

Samuel Beckett and Morton Feldman's 'Text-Music Tandem' in *Words and Music*

Francis Hutton-Williams

This essay explores the freedom that Beckett allowed for musical collaborations, a consideration that often surprises scholars given the notorious degree of control that he exerted on the stage.¹ Specifically, it addresses the concept of a 'text-music tandem' in the 1987 composition that Morton Feldman wrote for Beckett's *Words and Music* (1961). The relationship between Words and Music in the play – or between 'Joe' and 'Bob' as Croak calls them – is as perplexing as that of any of Beckett's better-known character couples. Less critical attention, however, has been given to their compassionate modes of alliance. The first part of this essay reconstructs the genesis of *Words and Music* from biographical sources that suggest a crucial interim between the play's composition and the creative stimulus it was intended to provide for the author's musical cousin, who had spent five months in recovery after a car accident in Little Bray. A reading follows which explores the effects of healing and renewal in the play's disassembling of operatic form. The second part of the essay analyses Feldman's contribution to the play in more detail, and the new partnerships that his music provides.

Many composers have believed that musical simplicities ought to conform well to Beckett's laconic style and direction. Philip Glass, for example, has attempted sparse renditions of many of Beckett's works, ranging from *Play* (1965) to *Company* (1984). Alternatively, the figuration of Beckett as an existentialist hero has tended to invoke John Cage as the only possible suitor for a lonely (but raging) avant-gardism. The detailed analysis here with Feldman serves to complicate

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both of these beliefs. The essay concludes by rejecting the demand for musical likeness, and by emphasising the role of generative structures in outlasting what Armin Schäfer has described as an 'exhausted literature'.

The concept of a 'text-music tandem' arises in a letter from Samuel Beckett to Judith Schmidt of Grove Press dated 12 February 1961.² Though the author would not complete the BBC venture entitled *Words and Music* until ten months later, the possibility of collaborating with John Beckett on a play was mentioned at this time. In March the following month, a serious car accident in Little Bray left the author's cousin in need of repeated surgery on his hip and in recovery for five months.³ News of this misfortune reached Samuel Beckett while he was in Dover, carrying out his secret marriage plans to Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil. In his biography *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, James Knowlson makes little connection between the accident that had befallen the author's cousin and the eventual composition of the play in November.⁴ However, Knowlson does mention John Beckett as the play's intended collaborator (*DF* 496–7 and 798). Instead, Knowlson refers back to Beckett's arduous fourteen-month collaboration with Marcel Mihalovici on an operatic setting of *Krapp, ou, la Dernière Bande* (1961) for clarification of the play's genesis (*DF* 496). Beckett's relationship with the Mihalovici production appears to have been somewhat ambivalent, though his interaction with the composer and Roger Blin was undoubtedly influential in the later conception of *Words and Music* as two separate characters. While Beckett remained positive about the performance of *Krapp* that he had heard at the Palais de Chaillot in February 1961, his discussion with Judith Schmidt that same month reveals a deeper uncertainty about the suitability of operatic adaptation. According to Chris Ackerley and Stanley Gontarski, it was out of his conviction that 'the scoring was too lush' that he went on to produce a new radiophonic text for Mihalovici in December.⁵

As Knowlson admits, 'there were more precise reasons why Beckett introduced music into his radio plays' (*DF* 496), the most pressing of which involved the creative stimulus that he wished to provide for his musical cousin. By the autumn of 1961, John Beckett was well on the way to recovery after his horrific accident. That the absence of the composer while in convalescence may have contributed inadvertently to the play's formal development is evident from the effects of healing and renewal that feature heavily in the play: Croak in fact twice calls Music 'My balms!'⁶ Yet the connection between the play's social origins and its formal innovations has evaded analysis on account of

the self-effacement of its originally intended collaborator. After the radio drama's première on BBC Radio 3, John Beckett decided to withdraw his musical score from use in future productions. A new version was commissioned in 1973 with music by Humphrey Searle, but was recorded only for archival purposes. It was not until the spring of 1989 that the play was again broadcast live, this time with Morton Feldman's score, during the Beckett Festival of Radio Plays.⁷

Everett Frost, the festival's director, remembers Beckett's inhibitions regarding the play as follows: 'He was uneasy about *Words and Music*, blaming himself for the failure of the first attempt at it, and describing the problems involved in setting it as formidable and perhaps insurmountable. Yet it seemed to me that he had a special fondness for it and was pleased that it might be revived with what he called "a fresh go".'⁸ As Frost's assessment of Beckett's inhibitions makes clear, the play's difficulty is an extremely one-sided affair that places extraordinary demands on the composer. Many of the problems involved in setting it can be referred to the way in which *Words* is kept out of the musical statement. From the outset, *Words* resists being layered into the structure and body of *Music* ('*No! . . . Please!*' [WM 333]), confirming its exclusion at the end of the drama when it pleads for music to play: '*Music. [Pause. Imploring.] Music!*' (WM 340). A second point of difficulty lies in the play's character sketch of 'Bob', which gives music a 'double' presence (both virtual and real). The would-be collaborator seeking connection with the play cannot, therefore, add an extra dimension to the existing material by consigning music to the role of a supporting act. The play renders itself immune to such treatment by cultivating a new occasion for music ('all expression gone' [WM 335]) that is itself constituted through a disavowal of extra-musical associations:

M: *Rap of baton on stand. Soft music worthy of foregoing, great expression, with audible groans and protestations – 'No!' 'Please!' etc. – from Words. Pause.*

C: [*anguished*] Oh! [*Thump of club.*] Louder!

M: *Loud rap of baton and as before fortissimo, all expression gone, drowning Words' protestations. Pause.*

C: My comforts! [*Pause.*] Joe sweet. (WM 335)

Here, 'music' is less an instrument of expression than the porous membrane that invites chaos in. From its '*Humble muted adsum*' [WM 334] to its '*Brief rude retort*' [WM 340], *Music* stays within its rudimentary constituents. In order to understand *Music*'s role in the play, and its ability to absorb *Words*' constant interruptions ('drowning *Words*' protestations'), I will reflect briefly on the term 'dehiscence'

within Beckett's oeuvre.⁹ 'Dehiscence' is a botanical term that the *OED* records as 'a gaping, or opening by divergence of parts, especially as a natural process'.¹⁰ A mutual destruction of forms, applied here to one medium against another, inserts a new aesthetic of inaudibility at the heart of the radio play. The play's bifurcation of sound and silence resonates powerfully with the 'punctuation of dehiscence' that is gleaned from Beethoven's early compositions in Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (c. 1932): 'I think of Beethoven, his eyes are closed, he smokes a long pipe, he listens to the *Ferne*, the *unsterbliche Geliebte*, he unbuttons himself to *Teresa ante rem*, I think of his earlier compositions where into the body of the musical statement he incorporates a punctuation of dehiscence'.¹¹ From Croak's abrupt requests for 'Age' and 'Love' to his eventual cry of 'Lily!', we have the renewal of the image of an 'Immortal Beloved' [*unsterbliche Geliebte*] in *Words and Music*. Music's ability to render Words' earlier groans and protestations inaudible stands out in *Dream* as a feature, too, of Beethoven's late compositions, after he had succumbed to total deafness, where the musical statement is said to be 'eaten away with terrible silences [...] in which has been engulfed the hysteria that he used to let speak up' (*DFMW* 139).

What I am calling the dehiscence of the later radio play, where Words resists being layered into the body and structure of the Music, will be shown to facilitate compassionate and non-conceptual modes of alliance that allow Music to re-emerge as a healing presence. An alternative politics to opera—that of a 'text-music tandem'—will be read from the evolution of the play's word-music partnerships, where the organising principle on which Croak's authority rests and which announces his 'themes' is finally dismissed: '*Sound of club let fall*' (*WM* 340). Feldman's comments to the British composer, Howard Skempton, a full ten years before he came to set *Words and Music*, reveal his exceptional sensitivity to the prising apart of these media. Skempton's questioning of Feldman over the musical setting of *Neither* (1977) prompted a number of reflections from the composer that anticipate in important ways the collaborative demands of the radio play he was to set later. Feldman explained at the time to Skempton that he had decided not to use existing material by Beckett because the texts were already 'pregnable' and 'didn't need music'.¹² Instead, Feldman claimed that he had been 'looking for the quintessence, something that just hovered' (Feldman/Skempton 5). The statement is in fact deeply paradoxical. In what sense can his music be the most concentrated extract of substance on the one hand, and something hovering or insubstantial on the other?

One way in which to account for the musical paradox that Feldman envisages in approaching Beckett's oeuvre is to show its underlying consistency with the radio medium. As is evident from the play's French title, 'Paroles et Musique' (1972), it is acts of speech that are extracted in the radio medium and not their original source.¹³ The medium is air, which, once transported inside the auditory wall, communicates material sounds from a place that exists but is invisible to the listeners. Another explanation for the paradox that Feldman envisages between disembodiment and concretion lies in his response to musical history. Feldman supports his pursuit of a hovering musical presence by looking for ways around the Monteverdi-Wagnerian legacy. In dialogue with the director immediately after the production, Feldman explained that his music '[is] not Wagnerian in terms of the layering of the word into the structure and body of the music. It's more distant. It's going along. I wanted to present its remoteness, its unattainableness. An unattainableness and yet a marvellous presence which is music.'¹⁴ Feldman develops a feeling of quintessence by attaching real musical duration to the time of the text, a strategy that is unique to the 'going along' of sound in the radio medium. With this effect in mind, he jokes about applying an operatic schedule to the play: '[While writing *Words and Music*] I couldn't call Barbara [Monk Feldman] into the room every five minutes and say, "Now, in heaven's name do you think? (*laughs*) Do you think, in a sense, that this should be a variation, or should it be a direct motif?"' (MFS 236).¹⁵ Feldman's jocular abandonment of operatic form shows an exceptional depth of consideration when regarding the play's internal dismissal of theme and variation. Rather than identify his music with the outward manifestations of a particular theme, Feldman sought to base his music on the intrinsic expression of the play's materials.¹⁶ It is characteristic of Feldman's approach that he should locate the most concentrated form of emotional substance in the author's capacities as a 'word man':

I never liked anyone else's approach to Beckett. I felt it was a little too easy; it was a little too—Again, they're treating him as if he's an Existentialist hero, rather than a Tragic hero. And he's a word man, a fantastic word man. And I always felt that I was a note man. And I think that's what brought me to him. The kind of shared longing that he has, this saturated, unending longing. (MFS 232)¹⁷

Feldman calmly rejects the figure of the existentialist hero by working in compassionate vibration with 'this saturated, unending longing' that he detects in the surface material of Beckett's language and its

underlying texture. While Marjorie Perloff has provocatively located *Words and Music* in anticipation of future works like John Cage's *Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (1979), the author's recommendation six years on of Feldman to Everett Frost leads us to view this collaboration in terms quite different from Cage's adaptation of Joyce's text for West German Radio.¹⁸ The actual influence of Cage is particularly unsuited to Feldman's third phase of composition, the very inception of which was preceded by detachment from his friend's aleatoric experiment. After early works that featured graphic and free notation, followed by a period of solo utterances against orchestral backdrops, Feldman's 1978 composition *Why Patterns?* heralds a third phase of musical experiment that is concerned with generative structures. Feldman's decision to distance himself from Cage has been well documented in interviews with Fred Orton and Gavin Bryars during the 1970s.¹⁹ Other writings in *Give my Regards to Eighth Street* provide a number of examples that demonstrate Feldman's rising attitudinal change: 'you can't write growing sound with free notation'.²⁰

It is, rather, his abandonment of free notation, and return to precise regulatory schemes, that brings Feldman closer as an artist to Beckett. Both of Feldman's collaborations with Beckett (in 1976 and 1987) were composed well after his departure from Cage during the 1960s. In any case, the experimental nature of Cage's music appears to be fundamentally at odds with the authority of the Romantic composers, especially Schubert and Beethoven, to which Beckett turned again and again in his letters and published writing. It is revealing of Feldman's own priorities that his shift in style away from free-style notation should have been motivated by his interests in visual art. As is suggested by his proximity to the painter Francesco Clemente (at whose studio in Solto, New York, he organised several concerts during the 1980s) it is Jasper Johns, not Cage, who intersects with Feldman's third compositional phase and Beckett's musical turn.

At this stage in his career, visual artists possibly exerted more influence over Feldman than musicians did: 'I learned more from painters than I did from composers', he states in July 1985.²¹ Jasper Johns had provided several etchings for Beckett's volume of prose fragments during the 1970s entitled *Foirades / Fizzles* (1973–5) that had greatly impressed the author. In his interview with Frost straight after the production of *Words and Music* in 1987, Feldman was quick to frame his approach to Beckett in terms of this previous collaboration with Johns:

I didn't see the collaboration that Mr Beckett did with Jasper Johns. [Francesco] Clemente did. And his comment was that it seemed obvious that, maybe, Jasper Johns would be a very good choice [for Beckett] because he was closed to the world. He wasn't closed to *his* world. But he was closed to the world. And I thought that was a very, very interesting point because when you get a world, either like Jasper Johns—especially in his new paintings—[or like] Beckett's, the reference to some degree is closed to any other experience but his own. Now, to me the exciting thing is that both Jasper Johns and Beckett are not narcissistic [...] but at the same time you feel a really complete and closed artistic experience. (*MFS* 229)

Especially important is the 'world' that Feldman describes in Johns' new paintings, which, like the unidentified listening space of *Words and Music*, is said to provide 'a really complete and closed artistic experience'. Yet as Feldman *also* recognises, the question of referential closure to outside influence is not 'narcissistic' but is more deeply connected to the liberation of the creative act. Many of the collaborative issues that affect Beckett's text can be seen in terms of a prior engagement with painting that is based on gestural drawing. The play's character sketch of Music exhibits similarity in this regard with its distrust of conscious concept. Music's warping appearance remains purely 'suggestive' in the criss-crossing of its patterned behaviour with Words. One of the problems with the abstract universals that Croak declares is, precisely, that they are cut off from the materials used to execute them: 'Croak' indeed. Croak's first decree ('Theme tonight...' [*WM* 334]) results in more of the same formulaic thoughtlessness—drably applied to Sloth and Love in equal measure—that we have been privy to hear Words pre-rehearse: '*Rattled off, low*' (*WM* 333). Croak's second and third decrees are answered only by a static litany of rejoinders from Words and Music, here referred to as 'Joe' and 'Bob': '[*Pause*] Joe. / [*as before*] My Lord. / Bob. / *As before*' (*WM* 334). As the composition advances, it becomes clear that for the play to be genuinely moving the 'theme' must arise in the course of its making. The collaborator is forced to compose directly out of his materials and to find his subject in the process of working through what they make available.

Feldman understood that his role lay not in trying to correspond with a given theme but in allowing the various gestural formations of 'Bob' to interact with, or against, his compositional technique. As Kevin Volans writes, Feldman is equally 'anti-conceptual' in his 'belief that the material itself should determine the form and the outcome

of the music. He felt that conceptualism had been the undoing of 20th century music, where methods, systems of proportioning, extra-musical concepts, had forced musical material into moulds that went against its nature.²² The way in which certain intervallic features of Feldman's composition are passed around from one instrument to another – across thirty-three fragments of the score – resonates with the textual presence of Bob's performance much in the way that Jackson Pollock might choreograph his movement around a canvas, his music 'falling' within the dynamics of the textual space even as any attempt to coordinate music precisely with words is resisted.

In an essay entitled 'Between Categories', Feldman states his fixation with 'time canvases' that lie 'between the music's construction, and its surface' (*GMRES* 88). The indeterminacy of Feldman's music evolves in the space between the sound surface and the musical construction from which it is being abstracted. The influence that visual artists exerted over Feldman at this stage of his career added to his fascination with the ways in which sounds, unlike visual materials, are necessarily abstracted from the construction that underpins them. Of Cézanne's flattening of the pictorial plane, Feldman remarks that 'his intelligence and touch have become a physical thing, a thing that can be seen. In the modulations of Beethoven we do not have his touch, only his logic. It is not enough for us that he wrote the music. We need him to sit down at the piano and play it for us' (*GMRES* 84). In reference to the lines in the accentuated, modular grid of Mondrian's compositions, Feldman repeats his disappointment with the runaway surface of music: '[...] the tragedy of music is that it begins with perfection. You can see all the time, while you are looking at a terrific picture, where the artist has changed their mind. I love those Mondrians where you can see it's erased. [...] There's nothing like that in music' (Feldman/Orton/Bryars 246).

In *Words and Music*, however, music's accidental beginning is there to be changed and improved. 'Bob' ascribes to music the kind of faltering presence or erasure that can be touched by the rap of a baton or beaten by Croak's club. The various revisions, 'improvements of above' and 'suggestions for following' (*WM* 336) that music undergoes lend the impression of its hovering nature as a concrete and tactile thing. For example, the build-up to the central passage about Age takes five minutes in its cautionary openings and amendments (*WM* 335–37). Feldman's step-by-step accompaniment of this 'song' addresses each of these shifting responses, with the result that the compositional growth is actively internalised. One is tempted to infer more generally from Feldman's references to

Mondrian, Cézanne, and Beethoven an understanding of the break-up, and reconfiguration, of the surface in Beckett, the first indication of which comes with the intermittent blasts he gives to the small orchestra trying to tune up during Words' opening soliloquy (*WM* 333).

The partial figuration of music's meaning through a succession of gestural deeds is vital to *Words and Music* since it enables another mode of alliance to develop that is at once intimate and separate. With a simultaneous impetus towards mimetic action and abstraction, the two *gentes de placer* – 'Joe' and 'Bob' – are less fully differentiated characters than a series of cajoling and bullying gestures that interact in aural mimicry.²³ In his treatment of Joe's halting words on Age, Feldman reacted to this equilibrium. In fact, Feldman explained to Everett Frost that he had only been able to respond to the theme of Age by attending to the gestural features of Beckett's writing: 'I didn't pick up, you see, on Age. [...] But it was the fact that the language was halting that created that pizzicato section' (*MFS* 235). The passage Feldman presumably had in mind runs: '[faltering] Age is... age is when... old age I mean... if that is what my Lord means... is when... if you're a man... were a man... huddled... Nodding... the ingle... waiting – [Violent thump of club]' (*WM* 335–36). Feldman grafts the uncertainty of this elliptical balance onto a heavily modified minor scale. Only five notes, or 'steps', are used by Feldman to bring forth the confused fragility of the emotional situation, which, played in isolation with no harmonic backing, acts in the style of a recitative. While the play effectively handed him universals, Feldman realised that in order to provide accompaniment he had to identify his music not with Croak's insistence on 'Theme' (*WM* 334) but with abstract qualities of gesture. In this respect, Feldman found the use of small, repetitive blocks of material to be the best way of encapsulating the larger themes around which the play is structured.

The space that Feldman creates for music while rotating blocks of material prevents him from mapping too closely the delivery of the original text. We may contrast this approach with Earl Kim (a fellow American composer of the Second Viennese School), who in his interpretation of multiple Beckett texts in *Earthlight* (1978) places chords right next to individual words. Feldman's rotation of small blocks of material is more sensitively allied to moments of dramatic transition in the text. For example, Croak's murmuring about 'The face. [Pause.] The face. [Pause.] The face. [Pause.] The face. [Pause.]' (*WM* 337) sharpens our sense of the material use of language and signals a suspension from thematic concerns as it picks up on Words' song about Age ('The face in the ashes' [*WM* 337]). With

Croak's unforeseen outburst of 'Lily!' (*WM* 338), the listener senses the temporary surrender of his patronage and a dismantling of the fictional narrative [*sjuzhet*] actually being heard in performance:

W: [...] the lips...

C: [*anguished*] Lily!

W: ... tight, a gleam of tooth biting on the under [...] (*WM* 338–39)

W: [...] Some moments later however, such are the powers –

C: [*anguished*] No!

W: –the brows uncloud, the lips part [...] (*WM* 339)

It is vital that Feldman's music keeps its distance here to retain its '*Warm suggestion*' (*WM* 338). As Words latches onto the face's features, the listener realises that the 'Love' in question is no longer a 'theme' but a live and biting subject. After Croak's cries, the beating subsides, the rhetoric disappears, and the alliance intensifies between Words and Music. The intensively gestural features of the language enable the mode of interaction to build towards a procreative tension that Clas Zilliacus has likened to post-coital recuperation: 'the brows uncloud, the lips part and the eyes... [*pause*] the brows uncloud, the nostrils dilate, the lips part and the eyes... [*pause*] ... a little colour comes back into the cheeks and the eyes... [*reverently*]... open. [*Pause*]' (*WM* 339).²⁴ As this punctuation of dehiscence swells itself 'open', we witness the renewal of the immortal beloved that Croak wishes to pummel into forgetfulness, the third and final '*Pause*' (culminating with the capital 'P') echoing with its elliptical bearing the arrival (or *parousia*) of the redemptive process. In the section of 'the wellhead' (*WM* 339–40), the listener detects the shaping of a formless image in which the 'hardness' of Words now co-exists with the 'softness' of Music. The sexual gaze that was previously fossilised in Words' narcissistic repartee is here transformed to its present absorption in the hearer's psychological attention ('to whence one glimpse' [*WM* 340]).

The non-conceptual direction of Feldman's music, which is sustained by small repetitive structures, works well in unearthing this territorial descent into the unconsciousness of the libido. Especially effective is Feldman's alteration of serial procedures, which supports the play's removal of mimetic constraints. Unlike standard techniques of serialism in which the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are arranged into horizontal 'tone rows' to form a melodic entity, Feldman's music develops a vertical construction by organising those twelve notes into harmonic clusters.²⁵ The result is that the musical direction is intensified in a manner that cannot be predetermined. The synchronic effects of Feldman's method



Fig. 1. Jasper Johns, *Usuyuki* (1981). Screenprint on Kurotani Kozo paper. 29-1/2×47-1/4 in. (74.9×120.0 cm). Published by Simka Print Artists, Inc. © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2012. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stewart S. MacDermott Fund, 1998.479 © Photo SCALA, Florence.

complicate any straightforward notion of fidelity to the play, or of fixed methods for proportioning the material. Feldman's comments after the production to the director are misleading in this regard. To Everett Frost, he confesses that he did not really ever 'read' Beckett's text at all, 'but dipped into it all the time'.²⁶

In order to explain Feldman's non-linear reading of *Words and Music*, I wish to highlight the use of generative structures in a space-grid system. The 'world' of Jasper Johns' new paintings, which Feldman mentioned to the director straight after the production, offers insight into his strategy for reading the radio play. A number of Johns' screen prints from the late 1970s and early 80s experiment with hand-drawn crosshatch markings over layered strips of media.²⁷ As an example, I have chosen to focus on a reproduction of the 1981 version of *Usuyuki* (in figures 1 and 2 respectively). 'Usuyuki' is the Japanese word for 'light snow' but is also a metaphor for the aural sensation of tinnitus or 'white noise' (Johns' etchings for Beckett were provided for a collection of prose fragments entitled *Foirades* or *Fizzles*). Two details are worth noting from the screen print: firstly, the directions of the crosshatch markings, which reassemble the physical presence of the

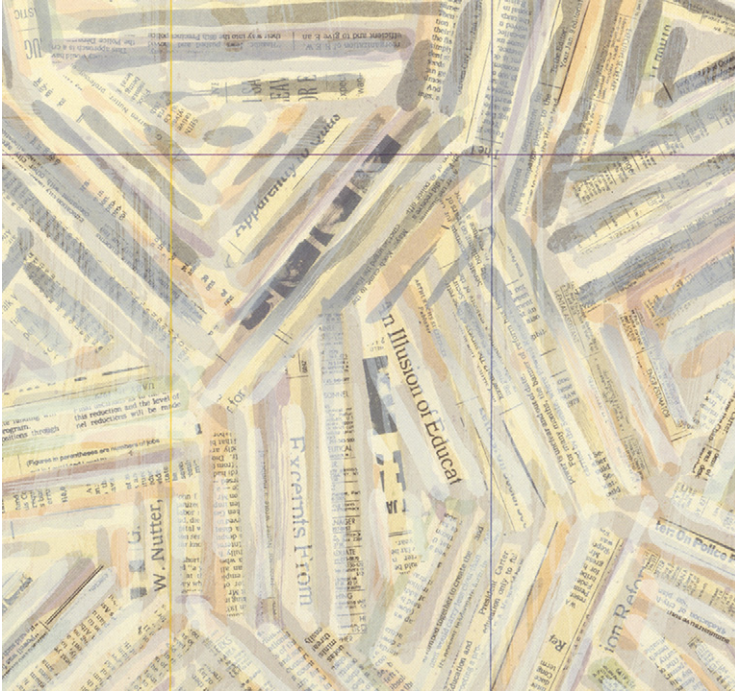


Fig. 2. Detail: bottom left. Jasper Johns *Usuyuki* (1981). Screenprint on Kurotani Kozo paper. Published by Simka Print Artists, Inc. © Jasper Johns / VAGA, New York / DACS, London 2012. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Stewart S. MacDermott Fund, 1998.479 © Photo SCALA, Florence.

text underneath; and secondly, the liberation of the creative act, which is achieved through closed patterns of reference.

As we can see from the second detail reproduction, the patterns simply fold about the space where the generative structures meet, replicating certain newspaper headlines and cylinder seals elsewhere. The closed patterns of reference evolve continuously from the discontinuity between reality and its textual presentation—in transfer, reversal, repetition, layering, and sequence—with the grid highlighting the meta-fictional aspects of decomposition. The significance of these generative structures for *Words and Music* lies in Feldman's reading of Beckett's text as a single multifaceted object from which the appearance of things can be shaped or addressed at any stage. This allows for the collapse of linear time as an absolute present. The time of Feldman's music moves in and out of the textual canvas, dipping vertically, rather than moving across the page from left to

right. Feldman is able to concentrate in this way on the layering of temporal experience that is set up by the creation of 'Bob' as a virtual presence.

The play's verbal detail lends itself surprisingly well to this treatment. From the beginning of the radio drama, Words desperately seeks 'Peace...!' from Music: then Words' 'imploing' (WM 333 and 340) retreats volte-face from an entreaty to silence to an appeal for Music to play. Words' 'My Lord' (WM 334 and 340) is employed both obsequiously and to sound the final note of shocked revelation as Croak drops his club and shuffles off in his slippers. The discrete placement of verbal material is vital to the play's dramatic logic, since it entails a sudden deferral to Music's power. Feldman is able to align his music with these modulations of identical verbal material by reading the text as a single multifaceted object that is explored from different angles. The musical trajectory of *Words and Music* is well suited, then, to expressive strategies that engage non-linearly with the text.

Feldman's reasons for a non-linear reading can easily be interpreted from the play's dramatic logic and his other artistic influences. The evidence of his reading method lies in his use of orchestration. Feldman had been writing a lot for the flute during the 1980s. The instrument features as the most prominent colour of the ensemble in *Crippled Symmetry* (1983), *For Philip Guston* (1984), and *For Christian Wolff* (1986), all of which involve the flute in a major capacity (the bass flute, the alto flute, and the flute respectively). Barbara Monk Feldman has argued that her husband's method of virtual notation for the flute in his late compositions bears a more precise correspondence to the sound of its actual duration than is the case with other instruments, an observation that is particularly relevant to Feldman's orchestration for the radio medium.²⁸ One of the reasons why the composer may have chosen to focus on this instrument once again for *Words and Music* – which employs *two* flutes – lies in the 'double' presence (both virtual and real) that is attached to music in the play. The tonal axis that the flutes carry in Feldman's score is connected to the interval of a second, which is rotated throughout the musical texture. In her examination of the Beckett-Feldman collaborations, Catherine Laws notes that '[p]art of the attraction of this interval is no doubt its avoidance of tonal associations and harmonic reference points or polarities' (Laws, *Music* 284): an attraction that is visually evident in Jasper Johns' screen prints. Feldman's patterning of the same basic material according to the interval of a second is vital to the spatialisation of his music within the larger dimensions of the score. As Laws explains:

One of the effects of the minor and major seconds being either inverted (into sevenths) or displaced (into ninths) is of alternate expansion to intervallic extremes and contraction to clusters moving inwards and outwards across a block of aural space. This idea is heard at different times in different forms. Often, then, the same basic material is effectively heard in varying contexts. Thus Feldman spatializes the music, emphasising the different areas of pitch space and the different instrumental sources. (Laws, *Music* 285)

After Croak has mulled over 'The face' (*WM* 337), the first flute begins its prolonged leaping back and forth between the dominant seventh and the tonic. When the second flute intersects this by changing down across the interval of a perfect fourth (D - A - D) (exactly half the interval of the dominant seventh) once every two leaps of the first flute (F - G - F, F - G - F), the effect is as if someone were holding back the tears. The music is not expressing any direct sentiment, or trying to tell a story; it is purely a gesture imploring us to react in some way. Feldman's roomy, see-sawing alterations in colour and tone bestow a generous sense of space that lends itself to compassion, the ordered pitch-interval successions reaching for some kind of a dialogue 'face to face' with that which exists outside of it.

Feldman's '*Warm suggestion*' for that which is 'seen from above in that radiance so cold and faint' (*WM* 338) stretches the flute's interval leaps without disturbing them. His use of the dominant seventh is vital here, since it cuts across the repetition of Age's minor scale in a major key. The flute's intervals are moved up a step after 'that radiance so cold and faint' (from B - C# - B to C - D - C) and are then taken down by a full tone on the descent (A# - C - A#) to shape the emotional leap. That leap is soon repeated, this time starting on the same note as the descent (from A# - C - A# to B - C# - B) before it is taken down by another full tone (A - B - A), and so on. This lends a gradual sense of diminishment amid permutation sensitive to Words' reflections on memory and loss. The emotional leaps are especially moving because, as Feldman mentioned after the recording in interview with Everett Frost, '[t]here's nothing to interrupt the flute line' (*MFS* 238). The flute line throughout is hardly altered despite the changes that occur during 26:13–27:55 and 37:19–38:08.²⁹ It is not until Words actively pleads for 'Music!' (*WM* 340) that Feldman's vertical sonorities rise out from this flat soundscape and come into their own. An extraordinary layering of sound takes place over three modulations in the space of under a minute [39:38–40:14], conferring a feeling of ascension which Feldman attributes to 'burst[ing] out with a little more sensual harmony' (*MFS* 238). A unique harmonic complexity underscores the

expansive intervals of the flute, as Feldman gleefully confessed to Everett Frost.

The pitch cells (like those delineated above) between the thirty-three fragments that comprise Feldman's score not only correspond, but are periodically synchronised, as the instrumental parts realign themselves elsewhere. This brings us closer to the concept of a 'tandem' between Feldman's score and Beckett's text. Though sometimes aurally disjunctive, Feldman's treatment of orchestral parts (as is the case with the whole ensemble, not just with the two flutes discussed here) can be caught in rotation, criss-crossing from one instrument to another where the generative structures meet. Feldman uses this method of orchestration to read the repetition of textual detail cyclically rather than linearly. A tandem is initiated, then, by Feldman's block orchestration, with similar pitch material being passed back and forth between instruments. The stepwise relationship that Feldman develops between the chords gives the effect of circling about the same spatial area. This is most noticeably the case when Feldman spreads out the intervals linearly (as we have seen with the flutes) to form successive dyads, so that a set of two notes or pitches create a melodic aspect out of the harmonic clusters. As part of this construction, the alternating pitches of the flute are able to shape a melody with temporary overlaps in the harmony. The parts of the vibraphone, piano, cello, viola, and violin are composed out of similar intervallic leaps or dyads, over displaced or inverted minor seconds.

While the flutes may appear to feature as prominently as they do in his other late compositions, Feldman insisted that he was not really able to 'get out there and do what he normally could do' (*MFS* 238). Aside from the independence that Feldman was able to maintain in relation to the play, he was still faced by a number of musical constraints. Feldman appears to have responded by breaking up the musical growth into even smaller grid divisions, or 'fragments', than was usual. Catherine Laws has observed that 'the internal reflection of material through these idiosyncratic processes of variation makes it hard to conceive of a starting or finishing point for this material' (Laws, *Music* 285): an exposition which subtly accounts for the way perceivable developments in Feldman's score lend themselves in support of no teleology overall. Feldman's music is crucially *less* decisive than the sentiments Beckett expressed to the philosopher Theodor Adorno about the play 'ending unequivocally with the victory of music' and to the scholar, Katharine Worth, that 'music always wins.'³⁰ While Music undoubtedly has its comeuppance over Words at the end of the play ('*Triumph and conclusion*' [*WM* 339]), the indeterminacy of Feldman's

approach does not really support the idea of a victorious outcome for music. The genre of radio drama seems to have allowed Feldman greater freedom to preserve the aural ambiguities in Beckett's text. It is a question, for example, left open in the play as to whether Croak's spectacular indolence ever subsides. When Croak drops his club at the end, we cannot be sure whether he is disarmed by pathos or whether he simply shuffles off bored. While Ackerley and Gontarski credit this reaction with profound emotional surrender ('overcome by overt emotion'), it might also be taken as vindication of Words' Freudian slip that of all the passions, *sloth* (not love) is the most urgent by which we are moved.³¹ The final, slightly altered repeat of Feldman's music, combined with the sound-effect of a dropped club and shuffling slippers, contains much that is left unresolved in Beckett's text.

This is not to undermine the sense of closure that is achieved at the end of the play. A homing tendency can be identified in the play's overall resistance to pre-conceived ideas and the discreteness of Bob's suggestions. Marjorie Perloff notes that 'Music's role is surprising because Croak asks both parties to "Forgive" (three times) – (the tripartite structure again signalling a possible transcendence) – 'and yet Music responds with the same soft chords as if to say that there is nothing to forgive.'³² Feldman's continuous rotation (in no fixed order) of chords and pitch material across different instruments maintains this compassionate relationship through a texture of distant intimacy, of warmth yet remoteness, which the radio play strives for in its emotional conclusion. By reading the effects of textual repetition in the light of generative structures, Feldman's music is able to 'outlast' what Armin Schäfer has described as an 'exhausted literature'.³³

In *Words and Music*, Words actually expires at the end, issuing a 'deep sigh' that is marked before the '*Curtain*' (*WM* 340): a strange direction for Beckett to have included in a radio drama. In the context of Words' earlier aggression, that 'deep sigh' features as part of Music's ongoing revisions and improvements to show how the eye of the mind and the ear of the body, if less than consubstantial, might at least allow Music to put flesh on Words. While the precision of Words can seem to engender cruelty, Music's '*Warm suggestion*' for that which is 'seen from above in that radiance so cold and faint' (*WM* 338) relates more strongly to what Charles Krance has called 'a compassionate sound' in Beckett.³⁴ A language of exhaustion, vexation and punishment is given temporary relief by a music that functions very much as the after-effect of Words' cold vanity and dismissal. Feldman's previous collaboration with Beckett on *Neither* had worked on sounding out this space where music happens as the emanation of a third vibration

ringing generously between self and other. His contribution to *Words and Music* is much more persuasive in this regard on account of the principle of divergence that lies at the heart of the play's genesis.

Here, we refer back to the almost procreative tension that is suggested by the play's 'dehiscence': an episode of post-coital recuperation. In prising apart the layering of Words and Music, instead of layering the word (as with Wagner) into the structure and body of the music, the play draws attention to a notional wound or sin out of which a compassionate sound must germinate ('*Burst of tuning. Hsst!*' [WM 333]). We have seen throughout how *Words and Music* refuses to permit the layering of words into the structure and body of music. It is, rather, in puncturing the composition (*dehiscere* inchoative of *hiäre*: 'to be open') that Music's 'suggestive' nature is gradually released as a source of compassionate warmth (with Words able at last to expire). Each carries an axis within it that resists Croak's punishing control and the dictation of 'theme'. By delving deeper into his own creative process, Feldman reached further into the play's expulsion of verbal discontents, operating in tandem with its contrastive and irrational intensities. As such, the vertical hovering of his music preys on the occasions of fertile disjunction—the pauses, the hesitations, the suggestions for following—the better to lead in compassionate direction.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Jeri Johnson and Nicholas Grene for their guidance with parts of this essay.
2. Samuel Beckett to Judith Schmidt (12/02/1961). The Judith Schmidt Douw Collection of Correspondence with Samuel Beckett (1957–1984) is contained in the Irish Collection at the John J. Burns Library in Boston.
3. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 483. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *DF*.
4. *Words and Music* was first published in the journal *Evergreen Review*, 6.27 (November–December 1961): pp. 34–43 before it was reprinted in *Cascando and Other Short Dramatic Pieces* by Grove Press in 1968.
5. See Chris Ackerley and Stanley Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life and Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 370.
6. Samuel Beckett, *Words and Music* (1961), in *The Grove Centenary Editions of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 3, ed. Paul Auster and intro. Edward Albee (New York: Grove Press, 2006): pp. 331–40, p. 335. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *WM*.
7. Beckett had forwarded Feldman's details to Everett Frost (the festival director) in July 1985, a decision that made his second collaboration with Feldman a statement of his high estimation of the composer. This is to be contrasted with Feldman's introduction to Beckett in Berlin eleven years previously, which had contained very little in the way of positive recommendation, but had led to the author sending him a card on the back of which was a handwritten text entitled 'Neither'. That

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- Beckett wrote this text at Feldman's specific request has been confirmed in a letter to Catherine Laws from William Colleran, director of United Edition (Feldman's publisher). See Catherine Laws, *Music and Language in the Work of Samuel Beckett* [PhD thesis: electronic resource] (University of York, 1996), p. 194. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as Laws, *Music*.
8. Everett Frost, 'Introduction to *Words and Music*', in Chris Villars (ed.), *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–87* (London: Hyphen, 2006): pp. 229–39, p. 229. This collection hereafter referred to parenthetically as *MFS*. For Everett Frost's opinion on why *Words and Music* should be allocated a central place in the Beckett canon, see 'Fundamental sounds: recording Samuel Beckett's radio plays' in the *Theatre Journal*, 43.3 (October 1991): pp. 361–76.
 9. For a more detailed discussion of the provenance of this term and its use, see John Pilling, *Beckett's 'Dream' Notebook* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999), and Jeffrey Saunders, 'The Mortal Microcosm: Creativity and the Body in the Fiction of Samuel Beckett, 1932–1961' [PhD thesis] (University of Reading, 1993).
 10. The *OED*: see <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49139>. Beckett also wrote out a dictionary definition for the term in his 1931–1932 notebook.
 11. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, eds Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (Dublin: Black Cat Press, first published 1992 [though completed summer 1932]): pp. 138–9. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *DFMW*.
 12. Feldman interview with Howard Skempton, 'Beckett as Librettist', *Music and Musicians*, 25.9 (May 1977): pp. 5–6. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as Feldman/Skempton.
 13. For a discussion about the value of radio as a medium for Beckett, see Katharine Worth, 'Beckett and the Radio Medium', in John Drakakis (ed.), *British Radio Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981): pp. 191–217.
 14. Feldman interview with Everett Frost (10/03/87; *MFS* 237).
 15. Feldman's provocative comments about opera demand a fuller explanation in light of the experiences that lie behind them. Feldman first met Beckett after he had been commissioned to compose a piece for the 1976 Rome Opera festival, a project for which the Buffalo professor earnestly recounted his dread a decade later: 'I just don't experience what exactly, what is meant theatrically by opera' (*MFS* 231).
 16. It is precisely these outward manifestations of 'theme' that are parodied by Words' *stile concitato* [agitated style]: 'Is love the word? [*Pause. Do.*] Is soul the word? [*Pause. Do.*] Do we mean love, when we say love? [*Pause. Pause. Do.*] Soul, when we say soul?' (*WM* 335).
 17. The description of Beckett as a 'word man' has an added emphasis here. Though Feldman often dedicated his music to literary figures, only nine of his compositions are based on literary texts.
 18. Marjorie Perloff, 'The Beckett/Feldman Radio Collaboration: *Words and Music* as Hörspiel', *The Beckett Cycle*, 26 (Fall 2003): pp. 207–11, p. 211.
 19. See 'Morton Feldman Interviewed by Fred Orton and Gavin Bryars' (27/05/76) in *Studio International CXCII* (November 1976): pp. 244–8. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as Feldman/Orton/Bryars. In interview with Gavin Bryars, Feldman states his difference from Cage with regards to free notation: 'GB: You've always worked more closely with the sounds than he [John Cage] has. MF: Right, it's not a big ideological difference. I think what happened with John [Cage] is that he became much more all-embracing in terms of what kind of shots the camera

- would take. Remember his very beautiful idea where he invented a camera for other people to take the picture, which in a sense pinpoints his whole consciousness of where he's at[?] I'm not into that' (Feldman/Orton/Bryars 246).
20. Morton Feldman, *Give my Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), p. 76. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *GMRES*.
 21. Morton Feldman, Middelburg Lecture (02/07/85), 'I'm Reassembling all the Time', in Raoul Mörchen (ed.), *Words on Music/Worte über Musik: Morton Feldman in Middelburg. Lectures and Conversations*, Volume 1 (Köln: MusicTexte, 2007): pp. 46–155.
 22. Kevin Volans, 'Morton Feldman ~ from Memory', in Seán Kissane (ed.), *Vertical Thoughts: Morton Feldman and the Visual Arts*, exhibition catalogue (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art/Áras Nua-Éalaíne na hÉireann, 2010): pp. 232–5, p. 233.
 23. Marjorie Perloff has argued that Croak, Joe, and Bob are not individuals at all, yet she still admits such descriptions as 'Joe's words' in her critical discourse. See Perloff, 'The Beckett/Feldman Radio Collaboration', *passim*.
 24. See Clas Zilliacus's account of this episode in *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett For and In Radio and Television* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1976): pp. 104–9.
 25. Feldman's relationship with serialism is much disputed by composers and critics, and a great deal more complicated than the account presented here.
 26. See Everett Frost, 'The Note Man on the Word Man: Morton Feldman on Composing the Music for Samuel Beckett's *Words and Music* in *The Beckett Festival of Radio Plays*', in Mary Bryden (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998): pp. 47–55, p. 51.
 27. For a recent analysis of Jasper Johns' screen prints, see Jennifer Roberts, 'The Printerly Art of Jasper Johns', in *Jasper Johns/In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print*, ed. Marsha Pomerantz (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012): pp. 10–44.
 28. Barbara Monk Feldman, 'Music and the picture plane: Poussin's *Pyramus and Thisbe* and Morton Feldman's *For Philip Guston*', in Kissane (ed.), *Vertical Thoughts*: pp. 250–67, p. 263.
 29. All recording timings are accurate as of the Naive-Montaigne 1997 recording (re-released 2001) of *Words and Music*.
 30. Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, p. 651. Beckett had listened to Theodor Adorno's opinions of his work at a lunch put on by their German publisher, Suhrkamp Verlag, earlier in 1961. This is Katharine Worth's account of Beckett's reaction after she had played him back Humphrey Searle's 1973 version of *Words and Music*. Worth assisted in the production of the play for the University of London Audio-Visual Centre a decade after John Beckett withdrew the music he wrote for the original BBC production. See Katharine Worth, 'Words for Music Perhaps' in Bryden (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and Music*: pp. 9–20 (p. 16), which takes its cue from W. B. Yeats's 1932 collection of poems.
 31. Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, p. 651.
 32. Perloff, 'The Beckett/Feldman Radio Collaboration', p. 209.
 33. See Armin Schäfer's article on 'Exhausted Literature [Erschöpfte Literatur]: The Emergence of the New in Samuel Beckett's Novels and Plays', *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 32.4 (December 2009): pp. 329–44. See also H. Porter Abbott,

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- Beckett Writing Beckett, The Author in the Autograph* (Cornell: Cornell University, 1996): pp. 61–2, which applies the term with a very different emphasis to the state of the writer's resources.
34. See Charles Krance, 'Beckett Music', in Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media* (New York: Garland, 1999): pp. 51–66.