

BECKETT'S GODOT: "A bundle of broken mirrors"

by

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Of Modern Poetry
-Wallace Stevens

*The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.*

*It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.*

It must

*Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.*

[Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, p. 174.]

*To write "purely visual perception" is to write a meaningless phrase. Obviously. Because every time we want to make words do a real job of transference, every time we want to make them express something other than words, they align themselves in such a way as to cancel each other out. This, no doubt, is what gives life so much charm. Because it is by no means a matter of awareness, but of vision, of simply seeing. Simply! And of the only field of vision that occasionally allows one merely to see, that doesn't always insist on being misunderstood, that sometimes allows its followers to ignore everything in it that is not appearance, the inner field. -Samuel Beckett, *Le Monde et le pantalon*, 1945]*

When Hamlet said that the dramatist was to hold up a mirror to nature there was implicit in the statement the idea that the reflection would be accurate and would be determined by universal and absolute natural laws which would reveal the stability of human nature underneath the appearances of humans acting out various motives, anxieties, hopes and wishes. The mirror metaphor is one that can be used to tease out different attitudes held over time by our writers and thinkers. Hamlet's mirror reflects stable meaning to the

discerning eye - we have objective knowledge (often screened by appearances or dimmed by our various weaknesses), a medium of transfer (in this case dramatic literature), and a subject. The idea seems to be: if the dramatist has a steady hand, and the mirror has no Hubbell flaws, then the report received by a careful observer will be accurate and meaningful.

In the years since Hamlet that mirror has been turning away from nature and is focusing more on the human face. In the nineteenth century, in a great poem like Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, the mirror is reflecting the human mind:

Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man..
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

and as yet with no apparent distortion. Wordsworth insists that the mind, including the imagination, shapes and gives meaning to the "not-me", the outside world, but finds some spiritual force which binds the mind and all things together. In his famous lines:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting air,
And the blue sky, and in the minds of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Wordsworth has the double theme of:

How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted: - and how exquisitely too -
Theme this but little heard of among men
The external World is fitted to the Mind;
And the creation (by no lower name
Can it be called) which they with blended might
Accomplish: - this is our high argument.

and we can see that he is allowing a reality to both the mind and the "not-mind." His mirror no longer reflects truths from the world to the mind, but acts as a combination mirror and window which allows him to see both the external realities and the *inner field*. No one will deny that Wordsworth's emphasis is on the individual poet's mind, on powerful feelings which have been filtered through the poet's mind or imagination. When he says that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity," he is prophetically stating the twentieth century commonplace about the subjective aspect of knowledge. Today we can agree that the form or meaning seen in a bunch of daffodils, or a lone twisted oak tree is projected into the landscape by the human mind observing the scene, and the nature of the projection is thought to tell us something about the mind which is doing the projection.

As soon as the individual human mind becomes involved in creating the reality and discussing the creating of the reality which Hamlet's mirror was to reflect unaided, we are

involved in a skepticism. Wordsworth's muse becomes, not nature, but his reaction to nature; and his bond of union between himself and the universe becomes delight. Remove the delight and the skepticism becomes solipsism. The mirror darkens and begins to show a twisted, clumsy, anti-hero, alone in an unsponsored universe, turning more and more inward, lost in the cocoon words and thoughts, which may be all that exist. And yet, the same basic human questions persist:

"What am I?"

"Who am I?"

"What should I be?"

persist without the same metaphysical belief systems to offer answers that are objective, knowable, and universal. Wordsworth stands half-way between Shakespeare and Beckett. Wordsworth has a mirror which reflects the world as reflected in his mind, but the mirror is in one piece. When *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were first produced it was apparent that the mirror was broken, and that what Beckett had was "a bundle of broken mirrors" which when dragged out on stage reflected parts of the human stature back and forth in a circular game of hats, words, repetition of scenes, and extremely clever gestures without meaning. There is no longer any delight which binds humans to the universe; there is simply waiting: waiting which fills the reprieve between birth and death, waiting which engages our attention while making the journey from "spermarium to crematorium," waiting which is futile and offers very little suggestion of heroic endurance. This dramatic shift in point of view from objective to subjective and its results as far as understanding works of art is concerned, can be quickly seen by looking at two dramatic monologues.

First, a look at Browning's "My Last Duchess" which has an objectivity and narrative clarity that allows us to reproduce the actors and the scene with a great deal of confidence. There is, of course, an apparent irony which allows us to know more about the speaker than he knows himself. The unity of the poem is remarkable and it is easy to imagine the sets and actors necessary to recreate the visual images the poet gives us in the language. It is an easy poem to translate into film. We know how many characters there are, how they are dressed, where they are standing, when they sit, their gestures, mannerisms, feelings for each other and for themselves - all in a very economical fifty-six lines. It is also clear that the Duke is giving a specific set of rules which he wants his next wife to follow and which the emissary is expected to pass on to the woman as soon as he returns to her. The "last duchess" comes into clear focus very quickly also, and the logical progression of scene is remarkable in its clarity and the abundance of sharply focused images which are created in so short a time. The poem, in short, is a vehicle of communication. **[tape #1 - 3:30]**

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," on the other hand, does not contain the same narrative clarity which allows for a neat and objective translation of poem to film. How many characters are in the poem? Does a visit actually take place? Is there any action at all outside of the speaker's mind? It is a poem of images, of suggestions, of dreams and illusions, of the reflections of the inner troubled spirit of a man who is spiritually anesthetized. The same demons and monsters that haunt early mythologies, that haunt our dreams, are present in this poem - these demons are not externalized but are in the human psyche. Prufrock's "song" is not so much a vehicle of communication as it is a vehicle for communion. Wordsworth's "haunt of the mind" without the controlling feature of a "Spirit that rolls through all things" has become haunted with the inadequacies, trivi-

alities, and fears of the individual person living in what Auden called the “age of anxiety.” Prufrock seems to inhabit a world diminished from its heroic past, from the larger than life sculptures of Michelangelo to talk about the sculptures of Michelangelo, to talk about talk about Michelangelo. **[tape #2 - 7 minutes]**

The two poems represent what Kenneth Burke has called “semantic ideal” - which “aims to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe” and “poetic meaning” which “is not the opposite of semantic meaning, but is other than, more than, or even less than semantic meaning.” While the semantic ideal attempts to get a description by the elimination, or, at least, careful control of attitude, the poetic ideal attempts to attain a full moral act by attaining a perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude.

If one takes the skeptical conclusions developed in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* (the argument from dreams, insanity, illusion or the evil genius argument) but does not find Descartes’ resolution of these conclusions persuasive, then one is indeed caught in a philosophical skepticism that is difficult to escape. The postmodernists take a position which is a form of radical skepticism - that is, they adopt skepticism and relativism as their main doctrine instead of approaching them as challenges to be answered. In general postmodernists take as fiction the Western belief in an independent external reality, would find themselves much closer to Prufrock than the Duke.

Let us look for a moment at just what this radical claim means for traditional philosophical assumptions. The only reason it makes sense to speak of one real object or event about which there have been many different theories or interpretations over the years is the assumption, which postmodernism denies, that these interpretations are about, that is, more or less true or accurate descriptions of, that real object or event. It is because of this modernist assumption that we imagine we are comparing an interpretation to the reality, to see how accurate or inaccurate it is. Since, on this traditional, modern philosophical assumption, there are many more or less accurate interpretations describing the same object, we assume that there is a single reality that all these interpretations are interpretations of and at which they all aim. Imagine many people shooting at the same target; to speak of some shots as “close” and others as “way off” presupposes they are all directed at a single bulls-eye. But if language fails completely to describe an external reality, then there is really no longer any point in talking about an object apart from particular interpretations, or “readings,” of it. In the target analogy, if shots going up, down, north, south, east, and west were all said to be equally accurate, we would begin to wonder whether there was a target at all.¹

Beckett is a skeptic and the ghost of Descartes is never far off stage. The emphasis in Beckett’s art is on technique, on the medium itself, but he still has to use words when he talks to us. And yet, as anyone can see by just looking at the text of either *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, Beckett is primarily interested in presenting action as an instrument of communion instead of language as an act of communication. *Endgame* more than any play of our century emphasizes this subjective, Cartesian, center from its very opening scene in which Hamm’s head is as much the stage as is the stage which is like Hamm’s head. About half of the total text of in *Endgame* is devoted to precise stage directions which do not allow for the different actor interpretations, of, say, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Beckett is not concerned with creating personalities which change, through

¹ David Stewart and H. Gene Blocker, *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, 3rd edition, page 242.

either growth or decay, but in presenting stylized puppets who act out a certain response to the human condition. The characters perform their dances in a very stylized and almost mathematical consistency, complete with masks of greasepaint and costumes which assert that they are not realistic characters. But what is *Waiting for Godot* about? How can we get our bearings in this non-representational landscape?

In a sense Didi and Gogo are the traditional fools of English dramatic literature. They ape the actions and attitudes of their “betters” just as King Lear’s fool mimics his actions. The difference between a Beckett clown and a Shakespeare fool is, of course, that in a Beckett play we are never given the “betters” to allow us to complete the comparisons. We feel at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot* that we, as audience, are the “betters” necessary to complete the relationship, but find by the end that we have really been watching ourselves dancing on the stage in our game of waiting. One thing the play does is burst the balloons of optimism which we all like to carry around on strings to give us a lift whenever we are in trouble. These balloons are the “old answers,” “the existence of a personal God ... with white beard” and an ordered purposeful universe. Notice that the Beckett character never discredits God - what he does however is discredit and ridicule our elaborate rational machinery for explaining God and Her ways.

Lucky’s speech, for example, is a cleverly contrived attack not against God but against arguments for the existence of or explanation of God. One critic likens these verbal incantations to “a record moving at the wrong speed or suffering from a stuck needle.” The attitude, the tone, the language and the contradictions, which follow quickly upon one another, serve to undercut all efforts to make the play’s meaning somber or significant, and leave us half-puzzled, enchanted by the delightful juggling act we have witnessed. Beckett once told an interviewer “I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. ‘Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.’ That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.”

Waiting for Godot has a wonderful shape. Act one ends:

Estragon: Well, shall we go?
 Vladimir: Yes, let’s go.
 (They do not move.)

Act two ends:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
 Estragon: Yes, let’s go.
 (They do not move.)

The play is a repetition of circular motions, echoes, actions, and gestures which moves within a prescribed circumference, the circle of consciousness, the circle of a mind, the Cartesian circle seeking a reference point outside itself. In a way, of course, every work of art echoes and repeats acts, attitudes, and emotions; but, whereas many works tend to create and echo which widens in concentric, always widening circles, *Waiting for Godot* has a structure which never defines a larger circle outside of the simple factual assertions and haunting epistemic questions which it makes. And we are told explicitly time and time again that this is a play. Estragon’s “I find this really most extraordinarily interesting,” and “Some diversion!” and Vladimir’s “How time flies when one has fun” and “This is becoming really insignificant” are detached from the action, as though Vladimir and Estragon are themselves spectators at the play. Estragon directs Vladimir to an un-

named Men's room, "End of corridor, on the left." and Vladimir requests, "Keep my seat." There are, of course, neither seats nor corridors on stage.

The play makes sense if one looks at it as the resultant dialogue and actions of two actors placed on stage without a script who must fill an allotted time with speeches, actions, anything just to keep the play going for the specified time. This is certainly implicit in the very first line of the play:

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

We think at first that Estragon is talking about his inability to pull off his boots. But it is also a comment about the play in general, about plays in general, and a marvelous comment at that, for the traditional idea is that at the beginning of a play there is everything to be done! There is a plot to unwind, a setting and situation to establish, conflicts to establish, characters to be developed, motives to be analyzed, causes and effects to be carefully balanced showing a necessary connections between actions and events, and in short, an entire complicate story to be presented before the audience. But Beckett undercuts all of this in the first sentence. Estragon is saying: Well here we are. We have two and one half hours to fill. We have to do something; we'll have no rest until this performance is over. And we will have a better time of it if we cooperate. See how this attitude is manifest throughout the play. For example, on page nine we find Vladimir attempting to relate the New Testament story of the crucifixion:

V: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

E: No.

V: Shall I tell it to you?

E: No.

V: It'll pass the time. (Pause.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Savior. One... E: Our what?

V: Our Savior. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other...(he searches for the contrary of saved)...damned.

E: Saved from what?

V: Hell.

E: I'm going. (He does not move.)

V: And yet...(pause)...how is it - this is not boring you I hope - how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there - or thereabouts - and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (Pause.) Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?

E: I find this really most extraordinarily interesting.

Here Vladimir makes a direct request for help: if Gogo doesn't "return the ball" the dialogue will stop and nothing will fill the silence. How many times does one or the other player threaten to leave? And if one of them did leave, what would become of the play? Without someone to play ball with there would be no game for us spectators to watch. Shortly after this exchange the two almost run out of things to say again:

E: Let's go.

V: We can't.

E: Why not?

V: We're waiting for Godot.

Vladimir's assertion allows for continued discussion. Godot is a means of initiating the dialogue again.

Pozzo and Lucky come on stage. Pozzo delivers a very stylized speech after preparing himself and his audience:

Pozzo: (who hasn't listened) Ah yes! The night. (He raises his head.) But be a little more attentive, for pity's sake, otherwise we'll never get anywhere. (He looks at the sky.) Look! (All look at the sky except Lucky who is dozing off again. Pozzo jerks the rope.) Will you look at the sky, pig? (Lucky looks at the sky.) Good, that's enough. (They stop looking at the sky.) What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (Pause.) In these latitudes. (Pause.) When the weather is fine. (Lyrical.) An hour ago (he looks at his watch, prosaic) roughly (lyrical) after having poured forth even, since (he hesitates, prosaic) say ten o'clock in the morning (lyrical) tirelessly torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale (gesture of the two hands lapsing by stages) pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until (dramatic pause, ample gesture of the two hands flung wide apart) pppfff! finished! it comes to rest. But - (hand raised in admonition) but behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (vibrantly) and will burst upon us (snaps his fingers) pop! like that! (his inspiration leaves him) just when we least expect it. (Silence. Gloomily.) That's how it is in this bitch of an earth.

Up to now there has been an insidious undermining of language as a means of communication. "Nothing to be done.", "I'm going", "It's not certain", "It hurts?", "It's inevitable", "What'll we do now?" But here in Pozzo's speech we seem to have a significant and meaningful passage. And yet, this apparent seriousness is undermined almost immediately by Pozzo's comments on his speech as performance:

P: How did you find me? (Vladimir and Estragon look at him blankly.) Good? Fair: Middling? Poor? Positively bad?

Pozzo is interested only in his performance, his delivery, timing and gestures, and not in any suggested meaning.

Repetitive monotony is a central device in the play and is, perhaps, best symbolized by the ballad that Vladimir sings at the opening of Act II. (A dog came in the kitchen and stole a crust of bread, whereupon he was beaten to death by the cook, then buried by the other dogs, who wrote on his tombstone, "A dog came in the kitchen," etc.). This ballad echoes the circularity of the entire play, and also indicates again that the waiting the two friends are involved in is between the birth and the death of the play, or the opening and closing curtains. The players almost lose the play again in the beginning of Act II, and to Vladimir's cry "Say something!" Estragon says, "I'm trying." They then get the idea of abusing each other; have what they consider not a "bad little canter" and end up in a name-calling contest which is won by Estragon who tops the vituperation with the most horrible name he can spit out:

V: Moron!
 E: Vermin!
 V: Abortion!
 E: Morpion!
 V: Sewer-rat!
 E: Curate!
 V: Cretin!

E: (with finality) Critic!

V: Oh!

(He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.)

The circular structure of the play defines, as it were, a circle of limited and precise size; and every time that a spark of suggested meaning is about to make a connection with a larger concentric circle the spark is grounded by comic undercutting. The many biblical echoes are mocking echoes, perhaps because for so many years Christianity seemed to promise meaning and purpose to so many in the western world. Vladimir thinks of the thief who was saved, only after he declares man's foot is at fault. Of the Gospels, Estragon remembers only the map of the Holy Land, where the blue of the Dead Sea awakens his thirst. Pozzo is mistaken for Godot, and is a kind of god to Lucky. Pozzo laughs to see that Estragon and Vladimir are of the same species as himself, "Made in God's image!" Estragon's comparison of himself to Christ culminates in a bitter contrast, "And they crucified quick." Vladimir's "Christ have mercy upon us" punctuates the information that Godot's beard is neither fair nor black, but white. The final promise of salvation if Godot comes is comically undercut by the dialogue about Estragon's fallen trousers. The two boys who appear echo the Cain and Abel story even as far as suggesting that one is punished and one is not, for inscrutable reasons. All there is outside the circle of this story is another story.

Lucky's incantation contains an extremely clever series of cultural cliches thrown around a central skeleton sentence. If you have not done so yet, now is a good time to play "find the sentence."

Given the existence...of a personal God...who...loves us dearly...and suffers...with those who...are plunged in torment...it is established beyond all doubt...that man ...wastes and pines wastes and pines...the skull fading fading fading.

There are probably other well formed sentences in the speech to be found by the discerning reader/listener. But the action is in the phrases tossed up around and through the syntactically correct structure. This speech is a microcosm of all groups of words, of all stories; faced with a collection of words we automatically begin to look for meaning for intention in the collection. Lucky's speech is a fountain of spewed up information which falls around the central sentence and buries it beyond all but the most careful investigation.

We are asked to think about the central sentence of the play, the idea or ideas of the play. We sift through the outpouring of the characters looking for that central sentence. It tells us about birth and death, salvation, the act of waiting, the fleeting nature of time, the lack of communication among human beings, how to fill the time between birth and death; but as far as the textual facts indicate the play is about how to write a play and the problems encountered by actors who must fill a given segment of time with dialogue.

On the most simple level it seems that what the players are waiting for is the end of the play. But, oh, how this "simple" play resonates. Resonates in the *inner field*.