

THE AESTHETICS OF SILENCE: A STUDY IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S LANGUAGE

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Samuel Beckett is one of the seminal propounders of absurdism in literature in general and English and French drama in particular. In fact, he is the single author who exhibited absurdism in the use of language itself. The whole *oeuvre* of Samuel Beckett is characterized by a minimal usage of even the austere and modest vocabulary which also disintegrates in the process of being used by Beckett's characters who are as much bewildered by language as by life itself. There is general, though gradual, breakdown of language in Beckett's works, reflecting one of his main concerns in his literary endeavors - where there is no certainty; there can be no definite meanings. This absolute distrust, and the resultant collapse, of language coincides with the absolute 'character annihilation' in his plays

“where he succeeds in presenting plays devoid of plot, décor, action, psychological development, climes, dénouement, and in which he even eliminated some of man's most essential functions.” (Raymond Federman, 1962: 234)

Particularly in his dramas, Becket reduced both the human element as well as the language component to naught. Earlier the theatre would not have progressed without the human presence, but Becket exhibited tremendous talent in 'dehumanizing' his theatre. Becket succeeded in showing the complete physical disintegration on stage by relying only on voices in some of his dramas. His shift to radio plays like *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music* and *Cascando* was a symbolic

gesture to communicate his 'distrust' of human performance in accompaniment of human voice. In fact, in his play *Krapp's Last Tape*, Becket replaced human relationship, previously an essential component for the growth of the dramatic performance, with a voice from a tape-recorder. Then Becket moved even beyond that. He presented short dramatic works in which human speech was totally excluded. They are *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*.

From his novels to dramas, Becket seems to be progressing towards "total emptiness" (John Flecher, 1967: 144), in which plot, characters and language itself crumble to nothing. Ruby Cohn (1962) comments, "In spite of his extraordinary vocabulary and impressive command of several languages, Becket deliberately limits the words of elegance, charging each word with an enormous burden." The factors that prompted Becket to take recourse to such reduction of language are bound up with Becket's philosophy of language. As early as 1929, Becket had observed in his essay on Joyce, "No language is so sophisticated as English. It is abstracted to death." (James Eliopoulos, 1975:58)

In fact, referring to Beckett's dramas, Ruby Cohn remarks,

"... (T)here is an insidious undermining of language as a means of communication or expression of intelligence." (1962:216-217)

Becket's absurdism, the source and fountain of his linguistic absurdism, is of extreme kind and poignancy. For Becket, unlike other existential thinkers, even the reflection on the so-called existential questions is absurd. To him, senses are not competent enough to distinguish between illusion and reality. Even when definitions are attempted, which again is a linguistic issue, they are usually made by a process of elimination where the word is exhausted and emptied of all that it denotes or connotes. Resultantly, every type of communication, from sublime to trivial, literally takes the shape of the language game in Wittgenstein's sense.

"There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names...world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little some with a beginning, a middle, and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead." (Ihab Hassan, 1971: 219)

Keeping this in mind, we can reflect upon what Wittgenstein would say:

"My aim is to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense," and "he who understands me finally recognizes (my propositions) as senseless." (Ibid: 16)

Wittgenstein, true to his contemporaneous temperament was having a radical and revolutionary understanding of language in general. But, by Beckett's time, language had got fully consolidated into a complex riddle which none could solve. All writing had become problematic. In fact every kind of discourse, in its loose sense, had become problematic. Beckett was writing in the same context of congeries of problematising theories.

Beckett could make his impossible art possible on the single foundation of silence, "...It's to go silent that you need courage, for you'll be punished, for having gone silent, and yet you can't do otherwise than go silent, then be punished for having gone silent." (Ibid: 219-20) This same tension between silence and speech is maintained throughout his plays and in the process devaluation and disintegration of language is carried to the extreme. There is only inverse progress happening in terms of eloquence in Beckett's all plays. Specifically, there are whole passages of dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* that tantamount to pure rhetoric stripped of any meaning instead of the word dialogue in its technical sense along with its implications. In fact dialogue is the wrong word for the miserable "inefficient communication" that takes place among his characters.

There are two aspects to Beckett's use of language in his plays. One is that language, per se, meant nothing, given the distrust of language Beckett nurtured due to his absurdism. Second is that Beckett advertently uses language in such a manner that he does not let it mean anything. So in addition to inherent flaws in language that philosophers and even mystics have always been talking about, Beckett employed it in a manner to expose its apparent inefficiency also. There are some techniques that Beckett often uses to do the job. One is repetition. This varies from the repetition of a single word to whole passages. Perhaps the purpose is to "communicate" the penury of both the language as well as the thought. 'Silence', 'long silence', 'then', and other words are the most recurring patterns that punctuate the 'discourses' in the plays. Other common refrains include phrases such as "it's not certain", "it hurts", "it's inevitable", "what shall we do now", etc.

"The striking characteristic of Beckett's style is...the absence of language. Beckett's struggle to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of language and the disintegration of thought, finds its ultimate expression in an absence of language. Beckett has regarded mere words as powerless to express the dialogue of man, and his theatre has evolved from limited dialogue through monologues to profound silence." (James Eliopoulos, 1975: 100)

Owing to this liberal use of silence, George Steiner rightly calls Beckett the "representative of our present diminished reach, as (Henry) James was representative of lost spaciousness..." (George Steiner, 1972: 14)

Another technique is the mode of questioning. Almost all characters in his dramas grill each other with constant questioning. This question and answer formula appears some twelve times before the end in *Waiting for Godot*. In fact, *Endgame* opens with the same technique:

"...Can there be misery-loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now? My father? My mother? My dog."

The technique of repetitive questioning permeates both Beckett's *chef de oeuvre* *Waiting for Godot* as well as *Endgame*.

The gradual progression of Beckett's dramatic style from inefficient dialogues to monologues, finally fade away in the single world of silence. Sometimes, recourse is even taken to "chaotic nonsense." (Refer to Lucky's famous speech in *Godot*) to indicate that language has lost its function as a means of communication.

"The only effective death in the play is the murder of language." (Ihab Hassan, 1971: 240)

Paradoxically, Beckett's characters speak bare basics of language to communicate something that is both incommunicable as well as incomprehensible from Beckett's perspective also. The result is that they find themselves grappling with the prodigious job of "communicating the incommunicable." Some critics have tried to interpret Beckett's rejection of language and his use of silence as his striving for some meaning in an otherwise a landscape of meaninglessness. Silence is not adopted and nurtured for nothing.

"The defiant rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic is by no means the equivalent of a total rejection of all meaning ...On the contrary, it constitutes an earnest endeavour to penetrate the deeper layers of reality." (James Eliopoulos, 1975: 56)

The idea is that our thinking is structured in terms of the language we use, and in order to penetrate to the 'real content of thinking', we must forgo the structure of language in general and its grammatical construction that screens the ineffable behind it.

This apparent incompetence in verbal medium and dissatisfaction with it leads Beckett to a realm where he prefers silence to speech. What happens is that "the total verbal

competence of Joyce yields to thorough “incompetence of Beckett.” (Ihab Hassan, 1971:211) This vacuum or the absence of language or silence has been interpreted diversely. It has been subjected to rigorous social, political and theological interpretations. Given the Christian undercurrents and overcurrents and the scaffolding they provide to Beckett’s works, this silence has been compared to the silence of holy men,

“who after knowing pain and outrage, reach for a peace beyond human understanding..... (Beckett) reaches beyond existentialism, beyond a literature, into a silence that sings.” (Ihab Hassan, 1971: 211)

Beckett does not merely move from the realm of speech to the speechlessness. Inversely speaking, he moves from the realm of meaninglessness to that of meaning. In terms of language, he means nothing, but in terms of thought, he transcends even metaphysics. Metaphysicality is not something that is his domain. He touches virtually the domain of pataphysics. That is what lies beyond metaphysics. Religious symbolism is not something that satisfies him, at least not in its apparent meaning. That is why he blasts religious terminology because he wants to seep into the fissures and arrive at universes lying inside them. Beckett succeeds to go beyond nonsense, noise and even Lucky’s farrago. He embarks on a journey that leads to the destination of silence. Silence is symbolic. It is also an act– a spiritual act. That way the theme of Beckett is religious, not secular nor even cynic or absurd. While traversing his ‘absurd journey’, Beckett ends up in the domain of religion.

His silence has been compared to the silence of Zen Buddhism. It can be compared to the initiation of a novice in religious mysticism when he is asked to abandon his speech and articulate through silence. How does he manage to do it? Beckett makes us understand that.

Another factor that is to be taken note of is that Beckett’s devaluation of language was not mainly out of social but philosophical determinants also. His concern was not the urbanized, aestheticised and mechanized diminished reach of the modest vocabulary. His was a philosophical discontent with language which happens when thought reaches a high but excruciating complexity and seriousness. There, in that realm, one understands the non-lingual nature of reality or what can be said to be the ‘heart/core’ of things. Though, talking of any such thing as ‘core meaning’ now is as absurd as..... what? I dunno.

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