

A PLAYWRIGHT OF THE MID CENTURY: SAMUEL BECKETT

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Translated by Dolores Burdick

Editor's Note:

Charles McKenna was a student at Oakland University from 1962 to 1966, graduating with majors in French, Russian and Chemistry. Today he is Professor of Chemistry at the University of Southern California, and is recognized around the world for his groundbreaking work in phosphorus chemistry. He was the 2005 winner of the OU Alumni Association's Distinguished Achievement Award and a special award from the OU Chemistry Department. In their letters of support, noted French and Russian scientists emphasized the role of McKenna's mastery of foreign languages in the impact he has made on European scientists and collaborators.

The following essay consists of a paper he wrote at OU circa 1964, in a class on mid-century French theater taught by Professor Dolores Burdick, now Emerita Professor of French. Soon after McKenna's graduation, Ms. Burdick submitted the essay to Oakland's earliest scholarly journal, the *Oakland Review*, where it was published—in McKenna's original French version—in Volume II, 1969. The *Review* was dedicated solely to scholarly and scientific articles written by OU students.

In recognition of the recent honors McKenna has been awarded at Oakland University, Ms. Burdick has translated his essay into English. As translated, McKenna's original version follows.

I. The World of Samuel Beckett

Everywhere a sinister darkness descends, swirling like a pestilent fog. The darkness blackens: now it is slithering toward you, whipping around your legs . . . a strange numbness starts rising from your feet, paralyzes your calves, reaches your knees, slowly penetrates your thighs. It's as though you had drunk hemlock. Immobilized now, you are slowly enveloped by a glimmer of ghastly light. . . .

Suddenly you see an amputee bound to a stool by his empty trouser-legs. A gray head covered with sores is showing above his hunched shoulders; from his drooling mouth comes an endless murmured monologue. As far as one can make out, he is unable to move, not even to lower an eyelid over his bloated eye. His hideous face is drenched in tears. It's obvious that this withered paralytic has fallen into talking drivel; nonetheless, one can make out, from bits of his babbled sentences, that he is waiting for death. Words seep from his lips the way blood oozes from a wound that can't be stanchd. And as for you, you too are fixed in your role, the role of spectator: in vain you twist with pain, you plead for help in vain. You cry out: O great God, come to our aid! Useless: no one is listening. In the silence, the derailed thoughts of the mutilated man continue to pour out in a frail, nearly inaudible voice.

A dark form erupts out of the grayish distance, approaches rapidly; turns around the old man like a comet circling a cold black sun, then plunges back into the darkness. Time flows invisibly over your inanimate body, as pitiless and indifferent as a stream flowing over a pebble. Suddenly a beggar is squatting in front of the stool, his big compassionate eyes on the old man who never stops his muttering the whole time. And then, in a flash, he disappears.

Reader! if you are still with me, allow me to welcome you to the work of Samuel Beckett, a mushroom who grew up in the shade of the great tree called James Joyce—Beckett, that bilingual profligate who pulls the lids off the trash-cans sheltering the bourgeoisie and empties them onto the avant-garde

stage. He is a madman, driven to rip off the veils that hide from man the nerve shattering reality of his misery, tearing away from the human condition the bandages of a worn-out humanism. This Irishman who exiled himself from his own language in order to teach Kafka to speak French, is the prophet of a nightmare where his grotesque characters find themselves cemented in petit bourgeois nothingness. He deals with characters whose impotence and feebleness make even suicide impossible, and who blanket themselves in complaints and reproaches the way a repentant sinner covers himself with ashes. Their sin is to go on living when they are no longer really alive.

Beckett is neither novelist nor dramatist; he is quite simply a torturer, the poet of masochism. His Absurd is as far from the drawing-room absurdism of a Sartre or a Camus as the groomed and gilded interior of a theater from the alleyway of stinking hovels that lies behind it. Beckett is a Jules Feiffer who doesn't try to make you smile. The bizarre look of his stage-sets summons a burst of laughter that is instantly stifled by the mordant realism of his texts, which for the most part are nothing but streams of consciousness declaimed in a quasi-dramatic context, and whose banality and profound despair are magnified by the atrocious condition of their declaimers.

What they have in common, the various well-known outcasts of the Emerald Isle—isle of potatoes, clergy-dominated isle—is the burgeoning of their genius when exiled in a foreign land—Swift and Shaw in England, Joyce and Beckett in France. The former, raised in Protestantism and interested in politics, satirize their society. The latter are reared in the Church, but being individualists and vagabonds, give their attention to art alone and isolate themselves from society, have nothing to do with it. One consequence of the Church's obstinate claim to go on existing after the Reformation: when a young man of talent, instructed by priests, finally revolts, he undergoes a reaction against his education exactly the way this occurred at the beginning of the Renaissance.

There is a very erudite art that affirms the individual against the immense and stifling collectivity from which he has

just freed himself. I refer particularly to Joyce. Beckett is of the next generation, and his thought reflects the troubled era of the Counter-Reformation, when the first ecstasy of individual liberty was transforming into a hopeless pessimism in the face of the uncertainty which this liberty and this individualism had drawn into man's existence. This spirit of the 17th century—of the France of Pascal and Descartes—surrounds the work of Beckett with its contradictory mixture of the rational and the irrational.

Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. He follows Joyce to famous Trinity College where he receives his B.A. in 1927, majoring in French and Italian. During the 1930's, he is named reader of English at the Ecole normale superieure, then reader of French at Trinity College. He roams around Europe and moves in with Joyce as his secretary. Joyce dictates *Finnegan's Wake* to him.

This period of his career, lived in the shadow of one of the most original authors in the galaxy of English letters, was not very productive for Beckett. Holed up in a small furnished apartment in the fourth *arrondissement*, isolating himself from Paris, he lazily spends entire days in bed, and when his energy returns, he wastes it wandering about aimlessly in France or Germany.

He publishes *Whoroscope*, a collection of poems ala T.S. Eliot, weighed down with pedantic notes; also there are some middling stories and, more importantly, two essays: "Work in Progress," comparing Joyce with two Catholics of the Renaissance, Giordano Bruno and Dante Alighieri; and an essay on Proust, written in a feverish, neurasthenic style.

After the tidal wave sweeping inter-war Europe from 1939 to 1942, Beckett seems to pull himself out of the ruins and sets about writing in furious earnest. This fertile period, from the middle of the war up to 1950, sees the birth of the works that will establish him in the front ranks of mid-century literature, of which the following are written in French: *Murphy*, *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*,—all stream-of-consciousness

novels—and the play *Waiting for Godot*. Then he catches his breath while Godot spreads his fame from one end of the West to the other.

In 1956 he goes back to work: in addition to translating several of his novels into English, he writes *Endgame* (1956), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *How It Is* (a novel, 1960), and *Happy Days* (1961). In these works one can see how hard he is trying to go beyond his own apocalypse, already over-populated with legless cripples, rot, horror and impotence, as he seeks to attract and excite an audience which he himself has helped render blasé and indifferent. Like concentration camp prisoners, they no longer open their mouths to scream in the face of atrocity, but only to yawn.

If you are acquainted with *The Spanish Tragedy*, you might say that Beckett is the petty bourgeois Thomas Kyd. Thus he worries about brutalizing his audience until their nerves no longer respond to his thrusts; he is afraid of being shipwrecked on the reef of horror's *nee plus ultra*.

Many critics have already pointed out that *Godot*—holding a place apart from the rest of Beckett's plays—includes the symbolic tree and the repetitive ritual of Noh drama; the small cast and the waiting for a *deus ex machina* of Greek theatre; the indefatigable improvisation of the *commedia dell'arte*; and the buffoonery and coarse joking of vaudeville. No character is ever alone; Beckett's theatre is a theatre of the symbiotic couple: Hamm-Clov, Lucky-Pozzo, Vladimir-Estagon, Winnie-Wilie, old Krapp and the young Krapp recorded on tape: *tecum nee sine te*. They are all unable to help one another, incapable of understanding one another. The beckettian character is old: hard of hearing, poorly shaven, flabby, with a purple-veined nose (Krapp); bald (Willie); hobbling (Vladimir); blind (Pozzo); mute (Lucky); covered with a bloody handkerchief (Hamm). Almost all of them are immobilized, mutilated, or afflicted with some disease; Hamm cannot get up from his wheelchair; Clov cannot sit down (acathesia); Nell and Nagg, Hamm's parents, having lost their legs in an accident, live in two boxes over a pile of saw-dust; if they chatter too much,

Hamm has them closed up the way one shuts a music box when the tune starts getting on your nerves. Krapp is a drunkard, Winnie is buried in earth up to her waist, Willie, an old man with no strength left, plies his way back and forth on all fours between Winnie and the hole where he lives. Endgame takes place in a subterranean room. They watch the world outside through a spy-glass, from a little window high up near the ceiling. *Happy Days* takes place in a sterile expanse, broiled by a pitiless sun. Krapp records his last tape in a ramshackle hut. Godot is awaited on "a country road, with tree."

The characters, the settings: thanks to Beckett's determination to avoid at any cost a meaning in any of his plays, my task from here to the end of the discussion will be easy. It is enough to stress that Beckett's theater represents a state, an indefinite duration, where time is directed toward noon, turns toward the north; then it turns again, and takes up the same circuits. Nothing makes itself clear, nothing ends, nothing new ever happens. The characters gnaw on the hopes of what might be, and stuff themselves with memories of what has been, but for now they are adrift in the Sargasso Sea which is their life; there is nothing but to repeat and repeat themselves. They perform acts, but they never act. Their world is limited to a small sum of possible gestures, like the world of a prisoner in his cell. To prevent themselves from thinking, they play, or they engage in conversation.

Beckett's style suggests a Remembrance of Things Past improvised aloud by a guy hanging onto a strap in the subway. In fact, the anti-hero of *The Unnameable* is an Everyman who thinks he is Proust. One is tempted to imagine Beckett watching the nib of his pen with astonishment as it scratches on a sheet of paper. Rebellng against the carefully constructed, maze like art of James Joyce, Beckett reduces the novel to a sort of transcription of his thoughts, however banal they may be—an automatic, impersonal thing, like recording his pulse on a chart while he sits on the doctor's table.

One cannot read certain passages of *Happy Days* or of his novels without suspecting that the spirit of the author was en-

cased in an iron lung; that he was worn out, that he was forcing himself to get to the end of the page, whatever the cost.

The plays of Beckett can be divided into two categories: *Waiting for Godot*. and all the others, the ones that repeat themselves over and over. In *Endgame*, Beckett, who often enjoyed playing chess with himself, represents life as an endgame where neither victory nor defeat is possible. After this symbolic war of attrition, the chessboard is almost empty: only Nagg and Nell are left, like two pawns, one white, one black. Clov (cloven hoof) and Hamm (ham actor; parody of *I am*, expression of identity that his uncertainty denies the beckettian anti-hero)—each incapable of making the one move of which the other is capable—make only the few useless moves they *are* permitted, two chess kings trapped in an eternal checkmate.

Krapp's *Last Tape*—once again, filled with endless repetitions—relies on a scenic invention to capture the audience: Krapp has recorded his monologues on tapes, marked in chronological order—a system that spares him the anguish of doubting his own memory.

Old Krapp, going to the back of the stage from time to time to take a drink, is listening to his voice at thirty, recounting an act of love with a young woman in a boat. The Krapp of sixty-nine, “drowned in dreams and burning to get it over with,” is celebrating the sale (seventeen copies!) of a book, while listening twice to the tape.

“My best years are gone. But I wouldn't want them back again.” While the curtain falls, he remains motionless onstage, staring into emptiness while the tape continues to roll in silence. The important question here, “the answer to which I leave to you,” is whether or not the unexpected bitterness of the line “I wouldn't want them back again” saves the play from a self-indulgent sentimentalism that its scenic brilliance tries to keep hidden.

Act Without Words simplistically expresses Beckett's favorite themes: impotence and frustration. A mime seated near a tree, hearing a whistle blow offstage, goes out and is at once pushed violently back onstage. This back-and-forth is repeated

several times. Meanwhile, a jug of water is lowered from above, just out of the mime's reach. He tries to climb the tree to reach the water, but the branches bend under him and he falls down. Blocks of wood are now lowered by a rope from above. The mime piles them up and climbs onto the pile. At the moment his hand is about to seize the jug, it is jerked out of his reach. The mime climbs the rope that had served to lower the blocks of wood; it gets cut. He prepares to seize the jug with a lasso; the jug is again jerked upward, out of his reach. The whistle blows. The mime runs off stage right and is immediately thrown back, landing on the ground. Curtain. It would be hard to miss the "meaning" of this play; any explication is superfluous.

Happy Days, coming out in 1961, presents Winnie, a plump blonde matron, and her husband Willie, a sixty-year old whose bald head is spotted with bloodstains. The play consists of the series of actions of which Winnie is capable, given that she is buried to the waist. She fumbles in her purse, wipes her glasses, brushes her teeth, looks at herself in a little hand mirror, throws a water-glass on the ground, pulls a hankie from her bodice, twists her neck trying to see Willie. She utters a monologue that swamps the audience in endless banalities—the only respite being an infrequent mutter from Willie, who reads the want ads, asks Winnie for a pornographic post-card, mouths a smutty pun, and makes an occasional effort to say "yes" so she'll believe he's listening to her. If one could forget the horror of their physical condition, one would think we were in an old couple's parlor on some Sunday in summer. Mechanically scanning the newspaper, dreaming about the silly love-affairs of youth, they are happy just thinking of insignificant and stupid things; they busy themselves as always with the little habits, the little tasks, the little ills that make up a life.

Happiness! the impotence of being nothing, having nothing to do, spending one's time sucking at stale, faded, rotting memories, or finding joy in a single tender word muttered by a cracked voice. This caricature, this satire of happiness con-

stitutes a battle cry of absurdists like Albee, Ionesco and Beckett, and stems in many ways from the works of Anouilh.

So now let us attack our *piece de resistance*, Godot. The two hoboes signify two exiles, men alienated from society. But paradoxically it is the hoboes who are waiting, while it is Pozzo, the land-owner, the capitalist, who travels. Estragon–Vladimir are isolated from the sociohistorical current of life, and have fallen upon “the worst obstacle to action,” hope—absurd because it is futile. Didi-Gogo are the moraine deposited by the enormous mass of humanity in its slow painful progress through time. The roles of Pozzo and Lucky are defined by an elementary economic relation: Pozzo is the master, Lucky is the slave, and the connection between them consists of nothing but this. The chaplinesque duo Didi-Gogo is united by a dull but necessary comraderie: they are outside of the society that defines the relations between Pozzo and Lucky, but since they are totally alone, they have to define themselves through one another. In fact, the play survives only because they are playing an eternal Alphonse and Gaston before the question of leaving. Their lamentable buffoonery is a diversion for an audience that says along with them: “Let’s leave. Impossible. Why? We’re waiting for Godot.”

Who is Godot? Godot is that which doesn’t arrive. Godot is the promotion to Branch Manager the company clerk dreams about; Godot is the first love awaited by the old maid in the last years of her youth; Godot is the wealthy patron who will free a poor writer from his daily grind at the department store. For some, Godot is fortune, glory, power, adventure; for others, less ambitious, a secure job in the factory, a decent place to live, the chance to get out of poverty. Godot is the orderly, rational, comprehensible play that the good middle-class audience waits for with ineffable exasperation. That’s the Absurd: the rational, orderly world no longer exists, is wiped out forever, and this ridiculous farce is true, it is real life, or at least—all that remains of it.