

# Existentialism versus Psychotherapy in the Plays of Samuel Beckett

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**Abstract— Psychoanalysis is a secular world's version of theology. It is a science of desire which fails to find satisfaction. Once again theology has pre-empted it. Thomas Aquinas asserts, "human beings can never be identical with themselves because desire is the very essence or organizing principle of their being." For Aquinas, "this longing is ultimately one for God. This is to say that it is the inscription within us of a sovereign good for which we cannot help yearning." The nothingness of God may be felt at work in his subjects in the negativity of desire. Desire is just the way that good is built into our material bodies and seizes us independently of the abstract will. It is what orientates our existence a predilection which is radically prior to choice. Choice does not go all the way down. The will for Aquinas is not a strenuous impulse but a primary orientation of our being. We have a natural bent towards well-being. Our appetite for happiness is not optional, but more than appetite for food is. It is the way our bodies are biased and ballasted towards what is desirable.**

**Keywords—** Existentialism, Psychoanalysis, Secular, Desire, Satisfaction.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IT IS NATURAL FOR US TO DESIRE HAPPINESS, BUT EQUALLY NATURAL FOR US NOT TO ATTAIN IT, AS SELF-DIVIDED TIME-TORN CREATURES THAT ARE CHRONICALLY UNABLE TO COINCIDE WITH OURSELVES. DESIRE FOR AQUINAS IS INFINITE. DISSATISFACTION IS OUR NORMATIVE CONDITION, AND THE PERFECTION WE SEEK SIGNALS THE DEATH OF OUR HUMANITY. THE ONLY SORT OF HUMAN BODY WHICH COINCIDES WITH ITSELF IS A CORPSE. FOR THE FREUDIANS, THE HUMAN CREATURE IS THE NEUROTIC ANIMAL, BECAUSE A DEGREE OF REPRESSION IS ESSENTIAL FOR US TO OPERATE. HUMAN BEINGS ARE SICK WITH DESIRE.

### **Discussion:**

Aquinas depicts that the desire which depletes us into no-being is consummated in the love and knowledge of God, who is both cause and object of it.

The British Philosopher, David Hume says that "the mind is simply a receptacle of sensations and perceptions from the 'external world'". He writes in a celebrated passage: -- "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception of other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time

without a perception, and never can observe anything, but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound-sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist.”

The feasibility of interpretative discourse depends on a prior context. There is no naked, pristine, interpreted mode of literary experience. This does not mean that this current psychoanalytic study of Beckett has already been preceded by many other ones, but a daunting one, the context being a rich one at that. It seems that Beckett psychoanalysis is obvious attraction for ever since his personal therapy with Bion. Beckett’s work has attracted the attention of a number of psychoanalytic critics but the real attempt has been made by Angela Moorjani. She roughly divides the vast domain into three areas: First, Beckett’s psychoanalytic culture and inter texts, secondly, Bion and other post-kleinians and, thirdly, Lacanian and Post-Structuralist approaches.

They are the first generation of psychoanalytic critics of Beckett. They have contributed greatly to the cult of the negative writer. Herein negative means pathological, neurotic, regressive or tragic.

Accounts of disintegration, loss of identity, schizophrenia, masochism, oedipal fixation rely upon either traditional Freudian or Jungian motifs. They tend to focus on reductive issues, such as the mother-son relationship in the trilogy or the Molloy-Moran relationship in Molloy.

Second generation psychoanalytic criticism is more responsive to the complex question of Beckett’s relationship to psychoanalysis. Moorjani provides a

timely correction to the somewhat stultified images of earlier Beckett psychoanalytic criticism. One neglected factor in this complex relationship is Beckett’s own therapy.

Didier Anzieu says that the Beckett-Bion relationship plays centre stage. Anzieu asserts that the form of Beckett’s mature post-war work is significant to the experience of his analysis which Anzieu categorically takes to be a traumatic failure. Such a painful interruption is paradoxically necessary for the ‘economy’ of the future work, since it provides an irreducible nucleus that will never be, mastered, but can at least be formally ‘represented’ albeit negatively. Consequently Beckett has pursued the interrupted analysis with Bion in the shape of a fictionalized self analysis. Steven cannot suggest that Anzieu’s voice may be seen to add ‘to the transferential conversation established between the work of Beckett and Bion, both triangulating it, and bringing it to full circle.’ The voice that Anzieu hears in Beckett’s auto analysis depends upon a voice which provides the one who emits it with that sonorous envelope with which it has failed to be surrounded, a voice as precious to be heard as a birth in the pharynx.

Anzieu’s conception of voice as sonorous envelope is closely related to his own original theory of the importance of the skin as an ideal, ego-forming container, a theory which he derives a great deal from the work of Bion on the relations between the container and the contained. The skin ego can be loosely defined as phantasms interface between the bodies self and the outer world. Envelopment that recalls fusion with the mother in the womb or in a common skin defends against separation anxiety. Jean Michel Rebate argues in an article that Beckett and Bion are concerned with ‘Ghosts’ with the issue of an infinitesimal lessness, and with the question of the

positivity of the 'void' or 'nothing' for the elaboration of a general logic subjectivity.

Both Bion and Beckett's fertile period was after the war, with Beckett writing the trilogy and Bion developing in the early fifties, his key concepts that were to lead to a theory of thinking in particular attacks on linking.

The second critical factor that is problematical for any analytic approach to Beckett is the Irish author's own extraordinary psychoanalytic culture. Most of the psychoanalytic critics of Beckett have shown the relationship between author and text in terms of Beckett's use of psychoanalytic intertexts. The intertextual presence of psychoanalysis is the proof of what Baker calls 'structural debts.' Locating Beckett in a whole retrospective landscape of loss in mid-twentieth century culture constituted by notions such as the paradise of the womb, pre-oedipal plenitude, material prohibition, oceanic regression, narcissism, and the narratives of mourning and melancholia. Baker argues for a natural structural indebtedness on Beckett's part to psychoanalysis. The affinity between the Beckettian imagination and psychoanalysis, or what Bajer calls 'psychoanalytic myths and models; is taken to be so evident and natural that Phill Baker puzzlingly takes them 'as read. By Freud's definition, the psychoanalytic situation is both a space and a relationship or series of relationship among people.

The analysis is designed to encourage regression and verbalization simultaneously to make apparent to all involved the dynamic relation between words and things in the patient's experience of his world. The patient recovers and learns to separate the past from any would be in appropriate projections unto the present relation with the analyst in the transference. The end of analysis, following this simplified model, is the reconstruction of historical truth, the real life

that was unconsciously enacted in the present and that the analysis relegates once more to the past, its proper place.

Beckett's early post-war writings complicate and causes problem such as process. Vladimir and Estragon jubilate in finding things to do in order not to have to think; and to temporarily leave behind the 1940<sup>s</sup> while in company (1980). Beckettian mental activity is playfully reduced to a minimal state, that is to say somewhere between thinking and remembering. The narrator acknowledges that while there is no escape from displaying some mental activity, 'the lower the order of mental activity the better the company.'<sup>12</sup>

The Beckettian character refuses to reveal the history of his subjectivity. They deny to separate the so called past from its projection into the narrative present. The loss of memory is literally thematised in *Waiting for Godot*. Functioning in the case of Estragon and Pozzo is made something accursed and abominable.

In psychoanalytic criticism of Beckett, the question of negativity is frequently brought to bear on the idea of primary narcissism. The trajectory of the Beckettian hero is usually being described in terms of an increasingly marked separation from exterior reality.

However, the withdrawal of investment equally affects inner reality as well as outer reality in Beckett's work. In other words, 'the search for pleasure has substituted itself for the search for displeasure. Similarly, the avoidance of displeasure has become avoidance of pleasure. For green, negative narcissism is a process that tends not towards the one but towards nothing.

Beckett's work of the negative can be linked to John Piling's description of Beckett's pre-war writing. It has compositional principle of negation which is 'at once generative but degenerative organic but disabling, and dynamic but dysfunctional'.

This is not to say that Beckett gives a clinical description of psychopathological states. His creative intuition explores the elements of experience. It shows to what extent all human beings carry the seeds of such depression and disintegration within the deeper layers of their personality. If the prisoners of San Quentin respond to *Waiting for Godot*, it is because they are confronted with their own experience of time, waiting, hope and despair. They recognize the truth about their own human relationship in the sadomasochistic interdependence of Pozzo and Lucky and in the bickering hate-love between Vladimir and Estragon. This is also the key to the wide success of Beckett's plays. To be confronted with concrete projection of the deepest fears and anxieties, constitutes a process of catharsis and liberation analogous to the therapeutic effect in psychoanalysis of confronting the subconscious contents of the mind. This is the moment of release from deadening habit, through facing up to the suffering of existence that Vladimir almost attains in *Waiting for Godot*. In this play Beckett paints a world of useless uniformity, blankness, sameness, indifference where all links and relations seem to have been served and ruptured. Bodies hardly function or move. Memory no longer operates. Names are no longer name.

The sense and quality of emptiness encountered in Beckett can be precisely understood as that particular experience which suspends existence in a state of non-existence. Emptiness can be linked to a past state which cannot be remembered. Beckett explores this experience through his work. It seems the 'goal' and structure of his literary discourse. In *Waiting for Godot* we notice that Beckett's void is characterized by states of unanticipated conservation, inert tension-free equilibrium and suspension.

The suspension of time, its past and its memory is specific to *Waiting for Godot* and other plays of Samuel Beckett. Estragon and Vladimir uphold blankness and emptiness as their supreme condition of being. They suspend particular sense of time or place. The reader must have to understand the role of time and memory in the play. As Bion tells us, "memory is seen as something limited since memory is born of, and only suited to, sensuous experience. To remain without memory is to leave the mental space open for the reception of something new, something which is not known. What is already known functions as pre-existing contexts which belongs to the past, and, as such, obstructs contact in the present?" Memory and desire must be precisely understood as past and future sense. Desire is like a future memory since it refers to an event that has not yet happened. Like memory, it is an obstacle or a defensive barrier against the intrusion of thoughts.

It is in relation to the horrors of war-time. *Waiting for Godot* is predicted on an active forgetting of the past, time, history, or to conjure Joyce, the nightmare of history. Instead it takes a mind boggling jump into the free air of temporal and spatial indeterminacy: -Estragon: (very insidious) But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

Pozzo: It's indescribable. It's like nothing.  
There's nothing. There's a tree.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The active suspension of remembering, thinking, knowing forgetting, phantasm, dreams, memories, frequent use of sleep, called Nirvikalp Samadhi in eastern existential philosophy are the elements of psychotherapy used by Samuel Beckett for the treatment of mental abnormalities,

depression and absurdity of the characters in his four major plays. Directly or indirectly the playwright suggests that the same can be used as a psychotherapy for the needed person in the world .

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