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"Words Are Few. Dying Too"
Death and Silence in Samuel Beckett's *A Piece of Monologue* and Caryl Churchill's *Here We Go*

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Abstract: There is a widespread belief that since words, belonging to the temporal dimension and ultimately formulated by the body, bind the utterer to human reality, the transcendental must lie beyond language. Ewa Wąchocka (2005) proposes a category of "transcendental silence" to mark those moments in a dramatic text which transgress ordinary silences and pauses to hint at something much more profound and inexpressible. One of the famous proponents of "literature of silence" (Hassan 1968) as a means of "saying the unspeakable" is Samuel Beckett, who in his play *A Piece of Monologue* (1979) moves towards expressing the inexpressible through experimenting with silences and transcendental silence. Arguably, a similar concept is explored by Caryl Churchill in her play about dying (*Here We Go*, 2015), where silences as part of everyday human communication become the vehicle for touching upon transcendental silence in the final act. The article provides a brief overview of the role of silence in the works by the two playwrights, arguing that *Here We Go* brings Churchill especially close to the Beckettian aesthetics.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, death, transcendental silence

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"Słów jest niewiele. I też umierają"**
Śmierć i cisza w *Partii solowej* Samuela Becketta i *Here We Go* Caryl Churchill

Streszczenie: Zgodnie z powszechnym przekonaniem, skoro mowa, istniejąca w czasie i pochodząca z ciała, przywiązuje mówcę do doczesności, to co transcendentne musi przejawiać się poza językiem. Ewa Wąchocka (2005) proponuje kategorię „milczenia transcendentnego" do opisu momentów tekstu dramatycznego, które, wychodząc poza zwyczajną ciszę i pauzy, dotykają czegoś znacznie głębszego i wymykającego się ujęciu za pomocą mowy. Jednym ze słynnych twórców „literatury ciszy" (Hassan 1968) pojmowanej jako narzędzie do „wypowiedzenia niewyrażalnego" jest Samuel Beckett, którego sztuka *Partia solowa* (1979) sięga do niewyrażalnego poprzez eksperymentowanie z pauzami i milczeniem transcendentnym. Można uznać, że podobna koncepcja przyświeca Caryl Churchill w sztuce o umieraniu zatytułowanej *Here We Go* (2015), w której milczenie jako część codziennej komunikacji stopniowo ustępuje miejsca milczeniu transcendentnemu. Artykuł przedstawia krótkie omówienie roli milczenia w twórczości obydwojga autorów, sugerując, że w *Here We Go* Churchill bardziej niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej zbliża się do Beckettowskiej estetyki.

Słowa kluczowe: Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, śmierć, milczenie transcendentne

Although Samuel Beckett and Caryl Churchill are both regarded as leading voices in contemporary British drama, there is surprisingly little comparative research focused on the works of these two authors[1]. This could potentially be due to the fact that, as Elin Diamond (2008: 285) observes, if we take into consideration only Beckett's and Churchill's most famous plays, namely *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* respectively, these two authors could hardly appear more different in terms of their chosen aesthetics and dominant concerns. And yet, these appearances may be misleading, as there are certain affinities and thought-provoking parallel visions to be observed, especially when examining Churchill's later work. In her essay, Diamond (2008: 288) names "three zones of connection" between Beckett's and Churchill's dramatic output, namely their shared "concern with form, with mothers, and with God". In the present article, I argue that there is at least one more cross-section worth exploring in this respect, that is to say the way in which both these authors utilise silence to touch upon the mystery of death. As the ground for my discussion, I use two short plays connected with this subject: Samuel Beckett's *A Piece of Monologue* and Caryl Churchill's *Here We Go*. But before delving into the analysis of the two texts, it is worth to take a brief look at the potential significance of silence

** Translated by Antoni Libera (Samuel Beckett, *Utwory wybrane. [1] Dramaty, słuchowiska, scenariusze*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2017: 295).

[1] In Charles A. Carpenter's extensive, 514-page-long bibliography of research on the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett, including an impressive list of comparative research done on Beckett and other playwrights, there is only one entry on Beckett and Churchill (as opposed to sixty-three scholarly works on Beckett and Pinter, to name but one significant example).

in drama and theatre, focusing on those aspects which seem predominantly to interest the authors in question.

Silence is a tool uniquely suited to the theme of death, chiefly through its opposition to the noise produced by speech and movement. Life is by its very nature associated with sounds – the most basic and also most emblematic life functions produce its characteristic noises, such as the heartbeat or the sound of breathing. As a result, as long as we are alive, complete silence is ostensibly beyond our reach. John Cage – the author of the famous *4'33''* piece composed of pauses alone – tells the story of his experience in an anechoic chamber (a room designed to completely absorb all sound reflections). For him, this was a moment of realisation that life and silence are mutually exclusive:

> There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence we cannot. […] I entered one [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. (2017: 8)

At the same time, apart from its being treated as the antithesis of language, silence is also an inherent part of language. In everyday conversations as well as literature it can replace an utterance or become a part of monologue or dialogue; it fulfils various cognitive, rhetoric and expressive functions. Due to its communicative character and capacity for encoding and conveying meanings, it can also be viewed as a semantic act, an act of interlocution (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 83).

In her book on silence in 20th-century drama Ewa Wąchocka (2005: 10) provides a long list of various types of communicative silences, proving that the opportunities to communicate things through silence are countless. With this notion in mind, Wąchocka introduces a crucial distinction between two kinds of silence in drama: "transcendental silence", which could never be transposed into language since it refers to phenomena that evade language and cannot be expressed or interpreted verbally, and "meaningful silence", which is meant to convey linguistic messages that in changed circumstances could equally well be expressed through words (Wąchocka 2005: 33). A similar taxonomy is offered by Leslie Kane, who proposes that a distinction be drawn between "silences" and "Silence" – the former serving as pauses within or between utterances and the latter construed as "the Void, the Nothing, the ultimate language of the self that is unattainable" (Kane 1984: 105).

If the opposition of sound and silence is so essential to life, there can be no wonder that it also plays a crucial role in theatre – so much so that Heiner Müller declares openly: "the basic thing in theater is silence. Theater can work without words, but it can not [sic] work without silence" (Holmberg and Schmit 1988: 458). After all, silence has a role to play both on stage and in the auditorium: silence among the audience is a prerequisite for performance, a token of the relationship between performers and spectators as well as that among the spectators themselves (see Wąchocka 2005: 9). It is the suspension of discourse that triggers the effect of anticipation (Colin 2017: 142), conducive to focused reception.

Consequently, silence occupies an important role in the works of both Beckett and Churchill, though to a varying degree. Famous for her overlapping dialogue and bold linguistic experimentation in her plays such as *The Skriker* (1994) or *Blue Heart* (1997),

Churchill is definitely not immediately associated with linguistic austerity and scarcity of speech (much unlike Beckett). On the contrary, plays such as *Top Girls* raise a multitude of voices, creating a loud and dissonant aesthetics in which "individual subjectivity dissolves into near-cacophonic vocalizations" (Diamond 2006: 477). Yet this is not to say that she refrains from using silence as a tool in her plays. In a lot of Churchill's earlier work, silence is employed chiefly as a powerful political message. It is predominantly the silence of the oppressed, as the playwright "tackle[s] globalization from the perspective of the powerless and the silenced" (ibid.: 479). Not infrequently, the most striking silence in Churchill's plays is the muteness of silenced women whose voices have been taken away by patriarchal capitalist societies. Such is the case, for instance, in *Fen*, where women are portrayed as "disenfranchised, powerless, silenced and economically impotent" (Simon 2012: 51). Another example of making a political reference through the use of silence can be Churchill's *Mad Forest* (1990), where silence exemplifies terror and oppression in Ceaușescu's Romania, while the progressive use of language stands for political resistance (cf. Luckhurst 2015: 117). But perhaps the most iconic moment exemplifying Churchill's exploration of silence in terms of oppression and politics is the short scene in *This Is a Chair* (1999) where parents force their completely silent daughter Muriel to eat. The scene is repeated twice in the play, but each time with a different heading: first as "Pornography and Censorship" and then as "The Northern Ireland Peace Process". While boldly challenging the concept of mimesis in theatrical representation and exploring the arbitrariness of interpretation, the playwright not only links Muriel's inertia and silence with the powerlessness of abuse victims, but also – as José Ramón Prado Pérez points out – introduces the element of ambiguity and challenges the audience to question their political beliefs: "the resulting silence and absence are to be interpreted differently, depending on which side of the spectrum one positions oneself" (Prado Pérez 2002: 97).

Nevertheless, it may be argued that in recent years Churchill's use of silence has shifted – in the words of Prado Pérez, "Churchill's plays can be said to have moved towards an aesthetic of silence" (2002: 101). In her most recent plays silence is not so much about being denied a voice or asserting the right to speech but rather about touching upon the unspeakable: deep trauma (which can be read into clipped sentences of the four female protagonists in the post-apocalyptic *Escaped Alone*, 2016) or the transcendental (*Here We Go*, 2015).

While Churchill's explorations of silence might be seen as varied and not necessarily obvious in nature, it can be argued that the journey towards silence is the defining characteristic of Beckett's oeuvre. He once famously declared that "every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence" (quoted in Bryden 1993: 86), and remained convinced that language is always painfully inadequate – in his conversations with Lawrence Harvey, he insisted that "[w]hatever is said is so far from the experience" (quoted in Knowlson 1996: 439); especially when the true subject matter is the tragedy of the human condition: "if you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable" (ibid.). At the same time, however, Beckett is fully aware of the fact that so long as we live, true silence is beyond our grasp as it can only be obtained through death. He explores this notion, for instance, in *Breath*, where two cries at the beginning and at the end and the sound of breathing locate silence just beyond the reader's/spectator's reach. It can be thus said that Beckett's

theatrical oeuvre is centred on transcendental silence, which is constantly hinted at, measured and teased through experimenting with silences.

As Ihab Hassan argues, "no one […] has carried the devaluation in drama further than [Samuel] Beckett" (1968: 175), who, as Kane puts it, "devised a language of cancellation" (1984: 106), since his "drama is characterized by a retreat from the word" (1984: 108). Mary Bryden insists that the privileging of silence over sound is fundamental in Beckett's writing (1997: 279), which is attributable to the fact that Beckett sees language as a burden of consciousness, from which only death offers release (O'Beirne 2005: 397). Yet it is a burden which cannot be escaped, as the only way of approaching the silent release is, paradoxically, through words. This leads to the essential Beckettian paradox: speaking is the only way of approaching the silence of the ultimate release, yet it is also the essence of being alive; while speaking keeps death at bay, due to its temporality it also means – to use Beckett's own turn of phrase – "dying on". In a famous quote from *Endgame* Clov asks Hamm "What is there to keep me here?", to which Hamm replies bluntly: "The dialogue" (CDW 120–121)[2], which at once offers an ironic commentary on Hamm and Clov's status as dramatic characters, whose *raison d'être* is to produce utterances on stage, and reminds us that dialogue is perhaps the only way of confirming (enacting?) one's existence.

A Piece of Monologue, written in 1979 and focused on the notion of death and decline, is a case in point. In the play the speaker, dressed in a ghostly white nightgown and standing in "faint diffuse light", delivers a long speech about passing, formulated in short, fragmented sentences, possibly reminiscent of the ragged breath of a dying person. His agony is reflected in the decline of language: "words are few. Dying too" (CDW 425), he declares at the beginning. The speaker's life is measured in seconds, which denies it continuity and instead breaks it into a sequence of moments – just as language is composed of separate words – two and a half billion seconds, roughly equivalent to eighty years, spent progressing "from funeral to funeral" (CDW 425).

The stage is meant to be faintly lit, which heightens its ghostly atmosphere[3]; stage directions mention a lamp like a "skull-sized white globe" (CDW 425), yet another element hinting at the theme of death. In this ghostly frame a monologue is produced, unrelentingly. Enoch Brater (1987: 112) suggests that this play has a speaker but not necessarily a character, as the protagonist of this piece is language – reminding us, perhaps, of Steiner's diagnosis that "[language] is the root and bark of our experience and we cannot readily transpose our imaginings outside it. We live inside the act of discourse" (1985: 30). And indeed, there is an obsessive, feverish quality to the monologue, as if the action of speaking was intended to postpone the moment of dying through keeping silence at bay – notwithstanding the fact that this is a doomed undertaking, as the words are "dying too". Language and death are inextricably linked, as essentially there is only one thing to express: "Never were other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. The word begone" (CDW 429).

[2] All quotes from Beckett's plays from: Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber 2006, abbreviated as CDW.

[3] See Ruby Cohn 1993. "Ghosting Through Beckett". *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 2: 1–12.

"The word begone" is the climax of the play, its central utterance, its rip word[4]. This short cryptic sentence has many layers of meaning: Beckett seems to draw our attention not so much to death itself as to t h e w o r d "death", reminding us that death is also a moment in language. At the same time, he expresses the fervent desire for a release from language: the word, be gone! But if there is a speaker capable of delivering these words, it means that he is alive. The very act of pronouncing them is an extremely physical act engaging around a hundred facial, laryngeal and respiratory muscles. The speaker is fully aware of it, focusing on the sensation of his speech apparatus at work: "Mouth agape. Closed with hiss of breath. Lips joined. Feel soft touch of lip on lip. Lip lipping lip" (CDW 428).

As it seems, the play expresses a typical Beckettian paradox: staving off death through language means both succeeding and being doomed to fail. As the play is composed of extremely short sentences, there are multiple stops akin to nooks and crannies in the text through which silence creeps in. The act of speaking – and constantly stopping – becomes then the performative act of "dying on". Inevitably, these silences will find their climax in the final silence at the end of the play – an icon, perhaps, of the transcendental silence.

Critics (e.g. Cohn 1993: 1) point out that although the subject of the play is dying, it opens with the word "birth" ("Birth was the death of him", CDW 425), reminiscent of the famous line from *Waiting for Godot* "They give birth astride of a grave". The last word in the text is "gone" ("Alone gone"), bringing it full circle, from cradle to grave. This is not entirely accurate, however: actually, the playscript requires "Ten seconds before the speech begins" at the beginning of the play after the curtain rises, and there are another ten seconds after the stage directions read "silence" and before the curtain falls. As a result, rather than progressing from "birth" to "gone", the text draws a full circle from silence to silence, touching upon transcendental silence in the process.

Another text exploring the connections between communicative silences and transcendental silence is *Here We Go* – a 2015 play by Caryl Churchill, first staged at the National Theatre in London, in a production by Dominic Cooke. On the back cover of the printed version it is described, briefly and to the point, as "a short play about dying". The play is indeed rather short – the printed version has fewer than 30 pages – and it has a very clear, ordered structure. There are three scenes that represent the process of dying in a reverse chronological order, with scene one showing a funeral, scene two being a monologue spoken by a person who has just died, contemplating various visions of the afterlife, and the final scene presenting "a very old or ill person", dressing and undressing themselves with the help of a carer. In all the three scenes Churchill makes different uses of silences and ellipsis, each such use serving a different purpose.

Scene one takes place at a "party after a funeral" and is composed of a string of clipped utterances. Churchill does not divide these utterances into parts and leaves the decision concerning the number of characters to the director, stipulating only that there should be "no fewer than three and no more than eight" actors involved (2015: 9). The overall impression is that of pieces of dialogue being interchanged:

[4] See Kristin Morrison 1982. "The Rip Word in A Piece of Monologue". *Modern Drama* 25, 3: 349–354. Project Muse (access: 10.05.2019).

We miss him
of course
[…]
because friendship was
wider range of acquaintances than anyone I've ever
[…]
listened
and so witty I remember him saying
listened and understood
always seemed
though of course *are* you any wiser when you're older I feel sixteen all the time
(Churchill 2015: 11)

The playwright uses ellipsis to trigger inference – a linguistic phenomenon in which the listener (reader) fills in the gaps in utterances based on their knowledge of the world, perception skills and command of language (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 87). Even though important chunks of sentences are missing from the dialogue, the reader/viewer is nonetheless able to supplant them on the basis of their own background knowledge, the memory of their own conversations conducted or heard at funerals. It could be argued that this use of ellipsis conveys the crucial message of the scene: this dialogue is universal, we all know it so well that mere hints at sentences are sufficient for us to grasp the meaning. These silences are clearly conversational: they invite the reader/viewer's participation in reconstructing meanings, they belong to the dialogue.

The second scene is very different: there is just one character, delivering a speech "very fast" (Churchill 2015: 23). This time, s/he is speaking in complete, unclipped sentences (or not sentences, perhaps, as there is no punctuation and no capital letters are used; there is, however, line spacing introduced between chunks that could be separate sentences). The monologue focuses on various ideas of the afterlife: Christian, Nordic, Ancient Egyptian and Greek, haunting as a ghost, reincarnation. There is also a reflection on the decomposition of the body ("of course all the bits of my body are on their way now breaking down into smaller and smaller rather disgusting at first but into the daisies" [ibid.: 28]), essentially stressing that the body is built of particles just as language is composed of sounds. The only moment of silence occurs at the very end of the scene:

and you're just a thing that happens like an elephant or a daffodil
and there you all are for a short time
that's how it's put together for a short time
and oddly you are actually one of those
and it goes on and on and you're used to it and then suddenly (Churchill 2015: 28)

A silent pause introduced at the end of the scene becomes a metonymy of death, a way of expressing the inexpressible. Silence here clearly serves a different purpose than ellipsis in scene one – it refers to transcendental silence rather than conversational silences as an ordinary speech phenomenon (Silence rather than silences). As Martin Middeke explains, "Churchill dramatizes here the most impossible of all possibilities. What readers and audience members share by witnessing the death of the other is the point of maximum

vulnerability, of maximum void, of maximum ontological precariousness – the extreme limit and liminality of our experience" (2017: 227) – and the confrontation with this liminality is achieved through silence.

Finally, in scene three (titled *Getting There*) no words are uttered at all – there is only silence, as a very old or ill person is dressing and undressing themselves a number of times, slowly and with difficulty. According to the playscript, this is to continue "for as long as the scene lasts" (Churchill 2015: 29) – in the original National Theatre production it went on for about 20 minutes. The effect was twofold: on the one hand, it depicted dying quite realistically as a gradual descent into silence. On the other hand, in theatre these twenty minutes of silence become a communal experience, and, of course, they fail to be silence at all: someone coughs, another person sniffles, there is rustling of clothes, someone takes a sip of their drink, a watch bleeps. After a couple of minutes stifled giggles break out here and there. The impact of these collective noises of life juxtaposed with the thick silence on stage is profound[5].

This final scene, dramatizing living-towards-death, is perhaps unparalleled in terms of its closeness to the Beckettian aesthetics in the whole of Churchill's oeuvre, reminiscent, for instance, of May's ghostly pacing in *Footfalls* or the woman in *Rockaby* rocking off towards the advancing end. It is also, as Middeke suggests, a "moment of pure immanence in which we become aware of the Other's repeated suffering and, thus, experience our own" (2017: 229). It can be argued that, using the binary opposition, figure and ground, to reach towards unobtainable silence, Churchill steers the viewer towards transcendental silence – the great mystery of passing – and forces them to confront it. What the play is "articulating, albeit without the words" (Angelaki 2017: 51) is that the coming of death is experienced through a string of silent moments.

Different uses of silence in the three scenes of *Here We Go* allow the playwright to draw a progression from silences as part of ordinary discourse through transcendental silence as a window opening on transcendence when the transition from living to dying is made, and, finally, to confront the reality of dying by contrasting the silent stage with the noise-producing audience. Interestingly, though the scenes are presented in a reverse chronological order (they start with a funeral, then there is the moment of death, and finally the last stage of life), silence is carried over from scene to scene, allowing silences to gradually morph into transcendental silence. It is through these conversational silences and transcendental silence that the playwright makes the spectators face the reality of "dying on".

To conclude, both Churchill and Beckett employ ellipsis, pauses and silences as means of reaching towards transcendental silence. Although their individual strategies differ, at the centre of both the discussed plays are smaller silences snowballing into transcendental silence. They both explore the gradual process: "the dying and the going" (CDW 429). It seems very fitting, therefore, that apparently Beckett's original title for *A Piece of Monologue* was *Gone* (White 2009: 33), which – employing the same verb as the one used in the title of Churchill's text – offers yet another shared characteristic between the two plays. On the whole, based on the parallels between the use of transcendental silence in *A Piece*

[5] Dominic Cooke's production was presented at the Lyttelton Theatre, which has a capacity of almost 900 seats (making it twice as large as the Royal Court Theatre, where most of Caryl Churchill's plays have had their premieres) and the concentration of these little sounds of life becomes more powerful in that space, because there are so many people sitting together in silence – and making noises – together at the same time.

of Monologue and *Here We Go*, it could be argued that the evolution in the use of silence by Churchill in her plays has brought her closer to the Beckettian aesthetics than ever before.

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