Beckett's Purgatory of the Individual, or the Three Laws of Thermodynamics

(Notes for an Incamination toward a Preliminous Exagmination round His Temporizing Dedramaturgification) (1967, 7,250 words)

NOTE 2022: The text is here taken from its book version in my *To Brecht and Beyond* (1984) slightly purged of some idiosyncrasies.

A critic of modern dramaturgy with a bent for Brecht and Chekhov, for the Berliner Ensemble and Théâtre National Populaire, for Strehler and Planchon in the 1950s and 1960s, also for Karl Marx and Ernst Bloch -- one, in other words, who enjoys the dramaturgy and theatre fully when their specific, exemplary sensual presentness participates in the great liberating effort of our century -- has one outstanding difficulty to come to terms with, if he or she is to be sincere to his trade and even to her or his (*ex hypothesi*) encompassing horizons: Samuel Beckett. If the chief measure of a major dramatist is a happy union of relevance and consistency of dramaturgic vision, there is little doubt that in our cultural circle -- middle and western Europe, based on the Mediterranean, with the massive wings of the Soviet Union and North America -- the two major dramatists since the Second World War are Brecht and Beckett. Yet it is rare for a critic devoted to Beckett seriously and knowledgeably to face Brecht. I can think of only one such comprehensive effort, Martin Esslin's, and that one is, to my mind, finally unconvincing. Conversely, however, I can think of no critic of the Brechtian bent who has attempted a comprehensive study of Beckett. This chapter cannot, of course, pretend to such comprehensiveness, but it may suggest a need for it and lines of further exploration. In the process, I would claim for it at least one merit: that of shunning the prevailing tendency to accept or reject Beckett on purely ideological grounds, because of the closed existential horizons of his works. There are many instances of uncritical acceptance of Beckett's works. As for uncritical rejection, I will quote only one example from Werner Hecht, a theatre historian and theoretician from the Berliner Ensemble, in an article whose ironic title translates as 'Brecht "and" Beckett -- An Absurd Comparison': 'Yet, for people who want to change the world to make it habitable, Beckett's theatre is uninteresting, lacking in matter and wit, simply: very old wine in not even quite new bottles.'[1] The best way to avoid aprioristic refusals, as well as fashionable adulations, seems to lie in trying, first, to consider Beckett's dramatic vision of world and man fully, in its internal consistency. From there, one should place it in its genetic and anthropological perspective in order, finally, to arrive at some conclusion about its external relevance.

1. Beckett's world[2] is, first of all, a closed one, of the cosmological family to which a Ptolemaic world also belongs, yet differing from that world by being dolorously and morbidly (some sicknesses induce a special awareness for certain relationships) conscious of the theoretical possibility, and perhaps need, for a transcendental vertical opening. Such a possibility is shown on the stage in *Act Without Words 1*, and it provides one of the poles of tension in *Waiting for Godot*. This does not mean that such an opening implies -- or that Godot is to be equated with -- a Christian, Buddhist, or any other kind of god. The closeness and distance between God and Godot is exactly indicated by their names. Godot is a kind of (small, impotent) god, being for Didi and Gogo absent from that place where God used to be present for Christians. Yet in his vanishing elusiveness Godot is at the same time a pseudo-god, a surrogate of doubtful

existentiality; in fact, as biologists would have it, he is functionally analogous to God, as gills are to lungs. The existence of the closed world, however, is not in doubt, and its constantly renewed implicit comparison with more open alternatives is a fundamental device by means of which the encapsulated Beckettian world is felt as unnaturally small, oppressively claustrophobic:

> *Hamlet*: Denmark's a prison.
>
> *Rosencrantz*: Then is the world one.
>
> *Hamlet*: A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one of the worst. (*Hamlet*, II. ii)

As compared to Hamlet's scope, Beckett's world has shrunk, it is not even a 'goodly' prison, yet it manages to include quite a few confines, wards and dungeons', strikingly visualised in the celebrated jars of *Endgame* and *Play*, or the canned voice-confines of *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Cascando*. One cannot but interpolate here that such a world excludes most empirical perceptions and values, that it intersects with the empirical 'only in the most desolate instances or at certain almost unbearable moments.'[3] Again, by the strange Becket tian twilight dialectics, this is and is not a living world. It is a life-in-death or death-in-life fauna and flora, almost like the world of a Lovecraft fantasy or a surreal limbo. With its lack of movement and activity -- and the cyclical repetitiveness that I shall discuss further on -- it is clearly a hopeless version of Dante's Purgatory (more particularly, as Beckett's interest in the figure of Belacqua proves, of the lowest part of the Antepurgatorio, where the negligent await the end of their punishment): an inverted Purgatory, with life over but not finished.

Terra Beckettiana is an aimless island universe, not only desolate but constantly running down. The objects, colours, energies are all in a state of degradation, visible as the cumulative fatigue of Gogo and Didi and the physical deterioration of Pozzo and Lucky (in which context I feel that the flowering tree is no more than an ironically ambiguous pitfall), the running out of food and drugs in *Endgame*, the growth of the heap entombing Winnie -- as a general *cascando* rhythm both of the whole and within the particular instances. This universe tends asymptotically to an absolute zero of energy, the famous *Wärmetod* -- an end of the universe in absolute lack of light, movement and warmth -- with which the *fin-de-siècle* physicists such as Boltzmann used to scarify a tired *fin-de-siècle* Europe.[4] Professor Kenner has wittily noted that the main characteristics of the Beckettian cosmos -- a closed system and the degradation of its energy are in fact the two laws of thermodynamics. There remained unnoted, however, the third law of thermodynamics (Nernst's theorem: absolute zero can only be approached asymptotically, i.e. getting ever closer to it without ever reaching it) which is just as characteristic of Beckett's rhythm and vision, and which should be accorded as important a place in any conclusion about him.

In such a world, where senselessness has radically blurred any clear aims, gestural and verbal action becomes purpose less and formal. It moves in a peculiar repetitive shuttle:

> *Estragon*: Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.
>
> *Vladimir*: With me it's just the opposite.
>
> *Estragon*: In other words?
>
> *Vladimir*: I get used to the muck as I go along.
>
> *Estragon*: (*after prolonged reflection*). Is that the opposite...?

Such a vicious circle, repeated at length, turns exertion into stasis, human existence into an inconsequential nightmare, the passage of time into an effect of timelessness. It subjects the reader or onlooker to disillusion at the end of each illusory period of achievement. The interchangeable nature of these periods, of the whole 'going along, creates an indeterminate time both temporal and timeless, correlative to the nondescript, purgatorial quality of the space. Time, whose measure is movement and change, has almost come to a stop. But not quite; there is still some rudimentary activity and consequence: ‘Ma vie... est finie et elle dure à la fois, mais par quel temps exprimer cela?’ (*Molloy*).[5]

A time characterised by arrested development in a vague world is a time of infantile characters,[6] whose inability to transcend a religious framework is counterbalanced by their consciousness of the absurdity of such a situation. This sliding between two epistemological levels constitutes the saving Beckettian dry black humour, which has probably been the decisive *aesthetic* factor in establishing his dramatic vision. Beckett's savage wit, at times Swiftian, leads to playing existential games, emulating and parodying empirical reality and trying arbitrarily to establish some structure in the near vacuum of his world. Any work of his may be regarded as one extended game involving a limit-situation of human consciousness -- a 'limit' translated into time (at the point of death, or perhaps of a ritual birth) and space (a limbo, or the beach of *Embers* and *Cascando*). Such an Einsteinian time/space system is dominated by 'the mirthless laugh... the saluting of the highest joke' (*Watt*): the game is played as a mirthless laugh both at the unseen powers which have sardonically foreordained such a world and at the world itself.

For a game, there must be two or more players: in this bleak system, a pair (present or implied) is the favourite number. Two people not only throw cues and responses to each other, they also play out a certain gamut of relationships towards objects and each other, engaging in music-hall crosstalk (as do Gogo and Didi) or demonstrating a power relationship (as do Pozzo and Lucky). Beckett's nature including human nature is 'a composite of perceiver and perceived’[7]. In his pair of figures each is the other's perceiver and perceived, the speaker and the listener necessary for communication in a closed world. Their sardonic game is played within each play by a 'comic gamut of estranging, impudent devices, carried out by clowning. As an acute French critic observed, 'Floating between frank grossness. and poignant poetry, his plays have the charm of a circus, the fascination of thought. They are illustrated philosophy (like the circus): an image of man is placed in the ring'.[8] The clown is a comedian consciously focusing his and the audience's awareness on his impotence, an epistemological rather than psychological stage figure. He is usually childishly gullible before objects, yet constantly, if with little success, reaching out toward understanding and refusing to submit to the entropy of order. Beckett's clowns are dehumanised because apparently deprived of history: yet history has shaped the presuppositions of their purgatorial environment. It is no longer only a background (as it would have been, say, in Ibsen) but has pervaded them so completely that they can no longer enter into any real collision with it: not even with their 'inner environment', as was possible for Pirandello's Eve and Lina, or Brecht's Shen Te and Shui Ta. The pseudo-escape from history has only delivered them more completely and helplessly into its hands. Even their language has become functionally transparent, just bricks for the building of scenic situations which show exhaustively that there is nothing to show. The grim and pedantic sticking to banalities is offset only by bawdiness and by a certain melancholy which seems to settle over the forlorn quest for sense. They are clownish victims, existing because of a 'hypothetical imperative', oscillating between attempts at a ludicrous gentility and *Lumpenproletarian* obscenity and violence, arrested between apathy and a hope of Nirvana. Here Nirvana is a consummation devoutly to be wished for, and blasphemously disbelieved in.

2. Why is Beckett's painfully consistent world such as it is? As Brecht would put it, what events behind it are the key to its events? An answer is necessary before judging Beckett's worldview. Has the author, as many apologists claim, in his nightmares and fears just happened to hit upon some archetypal horrors of the self, presumably identical in -- and relevant for -- a Vietnamese peasant, a Yugoslav worker, a French intellectual, and a US businessman (or at least, as the more cautious acknowledge, the last two)? No doubt, any valid artistic vision is a product of the 'inner environment' of its author; depersonalised writing, ads or slogans, can only use clichés, scraps of once valid visions. But to argue on the basis of this tautological commonplace, as Beckett too seems to do in the case of Proust, that the inner reality of any valid writer is beyond history because the writer himself (or his critic) rejects history, means to forget not only the great maxim which D.H. Lawrence formulated as 'Never trust the teller; trust the tale', but most human and critical experience too. The sardonic fate of Beckettian figures, caught in the viscous substance of arrested history because of their refusal to intervene into history, should be an appropriate warning.

Many students of Beckett have noted that his work is a radically foreshortened recapitulation of a certain cognitive and artistic tradition, almost a boiling down of a segment of intellectual history. A few have gone as far as to identify that segment, mostly at its source: 'all Beckett's work paradoxically insists upon and rebels against the Cartesian definition of man as "a thing that thinks",... the Cartesian cleavage between the world *in re* and the world in *intellectu*..."[9], but sometimes at its silting-up point: 'Beckett's *Comédie* is Feydeau seen from beyond the grave',[10] or as a comprehensive *Götterdämmerung* (here said *à propos* of his prose but applicable to all his work): '[behind Beckett's novel trilogy lie] acres of fictional moralising, reams of gnomic self-praise, and bundles of romances chronicling the acquisition and dispersal of portable property, from *Robinson Crusoe to The Spoils of Poynton*.'[11] If Beckett's work is, as the above further concludes, a 'compendious abstract' of a certain epoch 'in most general terms', these general terms should be accorded much greater, perhaps central, attention by any critic believing that (as the biologists would put it) the inner environment is genetically shaped too -- in the case of the human animal much more by social than by biological heredity. As argued in the first part of this book, that epoch's 'most general term' and stylistically decisive category is Individualism, i.e. a vision, feeling, or cognition of human relations with the world of things and other people from the standpoint of the Individual as the irreducible, atomic touchstone and measure. Individualism is a worldview arrived at in Italy at the time between Petrarch and Machiavelli, a century later in France and the Netherlands, and another century later in England. There it eventually found a most striking literary exemplification in the archetypical figure of Robinson Crusoe on his island, justly felt so relevant to Beckett's pairs of Robinsons and their latter-day island worlds.[12]

The centuries of Individualism between Bacon or Descartes and Proust or Beckett are, of course, the time of the definitive victory of money economy over natural economy. This *Instauratio Magna* led to many and great triumphs of man over nature, but the price paid for it was stiff, probably exorbitant. The price of the new enterprising 'Faustian'[13] spirit may be summed up as *desensualisation* and *reification*. Desensualisation of man's relation to material reality is a direct result of all commodities being reduced to the tyrannical common denominator of money. All phenomena appear then as subject to quantitative measurement; all values, including God, can be treated as entries in an individual profit-and-loss accounting system (*ragioneria*, systematised by Fra Luca Pacioli in the 15th century). The wholesale of indulgences which enraged the sturdy sensitivity of Martin Luther was only the logical end-

result of a system where posthumous legacies were supposed to atone for their own usurous sources. The dominant middle-class feeling treats God increasingly as the owner of a huge and multifaceted commercial firm, larger than but not differing in principle from those of Bardi and Peruzzi, the Medicis or the Fuggers. All of the middle class being God's children, he is accordingly each one's potential senior partner:

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him to do for us? (...)

Vladimir: Oh... nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Vladimir: Precisely.

Estragon: A vague supplication.

Vladimir: Exactly.

Estragon: And what did he reply?

Vladimir: That he'd sec.

Estragon: That he couldn't promise anything.

Vladimir: That he'd 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.

Vladimir: Before taking a decision.

Estragon: It's the normal thing.

Estragon: Is it not?

Vladimir: I think it is.

Estragon: I think so too. (*Silence*.)

In the balance sheet of individual life, the new 'double entry' bookkeeping severs money invested from its natural-economy function of acquiring objects necessary for life: in the new system money acts autotelically, existing purely for quantitative self-propagation, which gave canonic Christian writers a good deal of trouble right up to the time of Ben Jonson.[14] All the qualities of objects become thus irrelevant for commerce, which has the great convenience of sweeping away the limitations imposed by human nature and personal needs (one can eat, wear out, etc., only so many objects in a given time). The sensual data of cloth or cloves, flour or colour, surrender pride of place to the rational information about the amount of capital invested and profit earned, which can be only larger or smaller; quantity is money's only quality. Success in Individualist life manifests itself as the size of the profit. The ideal entrepreneur of a money economy measures values against a phantom scale of ciphers overriding the terrene, sensual reality and isolating the measurer from that reality: *quod non est in libris non est in mundo* (what

is not in the books is not in the world*)*. The ideal capitalist should, thus, live privately in one and socially in another world: he moves into the familiar field of a growing split between ambition and enjoyment, body and reason, feeling and thought, the immanent and the transcendental. In the somewhat obscure terminology of T.S. Eliot (who has, however, the merit of having been the first modern critic in English to draw attention to this group of facts) -- his sensibility dissociates.[15]

The profit principle and the ideology of Rationalism meet on the grounds of belief in omnipotent quantity -- in the number. The very term *ratio* (*ragione*, *raison*) slides from the classical, Ciceronian sense of reason, relation, manner, calculation, and account into the sense of an entry (*conto*) in ledgers, and finally into that of a commercial establishment or concern. In a way, Rationalism means, quite literally, the ideology (-ism) of business (*ratio*). It is not by chance that Individualism acquired a Rationalist philosophy, a Cartesian image of movement, and a Newtonian cosmography. Double-entry bookkeeping had introduced into daily economic life entries functioning as objects; once set into motion, such financial and numerical bodies move in calculable, mechanically determined grooves. Figures in theatre tend to acquire analogous fundamental characteristics: their setting into motion is increasingly (compare, say, Shakespeare and Ibsen) determined by calculation of profit or loss, whereas all other hypothetical motivations leave them inert. Finally, Beckett's figures find themselves in a permanent kind of 'Buridan's ass' arrested tension between an ideal norm of rest (Nirvana, thermodynamic death) and motions caused by flickers of the 'hypothetical imperative', each motion meriting detailed description and deliberation as an aberration from the norm. Rationalism, analytic mathematics, and mechanics are most intimately interwoven: in none of them is there a place for ***qualities***, for fertile deviations from fixed positive laws. Fertility and vitality, divorced from the unique and the particular, become vested in institutionalised generalisations; just as the 'legal person' of the enterprise grows distinct and separate from the sensual person of the entrepreneur, whom double-entry bookkeeping sees as a third party merely administering lent capital. *A fortiori*, other people too are interesting only rationally, as buyers or sellers of determined amounts of commodities (including their labour power) measurable in money and in time.

Time, sluggish or non-existent in the feudal natural economy, becomes equivalent to finances and their ever swifter turnover. In the 14th century, amounts of time begin to be exactly measured and laments heard over its rapid flow, all of which ascends with commerce from Italy northward to England. St Antoninus, from the financial emporium of Florence, admits then the subversive novelty of time being a *res pretiosissima et irrecuperabilis*,[16] a direct first progenitor of the US slogan ‘Time is money.' Together with an unbounded mechanical space organised around individual nuclei of force, an arithmetic time, neutral yet increasingly problematical, completes the Cartesian dimensions of an analytical Individualist cosmography, where Man becomes to Man merely an object of attraction or repulsion in time. Desensualised calculation encroaches upon fundamental human relationships of producer to product, man to woman, parent to child. The brief interlude of a harmonious Renaissance whole of autonomous personalities -- still visible in Boccaccio, Rabelais, or some of Shakespeare's comedies and romances -- draws to an abrupt close. Man can no longer attempt to realise himself within such a flexible whole, whose 'clearly limited several members were bound into a harmony in which each tone as such sounded with perfect clearness',[17] but only as a severed individual ruling ‘at the expense of’ nature and other exploited individuals -- women, children, workers, economically weaker citizens, poorer peoples. In such a context, intimate contacts of one individual with another grow increasingly intolerable. Drama shows this very clearly: Shakespeare's socially unmotivated but full-blown figures can touch, clash and harmonise;

Diderot and Lessing present only a pragmatic social morality of cooperation between individuals of a young and still oppositional class. Following this downward trajectory, Individualism arrives by way of the anti-social Romantic revolt (early Schiller, Hugo) to wholly egotist moral Robinsons (realist drama). Finally, as the only connection possible between the desert islands of individual psyches, there remain psychotic conflicts -- a connection, if I may say so, by ground-to-ground missiles across the seas of incommunicability (from naturalists through psychoanalysts to psychopathologists, say, Hauptmann--O'Neill—T. Williams).

Beckett has, after all this, understandably preferred to leave his figures without any bounds to speak of- except the scenically functional ones. When the rule is that Man is wolf to Man, then a ruthless defence of the self and denial of human solidarity becomes a realistic alternative. (Shaw played on this, sometimes questionably, from *Mrs Warren's Profession* to *Major Barbara*.) In throwing out the baby of 'Man to Man', Beckett's *dramatis personae* may get rid of the dirty bath of wolfishness.

Reification, the subordination of man to objects or things, is the second main aspect of the price exacted by Individualism. Within desensualised relationships *things* in their quantitativeness take pride of place. The arithmetic equivalents of things, *bodies*, and of their quantitative relations, *forces*, constitute the backbone of the clear and impoverished world-image of Rationalism. Here the ideal of plenty is no longer a stimulus for sensual enjoyment, a glorious and beautiful means as it was for Boccaccio, Alberti, Leonardo or Rabelais. No longer controlled by generic human values, quantitative abundance turns into an end in itself, running riot. Production divided from the producer is objectified. This process goes on until in the ideal-typic case of bourgeois Individualist society 'the capital is independent and personal, while the active individual is dependent and impersonal'.[18] Man, the producer and creator, is depersonalised on all fronts: economically (the capital), physically (one operation in the work process, soon mechanised), organisationally (the factory and its equivalents), legally (the company, increasingly anonymous in ownership and management), cognitively (specialisation, later institutionalisation), politically (the growing apparatus of States and parties), and so forth. The dehumanised Leviathans of economics, society, state, correspond to reified people. The lay deity of things, commodities, possessions, dominates in such a world over a degraded personality. Beckett will try to escape this domination by rejecting things, while retaining and insisting on the degraded figures: *results without causes* make up the Beckettian world.

If Beckett's world can thus be most usefully understood as a balance sheet which 'takes stock... and reduces to essential terms the three centuries, during which those ambitious processes of which Descartes is the symbol... accomplished the dehumanisation of man',[19] the question posed at the beginning of this section assumes the following shape: what kind of reduction does this world represent? To put it baldly, is it a laudatory or condemnatory balance in its judgement on the great Individualist tradition? The shying away from any unique individual experience and its replacement by reiterated, pseudo-allegorical events whose superimposition creates an apparently timeless experience -- indeed, the whole savage degradation of world and man (a main theme of Beckett's opus), which can be identified as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Individualist relationships to their logical and historical end-result -- all such pointers leave little doubt of the implied sardonic comment. Lucky's speech, or any number of shorter examples, can be cited in proof:

Pozzo: He used to dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, and even the hornpipe. He capered. For joy. Now that's the best he can do. Do you know what he calls it?

Estragon: The Scapegoat's Agony.

Vladimir: The Hard Stool.

Pozzo: The Net. He thinks he's entangled in a net.

Vladimir: (*squirming like an aesthete*). There's something about it...

Few people would, I imagine, dissent from a comment such as: 'The theatre of Beckett is a testament where the ruin of a civilization is written.'[20]

The stance or *Gestus* of a sardonic judgement on the history of Individualism, its import, thought, and art, explains why Beckett accompanies his bleak abstraction of its relationships with harking back, in some aspects, to pre-Individualist forms and modes. For all its Newtonian inner relations, this closed universe has a distinct affinity with the Ptolemaic world. A kind of infantile nostalgia for sweeping the board clear and returning to supposedly less complex and compromised relations seems implied in many facets of Beckett's universe. Their subsidiary status indicates, I think, that the author is aware of the impossibility of devolution. History may come to a stop, but it cannot run backwards. Beckett's arrested Individualist, and individual, Purgatory is godless because Individualist, and frozen because Beckett is unable to believe in Individualism any longer. His own unhappy Rationalist consciousness is continually faced with a paradox insoluble from within the Individualist frame: 'I speak of an art turning from [the plane of the feasible] in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road'. The Beckett of 'Three Dialogues' prefers to that art an 'expression' in which the consciousness that 'there is nothing to express' joins hands with an equally strong consciousness of 'the obligation to express'.[21] The Self, final atom of the Individualist world, has broken up, leaving a void; yet the Individualist tradition of self-questioning goes undaunted on, tragicomically enclosing the void.

3. It is now perhaps possible to approach some conclusions about the relevance of Beckett's vision to people in today's historical situation. Most conclusions affirming that relevance rely on two groups of arguments. The ***first*** claims that Beckett's figures stand for millions of workers and other people deprived of mastery over the result of their actions, or uneasily and anxiously aware of the senseless and even suicidal nature of these results, for whom action amounts to pseudo-activity. Furthermore, the full representativeness of Beckett's *dramatis personae* is seen in that they not only do nothing but at the same time keep wanting to go on: 'What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness'. As a proof of this, we are offered the tone or mode of sad farce informing his work, which reflects the 'sadness of all human fate', creating human solidarity and compassion which 'may make this fate a little less unbearable.[22] This claim consists, then, of two assumptions: (1) about the deeply gloomy present-day status of man; (2) about the wittily cognitive and comfortingly humanist nature of Beckett's comment on it. Beckett himself emphatically supports the first assumption, and there is no doubt that it constitutes the focus of his worldview. In the few interviews he has given, he explicitly attributed to any conscious person today the consciousness of his ignorance and impotence, in a world which is a 'mess'.[23] I see no reason for rejecting the first assumption -- supported by many aspects of the Seventy Years' War (so far) and other reifying processes of this century, and very much akin to Marx's boiling shame and Brecht's frozen indignation at the world and men around them -- provided one does not intolerantly claim that facet of human affairs as an exhaustive and timeless picture of 'all human fate' ever or today. It is also true that the persistence of Beckett's figures, in spite of the void in which they find themselves and which is found in them, implies that their situation still contains at least some sense. 'I persist, therefore I am' could be their slogan, literally true

on the stage. In a way, they are obviously not complete nihilists: ideal-typic nihilists can hardly be shown in any kind of scenic performance, including Happenings. Any gestic or verbal action, with however little sense, implies some rudimentary orientation towards values. But Beckett's basic formal device is a *hesitating balance*, without any clear leaning to either side. (I would myself venture the hypothesis that this balance is a quite interesting expression of the present arrested balance in European and world history -- and I do not mean the pragmatic balance between the great powers.) To say that Beckett' figures show the inability of man to be a nihilist is to see clearly one side of the balance; but the correspondingly prominent other side shows at the same time the inability of man to be anything but a nihilist. The cognitive and humanist – as different from the witty -- aspect of Beckett's standpoint remains thus to be proved. Even a superficial glance at, say, *Waiting for Godot*, its two-act structure, two pairs of figures, balancing situations, etc. points to this balancing act. In some dialogues, even the central 'indifferent' pointer of the balance is clearly seen: "*Vladimir*: Now... (*Joyous*.) There you are again... (*Indifferently*). There we are again... (*Gloomy*.) There I am again."

Another approach, still within the first group of arguments, purports to prove the humanism of Beckett by his integrity in facing the void of the *condition humaine* without yielding to temptations of facile consolation.[24] Again, one has to recognise that in his best works Beckett does take up such a stance, which is far more dignified and realistic than any shallow optimism peddled by organisation men of the *status quo*. The religious oleograph, the pseudo-idyll of a prosperous labour/capital embrace, or the buxom milkmaid/smiling tractor driver pastoral are all of them unworthy escapes from a complex reality. Yet this approach too seems to go begging the main question, which is: can the human situation be wholly equated with a hopeless anguish? If not, then no posture before an only partly understood situation can be accepted as intellectually satisfactory, much less as a tragic revelation. This argument covers also the -- in part undoubtedly valid[25] -- third approach of this group, which claims that a clearly described internal reality of some people, or any person, is relevant for all, and that even showing the absurdity of existence in a world without certainties is a first step towards mastering reality. Since the Bomb -- to name only a most visible element -- all men are more than ever members of each other's internal, even psychotic realities; but mastering our common reality depends, again, on our mature identification of the world as a process, not as an arrested Faustian anti-wish or curse *'Verweile doch, du bist so ungewiss!'* [O Time, arrest your flight, you are so -- uncertain].

The approaches of this first group have a common denominator in supposing Beckett to be more or less mirroring an existing state of reification, void, absurdity. The second group -- a much fainter voice among West European and American critics -- finds: 'He destroys in order to construct a city which never rises; but the space is cleared'.[26] A destroyer of the Terrene City clearing the ground for the Heavenly City, which could be implied *a contrario* to what he feels as horrible and therefore destroys: this view of an anti-bourgeois St Sam the Baptist is undoubtedly attractive to any sympathetic criticism with religious overtones, from Christian to some passing for Marxian. What is more, up to a point it can be quite plausible. Beckett did clear quite a lot of ground. For example, after *Waiting for Godot*, writing dramas as do Eliot or Williams, Camus or later Ionesco is no doubt still possible, but it can no longer be regarded as a significant artistic pursuit. In a wider context, his merciless devaluing of all Individualist values, his presentation of depersonalised agents and spaces certainly has a latent element of deadpan social satire. Brecht was probably going to use this element in his first go at an adaptation of *Waiting for Godot*, where the figures and their dialogues were to have been socially anchored (Estragon being a worker, Vladimir an intellectual, Pozzo a large landowner,

etc.).[27] Quite coherent performances of Beckett as a realistic awful warning can be given by emphasising this aspect: I have seen *Endgame* convincingly performed with the fundamental directing idea of an atomic shelter after global destruction, i.e. as prophetic, dystopian science fiction (in the Zagreb Drama Theatre, season 1958-9).

This side of, and apology for, Beckett can best be clarified by a comparison with the first great anti-Individualist writer, Swift. Both of them write as inhabitants of some cursed islands, of wholly black regions from which there is no way out. Both respond to this dystopian Rationalist world by pushing Rationalist propositions to their absurd extreme in a cold and savage anguish. Yet the parallel breaks down at a decisive point: Swift's sarcasm demonstrates implicitly (and sometimes explicitly, see, e.g. the Lindalino or Roman Senate episodes in *Gulliver's Travels*) the necessity of a radical transvaluation of all values to reverse the tide of Individualist beastliness. Beckett's clowning spurns any such possibility. He demonstrates a valueless, dehumanized world; but, in an almost as dehumanized way, he lacks values in the name of which to resent such a world. His destructiveness has thus the effect of abolishing all horizons behind which a new City of the Sun may rise. Finding themselves in a destroyed world, his figures harbour a pathological fear of any 'potential procreator'.[28] In the final balance, then, all presentations of Beckett either as the cognitive mirror of a desensualised and reified humanity, or as the symbolic destroyer of such a humanity clearing the ground for a new City, fail in my view to prove a full relevance of the mirroring or the open-ended character of the destroying. Let us not forget that Beckett deals in peripheral, exasperated situations of man and his consciousness. The gamut of his clowning devices has turned the reduction of his means -- story, figures, environment, language -- into an outstanding case of making a virtue out of one's limitations; yet the limitations remain. Epistemologically, they centre in the aprioristic conviction that Man exists, and has to endure, not only in an unchanging but in an absolutely unchangeable world: what might fairly be called a 'Platonic Gothic' parable. Beckett's avowed remoteness from the 'Apollonian' in art and his insistence that the 'mess' of our world cannot be explained or understood[29] are aspects of that conviction. If his key word 'Perhaps' does not prevent attempts at action and understanding, it does not encourage them either; in times of most dire need for them, as ours is, this may make quite a difference.

On the other hand, whole reaches of profound and most relevant human experience -- from the joy of harmonious achievement, through the tragedy made possible by ideals, to the keenest intellectual pleasure in a critical understanding of the rich and pulsating dialectics of life, of people in society -- are simply outside Beckett's wavelength. The logic: Didi and Gogo are sadly hopeless; they are men; therefore all men are sadly hopeless -- has the fundamental flaw of not distinguishing between the particular and the general, thus falling under the rule of categorical syllogistics *ex propositionibus mere particularibus nihil sequitur* (from merely particular propositions nothing follows -- this last, I hasten to add, is meant for apologetic Beckettians more than for the artist who largely operates by another kind of logic). Yet the lack of a central and all-embracing relevance should not, despite apologists who simply overlook this, make us forget what relevance can be found in Beckett's work: for where and when it is relevant, it is supremely so. I suggested earlier that it was relevant in random and closed situations of human existence: in war, camps, prisons, sickness, old age, grim helplessness of all kinds. As children of this century, however, we have seen that it is often very difficult to tell the centre from the periphery. The threat of grim helplessness hangs continually over all of us collectively, and unduly often over many of us personally. Beckett's stoic compassion is clearly relevant to situations which their protagonists are unable to change, as long as they are unable to change them. Of course, in the worst dehumanizing hells of Nazism, Stalinism or, say, Southern US racism, even in concentration camps, the flame of human revolt has never quite

died (third law of thermodynamics!): Dante's Farinata and Ulysses have had a progeny as well as Belacqua. Beckett's work lacks the vivifying tension between Belacqua and Ulysses, the revolt of life. Yet its tragically sterile, ahistorical hatred of Individualist sham and dehumanisation remains a historical and aesthetic fact -- as does his uncritical fascination with the death of energy.

The uses of Beckett in a non-Individualist tradition remain therefore manifold, from transmutation into social criticism, through deeper understanding of some new black facets of global human (and particular socialist) experiences, up to formal, material delight in this sleek 'dying gladiator' in the stockyards of our age. I do not think it is by chance that Brecht, who wrote plays on the saints of these stockyards (Joan and Simone, Vlassova and Grusha), was trying to find and reclaim what he could use from the waiters for Godot. On the contrary, I think such uses would clearly have been, and still are, based on the fact that alienation of man has been up to now persistent in the brief history of socialist societies, even shaping some new varieties of crass institutionalization. While this does not speak against the great experiment in changing Man and the world, it certainly speaks for an intelligent and judicious inclusion of Beckett's gloomy opus and vision within its larger horizons, as a possible dead-end to be kept in mind, understood, and avoided. Also, and above all, to be performed, with the pleasure of beholding which arises from the possibilities of understanding -- yes, and of learning -- latent within it, as within any genuine work of art.

With all these preliminaries over, one could begin to enter into a true inside dialogue with Beckett's dramaturgy and with his plays.

Notes

[1] Werner Hecht, 'Brecht "und" Beckett', *Theater der Zeit* 14, (1966), p. 30. See also the similar, if politer, view of the Russian critic Surkov, quoted in Pierre Mélèse, *Samuel Beckett* (Paris, 1966), p. 159; even Lukács has at times taken up similar simplified positions. But cf. the significant parallel between Brecht and Beckett in Hans Mayer, 'Brecht's Drums, a Dog, and Beckett's *Godot'*, in Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust eds., *Essays on Brecht* (Chapel Hill NC, 1974), pp. 71-78 (original in *Theater heute*, no. 6 [1972]: 25-27).

[2] This first task of identifying Beckett's worldview seems to have been very skilfully accomplished by US, French, and some other West Europen exegetes. I can only refer here to such critics as Anders, Coe, Cohn, Fletcher and Spurling, Kenner, Jacobsen--Mueller, and Webb to whom this chapter is indebted, although I do not share many of their presuppositions and conclusions. I hope not to be misrepresenting a certain consensus if I condense such analyses in a survey from my own vantage-point.

[3] Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller, *The Testament of Samuel Beckett* (New York, 1964), p. 161.

[4] Cf. for some among a host of examples Camille Flammarion's novel *La Fin du Monde*, or H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*.

[5] Günther Anders, 'Being Without Time,' in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs NJ, 1965).

[6] This has been well noted by Beckett's director Roger Blin, quoted in Mélése, op. cit., p. 149; it could also be called psychotic, see Jacobsen-Mueller, op. cit., pp. 70-1.

[7] Cf. 'Three Dialogues -- by Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit', in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection…* op. cit., p. 17.

[8] Madeleine Chapsal, *L'Express*, 8 February 1957, in Mélèse, op. cit., p. 163.

[9] Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Becket', in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection…*, op. cit., p. 170.

[10] G. Sandier, in Mélèse, op. cit., p. 169.

[11] Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett* (New York, 1961). p. 63.

[12] Cf. Kenner; also Anders, op. cit., p. 147.

[13] Cf. Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* I (Munich, 1920); and the more substantial works of Marx, Sombart, Simmel, Lukács 1971, and Hauser in the bibliography to my essay "On Individualist Dramaturgy".

[14] Cf. the works of Weber, von Martin, and Tawney in the bibliography to my essay "On Individualist Dramaturgy", where this argument is more fully developed, and an early application in L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London, 1962).

[15] T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays* (London, 1961).

[16] Alfred von Martin, *Soziologie der Renaissance* (Stuttgart, 1932), p. 119.

[17] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Munich, 1927), p. 169.

[18] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 2.

[19] Kenner, op. cit., p. 132.

[20] P. Marcabru, in *Mélèse*, op. cit., p. 165.

[21] Three Dialogues', op. cit., p. 17.

[22] Anders, *op. cit*., pp. 144, 151; the argument summarised here runs through most of his essay.

[23] As reported by L. Shenker in the *New York Times*, and Tom Driver in *Columbia University Forum*, both in Mélèse, op. cit., pp. 137-40.

[24] Cf. Martin Esslin. 'Introduction', in *Samuel Beckett*; *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 14.

[25] The million spectators of *Waiting for Godot* in its first five years cannot be dismissed out of hand; nor the fact that the Belgrade theatre Atelje 212 performed it on and off for ten years.

[26] Jacobsen and Mueller, op. cit., p. 163.

[27] Main fragments of this adaptation have been quoted in Hecht; but see also a report on a later and different plan of adapting in K. Rülicke-Weiler, *Die Dramaturgie Brechts* (Berlin DDR. 1966),

[28] *Endgame*. The French text, suppressed in English, is much more explicit; e.g. see the trilingual edition *Dramatische Dichtungen in drei Sprachen* I (Frankfurt, 1963), p. 304: *'Clov:* ... Quelqu'un. C'est quelqu'un! -- *Hamm*: Eh bien, va l'exterminer...(*Vibrant*.) Fais ton devoir!'

[29] Cf. the interviews with Shenker and Driver. Adorno has observed that in *Waiting for Godot* (as well as in *Endgame*) there is a dramaturgic episode shaped by Hegel's master-servant motif, one of the central contradictions of our epoch: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1981), pp. 370-1. But another way of getting at the anti-Apollonian one-sidedness

of *Beckett's* dramaturgy would be to reverse Adorno's powerful vindication by stressing that Pozzo and Lucky are a *dismissed episode*.