

EH JOE E OHIO IMPROMPTU: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND SELF-RESPONSIBILITY IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S DRAMA.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper one will be arguing that Beckett, both in the content and form of his writing, points humankind towards help. From the point of view of content, it will analyse *Eh Joe* (published in 1967) and *Ohio Impromptu* (published in 1982). Simultaneously, and to look at the form, the power of Beckett's writing, one will focus on the immanence of the present moment, the moment into which time has collapsed, the moment in which one can accept both the futility of going on and the necessity of going on, the acceptance of the responsibility.

Resumo

O presente artigo irá abordar simultaneamente o conteúdo e a forma da escrita beckettiana, assim avançando indicações para o auxílio da Humanidade. Sob o ponto de vista do conteúdo, serão analisadas as peças *Eh Joe* (publicada em 1967) e *Ohio Impromptu* (publicada em 1982). Simultaneamente, e atendendo à forma, a força da escrita de Beckett, será focada a imanência do momento presente, o momento no qual o tempo entrou em colapso, o momento em que se aceita quer a futilidade de continuar e a necessidade de continuar, a aceitação da responsabilidade.

I

Part of the appeal of Beckett's plays is that he evokes so compellingly the destruction of the connection and continuities between past, present and future in contemporary life. It is a destruction one may understand to be not only a self-defence, avoiding the greater pain that connection can threaten with, the pain of guilt, hurt or longing, but also a response to living in the pre-apocalyptic age. But Beckett would not be so fascinating if he was simply a chronicler of the present times. Everyone seems to agree that Beckett's plays do not tell stories, and here one will review the ways in which Beckett deconstructs narrative.

In this article one will be arguing that Beckett, both in the content and form of his writing, points humankind towards help. First, from the point of view of content, it will be proposing that *Eh Joe* (first published in 1967) and *Ohio Impromptu* (first published in 1982), two of Beckett's shorter plays, have embedded in them implied narratives, through which Beckett is suggesting that the opening up of desire and the acceptance of mourning are the best self-responsible remedies that heal fractured narrative.

To go a step further, and to look at the form, the power of Beckett's writing, what one finds interesting is not only the implied narrative, but also his focus on the immanence of the present moment, the moment into which time has collapsed, the moment in which one can accept both the futility of going on and the necessity of going on, in which one can simply rest, beset with the irony that one is "[born] astride a grave" (*Waiting for Godot* CDW 83)¹, born to die, in which one can bear that one both wants to meet Godot and won't – that is what is so compelling, the acceptance of the responsibility.

II

Joe... (...) Joe... (...) Thought of everything?... Forgotten nothing? (*Eh Joe* CDW 362)

Little is left to tell (*Ohio Impromptu* CDW 445)

More. (...) till in the end/ the day came/ in the end came/ close of a long day/ when she said/
to herself/ whom else/ time she stopped/ time she stopped (*Rockaby* CDW 436)

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (*Endgame* CDW 93)

Nothing to be done. (*Waiting for Godot* CDW 11)

Finished before having begun – that is Beckett's 'cheerful approach to storytelling. The above collation of the opening lines in five of Beckett's plays cautions the reader to abandon hope as one enters that area. Actually, there may be an opportunity to sort through the paraphernalia of abandoned lives – and if one wants to reconstruct their representation, one is free to do so, but the perspective is highly improbable.

Insofar as there is a future in Beckett's plays that is other than more of the same, it is, at least on the surface, a decaying contracting future that will fade into death, and even death will arrive, not as a catastrophe or climax, not as something longed for or dreaded, not even as an event, but as the outcome in an inevitable seamless cessation, life fading to zero on the monitor.

Four of Beckett's major plays seem to confirm this argument: *Waiting for Godot* ends in more waiting, *Endgame* in further decomposing, and both *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape* implicitly in death. Although the present moment may be intolerable, Beckett sees to it that the future is of no interest, since it will bring no better solution. For example, only incurable optimists could think that this next time Godot will appear, and they are already on the stage. And if the future will bring no better solution, why rush it?

Beckett seems equally ungenerous about the past, which is ironic considering that his plays are generally either in the form of representing the reminiscences, like *Eh Joe* and *Ohio Impromptu*, or are about representing the reminiscing, like *Krapp's Last Tape*, or even representing the languishing in reminiscence, like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Whatever is important has already happened, but the connection between the past events and present state of affairs is unclear. The attempt to imagine explanations that would link present and past, will necessarily have more to do with one's intolerance for the lack of narrative closure, than with sounding out which implications Beckett had in mind. The characters' self-represented past that Beckett reveals is a fractured, degraded past, odd experiences, ambiguous and dislocated in time and space. The characters are further dissociated from their past as Beckett places recollection in other voices, as in *Ohio Impromptu*. The Listener is then confronted with his own past, a past from which he is estranged, alienated.

For Beckett, what is important is not to be found in the past or future. Importance, if it exists, is immanent in the present moment. Future and past are echoes of the present, or perhaps shadows, cast forwards and backwards. Beckett wants his audience to be attracted by the luminous immediacy of the present experience, the presented presence. In the evolution of his technique, he increasingly focuses one's attention, as his dramatic structure and staging work toward simplification and intensity: one act, one character, one voice, a single spotlight.

Here it is desirable to focus on the problematic side of this denial of past and future perspectives – the destruction of narrative – for it is in the nature of the story that it must occur in the passage of time.

The selves of Beckett's characters are profoundly fractured. Clinically, it may be said to be a way of avoiding pain – the pain of shame, or grief, or love, or of recognizing one's own (self-)destructiveness. Their inner thought might be something like "If it didn't happen, if I can't remember it, if it is not worth hoping for, if I didn't do it, I am protected" – even if not acknowledged by the self.

Turning now to the two of Beckett's shorter plays under discussion, one has to explore the question of what it takes to live life as a historical self. Although these plays were not written as stories, here it is going to be presented what may be taken to be the implied narrative in each of them. These narratives will, in their telling, elaborate the self-representative problems that stand in the way of creating history and might point toward potential solutions.

Eh Joe, a television play, begins with Joe, a grey-haired man in his late fifties, garbed in an old dressing gown and slippers, leaving his bed to peer out his window and then close and curtain it, look out his door and then lock it, peer in his cupboard then lock and curtain it, look under his bed, and finally, relaxing, sit on the edge of the bed. The camera then gradually moves in on his face, which stays almost motionless throughout, as a woman's voice confronts him about his destructiveness. One learns that Joe has made a career of destroying the voices that haunt him:

You know that (...) hell you call your mind.... That's where you think it is coming from, don't you?... That's where you heard your father.... Isn't that what you told me?... Started in on you one June night and went on for years.... On and off.... Behind the eyes.... That's how you were able to throttle him in the end.... Mental thuggee you called it.... One of your happiest fancies.... Mental thuggee.... Otherwise he'd be plaguing you yet.... Then your mother when her hour came.... (...) Pitying love.... None to touch it.... And look at him now.... Throttling the dead in his head. (CDW 362-363)

One learns that Joe once seduced and discarded the woman who is speaking but that she has survived to go on and find a better man. Another one wasn't as fortunate. One hears the story of her suicide, under the viaduct; still alive after failing to drown herself and cutting her wrists, she took tablets and scooped out a place for her face in the wet stones, where she died. As the play ends, the woman's voice drops to a whisper and Joe's face fades.

Joe's obsession is to exterminate these haunting presences, as though that will free him from their persecution, while denying to himself that the voices and hidden threats under the bed are creations of his own mind. He has glorified this into a holy mission. The voice taunts him, knowing that the darkness would bring on nightmares and that Joe must sleep with the light on, perhaps the television on:

No one can see you now.... No one can get at you now.... Why don't you put out that light?... There might be a louse watching you.... Why don't you go to bed?... What's wrong with that bed, Joe? (CDW 362)

She reminds Joe that he's absolutely alone and describes Joe's squeezing out his memories:

Anyone living love you now, Joe?... Anyone living sorry for you now?... (...) Squeezed down to this.... (...) Brain tired squeezing.... It stops in the end.... (...) That's right, Joe, squeeze away... (CDW 363-365)

Joe may be squeezing his mind empty, but one also imagines his heart trying to squeeze blood through his body. And she warns him:

Watch yourself you don't run short, Joe... Ever think of that?... Eh Joe?... What it'd be if you ran out of us.... Not another soul to still.... Sit there in his stinking old wrapper hearing himself.... That lifelong adorer.... (CDW 363)

The fantasy in her last thought is that Joe, having extinguished all the voices, would be reduced to a perfect narcissistic state, completely disconnected from the world, left with only his own voice to listen to, which would become a living death. However, the murdered voices don't actually disappear. They are transformed into unnamable menaces

lurking inside and outside his room. The historical past becomes primal unfocused terror. This psychic destruction is a portrait in a purified form of a process typically operating in Beckett's characters, namely the creation of self-terror. And yet, matters are more complex because the woman's voice is a product of Joe's mind, and the stories she tells of her own fate and of the one who didn't survive are also tales in Joe's narrative. In those tales, Joe makes an accounting of his destructiveness: do not despair, one was saved; do not presume, one was damned. He assumes the responsibility in being his own judge.

In the telling of the suicide, one hears an unexpected representation of tenderness towards the other:

Imagine what in her mind to make her do that.... Imagine.... Trailing her feet in the water like a child.... (...) Scoops a little cup for her face in the stones.... The green one.... The narrow one.... Always pale.... The pale eyes.... The look they shed before.... The way they opened after.... Spirit made light.... (CDW 366)²

Joe is imagining someone who was capable of loving him, loving him enough to become hurt beyond repair, the one who could have made a difference for him. Had he been able to accept her compassion, to be open to his own vulnerable longing self, the lost child in himself, his narrative might have taken another course.

A very possible moral for *Eh Joe* (eventually not Beckett's) is that desire, the capacity to bear wanting, is the medicine that heals the dismembered narrative. Being found wanting, finding oneself wanting, is not a death sentence, terminal emptiness – it is an opportunity for discovering purpose, an invitation to life. Once fulfilled, life will be gone. Joe squeezes desire out, but his audience longs to recreate desire and breathe life into that drowning form.

Here desire feels unsafe because there is too much aggression; one tends to stanch one's love when one fears it will harm. Feeling one's own possible destructiveness makes people afraid – that's Joe's opening experience in his room. A mark of the emergence of the self is the capacity to be self-soothing, to soothe the destructiveness and make passion safe.

IV

Ohio Impromptu was written for a Beckett symposium at Ohio State University, in 1981, though the author did not attend it. A Listener and a Reader, identical in appearance, sit at a pine-board table, and the Reader reads to the Listener from the last pages of a book. At intervals, the Listener directs the Reader to repeat himself by knocking on the table. In brief, this is the story he reads, which apparently is also the story of their relationship:

(...) In a last attempt to obtain relief he moved from where they had been so long together to a single room on the far bank. (...) Relief he had hoped would flow from unfamiliarity. Unfamiliar room. Unfamiliar scene. (...) In his dreams he had been warned against this change. Seen the dear face and heard the unspoken words, Stay where we were so long alone together, my shade will comfort you. (...) [But] What he had done alone could not be undone. Nothing he had ever done alone could ever be undone. By him alone. (...) In this extremity his old terror of night laid hold on him again. After so long a lapse that as if never been. (...) White nights now against his portion. As when his heart was young. No sleep no braving sleep till – [*Turns page.*] – dawn of day. (CDW 445-446)

One night a man appeared and said that he had been sent by the dear name to comfort him, and he read to him until dawn. This was repeated from time to time, until one night the visitor said that he had received word from the dear one that he was not to come again:

(...) So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone. Through the single window dawn shed no light. From the street no sound of reawakening. Or was it that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no heed? To light of day. To sound of reawakening. (...) Buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No sound. (CDW 447-448)

And at the end:

Nothing is left to tell. (...) Nothing is left to tell. (CDW 448)

Reading and rereading *Ohio Impromptu* one finds it a moving self-description of the struggle to mourn, to separate, to join, to become a self-responsible person. In the theatre, it can be isolating, even awesomely distancing. Beckett brackets the play with disclaimers: it begins “Little is left to tell” and ends with “Nothing is left to tell” (CDW 445 and 448). In between, a great deal is told, especially to one who reads it, more removed from Beckett’s theatrical control, freer to use imagination. Maybe that is cheating, but here is what one can make of it.

In production, the Reader is mechanically impersonal, absolutely distanced from what he is reading; he seems more interested in the construction of the phrases, than in the meaning they carry. The Listener has suffered the loss of a loved one, a loss so painful that he leaves their home to take up residence in an unfamiliar setting, hoping that he will be able to forget. He spends his days pacing the islet, dwelling on the receding stream, watching “How in joyous eddies its two arms conflowed and flowed united on” (CDW 446). A terrible loneliness sets in. In his dreams he regrets the move, but he is determined to stand his ground, as though the only possibility for living requires that he bear being alone. He suffers sleepless nights, “White nights now against his portion” (CDW 446), until a reader comes to bring him comfort – the bedtime stories read to children that help them face being alone until they fall asleep. At the end, the reader will leave, but they will also join together, joined as one in stone, and perhaps the Reader will read this story to the Listener, about the reader and the listener every night, forever.

A final and amazing detail concerns the copies of Beckett’s earlier drafts of the play. He changed the dear face’s words from “my ghost will comfort you” to “my shade will comfort you”. This transforms the lost one, whoever he/she may be, from a haunting to a sheltering presence. And near the end, “sound of renewing toil” became “sound of reawakening” (Beja and Gontarski, 1983). Acceptance and hope from Beckett – a miracle. Something left to tell after all, that is an appealing thought.

V

It is the freeing of desire and the work of mourning that make possible the assemblage of the representation of a life. If desire is felt to be poisonous, and mourning murderous, then refuge is taken in a schizoid or obsessive solution. In Beckett, the task seems to be accepting both self-hatred and self-identification. Mourning is required for the creation of the historical self – each person, going through life, leaves behind a series of ‘murdered’ or ‘unlived’ alternative selves. In the life passionately lived, that ‘murder’ can be borne.

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[FOOTNOTES]

¹ All the quotations were taken from Beckett, Samuel (1990) *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber.

² These references about the former lover's eyes reminds one of Krapp's scene in the boat:

⁽⁻⁾ with the punt, bathed off the bank, then pushed out into the stream and drifted. She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed. (...) I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [*Pause.*] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments (...) she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Krapp's Last Tape* CDW 221).