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## **“In Love with Hiding”: Samuel Beckett’s War**

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Vire will wind in other shadows  
unborn through the bright ways tremble  
and the old mind ghost-forsaken  
sink into its havoc.

-Samuel Beckett, “Saint-Lô” (1946)

Interviewer: “What is the place of Bertold Brecht in your  
[i.e., the Polish avant-garde] theater?”

Jan Kott. “We do him when we want Fantasy. When we want  
Realism, we do ‘Waiting for Godot.’ ” (cited Eric Bentley)

Toward the end of *Waiting for Godot*, when Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) are at a momentary low point, the following dialogue takes place:

ESTRAGON: I’m going.

VLADIMIR: Help me up first, then we’ll go together.

ESTRAGON: You promise?

VLADIMIR: I swear it!

ESTRAGON: And we’ll never come back?

VLADIMIR: Never!

ESTRAGON: We’ll go to the Pyrenees.

VLADIMIR: Wherever you like

ESTRAGON: I’ve always wanted to wander in the Pyrenees.

VLADIMIR: You’ll wander in them.

Why Pyrenees? Surely Gogo is longing for more than a pleasant mountain idyll. In the original French version, Beckett specifies more fully: "Nous irons," Gogo tells Didi, "dans l'Ariège," and he adds, "J'ai toujours voulu me balader dans l'Ariège." The joke here is that the Ariège was hardly a place suitable for wandering. Also known as "Le Chemin de la Liberté" (later the title of Sartre's trilogy of novels), it was the chief World War II escape route from France to Spain—a route chosen to avoid all official checkpoints and any likely contact with German patrols. In June 1943 alone, as the website for the Ariège informs us, there were 113 successful evasions along the neighboring mountain peaks.

"Le Chemin de la Liberté" would have been on Beckett's mind when he composed *Godot* in 1947-48. The previous six years—the years leading up to his most productive period—had been an elaborate war nightmare—a nightmare Beckett never wrote about directly, although allusions to it are, as we shall see, everywhere in the texts of the postwar decade. The word "war" itself appears nowhere in *Godot* or in those strange lyrical fictions of 1945-1946, which were published in *Nouvelles et Textes pour Rien* (*Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 1955)—*L'Expulsé* ("The Expelled"), *Le Calmant* ("The Calmative"), and *La Fin* ("The End"). But the very absence of the word has an odd way of insuring its prominence in these stories. As the narrator of "The Expelled" (1945) puts it sardonically:

Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don't there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little. That is to say, must think of them for a while, a good while, every day several times a day, until they sink forever in the mud. That's an order.

Beckett knows, of course, that nothing is "forever," and that he can hardly obey his own order to put the matter behind him. "Little by little," those "killing" memories return.

But for the first wave of Beckett critics in postwar France—critics for whom war memories were not only painful but embarrassing, given the collaboration of the Vichy government—it was preferable to read Beckett as addressing man’s alienation and the human condition rather than anything as specific as everyday life in the years of Resistance. Here are some sample comments:

Maurice Nadeau (1951):

Beckett settles us in the world of the Nothing where some nothings which are men move about for nothing. The absurdity of the world and the meaninglessness of our condition are conveyed in an absurd and deliberately insignificant fashion

Georges Bataille (1951):

What ‘Molloy’ reveals is not simply reality but reality in its pure state: the most meager and inevitable of realities, that fundamental reality continually soliciting us but from which a certain terror always pulls us back. . . . There is in this reality, the essence or residue of being. . .

Jean-Jacques Mayoux (1960):

So man is alone and bereft not only of God, but also of the world: in this respect Beckett’s work is a ruthless criticism of experience. Our windowless monad. . . moves about his inner landscape coming face to face with his own private mirrors. . . . Always unreal, reality is, in particular, ambiguous, and the formulae of logic, by which A always remains A at the same time and in the same connections, no longer apply. . . .At the heart of this unreality is time, dimension of the absurd, which annuls everything, which is an unceasing hemorrhage of existence.

By the time *Godot* had opened in London (1954), this French perspective had been absorbed into Anglo-American culture. In *The New Republic* for 1956, the famous drama critic Eric Bentley wrote:

Samuel Beckett’s point of view seems pretty close to that of Anouilh or Sartre. ‘Waiting for Godot’ is, so to speak, a play that one of them ought to have written. It is the quintessence of ‘existentialism’ in the popular, and most relevant, sense of the term—a philosophy which underscores the incomprehensibility, and therefore the meaninglessness, of the universe, the nausea which man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence, the praiseworthiness of the acts of defiance

man may perform—acts which are taken, on faith, as self-justifying, while, rationally speaking, they have no justification because they have no possibility of success. And even in his *Postscript* 1967, when Bentley has come to realize that *Godot* might well have a historical specificity he had not at first recognized, he posits that the play “represents the ‘waiting’ of the prisoners of Auschwitz and Buchenwald . . . as also the prisoners behind the spiritual walls and barbed wire of totalitarian society generally, as also the prisoners behind the spiritual walls and barbed wire of societies nearer home.”

The universalism of such readings, with their emphasis on the absurdity of the human condition doesn't get us very far. For one thing, there is no necessary connection between a sense of alienation, absurdity, and the meaninglessness of life on the one hand, and Beckett's unrelenting curious emphasis on natural and bodily functions, on the other. The tramps of *Godot*, the narrators of “*The Expelled*,” “*The Calmative*,” and *Molloy*, invariably experience themselves as ugly, aging, smelly, toothless, incontinent, impotent or incapable of enjoying sex; they are homeless, friendless, and loveless. They meet and have contact with others—but these others remain largely unknown, despite shows of friendship and intimacy. Memory--of better days, of an idyllic childhood home, of a sea to bathe in--is at odds with current reality. Eating is a matter of sustenance rather than pleasure. Urinating is a hardship, defecating a worse one. Feet are likely to be swollen, hair lice-infested, clothing torn and filthy. Sleep is intermittent and disturbed and takes place, not in bed, but in cowsheds, caves, ditches, and on park benches. And yet Beckett's protagonists don't seem to be derelicts; on the contrary, they regularly cite Shakespeare, Augustine, the Bible, Shelley, Yeats, and various philosophical texts from Geulcinx to Kant.

One early critic who did understand Beckett's obsession with bodily functions was Theodore Adorno. In his *Metaphysics* (1965), he suggests that the imagery of “carrion, stench, and putrefaction” so prevalent in Beckett may be understood as an index to the failure of the Enlightenment

ethos, as it revealed itself in the Holocaust. “The metaphysical principle of the injunction that ‘Thou shalt not inflict pain’ . . . can find its justification only in the recourse to corporeal, physical reality, and not to its opposite pole, the pure idea.” Culture, in other words, finds itself in a position where it can no longer pretend to suppress nature, and thus, in Adorno’s view, Beckett’s dramas “seem . . . to be the only truly relevant metaphysical productions since the war.” This is an important insight, and accordingly Adorno understands that it will not do to put Beckett in the existential camp as did his early French critics. In his famous essay on *Endgame* (1961), Adorno writes:

Absurdity in Beckett is no longer a state of human existence thinned out to a mere idea and then expressed in images. Poetic procedure surrenders to it without intention. Absurdity is divested of that generality of doctrine which existentialism, that creed of the permanence of individual existence, nonetheless combines with Western pathos of the universal and the immutable.

Rather, Adorno posits, *Endgame* enacts the consequences of its more specific economic condition—the ruthless capitalism of the twentieth century. “The individual himself is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient himself. . . . *Endgame* assumes that the individual’s claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility.”

But, despite its shift from philosophy to culture, Adorno’s reading of the Beckett text as symptomatic of a doomed capitalist culture—a culture inevitably culminating in Auschwitz and the atomic bomb, reduces that text to a level of abstraction similar to that found in the readings of Mayoux or Bentley. The Beckett character as victim of capitalist commodification: it is an image too universal to be useful. More important: it pays insufficient attention to the actual discourse radius of Beckett’s writings—their imagery and nexus of allusions. Here the story of Beckett’s War becomes central—a story that, thanks to Beckett’s recent biographers, can now be fleshed out.

## 2. **Waiting. . .**

Beckett might have sat out World War II in his native Ireland, but as he later quipped, in an interview with Israel Shenker, "I preferred France in war to Ireland at peace." By 1941, he had joined the Resistance in Paris, largely as a response to the arrest of such Jewish literary friends as his old Trinity College classmate Alfred Péron. As a neutral Irishman who spoke fluent French, Beckett was in great demand; he and his companion (later wife) Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil joined *Gloria*, a *reseau de renseignement* or information network, whose main—and dangerous-- job was to translate documents about Axis troop movements and relay them to Allied headquarters in London. The coding of messages and transfer of microfilm, hidden in matchboxes, toothpaste tubes, and so on, has interesting implications for Beckettian dialogue that I discuss in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*: the so-called "cut-out" system, for example, whereby each cell member reported to the next in line, often unknown to him or herself, surely stands behind particular sequences in *Watt*, which Beckett was writing in the early forties.

When *Gloria* was betrayed by a double agent in August 1942, the Becketts had to flee Paris immediately, heading for the Unoccupied Zone in the south of France. It took them, sometimes alone, sometimes with other refugees, almost six weeks to cross into the free zone at Chalon-sur-Saône in Burgundy; they made their way, hiding in barns and sheds, and sometimes trees, haystacks, and ditches. As Beckett later told his biographer James Knowlson:

I can remember waiting in a barn (there were ten of us) until it got dark, then being led by a *porteur* over streams; we could see a German sentinel in the moonlight. Then I remember passing a French post on the other side of the line. The Germans were on the road; so we went across fields. Some of the girls were taken over in the boot of a car.

In another six weeks or so, the Becketts reached Roussillon, a village so named for its location on a plateau of red rock, some 40 km. from Avignon, which was to become their home for the next three years. Much as the 700km journey on foot had been hazardous and painful, Beckett's biographers agree that the stay in Roussillon was in many ways even worse: a mixture of boredom and danger. As an alien identifiable by his Irish accent, Beckett had to avoid Nazi patrols coming through the area, by hiding, sometimes for days at a time, in the fields and woods on the outskirts of Roussillon . Then too, as Stan Gontarski points out, "they never knew when they heard someone approach whether it would be a Nazi patrol or friendly villagers." Indeed, the uniqueness of the French war experience, as compared to the English or German, was that there was no sure way of differentiating between friend and enemy. Collaborator and Resistance fighter, after all, looked alike.

*Waiting* (the original title of *Waiting for Godot*) became, in any case, the central activity. At first the Becketts lived at the village hotel where bedbugs and mice were everywhere, and where they had to go outdoors, not only for the privy but also for drinking water. The fields where they searched for potatoes were often seas of mud. For a time, Beckett worked for a farmer named Aude and picked grapes for another farmer named Bonnelly, who is mentioned by name in *En Attendant Godot*:

VLADIMIR: Pourtant nous avons été ensemble dans le Vaucluse, j'en mettrais ma main au feu. Nous avons fait les vendanges, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the English translation, the specific references to the Vaucluse and Bonnelly have been excised, the lines reading, "But we were there, together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called . . . (*he snaps is fingers*) . . . can't think of the name of the man, at a place called . . . (*snaps his fingers*) . . . can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember?"

Beckett and Suzanne finally got their own house, but it was unheated and the winter of '43 was by all accounts especially cold and dreary. The village, enticing as it could be in spring, with its mountain setting, pine, oak, and olive (and after the war, a tourist attraction because of its prehistoric caves), was claustrophobic, indeed a kind of prison.

Here Beckett spent the better part of three years. He spoke, of course, only French at this time, there being almost no English speakers in residence. At war's end, the Becketts made their way back to Paris, and the Irishman continued on, by way of a bombed-out London, to Dublin to see his mother for the first time in five years. Then, since his status in France was that of resident alien, Beckett was not permitted to return to his home in Paris, where conditions were terrible—large-scale starvation-- and hence volunteered to help the Irish Red Cross build a hospital for the Normandy town of Saint-Lô, which had been devastated by the Allies en route from Cherbourg to Paris [figure 1]. In August 1945, Beckett wrote to Thomas McGreevy:

St.-Lô is just a heap of rubble, la Capitale des Ruines as they call it in France. Of 2600 buildings 2000 completely wiped out. . . . It all happened in the night of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> June. It has been raining hard for the last few days and the place is a sea of mud. What it will be like in winter is hard to imagine. No lodging of course of any kind. . . since last Wednesday we have been with a local doctor in the town . . . all 3 in one small room and Alan [Beckett's friend Alan Thompson] and I sharing a bed! ( "It was in St.-Lô," Knowlson, who reproduces McGreevy's letter, tells us, "that [Beckett] witnessed real devastation and misery . . . people in desperate need of food and clothing, yet clinging desperately to life." One of Beckett's jobs was to exterminate the rats in the maternity and childrens' ward. The building job took six months to accomplish; in January 1946 Beckett finally returned to Paris to begin what is usually referred to as "the siege in the room" where he wrote the works that were to make him



famous. Six years had gone by since France had fallen to the Germans in 1940.

The first writings of 1946 were a radio script for Radio Erin called "The Capital of the Ruins" and the stories included in *Nouvelles et textes pour rien*. The radio script begins on a low-key, factual note: Beckett describes the linoleum flooring and the "walls and ceiling of the operating theatre . . . sheeted in aluminum of aeronautic origin," and he comments on the obstacles encountered in the building process. On the last page we read, "Saint-Lô was bombed out of existence in one night. German prisoners of war, and casual labourers attracted by the relative food-plenty, but soon discouraged by housing conditions, continue, two years after the liberation, to clear away the debris, literally by hand." The new hospital was designed to be provisional, but "provisional," Beckett remarks, "is not the term it was, in this universe become provisional."

That last sentence explodes the script's air of reasonable reportage. What *is* the meaning of the word "provisional" when the universe itself has become provisional? It is this question that gives impetus to the 1946 stories and to *Godot*. Hugh Kenner, the first (and for a long time the only) Beckett critic to have paid attention to the actual *donnée* of *Godot*, describes the play this way in his *Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*:

Two men waiting, for another whom they know only by an implausible name which may not be his real name. A ravaged and blasted landscape. A world that was ampler and more open once, but is permeated with pointlessness now. Mysterious dispensers of beatings. A man of property and his servant, in flight. And the anxiety of the two who wait, their anxiety to be as inconspicuous as possible in a strange environment ("We're not from these parts, Sir") where their mere presence is likely to cause remark. It is curious how readers and audiences do not think to observe the most obvious thing about the world of the play, that it resembles France occupied by the Germans, in which its author spent the war years. How much waiting must have gone on in that bleak world; how many times must Resistance operatives—displaced persons when everyone was displaced, anonymous ordinary

people for whom every day renewed the dispersal of meaning—have kept appointments not knowing whom they were to meet, with men who did not show up and may have had good reasons for not showing up, or bad, or may even have been taken; how often must life itself not have turned on the skill with which overconspicuous strangers did nothing as inconspicuously as possible, awaiting a rendezvous, put off by perhaps unreliable messengers, and making do with quotidian ignorance in the principal working convention of the Resistance, which was to let no one know any more than he had to.

We can easily see why a Pozzo would be unnerving. His every gesture is Prussian. He may be a Gestapo official clumsily disguised.

Here is perhaps the playwright's most remarkable feat. There existed, throughout a whole country for five years, a literal situation that corresponded point by point with the situation in this play, and so far from special that millions of lives were saturated in its desperate reagents, and no spectator ever thinks of it. Instead the play is ascribed to one man's gloomy view of life, which is like crediting him with having invented a good deal of modern history.

The "literal situation" was especially marked in the play's first version, in which, as Gontarski, who has studied the manuscripts, notes, Estragon was called Levi. Even Kenner, however, feels it important to note that "Beckett saw the need of keeping thoughts of the Occupation from being too accessible, because of the necessity to keep the play from being 'about' an event that time has long since absorbed." These words date from 1973; thirty years and a few wars later, we may be less nonchalant than Kenner about that absorption.

Meanwhile, the drive to universalize—to give *Godot* a theme "everyone" might relate to-- continued. Martin Esslin, for example, declared in a 1988 lecture given in Korea, on the occasion of a major production of *Godot*:

Beckett gradually reduces the realistic original material, in order to extract the deeper, eternal, essential human situation - so that the play can become truly universal. That is the case in *Waiting for Godot*: the general situation of waiting has been, as it were, extracted from the particular experience that Beckett had had - he

used his waiting for the war to end as the starting point for the exploration of waiting in human life in general. We all wait for something for most of our lives - at school we wait for the end of the school year, and the exam results, at university we wait for our degree, then we wait to meet someone to get married to, and then we wait for a better job, and so on and so on. And when one wait is over, immediately another wait starts. Life itself is thus a kind of waiting - and life is determined by the fact that being is only possible in time, thus waiting becomes the exemplar of life in time itself.

*Waiting for Godot* is a play about waiting for something that does not come or if it comes, will not be as good as it seemed originally.

Here the notion that the literary text must “reduce the realistic original material in order to extract the deeper, eternal, essential human situation,” may well be a vestige of the New Criticism, which was at its height when *Godot* was first produced, although Esslin, who came to Beckett from his work in British radio and theatre, was no more a hard-line New Critic than was Jean-Jacques Mayoux. Indeed, perhaps the persistence of the New Criticism, even for those who were hardly card-carrying New Critics, was the result of the inevitable fear of history on the part of those who had lived through its recent manifestations. The drive to abstract and extract, to press for a larger vision above and beyond the realities of everyday life, thus loomed large. In France, where the facts of war were especially embarrassing, the Vichy government having stood firm with the Germans, the probing of historical context was especially unappealing.

*Godot*, however, bears unmistakable witness to the context in which it was born, especially in its original French version. From Estragon’s first “Nothing to be done,” to which Vladimir responds, “I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I’ve resumed the struggle (*combat*),” Beckett’s play dramatizes the tension between passivity and action that characterizes this very particular form of *waiting*—a waiting on the part of human beings thrust into a very particular—and wholly

unknown—situation. The audience never knows, for example, whether Didi and Gogo are life-long friends or have met for the first time quite recently. And what about Pozzo and Lucky: how long have master and slave been in this relationship and where do they stand vis-à-vis the two tramps?

Consider the indeterminacy of the beating motif. At the beginning of Act I, we read:

VLADIMIR: (hurt, coldly). May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON: In a ditch.

VLADIMIR: (admiringly). A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON: (without gesture). Over there.

VLADIMIR: And they didn't beat you?

ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR: The same lot as usual?

ESTRAGON: The same? I don't know.

The audience never knows who "they" are or indeed whether the beating actually occurred or is merely Gogo's invention. But we do know that in Act II, the beating theme is treated to the following variation:

VLADIMIR: Gogo! (*Estragon remains silent, head bowed*). Where did you spend the night?

ESTRAGON: Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!

After this wonderful non-sequitur, Didi persists in asking Gogo, "Who beat you? Tell me," a question Gogo avoids until Didi brags, "I wouldn't have let them beat you":

ESTRAGON: You couldn't have stopped them.

VLADIMIR: Why not?

ESTRAGON: There was ten of them.

VLADIMIR: No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.

ESTRAGON: I wasn't doing anything.

VLADIMIR: Then why did they beat you?

ESTRAGON: I don't know.

VLADIMIR: Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things escape you that don't

escape me, you must feel it yourself.  
ESTRAGON: I tell you I wasn't doing anything.  
VLADIMIR: Perhaps you weren't. But it's the way of doing it that counts,  
the way of doing it, if you want to go on living. (*Waiting* 39)

The absurd one-upmanship of this last exchange pinpoints the guilt and self-recrimination that goes with the territory of hiding from an enemy over an extended period. Was what happened Gogo's fault? Could he have avoided the "beating"? Could Didi have protected him? How can either man know? They are, after all, "not from these parts," as Gogo tells Pozzo. And again, Didi reminds Gogo, "Nobody ever recognizes us." *Waiting*, in these circumstances, is neither like waiting for the end of the school year nor is it simply an instance of something as general as the "human condition." Rather, Beckett's is the limbo of exceptionalism, of being forced to behave in ways posited throughout the play as normally *quite alien*. Thus when, at the end of the play, Godot has once again failed to materialize and Estragon says, "I can't go on like this," Vladimir responds sardonically, "That's what you think." One does what one has to do. In a provisional universe, it can hardly be otherwise.

### 3. ***Between Dens and Ruins***

But it is the three-story cycle of 1946 that contains Beckett's most searing examination of wartime conditions in Vichy France, especially the miseries and terror of the life of hiding and attempted escape. Each of the three interrelated stories—"The Expelled," "The Calmative," and "The End"—has a first-person narrator, whom we might, for brevity's sake, call Sam; each tale is a hallucinatory dream narrative that begins with an expulsion—from "home" down a flight of steps, from a "den littered with empty tins," or from an institution that may be asylum, hospital, or prison. In each case, the journey takes the protagonist through a town that is at

once familiar and yet wholly alien; the passage through that town takes the form of a series of tests that try Sam's patience and put his sanity into question. The encounters with strangers are absurd failures, not because these others intentionally do bad things to Sam, but because the characters talk and act at cross purposes. Again, in all three stories, the "journey" ends beyond the town on the open road, with Sam seeking guidance only from the sun or the stars or, in "The End," from the waters that promise to provide oblivion and bring death. Yet death is not "the end," for there is always the urgency and need to go on.

The step-counting ritual that opens "The Expelled" is the sort of absurd mental exercise one engages in when trying to keep oneself going in a moment of unbearable stress. The narrator admits that "After all it is not the number of steps that matters" (he has been considering whether to count the sidewalk as the first step which would give him  $n + 1$ , or to count the top of the steps as well, which makes  $n+2$ ); "The important thing to remember is that there were not many, and that I have remembered":

Even as I fell I heard the door slam which brought me a little comfort, in the midst of my fall. For that meant they were not pursuing me down into the street with a stick, to beat me in full view of the passers-by. For if that had been their intention they would not have shut the door, but left it open, so that the persons assembled in the vestibule might enjoy my chastisement and be edified. So, for once, they had confined themselves to throwing me out and no more about it. I had time, before coming to rest in the gutter, to conclude this piece of reasoning.

Here, as in *Godot*, is the reference to beating and pursuit that occurs for no ostensible reason. The identity of the beaters is never known, nor is it clear what distinguishes the actual pursuers from those who watch from the vestibule above. In the gutter where the narrator falls and where his hat, following him down the steps, lands, Sam distracts himself by recalling the first hat his father bought him and then contemplates "the house that had just ejected me," "beautiful," with its "geraniums in the windows and "massive green door." An idyllic memory of the poet's childhood home, the

imposing Tudor-style family residence at Cooldrinagh that his rigidly compulsive mother kept in such immaculate condition? Not quite, what with the door's "thunderous wrought-iron knocker" and "slit for letters, this latter closed to dust, flies and tits by a brass flap fitted with springs." And further, in an oddly Kafkaesque detail, "I looked up at the third and last floor and saw my window outrageously open. A thorough cleansing was in full swing" (CSP 49). The scene of expulsion fuses images of Beckett's elegant suburban home with overtones of menace: "they," after all, might be spying on him from behind the curtains" although "I had done them no harm."

Where are we? The narrator remarks that he is "in the prime of life," and he refers to the town as the "scene of my birth and of my first steps in this world, and then of all the others, so many that I thought all trace of me was lost." But the town of his birth is also totally unknown to him and so he raises "my eyes to the sky, whence cometh our help, where there are no roads, where you wander freely, as in a desert, and where nothing obstructs your vision, wherever you turn your eyes, but the limits of vision itself." Those "limits" have to do with memory, in this case the memory of the "Lüneburg heath," which the narrator had once sought out only to find it "most unsatisfactory, most unsatisfactory." The reference is to Beckett's 1936 stay in Germany, when he first became aware of what was in store under Nazi rule. The Lüneburg heath was one that Johann Sebastian Bach crossed regularly in his student days, when he gave concerts in Hamburg or Celle. But the new Germany was no longer Bach's: "I came home," the narrator recalls, "disappointed" but with a feeling of "undeniable relief."

It was across similar rolling fields of heather, that Beckett had recently made his way from the outskirts of Paris on the journey south. Days of walking must have reduced the body to a nearly non-functional mechanism: as "The Expelled" puts it:

I set off. What a gait. Stiffness of the lower limbs, as if nature had denied me knees, extraordinary splaying of the feet to right and left of the line of march.

The trunk, on the contrary, as if by the effect of a compensatory mechanism, was as flabby as an old ragbag, tossing wildly to the unpredictable jolts of the pelvis. I have often tried to correct these defects, to stiffen my bust, flex my knees and walk with my feet in front of one another, for I had at least five or six, but it always ended in the same way. I mean with a loss of equilibrium, followed by a fall.

*Walking*, which we take wholly for granted, is here viewed as the most taxing of tasks, the narrator's particular problem being related to his "deplorable" childhood habit of "having pissed in my trousers" and then going about all day "as if nothing had happened," so that his body supposedly leaned to one side. Thus, "I became sour and mistrustful, a little before my time, in love with hiding and the prone position."

*Hiding and the prone position*: when Beckett wrote these words in 1946, this position had been his *métier* for the better part of a decade. The landscape now shifts as in a dream from rural (heath) to urban (city sidewalk), the habit of hiding makes "normal" movement all but impossible. "The widest sidewalk is never wide enough for me, once I set myself in motion." Reeling into one person or another, he is stopped by a policeman, who "pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for every one, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category."

Absurd as this deduction sounds, the Expelled has memories to support his current fear:

You can hardly have a home address under these circumstances, it's inevitable. It was therefore with a certain delay that I learnt they were looking for me, for an affair concerning me. I forget through what channel. I did not read the newspapers, nor do I remember having spoken with anyone during these years, except perhaps three or four times, on the subject of food. At any rate, I must have had wind of the affair one way or another, otherwise I would never have gone to see the lawyer, he would never have received me. He verified my identity. That took some time.

These thoughts—of homelessness and hunger, of the absence of newspapers, of being wanted by a nameless "them" and of verifying one's "identity" with the help of a lawyer—thoughts perfectly consistent with



Beckett's actual escape from Paris, occur to Sam as he hires a cab, looks for a room to rent, considers a hotel but is turned away, and finally accepts the cabman's invitation "to do his wife and him the honour of spending the night in their home."

Why would this be an "honour," given the guest's ragged appearance? The moment, moreover, he takes off his hat at their house, the cabman "drew his wife's attention to the pustule on top of my skull." "He should have that removed, she said," and rather than confront what may be a mirror image of their own bestiality, cabman and wife agree that it is best to accede to Sam's demand that he sleep outside in the stable:

Stretched out in the dark I heard the noise the [cab horse] made as it drank, a noise like no other, the sudden gallop of the rats and above me the muffled voices of the cabman and his wife as they criticized me. I held the box of matches in my hand, a big box of safety matches. I got up during the night and struck one. Its brief flame enabled me to locate the cab. I was seized, then abandoned, by the desire to set fire to the stable. I found the cab in the dark, opened the door, the rats poured out, I climbed in.

Given the context of crossing enemy lines and the inability, in Vichy France, to distinguish friend from foe, everyone is suspect, even the cab horse, staring at him from outside the door. Unable to bear the proximity—"the horse wouldn't take his eyes off me"—Sam finally escapes via the cab's narrow window. "It wasn't easy. But what is easy? I went out head first, my hands were flat on the ground of the yard while my legs were still thrashing to get clear of the frame. I remember the tufts of grass on which I pulled with both hands, in my effort to extricate myself. I should have taken off my greatcoat and thrown it through the window, but that would have meant thinking of it."

The realism of this description is startling. Even the banknote, the speaker leaves behind for the cabman only to retrieve it, evidently thinking

the gesture might be incriminating, fits into the Resistance scheme. And now we come to the end of the story:

Dawn was just breaking. I did not know where I was. I made towards the rising sun, towards where I thought it should rise, the quicker to come into the light. I would have liked a sea horizon, or a desert one. When I am abroad in the morning I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I'm abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead.

Both sea and desert represent the open horizon—a horizon Sam can only dream of in the all too familiar world of houses and fields—a world where even the cab horse, staring at Sam spells doom. One can trust no one; only the diurnal movement of the sun is a reliable marker, the sun that guides "The Expelled" on his way.

And yet one goes on. The conclusion of "The Expelled" is not wholly negative; the narrator, after all, survives to tell his story and announces that he could tell another one. "The Calmative" may be taken to be that successor. This time the protagonist seems to return from the dead—"I don't know when I died" is the story's opening sentence. This time the expulsion is not a fall but an exodus from a "kind of den littered with empty tins":

Perhaps it's just ruins, a ruined folly. on the skirts of the town in a field, for the fields come right up to our walls, their walls, and the cows lie down at night in the lee of the ramparts. I have changed refuge so often, in the course of my rout, that now I can't tell between dens and ruins.

Here is the landscape of the Vaucluse, with its caves and cowsheds, its ramparts and stone remnants of medieval castle keeps." Is someone forcing Sam to leave? No, because "I wasn't with anybody"; at the same time, he voices relief that "I'm no longer with these assassins, in this bed of terror, but in my distant refuge, my hands twined together." And his story will be told in the past tense because it deals with the "age in which I became what I was."

The trajectory from the "den littered with empty tins" takes him, for starters, through a forest:

The paths of other days were rank with tangled growth. I leaned against the trunks to get my breath and pulled myself forward with the help of boughs. Of my last passage no trace remained. They were the perishing oaks immortalized by d'Aubigné."

Beckett's signature here, as later in *Godot*, depends upon the embedding of complex allusion in what looks like a straightforward narrative account. The reference is to Agrippa D'Aubigné, the French Huguenot soldier-poet of the later sixteenth century, who fought on the Protestant side in the religious wars and was wounded. In his long poems *Histoire Universelle* and the epic *Les Tragiques*, d'Aubigné condemned the brutalities of war, mourning, for example, "le triste forêt" bloodied and destroyed by battle, especially those *chesnes superbes*, the venerable oaks that couldn't withstand the onslaught.

Thus when the narrator of "The Calmative" says laconically, "They were the perishing oaks immortalized by d'Aubigné," he is reading the contemporary landscape in the light of the brutal religious wars that lasted some thirty years. Like d'Aubigné, Beckett was a minority Protestant in a Catholic country (first Ireland, then France), and the "perishing oaks" of sixteenth century France are once again the victims, this time of the Nazi terror, the irony being that although a "religious" group, the Jews, is now being persecuted, in the current war, religion has been replaced by a relentlessly secular political ideology. Hence the sardonic sentence, "Under the blind sky close with your own hands the eyes soon sockets, then quick into carrion not to mislead the crows."

Allusion thus makes it possible for Beckett to write of war without ever mentioning the word itself or suggesting that he might have been its victim. The journey through the dark forest is, of course, also Dante's journey but the scene that follows grounds the reader in Beckett's recent past:

But here a strange thing, I was no sooner free of the wood at last, having crossed unminding the ditch that girdles it, than thoughts came to me of cruelty, the kind that smiles. A lush pasture lay before me . . . drenched in evening dew or recent rain. Beyond this meadow to my certain knowledge a path, then a field and finally

the ramparts, closing the prospect, Cyclopean and crenellated, standing out faintly against a sky scarcely less somber, they did not seem in ruins, viewed from mind, but were, to my certain knowledge.

Is this dreamscape the Vaucluse or the Irish countryside? The ambiguity is surely intentional: a little later, inside what seems to be his home town ("I knew it well and loathed it"), Sam enters a cathedral where he "remark[s] the Saxon Stützenwechsel." The architectural term refers to alternating round and rectangular columns that characterize Romanesque churches — churches common in Provence near Roussillon but hardly in Ireland. The Shepherd's Gate, moreover, brings to mind Christ's entry into Jerusalem; indeed, the narrator immediately spots "the first bats like flying crucifixions."

The town itself has a fairy-tale quality: its streets and houses are brightly lit but entirely deserted. Yet the newly arrived traveler feels "the houses packed with people, lurking behind the curtains." And now a series of strange encounters occurs, the first with a "young boy holding a goat by the horn . . . barefoot and in rags." When Sam tries to address the boy, no words emerge from his mouth. "All I heard was a kind of rattle, unintelligible even to me who knew what was intended. But it was nothing, mere speechlessness due to long silence." It is as if all human contact has been lost, and yet, when the boy unaccountably offers him a sweet, he rallies long enough to mouth the phrase, "Where are you off to, my little man, with your nanny?"-- a phrase he repeats only to cover his face "for shame." "If I could have blushed I would have, but there was not enough blood left in my extremities."

The return to "civilization" after an unspecified period of living underground is fraught with terror. Even inside the cathedral, he fears that "They were hiding perhaps, under the choir-stalls, and dodging behind the pillars, like woodpeckers." In a scene that may have inspired Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, he ascends the spiral staircase to the top of the parapet, only to face a worse fear:

Flattening myself against the wall I started round, clockwise. But I had hardly gone a few steps when I met a man revolving in the other direction, with the utmost circumspection. How I'd love to push him or him to push me, over the edge. He gazed at me wild-eyed for a moment and then, not daring to pass me on the parapet side and surmising correctly that I would not relinquish the wall just to oblige him, abruptly turned his back on me, his head father, for his back remained glued to the wall, and went back the way he had come so that soon there was nothing left of him but a left hand.

It is a terrifying anxiety dream, as are the subsequent images of the cyclist, "pedaling slowly in the middle of the street, reading a newspaper which he held with both hands spread open before his eyes," or the "young woman . . . disheveled and her dress in disarray [who] darted across the street like a rabbit," he begins to fear his own shadow, which "flew before me, dwindled, slid under my feet, trailed behind me the way shadows will." The effort to *calm* himself—the word "calm" is the leitmotif of the story—repeatedly fails.

Like "The Expelled," "The Calmative" culminates in a mysterious meeting, this time on a bench, where a stranger addresses him with the words, "Where did you spring from?" announcing, like Didi and Gogo in *Godot*, that he is "not from these parts," and hence would like to hear the story of Sam's life: "No details . . . the main drift, the main drift," It is a request that totally terrifies the auditor: perhaps Sam understands it as code of some sort, the demand for secret information. We never know. When the narrator remains silent, the stranger offers to tell him his own life story instead—a story "positively fairy-like in places" about his relations with a woman named Pauline. The story prompts further questions from the stranger: first, "How old are you?" (Sam doesn't know) and then whether his penis is still capable of an erection? But the distracting bawdy banter cannot distract Sam from the image of the "big black bag" the stranger holds on his knees, "like a midwife's I imagine. It was full of glittering phials. I asked him if they were all alike. Oho no, he said, for every taste" and tries to sell Sam one.

Such potential exchanges must have been quite common on the road to and from Roussillon. When Sam declares he has no money, the man with the black bag asks for his hat. This too is refused; the third request is for a kiss on the forehead. Sam is hardly in a position to say no: "I pursed up my lips as mother had taught me and brought them down where he had said." This curious sign seems to be sufficient and the stranger goes off "with radiant smile. His teeth shone." But as in a dream, his exit also marks the end of the mysterious phials: Sam now finds himself in front of a horse-butcher's: "Through the chink I could make out the dim carcasses of the gutted horses hanging from the hooks downwards. I hugged the walls, famished for shadow." Escaping yet another image of death and putrefaction, he escapes to the "atrocious brightness of the boulevards," the "great chill clang" of city clocks" now "falling on me from the air." And this time even the sky provides no relief: the Bears are covered and "the light I stepped in put out the stars, assuming they were there, which I doubted, remembering the clouds."

What Joyce's Stephen Dedalus called "Signatures of all things I am here to read" are, in "The Calmative," at once quite literal and yet curiously opaque. We can never be sure what "information" a particular encounter yields, but the tonality remains constant: whether Sam is confronting the man on the parapet or the boy with the goat, the garishly lit streets or the shop window bearing the carcasses of gutted horses, he faces repeated obstacles to his *going on*. Yet—and this is the trajectory of all three stories—one goes on.

"The End" is the most fanciful of the three stories and also the darkest. It begins with the sentence "They clothed me and gave me money. I knew what the money was for, it was to get me started." Again, the motive of the tale is expulsion and beginning again, but this time the site of ejection seems to be a hospital, asylum, or prison, where Sam has been sequestered

for so long that, contemplating the wooden stool on which he has been sitting day after day, "I felt [its] wooden life invade me, till I myself became a piece of wood." So intent are "they" on getting rid of him that "they dismantled the bed and took away the pieces."

As in the other stories, expulsion is followed by total disorientation:

In the street I was lost. I had not set foot in this part of the city for a long time and it seemed greatly changed. Whole buildings had disappeared. . . There were streets where I remembered none, some I did remember had vanished and others had completely changed their names. The general impression was the same as before.

It is true I did not know the city very well. Perhaps it was quite a different one.

This description recalls Beckett's reaction to bombed-out London, where he spent a few days in '45 en route to Dublin. But it could also be Paris in ruins or indeed the Saint-Lô where he was sent to build the Red Cross hospital. Whatever the precise site, it is a city where, once again, Sam suffers from being *looked at*, this time by city horses. The narrator cites this reaction three times and concludes, "I longed to be under cover again, in an empty place, close and warm, with artificial light."

There follows, as in "The Expelled," the attempt to find lodgings, an attempt usually rebuffed, although "I never made the mistake of wearing medals." For a while, Sam occupies a basement room but the landlady cheats him and he is again expelled, forced now to sleep on a "heap of dung" in the fields outside the city. When he returns, the stench is overwhelming and "They made me get off three buses." But the survival instinct is strong: Sam dries his clothes with a "brush, I think a kind of currycomb that I found in a stable. Stables have always been my salvation. Then I went to the house and begged a glass of milk and a slice of bread and butter. They gave me everything except the butter" but won't let him stay in the stable, so the journey goes on.

We know from biographical accounts that Beckett didn't have to invent any of this. And even the following surreal encounter has a basis in everyday

reality under the Occupation: "One day I caught sight of my son. He was striding along with a briefcase under his arm. He took off his hat and bowed and I saw he was as bald as a coot. I was almost certain it was he." In wartime France, fathers and sons or best friends turned against one another and pretended to be strangers for fear of being caught by the Gestapo. So Sam's son might very well have looked the other way.

The next hiding place is a cave that belongs to "a man I had known in former times"—a friendly man who wants to help the narrator but the proximity of the ocean becomes oppressive. So the new friend offers him his cabin in the mountains: "he had not seen it since the day he fled from it, but . . . he believed it was still there." Here is Beckett's description of this new dwelling place:

What he called his cabin in the mountains was a sort of wooden shed. The door had been removed, for firewood, or for some other purpose. The glass had disappeared from the windows. The roof had fallen in at several places. The interior was divided, by the remains of a partition, into two equal parts. If there had been any furniture it was gone. The vilest acts had been committed on the ground and against the walls. The floor was strewn with excrements, both human and animal, with condoms and vomit. In a cowpad a heart had been traced, pierced by an arrow. And yet there was nothing to attract tourists.

Here is what Beckett called, with reference to Saint-Lô, "the capital of ruins." the newly devastated countryside that is seen with a shock of recognition. Sam is grateful for the "roof over my head," and now there follows a subtle analysis of how survival works:

One day I couldn't get up. The cow saved me. Goaded by the icy mist she came in search of shelter. It was probably not the first time. She can't have seen me. I tried to suck her, without much success. Her udder was covered with dung. I took off my hat and, summoning all my energy, began to milk her into it. The milk fell to the ground and was lost, but I said to myself, No matter, it's free. She dragged me across the floor, stopping from time to time only to kick me. I didn't know our cows too could be so inhuman. She must have recently been milked. Clutching the dug with one hand I kept my hat under it with the other, but in the end she prevailed.



For she dragged me across the threshold and out into the giant streaming ferns, where I was forced to let go.

*I didn't know our cows too could be so inhuman.* This updated version of Eliot's, "I had not thought death had undone so many," is a sobering reminder of what war does to a population and yet how tenacious the hold on life is. Outside the shed, Sam drinks the milk that has spilled on the ground and realizes the cow has given him a sign: one takes what one can get. And, as the story comes to its conclusion, we see Sam begging in the streets and finally finding a domicile in an empty shed on a deserted estate. The shed contains a boat, upside-down, and the narrator rights it and makes his bed in it. In these confined quarters, his main aim in life is to find positions in which to piss and shit. "To contrive a little kingdom, in the midst of the universal muck, then shit on it, ah that was me all over." Finally he releases the boat's chain and lets it drift out to sea. Behind him the town is burning, perhaps the gorse on fire. Raising up the floor-boards, Sam watches the water rise slowly and "swallows [his] calmative." And we read:

The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on.

It is the author, not his subject, who has that strength. Beckett's poetic war fictions fuse a curious literalism with the Mallarmean principle that to name is to destroy. To use words like *war*, *Vichy*, *Resistance*, *Auschwitz*, *atom bomb* would inevitably be to short-circuit the complexity of the experiences in question. Not for a moment does Beckett engage in the usual clichés about the horrors of war; not for a moment, does he assume moral superiority or the knowingness ("I" or "we" versus "them") that makes so much war writing problematic. To analyze how such a war could ever have occurred is not, in any case, the poet's purpose. Just as in actual life Beckett went to work for the Resistance on ethical instinct rather than

dogma, so in his fictions, he takes his responsibility to be that of *showing* rather than the making of ideological points. Hence the extreme ellipsis, indirection, and indeterminacy of the tales—an indeterminacy that allows the reader a good deal of space.

But in the immediate aftermath of war in Europe, Beckett's narrative was interpreted as putting forward such "universal" themes as man's alienation in a hostile universe, the trauma of birth and inevitability of death, or the waiting for something that never happens. Not surprisingly, when such thematic criticism of Beckett gave way, in the sixties, to the post-structuralist readings performed by Lacan and Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, as well as their disciples, the issues remained closely related to what Nadeau had called "the meaninglessness of our condition"—the loss of identity, the aporias of consciousness, the failure of agency, the gulf between signifier and signified, the inability of language to convey particular values, and so on. History and biography, especially the latter, were scorned by the purveyors of the archeology of knowledge. "To tell the truth," wrote Bataille in 1951, "we hardly know anything about the intentions of Molloy's creator, and on the whole, what we know of him amounts to nothing. Born in 1906, Irish, he was a friend of Joyce, and has ever remained his disciple to some extent. . . . Before the war he wrote a novel in English, but at the same time published his own French translation, and, being bilingual, he seems to have a decided preference for French."

I find this passage remarkable for what it does not say. The "decided preference" for French, for starters, did not come out of nowhere. But in the Paris of '51 it was perhaps too painful to dredge up such issues as primary language or national affiliation, and when, in the sixties, Marxism became dominant in France, Beckett's work could be read, as it was by Adorno, as a brilliant exposé of the capitalist ethos of modern mechanized society. Given this climate, even the New Historicism that became

dominant in Anglo-American theory of the 1980s, had an odd way of bypassing Beckett.

#### 4. **Winding Into Other Shadows**

In the meantime, however, Beckett's brilliant indirection, his ways of *not-saying* and yet *saying* that I have detailed here, became a model for subsequent writers, if not quite for the critics. From the menace in Pinter's *Birthday Party* to the sinister subtext of Georges Perec's *W*, to the particular tensions of Ashbery's *Three Poems* and Susan Howe's *Defenestration of Prague*, the world at war is never far away. Hence it would be accurate to say that the shift of tonality often labeled Postmodernism came, not as is usually declared, in the later sixties, but two decades earlier. From Beckett's vantage point, Modernism, even as understood by Eliot and Pound, seems almost buoyant.

Consider, in this regard, the image of the narrator, curled up in his little boat, at the conclusion of "The End":

The rats had difficulty in getting at me, because of the bulge of the hull. And yet they longed to. Just think of it, living flesh, for in spite of everything I was still living flesh. I had lived too long among rats, in my chance dwellings, to share the dread they inspire in the vulgar. I even had a soft spot in my heart for them. They came with such confidence towards me, it seemed without the least repugnance. They made their toilet with catlike gestures. Toads at evening, motionless for hours, lap flies from the air. They like to squat where cover ends and open air begins, they favour thresholds. But I had to contend now with water rats, exceptionally lean and ferocious. So made a kind of lid with stray boards. It's incredible the number of boards I've come across in my lifetime, I never needed a board but there it was.

Many features of Beckett's prose are resolutely modern: the Flaubertian *mot juste*, the Poundian "constatation of fact," the concision and ellipsis of the description, the irony of the last sentence with its bizarre self-

congratulation as to the availability of boards, and the vaudeville element in the absurdist behavior of Gogo and Didi and their heirs. What is different here, however, is the curious disjunction between description and affect that we meet in *Godot*, as in the rhythmic rendition of

toads at evening,  
                    motionless for hours  
lap flies from the air

followed by the “reasonable” explanation that “they like to squat where cover ends and open air begins, they favour thresholds.”

So abrupt a shift of tonal registers is one we don’t find in Joyce or Kafka or even in Louis Zukofsky or Mina Loy. But we do find it in our own turn-of-the century poets—a writing animated by the curious sense that nothing *follows* but that paradoxically, one must pay the closest attention to that which *does* follow, to the minutest differentials of articulation. Let me conclude with a look at the minimalist poem “Saint-Lô” (1946), with which I began:

Vire will wind in other shadows  
unborn through the bright ways tremble  
and the old mind ghost-forsaken  
sink into its havoc.

The Vire is the river that flows through the town of Saint-Lô. Beckett, as Lawrence Harvey was the first to note, is also drawing on the name’s etymology: the French *virer* (to turn) comes from the Latin *vibrare*, which means “not only to vibrate or quiver but also to gleam or scintillate.” In the poem, this gives us the words “wind,” “bright,” and “tremble.” Further: line 1 has elaborate phonemic chiming, *v* modulating into the alliterating *w*, and the first four monosyllables alternating long and short *i*’s: “*Vire will wind in.*” “Wind,” moreover, rhymes with “mind” in line 3, and the poem’s final word

"havoc" picks up the initial V of "Vire," thus producing what looks like a circular sound structure.

But the irony is that the ostensible closure is wholly illusory. The "other shadows" through which the "Vire will wind" are never specified. The phrase "wind in other shadows" makes one want to read "wind" as a noun: in this case it recalls Yeats's *Wind Among the Reeds*. Line 2 begins with an ambiguous modifier: does "unborn" go with "Vire" or with those "shadows"? The line, moreover, is ungrammatical: one wants to read "through" as "though" so as to make some sense, but, as it stands, either "through" has no object or "tremble" no subject. In line 3, the "old mind ghost-forsaken," a phrase that, together with "shadows" and "bright ways tremble," again recalls the early Yeats, this time of *The Shadowy Waters*, is an anomaly, for surely the very memory here is the ghost that does haunt the poet. The pathetic fallacy, in any case, is inverted: the Vire may well wind in other shadows, but the "old mind" can only "sink into its havoc." That last word makes little sense, given that the mind is ghost-forsaken, until we realize that it is a kind of transferred epithet: it is the town of the title, Saint-Lô, the "Capital of the Ruins," that has been subjected to "havoc." What begins as a would-be lullaby, initiated by a lilting trochaic tetrameter line with a feminine ending, cannot contain its subtext. The consolation of continuity found in the river's flow gives way to the gridlock of harsh *k* sounds in "sink into its havoc."

Not what wartime France *was* but how it *felt*: this is the motive of *Godot* and the *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. These fictions provide no answers; they merely give us what Wittgenstein would have called a more perspicacious *view* of our situation. In this sense, to borrow a famous axiom from the *Tractatus*, the only "position" Beckett's war writings take is that ethics and aesthetics are one.

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**Figure 1. The Ruins of St. Lô after the bombing, June 1944.**  
(Courtesy Enoch Brater, *Why Beckett* (Thames and Hudson, 1989),  
p. 45.