beckett, endgame and the melancholia of absurdity

Beckett is variously interpreted as an Existentialist, a miserabilist, a despairer or, worse, a philosopher. If it was ever Beckett's intention to transmit some philosophical truth or recognisable account of 'the human condition' then he did a very bad job of it. It certainly would take a miserabilist of some distinction to attempt to capture the breadth of human experience in as focused and minimalist an oeuvre as Beckett's. If we attempt to read Beckett like this, or criticise him for not being this kind of writer, then we not only fail to understand him, but we wilfully overlook his remarkable insight into the power of art as a gleefully meaningless and transcendental phenomenon. Faced with the task of expression, Beckett recognises that the failure of meaningful language or explicit narrative to genuinely convey, necessitates the re-casting of art as an enterprise that embraces this solipsism and works with the geometry and structure of thoughts rather than their content.

There is, thus, a laudable integrity and subtlety to Beckett's art that sidesteps philosophical pigeonholing into 'Existentalist' or 'Nihilist' categories and, similarly, the despair and bleakness associated with his work is somewhat misinterpreted [1]. The humour and warmth in Beckett's plays is often acknowledged as a part of Beckett's repertoire, but I contest that it plays a central role in his aesthetic; Beckett's absurdism is very much a facilitator of humour and a lens through which he isolates an aesthetic essence, rather than a tool to express thought or philosophical opinion. The art of writing is distilled by Beckett into an aesthetic appreciation of the ineffable. His work embodies a deep understanding of the importance of shape, rhythm and humour to express this inexpressible quality. The 'meaning' of Beckett's plays is not just elusive, but necessarily so. Beckett actively disengages with an art that attempts to say something new, to tell some new story. The stories have all been told; art is about life, death, love and hate. Beckett just maintains the conviction that art needs to be made regardless, that words need to be said even though they fail to mean.

We respond to Endgame with a sense of raw, un-anchored melancholy without truly understanding what transpired before our eyes, and it is this power of art that Beckett unlocks. Interpretation will always say too much, and tell us too little.

This essay will thus attempt a partial defence of this attitude, with reference to Endgame, among other works, and critical responses to it. I will focus on Cavell, who provides a very agreeable appreciation of the play [2], but takes a particular approach that I wish to avoid. Cavell hunts for associations, references and meanings in the utterances of Beckett's characters and I feel this is misleading. Towards the end of his essay he does, however, note the ultimate contradiction at the base of Beckett's conviction:

> […] one wants to say to Beckett: Other writers claim that words are meaningless, that communication is impossible, etc.; but you really mean it, so why do you write? [3]

I don't pretend to have an answer to this question, but I want to illuminate the way in which Beckett does write, in order to demonstrate why 'interpretation' is flawed, and why Beckett, like his characters, feels compelled to (fail to) express. I have an intuition that Beckett needn't answer Cavell's question, a shrug suffices.

Other critics, such as Adorno [4], discuss Endgame in the light of an existentialist disruption of the 'subject's unity', and Lukacs [5] accuses Beckett of a 'decadence' (!) that symbolises capitalist culture due to his supposed lack of a disruptive quality that might stir the proletariat into a disaffection with the status quo. Beckett's art is not created to engage with politics or philosophy in this realist sense, nor should it. The dual sense of isolation and humour created by Beckett's absurdism and unique use of language, when integrated with his intense visual and dynamic emphasis, conspire to engineer an aesthetic humanism that need not be expressed in the language of existentialism and cannot be expressed by anything other than witnessing Endgame. Beckett does not express a sense but facilitates an aesthetic that acts as the inevitable outcome of a flawed solipsism. Expression fails, as it is wont to do, but Beckett reaches outside the limits of philosophical and realist language to touch on a melancholic humanity that connects to us much more profoundly than conceptual exegesis, philosophical coherence or social realism. He sees an essential dishonesty in this other art, this art that is more pretentious and arrogant in its self-belief:

> I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of 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 [6].

The traditional attitude to writing conceives of capturing reality through adhering to strict, arbitrary conventions; picturing speech as complete and turn-based, like a chess game. Speech, and the experience of consciousness is, for Beckett, fragmentary and illusory. His strange imaginings are closer to reality than Tolstoy's realism by virtue of their honesty in the face of the task of expression.

I advocate, when reading Beckett, a holistic understanding of meaning and an aesthetic approach to interpretation that is akin to a certain approach to philosophy; Philosophical Investigations era Wittgenstein and much of modern Continental philosophy understands the importance of an emergent tone, not necessarily derivable from individual parts. One simply cannot interpret parts of Philosophical Investigations without appreciating the unarticulated thrust of Wittgenstein's writing [7]. Indeed, his style embodies his attitude towards philosophy. Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception understands the role of the Gestalt in perceiving something as something else, and in reading him, we are guided towards feeling a particular perceptual stance towards and object. While I am not committed to this attitude towards philosophy, I think it is essential to an appreciation of (successful) art, especially Beckett's. Cavell, for example, makes an interesting suggestion regarding, what he calls, the 'hidden literality' of Beckett's language:

> The words […] seem wilfully to thwart comprehension; and then […] we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare – totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view. […] It is we who had been wilfully uncomprehending, […] demanding further […] meaning. [8]

I agree with Cavell's resistance to uncover 'further meaning', I don't think Cavell takes Beckett's commitment to meaninglessness seriously enough. While Cavell goes on to look at examples of this in use, and what is being expressed in these instances, I wish to focus on the way Beckett employs this technique broadly throughout his work as a facilitation of this connection between absurdity, humour, aesthetics and melancholy. Cavell finds in these examples, certain 'meanings' that are, of course plausible, but, I argue, are destructive interpretations of a deliberate ambiguity on Beckett's part. One of Cavell's own examples is:

> HAMM: Did you ever think of one thing?
>
> CLOV: Never.

The humour that Beckett derives from it is a classic wordplay technique involving ambiguity, misdirection and misunderstanding; Godot is almost constantly a back and forth of quips and jokes of this sort and Endgame is littered with them. Another good example:

> CLOV: He's crying.
>
> HAMM: Then he's living.

One might interpret this as Hamm commenting on the necessary despair inherent in living; if one is crying then one is living, if one is living then one is crying. However, it might be read as Hamm literally seeing Nagg's weeping as a sign that he is still alive, a sign required to confirm his condition due to his age.

It is the very point of these examples of 'hidden literality' that we are left with humour derived from the absurdity and ambiguity of the response, but not an understanding of what it might mean. This is, in part, a simple humorous use of language to provide entertainment in the context of a play. However, when taken in the context of the play as performed, this sort of language use gives us our sense of isolation and aesthetic melancholy [9]. The potential meanings that Cavell affords the statements are taken from a focus on the line as isolated and literal; he notes that the unexpected literality of the response is the joke, but sees the remark as thereby insinuating a metaphysics. I argue that the literality of the response is, indeed, the joke, but it is not an expression; in the context of the flowing dialogue it builds a fully aesthetic, rather than conceptual, output. The unresolved statements are left hovering there, a tension sustained by the multiplicity of potential meanings and by the disruption of a linear exchange of ideas – to attempt to resolve this tension by falling down onto the side of the 'literal' rendering is to ignore the role that the unresolved ambiguity plays. It is not that the 'further', metaphorical meanings are foils for the literal meanings to be grasped – it is the peculiar poise of the couplets that gives the impression of significance, but maintains the substance of an irresolute thought that splinters.

Equally, the pace and ferocity of Clov and Hamm's to-and-fro leaves little room for a thought to linger, and it is this intense rhythm and pace that forms the dialogue. The conceptual content is fragmentary and scattered; Hamm is too exhausted and old to retain a coherent perspective. There are themes in the play's dialogue of course; we constantly return to talk of an 'end' [10], Hamm gets increasingly angry at his situation, Clov becomes rebellious and we uncover pieces of the characters' historical relationships, yet any interpretation of the dialogue as a coherent perspective or even an interaction of multiple coherent perspectives falls short of capturing the importance of its rhythmic context and its structural role.

Again, Cavell notes something to this effect, he sees that Beckett's dialogue is 'repartée, adjoining the genres of Restoration comedy, Shakespearean clowning, and the vaudeville gag, but also containing the sound of some philosophical argument and of minute theological debate' [11]. So much is true, but the repartée is not an expression of these philosophical attitudes but a medium for rhythm and the shape of language. As Beckett states:

> I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine: "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. [12]

In Endgame there is an acute sense of rhythm, pace and the shape of ideas. The joke that Nagg tells about the tailor is a perfect example, it is too long to quote in full but an illuminating extract follows:

> NAGG: […] "So sorry, come back in a week, I've made a mess of the seat." Good, that's all right, a neat seat can be very ticklish. A week later.
>
> (Tailor's voice.)
>
> "Frightfully sorry, come back in ten days, I've made a hash of the crotch." Good, can't be helped, a snug crotch is always a teaser. Ten days later.
>
> (Tailor's voice.)
>
> "Dreadfully sorry, come back in a fortnight, I've made a balls of the fly." Good, at a pinch, a smart fly is a stiff proposition. […]

As in the example from Godot above, Nagg ends up ruining this perfect joke by interrupting his flow and forgetting a section. The failure of Nagg's ageing mind is brought out in his flawed recital. Everything in Endgame is broken and aged, meanwhile, the joke is perfectly structured, with a pulsing metre and a uniform symmetry to the tailor's apologies. The language is bouncy, rapid and playful and the punchline is delivered with a pleasing efficacy, yet Nagg faults and we feel the decay and exhaustion that is also visually presented to us. In fact, one can see the reason for Beckett's general interest in jokes of this sort; a great joke demonstrates a perfect economy of words. The timing and pace are essential and jokes exhibit a keen awareness of good linguistic craft[13]. Beckett's plays exhibit a similar efficiency and rhythm to the perfect joke, along with the humour, and it is this warmth and joviality that breathes through his dialogue (even when it is through the language of despair and death), giving a human melancholy to the otherwise dreary and hopeless landscape. When Clov looks out of the window at the start of the play to look out on, what we can only assume is a lifeless place, he laughs.

Similarly, Nell's line: 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness' is a perfect illustration. She goes on to admit that unhappiness is like an old joke that we still find funny, but fail to laugh at anymore. This is a neat description of the creeping seriousness that inhabits Endgame. While the dialogue is full of jokes, and the absurd unhappiness displayed is humorous, as the play continues we stop laughing. Not out of despair or depression, but out of a familiarisation with the humanity on display. This is Beckett's process; the absurd is employed as a means of affecting the audience in this very idiosyncratic way. In the same way that contemplation of, and familiarisation with, a Bridget Riley or the patterned surfaces of the Alhambra, engineer a transcendental state, so Beckett allows his minimalist and absurdist art to reveal itself to us and stir us, gently, into a preoccupation.

To facilitate this linguistic rhythm, the stage directions are schizophrenically detailed in terms of pauses, pacing and gestures, and the pace of the play seems to oscillate between breakneck dialogue exchange and slow, awkward, deliberate movement. There are rarely comfortable, naturally paced passages of speech, and whenever a character is called upon to move (which is surprisingly rare), the details of the movement are filled with pauses and unnatural repetitions. Act Without Words II is a paradigm case of such slow awkward, repetitious movement, as is the opening of Endgame:

> Clov goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left.

This sequence continues for an uncomfortable amount of time and we are made aware of every designated movement of the head, body and props, which is choreographed like a dance or mime piece. It is well known

that Beckett was interested in silent comedy (even working with Buster Keaton on Film), and this language of exaggerated gesture and facial expression is employed frequently. For example, the opposite effect to the opening of Endgame is exemplified by Not I, Play and Rockaby in which dialogue is hurtled at the audience with incomprehensible speed; the repetition and pacing is much more constitutive of the piece than the words being spoken, and these shorter pieces represent Beckett attempting to wrench out pure rhythm and pace from literature. The 'narrative' is more a motif in which we merely register repeated passage of text, almost like a melody, that loses its 'meaning'. One is reminded of the tape loop experiments of Steve Reich or Pierre Schaefer's musique concréte that, by the sheer force of repetition, makes speech lose its meaning and sound lose its association with its producer. This focus on pace and rhythm (along with the set and the visual motif created by costumes and props [bowler hats and carrots]) is, not just central to Beckett's work, but what it is really all about.

What, then, of the sense of isolation and humanity that ties in with this aesthetic choreography and humour? This peculiar Beckettian melancholy, a melancholy that is nonetheless warm, is largely a product of the interplay of the characters within their extreme situation, brought out sharply by Beckett's unique language. Cavell does articulate this well, he notes the genuine ordinariness of Beckett's characters, the boredom with which they are burdened and the role of everyday monotonous routine, despite their immediate appearance of extraordinariness. In Endgame, Hamm conducts bizarre rituals involving his handkerchief, glasses, curtains etc. with abnormal over-animation and, upon witnessing a simple flea, remarks 'what a day!'. Clov's initial actions are given such emphasis and rigidity that one assumes they are done each day with necessary regimentation (for no apparent reason) [14]. The strange language that Beckett constructs, throughout his oeuvre is similarly ordinary, despite its appearances:

> The language sounds as extraordinary as its people look, but it imitates, as Chekov's does, the qualities of ordinary conversation among people whose world is shared – catching its abrupt shifts and sudden continuities; its shades of memory, regret, intimidation; its opacity to the outsider. [15]

Cavell notes that the internal dialogue of the characters isolates this strange group of people from us, their situations are a complete mystery, and their strange utterances equally so. But while the utterances are strange, the 'shades of memory, regret, intimidation' are clear as an emergent product of the rhythm and colour of the performance as a whole.

A more acute sense of isolation, verging on solipsism, is expressed by the faltering utterances of Beckett's principal characters, notably Hamm. Hamm is an ageing, withering intellect struggling to remain coherent, to recall the memories of brilliant thoughts he once had, to convince himself of his eloquence; the façade of profundity masks the exhausted, lonely core. The partially incoherent lyricism and corrective, halting, stuttering speech is used to present the language of our subject as like pieces of dim light breaking through cracks; we, the audience, will Hamm to recount a full story, and feel he is capable, but watch frustrated by his monumental effort to cough up words:

> HAMM: You prayed (Pause, he corrects himself) – You cried for night; it comes – (Pause, he corrects himself); It falls now cry in darkness. You cried for night; it falls. Now cry in darkness. (Pause) Nicely put, that.

The words are assured in tone but betray a weary faltering in the uncertain rhythm and incomplete narrative. We find it at the fore in Malone Dies, Molloy and Waiting for Godot, and employed throughout almost all his other works. Like the dynamic between Vladimir and Estragon in Godot, we are presented with a dominant intellect, convinced of his (fading) brilliance attempting to goad fine conversation out of his unreceptive audience. In

Molloy, our narrator fails to recall his strange and oblique past but we find him in the active process of failing nonetheless, similarly with Malone Dies. We are left with the loneliness of an individual's experience, desperate to be shared[16] even though it cannot be. We are confronted, across all Beckett's work with that ineffable melancholy of the failure of expression, a solipsism of sorts, and this, I believe, is Beckett's art:

> The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.[17]

The audience is pulled into this stuttering, repetitious slurry of words, feeling that they are witnessing some hypnotic incantation, made uneasy by its lilting absurdity. The language Beckett obsessively crafts is shape and rhythm first, 'meaning' second (or never). Beckett is a writer of rare aesthetic conviction and as much as his language is emphasised as enigmatic rather than rhythmic, the symbolism associated with much of Beckett's austere imagery detracts from its truly visual role. We are dismissive of 'meaningless' art, assuming it to be vapid or ill-conceived; Beckett champions it brilliantly, with the arrogance and conviction of a madman. Any interpretation of Endgame, or any of Beckett's works will always be more than or less than the play, because Beckett's plays are the traces of memories, a dreamlike state that eludes measurement. An interpretation loses the aesthetics, rhythm and shape that is so important and interprets dialogue as an expression of something that it is not. Beckett carries out, unflinchingly, the modernist goals of formal experimentation and relegation of narrative but achieves an unparalleled balance of humour and visual/poetic artistry that gets right to the heart of what, I believe, art should. As he said himself:

> My work is a matter of fundamental sounds [...] made fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.[18]

What separates art from anything else is its ability to generate some ineffable quality that is more than the sum of its parts. This is what Beckett isolates and what informs his unique, radical style – it is no-concept as opposed to high-concept; it is all in the execution, in its fearless minimalism. One emerges from Beckett's plays or novels in an altered state, not in the usual sense of having undergone an emotional manipulation or a process of philosophical awakening, but having a gnawing, unanchored response to the genuine humanity that is revealed in this strange process.

Notes

[1] For a start, existentialism was never about despair and anguish, and Nietzsche's nihilism was a liberating, life-affirming triumph.

[2] It will become evident that I share a lot with aspects of Cavell's reading, even if he does not adopt the overall attitude that I do.

[3] Cavell, S., 'Ending the Waiting Game', p. 160

[4] Adorno, T. W., 'Towards an Understanding of Endgame', in Chevigny, B. G., ed.

[5] Lukacs, G., The Meaning of Contemporary Realism

[6] Beckett, S., Proust and Three Dialogues, p.103

[7] I do not accuse Cavell of failing to appreciate this at all, he is obviously well acquainted with Wittgenstein and Beckett, but a lot of his analysis takes place at the level of interpretation of individual lines of dialogue, which I feel to be emphasising the wrong aspects of Beckett's work, not seeing the wood for trees as it were. The focus on Biblical reference is also misleading, while Beckett draws much of his inspiration from Biblical tales, there is no sense in which Beckett utilises these stories for their moral or for their philosophical poignancy. I suggest it is the unique imagery of the Bible, and the strange space it occupies in our collective consciousness that excites Beckett. Beckett said of Waiting for Godot, 'If I'd meant God, I'd have said God'.

[8] Cavell, S., 'Ending the Waiting Game', p. 119-120

[9] Think of the difference between Husserl's transcendental consciousness and Heidegger's Being-in-the-world.

[10] The title Endgame, with its chess connotations, seems to point to the stalemate between Hamm and Clov, neither being able to end the relationship, but neither wishing to admit that they cannot. Clov, although in the process of leaving at the end of the play, remains on the stage staring at Hamm, who covers his face, unsure of Clov's presence but, we sense, confident that he remains. However, Beckett's original French title lacked the overt chess imagery, and he felt uncomfortable with the English translation; this intimates the importance of an ambiguity in the title, and thus, the play's 'meaning'. It is, again, precisely in this ambiguity that our response to the play is formed, not in coming down on any one perspective.

[11] Cavell, S., 'Ending the Waiting Game, p. 127

[12] Beckett, S., quoted in Schneider, A., 'Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle', p. 14 – In Godot, this passage from Augustine is used in the 'repartee' between Vladimir and Estragon. Beckett, aware of the beautiful shape and symmetry of Augustine's articulation, plays with this shape, allowing Vladimir to almost ruin it with his ageing memory and Estragon with his stupidity and boredom. A joke is made at the end of this extract with Estragon replying to the word 'Hell' with 'I'm going'; the obvious ambiguity in this statement provides humour as well a moment's reflection on the overarching sense of ennui and the spectre of death that haunts the ageing duo. Yet it is the rhythm and cadence of this exchange that facilitates the humour (reminiscent of the Marx brothers) and the sense of lyricism that marks Beckett's plays.

[13] There are usually three men entering a bar, three being the orator's optimum number of items in a list.

[14] This is apparent everywhere in Beckett. In Act Without Words II we are presented with two distinct characters, carrying out monotonous, futile routines; Happy Days depicts a woman in bizarre circumstances continuing to keep faith in the importance of her ridiculous, everyday routine; and in Godot, Vladimir and Estragon awake each day with only the mundane as entertainment.

[15] Cavell, S., 'Ending the Waiting Game', p. 119

[16] Nagg and Nell are kept comforted by their shared experience but, from our privileged position we feel unease at their optimism, knowing them to be physically crippled, mentally exhausted and living only between long bouts of sleep.

[17] Beckett, S., Proust and Three Dialogues, p.103

[18] Beckett, S., quoted in Chevigny, B. G., ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, p. 12