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978-0-521-09866-3 - Six Dramatists in Search of a Language: Studies in Dramatic Language

Andrew K. Kennedy

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

## I

The decision to study the problems of verbal expressiveness in modern English drama is not simply a methodological one – focussing on one element in drama so as to see it more clearly within discussable limits. This study is impelled by, and will attempt to demonstrate, the heightened critical consciousness about language in drama, which is already *there* – makes itself felt or is ‘encoded’ – in the achieved work of our representative dramatists. *Criticism* and *crisis* are related in the development of all the arts (the etymology and the common adjective are a pointer): critical awareness is ‘fed back’ at an accelerating rate into separate acts of creation that may result in a crisis of expressiveness.

There seem to be three main areas of critical self-consciousness about language in drama:

(1) The dramatist’s awareness of naturalism as a tired or exhausted style which yet survives – since the dramatist cannot wholly lose touch with everyday speech without sterility – as a constant pull towards mimetic dialogue.

(2) His awareness of a whole ‘imaginary museum’ of possible languages, usually conjoined with a self-imposed and restless search for a ‘new’ language, worked out in and for his own drama.

(3) His awareness of the shrinking uses and powers of language itself, as the mediator of thought and feeling, and as the meaningful counterpart of action.

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Only a brief, simplified gloss can be given here of each of these complex areas of critical awareness, aspects of a single theme that runs through this whole study.

It is no news that naturalism has imposed a severe limitation on the resources of the word in the theatre. But the crisis of verbal expressiveness, as I see it, is not found in classical naturalistic drama as much as in the peculiar stylistic problems a dramatist experiences when he attempts to go 'beyond naturalism' – whether through an enriched theatrical language (prose rhetoric, verse, liturgy, the parodistic use of former styles or archaic speech), or through pushing the verbal poverty of naturalism itself, with conscious artistry, towards a fragmented or minimal language. It is not just that naturalism has established itself as the dominant modern style which could not be ignored, could only be reacted to with a conscious aesthetic purpose – an explicit or implicit personal poetics – involving a rethinking of the function of language in drama. Even more significantly, a dramatist cannot leave behind the 'living speech' of his age in the radical way in which an abstract artist can leave the human figure out of his canvas or his sculpture.

The 'living language' keeps pressing with peculiar tenacity on the 'shaping imagination' of the dramatist. Yet the dramatist who is critically conscious of the shortcomings of an imitative language in drama may become a highly conscious critic of everyday language itself. Many of the most interesting attempts at creating new patterns of dialogue based on everyday speech (for example Eliot in *Sweeney Agonistes*, Beckett in *All That Fall*, Pinter in much of his work) gain their expressive vitality partly through a built-in critique of everyday speech – through the patterns of parody, exposing *homo loquax* in his struggles with the curse of language. There is, then, a danger that the language-conscious dramatist will lose the art of creating a non-parodic or natural-sounding dialogue – the language of men speaking to men.

The rich spectrum of possibilities which the post-naturalist dramatist has 'before' him for creative use may be seen as a source of great potential stylistic freedom (comparable to that enjoyed by the Modernist poet and novelist). Yet it is bought at the cost of a language-consciousness which is limiting in certain crucial ways. In a sense the dramatist is aware of too

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much – modes of language from the past, the multiple styles of his own age, countless experimental possibilities. Conjoined with the urge to innovation – ‘making it new’ – this sets up a taboo on repetition, including self-repetition; and it imposes on the dramatist the burden of re-creating the language for himself, possibly for each new play, and for a splintered audience which has to be *taught*, by the work itself, to respond to the unfamiliar language, as if it were a new code to be deciphered, within a strict limit of time (and all the other limitations of a stage performance). To take only one characteristic situation: when a dramatist revitalises his language through ‘borrowing’ a language from the past – Eliot using the rhythms of *Everyman* for sections of *Murder in the Cathedral*, or Arden using sixteenth-century Scots in *Armstrong’s Last Goodnight* – he is working through a much more self-conscious, critical-creative situation than the dramatist who inherits, among other conventions, a central yet flexible dramatic language.<sup>1</sup> He is (though such spatial metaphors can do no more than approximate) ‘outside’ rather than ‘within’ his verbal medium. He is reframing this or that language, a subtle practitioner of parody and pastiche, a linguistically conscious ventriloquist.

An awareness of the ‘sickness’ or all-pervasive inadequacy of language<sup>2</sup> can add a new dimension to the more formal problems of using words in post-naturalist drama. Critical concepts interact with painful personal experience: the intense awareness of failing words may have a mystical source (as in Eliot), or it may absorb a philosophical critique of language (Beckett), or it may manifest itself as a more general weariness or despair concerning

<sup>1</sup> Allardyce Nicoll points out that Shakespeare inherited four chief stylistic modes for his dialogue: blank verse; prose; rhymed ten-syllable and rhymed shorter lines – each with its own distinct function, which the audience immediately recognised. *The Theatre and Dramatic Theory*, London, 1962, pp. 157ff.

<sup>2</sup> I shall briefly trace the literary-dramatic context for this ‘sickness of language’ in the section on Symbolist and related ideas, pp. 22ff. A sentence from Ernst Cassirer seems to epitomise ‘the conclusion which the modern sceptical critics of language have drawn: the complete dissolution of any alleged truth content of language, and the realisation that this content is nothing but a sort of phantasmagoria of the spirit’. From *Language and Myth* (1925), translated by Suzanne Langer, London, 1946. (This quote via Ellmann and Feidelson, *The Modern Tradition*, New York, 1965, p. 636.)

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the value of language. Only detailed discussion can show the extent to which the texture of dialogue in particular works is moulded by such radical thinking about language. The tension between words and the Word, fallen speech and the promptings of illumination, cut through Eliot's technical struggles, 'the intolerable wrestle with words'. Beckett, who used to read Mauthner's *Critique of Language* aloud to Joyce,<sup>3</sup> has woven a far-reaching epistemological scepticism about all language into all his texts; and his dialogue is shot through with the pathos of man's insuperable need to go on talking without end, despite the ultimately self-cancelling feeling that 'there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express'. Pinter, influenced by Beckett, had to overcome a sense of 'paralysis' or 'nausea' induced by words;<sup>4</sup> but he went on to develop a technical refinement of dialogue, 'a language where under what is said another thing is being said'. When the tormented language-consciousness combines with new techniques in dialogue (and both Beckett and Pinter went further here than Eliot) then a *theatre of language* comes into being which, unlike the traditional theatre, presents not just 'the psychological relationships which language only translates. . . ' but sets up 'a dramaturgy of human relations at the level of language itself'.<sup>5</sup>

## 2

Historically, these types of language-consciousness have made themselves felt comparatively late in the English theatre – many years after they had begun to germinate in European culture. There seems to be no radical questioning – in London, early in the century – comparable to Yeats' asking whether it is possible to make a play that will live, a work of art, 'out of a dying, or at any rate a very ailing language' (*Sambain*, 1904);<sup>6</sup> or Hofmanns-

<sup>3</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, New York, 1959, p. 661. For 'there is nothing to express. . . ' see my Ch. 3, pp. 134ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ch. 4, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Vannier, 'A Theatre of Language', *Tulane Drama Review* (Spring 1963), p. 182. (See also p. 169, n. 11.)

<sup>6</sup> *Explorations*, 1962, p. 167. The whole context is relevant, because Yeats is here expressing hope for a language 'as much alive as if it were new come out of Eden'. See also the section on Symbolism in this Introduction.

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thal's asking, in his 'Lord Chandos' Letter (1902), whether language, when it fails in connecting and in being speakable, should not be abandoned altogether.<sup>7</sup> One has to bear in mind here a number of things: the innate artistic conservatism of the theatre in England at the turn of the century, including, among other things, the unquestioning faith in the language of imitation of a dramatist like Pinero, and the relative timidity of Henry James in his dramatic years. Above all, the scene was dominated by the 'naive' and robust creativity of Shaw, who became conscious only gradually and partially of some of the things he was doing in drama: that his language was not Ibsenite; that 'verbal music' tended to work against mimetic speech. It was only late in his long life that Shaw explicitly declared that the theatre 'does not develop, and it has, in the evolutionary sense, no future that will not repeat the past'. And it was towards the end of his life that he argued, retrospectively, that his early and 'furious' opposition to Pinero and the School of Paris (including Sardou, whom Henry James admired) made him go 'back to Shakespeare, the Bible, Bunyan, Walter Scott, Dickens, Dumas père, Mozart and Verdi' – in short, an all too miscellaneous 'imaginary museum'.<sup>8</sup> And Shaw only became troubled by the absurdity of words sporadically and in the old, confident, pre-modern sense of the absurd.

The problems of language in modern drama were crystallised – as problems – in the early dramatic criticism of Eliot (from 1919 onwards).<sup>9</sup> And one might single out Eliot's celebrated rejection, in 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists' (1923), of William Archer's over-simple faith in the progress of drama based partly on the affirmation that the *language of imitation* has a natural ascendancy in modern drama.

Archer's late book *The Old Drama and the New* (1923) includes something like a doctrine on dramatic language, which has the clarity of assertions made by someone who thinks he is standing firmly on the top of the ladder. Even the tone is triumphant

<sup>7</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Ein Brief', *Werke: Prosa II.*, Frankfurt, 1959, pp. 7–20. (English translation in *Selected Prose*, London, 1953.)

<sup>8</sup> The two Shaw quotes are taken, respectively, from *Shaw on Theatre* (ed. E. J. West), pp. 217 and 268; the dates are 1933 and 1946. See also Ch. 1, pp. 39–40, with further quotes. The statement at the end of the paragraph is the subject of a section on pp. 75ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ch. 2, n. 4 especially.

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whenever Archer celebrates the substitution of 'the true accent of human speech for inflated rhetoric'<sup>10</sup> and, in his grand exordium,

the sloughing off from drama of the lyrical and rhetorical elements, both tragic and comic, and of the conventions associated with them, until we reach a logical and consistent art form, capable of expressing, by means of pure imitation, not only the social but the spiritual life of the modern world.<sup>11</sup>

The comfort of this doctrine, from Archer's point of view, is that it works both retrospectively (all drama of the past points to this state of technical refinement in dialogue) and, as it were, prophetically (there is no reason why 'progress', so defined, should not continue). Between the two primary sources of all drama – imitation and passion – the former has at last come into its own; and it follows that rhetorical, lyrical, 'cothurnate' speech is, in modern drama, an aberration.<sup>12</sup>

For a dramatist who wrote in keeping with Archer's doctrine the writing of the dialogue would present only, or largely, technical problems – problems of economy, timing, appropriateness, 'speaking in character'. Such things do demand great and consistent creative attention, but they are usually free from the kind of tensions we find in the work of the dramatist who sets out to re-create a dramatic language.

Looking back, we may briefly recall that two such very different early contemporaries of Shaw as Pinero and Henry James seem to have accepted the ascendancy of the language of imitation, without any critical questioning. Pinero once wrote an essay to explain the failure of Robert Louis Stevenson as dramatist (1903),<sup>13</sup> in which he criticises Stevenson for 'deliberately imitating outworn models'. In this respect Stevenson

<sup>10</sup> William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, London, 1923, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 24–5.

<sup>12</sup> My sentence, made up of terms repeatedly used by Archer.

<sup>13</sup> 'Robert Louis Stevenson: The Dramatist', extracts reprinted in Barrett H. Clark, *European Theories of the Drama*, New York, 1929, pp. 454–7. My own quotes are taken from the fourth and final paragraphs. Pinero objects to Stevenson's imitation of the 'absurdities' of the stage – precisely what happens later in parodistic theatricality. As for 'progressive' drama, this came to be opposed by deliberate 'regression' to primitive modes.

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was like the many poets and novelists, starting with the Romantics, who had broken what is 'perhaps the only universal rule of the drama...that you cannot pour new wine into old skins'. This amounts to a failure to realise that the art of drama is *progressive*. Stevenson had failed to master the new technique of compression, the art of making the characters 'say nothing very remarkable, nothing you think...that might not quite well have occurred to you'. The 'problem of language' from that standpoint is tantamount to the effort of writing such compressed dialogue: 'every page of the play has cost more care, severer mental tension, if not more actual manual labour, than any chapter of a novel, though it be fifty pages long'.

Henry James's agonised struggle to write a few dramatic masterpieces – his love of the 'drama', hatred of the 'theatre', that 'unholy trade' – has been reconstructed, in masterly detail, by Leon Edel in several studies.<sup>14</sup> We are made to re-experience the peculiar ambiguities of a reluctant lover for a questionable art form; we see James spending twenty years or so in conscious preparation for drama in Paris and London; we see how pre-occupied he was by the conditions of the theatre of his time, with what circumspection he chose the *subjects* and thought about the *structure* of his plays. ('The fine thing in a real drama, generally speaking, is that, more than any other work of literary art, it needs a masterly structure...The five-act play...is like a box of mixed dimensions and inelastic material, into which a mass of precious things are to be packed away. It is a problem of ingenuity and a problem of the most interesting kind...') Yet in all his writing about drama, James – the subtle master of verbal nuances and the creator of the 'dramatic method' in the novel – seems to have given no critical attention to his dialogue, or to dramatic language in general. Neither does he seem to have considered the possibility of choosing or creating a theatrical style in opposition to the dominant style of his time.

Thus Pinero, the successful non-literary dramatist, and James, the unsuccessful literary dramatist, virtually shared the assumption

<sup>14</sup> (1) *Henry James: Les années dramatiques*, Paris, 1931. (2) Introduction to *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, London, 1949. (3) Introduction to Henry James, *Guy Domville*, London, 1960, pp. 13–121. The bracketed quotation is from Henry James' review of Tennyson's *Queen Mary* (1875), quoted by Edel (3), pp. 39–40.

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that the problem was learning to write dialogue, in accordance with the dominant, the progressive style of the day. Wholly new kinds of stylistic tension arise in the work of the dramatist who refuses to accept the language of imitation as *the* style, who becomes aware of an extended spectrum of possible dramatic languages.

## 3

In examining this extended spectrum, let us consider first of all the limits of possibility for *any* dramatic language – the point where it ceases to be a language. For it is no longer enough simply to recall the old truism that all dramatic speech is more than words; that the words of any play – except, perhaps, in intentional closet drama – are written to be spoken and enacted; that there is in drama, and only in drama, a permanent tension between verbal and non-verbal elements (since poetry and the novel cannot, even at extreme points, experiment beyond words). We must be aware, further, that this unique interaction between word and non-word – from the single gesture to the whole concert of signals on stage – has itself been put under pressure by the heightened critical questioning of the value of the word in the theatre. In brief, the quickest escape-route from the internal tensions of language – which we shall chiefly consider – is the enlargement of the area of wordless drama: mime and ballet, music and sound effects, the promised freedoms of physical expressiveness: the actor's body, the 'events' on the stage, the spontaneous instants of performance. The very word language – which we shall consistently restrict to the verbal element, the forms of speech and dialogue – has been extended to include almost anything: we might hear about the language of movement, about action-language. This extension is interesting; it is partly metaphorical, partly influenced by the modern structuralist approach which sees every system of signs, from menus and garments to ways of pointing, as a language.<sup>15</sup> In the

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes can be tentative and declaratory in turn concerning *language/speech* as 'a general category . . . which embraces all the systems of signs'. See *Elements of Semiology* (1964), London, 1967, pp. 9 and 25. In the context of the theatre, he sees the words spoken by the actors (with gesture) as 'turning' signs in a whole polyphony of signs. *Essais critiques, Littérature et signification*, Paris, 1964, p. 258.



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present context, the appeal to non-verbal ‘languages’ as in some sense more creative or more vital than words in the theatre should help to define the pole of wordless drama. And we need this definition even if the ‘aesthetics of sight and sound’ may appear to cut the ground from under our feet. Here then is an extract from Antonin Artaud’s manifesto attacking verbal drama, and extolling the ‘language of space and movement’, and a ‘language half-way between gesture and thought’ in *The Theatre and its Double* (1938).

This language cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue. And what the theatre can still take over from speech are its *possibilities for extension beyond words*, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility. This is the hour of intonations, of a word’s particular pronunciation. Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once we are aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theatre must organise it into veritable hieroglyphs. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, this is a creed rather than a critical statement; and Artaud nowhere examines how literary dialogue works in, or in counterpoint with, a performance. The attack on articulate language ultimately assumes that the reader, including the potential dramatist, will share a general weariness with *all* the conventions of dramatic speech – poetic, rhetorical, and naturalistic; and beyond that lies the reaction against the linguistic habits of Western culture, nothing less. The position is, as intended, extreme, although not all that new. (One thinks of Gordon Craig discovering the clue to the Art of the Theatre in a notice he saw at the stage door of a Munich theatre: *Sprechen streng verboten*.<sup>17</sup> And ‘pure theatre’ can be traced back to the

<sup>16</sup> This manifesto is reprinted in *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (ed. Eric Bentley), Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 55–6. For a full contrast between ‘*langage concret*’ and ‘*langage articulé*’ see Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (1938), Paris, 1964, pp. 53ff.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, London, 1911, p. 131. Cf. ‘Über-marionettes and wordless plays and actorless dramas are the obvious steps to a far deeper mystery’, quoted in Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, New York, 1955, pp. 17ff.

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non-verbal gags of the clowns, to the *commedia dell'arte* and, ultimately, to the vulgar mime-plays of antiquity.<sup>18</sup>) Then the text may become a 'pretext' – or it is reduced to something provisional and minimal, a scenario (as in the hands of the Living Theatre of our time). The words – if words – are to serve as an 'auditory language of sounds', intonations, cries, onomatopoeia; the syllable, or the isolated word, replaces the sentence; incantatory rhythm imposes abstraction. As a potential direction non-verbal drama shifts the whole spectrum of dramatic language away from those modes of drama – particularly Greek and Elizabethan – where the text fully controls enactment.<sup>19</sup>

A less radical idea may be briefly considered: the idea that non-verbal action – mime for instance – can express the words in a play. Thus Arthur Miller, a dramatist with limited verbal gifts whose plays are, nevertheless, hardly the stuff for a dumb-show, writes:

*A very great play can be mimed and still issue forth its essential actions and their rudiments of symbolic meaning; the word, in drama, is the transformation into speech of what is happening, and the fiat for intense language is intensity of happening.*<sup>20</sup>

Despite the question-begging 'very great play' and the seeming confusion of 'essential' and 'rudiments', a point is made: words can be transposed into wordless action, which is in some sense primary. Does Miller think that mime could be a direct 'translation' of the words – a correspondence? Presumably not. Mime

<sup>18</sup> See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised ed., Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 318–29 (drawing on the partly disproved work of Hermann Reich).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance*, London, 1968, pp. 175ff.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Miller, *Collected Plays*, London, 1958, Introduction, p. 8. (My italics for sentence, Miller's for 'happening'.) Cf. the more extreme sounding 'The greater and chief part of playwriting has nothing to do with words' – Elder Olson in *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama*, Detroit, 1961, p. 9. Such statements look Aristotelian at first sight. But Aristotle balanced his view that 'the plot is the first principle' (*Poetics*, VI, 14) by the view that the words, when they are spoken, should be irreplaceable: 'the effects aimed at in speech should be produced by the speaker and as a result of the speech. For what were the business of a speaker, if the Thought were revealed quite apart from what he says?' (*Poetics*, XIX, 3, Butcher's translation).