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What is there to say when faced with the end of the world: The Representation of Language in Beckett's *En attendant Godot* and Céline Minard's *Le dernier monde*

The theatre of the absurd and end-of-world literature are not often considered as connected despite their tendency to draw from the events of the Second World War. The former is recognized as a major part of post-war literature, with authors such as Ionesco and Beckett, who wrote in the end of the 20th century and continue to be a topic of scholarly discourse. Moreover, the latter has grown in prominence in the beginning of the 21st century in correlation with the rise in natural disasters and the prevalence of weapons of mass destruction. One significant feature of the theatre of the absurd is its dialogue, in which communication between the characters is nearly, if not completely, absent. This is also echoed in end-of-world fiction; however, the lack of communication is often instigated by the disappearance of society. This paper argues that this decomposition of a key aspect of language indicates a thematic heritage between the theatre of the absurd and apocalypse literature.

Communication between interlocutors follows and obeys certain implied rules which helps give structure to the social ritual of conversation. According to Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, the dialogue of a play or novel often imitates real conversation in abiding by these same rules (« approche pragmatique du dialogue théâtral » 54). This imitation is demonstrated by the use of *turn-taking*. The act of each interlocuter “taking their turn” when speaking allows for a structured conversation. Further, the act of speaking, just as in a real conversation, implies an *allocution* – the existence of a recipient, an “other” to whom the message is directed (Kerbrat-

Orecchioni, *interactions verbales* 13). By exposing the cases in which the dialogue of *En attendant Godot* or *Le dernier monde* violates these conversational rules and norms, we can identify a thematic heritage between the two works.

In *En attendant Godot*, two vagrants, Estragon and Vladimir, spend their waiting for the arrival of a mysterious Godot, who will never come. The play mainly consists of the two talking to each other about their life, telling stories and general small talk to help pass the time. They are joined by Pozzo and his servant Lucky near the end of each of the two acts and continue to fill their time waiting for Godot. It is in these conversations that speech is shown to be an inadequate tool of communication. The dialogue, which forms the very essence of the play, becomes incoherent, circular, and contradictory. The *turn-taking*, which Kerbrat-Orecchioni describes as one of the main structures of conversation (« approche pragmatique du dialogue théâtral » 56), is often absent when Estragon and Vladimir are talking with each other:

Vladimir. — Ah oui, j'y suis, cette histoire de larrons. Tu t'en souviens ?

Estragon. — Non.

Vladimir. — Tu veux que je te la raconte ?

Estragon. — Non.

Vladimir. — Ça passera le temps. (*Un temps*) C'étaient deux voleurs, crucifiés en même temps que le Sauveur. On...

Estragon. — Le quoi ?

Vladimir. — Le Sauveur. Deux voleurs. On dit que l'un fut sauvé et l'autre... (*il cherche le contraire de sauvé*)... damné.

Estragon. — Sauvé de quoi ?

Vladimir. — De l'enfer.

Estragon. — Je m'en vais. (*Il ne bouge pas*) (Beckett 14)

There is a lack of back and forth between the two interlocutors. Vladimir appears to ignore

Estragon's responses, continuing to tell his story even though his friend says he doesn't want to

hear it. The message that Vladimir is trying to tell Estragon is lost, shown by the constant questions of the former “Le quoi?” and “Sauvé de quoi?”. Vladimir’s answers are useless to Estragon, being merely short repetitions of what he had already stated. The dialogue which appears to have the structure of a normal conversation, arrives at an empty conclusion, neither the story which Vladimir is trying to recount, nor the questions of Estragon are satisfied. To conclude this conversation, Estragon says that he is leaving, while staying rooted in place. The contradiction between his speech and his actions reinforces the non-sensical nature of any verbal enunciation in this play.

These contradictions also reveal themselves within the dialogue itself. Let us continue on with our previous example in order to illustrate this point:

Vladimir. — Et cependant... (*Un temps*) Comment se fait-il que... Je ne t’ennuis pas j’espère ?

Estragon. — Je n’écoute pas.

Vladimir. — Comment se fait-il que des quatre évangélistes un seul présente les faits de cette façon ? Ils étaient cependant là tous les quatre — enfin, pas loin. Et un seul parle d’un larron de sauvé. (*Un temps.*) Voyons, Gogo, il faut me renvoyer la balle de temps en temps.

Estragon. — J’écoute. (Beckett 14)

Vladimir worries that he is boring his partner with his story, yet he continues to recount it. Estragon subsequently claims to both listen and not listen. The two vagrants are not able to sustain a conversation that does not fall eventually to a contradictory, nonsensical mess. In this next passage, Estragon and Vladimir are saying goodbye to Pozzo and Lucky, an ordeal that takes far longer than it should:

Pozzo. — Et merci

Vladimir. — Merci à vous.

Pozzo. — De rien.

Estragon. — Mais Si.

Pozzo. — Mais non.

Vladimir. — Mais si.

Estragon. — Mais non. (Beckett 61)

The “Mais Si.” of Estragon changes into a “Mais non.” in this short conversation that achieves little to nothing. Even the written language contradicts itself, with the “Si” in Estragon’s dialogue being capitalized while it is not in Vladimir’s. Spoken language has lost a consistency and logic that allows ordinary conversations to progress. In *En attendant Godot*, these conversations continue in circles, never fully concluding. Before this last passage, Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo repeat the word “Adieu” at least two times each, yet no one leaves. The dialogue suspends itself in a “*Silence*”. Pozzo, like Estragon before him, says he is leaving, yet does not move, stating: “je n’arrive pas... (*il hésite*)... à partir” (Beckett 60-61). Not only has the act of leaving become impossible but speaking itself becomes painful and strained. Pozzo is almost unable to complete a sentence of six words. Dialogue dominates the play, with the characters constantly speaking about seemingly random topics, without arriving at any conclusion. Rather, they simply pause in a *Silence* and start conversing again.

In Céline Minard’s *Le dernier monde*, Jaume Roiq Stevens, a cosmonaute who has returned to earth after a long stay aboard a space station where he was the only remaining crewmate, wanders around a world devoid of humanity. Using his skills as a pilot, he goes from country to country, and is the only witness to the disappearance of the human race. However,

despite his evident solitude, the novel is rife with dialogue. Stevens converses with various imaginary characters, knowing that they are only answering in his head. Most often in the novel, dialogue is denoted by a dash, giving the semblance of a real conversation with structure, further obeying Kerbrat-Orecchioni's rule of *turn-taking*. Nonetheless, there are passages in which this traditional dialogical structure breaks down and speech becomes intermixed with prose. One such example occurs during a helicopter malfunction, where Stevens appears to be arguing with Lawson, one of his imaginary characters:

L'air sifflait, glissait, tapait la tôle, j'appuyais, je toussais pour leur montrer, je savais qu'un moteur était sur le point de redémarrer quand le capitaine Lawson m'arracha le manche des deux mains. QUI C'EST CELUI-LÀ ? En gueulant comme un orque qu'on égorge au rasoir. C'EST MA PEUR ! Salaud de Blanc de blanc-bec, donne-moi les commandes tu vas nous tuer. Il était fou, il était déjà fou, je lui avais déjà envoyé un coup de poing en pleine face des années auparavant, j'avais déjà repris le principal et le décroché avait été tel que oui nous avions maintenant les pales dégagées mais pas plus de moteur que ça sous le siège, bougre de fils de pute, tu n'as pas changé. (Minard 97)

The capital letters seem to indicate the beginning of a dialogue between Stevens and Lawson, but it is unclear who is speaking to whom. The answer "C'EST MA PEUR!" does indicate the beginning of a *turn-taking*, yet again there is an ambiguity as to the identity of the speaker. Is the following sentence ("Salaud de Blanc de blanc-bec, donne-moi les commandes tu vas nous tuer.") Stevens' voice? Or is it Lawson's, critiquing the whiteness of Stevens' skin? Further, the use of the impersonal "il" in "Il était fou, il était déjà fou" does not assist in our identification of the interlocuters. This passage takes the form of a monologue from Stevens without any other

interlocuter, yet the content would indicate an exchange. Thus, it is a contradiction, not in so much as it offers contradictory information, but rather that there is no consistency between its structure and its content. The written language on the page does not clearly coincide with the supposed verbal interaction due to the lack of organization.

The degradation of language as a tool of communication is clearly shown in a passage where words begin to disappear from the page, leaving blank spots in their place: “C’est vous le survivant, je vous plains” (Minard 131). The following pages are almost empty with only a few words each, spread out in a random manner. If read together they form sentences with the last word being cut off:

Vos actions n’auront pas de//mesure. //Vous n’avez plus de
semblable//Vous//n’appartenez plus à//une espèce. //Votre langue//est//sans
partage//vous êtes//libr (Minard 131-35)

These pages, devoid of words, denote the futility of Stevens’ existence as well as his extreme solitude. They further affirm the imaginary nature of the dialogues. As we have previously established, conversation and dialogue necessitate at minimum two interlocuters (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *interactions verbales* 17). However, this passage seems to affirm that this cannot be the case in the novel, as there exists no “other” with whom Stevens can communicate. It is to attest to his belonging to a species that in the following passage Stevens describes his hand:

OK.

J’ai ma main devant moi. Elle a de longs doigts blancs, les ongles sont ovoïdes et lisses cernés de noir, les ongles sont en deuil.

Il y a quelques poils sombres sur les phalanges. Le est un os, il ressort légèrement, il saille sous la peau du poignet. (Minard 135)

For Stevens, his hand becomes representative of his belonging to humanity. He personifies his fingers by describing them as “en deuil” and later stating that they seem to have a mustache. His fingers become part of his community of survivors. He creates a community with which he can mourn and communicate. Stevens is attempting in vain to resist the degradation of language as a tool of communication by re-establishing the various rules and conditions that come with conversation.

Within these two texts, we can notice a similar violation of the rules of conversation. While Estragon and Vladimir’s conversation at first seems to have more structure, a closer look reveals that they are barely conversing at all. For Stevens, this disappearance of structure is evident in passages where dialogue can be easily mistaken for mere description. Kerbrat-Orecchioni describes speaking as an exchange between at least two people. It is this exchange that is muddled in *En attendant Godot* and *Le dernier monde*. As a result, neither the vagrants nor Stevens are able to communicate anything of use. This degradation of language emphasizes a common theme between the works, that of the hopelessness of their situation. For Estragon and Vladimir, the futility of waiting for someone who will not come is manifested in their speech that does not communicate anything. They are cursed to repeat and contradict themselves in a circular conversation that will never end. For Stevens, he will always be alone in the void of the world. The “others” with whom he communicates are nothing but an extension of his self. Thus, in both texts, language, or more specifically, the failure of language to communicate, depicts an inescapable solitude.

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