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Samuel Beckett : Drama as philosophical endgame ?

“No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we”: *Endgame* According to Adorno

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"No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we": *Endgame* According to Adorno

Philippe Birgy

- 1 Adorno's essay "Trying to Understand Endgame" deals with the limits of rational understanding. According to the philosopher, explaining the unexplainable was more or less the project of the Enlightenment. It rested on the belief that all phenomena could be neatly circumscribed as a series of objects lending themselves to inquiry and that the knowledge thus obtained would constantly reinforce one's sense of mastery over them. In the process, pure reason had to sever itself from nature and forcefully dispel the obscurity around it in order to assert itself, erasing in the process the many shades of blackness and grayness that lay out there, the many nuances that were so important to Beckett. In other words, a great deal was thus left in ignorance since the world was thereby reduced to what could be rationally thought about it:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth radiates under the sign of triumphant calamity (Adorno 2002, 1).

- 2 This "calamity" or "disaster" (an alternative translation of the German term) is obviously a reference to a historical predicament. The Second World War was a threshold in modernity, and in Adorno's work, the name "Auschwitz" stands as a metonymy for this threshold. It designates the crumbling of the whole edifice of knowledge predicated upon reason that had been erected throughout the past centuries. By the same token, it also precluded any artistic project that aimed at aesthetic perfection. Consequently, "Understanding *Endgame*" would be playing into the hands of the Enlightenment thinkers—that we all are, somehow. It would just be the same recipe for "disaster".
- 3 On the face of it, these very general notions, which may be derived from Adorno's more theoretical works, *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, seem to justify the systematic rejection of any philosophical discourse on Beckett's play. They hold that the

project of the Enlightenment has encountered a major setback with the great upsurge of irrationality of the Second World War which has forced us to reconsider its "grand narrative". Or so reads the vulgarized digest of Adorno's argumentation, as exposed in these theoretical pieces of work. And indeed there is much, in Adorno's essay "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" that reminds us of these general statements.¹ It must be noted that adopting that premise brings us into alignment with a supposedly coherent post-modern strand of criticism vaguely understood as the practice of universal suspicion towards "meta-narratives" Yet Adorno and Hockheimer's point in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* is that it is rationality itself, the triumph of reason, which is irrational. And Clov and Hamm seem to bring grist to Adorno's mill when they try to comment on their own predicament:

CLOV (sadly): No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we.

HAMM: We do what we can.

CLOV: We shouldn't. (Pause.)

HAMM: You're a bit of all right, aren't you?

CLOV: A smithereen. (Pause.)

HAMM: This is slow work. (11)

- 4 Certainly, the explicit content of their exchange is the admission of their own senselessness. But insofar as theatricality is concerned, the flaw that evidently undermines the characters' attempt at reasoning, the inconclusiveness of their exchange of lines, is in inverse proportion to their talent for repartee. As Adorno puts it, "The drama attends carefully to what kind of sentence might follow another. Given the accessible spontaneity of such questions, the absurdity of content is all the more strongly felt" (Adorno 1982, 140). Idiomatism seems to be the rule of their verbal exchange. The lines, when added up, do not constitute any sort of argument. Hamm and Clov are "empty personae through which the world truly can only resonate". What remains of the mind, which "originated in mimesis" is "only ridiculous imitation" so that the characters react "behaviouristically" (Adorno 1982, 128). It is the "universal law of clichés"² which applies, that is: the fossilization of language into a culture that after having been turned into a commodity, has eventually become residual. The protagonists' dialogue is indeed a series of conventional phrases, one programmatically calling for the other, a play on language that valorizes the letter rather than the meaning, yet one whose ceaseless rebounding produces puzzling results. And these in turn inevitably foster the temptation to interpret them.

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There's no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity.

HAMM: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

CLOV: Then she hasn't forgotten us.

HAMM: But you say there is none. (10)

- 5 Here, the only function of Clov's first rejoinder seems to be the invalidation of the preceding statement. After which he retreats with a *caveat* which substantially reduces the bearing of what he has just affirmed. For his part, Hamm eloquently retorts with the empirical evidence of tangible physicality. But the short list of body parts and functions he cites as examples is prolonged by the vaguer and more aesthetic "bloom" and eventually the very abstract "ideals." So that, implicitly, these notions are set on the same plane as the biological organs. And as these "ideals" materialize, they necessarily lose much of their notional or conceptual tenor. After all, the artistic idiom is supposed to

supply a more visceral expression of whatever cannot be set out in plain and accurate technical language, so as to make it more palpable. According to common sense, Art supplements the language of Science, allowing Man to complete his exploration of the world. But in Hamm's answer, the spirituality of "bloom" and "ideals" has evaporated and there is not much left of this enterprise of clarification. Besides, the seemingly optimistic tone of Hamm aimed at relativizing and correcting Clov's affirmation eventually becomes a dysphoric assessment of bodily decay, although the tone remains celebratory, deepening the gap between form and content.

All content of subjectivity, which necessarily hypostatizes itself, is trace and shadow of the world, from which it withdraws in order not to serve that semblance and conformity the world demands (Adorno 1982, 127).

- 6 Eventually, in the two last lines of the excerpt quoted above, contradiction closes upon itself at both ends, so to speak, in the sense that the antithetical formulations of the characters are both negations of the respective statements they have so learnedly pronounced before.

The logical figure of the absurd, which makes the claim of stringency for stringency's contradictory opposite, denies every context of meaning apparently guaranteed by logic, in order to prove logic's own absurdity. (Adorno 1982, 141)

- 7 The possibility of meaningful statements fleetingly becomes a subject of comedy, but the fun is not much fun.

Psychoanalysis explains clownish humor as a regression back to a primordial ontogenetic level, and Beckett's regressive play descends to that level. But the laughter it inspires ought to suffocate the laughter. That is what happened to humour after it became—as an aesthetic medium—obsolete, repulsive, devoid of any canon of what can be laughed at; without any place for reconciliation, where one could laugh. (Adorno 1982, 134)

- 8 Again, in the following series of lines, a distinction is made between meaning and interpretation:

HAMM: Clov!

CLOV (impatiently): What is it?

HAMM: We're not beginning to... to... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!

HAMM: I wonder. (Pause.) Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. (Voice of rational being.) Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at! (Clov starts, drops the telescope and begins to scratch his belly with both hands. Normal voice.) And without going so far as that, we ourselves... (with emotion)...we ourselves... at certain moments... (Vehemently.) To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing! (22)

- 9 Hamm cannot go as far as positing an interpreter who would regulate and impart significance to his verbal exchanges with Clov. Such a return to rationality cannot be conceived of, for it would constitute a future, and that is definitely far too presumptuous and frightening for the character. But at least he may entertain the possibility that their own words might just have some immanent meaning, that is: some significance in themselves *in spite of* their apparent platitude and inanity for those who utter them. The evocation of that second possibility seems enough to comfort Hamm.

- 10 As for the hypothesis that a "rational being" might decipher their gibberish, thus conferring meaning on it, that is surely a flight of fancy, and it is treated in the parodic

mode, parody being, according to E. Angel-Perez and A. Poulain, one of the only available options if one wants to "reinstatate the concepts of the humanistic world of yore" (119).

11 Now, for Adorno, if an updated humanistic project may still be envisaged, it must be redesigned from the ground up. One can definitely not resume the enterprise of clarification and exhaustive description of the universe that safely dissociated the knowing subject from the known world. Or else, it must certainly be a joke. Already, in the preceding quote, the brief laughter of Hamm is dissociated from any idea of enjoyment or exultation, not to mention the plenitude of happiness. Hamm's laughter resembles the compulsory and self-serving "fun" of anomic societies. "[E]ven the remaining trace of silly, sophistic rationality is wiped away. The only comical thing remaining is that along with the sense of the punchline, comedy itself has evaporated" (Adorno 1982, 135).

12 As we have repeatedly stressed, the whole Enlightenment enterprise was disastrous, according to Adorno, because its triumph was achieved at the cost of our separation from the natural world. Our scientific detachment has excluded us from it. And, having alienated ourselves from Nature, the latter escaped us even more, becoming in the process a source of fears and anxieties.

13 Certainly, this description connects well with the formulae of despair or insignificance which are brandished triumphantly by Hamm and Clov, with their insistence that there must be nothing outside because whatever appears on the horizon is a threat, their affirmation that the worst is the best, and that, entrenched as they are and secured against any irruption of nature, hope would be dangerous.

CLOV (anguished, scratching himself): I have a flea!

HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas?

CLOV: On me there's one. (Scratching.) Unless it's a crab louse.

HAMM (very perturbed): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God! (22)

14 The shortened line of reasoning that Hamm offers as a justification for the extermination of the flea ("Humanity might start from there...") does not explain why he takes it upon himself to prevent the development of natural life. It is soon contradicted by another exchange, where Clov has appropriated his master's argument ("A potential creator?") while Hamm seems to have renounced it. Yet again he exposes a logical counter-argument which proves equally faulty and leaves Clov's proposition unaltered ("And if he doesn't...").

Let's see. (He moves the telescope.) Nothing... nothing... good... good... nothing...

goo— (He starts, lowers the telescope, examines it, turns it again on the without.

Pause.) Bad luck to it!

HAMM: More complications! (Clov gets down.) Not an underplot, I trust. (Clov moves ladder nearer window, gets up on it, turns telescope on the without.)

CLOV (dismayed): Looks like a small boy!

HAMM (sarcastic): A small... boy!

CLOV: I'll go and see. (He gets down, drops the telescope, goes towards door, turns.)

I'll take the gaff. (He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.)

HAMM: No! (Clov halts.)

CLOV: No? A potential procreator?

HAMM: If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't... (Pause.)

CLOV: You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing? (Pause.) (46)

15 On the one hand, as Adorno notes, such permutations prevent us from grasping Hamm and Clov as individuals but rather encourage us to view them as the parts of a same

dramatic entity. "Even the outlines of Hamm and Clov are one line, they are denied the individuation of a tidily independent monad. They cannot live without each other" (Adorno 1982, 144).

- 16 On the other hand, the anthropomorphic illusion of independent characters is dispelled, the coherence and integrity of the individual atomized into isolated repartees. The only observable line that circumscribes a locus of identity is the contour of the body which is neither the seat of organized thoughts nor the site of intentional action.

For the time being, the historical crisis of the individual runs up against the single biological being, its arena. The succession of situations in Beckett, gliding along without resistance from individuals, thus ends with those obstinate bodies which have regressed. (Adorno 1982, 134)

- 17 It must be added that the said bodies, identifiable as a conglomerate of matter, a functional system of organ or machinery, are in a process of decay, their internal connections partly dismantled.

As soon as the subject is no longer doubtlessly self-identical, no longer a closed structure of meaning, the line of demarcation with the exterior becomes blurred, and the situations of inwardness become at the same time a physical one. (Adorno 1982, 129)

- 18 Of course, whether the characters can be said to comment "explicitly" or "deliberately" on their predicament, once we have interpreted their speech through the lens of some philosophical system, is mere psychologizing. As a general rule, ascribing any measure of deliberation to characters is certainly a dubious critical move. But crediting the play or the author with any illustrative intention is even more suspicious for it would either imply a case of prophetic or intuitive reconstitution of Beckett's line of thought (by Adorno, in this case), or else two concurrent formulations of the same condition of the world.³ However, Adorno insists that Beckett's theatre is not the reconstitution of a line of thought. Any attempt at having the characters or the play as a whole expose or enact the beliefs of the author would not satisfy Adorno's conditions for a genuinely critical literature.

- 19 Tentatively acknowledging his debt to Hegel, the philosopher practices a form of dialectic which refutes the secondary, purely illustrative, nature of the example and argues that it is not the playwright's role to make a stand. The artwork must mimetically conform to and confuse itself with what it is about, what it "presents"⁴ to the spectator. For it is only by being like what it imitates that art can object to it.

- 20 Those who find fault with the vulgarized form of anti-foundationalism which is said to serve as a culture in postwar Europe, may indeed conclude that *Endgame* exactly exposes the untenable consequences of a hypothetical disappearance of meaning in a supposedly post-modern regime where anything goes, where one thing is just as good as another, where nothing holds and there is nothing to choose from, because nothing has any worth. Consequently, it is all the same, it is all one, it is worthless.⁵ Again, the characters' words, or lack of them, seem to reflect that post-war condition:

HAMM (violently): Wait till you're spoken to! (Normal voice.) All is... all is... all is what? (Violently.) All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards Hamm.) Corpsed. (Pause.) Well? Content?

HAMM: Look at the sea.

CLOV: It's the same. (20)

- 21 Now, the absurdity of generalization is certainly enacted in such passages of the play, but it is impossible to tell whether the scene disqualifies it as an untenable premise or confirms the impossibility of such generalizations. If anyone had the final word on the state of the universe, that word would be "corpsed". But Clov's comment is "just a moment" in a dynamic theatrical sequence. His histrionic behaviour is plainly a parody of scientific observation, involving deduction and induction. After scrutinizing the objects that constitute the external world, he pretends to derive a universal statement from this study. Yet the rhetorical function of his answer is apparent from his preoccupation with Hamm's reaction ("Well? Content?"). Indeed, Hamm does not rest content. And his unrest precisely manifests what remains of life within him. And the same is also true of his companion. Conversely, content or contentedness would precisely describe that quality of the objects whose life has been extinguished. As for the rest, observation and deduction are just a variation, a phase or phrase in a composition that spans a wider range of tones and intensities. Hamm presses on with his questions, and Clov's affirmation on similitude or identity proves inconclusive for it relies on comparison. And comparison requires a reference point to assess and measure the resemblance between one thing and another and eventually prove them to be the same: it calls for a second term which is conspicuously absent in the passage.
- 22 All in all, Clov's and Hamm's pessimism is only raised by the force of a solipsistic enthusiasm.⁶ But mostly, *Endgame* is nothing but that presentation of the habitual. The situations that Beckett dramatizes do not detract or add anything to the presentation of a modern condition, and least of all do they comment upon such a state of things. It may be that Beckett pushes the situation to its reasonable "conclusion", which is that it is inconclusive. Perhaps he even does it with a measure of exaggeration. But mostly, the playwright lets the situation speak for itself. Yet in the final analysis, there is more to it than strict presentation because this *mimesis* appears to us as untenable, it compromises, unsettles and harms what it presents. For Adorno insists on the necessity of a commitment to the world in the artistic process. This commitment cannot assume the form of a didactic or expository discourse—the illustration or dramatization of an idea. Neither can art subscribe to the dictates of realism, the "pure" or "accurate" representation of reality. For in both cases, the artist would impose an interpretative order on reality. Yet if Art consequently dissociates itself from reality and exists for its own sake, then what remains of its commitment? Art, then, is unavoidably caught in this double bind (Adorno 1980).
- 23 The historicist hypothesis from which we started, that of a breaking point which would make it impossible to narrate a story after the Second World War does not summarize the practical import of Adorno's approach. The philosopher recommends a method which is far removed from any generalization based on the systematic application of a theory. It equally denies that Beckett's play might have any illustrative function and refutes the so-called antinomy between theory and practice. The elements of Hegelian dialectics that still obtain in Adorno's line of thought imply quite precisely that a particular example never ceases to be an example just because it exemplifies something else: its exemplary nature belongs with it. This singularity may be understood as a postmodern trait in the sense that it posits an irreducible pluralism, a pure difference that does not lend itself to any of the categorizations induced by language. Thus it does not allow any game of substitution. Indeed, partial objects in *Endgame* blatantly fail to replace what they stand for. The unfinished toy-dog fulfils no function as a substitute. The same comment applies

to the last child which could presumably symbolize a hope for mankind, or even the last flea or the last rat. The seeds that have not sprouted are also offered as experimental proof that no renewal is possible. In all these cases, the possibility of generalizing a particular experience to a whole class of comparable objects remains unconvincing.

- 24 We may also hear in the characters' absurd retorts the avowal that such generalizations do not tell us anything about the world ("All is, all is..."), and that what is iterated and repeats itself is language, exclusively. It is always the same story, the same play that plays itself out. The characters cannot leave the scenic enclosure for they only exist in this restricted perimeter. The singular presence of objects, the physical evidence of the body and the limited movements of the characters, all this raw dramatic material is detached from the language of the stage.⁷ And their passive existence is all there is to them.
- 25 Adorno's declarations on this subject are unambiguous. He rarely discusses at length any possible interpretation of this or that symbol (say, the dustbin or the wheelchair) but restricts his observations to what there is on stage: a couple of dustbins, two windows that do not open on any imaginable beyond, a painting that may represent an identifiable personage, although we can't see it. In short, nothing that could contribute to an overall "theoretical" perception of the play. The objection that Adorno interprets facts through the prism of the theory of "the end of history" simply does not take into account the details of his essay, and this against Adorno's own suggestion that in Beckett's work, it is the persistence of the details that counts most.

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NOTES

1. For instance: "In *Endgame*, a historical moment is revealed, the experience which was cited in the title of the culture industry's rubbish book *Corpsed*. After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state" (Adorno 1982, 122).
2. "Communication, the universal law of clichés, proclaims that there is no more communication. The absurdity of all speaking is not unrelated to realism but rather develops from it. For communicative language postulates—already in its syntactic form, through logic, the nature of conclusions, and stable concepts—the principle of sufficient reason." Adorno 1982, 139.
3. This position corresponds to the first of the three options proposed in the introduction to this volume.

4. Bearing in mind the particular meaning that Badiou ascribes to the word (Badiou 1988, 193-211.)
5. Badiou offers a description of that ideological consensus : "La cible d'Adorno est donc la fonction du principe d'identité dans le rationalisme occidental et, par conséquent, la suspicion à l'égard de l'universalisme en ce que ce dernier est justement l'imposition de l'Un, soit une imposition identitaire selon laquelle une chose peut valoir pour tous ou, en d'autres termes, la réduction de tous au semblable en tant que le semblable est cette prescription universelle. À ce titre, Adorno anticipe avec vingt ans d'avance des thèmes devenus absolument ordinaires de l'idéologie contemporaine. On trouve des passages d'Adorno à vrai dire un peu sophistiqués (ce n'est pas un écrivain léger...) mais qui aujourd'hui sont omniprésents dans les journaux, comme en témoigne cet extrait : 'c'est justement l'insatiable principe d'identité qui éternise l'antagonisme en opprimant ce qui est contradictoire. Ce qui ne tolère rien qui ne soit pareil à lui-même, contrecarre une réconciliation pour laquelle il se prend fausement. La violence du rendre-semblable reproduit la contradiction qu'elle élimine'. Les thèmes conjoints de la nécessité de l'évaluation des différences, du respect de l'altérité, du caractère criminel de la non-considération de l'identité, de la volonté nécessairement violente de la similitude universelle, etc., sont des thèmes fondamentaux dans toute la Dialectique négative d'Adorno" (Badiou 2005).
6. To be more accurate, the "state of affairs" affecting the modern world having reached the critical moment of its modernity, its untenable climax would be the demise of all claims to universality (except the universality of relativism). Conversely, we should reserve the term post-modernism to describe its joyous embrace of everything fragmentary, its affectation of effortless mastery in the face of uncontrollable events. In Halward's words, Badiou's Beckett "reduces the function of joy to its breathless affirmation" (Hall 201).
7. This language is not only made up of the speeches of the characters, but it also includes the text of the play, with its supposed intentionality, its organization and the stylistic traits or principles that can be derived from its observation.

ABSTRACTS

Adorno's essay "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" has had a large and enduring influence in the field of Beckettian study. Yet because of its banalization, it is now often assumed that Adorno's historical argument is an interpretative grid applied to the play from without and that it consequently fails to account for *Endgame*'s essentially theatrical nature. The purpose of this article is to retrace the philosopher's line of thought in the above-mentioned essay, trying to show that, contrary to a very common opinion, Adorno proves himself to be particularly conscious of the physical, oral, visual and, more generally, perceptive dimension of the play.

L'essai d'Adorno "Pour comprendre *Fin de partie*" a eu un impact considérable et durable dans le champ des études beckettiennes. Mais en raison de sa banalisation, on tient souvent pour acquis aujourd'hui que l'argument historiciste d'Adorno est une grille interprétative appliquée sur la pièce de l'extérieur, et qu'en conséquence, il ne rend pas compte de la nature essentiellement théâtrale de *Fin de partie*. Dans cet article, nous nous proposons de retracer les grandes lignes de la pensée du philosophe dans l'essai cité plus haut, afin de montrer que contrairement à une opinion fort répandue, Adorno s'attache tout particulièrement aux dimensions physiques, orales, visuelles, et plus généralement perceptives de la pièce.

INDEX

Mots-clés: fin de partie, historicisme, philosophie, postmoderne, réalité, représentation, théâtralité

Keywords: endgame, historicism, philosophy, post-modern, reality, representation, theatricality

Quoted persons: Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Samuel Beckett, Peter Hallward, Max Horkheimer

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