SONG AND IMPROVISATION IN LESSNESS

Many of Beckett’s later, short works are characterized by a variative form of language that is governed by the “statistical arrangement of events.” The systematic development and application of such ideas appeared first in music, and is largely attributable to composers like Cage, Luning, Xenakis, Subotnik, and Stockhausen. Stockhausen (b. 1928), for example, argued for the controlled use of multiple realization as a new conception of performed music, and claimed in the mid-1950s that such techniques were in themselves new forms. He sought to develop compositional systems that, coupled with extensive work in the electronic production and manipulation of sound, have resulted in a rigorous, fascinating music that is sophisticated in its organization and design. His illuminating discussions defining music and the nature of intuition made him a pioneer in the innovative uses of physical space, chance or open forms in composition, “intuitive” music, and other aesthetic and philosophical developments.

In Beckett’s hands, harmonic language takes on the characteristics of textual, melodic, and contrapuntal elements that reflect the same kinds of musical concepts of conflict and opposition as those of Stockhausen. After all Beckett’s wordy outbursts in How It Is and The Unnamable, what else was left except linguistic shrinkage and devastation? With Lessness, he dared to write a work of short musical fragments whose “statistical” arrangement of language and structures suggest fragmentation and loss of an easily perceivable center and the impression is of a bombardment of disconnected energy and impulses. Such knotty complexity, often thought of (by critics) as a product of Beckett’s penchant for systems and linguistic compositional techniques, shares much with the deliberate application of randomness — tossing the dice to let the I Ching make decisions, for example — and produces a dissociation of effect.

Particularly notable in Lessness is how the voicing, vanishing subject expresses emotions that are quite unconventional in terms of ordinary human feeling. Here Beckett breaks down the basic sentence or phrase structure and moves towards patterns of unfixed or random frequency content. The emphasis is on structure, formalized patterns, artifice, and the undercutting of pathos in order to develop the themes of rejection, of isolation, and of the absence of love. By means of difficult, scattered, and even “spastic” language, this work presents problems of interpretation. A closer investigation of the piece, however, will reveal how the text is musically refined in the complexities of its language.
By the time Beckett wrote *Lessness*, he had already interiorized sound density in *Play* (1964) and had formalized cyclical and repeated structures. The paradox of a subject’s position with himself or others is that his or her place is in fact defined in the voice of the text. Perhaps the most important conceptual contributions made by the voice and the dense constructs of language in this work is that they mirror the radically circumscribed space of little body in *Lessness*. And like the subject imagining, the viewer’s memory also drifts from wholeness to particularity. In this way, the viewer subconsciously follows the “score” of *Lessness*, in which the voice is used as an instrument that performs the detritus of memory.

In placing the troubles of the self in the realm of sound, *Lessness* dislocates the body from language precisely to show that the verbal, spoken word is an inadequate means of communication. That words fail to express is a fetish on Beckett’s part; he realizes that the heroic is too big for us, or we are too small for it. What *Lessness* makes plain is a faith in the will to overcome the problems intrinsic to communication.

The hovering and repeating of phrase/sentences in *Lessness*,¹ changing only minutely, represent an extreme penetration into relatively unexplored areas of consciousness, to a point where an enormous amount of mental energy is focused on an absolute minimum of sensory data. *Lessness* suggests a collaboration of past and present, repetition and invention, the world as given and the world imagined. In it homogeneity is layered over with hopes of poetic joy coupled with superstition, ignorance, and diligence. To not know one’s place — and even more discomforting, to want to change it, is to try to escape one’s lot — and constitutes proud rebellion. But *Lessness* is in no way a tale of hypocrisy or repression. It gives variations on the theme of improvisation, introducing many of the same types of figures of the other short prose works by interlarding dreams, narrative, musical fragments, and personal “history.” What is interesting and not at all unique is the use of paradox on which it turns: the improvisational form stands for the subject’s creativity in its most elemental form (inspiration), but at the same time the text is always something given to the imagination.

A schematic of paragraphs and sentences is deliberately employed. The work is composed of twenty-four paragraphs, varying in length, but each with seven sentences. As a musical piece, *Lessness* creates a “dual effect, that is, both instantaneous and cumulative, as the echoes of the earlier variations reverberate in the mind (...)”² The distorting perspective that this work has on the readers’ emotional viewpoint is offset by the contrapuntal language that is seen on the printed page. The