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THE APOCALYPSE OF BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

Since *Endgame* is unmistakably a play about an end of a world, there are many recollections of the Book of Revelations.¹

The confrontation with Christian writing would perhaps be the final test of the power of Beckett's sensibility.²

Although finished in 1956 and published and presented in America in 1958, to this very day Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* mystifies its audiences and critics. Without underestimating the difficulties posed by the play, it is worth insisting that *Endgame* is nonetheless comprehensible.

What is there to comprehend? For the moment, a sufficient response can be begun with the recognition and investigation of the religious aspect of the play.

The characteristic allusiveness of Beckett, particularly his frequent allusions to the Bible, has been noticed by others. Nothing less, no doubt, should be expected of a writer so closely attached to James Joyce. Yet, to my knowledge, little has been done to follow out systematically the themes begun in Beckett's biblical allusions. Because of this lapse, much has remained hidden of the true center of his work and much has remained unappreciated of the deep theological implications of his sensibility. *Waiting for Godot* appeals explicitly to man's condition in relation to God, and even refers to specific instances of Christian iconology (e.g. the two thieves crucified with Jesus)³. *Endgame*, however, offers the most sustained portrayal of Beckett's religious sensibility. I begin my investigation of its religious themes by flatly stating two previously unnoticed facts about the play which are crucial to its events and its story.

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First, Clov is Christ and Hamm is man. Second, the end of the game that Beckett announces in the play is the end of Christianity.

I. *ENDGAME'S* EVENTS AND STORY

HAMM (*anguished*). What's happening, what's happening?

CLOV. Something is taking its course.

(p. 13)^{3a}

Martin Esslin has said, "*Endgame* certainly was not planned as a sustained allegory."⁴ His is a common but fundamentally mistaken assumption. Readers are misled, I think, by the surface disorder and apparent confusion of the play to infer its basic incoherence. Yet there is a story, or allegory, to *Endgame*, one that sustains the play's movement from beginning to end. It is, however, composed of more or less discrete "events" (e.g. the opening enactment, Hamm's chronicle, the coming of the small boy, Clov's concluding soliloquy). The whole cloth of the story must be woven in tandem by combining the individual threads of those events with the contextual fabric used as a framework and brought into focus by Beckett's allusions.

(1) *Opening Events: Introducing Christ and Man.* The play opens with a "brief tableau." This tableau yields to a silent enactment that identifies its actor and sets the stage for the entire drama: it depicts the best-known drama in the Western world, the crucifixion of Christ. Clov (Christ) takes up his step-ladder (his crucifix), mounts it (re-enacting Golgotha's drama), and draws back the curtains on both sides (acknowledging the two thieves crucified). But this is a re-enactment of the original drama, not the crucifixion itself. This is today, not yesterday.⁵ Behind the curtains stand only open windows, with nothing ("Zero," we find out) as the empty view—the thieves are gone. Yet just as long ago Christ awoke us (through His birth, death and resurrection) to the age of Christianity and that age's forms of life, Clov this day awakens this world. Another day dawns on the age of Christ.

It is to be its last. "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." (p.1) Clov's (and the play's) first words immediately identify him as Christ. Simultaneously, they announce the coming of the end of the age as they recall the end of Christ's human existence—His crucifixion, when He cried out, "It is finished."⁶ (John 19:30) The play's opening line parallels "yesterday's" event in that now the end of Christ's divine existence is being announced. The age of Christianity is finished.

CLOV. Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.

(*Pause.*)

I can't be punished any more.

(p. 1)

Grain upon grain, the grains of time have mounted since Bethlehem, since Golgotha. Suddenly, Christ's tenure on earth is nearing its end.

What might one expect in such a situation? We might expect, for one thing, that Christ's torments would end, for we know that His torments on earth have been never-ending. HAMM. "Did you ever have an instant of happiness?" CLOV. "Not to my knowledge." (p. 62) Part of the blame for Christ's having suffered is man's, and Hamm acknowledges as much when he admits to Clov, "I've made you suffer too much." (p. 6) But we share that blame with God, for God also helped perpetrate and perpetuate Christ's torments (first by requiring Christ's crucifixion and then by forsaking Him). CLOV. "It's not that." HAMM (*shocked*). "I haven't made you suffer too much?" CLOV. "Yes!" (p. 7) Beckett's point is to sweep aside our *mea culpas* and our love of attempted expiation through guilt-mongering. Man hasn't made Christ suffer *too* much; Christ has suffered just enough, just as much as God knew Christ would (have to) suffer in order to redeem man.

In his opening soliloquy Clov claims that his torments are about to end, that now he can't be punished any more. Why can't he? One reason is that he cannot be punished any more (more severely) than he already has been. There's a limit, you know. The other reason for Clov's punishment coming to an end is that he cannot be punished any more (any longer) because he will not be *here* any more. Christ's torments (his punishment) end when His tenure on earth ends; He cannot be punished any more because He will not be *here* any more and earth is where He is punished. Beckett is making a logical argument.

Enter Hamm. Hamm = *homme* = man. (Cavell has mentioned that "Ha-am" means "the people" in Hebrew.) Man has his own problems in the age of Christ.

HAMM. Can there be misery—

(*he yawns*)

—loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now?

(*Pause.*)

My father?

(*Pause.*)

My mother?

(*Pause.*)

My . . . dog?

(*Pause.*)

Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt.

(*Pause.*)

No, all is a—

(*he yawns*)

—bsolute,

(*proudly*)

the bigger a man is the fuller he is.

(*Pause. Gloomily.*)

And the emptier.

(pp.2-3)

Today, at the end of Christianity, whose misery is loftier than man's? Hamm wonders whether his predecessors—who in this context would be Adam (man's "father") and Eve (man's "mother")—suffered loftier misery. Or was Christ's (Clov the "dog"⁷) suffering loftier? Hamm doesn't directly answer his question but he does express his willingness to believe that perhaps all of his predecessors suffered loftier misery; that would really make no difference. "No, all is a—bsolute!" His predecessors were not men in the age of Christ; therefore, they are "creatures" different from man, with a capacity for suffering different than man's in this day and age. How can their suffering equal man's? It cannot. Beckett's point again is a logical one. The suffering of those beings cannot equal man's because it cannot be equated with man's. Theirs are different categories of suffering; they are literally worlds apart. They may have suffered as "such creatures" suffer, but Hamm is a man, a man at the end of the Christian age, and in that context (call it a world or an era or an age) "the bigger a man is the fuller he is And the emptier."

(2) *The Eventual Story*. Beckett introduces us to a drama already under way; the audience joins the play (or game) near its end, already in the endgame. If we are to understand the events of this play we must have its story whole.

The most obvious context (or setting) in which to locate the drama is the shelter, which shelters all of the play's action and is acknowledged by all to be Hamm's home. Since Hamm is man and the shelter is his home, it follows that the drama is located on earth (man's home). The shelter is earth. (Heaven and hell—"the . . . other hell," [p. 26] not the hell-on-earth we've created—are outside, they are out of bounds for the purposes of this play.) This is our ordinary, everyday context.

Because *Endgame's* setting is the natural context within which our ordinary lives take place, it would be natural if the conditions shown and the relations sketched in the play are those conditions and relations which exist in our ordinary lives. Therefore, this play is not surrealistic but all too realistic.

The play's story is the most extraordinary event to happen to us in our ordinary lives. The play centers on Christ's imminent departure from earth after a 2000-year visit.

CLOV. I come . . . and go.

HAMM. In my house.

(p. 36)

HAMM. My house a home for you.

CLOV. Yes.

(He looks about him.)

This was that for me.

(p. 38)

How did man's house come to be Christ's home? The story we have always told ourselves to explain Christ's visit to our planet is the story of Christmas, and in the middle of the play (pp. 50-4) Hamm relates his own version of that extraordinary event.⁸

Hamm's story begins with the admission that it indeed seemed to be an extraordinary day.

HAMM. It was an extra-ordinarily bitter day, I remember, zero by the thermometer. But considering it was Christmas Eve there was nothing . . . extra-ordinary about that. (p. 51)

For an ordinary day it would have been extraordinary, but it was Christmas Eve—no ordinary day—and so the day's event was what one could expect on such a day: the coming of Christ. On the eve of Christmas, as Hamm's chronicle goes, a man (God) came crawling to man. He had been blown to earth by an "ill wind" and was looking thereabouts for some food and shelter for His son. But man had no time or patience for the stranger, what with the coming event and all.

HAMM. I'm a busy man, you know, the final touches, before the festivities, you know what it is.

(Pause. Forcibly.)

Come on now, what is the object of this invasion? (p. 51)

Hamm speaks the literal truth: God does know what "it" is—it is the birth of Christ. But Hamm does not know that the object of his festivities and feverish preparations is the same as that of the man's invasion. God wants to enter man's world with His child and man wants to welcome Christ. But man is too busy getting ready for the coming event to recognize it when it arrives. So man and God are, as usual, working at cross-purposes.

The chronicle continues. God begged man for bread for His child, but man had none to give. However, man did have corn to offer (the point being that man *could* sustain the child if man so chose to do). But would man offer the corn to save the child? And what if it kept God's Son alive?

HAMM. But what in God's name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there's manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you? (p. 53)

What does God suppose? That we can once more go forth, be fruitful,

and multiply? The world of the Old Testament has ended, the manna from heaven (Exodus 16:15) has dried up. Yet at one time we did celebrate Christ's resurrection and the earth's awakening in spring, and we did look to heaven for our salvation. Hamm's chronicle records that fact of our lives as well.

HAMM. Well to make it short I finally offered to take him into my service. He had touched a chord.

. . .

In the end he asked me would I consent to take in the child as well—if he were still alive.

(Pause.)

It was the moment I was waiting for. (p. 53)

Would man consent to take in Christ? The answer is easy: of course we would take Him in, *then*. He was to redeem us, was He not, and that was the moment we had been waiting for, was it not? That was the meaning of Christmas: man took Christ into his world so that Christ could change it.

But what about *now*? This isn't the eve of Christmas any more, this is 2000 years later. Do we need Him any more?

HAMM. I'll soon have finished with this story.

(Pause.)

Unless I bring in other characters.

(Pause.)

But where would I find them?

(Pause.)

Where would I look for them? (p. 54)

Hamm indicates that man will soon have finished with Christianity. But that finish could lead or evolve into another "story" (another age) if new "characters" were introduced. Where might one look for such "other characters"? One obvious place would be wherever the original characters were found or wherever they were last seen. In the context of this play that means Bethlehem. What new character would man find there now (the second time)? Following Yeats, we might say: man will find whatever rough beast "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."

(3) *The Central Event: The Anti-Christ, the Second Coming, and the Apocalypse.*

HAMM. Do you not think this has gone on long enough?

CLOV. Yes!

(Pause.)

What?

HAMM. This . . . this . . . thing.

(p. 45)

Beckett's vision is that "This . . . this . . . thing," Christianity, has gone on long enough. In fact, it has reached its natural end. But it comes to an end not by having fulfilled its purpose or its promise. The whole history of Christianity shows that Christians are more fit for Children's Crusades than for babes wrapped in swaddling clothes. This world, *Endgame's*, is the very opposite of a fruitful world: it is "corpsed." (p. 30) No, Christianity is coming to an end because its time is up.⁹ In *Endgame* something is taking Christianity's place, replacing it, by wrenching and shunting it aside.

The very idea seems absurd. What could possibly take Christianity's place? But there is no absurdity, because it is something akin to Christianity, something that serves the same function and therefore fills our same need. It is a second coming, another cycle in the eternal recurrence: this time it is the coming of the Anti-Christ.

CLOV. I never had a bicycle.

HAMM. The thing is impossible.

(p. 8)

So we would like to think. (Progress is our most important delusion.) But the second coming *is* the second (bi) cycle; it follows upon the demise of the first. What if Yeats turns out to have been a prophet, as prophetic as the Bible? We would have *A Vision* becoming the Anti-Bible, "The Second Coming" taking the place of Isaiah.

The play's center is Christ's leaving. It is crucial, however, to recognize the particular way in which His leave-taking is effected: Christ leaves *because* another god (the Anti-Christ) arrives. In a word, it is the Second Coming. But it is the Second Coming with a singular twist from Beckett. Upon examination it will become clear that the blistering vision in Yeats' "The Second Coming" is an explicit key to the play. The resonances and echoes between the poem and the play are too frequent and illuminating to be merely coincidental.

The apocalypse, the revelation, of *Endgame* is the following. What is ending is the world, the world of Christianity. It ends when the relationship between man and Christ (which constitutes the world of Christianity) ends. Specifically, it ends when Clov (Christ) leaves.

(4) *Concluding Events: The relinquishment of Christ.* As the play draws to a close, its resolution remains. That resolution is accomplished in its last two soliloquies.

Clov's soliloquy is the most arresting dialogue of the play in that it is the most naked identification of Clov as Christ. Clov narrates, quite appropriately, what turns out to be his autobiography, the life of Christ. Just as its beginning was recalled at the opening of the play, now we have that story's ending.

As Clov prepares to leave, Hamm requests (p. 79) some words to ponder in his heart:

CLOV (*fixed gaze, tonelessly, towards auditorium*). They said to me, That's love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how—

HAMM. Articulate!

CLOV (*as before*). How easy it is. They said to me, that's friendship, yes, yes, no question, you've found it. 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 comes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all those dying of their wounds.

HAMM. Enough! (p. 80)

Clov is speaking to us, the audience, to mankind. He begins with that great Christian shibboleth, Christian (brotherly) love. But Hamm interrupts Clov's soliloquy: "Articulate!" His cry, in the form of a command, is as well a request, a plea. Why? Because Clov's last speech is a parable. Christ, although very articulate, spoke in parables and His disciples could not understand Him. (Luke 8:9-10) Clov's soliloquy is Christ's last parable; this time *we* will be the ones not to understand. Cavell diagnoses our problem this way:

[T]hey can't use their heads; men are enough to try the patience of a God Use your head, can't you? It was a parable! Get it? But he's said that before and he'll say it again, and nobody gets it. They want signs, miracles, some cure for being on earth, some way of getting over being human. Maybe that's just human; and there's no cure for that.¹⁰

Hamm makes the same diagnosis: "Ah the creatures, the creatures, everything has to be explained to them." (p. 43)

Clov continues despite the interruption. It's easy! (This parable, Christian love, Christian friendship.) Yes, it's easy; easy to give, easy to withhold. It has cost us nothing—Christ is the one who died. Perhaps that is why we hold it so cheap. Clov then makes an overt reference to "The Second Coming." Christ is not a "brute beast" (Revelation, 11:7, 13:1-4); the "rough beast" comes when Christ leaves. And we spectators should not be so beastly ourselves, by failing to see the obvious. It's clear and simple: think about it. But we fail to understand what is being said and shown before our very (but un verifying) eyes and ears. Our eyes are in the same condition as are Hamm's at the play's beginning: all white with no pupils. (pp. 3-4) We are blind, so it is no wonder that we fail to see. Or is it that we are blind because we fail to see?

From exhortation Clov switches to an example which everyone should recognize: the crucifixion. The three, dying of their wounds, were tended and ministered to (such skilled attention for the dying). But Hamm has had "Enough!" (Enough to ponder? Too much?) It is a scene too grisly to be acknowledged. Of course, the reason for our refusal to acknowledge this scene is our fear that we might be recognized in it, or that we might recognize ourselves. So man denies Christ again, only no cock crows this time. The refusal of recognition is the same.

CLOV (*as before*). I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you—one day. I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go—one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it'll never end, I'll never go.

(*Pause.*)

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 am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit.

(*Pause.*)

It's easy going.

(*Pause.*)

When I fall I'll weep for happiness. (pp. 80-1)

He must be better if they (man and God) are to become weary of punishing Him. If they stop punishing Him, perhaps they will let Him go. (The meaning is deep here: remember the choice between Christ and Barab-bas.) But letting Christ go does not mean that he is to get a second chance. No, Christ is too old for that, too set in His old habits. Letting Him go means both letting Him leave and giving up our claim on Him (letting go of Him): relinquishing Him. We must relinquish our need for Him and we must relinquish Him to His fate.

Christ removes the stone from His sepulchre and goes out. This time, however, it is not a resurrection; this time He is slouching to Bethlehem to die. Even He is returning to dust. When Christ dies He will weep for happiness, for happiness has no place in the world of the rough beast. Yet, to leave this vale of tears, one can only weep for happiness.^{10a}

At this stage of the play there is one last thing to do, and that is for us to relinquish our hold on Christ. We must say goodbye, allow Him to

leave, exorcise ourselves of our need for Him. We do that by acknowledging His death to us, to this world. That acknowledgment is made by Hamm's soliloquy.

Man once needed Christ. In fact, man thought Christ was all he needed. HAMM. "It was the moment I was waiting for." (p. 83) But that moment was long ago; it is time to abandon that way of life.

HAMM. You don't want to abandon Him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? (p. 83)

We fail to let go of ("abandon") Christ because we fail to see what has been done to Him. Only the new man (Hamm) sees, and as to this he sees more acutely even than Christ. At this, the very end, it turns out to be *man* who supplies the compassion and *Christ* who is its beneficiary.

HAMM. He doesn't realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays. Oh I put him before his responsibilities! (p. 83)

Hamm is talking to us, the audience. Christ's task, set for Him by God, was impossible. We should know our world (not to mention ourselves) well enough to see that much. Man gave Christ His crown of thorns. Now, for once, it is man making the sacrifice, man removing Christ's mantle of burdens from His shoulders and forehead. We know what this world is like; Christ can't help "nowadays." The new man is the person who puts Christ before His inhuman responsibilities.

HAMM. Well, there we are, there I am, that's enough.

. . .

And to end up with?

(Pause.)

Discard.

(He throws away the dog)

. . .

. . . and speak no more about it . . .

. . .

(He holds handkerchief spread out before him.)

(Pause)

Old stancher!

(Pause)

you . . . remain.

(pp. 83-4)

We discard our dog-eaten religion at last: Christianity ends. We shall speak no more about it. We remain, literally, in our veil of tears.

II. THE JUVESCENCE OF THE YEAR

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger

—Eliot, "Gerontion"

The apocalypse of Beckett's *Endgame* is the revelation of the coming of the Anti-Christ and the leaving of Christ. With that event, the world of Christianity ends. So, while Beckett's play recalls the New Testament's Book of Revelation in its imagery (as noted by Professor Cohn), it produces a startlingly new twist to that iconology. Christianity does not triumph, as it does in the New Testament, but dies.

Beckett's twist is not without contemporary competitors or antecedents. The connections between Beckett's work and Eliot's work are, I think, surprisingly numerous. But they tend to be made at a depth that requires more detailed analysis than can be offered here. Perhaps it will suffice to say, with Cavell, that Beckett "is the contemporary writer complex and single enough to match with Eliot."¹¹

On the other hand, Beckett's connection with Yeats seems at once more obvious and more restricted to the affinity between "The Second Coming" and *Endgame*. Consider the following resonances between lines from the poem and dialogue from the play:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;"

HAMM. I was right in the center, wasn't I? (p. 25)

HAMM. Am I right in the center?

. . .

I'm more or less in the center? (p. 26)

HAMM. Put me right in the center!

. . .

Bang in the center! (p. 27)

HAMM. Am I right in the center? (p. 76)

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,"

CLOV (*straightening up*). I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.

. . .

I'm doing my best to create a little order. (p. 57)

"The ceremony of innocence is drowned;"

CLOV. What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment.

(*He turns the telescope on the without, looks, . . .*)

Corpsed.

(*Pause.*)

Well? Content?

HAMM. Look at the sea.

CLOV. It's the same.

(pp. 29-30)

CLOV. Christ, she's under water!

(p. 73)

"The best lack all conviction,"

CLOV. Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?

(p. 43)

"while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."

HAMM. How are your eyes?

CLOV. Bad.

HAMM. How are your legs?

CLOV. Bad.

HAMM. But you can move.

CLOV. Yes.

HAMM (*violently*). Then move!

(pp. 7-8)

HAMM. My anger subsides, I'd like to pee.

(p. 24)

These resonances, by themselves, do not prove a connection between the poem and the play but only make it plausible. Proof of that connection will come only in the tracing out of its several strands, some of which follow.

(1) We can begin by returning to the dialogue partially quoted above, which illustrates in particular the play's allusion to "The Second Coming" and in general Beckett's characteristic (yet elusive) allusiveness.

HAMM. Put me right in the center!

. . .

Roughly! Roughly!

(*Clov moves chair slightly.*)

Bang in the center!

CLOV. There!

(*Pause.*)

HAMM. I feel a little too far to the left.

(*Clov moves chair slightly.*)

Now I feel a little too far to the right.

(*Clov moves chair slightly.*)

I feel a little too far forward.

(*Clov moves chair slightly.*)

Now I feel a little too far back.

(p. 27)

With two exclamatory remarks Beckett manages to allude to two of the most renowned apocalyptic poems: Yeats' "The Second Coming" ("what rough beast") and Eliot's "The Hollow Men" ("Not with a *bang* but a whimper"). Both are concerned with the revelation of a world coming to its end, so both are pertinent here. But it is the allusion to "The Second Coming" which requires tracing out at this time.

Yeats' vision of the disintegration of the world (when it loses its power to cohere with our lives, both it and we fall apart) is captured in Beckett's dialogue. The world in the play disintegrates from psychic causes (shock and disorientation) rather than from physical causes.

If we lose the world (the consciousness) formed by Christianity, we enter an unknown world under the strain of a "future shock" as severe as any since the Copernican Revolution. At one time (pre-Copernicus) man was in the center, once he *was* the center of things, of God's universe. The world revolved around him and did his bidding. Now man is on the periphery; he feels himself slipping off-center, out of God's sight, and therefore out of God's mind. First to the left, then to the right, now too far forward, now too far back. If only he could once more be *bang* in the center!

(2) There is a connection with "The Second Coming" by way of a Beckett pun.

CLOV. I'm back again, with the biscuit.

(*He gives biscuit to Nagg who fingers it, sniffs it.*)

NAGG (*plaintively*). What is it?

CLOV. Spratt's medium.

(p. 10)

When one realizes that Clov is Christ and that he is back again because he is alive again, after the crucifixion, and that he carries with him a part of himself (bread for communion), then one realizes the answer to Nagg's question. What is Spratt's medium? Why, it's Spirit's medium, which is Spirit's Meat (yum), which is Yeats' *Spiritus Mundi*.¹²

(3) *Endgame's* connection with "The Second Coming" is deeper than an occasional allusion or pun. One major area of the play's resonance with the poem requires some prefatory remarks.

The conventional reading of *Endgame* accepts Nagg and Nell as Hamm's parents. And there are points in the play where Hamm even refers (seemingly) to Nagg as "my father" (p. 48) or at least to a father (p. 69). But Hamm does not have just a father, he has A Father. Nagg is "Our Father," which indicates that he is everyone's father, God the Father, and not just Hamm's father.

Consider the very first exchange in the play between Nagg and Hamm. (First appearances in *Endgame* serve to identify the characters who appear, so I look for professions of identity.)

NAGG. Me pap!

HAMM. Accursed progenitor!

NAGG. Me pap!

(p. 9)

Nagg seems to be demanding his pap (food). But literally, he is saying, "Me father!" He is identifying himself. Hamm's response is hardly what one would expect. Hamm curses Nagg for being his father, for having engendered him. At the same time, Hamm gives a perfectly fitting (and literal) description of God. God is, after all, roundly cursed and He is the creator of us all, of the universe. He is the original progenitor and He is accursed. Nagg then reasserts his identity, as though he can't quite believe man's irreverence. Or perhaps his reassertion is a threat: doesn't man know, or appreciate, to whom he is speaking?

The dialogue continues by inserting a familiar figure between God and man, clarifying the fact that Nagg is God and not Hamm's natural father.

HAMM. (*He whistles. Enter Clov*)

Well! I thought you were leaving me.

CLOV. Oh not just yet, not just yet.

NAGG. Me pap!

HAMM. Give him his pap.

CLOV. There's no more pap.

(p. 9)

Christ's appearance on the scene provokes both man and God. Man thought Christ was leaving him. No, not just yet; it isn't time for Christ to leave yet. Then God interjects Himself. Clov's acknowledgment in return is devastating. He restates Nietzsche's revelation, that God is dead. There's no more pap; pap is no more. For Christ to be the bearer of this news is startling. Yet who could be in a better position to know such a fact than God's Son? A moment later in the dialogue, Hamm changes his description of Nagg to "Accursed fornicator!" (p. 10) This remark is as accurate as Hamm's preceding one. If Christ was a bastard,¹³ then Mary was an adulteress and God a fornicator.

So much for the prefatory remarks. If Nagg is God, then perhaps Nell is Mary. With that premise, the following exchange becomes clear with reference to "The Second Coming."

NAGG. Has he changed your sawdust?

NELL. It isn't sawdust.

(*Pause. Wearily.*)

Can you not be a little accurate, Nagg?

NAGG. Your sand then. It's not important.

NELL. It is important.

(*Pause.*)

NAGG. It was sawdust once.

NELL. Once!

NAGG. And now it's sand.

(p. 17)

The first coming, the coming of Christ, occurred in a manger in Bethlehem, on a sawdust floor. "It was sawdust once," says Nagg. The drollery is devastating, as Nell's exclamation indicates. Once?! Wasn't once enough? How many times can God be expected to send His Son to earth to be born (and crucified)? It is important to be "a little accurate" about such things. Nagg is accurate in his other lines. Once it was sawdust, now it is sand. Nagg in effect tells us where the old age began and the new age will begin. Today, man's future (if he has one) rests elsewhere than in a manger or with Christianity: "now it's sand."

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert

The sands of the desert are where the new age lies. They are also where the past age (the aged Christ) dies.

NELL. So white.

HAMM. What? What's she blathering about?

(*Clov stoops, takes Nell's hand, feels her pulse.*)

NELL (to Clov). Desert!

(*Clov lets go her hand, pushes her back in the bin, closes the lid.*)

CLOV. . . . She has no pulse.

HAMM. What was she drivelling about?

CLOV. She told me to go away, into the desert.

(p. 23)

Nell warns Clov about his imminent end; yet her warning is futile. It anticipates, or projects, Clov's very end. His end will come in the desert (because that is where the Anti-Christ's beginning will come). Nell is sending him away, to flee into the desert. But that is his end: to go away, slouching into the desert to die. (p. 81)

(4) HAMM (*exasperated*). Have you not finished? Will you never finish?

(*With sudden fury.*)

Will this never finish?

. . .

My kingdom for a nightman!

(p. 23)

Hamm's "nightman" cry refers to another major image in *Endgame* that is shared with "The Second Coming." The cry is a literal wish for darkness, for ending, for surcease. In Eliot's phrase, Hamm wishes to be

“Swaddled with darkness.” Hamm pledges to give up his kingdom (this world) for unconsciousness. But that would seem to be the simplest of pledges to fulfill. Yet Hamm’s all-consuming desire for conclusion, for darkness, is *not* simple, for if it were Hamm could bring darkness and ending by ending himself. And that end—suicide—is not what he wants. What he wants—the end to all consciousness and to the world he inhabits—is not within his power. Thus, he needs a “nightman” (something like “The Prince of Darkness,” which is one way to name the Anti-Christ) to bring him ending, to bring him darkness.

In *Endgame* we witness the natural progression of light being extinguished and the world being cloaked with darkness. As Yeats would have it, when Christainity ends, “The darkness drops again.”

HAMM. Then let it end!

. . .

With a bang!

. . .

Of darkness!

(p. 77)

HAMM. You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness.

(p. 83)

(5) Another of *Endgame*’s images instructs us as to how we might know when, in Yeats’ terms, an hour has “come round at last.”

What would tell us when a given hour has struck or when a time certain has expired? The answer is: an alarm-clock.

HAMM. If you leave me how shall I know?

. . .

CLOV. . . . I have it! I set the alarm.

(Pause.)

HAMM. This is perhaps not one of my bright days, but frankly—

CLOV. You whistle me. I don’t come. The alarm rings. I’m gone. It doesn’t ring. I’m dead.

(Pause.)

HAMM. Is it working?

(Pause. Impatiently.)

The alarm, is it working?

CLOV. Why wouldn’t it be working?

HAMM. Because it’s worked too hard.

CLOV. But it’s hardly worked at all.

HAMM (*angrily*). Then because it’s worked too little!

CLOV. I’ll go and see.

(Exit Clov. Brief ring of alarm off. Enter Clov with alarm-clock. He holds it against Hamm’s ear and releases alarm. They listen to it ringing to the end. Pause.)

Fit to wake the dead! Did you hear it?

HAMM. Vaguely.

(pp. 45, 47-8)

Clov is providing Hamm with the device by which man can tell the changing of the age. (That would be a most unusual alarm-clock. But then it tells a most unusual time.) We are alarmed too much ("it's worked too hard"). And yet we never wake up, we are so dead. That is why, after saying that the alarm is fit to wake the dead (even the spiritually dead), Clov immediately asks Hamm whether it awoke him. Hamm is our representative, he is one of us, so he is the test of the alarm's ability, its fitness. If it won't wake him it won't wake us. But now, thanks to Clov, the alarm rising in our hearts is also ringing in our ears. It hasn't rung for 2000 years ("it's hardly worked at all"). But when it rings it is capable of waking the dead and changing the age.

The alarm signals the end of Christianity. It signals at the same instant the beginning of the era of the Anti-Christ. HAMM. "The end is in the beginning" (p. 69)

(6) In the following dialogue we discover the revelation *Endgame* shares with "The Second Coming." This event, the heart of the play, presents the transference of power, a changing of the guard and of the realms.

CLOV. I warn you. I'm going to look at this filth since it's an order. But it's the last time.

(He turns the telescope on the without.)

Let's see.

(He moves the telescope.)

Nothing . . . nothing . . . good . . . good . . . nothing . . .
goo—

(He starts, lowers the telescope, examines it, turns it again on the without.)

Pause.)

Bad luck to it!

HAMM. More complications!

. . .

Not an underplot, I trust.

. . .

CLOV *(dismayed)*. Looks like a small boy!

HAMM *(sarcastic)*. A small . . . boy!

CLOV. I'll go and see.

(He gets down, . . . goes towards door, turns.)

I'll take the gaff.

(He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.)

HAMM. No!

(Clov halts.)

CLOV. No? A potential procreator?

(p. 78)

The coming of the Anti-Christ touches off a murderous display of sibling rivalry: Christ versus the Anti-Christ. When the boy appears,

Clov reaches for the gaff. (The reference to the gaff reveals more of the logic of Beckett.¹⁴) His intent to kill is clear: death to the usurper! Thus, when “the centre cannot hold,” even Christ proves capable of killing. Yet Christ is merely acting in self-defense, for the coming of the Anti-Christ means the end, the death, of Christ (His death to this world).

It is “the juvenescence of the year.” Clov (Christ) tells us that this is the last time he will gaze upon the earth. What we do not realize is that he is announcing his imminent departure. He is leaving because the young Turks are plotting the overthrow of the elders, and Christ is the elder savior on earth. It is not a plot aided and abetted by man, which is what Hamm acknowledges by saying that it is not an “underplot” he trusts. Why we do not trust it can be explained in various ways: the young “rough beast” does not inspire our confidence; we are more comfortable with the world the way it is; we do not know what time it is. Clov knows what time it is (“*Clov . . . looks at alarm-clock*”).(p. 79) His time (Christianity) is up. The end of his era is signaled in the instant the second coming begins.

The French version of *Endgame*, as reported by Martin Esslin,¹⁵ has an expanded presentation of this episode.

HAMM (*violently*). What is he doing?

CLOV (*also violently*). I don't know what he's doing. What little boys used to do.

(*He looks through the telescope*)

He seems to be sitting on the ground, with his back against something.

HAMM. The lifted stone.

(*Pause.*)

Your eyesight is getting better.

(*Pause.*)

No doubt he is looking at the house with the eyes of Moses dying.

CLOV. No.

HAMM. What is he looking at?

CLOV (*violently*). I don't know what he is looking at.

(*He raises the telescope*)

His navel. Or thereabouts.

Esslin comments: “like Christ the moment after the resurrection, [the boy] has been newly born into a new life, leaning, a babe, against the lifted stone. Moreover, like the Buddha, the little boy contemplates his navel.”¹⁶ Esslin sees Beckett's explicit religious symbolism but fails to see what it symbolizes. In our world what little boys (or babes) used to do—come as gods—is what this little boy is doing: he is coming as a god

at the end of the Christian era (“with the eyes of Moses dying”). Esslin is correct that the boy is “like” Christ and “like” the Buddha, because he is yet another god, the Anti-Christ. The second coming is at hand.

With the coming of Yeats’ rough beast, the present age ends. Any clock-watcher knows what time it is: it is time for Christ to leave. HAMM. “It’s the end, Clov, we’ve come to the end. I don’t need you any more.” (p. 79) *Endgame* does not prophesize the end of Christianity; it shows that Christianity in fact has ended.¹⁷ The ways of that route, its possibilities, the forms of life it offered, are now closed to us. The mandala of life turns, the cycle revolves, and a new era dawns inexorably: that is the logic of Beckett’s drama and Yeats’ poem. *Time* is what makes them work. Thus, Zeno is twice alluded to during the play. (pp. 1, 70) Who can save himself—much less other souls—in such a world? Not even Christ.

III. CLOSING EVENT: THE CURTAIN

Just before the curtain, during Hamm’s soliloquy, Clov is standing by the door, in the audience’s presence. Commentators on the play have asked whether Clov leaves when the play ends and have concluded that the question is unanswerable.¹⁸ But its answer is simple enough: No, he does not leave as the play closes.

Even though I emphasize the fact that the Anti-Christ replaces Christ, the end of the play does not therefore consist in Christ’s leaving us. *His* leave-taking occurs *before* the play’s end; it is effected upon the appearance of “the small boy.” Clov’s last soliloquy (pp. 80-1) is his farewell, and by the time of Hamm’s soliloquy Clov is in the same position as each of us, just another spectator. He is outside Hamm’s world, outside the proscenium arch. (Beckett effectively puts Clov in the audience’s position by his stage directions during Hamm’s closing soliloquy. “*Exit Clov Enter Clov, dressed for the road He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end.*” (p. 82))

So what is the end of the play, who leaves at its end? *We* do; the audience does. It couldn’t be more obvious. The event which ends the play—the curtain—*marks* the end of our Christian lives. We leave (“abandon”) Christ exactly as we have throughout the age of Christianity. We never could follow Him, and we still can’t at the end. Our exit is our acknowledgment, called up to our attention by Beckett, that both the play and Christianity are over. That’s the end of *Endgame*: we are implicated to the last.*

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down

This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I shall be glad of another death.

—Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”

FOOTNOTES

¹Ruby Cohn, “*Endgame*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of ENDGAME*, (B. G. Chevigny ed. 1969), pp. 40-52, at p. 44.

²Stanley Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game,” *Must We Mean What We Say?*, (1969), pp. 115-162, at p. 161.

³After this article had been submitted for publication, a provocative essay appeared, detailing many of the religious themes in *Godot*. See Daniel Stempel, “History Electrified into Anagogy: A Reading of *Waiting for Godot*,” *Contemporary Literature*, XVII (Spring 1976), pp. 263-278.

^{3a}All unidentified page references in this article are citations to Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (Grove Press, 1958).

⁴Martin Esslin, “Samuel Beckett,” *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (rev. ed. 1969), pp. 11-65, at p. 45.

⁵Yesterday was the crucifixion. HAMM. “Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!” CLOV (*violently*), “It means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day.” (pp. 43-4)

⁶Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 41, concurs in this reading.

⁷That is the point of Clov’s reference to himself as having been “whelped.” (p. 14)

⁸Cavell, *op. cit.*, p. 142, calls attention to the fact that Hamm “calls his story a ‘chronicle,’ suggesting that it is a record of fact.” Hamm’s story, therefore, is not a tale or a fabrication of his imagination. It is the recounting of an event. And a chronicle, a matter of fact statement, of Christ’s coming to earth may be what we need. All we have had up to now have been miracles and myths, signs and symbols. —But, then, how *does* one characterize the coming of a god without the miraculous, without hyperbole? Why, the thing is extraordinary.

⁹This is a play about maturing, and it illustrates the maturation (the fullness) of time itself. The time is up.

¹⁰Cavell, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-5.

^{10a}The saddest fact about this whole story is that Christ’s sacrifice has been fruitless. The Sower’s seeds (Luke 8:5-8) have not sprouted.

HAMM. Did your seeds come up?

CLOV. No.

HAMM. Did you scratch around them to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV. They haven’t sprouted.

HAMM. Perhaps it’s still too early.

CLOV. If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted.

(*Violently.*)

They’ll never sprout!

(p. 13)

¹¹Cavell, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹²The identification between Spratt's medium and *Spiritus Mundi* is based on more than alliteration. Yeats considered *Spiritus Mundi* to stand for the storehouse of man's collective consciousness, his archetypes and symbols. (See Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, (Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 219, 259.) Such a storehouse would seem to be properly called the medium of the spirit; "Spratt's medium" to a disciple of James Joyce.

¹³Cavell recalls, "That Christ was literally a bastard was among the first of the few things I was ever told about him, and I suppose other Jewish children are given comparable help to their questions." *Op. cit.*, pp. 146-7.

¹⁴Like the alarm-clock, the gaff's significance is hidden because it is so obvious. A gaff is a spear or lance. (They opened His side with a lance and out poured blood and water. John 19:34) More particularly, it is a curved implement used to spear and bring aboard fish. (The fish was an early Christian symbol.) Finally, Christ is said to have broken bread and distributed fish (Matthew 15:36); *Endgame* refers to biscuits and gaffs.

¹⁵*Op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁶*Ibid.* The little boy's gazing at his navel is a specific acknowledgment of Clov's desire to gaff him. What is the boy doing? Looking at his navel. What is a navel? A hole in one's stomach. Where does one gaff a fish? In the stomach.

¹⁷Christ was our lamp (The Sermon on the Mount) but now His light is being extinguished.

HAMM. . . . And what do you see on your wall? Mene, mene? Naked bodies?

CLOV. I see my light dying.

(p. 12)

"This is the interpretation of the thing: ME; NE; God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it." (Daniel 5:26) Christianity, Christ's light, is finished. See Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 41; John J. Sheedy, "The Comic Apocalypse of King Hamm," *Modern Drama*, IX, (December, 1966), at pp. 310-311.

¹⁸See e.g. Cavell, *op. cit.*, p. 148; Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 51; Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

*This article is a compilation of selected insights and discoveries about *Endgame* on which I have been working since 1972, when I was still in law school. Thus, the article does not exhaust the many matters of interest in the play that are worth pursuing (e.g. it does not discuss the minor character of "Mother Pegg," whom I identify as Mary Magdalene).

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