 2000, p. 120). Heidegger's *schweigen* (keeping-silent) and proposed “science of sigetics” construe silence as an *act* that discloses rather than conceals (Kockelmans, 1980, p. 115). Taken together, these positions illuminate Beckett's metaphysical impasse, speech violates the silence it desires, and Pinter's strategic hush, silence as an efficacious deed within social exchange. Both playwrights exploit the limit-function of language: Beckett to stage unsayability, Pinter to stage the un-said.

2.8.4. Theatre Semiotics and Performance Grammar

From a semiotic perspective, silence is a marked sign within a system of stage codes (gesture, timing, scenography, sound). Kane (1984) and Herman (1998) treat the unspoken as part of dramatic discourse; Ephratt (2008) shows silence performing conversational work (face, power, affect). Beckett's scripts annotate silence qualitatively, “full value,” “longer,” “embarrassed,” “more anguished”, inviting performers to *encode* intention into gaps (Morin, 2017, p. 36). Pinter's typographic cues (ellipses, pause, silence) and Peter Hall's operational “grammar” (ellipses as pressure, pause as nonverbal speech, silence as crisis) formalize playable distinctions that audiences can decode as narrative turns or shifts in attitude (Hall, 2009, p. 163). Semiotics thus treats silence as legible sign-action, not inert downtime.

2.8.5. Integrative Model

Bringing these strands together, the article operationalizes silence along two intersecting axes: ontological pressure ↔ interactional strategy (phenomenology/language limits) and speech-replacement ↔ speech-interstitial (semiotic function). Beckett's work weights the ontological and speech-

replacement poles: silences that are the scene, where words arrive as “fatuous clamour” against dread-filled quiet (Beckett, 1956/1989, p. 116). Pinter’s work weights the interactional and interstitial poles: silences braided into “a torrent of language,” functioning as tactics of masking, coercion, or refusal (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii; Esslin, 1970). Throughout, negative aesthetics clarifies why subtraction yields surplus meaning, while phenomenology and semiotics explain how audiences perceive and interpret that surplus in performance. In short, silence becomes a designed, intentional, and interpretable poetic voice that structures both the doing and the receiving of drama.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a comparative close-reading design integrated with performance-semiotic analysis. Silence is treated as a scripted and performed sign, authored on the page (via typographic and lexical notation), realized in rehearsal (via actor intention), and received in performance (via spectatorial perception). The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical-timing based: Peter Hall’s “grammar” of ellipses/pauses/silences is used as an analytic lens, not as a stopwatch protocol.

3.2. Corpus and editions

The corpus comprises six canonical plays, selected for (a) their density of scored hush and (b) their centrality to scholarship and production practice:

Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (Faber & Faber, 1956), *Endgame* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* (in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber & Faber, 1989). For *Godot*, the analysis consults both *En attendant Godot* (French) and *Waiting for Godot* (English) to examine the bilingual scoring of silence (e.g., repos, un temps, silence, grand silence) and its consequences for rhythm.

Harold Pinter: *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Homecoming*.

4. Analysis

4.1. Beckett

4.1.1. Beckett’s Dramaturgy of Silence

Beckett composes silence as material, written, timed, and qualitatively notated, so that the audience hears absence as pressure. His stage directions specify shades of muteness (“full value to silence,” “longer,” “embarrassed,” “more anguished”), and many lines are to emerge “out of silence” or fall “between long silences,” turning hush into an active sign (Morin, 2017). Performance testimony confirms that these gaps are never neutral. Roger Blin cautions that no pause has an absolute duration, each relates to the last, while Billie Whitelaw recalls Beckett’s micro-precision (“make those three dots, two dots”), underscoring a quasi-musical calibration (Branigan, 2008; Kalb, 1991). Beckett’s “flight from language” thus produces a paradoxical poetics: words violate a desired quiet, yet only through carefully scored quiet can words resonate (Finney, 1994; Kane, 1984). In this sense, his theatre enacts what negative aesthetics predicts, subtraction yields surplus meaning.

4.1.2. Silence as Ontological Pressure

From its opening tableau, “A country road. A tree. Evening.”, *Godot* frames speech against an engulfing quiet (Beckett, 1956). Vladimir and Estragon talk to stave off the void; when they run out of talk, they fall silent; when the silence becomes unbearable, they speak again. The alternation itself is the action. Silence here is not a pause in communication but evidence that communication is impossible: talk becomes “fatuous clamour,” a defensive noise against “all the dead voices” that threaten to fill the quiet (Beckett, 2009, p. 116; Beckett, 1956). Beckett’s notation multiplies these pressures across the play, short hesitations, long silences, frozen tableaux, so that spectators experience quiet as dread, stasis, and temporal suspension. The Boy’s visits at the end of each act intensify this scoring: Act I’s closing stretch contains multiple silences; Act II nearly doubles them, registering the deepened awareness of futility and the thickening of existential time (cf. Morin, 2017).

A bilingual dimension complicates this score. Beckett often drafted in French and produced English “versions” rather than strict translations, adjusting references and even the taxonomy of quiet, *repos*, *un temps*, “silence,” “long silence,” “grand silence”, with consequences for rhythm and performance (Finney, 1994; *En attendant Godot*, pp. 37, 41, 57, 62). The silence, then, is not just thematic; it is linguistically and culturally re-authored.

4.1.3. Terminal Quiet and the Freeze of Still Life

If *Godot* oscillates between talk and hush, *Endgame* pushes toward terminal quiet. Hamm’s and Clov’s exchanges are riddled with stoppages that freeze action into tableau, the famous final still, so that silence becomes the end state toward which speech limps (Beckett, 1989). Here hush is a terminal figure: not merely an interval between lines but the condition that speech cannot overcome. The “dripping” in Hamm’s head functions as an inner noise against which external quiet is measured, suggesting that even when the stage is silent, consciousness remains noisily unquiet (Beckett, 1986, p. 116). The result is a dramaturgy in which silence is both diegetic atmosphere (post-apocalyptic stasis) and phenomenological event (audience breath held, time thickened). Beckett’s notation, delays, longer waits, exhausted restarts, makes the audience feel the labor of speaking against the grain of nothingness.

4.1.4. Eloquence of Withholding

In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, silence becomes editorial. Krapp listens, stops, rewinds, fast-forwards, and, crucially, does *not* speak. The piece frames silence as a choice among sonic options: to withhold, to let recorded words play, to drown a memory in quiet, to sit in the dark with tape spooling. The counterpoint between the recorded voice (past speech) and the present, often wordless body exposes the limits of language to secure the self across time. Beckett’s score assigns meaning to each decision not to speak: the long listen, the aborted utterance, the mute stare into darkness. Silence here is neither blank nor purely metaphysical;

it is a *curatorial act* that edits what will and will not be said, a performance of memory's negative space (Beckett, 1989).

4.1.5. Musicality

Beckett's admiration for Beethoven's "enormous pauses" clarifies his compositional ambition: to write silence as rhythm, cadence, and form (van Hulle, 2005, p. 52). Whitelaw's remark, "my first task is to find the music of it", captures how actors realize the score (Kalb, 1991, p. 17). On this reading, Beckett's pages behave like musical notation: rests organize phrase and force; the weight of a pause changes what came before and what can come after. Brînzeu's claim that silence grants words their reverberation, allowing them to sound "within the blank space of the pause", follows directly (Brînzeu, 1993, p. 229). What looks like absence is, in practice, the metrical infrastructure of meaning.

4.1.6. Staged Muteness

Beckett's early prose already thematizes the desire for silence and the impossibility of achieving it, "I have no voice and must speak", a paradox the theatre translates into embodied gaps (Beckett, 2009, p. 309). Across the dramatic corpus, the trajectory is a progressive paring-down—fewer words, longer silences, toward mime and wordless pieces, that enacts what Pattie calls a "literature of self-erasure" (Pattie, 2000, p. 168). De la Durantaye notes that silence "pours into" *Godot* "like water into a sinking ship," a metaphor Beckett gave actors himself when coaching how to ride the cycle of action → pause → action (de la Durantaye, 2016; Knowlson & Knowlson, 2006, p. 181). The endpoint is not pure quiet, Beckett's work insists that total silence cannot be staged, but a theatre where the *attempt* to reach it structures everything the audience sees and hears.

4.1.7. Silence as Condition, not Tactic

Against later playwrights for whom hush is often a tactic within social interaction, Beckett's silence functions as the *condition of being* onstage. It is what words disturb and what words reveal, the pressure that makes dialogue necessary and futile at once. In *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*, the eloquence of quiet is not merely metaphorical. It is dramaturgical: authored on the page, executed in rehearsal, perceived in the body of the spectator. In Beckett, the pause is not an ornament of speech; it is where the play *happens*.

4.2. Pinter

4.2.1. The Two Silences

Pinter's dramaturgy relocates silence from ontological predicament to social combat. He famously distinguishes between two silences: the obvious one "when no word is spoken" and the covert one "when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed," where audible speech masks a deeper, locked discourse (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii). In practice, characters weaponize both modes to stake territory, test alliances, and avoid exposure. The result is a theatre of dominance and subservience, Pinter's own phrase, where power is registered as

much in what is withheld as in what is said (Wardle, 1960; Bensky, 1967). Peter Hall's working "grammar" translates this poetics into repeatable stage action: ellipses as pressure-points, pause as nonverbal speech (a threat), and silence as crisis after which attitude may be transformed (Hall, 2009, p. 163). Audiences hear these differences as plot.

4.2.2. Interrogation, Evasion, Collapse

In *The Birthday Party* (1958), Goldberg and McCann's interrogations turn everyday dialogue into coercive ritual. Their verbal torrents, overlapping questions, clichés, non sequiturs, constitute Pinter's second silence: the chatter that smothers meaning. Stanley's responses shrink into hesitations and mute refusals, with pauses signaling loss of agency more clearly than any declaration could (Esslin, 1970). Here, silence is not metaphysical failure; it is engineered by others. The interrogators' control of rhythm, accelerating speech, landing a pause like a blow, enacts social dominance in real time. By the final scene, the room's hush is an achieved subjugation: Stanley's quiet is the residue of systematic linguistic assault (Taylor-Batty, 2014).

4.2.3. Grammar of Pauses

Often described as "a kind of Godot in Birmingham," *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) replaces metaphysical waiting with transactional menace (Billington, cited in Brewer, 2009, p. 3). Two hitmen, Ben and Gus, idle in a basement, their talk pocked with ellipses, short pauses, and abrupt silences. The arrival of orders through the dumbwaiter converts the room into a command-and-control system; the men's speech stutters into compliance. Pinter grounds this menace in English realia, "McVitie and Price," "Lyons Red Label," "Smiths crisps," "Eccles cake!"; so that classed, local detail rubs against abstract threat (Pinter, 1991, p. 136; Copeland, 2001). Onstage, Hall's grammar proves decisive: the pause becomes the beat in which the hierarchy between Ben (senior) and Gus (junior) is felt; the silence marks crisis points where the men intuit a fatal order. What is unsaid culminates in the final tableau, where silence is legible as understanding.

4.2.4. Withheld Histories

In *The Homecoming* (1965), silence reorganizes kinship and desire. The family's conversational bravado, banter, insult, reminiscence, constitutes Pinter's second silence, smothering inquiry into the past. Ruth's strategic withholding destabilizes the male order; her quiet is not retreat but sovereignty, the space in which she re-negotiates terms of belonging and exchange (Hollis, 1970; Taylor-Batty, 2014). Pauses acquire contractual weight: a held look, a withheld answer, a measured "yes" after a long beat, each becomes a performative act that redistributes power in the room. By the end, the final silences fix a new arrangement more forcefully than any explicit agreement.

4.2.5. Playable Ambiguity

Practitioners consistently analogize Pinter's pages to musical scores. "Listen to his rhythms," Hall advises; a silence operates "like a musical pause," shaping

phrase and meaning (Hall, 2009, p. 162; Salem, 1986, p. 79). Actors report having to learn the pauses to play them; every gap has value, and if you do not “play” it, “you’ve not heard the piece” (Smith, 2005, p. 211). Crucially, Pinter insists that “one pause is quite unlike another,” resisting any mechanical timing (Pinter, 1989; Hall, 2009). This playable ambiguity preserves interpretive openness while ensuring that silence remains an authored sign, “meticulously considered,” yet contingent on performance (Hall, 2009, p. 163; Herman, 1998).

4.2.6. Englishness

Unlike Beckett’s abstracted landscapes, Pinter’s rooms carry the acoustics of English life, speech rhythms, brands, bus routes, which moor menace in recognizably domestic soundscapes (Copeland, 2001). Horace Engdahl’s Nobel citation that Pinter “uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle” is apt: the chatter is not filler but a cover (Taylor-Batty, 2014, p. 1). In *The Birthday Party*, it masks interrogation; in *The Dumb Waiter*, obedience; in *The Homecoming*, bargaining. Silence, then, is the revelatory counter-sign: it exposes what the prattle conceals.

4.2.7. Silence as Strategy, not Condition

Where Beckett’s silence functions as the condition of being onstage, an ontological pressure that speech cannot overcome, Pinter’s silence is a strategy enacted within social relations. It is how characters conceal, coerce, and survive; how power is asserted, resisted, or transferred. The plays demonstrate that pauses and silences can be climaxes, “the still centre of the storm”, and that audiences can follow the emotional journey *through* the gaps (Esslin, 1970, p. 238; Hall, 2009, p. 164). In Pinter, silence is not the end of language; it is the means by which language does its most consequential work.

5. Comparative Synthesis

Both Beckett and Pinter elevate silence from a negative gap to a poetic voice that organizes dramatic meaning. In each, silence is written (via calibrated notation), rehearsed (via actorly intention), and perceived (as phenomenological pressure by spectators). Directors and actors consistently describe these gaps in musical terms, rests, cadences, crises, so that audiences “hear” silence as structure, not defect (Hall, 2009; Kalb, 1991; Salem, 1986). This convergence is grounded theoretically in negative aesthetics and language philosophy: if language can only grasp a restricted segment of reality, silence must carry the remainder (Sontag, 2002; Steiner, 2010). Both dramatists thus produce what Esslin called plays whose climaxes can be pauses, “the still centre of the storm”, and whose most consequential meanings unfold in the unspoken (Esslin, 1970, p. 238). In performance, neither writer treats pauses as interchangeable: every gap is context-bound, intention-laden, and functionally plural, demanding the “imagination, tension, or thought” that actors supply (Shaw, 2007; Morin, 2017). Yet the divergences are equally constitutive. Beckett’s silence is predominantly ontological: an outward sign of an inward metaphysical pressure where language fails and consciousness strains toward an impossible quiet. The dramaturgy is

oriented toward speech-replacement, stoppages and still-life tableaux in which silence is the scene (Beckett, 1956/1989; Kane, 1984). Even in talky moments, dialogue is figured as “fatuous clamour” against “all the dead voices,” an acoustic defense against the void rather than a vehicle of social exchange (Beckett, 2009, p. 116). Pinter, by contrast, situates silence as interactional strategy within recognizably English rooms: a tactic of masking, coercion, testing, and renegotiation. His signature “two silences”, the mute gap and the torrent that covers nakedness—fold pauses into speech-interstitial rhythms that weaponize ordinary talk (Pinter, 1989, p. xiii; Taylor-Batty, 2014). Where Beckett’s characters are ontologically exposed by silence, Pinter’s characters use silence to expose or protect themselves.

Spatial and cultural frames also diverge. Beckett abstracts locale, “A country road. A tree. Evening.”, to universalize existential pressure; silence reads as condition (Beckett, 1956). Pinter saturates space with classed and local textures (“Lyons Red Label,” “Smiths crisps”), making silence legible as social maneuver within “life as lived” (Pinter, 1991, p. 136; Copeland, 2001, p. 130). Correlatively, Beckett’s score tends toward parings-down across the oeuvre, longer rests, fewer words, movement toward mime, consistent with a “literature of self-erasure” (Pattie, 2000, p. 168). Pinter’s score tends toward codification of playable distinctions (ellipsis/pause/silence) that mark shifting hierarchies and crises, a grammar that directors like Peter Hall operationalize for audiences to decode (Hall, 2009, pp. 162–164).

Finally, the spectatorial contract differs. Beckett obliges viewers to suffer time: silence becomes thickened duration that makes stasis audible and death adjacent; the poetic voice of absence speaks by suspending action. Pinter obliges viewers to infer social stakes: silence becomes a hinge where attitudes flip, deals are struck, and power transfers—often more decisively than in any explicit line. In sum, both dramatists transform absence into presence, but Beckett’s silence is the condition that speech violates, while Pinter’s silence is the means by which speech does its most consequential work. Each thus forges a distinct poetics of staged absence: one metaphysical and speech-replacing, the other interactional and speech-interstitial, converging in the conviction that what most matters in drama is often what is not said (Esslin, 1970; Hollis, 1970; Hall, 2009).

6. Contribution

This article has argued that in Beckett and Pinter, silence is not a negation of language but a poetic voice with autonomous signifying force. Reading across philosophy of language, negative aesthetics, phenomenology, and theatre semiotics, we showed that both dramatists author silence (on the page), orchestrate it (in rehearsal and performance grammar), and stage it as audience experience. The comparative analysis clarifies a core divergence: Beckett’s silences are largely ontological and speech-replacing, registering the metaphysical pressure of unsayability and moving toward paring-down and muteness; Pinter’s silences are primarily interactional and speech-interstitial,

functioning as tactics of masking, coercion, and renegotiation within socially textured rooms. Convergences, musical calibration, context-dependence, and performer-intention, support the central claim that what most matters in these plays is frequently what is not said.

Directors and actors can treat silence as scripted action. Hall's operational distinctions (ellipsis/pause/silence) and Beckett's qualitative modifiers ("full value," "longer," "embarrassed," "more anguished") justify rehearsal strategies that assign concrete objectives to each gap and track attitude-shifts across them. Casting and pacing decisions should therefore prioritize a company's ability to *play* rests as meaning. Treating silence as a phenomenological event invites research on spectators' temporal perception (tension, expectancy, discomfort), memory consolidation during gaps, and how silence modulates comprehension and affect in real time.

Future research can move beyond close reading to empirical performance analytics, assembling a cross-production corpus (rehearsal reports, prompt books, recordings) to quantify pause/silence durations and relate temporal profiles to perceived effects (e.g., menace in Pinter, stasis in Beckett), while testing variation by director, venue, and culture; complementary acoustic and kinesic studies should examine how room acoustics, ambient noise floors, breath, micro-gesture, blocking, and sound design condition the *audibility* of silence across studio versus proscenium spaces.

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