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‘The Laugh laughing at the Laugh’: Beckett’s ‘Mirthless’ Humor and Ethics in the Face of Evil

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Samuel Beckett distinguishes between three kinds of humor namely, ethical laugh, intellectual laugh and mirthless laugh. In my paper I shall first present Beckett’s humor in his novel ‘Watt’ following which I shall contextualize the understanding of Beckett’s humor within the issues concerning overcoming of the evil in face of all inhuman possibilities of human life. My view stands in opposition of understanding Beckett’s humor as redemptive of the disappointments following the experience of a void/emptiness emanating from the existential human condition in the form of the limits of human existence. Conclusively, my paper reflects on the significance of retaining the tension between skeptical and optimistic humor in understanding the acrobatics of Beckett’s ‘mirthless’, meaningless laugh toward an ethics of survival.

Introduction

Beckett’s humor is closely linked with his categorization of humor and his aesthetics. For Beckett, there are three kinds of laugh namely, the ethical laugh, the intellectual laugh and the mirthless laugh. In his novel ‘Watt’, he writes: ‘The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout — Haw! – so. It is the laugh of laughs, the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please — at that which is unhappy.’ (Watt, 40)

The ethical laugh constitutes Henri Bergson’s ideas on humor while the intellectual laugh coincides with Kant and Bergson’s view of laughter. Both these two kinds of laughter involve an assertion of power over their object of laughter. Beckett however proposes the ‘mirthless laugh’ which is the laugh of the powerlessness; it is distinct from ‘all humor that accepts the status quo’. For Adorno, Beckett’s humor reflects on ‘the absurdity of laughter and the laughter about despair’. Beckett’s laugh of powerlessness takes issue with the redemptive power of laughter and mourning in the face of disaster and deep despair when both of them fail in situations of extreme evil. The ‘mirthless’ laughter arises from an exhaustive experience of powerlessness and it is for the sake of survival. It is sad, histrionic, happy and contagious. It is meaningless laughter.

There is a hierarchy between the ethical, intellectual and mirthless laugh in the sense that one can only graduate in the intensity from one to the other with mirthless laugh at the highest form of laughter. He writes that: ‘Of all the laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs, but modes of ululation, only three I think need detain us, I mean the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless. They correspond to successive, how shall I say successive...suc...successive excoriations of the understanding, and the passage from the one to the other is the passage from the lesser to the greater, from the lower to the higher, from the outer to the inner, from the gross to the fine, from

the matter to the form. The laugh that now is mirthless once was hollow, the laugh that once was hollow once was bitter. And the laugh that once was bitter? Eyewater, Mr Watt, eyewater.' (Watt, 39-40).

Laughter as performance

Beckett describes all laugh of 'Haw! Hell! Haw!' as 'modes of ululation' (Watt, 39). It is associated with a sound effect which interferes with the silent activity of reading and writing. His mirthless laugh is not an effect of a comic performance but it is a performance in itself which is acoustic in nature. The acoustic medium of his art speaks through itself. Beckett follows a non-representational aesthetics. His humor does not follow any given template of narrative art (i.e. of plot, sequence etc) but he makes his art speak through its performance in its muteness and incompetence that evokes a mirthless laugh from the readers. Beckett's art takes an indirect route to grasp the facts of life in not trying to offer any false hope but only a little realization that we fail in our attempts to grasp any such facts through art. In Watt, Beckett presents many examples of such artistic failures such as the narrow corridors, fenced by barbed wires that prevent any access to gardens, through which Watt and Sam carefully try to make their way. For Beckett laughter is both an acoustic and an aesthetic event. Adrienne Janus compares it with Badiou's concept of '*événement*'. She writes: 'As such, laughter as an event may have some affinities to the notion of '*événement*' developed by Alain Badiou: a sudden manifestation ("*pur surgissement*") whose emergence and disappearance resists, or is exempt from, the laws of representation as of conceptual categorization (Badiou 42, 44).³ As a vocalized bodily response to limit conditions, and as a sudden manifestation of embodied presence, the event of laughter can be listened to and sensed as something that touches us with the resonances of its vibrations, but cannot be grasped as an identifiable image, concept or object. In this way, laughter not only serves as a marker of the limits of normative modes of socio-political and literary representation' (Janus, 2).

Such an aesthetics of humor leads to new forms of writing which cannot be represented directly but emerges itself in the process of presentation itself. It has an element of unpredictability and improvisation. Beckett writes that such writing is borne out of a need where one has 'nothing to express, no means to express, together with the obligation to express' (Three Dialogues, 124).

Laughter at the limits of human condition

Watt is a response to the limits of human epistemological capabilities as the conditions of human existence. Instead of taking a nihilistic stand, Beckett's laughter offers resistance to it. Watt is a Chaplinisue character and a caricature of a rationalist who cannot accept anything outside his mind. Watt carries Cartesian skepticism to comic extremes in stretching all the limits of his powers of rational deductions. He is unable to conceive of any counterfactual possibilities that exist outside his rational methods. Watt becomes a prisoner of his search for absolute certainty and knowledge and he is constantly defeated by the 'contingencies of the contingent world' in the novel. Finally he finds his place in an asylum. Beckett gives many examples of possibilities throughout the text. For instance, Arsene recounts an estranging episode. While walking outdoors, "something slipped" and he experiences a "reversed metamorphosis". The incident is compared to the transformation as told by Ovid, but instead of Apollo turning a woman to foliage, here Arsene says it is rather "the Laurel into Daphne". This moment is taken up later:

“Took a turn in the garden Made merry with the hardy laurel” (Watt, 36). The pun on the word ‘turn’ invokes various possible meanings: rotation as well as transformation; a performance; a “go” in a sequence; a short walk; a spell of confusion or distress; all finished off with a nod to the short sketches of two of Beckett’s favorite performers, Laurel and Hardy.

Beckett doubts rationalism akin to the questions posed by many philosophers like Kant, Leibniz, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, etc. For him the pursuit of certainty undermines possibilities and human freedom. Further he is of the view that the only thing certain is the lack of certainty. Human life is contingent and there exists no transcendental validation for this human condition. His humor is a way of confronting this reality. In Watt, Beckett makes us go through the chaos of this already doomed search for certainty through the protagonist, Watt.

The comedy of ‘Exhaustive enumeration’

The form of Beckett’s novel, Watt does not follow any template of narrative art. Instead of writing a hyper representative text, Beckett’s aesthetics follows arithmetic strategies for composing his text and creates characters from a word list of ‘intransitive verbs’ and ‘body describing adjectives’. His main purpose behind this is to bring the element of chance and possibility with an experimental narrative form. In his writing he follows a reasoning by which he exhausts the relationship between aesthetic form and experience beyond the aesthetic moment. As a result there is a proliferation of logical possibilities that emerge throughout the text. Thereby, it becomes impossible to understand this relationship through human understanding. Beckett describes it as the relationship between circle and point. In order to understand this relationship Watt almost neurotically tries to assemble his perception of uncertainties into a list of possibilities:

‘The only other object of note in Erskine’s room was a picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture ... Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and the circle entered together upon the same plane. Or had they not done so already, or almost? And was it not rather the circle that was in the background, and the point that was in the foreground? Watt wondered if they had sighted each other, or were blindly flying thus, harried by some force of mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. He wondered if they would eventually pause and converse, and perhaps even mingle, or keep steadfast on their ways, like ships in the night, prior to the invention of wireless telegraphy. Who knows, they might even collide. And he wondered what the artist had intended to represent (Watt knew nothing about painting), a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively...’ (Watt, 109-110).

The relationship between circle and point is also the relationship of human beings and the capacities of understanding, between the circle and circumference, between human beings and God. Watt is constantly exposed to contingent situations and becomes a victim of them and in face of this ‘all he desired was to have his uncertainty removed.’ Beckett changes the usual understanding of cause and effect. For him human beings are unaware of the original cause of their situation (the first cause) and also that there are an exponential number of effects for a single cause which cannot be captured by human epistemic capabilities. The novel is replete with

repetitions and a proliferation of pointless and illogical possibilities of the contingent effects that follow from many a single cause. Beckett seems to celebrate the exhaustion of various possibilities of contingent effects that arise from an illogical and irrational exchange. Initially they are small paragraphs but later on they become so huge that it becomes a waste for the reader to spend so much attention on reading the absurd logical possibilities. There is a disjunction of the relationship between subject and object. Just as without spatial relation one cannot orient oneself similarly Watt could not make sense of directions unless he begins to perceive the picture from the pictures' perspective rather than from Watt's own point of view. Chris Ackerley writes: 'this is "the comedy of an exhaustive enumeration" (Proust 92), logic taken to the point of absurdity, and a process that reflects Watt's attempts, increasingly vain, to comprehend the paradigms that rule his world.' (Ackerley, 9) Beckett makes a comedy of Descartes four rules as summed in his method.¹

As a caricature of Cartesian rationalism, Watt sincerely follows Descartes method in order to resolve his complexities. Yet the Cartesian method only makes him struggle with multiple contingencies as his world disintegrates. Instead of understanding his relationship with Mr. Knott he ends up in an asylum. Watt's language becomes more and more evasive. This is because his logical paradigms are unable to handle the complexities that arise. Consequently both his logical paradigm and the linguistic structures break down towards the end. He uses words where logic and language do not unite and there are missing elements in his word sets. For instance, the use of word sets like 'breast to breast', 'pubis to pubis', 'face to face', 'glued together', 'belly to belly' etc. He gives maniacal descriptions of ordinary things like the cooking pot which he describes as 'It was a pot of which one could say pot, pot and be comforted' (Watt, 67).

Watt consistently exhausts the Cartesian method in his pursuit to understand the relationship between him and his master Mr. Knott but he fails. Beckett likens this to the fate of an artist who tries in order to fail and failure becomes the plight of all such attempts. Chris Ackerley comments on this: 'The paradigm is complete, but Watt still does not know Mr. Knott at the end of the exhaustive process, for his essence is not deducible from his attributes. To mention these four only (211), for innumerable other aspects (carriage, expression, shape and size; feet, legs, hands, arms, mouth nose, eyes and ears) might be considered, and then the paradigms would be virtually inordinate, and Watt still no better off. Watt perhaps needs to be reminded of Augustine's dictum that one cannot know what God is, but only what he is not.' (Ackerley, 12)

Another concern within the theme of logical exhaustion is the theme of mathematical seriality by introducing which Beckett tries to argue the claim that just the presence of mere design or pattern in nature does not establish the existence of a purpose comprehensible through reason. The song

¹ These four rules as stated by Descartes are : 1) "Never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all grounds of doubt." 2) "To divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution." 3) "To conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence." 4) "To make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general that I might be assured that nothing was omitted." (Descartes, 12)

of the three frogs croaking 'KraK! Krek! Krik!' (Watt, 117) represents a perfect harmony in a fibonacci series in which the three frogs croak after an interval of eight, five and three respectively.

Beckett also highlights antinomies of mathematical reason in the choir that he hears while going to Mr. Knott's house. Ackerley writes that the subject of the choir is a mixed number which is formed when 366 days of the leap year are counted into weeks and the number of days in a regular year in the second verse. But an intentional mathematical error creeps in the song to retain its musicality. Ackerley writes: 'The song acts as a paradigm of what Heath Lees calls the "Pythagorean comma," the gap that arises in Western music between the mathematical reality of acoustics and the musical necessity of an equally-partitioned octave (Lees 14). The Pythagorean ratios are not quite true, and the scale must be tempered to reconcile the anomaly. As Lees concludes (15), with reference to the Galls, father and son, Watt fails because Western music is based on distortion: "In Wattian terms, Art is Con; tuner, piano and pianist are all doomed."' (Ackerley, 7)

For Beckett such logical errors and deformities are central to art which tries to employ the techniques of one medium into another for instance influences from painting into narrative, or from music to painting etc. Unlike Adorno who hated such 'pseudomorphs', Beckett seems to be an expert of mixing mediums in his narrative art. For him art is a kind of deformity of many such mediums into an aesthetic entity. In Watt he experiments with logic, seriality, mathematics (set theory) and various concepts from music and philosophy to create his artistic humor.

The theme of seriality is very important throughout the text. In the addenda, when Watt is confused for Mr. Knott, he is told about Mr. Knott that "that Mr Knott too was a serial, in a vermicular series. But not now. For Watt was an old rose now, and indifferent to the gardener" (Watt, 222) For Arsene the sequentiality of servants takes place in biblical terms of those who were there before them and those who come and go. Each one is a replaceable number: Walter, Vincent, Arsene, Erskine, Watt, Arthur and Micks, to others as yet unknown. Although Mr. Knott seems immortal but in the addenda Watt is told that he too is a serial. It is only a matter from a different serial perspective that he seems to be immortal like the decanter or the gardener but he is not so in absolute terms.

'A Cat's Flux'

Watt is a comedy that celebrates possibilities and refutes certainty. Beckett abandons all hope in the face of such possibilities. In the novel, he writes: And if I could begin it all over again, knowing what I know now, the result would be the same. And if I could begin again a third time, knowing what I would know then, the result would be the same. And if I could begin it all over again a hundred times, knowing each time a little more than the time before, the result would always be the same, and the hundredth life as the first, and the hundred lives as one. A cat's flux.' (Watt, 39) His stance is similar to the Nietzschean 'eternal return'-'a cat's flux'. There is no religious or transcendental hope in the optimism he offers but rather it is the hope to remain skeptical.

Simon Critchley writes that Beckett makes us laugh and invokes a self-questioning through that laughter. It 'opens us up and causes our defenses' to drop momentarily, but it is precisely at that moment of weakness that Beckett's humor rebounds upon the subject. We realize in an instant that the object of laughter is the subject who laughs.' (Critchley, 49)

We cannot laugh at his crippled and hapless characters if we pity them. Beckett seems to create a Kantian incongruity in his humor by reversing the expectation here. At the same time he also agrees with Bergson for whom humor 'must not rouse our feelings'. His strategy is to change the decorum and initial attitude by introduces competing modes of 'pathos and irreverence'. For instance: He changes the attitude towards Socrates while re-narrating and rephrasing his situation from the ordinary understanding of it. He detaches Socrates from his cohorts and changes him into a 'seventy year old, nameless, ignorant, solitary, and potentially pathetic old man' (Hayman, 30). In the new rephrased understanding we now see Socrates with the view that 'This is a lonely unhappy old fool suffering the pains of memory as well as of age' (Hayman, 30). Here the relationship between suffering and the act of suffering goes beyond the aesthetic moment. Beckett exhausts the limits here again. Samuel Beckett's humor is sardonic like that of Nietzsche. It insists that 'life is not to be affirmed ecstatically but acknowledged comically'. There is a tension between skepticism and optimistic (redemptive) humor.

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