

The Century of Beckett

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Samuel Beckett: Works for Radio: The Original Broadcasts

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of
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The dark is whence the architectures flow. Whisper drifts in storeyed layers, echoes into tiers on tiers. Partitions planked in vapored lays, in shuttered gloom, and iterating on into the endlessly. Patterns upon patterns; patter upon patter. The night alive in sliding structure. Turbulences infiltrated by the turbulences. Senses drift through senses. Billows ripple countermanded in the breakers throw, and crossings cut through crossings, meshes compromised by their orthogonals and integrally stay, untouched. Networks overlay on networks, waves through waves, and phases down through phases down through phases, as if tears cried in an ocean: “drops of silence through the silence.” Movements laced by motions play, as stretches weave through lines harmonic, everything the metonym in all, and in symphonic flourish.

A field, of forms, forms fallow into forms, all done, undone. The flats dissolving into stages, tower down to tower, melting into melting—the pouring fall of atmosphere to air prepared to fall. The shudder to anticipates the shudder, the chill expectant of the chill. Divisions multiply. The segmentations ramify. The flow in curdle to the flow. And everything is skin between the nowhere and the nowhere, between no where and no where. The nullity in density, dividings in divide, and oscillations of the non compounded into all.

“

I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.

(The Unnamable)

There is a thought. There is one thought, for the thought never changes. The thought is the heart of the history of thought, and the history of thought is but the hovering of a thought. There is no progress of thought but to the diversions from the thought. It is the recognition we would not register, the realization we would fend away, the blink we wish, the flinching that is the soul of mental life, the time of mental life, the biography of the mind. For the thought is out of time. It is the delicate, light, feather of an inkling that turned to whelms to a tidal surge, the mildest hush that at an eye touch billows and pounces. It is the gentle quiver of a breath that shocks the spirit—a thought sustained and halting in the air, suspended like a tuft in the vacant breezes, a weightless filament floating in the wind, that noticed buds, sprouts a head, and strikes.



These millions of different sounds, always the same, recurring without pause, are all one requires to sprout a head, a bud to begin with, finally huge, its function first to silence, then to extinguish when the eye joins in, and worse than the evil, its treasure-house.

(*The Unnamable*)

Some know this thought, for some are those who do what must be done—and some of them are artists. There comes a point for some artists, there comes a point for some thinkers (for here it amounts to the same thing) when one wishes to take on not merely subjects that provide the opportunity or the excuse for committing art or subjects for which one feels a particular personal interest (for here it amounts to the same thing), but instead one wishes to take on the subject of the most dire import, the subject that is compelled by its intrinsic imperatives, the subject that puts its stamp upon personal viewpoint, that defines the artist and is not defined by the artist, the subject that forces its place as the central human concern. There comes a point for some at which one does what must be done—one does what one has no choice but to do. Such instances are detectable, even though they are not noted by biographical testimony, for they occupy their inquirers in silence, in isolation, and once they have imposed themselves, there is nothing to be said of oneself, not to friends, not to intimates, for there are no longer any intimates. There are no longer friends. One is thoroughly alone. Such instances are detectable, for we know them when we encounter them—we know them by the work. For some, only work such as this, work of the gravest urgency, qualifies as art. All the rest is playtime, for art is a desperate measure.



Granted, our beginnings matter, but we make the decisive step toward ourselves only when we no longer have an origin, when we offer as little substance for a biography as God.

(E. M. Cioran, “Beckett”)

Of his friend Samuel Beckett, Cioran wrote, “He lives not in time but parallel to it, . . . He is one of those beings who make you realize that history is a dimension man could have done without.” Which is to say that the thought had occasioned Beckett, that he knew. And it is to acknowledge that Beckett was something more than an authentic artist or a major figure of his age. He was an artist in the fullest sense, in a sense in which few ever are—he was an artist not just by practice but by vocation, not by choice but by calling, not by convention but by authority of vision, not by privilege but by burden, by an endowment that cannot be selected and cannot be denied. He was an artist by virtue of possessing and being possessed by the piercing awareness that is art’s only legitimacy—that is the mind’s only legitimacy.

The year just closed was the centenary year of Beckett, who was born on April 13, 1906, which marks the fact that his life, given its perhaps intrinsically ironic longevity (he died on December 22, 1989), largely coincides with the twentieth century. It is right, for Beckett is more than a child of a century of artistic revolution. And he is more than one of the few artists who continued the advances he adopted, along with the many he engendered, through not only the course of his career but nearly to the close of the century of their own birth, disregarding the retrenchment positions of much of what we continue to refer to, for want of a term, as Postmodern art. Beckett is one of the few artists if not the only artist in any field of artistic endeavor who can be argued the culmination of the artistic movements of which he was both a resident and a source. He is, and very likely is alone in this, the abstract of his time—and of more yet.

The year was laden with moments of observation and obeisance. Grove Press published *The Grove Centenary Editions of Samuel Beckett*, a four-volume set of Beckett's major works in prose, drama, poetry, and criticism. The Samuel Beckett Research Circle of Japan held the Samuel Beckett Festival Tokyo 2006. The Barbican in London conducted its "Beckett Centenary Festival." Other theatre festivals were held around much of the world, museums produced film series, conferences were attended at universities, lectures were given and events were run in France, Denmark, Turkey, and more countries than one could chase to, and, on Beckett's birthday, the British Library published *Samuel Beckett: Works for Radio: The Original Broadcasts*, the project under consideration here.

Samuel Beckett: Works for Radio: The Original Broadcasts is a four-CD set of recordings of the five works Beckett wrote specifically for radio performance: *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music*, *Cascando*, and *Rough for Radio*. It includes as well a recording of *The Old Tune*, Beckett's translation of Robert Pinget's *La Manivelle*, and a monologue titled *From an Abandoned Work*. The recordings are of the original BBC broadcasts, done from 1957 to 1976, the performances for which, in the case of the five works written for radio, the works were commissioned. *La Manivelle* is a work commissioned by the BBC from Pinget—Beckett did the translation for the first production, which is the recording included in this



* Edward Beckett, the nephew of Samuel Beckett and manager of the Beckett estate, has written to *Hyperion* to clarify this matter:

"It was not Sam, but John who was dissatisfied with the music for *Words and Music* and it was John who asked for his music to be removed from all future recordings; Samuel Beckett thought highly of his cousin's music and was hurt and puzzled by John's decision. John had had a crisis of confidence in his abilities as a composer and simply thought that his contribution to the play was not up to quality of the text, a judgment that in my and in many other's opinion was completely wrong.

"As a result of this decision my uncle was at a loss when Everett Frost proposed his series of recordings and not wishing to go against his cousin's wishes suggested Morton Feldman, whom he had met in 1976 in Berlin. I consider Feldman's music here to be much inferior to John Beckett's.

"When the British Library sought permission to issue the original broadcast I spoke to John Beckett, he agreed to it, not wishing to have Pat Magee's performance sacrificed. John died last year and we have so far found no trace of his score of *Words and Music*."

The editors of *Hyperion* apologize for the error in the first version of this essay.

set. *From an Abandoned Work* also is presented in its first, and perhaps only, broadcast performance.

The worth of this set is both in the quality of the performances and in the historic value of the recordings, although these virtues are not equally shared by all the productions. The strength of these productions rests on the actors, most particularly, on the presence of Patrick Magee, who appears in every work, and who can be considered the quintessential Beckett voice. His vocalizations—gravelly yet tender and vulnerable, broken yet strong, aged, filled with rigor, at times barely human, barely articulate, at times almost unlistenable, and always delicately turned to every emotional nuance—is the tonality not just of Beckett's perennial characters but of the Beckett aesthetic. His is the very sound of Beckett's universe. (We know that Beckett felt the same—he wrote *Krapp's Last Tape* for Magee to perform.) The alignment of Magee with Beckett is one of the gifts this last century received. Present as well are two of the other actors who helped to define Beckett on stage, who knew him, worked with him, and understood how to forge the message: Jack MacGowran and Billie Whitelaw. Any recording of either of these two doing Beckett is indispensable. (Whitelaw, in particular, for those of us who rushed to see the first English language productions, in New York and so often done with Whitelaw, of Beckett's short stage works in the 1980s—works many of us consider the height of Beckett's achievement on stage. It was like watching works belonging to the ages emerging in our time, before our eyes, and Whitelaw was the necessary presence in virtually every one of the productions, achieving what seemed not to have been done before, and never with such stunning force, clarity, and impeccable impact as in *Rockaby*.)

The historical value is, of course, in this as a collection of first productions, the productions for which the plays written for radio were composed. The especial historical worth is in the production of *Words and Music*. The production, created in 1962, had music composed by John Beckett, Beckett's cousin. Samuel Beckett thought highly of the music, but John was dissatisfied with it and asked that his music be removed from all future recordings.* In 1987, the work was revived by Everett C. Frost, and Beckett suggested that the composer Morton Feldman be engaged to provide the music. It is the Feldman version that is more generally available now. (It can be obtained as part of the set *The Beckett Festival of Radio Plays*, which includes later productions of all five plays for radio.) Thus, the inclusion the original production of *Words and Music* is something of a rarity and, in the comparison, an indication of Beckett's own judgment on how his works should be handled in performance.

The principal value in this set is that the five plays written for radio, which are presented chronologically, chart the development of style in Beckett's writing career—they are that career in miniature. For over the course of Beckett's project, a project from which he never departed, staying with and refining his subject to the end of his efforts—and Cioran wrote about Beckett, "I find him as obstinate as any fanatic. Even if the world crumbled, he would not abandon the work under way, nor would he alter his subject."—there is a distillation.

There is a purification of his vision, a progress toward a purity of vision, and with it a purification of what is seen, of his report—a progress toward a shocking accuracy concerning the truth of things: the truth of our nature and the truth of the world we are in.

The movement to a purity of vision is a movement to a purity of voice. For Beckett, the distillation down to the vision of truth, the stripping away of the meaningless paraphernalia of insignificances, is the reduction down to simple voices. Nothing but voice remains once one dismisses what will not withstand scrutiny, once one leaves behind what fades and vaporizes under examination. Whether he sets the scene with characters wandering or failing to wander in a barren and desolate scenario—as in *All That Fall* and *Embers*, or *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*—or suspends his vocal characters, attributing to them nothing but vocality, wrapping them in nothing—as in *Words and Music* and *Cascando*, or *Rockaby* and *The Unnamable*—what he gives us is voice that cannot stop and meanders and maunders about the available interlocutory terrain, seeking something to say, something to take up its capabilities, its time, its compulsion to spend time saying. The implicit stipulation, the inevitable doom, is that the voice comes first, that it needs something to which to dedicate itself, that it requires a devotion, that any will do, and that in the end none will do.

It is a proposition that does not change, that is as obstinate as a fanatical obsession, and it makes the radio drama, the drama reduced to simple voices, an ideal mode for Beckett's vision, for radio is inherently the presentation of voices afloat in vacancy. The radio drama is also the ideal image of Beckett's progress of purification, for the purification to voice is also the purification of the authorial voice, of Beckett's voice. As with all thinkers of the first rank, the variety of voices simulated are nothing more than inflections of the author's writing voice, nothing more than variations on the theme of his chant. Shakespeare, for all the characters he renders, for all the impossibly complex personalities whose simulations distract so many from the poem that Shakespeare is always writing, and always composing in one voice, is always speaking Shakespeare—just as Bach always spoke *Bach*. Nabokov once called *Hamlet* “the wild dream of a neurotic scholar,” and that mad pedant is the only simulation Shakespeare created in the play, is nothing other than one more nuance of Shakespeare's voice, a nuance inundated with nuance, coming from the most fecund imagination we have received—the rest is detail and scaffolding, executions of the demands of the form.

There is a purity there, a voice that no one mistakes coming upon it in performance. Shakespeare's is one of the most purified voices in art. So, too, with Beckett. One cannot mistake him for another, regardless of the momentary claims concerning characters on a roadside, climbing into and down from a wagon, waiting for nothing, hanging in the nothing, imagining each other. Beckett's voice became increasingly purified as he progressed, becoming one of the purest and most identifiable modes of expression in the canon. As Beckett left behind scene setting and personality and presumed

personal history arranged as characters in a place, his voice became more intensely and precisely his own. It gained in the indispensable artistic quality: the quality of inimitability, the indelible stamp. It carries the conviction of art, the impression that it is a work of art we are seeing, in direct proportion to that purification, that indelibility.

And it compels a question: whether such unswerving, dedicated, obstinate idiosyncrasy, such heightened identifiability, must also be devoted to an appropriate subject, at least a sufficiently serious subject, or whether such impeccable identity of voice automatically and necessarily orients itself to strictly appropriate concerns—whether the purity of voice purifies it of all intellectual dross. Perhaps inimitability causes art to occur, causes artistic effort to come upon the single thought that matters. Perhaps it is merely a necessary precondition, and further correct decisions are required. Either it is a necessary condition or a necessary and sufficient condition. Or perhaps all one needs to create art is a titanic soul, a most comprehensive soul, the rest taking care of itself. Nothing more is needed, and nothing less will do.

The voice isolated from all circumstance, the voice as the first stipulation, is the purification of consciousness—it is consciousness existing alone, without attribution, without condition or foundation, consciousness per se as the single extant. For Beckett, this stipulation is not a literary device or an image, the free-floating voice does not stand as a metaphor for an impression of predicament or a symbol for a weight of import, for a degree of risk. It is not to be interpreted as a measure of the dire of some other situation—it is not to be interpreted at all. The stipulation is an ontological proposition—a statement by the artist of the nature of the real. Which is to say that Beckett is entirely serious in this. He means precisely what he portrays. We are merely consciousness. Nothing of what supports or attends our awareness, nothing of what we are aware, is real. All of what we know, everything of which we are conscious, is unreal—illusory, evanescent, fleeting, a function of the consciousness that calls it up, that creates it. Our memories, the events we recall, the events we witness, the articles of the world we observe around us, other people—all are the result of the words used by the consciousness one is, each generated as experience by the saying of its name, by the stating of its existence. But to say it is not to make it so, and none of it actually is. All there is, is the awareness, the endless saying, for the saying of something or another is unable to cease. There is nothing but the saying and the awareness of saying, and the awareness of the appearance of what has been said, and the sense of possibly endless space all around—of the void. The void, and a voice that will not stop.



Look you, miss, what counts is not so much the thing, in itself, that would astonish me too. No, it's the word, the notion.
(Rough for Radio II)

It is all fomented around us, by us, or by something akin to a biological urge, as if a life force were simply driving forward, without purpose, without reason, for that is what a life force, once initiated, does. As if mere chemical reaction, pressing forward what we think of, what we devise unwittingly and experience, as life. Consciousness, the human world, then becomes a stage set of imagined issues of emotional import added to imagined facts—a scenario of ethics and emphases and hopes and despairs and “should’s” compounded upon “is’s,” of poignancies imposed upon data imposed, all imposed upon nothing. It is all a function of need, of want, of the impulse to obtain that which is needed to continue to live, occurring to a creature, or not even a creature, who has become, to its own dismay, conscious of itself. But it is conscious of the mere condition of itself, of the empty shell of thought, aware purely of vacant awareness, and it must be filled to be tolerable, and to serve its function. Amoebae simply move (one may hope). However, we move by inventing reasons for moving whose function is purely to get us to move, or, Hume-like, they merely attend our moving and seem to us to precede and trigger it, occurring presumably for the sake of some function they serve that we are incapable of discovering. We are not minds, for we do not decide—we proceed senselessly and ineluctably. We are not minds; we are the victims of minds, or a mind.

“ . . . some consummate inner process . . .
(*Words and Music*)

The biology of the organism, or of whatever it is, is real, and consciousness is real, but personal consciousness is not real, not real as in it is not that which determines—it is determined. The words we hear ourselves using drop the seed that initiates the process whereby we “sprout a head,” grow an ego, like a flower blooming. It occurs of necessity, and then we suffer through the life cycle of the plant we truly are, as if the dandelion had the poor fortune to have woken up, as if it had, through a vagary of evolution, grown an eye and with it a mind, as if an ancillary and superfluous organ were being tested for its survival value, and were doing badly. Odilon Redon once drew *The Origin of Vision Begins in the Flower*, 1883, in which a monstrous floral growth develops an eye in the center of its bloom; and C. G. Jung once warned us, “We fail to appreciate how plant-like we are.” But the voice is incessant.

“ Just went on, my body doing its best without me.
(*From an Abandoned Work*)

Our existence continues insistently, and senselessly. It is not the result

of resolve, or even resignation. It is the result of a biological drive, sheer animation, with a thinking self tied to it as if tied to a dying animal.

“

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
(William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”)

It is not the will to go on, but rather the impertinence of the will in itself. The biochemical processes press on, and we are dragged along. We may give up, but the body continues to move, the biological processes continue of their own impulse, until they don't, which is all that might be hoped for, for there is horror throughout this eventuality. It is the horror of degeneration, for life perceived is in Beckett a continuous degradation, an inexorable movement toward extinction—awareness aware of nothing certain but its own eventual extinguishing—along with the pains, the disappointments, the apparent betrayals of a single circumstance, which requires the devising of what never can withstand the inquiry of thought, the inquiry of that which is driven to devise it. The horror is the continuous dying, and the knowledge of the vacancy within which it is fated—the awareness that, finally, there is nothing to be aware of, that we think futilely as a result of processes that accidentally produced thought, or that we think to a purpose that has nothing to do with the content of thought, that thought is a nullity: the horror of a Pascal alone in the eternal silence of infinite spaces. And somehow, the dying and the silence are the same thing. The horror is not death but dying, the horror is mortality: the horror is Keatsian.

“

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;

(John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”)

As much as *The Unnamable* is Beckett's *Tempest*, the work in which the conjurer calls up his characters—characters of the preceding novels—as his palpable, and for Beckett pointless, puppets, his entire oeuvre is the Keatsian formula: death is the only escape from the terror of mortality—to escape dying, all we can do is die.

“ | There are thoughts, not mine.
(From an Abandoned Work)

If there is anyone to die. For we, the organism, the biochemical processes, the “body doing its best,” the sprouted head, the “millions of different sounds,” the voice we emit, that emits us, are as much figments as are the voice in *Cascando* that speaks of Woburn at the behest of the Opener but who is not Woburn and who is directed by the will of the Opener, and Woburn who is nothing but a character in a story told by a voice instructed by something else yet, and Words in *Words and Music* that is commanded by Croak to render a thought only Croak knows, and Music who is no more capable than Words of rendering what is known only to Croak—to nothing, to a denatured impulse of some sort, some other sort.

“ | All is mental, figments.
(From An Abandoned Work)

For there is only a voice, and that voice is not us. The voice is Croak, and it calls for words and music to express something about it that it can hardly understand, and we are the figures in the story that the words conjure, and the feelings that the music strives to congeal. The voice is the Opener, who, or which, instigates all that occurs, all that can occur, and Woburn is one of us—stories being told for lack of anything else to do, for lack of anything else to be done by something that we are not. We lack virtually all presence. We are awake in the story being told of us, patterns in the tapestry something weaves with words and music to kill the time. We are alive just enough to know that we are not alive, extant just enough to know that we are not extant. We are nothing seen by nothing, but the seeing does occur.

Beckett is right. It could be no worse.

“ | . . . can't call your soul your own . . .
(The Old Tune)

We are not. All our cares, concerns, hopes, and despairs are over nothing, felt by nothing—merely stimulations, without inherent character, without significance. Which is to say that ardency proves nothing—how much we care, of what we care, in what way we care, determine nothing. Our ardenities are what we wallow in, to all appearances. There are merely moments, a moment, with a thought hanging in the ether, capable only of inventing stories and suffering over the fact that there is nothing but a thought hanging in the ether, capable of suffering, and of inventing stories to divert itself from suffering over the fact that there is nothing but a thought hanging in the ether, only to suffer again.



A: And then the tear.

S: Exactly, sir. What I call the human trait.

(Rough for Radio II)

All of our reality is superstition, mere magic, the misconstructions we substitute for a science we do not understand, or that we cannot fully see for we must see from the perceived point of view of something that does not exist, that posits and seems to witness causes that do not operate, entities that do not occur, and ambitions, results, and frustrations that are mere fantasies. We are superstitious beliefs.

It is as simple as it could be, for it is as great a thought as it could be, and greatness is always simple, and always apparently absurd. The greatest of thoughts is that which alters the very structure of thought, the geometry of inference, the architectural pattern by which inference is drawn. Great thought does not find it sufficient to trade in overt starting propositions—it staggers the principles whereby thought progresses, the assumptions that underlie all we believe, that hover behind every assertion and suspicion, that stand unchanged at every moment, that do not progress. Beckett's assault is on the principal prevailing assumption, the primary of the axioms that remains established throughout all normative thinking, that inflects every inference in every train of rumination, that puts the bias in the lawn of otherwise balanced contemplation, that provides the gravitational pull which sets a positive curvature to the line leading to conclusion. He dismisses the assumption of our own existence. As long as one takes for granted one in fact is, as long as one permits that presumption to sneak in behind the back of every observation on any subject, as long as one permits oneself to become distracted from the concentration on disregarding one's own presence through the shift of attention to anything else, such that the most seemingly obvious of false assumptions becomes invisibly obvious again and sweeps back into one's base of judgments, Beckett's point and purpose themselves become invisible. He is absurd only if we reject the most seemingly absurd of positions—otherwise, he is most simple and clear as crystal.



The face in the ashes.
(*Words and Music*)

It is a great thought, for it changes everything, for everything has always depended on the assumption of its opposite—the assumption that we do exist, the seemingly most self-evident of assumptions. But it is not true.

It is a great thought, and it is the thought of our past century, of the century of artistic revolution of which Beckett was the resident and is the culmination. The absence of our existence, our non-appearance, is the revelation of Modernism in the arts and in philosophy, from abstraction to atonal music that seems to defy the emotional call, to Nietzsche and Mauthner. All evaporated the active agent of us from the compound solution of the real. It begins with Mallarmé, as much as it does with any, for whom all we are and know is illusion, whose *Igitur* is a drama without characters, whose sonnet “Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx” is a near melodrama in which nothing happens. It can be said that even Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (notably dismissing the typographical possessive, as if there were no one to possess anything) renders existence as a continuous nightmare and nothing more, with no dreamer in evidence, available only to mere supposition (although there is an enormous difference, though not a world of difference, between the claim that the dream is real—Joyce—and the claim that not even “reality” is—Beckett). And Borges claimed the same position in his first published essay, “The Nothingness of Personality,” as the foundation of his art, and it is well known that Nabokov found only the dream to be true.



We need “unities” in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist. We have borrowed the concept of unity from our “ego” concept—our oldest article of faith. If we did not hold ourselves to be unities, we would never have formed the concept “thing.”
(Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 635)

And it can even be argued that the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism lies in the response to this inescapable fact, in the response to the inescapability of this fact. The difference is not in the estimation of the fact but in the disposition of the reaction. When one seeks truth and finds it unobtainable, there are only two postures one can take: either one wallows in the illusory as all that is available, or one redoubles one’s efforts. The alignments in this are easily recognized. It is all a question of commitment, and of character, and of courage—the question of our age.



Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered . . .
(Ezra Pound, “Canto LXXXI”)

And one may argue that the thought goes further back than this, that the thought of our nonexistence has hovered before us throughout history, that the history of the mind, history in the mind, has been nothing other than an avoidance of the final recognition, suspended timelessly in front of us. The realization, rendered to be undeniable, rendered to be as evident fact, of our nonexistence is the principal artistic message—the message of the greatest minds who turned their efforts to art. Nabokov’s observation that *Hamlet* is “the wild dream of a neurotic scholar” is echoed in reverse by Shakespeare himself, for he ratifies the idea in the preceding *Julius Caesar*, when Brutus “predicts” the plot of *Hamlet* and identifies it as a momentary daydream, telling us in effect that the entirety of the future play is a disturbing fantasy, an “insurrection” of the mind, that flashes briefly through the thoughts of Hamlet who does not hesitate to kill the king, or do whatever it is he will do, taking no more time about it than does Brutus to kill Caesar—acting without vacillation, without diffidence, without falter.



BRUTUS

Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,
I have not slept.
Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

(*Julius Caesar*, II, i, 61-69)

Hamlet then is a fantasy, a rapid nightmare, suffered by a Hamlet we never meet, who acts in a story we are not told, within a world we do not enter, among characters we cannot suspect. Only the characters and events and world of *Hamlet* are real, but they are not real—they are someone else’s dream. Nothing said in this is real. And there is no daylight between this view and Nietzsche’s: that Hamlet must be taken in its entirety to be found meaningful at all. Speaking at first of Greek tragedy, “The structure of the scenes and the visual images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself

can put into words and concepts: the same is also observable in Shakespeare, whose Hamlet, for instance, similarly, talks more superficially than he acts, so that the previously mentioned lesson of Hamlet is to be deduced, not from his words, but from a profound contemplation and survey of the whole.” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, § 17) It is only the play as a whole that matters—nothing in it is of concern. And, the significance is not in the words, in a literary work that is made of nothing but words—the significance, the meaning, is elsewhere, which is to say that it is not in the work at all. And we must not forget the now too little read play by Calderon: *Life is a Dream*. Or Gogol, or Kafka, or Bruno Schulz.

And it is what we see traced in Greek tragedy, conveyed to us in the earliest thought of our tradition.



It is evident that the further the archetypal masque gets from the ideal masque, the more clearly it reveals itself as the emancipated antimasque, a revel of satyrs who have got out of control. The progress of sophisticated drama appears to be towards an anagnorisis or recognition of the most primitive of all dramatic forms.

At the far end of the archetypal masque, where it joins the auto, we reach the point indicated by Nietzsche as the point of the birth of tragedy, where the revel of satyrs impinges on the appearance of a commanding god, and Dionysus is brought into line with Apollo. We may call this fourth cardinal point of drama the epiphany, the dramatic apocalypse or separation of the divine and the demonic, a point directly opposite the mime, which presents the simply human mixture. This point is the dramatic form of the point of epiphany, most familiar as the point at which the Book of Job, after describing a complete circuit from tragedy through symposium, finally ends. Here the two monsters behemoth and leviathan replace the more frequent demonic animals.

The Classical critics, from Aristotle to Horace, were puzzled to understand why a disorganized ribald farce like the satyr-play should be the source of tragedy, though they were clear that it was.

(Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 291-2)



Mrs Rooney: The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down.

[Silence. They join in wild laughter.]

(*All That Fall*)

The point at which satyrs impinge upon the commanding god, the point opposite the human mixture, the point at which chaos batters the banks and coasts of meaning, and all falls down. Which positions Beckett among the ages, with the thought that ignores the ages, his dark and his silence the night of first ages, of ages that are gone and not gone, and his earth seeming unearthly. And which makes him one of the premier artists of the ages, not only for the sheer courage to witness without blinking, without flinching, the dissolution of everything in the sodium light of truth, but to have the ability to formulate the realization sufficiently to get off the first page—or past the first few brush strokes, or the first atonal, or if one likes geometrically precise, musical phrase, or the first few passes at modeling a thin, elongated, emaciated, asexual, standing figure, staring straight into the void. A figure, or a tree.

And it makes Beckett's plays, and his literature as a whole, what Nietzsche sought in a Dionysian art—not the manner he analyzed but the point he saw made: that we do not exist, that we are figments, not part of the real, and doomed, to the degree we find ourselves to be perceptibly present at all, to suffer dissolution as we are fed into the maw of a world that “lives on itself: its excrements are its food.” (*The Will to Power*, § 1066)

Beckett douses vividness for truth—that is his artistic revolution. If the purpose of art, or one of its purposes, is to heighten the experience of existence, is to give special attention, if art is celebratory, then Beckett's literature both is and is not. There is nothing in Beckett that stokes the pleasure of sheer existence, that amplifies the sense of being alive, alive in the sense of pure verve, limitless élan, absolute joy—no attribution could be more obvious than that. Yet, Beckett does magnify the awareness. He makes the nature of existence undeniable. If Sontag is right that every style is a means of giving emphasis, of committing an insistence, then Beckett is our high stylist, for his insistence is unparalleled. Read anything by Beckett, and you cannot help but see it. There is no greater accomplishment for an artist in any field of art: to transform you into the artist, to make you what he has seen—here, to make you the hopelessness, the mind fastened to the dying animal. What you always were, and what now you perceive—to break the illusion.

And it is an act of monumental compassion, for can there be anything more humane, anything more courageous, anything more vivifying, than to tell us the source of our pain?



All works of genius have this in common: even when they demonstrate and make us perceive the inevitable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most dreadful despair, they nevertheless comfort the noble soul that finds itself in a state of depression, disillusionment, nullity, boredom, and discouragement, or in the most bitter and deadening misfortunes. Such works rekindle our enthusiasm, and though they treat and represent nothing but death, give back (to us) that life that had been lost.

(Giacomo Leopardi)