

FOUCAULT'S DISCURSIVE THEORY IN WAITING FOR GODOT

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At all events, one thing at least must be emphasized here: that the analysis of discourse thus understood, does not reveal the universality of a meaning, but brings to light the action of imposed rarity, with a fundamental power of affirmation.

Michel Foucault

With the 1950s came the birth of a revolutionized literary movement that sought to express the estrangement of man from religion, meaning, and value in human life. During a time when the world was still fresh with the wounds of World War II, this mentality of hopelessness was much too familiar to most individuals. God and religion retreated to the shadows of human concerns, hidden somewhere behind the prevailing anxiety that the aloneness with which people were struggling might be the only *real* truth in their lives. Where was God during the Holocaust? Where was God while millions of innocent lives were brutally ruined? Where were the salvation and peace of God and religion when the world most needed them? Humanity desperately searched for some speck of reason or meaning within life's mysteries and found only that such mysteries were to remain open questions. The lack of answers and understanding forced many to cope with feelings of detachment and solitude, sending them into an overwhelming state of despair over our apparent purposeless existence. This alienation and confusion that defined humanity's internal struggle was revealed in the literary world through absurd drama.

Absurd drama broke away from the practices of conventional theatre to introduce the world to an entirely unique form of dramatic expression. Combining Albert Camus' notion of absurdity with a sometimes dark and cynical humor, a band of writers grouped under "The Theatre of the Absurd" outwardly accepted and exposed the vulnerability of mankind and urged the rest of humanity to do the same.

One of the most well-known writers to be included in the absurd literary category is Samuel Beckett. Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* consists of a seemingly ambiguous and incoherent dialogue, which caused its initial dismissal among critics frustrated by the apparent disorder to the play. The setting of the play is quite simple: an empty stage, a dying tree, Vladimir and Estragon, two hopeless vagabonds who never leave the stage, and Pozzo and Lucky, two awkward male companions who appear throughout the play. The characters' clothes are tattered, their body language limited, and their speech guided by a purposefully disjointed language. In time, however,

it became apparent that the language of *Godot* was not simply chaotic but was instead a language that demonstrated and defined discourse as a vehicle of control, inhibiting the thoughts and actions of its unknowing participants. This notion of control is seen through the rhythm, silence, and incoherence of the dialogue by which Beckett cynically expresses his contempt for, and indeed demonstrates his own involuntary submission to, the human need for control and order.

Throughout the play, Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky engage in a variety of simplistic and outwardly foolish conversations and gestures that appear to simply occupy time while they wait for the character Godot. During the second act, Estragon tells Vladimir, “In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent,” indicating that, at some level, the characters are aware of their need to pass time by participating in the human task of conversing (Beckett 68). They realize that they cannot simply separate themselves from what is indubitably their nature and continue to wait without imposing some word, action, or involvement on their situation. That is to say that the two vagabonds of this play must actively participate in the task of waiting, thus establishing themselves as officially caught in the inhibiting confines of the human condition of conversation.

Within the active discourse of *Waiting for Godot*, there are three distinct vehicles of the language that prove to be powerful rhetorical tools: the first is the use of poetic or lyrical features to the discourse; the second is the significance of silence; and the third, and perhaps most interesting, is the incoherence of the dialogue and eventual loss of any form or structure in the spoken word. Given these three specific qualities of the dialogue, French scholar Michel Foucault’s discursive theories provide a mechanism for appreciating and understanding *Waiting for Godot*.

Michel Foucault exposes humanity’s need for a unifying theory to guide its discursive form of expression when, similar to Beckett, he highlights the natural aversion that humankind has for anything appearing disorderly or out of the ordinary. Foucault begins his discursive theory by first supposing that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (216). To further illustrate this notion, Foucault moves to discuss several “rules” that are ever-present behind those discourses that populate our reading, writing, or conversations. He points out certain prohibitions and rules of exclusion that are used to penetrate the language and eliminate societal taboos, such as politics or sexuality, from discourse. He questions Western culture’s obsession with the “will to truth,” which assimilates the various forms of discourse and unifies them under its subject. Lastly, and perhaps most relevant to the rhetorical analysis of the poetic language in *Waiting for Godot*, Foucault examines the “will to knowledge” as exercising “a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse,” constraints which he identifies as being a product of our society (219).

A Purposefully Poetic Language

Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of the influence of the “will to knowledge” is seen through the character Pozzo. In Act I, Pozzo attempts to explain to Estragon and Vladimir what the “twilights” of “these parts” can do. After battling somewhat for the attention of the characters, he begins his monologue:

Pozzo: Ah yes! The night (*He raises his head*). But be a little more attentive for pity’s sake, otherwise we’ll never get anywhere. (*He looks at the sky*.) Look! (*All look at the sky except Lucky who is dozing off again. Pozzo jerks the rope*.) Will you look at the sky, pig! (*Lucky looks at the sky*.) Good, that’s enough. (*They stop looking at the sky*.) What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (*Pause*.) In these latitudes. (*Pause*.) When the weather is fine. (*Lyrical*.) An hour ago (*he looks at his watch, prosaic*) roughly (*Lyrical*) after having poured forth even since (*He hesitates, prosaic*) say ten o’clock in the morning (*Lyrical*) tireless torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale (*gesture of the two hands lapsing by stages*), ever a little paler, a little paler until (*dramatic pause, ample gesture of the two hands flung wide apart*) pppfff! Finished! It comes to rest. But—(*hand raised in admonition*)—but behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (*vibrantly*) and will burst upon us (*snaps his fingers*) pop! Like that! (*His inspiration leaves him*) just when we least expect it. (*Silence. Gloomily*.) That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth. *Long silence*. (38-9)

This passage proves particularly significant because it serves as a prime example of Foucault’s theory on controlling who is permitted to speak on a given subject. Foucault explains that under these rules of control, “we are no longer dealing with the mastery of the powers contained within discourse, nor with averting the hazards of its appearance; it is more a question of determining the conditions under which it may be employed, of imposing a certain number of rules upon those individuals who employ it, thus denying access to everyone else” (224).

At the start of his monologue, it is apparent that Pozzo is the character commanding this scene. He orders the other characters to look at the sky, and indeed each does exactly as he demands. Pozzo then dramatically articulates his philosophical and poetic understanding of the sky, not to engage in any conversation about “qua sky” with the other characters, but only to say his piece and have the subject thus terminated from further discussion. In this way, Pozzo clearly considers himself the only individual who, as Foucault says, satisfies the necessary credentials (whatever they may be) to be accepted as a credible source of truth and knowledge (225). By ending his monologue with the declarative statement, “That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth,” Pozzo signals with concluding certainty the end of the “discussion,” forbidding Vladimir, Estragon, and indeed Pozzo’s submissive companion, Lucky, from adding any comment to his short discourse on the sky.

Beckett's lyrical passages also act as structural aids in the dialogue, demonstrating humankind's search for an adequate mode of expression. For example, Pozzo indecisively bounces back and forth among several means of delivery and never really becomes satisfied with any one mode, illustrating that language is a limited mode of expression inhibiting humans from being able to communicate clearly and accurately even a single concept or thought. The concept of language as confining or restricting is also seen in Act II, when Vladimir and Estragon appear to find themselves linguistically incapable of breaking from a ritualized poetic/lyrical structure and, as a result, become confined to its limitations of style and communication.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon: It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Silence.

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To have died is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

Silence. (68-9)

This particular discourse is so powerful and significant because it makes use of the lyrical structure, illustrates the characters inhibited by that structure, and gives rise to the periodic breakdown of language to complete silence. Foucault references such a discursive occurrence in his discussion on the use of ritual. He explains ritual as a "restrictive system" and declares that "ritual defines the qualifications required of the speaker . . . it lays down the supposed, or imposed, sig-

nificance of the words used, their effect upon those to whom they are addressed, the limitations of their constraining validity” (225).

To further appreciate the relevance of Foucault’s theory on ritual, one can see that when Vladimir and Estragon give similes for the noises of the “dead voices,” they each become fixed in and attached to their own examples, thereby falling victim to the limitations of this linguistic ritual. Vladimir declares that the sound is like wings or like sand, while Estragon says it is a sound like leaves. By repeating their similes to identify the sound, each character is trying to persuade the other to accept his interpretation as the best example by which to define the sound. After the first exchange, there is a silence. The concrete examples then become the sounds that they evoke—“they rustle,” “they murmur,” etc. Again the characters return to linguistically battle over the best way by which to identify the sound, again they cannot agree, and again the exchange is reduced to silence. The conversation proceeds, and Vladimir and Estragon, each unable to separate themselves from preferring their own understanding of the dead voices, revert to the contest of who can best describe the sound of these voices:

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Long Silence.

Vladimir: Say something! (69)

What is also interesting about this continuation of the discussion is that Vladimir keeps changing objects, perhaps in hopes of introducing a more adequate and acceptable simile for the sound of the dead voices, but each example has the same murmuring quality of sound as his original idea of the wings. In spite of Vladimir’s attempt to realize new examples, Estragon remains fixed to his original concept of equating the sound with leaves, thus contributing to the repetition of this lyrical sequence. In the end, the two are again forced into silence until Vladimir exclaims, thus freeing the characters (for some time) from the lyrical structure in which they were trapped.

In these ways, Beckett illustrates for his audience an awareness of the restrictions imposed by discursive formations on everyday discourse. Like Foucault, he brings to the surface the already existing, underlying rules of discourse that control how we can think about and understand the world.

The Significance of Silence

Beckett’s use of poetic language helps to define the restrictions of communication by demonstrating, through poetry, the confinement of the strict structures of repetition and sound, which ultimately reduce the language to silence. In addition to the lyrical nature of the language

in the previous dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon, the silences in that particular scene help to establish the poetic structure of the exchange. The silences are precisely placed to serve as a break in the language, thus enhancing the poetic appearance of this dialogue between the characters by separating their conversation into four apparent stanzas. With the repetitive sequencing of the dialogue, the lyrical nature of the words, and the importance of the silences dividing the dialogue into stanzas, the poetic aspect of the language during this exchange cannot go unnoticed.

Silence is also an important aspect of discourse in itself and not simply an adherent to the poetic effect of the language. Beckett's use of silence in the dialogue of *Waiting for Godot* admits the natural occurrence of silence in everyday conversation. Instead of masking the existence of silences by the usual "ahhs" and "uhms" that we use in our everyday speech, Beckett freely includes it, demonstrating that silence too has a function and a place in discourse. The silence in *Godot* proves significant in and of itself because it fully captures Beckett's concept of the breakdown of communication, and it encourages the audience to reflect on the content of the drama. The periods of silence in *Waiting for Godot* are moments in which the conversation realizes the futility of words and is reduced to total absence of language. In keeping with the absurd theme of exposing the breakdown of language and communication, Beckett eliminates the use of our usual verbal fillers to place a greater emphasis on the importance of what is *not* being said.

Beckett's use of silence is rhetorically relevant to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which Foucault articulates his understanding that "it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware" in order to fully comprehend the object, or purpose of a discourse (44). In addition to pointing out the limitations of language, Beckett's "object" is to challenge his audience to contemplate the drama and the relevance of the language as it is applicable to each individual audience member. Beckett uses the silences to influence not only the structure of the dialogue but also the way in which the audience is to interpret the drama.

The Importance of Incoherent Dialogue

While one can fairly easily observe the poetic quality and unique use of silence in *Godot*, no feature is more apparent than the incoherence of the dialogue. Throughout the play there are various points at which the dialogue appears contradictory, disjointed, and beyond any apparent logical understanding; however, this paradoxical discourse has a purpose.

Lucky's monologue at the end of Act I seems to fully capture absurdist dialogue as complete incoherence. This passage is the only point in the play at which Lucky speaks, and it precedes a great change in his relationship to Pozzo, for Pozzo becomes blind and completely dependent on Lucky in Act II. Lucky's speech is a rambling of disjointed nonsense language. There is no grammar, no structure, no punctuation. The passage is three pages of incessant, incoherent babbling. It is words and language randomly spoken, devoid of any apparent meaning within the text. Lucky even declares interjections of utter gibberish, such as "quaquaquaqua" and "Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in Possy of Testew and Cunard" (45). What is most intriguing about

this passage is not only the complete breakdown of language, but also the reactions of the other characters to Lucky and the actor's delivery of this speech.

In the script, there are explicit directions given to the characters, which they are to perform throughout Lucky's rant—directions which Beckett uses to control the performance:

- 1) Vladimir and Estragon all attention, Pozzo dejected and disgusted.*
- 2) Vladimir and Estragon begin to protest, Pozzo's sufferings increase.*
- 3) Vladimir and Estragon attentive again, Pozzo more and more agitated and groaning.*
- 4) Vladimir and Estragon protest violently. Pozzo jumps up, pulls on the rope. General outcry. Lucky pulls on the rope, staggers, shouts his text. All three throw themselves on Lucky who struggles and shouts his text. (45)*

It is important to note that Lucky does not participate in any dialogue throughout the play, and during the only instance in which he *does* speak, his words have a profound effect on the other characters, particularly Pozzo. As soon as Lucky begins speaking, Pozzo becomes “dejected and disgusted” and continues to become more “agitated” as the speech goes on. This reaction to Lucky's speech is indicative perhaps of the transfer of power between Lucky and Pozzo that occurs during the second act. Lucky, who is under the very strict and abusive control of Pozzo, finally explodes in a conglomeration of ridiculous language when so commanded by his master. It is interesting, then, that Pozzo has such an agonizing reaction to his companion's discourse, since it was originally his idea to make Lucky speak by commanding Estragon to put Lucky's hat on his head. Since this monologue directly precedes Pozzo's becoming dependent on Lucky in Act II, Pozzo appears to outwardly illustrate in this scene the anguish, frustration, and humiliation that people may experience when forced from a position of power into one of submission.

Somewhat similar to Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon initially respond to Lucky by simply listening to him; however, their reactions eventually evolve into a violent protest of Lucky's speech. Since the audience is left to speculate on what it is that Lucky is saying that is so offensive to the rest of the characters, if one is to apply Foucault's discussion of prohibiting subject matters (more specifically, politics or sexuality), then the offensive nature of the rant may be comparable to a taboo topic of conversation. Clearly, throughout the play, Lucky's speech has been prohibited under the physical and verbal abuse of Pozzo. Perhaps then, the justification for Lucky's being kept silent is introduced through the reactions of the characters when he does gain the opportunity to speak. By the end of the speech, Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo are struggling to stop Lucky from continuing to disgrace himself and his master, and they seek some way again to silence the character. It is only when Vladimir seizes the hat from Lucky's head that he immediately discontinues his disjointed tirade, and the three men succeed in putting an end to a monologue spoken by a character who perhaps did not meet the “conditions” which Foucault identifies as making an individual credible and thereby able to participate in the discourse.

Moreover, Lucky's monologue, despite its non-linear, nonsense language, establishes cred-

ibility and appears coherent through the passion of the actor's delivery. In *Beckett Directing Beckett*, the filmed production of *Waiting for Godot* starring Alan Mandell as Lucky, Mandell delivers the monologue in such a way that it appears that he is conveying an important and urgent message. In observing this performance, one is almost unable to distinguish that Mandell is speaking incoherently, for the delivery is rapid and passionate, thereby leaving an observer thinking that this message is far too complex to comprehend and is beyond his or her understanding. Foucault even addresses the power of such a delivery when he discusses the "mad men" of the Middle Ages. He explains that a man was considered mad if "his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men" (217), and certainly Lucky's discourse is of that kind. However, Foucault also notes that, despite the man's break from conventional conversation, like Lucky, some people understood his words as revealing some hidden truth which no one else was able to comprehend. In this way, both Beckett and Foucault acknowledge that the delivery of one's discourse can lead to erroneously interpreting one's incoherent ranting as indicative of some hidden truth.

Conclusion

Foucault's discursive theory helps to explain the ways in which Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* challenges its audiences to further explore the consistencies behind reality in order to come to accept the absurdity of the world and of one's place in it. This concept is perhaps best illustrated when Estragon states, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (Beckett 77). However meaningless and futile Beckett believes life to be, he understands that it is human nature to communicate and express oneself, and that man needs language to allow for a belief that there is some purpose to his existence.

As Foucault notes, throughout history, and essentially throughout all of human thought and experience, we have been and by nature are compelled to link together events and people, thoughts and ideas to create some underlying form of unity among all things (231). It is this concept that unlocks for us the cynical intentions of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. Though both Foucault and Beckett purposefully expose and urge against this need for unity and control, Beckett realizes that each reader or audience member will naturally fall victim to that need and thereby attempt to impose some definitive meaning on the play. It is in mocking what is indisputably human nature, however, that Beckett essentially proves what he set out to critique, namely, that the human need for control and order, however foolish, senseless, and absurd, remains ever-present and inescapable to us all.

Works Cited

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