THE DECLINE OF WORDS IN DRAMA

Mavor Moore

IN JOYCE'S *Finnegan's Wake*, a play is announced which never takes place. H. C. Earwicker dreams it up in his dream, for presentation at the Feenichts Playhouse. It is "adopted from the Ballymooney Bloodriddon Murther by Bluechin Blackdillain (authorways 'Big Storey')." It is a pity we never had the play, for if the dialogue had been in the same style — language mocking language — it might have suggested that in the theatre words have reached the end of the line. Joyce ducked the challenge by making Earwicker's play a Mime. But in Samuel Becket's recent forty-second epic *Breath*, words are dispensed with and vocal communication reaches the zenith of abstraction: inhalation, baby's cry, exhalation.

Finnegan's Wake was published in 1939. The previous year the French iconoclast Antonin Artaud had published his *Le Théâtre et son Double*, in which he sought to demolish the literary basis of theatre in favour of the "concrete language" of the stage, which "is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language." Artaud's proscription applied equally to the written text. "The fixation of the theatre in one language . . . betokens its imminent ruin, the choice of any one language betraying a taste for the special effects of that language; and the dessication of the language accompanies its limitation."

Has this ruin already overtaken us?

Artaud saw at the root of our times' confusion "a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation." Wanting a theatre which would "break through language in order to touch life", he cursed our "artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signalling through the flames." He makes a frontal assault on the whole canon of dramatic literature:

> We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and *written* poetry . . . Let the dead poets make way for others. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already been created, however valid and beautiful it may be, that petrifies us, deadens our responses, and prevents us from making contact with that underlying power, call it thought-energy, the life force . . . or anything you like. Beneath the poetry of the texts there is the actual poetry, without form and without text. And just as the efficacy of masks in the magic practices of certain tribes is exhausted — and these masks are no longer good for anything except museums — so the poetic efficacy of a text is exhausted.

In order to survive, Artaud insists, the theatre must make capital of "what *differentiates* it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means . . . On the stage, which is above all a space to fill and a place where something happens, the language of words may have to give way before a language of *signs* whose objective aspect is the one which has the most immediate impact upon us." Even when words are used, he wants them used differently: "Let there be a return to the active, plastic, respiratory sources of language, let words be joined again to the physical motions that gave them birth, and let the discursive, logical aspect of speech disappear beneath its affective, physical side, i.e., let the words be heard in their sonority rather than be exclusively taken for what they mean grammatically . . . "

Like the philosopher Hume, and like MacLuhan in our own day, Artaud is of course sitting out on a limb and sawing himself from the trunk with his own argument: using words to plead that words no longer plead well. But like them he cannot be easily dismissed. If professors of English literature do no more than smile loftily at his impertinent depreciation of their vested interest, and if theatre-goers who crowd the latest "happening" have never heard of him, Artaud has proved too prophetic to be put down as a crank hypothesist. Like most prophets, however, he was less a foreseer than a seer, observing around him currents whose direction and force others less percipient underestimated. In retrospect, we can see how it happened. From the vantage point of today's spontaneous and often improvised theatre, more apt to reveal bodies than minds, and even from the calculated laryngeal ritual of such groups as Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, we can see the chain of now seemingly inevitable steps which led us here. What Artaud did not perhaps allow for, in his concentration on the live theatre, was the possibility that if his diagnosis was correct the film might displace the stage as a dramatic form for the general public, and the theatre itself — like a virgin protesting her purity — lose more in popularity than it gained in self-esteem.

I do not propose to deal here with the traditional arts of mime and dance, or

with the more recent silent cinema, which have always been primarily wordless, but with those forms of dramatic art traditionally employing a verbal text: the play (known as "straight" in the theatre), the opera (*seria* and *buffa*), the musical comedy, and the dramatic film — although the categories have become somewhat blurred. I wish to suggest the various influences which seem — at an astonishing pace — to be shaping the theatre and the lyric theatre of today and tomorrow, and which may change forever the anatomy of dramatic criticism.

It is no news, of course, that the television age inclines even literate people to think visually — a habit which President Pusey of Harvard feared would lead us to "think with the eye's mind instead of the mind's eye." But I hope we are beyond the point where any but a sheltered philosopher would claim that the stimulation of the mind is antithetical to sensory awareness, or even that verbal language is always the best means of expressing thought, let alone emotion.

I have never seen the beginnings of the anti-verbal theatre traced to Maeterlinck, but when that volatile theorist noted that the most exciting drama in the world went on inside the head of an old man sitting quietly by the fire, he plainly started something. Chekhov was possibly the first great playwright to exploit the possibility of achieving a kind of reverse suspense by having his characters do nothing until you were ready to scream. Often nothing *ever* happened — and that was the point of it, just as later it became the point of *Waiting for Godot*. But while waiting for nothing to happen, and getting stirred up by pregnant pauses, may provide welcome variety and plenty of food for thought between stretches of activity, it is fundamentally an interstice — and certainly not one of the colourful and sensually exciting kind which provides the escape from daily toil so often required of the theatre, whether verbal or spectacular.

By far the most popular form of theatre today is the "musical", the main features of which (despite the label) are scenic spectacle and dancing. The effect of the musical on the straight play has been to arouse a demand for equally galvanic frenzy in the staging of even the most relentlessly verbal drama, usually at the expense of the dialogue. It is one thing to see this kind of hyperthyroid *mise-en-scène* in works written for the style, such as *The Great White Hope* or *Indians*, but another to see Euripides and Shakespeare used as raw material for Walpurgisnacht. Moreover the increasing use of some form of thrust or apron stage — a fashion largely popularized in our time by Ontario's Stratford Festival Theatre — has made constant movement manda-

tory: in order to share their favours with the surrounding audience, the actors must resolve continuously — all too often with the result that half the audience gets the first half of a line and the other half the second. Speeches are not so much cut as lopped.

The musical, or its hyperactive equivalent in the straight play, is usually carefully choreographed and "set". But a different style characterizes the free-wheeling improvisation of groups such as the Living Theatre, where dialogue is often made up by the performers as the play progresses (or whatever it does) and involves the more exhibitionistic of the audience as well. Much of the burden of communication is also put on sighs, wails, shrieks, grunts and other vocal but non-verbal expressions — all of which a writer is hard put to codify by anything more exact than "Oh!" or "Grrr!" In fact the dramatist, in this pluralistic kind of theatre, is no more than his title: "The word-man."

If it is true that operas are first and foremost musical compositions, we need not concern ourselves with libretti except as singable collections of vowels and consonants; I do not agree with this, although we may enjoy opera in a foreign language *qua* music. But contemporary opera often exploits speech patterns and rhythms, and sometimes uses the very same improvisation and word-begging vocables that characterize our "straight" theatre. Here is a stage-direction from the electronic opera *Stacked Deck,* by the U.S. composers Richard Maxfield and Dick Higgins:

> If the light is red or orange for ten seconds [*note that the cue is visual and mechanical, not musical*], he approaches the nearest lady and looks over her shoulder, grinning, and sends out a puff of smoke. If the light has not changed yet, and the lady has not reacted unfavourably, he may pick her up, set her on his shoulder, turn his head and kiss her leg, grin, set her down gently, and motion offstage. If she slaps him, he sings "Palas aron azinomas" [gibberish] and pinches her behind, then dodges away from her, his head drawn into his shoulders, chortling, and hides behind the nearest character. If she wants to go offstage, they go.

What has happened to bring us to this pass, it seems to me, is only intelligible if we view the theatre, both "straight" and lyric, in the context of the mechanical dramatic arts of film and television with which we are surrounded, and of the new mechanical means which technology has at the same time made available to the live theatre.

While it is true that radio, and sound recordings, provided an unparalleled opportunity for a flowering of the spoken word (and still do, if for a smaller audience), and while it is true that music and "sound effects" have always played

an important role in live theatre, the new technology has given us an immensely wider range of both visual and aural effects than the theatre possessed before. In film, moreover, *all* possible effects can be used *together*, can be carefully controlled and matched, and be just as carefully measured for proper amplification wherever the film is shown. Almost for the first time, that is to say, these elements are not necessarily separate and then wedded, not different and then blended, but facets or aspects of a singly conceived artistic whole. The words which characters in the drama are called upon to say or sing, then, are only one of these facets, and by no means necessarily the most important. (In fact, the effect is always funny when a character says something which we have already visually comprehended.) This is particularly obvious in the case of the close-up, where a slight movement of the eyes, or a breaking strand of rope, can literally speak volumes. A sting in the music, a sound effect, or a switch in its source, can do the same. The performer needs neither to explain nor to project.

Some of the technological advances that have enlarged the live theatre's armoury of effects need hardly be mentioned: sophisticated lighting, front and rear-projection, stereophonic sound, infinitely mobile scenery, and the like. And as with film, they can be used as aspects of a whole. But while most of these reduce the need for wordage to inform the audience of what is going on, there are other influences, many of them less obvious, which have contributed to the decline of the word.

One such is amplification itself. The film has accustomed our ears to amplified sound. We do not have to strain to grasp a whisper in a movie-house; it grasps us. Hi-fi recordings and electronic musical instruments have further deafened us, to the point where we can either quickly understand what we are meant to or ignore words or lyrics if comprehension is immaterial. In either case we have become unwilling to *reach* for speech — especially in many of the huge barns into which the economics of modern theatre has forced our productions. This development faced the theatre with a difficult choice: either amplify or go "intimate" — intimacy being best achieved by what the films cannot offer, an audience surrounding the players and even actual physical contact between them. Most musicals (which must play in larger auditoriums) use amplification throughout, even though this means sacrificing all subtlety in the delivery of the lines, since microphones reduce the range of the voice. Most straight plays turn instead to "audience involvement". It is not by chance that the greatest international theatrical success of the moment, the musical *Hair*, does both.

Films have had another little noticed effect on the course of theatre. To make

a profit, a film requires international distribution — and since the coming of "talkies" language (in the narrow sense of one tongue) has proved a serious stumbling block. Neither sub-titles nor dubbing meets the problem more than half way, since we generally notice only as much of the dialogue as we have to and concentrate on the picture. We have thus acquired, as an audience, a second habit inimical to spoken language: a tendency to disregard what is being said in favour of what is being shown. To prove the point one need only compare a twenty-year-old film on its TV rerun with most of the newer productions: the purple passage has given way to the grunt, which needs no translation. Our dramatic heroes reflect the trend; the Stanley Kowalskis and Willy Lomans of this world are not notably articulate. The point I wish to make here is not the critical cliché that they are anti-heroes, but that the less articulate they are, the more easily the stage-play translates into a film — which is much more widely distributable than the stage-play — and the more easily the film translates into Jugoslavian, or what-have-you. Actions not only speak louder than words; they seldom need an interpreter.

This presents the playwright or the lyricist, naturally, with a serious problem when he wishes to make these inarticulate slobs express themselves in anything resembling fine words. But here we must note still another, perhaps less important, way in which the international reach of film has down-graded speech. A primary dramatic function of speech used to be the differentiation of character by nationality (accent) or class (dialect). When the Japanese watch Mary Poppins spout Japanese, or "transatlantic" English replaces British and American educated speech, or assorted European actors pretend to belong to one family (as they often do in films), national distinctions go out of the window; one can only conclude that we are getting deaf to them. Furthermore, the democratization of our whole social life — in which the films have played a major role — increasingly makes nonsense of verbal class distinction. When presidents are less eloquent than plumbers, even with the help of ghost-writers, speech becomes a poor index of status.

But the film, when all is said and done, merely restricts the role of speech. It cannot be held responsible for the curious fact that language itself, whether spoken or written, seems to have become suspect — a victim, perhaps, of over-exposure. For more is being said and written today than ever be-

fore, and it is all being given much wider circulation than ever before, mainly through radio, television, pocket-books, magazines and the daily press. This seeming anomaly — the proliferation of wordage on the one hand, and the shrinkage of its role in that mirror of mankind, the theatre, on the other — disappears if we note two things: first, that *all* means of communication, including spoken and written speech as only two of many, are proliferating; and second, that the coinage of language (in its narrow sense) has become debased.

The chief responsibility for this, I believe, lies with the ubiquitous advertising industry. This stricture is not likely to give any advertiser I know a moment's unease, nor to worry his clients. We admire the word-jugglery of the modern promoter, and often succumb to his blandishments; but in the process we have developed, as a defense-mechanism, a deep distrust of verbal cleverness of all kinds. I do not mean we do not enjoy verbal felicities, only that we no longer take them for truth. The credibility gap, that typical lesion of the sixties and seventies, is caused as much by disenchantment with words as by fondness for activism.

And that, I take it, is what Artaud meant by the "rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation." Apply this explanation to the theatre, and we are forced to ask whether, after the preciousness of Wilde, the prolixity of O'Neill, the inanities of Coward, the obscurities of Eliot, our dramatic speech has not worn itself impossibly thin. Certainly the Theatre of the Absurd has shown us that there is a vein to be mined in turning language in upon itself, verbal jokes played at the expense of language — but is not this the very confession of bankruptcy to which Artaud referred? Is it not the beginning of an end?

The question is hardly rhetorical, since our academies persist in revering texts which would appear to have become irrelevant, persist in ignoring (or at least slighting) all languages which cannot be printed and bound, and persist in believing what so many of their students apparently no longer believe: that words get closer to life than any other means of contact or communication. Our English Departments, and other Departments of Literature, are — with a very few honourable exceptions — the sturdiest guardians of this perishable doctrine, and not unnaturally. But they are manning a Maginot Line. Their students, when they are not learning the new language of film (with precious little help, in most cases), echo Eliza in *My Fair Lady*:

> Don't talk of stars
> Shining above:

If you're in love
Show me!

I grant you that Eliza sings (or says) this to her swain, and that they couldn't get along without words. Nobody wants to get along *without* words, surely. And surely — most important of all — it is not a question of words *versus* other means of communication or expression. The case, it seems to me, is that words for thousands of years carried, magnificently, a burden which they may now share with other extensions of man, no less subtle or powerful, and capable of as much sophistication and profundity. There are functions which words will continue to perform better than any other means, and functions which may now be better served by words *among* other means. The text may even be *primus inter pares* — but this is not yet a status generally acceptable to our academies.

"Why should we refuse", wrote Macneile Dixon in 1935 in his *The Human Situation*, "to admit the infinite complexity, the innumerable windows through which the soul may view the astonishing landscape?"

The theatre, in all its forms, is exploring the landscape through new windows, as it must.