

Beckett and Hemingway: A Stylistic Comparison

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Nothing is more real than nothing.

—Democritus

My long sickness of health and living now begins to mend and nothing brings me all things.

—*Timon of Athens*

A comparison of Beckett's use of language in drama and Hemingway's in fiction might appear gratuitous. The writer of fiction has to sustain an element of narration. He is also more dependent on language for his effects, not having communicative alternatives like gesture, mime, sound and light effects, which are available to the dramatist. On the other hand, the dramatist has to work in awareness of the continual presence of the audience. What the dramatist writes has not only to say but to show. In spite of these differences, there is some justification for drawing parallels between Beckett and Hemingway. Both show a deep awareness of the inadequacy of the linguistic medium, and both use the techniques like reduction and indirection in order to achieve unusual stylistic concentration, power and intensity. This paper attempts to analyse some of the linguistic devices used by the two writers, and to relate them to the effects achieved by them.

"My work is a matter of fundamental sounds made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else", says Beckett¹, thus emphasizing the primacy of language in his drama as against all the theatrical elements used by him effectively. Yet, Beckett's attitude towards language is one of distrust. So is Hemingway's, as is evidenced by such remarks of his characters as "You'll lose it if you talk about it," in *The Sun Also Rises*, or "all our words, from loose using have lost their edge," in *Death in the Afternoon*. These writers know that they cannot depend on language to communicate fully. The artist, as Gombrich has pointed out, "cannot transcribe what he sees, he can only translate it into the terms of his medium."² This suggests the imperfection of language and the resistance that it offers to the artist. Similarly, Ernest Cassirer says, "Language harbours the curse of mediacy, and is bound to conceal what it seeks to reveal."³ Both Beckett and Hemingway have an acute awareness of the failure of language to communicate to the reader the texture, quality and immediacy of experience. Beckett wrote, "art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication."⁴ Later, in an article on van Veldes (1945), he remarked words are insufficient, "each time that one wishes to make words do a true work of transference, each time one wishes to make them express

something other than words, they align themselves in such a way as to cancel each other out.”⁵ The inadequacy of language as a tool for communication is brought out even more specifically by Beckett in his plays. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon refuses to return the ball of conversation because language fails him. But even when conversation takes place, communication may not be effective, as Beckett shows in *All That Fall*. “Do you find anything bizarre about my way of speaking?”⁶ asks Mrs. Rooney. No wonder, because her attempts to communicate with the people around her have been in vain, and she concludes that she is “struggling with a dead language.”⁷ In *Happy Days*, Winnie feels that “even words fail at times.”⁸ Language may distort or miss the truth it should convey. “There is a little one way to say it all. ...And no truth in it anywhere.”⁹ This can happen even with a well-developed language like English. The very richness of a language like English can result in blurred impressions and abstractions. Ford Madox Ford tells us that Joseph Conrad was troubled by such a problem :

He used to declare that English was a language in which it was impossible to write a direct statement...All English words are instruments for exciting blurred emotions. “Oaken” in French means “made of oak wood” – nothing more. “Oaken” in English connotes innumerable moral attributes.¹⁰

These overtones makes for vagueness of inexact expression.

There are other difficulties too. Literary art does not have language as an exclusive medium for its own use; it shares this with all discourse. Such a situation has disadvantages. Constant and careless use for varying purposes has turned words into worn-out imprecise tools. This is especially true of English. Hemingway regrets, “all our words from long use have lost their edge.”¹¹ They are unsuitable for the rigorous use to which he intended to put them. “A writer’s job is to tell the truth,” he declared in his introduction to *Men and War*. In a latter work he complained about the tendency that words have of distorting and falsifying “the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact” that he wanted to convey to the reader.¹² Hemingway’s distrust of language is also expressed in Frederick Henry’s denunciation of “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage,” which contrast with “concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.”¹³ The disparity between words and things, between expressions and experiences, was difficult to bridge. The writer has to struggle with language if his aim is to communicate *the real thing*. Hemingway’s attitude here is comparable to Beckett’s. “No language is so sophisticated as English. It is a language abstracted to death.”¹⁴ He reacted against this abstraction by writing in French,¹⁵ where his style became so functional as to almost disappear. Later, the rigorous exercise of translation enabled him to achieve a like functional quality or bareness in English.

Both Hemingway and Beckett tried to evade abstraction in language by means of various devices. Hemingway used a process of reduction in order to “strip language clear

to lay it bare to the bone.’¹⁶ He severely limited his vocabulary. His is a strictly selective and restricted vocabulary, consisting of relatively few and short words. For instance, he is sparing in his use of adjectives, though this may result, sometimes, in repetitions of “such uncertain monosyllables as *fine* and *nice*.”¹⁷ But this economy makes for compression and directness. Hemingway regarded adjectives as more decorative than functional and so preferred nouns to adjectives. Also, “Hemingway puts his emphasis on nouns because, among parts of speech, they come closest to things. Stringing them along by means of conjunctions, he approximates the actual flow of experiences.”¹⁸ These linguistic habits are illustrated in the following samples:

1. It was a fine clear afternoon, pleasant, not cold, with a light north breeze. It was a nice afternoon all right. The tide was running out and there were two pelicans sitting on the piling at the edge of the channel. A grunt fishing boat, painted dark green, changed past on the way around to the fish market, the Negro fisherman sitting on the stern holding the tiller. Henry looked out across the water, smooth with the wind blowing with the tide, grey blue in the afternoon sun, out to the sandy island formed when the channel was dragged where the shark camp had been located. There were white gulls flying over the island.
“Be a pretty night,” Harry thought. “Be a nice night to cross.”¹⁹
2. Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling.²⁰

Hemingway also uses verbs sparingly. Harry Lavin remarks, “without much self-deprivation, Hemingway could get along on the so-called ‘operators’ of Basic English, the sixteen monosyllabic verbs that stem from movements of the body. The substantive verb *to be* is predominant, characteristically introduced by an expletive (e.g. ‘there was’, ‘there were’)²¹. Such reductions are Hemingway’s way of coming to terms with reality, and achieving immediacy.

Repetition is another linguistic device that both Hemingway and Beckett employ. Repetition is one way of economising words or reducing vocabulary. Hemingway uses repetition of words and details in order to achieve emphasis, immediacy, and a sense of ‘objectivity’, as in the example given below:

Of course they turned on you. They turned on you often but they always turned on every one. They turned on themselves, too. If you find three

together, two would unite against one, and then the two would start to betray each other. Not always, but often enough for you to take enough cases and start to draw it as a conclusion.²²

Beckett uses repetition to a greater extent than Hemingway. The word *nothing* is used thirty times in *Waiting for Godot*, while other words frequently repeated are *Godot*, *silence*, *happy* and *pity*. Repetition has, sometimes, an echo-effect, as in the following dialogue:

VLADIMIR: And didn't they beat you?
ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.
VLADIMIR: The same as usual?
ESTRAGON: The same? I don't know.²³

Sometimes, repetition becomes insistent and produces a cyclic effect:

CLOV: So you all want me to leave you?
HAMM: Naturally.
CLOV: Then I'll leave.
HAMM: You can't leave us.
CLOV: Then I won't leave you.
HAMM: Why don't you finish us? I'll tell you the combination of the cupboard if you promise to finish me.
CLOV: I couldn't finish you.
HAMM: Then you won't finish me.²⁴

Speaker, and sometimes context, confer variety on repetition. Repetition becomes, in these writers, a very useful stylistic device. "Repetitions of word and phrase insinuate their significance precisely because they avoid expansion and customary elaboration".²⁵ Repetition helps in the reduction process: "The little that stands before us stands sharply, brilliantly present; the rest is ruthlessly banished. ... We are in the huge and abrupt present, given to us without connectives or transitions."²⁶

Reduction can also be seen Hemingway's syntax. This shows a sparing use of transformations. Very often Hemingway gives us a string of kernel sentences, as in the following passage:

"Listen," the detective said. "This isn't Chicago. You're not a gangster. You don't have to act like a moving picture."²⁷

"Three or four times we waited for you to kill him. Pablo has no friends."

"I had the idea," Robert Jordan said. "Best I left it."

"Surely all could see it. Everyone noted your preparations. Why didn't you do it?"²⁸

Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He made his

camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there in the good place.²⁹

Hemingway's syntactic choices are also typical. He avoids involved sentence structures or sentence linked by cause-effect relationship. Instead, he prefers sentences conjoined to show sequence or co-ordinate clauses to embedding. We can observe such preferences in a piece of writing like the following:

She said nothing, and neither did he, and when the great bird had flown far out of the closed window of the gondola, and was lost and gone, neither of them say anything. He held her head lightly with his good arm and the other arm held the high ground now.³⁰

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white, except for the leaves.³¹

Often, intra-sentence and inter-sentence relationships are based on repetition or juxtaposition of phrases or clauses:

Nobody knows what tribes we come from nor what our tribal inheritance is nor what the mysteries were in the woods where the people lived that we came from. All we know is that we do not know. We know nothing about what happens to us in the nights. When it happens in the day though it *is* something.³²

There were many more guns in the country around and the spring had come.³³ Such a rigid syntax gives us the impression of concentration: only the essentials of a situation are given.

Beckett's syntactic patterning, like Hemingway's, is simple. The characters of Beckett, especially in the earlier plays, speak very short sentences or even mono-syllables. Repetitive patterning is common, as in the following dialogue:

POZZO: I can't bear it any longer ... the way he goes on ... you've no idea ... it's terrible ... he must go ... I'm going mad ... I can't bear it ... any longer ...

VLADIMIR : He can't bear it.

ESTRAGON: Any longer.
 VLADIMIR : He's going mad.
 ESTRAGON : It's terrible.³⁴

Beckett's most common syntactic device is the use of simple connectives, or the juxtaposition of clauses.

1. We have kept our appointments, and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment.³⁵

One isn't master of one's moods. All day I've felt in great form. I didn't get up in the night.³⁶

Sometimes Beckett's juxtaposes kernel sentences cleverly to create a sense of 'objectivity' as in the following example:

We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. ... But habit is a great deadener. ... At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.³⁷

This is an attempt by Vladimir to see his own situation as through the eyes of another person.

Though Beckett has a preference for kernels his style is not always free from transformations. For instance, adverbialization is a transform that Beckett uses frequently. The adverb slot in a sentence (S = NP + VP, where S stands for Sentence NP for Noun Phrase and VP for Verb Phrase), may be filled by either a single lexical item, a phrase, or a clause. For example in the sentence,

They crucified him + (adv.)

Transformations like the following are possible:

They crucified him + (quick/quickly)

They crucified him + (in warm weather)

They crucified him + (while it was warm)

The constituent sentence which fills the adverb slot in sentence 3 is embedded in the following manner :

1
 Matrix (Then crucified him)

3
 constituent: (It was warm)

2
 Adv. While

Transformation: 1 + 2

= 1 + while + 3 (right-branching)

= They crucified him while it was warm

Or,

Deletion, in the writings of Hemingway and Beckett, is a very useful reductive device. "Deletion is a transformation that affects the deep structure to create more compact, concrete and elegant structures. Deletion is a minus action, it omits, effaces, erases and cancels."⁴³

Reductive processes are applied to life as to language: both Beckett and Hemingway concern themselves with limited areas of life. Hemingway usually concentrates on physical details, sensations and actions, while Beckett focuses attention on life narrowed down by various restrictions. Hemingway's characters are men of action – fighters and hunters – confronting danger and death, and avoiding thinking. Beckett's characters are severely limited by their own physical disabilities as by situational and environmental constraints. They are really fractured characters encountering fractional situations. When Pozzo, in *Waiting for Godot*, asks Vladimir and Estragon who they are, they reply, "We are men." They are, however, "the diminished remnants of man, "they represent mankind reduced to the lowest level – "man reduced to the role of helpless, homeless, impotent comic."⁴⁴ They are tramps with nothing to do, waiting alone in the middle of nowhere for an impossible Godot. Life narrowed down by so many negatives is the experience conveyed by the play. *Waiting for Godot* begins with the words, "Nothing to be done", and much of the action in the play is self-cancelling. "Let's go", they say, but do not move. Beckett's use of a limited and austere vocabulary, with a predominance of mono-syllables, gives the dialogues in insistent bareness:

VLADIMIR:	...What are we doing here, <i>that</i> is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come –
ESTRAGON:	Ah!
POZZO:	Help!
VLADIMIR:	Or for night to fall. ⁴⁵

By means of such bare dialogue and minimal language, Beckett manages to give us an authentic portrayal of the experience during the process of *waiting*, which is better suggested by the French title *En Attendant Godot* than the English. The directness and immediacy of the play might have been lost with a richer or more varied vocabulary.

Reduction techniques in Hemingway and Beckett resist "abstraction", but such techniques are not always used to achieve *concrete* writing. "The term *concrete* is an inaccurate term to describe Hemingway's style,"⁴⁶ because beneath the hard surface is concealed an inner reality which is more important. Hemingway's writing, as Earl Rovit points out, "is an inevitable product of a writer who ...turned his view Internally."⁴⁷ For instance, the short story "The Killers" seems to present a factual report of a conspiracy, and of the refusal of the intended victim (Ole Anderson) to be roused even by the warning of death; but the story also gives us a glimpse into "hopelessness and despair, ...into a whole

widespread human predicament, deep in the grain of human affairs.”⁴⁸ In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan sacrifices life and love, and finds fulfillment in death. The courage of his heroes, their uncomplaining endurance of pain, and their readiness to face death, whether in battle or in bullring, are all aspects of the reality that Hemingway wants to reveal.

Hemingway prefers suggestion to statement; he says, “A writer... may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them.”⁴⁹ Here is a reductive technique to capture the maximum of reality with the minimal use of language. Hemingway’s own comment on this techniques is interesting; in an interview with George Plimpton in 1945, he said.

If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story. ... In writing you are limited by what has already been done satisfactorily. So I have tried to learn to do something else. ... I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader.⁵⁰

The iceberg metaphor aptly brings out the difference or contrast between statement and suggestion. Suggestion is a device widely used in literature, but in Hemingway and Beckett we have a very deliberate use of this both in semantic and syntactic terms. There are gaps in narrative or dialogue; sometimes apparently unrelated items are juxtaposed. The device of parataxis shows syntactic gaps and preference for juxtaposition over exposition. The gaps in syntax or meaning do not create the sort of “holes” that Hemingway feared. Instead the reader’s imagination tends to bring out the connections forcefully. Suggestion here proves more effective than statement, explanation and comment. The syntactic and semantic arrangement gives the effect of an ‘objective’ presentation of events as they happen. An example is the kind of presentation one finds in Hemingway’s short story, “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio.” The three referents in the title do not seem to have any connection with one another. Yet, as we read the story, the relationship of the three to the reality presented in the story becomes clear.

Hemingway frequently juxtaposes apparently unconnected ideas without specifying their relationship, sometimes using co-ordinate clauses bridged by a neutral connective like ‘and’ or ‘that’, as in the following examples:

There were signs on the walls of the churches saying it was forbidden to play pelota against them, and the houses in the villages had red, tiled roofs, and then the road turned off and commenced to climb and we

were going away up close along a hillside, with a valley below and hills stretched off backward toward the sea.⁵¹

"They look like white elephants," he said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No you wouldn't have."⁵²

The first of these passages seems to list a number of items of the scene as they claim the attention of someone who is driving through the town. The second example has an almost Beckettian brevity, and suggests the death of love more effectively than any description. The contrasts and the gaps in these pieces induce the reader to make the connections in his own mind.

Juxtaposition of phrases and clauses seems more natural in dialogue. In Beckett's dialogues we have gaps and silences. Winnie's short spurts of speech illustrate this very well:

Willie! ...Ah well, not to know, not to know for sure, great mercy, all I ask. ...Ah yes ...then ...now ...beechn green ...this ...Charlie ...kisses ...this ...all that ...deep trouble for the mind. ...But it does not trouble mine.⁵³

The confusion of times and things, *then/now, this/that*, reflect the chaos of Winnie's world. In another work, Beckett gives us this exchange:

W: That poor creature who tried to seduce you, what ever became of her?...
M: Personally I always preferred Lipton's.⁵⁴

Parataxis becomes more common in Beckett's later plays. For instance, the whole of *Not I* is a non-sentence of great syntactic daring. Once Mouth starts speaking, she cannot stop:

Now this ...something she had to tell...could that be it?... something that would tell ...how it was ...how she... what? ... had been? ...yes ...something that would tell how it had been ... how she had lived ... lived on and on ... guilty or not ... on and on ...⁵⁵

Here the fractured and reduced syntax calls attention to itself; that is the chief effect of parataxis. It is also a perfect symbol of fractured and reduced man. Beckett applies the reductive process ruthlessly to his characters: Hamm is deprived of sight and movement, Winnie is half-buried, and Mouth is just mouth (only that is seen on the stage). In *Not I*, "humanity has shrunk to near anonymity."⁵⁶ This reduction is paralleled in dramatic expression: in *Waiting for Godot* there is dialogue, in *Happy Days* only the semblance of dialogue is maintained, while in *Not I* dialogue is abandoned for monologue. A similar process of reduction is applied to situation and action, so that what we get is not the experience of individuals as "the residue of human experience."⁵⁷ The minimal language

and situation achieve concentration and intensity. They diminish the importance of the personal element, and bring out “impersonal states of consciousness.”⁵⁸ All this serves the artistic purpose Beckett aimed at. The very minimal concrete reality and language that the drama presents on the stage, directs and concentrates our attention on the *inner* reality: *being*.

The use of juxtaposition and syntactic gaps in Hemingway and Beckett is aimed at creating a sense of immediacy. Language breaks in the intense concentration on the immediate, the present. Hemingway’s concern is with the immediate experience: to “live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after.”⁵⁹ Elsewhere, he says, “There is neither yesterday, certainly, nor is there any tomorrow. ... There is only now.”⁶⁰ So does Beckett focus attention on the immediate experience, often creating a cyclical effect, as in the following dialogue:

POZZO: Help!
ESTRAGON: Let’s go.
VLADIMIR: We can’t.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.⁶¹

This can be compared with the following dialogue in a Hemingway short story, between the Old Waiter and the Young Waiter, who are speaking about an old man who frequents their restaurant,

- Last week he tried to commit suicide.
- Why?
- He was in despair.
- What about?
- Nothing.
- How do you know?
- He has plenty of money.⁶²

Here, the interest of the waiters in the old man and their dialogue, is conveyed to us all their immediacy. Both Beckett and Hemingway, in their urgency to communicate experience, defy syntax and the linear progression in time of narrative. This defiance or conflict places a great strain on the language used in their writings:

Because words “take time” they are fundamentally ill-adapted to the task of defining any aspect of absolute reality, since all “reality” – in any metaphysical sense – is in the present, that is, instantaneous.⁶³

The abrupt, broken, shifting style of Hemingway and Beckett forces the reader’s consciousness *into* the experience. In the impact thus made, there is little scope for contemplation.

Beckett uses a device to convey the immediacy of experience: he places linguistic expression in opposition to the action on the stage. The tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, for

instance, say, "Let's go"; this is contradicted by their refusal to move. The actions of the characters, as indicated by the stage directions in the play, contradicts their speech. Action stands for movement, which involves linear progression in time. But what we have in Beckett's plays is the absence of movement, even when the character's speech indicates the contrary. In fact, "the stage directions emphasize the dissolution of the coordinates of speech and deed."⁶⁴ The contradiction between speech and action helps Beckett – who is little concerned with presenting any outside reality – to create the experience of helplessness. The use of the present continuous tense in the title is significant. The tramps stand waiting, without past or future; they are unmistakably *there*. In the play, immediacy of the experience of waiting, *on attendant*, is communicated.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett concentrates our attention on the reality within by creating a closed world. We live wholly in the present, the *now*, which seems to be eternal. Godot may come after all, but that is a future event which is not allowed to intrude into this world. So Godot never comes in the play. Beckett takes the audience into this closed world (instead of going out to them), and gives it an experience of loneliness and *being*. Vladimir characterises this state of being in the play when he says, "The essential doesn't change."⁶⁵ Change indeed seems to be banished: there is neither more individual occurrence nor sequence. Estragon's inquiry about an occurrence (which could have taken us to the past) is quickly answered by Pozzo's "One day, is that not enough?" form of narration, because time is seen to cyclic and eternal instead of linear and progressive. Cyclic time forces the characters to live continually in the present – not even death is a way out – to remain *being there*. This view of time, this closed world, is reflected both in the structure and language of the play.

The two acts of *Waiting for Godot* repeat almost the same pattern. Characters, their activities and speeches too are repetitive. Estragon is like an echo of Vladimir, hats and boots are put on and off, speeches like "Let's go," and "We're waiting for Godot" are spoken over and over again. Anaphora right at the beginning of the play, for example, "resumed the struggle", "again", suggest repetition of something that has already been done. In the cyclic form of the play, there is no beginning or end. The song which opens Act II symbolizes the circularity of the play. What is true of *Waiting* is also true of other plays like *Endgame* and *Happy Days*.

In his plays, Beckett tends to turn even language into a closed system. Usual language directs our attention to something outside itself – an object or an event, a situation or an emotion, which can be verified at least in a general way. That is, language has, normally, a referential quality. This is particularly true of dramatic language. Dramatic communication tends to become a shared event because of the audience which receives it. In the language of both Hemingway and Beckett, there is an attempt to reduce this referential quality, so that it may "purify itself from all reference."⁶⁵ Instead, such writing makes us look to something *within* the literary work. However, Hemingway is still mimetic to an extent, probably because of the necessity to tell a story and because of his commitment to external

reality. That is, there is a certain “referential” element in his writing. But in Beckett we have a situation where reality can no longer be recorded. Beckett does not imitate the world, but constructs a way of looking into it in order to find its meaning. “There is no mimesis, only poesis.”⁶⁶ Critics, particularly those who associate him with the Absurd Theatre see in Beckett a failure of language, breakdown in communication. But such a breakdown does not take place; instead, “the failure of language has served Beckett as a myth for creation.”⁶⁷ Beckett achieves, in many ways, the recreation of language through its seeming failure. The intensity and power of Beckett’s dramatic language is evident. Reductive methods are used to so control the wornout language that it “gains ‘new life’ within the context of the play.”⁶⁸ Beckett does what he praised Joyce for achieving: “a quintessential extraction of language” where the words “are alive.”⁶⁹ Kennedy gives Lucky’s speech in *Waiting for Godot* as an example of such creativity in Beckett:

The speech is placed and organised in such a way that the pathological breakdown in language – the agony of lost meaning – becomes a source of creative energy in the play ... The deteriorating syntax releases, as through fission, isolated word-clusters which sound like the lost ‘true voice’ in the speech. ... Though Lucky is destructively silenced his language works creativity within the play.⁷⁰

Another way of achieving intensity is by means of a conscious lyricism. This lyricism is seen in some of Beckett’s word clusters and rhythms, as in Pozzo’s, “It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day,”⁷¹ or in Mr. Rooney’s, “There is a bank, let us sink down upon a bank.”⁷² In his dialogues, Beckett sometimes substitutes rhythm or stichomythy for logical links, as in the following:

ESTRAGON:	All the dead voices.
VLADIMIR:	They make a noise like wings.
ESTRAGON:	Like leaves.
VLADIMIR:	Like sand.
ESTRAGON:	Like leaves. ⁷³

There is no logical or thematic development here, the similes for the dead voices are more significant as sound than as sense. Later, in *Play*, Beckett substitutes stichomythy for the give-and-take of dialogue throughout. Another device used by Beckett is what Winnie in *Happy Days* calls “the old style”, the high rhetoric of poetry, the linguistic remnants of a past culture. Beckett has parodied and exploited poetic language, creating allusive and ironic effects. Shelley’s lines on the moon are woven by Estragon into his talk about boots:

VLADIMIR:	What are you doing?
ESTRAGON:	Pale for weariness.
VLADIMIR:	Eh?
ESTRAGON:	Of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us.
VLADIMIR:	Your boots. What are you doing with your boots?

ESTRAGON: I'm leaving them there ...⁷⁴

Beckett's drama is full of literary echoes. Poetical words or phrases gain a new life and intensity when placed in an unexpected context. Montage is a technique which has been used by several modern writers, particularly T.S. Eliot. But in Beckett, even this *poesis* is subjected to reduction, "the revitalised language itself is running down."⁷⁵ The lyricism quickly degenerates into what Estragon calls talking "about nothing in particular."⁷⁶ In order to continue their dialogue, Vladimir and Estragon try various expedients like playing language games, acting Pozzo and Lucky, and a ritual of courtesies and curses. But all this can hardly help them in evading silence, as they themselves confess:

ESTRAGON: That's enough. I'm tired.

VLADIMIR: We're not in form.⁷⁷

This linguistic exhaustion can be observed in other plays too. Winnie, in *Happy Days*, fears that "words fail, there are times when even they fail."⁷⁸ Nevertheless, she tries to maintain what seems to be an endless flow of talk. However, like her toothpaste, Winnie's store of words is running out. By the end of the play, she realizes this and clings to the few objects she has with her in the hope that they at least would not fail her: "Do not overdo the bag."⁷⁹ In *Play*, speech starts or stops at the bid of spotlight. Even so, the spiraling dialogue reaches towards exhaustion. *Play* attempts to evade silence by repeating itself. Thus, reduction applied to lyricism seems to lead to silence.

Reduction works in another way too. In his dramatic language Beckett brings about a tension between "what is irreducibly public in drama (which) gives a concreteness to the words" and the tendency "away from everybody speech, towards an internal purity."⁸⁰ Beckett forces the latter, the movement of systematic *say-less*, further and further in a bid to make it non-referential and pure. This reminds us of the Symbolist attempt to "purify" language, or to thin the barrier that language becomes in reaching reality. In their attempts to reveal unmediated reality, poets like Mallarme and Valery attained total opacity or silence. It is possible to regard the reductive methods of Hemingway and Beckett as part of an inner movement, within language, that began with the French Symbolists; it is a movement from implication and suggestion towards minimal language and silence. The regression towards silence may also be regarded as a movement towards reality. Ihab Hassan says, "Beckett reduces, he never simplifies."⁸¹ This is because Beckett wants to give us the unmediated or transparent reality. The Symbolists, too, had attempted to reach reality *in and through* language, to break the barrier of language to reveal unmediated reality. But that attempt could also lead to total opacity as with Mallarme, or to silence, as with Valery. Beckett's efforts to reach the reality within is both metaphysical and linguistic. His dramatic method increasingly becomes

a contraction,...immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent,...shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumferential phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy...⁸²

Beckett, in his plays, seeks the core of the *eddy*, or more truly of the onion. Earlier, in his book on Proust, Beckett had observed that “the heart of the cauliflower or the ideal core of the onion represent a more appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excavation than the crown of bay.”⁸³ That is Beckett’s dramatic method: it is like peeling an onion, layer after layer, till it reaches within to the emptiness at the core.

Both Hemingway and Beckett have been fascinated by silence and nothingness as the ultimate reality. In Hemingway’s writings nothingness is associated, as Baker has pointed out, with night, disorder, not-home. Many of Hemingway’s characters have experienced the terror of the meaninglessness of existence, or nothingness. “A Clean Well-lighted Place” brings out man’s sense of *nada* or nothingness, and his attempts to avoid a confrontation with it. The old waiter, who has himself sleepless nights in this experience, wants to provide a clean, well-lighted place as a refuge to all solitary men (like the old Spaniard) who have experienced the terror of *nada*. But knowledge of it was greater than the terror. The old waiter voices Hemingway’s own attitude to this reality: “What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too.”⁸⁴ In another short story, “The Gambler, the Nun and the Radio,” Hemingway had distinguished three different levels of reality. While the Gambler has his courage and the nun her faith, Mr. Frazer has *the horrors* of the void, which he tries to keep out by listening to the radio all night. In another story, “A Way You’ll Never Be,” Nick Adams encountering nothingness finds that he “can’t sleep without a light of some sort.” On the other hand, a hero like Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and Into the Trees* faces the void fearlessly, and does not attempt to avoid it. He tries to contemplate nothingness, “as he had thought of nothing so many times in so many places.”⁸⁵ He dies while contemplating nothingness. Is this story to be interpreted as ending in nothingness, or as showing the sacrifice (of a life) that a man has to make in his confrontation with of nothingness? Hemingway leaves us in uncertainty. Even the fear of *nada* that his characters show can be mysterious or “wrenched back by a final twist into the realm of the recognizable.”⁸⁶ The old waiter in “A Clean Well Lighted Place” concludes that the terror of *nada* might be, after all, “probably only insomnia. Many must have it.” In Hemingway, thus, there is an ambiguity about the attitude to the ultimate reality. *Nada* can be the nothingness or meaninglessness of the physical world, or the mystery of existence in facing which language lapses into silence.

Hemingway’s *nada*, Sartre’s *le neant*, Heidegger’s *Das Nichts*, and Beckett’s void or nothingness are all related. But the encounter with nothingness may evoke different responses. Hemingway’s response has been interpreted by some as existentialist, but the agony was a reaction more akin to mental derangement than *l’angoisse* of Sartre, and it resulted in suicide. On the contrary, Beckett seems to say no to nothingness; his response is neither suicide nor silence. For him, death is no way out of the anguish. Vladimir and Estragon contemplate but do not commit suicide, while in *Play*, the anguish seems to continue even after death. Nor does Beckett lapse into silence. One view of Beckett’s work is that

it tends towards silence without actually reaching it. Andrew Kennedy says,

Each play is a cyclical rundown, and the plays taken together can be seen to move towards a minimal language. The language of drama is itself taken by Beckett to an extreme point, towards the zero point which – as in the third law of thermodynamics – can only be approached asymptotically: getting ever closer to it without ever reaching it.⁸⁷

But another view is also tenable. Beckett maybe regarded as having achieved the Husserlian transcendence, finding Being in Nothingness, which again is akin to Heidegger's idea of new creation out of nothingness. It is true Beckett seemed to have reached the end of his quest from reality when he confronted nothingness: he was like a man "on his knees, head against the wall – more like a cliff – with someone saying, 'go on' – Well, the wall will have to move a little, that's all."⁸⁸ The wall does move. Even nothingness and silence become creative, challenging language to function. Then, Beckett finds that "the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something."⁸⁹ Beckett seems to have realised the possibility that J. Hillis Miller pointed out of nihilism preparing for creativity: "Nihilism is the nothingness of consciousness when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything."⁹⁰ However, Beckett characterises his approach to the ultimate reality as that of a writer rather than of a philosopher. He says,

When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know. But their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher.⁹¹

He is not a philosopher, but he is well acquainted with philosophy. Thus, while accepting Democritus' view that 'Nothing is more real than nothing,' – which has affinities with the Existentialist and Phenomenological views – he insists that nothing reveals itself as everything or the Mess. This mess or chaos is somewhat akin to the Buddhist view of the paradoxical coexistence of nothing and everything in *Shunya*. In an interview, Beckett told Tom Driver,

One cannot speak any more of being, one must speak only of the mess... One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess.⁹¹

Beckett's plays attempt to communicate the mess. If that were all, he could be considered an Absurdist, but he goes beyond that aim. His characters, in spite of all their limitations and restraints, have 'the courage to be'. If there is also terror in his plays there is also compassion, if there is despair there is also courage. It is this transcendence that gives Beckett's drama its intensity and power.

Beckett's dramas, with their highly stylized structure, embody the tension between the mind's need for order and the mess that it encounters. One of the important aspects in

making sense of the mess, or accommodating it as Beckett puts it, is the cyclical character of time, a concept which has roots in ancient Greek, Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. The cyclical and repetitive structure of Beckett's plays is based on this concept, which has also been explained in terms of the myth of regeneration by modern thinkers like Northrop Frye and Mircea Eliade. The concept of cyclical time also owes much to Bergson and Einstein. It has been accepted and used by several twentieth century writers including Yeats and Eliot.

Beckett's writings show that he has made use of diverse ideas of philosophers from Plato of Democritus to the Existentialists, but he cannot be regarded as the follower of any particular philosophy. As John Pilling says,

Some of the parallels critics seek are forced and irresponsible.... We should value his work for its idiosyncratic and individual approach to some of the most complex and unsolved problems of mankind.⁹²

The approach is all part of the artist's endeavour to reveal reality. What is remarkable is the attempt to make order in the form of fundamental sounds.

Notes and References

¹ "Letters on *Endgame*" in *Village Voice*, March 19, 1958, quoted by Ihab Hassan in *The Literature of Silence*, (New York: Knopf & Co., 1967), p. 116.

² *Art and Illusion*, p. 80.

³ *Language and Myth*.

⁴ *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, (London, 1965), p. 64.

⁵ Quoted by John Pilling in *Samuel Beckett*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 19.

⁶ *All That Fall*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸ *Happy Days*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Joseph Conard, a Personal Remembrance*, quoted by Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Death in the Afternoon*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹³ *A Farewell to Arms*, Ch. XXVII.

¹⁴ *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, (London, 1935), p.15.

¹⁵ The foreign language may also have helped him to achieve a sense of distance and objectivity in his writings.

¹⁶ Samuel Putnam, *Paris was our Mistress*. (New York, 1947), p. 128.

¹⁷ Harry Levin, "Observations on the Style of Earnest Hemingway", in Howard S. Babb (ed.) *Essays in Stylistic Analysis*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 329.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

¹⁹ *To Have and Have Not*, Ch. XXVI.

- ²⁰ *The Sun Also Rises*, Ch. XV.
- ²¹ Babb, pp. 330-331.
- ²² *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ch. XI.
- ²³ *Waiting for Godot*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 9.
- ²⁴ *Endgame*, (Faber, 1970), p. 29.
- ²⁵ Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 89.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ²⁷ Hemingway, "The Gambler, the Nun and the Radio".
- ²⁸ *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Ch. V.
- ²⁹ Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River".
- ³⁰ Hemingway, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, Ch. V.
- ³¹ *A Farewell to Arms*, Ch. I.
- ³² *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, ch. XIII
- ³³ *A Farewell to Arms*, Ch. III.
- ³⁴ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 34.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ⁴² *All That Fall*, p. 31.
- ⁴³ Maire Jaanus Kurrik, *Literature and Negation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 206.
- ⁴⁴ Eric Bentley in Lawrence Graver & Raymond Federman (d.). *Samuel Beckett. The Critical Heritage*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 110.
- ⁴⁵ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 80.
- ⁴⁶ Richard K. Peterson, *Hemingway Direct and Oblique*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 26.
- ⁴⁷ Earl Rovit, *Ernest Hemingway*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p. 165.
- ⁴⁸ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway, The Writer as Artist*. (Princeton, 1973), p. 123.
- ⁴⁹ *Death in the Afternoon*, Ch. XVI.
- ⁵⁰ Hemingway in *The Paris Review*, XVIII (1958), quoted by Peterson, p. 106.
- ⁵¹ *The Sun Also Rises*, Ch. X.
- ⁵² "Hills Like White Elephants".
- ⁵³ *Happy Days*, (London: Faber, 1976), p. 38.
- ⁵⁴ *Play*, (London: Faber, 1971) p. 18.
- ⁵⁵ *Mouth*, (London: Faber, 1975), p.
- ⁵⁶ Elia Diamond, "The Fictionalizers in Beckett's Plays", in Ruby Cohn, (ed.), *Samuel Beckett*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), p. 116.
- ⁵⁷ Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett*. (Princeton, 1976), p. 272.

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- ⁵⁸ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1966), p. 101.
- ⁵⁹ Hemingway's introduction to *Men at War*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1942), p. xxvii.
- ⁶⁰ *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ch. XIII.
- ⁶¹ *Waiting*, p. 78.
- ⁶² "A Clean, Well Lighted Place".
- ⁶³ Richard Coe, *Samuel Beckett*. (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 17.
- ⁶⁴ Wolfgang Iser, "Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Language" in *Modern Drama*, 9.3. December 1966, p. 206.
- ⁶⁵ *The Literature of Silence*, p. 206.
- ⁶⁶ Robert Scholes, "The Fictional Criticism of the Future," quoted by Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, (Chicago, 1979), p. 172.
- ⁶⁷ Andrew K. Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, (Cambridge, 1976), p. 135.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ⁶⁹ *Our Examination*, pp. 17-18.
- ⁷⁰ Kennedy, pp. 139-140.
- ⁷¹ *Waiting*, p. 37.
- ⁷² *All That Fall*, p. 32.
- ⁷³ *Waiting*, p. 62.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁷⁵ Kennedy, *Six Dramatists*, p. 144.
- ⁷⁶ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 66.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ⁸⁰ *Six Dramatists*, p. 136.
- ⁸¹ Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, p. 206.
- ⁸² *Proust*, pp. 65-66.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ⁸⁴ "A Clean Well Lighted Place".
- ⁸⁵ Hemingway, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, p. 230.
- ⁸⁶ Baker, *Hemingway*, p. 141.
- ⁸⁷ *Six Dramatists*, p. 137.
- ⁸⁸ Quoted by Grover and Federman, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 29.
- ⁸⁹ *Watt*, quoted in *Samuel Beckett, The Critical Heritage*, p. 138.
- ⁹⁰ *Poets of Reality*, (Harvard, 1965), p. 3.
- ⁹¹ *Samuel Beckett, The Critical Heritage*, p. 219.
- ⁹² John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 158.