

Repetition and the visual in beckett's act without words



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The title of Beckett's play, 'Act Without Words I', betrays an immediate awareness of its dual status as a text on a page and as a thing intended to be used for performance. The title, lacking an indefinite article preceding it, could be read either as descriptive: 'An Act Without Words I', or as an imperative command to the reader: 'Act without words!' From the outset then, there is a self-awareness about the text's unstable or unfamiliar status. On the page, it does not look like a play-text usually does; there are no character names, speech, or italicized stage directions. The page looks like widely spaced prose or even poetry; and yet it declares itself in writing as 'a mime for one player', and indicates at the end that a 'curtain' should fall. At a preliminary glance, the play is a set of precise directions for a 'player' to imitate. The lack of speech, or textual elaboration upon the motives or inward life of the man make the text appear both unlike a written story, and unlike a dramatic performance text. Yet it is precisely these qualities that constitute a special relationship between the reader, text, and potential performance through the act of reading. Beckett uses the blank space on the page, punctuation, and repetitions in order to mimic the pace of performance action to the pace of reading to create a highly visual experience; the player 'sees' the play being performed as they read. If they are a 'player', they then have to repeat the actions in the same futile cycle for an audience. Where there is no speech indicated in performance, the aforementioned techniques of repetitions and suggestive language on the page allow the reader to infer feeling and emotions as they read, in effect performing and embodying the character themselves.

Everything in the text happens in the present tense, thus meaning that the reader moves at the pace of the action as it happens, as they read:

“ He turns, sees a second cube, looks at it, at carafe, goes to second cube, takes it up, carries it over and sets it down under carafe”

The position of the reader here is twofold, as they are made to occupy both the usual position of reader at a distance and embody the man's gaze. This is effected by the moments of ' looking' in the text. Because, as readers, we are offered no other gaze, nor any other information, we must look where the man looks, and embody his gaze. The word ' look', too, is imperative, and where it appears in the text our attention is drawn, and we are forced, by the text, to imagine the object the man gazes on. In addition to this, Beckett's careful punctuation throughout slows the reader's pace down to allow for a pause in between each action, ' looks at it, at carafe, goes to second cube', creating a sense of realistic bodily movement in time. His use of white space on the page is also very suggestive, as it imposes a pause between each action as one reads:

“ A big cube descends from flies, lands. He continues to reflect. Whistle from above.”

As readers, our eyes cannot move as rapidly between sentences as they normally would in a line of prose, or closely spaced poetry. This has the effect of imposing real time between one action and another, as it would appear with a body on stage. Thus, if we treat this as a performance text, the words here do not only inform movement, but posit that movement in time too.

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The word 'reflect' here also has special significance in the text. The white space left after the word in the aforementioned example has an obvious feature of imposing a spatial implication of time in which the man is reflecting. But, the word 'reflect' has further significance with regards to the reader's experience of the text because of its layered repetition. It is one of few words in the text that indicates an inner life to the 'man' performing the otherwise mechanical actions, and thus invites an opportunity for the reader to embellish or imagine the substance of this 'reflection'. Reading at the same pace at the man 'performs', they are invited to reflect from the same intellectual position of the man, both participants given no indication as to the reason behind the events on stage. It is at these moments that the reader ceases to be an onlooker of the man's actions, and instead becomes an instrument in giving him an inner life, performing him through reading. This works by means of repetition. Each time the word 'reflects' is repeated, the reader is invited to reflect upon the action that has just passed. The first time the word is used, it stands enclosed by punctuation:

" He falls, get up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects."

The moment is given an integrity of its own, cordoned off in a visual impression of an on-stage pause. But each time the word is repeated, it takes on a different meaning simply by nature of having been repeated, becoming each time more hopeless, and devoid of understanding:

" A little tree descends from flies, lands [...] He continues to reflect. Whistle from above. He turns, sees tree, reflects, goes to it, sits down in its shadow, looks at his hands."

Though the word itself does not change, each time the man is foiled, the reader necessarily takes the word differently. They begin to wonder whether the 'reflection' is at all effective. And the text guides this understanding too, by the repeated gesture of the man looking at his hands, an event which only occurs after several moments of 'reflection'. The two gestures point to the text's own self-consciousness attempt to produce the simultaneous readerly experience of embodying the man (produced by moments of reflection) and watching the man at a distance (embodied by looking at his hands). In both these positions, the reader, like the man, is unable to make any progress, by will of thought (reflection) or action (hands). The fact that the person who reads this text is likely to be a player who will go on to literally embody the man on stage heightens the sense of futility, and evinces the sense of endless repetition that the text portrays.

In the final moments of the act, the text states that, after falling, the man 'remains lying on his side, his face towards auditorium, staring before him.' This is a moment at which the intimacy between the act of reading and performance crystallizes. The reader has been 'watching' the man's actions, but now he looks towards them, 'staring', and pushing further at the boundary between text and performance that the reader has experienced throughout. They become very aware here of being 'looked' at, a visual gesture that would usually only be performed in a theatre. Saying this, even this gesture would be unusual in a theatre, as it would break the fourth wall between the performer and the audience, an effect here which I argue is deliberate; co-opting the reader into the performance of what they read.

The relationship between the text as a thing for reading and a thing for performance is complex here in many ways, but the lack of spoken words means that an intimate and unnerving relationship can exist between the two, as they both rely on a visual experience only. The imperative which I suggested could have been read in the title, 'act without words', is indeed a challenge to the reader. Whether they approach the text intending only to read or to perform, the very reading experience performs the text by positioning the reader as an audience member, but one who is privy to no more information or understanding than the man that they 'watch'. Further than this, the repetitions and appearance of the text on the page as well as Beckett's linguistic choices call on the reader to make conclusions about the emotion and frustrations in the scene, and fill in the moments of 'reflection' with their own.