

# *Endgame* and the Meaning of Meaninglessness\*

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## Summary

This article examines the similarities between Theodor Adorno and Stanley Cavell's readings of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1964) and seeks to demonstrate the ways in which these interpretations, two of the earliest philosophical responses to Beckett's work, anticipate some of the most recent ones. The article argues that Adorno and Cavell both construe Beckett's play as a challenge to and complication of humanist notions of subjectivity, in stark contrast to the primarily existentialist contemporaneous understanding. It then goes on to point out the analogies between these earlier readings and those of certain contemporary critics.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die ooreenkomste tussen Theodor Adorno en Stanley Cavell se interpretasies van Samuel Beckett se *Endgame* (1964), en poog om aan te dui op watter wyses hierdie interpretasies, twee van die vroegste filosofiese reaksies op Beckett se werk, voorlopers is van die mees onlangses. Die artikel voer aan dat Adorno en Cavell albei Beckett se drama vertolk as 'n uitdaging aan en komplisering van humanistiese idees oor subjektiwiteit, in skrilte kontras met die primêre eksistensialistiese eietydse verstaan daarvan. Dit wys verder op die analogieë tussen hierdie vroeër vertolkings en dié van sekere eietydse kritici.

From its first appearance, Samuel Beckett's work has elicited philosophical response. While such responses have appeared often and consistently, their tenor has, over the course of the last fifty years, varied not inconsiderably, generally following or drawing on topical trends in contemporaneous philosophy. This is not surprising. Amongst the voices in this voluble discourse, however, two stand out as particularly interesting for the way in which they buck this trend: Theodor Adorno's, in his essay "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" (2003), and Stanley Cavell's, in his essay of 1969, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" (1969).

The two are among the earliest philosophical readings of Beckett – (Adorno's may be in fact the earliest: Richard Coe's *Samuel Beckett*, the

first philosophically oriented monograph on the author, was published in 1964) – and both, despite proceeding entirely independently, offer remarkably similar interpretations of the structure and significance of *Endgame*. The writers' understanding of the play, as demonstrated by their concern with form and the challenge it poses to conventional exegesis, prefigures in many important respects the most recent, and, to my mind, convincing, in a long series of philosophical readings of Beckett.

The paradigm shift that occurs between readings such as those offered by, for example, Martin Esslin (1965) and Richard Coe (1964), and those represented by writers such as Simon Critchley (2004), Richard Begam (1996), or Thomas Tresize (1990), lies in the recognition of the works' active antipathy to notions of significance, structure and development as premised on an existential, humanist construal of subjectivity. A great majority of studies from the mid-80s onward have read Beckett as involved in and depicting the reconceptualisation of the nature of the self as carried out in various strands of post-structuralist discourse, marking a shift from those earlier ones which centred on existentialist premises. One implication of this change of focus is an emphasis, in the case of the later readings, on the ludic, self-referential and fundamentally creative nature of the texts, in opposition to analyses which read Beckett in quasi-Sartrean allegorical terms as depicting issues of abandonment, meaninglessness and destitution. Adorno and Cavell's interpretations, in advance of and in opposition to their times, proceed along lines similar to those followed by more recent critics, as I will proceed to elucidate.

It is the form, both contend, that is finally and fundamentally most significant about a piece which seems to cast aspersions on the very possibility of significance; the meaning of the play is to be found in the style, structure and very syntax with which it attempts to dismantle meaning. A large part of the essays' interest lies in the fact that the remarks the two writers make regarding the function of form in Beckett's work are applicable to the author's entire oeuvre, and, indeed, to any art whose form makes conventional exegesis problematic. Adorno and Cavell's readings offer two of the most perceptive and convincing analyses of the peculiar resonance of Beckett's form, and the most compelling accounts of the implications of this for our understanding of not only our interpretive procedures with regard to literature, but of the way in which we understand ourselves, our lives and the world.

Because the way we experience ourselves in the world is so dependent on our structures and procedures of interpretation, it is precisely those aspects of the narratives which render interpretation problematic that are most significant. The primary significance of Beckett's work, in the opinion of Adorno and Cavell, is the way in which it makes us acknowledge the need to rethink our notions of artistic and philosophical signification and interpretation. The meaning of these works is the way in which they put meaning

on trial, and the formal strategies by way of which this putting on trial is enacted demand an analogous reinterpretation of the nature of interpretation from the responsive reader or audience. The significance of such a reinterpretation of our modes of understanding, in these views, is to undermine structures of thinking that have become, or have always been, implicitly harmful. The point is not to replace such paradigms with others (a move which would merely reiterate the original problem) but to attempt to learn to live, think and interact without the need for such structural definition. Both Adorno and Cavell thus draw fundamentally ethical lessons from *Endgame*: by putting us in a position analogous to that occupied by the protagonists, Beckett's texts make us undergo certain experiences or sensations that bear on the way we think of and experience ourselves in our world.

This insight gestures toward the thesis explored in greater detail by H. Porter Abbot's notion, taken from Yvor Winters, of "imitative form" (1973: 4), which he describes as an artistic technique which puts the reader into an analogous relationship to the work of art as the text depicts its protagonist as being in to the world. In this sense, the modernist experiments of Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner can all be seen as examples of imitative form. Importantly, any such form will proceed from a specific picture of the mind and thesis as to the way in which it works. Beckett's fiction depicts the mind as inevitably failing to appropriate that which it attempts to understand, as sliding inexorably into a murkier and murkier mire of obscurity and confusion, which, because of the imitative nature of the form, is reiterated in any attempt to interpret it.

Sandra Raponi, in contrast, following a remark of Kristeva's in *Black Sun*, construes Beckett's form as the manifestation of a means of dealing with the meaninglessness his characters inhabit. The significance of semantic meaning having been invalidated, the semiotic dimension of language – in Kristeva's conception, "melody, tone, rhythm, gesture, semantic polyvalency, and prosody" (Raponi 2003), and also silence, even – take over the role of conferring meaning.<sup>1</sup> The characters in *Endgame*, in this reading, stave off melancholy by means of banter, storytelling, jokes, and simple persistence in continuing to talk. Raponi considers this analogous to, and a reflection of, the ways in which Beckett's art itself negotiates the meaninglessness it confronts: in contrast to a writer such as Marguerite Duras, for whom silence is the only response to an impossible work of mourning, Beckett acknowledges the impossibility of silence and the obligation to continue speaking. Raponi's contention is that this recognition of the impossibility of remaining silent is the work's triumph against despair and meaninglessness.

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1. It would be fruitful to consider to what extent humour is a function of the semiotic. Humour fulfils the dual function, with respect to Beckett's work, of exceeding the semantic and enlivening the dialect with flashes of surprising and unlooked-for significance.

Raponi's analysis, which draws to some extent on Adorno's, shares many fundamental parallels with the two with which this essay is concerned, such as a preoccupation with *Endgame*'s concern with outmoded modes of meaning and the ways in which formal responses in some ways replace these. Adorno and Cavell's readings, and the prescriptions they offer for philosophical and cultural conduct consequent on these, are premised on the insight that, as Cavell puts it, "the Gods of the world went too far" (1976: 149), that those ideals and procedures in terms of which existence has generally been made meaningful have not merely not averted atrocity but actually brought it about. It has usually been in the name of philosophical or cultural conceptions of teleological progress that atrocity has been made possible, and the correct response lies in the recognition that, as Cavell writes,

[t]he greatest endgame is Eschatology, the idea that the last things of earth will have an order and a justification, a sense. That is what we hoped for, against hope, that was what salvation would look like. Now we are to know that salvation lies in reversing the story, in ending the story of the end, dismantling Eschatology, ending this world of order in order to reverse the curse of the world laid on it in its Judeo-Christian end. Only a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution – as we have been shaped for these things – is free from the curse of God.

(Cavell 1976: 49)

In Adorno's view, which is concerned more with instrumental rationality than Judeo-Christian mythology, the equivalent to "dismantling Eschatology" is the need to achieve a sense of the irrationality of reason. By this he is not advocating a simple primitivism, or urging that we try and undo the fact of consciousness. "It is not as a *Weltanschauung* that the absurd replaces the worldview of rationality", he writes, but "rather, in the absurd that worldview comes into its own" (2003: 284). Rationality, freed from an eschatological scheme in which reason is both the being and *telos* of the universe, comes fully into its own in its recognition that it itself is the source of metaphysical absurdity rather than that which offers a solution; that the attempt to offer a solution is the primary false move. "Consciousness", Adorno writes, "gets ready to look its own end in the eye" (p. 294) as the realisation dawns that the solution to the riddle of existence lies in ceasing to think of it as a riddle, and coming to accept it as merely existence. Thus, Adorno's conclusion is the same as Cavell's, who writes, "[s]olitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence – these are not the givens of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking" (1976: 156).

I shall proceed to outline these arguments in greater detail, beginning with Adorno's.

## “Can One Live After Auschwitz?” – Adorno on *Endgame*

Adorno’s reading, which Simon Critchley considers “the philosophically most powerful and hermeneutically most nuanced piece of writing on Beckett” (2004: 187), focuses closely on the effect and implications of the particular formal subversions at work in *Endgame*, arguing that it is by way of these that the text’s inversion of phenomenological existentialism is carried out.

Beckett, according to Adorno, “takes existentialism, which had been standing on its head, and puts it back on its feet” (2003: 271). His argument starts from the contention that phenomenological existentialism, having begun on the right track by situating its philosophical starting point in subjective experience (rather than abstraction or idealism), lapses into the old error by essentialising subjectivity. While Critchley rightly emphasises “the extraordinary violence of Adorno’s interpretation ... which treats Sartre, Camus, Jaspers and Heidegger as if they were saying the same” (2004: 259), its critique of the rhetoric of authenticity and freedom which is premised on their hypostatisation of the self remains valid. In Beckett’s drama, which “abandons those [existential] positions like an outmoded bunker” (Adorno 2003: 251), the idea of authenticity becomes a farce, a hollow slogan which serves merely to mask the destitution of subjectivity by turning a blind eye to the problematic implications of the notions of self, philosophy and ethical system in light of the condition in which we find ourselves. The continued insistence on these categories seems, at best, irrelevant or, at worst, immoral, and the real question becomes how one can continue to justify philosophy and culture at all.

Culture, having been co-opted into the complete commodification of society, is no longer in a position to remedy or criticise itself, and philosophy, insofar as it is not doing so, will remain an irrelevant, and often tautologous, aside. The strength of Beckett’s response to this situation is elucidated by Lambert Zuidervaart when he comments that “here lies a premise omitted from [Adorno’s] *Endgame* essay”:

Whereas philosophy can no longer confidently criticize academic disciplines such as economics and sociology when trying to understand its own time, authentic artworks such as *Endgame* contain a penetrating apprehension of contemporary society. To the extent that philosophy wants to be a thoughtful apprehension of its own time, *Endgame* calls for philosophical interpretation. The difficulty of interpreting this play is that it exposes the irrationality of contemporary society while resisting rational exposition.

(Zuidervaart 1991: 153-154)

From this perspective, the challenge *Endgame* poses to interpretation, like the absence of metaphysical meaning, becomes, rather than a fact hostile to human intention, the only stance that will not entail dangerous hypostatisa-

tion, and thus the only possible ethically responsible attitude. Beckett's work thus represents, in light of this, a serious response to a situation which compels one to give form and voice to a philosophical stance which means, essentially, the impossibility of either.

Adorno's appraisal of *Endgame* proceeds, then, as an analysis of the ways in which the play, through its form, performs an apprehension of its world that achieves what philosophical theorising or political critique could not, and the value he attaches to it is the result of the way it responds to the dramatic challenge he articulates as follows:

Drama cannot simply take negative meaning, or the absence of its meaning, as its content without everything peculiar to it being effected to the point of turning into its opposite. The essence of drama was constituted by that meaning. Were drama to try and survive meaning aesthetically, it would become inadequate to its substance and be degraded to a clattering machinery for the demonstration of worldviews, as is often the case with existentialist plays .... Through its own organized meaninglessness, dramatic action must model itself on what has transpired with the truth content of drama in general.

(Adorno 2003: 260)

Beckett's achievement is to have come up with a formal solution to this challenge, the primary means by which he does so Adorno considers to be "parody, both of philosophy ... and of forms" (2003: 261), wherein parody is understood as a literal *reductio ad absurdum* of certain postulates and procedures of philosophical method and the conceptions of drama that proceed from these. Adorno's understanding of parody implies that "dramatic categories as a whole ... are parodied. But not derided. In its emphatic sense, *parody means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility*. It demonstrates this impossibility and by doing so alters the forms" (p. 278; my italics).

The role of form in Beckett's writing thus exposes the absurdity of the presuppositions on which any metaphysical, existential or otherwise philosophical project can be grounded by extrapolating the implications of these in a context in which they are rendered impossible. Adorno exemplifies the procedure at work here by asking us to imagine certain postulates of Jaspers's as uttered by one of Beckett's characters, writing that

[p]latitudes like "I cannot live without struggling and suffering; .... I cannot avoid guilt; .... I must die" lose their blandness when they are retrieved from the a priori and returned to the sphere of phenomena .... [Beckett's] play responds to the comedy and ideological distortion in sentences like "Courage in the boundary situation is an attitude that allows me to see death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself."

(Adorno 2003: 271)

Taken out of an academic existential treatise and uttered in the apocalyptic light that dimly illuminates *Endgame*, these statements render the form of the discourse in which they are uttered absurd. This is done, as Adorno notes, not by derision, and certainly not for derision. In Beckett's works claims such as "I cannot live without struggling and suffering", "I cannot avoid guilt", are uttered in deadpan earnest which renders them infinitely more subjectively meaningful (the only way, in Adorno's opinion, that remains in which anything can be so), but, in so doing, also contingent and partial. Thus the form of thought and manner and thinking that spouts these slogans as complacent philosophical platitudes is cast in stark relief, and in so doing "the qualities of nobility and affirmation disintegrate ... qualities with which philosophy ... adorns an existence Hegel already called 'foul'" (p. 271).

This ironic recasting of existential ontology is what Adorno means by "the use of forms in the era of their impossibility" (p. 278). Doing so, however, simultaneously entails the creation of a new form out of the destruction of the old, which occurs by making the central thematic preoccupation of the work the question "what is the *raison d'être* of forms when the tension between them and something that is not homogenous with them has been abolished, without that slowing down progress in the artistic mastery of materials?" (p. 278). The result of this contradictory situation is, as Molloy writes, "a form fading among fading forms" (Beckett 1959: 17), a form that enacts the formlessness corresponding to and consequent on the realisation that "there is no longer any substantive, affirmative metaphysical meaning that could provide dramatic form with its law and epiphany" (Adorno 2003: 260).

Instead, dramatic form must model itself on and enact the implications of this loss of meaning not by constructing Sartrean allegories of meaninglessness, nor by the affirmation of Dadaist anarchy but by the ironic use of forms "in the era of their impossibility", which thereby dramatises the vacuous character of obsolete models of metaphysical meaning in present circumstances, while simultaneously, perversely transforming them. As Zuidervaart writes, the "negation of meaning becomes aesthetically meaningful when it is realized in the material with which the artist works. Because such a realization requires form, authentic negation requires formal emancipation, not emancipation from form" (1991: 175).

Through the modelling, and formal imitation, of what has transpired with the truth content of the world in general, Beckett's work forces the reader or audience into a situation analogous to that of Adorno's vision of post-modern humanity's relation to its existence. In the light of the Holocaust, the desire for metaphysical meaning is what has come to seem the most monstrous aspect of existence, and the quest for a transcendent truth which has allowed inhumane, senseless violence to be perpetrated on particular and immanent bodies. The most pressing task of philosophy thus becomes

the need to overcome the need for meaning itself, and to subordinate the imperative to make sense to a concern for the generally senseless particular and immanent, for things as they are. “Hence interpretation”, according to Adorno, “cannot pursue the chimerical aim of expressing the play’s meaning in a form mediated by philosophy. Understanding it can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning” (2003: 261).

This is the interpretive equivalent of the role philosophy must fulfil in its attempt to evacuate the world of all the harmful and dangerous doctrines of transcendence it has given rise to. The paradoxical task of interpretation thus becomes the reflexive attempt not to do violence to the work by ascribing a meaning but rather to see through the assumptions that bring about the ideological commitments to do so. Interpretation interprets itself, and thus undoes its own dangerous assumptions.

### **Redemption from Redemption – Cavell on *Endgame***

Stanley Cavell’s reading, proceeding wholly independently of Adorno’s, reaches, on the whole, remarkably similar conclusions. Taking his cue from Hamm, the protagonist’s name, Cavell sees the action of the play as taking place on board the ark, and construes *Endgame* as what can perhaps best be described as a Nietzschean parable. Reading the play’s protagonist as Noah’s disenfranchised son, Cavell imagines a situation in which Hamm sees God’s salvation of his family not as evidence of goodwill but impotence: God, having been unable to justify his creation, then proves incapable of properly destroying it, and the covenant he subsequently secures with Noah is just a shifting of responsibility. As Cavell writes:

[g]od has reneged [his] responsibility, and doubly. In meaning to destroy all flesh, he has confessed that existence cannot be justified by him. And in saving one family and commanding them to replenish the earth, there is a high hint that man is being asked to do a god’s work, that he is not only abandoned to his own justification, but that he must undertake to justify god himself, to redeem God’s curse and destruction.

(Cavell 1976: 140)

Hamm’s response to this, Cavell imagines, would be to take it upon himself to conclude God’s business by ending the game in which transcendental meaning is the aim. “[W]hat must end,” Cavell postulates Hamm as thinking, “is the mutual dependence of God and the world: *this* world, and its gods, must be brought to a conclusion” (p. 140). This hints at the significance of the title, which refers to a situation in a game of chess in which two kings – in the context of the play “Hamm and the Old King, the King of Kings” (p. 155) – circle one another on a board on which the pieces have



been obliterated, strategy all but exhausted, and the playing out of possibilities grinds tediously toward its conclusion.

The action of the play thus consists in the attempt to bring the game to an end, which is carried out, on Clov's part, by trying, or perhaps only threatening, to leave and, on Hamm's part, by trying to complete the story he tells to whomever he can force, or bribe, to listen to it. Through the narration of what he calls his "chronicle" (1964: 40), Hamm imagines that he will be able to bring things to a close. In this he is very like Malone, whose narration aims to attain the most complete and total closure imaginable. Where Malone hopes only to finish, though, Cavell thinks that "Hamm, the artist, still hopes for salvation through his art; hopes to move his audience to gratitude, win their love through telling his story" (1976: 151). His need for an audience, though, his need for his stories, is exactly what keeps him, and Clov also, trapped in the game. (When, for example, Clov asks, "What is there to keep me here?", Hamm replies, "The dialogue" (1964: 41).) The sadomasochistic relationship that obtains between the two can be explained as based on this mutual need for narration, on the need to speak and listen, which gives rise to discourse. Because the play ends ambiguously, with Clov standing at the exit with bags packed as he listens to Hamm's "final soliloquy" (p. 19), there is a strong indication that Clov fails, finally, to leave, and that the end of the game merely serves as pretext for the beginning of a new one.

The nature of this attachment, or compulsion, rather, is made apparent and substantiated by Nagg, Hamm's father. Hamm calls his father, who is also a storyteller, "accursed progenitor" (p. 15), and rails at him for having brought him into being; when he asks him why he did so, his father replies "I didn't know." "What? What didn't you know?" Hamm persists, to which his father replies: "That it would be you" (p. 35). The conflict between Nagg and Hamm is waged by way of their stories, with the authority granted by being the narrator counterbalanced by the need to have someone listen: at one point Hamm has to bribe Nagg with the promise of a sugarplum to get him to listen to him tell his story, while Nagg wakes his wife to make her listen to the story he has been telling their entire life together.

Our stories, importantly, are always also our interpretations, the "spin" we put on things, the ways we make sense. In *Endgame*, then, the point is to have someone listen to you, to have someone to speak to, or to be in a position where someone needs you to listen. This is the truth Nagg has arrived at, while Hamm remains stuck with his delusive eschatological dreams. Rather than longing for it all to end, Nagg says, "I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice .... Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope" (p. 38).

Having been the father and voice of authority, such as Hamm is in the play, and having been deposed, Nagg's only desire has become that of wanting to see the situation reversed again, of seeing Hamm reduced to the need to hear a voice or have someone listen which will presumably re-affirm his own strength or afford him some sort of sadistic pleasure. Either way, what is indicated is that what these characters finally desire is not to end the game, but to play it their own way.

Hamm's intention to tell the story to the end is, then, just another story. When he proclaims that he is nearing the end of his story, Clov disparages this claim with the assertion "But you'll start another" (p. 41). Cavell sees in this the idea that Hamm's "Endgame will come when he is able 'to speak no more about it', stop telling himself the old stories of justification, or the new story that justification can be found in art, or indeed that art, as we have conceived and practised it, has any relevance at all to our current necessities" (1976: 152). The telling of stories engenders new narratives, creating tides and currents which others are carried along in or have to struggle against, as stories call for interpretations which themselves become new stories. This is like a narrative version of karma, an interpretative law of birth and rebirth. The connection between engendering offspring and bringing narrative into being – the one perpetuating humanity, the other, the humanities – is made explicit in the conclusion of Hamm's tale.

While the particulars of the story change with each attempt Hamm makes to tell it, the interaction it describes remains much the same: a man, emaciated, approaches the narrator of Hamm's story crawling on his hands and knees. He asks for some food for his son, or, in the final version, which brings the play to a close, when offered work, asks if his son will be allowed to stay with him. The narrator of the story Hamm tells, says:

It was the moment I was waiting for. [*Pause*] You don't want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? [*Pause*] He doesn't realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like nowadays. Oh, I put him before his responsibilities!

(Beckett 1964: 52)

The father's "responsibilities" are, presumably, to let his son die where he had abandoned him, knowing only hunger and cold and death. Hamm's attempt to undo creation and propagation finds analogy in his recommendation that the father let his son die, with the weight of the admonition being impressed upon him as no less than a responsibility. The relevance of this is emphasised by another story Hamm tells:

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'd seen was ashes. [*Pause*] He alone had been saved.

(Beckett 1964: 32)

The character here described has been saved because he has given up hope of salvation, redeemed because he no longer believes redemption will change anything at all. This is the case because, as Cavell writes, “[t]hat which used to seem life’s leaven, the sources of meaning and coherence ... morality, art, religion and the rest, lead lives of their own, grown out of hand, [and] shear man’s existence from him” (1976: 49). The world and human existence are too full of meaning, have been adorned with delusory myths of transcendence and salvific narratives of redemption which have brought about atrocity and made ordinary life uninhabitable, and the only sensible response to this is a concerted undoing of these paradigms. This is precisely what Cavell and Adorno read *Endgame* as carrying out, and see therein its significance, value, and strength.

\* This is a revised version of a paper originally presented to the Department of English at Rhodes University, and subsequently included in my MA thesis completed for the same. Many thanks are due to Prof. Mike Marais for his thorough and incisive advice regarding the material and presentation.

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