Waiting for Gödel

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'So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable.'[1]

The 1930s is probably best described as a period of complete turnarounds. Not only had the entire world experienced four years of one of the deadliest and traumatising wars, a global pandemic, economic recession, poverty, and widespread social unrest, but it was also ill-fated to repeat this history in the years to follow. As if happening in a parallel universe, the arts and sciences of the early and high Modernism seemed to flourish out of this residue of contrasting ideas. At what was considered to be the height of scientific discovery, at least following Albert Einstein's theories of general and special relativity, the 20th century announces the complete reversal of established assumptions on which human knowledge had been premised up to that point. Kurt Gödel publishes the 'Incompleteness Theorems' which expose the inherent inconsistency in any mathematical system, and thus contend that certain properties are outside any value—we can demonstrate neither their truth, nor their falseness. Gödel's theorems not only shattered the mathematicians' trust in deduction, as a means of proving the certainty of axiomatic beliefs, but also impacted the whole fabric of Western thought, thus paving the way

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[1] Samuel Beckett, 'Proust', in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 7. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

to a generation characterised by relativism and scepticism. At the *centre* (sic) of this essay lies Deconstruction, a form of philosophical and literary analysis founded by Jacques Derrida around the time Beckett and Barnes were writing, which questions the fundamental 'oppositions' inherent in Western thought, binary oppositions which assign more value to one of the elements in the pair, such as, presence over absence; form over meaning; speech over writing. To "deconstruct" is to explore the tensions inherent in this hierarchical ordering, to reveal the more peripheral aspects of a text, to displace the centre of interpretation. Paramount to this approach is the idea that language is an imperfect tool of expression, predicated on a system of infinitely deferred signs—what we intend to express is never fully contained in the words that we employ.

It is against the backdrop of a dead-end of meaning that *Nightwood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes and Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame: (1957) A Play in One Act' were born. This essay will propose a deconstructionist analysis of the texts, contending that both texts expose the limitations of a world constrained by language and time. Whilst Beckett concerns the futile 'endgame' of repetition rendered by the limits of knowledge, Barnes engages in an equally futile act of writing otherness. Both texts, as we shall see, are nonetheless driven by a covert desire or 'hunger' for revelation.

The play analogically enacts the absurdity which it decries. The inconsistency between Hamm's questions and Clov's answers alludes to a human limitation which renders this absurd effect – the Derridean impossibility of arriving at fixed meaning, whereby 'man […] cannot come forth from himself' and 'who knows others only in himself […]' (Beckett, *Proust,* p. 66). The 'dialogue' between Hamm and Clov suffers from a linguistic malady, an aphasia which fails to establish a connection between the question and its answer, referent and sign. Constant interruptions created through yawns and em dashes delay Hamm's lines and at times completely erase the sentences' grammatical logic: 'Me – [he yawns] – to play'; 'No, all is a-

[*he yawns*] -bsolute.'[2] Furthermore, the interactions between Hamm and Clov are characterised by a pattern of incongruity which reinforces the meaninglessness of their verbal exchange. As if caught up in an inconsistency morass, Clov's answers never directly respond Hamm's questions; instead, they appear to perpetuate semantic deferral. 'You feel normal?', inquires Hamm, to which Clov replies 'I tell you I don't complain' (*Endgame*, p. 1037). In other instances, especially with questions which demand serious replies, Clov seems to resort to a heuristic model of answering, one which also inevitably produces a digression, such as when Hamm asks 'Why don't you kill me?' 'I don't know the combination of the larder' (*Endgame*, p. 1038). Not only does the mentality of *Endgame*'s players create a sense of solipsism, whereby thought 'remains imprisoned in its structure', but it also renders any act of rational production completely futile.[3] This is particularly evident in the pattern of exclamations which at once repeat and diminish the lines of characters through their parodical nature: 'Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh*]' (*Endgame*, p. 1045). Like Gödel's theorems, meaning in *Endgame* is merely a matter of aleatory either-or, a continuous oscillation between a 'Then we'll die' and a 'Then we won't die' (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1037). This is also why players indulge in an absurd repetition of signifiers as in a vain endeavour to explain themselves. 'In the hollow. What hollow? The hollow!', struggles Nagg to clarify, as if forcing the word to signify itself (*Endgame*, p. 1042). Reduced to a one-act play, Beckett implies, life does translate into this indecipherable melange of superfluous signs which never arrive at a fixed meaning. The play's central concern, therefore, lies in the contradiction, if not the paradox, between habit and desire. Once all the resources of thought are exhausted and man realises that revelation is not in store for him, the only option available is to desire complete

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[2] Samuel Beckett, 'Endgame (1957): A Play in one act', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 1035–61 (p. 1036). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[3] Eric P. Levy, 'Disintegrative Process in "Endgame"', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 12 (2002), 263–79 (p. 267).

extinction, and that is, death. The play problematises the impossibility of evading this system of habit, which in turn reinforces the idea that it is impossible 'to imagine a life brought to completeness', to a standstill.[4]

Borrowing from Schopenhauer's pessimism, Hamm and Clov could be seen to have reached a point of no evolution, no change. 'Have you not had enough?' and 'I always had' lead to the inference 'Then there's no reason for it to change' (Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 1037). Whilst 'having had enough' is negatively charged and should, in a normal system of logic, be deemed a sufficient reason for change, it nonetheless does not. Conversely, in the play's world, repetition becomes a sufficient reason for it to persist; 'I always had' is devoid of value, it does not communicate an emotion, it simply is part of the reality of repetition. Thus, the appearance of an 'unremitting monotony' becomes the rule, and the absence of the idea of evolution 'condemns the world and mankind to being always the same, without solace'.[5] As if caught in an eternal recurrence, every day becomes 'a day like any other day', as long as it lasts (Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 1040). Temporally speaking, the absence of evolution also clarifies the possibility of repetition. If we take Vladimir Jankélévitch's theory of time as a point of reference, then 'time *is* only to the extent that it is irreversible' and is under a continuous process of *becoming*.[6] Due to the 'hapax' character of existence, the possibility of repetition is inevitably ruled out. In Beckett's dramatic context, time simply stops being perceived as a flow; rather, it disintegrates into units, 'moments for nothing', which no longer cumulate into a whole, no longer add to a progression (Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 1060). In *Endgame*, the players appear suspended in atemporality, in a continuous "not-yet" which is, however, fixed. Indeed, as Levy points out, time appears to 'paradoxically perpetuate its own irrelevance' and to resemble an

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[4] Steven Connor, 'Presence and Repetition in Beckett's Theatre', in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2007), p. 137.

[5] Georg Simmel, 'Their Position in Cultural History' in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. by Helmut Loinskandl (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 8–9.

[6] Aaron T. Looney, 'The Temporality of Human Existence and Action', in *Vladimir Jankelevitch: The Time of Forgiveness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 77–92 (p. 81).

Ouroboros, a thing which eats its own tail (Levy, 264). The fact that the characters 'remain(s) motionless' coupled with their shared handicap to neither sit nor stand are visual manifestations of this constant state of stasis (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1040). This relentless oscillation between action and its retardation is also visible in the verbs the players employ.

> NAGG:
>
> Could you not?
>
> (Pause)
>
> Would you like me to scratch you?
>
> (Pause)
>
> Are you crying again?
>
> NELL:
>
> I was trying.
>
> (Pause)
>
> HAMM:
>
> Perhaps it's a little vain.
>
> (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 142)

The use of modal verbs 'could', 'would' imply an intention to act, deferred by the present and past-continuous tenses. If modal verbs are a prolepsis of a future action, then the continuous tenses only disturb this intention. Of course, the question is why do the characters insist on flashbacks which allude to a nostalgic past? Here, William Worther and Beckett himself may elucidate the dilemma. When referring to *Play*, Worther suggests that by focusing on the 'literalised' act of performance, characters are completely free, *en situation,* and the play 'no longer requires reference to the preexisting world' (Connor, 130). Conversely, then, the evocation of the past in *Endgame* renders the exact opposite effect, characters are not free, and

instead perpetuate sameness. If the present is 'filled' with moments of the past, then the play's stillness is reinforced.

Most importantly, memory is flawed; it involves an act of representation which can never bridge the gap between the original and its image. In the context of the play, memory is at most a sedative, numbing the characters further. Moreover, it also enacts the 'poisonous ingenuity of Time' whereby existence can only be comprehended retrospectively (Beckett, *Proust,* p. 4). In this sense, we can say that Hamm and Clov are only their past in this fixed 'present' of the play. And although 'all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life', the waiting ends with the uneventful end— 'Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes'—and all for nothing, providing no revelation of it all, only wonder of 'what can have brought it on' (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1056) Instead, the endgame of 'play and lose' is finally lost (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1060).

This is why Hamm and Clov desire an ending. Closure in *Endgame* would be a privilege, it would end the cycle of suffering which is life. Even the ending of the play alludes to its repetition. The actors will leave the stage and night after night will repeat the same act. But the desire to end this cycle is recurrent throughout the whole play. This is present, for instance, in Hamm's demands to be heard— 'I said forgive me!' —a cry which is not rewarded with the closure of an 'I forgive you', but is instead deferred with an 'I heard you' (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1039). Another example of ideal closure is the 'madman' Hamm evokes, who, having seen the 'ashes' of the end of the world, 'had been spared. Forgotten' (Beckett, 'Endgame', p. 1049). The implication here is that to be forgotten equals being spared, for forgetfulness erases one's existence from the memory of time.

In Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood (1936)*, the disenchantment with the world takes place in a context of overt political and social concerns, as opposed to 'Endgame' where the message is veiled under the guise of "nonsensical" performance. Nonetheless, they both are concerned

with the framework imposed by reality as it is, namely, (1) the impossibility of arriving at a standstill of meaning, in the case of *Endgame*, and (2) the pre-established 'truths' which deny the writer the possibility of constructing new ones. *Nightwood* is interested in creating new narratives for the outcasts who had been left out in the course of history. Without a language that accommodates these subjects in the history of ideas, every attempt to do so is faced with a dilemma. Taking Simone de Beauvoir as an example of writing about otherness, we can contend that Barnes's story is condemned to the same fate—'At the moment that women', or figures of the LGBTQ+ community, 'are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs' to those who established the narrative of history.[7] By writing about homosexuality as a woman, Barnes is twice as constrained as her male heterosexual counterparts. Hence, her challenge is to reconcile writing about outcasts using the rules of the establishment, while preserving the authentic character of her subjects. Indeed, 'the history of those marginalised by the official record is shaped by their relation to that record'.[8] The text, therefore, can only be a result of compromise; the prohibition of her subjects means that *Nightwood* records their absence from the general narrative.

The theme of exclusion pervades the novel in different forms. *Nightwood* shares with *Endgame* an obsession with the idea that one cannot choose whether or where to be born. Barnes's characters are either bound to appropriating a history which does not represent them, or to a central unattainable subject, in this case Robin, herself absent from the narrative. Such a condition can only condemn the characters to an incessant, catatonic to-and-fro between a hunger to *be* and a constant negation of that *being*. Cast in alienating life scenarios, Barnes's characters suffer from, what Tyrus Miller accurately called, 'transcendental homelessness'.[9]

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[7] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex [1949]*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Mclovering-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 10.

[8] Julie Abraham, 'Djuna Barnes, Memory, and Forgetting', in *Are Girls Necessary?* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), pp. 121–138 (p. 123).

[9] Tyrus Miller, *Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 127.

Although in writing about outcasts Barnes displaces the centre of historical narrative, in making her characters chase an absent centre, she exposes the limits of her novel. Felix, for instance, is a character who is unable to constitute himself as a subject. The allusions to the myth of the wandering Jew make Felix a character doomed to an aimless wandering in search for a metaphorical home, an identity. The novel commences with death—the death of Felix's mother and father. Already we notice that by making him orphan, Barnes establishes him as a character who cannot authenticate himself in terms of his roots. He is 'thrust from her', violently cut off from his origin (Barnes, p. 1). Thus, Felix can only be a character of mimicry; his identity is borrowed. We know that he inherits from his parents the 'impermissible blood' which 'force(s) the mind to succumb to an imaginary populace' (Barnes, p. 3). Felix is merely a collector, an appropriator of identity—'he had adopted the sign of the cross' (Barnes, p. 3). In this sense, as Lawrence R. Schehr points out, he retains the character of 'the unanchored signifier, the sign that is always displaced, deferred.'[10]

Similarly, Robin seems to suffer from the same impossibility to emerge as a character. The first time we encounter Robin, she is described through similes and metaphors to do with botany and chemistry, as if she is a specimen in an herbarium, rather than a character. Her body exudes the smell of 'dampness', her skin has the 'texture of plant life' (Barnes, p. 31). Indeed, the scene has the qualities of a *tableau vivant* with a still, if not deadly, character. It is perhaps no coincidence that the word 'effulgence' resembles the word 'effigy', which also links to the recurrent metaphors of statues and ruins. Like a memory of the monument, 'symbolizing her life out of her life', Robin is a 'disfigured and eternalized' ruin, a mere 'trace' inscribed in idols and 'hieroglyphics' (Barnes, p. 57). The allusions to death—'as if sleep were a decay'—and the almost Baudelairean oxymoron of the 'luminous deteriorations' make Robin seem as having more of an appearance than an essence. She embodies ambivalence; Robin 'lives in two

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[10] Lawrence R. Schehr, '"Nightwood": Dismantling the Folds' in *Style,* 19 (1985), 36-49 (p. 40).

worlds' (Barnes, p. 31). This initial image only establishes the pattern of description for the whole novel, since Robin is constantly referred to 'as a picture' (Barnes, p. 33), as 'unable to give account of herself' (Barnes, p. 44), as 'an enigma' (Barnes, p. 41). She is, in short, of nonhuman matter, 'a character masquerading as a sign' (Schehr, p. 43).

We could infer, then, that Barnes's characters suffer from the same shallowness that Clov and Hamm do, rendering them empty in the context of a language that does not accommodate their existence as outsiders. We now turn to the idea which binds both *Endgame* and *Nightwood* in a final act of revolt against the limitations of language, culture and, more generally, life. 'The bitter impatience with the whole apparatus of cognition', as Howe puts it, is ultimately a result of a central desire and 'hunger' for a revelation which is not in store for humankind. In *Nightwood*, this is figuratively translated into an object of desire which cannot be claimed – Robin, the enigma. This longing for possession takes the form of morbid metaphors, such as in Nora's dreams wherein she 'takes the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse' (Barnes, p. 51). The recurrent analogies to do with death and burying allude to Nora's repressed desire to contain Robin. As in the simile of the 'amputated hand that cannot be disowned' (Barnes, p. 53), the loss of the loved object involves the mutilation of the subjecta resemblance of Jacques Lacan's concept of the *objet petit a*. Paradoxically, the object of desire, Robin, always emerges as being already lost, as in the case of Barnes's writing of her outcasts. Like the simile of amputation, Robin is an integral part of the loving subject, and her loss is inevitably a symbolic castration. Nevertheless, unrequited love is not the unique manifestation of the unattainable object of desire, but indeed, the entire web of unsatisfactory conditions of human existence. Whether it is love or a desire to evade time, the unattainable object is the 'impossible-real ultimate reference point of desire'.[11]

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[11] Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 15.

It is for this reason that *Endgame* and *Nightwood* remain 'stuck' in symbols of hysterical obsession translated in relentless repetition or vain pursuit. Through their elusive form, they illustrate the 'human will (to) persist in its effort, remaining transfixed by the impossible' (Zizek, p. 16).

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