

EXCERPTS FROM “*No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we*”: *Endgame According to Adorno* by 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).

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2.

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” 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)

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3.

[...] 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)

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4.

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)

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5.

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 counterargument 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)

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