

SAMUEL BECKETT: THE INTELLECUTAL CLOWN

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the "absurdity" of Beckett's absurd theatre. It examines his technique and trend of thought and analyses his conception of the modern hero and the role he plays in modern society. A Beckettian hero is a sort of clown who depends on words and gestures to pass the time. So we meet with these forms of action in Beckett's theatre: circus clownery, music-hall cross-talk and dramatic mime. The hero fills up the time by performing these gestures without entertaining an audience; his only aim is to get rid of a feeling of boredom. It is true that he is acting and that he knows he is acting; but the fact remains that he is acting for himself.

Beckett uses a broken dialogue to show the disintegration of the language; it is disjunctive, circular, contradictory and irrelevant. This reflects the plight of the modern artist. Beckett's heroes cannot bear silence, despite the confusion and misunderstanding their talk may lead to. For while talking they sustain the illusion of existence.

In Beckett's drama there is a rich vein of comedy; yet this is a humour that treads on the brink of tears, while his tragedy reveals the varied riches of comedy.

To Beckett Man is a brute and a savage and a disgusting animal. So Beckett and Swift have a lot in common: their fondness of macabre and grotesque humour, their indulgence in verbal wit, their skill in ridicule and anti-climax and their disrespect for and mockery of things sacred.

Beckett has often been compared with Shakespeare for their use of the grotesque. They offer a grotesque portrayal of life, but the despair we feel in Beckett has no place in Shakespeare's drama. While Shakespeare is preoccupied with life, Beckett has been possessed with death or rather with death-in-life.

Beckett's drama consists of anti-plays. They have no conventional plots. Orthodox drama is not to be expected; no characterization or dramatic structure is there. No rational discourse arises between one character and another. His drama is thrifty and effective in gesture and action.

Beckett's success as a dramatist lies in his technique rather than in the 'message' he is expected to convey.

Like the other absurdists he sees man as an alien in a repulsive world. Man has lost his identity. Life has no purpose or meaning; there is only nothingness.

Still Beckett's theatre is a comic one saved from black despair by its humorous situations and exchanges. That is why some critics describe him as an intellectual clown, a laughter maker and a constructor of clever and cruel riddles. His laughter is mingled with bitterness at the decline of the Western Civilization.

Beckett is very selective; he concentrates on a few prominent themes. He just tries to chart a certain zone in the individual neglected or left out by the artist. For Beckett what *cannot* be expressed is more important than what can be expressed.

He is deeply pessimistic about literature not about life. His work may serve as a step towards a new literature, free from any illusion or absurdity and shedding more light on humanity at large.

Beckett has enjoyed great popularity as an Absurdist playwright. But on examining his plays we can easily feel his unique approach in theme and technique. His stage-settings are barren and empty. His theatre is a bankrupt one where the audience is an accomplice and knows as much or even more than the actor does. Such a theatre reflects the absurdity, cruelty and ridiculousness of a meaningless life. Man has turned to be an actor in a cosmic farce.

Beckett's technique shows that the theatre has come a full circle since Ibsen and the other 19th Century playwrights. Life is no more a well-made play; it is angular, startling, unmotivated and irreverent.

Man has been deprived of his personal freedom except "the freedom of the slave to crawl east along the deck of a boat travelling west" (Coe, 1964:18).

In Beckett's theatre action is cut down to a minimum and is carried out boringly and monotonously to reflect our daily mechanical routine. This is well illustrated in *Happy Days* where Minnie fills her day by brushing her teeth, painting her lips, adjusting her hat, putting on and taking off her glasses. *Endgame* opens with some repetitive gestures from Clov, mainly moving the ladder about the stage. These gestures reveal a lot about the theme of the play which is "Old game lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing" (Beckett, *Endgame*, 1958:51). In *Waiting for Godot* dramatic action is contained in wasting, pining and fading through waiting. It consists of a series of stops and starts where communication is difficult.

Sometimes the action on Beckett's stage turns to cruelty and persecution, or it may be gratuitous. Yet Beckett's people know that they are actors and they act what they do not believe in. They may even show a sense of disgust at what they are doing. Everything in the plays is running down from energy to exhaustion, from life consciousness and design to a final dead level of inanimate chaos. This extends to human powers which are shown as increasingly maimed, narrowed, degraded; the characters' memories, too, have blurred.

The spectator may feel sick at Beckett's exhibition of man as a two-legged muck-heap: fasting, urinating, nose-picking, eructing and generally stinking. These run-down people are emotionally fragmented and confused. They flicker from pain to boredom, from rage to fear. Suicide is a constant temptation. There is no development of conflict because of the lack of purpose in the characters. But neither tragic catastrophe nor comic cure is offered as alternatives by which man can triumph over his situation as he has neither the urge nor the ability to do so.

Beckett does not pretend to tell a story, nor does he suggest to represent reality; he just uses stage action for stage metaphor. And it is because the characters have nothing else to do that they play.

What does the actor do in a Beckettian play? The answer is simple enough: he must act. He has to walk in and out and fill the time in between. He can fill that time by talking or by saying nothing. The characters in Beckett's theatre live in reality and in unreality at the same time. In *Endgame* (1958:52) Hamm says: "Since that is the way we are playing it... (he unfolds handkerchief)... let's play it that way... and speak no more about it". In *Happy Days* (1970:10) Winnie plays her role wearily and scornfully: "Begin, Winnie. (pause). Begin your day, Winnie".

At the same time we feel that the characters are vague and mysterious. The stage directions do not provide us with any information about them. Still they all have something in common: resignation, rebellious humour and seditious irony. They are strikingly simple without being mechanical. They do not change; they do not develop as they belong to a theatre that is largely static. So there is the risk that the play might become immobile, with no basic situation that justifies the play's very existence. But Beckett's plays have been saved through certain devices borrowed from the circus and the music hall, which provide real action on the stage.

In Beckett's theatre we notice that dramatic dialogue has lost one or more of its designated dimensions. The characters can speak to each other without communicating anything, for the experience has become incommunicable. Language is no more used as a means of influence, since

lack of purpose is a vital characteristic of the modern situation. The dramatic language of the characters lacks expression, communication and reciprocal influence. The characters are not interested in individual topics and so we notice a shift of subjects and no theme is brought to a natural conclusion. The dialogue is abstract because there is no motivation. It betrays the separation of the characters from their various situations and, along with the short speeches, it reveals a dissolution of the relationship between speech and speaker. A step further is taken when the speaker is separated from his own words. As all purpose is absent from their conduct, the characters do not need language. If they continue to speak, it is just to convince themselves that they are alive. So talk is the routine par excellence. It is the only inalienable human activity. "What is there to keep me here?" Clov asks. Hamm answers, "The dialogue". Gogo in *Waiting for Godot* says, "We are incapable of keeping silent". Winnie in *Happy Days* has just one major need: to talk: "There is little one can speak of. One speaks of it all. All one can".

Cross-talk which is typical of music-hall is to be found in abundance in all Beckett's plays, especially in *Waiting for Godot*. Here is an example (1965:18):

Estragon: And what did he reply?

Vladimir: That he would have to think it over.

Estragon: In the quiet of his home.

Vladimir: Consult his family.

Estragon :His friends.

Vladimir: His agents.

Estragon: His correspondents.

Vladimir: His books.

Estragon: His bank account.

Beckett sometimes uses a broken dialogue to show the disintegration of language. At other times the dialogues may turn into a monologue just to keep one company. In *Endgame* (1958:45) Hamm exclaims: "... babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two,

three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark”.

The language is meant to reflect the individual self in an attempt to define itself and its relations with other selves. Beckett's characters talk with desperate fervour. They rely heavily on language. This is clear in the case of Krapp's records, of Henry who talks incessantly in *Embers*, of Winnie who is a non-stop chatter-box in *Happy Days*. All these characters are obsessed with talk. But the dialogue is disjunctive, circular, contradictory and irrelevant.

Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition. (Beckett, 1959:28).

So we see that there are no positive statements in the utterances of Beckett's characters, which betrays their awkward situation in a meaningless and empty world:

There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. (Esslin, 1968:17).

This is the major problem with most of Beckett's heroes: yearning for silence, the characters are compelled to talk. They cannot bear silence, despite the confusion and the misunderstandings their talk may lead to. For as long as they talk, they can sustain the illusion of existence: "I speak, therefore I am". Talk is a great deadener and helps to numb the pain of existence. To be silent would be to admit the existence of the void, the unknowable. So the characters continue to talk, hoping to keep the fatal admission at bay. It follows that the silent characters have abandoned the human function of communication and become alienated within society.

It is now obvious that language has a definite role: to convey the sense of boredom, or to show the pointless existence of the characters. In *Waiting for Godot* (1968:69) Estragon says to Vladimir, "We always find something, eh' Didi, to give us the impression we exist? .. We are bored. Now,

don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it".

The same words are used again and again to reflect the boredom that prevails throughout *Waiting for Godot*: (1968).

Estragon: Off we go again...

Vladimir: It wasn't you came yesterday?

.

Vladimir: Tell him you saw us.

(End of Act I)

Vladimir: Off we go again.

.

Vladimir: It was you came yesterday.

.

Vladimir: Tell him you saw me and that. .. you saw me. ..

(End of Act II)

The same words may be echoed by the different characters with the change of a few words. Here is a good illustration from *Endgame* (1958:29):

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.

Hamm: Naturally.

Clov: Then I'll leave you.

Hamm: You can't leave us.

Clov: Then I shan't leave you. ..

Another example from *Waiting for Godot* (1965:84) shows Beckett's skill at repetition, economy of language and the reshuffling of the same words and phrases. Here we listen to Estragon and Vladimir talking about Pozzo who is prostrate on the ground:

Pozzo: Help.

Vladimir: What about helping him?

Estragon: What does he want?

Vladimir: He wants to get up.

Estragon: Then why doesn't he?

Vladimir: He wants us to help him to get up.

Estragon: Then why don't we? What are we waiting for?

Beckett's prose is pure and sober; all excesses are rejected; economy is almost an obsession; language is disciplined and refined. The size of a Beckett play or novel has been cut down to a few pages. Beckett's vocabulary is rich — typical of Irish writers — yet he exercises just a thin fraction of it.

Beckett's plays question so many paradoxical topics: temporality, evanescence, existence, change, stability, necessity, absurdity, renovation, destruction, lack of communication and uncertainty. Thus, they form one long journey in search for reality. They are a projection of fear, anxiety, deadness, heaviness, hopelessness and deep depression. They are dramatic statements of the human predicament. Beckett tries to explore the human soul, to answer such questions as: Who am I? Does "I" mean anything? At the same time he betrays a sense of despair, mystery and bewilderment as he examines the human condition and finds it meaningless, empty and uncertain. Guicharnand (1961:215) states that for Beckett life is "no more than the comedy of life, no more than an attempt to play at living, no more than an embryonic farce".

Beckett's drama is an illustration of man's various attempts to fill life's emptiness. A Beckett hero is a sort of clown who does his best to fill life's emptiness by performing certain gestures of uttering some disconnected words and phrases without having in mind the intention of entertaining an audience. His only aim is to get rid of a feeling of boredom. It is true that he is acting and that he knows he is acting, but the fact remains that he is acting for himself. Thus one meets with unusual forms of action in Beckett's theatre: circus clownery, music-hall cross — talk, and dramatic mime. In the radio plays sound fills auricular space in much the same way as action fills visual space in the stage plays. The circus games are most evident in *Waiting for Godot*. Estragon pulls at his boots, lets his trousers drop about his feet, drops off to sleep. Vladimir walks with his legs apart.

They both behave in a clumsy way, argue, kiss, smell one another and retreat in disgust. They are troubled with fleas, use insecticide powder, wear bowler hats, etc.

Passing the time is thus a major problem that confronts the characters in Beckett's plays. So all they can do is to play games or wait for something or somebody or an event. In waiting they experience the passing of time and the illusory change as everything is the same.

Pozzo bursts out in *Waiting for Godot* (1965:89):

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? It's abominable. When. When. One day, is that not enough for you? one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we are born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

Beckett stresses the tragic nature of time. Tragedy for him is the statement of expiation, the expiation of the original sin, the sin of having been born. He believes that there is no escape from the hours and days and that life is the desert of loneliness and recrimination.

In *Waiting for Godot* (1965:11), the characters try to repent the original sin:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir: Oh. .. (He reflects) we couldn't have to go into the details.

Estragon: Our being born.

This sense of guilt and disgust at the aimless and empty life the characters are leading is reflected again in that sense of discontinuity between one day and its successor. Here is an example from *Endgame* (1958:32):

Hamm: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

Clov: (Violently) That means that bloody awful day, long ago before this bloody awful day.

Ultimately the concept of time dissolves completely. Both past and present are uncertain.

One of the important themes that inspire Beckett's writing is a negative awareness of the Deity and mockery of theology. In *Happy Days* (1970:24) Winnie asks: "How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poor ones?" In *Murphy* (1938:34) Beckett refers to the world as "a mess of chaos made through an imperfect sense of humour". With the exception of *Waiting for Godot*, where we can find a religious interpretation, we can sense that hostile attitude to religious beliefs and to the Almighty. Beckett may even attribute wanton cruelty to God Himself. God is conceived as the tyrant that torments Beckett's later heroes. Christ is portrayed as the suffering Jesus rather than the Saviour. Salvation is a fairy tale. Man is born to suffer and die. Life is almost an endless "pensum". Man even longs to be gone.

In Beckett's drama there is a rich vein of comedy: yet his is a humour that treads on the brink of tears while his tragedy reveals the varied riches of comedy. In *Endgame* we enjoy the comedy in the pathetic whisperings of Hamm's legless parents as they beg for their biscuits from their dustbins. They even enjoy their very predicament (*Endgame*, 1958:20

Nagg: Do you remember when we crashed on our tandem and
lost our shanks?

(They laugh heartily)...

Nell: (Without lowering her voice) Nothing is funnier than un-
happiness. I grant you that.

We often meet with this sustained use of misery and dejection as sources of comedy in most of Beckett's works. Physical handicaps of every kind are presented in comic terms by the sufferers themselves. In *All That Fall* (1977:31,32) Dan Rooney addresses his wife:

Well! Did you ever know me to be well? The day you met me I
should have been in bed. The day you proposed to me the doc-
tors gave me up... The night you married me they came for me

with an ambulance. You have not forgotten that, I suppose (Pause). No, I cannot be said to be well. But I am no worse. Indeed I am better than I was. The loss of my sight was a great fillip. If I could go deaf and dumb I might pant on to be a hundred.

Beckett's plays portray man as a brute and a pig and a disgusting animal. Beckett uses always the symbol of excrement which reminds us of Swift. In fact, they have quite a lot in common: their fondness of the macabre and of the grotesque, their indulgence in verbal wit, their skill in ridicule and anti-climax, and their disrespect for and mockery of things sacred. They are both Irish, and Beckett's Irish origin cannot be easily overlooked in studying his works. That is why Vivian Mercier in his book *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1972-75,6) studies the playwright's works against the Gaelic literary heritage:

We have the peculiar case here of an Anglo-Irish man, who, like Swift, seems to fit comfortably into the Gaelic tradition, yet has almost no conscious awareness of what the tradition is. He might be described as in the Gaelic tradition but not of it.

On the other hand, he has often been compared with Shakespeare in the skilful use of the grotesque. Both offer a more or less grotesque portrayal of life, where God is replaced by an absurd automaton that is hostile and blind towards mankind. But the despair we do feel in Beckett has no place in Shakespeare's drama. While Shakespeare is preoccupied with life, Beckett has been obsessed with death or rather with death-in-life. He believes that man can best be seen when his passions are largely dead. In this state he can look into man's essential nature stark naked.

Beckett's drama consists of anti-plays. They have no conventional plots. Orthodox drama is not to be expected; no characterization or dramatic construction is there. No rational discourse arises between one character and another. When two characters start to discuss something and they warm up, they soon cool down, become indifferent and change the subject before they reach a definite conclusion. There is no point then in

looking for intellectual analysis. Beckett presents an experience not an argument, truth not a statement. At the same time he draws on every source at the disposal of the dramatist: words, movements, costumes, scenery, sound effect and lighting. C. Bandman, writing in *San Quentin News*, described a performance of *Godot* at the California State Penitentiary in the following words:

It was an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expects each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors. It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held out no specific hope (Reid, 1969:30)

Beckett has often said that his plays are very simple; the difficulties are of the audience's making. As Prof. Kenner (Reid, 1969:33) remarked of *Endgame*, "The play contains whatever ideas we discern inside it; no idea contains the play".

George Devine (Reid, 1969:33) writes:

To approach Beckett openly we have to give up asking "What is it meant to mean?" With the kind of panic which leads to rejection or scorn (Sic). His plays are a series of static situations.

In a letter to Alan Scheinder, dated August, 1957, Beckett Wrote:

My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, *nec tecum nec sine te*, in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could (Reid, 1969:33)

Beckett's success as a dramatist lies in his technique rather than in the 'message' he is expected to convey. This is a drama of discovery and revelation, a drama meant to be watched or listened to and in which dialogue is no longer all important. He has not written his plays in accordance with

any theory and he belongs to no school. The theatre for him is a means of distraction and liberation. Still he has something in common with the Absurdist who are preoccupied with man's predicament: Camus, Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter and Genet. They all see man as an alien in a repulsive world. Man has lost his identity. Life has no purpose or meaning; there is only nothingness. The whole world is irrational; it is not fit for Man to live in; and so Man is waiting for death in this irrational world; yet he is afraid of the unknown. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon realize that their pointless existence should end one way or another, but their efforts to commit suicide are sordidly comic. Man's lot in this pointless life is bleak and dreary; the moments of grotesque humour are intended to intensify the predicament of modern man. Man's life is a slow burial that begins with birth. This is clear in Beckett's *Happy Days* where all the characters we meet with are either maimed, diseased, crippled or tortured. There are 'corpses' everywhere.

Still Beckett's theatre is a comic theatre saved from black despair by its humorous situations and exchanges. That explains why some critics describe Beckett as an intellectual clown, a laughter maker and a constructor of clever and cruel riddles. He laughs at our follies, at the way we cling to life, the vacuum we live in, the boredom, the monotony of existence and the inertia we have dropped into.

Beckett simply means to say that life is really awful and that we know it. Yet we keep at it, trying to forget the ghastly fact by hoping for somebody to come or for the night to fall or for a little joke to kill the time. When we become aware of what we are doing, we feel the folly of what we are doing and still we insist on going on living, most unwilling to put an end to this farce. This is obvious in the words of Nell in *Endgame* (1958:20):

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness... Yes, yes it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it is like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we laugh no more.

Beckett sees the decline of Western civilization as well-deserved and inevitable. His laughter is mingled with bitterness. For him there is neither meaning nor substance in Western civilization; it moves towards death in a grotesque way. He has reduced solemn morality to burlesque. He aims at the demolition of old mythologies, the negation of the myth, the representation of a dehumanized and senseless world where noble ideals have lost their meaning and their value, and where religion, science and art are no more than material for farce.

Beckett confines his interest within a very narrow range. He is very selective and concentrates on a few prominent themes. Even his heroes are mere recreations of their predecessors. There is also that recurrence of the same situations, the same images, the same devices, the same phrases which has raised controversial criticism. But Beckett answers by saying that the only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent.

Beckett never means to 'imitate' life as we know it. He just tries to chart a certain zone in the individual neglected or left out by the artist. That is why his drama is a non-specific drama based on impact rather than argument. He does not write about something; it is that something itself. *Waiting for Godot* is not about Godot or about waiting; it is waiting and ignorance and impotence and boredom presented on the stage. And as impotence leads to no action, so there is no conflict. Beckett's art is of entanglement. He cannot detach himself from what he is describing: ignorance or impotence. His world has no outside. He once said, "It is impossible for me to talk about my writing because I am working in the dark. It would be like an insect leaving his cocoon. I can only estimate my work from within".

This means that he is expressing his own feeling and his own life, not the lives of others. That life is no more than the distance between birth and death. This reminds us of the words of Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* (1965:90): "Down in the hole, lingeringly the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old".

In the same play (1965:91) Vladimir says:

The hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which-how shall I say-which may at first sight seem reasonable until they become a habit. ... Habit is a great deadener.

Beckett's work has a unity resulting from a consistency of approach from one novel to another and from one play to the next. While the novels move towards total emptiness in which plot, character and language end in nothingness, his drama takes the same road. The number of characters is cut down to a minimum; plot disappears and the dialogue dwindles into a monologue. He is on the verge of annihilating literature altogether, through immolating and dismantling it, as if for Beckett, what *cannot* be expressed is more important than what can be expressed. This may lead to the utter destruction of the whole works of Beckett as they will sound to be out of time. But Beckett is deeply pessimistic about literature, not about life itself. For him literature cannot express ideas that may serve humanity. It is a failure because the human condition it reflects willy-nilly is a failure. Still his works may serve as a step towards a new literature, free from any illusions or absurdities and shedding more light on humanity at large.

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