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POLITICAL BECKETT?

IN SEPTEMBER 1941, one of the twentieth century's most apparently non-political artists secretly took up arms against fascism. Samuel Beckett, who with exquisite timing for a notorious pessimist was born on Good Friday (and Friday the 13th) 1906, had been living in Paris since 1937, self-exiled from his native country in the manner of many an eminent Irish writer. The Irish, unlike their erstwhile colonial proprietors, have always been a cosmopolitan nation, from the nomadic monks of the Middle Ages to the corporate executives of the Celtic Tiger. If the oppressiveness of colonial rule turned some of them into nationalists, it turned others into citizens of the world. Joyce, Synge, Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy, men already caught between two or three cultures and languages, were to flourish in the rootless, polyglot, ambience of high-modernist Europe, rather as half a century later their compatriots were to embrace the European Union. It helped, in signing up to a linguistically self-conscious modernism, to stem from a nation in which language, as a political minefield, could never be taken for granted.

Beckett had volunteered to drive an ambulance for the French forces in 1940, but when the Germans invaded the country he and his wife Suzanne fled south, a mere forty-eight hours before the Nazis marched into Paris. Stopping briefly in a refugee camp in Toulouse, they arrived exhausted and almost penniless at a friend's house in Arcachon on the Atlantic coast. Some months later, lured in part by reassuring tales of the Germans' conduct in the capital, the couple returned to their Parisian apartment, surviving the bitter winter of 1940–1 on little more than a handful of vegetables. James Knowlson, Beckett's official biographer, sees this as the origin of Vladimir and Estragon's animated discussions of carrots, radishes and turnips in *Waiting for Godot*.¹ Beckett's characters, true to his own wartime experience, are vulgar materialists, too

busy keeping biologically afloat to indulge in anything as grandiose as subjectivity. They are more body than soul—mechanical assemblages of body parts, as in Swift, Sterne or Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, in which human bodies betray a distressing tendency to merge into bicycles. The mystery of the human body, like the mystery of black marks on a page for the Tipperary-born Laurence Sterne, is how this inert piece of matter comes to be more than itself—how it keeps crawling or bleating, when it ought by rights to be as silent as a stone. If the focus of Beckett’s play *Not I* is the human mouth, it is because there meaning and materiality mysteriously converge.

Once back in Paris, Beckett joined the Resistance, his growing revulsion at the Nazi regime brought to a head by the deportation of a Jewish friend to a concentration camp. With characteristic generosity, he donated his meagre rations to the victim’s wife. The eighty-strong Resistance cell of which he became a member was co-founded by the redoubtable Jeannine Picabia, daughter of the celebrated Dadaist painter, and was part of the British Special Operations Executive. From the viewpoint of pro-Nazi Republicans in the officially neutral Irish state, the Dublin émigré was now in cahoots with the political enemy. His role within the group drew on his literary skills: he was set to work translating, collating, editing and typing out scraps of information brought in by agents about German troop movements, information which was then microfilmed and smuggled out of France. Like the boy in *Waiting for Godot*, some of the agents’ messages proved somewhat unreliable. Despite its sedentary nature, the work was highly dangerous, and after the war he was to be awarded both the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de la Reconnaissance* in honour of his services. His silence and secretiveness, qualities apparent in his art, proved to be signal advantages for a *maquisard*.

Even so, the cell’s cover was soon blown. A comrade cracked under torture, and more than fifty of the group were arrested, many of them later deported to concentration camps. The Becketts, advised to leave the capital immediately, perilously delayed their departure by forays to alert other members of the cell, in the course of which Suzanne was arrested by the Gestapo but managed to bluff her way out of trouble. The couple escaped being picked up by a whisker, vacating their apartment only minutes before the secret police arrived at their door. Scrambling from one small hotel to another under false names, they took shelter for a

¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London 1996, p. 361.

time with the writer Nathalie Sarraute, and later, duly armed with forged documents, hid away in the village of Roussillon in Provence, where most of the locals mistook them for refugee Jews.

It was here that Beckett rejoined a Resistance cell in 1944, hiding explosives around his house, undergoing some basic training in handling a rifle and occasionally lying in ambush for the Germans at night. If Vladimir and Estragon sleep in ditches, so did their creator. Indeed, he was more of a vagrant than they are, since the play does not actually tell us that they are tramps. On their return to Paris after the war, the couple found themselves once again emaciated and half-famished, along with the rest of the city's population. When Beckett took up his pen, it was sometimes with fingers blue with cold. Sometime during these years, he is said to have suffered a severe psychological breakdown. Ten years before, he had taken a course of psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion.

Angst and exile

Beckett, then, was one of the few modernist artists to become a militant of the left rather than the right. And James Knowlson is surely right to maintain that 'many of the features of his later prose and plays arise directly from his experience of radical uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger and need'.² What we see in his work is not some timeless *condition humaine*, but war-torn twentieth-century Europe. It is, as Adorno recognized, an art after Auschwitz, one which keeps faith in its austere minimalism and unremitting bleakness with silence, terror and non-being. His writing is as thin as is compatible with being barely perceptible. There is not even enough meaning to be able to give a name to what is awry with us. One pointless narrative cranks itself laboriously off the ground only to be aborted for another, equally futile tale. These stripped, stark texts, which seem to apologize for doing anything as importunate as actually existing, have a Protestant animus against frippery and excess, as their words flicker up for a fragile moment from a void into which they then fade back. Sparseness and pedantic precision are the nearest one can now come to truth. His friend James Joyce, Beckett once remarked, was always adding to his material, whereas 'I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding'.³ He shares with his compatriot Swift a savage delight in diminishment.

² Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 416. ³ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 417.

Beckett's art maintains a compact with failure in the teeth of Nazi triumphalism, undoing its lethal absolutism with the weapons of ambiguity and indeterminacy. His favourite word, he commented, was 'perhaps'. Against fascism's megalomaniac totalities, he pits the fragmentary and unfinished. In his Socratic way, Beckett preferred ignorance to knowledge, presumably because it resulted in fewer corpses. If his works are morosely, hilariously conscious of the fact that they might just as well never have existed—that their presence is as farcically gratuitous as the cosmos itself—it is just this sense of contingency, one quite as much comic as tragic, that can be turned against the murderous mythologies of necessity.

Like many an Irish writer, from the great medieval philosopher and negative theologian John Scotus Eriugena, to Edmund Burke with his aesthetics of sublimity, Flann O'Brien, and the contemporary Irish philosopher Conor Cunningham,⁴ Beckett, a keen reader of Heraclitus, had a consuming interest in the notion of nothingness—a harmless enough phenomenon in the view of Sterne, 'considering', as he observed, 'what worse things there are in the world'. 'We Irishmen', wrote Bishop Berkeley, 'are apt to consider something and nothing as near neighbours'. The attenuated world of Beckett, populated as it is by characters of an alarming Lacanian leanness, exists somewhere in this crepuscular region, as a form of anti-Literature allergic to all rhetorical flatulence and ideological plenitude. When *Godot* was first produced in London in 1955, cries of 'This is how we lost the colonies!' could be heard from the scandalized audience.

Irish deflations

Yet Beckett's depleted, degree-zero writing, one to which the tongue of Descartes and Racine seemed more hospitable than the language of Shakespeare, is also a riposte to the florid rhetoric of a far more benign form of nationalism than the Hitlerite variety: that of Irish Republicanism. Like Joyce, his keen sense of Irishness survived years of never setting foot in the place, and he had a weakness for what struck him as a particularly Irish kind of desperation and vulnerability. He was always glad to have a drink with a compatriot passing through Paris, and his black humour and satirical wit (an early work was entitled *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*) are cultural as well as personal traits. If the

⁴ See Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, London 2002.

starved, stagnant landscapes of his work are post-Auschwitz, they are also a subliminal memory of famished Ireland, with its threadbare, monotonous colonial culture and its disaffected masses waiting listlessly on a Messianic deliverance which never quite comes. Perhaps there is a particular irony in this respect in the name 'Vladimir'.

Even so, as a Southern Irish Protestant descended from eighteenth-century Huguenot émigrés, Beckett belonged to a besieged minority of cultural aliens, some of whose big houses were burnt to the ground during the war of independence, and many of whom took refuge in the Home Counties after 1922. Encircled by what the ascetic young Trinity College student from middle-class Foxrock scorned as a bloated Gaelic bigotry, Southern Irish Protestants found themselves trapped later within the Catholic parochialism of the Free State. Beckett's father's dying words to him were 'fight, fight, fight!', perhaps with a political resonance, though he rather undercut this clarion call by adding, with remarkable understatement, 'What a morning!'. It is a bathos worthy of his son. Isolated and displaced, Beckett abandoned Ireland for a spell in London in 1933, a year after the theocratic, authoritarian De Valera took power. He was to pass only another two years of his life in Ireland. As with any internal émigré, it seemed as logical to be homeless abroad as at home. The traditional alienation of the Irish artist could be translated into the rather more glamorous *Angst* of the European avant-garde. Art or language might prove substitutes for national identity, a phenomenon which could be derided as *passé* in polyglot bohemian cafes at the very moment when the most noxious nationalism of the modern epoch was looming over the horizon.

Yet there is, ironically, a distinctively Irish quality to Beckett's deflation of what might nowadays be called Oirishness. For one thing, nothing is more Irish than debunkery. For another thing, Beckett's rejection of his nation, like Joyce's, was of a peculiarly intimate, keep-it-in-the-family kind. Insulting themselves is a time-honoured Irish custom, one in which only insiders (and certainly not the British) are permitted to take part. It is as native to Ireland as getting out of the place. Many Irish dissidents have been inverted nationalists, just as the Irish Catholic Church fosters a booming business in atheism. As a marginal nonconformist marooned in an assertive new cultural orthodoxy, Beckett, rather like Wilde, found ways of translating the displacement of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy into a deeper kind of fidelity to dispossession. There is a

powerful lineage of such Irish Protestant 'convert' figures to radical causes, from Wolfe Tone and Thomas Davis to Parnell and Yeats.

What helps to deflate swollen rhetoric in Beckett is also what demystifies cosily humanistic sentiment. It is the inhuman device of the *combinatoire*, in which the same few drab odds and ends are rigorously permuted with all the clinical impersonality of what would later be called structuralism. There is a monkish pedantry about Beckett's art, a crazed meticulousness which smacks among other things of a hard-headed Protestant rationalism. There is a similar dimension to his Protestant middle-class Dublin colleague Yeats, whose dreamy Celtic reveries sit cheek by jowl with the neurotically systematized world of magic. Beckett's Molloy must arrange his sucking stones in a series of pockets sewn specially into his garments, moving each stone as soon as it is sucked to a different pocket, so that no stone will be sucked out of sequence. One thinks of Sterne's mad philosopher Walter Shandy, or Swift's lunatic projectors. Rationalism, pressed to a limit, capsizes into its opposite. There is a venerable Irish tradition of such satire, in a philosophically idealist culture which never produced a major rationalism or empiricism.

Complete Beckettian texts are conjured up by an ingenious reshuffling of the same few scraps and leavings, in a parsimony of gesture which is both theatrically subversive and dramatically engaging. The reader or theatre audience is packed off poorer but more honest. What strikes us is the extraordinary exactness with which this supposed obscurantist weaves the wind, the clear-sighted logic with which he sculpts the void and seeks, in his own phrase, to 'eff the ineffable'. An obsessive scrupulousness plucks ever more slender nuances from what seems mere shapelessness. Beckett's materials may be raw and random, but his treatment of them, like so much Anglo-Irish art, is highly stylized, with a balletic elegance and economy. It is as though the whole formal apparatus of truth, reason and logic has remained intact, even though its contents have long since leaked away; and if this is an antidote to Gaelic extravagance, it also owes something to a very Irish-Catholic scholasticism.

Everything in this post-Auschwitz world is ambiguous and indeterminate, which makes it hard to understand why sheer physical pain should be so brutally persistent. As far as indeterminacy goes, it is not just that nothing much happens, but that it is hard to be sure whether anything is happening or not, or what would count as an event. Is waiting doing

something, or the suspension of it? It is, to be sure, a kind of deferment; but then this is true for Beckett of human existence itself, which like Derridean difference keeps itself going only by the perpetual shelving of some ultimate meaning. All we can know, in the words of Clov in *Endgame*, is that 'Something is taking its course', with all the irresistible force of a teleology but with none of its sense of purpose.

Refusing finality

Perhaps the final meaning would be death; and that is devoutly to be wished in a world in which the only opiate for suffering is habit, now degraded from revered Burkean custom to mechanical reflex. Yet there is in fact no death in Beckett's work, merely a steady disintegration as the body continues to peel and stiffen. Death would be far too grand, definitive an occurrence for these eviscerated figures to cope with. Even suicide requires more sense of identity than they are capable of mustering. Beckett's characters thus have all the unkillability of comic protagonists, with nothing of their craftily gained achievements or blitheness of spirit. They are not even up to tragic status, which would at least be some kind of recompense. They would only fluff their lines and bungle their big moment, distracted by a hairpin or a bowler hat. Lucky's big metaphysical speech falls to pieces as it leaves his mouth. We are in the presence of low farce or black carnivalesque rather than high drama.

No doubt Godot's eventual arrival would constitute a big moment; but who is to say, in this world of extreme conceptual scarcity in which there is only so much meaning to go around, that it would be recognizable when it happened? Maybe Godot is in fact Pozzo; Vladimir and Estragon may have misheard the name. Or maybe this whole agonizing freezing of time, in which the past is erased so that you must reinvent yourself from scratch at every moment, *is* Godot's coming, rather in the way that for Walter Benjamin the very catastrophism of history points in its negative way to the imminence of the Messiah. Perhaps there never was any one big thing crying out for redemption, and this is the characters' mistake. For one lineage of Messianic thought, the Messiah will transfigure the world by making minor adjustments.

Yet the problem is that Beckett's universe looks like the kind of place where the idea of redemption indeed makes sense, while being at the same time grievously bereft of it. There is a meaning-shaped hole at the

centre of this lamentable condition, since modernism, unlike its more callow postmodern progeny, is old enough to remember a time when there appeared to be truth and reality in plenty, and is still tormented by its disappearance. There is no danger of an excess of nostalgia here, however, since memory, and therefore identity, has collapsed along with everything else. All one can salvage by way of consolation is the fact that, if reality is indeed indeterminate, then despair is not possible. An indeterminate universe must logically leave room for hope. If there are no absolutes, there can be no absolute assurance that Godot will not come or that the Nazis will triumph. If the world is provisional, then this must be true of our knowledge of it as well—in which case there is no saying whether this landscape of freaks, cripples and hairless spheres of flesh, viewed from another perspective altogether, may not be teetering on the brink of transfiguration.

Clinging to the possibility of redemption has at least this benefit, that it allows us to measure how dismally far short of it we fall. Beckett has sometimes been accused of nihilism; but if there were no sense of value in his universe, there would be no cause for so much shrieking and howling. Without some sense of value, we would not even be able to identify our suffering as objectionable, and so would fail to recognize our plight as anything but normal. It is just that such value cannot be spoken outright for fear of its being ideologized, inflated to some sentimental humanism and so becoming part of the problem rather than the solution. Instead, value must manifest itself negatively, in the unswerving lucidity with which this writing confronts the unspeakable. Since the detachment it requires for this confrontation is also the detachment of comedy and farce, value lies also, as so often in Irish writing, in that momentary, inexplicable transcendence of a drearily oppressive world which we know as wit. Madness, pedantry, the body, self-irony, arbitrariness, endless repetition, mechanistic reduction: these are just the kind of grim motifs which can also be very funny, and are thus fit meat for this comic maestro of the post-human. If he is indeed, in the end, a comedian, it is not least because he refuses tragedy as a form of ideology. Like Freud and Adorno, Beckett knew that the sober, bleak-eyed realists serve the cause of human emancipation more faithfully than the bright-eyed utopians.