DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE

Trying to Understand Endgame
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Source: *New German Critique*, No. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer, 1982), pp. 119-150
Published by: Duke University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/488027
Accessed: 21-11-2015 09:21 UTC

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Trying to Understand Endgame*

by Theodor W. Adorno

to S.B. in memory of Paris, Fall 1958

Beckett's *oeuvre* has several elements in common with Parisian existentialism. Reminiscences of the category of "absurdity," of "situation," of "decision" or their opposite permeate it as medieval ruins permeate Kafka's monstrous house on the edge of the city: occasionally, windows fly open and reveal to view the black starless heaven of something like anthropology. But form — conceived by Sartre rather traditionally as that of didactic plays, not at all as something audacious but rather oriented toward an effect — absorbs what is expressed and changes it. Impulses are raised to the level of the most advanced artistic means, those of Joyce and Kafka. Absurdity in Beckett is no longer a state of human existence thinned out to a mere idea and then expressed in images. Poetic procedure surrenders to it without intention. Absurdity is divested of that generality of doctrine which existentialism, that creed of the permanence of individual existence, nonetheless combines with Western pathos of the universal and the immutable. Existential conformity — that one should be what one is — is thereby rejected along with the ease of its representation. What Beckett offers in the way of philosophy he himself also reduces to culture-trash, no different from the innumerable allusions and residues of education which he employs in the wake of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, particularly of Joyce and Eliot. Culture parades before him as the entrails of *Jugendstil* ornaments did before that progress which preceded him, modernism as the obsolescence of the modern. The regressive language demolishes it. Such objectivity in Beckett obliterates the meaning that was culture, along with its rudiments. Culture thus begins to fluoresce. He thereby completes a tendency of the recent novel. What was decried as abstract according to the cultural criterion of aesthetic

*Adorno's "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen" was first published in *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt am Main, 1961). It appears here in English with the permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.

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immanence — reflection — is lumped together with pure representation, corroding the Flaubertian principle of the purely self-enclosed matter at hand. The less events can be presumed meaningful in themselves, the more the idea of aesthetic *Gestalt* as a unity of appearance and intention becomes illusory. Beckett relinquishes the illusion by coupling both disparate aspects. Thought becomes as much a means of producing a meaning for the work which cannot be immediately rendered tangible, as it is an expression of meaning's absence. When applied to drama, the word "meaning" is multivalent. It denotes: metaphysical content, which objectively presents itself in the complexion of the artifact; likewise the intention of the whole as a structure of meaning which it signifies in itself; and finally the sense of the words and sentences which the characters speak, and that of their progression — the sense of the dialogue. But these equivocations point toward a common basis. From it, in Beckett's *Endgame,* emerges a continuum. It is historio-philosophically supported by a change in the dramatic *a priori:* positive metaphysical meaning is no longer possible in such a substantive way (if indeed it ever was), such that dramatic form could have its law in such meaning and its epiphany. Yet that afflicts the form even in its linguistic construction. Drama cannot simply seize on to negative meaning, or its absence, as content, without thereby affecting everything peculiar to it — virtually to the point of reversal to its opposite. What is essential for drama was constituted by that meaning. If drama were to strive to survive meaning aesthetically, it would be reduced to inadequate content or to a clattering machinery demonstrating world views, as often happens in existentialist plays. The explosion of metaphysical meaning, which alone guaranteed the unity of an aesthetic structure of meaning, makes it crumble away with a necessity and stringency which equals that of the transmitted canon of dramaturgical form. Harmonious aesthetic meaning, and certainly its subjectification in a binding tangible intention, substituted for that transcendent meaningfulness, the denial of which itself constituted the content. Through its own organized meaninglessness, the plot must approach that which transpired in the truth content of dramaturgy generally. Such construction of the senseless also even includes linguistic molecules: if they and their connections were rationally meaningful, then within the drama they would synthesize irrevocably into that very meaning structure of the whole which is denied by the whole. The interpretation of *Endgame* therefore cannot chase the chimera of expressing its meaning with the help of philosophical mediation. Understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility, or concretely reconstructing its meaning structure — that it has none. Isolated, thought no longer pretends, as the Idea once did, to be itself the structure's meaning — a transcendence which would be engendered and guaranteed by the work's own im-

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manence. Instead, thought transforms itself into a kind of material of a second degree, just as the philosophemes expounded in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus,* as novel materials, find their destiny in replacing that sensate immediacy which is diminished in the self-reflective work of art. If such materiality of thought was heretofore largely involuntary, pointing to the dilemma of works which perforce confused themselves with the Idea they could not achieve, then Beckett confronts this challenge and uses thoughts *sans phrase* as phrases, as those material compents of the *monologue intérieur* which mind itself has become, the reified residue of education. Whereas pre-Beckett existentialism cannibalized philosophy for poetic purposes as if it were Schiller incarnate, Beckett, as educated as anyone, presents the bill: philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy as the dreamlike dross of the experiential world, and the poetic process shows itself as worn out. Disgust (*dégoût*), a productive force in the arts since Baudelaire, is insatiable in Beckett's historically mediated impulses. Everything now impossible becomes canonical, freeing a motif from the prehistory of existentialism — Husserl's universal annihilation of the world — from the shadowy realm of methodology. Totalitarians like Lukács, who rage against the — truly terrifying — simplifier as "decadent," are not ill advised by the interests of their bosses. They hate in Beckett what they have betrayed. Only the nausea of satiation — the tedium of spirit with itself — wants something completely different: prescribed "health" nevertheless makes do with the nourishment offered, with simple fare. Beckett's *dégoût* cannot be forced to fall in line. He responds to the cheery call to play along with parody, parody of the philosophy spit out by his dialogues as well as parody of forms. Existentialism itself is parodied; nothing remains of its "invariants" other than minimal existence. The drama's opposition to ontology — as the sketch of a first or immutable principle — is unmistakable in an exchange of dialogue which unintentionally garbles Goethe's phrase about "old truths," which has degenerated to an arch-bourgeois sentiment:

> HAMM: Do you remember your father.
> CLOV: (wearily) Same answer. (Pause.) You've asked me these questions millions of times.
> HAMM: I love the old questions. (With fervor.) Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them.[1]

Thoughts are dragged along and distorted like the day's left-overs, *homo homini sapienti sat.* Hence the precariousness of what Beckett refuses to deal with, interpretation. He shrugs his shoulders about the

1. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 38.

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possibility of philosophy today, or theory in general. The irrationality of bourgeois society on the wane resists being understood: those were the good old days when a critique of political economy could be written which took this society by its own *ratio.* For in the meantime it has thrown this *ratio* on the junk-heap and virtually replaced it with direct control. The interpretive word, therefore, cannot recuperate Beckett, while his dramaturgy — precisely by virtue of its limitation to exploded facticity — twitches beyond it, pointing toward interpretation in its essence as riddle. One could almost designate as the criterion of relevant philosophy today whether it is up to that task.

French existentialism had tackled history. In Beckett, history devours existentialism. In *Endgame,* a historical moment is revealed, the experience which was cited in the title of the culture industry's rubbish book *Corpsed.* After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's own battered state. From the marketplace, as the play's pragmatic precondition, that fact is ripped away:

> CLOV: (He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.) Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero. . . (he looks) . . . zero . . . (he looks) . . . and zero.
> HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is —
> CLOV: Zer —
> HAMM: (violently) Wait till you're spoken to. (Normal voice.) All is . . . all is . . . all is what? (Violently.) All is what?
> CLOV: What all is? In a word. Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns toward Hamm.) Corpsed. (Pause.) Well? Content?[2]

That all human beings are dead is covertly smuggled in. An earlier passage explains why the catastrophe may not be mentioned. Vaguely, Hamm himself is to blame for that:

> HAMM: That old doctor, he's dead naturally?
> CLOV: He wasn't old.
> HAMM: But he's dead?
> CLOV: Naturally. (Pause.) *You* ask *me* that?[3]

The condition presented in the play is nothing other than that in which "there's no more nature."[4] Indistinguishable is the phase of completed reification of the world, which leaves no remainder of what was

2. *Endgame,* pp. 29-30.
3. *Endgame,* pp. 24-25.
4. *Endgame,* p. 11.

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not made by humans; it is permanent catastrophe, along with a catastrophic event caused by humans themselves, in which nature has been extinguished and nothing grows any longer.

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?
CLOV: No.
HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?
CLOV: They haven't sprouted.
HAMM: Perhaps it's still too early.
CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (Violently.) They'll never sprout![5]

The *dramatis personae* resemble those who dream their own death, in a "shelter" where "it's time it ended."[6] The end of the world is discounted, as if it were a matter of course. Every supposed drama of the atomic age would mock itself, if only because its fable would hopelessly falsify the horror of historical anonymity by shoving it into the characters and actions of humans, and possibly by gaping at the "prominents" who decide whether the button will be pushed. The violence of the unspeakable is mimicked by the timidity to mention it. Beckett keeps it nebulous. One can only speak euphemistically about what is incommensurate with all experience, just as one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews. It has become a total *a priori*, so that bombed-out consciousness no longer has any position from which it could reflect on that fact. The desperate state of things supplies — with gruesome irony — a means of stylization that protects that pragmatic precondition from any contamination by childish science fiction. If Clov really were exaggerating, as his nagging, "common-sensical" companion reproaches him, that would not change much. If catastrophe amounted to a partial end of the world, that would be a bad joke: then nature, from which the imprisoned figures are cut off, would be as good as nonexistent; what remains of it would only prolong the torment.

This historical *nota bene* however, this parody of the Kierkegaardian one of the convergence of time and eternity, imposes at the same time a taboo on history. What would be called the *condition humaine* in existentialist jargon is the image of the last human, which is devouring the earlier ones — humanity. Existential ontology asserts the universally valid in a process of abstraction which is not conscious of itself. While it still — according to the old phenomenological doctrine of the intuition of essence — behaves as if it were aware, even in the particular, of its binding determinations, thereby unifying apriority and concreteness, it nonetheless distills out what appears to transcend temporality.

5. *Endgame,* p. 13.
6. *Endgame,* p. 3.

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It does so by blotting out particularity — what is individualized in space and time, what makes existence existence rather than its mere concept. Ontology appeals to those who are weary of philosophical formalism but who yet cling to what is only accessible formally. To such unacknowledged abstraction, Beckett affixes the caustic antithesis by means of acknowledged subtraction. He does not leave out the temporality of existence — all existence, after all, is temporal — but rather removes from existence what time, the historical tendency, attempts to quash in reality. He lengthens the escape route of the subject's liquidation to the point where it constricts into a "this-here," whose abstractness — the loss of all qualities — extends ontological abstraction literally *ad absurdum*, to that Absurd which mere existence becomes as soon as it is consumed in naked self-identity. Childish foolishness emerges as the content of philosophy, which degenerates to tautology — to a conceptual duplication of that existence it had intended to comprehend. While recent ontology subsists on the unfulfilled promise of concretion of its abstractions, concreteness in Beckett — that shell-like, self-enclosed existence which is no longer capable of universality but rather exhausts itself in pure self-positing — is obviously the same as an abstractness which is no longer capable of experience. Ontology arrives home as the pathogenesis of false life. It is depicted as the state of negative eternity. If the messianic Myshkin once forgot his watch because earthly time is invalid for him, then time is lost to his antipodes because it could still imply hope. The yawn accompanying the bored remark that the weather is "as usual"[7] gapes like a hellish abyss:

> HAMM: But that's always the way at the end of the day, isn't it, Clov?
> CLOV: Always.
> HAMM: It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it, Clov?
> CLOV: Looks like it.[8]

Like time, the temporal itself is damaged; saying that it no longer exists would already be too comforting. It is and it is not, like the world for the solipsist who doubts its existence, while he must concede it with every sentence. Thus a passage of dialogue hovers:

> HAMM: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?
> CLOV: (lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, exasperated): What in God's name would there be on the horizon? (Pause.)
> HAMM: The waves, how are the waves?
> CLOV: The waves? (He turns the telescope on the waves.) Lead.
> HAMM: And the sun?

7. *Endgame,* p. 27
8. *Endgame,* p. 13.

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CLOV: (looking) Zero.
HAMM: But it should be sinking. Look again.
CLOV: (looking) Damn the sun.
HAMM: Is it night already then?
CLOV: (looking) No.
HAMM: Then what is it?
CLOV: (looking) Gray. (Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, louder.) Gray! (Pause. Still louder.) GRRAY![9]

History is excluded, because it itself has dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history, the power of remembrance. Drama falls silent and becomes gesture, frozen amid the dialogues. Only the result of history appears — as decline. What preens itself in the existentialists as the once-and-for-all of being has withered to the sharp point of history which breaks off. Lukács' objection, that in Beckett humans are reduced to animality,[10] resists with official optimism the fact that residual philosophies, which would like to bank the true and immutable after removing temporal contingency, have become the residue of life, the end product of injury. Admittedly, as nonsensical as it is to attribute to Beckett — as Lukács does — an abstract, subjectivist ontology and then to place it on the excavated index of degenerate art because of its worldlessness and infantility, it would be equally ridiculous to have him testify as a key political witness. For urging the struggle against atomic death, a work that notes that death's potential even in ancient struggles is hardly appropriate. The simplifier of terror refuses — unlike Brecht — any simplification. But he is not so dissimilar from Brecht, insofar as his differentiation becomes sensitivity to subjective differences, which have regressed to the "conspicuous consumption" of those who can afford individuation.

Therein lies social truth. Differentiation cannot absolutely or automatically be recorded as positive. The simplification of the social process now beginning relegates it to "incidental expenses" (*faux frais*), somewhat as the formalities of social forms, from which emerged the capability for differentiation, are disappearing. Differentiation, once the condition of humanity, glides into ideology. But the non-sentimental consciousness of that fact does not regress itself. In the act of omission, that which is omitted survives through its exclusion, as consonance survives in atonal harmony. The idiocy of *Endgame* is recorded and developed with the greatest differentiation. The unprotesting

9. *Endgame,* p. 31.

10. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," in Ernst Bloch *et al., Aesthetics and Politics,* afterword Frederic Jameson (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 161; and Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism,* trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 31.

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depiction of omnipresent regression protests against a disposition of the world which obeys the law of regression so obligingly, that a counter-notion can no longer be conceived to be held against it. That it is only thus and not otherwise is carefully shown; a finely-tuned alarm system reports what belongs to the topology of the play and what does not. Delicately, Beckett suppresses the delicate elements no less than the brutal ones. The vanity of the individual who indicts society, while his rights themselves merge in the accumulation of the injustice of all individuals — disaster itself — is manifest in embarrassing declamations like the "Germany" poem of Karl Wolfskehl. The "too-late," the missed moment condemns such bombastic rhetoric to phraseology. Nothing of that sort in Beckett. Even the view that he negatively presents the negativity of the age would fit into a certain kind of conception, according to which people in the eastern satellite countries — where the revolution is carried out by bureaucratic decree — need only devote themselves happily to reflecting a happy-go-lucky age. Playing with elements of reality — devoid of any mirror-like reflection — , refusing to take a "position," and finding joy in such freedom as is prescribed: all of this reveals more than would be possible if a "revealer" were partisan. The name of disaster can only be spoken silently. Only in the terror of recent events is the terror of the whole ignited, but only there, not in gazing upon "origins." Humankind, whose general species-name fits badly into Beckett's linguistic landscape, is only that which humanity has become. As in utopia, the last days pass judgment on the species. But this lamentation — within mind itself — must reflect that lamenting has become impossible. No amount of weeping melts the armor; only that face remains on which the tears have dried up. That is the basis of a kind of artistic behavior denounced as inhuman by those whose humanity has already become an advertisement for inhumanity, even if they have as yet no notion of that fact. Among the motives for Beckett's regression to animal-like man, that is probably the deepest. By hiding its countenance, his poetic work participates in the absurd.

The catastrophies that inspire *Endgame* have exploded the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was the common element between Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and the Sartrian version of existentialism. Even to the concentration camp victims, existentialism had attributed the freedom either inwardly to accept or reject the inflicted martyrdom. *Endgame* destroys such illusions. The individual as a historical category, as the result of the captalist process of alienation and as a defiant protest against it, has itself become openly transitory. The individualist position belonged, as polar opposite, to the ontological tendency of every existentialism, even that of *Being and Time.* Beckett's dramaturgy abandons it like an obsolete bunker. In its narrowness and contingency, individual experience could nowhere locate the authority to interpret itself as a cipher of being, unless it pronounced itself the

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fundamental characteristic of being. Precisely that, however, is untrue. The immediacy of individuation was deceptive: what particular human experience clings to is mediated, determined. *Endgame* insinuates that the individual's claim of autonomy and of being has become incredible. But while the prison of individuation is revealed as a prison and simultaneously as mere semblance — the stage scenery is the image of such self-reflection —, art is unable to release the spell of fragmented subjectivity; it can only depict solipsism. Beckett thereby bumps up against art's contemporary antinomy. The position of the absolute subject, once it has been cracked open as the appearance of an overarching whole through which it first matures, cannot be maintained: Expressionism becomes obsolete. Yet the transition to the binding universality of objective reality, that universality which could relativize the semblance of individuation, is denied art. For art is different from the discursive cogniton of the real, not gradually but categorically distinct from it; in art, only what is transported into the realm of subjectivity, commensurable to it, is valid. It can conceive reconciliation —its idea — only as reconciliation of that which is alienated. If art simulated the state of reconciliation by surrendering to the mere world of things, then it would negate itself. What is offered in the way of socialist realism is not — as some claim — beyond subjectivism but rather lags behind it and is at the same time its pre-artistic complement; the expressionist "Oh Man" and ideologically spiced social reportage fit together seamlessly. In art, unreconciled reality tolerates no reconciliation with the object; realism, which does not reach the level of subjective experience, to say nothing of reaching further, merely mimics reconciliation. The dignity of art today is not measured by asking whether it slips out of this antinomy by luck or cleverness, but whether art confronts and develops it. In that regard, *Endgame* is exemplary. It yields both to the impossibility of dealing with materials and of representation according to nineteenth-century practice, as well as to the insight that subjective modes of reaction, which mediate the laws of form rather than reflecting reality, are themselves no absolute first principle but rather a last principle, objectively posited. All content of subjectivity, which necessarily hypostatizes itself, is trace and shadow of the world, from which it withdraws in order not to serve that semblance and conformity the world demands. Beckett responds to that condition not with any immutable "provisions" (*Vorrat*), but rather with what is still permitted, precariously and uncertainly, by the antagonistic tendencies. His dramaturgy resembles the fun that the old Germany offered — knocking about between the border markers of Baden and Bavaria, as if they fenced in a realm of freedom. *Endgame* takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer, neutral between — on the one hand — the "materials" without which subjectivity could not manifest itself or even exist, and — on the other — an animating impulse which

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blurs the materials, as if that impulse had breathed on the glass through which they are viewed. These materials are so meager that aesthetic formalism is ironically rescued — against its adversaries hither and thither, the stuff-pushers of dialectical materialism and the administrators of authentic messages. The concreteness of the lemurs, whose horizon was lost in a double sense, is transformed directly into the most extreme abstraction; the level of material itself determines a procedure in which the materials, by being lightly touched as transitory, approximate geometrical forms; the most narrow becomes the general. The localization of *Endgame* in that zone teases the spectator with the suggestion of a symbolism which it — like Kafka — refuses. Because no state of affairs is merely what it is, each appears as the sign of interiority, but that inward element supposedly signified no longer exists, and the signs mean just that. The iron ration of reality and people, with whom the drama reckons and keeps house, is one with that which remains of subject, mind (*Geist*), and soul in the face of permanent catastrophe: of the mind, which originated in mimesis, only ridiculous imitation; of the soul — staging itself — inhumane sentimentality; of the subject its most abstract determination, actually existing and thereby already blaspheming. Beckett's figures behave primitively and behavioristically, corresponding to conditions after the catastrophe, which has mutilated them to such an extent that they cannot react differently — flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them. The aesthetic *principium stilisationis* does the same to humans. Thrown back completely upon themselves, subjects — anti-cosmism become flesh — consist in nothing other than the wretched realities of their world, shrivelled down to raw necessities; they are empty *personae*, through which the world truly can only resound. Their "phonyness" is the result of mind's disenchantment — as mythology. In order to undercut history and perhaps thereby to hibernate, *Endgame* occupies the nadir of what philosophy's construction of the subject-object confiscated at its zenith: pure identity becomes the identity of annihilation, identity of subject and object in the state of complete alienation. While meanings in Kafka were beheaded or confused, Beckett calls a halt to the bad infinity of intentions: their sense is senselessness. Objectively and without any polemical intent, that is his answer to existential philosophy, which under the name of "thrownness" and later of "absurdity" transforms senselessness itself into sense, exploiting the equivocations inherent in the concept of sense. To this Beckett juxtaposes no world view, rather he takes it at its word. What becomes of the absurd, after the characters of the meaning of existence have been torn down, is no longer a universal — the absurd would then be yet again an idea — but only pathetic details which ridicule conceptuality, a stratum of utensils as in an emergency refuge: ice boxes, lameness, blindness, and unappetizing bodily functions. Everything awaits evacuation. This stratum

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is not symbolic but rather the post-psychological state, as in old people and torture victims.

Removed from their inwardness, Heidegger's states of being (*Befindlichkeiten*) and Jaspers' "situations" have become materialistic. With them, the hypostatis of individual and that of situation were in harmony. The "situation" was temporal existence itself, and the totality of living individuals was the primary certainty. It presupposed personal identity. Here, Beckett proves to be a pupil of Proust and a friend of Joyce, in that he gives back to the concept of "situation" what it actually says and what philosophy made vanish by exploiting it: dissociation of the unity of consciousness into disparate elements — non-identity. As soon as the subject is no longer doubtlessly self-identical, no longer a closed structure of meaning, the line of demarcation with the exterior becomes blurred, and the situations of inwardness become at the same time physical ones. The tribunal over individuality — conserved by existentialism as its idealist core — condemns idealism. Non-identity is both: the historical disintegration of the subject's unity and the emergence of what is not itself subject. That changes the possible meaning of "situation." It is defined by Jaspers as "a reality for an existing subject who has a stake in it."[11] He subsumes the concept of situation under a subject conceived as firm and identical, just as he insinuates that meaning accrues to the situation because of its relationship to this subject. Immediately thereafter, he also calls it "not just a reality governed by natural laws. It is a sense-related reality," a reality moreover which, strangely enough, is said by Jaspers to be "neither psychological nor physical, but both in one."[12] When situation becomes — in Beckett's view — actually both, it loses its existential-ontological constituents: personal identity and meaning. That becomes striking in the concept of "boundary situation" (*Grenzsituation*). It also stems from Jaspers: "Situations like the following: that I am always in situations; that I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die — these are what I call boundary situations. They never change, except in appearance; [with regard to our existence, they are final]."[13] The construction of *Endgame* takes that up with a sardonic "Pardon me?" Such wise sayings as that "I cannot live without suffering, that I cannot avoid guilt, that I must die" lose their triviality the moment they are retrieved back from their apriority and portrayed concretely. Then they break to pieces — all those noble, affirmative elements with which philosophy adorns that existence that Hegel

11. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), II, p. 177.
12. *Philosophy*, II, p. 177.
13. *Philosophy*, II, p. 178; bracketed material omitted in English translation.

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already called "foul" (*faul*). It does so by subsuming the non-conceptual under a concept, which magically disperses that difference pompously characterized as "ontological." Beckett turns existential philosophy from its head back on its feet. His play reacts to the comical and ideological mischief of sentences like: "Courage in the boundary situation is an attitude that lets me view death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself,"[14] whether Beckett is familiar with them or not. The misery of participants in the *Endgame* is the misery of philosophy.

These Beckettian situations which constitute his drama are the negative of meaningful reality. Their models are those of empirical reality. As soon as they are isolated and divested of their purposeful and psychological context through the loss of personal unity, they assume a specific and compelling expression — that of horror. They are manifest already in the practice of Expressionism. The dread disseminated by Leonhard Frank's elementary school teacher Mager, the cause of his murder, becomes evident in the description of Mager's fussy manner of peeling an apple in class. Although it seems so innocent, such circumspection is the figure of sadism: this image of one who takes his time resembles that of the one who delays giving a ghastly punishment. Beckett's treatment of these situations, that panicky and yet artificial derivation of simplistic slapstick comedy of yesteryear, articulates a content noted already in Proust. In his posthumous work *Immediacy and Sense-Interpretation,* Heinrich Rickert considers the possibility of an objective physiognomy of mind, rather than of a merely projected "soul" of a landscape or a work of art.[15] He cites a passage from Ernst Robert Curtius, who considers it "only partially correct to view Proust only or primarily as a great psychologist. A Stendhal is appropriately characterized in this manner. He is indeed part of the Cartesian tradition of the French mind. But Proust does not recognize the division between thinking and the extended substance. He does not sever the world into psychological and physical parts. To regard his work from the perspective of the 'psychological novel' is to misunderstand its significance. In Proust's books, the world of sensate objects occupies the same space as that of mind." Or: "If Proust is a psychologist, he is one in a completely new sense — by immersing all reality, including sense perception, in a mental fluid." To show "that the usual concept of the psychic is not appropriate here," Rickert again quotes Curtius: "But here the concept of the psychological has lost its opposite — and is thereby no longer a useful characterization."[16] The physiognomy of

14. *Philosophy*, II, p. 197.

15. Heinrich Rickert, *Unmittelbarkeit und Sinndeutung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1939), pp. 133 f.

16. Ernst Robert Curtius, *Französischer Geist im neuen Europa* (1925), rpt. in his *Fran-*

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objective expression however retains an enigma. The situations say something, but what? In this regard, art itself, as the embodiment of situations, converges with that physiognomy. It combines the most extreme determinacy with its radical opposite. In Beckett, this contradiction is inverted outward. What is otherwise entrenched behind a communicative facade is here condemned merely to appear. Proust, in a subterranean mystical tradition, still clings affirmatively to that physiognomy, as if involuntary memory disclosed a secret language of things; in Beckett, it becomes the physiognomy of what is no longer human. His situations are counterparts to the immutable elements conjured by Proust's situations; they are wrested from the flood of schizophrenia, which fearful "health" resists with murderous cries. In this realm Beckett's drama remains master of itself, transforming even schizophrenia into reflection:

> HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter — and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (Pause.) He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (Pause.) He alone had been spared. (Pause.) Forgotten. (Pause.) It appears the case is...was not so...so unusual.[17]

The madman's perception would approximate that of Clov peering on command through the window. *Endgame* draws back from the nadir through no other means than by calling to itself like a sleepwalker: negation of negativity. There sticks in Beckett's memory something like an apoplectic middle-aged man taking his midday nap, with a cloth over his eyes to keep out the light or the flies; it makes him unrecognizable. This image — average and optically barely unusual — becomes a sign only for that gaze which perceives the face's loss of identity, sees the possibility that being concealed is the face of a dead man, and becomes aware of the repulsive nature of that physical concern which reduces the man to his body and places him already among corpses.[18] Beckett stares at such aspects until that family routine — from which they stem — pales into irrelevance. The tableau begins with Hamm covered by an old sheet; at the end, he places near his face the handkerchief, his last possession:

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zösischer Geist im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert (Bern: Francke, 1952), pp. 312-313; quoted in Rickert, *Unmittelbarkeit*, pp. 133 f.,footnote.

17. *Endgame,* p. 44.

18. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 234.

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HAMM: Old Stancher! (Pause.) You...remain.[19]

Such situations, emancipated from their context and from personal character, are reconstructed in a second autonomous context, just as music joins together the intentions and states of expression immersed in it until its sequence becomes a structure in its own right. A key point in the drama — "If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound, and motion, all over and done with"[20] — betrays the principle, perhaps as a reminiscence of how Shakespeare employed his principle in the actors' scene of *Hamlet.*

HAMM: Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark. (Pause.) Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of... (he hesitates) that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life.[21]

In the tremors of "not being in a hurry," such situations allude to the indifference and superfluity of what the subject can still manage to do. While Hamm considers riveting shut the lids of those trash cans where his parents reside, he retracts that decision with the same words as when he must urinate with the tortuous aid of the catheter: "Time enough."[22] The imperceptible aversion to medicine bottles, dating back to the moment one perceived one's parents as physically vulnerable, mortal, deteriorating, reappears in the question:

HAMM: Is it not time for my pain-killer?[23]

Speaking to each other has completely become Strindbergian grumbling:

HAMM: You feel normal?

CLOV: (irritably) I tell you I don't complain.[24]

And another time:

HAMM: I feel a little too far to the left. (Clov moves chair slightly.) Now I feel a little too far to the right. (Clov moves chair slightly.) Now I feel a little too far forward. (Clov moves chair slightly.) Now I feel a little too far back. (Clov moves chair slightly.) Don't stay there, (i.e. behind the chair) you give me the shivers. (Clov returns to his place beside the chair.)

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19. *Endgame,* p. 84.
20. *Endgame,* p. 69.
21. *Endgame,*.p. 70.
22. *Endgame,*.p. 24.
23. *Endgame,* p. 7.
24. *Endgame,* p. 4.

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CLOV: If I could kill him I'd die happy.[25]

The waning of a marriage is the situation where one scratches the other:

NELL: I am going to leave you.
NAGG: Could you give me a scratch before you go?
NELL: No. (Pause.) Where?
NAGG: In the back.
NELL: No. (Pause.) Rub yourself against the rim.
NAGG: It's lower down. In the hollow.
NELL: What hollow?
NAGG: The hollow! (Pause.) Could you not? (Pause.) Yesterday you scratched me there.
NELL: (elegiac) Ah yesterday!
NAGG: Could you not? (Pause.) Would you like me to scratch you? (Pause.) Are you crying again?
NELL: I was trying.[26]

After the dismissed father — preceptor of his parents — has told the Jewish joke, metaphysically famous, about the trousers and the world, he himself bursts into laughter. The shame which grips the listener when someone laughs at his own words becomes existential; life is merely the epitome of everything about which one must be ashamed. Subjectivity is frightening when it simply amounts to domination, as in the situation where one whistles and the other comes running.[27] But what shame struggles against has its social function: in those moments when the bourgeois (*Bürger*) acts like a real bourgeois, he besmirches the concept of humanity on which his claim rests. Beckett's archaic images (*Urbilder*) are also historical, in that he shows as humanly typical only those deformations inflicted on humans by the form of their society. No space remains for anything else. The rudeness and ticks of normal character, which *Endgame* inconceivably intensifies, is that universality of the whole that already preforms all classes and individuals; it merely reproduces itself through bad particularity, the antagonistic interests of single individuals. Because there was no other life than the false one, the catalogue of its defects becomes the mirror image of ontology.

This shattering into unconnected, non-identical elements is nevertheless tied to identity in a theater play, which does not abandon the traditional cast of characters. Only against identity, by dismantling its concept, is dissociation at all possible; otherwise, it would be pure,

25. *Endgame,* p. 27.
26. *Endgame,* pp. 19-20.
27. *Endgame,* p. 45.

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unpolemical, innocent pluralism. For the time being, the historical crisis of the individual runs up against the single biological being, its arena. The succession of situations in Beckett, gliding along without resistance from individuals, thus ends with those obstinate bodies to which they have regressed. Measured by a unit, such as the body, the schizoid situations are comical like optical illusions. That explains the *prima vista* clowning evident in the behavior and constellations of Beckett's figures.[28] Psychoanalysis explains clownish humor as a regression back to a primordial ontogenetic level, and Beckett's regressive play descends to that level. But the laughter it inspires ought to suffocate the laughter. That is what happened to humor, after it became — as an aesthetic medium — obsolete, repulsive, devoid of any canon of what can be laughed at; without any place for reconciliation, where one could laugh; without anything between heaven and earth harmless enough to be laughed at. An intentionally idiotic *double entendre* about the weather runs:

> CLOV: Things are livening up. (He gets up on ladder, raises the telescope, lets it fall.) It did it on purpose. (He gets down, picks up the telescope, turns it on auditorium.) I see . . . a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy. (Pause.) That's what I call a magnifier. (He lowers the telescope, turns toward Hamm.) Well? Don't we laugh?[29]

Humor itself has become foolish, ridiculous — who could still laugh at basic comic texts like *Don Quixote* or *Gargantua* — and Beckett carries out the verdict on humor. The jokes of the damaged people are themselves damaged. They no longer reach anybody; the state of decline, admittedly a part of all jokes, the *Kalauer*, now covers them like a rash. When Clov, looking through the telescope, is asked about the weather and frightens Hamm with the word "gray," he corrects himself with the formulation "a light black." That smears the punchline from Molière's *Miser*, who describes the allegedly stolen casket as gray-red. The marrow has been sucked out of the joke as well as out of the colors. At one point, the two anti-heroes, a blind man and a lame man — the stronger is already both while the weaker will become so — come up with a "trick," an escape, "some kind of plan" à la *Three Penny Opera*; but they do not know whether it will only lengthen their lives and torment, or whether both are to end with absolute obliteration:

> CLOV: Ah good. (He starts pacing to and fro, his eyes fixed on the ground, his hands behind his back. He halts.) The pains in my legs! It's unbelievable! Soon I won't be able to think any more.
> HAMM: You won't be able to leave me. (Clov resumes his pacing.)

28. Cf. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (Munich: Beck, 1956), p. 217.
29. *Endgame*, p. 29.

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What are you doing?
CLOV: Having an idea. (He paces.) Ah. (He halts.)
HAMM: What a brain! (Pause.) Well?
CLOV: Wait! (He meditates. Not very convinced.) Yes . . . (Pause. More convinced.) Yes! (He raises his head.) I have it! I set the alarm![30]

That is probably associated with the originally Jewish joke from the Busch circus, when stupid August, who has caught his wife with his friend on the sofa, cannot decide whether to throw out his wife or the friend, because they are both so dear to him, and comes up with the idea of selling the sofa. But even the remaining trace of silly, sophistic rationality is wiped away. The only comical thing remaining is that along with the sense of the punchline, comedy itself has evaporated. That is how someone suddenly jerks upright after climbing to the top step, climbing further, and stepping into the void. The most extreme crudity completes the verdict on laughter, which has long since participated in its own guilt. Hamm lets his stumps of parents completely starve, those parents who have become babies in their trashcans — the son's triumph as a father. There is this chatter:

NAGG: Me pap!
HAMM: Accursed progenitor!
NAGG: Me pap!
HAMM: The old folks at home! No decency left! Guzzle, guzzle, that's all they think of. (He whistles. Enter Clov. He halts beside the chair.) Well! I thought you were leaving me.
CLOV: Oh not just yet, not just yet.
NAGG: Me pap!
HAMM: Give him his pap.
CLOV: There's no more pap.
HAMM: (to Nagg) Do you hear that? There's no more pap. You'll never get any more pap.[31]

To the irreparable harm already done, the anti-hero adds his scorn — the indignation at the old people who have no manners, just as the latter customarily decry dissolute youth. What remains humane in this scene — that the two old people share the zwieback with each other — becomes repulsive through its contrast with transcendental bestiality; the residue of love becomes the intimacy of smacking. As far as they are still human, they "humanize":

NELL: What is it, my pet? (Pause.) Time for love?
NAGG: Were you asleep?

30. *Endgame*, pp. 46-47.
31. *Endgame*, p. 9.

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NELL: Oh no!
NAGG: Kiss me.
NELL: We can't.
NAGG: Try. (Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.)[32]

Dramatic categories as a whole are treated just like humor. All are parodied. But not ridiculed. Emphatically, parody entails the use of forms in the epoch of their impossibility. It demonstrates this impossibility and thereby changes the forms. The three Aristotelian unities are retained, but drama itself perishes. Along with subjectivity, whose final epilogue (*Nachspiel*) is *Endgame*, the hero is also withdrawn; the drama's freedom is only the impotent, pathetic reflex of futile resolutions.[33] In that regard, too Beckett's drama is heir to Kafka's novels, to whom he stands in a similar relation as the serial composers to Schönberg: he reflects the precursor in himself, altering the latter through the totality of his principle. Beckett's critique of the earlier writer, which irrefutably stresses the divergence between what happens.and the objectively pure, epic language, conceals the same difficulty as that confronted by contemporary integral composition with the antagonistic procedure of Schönberg. What is the *raison d'être* of forms when the tension between them and what is not homogeneous to them disappears, and when one nevertheless cannot halt the progress of mastery over aesthetic material? *Endgame* pulls out of the fray, by making that question its own, by making it thematic. That which prohibits the dramatization of Kafka's novels becomes subject matter. Dramatic components reappear after their demise. Exposition, complication, plot, peripeteia, and catastrophe return as decomposed elements in a post-mortem examination of dramaturgy: the news that there are no more painkillers depicts catastrophe.[34] Those components have been toppled along with that meaning once discharged by drama; *Endgame* studies (as if in a test-tube) the drama of the age, the age that no longer tolerates what constitutes drama. For example, tragedy, at the height of its plot and with antithesis as its quintessence, manifested the utmost tightening of the dramatic thread, stychomythia — dialogues in which the trimeter spoken by one person follows that of the other. Drama had renounced this technique, because its stylization and resulting pretentiousness seemed alien to secular society. Beckett employs it as if the detonation had revealed what was buried in drama. *Endgame* contains rapid, monosyllabic dialogues, like the earlier question-and-answer

32. *Endgame*, p. 14.
33. Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (1967; rpt. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 262-263 fn.
34. *Endgame*, p. 14.

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games between the blinded king and fate's messenger. But where the bind tightened then, the speakers now grow slack. Short of breath until they almost fall silent, they no longer manage the synthesis of linguistic phrases; they stammer in protocol sentences that might stem from positivists or Expressionists. The boundary value (*Grenzwert*) of Beckett's drama is that silence already defined as "the rest" in Shakespeare's inauguration of modern tragedy. The fact that an "act without words" follows *Endgame* as a kind of epilogue is its own *terminus ad quem*. The words resound like merely makeshift ones because silence is not yet entirely successful, like voices accompanying and disturbing it.

What becomes of form in *Endgame* can be virtually reconstructed from literary history. In Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, the degenerate photographer Hjalmar Ekdal — himself a potential anti-hero — forgets to bring to the teenager Hedwig the promised menu from the sumptuous dinner at old Werle's house, to which he had been invited without his family. Psychologically, that is motivated by his slovenly egotistical character, but it is symbolically significant also for Hjalmar, for the course of the plot, and for the play's meaning: the girl's futile sacrifice. That anticipates the later Freudian theory of "parapraxis,"* which explicates such slip-ups by means of their relation to past experiences and wishes of an individual, to the individual's identity. Freud's hypotheses, "all our experiences have a sense,"[35] transforms the traditional dramatic idea into psychlogical realism, from which Ibsen's tragi-comedy of the *Wild Duck* incomparably extracts the spark of form one more time. When such symbolism liberates itself from its psychological determination, it congeals into a being-in-itself, and the symbol becomes symbolic as in Ibsen's late works like *John Gabriel Borkmann*, where the accountant Foldal is overcome by so-called "youth." The contradiction between such a consistent symbolism and conservative realism constitutes the inadequacy of the late plays. But it thereby also constitutes the leavening ferment of the Expressionist Strindberg. His symbols, torn away from empirical human beings, are woven into a tapestry in which everything and nothing is symbolic, because everything can signify everything. Drama need only become aware of the ineluctably ridiculous nature of such pan-symbolism, which destroys itself; it need only take that up and utilize it, and Beckettian absurdity is already achieved as a result of the immanent dialectic of form. Not meaning anything becomes the only meaning. The mortal fear of the

*"Parapraxes" is the usual translation of Freud's *Fehlleistungen*, although Adorno writes *Fehlhandlung*: faulty acts, slip-ups.

35. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), XV, p. 40. [The context is discussing "parapraxes," and Freud asserts that "we formed an impression that in particular cases they seemed to be betraying a sense of their own."]

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dramatic figures, if not of the parodied drama itself, is the distortedly comical fear that they could mean something or other:

> HAMM: We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?
> CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one![36]

With this possibility, long since crushed by the overwhelming power of an apparatus in which individuals are interchangeable and superfluous, the meaning of language also disappears. Hamm, irritated by the impulse of life which has regressed to clumsiness in his parents' trashcan conversations, and nervous because "it doesn't end," asks: "Will you never finish? Will this never finish?"[37] The play takes place on that level. It is constructed on the ground of a proscription of language, and it articulates that in its own structure. However, it does not thereby avoid the aporia of Expressionist drama: that language, even where it tends to be shortened to mere sound, yet cannot shake off its semantic element. It cannot become purely mimetic[38] or gestural, just as forms of modern painting, liberated from referentiality (*Gegenständlichkeit*), cannot cast off all similarity to objects. Mimetic values, definitively unloosed from significative ones, then approach arbitrariness, contingency, and finally a mere secondary convention. The way *Endgame* comes to terms with that differentiates it from *Finnegan's Wake*. Rather than striving to liquidate the discursive element of language through pure sound, Beckett turns that element into an instrument of its own absurdity and he does that according to the ritual of clowns, whose babbling becomes nonsensical by presenting itself as sense. The objective disintegration of language — that simultaneously stereotyped and faulty chatter of self-alienation, where word and sentence melt together in human mouths — penetrates the aesthetic arcanum. The second language of those falling silent, a conglomeration of insolent phrases, pseudo-logical connections, and galvanized words appearing as commodity signs — as the desolate echo of the advertising world — is "refunctioned" (*umfunktioniert*) into the language of a poetic work that negates language.[39] Beckett thus approximates the drama of Eugène Ionesco. Whereas a later work by him is organized around the image of the tape recorder, the language of *Endgame* resembles another language familiar from the loathsome

36. *Endgame*, pp. 32-33.
37. *Endgame*, p. 23.
38. Theodor W. Adorno, "Voraussetzungen," in *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), pp. 136-155; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* pp. 24f.
39. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Dissonanzen: Musik in der verwalteten Welt,* 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 34 and 44.

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party game, where someone records the nonsense spoken at a party and then plays it back for the guests' humiliation. The shock, overcome on such an occasion only by stupid tittering, is here carefully composed. Just as alert experience seems to notice everywhere situations from Kafka's novels after reading him intensely, so does Beckett's language bring about a healing illness of those already ill: whoever listens to himself worries that he also talks like that. For some time now, the accidental events on the street seem to the movie-goer just leaving the theater like the planned contingency of a film. Between the mechanically assembled phrases taken from the language of daily life, the chasm yawns. Where one of the pair asks with the routine gesture of the hardened man, certain of the uncontestable boredom of existence, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?"[40] then this shoulder-shrugging in language becomes apocalyptic, particularly because it is so familiar. From the bland yet aggressive impulse of human "common sense," "What do you think there is?" is extracted the confession of its own nihilism. Somewhat later, Hamm the master commands the *soi-disant* servant Clov, in a circus-task, to undertake the vain attempt to shove the chair back and forth, to fetch the "gaff." There follows a brief dialogue:

> CLOV: Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?
> HAMM: You're not able to.
> CLOV: Soon I won't do it any more.
> HAMM: You won't be able to any more. (Exit Clov.) Ah the creatures, everything has to be explained to them.[41]

That "everything has to be explained to the creatures" is drummed daily by millions of superiors into millions of subordinates. However, by means of the nonsense thus supposedly established in the passage — Hamm's explanation contradicts his own command — the cliché's inanity, usually hidden by custom, is garishly illuminated, and furthermore, the fraud of speaking with each other is expressed. When conversing, people remain hopelessly distant from each other no more reaching each other than the two old cripples in the trash bins do. Communication, the universal law of clichés, proclaims that there is no more communication. The absurdity of all speaking is not unrelated to realism but rather develops from it. For communicative language postulates — already in its syntactic form, through logic, the nature of conclusions, and stable concepts — the principle of sufficient reason. Yet this requirement is hardly met any more: when people speak with each other, they are motivated partly by their psychology or pre-logical

40. *Endgame,* p. 31.
41. *Endgame,* p. 43.

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unconscious, and partly by their pursuit of purposes. Since they aim at self-preservation, these purposes deviate from that objectivity deceptively manifest in their logical form. At any rate, one can prove that point to people today with the help of tape recorders. In Freud's as in Pareto's understanding, the *ratio* of verbal communication is always also a rationalization. *Ratio* itself emerged from the interest in self-preservation, and it is therefore undermined by the obligatory rationalizations of its own irrrationality. The contradiction between the rational facade and the immutably irrational is itself already the absurd. Beckett must only mark the contradiction and employ it as a selective principle, and realism, casting off the illusion of rational stringency, comes into its own.

Even the syntactic form of question and answer is undermined. It presupposes an openness of what is to be spoken, an openness which no longer exists, as Huxley already noted. In the question one hears already the anticipated answer, and that condemns the game of question and answer to empty deception, to the unworkable effort to conceal the unfreedom of informative language in the linguistic gesture of freedom. Beckett tears away this veil, and the philosophical veil as well. Everything radically called into question when confronted by nothingness resists — by virtue of a pathos borrowed from theology — these terrifying consequences, while insisting on their possibility; in the form of question and answer, the answer is infiltrated with the meaning denied by the whole game. It is not for nothing that in fascism and pre-fascism such destructionists were able heartily to scorn destructive intellect. But Beckett deciphers the lie of the question mark: the question has become rhetorical. While the existential-philosophical hell resembles a tunnel, where in the middle one can already discern light shining at the end, Beckett's dialogues rip up the railroad tracks of conservation; the train no longer arrives at the bright end of the tunnel.Wedekind's old technique of misunderstanding becomes total. The course of the dialogues themselves approximates the contingency principle of literary production. It sounds as if the laws of its continuation were not the "reason" of speech and reply, and not even their psychological entwinement, but rather a test of listening, related to that of a music which frees itself from preformed types. The drama attends carefully to what kind of sentence might follow another. Given the accessible spontaneity of such questions, the absurdity of content is all the more strongly felt. That, too, finds its infantile model in those people who, when visiting the zoo, wait attentively for the next move of the hippopotamus or the chimpanzee.

In the state of its disintegration, language is polarized. On the one hand, it becomes Basic English, or French, or German — single words, archaically ejected commands in the jargon of universal disregard, the intimacy of irreconcilable adversaries; on the other hand, it be-

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comes the aggregate of its empty forms, of a grammar that has renounced all reference to its content and therefore also to its synthetic function. The interjections are accompanied by exercise sentences, God knows why. Beckett trumpets this from the rooftops, too: one of the rules of the *Endgame* is that the unsocial partners — and with them the audience — are always eyeing each other's cards. Hamm considers himself an artist. He has chosen as his life maxim Nero's *qualis artifex pereo.* But the stories he undertakes run aground on syntax:

> HAMM: Where was I? (Pause. Gloomily.) It's finished, we're finished. (Pause.) Nearly finished.[42]

Logic reels between the linguistic paradigms. Hamm and Clov converse in their authoritative, mutually cutting fashion:

> HAMM: Open the window.
> CLOV: What for?
> HAMM: I want to hear the sea.
> CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.
> HAMM: Even if you opened the window?
> CLOV: No.
> HAMM: Then it's not worthwhile opening it?
> CLOV: No.
> HAMM: (violently) Then open it! (Clov gets up on the ladder, opens the window. Pause.) Have you opened it?
> CLOV: Yes.[43]

One could almost see in Hamm's last "then"the key to the play. Because it is not worthwhile to open the window, since Hamm cannot hear the sea — perhaps it is dried out, perhaps it no longer moves —, he insists that Clov open it. The nonsense of an act becomes a reason to accomplish it — a late legitimation of Fichte's free activity for its own sake. That is how contemporary actions look, and they arouse the suspicion that things were never very different. The logical figure of the absurd, which makes the claim of stringency for stringency's contradictory opposite, denies every context of meaning apparently guaranteed by logic, in order to prove logic's own absurdity: that logic, by means of subject, predicate, and copula, treats non-identity as if it were identical, as if it were consumed in its forms. The absurd does not take the place of the rational as one world view of another; in the absurd, the rational world view comes into its own.

The pre-established harmony of despair reigns between the forms and the residual content of the play. The ensemble — smelted

42. *Endgame,* p. 50.
43. *Endgame,* pp. 64-65.

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together — counts only four heads. Two of them are excessively red, as if their vitality were a skin disease; the two old ones, however, are excessively white, like sprouting potatoes in a cellar. None of them still has a properly functioning body; the old people consist only of rumps, having apparently lost their legs not in the catastrophe but in a private tandem accident in the Ardennes,"on the road to Sedan,"[44] an area where one army regularly annihilates another. One should not suppose that all that much has changed. Even the memory of their own particular *(bestimmt)* misfortune becomes enviable in relation to the indeterminacy *(Unbestimmtheit)* of universal misfortune — they laugh at it. In contrast to Expressionism's fathers and sons, they all have their own names, but all four names have one syllable, "four-letter words" like obscenities. Practical, familiar abbreviations, popular in Anglo-Saxon countries, are exposed as mere stumps of names. Only the name of the old mother, Nell, is somewhat common even if obsolete;' Dickens uses it for the touching child in *Old Curiosity Shop*. The three other names are invented as if for bill-boards. The old man is named Nagg, with the association of "nagging" and perhaps also a German association: an intimate pair is intimate through "gnawing" *(Nagen)*. They talk about whether the sawdust in their cans has been changed; yet it is not sawdust but sand. Nagg stipulates that it used to be sawdust, and Nell answers boredly: "Once!"[45] — a woman who spitefully exposes her husband's frozen, repetitive declarations. As sordid as the fight about sawdust or sand is, the difference is decisive for the residual plot, the transition from a minimum to nothing. Beckett can claim for himself what Benjamin praised in Baudelaire, the ability to "express something extreme with extreme discretion;"[46] the routine consolation that things could be worse becomes a condemnation. In the realm between life and death, where even pain is no longer possible, the difference between sawdust and sand means everything. Sawdust, wretched by-product of the world of things, is now in great demand; its removal becomes an intensification of the life-long death penalty. The fact that both lodge in trash bins — a comparable motif appears, moreover, in Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real*, surely without one play having been influenced by the other — takes the conversational phrase literally, as in Kafka. "Today old people are thrown in the trashcan" and it happens. *Endgame* is the true gerontology. According to the measure of socially useful labor, which they can no longer perform, old people are superfluous and must be discarded. That is extracted

44. *Endgame*, p. 16
45. *Endgame,* p. 17.
46. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in his *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 183-184.

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from the scientific ruckus of a welfare system that accentuates what it negates. *Endgame* trains the viewer for a condition where everyone involved expects — upon lifting the lid from the nearest dumpster — to find his own parents. The natural cohension of life has become organic refuse. The national socialists irreparably overturned the taboo of old age. Beckett's trashcans are the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz. Yet the sub-plot goes further than too far, to the old people's demise. They are denied children's fare, their pap, which is replaced by a biscuit they — toothless — can no longer chew; and they suffocate, because the last man is too sensitive to grant life to the next-to-last ones. That is entwined with the main plot, because the old pair's miserable end drives it forward to that exit of life whose possibility constitutes the tension in the play. Hamlet is revised: croak or croak, that is the question.

The name of Shakespeare's hero is grimly foreshortened by Beckett — the last, liquidated dramatic subject echoing the first. It is also associated with one of Noah's sons and thereby with the flood: the progenitor of blacks, who replaces the white "master race" in a Freudian negation. Finally, there is the English "ham actor." Beckett's Hamm, the key to power and helpless at the same time, plays at what he no longer is, as if he had read the most recent sociological literature defining *zoon politikon* as a role. Whoever cleverly presented himself became a "personality" just like helpless Hamm. "Personality" may have been a role originally — nature pretending to transcend nature. Fluctuation in the play's situations causes one of Hamm's roles: occasionally, a stage direction drastically suggests that he speak with the "voice of a rational being;" in a lengthy narrative, he is to strike a "narrative tone."The memory of what is irretrievably past becomes a swindle. Disintegration retrospectively condemns as fictional that continuity of life which alone made life possible. Differences in tone — between people who narrate and those who speak directly — pass judgment on the principle of identity. Both alternate in Hamm's long speech, a kind of inserted aria without music. At the transition points he pauses — the artistic pauses of the veteran actor of heroic roles. For the norm of existential philosophy — people should be themselves because they can no longer become anything else —, *Endgame* posits the antithesis, that precisely this self is not a self but rather the aping imitation of something non-existent. Hamm's mendacity exposes the lie concealed in saying "I" and thereby exhibiting substantiality, whose opposite is the content disclosed by the "I." Immutability, the epitome of transience, is its ideology. What used to be the truth content of the subject — thinking — is only still preserved in its gestural shell. Both main figures act as if they were reflecting on something, but without thinking.

HAMM: The whole thing is comical, I grant you that. What about

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having a good guffaw the two of us together?
CLOV: (after reflection) I couldn't guffaw today.
HAMM: (after reflection) Nor I.[47]

According to his name, Hamm's counterpart is what he is, a truncated clown, whose last letter has been severed. An archaic expression for the devil sounds similar — cloven foot; it also resembles the current word "glove." He is the devil of his master, whom he has threatened with the worst, leaving him; yet at the same time he is also the glove with which the master touches the world of things, which he can no longer directly grasp. Not only the figure of Clov is constructed through such associations, but also his connection with the others. In the old piano edition of Stravinsky's "Ragtime for Eleven Instruments," one of the most significant works of his Surrealist phase, there was a Picasso drawing which — probably inspired by the title "rag" — showed two ragged figures, the ancestors of those vagabonds Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for Godot. This virtuoso sketch is a single entangled line. The double-sketch of *Endgame* is of this spirit, as well as the damaged repetitions irresistably produced by Beckett's entire work. In them, history is cancelled out. This compulsory repetition is taken from the regressive behavior of someone locked up, who tries it again and again. Beckett converges with the newest musical tendencies by combining, as a Westerner, aspects of Stravinsky's radical past — the oppressive stasis of disintegrating continuity — with the most advanced expressive and constructive means from the Schönberg school. Even the outlines of Hamm and Clov are one line; they are denied the individuation of a tidily independent monad. They cannot live without each other. Hamm's power over Clov seems to be that only he knows how to open the cupboard, somewhat like the situation where only the principal knows the combination of the safe. He would reveal the secret to Clov, if Clov would swear to "finish" him — or "us." In a reply thoroughly characteristic of the play's tapestry, Clov answers: "I couldn't finish you;" as if the play were mocking the man who feigns reason, Hamm says: "Then you won't finish me."[48] He is dependent on Clov, because Clov alone can accomplish what keeps both alive. But that is of questionable value, because both — like the captain of the ghostly ship — must fear not being able to die. The tiny bit that is also everything — that would be the possibility that something could perhaps change. This movement, or its absence, is the plot. Admittedly, it does not become much more explicit than the repeated motif "Something is taking its course,"[49] as abstract as the pure form of

47. *Endgame,* p. 60.
48. *Endgame,* p. 36.
49. *Endgame,* p. 13; cf. p. 32.

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time. The Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, mentioned by Günther Anders with reference to *Godot*, is derided rather than portrayed according to the tenets of traditional aesthetics. The slave can no longer grasp the reins and abolish domination. Crippled as he is, he would hardly be capable of this, and according to the plays historico-philosophical sundial, it is too late for spontaneous action anyway. Clov has no other choice than to emigrate out into the world that no longer exists for the play's recluses, with a good chance of dying. He cannot even depend on freedom unto death. He does manage to make the decision to go, even comes in for the farewell: "Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag"[50] — a strong, almost musical conclusion. But one does not see his exit, rather he remains "impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end."[51] That is an allegory whose intention has evaporated. Aside from some differences, which may be decisive or completely irrelevant, this is identical with the beginning. No spectator and no philosopher can say if the play will not begin anew. The dialectic swings to a standstill.

As a whole, the play's plot is musically composed with two themes, like the double fugue of earlier times. The first theme is that it should end, a Schopenhauerian negation of the will to live become insignificant. Hamm strikes it up; the persons, no longer persons, become instruments of their situation, as if they were playing chamber music."Of all of Beckett's bizarre instruments, Hamm, who in *Endgame* sits blindly and immovably in his wheelchair, resounds with the most tones, the most surprising sound."[52] Hamm's non-identity with himself motivates the course of the play. While he desires the end of the torment of a miserably infinite existence, he is concerned about his life, like a gentleman in his ominous "prime" years. The peripheral paraphernalia of health are utmost in his mind. Yet he does not fear death, rather that death could miscarry; Kafka's motif of the hunter Grachus still resonates.[53] Just as important to him as his own bodily necessities is the certainty that Clov, ordered to gaze out, does not espy any sail or trail of smoke, that no rat or insect is stirring, with whom the calamity could begin anew; that he also does not see the perhaps surviving child, who could signify hope and for whom he lies in wait like Herod the butcher for the *agnus dei*. Insecticide, which all along pointed toward the genocidal camps, becomes the final product of the domination of nature, which destroys itself. Only this content of life remains: that nothing be living. All existence is levelled to a life that is itself death,

50. *Endgame,* p. 82.
51. *Endgame,* p. 82.
52. Marie Luise von Kaschnitz, "Lecture on Lucky," Frankfurt University.
53. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," *Prisms,* p. 260.

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abstract domination.The second theme is attributed to Clov the servant. After an admittedly obscure history he sought refuge with Hamm; but he also resembles the son of the raging yet impotent patriarch. To give up obedience to the powerless is most difficult; the insignificant and obsolete struggles irresistably against its abolition. Both plots are counterpointed, since Hamm's will to die is identical with his life principle, while Clov's will to live may well bring about the death of both; Hamm says: "Outside of here it's death."[54] The antithesis of the heroes is also not fixed, rather their impulses converge; it is Clov who first speaks of the end. The scheme of the play's progression is the end game in chess, a typical, rather standard situation, separated from the middle game and its combinations by a caesura; these are also missing in the play, where intrigue and "plot" are silently suspended. Only artistic mistakes or accidents, such as something growing somewhere, could cause unforeseen events, but not resourceful spirit. The field is almost empty, and what happened before can only be poorly construed from the positions of the few remaining figures. Hamm is the king, about whom everything turns and who can do nothing himself. The incongruity between chess as pastime and the excessive effort involved becomes on the stage an incongruity between athletic pretense and the lightweight actions that are performed. Whether the game ends with stalemate or with perpetual check, or whether Clov wins, remains unclear, as if clarity in that would already be too much meaning. Moreover, it is probably not so important, because everything would come to an end in stalemate as in checkmate. Otherwise, only the fleeting image of the child[55] breaks out of the circle, the most feeble reminder of Fortinbras or the child king. It could even be Clov's own abandoned child. But the oblique light falling from thence into the room is as weak as the helplessly helping arms extending from the windows at the conclusion of Kafka's *Trial.*

The history of the subject's end becomes thematic in an intermezzo, which can afford its symbolism, because it depicts the subject's own decrepitude and therefore that of its meaning. The hubris of idealism, the inthroning of man as creator in the center of creation, has entrenched itself in that "bare interior" like a tyrant in his last days. There man repeats with a reduced, tiny imagination what man was once supposed to be; man repeats what was taken from him by social strictures as well as by today's cosmology, which he cannot escape. Clov is his male nurse. Hamm has himself shoved about by Clov into the middle of that *intérieur* which the world has become but which is also the interior of his own subjectivity:

54. *Endgame,* p. 9.
55. *Endgame,* p. 78.

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HAMM: Take me for a little turn. (Clov goes behind the chair and pushes it forward.) Not too fast! (Clov pushes chair.) Right round the world! (Clov pushes chair.) Hug the walls, then back to the center again. (Clov pushes chair.) I was right in the center, wasn't I?[56]

The loss of the center, parodied here because that center itself was a lie, becomes the paltry object of carping and powerless pedantry:

CLOV: We haven't done the round.
HAMM: Back to my place. (Clov pushes chair back to center.) Is that my place?
CLOV: I'll measure it.
HAMM: More or less! More or less!
CLOV: (moving chair slightly) There!
HAMM; I'm more or less in the center?
CLOV: I'd say so.
HAMM: You'd say so! Put me right in the center!
CLOV: I'll go and get the tape.
HAMM: Roughly! Roughly! (Clov moves chair slightly.) Band in the center![57]

What is payed back in this ludicrous ritual is nothing originally perpetrated by the subject. Subjectivity itself is guilty; that one even is. Original sin is heretically fused with creation. Being, trumpeted by existential philosophy as the meaning of being, becomes its antithesis. Panic fear of the reflex movements of living entities does not only drive untiringly toward the domination of nature: it also attaches itself to life as the ground of that calamity which life has become:

HAMM: All those I might have helped. (Pause.) Helped! (Pause.) Saved. (Pause.) Saved! (Pause.) The place was crawling with them! (Pause. Violently.) Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that![58]

From that he draws the conclusion: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on."[59] The autonomous moral law reverts antinomically from pure domination over nature into the duty to exterminate, which always lurked in the background:

HAMM: More complications' (Clov gets down.) Not an underplot, I trust. (Clov moves ladder nearer window gets up on it, turns telescope on the without.)
CLOV: (dismayed) Looks like a small boy!
HAMM: (sarcastic) A small . . . boy!

56. *Endgame,* p. 25.
57. *Endgame*, pp. 26-27.
58. *Endgame*, p. 68.
59. *Endgame*, p. 69.

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CLOV: I'll go and see. (He gets down, drops the telescope, goes toward door, turns.)
HAMM: No! (Clov halts.)
CLOV: No? A potential procreator?[60]

Such a total conception of duty stems from idealism, which is judged by a question the handicapped rebel Clov poses to his handicapped master:

CLOV: Any particular sector you fancy? Or merely the whole thing?[61]

That sounds like a reminder of Benjamin's insight that an intuited cell of reality counterbalances the remainder of the whole world. Totality, a pure postulate of the subject, is nothing. No sentence sounds more absurd than this most reasonable of sentences, which bargains "the whole thing" down to "merely," to the phantom of an anthropocentrically dominated world. As reasonable as this most absurd observation is, it is nevertheless impossible to dispute the absurd aspects of Beckett's play just because they are confiscated by hurried apologetics and a desire for easy disposal. *Ratio*, having been fully instrumentalized, and therefore devoid of self-reflection and of reflection on what it has excluded, must seek that meaning it has itself extinguished. But in the condition that necessarily gave rise to this question, no answer is possible other than nothingness, which the form of the answer already is. The historical inevitability of this absurdity allows it to seem ontological; that is the veil of delusion produced by history itself. Beckett's drama rips through this veil. The immanent contradiction of the absurd, reason terminating in senselessness, emphatically reveals the possibility of a truth which can no longer even be thought; it undermines the absolute claim exercized by what merely is. Negative ontology is the negation of ontology: history alone has brought to maturity what was appropriated by the mythic power of timelessness. The historical fiber of situation and language in Beckett does not concretize — *more philosophico* — something unhistorical: precisely this procedure, typical of existential dramatists, is both foreign to art and philosophically obsolete. Beckett's once-and-for-all is rather infinite catastrophe; only "that the earth is extinguished, although I never saw it lit"[62] justifies Clov's answer to Hamm's question: "Do you not think this has gone on long enough?" "Yes."[63] Pre-history goes on, and the phantasm of infinity is only its curse. After Clov, commanded to look

60. *Endgame*, p. 78. [Adorno cites the divergent German edition, which here includes Clov's belief that he sees someone and Hamm's command to him to do his duty and extirpate that person.]
61. *Endgame*, p. 73
62. *Endgame*, p. 81.
63. *Endgame*, p. 45. [In the German edition, Clov says "from time immemorial."]

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outside,[64] reports to the totally lame man what he sees of earth, Hamm entrusts to him his secret:

> CLOV: (absorbed) Mmm.
> HAMM: Do you know what it is?
> CLOV: (as before) Mmm.
> HAMM: I was never there.[65]

Earth was never yet tread upon; the subject is not yet a subject.

Determinate negation becomes dramaturgical through consistent reversal. Both social partners qualify their insight that there is no more nature with the bourgeois "You exaggerate."[66] Prudence and circumspection are the tried-and-true means of sabotaging contemplation. They cause only melancholy reflection:

> CLOV: (sadly) No one that ever lived ever thought so crooked as we.[67]

Where they draw nearest to the truth, they experience their consciousness — doubly comical — as false consciousness; thus a condition is mirrored that reflection no longer reaches. The entire play is woven with the technique of reversal. It transfigures the empirical world into that world desultorily named already by the late Strindberg and in Expressionism. "The whole house stinks of corpses . . . The whole universe."[68] Hamm, who then says "to hell with the universe," is just as much the descendant of Fichte, who disdains the world as nothing more than raw material and mere product, as he is the one without hope except for the cosmic night, which he implores with poetic quotes. Absolute, the world becomes a hell; there is nothing else. Beckett graphically stresses Hamm's sentence: "Beyond is the . . . OTHER hell."[69] With a Brechtian commentary, he lets the distorted metaphysics of "the here and now" shine through:

> CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?
> HAMM: Mine was always like that. (Exit Clov.) Got him that time![70]

In his conception, Benjamin's notion of the "dialectic at a standstill" comes into its own:

> HAMM: It will be the end and there I'll be, wondering what can have brought it on and wondering what can have (he hesitates) . . . why it was so long coming. (Pause.) There I'll be, in the old shelter, alone

64. *Endgame*, p. 72.
65. *Endgame*, p. 74.
66. *Endgame*, p. 11.
67. *Endgame*, p. 11.
68. *Endgame*, p. 46.
69. *Endgame*, p. 26. [Not capitalized in the English edition.]
70. *Endgame*, p. 49.

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> against the silence and . . . (he hesitates) . . . the stillness. If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound and motion, all over and done with.[71]

That "stillness" is the order which Clov supposedly loves and which he defines as the purpose of his functions:

> CLOV: A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place,under the last dust.[72]

To be sure, the Old Testament saying "You shall become dust (*Staub*) again" is translated here into "dirt" (*Dreck*). In the play, the substance of life, a life that is death, is the excretions. But the imageless image of death is one of indifference. In it, the distinction disappears: the distinction between absolute domination, the hell in which time is banished into space, in which nothing will change any more — and the messianic condition where everything would be in its proper place. The ultimate absurdity is that the repose of nothingness and that of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from each other. Hope creeps out of a world in which it is no more conserved than pap and pralines, and back where it came from, back into death. From it, the play derives its only consolation, a stoic one:

> CLOV: There are so many terrible things now.
> HAMM: No, no, there are not so many now.[73]

Consciousness begins to look its own demise in the eye, as if it wanted to survive the demise, as these two want to survive the destruction of their world. Proust, about whom the young Beckett wrote an essay, is said to have attempted to keep protocol on his own struggle with death, in notes which were to be integrated into the description of Bergotte's death. *Endgame* carries out this intention like a mandate from a testament.

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71. *Endgame*, p. 69
72. *Endgame*, p. 57.
73. *Endgame*, p. 44.

Translated by Michael T. Jones

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