

Must we mean what we say?

A Book of Essays

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is anywhere being followed with the completeness it describes and exemplifies. There must be, if this is so, various reasons for it. And it would be something of an irony if it turned out that Wittgenstein's manner were easier to imitate than Austin's; in its way, something of a triumph for the implacable professor.

## V

## Ending the Waiting Game

### A READING OF BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

Various keys to its interpretation are in place: "Endgame" is a term of chess; the name Hamlet is shared by Noah's cursed son, it titles a kind of actor, it starts recalling Hamlet. But no interpretation I have seen details the textual evidence for these relations nor shows how the play's meaning opens with them. Without this, we will have a general impression of the play, one something like this: Beckett's perception is of a "meaningless universe" and language in his plays "serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language"—by, one gathers, itself undergoing disintegration. Such descriptions are usual in the discussions of Beckett I am aware of, but are they anything more than impositions from an impression of fashionable philosophy? <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>When the ideas which prompted this essay started occurring to me, I read Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Anchor Book, 1961; Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett*, Grove Press, 1961; David Grossvogel's *Four Playwrights*, Cornell University Press, 1962; and, I'm afraid, little else, and incompletely in Beckett's other works. But I felt compelled to have my say about this play once the methodological route to it opened for me and when the detailed closeness to Noah, Hamlet, Lear, and the Sermon on the Mount made themselves felt; and I did not want to get talked out of it by arguing with others. This may mean that what I have said, so far as it is valid, is known. Three of the four "keys" listed in the opening sentence are mentioned by Kenner, two of them, the allusion to acting and to chess, forming the basis for much of what he says about it. The fourth, Noah's son, is noted by Grossvogel, but nothing further, as I recall, is made of it. Any further resemblances between what I have said and those writings should therefore be credited as due to them. All page references to *Endgame* are to the Grove Press edition, 1958, and selections are used by permission of the Grove Press.

Martin Esslin, from whom I was just quoting, applauds Beckett for his veridical registering of the modern world. Georg Lukacs deplores Beckett as an instance of the modernist writer who, while accurately registering something about our world, fails to see that his response to that world (in subjectivity, *angst*, formalism, psychopathology) is chosen, and partial—in particular, a choice against a socialist perspective from which alone possibilities for the future of human society can be spoken for by artists.<sup>2</sup> One recognizes the sorts of production which fit Lukacs' descriptions, the amusements which sell the world its own weirdness. Both Esslin and Lukacs take Beckett's work much as any corrupted audience takes it, except that Lukacs maintains the classical demand of art, that the artist achieve perspective which grants independence from the world within which he is centered; that he not allow himself merely to pander to the world, becoming one of its typical phenomena, but that he witness it, helping the world to see its phenomena by providing his perspective. Esslin speaks with those who have forgotten that such a perspective is necessary, or who assume that it is no longer possible. Lukacs proposes to bring society and art back together by demanding that the artist's perspective be provided by a particular social attitude or choice. Both views are blind to the fact that in modernist arts the achievement of the autonomy of the object is a *problem*—the artistic problem. Autonomy is no longer provided by the conventions of art, for the modernist artist has continuously to question the conventions upon which his art has depended; nor is it furthered by any position the artist can adopt, towards anything but his art. (Contrariwise, the success of socialism is not to be measured by its providing artists with perspective, but by its providing conditions under which artists are free to find their own, without punishing eccentricity or isolation, and in which the members of his community are each in a position to expose themselves to those discoveries, or not to.)

Neither Esslin's praise nor Lukacs' blame ought to guide or to depress us, for the former does not see the problem and the latter does not see Beckett's solution to the problem. The first critical problem is to discover how Beckett's objects mean at all, the original source of their conviction for us, if they have conviction. My argument will be that Beckett, in *Endgame*, is not marketing subjectivity,

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Georg Lukacs, *Realism in Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

popularizing *angst*, amusing and thereby excusing us with pictures of our psychopathology; he is outlining the facts—of mind, of community—which show why these have become our pastimes. The discovery of *Endgame*, both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means the lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success—our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean.

## I

Who are these people? Where are they, and how did they get there? What can illuminate their mood of bewilderment as well as their mood of appalling comprehension? What is the source of their ugly power over one another, and of their impotence? What gives to their conversation its sound, at once of madness and of plainness?

I begin with two convictions. The first is that the ground of the play's quality is the *ordinariness* of its events. It is true that what we are given to see are two old people sticking half up out of trash cans, and an extraordinarily garbed blind paraplegic who imposes bizarre demands on the only person who can carry them out, the only inhabitant of that world who has remaining to him the power of motion. But take a step back from the bizarrerie and they are simply a family. Not just any family perhaps, but then every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way—gets in its own way in its own way. The old father and mother with no useful functions any more are among the waste of society, dependent upon the generation they have bred, which in turn resents them for their uselessness and dependency. They do what they can best do: they bicker and reminisce about happier days. And they comfort one another as best they can, not necessarily out of love, nor even habit (this love and this habit may never have been formed) but out of the knowledge that they were both there, they have been through it together, like comrades in arms, or passengers on the same wrecked ship; and a life, like a disaster, seems to need going over and over in reminiscence, even if that is what makes it disastrous. One of their fondest memories seems to be the time their tandem bicycle crashed and they lost their legs: their past, their pain, has become their entertainment, their pastime. Comfort may seem too strong a term. One of them can, or

could, scratch the other where the itch is out of reach, and Nagg will tolerate Nell's girlish re-rhapsodizing the beauties of Lake Como if she will bear his telling again his favorite funny story. None of this is very *much* comfort perhaps, but then there never is very *much* comfort.

The old are also good at heaping curses on their young and at controlling them through guilt, the traditional weapons of the weak and dependent. Nagg uses the most ancient of all parental devices, claiming that something is due him from his son for the mere fact of having begot him. Why that should ever have seemed, and still seem, something in itself to be grateful for is a question of world-consuming mystery—but Hamm ought to be the least likely candidate for its effect, wanting nothing more than to wrap up and send back the gift of life. (His problem, as with any child, is to find out where it came from.) Yet he keeps his father in his house, and lays on his adopted son Clov the same claim to gratitude ("It was I was a Father to you"). Like his father, powerless to walk, needing to tell stories, he masks his dependence with bullying—the most versatile of techniques, masking also the requirements of loyalty, charity, magnanimity. All the characters are bound in the circle of tyranny, the most familiar of family circles.

Take another step back and the relationship between Hamm and his son-servant-lover Clov shows its dominance. It is, again, an ordinary neurotic relationship, in which both partners wish nothing more than to end it, but in which each is incapable of taking final steps because its end presents itself to them as the end of the world. So they remain together, each helpless in everything save to punish the other for his own helplessness, and play the consuming game of manipulation, the object of which is to convince the other that you yourself do not need to play. But any relationship of absorbing importance will form a world, as the personality does. And a critical change in either will change the world. The world of the happy man is different from the world of the unhappy man, says Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. And the world of the child is different from the world of the grown-up, and that of the sick from that of the well, and the mad from the un-mad. This is why a profound change of consciousness presents itself as a revelation, why it is so difficult, why its anticipation will seem the destruction of the world: even where it is a happy change, a world is always lost. I do not insist

upon its appearing a homosexual relationship, although the title of the play just possibly suggests a practice typical of male homosexuality, and although homosexuality figures in the play's obsessive goal of sterility—the non-consummation devoutly to be wished.

The language sounds as extraordinary as its people look, but it imitates, as Chekhov's does, the qualities of ordinary conversation among people whose world is shared—catching its abrupt shifts and sudden continuities; its shades of memory, regret, intimidation; its opacity to the outsider. It is an abstract imitation, where Chekhov's is objective. (I do not say "realistic," for that might describe Ibsen, or Hollywoodese, and in any case, as it is likely to be heard, would not emphasize the fact that art had gone into it.) But it is an achievement for the theater, to my mind, of the same magnitude. Not, of course, that the imitation of the ordinary is the only, or best, option for writing dialogue. Not every dramatist wants this quality; a writer like Shakespeare can get it whenever he wants it. But to insist upon the ordinary, keep its surface and its rhythm, sets a powerful device. An early movie director, René Clair I believe, remarked that if a person were shown a film of an ordinary whole day in his life, he would go mad. One thinks, perhaps, of Antonioni. At least he and Beckett have discovered new artistic resource in the fact of boredom; not as a topic merely, but as a dramatic technique. To miss the ordinariness of the lives in *Endgame* is to avoid the extraordinariness (and ordinariness) of our own.

## II

I said there are two specific convictions from which my interpretation proceeds. The second also concerns, but more narrowly, the language Beckett has discovered or invented; not now its use in dialogue, but its grammar, its particular way of making sense, especially the quality it has of what I will call *hidden literality*. The words strew obscurities across our path and seem willfully to thwart comprehension; and then time after time we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare—totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view. Such a discovery has the effect of showing us that it is *we* who had been willfully uncomprehending, misleading ourselves in demanding further, or other, meaning where

the meaning was nearest. Many instances will come to light as we proceed, but an example or two may help at the outset.

At several points through the play the names God and Christ appear, typically in a form of words which conventionally expresses a curse. They are never, however, used (by the character saying them, of course) to curse, but rather in perfect literalness. Here are two instances: "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?" (p. 31); "Catch him [a flea] for the love of God" (p. 33). In context, the first instance shows Hamm really asking whether anything on the horizon is appearing in God's name, as his sign or at his bidding; and the second instance really means that if you love God, have compassion for him, you will catch and kill the flea. Whether one will be convinced by such readings will depend upon whether one is convinced by the interpretation to be offered of the play as a whole, but they immediately suggest one motive in Beckett's uncovering of the literal: it removes curses, the curses under which the world is held. One of our special curses is that we can use the name of God naturally only to curse, take it only in vain. Beckett removes this curse by converting the rhetoric of cursing; not, as traditionally, by using the name in prayer (*that* alternative, as is shown explicitly elsewhere in the play, is obviously no longer open to us) but by turning its formulas into declarative utterances, ones of pure denotation—using the sentences "cognitively," as the logical positivists used to put it. Beckett (along with other philosophers recognizable as existentialist) shares with positivism its wish to escape connotation, rhetoric, the noncognitive, the irrationality and awkward memories of ordinary language, in favor of the directly verifiable, the isolated and perfected present. Only Beckett sees how infinitely difficult this escape will be. Positivism said that statements about God are meaningless; Beckett shows that they mean too damned much.

To undo curses is just one service of literalization; another is to unfix clichés and idioms:

HAMM. Did you ever think of one thing?

CLOV. Never.

(p. 39)

The expected response to Hamm's question would be, "What?"; but that answer would accept the question as the cliché conversational gambit it appears to be. Clov declines the move and brings the ges-

ture to life by taking it literally. His answer means that he has always thought only of *many* things, and in this I hear a confession of failure in following Christ's injunction to take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, nor for tomorrow—the moral of which is that "thine eye be single." Perhaps I hallucinate. Yet the Sermon on the Mount makes explicit appearance in the course of the play, as will emerge. Our concerns with God have now become the greatest clichés of all, and here is another curse to be undone.

CLOV. Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM. Mine was always that.

(p. 49)

Hamm knows he's made a joke and, I suppose, knows that the joke is on us; but at least the joke momentarily disperses the "belief" in the cliché "life to come," promised on any Sunday radio. And it is a terribly sad joke—that the life we are living is not our life, or not alive. Or perhaps it's merely that the joke is old, itself a cliché. Christ told it to us, that this life is nothing. The punch line, the knock-out punch line, is that there is no other but this to come, that the life of waiting for life to come is all the life ever to come. We don't laugh; but if we could, or if we could stop finding it funny, then perhaps life would come to life, or anyway the life of life to come would end. (Clov, at one point, asks Hamm: "Don't we laugh?", not because he feels like it, but out of curiosity. In her longest speech (p. 19), Nell says: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness . . . It's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more.") As it is, we've heard it all, seen it all too often, heard the promises, seen the suffering repeated in the same words and postures, and they are like any words which have been gone over so much that they are worn strange. We don't laugh, we don't cry; and we don't laugh that we don't cry, and we obviously can't cry about it. That's funny.

So far all that these examples have been meant to suggest is the sort of method I try to use consistently in reading the play, one in which I am always asking of a line either: What are the most ordinary circumstances under which such a line would be uttered? Or: What do the words literally say? I do not suggest that every line will yield to these questions, and I am sharply aware that I cannot provide

answers to many cases for which I am convinced they are relevant. My exercise rests on the assumption that different artistic inventions demand different routes of critical discovery; and the justification for my particular procedures rests partly on an induction from the lines I feel I have understood, and partly on their faithfulness to the general direction I have found my understanding of the play as a whole to have taken. I have spoken of the effect of literalizing curses and clichés as one of "undoing" them, and this fits my sense, which I will specify as completely as I can, that the play itself is about an effort to undo, to end something by undoing it, and in particular to end a curse, and moreover the commonest, most ordinary curse of man—not so much that he was ever born and must die, but that he has to figure out the one and shape up to the other and justify what comes between, and that he is not a beast and not a god: in a word, that he is a man, and alone. All those, however, are the facts of life; the curse comes in the ways we try to deny them.

I should mention two further functions of the literal which seem to me operative in the play. It is, first, a mode which some forms of madness assume. A schizophrenic can suffer from ideas that he is literally empty or hollow or transparent or coming apart at the seams.<sup>3</sup> It is also a mode in which prophecies and wishes are

<sup>3</sup> On this topic see Stanley R. Palombo and Hilde Bruch, "Falling Apart: The Verbalization of Ego Failure," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 27, No. 3, August, 1964. But the issue is philosophically complex. Drs. Palombo and Bruch emphasize the *spatial* and *physical* basis of such terms, whereas I was led to speak of it as the *literal*. I do not, however, wish to pre-judge the possible identity of spatiality (or physicality) with literality, and in particular I do not mean to suggest that when one is not meaning one's words with purely spatial or physical reference one is then using them metaphorically. For two sorts of reasons: The metaphorical statement "Juliet is the sun" refers to two physical objects, grammatically equating them, and it would not work as a metaphor unless one knew what those two objects were. Contrariwise, a statement like "It will take a long time" is not metaphorical even though time does not come in (spatial) lengths. There are two grounds for denying that it is metaphorical: (1) There are good reasons (one could say, there are facts which explain) why the concept of length is applied to the measurement of time; in particular the facts of our world which make it normal for longer distances to take longer to traverse than shorter distances. There are not comparable facts which explain why Juliet is equated with the sun, though the metaphor depends upon one's knowing facts about the sun (e.g., that the day begins with it, that it is the source of life) and it summarizes many things Romeo takes to be facts about Juliet. (2) What Empson calls the "pregnancy" of metaphor—the fact that its paraphrase is indefinitely long and elaborate—is essential to it. Whereas in statements about the length of time it is not up to each of us to determine how much of the concept of length, or which facts about measuring lengths, apply to the measurement of time. This is related to the fact that no one could have *invented* the normal application of length to time. But the topic is enormous, and needs investigation.

fulfilled, surprising all measures to avoid them. Birnam Forest coming to Dunsinane and the overthrow by a man of no woman born are textbook cases. In the *Inferno*, Lucifer is granted his wish to become the triune deity by being fixed in the center of a kingdom and outfitted with three heads. *Endgame* is a play whose mood is characteristically one of madness and in which the characters are fixed by a prophecy, one which their actions can be understood as attempting both to fulfill and to reverse.

A central controversy in contemporary analytic philosophy relates immediately to this effort at literalizing. Positivism had hoped for the construction of an ideal language (culminating the hope, since Newton and Leibniz at the birth of modern science, for a *Characteristica Universalis*) in which everything which could be said at all would be said clearly, its relations to other statements formed purely logically, its notation perspicuous—the form of the statement looking like what it means. (For example, in their new transcription, the statements which mean "Daddy makes money" and "Mommy makes bread" and "Mommy makes friends" and "Daddy makes jokes" will no longer look alike; interpretation will no longer be required; thought will be as reliable as calculation, and agreement will be as surely achieved.) Post-positivists (the later Wittgenstein; "ordinary language philosophy") rallied to the insistence that ordinary language—being *speech*, and speech being more than the making of statements—contains implications necessary to communication, perfectly comprehensible to anyone who can speak, but not recordable in logical systems. If, for example, in ordinary circumstances I ask "Would you like to use my scooter?", I must not simply be *inquiring* into your state of mind; I must be *implying* my willingness that you use it, offering it to you. —I *must*? Must not? But no one has been able to explain the force of this *must*. Why mustn't I just be *inquiring*? A positivist is likely to answer: because it would be bad manners; or, it's a joke; in any case most people wouldn't. A post-positivist is likely to feel: That isn't what I meant. Of course it *may* be bad manners (even unforgivable manners), but it *may* not even be odd (e.g., in a context in which you have asked me to guess which of my possessions you would like to use). But suppose it isn't such contexts, but one in which, normally, people *would* be offering, and suppose I keep insisting, puzzled that others are upset, that I simply want to know what's on your mind. Then aren't you going to have to say

something like: You don't know what you're saying, what those words mean—a feeling that I have tuned out, become incomprehensible. Anyway, why is the result a *joke* when the normal implications of language are defeated; what kind of joke?

Hamm and Clov's conversations sometimes work by defeating the implications of ordinary language in this way.

HAMM. I've made you suffer too much.

(Pause.)

Haven't I?

CLOV. It's not that.

HAMM (*shocked*). I haven't made you suffer too much?

CLOV. Yes!

HAMM (*relieved*). Ah you gave me a fright!

(Pause. Coldly.)

Forgive me.

(Pause. Louder.)

I said, Forgive me.

CLOV. I heard you.

(pp. 6-7)

Hamm's first line looks like a confession, an acknowledgment; but it is just a statement. This is shown by the question in his next speech, which is to determine whether what he said was true. His third speech looks like an appeal for forgiveness, but it turns out to be a command—a peculiar command, for it is, apparently, obeyed simply by someone's admitting that he heard it. How could a *command for forgiveness* be anything but peculiar, even preposterous? (Possibly in the way the Sermon on the Mount is preposterous.) An ordinary circumstance for its use would be one in which someone needs forgiveness but cannot *ask* for it. Preposterous, but hardly uncommon. (One of Hamm's lines is: "It appears the case is . . . was not so . . . so unusual" (p. 44); he is pretty clearly thinking of himself. He is *homme*. And "Ha-am" in Hebrew means "the people." Probably that is an accident, but I wouldn't put anything past the attentive friend and disciple of James Joyce.<sup>4</sup>) In Hamm's case, moreover, it

<sup>4</sup> Though it is hard to be reasonable. I am thinking of the syllable "Om," holy in Eastern mysticism. Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958; first published in 1923) says this about it: ". . . no word, nor even a complete syllable, for the *m* in which it ends is not an ordinary 'm,' but simply the

would have been trivially preposterous, and less honest, had he really been *asking* for forgiveness "for having made you suffer too much": How much is just enough? We have the need, but no way of satisfying it; as we have words, but nothing to do with them; as we have hopes, but nothing to pin them on.

Sometimes the effect of defeating ordinary language is achieved not by thwarting its "implications" but by drawing purely logical ones.

HAMM. I'll give you nothing more to eat.

CLOV. Then we'll die.

HAMM. I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying.

You'll be hungry all the time.

CLOV. Then we won't die.

(pp. 5-6)

Clov can hardly be meaning what his words, taken together and commonly, would suggest, namely "It makes no difference whether we live or die; I couldn't care less." First, in one sense that is so *trivial* a sentiment, at their stage, that it would get a laugh—at least from clear-headed Hamm. Second, it is not true. How could it make no difference when the point of the enterprise is to die to that world? (Though of course *that* kind of living and dying, the kind that depends on literal food, may make no difference.) And he *could* care less, because he's *trying* to leave (as he says, p. 7). If he were really empty of care, then maybe he could stop trying, and then maybe he could do it. The conventional reading takes Hamm's opening remark

long-protracted nasal continuation of the deep 'o' sound. It is really simply a sort of growl or groan, sounding up from within as the quasi-reflex expression of profound emotion in circumstances of a numinous-magical nature, and serving to relieve consciousness of a felt burden, almost physical in its constraining force" (p. 193). A conjunction of three intimations lead me to look up, and constrain me to quote, that passage: (1) Wondering, and skeptical, about the Hebrew word, I noted that the "a" is not doubled in Hamm's name, but that the "m" is, and I looked for significance in that. (2) Hamm is not called by name by any of the other characters, though each of the others is. He does say his own name once, however (in a line in which it is followed by a word clearly echoing it): "But for me, no father. But for Hamm, no home" (p. 38). (" . . . but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.") (3) A critical moment at the end of the play concerns the sudden appearance of a young boy outside the shelter: in a passage omitted from the English version, he is said to be looking at his navel. The whole passage is given in Esslin, pp. 35-36.

The succeeding paragraph in Otto further encourages, or discourages, speculation: "This *Om* is exactly parallel to the similar sound in Sanskrit, *Hum* . . ." *Hm*.

as a *threat*; but there are no more threats. It is a plain statement and Clov makes the inference; then Hamm negates the statement and Clov negates the conclusion. It is an exercise in pure logic; a spiritual exercise.

The logician's wish to translate out those messy, non-formal features of ordinary language is fully granted by Beckett, not by supposing that there is a way out of our language, but by fully accepting the fact that there is nowhere else to go. Only he is not going to call that rationality. Or perhaps he will: this is what rationality has brought us to. The strategy of literalization is: you say *only* what your words say. That's the game, and a way of winning out.

I refer to contemporary analytical philosophy, but Hamm presents a new image of what the mind, in one characteristic philosophical mood, has always felt like—crazed and paralyzed; this is part of the play's sensibility. One thinks of Socrates' interlocutors, complaining that his questions have numbed them; of Augustine faced with his question "What is Time?" (If you do not ask me, I know; if you ask me, I do not know). Every profound philosophical vision can have the shape of madness: The world is illusion; I can doubt everything, that I am awake, that there is an external world; the mind takes isolated bits of experience and associates them into a world; each thing and each person is a metaphysical enclosure, and no two ever communicate directly, or so much as perceive one another; time, space, relations between things, are unreal. . . . It sometimes looks as if philosophy had designs on us; or as if it alone is crazy, and wants company. Then why can't it simply be ignored? But it is ignored; perhaps not simply, but largely so. The question remains: What makes philosophy possible? Why can't men *always* escape it? Because, evidently, men have minds, and they think. (One mad philosophical question has long been, Does the mind *always* think? Even in sleep? It is a frightening thought.) And philosophy is what thought does to itself. Kant summarized it in the opening words of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which . . . it is not able to ignore, but which . . . it is also not able to answer." And Wittgenstein, saying in his *Investigations* that his later methods (he compared them to therapies) were to bring philosophy peace at last, seemed to find opportunity, and point, within such disaster: "The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sick-

nesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the sound human understanding" (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 157)—as though there were no other philosophical path to sanity, save through madness. One will not have understood the opportunity if one is *eager* to seize it. Genuine philosophy may begin in wonder, but it continues in reluctance.

## III

The medium of Beckett's dialogue is repartée, adjoining the genres of Restoration comedy, Shakespearean clowning, and the vaudeville gag, but also containing the sound of some philosophical argument and of minute theological debate. It is the sound in which victory or salvation consists (not exactly in proving a point or defending a position but) in coming up with the right answer—or rather, with the *next* answer, one which continues the dialogue, but whose point is to win a contest of wits by capping a gag or getting the last word. And within stringent conventions: for example, your entry must include an earlier bit of the dialogue, which it furthers or overturns, and it must be at least as witty as the entry it follows. The game is won by the one who gets off the last word, and no reply is a priori the last, hence best; no direction of reply the most likely; you never know, on hearing it, that a given reply will be the end; it is solely a matter of personal invention and resourcefulness. This is perhaps why defeat here can have its special pang of humiliation and why the knack of answering is so powerful a weapon. With it one can control not only cocktail parties and revolutionary movements, but relationships whose medium is an interminable, if frequently interrupted, discussion; and usually a discussion whose principal theme is the sickness of the relationship itself. What counts as insight or perceptiveness in such dialectic is the wit to come up with an answer, resulting in that special state of impotence in which the other knows he is not convinced but feels he hasn't the right not to be convinced. (A conclusion endemic in philosophical and theological exchange.) He may think of the right, and the right answer, in thirty minutes, or thirty years. And wittiness need not make you laugh. The device of aphorism depends upon the sound of wit, and its effect is of hilarity, but with all passion spent.

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 e after a few days



A necessary task of critical description in grasping Beckett would be to capture his particular force of wit, distinguishing it from its neighbors. One element in this description must be that literalizing of words I have taken as characteristic of his writing. One effect Beckett achieves with his dexterity of the curt, stunted line is that of the riddle posed, a situation in which you know that the correctness of the answer logically depends upon its being witty. (This effect, if it occurs, would express Hamm and Clov's constant air of strained puzzlement.) Not so much the sort of riddle which depends upon a play of words ("What snake is a mathematician?" "An adder"), nor on distracting clues ("What coat has no buttons and is put on wet?" "A coat of paint"), nor upon finding a verbal twist ("What is the difference between a schoolteacher and a railroad conductor?" "One trains the mind, the other minds the train"), but one whose difficulty lies in avoiding a conventional reading, seeing the syntax a new way, whose answer, therefore, is not recognized to be right immediately on being told it (you have first to go over and refigure the syntax), but which is suddenly seen to make perfect sense ("What can go up a chimney when it's down, but can't go down when it's up?" "An umbrella").

Another technique is harder for me to characterize, partly because I know of no literary form or figure with which to compare it. It is a phenomenon I have often encountered in conversation and in the experience of psychotherapy—the way an utterance which has entered naturally into the dialogue and continues it with obvious sense suddenly sends out an intense meaning, and one which seems to summarize or reveal the entire drift of mood or state of mind until then unnoticed or unexpressed. I am remembering a conversation in which a beautiful and somewhat cold young lady had entered a long monologue about her brother, describing what it was like to live for the summer with him alone in their step-mother's New York apartment, telling of her fears that he was becoming more and more unhappy, more than once mentioning suicide; a beautiful young man like that. And then she said: "When I was in the shower, I was afraid of what my brother might do." The line came at us; I seemed to know that she had not been talking about her fears for her brother, but her fears of him. "What might your brother do?" But she had become perplexed, we were both rather anxious, the subject got lost; the line, however, stayed said. It would not be quite right to say that some-

thing was revealed; but there was as it were an air of revelation among us.

There are several examples of this effect in *Endgame*; two or three achieve the spiritual climaxes of the play, letting its meaning swell out suddenly, like a child playing with the volume control of a radio. Twice (p. 53, p. 68) Hamm comes out with: "Use your head can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!". The natural, or conventional, reading will emphasize the word *that*, and this way makes a stunning enough effect. But another reading becomes possible, emphasizing the word *cure*; and with that I have the feeling of revelation stirring. No *cure* for that, but perhaps there is something else for it—if we could give up our emphasis upon *cure*. There is faith, for example.

Other instances must wait for more context, but after convincing myself of several of them, I am able, perhaps too willing, to hear it happening in Hamm's early, very innocuous line: "Quiet, quiet, you're keeping me awake" (p. 18)—said to his parents shortly after they have popped up. What is keeping him awake? His parents talking, obviously; but they are not talking loudly. It seems Hamm is curious, cannot not listen. What are they talking about, what does Hamm hear? Some moments earlier Hamm had said, "It's the end of the day like any other day," and dismissed Clov. A few lines earlier still his father Nagg had lifted the lid of his bin and stared listening to Hamm and Clov. When Clov leaves and Hamm quiets down, Nagg knocks on the lid of Nell his wife. She comes up with:

What is it my pet?

(Pause.)

Time for love?

NAGG. Were you asleep?

NELL. Oh no!

NAGG. Kiss me.

(p. 14)

The husband of an old married couple nudges his dozing wife and she turns to him with encouragement. That is what Hamm may be hearing to keep him awake. This idea would naturally explain Hamm's silence, save for his complaint at being kept awake and for one later brief speculation, throughout the long intercourse which

now ensues between his parents. They have meant not to disturb him, but he is disturbed, and powerless to intervene. If this is accepted, something definite follows about the way the scene is to be played. Hamm will not then say "Quiet, quiet . . ." to his parents, as a straight request; rather he will say it to them as if in reverie, remembering something, not seeing them here and now but as characters of his imagination. An imagination stuffed with jealousy, competition, disgust, murderousness, guilt—states in which little boys begin their lives. Some are paralyzed in them, never stand on their own feet. His parents certainly do not think he has spoken to them. Nagg says—and the stage direction is (*Soft*)—"Do you hear him?" They are over-hearing him, as he is over-hearing them, and soon they go back to over-looking him. They will play most of the scene in bed-whispers.

The sudden turning of an obvious line into a cry of anxiety is something one expects of Chekhov, who is, I suppose, the closest classical equivalent to Beckett's glazing of calm onto terror. But in Chekhov the lines implode a different way: first, they characterize their speakers; second, their effect, like the effect of gestures, depends upon when and to whom they are made; third, they shape the silence which surrounds them so that what is unsaid leads a life of its own, sapping the life of the speakers and cursing what is left. His characters speak in order that they not have to hear themselves: that is the drama of his plays. Beckett has no such resources. Chekhov, in a word, is the greater dramatist, but Beckett is the superior showman, or raconteur; and like any strong performer he exploits his limitations. His lines do not individuate his characters nor further the action of the play; their interest is intrinsic. Words, we feel as we hear them, can mean in these combinations, and we want them to, they speak something in us. But what do they mean, and what in us, who in us, do they speak for? Nothing is left unsaid, but the speakers are anonymous, the words lead a life of their own. To own them, to find out who says them, who can mean them when, is the drama of the play.

Our relationship to the characters, accordingly, is different. About Vershinin we can say: He cannot bear not to dream; the future which he can be no part of is more precious to him than any present, is his present. About Irina we can say: She says she wants to go to Moscow, but there is no Moscow, and she cannot survive that

knowledge. It is not that our relationship to Beckett's characters is more intimate, but that there is no distance at all or no recognizable distance between them and us. After Chekhov we know that each of us has his Moscow and that each has his way of foregoing reality. From Beckett no such statements emerge, or not this way. We cannot see ourselves in his characters, because they are no more characters than cubist portraits are particular people. They have the abstraction, and the intimacy, of figures and words and objects in a dream. Not that what we see is supposed to be our dream, or any dream. It is not surrealism, and its conventions are not those of fantasy. If this were a movie its director would not be Cocteau but Hitchcock.

There is no world just the other side of this one, opened onto through mirrors; escapes, if they come, will be narrower than this. There is only this world, unenchanted, unsponsored, but more fantastic than we can tell. The unbelievable, the plain truth which you cannot tell, that others will think you mad when you try to tell, is one of Hitchcock's patented themes. Take two people as pointedly ordinary as Robert Cummings and Priscilla Lane, have them discover, during the war, a plot to blow up a ship in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, have them momentarily elude the plotters only to find themselves in the midst of a private charity ball, the house owned by a colleague of the enemies, the immaculately proper servants guarding each exit, their only hope of escape lying in convincing the unknowing among the well-dressed mob of dancers and patrons under the crystal chandeliers and the spell of society dance music that their socially prominent and conscientious hostess is a Nazi sympathizer sheltering a gang of saboteurs—why anyone present would have to be mad to believe such a tale.

Beckett's characters have such a tale to tell, but their problem is not to distinguish friends from foes under the tuxedos, for there are neither friends nor foes any more; nor to prevent a disaster from happening or a culprit from escaping justice, for no one in particular is the culprit and all disasters have taken place. Their problem is not to become believable, but to turn off the power of belief altogether since it has become, because useless, the source of unappeasable, unbelievable pain. Suspense is for Hitchcock what faith is for the Christian, an ultimate metaphysical category, directing life's journey and making the universe come clear, and clean at the end. The overwhelming question for both is: How will the truth come out at last?

Beckett's couples have discovered the final plot: that there is no plot, that the truth has come out, that *this* is the end. But they would be mad to believe it and they cannot, being human, fully give up suspense. So they wait. Not for something, for they know there is nothing to wait for. So they try not to wait, but they do not know how to end.

But why should ending it be a problem, and why should the problem be an intellectual one, going beyond assembling the stamina for suicide? Because, evidently, suicide is not the end. I do not mean what Hamlet seems to mean (and perhaps he didn't either) that such an end has consequences, and hence is not the end. I mean it is not the *right* end, not the right solution to some particular problem. This has two implications: (1) Man is the animal for whom to be or not to be is a *question*: its resolution therefore must have the form of an *answer*. (2) It must form the answer to a *particular* reason for ending. Hamlet shuns suicide not because of the divine canon against self-slaughter; there is ample canon against other-slaughter as well, which he does not often hesitate to break. His real hesitations are over the right of vengeance and the belief in ghosts,<sup>5</sup> hesitations which have survived the God-slaughter of the succeeding centuries. He shuns suicide just because it makes no sense for his unhappiness. His problem is not one of radical failure or dishonor or abandonment. (I take it that suicide can solve these unhappinesses: in the first case because it serves as punishment, in the second because it serves as sacrifice, in the third because it vengefully turns the tables, turning the abandoner into the abandoned. All convert suffering into action; in all, impotence has become unbearable; in all, the act is toward silence, toward a shelter from a torment of accusation.) Hamlet's problem, on the contrary, is that he alone has the success of knowledge, the honor of succession, and the presence of motive to doctor the time. It makes no sense to run from that conjunction through use of suicide, though the thought of running from it may move him closer to suicide.

Why do men stay alive in the face of the preponderance of pain over pleasure, of meaninglessness over sense? Camus' answer is, in effect, that suicide, as a response to the general condition of human life, is a contradiction, because the condition to which it would be a response is life's absurdity, and suicide does not *respond* to this

<sup>5</sup> In *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), Harry Levin points to these as Hamlet's "double dilemma" (p. 24).

absurdity, but removes it. That seems a very academic way of putting the problem. Camus is right that this is *the* philosophical problem, because until it is answered one's chance for moral existence has not begun—or ended; one has not taken one's life into one's own hands. And after it is answered the supposed need for a philosophical "foundation" for morality vanishes, which is the reason all such foundations—metaphysical, epistemological, political or religious—strike one as conceived in bad faith.

It is true that Hamm wants death, at least there is no life he wants, and one can say that his entire project is to achieve his death. Why will suicide not answer? Because he cannot imagine his death apart from imagining the death of the world. *That* is what he wants, and his death is wanted as a necessary, and welcome, entailment of that. If the imagination of death requires the imagination of *leaving*, of farewells, then Hamm is not imagining his death. (Perhaps this means he cannot imagine his life either. In the eighth *Duino Elegy*: ". . . so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied.") He wants to end, but without taking leave. But where does the motive come from to destroy the whole world?

It is as if personal escape, individual non-existence, private relief, are insufficient to neutralize the pain which would motivate suicide; as long as *anyone* can remember, the memory which is to die has not died; as long as anything breathes, I am not at rest. But how can anyone take in, or even conceive, an ambition or obligation large enough to encompass the death of the world? Perhaps, however, largeness is not at issue. If we are to speak of ambition or obligation, the question is: How does this *specific* obligation come to be shouldered?

Merely the connection between the death of personal existence and the death of the world is not new. Hamlet and Lear both crave death, and knowing they must be the *last* to die, crave the death of their worlds. Certainly Hamm, for all his efforts, cannot surpass them in their *disgust* with the world, especially with its fruitfulness. But their worlds were limited to the coherent state; the universe outside that was not their responsibility. Christ had wished the death of all, but in order for the re-birth of all. What is new is to wish for unlimited surcease, and without the plan of redemption.

It must be some widening knowledge of such a wish—heard by Nietzsche before this century turned on us the news now reaching our ears—which functions in our awareness of the Bomb. I would

scarcely deny its objective threat, but one senses reactions to it that are not reactions to an objective threat. Sometimes they are hysterically fearful ("Better Red than dead," as though the *others* are willing to send them over at any moment), sometimes hysterically repressive and rational (the mode of all official rhetoric employing concepts of deterrence, over-kill, etc.—language breaking down in front of our ears, denoting nothing we know or imagine). I do not suggest that there is some *right* reaction waiting to be had. The situation is in fact mad. We know, sort of, that the world may end in twenty minutes (and to qualify this by calculating whether 30,000,000 or 50,000,000 persons will survive, or to speculate whether plant life will continue, is merely tragic relief). And we know there is nothing we can do to stop it which is not absurdly disproportionate to the event. So we treat it, or improvise around it, using the reactions we know: forgetfulness, habit, hope against hope, humor, hysteria, fantasy. The Three Sisters are no more out of touch with their world than we are with ours. We are a billion times three sisters.

One thinks of *Dr. Strangelove*. The film has been criticized because it presents superficial explanations of our final difficulties (it's all due to mad Generals, boy scout Generals, German rocket designers, bullies and dupes in high places) and childish solutions to them (get the bastards out, we want anarchy). Perhaps these are motives of the film, and doubtless some of its ardent fans have been fans of those explanations and solutions. But the issue is a false one. The clearest fact about the film is its continuous brilliance, and any understanding of it must understand that. It is not, for example, the result of brilliant movie-making, at which it is quite routine; nor the result of brilliant ideas, for it has no ideas (which is perhaps sufficient reason not to defend it, as has been tried, as satire). Its brilliance is that of farce, with its stringent rhythm of entrances and concealments; and of silent comedy, with its sight gags. Only it is abstract. The figure displaced under the bed or into the closet is not a person but a turn of mind; the object that drops on the head is not a loose chandelier but a tight loyalty; the inappropriate get-up is not a feather boa or a spittoon on the foot from which you cannot extricate yourself, but a habit of response. It is a collage whose bits are as common as sand: Who has never endowed a pop tune with Proustian power of recall and summary; or straightened out an awkward moment with a piece of pop seriousness ("Of course it's not just

physical; I respect you as a person"); or thrilled when, at Saturday matinees, the tight-faced soldier nudges the door open with one hand and in the other holds a sub-machine gun upright in world-preserving coolness? If these fantasies are worthless, we are worthless. And nothing in all of Beckett's sadness is sadder than the scene in which Slim Pickens encourages his crew of doom by reminding them that the folks back home are counting on them. Inappropriate no doubt now; but the Second World War—and it is from movies about that War that this scene is taken—depended upon scenes like that, and it is not clear that without such scenes the outcome of the War would have been the same. What is so sad is that it is something good in us that has turned out to be so inappropriate. What is the solution? To see to it that our minds are no longer composed of trivial tunes, adolescent longings and movie clips? No doubt. Exactly what would one have in mind?

*Dr. Strangelove's* strategies of sacrifice are singly clear to laugh at; but they amount to that mood of hilarity which does not produce laughter. It also suggests, what I take *Endgame* to be about, that we think it is right that the world end. Not perhaps morally right, but inevitable; tragically right. In a world of unrelieved helplessness, where Fate is not a notable Goddess but an inconspicuous chain of command, it would be a relief to stop worrying and start loving the Bomb (the extent to which these are accepted as our fixed alternatives is a measure of our madness.) A love too precious for this world, no doubt; but God will witness how powerful and true to itself. (I can hear the lyrics for the new *Liebestod*. They begin: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. I regret that I have but three billion lives to give for my country.") The official rhetoric is rational, but it bears to ordinary consciousness the same relation as advanced theology to the words and the audience of a revivalist. What does an ordinary Christian think when he says, or hears, that Christ died to save sinners? What does an ordinary citizen think when he says, or hears, that our defense systems provide such and such a margin of warning, or sees a sign saying "Fallout Shelter"? We speak about the dangers of "accidental war," but what does this mean? Not that the *whole* war will be an accident, but that it will *start* accidentally. From then on it will be planned. We are imagining that, if ordered to, men will "push buttons" which they know will mean the destruction of their world. Why do we imagine they will do this? Because they are

soldiers and will be following orders and thereby doing a soldier's duty? That seems no more satisfactory an explanation here than its use to explain the behavior of extermination squads. In both cases, what is suppressed is the fact that the content of an act is essentially related to that action's counting as a duty. (Kant, I believe, is still thought to have denied this, and thus, I suppose, to have contributed to the moral destruction of Germany. What Kant denies, however, is only that anything *other* than the content of an act—in particular, its being performed from a particular motive (other than duty itself) or its having certain consequences—can make the act morally right.) For an action even to seem to be a duty it must be taken as on the whole good, or to lead to good; or at the least a regrettable necessity—and necessary on grounds other than the mere fact that it has been commanded: it is necessary in order that a greater good may supervene.

Someday, if there is someday, we will have to learn that evil thinks of itself as good, that it could not have made such progress in the world unless people planned and performed it in all conscience. Nietzsche was not crazy when he blamed morality for the worst evils, though he may have become too crazy about the idea. This is also why goodness, in trying to get born, will sometimes look like the destruction of morality. I am scarcely to be taken as presenting a theory of Nazism, any more than of the acquiescence to world destruction, so it would be irrelevant to point to other considerations which help explain human involvement in events of such catastrophe, for example to ways in which one denies to oneself the name and meaning and consequence of one's actions, to ways in which one merely hopes, out of a helplessness to see or to take any alternative, that one will be justified, and so on. What I am suggesting is that one dimension of our plight can only be discovered in a phenomenology of the Bomb.<sup>6</sup> For it has invaded our dreams and given the brain, already

<sup>6</sup> An instance of what I have in mind is Resnais' film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. It has been called an anti-war film, on the ground, I suppose, of its display of the evil of the Bomb. But while it doubtless contains such an awareness (that evil is, after all, pretty obvious) its real subject is the evil of using the Bomb as an excuse—or, which is perhaps the same, a symbol—for inner horror, and thence about the oblique and ironic relations between inner and outer worlds generally. This suggests both a political and aesthetic problem. (1) While one does not expect, and does not want, politicians to become phenomenologists, nor to give up the most practical worries they can find, one of their biggest worries, and perhaps a new one, is this new importance, and power, of phenomenological awareness, making realistic appraisal and accommodation difficult in a new way. (2) The aesthetic problem concerns what limits there may be to subjects of art. Is, for example, the Bomb too practically engulfing to fit requirements of artistic treatment?

wrinkled with worry, a new cut. And it has finally provided our dreams of vengeance, our despair of happiness, our hatreds of self and world, with an instrument adequate to convey their destructiveness, and satisfaction.

I raise the image of the Bomb because Beckett's play has seemed to raise it for some of its audience, and this is as good a place as any to begin pursuing systematically the textual evidence for the pile of claims which has been so long accumulating.

#### IV

Does the play take place, as is frequently suggested, after an atomic war? Are these its last survivors? Well, Beckett suggests they are, so far as they or we know, the last life. And he says twice that they are in "the shelter" (p. 3; p. 69). Is it a bomb shelter? These considerations are doubtless resonant in the play's situation: it tells its time. But the notion leaves opaque the specific goings on in the shelter. Do these people want to survive or not? They seem as afraid of the one as of the other. Why do they wish to insure that nothing is surviving? Why are they incapable of leaving? That Hamm and Clov want (so to speak) the world to end is obvious enough, but an understanding of the way they imagine its end, the reason it must end, the terms in which it can be brought to an end, are given by placing these characters this way: The shelter they are in is the ark, the family is Noah's, and the time is sometime after the Flood.

Many surface details find a place within this picture. Most immediately there is the name of Hamm. He is, in particular, the son of Noah who saw his father naked, and like Oedipus, another son out of fortune, he is blinded by what he has seen. Because of his transgression he is cursed by his father, the particular curse being that his sons are to be the servants of men. Clov, to whom Hamm has been a father, is his servant, the general servant of all the other characters. We are told (Genesis 9:23) that Shem and Japheth, the good brothers, cover their father while carefully contriving not to look at him. I hear a reference to their action when Hamm directs Clov (p. 10) to "bottle him" (i.e., clamp the lid down on his father)—one of the most brutal lines in the play, as if Hamm is commenting on what has passed for honorable conduct; he is now the good son, with a vengeance. At two points Hamm directs Clov to look out of the windows,

which need to be reached by a ladder (they are situated, as it were, above the water line) and he looks out through a telescope, a very nautical instrument. (Another significant property in the shelter is a gaff.) One window looks out at the earth, the other at the ocean, which means, presumably, that they are at the edge of water, run aground perhaps. Earlier he has asked about the weather, and there was a little exchange about whether it will rain and what good that would do. Now he asks Clov to look at the earth and is told, what both knew, that all is "corpsed": Man and beast and every living thing have been destroyed from the face of the earth. Then Hamm directs Clov to look at the sea, in particular he asks whether there are gulls. Clov looks and answers, "Gulls!", perhaps with impatience (how could there be?), perhaps with longing (if only there were!), perhaps both. Hamm ought to *know* there aren't any, having looked for them until he is blind, and being told there are none day after day. And Hamm ought to ask what he really wants to know but is afraid to know, namely, whether there is a raven or a dove.

Let this suffice to establish a serious attention to the tale of Noah. Its importance starts to emerge when we notice that the entire action of the play is determined by the action of that tale. After the flood, God does two things: he establishes a covenant with Noah that the earth and men shall no more be taken from one another; and presses a characteristic commandment, to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. Hamm's behavior is guided by attempts to undo or deny these specific acts of God.

Something has happened in the ark during those days and nights of world-destroying rain and the months of floating and waiting for the end, for rescue. Hamm has seen something in the ark of the covenant. I imagine it this way.

He has seen God naked. For it is, after all, the most fantastic tale. God repented, it says, that he created man. How does a God repent? How does anyone? Suppose he has a change of heart about something he has done. If this is not mere regret, then the change of heart must lead to mending one's ways or making amends. How does a God mend his ways; can he, and remain God? A further question is more pressing: How does God justify the destruction of his creation? A possible response would be: Man is sinful. But that response indicates at most that God had to do *something* about his creatures, not that he had to separate them from earth. He might have found it in

himself to forgive them or to abandon them—alternatives he seems to have used, in sequence, in future millennia. Why destruction? Suppose it is said: God needs no justification. But it is not clear that God would agree; besides, all this really means is that men are God's creatures and he may do with them as he pleases. Then what did he in fact do? He did not, as he said, cause the end of flesh to come before him, for he preserved, with each species, Noah's family; enough for a new beginning. He hedged his bet. Why? And why Noah picked from all men? Those are the questions I imagine Hamm to have asked himself, and his solution is, following God, to see the end of flesh come before him. As before he imitates his good brothers, so now he imitates his God—a classical effort. Why is this his solution?

God saves enough for a new beginning because he cannot part with mankind; in the end, he cannot really end it. Perhaps this means he cannot bear not to be God. (Nietzsche said that this was true of himself, and suggested that it was true of all men. It seems true enough of Hamm. We need only add that in this matter men are being faithful to, i.e., imitating, God.) Not ending it, but with the end come before him, he cannot avoid cruelty, arbitrariness, guilt, repentance, disappointment, then back through cruelty . . . Hamm and Clov model the relationship between God and his servants.

And if the bet must be hedged, why with Noah? The tale says, "Noah walked with God." That's all. Well, it also says that he was a just man and perfect in his generations, and that he found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Is that enough to justify marking him from all men for salvation? It is incredible. Perhaps God has his reasons, or perhaps Noah does not deserve saving, and perhaps that doesn't matter. Doesn't matter for God's purposes, that is. But how can it not matter to those who find themselves saved? The tale is madly silent about what Hamm saw when he saw his father naked, and why it was a transgression deserving an eternal curse. Perhaps all he saw was that his father was ordinary, undeserving of unique salvation. But he saw also that his father was untroubled by this appalling fact. Nell, at one point in her reminiscence of Lake Como, says to Nagg: "By rights we should have been drowned" (p. 21)—a line which both undoes a cliché ("by rights" here literally means: it would have been right if we had, and hence it is wrong that we weren't) and has the thrill of revelation I spoke of earlier (it is not Lake Como she is thinking of). But Nagg misses the boat. So blind Hamm sees both that he



exists only as a product of his father ("Accursed fornicator!" p. 10), and that if either of their existences is to be provided with justification, he must be the provider; which presents itself to him as taking his father's place—the act that blinds Oedipus.

And how is one to undertake justifying his own—let alone another's—existence? One serious enough solution is to leave this business of justification to God; that is what he is for. But God has reneged this responsibility, and doubly. In meaning to destroy all flesh, he has confessed that existence cannot be justified by him. And in saving one family and commanding them to replenish the earth, there is the high hint that man is being asked to do a god's work, that he is not only abandoned to his own justification, but that he must undertake to justify God himself, to redeem God's curse and destruction. God cursed the world, and he is cursed. This seems to me to set the real problem of Theodicy, to justify God's ways to God. Its traditional question—Why did God create man and then allow him to suffer?—has a clear answer: Because it is man that God created; all men are mortal, and they suffer.

The Covenant, therefore, is a bad bargain, and the notion of replenishing the earth is a losing proposition. Promising not to destroy man *again* is hardly the point, and is not so much a promise as an apology. (As the rainbow is more a threat than a promise.) The point is to understand why it was done the first time, and what man is that he can accept such an apology. As for replenishing the earth, what will that do but create more fathers and sons, and multiply the need for justification? God was right the first time: the end of flesh is come, God's destruction is to be completed. Or rather, what must end is the mutual dependence of God and the world: *this world*, and its god, must be brought to a conclusion. Hamm's strategy is to undo all covenants and to secure fruitlessness. In a word, to disobey God perfectly, to perform man's last disobedience. No doubt Hamm acts out of compassion. ("Kill him, for the love of God.") The creation and destruction of a world of men is too great a burden of responsibility even for God. To remove that responsibility the world does not so much need to vanish as to become *un-created*. But to accomplish that it seems that we will have to become gods. For mere men will go on hoping, go on waiting for redemption, for justification, for meaning. And these claims ineluctably retain God in creation—to his, and to

our, damnation. And yet, where there is life there is hope. That is Hamm's dilemma.

(At some such point another feature of our time is apt to enter the resonance of these lines, another mine of response running under the original meaning of Hamm's name: the new sense of blackness. The demand for the end of the world in which blacks and whites are dependent upon one another for their own view of themselves, for their own sense of worth—this demand is now irreversible. And the reversal of the curses and covenants which have created this world will feel like the loss of the world. Whether it also feels to a given man like the hope of the world depends upon whether that man relocates his sense of worth inside his single skin. That this preposterously simple demand should be so preposterously complex to fulfill is itself maddening. It is simply crazy that there should ever have come into being a world with such a sin in it, in which a man is set apart because of his color—the superficial fact about a human being. Who could *want* such a world? For an American, fighting for his love of country, that the last hope of earth should from its beginning have swallowed slavery, is an irony so withering, a justice so intimate in its rebuke of pride, as to measure only with God. The question is whether enough men can afford the knowledge that the way the world is comes down in the end to what each son is doing now, sitting within his ordinary walls, making his everyday demands. And whether enough men can divine the difference, and choose, between wanting *this world to stop itself, and wanting all world to end.*)

Hamm's problem, like Job's, is that of being singled out. Job is singled out for suffering, Hamm for rescue, and it is something of an insight to have grasped the problem still there. Job, presumably, has his answer in recognizing that there *is* no humanly recognizable reason for being singled out to suffer. That is, none having to do with *him*. Life becomes bearable when he gives up looking for such a reason. Couldn't we give up looking for a reason for being singled out for rescue? For certain spirits that is harder, for the good Christian reason that others are there, unrescued.

It is in some such way that I imagine Hamm's thoughts to have grown. It is from a mind in such straits that I can make sense (1) of his attempt to reverse creation, to empty the world of salvation, justification, meaning, testaments; and (2) of the story he tells, the composing of which is the dominant activity of his days.

He calls his story a "chronicle," suggesting that it is a record of fact. It concerns a man who had come to him for help, begging him at least to "take his child in" (p. 53). And we learn that this is not an isolated case, for Hamm refers to

All those I might have helped.

(Pause.)

Helped!

(Pause.)

Saved.

(Pause.)

Saved!

(Pause.)

The place was crawling with them!

"Might have." With those words every man takes his life. Hamm is remembering something that actually happened. I imagine him to be remembering the ark being built. It would have taken a while—all those cubits to arrange, and all that food and all the paired beasts to collect. People would have got wind of it, perhaps some were hired to help in the preparations. God, the tale says, went away while it was being done, perhaps to let the family get used to the idea of their special fortune, and to get a full appreciation of God's love. Then he returned to order them into the ark, and when the family and each kind had gone in unto Noah into the ark, "the Lord shut him in" (Genesis 7:7), preserved him, bottled him. At first people would have been skeptical at Noah's folly rising there in the middle of land, but some would eventually have believed, and even if these were the glib and lunatic who believe every announcement of doom, Noah would have known that this time they were right; but he would have had to refuse their crazed petitions to be let in. Finished, the ark stood there closed for seven days, then the rain began, and some days would have passed before it lifted off its scaffolding to be held up in the palm of God's sea. Suppose it had been built just by the family, in secret. But now the water is deep, raising the general horizon, and the ark is visible for as far as the eye can see, to anyone who is still afloat. Perhaps no one is, but Noah's family doesn't know that. Perhaps the sounds of pounding are not survivors screaming for rescue, only dead wreckage in the water. They don't know that either, but it wouldn't require much imagination to wonder whether it was. They

must not imagine, or they must be mad. Imagination has to be bottled. But in Hamm it has started to leak out. He complains twice that "There's something dripping in my head"; both times his father has to suppress a laugh—how comical the young are, so serious, so pure; they'll learn. The first time is his over-hearing his parents together; he tells himself it's a heart, "A heart in my head" (p. 18). Something is pounding. Children will give themselves *some* explanation. The second time he thinks of it as splashing, "Splash, splash, always on the same spot" (p. 50). Now he tries pressing his earlier thought that it is a little vein, and now adds the idea that it is a little artery; but he gives it up and begins working on his chronicle, his story, his art-work. (His art-ery? That could mean, following Eric Partridge on the origin of the suffix "-ery", either the action (cp. "drudgery"), the condition (cp. "slavery"), the occupation (cp. "cauistry"), the place of actions (cp. "nursery"), the product of the action (cp. "poetry"), or the collectivity (cp. "citizenry") of art. Each of these would fit this character and this play.) Art begins where explanations leave off, or before they start. Not everything has an explanation, and people will give themselves *some* consolation. The imagination must have something to contain it—to drip into, as it were—or we must be mad. Hamm is in both positions.

V

Whatever God's idea in destroying men, to have saved one family for himself puts them in the position of denying life to all other men. [To be chosen, to be special, singled out, for suffering or for salvation, is an inescapable curse.] Perhaps this was something Christ tried to show, that even to be God is to be completely unpecial, powerless to claim exemption. To deny this is to be less than a man: we are all in the same boat. But can any man, not more than a man, affirm it?

It seems possible to me that this is what *Endgame* is about, that what it envisions is the cursed world of the Old Testament. ("Ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them," p. 38) and that what is to be ended is that world, followed by the new message, glad tidings brought by a new dove of redemption, when we are ready to receive it. Without it we are paralyzed.



But I do not think this is what is seen, though it may be a permanent segment. For the new message is also present in the play, and it too is helpless. Immediately after Hamm's first full telling of the story, his telling of it to date, he wonders how he is to continue (as anyone does, artist or man, in final difficulties) and says: "Let us pray to God" (p. 54). There are references to food (not to loaves, but to the bribe of a sugar-plum, and to calling Clov from the kitchen), and he finally persuades Clov and Nagg to join him. Nagg wants his sugar-plum before he prays, but Hamm insists "God first!"—thus summarizing the First Commandment, according to Christ the first and greatest commandment. Whereupon Nagg begins to recite the Lord's Prayer, taught during the Sermon on the Mount. That occasion is alluded to further in the way Hamm immediately interrupts his father's prayer: "Silence! In silence! Where are your manners?" (p. 55). Christ cautions that prayer be offered "in secret" immediately before he delivers his Father's Prayer. If here Hamm's teaching parodies Christ's he will later imitate him more directly, as in his chronicle he presents himself as in God's position, distributing life and death to supplicants. That's the position God has put him in.

The next time he tries to finish his story, instead of praying to God he ends by calling his father. "Father, Father" he says (p. 66), echoing the repeated among the seven last words, and addressed to the same old party. ("Father, Father" he says again near the end of his, and the play's, last speech.) And now it looks as if he is not only the son of the only spared man, hence has the same ancestor as all men; but the one and only son, with the father to end all fathers. No wonder he is confused about whether he is father or son.

He goes back to his chronicle, to try to end it, or make some continuation, a third time; again he gets to the point at which he is begged for salvation and again this is the stumbling block (pp. 68-69). Now he quotes the Sermon on the Mount more openly: "Get out of here and love one another! Lick your neighbor as yourself!" And now he becomes petulant: "When it wasn't bread they wanted it was crumpets." And wrathful: "Out of my sight and back to your petting parties." He can find no conclusion to the story of suffering and sin, and no answer to the prayer for salvation, no answer old or new. He has just told them again everything eternity knows: "Use your head can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!". But they can't use their heads; men are enough to try the

patience of a God. "How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:11-12). Use your head, can't you? It was a parable! Get it? But he's said that before and he'll say it again, and nobody gets it. They want signs, miracles, some cure for being on earth, some way of getting over being human. Maybe that's just human; and there's no cure for that.

So Hamm renounces parable in favor of the perfectly literal. (People, he might say, have no head for figures.) Only it is just as hard to write his anti-testament that way. Maybe to receive either word one would have to have a heart in one's head. No doubt it is not very clear how that could be, but then Christ sees his disciples' lack of understanding as a lack of faith, and it has never seemed unusually clear what that would be either. ("Believe," said Augustine, "and you have eaten"; Luther thought he understood what that meant.) However it is to come, nothing less powerful than faith will be needed to remove God and his curse, the power to un-create God. Hamm, however, may believe, or half-believe—believe the way little children believe—that he really has got a blood-pumping organ upstairs. We have known for a long time that the heart has its reasons which reason knows not of. But we have come to think that reason *can* know them, that the knowing of them takes over the work of the heart, that what we require for salvation is more knowledge, knowledge of the sort we already know, that will fit the shape of our heads as they are. Hamm is half-crazy with his efforts at un-doing knowledge, at not knowing. But no half-crazier than we are at our frenzy for knowledge, at knowing where we should love, meaning our lives up.

Finally, he tries to imagine that it can end without ending his story. "If I can hold my peace and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound, and motion, all over and done with" (p. 69). But it seems to be just the same old story. "I'll have called my father and I'll have called my . . . [he hesitates] . . . my son." He hesitates, as if not knowing whether he is the new god or the old, son or father. But at least he is putting himself into the picture; no attitude is struck now towards father or son; the son is now not another's—as if to acknowledge that all sons are his. "I'll have called . . . I'll say to myself, He'll come back. [Pause] And then? [Pause] . . . He couldn't, he has

gone too far. [Pause] And then?" And then a description of confusion: "Babble, babble . . ." (Babel? If so, what does it mean? What caused Babel and its aftermath? Our presumption, in desiring God's eminence? Or our foolishness, in imagining that a tower is the way to reach heaven? In either case the confusion of tongues is God's punishment, hence proof of his existence. Or is the din rather the sound of our success, that we reached heaven and found it empty? Better to bite the tongue than admit that. Better to take over and punish ourselves than to forgo that proof.)

Here is at least one possible endgame other than the act of ending the story: I call; there is no answer. But this ending is unclear. The problem seems to be that there is no way of *knowing* there is no answer, no way of knowing the call was heard, and therefore *unanswered*. (An unconnected telephone cannot be left unanswered.)

One source of confusion seems clear enough. *Who* has gone too far to come back? The father or the son? Is it God who has gone too far, in inflicting suffering he cannot redeem? Or Christ, in really dying of suffering we cannot redeem? What does it matter? The one threatened, the other promised, the end of the world; and neither carried through. We are left holding it.

There are three other allusions to Christ which need mentioning, one at the beginning, one near the middle, and one at the end of the play. The first may seem doubtful: "Can there be misery loftier than mine?" (p. 3). If confirmation is wanted beyond the fact that the tone of this remark perfectly registers Hamm's aspiration (perhaps the usual tone in which Christ is imitated) there is the refrain of George Herbert's "The Sacrifice": "Was ever grief like mine?", in which the speaker is Christ. The middle allusion is the only explicit one, and it occurs with characteristic literality. After Hamm's instruction in the etiquette of prayer, the three men have a try at it, whereupon each confesses in turn that he has got nowhere. King Claudius, in a similar predicament, gives the usual honest explanation for this failure: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: words without thoughts never to heaven go." Hamm has a different, perhaps more honest, certainly no less responsible, explanation: "The bastard! He doesn't exist." To which Clov's response, in full, is: "Not yet", and the subject is dropped (p. 55). Removing the curse, what Hamm has just said is that the bastard does not exist. That Christ was literally

a bastard was among the first of the few things I was ever told about him, and I suppose other Jewish children are given comparable help to their questions. I take it this exciting gossip makes its way in other circles as an advanced joke. So it is Christ whom Clov says does not exist yet. This may mean either that we are still, in the play, in the pre-Christian age, with rumors, prophecies, hopes stirring; or that since we know there is a bastard, he has come, but not returned. (The French version notates the ambiguity: "Pas encore" is "Not yet." But also, I take it, "Not again.") Either way, "Not yet" is the most definite expression of hope—or, for that matter, of despair—in the play, the only expression of future which is left unchallenged, by contradiction, irony or giggles.

What weight is to be attached to this? Do those two words give the Endgame to this play of suffering, that with Christ's coming this will all have meaning? It seems unimaginable in this total context of run-down and the fallout of sense. Yet there is a coming at the end of the play, one which Hamm apparently takes to signal the awaited end, and upon which he dismisses Clov. Clov spies a small boy through the glass; it is a moment which is considerably longer in the French, but for some reason cut down in Beckett's English version. In the French, the boy is said to be leaning against a stone, and this seems a clear enough suggestion of the sepulchre. But even without this description, the character is sufficiently established by Hamm's response, which is to speculate about whether what Clov sees exists. (This is the only use of "exists" in the play outside the bastard remark.) The important fact for us is that after that earlier exchange between Hamm and Clov, it is Clov whose immediate response is to prepare to kill the newcomer, whereas Hamm, for the first time, prevents the destruction of a "potential procreator" (p. 78), saying in effect that he cannot survive anyway, that he will make no difference, present no problem. Earlier, Clov had expressed the straightest hopes for this coming, but he misses it when it comes; Hamm is now ready to admit that perhaps it has come but he sees that it is too late, that it was always too late for redemption; too late from the moment redemption became necessary. We are Christ or we are nothing—that is the position Christ has put us in.

## VI

Suppose this is what Hamm sees now that the boy has finally appeared. Does this mean the game ends, that Hamm now knows what he needs to know to end; that knowing there is no salvation from salvation or damnation, he can give up hope and fear, and end?

He knows nothing. His final soliloquy, like every other moment in the play, was planned, rehearsed. His first words are "Me to play"; it's his move, it's up to him. Over and over we are shown that everything that is happening has happened before. Just before his last speech Hamm the ham makes what he calls an aside and says he's "warming up for my last soliloquy" (p. 78). True, this is said immediately before the boy appears, so that what is in fact his last soliloquy may not be the one he had planned. However, the last soliloquy contains the same reference to conscious composition as the former ones do ("Nicely put, that," p. 83), and its content is about the same. Still, Clov is "dressed for the road," standing at the exit, and Hamm, a stage direction informs us, "gives up" (p. 82). Does Clov really leave? There is evidence for believing he does and evidence the other way. We don't know, they don't know. And if he does leave, is *that* the end?

This can't, I think, be the right track. The end Hamm seeks must be shown in the efforts made throughout the play. What are these efforts? Take these:

1. To play out a game, or drama, to a conclusion.
2. To finish a story.
3. To secure fruitlessness, and in particular:
4. To defeat meaning, of word and deed.

This ought to seem a set of goals split against itself: as though the end of the game will be to show that the game has no winner, the moral of the story to show there is no moral anyone can draw, its art directed to prove that art—the grouping of details to an overwhelming expression—does not exist; that games, plays, stories, morals, art—all the farcing of coherent civilizations—come to nothing, are nothing. To accomplish this will seem—will be—the end of the world, of *our* world. The motive, however, is not death, but life, or

anyway human existence at last. Because what has happened since the Gods of the world went too far is that what used to seem life's leaven, the sources of meaning and coherence, the shelters from chaos and destruction, have now grown to shut out existence; morality, art, religion and the rest, lead lives of their own, grown out of hand, that shear man's existence from him. God shut us in. The result is that the earth is blotted out for man, sealed away by a universal flood of meaning and hope. The price of soaking it up will be no less high, for there is nothing to soak it up with except ourselves. A hope precipitated and concentrated through millennia will not swiftly recede, it comes back in waves. Splash, splash, always on the same spot.

Suppose what Hamm sees is that salvation lies in the ending of endgames, the final renunciation of all final solutions. The greatest endgame is Eschatology, the idea that the last things of earth will have an order and a justification, a sense. That is what we hoped for, against hope, that was what salvation would look like. Now we are to know that salvation lies in reversing the story, in ending the story of the end, dismantling Eschatology, ending this world of order in order to reverse the curse of the world laid on it in its Judeo-Christian end. Only a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution—as we have been shaped for these things—is free from the curse of God.

But Hamm can't do it. At one point, though he and Clov seem, as he puts it, to be "getting on," getting on together by getting on with the game of un-doing, still he doubts: "We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?" Clov apparently laughs at the idea, but Hamm's doubt remains a moment, and he comes out with, "To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!", a climactic exclamation whose force, for me, indicates another of the revelatory utterances I have tried to describe. The exclamation remains perfectly ambiguous in attitude, poised between hope and despair. The obvious rhetoric is that of hope: Only think! The super-human effort won't have been for nothing, won't have been wasted; against divine odds we shall have come through. But in context it is a cry of despair (the stage direction leading to the question cites Hamm as "anguished"): Only think! The effort won't have been for nothing; therefore it will have been for something; but since divine odds insure that we can only mean the old things—namely the very things that have brought us into the sealing shelter—we cannot come through.

I think here of the quotation from St. Augustine which Beckett is reported to have offered as a help to *Godot*. Somewhere Augustine cautions: "Do not despair, for one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, for one of the thieves was damned." The implication is that the correct attitude is hung between; between the despair and the presumption of salvation, absorbing both. That is the poise I hear in Hamm's exclamation, and perhaps as difficult to sustain.

The allusion in *Godot* is perfectly clear. Near its opening there is a discussion which begins: "One of the thieves was saved. A reasonable percentage." Reasonable indeed. Just the percentage you'd expect on the basis of chance alone, if there were no third. And an appropriate speculation beneath an empty tree, one on which there is no hanging man, no third. *Godot* is about waiting, about the inescapable fact that human beings are suspended, between future and past, hope and despair, beast and angel, mother and father, parent and child, birth and death, good and evil, heaven and earth. They wait; therefore they wait for something; and because they cannot not wait, what is waited for cannot, logically cannot, come; otherwise waiting would stop. "Man," says Nietzsche at the close of *The Genealogy of Morals*, a book which wants the end of morality, and of art, of knowledge, of hope, of man—"Man would rather take the void for his purpose than to be void of purpose." Hamm may not be much in the way of a Superman (but who is?), yet he faces the hard Nietzschean alternatives: either nihilism or else the task of purposely undoing, re-evaluating all the purposes we have known, re-locating the gravity of purpose itself. Perhaps it's not clear, perhaps he doesn't know, which alternative he has chosen. But who, having faced them, does know? They look so much alike.

What Hamm sees is that waiting is the final losing game, that waiting itself is damnation: for one waits either for damnation or salvation, and both are impossible. To destroy all flesh *save mine* is not a reasonable percentage. Sense cannot come of it, or rather sense *must* not come of it for it is damnation to think it can—but what else can we think as long as we wait and hope? The endgame Hamm centers is meant to end the waiting. Why does this require a game of strategy and skill? Because a man cannot simply *stop* waiting anymore than he can overcome a lack of air by stopping breathing. One solution is to wait for nothing, for zero, to make every goal empty, to accompany each wish by a wish for the opposite. (To wish that it will

rain and that it will not rain is to wish for nothing; the same goes for the wish simultaneously to get out of and to stay in a relationship, or any shelter.) The result may be paralyzing, but at least it is not waiting, and therefore contains a seed of truth, that there is nothing to wait for. Another strategy would be to wait better, more effectively; to wear out waiting like a shirt.

This is also tried by Hamm and Clov. The canonical forms of waiting are Jewish messianism and Christian suffering. We've said something about the former, but the latter is coiled together with it in the play, in the play of our Jewish-Christian minds. Clov opens the play with a speech which declares, "I can't be punished any more." His meaning here is amplified in his last soliloquy, just before Hamm's last: "I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you—one day . . . You must be there better than that if you want them to let you go . . ." And we heard Hamm at the start of his opening speech ask: "Can there be misery [he yawns] loftier than mine?" These beginning utterances suggest the uses to which suffering (or waiting), since we were taught to suffer, has been put, in order to end itself. Either it can make us good, worthy of pardon, or it can make us powerful, ascendant, worthy of praise. These are the endgames of suffering with which we begin: I win, my suffering ends, either when I learn perfectly that suffering is punishment, that is to say, that I deserve it, that I am perfectly sinful; or when I win the competition of suffering itself. These exhaust the strategies of suffering used in the shelter. To get out, these ways of winning have to be brought to an end; suffering has to stop being *used*, has to stop *meaning anything*, and become the simple fact of life. Where it is a game, it is a losing game; where existence is interpreted, sheltered, it is lost. Hamm and Clov both know this, and the play is about their efforts to forgo the losing win of suffering. This is why they try to give each other up, because apart from one another the strategies are pointless. Each requires his audience: Clov, because his worthiness must be seen; Hamm, because his loftiness must be appreciated. And the giving up of audience must present itself, both to the theologian and to the artist, as death.

Hamm, the artist, still hopes for salvation through his art; hopes to move his audience to gratitude, win their love through telling his story. It is the usual story of private guilt, complete with self-justifica-

tions and vengeance on his characters, and he's been telling himself that, told well enough, the burden of his guilty secret will be shared. His end of endgame will come when he is able to "speak no more about it" (p. 84), stop telling himself the old stories of justification, or the new story that salvation can be found in art, or indeed that art, as we have conceived and practiced it, has any relevance at all to our current necessities. I imagine all this is meant when Clov refers to Hamm's composition as "The story you've been telling yourself all your days" (p. 58). Perhaps he also means, most directly, that the biggest fiction is that one's days form a story, that you can capture them by telling them. (This is Sartre's best subject—purest in *Nausea*—and if he is relevant anywhere to the play, he is here.) Nowadays, if you pour the wine of new meaning into old bottles, it is the wine which breaks. And all bottles are old.

I am reminded here of another of the precious few properties called for in the description of the set: a picture, "its face to the wall." Someone is in disgrace, has disgraced those left behind. The suggestion is too salient for Beckett not to have meant us to make something of it. But who is out of grace? All of us, none of us? What pictures, turned to the wall, would mean either of these? It is possible we are to be left guessing, like his characters. I have imagined it variously: as an illustration of a biblical scene (perhaps of the Creation); as an icon portrait of Christ; as a family portrait of the four characters. It now seems to me that the picture may be turned not because anyone special is in disgrace, nor everyone special, but just because it is a picture. It is art itself which is disgraced, cursed because it makes the artist special, bullies his audience into suffering for him, contains his meaning, tells stories, loves floods.

As the play starts toward its close, Clov takes down the picture, keeping its face to the wall, and in its place hangs up an alarm clock. Hamm asks what he's doing and he replies, "Winding up" (p. 72). That is, ending; but literally—since the subject is a clock—starting. Apparently important business has focussed around that clock before, but only with reference to its alarm, not as something which tells time. What time it is has significance only when it may be time for something. Recurrently, Hamm asks whether it is time (for his pain-killer, or his story—which perhaps are the same) and says that it is time; but it is time no clock can tell. What is alarming is just time itself—that it is always time, that it is never time.

Once Clov suggests setting the alarm to signal Hamm that he has departed, not just died, and this is what happens as they try the alarm to see if it works, listening to its ringing to the end:

CLOV. Fit to wake the dead! . . .  
The end is terrific!  
HAMM. I prefer the middle.

(Clov is the eschatologist to the end; Hamm, as usual, is caught in the middle.) They use it as a toy, or a musical instrument; they have their resources. Gabriel's is the other musical alarm to wake the dead (and is alluded to when Clov, as he and Hamm are winding up, removes the clock from the wall and puts it on the lid of Nagg's bin). But that cannot be what the alarm clock, run-out, is supposed to mean—the significant, terrific end of time. They need to test the alarm because:

HAMM. The alarm, is it working?  
CLOV. Why wouldn't it be working?  
HAMM. Because it's worked too much.  
CLOV. But it's hardly worked at all.  
HAMM (*angrily*). Then because it's worked too little.

(p. 47)

Worked too little, because it's worked too much: we have been alarmed too often. What in God's name could there be, finally, to be alarmed about? Hang it on the wall, bury it on the tomb, as a monument, or memento, to time and to eternity. Hang the run-out object where art used to hang, for if only art is worth looking at, nothing is. Hang it up because it is a real thing, empty of function and alarm; and in the place of art, which is not able to recover for us the things of this world or of the next.

Clov had not, so far as we know, rewound the alarm, so we are not to assume that he has set the signal of his departure. Not that it matters, because if Clov's leaving Hamm is to secure their mutual lack of audience, this too is no end. An audience remains, in two locales: in each self and in heaven.

Self-consciousness is many kinds of curse, but specifically here in providing a witness for actions whose entire point is that they have

no point. But a witness will, ineluctably, give them a point. That is the danger of strangers, that they will misunderstand, or that they will understand. It is the thought of this invasion of the self that produces Hamm's outcry, "Perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!". But even if the last man goes, how can I keep the point from myself, how not let the left man know what the left man is doing? If I could do that I would know prayer and charity; but that is back to the endgames we know about, and have tried and have lost.

The danger remains in heaven. The audience of the play is God, and its object is the reverse of prayer. I do not mean that its object is to achieve damnation; that is not the reverse of prayer but a parody of it, or a prayer to the Devil (which perhaps comes to the same). Its object is to show God not that he must intervene, bear witness to our efforts and aid and mitigate them, but that he owes it to us, to our suffering and our perfect faithfulness, to depart forever, to witness nothing more. Not to fulfill, but to dismantle all promises for which we must await fulfillment. "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief" now means: Help me not to believe.

Hamm's kinship to Hamlet has been mentioned. Abandoned sons, each is forced to redeem his father's soul, knowing that the task is a curse which requires taking his father's place; each uses the antics of methodical madness as his characteristic tactic; both are in a shelter which is thought of as a prison; the situations of both are paralyzing. (Nietzsche gave the answer to suggestions that Hamlet "cannot make up his mind." What Hamlet sees is the *cost* of action, the hardest of all truths, that redemption is impossible, that nothing makes up for anything. "All is absolute" says Hamm at the beginning of his play, and *Hamlet* is the Revenge Play to end revenge, which sees that revenge, getting even, is only the hardest of lies, in denying the hardest truth: we are never even and we are always even; the uniqueness of the human soul, held to be its greatest value, is its greatest curse. We are alone, separate. Who has made up his mind to that?) Finally, they are alike in helping to compose a play within the play, only Hamm's is the entire play. The surrounding play is the mind to date, with its cursing self-performances, its inheritance of testaments, its ghosts and their tasks. The play within the play is to show us how to acquit ourselves. And it is still to perform its work by catching the conscience of the King.

There are two Kings of the world of *Endgame*, Hamm and the old King, the King of Kings. That Hamm is a King, or takes a King's place, is shown in many ways. His identification with the Gods has been mentioned; and it is the clearest implication of the chess title. Further, he picks up direct lines from two of Shakespeare's rulers: from the most isolated, Richard the Third ("My kingdom for a nightman" (on drayhorse), p. 23) and from the most powerful, Prospero ("Our revels now are ended," p. 56). Above all he resembles Lear, and his world Lear's: there is the sexual disgust related, as also in *Hamlet*, to unassimilable revelations about a parent or child; there is, further, the catastrophic reversal of roles (Lear with the Fool; father with children; sanity with madness); it is a world pervaded by madness and the fear of madness—a fear not of chaos but of naked meaning; there is the attempt, and the inability, at renunciation; there is the obsession with Gods; there is the emphasis upon *nothing*, a thematic word in the play; it is the great secular play about suffering—showing that it has no known limits, and is absolute, unredeemable; and finally it is about life outside the shelter (of authority, family, place, sanity).

The ambition of Hamm's play, knowing all bounds, is to catch the conscience of both Kings. It is to catch Hamm's own, as has been suggested, by embodying it, turning it into art. It is to catch God's by showing him to himself naked. In it he will see a King, made in his own image, cursing his Kingdom, betraying his subjects and being betrayed by them, and having the poison of covenants and salvation poured into his ears. Claudius, at this point in his performance, calls for light. If God picks up his cue, he will remove the light he called forth to begin this entire business, and let earth find its own; or not find it. In the beginning God created the heaven *and* the earth; in the end the conjunction must be denied. That is the only effective Theodicy. God, accordingly, must repent once more—not indeed by destroying, nor again by sending salvation, but by doing nothing more: by repenting precisely all repentance. Above all, by stopping waiting. We waited for him and we were left waiting; now he waits for us and we keep him waiting. But that is vengeance, the game nobody can win, because nobody can end. If God would stop waiting, maybe then we could imitate him, finally, in that.

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Solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence—these are not the *givens* of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking. To say that Beckett's message is that the world is meaningless, etc. is as ironically and dead wrong as to say it of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or Rilke, for whom emptiness or perfect singleness are not states—not here and now—but infinite tasks. Achieving them will require passing the edge of madness, maybe passing over, and certainly passing through horror, bearing the nausea Zarathustra knows or the vision of oneself as a puppet ("the husk, the wire, even the face that's all outside") as in Rilke's fourth *Duino Elegy*—not protesting one's emptiness, but *seeing* what one is filled with. Then the angel may appear, then nature, then things, then others, then, if ever, the fullness of time; then, if ever, the achievement of the ordinary, the faith to be plain, or not to be.

If this is right, how can it be acted? How spoken? I am now not thinking of the lines as directed between the actors, where there will be many particular choices whether to read according to the literalization or to leave it latent. For example, the phrase "for the love of God" sounds different as a cliché curse and as a literal appeal. Again, it is possible that a given actor will be led to try the Hamm/home utterance as the "growl or groan, sounding up from within" which Rudolf Otto speaks about (cf. note 4). The problem arises in the relation between an analysis of a piece of music and a performance of it. The *Hammerklavier* Sonata can be analyzed as sequences of falling and rising thirds, but it would be mad to perform the piece accenting all intervals of a third. How much, or what points, of an analysis, do you play? (Not, of course, that every performance must allow the same resolution.) I raise the question just to suggest that it is not unique to Beckett, or to modern theater, or to theater, but is one of performance (or reading) generally. The first aesthetic fact about performances is that they have audiences. And my question now is: How are we to conceive of the audience of Beckett's (not Hamm's) play? If we say, not that there is no audience, but that the goal of the play is that there be no audience, then what are we to make of all those people sitting out there in the dark, watching and listening?

These questions have seemed to me crucial and unanswerable, but now I think that I was looking for the wrong kind of answers, ones too new or too special. Partially the problem is one as old as Aristotle's about tragedy: How can such events give pleasure? The aesthetic problem about Beckett's dramaturgy is no more difficult, and perhaps no different: it still concerns how the people comprising the audience are different from those same people when they are not an audience. Partially the answer has to do with the conventions of the theater: getting rid of the audience is not necessarily a matter of emptying the theater, but of removing the concept and the status of audience.

What is an audience? A theoretical answer to this is not in question now, except to take encouragement from remembering that the audience, as we conceive it, is a fairly recent invention in the history of theater; so its disappearance or transcendence is not unthinkable. One recalls *The Birth of Tragedy*: "An audience of spectators, such as we know it, was unknown to the Greeks" (Anchor Book edition, p. 54). Nietzsche's is the profoundest discussion, to my knowledge, of the problem of audience—and hence, I suppose, of the aesthetics of theater generally. And his profoundest wish was to remove the audience from art, something that must present itself as an attempt to remove art altogether, an experience hardly foreign to us today, however little understood. Whatever philosophical difficulties must be faced, practical solutions are not hard to see. Practically, or conventionally, "audience"—for theater in the period after Shakespeare through, say, the 19th century—means "those present whom the actors ignore," those beyond the fourth wall. Deny that wall—that is, recognize those in attendance—and the audience vanishes. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that if anything is sensibly to be grasped as "modern theater" one of its descriptions would be the various ways in which modern dramatists have denied the wall.

Beckett's way is two-fold. First, while he does not speak to those out there (a possible form of denial) he never lets them forget that those on the stage are acting, and know they are acting. He makes the fact that they are acting one of their constant topics and problems. This is scarcely original. Second, he has his own way of putting the audience in the position of the actors; I mean in the position of the characters. In other theater the audience knows more than any character (for example, they know what happens when he is off stage); or



some character knows more than the audience (for example, what is happening to him off stage). Not that it is a matter merely of entrances and exits—though to have called attention to these as conventions may itself be something of a dramaturgical discovery. It is a matter of our feeling that no one in the place, on the stage or in the house, knows better than anyone else what is happening, no one has a better right to speak than anyone else. Something is happening, something is happening to the actors (I mean the characters). In *Waiting for Godot*: “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” But in *Endgame* there is something more awful, namely the experience of something happening. Near the beginning (p. 13) Hamm asks (and the direction is, “anguished”) “What’s happening, what’s happening?”, and later (p. 32, and again “anguished”) he reiterates the question. It’s a normal question for a blind man, but both times Clov answers: “Something is taking its course.” Near the end (pp. 74–5) Hamm says: “It all happened without me. I don’t know what’s happened.” Then he asks if Clov knows what’s happened, and in his next three small speeches he asks three more times. The concept is thematic, but at this point we can hardly enter a new theme. The suggestion is, partly, that for anything to happen is anguishing because that means the end has not come. But it also suggests that so far as something is happening to us, we are not acting, and if we are not acting, we are not in control; we have moved from the waiting of patience to the waiting of passion. And then anything can happen, in particular the most anguishing thing of all, that we may change. Any misery is better than that, I can always find some attitude toward my misery which exploits it, for the entertainment or enchantment of others, and to my fuller love of myself. But if I change, I am no longer intact; I die to my world. I would rather die.

To the extent the figures up there are not acting, but undergoing something which is taking its course, they are not characters. And we could also say: the words are not spoken by them, to one another; they are occurring to them. It is a play performed not by actors, but by sufferers. Clowns. Beckett has discovered how clowns would talk if they were given the power of speech, and if they couldn’t be slapped any more (nobody has the strength), or trip (they can’t walk), or do prat-falls (they can’t sit). Their words take the falls for them, since they have to fall.

That what is now happening to them is not now happening to

us is our only difference from them—the deepest, the only unbreachable difference there is between two people: that they are two. The only difference, in the end, that counts.

Perhaps the sense of *happening* (vs. *acting*) is an effect of theater generally; and perhaps the point of Method acting is to demonstrate our new appreciation of this effect. I am far from clear about it, and I do not imagine that I have conveyed my experience of it, if it is there, in these poor descriptions. A good test case here is Paul Scofield’s performance of Lear in the Peter Brook production. It shares with other great performances the immediacy, conviction, absorption of actor into character, of technique into expression, that we know how to expect, if rarely expect. But in Scofield the process occurs at a further stage, a place in which technique is not merely absorbed, but in which it seems altogether irrelevant; one does not see how the part can be entered gradually, and improved. One wants to say not that the character we know is embodied for us, but that the performance is about embodiment; it displays not merely the end-points of thought and impulse, but the drama by which impulse and thought find (and lose) their way through the body. Or: it is not merely that the words are so perfectly motivated that they appear to be occurring to the character, but that the style or delivery is itself one of *occurring*: the words do not so much express thought as they represent after-thought, or pre-thought. They are not so much what the character wishes to say as they are what he cannot help saying, the result not of expression but of failed suppression. Whether such a style can function as well in plays which are not themselves about madness and radical dissolution, is a further question. One would not expect Congreve and Shaw to yield to it; Chekhov certainly, and I have seen a performance of *Alceste* in Molière’s *Misanthrope* which could be described this way.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Brook production is relevant to what I have written in another way. It is said to have been inspired by the writing of Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), one of whose chapters is titled “King Lear or Endgame.” I have now read that essay (in the *Evergreen Review*, August–September 1964) and it may be worth mentioning briefly some reactions to work which may appear similar, which is, in some ways, obviously similar, and yet opposed in spirit to what I have wished to suggest. (1) Its momentum is provided by a theory which contrasts the tragic with the grotesque. Not that anything is wrong with theory as such, and even obscure theory can be enlightening. But in Kott’s essay the theory seems too often not merely irrelevant to the lines of the play quoted as evidence, but to violate them, not by overinterpreting them but by muffling them. Whatever the limitations of the New Criticism



Beckett's peculiar value is most evident, to my mind, in his radical sense of the problem developing in our relation to our own words. (Wittgenstein indicates the level of this problem when he expresses dissatisfaction with the idea that we *hear* our own words (cf. *Investigations*, p. 199ff.). This suggests an exercise for the actor: not merely that he not listen to the words he always knew he would be saying, but that he not anticipate, in forward memory as it were, what he is about to say. Improvisation becomes an effort to regain a lost knack of spontaneity; and improvisation can itself become mechanical.) This is a discovery for the theater which goes beyond any obvious solution in given theatrical terms. Brecht calls for new relations between an actor and his role, and between the actor and his audience: theater is to defeat theater. But in Beckett there is no role towards which the actor can maintain intelligence, and he has nothing more to tell his audience than his characters' words convey. Theater becomes the brute metaphysical fact of separateness; damnation lies not in a particular form of theater, but in theatricality as such. If, against that awareness, theater were to defeat theater, then while theater loses, it thereby wins; we have not found our way outside, we have merely extended the walls. —This is what makes one want to say to Beckett: Other writers claim that words are meaningless, that communication is impossible, etc.; but you really mean it, so why do you write? Other playwrights claim that there is no audience, but you really mean it, so why do you write plays? Esslin reports

(and one of the most serious is its lack, or casualness, of theory), its permanent contribution to the activity of literary criticism has been its renewed concentration on the autonomy of the given text. (2) The suggestion that Shakespeare can only be made "our contemporary" by virtue of a particular theory of his work seems to me philosophically disastrous (turning aesthetic theory into political ideology) and to falsify and cheapen what it is which makes certain literature "classic"—the fact that it is *always* our contemporary, though in any age it will turn a different side, and sometimes one very thin, to our immediate gaze. (3) The fact that a period's productions (or readings) of classics will be formed from within the art and sensibility contemporary with that period, is just that—a fact. To argue that it *must* be so is to miss the significance of the fact. It substitutes an ideology of modernity for the ineluctable shifts of consciousness which naturally yield what we will understand as relevantly modern. It seems to me to imply a distrust both of the contemporary and of the classic, to wish to *insure* their relation a priori rather than to determine what, in a given moment of history, the relation, in its complexity, is. Of course productions are events at which various histories of conventions—artistic, economic, political and social—meet; so that productions of operas and symphony concerts and commercial films as well as productions within professional theater, are dragged from contemporary relevance by their forced responsiveness to perceptions and conventions which are themselves unresponsive to live art. What therefore needs to be argued, and fought for, is not that productions become contemporary but that they be freed from the holds which prevent them from being contemporary.

this incident: "When Gessner asked him about the contradiction between his writing and his obvious conviction that language could not convey meaning, Beckett replied, "Que voulez-vous, Monsieur? C'est les mots; on n'a rien d'autre." Esslin's reaction to this continues: "But in fact his use of the dramatic medium shows that he has tried to find means of expression beyond language"—which strikes me as about as useful to say of Beckett as of Tennessee Williams or Mallarmé; and less true of these than of Al Capone, or Werther. I do not know what Gessner thought, but one hopes he knew it was Beckett speaking and knew he hadn't given an answer—or that he had made room for the next question: Why, if there are only words, do you use *any*? Which means: Why talk? To which Beckett's answer might have been: That's what I'd like to know.

Is there a *contradiction* between Beckett's "obvious conviction" about words and his going on using them? One could say: He doesn't use them just *any* way; and even: He doesn't *use* them at all (for example, to promise, to threaten, to pray, to apologize—the things words are used for) or sees how far he can go in not, in not saying more than the words. And one should add that "contradiction" is a good word, useful for describing a particular relation between two statements. Does it name accurately the relation between a conviction and an action which apparently proceeds as if the conviction weren't there? If it did, Beckett's problem, and ours, would be less serious than it is. (Mutually contradictory statements cannot both be true; but a conviction and an action which counters it can both be present.) We *have* to talk, whether we have something to say or not; and the less we want to say and want to hear the more willfully we talk and are subjected to talk. How did Pascal put it? "All the evil in the world comes from our inability to sit quietly in a room." To keep still.

More than once I have had to suppress an impulse to bring in *Ash Wednesday*, and in the end it had better at least be mentioned. The clearest connections, to my reading, are these: "Teach us to sit still"; "Teach us to care and not to care"; "Redeem the time"; "the Word unheard, the Word without a word"; and the Christian ambiguities in the ideas of birth and death, of the exhaustion of spirit and the inability to "turn." The claims are undeniable; but just because the confrontation with Christian writing would perhaps be the final test of the power of Beckett's sensibility (as the confrontation with a Marxian criticism was the initial test of his seriousness), it is too webbed and delicate to be handled quickly. I should hope, how-

ever, that the work I have wished to show in what I have written would seem a necessary preliminary to its description. In particular, the problem I see is this: Both Beckett and Eliot begin with a decisive experience of the truth of *Ecclesiastes*: e.g., the profitlessness of labor, the absoluteness of time. Section I of Eliot's poem is a virtual transcription of this position, including the injunction to "rejoice." But from here Eliot manages, as the poem progresses, to move from the joy of surcease to the joy of surrender; the direction is up. But can it really be *taken*, or does Eliot's assurance rely only on knowing his religion like a book? Eliot's Christianity ought to raise raw the fundamental aesthetic question of the relation of belief to art, since it contains the highest versions of both—where his belief is organizing his art and his art is testing his belief. If the direction Eliot describes can really be described, then Beckett's vision can be encompassed within Christianity. Within it, we could explain why we lack words, and have too many. We could re-understand the sense in which redemption is impossible, and possible: impossible only so long as we live solely in history, in time, so long as we think that an event near 2,000 years ago relieves us of responsibility rather than nails us to it—so long, that is, as we live in magic instead of faith. And we can re-interpret suffering yet again: I had occasion to complain that we take suffering as proof of connection with God; but a sounder theology will take *that* suffering to prove exactly that the connection has not been made, but resisted; for, as Luther's confessor had to remind him, God appears only in love. —But can we really believe all this, or *must* these explanations be given in bad faith, blinding us to what we *do* believe? Beckett tests this because he is the contemporary writer complex and single enough to match with Eliot. I do not mean that Rilke or Stevens or Frost are not large enough; but their worlds do not measure together, or they scrape, where Eliot's and Beckett's eclipse one another. It is not everyone's problem; but it may be anyone's.

Shall we blame Beckett because he cannot keep still? Then blame Hamlet because he cannot keep going? Why won't somebody stop us, or start us? Perhaps we've got something to complain about, and maybe it has to do with our efforts first to create and then to destroy our Gods. Nietzsche said we will have to become Gods ourselves to withstand the consequences of such deeds. Camus said we will never be men until we give up trying to be God. *Que voulez-vous, Monsieur?* Which do you pick? —We hang between.

## VI

### Kierkegaard's

#### ON AUTHORITY AND REVELATION

"I myself perceive only too well," Kierkegaard says in beginning a second Preface to his Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays, "how obvious is the objection and how much there is in it, against writing such a big book dealing in a certain sense with Magister Adler." His first answer to this objection is just that the book is "about" Adler only in a certain sense, the sense, namely, in which he is a Phenomenon, a transparence through which the age is caught. But that is scarcely a serious answer, because what the objection must mean is: Why use the man Adler in this way? And Kierkegaard has an answer to this as well: it enabled him to accomplish something which "perhaps it was important for our age that [I] should accomplish and which could be accomplished in no other way." This is not a moral defense for his treatment; it does not, for example, undertake to show that an action which on the surface, or viewed one way, appears callous or wanton, is nevertheless justified or anyway excusable. Kierkegaard goes on to offer what looks like an aesthetic defense of his treatment of Adler—"without him [I] could not have given my presentation the liveliness and the ironical tension it now has." This moral shock is succeeded by another as we realize that the presentation in question is not offered for its literary merit, but for its value as a case study; it is the justifi-

This book, *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler, or a Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays*, was translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955). All references are to this edition.