Throughout his career, Samuel Beckett's style, mood, and attitudes toward art change. These changes are related to, and grow out of, a series of changes that occur in Beckett's semantic and syntactic principles. Linguistically, Beckett moves from a celebration of syntax at the expense of semantic content, through both identification and later dissociation of the two, to a period of reconciliation in which he accepts the solace of form as being itself an adequate semantic comment.

Beckett's early linguistic attitudes are suggested by the Verticalist manifesto he signed in 1932 advocating use of language as "a mantic instrument . . . which does not hesitate to adopt a revolutionary attitude toward word and syntax, going even so far as to invent a hermetic language, if necessary."¹ According to the Verticalists, the artist is free to—perhaps even obligated to—fashion new syntactic orders and hence new patterns of meaning. This Verticalist conception of language that informs the prose of Beckett's earliest works is perhaps most clearly displayed in "Text,"² a published extract of the unpublished Dream of Fair to Middling Women. Basically, the piece portrays an exchange between a "lust-be-lepered" lover and the woman he unsuccessfully importunes to be his "bonny bony doublebed cony." The real interest, however, lies not in the situation but
in the language that compounds aural devices into one long (approximately 180-word) sentence. Within the first two dozen words alone, there is a remarkable accumulation of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme: "Come come and cull my bonny bony doublebed cony swiftly my springal and my thin Kerry twingle-twangler comfort my days of roses days of beauty. . . ." Sound replaces meaning as the interpersonal relationship is subsumed under a verbal one. We are more interested in the way words tumble about each other's meanings than we are in the lover's frustrated efforts to tumble about with his cony. The piece celebrates not humanistic concerns but rather the power of the artist who forces his words to operate on all levels of meaning simultaneously, who makes each word refer both forward and backward in a flowing prose. For example, in a dazzling display of metaphysical transitions, Beckett transforms the woman into a hunted rabbit, to nibbled-up lettuce, to a plant covered by an insect's secretion, and back to a woman. The very density of images, in which human, animal, and vegetable allusions interconnect and overlap, testifies to an underlying belief in the possibility of order, in the reality of the external, and in the capacity of language to project and display that order and that reality. Such beliefs affirm an order antithetical to the uncertainty, fluidity, and chaos that Beckett postulates, forcing him to find new linguistic models for his art.

For the major portion of his career, Beckett pursues the linguistic theory he ascribes to Proust and Joyce, that form is a spatial configuration of meaning: "for Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world." An idea resides in its shape, and style reflects more accurately than any content a speaker's vision of the universe. It is as if Beckett could not argue strongly enough for the identity of form and content, for he insists on underlining his points in discussing Joyce: "Here form is content, content is form. . . . His writing is not about something; it is that something itself." The identification of form and content encourages Beckett to
emphasize the structure of his own works and the shapes of his ideas: "I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. . . . It is the shape that matters." 

Beckett's purported interest in the shape rather than the validity of ideas finds its best formal expression in the trilogy where form and content are made to seem identical and indivisible as the narrator creates himself, and incidentally the text we read, through the very act of narration: "... I'm in words, made of words, others' words." Despite all assertions, however, the narrator/narrated is as irretrievably split as are form and content. On the one hand, the narrator is the formless, fluid speaker who rejects all that is alien to the nonverbal core of himself. On the other hand, he resides in the fixed shapes and external orders of his spoken words. He exists, as the Unnamable observes, in the interstice between internal and external:

... I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either... (The Unnamable, p. 383)

In "Shades of Syntax," Hugh Kenner examines the linguistic implications of Beckett's efforts to conflate form and context, observing that it is "a typical Beckett strategy, to equate syntax with logic, lull us with their coincidence, then trap us with the consequence." Kenner argues that, unlike a Joycean "interior monologue" in which the mind "exerts no effort to control its own contents," Beckett presents us in a work like How It Is with a narrator "struggling to utter sentences, which means to control his thoughts, which means to grasp and comprehend the reality in which he partakes. Each block of type is a unit of his effort; we can gauge his progress by keeping track of the syntactic order he achieves" (pp. 30-31). The "overall symmetry" of How It Is creates the illusion that the narrator has achieved order and control. But the control is syntactic not semantic; the narrator has ordered his words to attain a symmetrical form, but he has understood little: "his effort... is over-
whelmed . . . by all the grim data he has not managed to clarify nor explain” (p. 31).

In the 1960s, instead of continuing to ignore the tensions between semantics and syntactics, Beckett reverses his linguistic theory and emphasizes their disparity. Instead of identifying form and content, he counterpoints them. In a 1961 interview with Tom Driver, Beckett acknowledges that form does not have to be content: “The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates.”

The shape of a work of art can be separate from the idea it accommodates. Structure may, in fact, work in opposition to chaos as it does in the Residua, where Beckett creates structures that mathematically and scientifically describe fantastic objects, people, and images. Paradoxically, the very artifice of these carefully constructed structures points toward their underlying structural meaninglessness, whereas the arbitrariness beneath their order gestures toward a more fundamental absence of order. “Lessness,” for example, presents a randomly arranged collection of words, images, and sentences. In order to read the work, the reader must reverse Beckett’s creative process and break the piece down into sentences and phrases, regroup the components, and analyze the resulting families of sentences. The piece thus exists between composition and decomposition.

In his residual works, Beckett successfully accomplishes what his Verticalist pieces failed to do: he uses language and literature to capture the essence of the void by implication and exclusion: he expresses the chaos by avoiding it. Beneath the form lies the fluidity, uncertainty, and “mess” that Beckett seeks to accommodate. In the words Beckett used to distinguish himself from Kafka: “... Kafka’s form is classic, it goes on like a steam-roller—almost serene. It seems to be threatened the whole time—but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form.”

The new mood of the most recent fictions marks yet another stage in Beckett’s linguistic explorations. Instead of striving to portray the “consternation behind the form,” “Sounds,” “Still
3," and Company return to the solace of form. Serenity is possible because the pieces are indifferent to the distinctions between internal and external realms that troubled earlier narrators. The figure in "Sounds" listens equally for the noise of the lightest leaf or for the sighs of his own breath. His postures intimate both Belacquæsque hermeticism, as he sits with his head in his hands, and exterior connections, as he stands embracing a tree. Even his speech patterns mix once mutually exclusive worlds. The wind is described in terms of the self and its mutterings: the wind makes "no more sound than a ghost or mutter [of] old words once got by heart. . . ." It is no longer necessary to denounce associations or to seek absolute answers. Peace comes as the agonized questions that informed earlier quests fade away: "No not yet not listening again in vain quite yet while the dim questions fade where been how long how it was" (p. 156). Imperatives, interjections, permutations, and interruptions disappear. Direct contradiction is replaced by alternative possibilities. Repetitions become less insistent, the phrases longer, the rhythms more sustained. As commas and periods become less frequent, the prose becomes more fluid and tranquil. The syntax and lexicon become simpler and more conventional. The recent pieces dispense with a learned vocabulary including terms such as commissure, cacodemons, deasil; they eliminate word games such as the ones the narrator of "All Strange Away" plays with "Emma/Emmo" and "haven/heaven" (p. 9); and they avoid the unconventionally ordered syntax of: "And finally for the moment and then that face the tailaway so common in untrained speakers leaving sometimes in some doubt such things as which Diogenes and what fancy her only" ("All Strange Away," p. 5). We are proffered instead the comfort of the familiar and the solace of conventional linguistic forms.

Although the most recent pieces are without urgency, they are not without energy. "Sounds" and "Still 3," for example, are serene but not static. Just enough imagination persists to keep the narration going. Almost inaudible sounds recur just frequently enough to keep the silence from being absolute. Barely perceptible images appear just often enough to forestall
the growing darkness. Instead of an impasse, the pieces project a tranquil diminishing. Instead of falling into exhausted silence, the pieces drift softly to rest. As in Valéry's "The Spinner," which ends at the same moment its drowsy spinner nods into sleep, Beckett's pieces tranquilly blend into the spreading calm:

Leave it so then this stillest night till now of all quite still head in hand as shown listening trying listening for a sound or dreamt away try dreamt away where no such thing no more than ghosts make nothing to listen for no such thing as a sound. ("Sounds," p. 156)

There are no more sounds or images to disturb the peace, and an impotent speaker has been reconciled to an ambiguous universe.

Reconciliation leads not to an exhausted silence but to images of serenity. Urgency, not artistry, disappears. Beckett no longer seeks the linguistically impossible: his art does not have to be the chaos. It is enough if he can return to conventions without reasserting their assumptions. A sense of sufficiency predominates, enabling Beckett to create from the solace of traditional linguistic forms new shapes to accommodate the uncertain and fluid human condition. To alter a phrase from "All Strange Away," syntax need no longer be upended in opposite corners.


11. Contrast, for example, the following passages from “All Strange Away” and “Sounds”:

Light out, strike one to light, light all the same, candlelight in light, blow out, light out, so on. No candle, no matches, no need, never were. ("All Strange Away," Journal of Beckett Studies, No. 3 [Summer 1978])

Sounds then even stillest night here where none come some time past mostly no want no not no want but never none of any kind even stillest night seldom an hour another hour but some sound of some kind here where none come none pass even the nightbirds some time past in such numbers once such numbers. Or if none hour after hour no sound of any kind then he having been dreamt away let himself be dreamt away to where none at any time away from here where none come none pass to where no sound at any time no sound to listen for none of any kind. ("Sounds," p. 155)