

Samuel Beckett and Rumiko Kōra

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The Aphasiac Experience

Looking at the work of Rumiko Kōra and the work of Samuel Beckett, we find a similar tendency in their experience of language.¹ Both have an intense awareness of language; both involve the aphasiac experience which is based on a strong resistance to what they call "their language." For Kōra, "their language" means the language of the powerful or the intellectual language separated from daily life, and for Beckett "their language" reveals itself as abstracted and sophisticated language which is manifest in an official English. Kōra's work and Beckett's work show the need to recover or rediscover what lies behind "their language."

In her essay entitled "In Search of Lost Language," Rumiko Kōra writes: "I recall the cheerful faces of the people who are recovering language."² In this essay, which is a reportage about aphasiac patients at the hospitals that she visited, she draws a parallel between her own experience of "recovering the lost language" as a poet and the experiences of aphasiac patients who make efforts to recover their languages.

Kōra begins the essay with her childhood memories, especially how she experienced language as a child. According to this essay, she stopped speaking

¹ Rumiko Kōra is a well-known contemporary poet who was born in Tokyo in 1932. She studied at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and at Keiō University. She published her first book of poems, *Seito to tori* (A Student and A Bird) in 1958. Her second book of poems published in 1962, *Basho* (The Place) won the Mr. H prize in 1963. In 1988, her book of poems, *Kamen no hoe* (Voices of a Mask) won the Contemporary Poet's Prize. She also writes novels and literary criticism. A six-volume collection of her literary criticism, *Kōra Rumiko no shisō sekai* (Collected Essays of Kōra Rumiko: The World of Kōra Rumiko) is a significant work in the field of literary criticism in Japan where few women critics have yet obtained a recognized voice.

² Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko no shisō sekai*, Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō, 1992, vol. 2, pp. 4-23.

at some point in her early childhood. When she was with people, especially with her parents, she would not talk. She felt at ease speaking only when she was alone or when she was with her dolls. But this does not mean that she had nothing to express or nothing to convey to other people. On the contrary, she had too much to express. She just could not put it into words when she was in front of others. Instead of using her mouth, she very often started a fight by using her hands.

What prevented her from speaking was her resistance to language. In an interview, she says:

From the time I was a small child, I was intensely aware of language. I felt even as a child that language was not mine, that I existed outside the language that surrounded me, like a foreigner. The warmth and familiarity of a language that was my own, wrapped gently around me, remained a dream, unknown. In the absence of a language that I could wear comfortably, I took the sounds and words around me and played with them. Language was one of my favorite toys as a child. Yes, it's true that I have always been aware of language as something outside myself and have written about it, and within it, in a very self-conscious way.³

This feeling of alienation from language is related to her strong resistance to what she terms "their language." In another essay, "Words and Things," she describes her resistance to "their language"⁴ by which she means "the language of the powerful, or the language of intellectuals, language separated from daily life," or "language that pretended to be the everyday language of everybody." But at the

³ Sandra Buckley (ed.), *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 104. Nicola Liscutin, in "Reclaiming a Language Taken," briefly discusses the significance of Kōra's work in terms of the relationship of women to language. In this article, she reviews two books, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism* and *The Woman's Hand: Gender Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker eds., Stanford: Stanford University, 1996). Nicola Liscutin, "Reclaiming a Language Taken," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Instituts für Japanstudien der Philipp Franz von Siebold Stiftung*, December 1998, pp. 338-339.

⁴ Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko no shisō sekai*, vol. 2, pp. 38-47.

same time she had a great love of language, a love that was connected to the memory of "play" or "pleasure." She remembers that she enjoyed "naming" various things with her elder sister in her childhood. Thus we see her ambivalent relation to language - both resistance and love.

According to her, it was her resistance to language that connected her to the aphasiac patients in the hospitals that she visited. For both, recovering language meant overcoming their resistance to language.

At one level we could say that Kōra's aphasiac period ended when she started writing poetry. She had been deprived of her language for a long time (from her childhood to her early adulthood), but at one point of her life she suddenly recovered her language. Yet at another level we could say that the aphasiac state continued even after she had started writing poetry; it became the condition of the creation of poetry. This leads us to think that "recovering the lost language" is a continual process that does not have a definite end, a process that repeats itself. For, in Kōra, the aphasiac state means "the lack of language" or "the lack of being" found in language. It is what makes her continue writing. In other words, it is the very "lack of language" that brings forth a new language.

Beckett also had a resistance to "their language." In a letter written in German in 1937, he calls language (especially the English language) "a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it."⁵ He also calls language "a mask." Or again, he evokes the "terrible materiality of the word surface [fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität der Wortfläche]." Clearly, we see in this letter a kind of hostility toward language, to be more specific, a hostility toward "an official English," "Grammar and Style." We also recall that in his early essay, "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce," Beckett asserts the need for hieroglyphic language as opposed to "abstracted and sophisticated language" which is manifest in English.⁶

Beckett's work often originates from the condition of aphasia -- language disorder, a loss of the ability to communicate. The main character in Beckett's work very often appears as the subject who experiences the limit of language or

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, New York: Grove Press, 1984, pp. 52, 171-172.

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *A Samuel Beckett Reader*, New York: Grove Press, 1992, pp. 105-126.

rather who is the limit of language itself, or we could say, as the subject who suffers from some speaking disorder or experiences the failure of speech. For example, in *The Unnamable* the subject's speech is the gap between "the madness of having to speak and not being able to." That is to say, the subject "I" who is obliged to speak of things that he cannot speak of is this gap itself:

I don't feel a mouth on me, I don't feel the jostle of words in my mouth, . . . words falling, you don't know where, you don't know whence, drops of silence through the silence, I don't feel it, I don't feel a mouth on me, nor a head, do I feel an ear, frankly now, do I feel an ear, well frankly now I don't, so much the worse, I don't feel an ear either, this is awful, make an effort, I must feel something, yes, I feel something, they say I feel something, I don't know what it is, I don't know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I'll tell you who I am, they'll tell me who I am, I won't understand, but the thing will be said, they'll have said who I am, and I'll have heard, without an ear I'll have heard, and I'll have said it, without a mouth I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either, . . .⁷

The subject "I" no longer feels a mouth nor an ear, or it no longer knows what it feels. It enters the space of exile where there are no words, no organs, no identity, no feeling, no thought. It loses itself, in being interrupted and divided. But it does speak. Or it cannot stop speaking and just goes on like a broken record player.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable in Three Novels by Samuel Beckett*, New York: Grove Press, 1955, pp. 382-383.

One of the significant motifs in *The Unnamable* has to do with some hidden imprinting device which seems to be at work in the subject "I." The following quote reveals the power of this device, that is to say, the power of "their language":

Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with. . . . On their own ground, with their own arms, I'll scatter them, and their miscreated puppets. Perhaps I'll find traces of myself by the same occasion. . . , yes, they've inflicted the notion of time on me too. . . . They loaded me down with their trappings and stoned me through the carnival. I'll sham dead now, whom they couldn't bring to life, and my monster's carapace will rot off me. But it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate. They've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear. Who them?⁸

Wandering at the edge of "their" language, "I" betrays the secret of the device, of "a poor trick" that makes "I" speak in "their" language. It consists of "ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed." This shows that the essential function of this device is "branding"--imprinting. Whatever language "I" speaks, whatever voice "I" utters, it is always branded as "theirs." It is only through this branding or imprinting that "I" becomes "I" (the subject "I" is

⁸ Ibid., pp. 324-325.

appropriated). In other words, it is the power of branding, cutting, or even marking as a sinner (as the etymology of the word "brand" indicates) that makes "I" exist in the world, that is to say, that *gives* "I" time, language, and meaning in the most fundamental sense.⁹ This device has a tremendous power which encloses and entraps the subject within time, language, and meaning, without the subject noticing it. In the passage above we sense a great resistance of "I" to the power of "their language" and even a hostility toward it: "I" mumbles, "I'll fix their gibberish for them. . . . On their own ground, with their own arms, I'll scatter them, and their miscreated puppets." Although "I" is well aware that it cannot escape from "their" power revealed as this imprinting device, it never ceases to try to escape from it. For it needs to find the traces of its own voice which is not branded as "theirs."

The Otherness of "the Thing"

We have seen how the works of Kōra and Beckett involve the aphasiac experience and the resistance to "their language," an experience that is inseparable from the need to recover or rediscover what lies behind "their language." Now we can ask how they recovered what lies behind "their language." We can think of this question through the experience of the otherness of "the thing" found in their works. Here "the thing" means that which resists being objectified in the subject-object relation.

Reflecting on her collection of poetry, *The Place*, Kōra describes how her effort in this collection was a dangerous attempt to grasp the moment in which she and things exchange their positions.¹⁰ It was dangerous because she had to take a risk of "becoming things," which suggests that she had to risk her life in encountering her death in things. This performance of "becoming things" is very

⁹ The word "brand" meant torch and sword in Middle English. The acts of burning and cutting are involved here. Interestingly, one of the senses of the word is a mark put on criminals with a hot iron, which can be easily linked to what has happened to "I" in the passage. The word "brand" is associated with such ideas as sin, disgrace, law, territory, ownership, manufacture, classification, death, etc.

¹⁰ Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko shishū* (Collected Poems of Kōra Rumiko), Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1971, p. 129.

important in her poetry. In "Words and Things," she writes:

Words were dead, and things were dead, too. In words I recognized my death, and in things, too, I recognized my death. But my future and the possibility of my life seemed to be hidden in them. It was only in words and things that my future, the possibility of life, existed, if it did.¹¹

What Kōra sees in things is the death of things, the state of being deprived of their capacity to undertake a project. And she finds "my death" in things. In other words, she sees, in the inertia of things, her own state of being deprived of her capacity to undertake a project. She argues in the same essay that in modern society human beings and things are locked up in the state of being deprived of their "being," that is, of their capacity to create. At the same time, she holds that it is in the very inertia of things that the turning from death into life will take place.

Kōra's thought on poetry in this period, especially her reflection on the relation between words and things, shows the influence of Francis Ponge's theory of poetry. According to her interpretation (in her essay on Poe and Ponge), Ponge attempts to overcome the inertia of things by placing himself on the side of things.¹² What Ponge recognizes in things is the fragility of human beings who are deprived of their capacity for a project and exist at the mercy of the hands of others. So his attempt involves delivering human beings from a spell of inertia, while delivering "things in themselves" from the domination of human beings and language. He tries to strip things of their usefulness and instrumentality, and to describe in his poetry the being of things which are prior to the state of being a tool. Kōra sees in Ponge the desire to transform not only things and language but also human beings. Ponge wants to connect human beings and things in their "being," and recover an organic relation between human beings and things.¹³ In

¹¹ Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko no shisō sekai*, vol. 2, p. 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 68-80. See, for instance, Margaret Guiton (ed.), *Francis Ponge Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

¹³ In "Words and Things" Kōra writes, "What I really want to open is not their reality [the reality of

brief, she recognizes in Ponge an experiment in which the possibility of remaking the world is at stake.

Her famous poem entitled "The Place" indicates the meaning of recovering the lost language. It is recovering, in poetic language, "the place" where the death in the past will renew itself into the future life. Here "the place" appears as the renewing process itself or the plane where the change of the world will take place.

We might say that this attempt to recover language as "the place" is at the center of her work. There are other poems where we sense the force of the plane on which a new form is forming itself. For example, in "The Tree" the images of life in nature and the human world are presented as the redoubling process or as the renewing process.

"The Tree"

Within a tree there is a tree which does not yet exist.
Now its twigs tremble in the wind.

Within a blue sky there is a blue sky which does not yet exist.
Now a bird cuts across its horizon.

Within a body there is a body which does not yet exist.
Now its sanctuary accumulates fresh blood.

Within a city there is a city which does not yet exist.
Now its plazas sway before me.¹⁴

the things] but the relation with them which does not exist, but might come into being." Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko no shisō sekai*, vol. 2, p. 40.

¹⁴ Rumiko Kōra, *Kōra Rumiko shishū*, p. 69. The English translation cited here was done by Rumiko Kōra. The journal, *International Poetry* (Vol.1, 1996, pp. 9-34), has a section devoted to selected poems by Kōra as well as an English translation. An English translation of her poems is also found in *Lines Review*, 114, September 1990, pp. 14-17. Kusano Shinpei, Kazuko Shiraishi, and Gōzō Yoshimasu contribute to the same issue.

In this poem, the image of a "thing" that exists at present (a tree, a blue sky, a body, or a city) reveals itself as the movement of redoubling. It contains within it the latent state of its future. And we sense the outlines of the future world emerging.

Thus, Kōra tries to "recover the lost language" through her attempt to experience the moment in which she and things exchange their positions. It is an attempt to encounter the death of things and discover, in that very death, the possibility of turning or the possibility of the future life. What she rediscovers in things is the force to transform the world.

Beckett also tries to uncover, behind "their language," the force of things that resists objectification. We could also say that he tries to show it as the work of art. For him, the thing is revealed as "the human condition" or as "the essence of our being."

"The thing" in Beckett cannot be understood through our customary idea of things. For him, the thing means "the thing itself." The thing is essentially that which retreats into itself or withdraws itself from the visible world. In his works, a visible thing exists as the symbol of "the thing" that Beckett calls "Idea," "the thing itself," or "the pure object."

Beckett's understanding of "the thing" is found in his works *Proust* and "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon." *Proust* shows how our reason and intellect as well as our habits prevent us from perceiving "the thing" as such. In other words, it shows how the subject-object relation found in Western modernity hinders our perception of "the thing." What Beckett points out in this early critical work is the doubleness of "the thing." "The thing" is at once ideal and concrete. The essential is hidden within the empirical. "The thing" exists as this duplication and discloses the fact that "the extratemporal" is hidden within time and that the immaterial is imprisoned in matter. This duplication of "the thing" is linked to the "auto-symbolism" that Beckett speaks of in the same work.

In "La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon," Beckett talks about the paintings of the van Velde brothers and explains that both their

paintings depict "the thing."¹⁵ According to Beckett, there is a clear difference between their ideas of "the thing."

A. van Velde's painting gives the impression of "the thing in suspense," "the dead thing," or "the thing in the void." It is also described as "the isolated thing," the thing that is congealed and immobile in the void, or "the pure object." For A. van Velde, what is important is to catch a vision in an inner space or to catch an inner vision of "the thing." "The thing" can be seen in the inner space of the dark.

Then Beckett says that "the thing" that G. van Velde is interested in painting is not really the object but the process itself. Whereas A. van Velde is interested in "l'étendue," G. van Velde is concerned about "la succession."

It could be said that what Beckett says about A. van Velde and G. van Velde can also be found in Beckett's own work. In Beckett's work, we can see these two series of "the thing" intertwining with each other and maintaining a balance between the two.

Beckett's work does not show directly how one can transform the world. But it safeguards the almost imperceptible trembling of "the thing" against the violence of the objectifying power in modern society. This trembling of "the thing" can be seen only by an eye which no longer needs light (this is linked to what A. van Velde says about "the thing"). In other words, this trembling of "the thing" is not perceptible for the modern subject produced by the subject-object relation.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, there is an image of a buttonhook which is faintly trembling in "her" cabin. In this prose work, the image of the trembling of "the thing" is repeated.

Before left for the stockings the boots have time to be ill buttoned.
Weeping over as weeping will see now the buttonhook larger than life.
Of tarnished silver pisciform it hangs by its hook from a nail. It
trembles faintly without cease.¹⁶

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, pp. 118-132.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, New York: Grove Press, 1981, p. 18.

Later in the work, the image of a buttonhook reappears as the image of an old key which trembles faintly. We might say that this image of the key indicates the possibility of the opening of an entirely new plane which has not existed before.

As hope expires of her ever reappearing she reappears. At first sight little changed. It is evening. It will always be evening. When not night. She emerges at the fringe of the pastures and sets forward across them. Slowly with fluttering step as if wanting mass. Suddenly still and as suddenly on her way again. At this rate it will be black night before she reaches home. Home! But time slows all this while. Suits its speed to hers. Whence from beginning to end of her course no loss or but little of twilight. A matter at most of a candle or two. Bearing south as best she can she casts toward the moon to come her long black shadow. They come at last to the door holding a great key. At the same instant night. When not evening night. Head bowed she stands exposed facing east. All dead still. All save hanging from a finger the old key polished by use. Trembling it faintly shimmers in the light of the moon.¹⁷

Conclusion

Looking at the works of Kōra and Beckett in terms of their relation to modernity, we recognize in both a reaction against modernity through the experience of the otherness of "the thing." Both try to uncover or recover "the thing" which lies behind what they call "their language." And for both, "the thing" reveals itself as what envelops within it the possibility of the opening of a new plane --a plane which has existed in its latent state behind the habitual horizon of our experience.

Compared with Beckett, Kōra is more directly involved in political movements; she is interested in working on the question of Asia and that of

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

women. And her work clearly shows the will to overcome modernity, in particular, the Japanese modernity that suppresses the question of Asia and that of women. Kōra emphasizes the importance of maintaining a relation with the historical reality and engaging in the political transformation of the existing world.

It is difficult to say whether Beckett's work clearly shows the will to overcome modernity. But his work shows a resistance to modernity and its drive toward the mastery of nature and society through human reason and intellect. His work safeguards the almost imperceptible trembling of "the thing" against the violence of the objectifying power (or the appropriating power) in modern society. The language that Beckett creates, or "the thing" that Beckett depicts in his work, comes from the edge of Western modernity (or Western reason), while questioning its ground. Beckett's work has a force that leads Western modernity to its own outside.

(This paper was presented at the 117th Modern Language Association Annual Convention in New Orleans on December 27, 2001.)