

The Spectacle of the Struggle: Existential Themes in the Work of Samuel Beckett.

by

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'We have art in order not to die of the truth.' – Nietzsche (quoted in MOS p86)

No work of art can be reduced to a set of philosophical or moral precepts. That is not the way that works of art work. Great art will always escape reduction to a set of ideas. Art *works* by creating a concrete experience; and like a natural experience it is open to multiple interpretations. The richer the work of art the more various the interpretations. It is no accident that Beckett is one of the most over-interpreted writers who ever lived; it merely attests to the richness and resonance of his work.

Since art affects us by creating a concrete experience akin to the experiences of life one could say that all art is existential in the sense of emphasising lived experience, doing rather than thinking, embodiedness rather than abstraction, interaction rather than detachment. Art, in Kierkegaardian terms, is a form of indirect communication; it does not simply tell us things, it shows us a way of being. In this respect all art is existential in that it makes us question our being, our relationship to the world, and to see it in a new light and also forces us back on ourselves to examine how we are. This is where art differs from simple entertainment. Pure entertainment takes us out of ourselves, whereas art returns us to ourselves, but changed, enriched with new perspectives, and new questions, on which to reflect.

Beckett is a philosophically very aware writer. He read a lot of philosophy and he makes explicit use of philosophical ideas in his work. His first published piece, 'Whoroscope', was a long ironical narrative poem about the life of Rene Descartes. Descartes and his ideas about mind-body dualism remain a very potent influence on

Beckett's writing. For instance, in *Murphy*, his first novel, published in 1938, he writes:

Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common. But he felt his mind to be bodytight and did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap. (from *Murphy* p64).

In addition to Descartes Beckett's works make explicit or implicit use of ideas derived from the philosophy of the Occasionalist followers of Descartes (Geulincx and Malebranche), Spinoza, Berkeley (Beckett's only film script *Film* takes Berkeley's *esse est percipi* as its premiss), Kant, Hegel and especially Schopenhauer. There is a deep affinity between the bleak, pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, wherein life is nothing but a blind striving of the will to life in a world of suffering, and Beckett's world-view. As Acheson demonstrates (see BPS *passim*) Beckett made use of Schopenhauerian ideas in his study of Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Beckett was, in his early career, strongly influenced by James Joyce (for instance early works like *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks* display a self-conscious and extravagant use of language in a Joycean mode). Beckett's mature style is usefully seen as a reaction against the effulgence of Joyce's style. Whereas Joyce's work is one of expansion and addition, an attempt to contain all the richness and variety of lived experience within a literary work (e.g. *Ulysses* with its references to everything from the Classics to advertising and the sights, sounds and smells of the street) Beckett's are of contraction and subtraction. Beckett pares down experience to its existential core.

It is because of this austerity in Beckett's work that he can display the fundamental existential predicament of humankind in such a compelling, startling and profound way. Beckett dispenses with most of the props that writer's use to bolster

their work. He leaves in only what is essential. In an interview with Tom Driver

Beckett is reported as saying:

When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess. (quoted in Cohn, SBCE p169)

Beckett depicts the mess that is the human predicament in a particularly striking and profound way. As we can see from the above quote, and from reading his work, Beckett is against systematic or abstract ideas; when his characters indulge in philosophy (e.g. Murphy, Watt, Lucky) it is in order to show how absurd it is to indulge in philosophy. A degree of suspicion about the value of traditional philosophical modes of thought, characterised by an abstract detachment from the phenomena of lived experience (the mess), handed down from a remote height, removed from being-in-the-world, is of course a feature of existentialist thought with its emphasis on the value of engagement, and the importance of subjective truth over abstractions.

Martin Esslin draws a parallel between Beckett and Kierkegaard, since for both figures 'any abstract statement about the nature of the world, by having been abstracted from the living experience of an individual, is necessarily dead, the mere empty shell of a living truth.' (p6 SBCE). He goes on to quote Kierkegaard, from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

While objective thought is indifferent toward the thinking individual and his existence, the subjective thinker, as an existing being, is vitally interested in his own thought within which he exists...(SBCE p6)

Beckett is such a subjective thinker. He creates in his novels, plays and short texts powerful concrete experiences that reflect on the mess. He refused to explain the meaning of his texts because to do so would be to provide a ready-made answer

rather than creating the possibility for the reader or viewer to experience the revelation of a subjective truth through experiencing the work directly. As Kierkegaard says:

While objective thought attaches supreme importance to results and enables all mankind to practice deceit by copying and repeating results and summations, subjective thought puts all its store on the process of becoming and omits the result, partly because this, precisely, is a matter for the thinker himself, he being the one who knows the way it is reached, partly because he is in a constant process of becoming... (quoted in SBCE p6).

Waiting for Godot is sub-titled 'a tragi-comedy'. All Beckett's work is tragi-comic. We should never forget the humour. It is the humour that makes the tragedy of existence bearable, to some extent. Performed correctly all Beckett's works, however bleak they may be, are also very funny. It is a gallows humour, but just as valuable for all that. Beckett's humour is almost always laughter in the face of the absurdity of existence. Tragedy and comedy are two sides of the same coin depending on how you look at events.

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. ... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more. (E p20)

In an absurd world, that is a world where there is no ultimate foundation to give meaning to our existence, all we can do is cling to a meaning we have invented for ourselves. In an absurd world every individual must invent their own meaning for existence. The opening lines of *Waiting for Godot* illustrate the predicament of, in Heideggerian terms *Geworfenheit* or Thrownness, the fact that we always find ourselves already in the midst of existence. Here is the opening text of *Waiting for Godot*:

Estragon, *sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before.*

Enter Vladimir.

Estragon: (*giving up again.*) Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart.*)

I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

(WFG p9).

There is literally nothing to be done about the fact of our existence. Our thrownness into the world cannot be avoided; it has to be confronted. We did not choose to exist, in this world, at this time, in this place, on this stage, but nonetheless here we are. We are then confronted with the necessity of doing something about our situation. We can despair, and give up, 'nothing to be done', or we can 'resume the struggle' and attempt to make something out of the disaster of our existence, which for Beckett is the original sin of having been born. Beckett concurs with the Greek sage who declared: the best thing is never to have been born.

This concept of Thrownness is illustrated even more literally at the start of Beckett's mime called 'Act Without Words 1':

Desert. Dazzling light.

The man is flung backwards on stage from right wing. He falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects.

Whistle from right wing.

He reflects, goes out right.

Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects.

Whistle from left wing.

He reflects, goes out left.

Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects. (p43 Collected Shorter Plays)

Once you're 'on' you can't get easily get off. Stranded in the desert Beckett's character is tantalised by various objects of desire (water and shade) that are dangled just out of reach. In many ways the existentialist writer who is closest to Beckett is Albert Camus. The situation of the character in *Act Without Words 1* chimes with Camus's statement in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

The Myth of Sisyphus . . . sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create in the very midst of the desert.' (MOS p7)

Similarly, in *Endgame* Hamm declares: 'Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!' Gogo's boots being stuck on is therefore a metaphor for the Existentialist adage: 'existence precedes essence'. We are stuck with life just as Gogo's boot is stuck to his foot.

Waiting for Godot can be seen as one big metaphor for the existential predicament of humankind. We are thrown into the world, we have to decide what to do with our life. There is no ultimate point to existence (Groundlessness) therefore we have to invent a meaning to give it in order to continue the wait between birth and death.

Beckett's vision is bleak and pessimistic, verging on nihilism. One of the last lines in his late play *Rockaby* is simply: 'Fuck life.' (CSP p282). There is a constant tension in his work between despair/nihilism and a kind of stubborn resilience or hope. Beckett's characters occupy the space between the poles of, on the one hand, nihilism, despair, and Thanatos and, on the other hand, affirmation, hope and Eros. Beckett confronts the necessity to continue in the face of impossible situations, perhaps most clearly illustrated in the predicament of Winnie in *Happy Days* who is slowly being engulfed by the earth and yet, in this impossible position, she finds ways of carrying on. It is this demonstration of human resilience that, at the end of the day, results in Beckett's work being a positive expression of human resilience rather than just being a depressing vision of death, decay and pain. It is significant that, despite their suffering, none of Beckett's characters do elect to kill themselves. As Camus states:

He [Sisyphus] is stronger than his rock ... There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn ... crushing truths perish from being acknowledged ... I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well ... The struggle itself

towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' (MOS p109-111)

Camus' wild Nietzschean optimism about Sisyphus's state of mind would not be endorsed by Beckett but the power to endure cruel predicaments is powerfully illustrated in his work. In many of Beckett's plays the characters are either physically unable (e.g. *Happy Days*, *Play*, *Act Without Words 1*) to leave the stage, or mentally unable (e.g. *Endgame*, *Not I*) to leave. It is as if beyond the confines of the stage is death, like the bleak lifeless landscape outside the refuge in *Endgame*.

As Pozzo says in *Waiting for Godot*: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.' (WFG p89). For Beckett life is a transient burden between the dual cataclysms of birth and death, a vale of tears, of struggle and torment. Compare, for instance, what Camus says in *the Myth of Sisyphus*:

In the experience that I am attempting to describe and to stress on several modes, it is certain that a new torment arises wherever another dies.' (MOS p86)

with *Waiting for Godot*:

Pozzo: He's stopped crying. (*To Estragon*.) You have replaced him as it were. (*Lyrical*.) The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (*He laughs*.) (WFG p33)

The characters in *Godot* are clearly designed to be seen as representations of everyman:

Vladimir: 'But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!' (WFG p79)

Vladimir: 'What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come –' (WFG p80)

In other words, whatever sense of purpose you have invented and given to yourself that is your Godot. Our sense of meaning in life is just as pointless/groundless as the

two tramps endlessly waiting for Godot, but it is ours. In an absurd world, that is a world where there is no ultimate foundation to give meaning to our existence, all we can do is cling to a meaning we have invented for ourselves. In an absurd world every individual must invent their own meaning for existence.

Many people have asked 'Who is Godot?'. A proper name naturally inclines people to seek some unique individual that corresponds to it. But Godot is not clearly defined and that is intentional because he is a placeholder for whatever it is that gives meaning to one's existence, to what keeps one going on in the face of the struggle for survival, the pain and ultimate diminution of life. It is therefore a pointless question to ask, as so many have, Who is Godot? Godot is simply a placeholder for whatever it is that keeps one going.

But while we wait for our personal Godot (God, hope, success in our endeavours, love, political change, whatever is our ultimate goal and, of course, our ultimate destination, death) what do we have to work with? We have relationships. At the core of *Waiting for Godot* is the relationships between two couples: the tramps Didi and Gogo, and the master and slave relationship of Pozzo and Lucky. These two pairs are best seen as representing couples, like married couples, but one relationship is basically supportive, Gogo and Didi, and the other is basically exploitative, Lucky and Pozzo. Significantly both sets of couples repeatedly threaten to leave one another but never do. They need one another, even the Pozzo/Lucky combination need one another. Each would be diminished by the absence of the other. Therefore the palliative value of human relationships, complete with bickering and abuse, is the very thing that makes the waiting between birth and death bearable. The human need for recognition and identity is illustrated forcefully at the end of Godot when the messenger boy from Godot does not recognise Didi:

Vladimir: ... Do you not recognise me?
Boy: No, sir.
Vladimir: It wasn't you came yesterday.
Boy: No, sir.

Silence

....

Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?

Vladimir: Tell him . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . that you saw me. (*Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.*) You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! (WFG p91-92).

We want to be recognised for who we are. We need the recognition of others to truly believe that we exist. Yet, we do not want to be pinned down, labelled, filed, fixed like a butterfly in a tray of specimens. Hence, we adopt different personas, depending on the situation.

The shifting sands of identity are indicated by the fact that each of the two main characters has three names: their official name, which is not used, their diminutive/affectionate name, which they use between themselves, and their aliases, which are used with strangers.

E.g.	Vladimir –	Didi –	Mr. Albert
and	Estragon –	Gogo –	Adam

Didi and Gogo seek distractions to relieve the boredom of waiting/existence and they invent a number of diversions to entertain themselves. But their primary diversion is the appearance of another couple, Pozzo and Lucky, who vividly represent a kind of sado-masochistic relationship of dominance and submission. Immediately after the entrance of Pozzo (brandishing his whip) and Lucky (on a long leash of rope) the two tramps feel pity for Lucky. They see how badly he is treated by Pozzo and note the running sore on his neck. A little later, after Pozzo complains of how Lucky is driving him mad, they turn on Lucky, and sympathise instead with Pozzo.

Vladimir: (*to Lucky*) How dare you! It's abominable! Such a good master! Crucify him like that! After so many years! Really! (WFG p34)

Such is the fickleness of human sympathy. When it looks like Pozzo wants to get rid of Lucky, and even though they have seen how badly he is treated, they want to see if they can replace him:

Pozzo: (*sobbing*) He used to be so kind . . . so helpful . . . and entertaining . . . my good angel . . . and now . . . he's killing me.

Estragon: (*to Vladimir*) Does he want to replace him?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: Does he want someone to take his place or not?

Vladimir: I don't think so.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: I don't know.

Estragon: Ask him. (WFG p34)

They attempt to abandon their freedom in exchange for a position, a little succour. I am reminded of how I go to great lengths filling in elaborate application forms, sitting tests and having interviews for jobs I have no real interest in doing, simply because I need to earn a living. In a less explicit way we are continuously giving away our freedom in return for a disguised form of slavery that is ultimately akin to that of Lucky. The pompous boss is the model for Pozzo. Most of us sacrifice our freedom for a regular income, for the bones that society's Pozzo's toss us.

The Pozzo and Lucky characters illustrate the nature of human dominance and the mutual dependence of master and slave and how the role of the master is only possible with the complicity of the slave. However, it should not be mistaken for a representation of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic because there is no sense of progress or *Aufheben* (superseding). With the Hegelian dialectic we have an in-built concept of progress. There is no progress in Beckett, just gradual decay. In Beckett we have repetition but no dialectic. He never wrote a three-act play. What does the third act give us? Resolution/synthesis/culmination. There is no resolution in Beckett's work: just repetition and a gradual winding down. The endings of Beckett's plays are always inconclusive and seem to promise yet more repetition. For instance, the last lines of *Godot* are:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.
They do not move. (WFG p94)

Similarly, at the end of *Endgame*, though Clov has been threatening to leave Hamm throughout the play, and has packed his bags, the final instructions to the actor are:

He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end. (E p51-52)

The shape of Beckett's works is a metaphor for the shape of a human life; day after day, on and on, a gradual diminution of vitality, until the last day. Repetition plus entropy, slow decline/decay, is the structural principle of Beckett's work and can be seen clearly, for instance, in major pieces such as *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days*, and *Play*.

In *Waiting for Godot*: the second act repeats the *mise en scène* of the first act. In both acts the two tramps wait for Godot, are interrupted by the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky and are then told by a Boy that Godot will not come today but surely tomorrow. However, in the second act Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky has gone dumb, illustrating decay.

In *Happy Days* the second act is a repeat of the first act with Winnie valiantly attempting to get through her day (to speak in the old style) determined to remain cheerful even in an impossible situation. In the first act she is stuck in the earth up to her waist, in the second act she is stuck up to her neck and the blazing light has become more intense.

In *Play* three heads stuck in urns recount their triangular relationship while being interrogated by a light. The second act is a virtual repeat of the first act, however the light is fainter, as if growing weary of torturing the characters, and the voices of the characters are softer and slower.

This repetition is akin to Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. Beckett's characters are forced to relive their experience in all its pain and boredom again and

again. Whereas for Nietzsche the idea of eternal recurrence is a chance for a valiant affirmation of life in the face of all its cruelty, for Beckett it is simply how things are, the diurnal cycle, waking and sleeping (remember the bell for waking in *Happy Days*), something to be endured. For Beckett life is not something one can say yes to, because of one's existential thrownness it is pointless to say yes, all one can do is either say no (i.e. kill oneself, as the tramps contemplate - though not very seriously - in *Waiting for Godot*) or endure. For Beckett enduring life is not the same as saying yes to it. In Existentialist philosophy one can either react to the fact of existence in an authentic or inauthentic way and many of Beckett's characters illuminate this predicament.

There would seem to be, implicit in Beckett's work, a value placed on honesty to oneself about one's life, actions, thoughts, feelings. Often he depicts characters who are tortured by the inability to be honest with themselves about their life experience. For instance, in *Not I*, one of his most innovative dramas where the character is reduced to a virtually disembodied consciousness repeatedly, obsessively, going over the same life memories. A mouth hovers in the air telling the story of a woman, 'she', in snatches; an Auditor listens to the speech, says nothing but sometimes raises his/her arms 'in a gesture of helpless compassion' at the moments when the character is interrupted by a questioner (audible only to the mouth) and refuses to acknowledge that the woman, about whom she talks in the third person, is in fact herself, hence the title, *Not I*.

stop and stare again ... so on ... drifting around ... when
suddenly ... gradually ... all went out ... all that early April
morning light ... and she found herself in the- what? ...
who? ... no! ... she! ... found herself in the dark ... (p217 CSP)

In this play the character has been stripped down to a lingering/tortured consciousness, endlessly going over traumatic events in her mind, refusing to acknowledge herself as the agent of her actions. Yet the mind has glimpses of what it needs to do to find rest:

... painless ... so far ... ha! ... so far ... then thinking ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... perhaps something she had to ... had to ... tell ... could that be it? ... something she had to ... tell (p221 Collected Shorter Plays).

As one of the female characters says, in the similarly interrogatory *Play*, 'Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?' (P p16)

In the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* Beckett said that '...there is nothing to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express...' According to Beckett this is the predicament of the modern artist, but it is also, as we can see above, the predicament of many of his characters.

This compulsion to express, even with no means to express, is the underlying force within his great prose trilogy (*Molloy – Malone Dies – The Unnamable*). The last lines of *The Unnamable* are:

'...you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.' (T p418)

Punctuation is always of crucial importance in a Beckett text. Note that there is a comma between 'you must go on' and 'I can't go on' signifying that the immediate reaction to the injunction to go on is that it can't be done; then there is another comma, and after it, 'I'll go on', signifying an immediate change of heart and the resolve that the impossible will be attempted, yet again. There is also irony here because 'I'll go on' are the last words of *The Unnamable*; it is the precise point at which it does *not* go on. Similarly, in his late prose piece, *Worstward Ho*, Beckett writes: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' (WH p7). A certain aged weariness has crept in with the commas of *The Unnamable* replaced by the full-stops of *Worstward Ho*, but the struggle continues. Beckett's point, which I find full of solace, is that the knowledge of certain failure is no reason to give up trying.

Though the message of Beckett's plays is, to a large extent, that life is a meaningless, repetitive struggle, akin to Sisyphus's struggle to roll his rock up the

mountainside only to have it roll down to the bottom again, yet the alchemy of art is such that one leaves feeling uplifted by the spectacle of the struggle, that one feels, thanks to the demonstration that Beckett's work gives, more able, in the words of Didi, to 'resume the struggle'.

It is impossible to sum up the achievements of a writer as great as Samuel Beckett. However, I believe another great writer, Harold Pinter, came close to it when he said, reflecting on the importance of Beckett's work for him:

The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. (VV p55)

END

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