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Autor: O'Brien Johnson, Toni
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Unfamilial Beckett: Unrelated Voices in the Plays

Toni O'Brien Johnson

The depth psychology practiced at the beginning of this century might be said to have addressed problems of passion, whereas nowadays one finds many more problems arising from a deficiency of passion: passion has, as it were, gone underground, producing more schizoid, narcissistic, and borderline personalities.¹ Attention has shifted from the classic psychoneuroses and their related character-types, such as phobias, hysteria, or obsessions, to a concern with questions of the integrity and functioning of the self, and the ability to relate to others in the most elemental ways. Vital relatedness is of necessity passionate: copulation and engendering on the human level presuppose some degree of human attachment, and we would create nothing without the operation of passion in one form or another. The concept of passion with which I am working is not confined to the sexual, but extends to psychic energy in general;² and for the most elementary relatedness, psychic energy must flow.

The same deficiency of passion that is a widespread problem in today's psychology is evident in the characters of Samuel Beckett's plays and can be seen in the withdrawn nature of his own life.³ What encourages me to explore the question of why Beckett is so unfamilial in his plays is the fact that the family is the locus for our primary experience of passion; it is also the social paradigm *par excellence* for relatedness; and the work of the

¹ See Simon 235-6. My paper is heavily indebted to Simon's lucid view of the clinical as well as complex theoretical background to thinking about the psychological issues pertinent to the idea of an "unfamilial Beckett."

² For Jung's account of libido as psychic energy, see especially vol. 5 of his *Collected Works*, *Symbols of Transformation*, 132-170: "The Concept of Libido" and "The Transformation of Libido;" and vol. 8, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 3-66: "On Psychic Energy."

³ See Bair and Simon.

“object relations” school of psychology suggests that the capacity for attachment is normally formed within the framework of the family.⁴

From my position of familiarity with Beckett’s formative culture, I tend to see Beckett as belonging to a family of playwrights who began to produce a form of tragedy that is exceptionally brief: this family would include Yeats and Synge – especially Synge, whose one-act tragedy *Riders to the Sea* was a landmark in Irish drama, and whose *Well of the Saints* Beckett admired and “wrote back to” both in his *Waiting for Godot* and *Rough for Theatre 1*.⁵ Beckett, Yeats and Synge also belonged to the Anglo-Irish “family,” with its attendant problems of minority identity; and both Beckett and Synge had very difficult relationships with their mothers. However, whereas Synge in his plays at the beginning of the century strongly maintained the procreational function of families intact, Beckett radically altered this: he did not work with the traditional interpersonal, intergenerational familial conception of tragedy, but with the tragedy within the individual soul. Thus the propagational aspect of families in his work is distinctly disturbed: it appears that there is no possibility for a next generation. Besides, where Synge’s plays show people propagating stories (which are inherently intended for the next generation), Beckett’s plays show people moving towards silence. The solipsism of his characters progresses to an extreme in the “remembered lives” of the two late twin plays *Not I* and *That Time*. In these two plays, this solipsism is demonstrably the outcome of the disturbance of attachment formation or bonding at a crucial phase of the characters’ development.

From 1904 on, C. G. Jung evolved a word-association experiment, which became the basis for lie detection tests in criminal cases as well the means for identifying people’s complexes. The extensive research that he carried out in applying this word-association test showed that within families there are shared psychic patterns – in other words, there are family complexes. A complex is a configuration of feeling-toned associations in the psyche that disturbs the individual’s functioning, notably in the domain of attention. In the application of the word-association experiment, in response to a word that touches a complex, there may be delayed reaction, repetition or misunderstanding of the stimulus word, a rhyming response, physiological changes (blushing, movement, laughter etc.), multiple word response, or failure of memory on being asked to recall the response. If, in “normal” circumstances, one is asked a question that is important in a personal way,

⁴ See Klein, Fairbairn, and Winnicott.

⁵ See my 1984 article on *The Well of the Saints* and *Waiting for Godot*.

one is likely to hesitate, stammer, or even sweat, more than usual. That could be an “innocent” example of affective disturbance, but we all have some complexes that are far from innocent in their effects on our lives – for instance a “negative father” complex, or a “positive mother” complex, or a “power complex” and so on. Jung evolved a creative and effective way for identifying such complexes through the word-association experiment (*Collected Works*, vol. 2).

Jung spoke about his theory of complexes and their autonomous nature in the third of the five lectures he gave at the Tavistock Institute in London in September/October 1935 to which Beckett was taken by his analyst Wilfred R. Bion (Bair 208), and where Jung showed a number of diagrams resulting from his research on families. It was some consolation to Beckett to discover Jung’s theoretical affirmation of his own experience of the autonomous nature of complexes. He was also consoled by Jung’s insistence on the illusory nature of the unity of consciousness, and touched by his description of a girl patient who died as having “never been born entirely” (*Collected Works*, vol. 18: 96), an idea which he went on to include in *All That Fall*.⁶

This idea of never having been entirely born offers a striking image of being blocked in one’s development at a point where it is impossible to separate from the mother, and subsequent research has shown that for a child to be able to progress to a separate existence from the mother, there must have been an adequate mothering experience in the first place and a gradual process of distancing thereafter. Otherwise the child may defend itself from the anxiety of separation by adopting a pattern of non-relating, or may frustrate attempts at intimacy while being incapable of separating.

If we look at Beckett’s plays and the view of the family they portray, the problem of attachment/separation is all-pervading. In Beckett’s earliest performed play, *Waiting for Godot*, we have the first instance of characters (whose memories do not suggest that they are brothers) remaining inexplicably together, without any motive beyond habit and *faute de mieux*, and showing contradictory signs of attachment. The servant, Lucky, would also qualify as part of the family according to a traditional *OED* definition, and the tyrannical control Pozzo exerts over him through the rope is a “given.” We have no idea why Lucky should accept such an “attachment” but can guess at total dependence. In *Endgame*, we again find the figure of the servant, Clov, who is also abused, and had in the past been tyrannized by Hamm. He had wept to have a bicycle when there were still some available,

⁶ See my 1991 article on Beckett in *Gender in Irish Writing*.

but Hamm told him to go to hell, and now there are none.⁷ Relationship as a form of tyrannical control is what happens to Lucky and Clov.

The second family motif that occurs in *Godot* is that of the suffering son, which in later plays is broadened to the trans-gender suffering child. The boy who arrives at the end of Act I has a brother who is beaten (CDW 49), and the boy who arrives at the end of Act II has a brother who is sick (CDW 85). Since both of them are messengers from Godot, what one can infer is that these are the "suffering sons" of Godot the father. Likewise, in *Endgame*, Hamm tells the story of a destitute man who came to the door and said: "It's my little one . . . My little boy, he said, as if the sex mattered" (CDW 117); and Hamm had agreed to take the father into his service. Thus Clov becomes the suffering "son" of Hamm, who claims: "It was I was a father to you" (CDW 110). But of course we cannot be sure whether Clov was that little boy, which is an instance of Beckett's tyrannical control as author over the knowledge he permits the audience to have.

Henry, another suffering son in *Embers*, evokes the presence of his father as he sits on the shore (between conscious and unconscious) and talks so as to drown out the sea in which his father had drowned. His father had called Henry "a washout" when he left for his fatal swim, a word which Henry associates with abortion, wishing his wife Ada had had one, which endorses the motif of the unwanted or abandoned child. It had taken Henry and Ada a long time to have their daughter Addie, of whom he thinks as a "horrid little creature, wish to God we never had her" (CSP 96); and he ruminates with resentment: "it was not enough to drag her into the world, now she must play the piano" (CSP 99).

If we take the idea of the unwanted child a step backwards, we can link it to the curtailment of procreation: why, one is encouraged to ask, should procreation be promoted when life is such a "vale of tears"? In the ironic defiance of this vale of tears that *Happy Days* proposes, we only see a childless couple; and the passing ant (= emmet) with its ball of eggs is the source of Willie's joke "formication" (24).

In *All That Fall*, childlessness, orphanhood, and even the implied infanticide have the cumulative effect of reinforcing this idea of curtailed procreation. Yet *All That Fall* has the most familial references of all Beckett's plays, and its central character, Maddy Rooney, is the most actively "related," though in a clearly neurotic way. We can infer that a daughter of hers died young, and *Death and the Maiden* is not only a

⁷ Simon takes *Endgame* as Beckett's representative play and examines it through the lens of the "Abortion of Desire."

musical background to the play but also a theme. This underlies Maddy Rooney's continual enquiring about the health of the mothers and daughters of the characters she encounters: she strongly identifies with a "sick feminine."

In *Endgame*, we find the same sense of cursed procreation: Hamm calls Nagg his "accursed progenitor" (CDW 96). Clov refers to himself as having been whelped (98); and the seeds he has set have not sprouted. When he sees a small boy through a telescope at the end of the play (130), he refers to him regretfully as "a potential procreator" (131), and the whole "action" of the play appears to take place against a devastated world outside. The man in the wheelchair in *Rough for Theatre 1* has also had his generative effort curtailed since he calls the blind beggar "Billy, like my son" (CSP 67), indicating that the son has died; and when the man envisages himself dying "reconciled with [his] species" (71), it is with heavy irony. His heirlessness is echoed in the aunt of *Rough for Theatre 2*, a play which also has references to miscarriages, lost genitals (CSP 87), and envisages the extermination of the species (82).

Both *Rough for Radio 1* and *2* evoke problems of pregnancy and delivery, as well as problems of gender and sexuality. The suffering male speaker of *Rough for Radio 1* is waiting at the end for a return phone-call from his male doctor, who is prevented by two confinements he has to attend to, one a breech, so he will not be coming before noon the following day (CSP 111). There is an increasing sense of frustration of the male protagonist with and by the female in the play – both the secretary and the mother.

— The doctor is replaced by a male "animator" in *Rough for Radio 2* who, since there is no audience within the play, may more readily be interpreted as an internalized analyst probing memories from Fox. Fox is the subject of sadistic whipping which might be linked back to unproductive sexuality. Moreover, a monstrous cross-gender pregnancy is evoked: in connection with an imagined brother inside him, Fox quotes Maude as saying: "Have yourself opened, [. . .] opened up, it's nothing, I'll give him suck if he's still alive" (CSP 119). The female stenographer comments that the lactation mentioned by the Maud of Fox's memory signifies that she had been fecundated (123), and the animator comments on the "frequentative" aspect of Fox's reference to her, so the suggestion arises that there may have been one humanizing contact in his life. Yet Fox is described by the stenographer as definitely never having mentioned "kith or kin," because she would have remembered this since her own (kith and kin) mean so much to her (120).

This implies that the capacity for relatedness is more accessible to the feminine (in the contrasexual, Jungian sense, given that it is clearly a male who is being "analyzed"), though the masculine is necessary for reproduction. Taken as a whole, this play might be seen as an enactment of an exploration of arrested development in the domain of human relationship.

This curtailment of procreation in the plays is easier to understand if we take into account the compression of birth and death that occurs in them. The living time that should intervene between birth and death is negated by confounding womb and tomb. In Vladimir's lines from *Godot*, "Astride of the grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps" (CDW 84), there is no space or time left for relating and generating. In *Endgame*, Nagg and Nell in their ashbins are nearer death than birth, and when they try unsuccessfully to kiss (CDW 99) are clearly past generation. Krapp, when he recalls the time of waiting for his mother's death, remembers the black perambulator of the young nursemaid as "a funereal thing" (CSP 59), again collapsing procreative time. *A Piece of Monologue* begins with the statement that "Birth was the death of him" (CSP 265), and just before the final going down of light we hear: "there are no other matters. Never were any other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. The word begone" (269). This evokes the original unity of the child with the mother, followed by the pain of separation, and it also takes us back to Beckett's inextricable attachment to his *mater* who was noted for having "black rages," periods of depressive withdrawal, and of being "difficult."⁸

Before turning to the twin plays that I regard as culminating examples of Beckett's exploration of the failure of relatedness, this is perhaps the moment to say a little more about the developmental aspect of attachment and its accompanying separation anxiety: first, there is the obvious total dependence of the human infant on the mother, i.e. on the mothering figure. Such total dependence creates an evident space for tyranny because of the immense power of the mother over the infant.

Erich Neumann describes the human child in the primal relationship as going through an extra-uterine embryonic phase during which the Self is externalized in the mother. In his conception, the I/thou relationship can only begin when the ego develops, and this depends on the ability of the Self/ego to break away, gradually, from the primary relationship – to

⁸ See Bair (14-16) about the beatings she gave him; and Simon (233) about her suffocating and controlling attitude to her sons.

become rooted in the human world, outside of the dyadic structure (25). The child's early ego-formation depends on the mother's relatedness; and a secure contact acquired at this point enables a secure relation to the "thou" in every form: the human thou, the world, the body, the Self, and the unconscious. If frequent experience of anxiety, distress, or deprivation occurs at this point, what Neumann calls a "distress-ego" is prematurely thrown back on itself and driven to independence too early (77). The "forsakeness" (Neumann 78) of this kind of ego impairs contact with the "thou." Thus, what Jungians call the archetype of the "Terrible Mother" is constellated, and a corresponding complex develops around it, so that all relationship is fraught with anxiety. The result is a disturbance of the capacity for attachment, and the development of separation anxiety, both of which can be seen in Beckett's characters as well as in his life.

Such failure of attachment-formation deprives the individual of occasion to live her/his passions. At the beginning of Beckett's radio play *Words and Music*, we are offered a definition of passion which goes on to focus on what appears to be the very antithesis of passion, sloth: "by passion we are to understand a movement of the soul pursuing or fleeing real or imagined pleasure or pain [...] of all these movements and they are legion sloth is the most urgent" (CSP 127). Sloth, deprived of its moral overtones, conveys rather a deficiency of passion; and this is what we invariably find in Beckett's characters, who neither pursue nor flee. They are detached from living, from the world, from their bodies and from the other, except for neurotic (inter)dependencies, therefore the urgency that this voice in *Words and Music* identifies with sloth makes sense only when we see sloth as threatening survival, in the way that Beckett's characters' detachment leads to the extinction of relatedness, and thus of the species.

D. W. Winnicott, in his research on how infants deal with separation from the mother, evolved the idea of "transitional objects," "transitional space," and "transitional phenomena." Here are a few pertinent statements by Winnicott: "Sooner or later in the infant's development there comes a tendency on the part of the infant to weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern. To some extent these objects stand for the breast" (3). Some phenomenon "becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of a depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object [...] becomes what I call a *transitional object*" (4). "The transitional object is *not an internal object* (which is a mental concept) – it is a possession. Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either" (9). Certain objects appearing

in Beckett's plays may be viewed as traces of transitional objects; and language (or perhaps more accurately "talk") as a transitional phenomenon for his characters who might be seen as being in a state of regression.

It is inviting to move from Winnicott's idea of weaving an object into the personal pattern to conceiving of Krapp's tape-recorder as a transitional object which helps him to endure the distress of isolation by vocally reflecting him. He is constantly in touch with the tape recorder, and bends his ear closer to it (CSP 59). It stimulates memories, notably that of being on the punt, which becomes a kind of rocking cradle three times (60, 61, 63); and it is through the magic of the tape that Krapp finds himself "with my face in her breasts and my hand on her" (63), so that he actually echoes this position in the (stage) present.

Like the transitional object, the tape-recorder coagulates time, filling the gap left by the absence of the (m)other (which recalls Beckett's compression of birth and death). One might suggest that the tape substitutes for the umbilical cord; or it fills the gap between Krapp and the other (female) figures of his life: it functions as his objective memory-bank. It is both an extension of himself/his voice, and contains the women of his life: the woman in the punt, Bianca and Miss McGlome, without his having to actually encounter them. Miss McGlome, Krapp says, "always sings at this hour" (58), this hour being evening, thus suggesting a lullaby, and indicating Krapp's child-like attachment to ritual. It recalls Winnicott's remarks on how an older child goes over a repertory of songs and tunes while preparing for sleep, and it comes within the intermediate area as transitional phenomena.

The black rubber ball also has characteristics of the transitional object which can be handled and fondled, with Krapp thinking, "I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [Pause.] I might have kept it. [Pause.] But I gave it to the dog" (60). Hamm's dog in *Endgame* could also be considered as a transitional object, as could the cassette in *Ghost Trio* and the book on the table in *Ohio Impromptu*. In *Come and Go*, the transitional phenomenon shifts to another plane: the more linguistic one of the secret. Of the three sisters, each pair has a secret from the third, and the audience is excluded from all three secrets. A secret requires the existence of the person excluded from it as well as the person who shares it. It is an essentially triangular phenomenon, and thus goes beyond both the initial unitary phase and the secondary I/thou phase proposed by Neumann. It relates to the dynamic of narration, where a narrator, a narratee, and an audience are all required. Although the physical attachment at the end of *Come and Go* is the closest

we see in a Beckett play – three pairs of hands intertwine inextricably – once again a closed, neurotic attachment is suggested.

A number of very short late plays continue to explore the capacity of language for self-construction, and, I would suggest, they treat language itself as a transitional phenomenon, fondling the voices and events they present. They treat the voice in an experimental way, using recordings (as was the case earlier in *Krapp's Last Tape*) and different pitches.⁹ There are many occasions when we seem to be hearing internalized “other” voices. This liminal quality of their language fits the idea of transitional phenomena: rudimentary figures of family relationship – father, mother, child, wife etc. – are present in the remembered lives embodied in the language which gives access to the psyche of the speaker, though these figures are absent from the stage. The family has abandoned someone emotionally, or has been externally but not internally abandoned by the speaker.

Let us look particularly at *Not I* and *That Time*, where we have apparently solitary figures on stage, and where Beckett seems to be trying to get as far away as possible from embodied relatedness. Indeed, the principal figures are virtually disembodied. In *Not I* we see only the mouth of the speaker, which does not help to identify the gender: we have to hear the female voice for that. In *That Time*, however, we see the whole face, but the flowing hair confounds the question of gender again, as after a certain age, apart from possible differences of hair distribution, the human face appears androgynous. In *Not I* there is also an auditor present on stage but this too is an androgynous figure: the stage directions specify: “sex indeterminable.”

Pronouns are handled with specific constraints. The female voice of *Not I* refuses to say “I” and insists on referring to the person whose “autobiography” she is recounting as “she.” The first person singular pronoun is not used in *That Time* either, and the discourse of this play, which Beckett described as “a brother” to *Not I* (Pountney 92) is uttered by three male voices, and heard by an intently listening male, whom I take to be the silent Self to whom these voices belong. On one occasion, “I” is used in quotation, as it were, when the C voice says:

never the same but the same as what for God's sake did you ever say I to yourself in your life come on now [*Eyes close*] could you ever say I to yourself in your life turning-point that was a great word with you before they dried up altogether always having turning-points and never but the one the first and last that time curled up worm in slime when they lugged you out

⁹*Eh Joe, Footfalls, Rockaby, Ghost Trio, That Time* etc.

and wiped you off and straightened you up never another after that never looked back after that was that the time or was that another time. (CSP 230)

The implication here is that to have an I-identity, there has to be something/someone to be the same as in the first place, and of course there has to be an Other present to warrant using it, too: there has to be relationship if the speaker is to escape from the circle of *sol-ipsism*, or from simply talking to himself.

If we examine the appearance of these two texts, the ellipses in *Not I* add to the fragmentation in the linguistic structures, leaving countless openings for intervention by an Other, whereas *That Time* is dense and impenetrable. This results in a closed quality in the male discourse, which is underscored by the fact that his voices begin and end the play against a background of silence, whereas when the curtain goes up for *Not I* the voice is already ad-libbing, gabbling on, as it still is after the curtain has come down.

She had been abandoned as a speechless infant, and had remained speechless until seventy, when her "stream of words" began, when she got the impulse to "tell how it had been [. . .] how she had lived" (CSP 221, my emphasis). Although the verb "to tell" implies a listener, this female discourse is both too open and too self-engrossed (self-impregnated?) for dynamic linguistic relationship, and the insistence on not implicating the I/ego and speaking only in the third person discourages the response of the auditor, who finally gives up even her/his gestural responses. The exclusively gendered statements concerning "she" leave her/him no possibility for resonance, for the androgyne is not a "she," but might be able to relate to another "I."

The virtual absence of punctuation in *Not I* and its total absence in *That Time* conveys the problematic nature of time and its structuring. The male is fixated on identifying a particular time, and fixing it, but this time remains elusive except for the occasion when he reached the moment of birth through his one quotation of "I" as we saw above.¹⁰ Thus, he arrives at the notion "come and gone in no time, gone in no time" – which again recalls the compression of birth and death, and the coagulation of time we saw earlier. And this coagulation of time seems to have removed him from the time-flow of the Other, since his words "dried up altogether."

¹⁰ It is unlikely to be the moment of copulation because of the intervention of the third person "they lugged you out and wiped you off and straightened you up," though there is clearly an echo at work.

The female, on the other hand, goes on and on spinning the apparently pointless story of her speechless, hence unrelated/un-related life. Her remembering of it is retraced in cycles, apparently returning repeatedly to the same point, yet going on because of her compulsion to "tell," hence to find a listening Other. She is caught in the flow: her discourse is like an opening spiral, whereas the male discourse of *That Time* is like three interconnecting circles, meeting and off-centered in the silent Self.

I would suggest that the social unrelatedness of both the female and male voices positions them close to the borders of the unconscious, and that this unrelatedness is initiated by a childhood trauma in both cases. For the female, this trauma consists of very early abandonment to which she responds by denying the value of any attachment, "rejoicing" that there was "no love such as normally vented on the speechless infant . . . spared that . . . no love of any kind" (CSP 216). For the male, on the other hand, the nature of the childhood trauma is less clear. He was certainly not abandoned, yet something drove him to slip off and hide in Foley's Folly ("poring on his book on into the night," CSP 233) and begin talking to himself when his entire family was out on the roads looking for him. The family was clearly not a "facilitating environment." What results in both cases is a turning away from the human Other, which sends the energy into the unconscious and confines it there.

The discourse of the male appears much more related to the outside world: whereas she only enters the supermarket and the public lavatory (both connected with bodily needs), he goes to the Portrait Gallery, the Public Library, and the Post Office. While such locations may not facilitate generation on the biological level, yet if some passion were present, some creative activity might take place in the gallery or the library; and even in the post office, some communication might occur.

Beckett's creativity depended on his capacity to hold a liminal position vis-à-vis language. He possessed all the public, outwardly-turned skills that traditionally belong to masculinist language, but he did not remain centred in such language. He allowed himself the child-like liberty of treating language as a "transitional object," possessing it and substituting it for the absent Other (in his case, the Terrible Mother). One might say that through language he came to terms with his painful extra-uterine phase (Neumann). Language was his salvation: his creation (in a mode which discourages procreation in view of the family not being a facilitating environment) is inherently dialogical. Moving beyond the still socially adapted monologue of Molly Bloom, he takes us to a more "primitive" linguistic level where he

records, with fine gender-sensitivity, his awareness of the devastating effects of emotional abandonment (*Not I*). Taking male discourse from a point outside the temporal flow, he can finally be "gone in no time," in ultimate isolation (*That Time*, closing words, before the smile). His late texts demand of the audience/reader some of the courage Beckett himself had: the courage to be liminal, and not always stay at the centre of the symbolic order of the patriarchal world on which we have traditionally depended for relating.

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