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Inauthenticity, Anxiety, Waiting: or, the Unnamable Design

Michael R. Hunnicutt

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Open any of Beckett's texts, and the first thing you realize is his erudite, failing clowns have been thrown into an existence they neither asked for nor understand: Murphy tied naked to a wooden rocker, Watt cast off the evening tram looking more like a roll of carpet than a man, Molloy lying in Mother's bed wondering how he got there, or perhaps best known, Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for Godot. In Heideggerian terms, Beckett's characters are thrown into the inauthentic existence of the they-self. As such, they wait for a disclosing of authenticity, but when anxiety produces the opening, Beckett's characters lack the courage to enter into authenticity. Failing to become authentic, they wait in stasis, always on the brink of choosing individual action, yet always incapable of doing so. Valdimir, for example, admits both the futility and the comfort of inauthentic existence when he ponders whether or not he should assist Pozzo: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse," he rants in hauntingly Heideggerian language, "Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed" (WFG 51). But just before committing himself to action, he falls back on his plea: "Not that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not" (WFG 51). Here the others Vladimir turns his back on are the 'they' of inauthentic existence.

To become authentic, Beckett's characters, like Heidegger's Dasein, must learn to enact their own individual voice against the collective voice of the 'they.' In Being and Time Heidegger states:

If Dasein is to be able to get brought back from this lostness of failing to hear itself, and if this is to be done through itself, then it must first be able to find itself—to find itself as something which has failed to hear itself, and which fails to hear in that it listens away to the 'they.' (315-16)

Learning to listen away from the collective voice "has the character of appeal to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-self" (BT 314). But Being-in-its-self offers Beckett's characters a freedom they haven't the courage to accept. They're too busy analyzing the various possibilities to ever choose one of them. And like Vladimir, they fear choosing one action will forever deny the choice of other actions. Thus the Beckett clown-tramp waits, a la Hamm, always on the verge of enacting the "last million last moments" (Endgame 83). "I can't go on, I'll go on," concludes the Unnamable, taking Charlie Brown wishy-washiness to its extreme, and after 120 pages of trying to decide what to do, he sinks back into the inauthentic existence of waiting.

So what's to be done? Why can't Beckett's characters rise from the they-self to the I-self? One answer is found by realizing that, on one level of mis-reading, Beckett and Heidegger are exploring parallel parables of Being.
Both Beckett's characters and Heidegger's Dasein are fundamentally Beings-in-the-world. As such, they are subject to anxiety, a basic state-of-mind capable of opening possibilities of authentic action. But Beckett's characters fail to grasp onto this offered freedom, thus they remain waiting in a death-in-life, inauthentic existence.

As mentioned, both Beckett's characters and Dasein exist fundamentally as Beings-thrown-into-the-world. In Being and Time Heidegger clearly argues that Being-in is "the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state" (BT 80). By definition, Dasein exists, stands-out-from, other Beings and entities in the world. Note how the opening lines of any number of Beckett's texts confirm awareness of location and Being-in-the-world. Molloy: "I am in my mother's room. It is I who live there now" (TN 1). Molone Dies: "I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of it all. Perhaps next month" (TN 179). The Unnamable: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I" (TN 291).

Endgame likewise begins with Clov situating the there-ness of his Being: "I can't be punished any more. I'll go now to my kitchen, ten feet, by ten feet, by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me" (1-2). This acute awareness of presence continues into Beckett's latest dramatic pieces such as "What Where." Here five grey cloaked characters chant variations of

We are the last five.
In the present as were we still.
It is spring.
Time passes.
First without words.
I switch on. (Collected Shorter Plays 310)

This is not merely an exhibition of ego. Like Dasein, Beckett's characters exist in a non-Cartesian world, and lacking the subject-object schizophrenia, both desire knowledge of how they relate alongside other Beings and objects in the world. According to Heidegger,

When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always 'outside' alongside entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered. (BT 89)

And he goes on to argue that "even in this 'Being-outside' alongside the object, Dasein is still 'inside'" (BT 89).

The setting of Endgame is a dramatic rendering of Dasein existing outside-alongside, yet inside, the world. Even a dense reader would, with a little thought, recognize the stage setting as the interior of a skull—presumably Hamm's:

Bare interior.
Grey light.
Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn.
Front right, a door. (1)

Within this space sits "Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins" (1). These ashbins house Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, who exist and pass out of existence alongside each other. Prior to his opening speech, Clov stiffly staggers from window to window—eye to eye. He too exists alongside, yet inside, the world of Hamm's perception. Clov is a res cogito, a project of Hamm's imagining, but simultaneously a res extensio, a Being-with-location. In Clov, the Cartesian split dissolves, for Clov exists.
as does Dasein. His location is painfully represented by his inability to sit down and become, as Hamm prophesies, "a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me... a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe" (36).

The things within and without the setting of Endgame function as equipment in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Heidegger translates "things" from the Greek term meaning "that which one has to do with in one's concernful dealings" (BT 96). Such equipment is encountered through "assignment or reference of something to something" (BT 97). Further, "equipment--in accordance with its equipmentality--always is in terms of its belonging to other equipment" (BT 97). For Heidegger, equipment exists in two forms: the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand. Because Dasein encounters the world through concernful dealings with care, ready-to-hand is its primary way of encountering equipment. When Dasein encounters equipment, the world discloses meaning, and for Heidegger, this announcement, opening, unconcealment, is truth.

Beckett's characters sadly, have some difficulty distinguishing between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand. Thus they rarely open into a true-ing space wherein authenticity can be enacted. Because Clov is never able to grasp onto external equipment, the world around him is unable to open into meaning, and he remains stuck between authenticity and inauthenticity. When Clov first peers through the telescope at the equipment alongside him, he feels "a multitude... in transports... of joy" (29). But "after reflection," that is, after analysis that robs readiness from presence, "(He gets up on the ladder, turns the telescope on the without) Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero... (he looks)... Zero... (he looks) ... and Zero" (29). Here he does what one does--looks and sees, but not what the individual does--looks and grasps. Then, still looking and still analyzing, Clov sees only present-at-hand entities, equipment incapable of having a world: "All gone"--gulls, waves, sun (30-31). Because the present-at-hand does not disclose individual meanings, the inauthentic world Clov observes fails to mean: "Mean something! You and I, mean something!" (He briefly laughs.) Ah, that's a good one!" (33).

Regarding Being-in-the-world, Heidegger notes that "the ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements" (BT 191). But the present-at-hand breaks from this involvement in much the same way the world breaks down for Clov in the passage cited above: "When we merely stare at something, our just-having-it-before-us lies before us as a failure to understand it" (BT 190). In a conversation with Georges Duthuit, Beckett comments on the present-at-hand world Clov observes:

All have turned wisely tail, before the ultimate penury, back to the more wisely where destitute virtuous mothers steal bread for their starving brats. There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemable commodities. (Proust 122)

Beckett's talk of "being short of the world," as it refers to his characters' loosing grip on the equipment of the world, parallels Heidegger's talk of anxiety. Heidegger introduces this concept into Being and Time by recalling that Being-in-the-world is a basic state of Dasein. That in the face of
which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such" (230). In anxiety, equipment flees out of reach. This is part of what Clow experiences when he views his world with the telescope, for in this state-of-mind, Dasein flees into the inauthentic existence of the 'they':

What is the difference phenomenally between that in the face of which anxiety is anxious and that in the face of which fear is afraid? That in the face of which one has anxiety is not an entity within-the-world. Thus it is essentially incapable of having an involvement.

(BT 231)

Here Heidegger's philosophy is tangential to Beckett's fiction. And who writes of one's lack of involvement with the world more convincingly than Beckett, whose characters are in a perpetual state of fleeing from Nothing?

Malone Dies is perhaps Beckett's most sustained portrait of anxiety. Here Beckett presents two parallel views of Dasein in anxiety, Dasein forever falling into inauthentic existence. In the novel, Malone tells the story of Sapo-Macmann, an autobiographical story which disintegrates as Malone himself disintegrates from anxiety.

Malone initially sees himself as free, as a Being-with-possibility: "This time I know where I am going, it is no longer the ancient night, the recent night. Now it is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now" (TN 180). This accords with anxiety which makes manifest in Dasein its Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being—that is, its Being-free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its Being-free for (propensio in . . .) the authenticity of its Being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always is. (BT 232)

Yet Malone is unable to bare such freedom—acting is too risky—he might decide he should have done something else in the future: "But it was not long before I found myself alone in the dark. That is why I gave up trying to play and took myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding" (TN 180). Sapo-Macmann is born from this paradoxical fleeing into inauthenticity to ward off the freedom of authenticity. Malone looses himself in the identity of Sapo, his created doppelganger through whom he views the authenticity existence discloses.

The young Sapo is thus capable of experiencing the world as ready-to-hand: But he loved the flight of the hawk and could distinguish it from all others. He would stand rapt, gazing at the long pernings, the quivering poise, the wings lifted for the plummet drop, the wild reascent, fascinated by such extremes of need, of pride, of patience and solitude. (TN 191).

The needs of the hawk mirror Sapo's own needs, and provide the courage to rise out of inauthenticity. Malone's editorial comment is hence a vain attempt to justify the inauthenticity to which he has resigned himself:

And a little less well endowed with strength and courage he too would have abandoned and despaired of ever knowing what manner of being he was, and how he was going to live, and lived vanquished, blindly, in a mad world, in the midst of strangers. (TN 193)

By telling Sapo's story, Malone hopes to rise out of his own inaction and to find his individual voice. Sapo's story thus becomes a story of anxiety,
"for anxiety individualizes. . . [and] . . . brings Dasein back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being" (BT 235). As he writes Sapo's story, Malone feels a change, a reawakening: "It is because it is no longer I, I must have said so long ago, but another whose life is just beginning" (TN 207-08). This life just beginning is the authentic existence Malone is waking to. A feeling characteristic of anxiety, a fleeing "in the face of. It does not flee in the face of entities within the world; these are precisely what it flees towards--as entities alongside which our concern, lost in the 'they,' can dwell in tranquillized familiarity" (BT 234).

The familiarity which mitigates the uncanniness of anxiety is realized by Sapo's stay with the Lamberts. The Lamberts are as close as Beckett comes to depicting home life. And while Sapo dwells with them, he is treated to all the homey comforts of rural living--a lazy mule, lentil soup, rabbit killing, and at night, incest. Until the No-thing returns and Sapo becomes terrified and flees. And the family dissolves into an uncanny chaos:

Yes, an old foetus, that's what I am now, hoar and impotent, mother is done for, I've rotted her, she'll drop me with the help of gangrene, perhaps papa is at the party too, I'll land head foremost mewling in the charnel-house, not that I'll mewl, not worth it. (TN 225)

In History of the Concept of Time Heidegger describes the uncanniness Sapo experiences while at the Lambert's home:

One no longer feels at home in his most familiar environment, the one closest to him; but this does not come about in such a way that a definite region in the hitherto known and familiar world breaks down in its orientation, nor such that one is not at home in the surroundings in which one now finds himself, but instead in other surroundings. On the contrary, in dread, being-in-the-world is totally transformed into a 'not at home' purely and simply. (289)

In this state of anxiety, the words and the things begin to flee from Malone. He drops his pencil, and he can't rise from his bed to retrieve it. His stick falls away from him, and his chamber-pot-cum-breakfast-bowl disappears. Heidegger observes that "the leveling and the disappearance of Dasein in the Anyone is a falling apart of Dasein which is covered up by the public and everyday character of the Anyone" (HT 282). Malone's falling apart is so complete that he begins to fall out of Being-in-the-world. That is, he begins to loose all ready-to-hand entities: "Strange, I don't feel my feet any more, my feet feel nothing any more, and a mercy it is" (TN 234). Ultimately language, which for Heidegger is "the House of Being," begins to flee from Malone's grasp (Basic Writings 122):

But my fingers too write in other latitudes and the air that breathes, through my pages and turns them without my knowing, when I doze off, so that the subject falls far from the verb and the object lands somewhere in the void, is not the air of this second-last abode, and a mercy it is. (TN 234)

Heidegger explicates this progression into deep anxiety as a dread of death: This experience can, though it does not have too--just as all possibilities of being come under a 'can'--assume a distinctive sense in death or, more precisely, in dying. We then speak of the dread of death, which must be kept altogether distinct from the fear of death, for it is not fear in the face of death but dread as a disposition to the naked being-in-the-world, to pure Dasein. (HT 291)

Thus Malone dies.
In the dread of death, Malone falls from his vision of authentic existence as opened by anxiety, and sinks into inauthenticity. Thus Sapo disappears into the 'they', and looses his individuality. When he returns, he returns in the guise of an-other, Macmann. In anxiety Sapo surrenders so deeply into the herd that he becomes hidden from his true self and from his creator, Malone, whose own individuality dissolves into the story he tells:

But suddenly all begins to rage and roar again, you are lost in forests of high threshing ferns or whirled far out on the face of wind-swept wastes, till you begin to wonder if you have not died without knowing and gone to hell or been born again into an even worse place than before. (227)

As Malone-Macmann die, they relinquish themselves to complete inauthenticity: "I speak of morning and afternoon and of such and such an hour, if you simply must speak of people you simply must put yourself in their place, it is not difficult" (TN 270). Their fall is all the more poignant because both have experienced the anxiety capable of disclosing authenticity. For Heidegger, anxiety liberates "from possibilities which 'count for nothing' ["nichtigen"], and lets him become free for those which are authentic" (BT 395). Having denied the freedom anxiety offers, Malone-Macmann can only wait, inauthentically, and ponder the vision of authenticity.

Beckett's characters ultimately choose this death-in-life waiting by default, since they lack the courage to act. Hence the refrain in Waiting for Godot:

Estragon: Let's go.
Vladimir: We can't.
Estragon: Why not.
Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. (10)

In Being and Time, Heidegger makes clear that "the inauthentic future has the character of awaiting" (386). In a footnote, Macquarrie and Robinson point out the subtleties of the German term for awaiting, des Gewartigens: "While the verb 'await' has many advantages as an approximation to 'gewartigen', it is a bit too colourless and fails to bring out the important idea of being prepared to reckon with that which one awaits" (BT 386 n.4). This "being prepared to reckon with" is precisely what Beckett's characters lack. Like Vladimir and Estragon, they are too caught up in futile analysis and self-introspection to commit themselves to the future by acting. Thus they wait, forever poised between the thought and the act. For Heidegger waiting is how we comport ourselves toward the possibility of action, an action authenticity can take up. But this is what Beckett's characters fail to do. For them, waiting never ends, and they remain sunk within a plethora of possible decisions, but impossible choices. Beckett's characters no longer hope for authenticity, but wait, with no intent to act.

The Unnamable, more than any other of Beckett's failed characters, waits in vain for the actualization of action:

And there is nothing for it but to wait for the end, nothing but for the end to come, and at the end all will be the same, at the end at last perhaps all the same as before, as all that livelong time when there was nothing for it but to get to the end, or fly from it, or wait for it, trembling or not, resigned or not, the nuisance of doing over, and of being, same thing, for one who could never do, never be. (TN 370)
The Unnamable can never actualize possibility, can never end. He has resigned himself to inauthenticity and fails to accept the possibility-for-freedom disclosed in anxiety. In the third paragraph of his soliloquy he equates his Being with the they-self by becoming other characters in Beckett's fiction: "To tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here, but so far I have only seen Malone" (TN 293). And recall that the only place the Unnamable is, is in his own thought. Thus he next asks: "Is this not rather the place where one finishes vanishing?" (TN 293). The Heideggerian 'one' takes on great significance here. The Unnamable vanishes into inauthenticity as one does, when one lacks the courage to act. For this reason, he no longer has contact with ready-to-hand equipment. Heidegger sums up the Unnamable's plight accordingly:

The awaiting of the 'towards-which' is neither a considering of the 'goal' nor an expectation of the impendent finishing of the work to be produced. It has by no means the character of getting something thematically into one's grasp. Neither does the retaining of that in which we let something be involved, than they do to what is involved itself. (BT 405)

Read literally, the Unnamable is a mucilage egg shaped head suspended in a cage between a Parisian cafe and a butcher shop. But read in light of Heidegger's discussion of authenticity/inauthenticity, he becomes a man sitting at an outdoor cafe who realizes he has fallen so far away from his individuality that he has lost the very location—the Da—of his body. This is further evidenced by the Unnamable's lack of a name. To name is to individualize, to provide distinct location for. The nameless Unnamable is a post-modern Everyman-yet-no man. His search for name-location is a design woven throughout his soliloquy: Mahood, Worm, Jones—all rejected names as the Unnamable falls ever deeper into the 'they' where he becomes Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone, Mercier-Camier.

Nor is the Unnamable alone in his inability to become authentically involved in the world. The voice of Beckett's seventh Text for Nothing concludes with a hope to re-begin a search for authentic identity:

And to search for me elsewhere, where life persists, and me there, whence all life has withdrawn, except mine, if I'm alive, no, it would be a loss of time. And personally, I hear it said, personally I have no more time to lose, and that that will be all for this enemy, that night is at hand and the time come for me too to begin. (Stories and Texts for Nothing 110)

How It Is concludes with a similar, though more bitter lament:

so things may change no answer end to answer I may choke no answer the dark no answer trouble the peace no more no answer the silence no answer die no answer DIE screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good (147).

Here too the anxiety which opens possibility is leveled to an unheeded dread of death, and the character becomes self-doomed to wait for an authentic existence he realizes, in moments of self-honesty, will never be choosen. The Unnamable says it best:

you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence
you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (TN 414)

The Unnamable remains on the threshold of authenticity and, representative of Beckett's characters, would rather tell stories, sink into a never ending self-analysis, or simply wait by a tree than leap into the possibility of authenticity. Malone: "And there comes the hour when nothing more can happen and nobody can come and all is ended but the waiting that knows itself in vain" (TN 241). Lacking the courage to launch into authentic existence, all that remains is this waiting, as one waits, alone with everyone in the dark. Anxiously analyzing, and failing to open into authenticity, possibility, Being.