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Endgame: Beginning to End

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The silence at times is such that the earth seems to be uninhabited. That is what comes of the taste for generalization. You have only to hear nothing for a few days, in your hole, nothing but the sound of things, and you begin to fancy yourself the last of human kind. (Beckett, Malone Dies, 81)

Why is the opening of Fin de Partie different from the opening of Endgame? In the French version, the curtain rises to reveal two covered trash bins, two shaded windows, one shrouded armchair, an inverted painting, and a solitary red-faced figure, Clov, “immobile à côté du fauteuil” (motionless by the armchair, my translation, 13). In the English — translated by Beckett himself and mounted just eight months after the French premier — there is a single, seemingly trivial difference: the solitary red-faced figure, Clov, stands “motionless by the door” (1). It is a rather peculiar alteration, this displacement of Clov from the fauteuil to the door. Hardly enough to suggest a substantial revision on Beckett’s part. But then why make such a focused revision at all? There’s no dismissing it as mere authorial whimsy, especially given Beckett’s reputation for directorial fastidiousness — after all, this is the same Beckett who rallied his bewildered actors with the phrase “there are no accidents in Endgame” (McMillan 212).

That only brings us back to the initial dilemma: such a tiny adjustment is surely too small to warrant attention, and yet it wasn’t too small to warrant Beckett’s attention. This sort of thing always poses problems for interpretation (does it matter that Oscar Wilde held up the proofs of Dorian Gray to change a minor character’s name from Ashton to Hubbard? [Lawler, 93n]). But it is a particularly pointed problem for Beckett, if only because his is the fictional universe that seems least susceptible to meaningful change. Why should we pay attention to where Clov is standing if the world he inhabits is hopelessly desiccated? What difference could it make whether his descent into inexorable despair begins beside the chair or next to the door? If Fin de Partie unfolds in a universe of irremediable entropy — and Hamm certainly thinks it does — then Clov’s re-placement

can mean only the difference between decaying here and decaying there, which is to say not much of a difference. But then why did Beckett so particularly attend to the question of Clov’s initial placement? Quite simply, because it matters in the end: because ultimately Clov’s placement tells us something crucial about the trajectory of the play, about the limits of the hermeneutic of fatalism, and about the possibilities of Clov’s end. What the minute alteration of the beginning reveals is the hesitant ambiguity of the end. After all, as Hamm says, “La fin est dans le commencement [the end is in the beginning]” (91, 69).

The very first line of the play is already an ending: “Fini, c’est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir [Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished]” (15, 1). We have just begun and already it is over, or perhaps only nearly over — Hamm seems the only one who can tell. ‘It is finished, it will finish, it will perhaps finish’: three quite different ways to imagine the end. And perhaps more than three, thanks to Beckett’s loose translation (which allows “ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir” to become “nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.”) Just how the end develops — and how it relates to the beginning — remains an open question, indeed the obsessive question(ion) of the play.

Though the question of ending obsesses Beckett’s characters, it has not particularly interested Beckett’s critics. Even the literal ending of Fin de Partie/Endgame — the possibility of Clov’s departure — has received only occasional attention, which as often as not has meant occasional indifference. Following the French premier in 1957, only a paltry few reviewers even acknowledged Clov’s prospective departure, and those who did treated it as either immaterial or predetermined: “A la fin, Clov part. Mais part-il vraiment? Il sait qu’il n’ira pas loin [At the end, Clov leaves. But does he really leave? He knows that he won’t get far]” (Arts-Spectacles); “Clov annonce son proche départ, encore qu’il le sache impossible [Clov announces his imminent departure, though he knows it to be impossible]” (Figaro Littéraire). No one familiar with Beckett criticism can be surprised by this insensitivity to the indeterminacy of Beckett’s ending.1 Like so many of Beckett’s most famous and most capable critics (Adorno being only the most prominent example), those early reviewers saw no indeterminacy in Beckett’s work, only overdetermination: “Comme dans la plus classique des tragédies, on sait que la fin viendra, on sait surtout ce qu’elle sera [As in classical tragedies, we know that the end will come, and above all we know what it will be]” (Arts-Spectacles); “Nous savons, dès les trois premières minutes, qu’il n’arrivera rien, qu’il ne peut rien arriver [We know, after the first three minutes, that nothing will happen, that nothing can happen]” (Nouvelles Littéraires); “Au bout de quelques minutes, nous savons de quoi il retourne et nous n’avons plus rien à apprendre [After just a few minutes, we know what it’s about and we have nothing more to learn]” (La Revue de Paris).2

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1. No less a Beckett scholar than Ruby Cohn said of Endgame: “It is a circle rather than a straight line that diagrams Endgame, whose end echoes its beginning” (184). True enough, we could say, assuming Endgame and Fin de Partie to be different plays — a possibility that might be worth entertaining, but probably not one that Cohn had in mind. If Clov begins in a different place in each version, and ends in the same place, then one of them must be more a spiral than a circle.

2. Reviewers of the 1958 English production shared their French counterparts’ indifference and general fatalism, although few could match the lugubriousness of the Village Voice: “Each of us must engender our own vision for ‘Endgame.’ Here, to some first tiny extent, is mine: Imagine a foetus, doomed to be stillborn, suspended in darkness in the amniotic fluid, progressing meaninglessly toward the birth that is death, its life-not-to-be leaking away through the fontanelle — the membranous gap at the top of the skull of every human embryo.”
If the reviewers are right, and *Fin de Partie/Endgame* presents a world drifting ineluctably towards dissolution, then the ending is largely immaterial, having long been determined. But perhaps it is not Clov’s inability to depart that generates this sense of fatalism; perhaps it’s the other way around. What if the assumption of fatalism — so tempting and so apparently unavoidable in Beckett — makes the genuine ambiguity of Clov’s departure simply unrecognizable? Perhaps, that is, a reexamination of the ending — as a strangely ambivalent moment in which Clov both leaves and doesn’t leave — will allow us to glimpse, within the play itself, an alternative to the prevailing hermeneutic of fatalism. Alternative may not even be the right word. It’s not hope we’re talking about, and certainly not escape — the despair is all too real and all too authentic. Rather, it’s something like indeterminacy. Even if we can’t finally decide whether Clov leaves or doesn’t leave, what might we learn about the play by thinking of Clov’s departure as both imminent and impossible, not an either/or but a both/and?

After all, the play gives us ample reason to distrust the critics’ thoroughgoing fatalism. Doubtless it seems “mortibus/corpsed” (46, 30), but perhaps we should give less credence to this *seems*. Hamm knows full well the abyss that separates seeming from being:

*I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter — and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (Pause.) He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (Pause.) He alone had been spared. (Pause.) Forgotten. (Pause.) It appears the case is . . . was not so . . . so unusual. (44)*

Not unusual at all. Hamm, too, projects a landscape of ashes onto a backdrop of loveliness — at least that’s what the ellipses suggest. Like his friend, Hamm fancies himself a kind of artist (think, for example, of his unfinished story), capturing nature with his palette of blacks and grays. What we know of the outside world, we know from Hamm: Clov may look out the window, but it’s Hamm who tells him what to see. And it’s Hamm who tells us “Hors d’ici, c’est la mort [Outside of here it’s death]” (23, 9), not just once but repeatedly and as the French stage directions add, “fièrement”

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3. Christopher Ricks’s book, *Beckett’s Dying Words*, reminds us that even abjection has its dignity, and that Beckett’s great triumph was to confront death with a wry humor that never settled for denial.

4. “In *Godot,*” Beckett wrote, “the audience wonders if Godot will ever come, in *Endgame* it wonders if Clov will ever leave” (McMillan 163). Our job is not to resolve this question but to rediscover this wonder.

5. The addition of “engraver” to the English translation makes the connection between these two artists more explicit, integrating it into the hammer and nail wordplay that gives Hamm his name.
(proudly, my translation): “Loin tu serais mort . . . Loin de moi c’est la mort. [Gone from me you’d be dead . . . Outside of here it’s death]” (93, 70). “Ah les gens, les gens,” he complains to the audience, “il faut tout leur expliquer [Ah the creatures, the creatures, everything has to be explained to them]” (61, 43). As often as not, Hamm’s explanations are simply indoctrinations which is why Clov, when asked if the old doctor is dead, replies: “c’est toi qui me demande ça? [You ask me that?]” (40, 25) — as if to say “you, the great thanatologist, ask me if the doctor is dead? You yourself taught me that there is nothing but death.”

None of this proves that the world isn’t really “corpsed” — it may be that the madman was deluded but that Hamm is genuinely trapped in a world of ashes. All it does is re-introduce a peut-être (as in the opening lines: “ça va peut-être finir”). Perhaps the decaying world of Fin de Partie/Endgame, like the desolate landscape of the madman, is a solipsistic projection, impressed — like an engraving — not only onto the minds of the characters but equally onto the audience.

Hamm’s endgame is a game first and an end second. If it looks like a ritual of ending, it is really just a deferral of the end he hesitates to meet: “Assez, il est temps que cela finisse, dans le refuge aussi. (Un temps.) Et cependant j’hésite, j’hésite à . . . à finir [Enough, it’s time it ended, in the shelter too. (Pause.) And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to . . . to end]” (17, 3). As Beckett noted in a rare moment of interpretive charity, “Hamm is the kind of man who likes things coming to an end but doesn’t want them to end just yet” (McMillan 177). The shelter, and indeed the play itself, provides an elaborate setting for this game of death — and only Hamm knows all the rules. He gets to play at death, to practice lying in his coffin. The only risk is that one of the other characters will simply stop playing.

_Clov (implorant): Cessons de jouer !_
_Hamm: — Jamais! (Un temps.) Mets-moi dans mon cercueil._
_Clov: — Il n’y a plus de cercueils._
_Hamm: — Alors que ça finisse! (102)_

[Clov (imploringly): Let’s stop playing!]
_Hamm: Never! (Pause.) Put me in my coffin._
_Clov: There are no more coffins._
_Hamm: Then let it end! (77)_{]}_

What Clov begins to recognize — slowly and without conviction — is that the only way out of Hamm’s game of death is death, or rather a retreat to that outside which Hamm calls death. For Clov, the end represents not only a space of termination but also a space of possibility. “La fin,” he says of the clock’s alarm, “est inouïe [The end is terrific],” to which Hamm replies, characteristically: “Je préfère le milieu [I prefer the middle]” (67, 48). Of course Hamm prefers the middle, from there the end seems inevitable yet suspended. And, in this suspended state, Hamm reigns as king. For Clov, a mere pawn in Hamm’s game, the escape from ennui to inouie passes through the suspended end.

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6. The authoritarian context of Hamm’s teaching is well captured by this translation of gens as creatures.
7. The alarm clock is central to this struggle over ending. It is the only object that gives voice to the genuine possibility of departure.
In the end, as Clov prepares to leave (or not to leave) — changing his clothes and moving towards the door — he delivers his most personal and poignant monologue, something like a final confession or an account of the life he has been ordered to lead:

*Clov (regard fixe, voix blanche): . . . On m’a dit, C’est là, arrête-toi, relève la tête et regarde cette splendeur. Cet ordre! On m’a dit, Allons, tu n’es pas une bête, pense à ces choses-là et tu verras comme tout devient clair. Et simple! On m’a dit, Tous ces blessés à mort, avec quelle science on les soigne.* (108)

[Clov (fixed gaze, tonelessly, towards auditorium): . . . They said to me, Here’s the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you’re not a brute beast, think upon these things and you’ll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all those dying of their wounds. (80)]

Clov’s meaning here turns on the ambiguity of “ordre/order.” What he recognizes is the intimate relation between social order and the giving of orders, or between the perception of order and the ordering of perception. “*Cet ordre/That order*” refers both to the “*splendeur/beauty*” Clov perceives and the imperatives which compel him to perceive: “*relève la tête et regarde* [raise your head and look].” To put it simply, how we see the world depends on what we have been told to recognize. Such, we could say, is the regime of Hamm, impressing its corpsed vision onto others, ordering forgiveness (“*Pardon . . . J’ai dit pardon* [Forgive me . . . I said forgive me]” (27, 12)), enjoining perceptual conformity (“*Tu as la lunette? . . . Va la chercher* [Have you the glass? . . . Go and get it]” (99, 75)), and confusing compassion with compulsion (“*Clov: Pourquoi je t’obéis toujours. Peux-tu m’expliquer ça? Hamm: Non . . . C’est peut-être de la pitié* [Clov: Why I always obey you. Can you explain that to me? Hamm: No . . . Perhaps it’s compassion.]” (99–100, 76)). For Clov, such order(s) seem at times inviolable, unassailable; escape just another move in Hamm’s unending game of ending. Then something happens:

*Puis un jour, soudain, ça finit, ça change, je ne comprends pas, ça meurt, ou c’est moi, je ne comprends pas, ça non plus. Je le demands aux mots qui restent — sommeil, réveil, soir, matin. Ils ne savent rien dire (Un temps.) J’ouvre la porte du cabanon et m’en vais . . . Je me dis que la terre s’est éteinte, quoique je ne l’aie jamais vue allumée.* (108–9)

[Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don’t understand, it dies, or it’s me, I don’t understand, that either. I ask the words that remain — sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say. (Pause.) I open the door of the cell and go . . . I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. (81)]

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8. More than that, though, the relation between order and orders, between perception and compulsion, conceals its own violence, anesthetizing or aestheticizing the very wounds it produces with the dispassionate, mechanical ministrations of “science/skilled attention.”
Then one day, the inexplicable enters, the indeterminate arrives. We have no language for it; the words that remain say nothing, or more literally, can say nothing. But perhaps they had been saying too much. The landscape we called extinguished may not be extinguished at all; it may be brimming with a life we could not name, or were ordered not to name. Clov’s recurring “je ne comprends pas [I don’t understand]” is itself a kind of resistance. Not knowing becomes a form of liberation, an escape from the desiccated language and overdetermined decay of Hamm’s endgame.

Both an end and a change (“ça finit, ça change [it ends, it changes]”), both a death and a rebirth (“ça meurt, ou c’est moi [it dies or it’s me]”), Clov’s final monologue defines a new kind of ending, an ending that is indeterminate — or rather zweideutig — comprising two distinct possibilities. For Clov, ending is just another name for the one day, the moment of change and death. And the end of Fin de Partie/Endgame may also be such a moment. Perhaps, in the final scene, Clov escapes the fatalism that so enthralls both Hamm and Beckett’s reviewers, opening a door to death that is also a door to possibility. Perhaps Beckett’s play ends not with a whimper but with a bang, a rupture that reveals the utterly solipsistic origin of its fatalism and gestures towards an alternative landscape in which “étendue/extinguished” is just a word we have forgotten how to use.

Then again, perhaps not. As Clov says in his subsequent, and penultimate, line: “C’est ce que nous appelons gagner la sortie. [That’s what we call making an exit]” (109, 81). Whatever exit the play offers is only theatrical, which is to say no exit at all: an exit that is always also a return. Clov doesn’t leave. The alternate end he envisions remains possible, but unperformed. The curtain falls with Hamm seated, covered by his “mouchoir/handkerchief,” and Clov “près de la porte, impasabile . . . immobile [He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless]” (110, 82). It is the same arrangement on which the curtain rose, or at least it’s perhaps the same arrangement. That depends on whether the play is performed in French or English. Either there has been some movement — Clov escaping from the fauteuil to the door — or there is only repetition. But which? Does the end reveal a difference or does it reduce all resistance to repetition?

One could plausibly argue, given that the English was written after the French, that this latter text is the authoritative one. If so, then the end merely repeats its beginning, and there can be no possibility of escape. But those were not the only two versions of Endgame that Beckett oversaw. At the 1967 opening of the German version Endspiel — a production directed by Beckett himself — we once again find Clov in a new position, closer to the chair than the door but not immediately “à côté du fauteuil” (Beckett, Production Notebooks). Then there is the 1980 production of Endgame in London, again directed by Beckett. This time Clov finds himself at a point Beckett labeled A, “halfway from door to H[amm]” (Beckett, Production Notebooks 195). Not at the door, and not beside the chair, but midway between the two.

If nothing else, it is clear from this further itinerancy that Clov’s re-placement is no idle affair; indeed, it must matter intently. But why this particular movement from the chair (Fin de Partie 1957) to the door (Endgame 1958), back towards the chair (EndSpiel 1967) and finally to the mid-point A (Endgame 1980)? Not because Beckett was desperately searching for the right place to put him. Rather because there is no right place to put him, because he needs to start in (at least) two different places. To see Clov standing at point A, for example, is to see both the French opening and the English opening; it’s an attempt, however strained, to envision Clov in both places at once.

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9. Such a reading has the virtue of being consistent with one of Beckett’s most famous directorial pronouncements: “The play is full of echoes. They all answer each other” (Gontarski xxi).
The constellation of *Endgame* openings has something of a cumulative effect, positioning Clov not just here or there but here and there (and perhaps also there). In the end, when the curtain rises on *Fin de Partie/Endgame*, Clov stands both beside the chair and beside the door and at several places in between, which suggests that the *fin/end* of *Fin de Partie* is both an exit and a return, both the “*fin de partie*” and the “*fin d’une partie*”. As Beckett explained to the actors of *Endspiel*: “Between the beginning and the end lies a small distinction which is that between ‘beginning’ and ‘end’.” (McMillan 224–5). The end is the beginning and also it is not. Clov both leaves and does not leave; he both is and is not in the same place that he began. And there’s no way to extricate ourselves from this both which is also a *peut-être*.

We have seen this *peut-être* before, in all those strange, incomplete eruptions of life that Hamm can never fully extinguish: in the seeds that have not yet sprouted; in the flea that is both lying and laying [both *coite* and *coïte*]; in the rat that is only half exterminated; in the boy that is both fictive and messianic; 10 in short, in all those provisional regenerations that threaten the trajectory of decay with what Hamm calls “*des complications* [an underplot]” (103, 78). The seeds, the flea, the rat, the boy, none of these forestall the apparent dissolution of life. Simply put, they are not alive; rather they are both half-alive and half-exterminated, both subject to and distinct from the otherwise ubiquitous organic decay. They evince the same logic of both/ *peut-être*, the same structure of indeterminacy that characterizes the end of *Fin de Partie/Endgame*. In all cases, this indeterminacy reveals a form of life that, if not free from Hamm’s “order” — in the sense that it remains half-extinguished — is nonetheless utterly other to that order. It is not life but the possibility of life that continually interrupts Hamm’s game. And it’s not escape but the possibility of escape that fractures the overdetermined end of Beckett’s play. “Not hope,” Beckett explained to an actor playing Hamm, “but the possibility of another situation than the present one” (McMillan 221).

What complicates our interpretation of the end also complicates our interpretation of the play: determining whether there is hope when it’s clear that there is and there isn’t. The answer is always both yes and no, and the two never cancel each other out. The flea lays eggs and lies down, the rat is half extinguished and half living, the boy is alive and fictive, and Clov both leaves and does not leave. This indeterminacy, or double-determination, is the primary, if universally unacknowledged, alternative to the logic of overdetermination (Hamm’s logic) that has so pervasively structured the critical reception of Beckett’s play (which is really just the critical reception of Hamm’s play). There is another possibility, not only for Clov but for every Beckett reader, provided we accept that it is only a possibility and not really a hope. This possibility can not free us from Beckett’s decaying universe, but neither can it be dismissed as an inconsequential stillbirth. What happens at the conclusion of *Fin de Partie/Endgame* remains uncertain, but it is nonetheless liberatory — for us as much as for Clov. In the end, we fear two things: that Clov will never leave and that Clov will leave (and find nothing). Between those alternatives there is no room for hope, but there is room enough to wonder, and room enough for critics to recognize that Hamm’s final “Toi — je te garde [You . . . remain]” (112, 84) is as plaintive as it is commanding.

10. The French text is more explicit about the boy’s status, as in “*les yeux de Moïse mourant*” (104). But his uncertain or indeterminate facticity is crucial to both versions (see Stanley Cavell’s “Ending the Waiting Game” in his book *Must We Mean What We Say*). Of the many differences between the French and English versions, the depiction of the boy has received a disproportionate amount of critical attention. Indeed, as comparatists like Brian Fitch have noted, the complexities of Beckett’s bilingualism remain grossly underappreciated. Though tentative steps have been made towards rectifying that problem more generally (see, for example, Fitch’s own *Beckett and Babel* or the collection of essays in *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*), conspicuously little has been done in the way of a comparative analysis of *Endgame*. 
**Works Cited**


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