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Beckett and the Plight of the Educator

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1.

Education has us wait endlessly. Educators and students alike await the fulfilment of its promise, assuming education is synonymous with betterment. Their plight can be illustrated by way of contrast with Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* (1956). In the play, Estragon and Vladimir wait because there is no alternative. Holding hands from the top of the Eiffel Tower is how they would have gone. But those times have passed. Now they wouldn't be allowed up. The tramps. Beckett's writings are full of filthy, ill-clad vagrants—debarred, excluded. Educators are not yet filthy enough; the filth is always on someone else. Or else, it is generalised: *Industrial civilisation reached great heights and befouled them*. There is no high position—actually scrub that—there is no decent platform—better—from which the educated might cast themselves down in disappointment.

2.

It is difficult to leave education and by leaving make a statement that would reveal its hypocrisies, shatter its illusions, and empty its institutions of their industrious sycophants. There is no leaving education, since every bitter departure testifies to a love of it, reviving the very idea that education is worth waiting for.

3.

At work I wait, filling time with jobs. Estragon and Vladimir behave differently. They contemplate hanging themselves. Not even the strength of the bough can be trusted to hang one, and then the other, for it might break before the job is done. Either Vladimir or Estragon might be left alone. It is safer to wait. Though they do

not wait diligently. Attempting and failing to remove themselves from the agony of waiting, they wait without falling in step. Each waits in such a way that the force of waiting is felt. The educator, by contrast, waits conscientiously, filling time with commitments to education.

4.

Vladimir can hardly laugh it causes him that much pain. He may fool about. But like his companion is constantly restored to the horror of his situation. The educator may fool about at times, but laughs more freely and without much horror.

5.

Though every educator discovers—and then most often covers over—a hatred of the student, the educator, by the by, may also be a student. Educators are not always teachers. Education has far greater reach than that. It would make us all educators in time.

6.

Education breeds conceit in the waiting room. The fact of waiting is a sign: *education is worth waiting for*. Estragon and Vladimir are less credulous. They wait endlessly and without much conceit. In waiting they are demeaned. They demean themselves by waiting. They did not lose their rights, or so they decide, but got rid of them. It is their doing.

7.

The educator is laden. There is so much to carry. The responsibility for education—at once heavy and formless—is devolved to the educator who complies more or less voluntarily. Something Estragon and Vladimir find odd. Even within their absurd universe the idea of carrying a burden needlessly—Lucky's burden without break—seems unreasonable. Pozzo may drive Lucky with a whip. Have him on a lead that chafes at the neck. But Lucky refuses to put down his bags. Even when opportunities appear Lucky remains laden, violently resisting any attempt to ease his burden. The educator does something similar. When asked to dance Lucky finally puts down his bags. He used to dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig. Now his repertoire is limited. As Pozzo explains, Lucky dances as if entangled

in a net. His other trick is to think, but that only happens on command. Thinking and doing have become separate activities and Lucky is mainly involved in doing. He was known for this ability to think. There was a time when he thought quite a bit. But now his thinking is occasional. Most often he does. When commanded to think Lucky becomes confused and begins to dance. He must be told repeatedly. His thoughts appear as if they were themselves commands. They commandeer previous thoughts. Lucky dredges material from the past. Deracinated. Recombined. It makes little sense. The educator dances too, though from place to place. Most often the educator does. There is little time or space to think. If the educator thinks, thinking must take the form of doing. Thinking without doing is wasted doing. Reading, which might be considered a form of thinking, must be carried out as if it were a form of doing. Reading sitting forward is better than reading sitting back. Reading with a pen, or with a keyboard, is better than reading without. To read at work, openly, is not advisable. You may read before bed, or perhaps on the train. To be seen reading is not prudent. Reading gives the impression of thinking without doing. The educator does, and must be seen to be doing at all times. The educator thinks when commanded to do so. The educator thinks when the job requires it. Produced in such moments, the educator's thoughts are necessarily fragmented. Such thoughts may sound connected. They are linked together though largely drowned out by the sound of doing. Even writing is more doing than thinking. That is, performed with an audience in mind: one's auditors. Thinking was never free. But thinking is splintered more now by the act of doing. The educator thinks in short bursts.

8.

Vladimir and Estragon know how to wait/Pozzo and Lucky do not. They do not even know they are waiting until compelled to stop. Usually they are on the move, trudging from place to place, driven by Pozzo's whip. When Lucky is asked to think, as he suffers that demand, his thinking becomes unwieldy. When produced, Lucky's thought aborts, almost kills him. Only Lucky comes close to engineering his own final collapse by thinking a thought rendered entirely perverse by its separation from doing, that is to say, in its doing nothing other than speaking itself after which its work as thought is done. In Lucky there is a reduction—wait—an elevation—no neither—of thought to senseless noise. On the matter of their self-destruction, Estragon and Vladimir fail outright. Their methods are different, less

pure, more lethargic. Even Pozzo recognises his limits. He does not seem able, so he declares, to depart.

9.

If the educator thinks in short bursts, this does not announce the end of thought, or what stands for thinking in the company of those who think by doing. If anything, it extends that end, interminably. Educational time is defined by its obsession with productivity, or what stands for productivity, as it issues forth. Education may involve great procrastination, but only under a cloud of guilt. Educators are defined by their (fruitless) activity. Vladimir and Estragon are not. In waiting they do not define themselves by their determined exhaustion. They do not distract themselves by rushing about. And they do not feel guilty for a moment's pause. Only empty. Most of all, they know how to wait. They know and desperately feel they are waiting. The educator does not, and does not know how to wait.

10.

Vladimir and Estragon are not carried away by the passing of time. But they do enjoy temporary respite. The presence of Pozzo and Lucky is a welcome distraction. It makes the wait less obvious. As Pozzo and Lucky depart, the effects of waiting resume. Who were Pozzo and Lucky? Without the constant stimulus of their presence, the effect, the impression of constancy they gave, begins to evaporate. Who were they? Estragon and Vladimir can no longer be sure. Waiting, as they recognise, is positively stupefying.

11.

In the night, between acts, Estragon is beaten up. Vladimir would never have allowed it to happen, the beating that is. Not by stopping the attackers. There were ten. He would have stopped Estragon from causing the attack. He would have prevented Estragon from doing whatever he was doing. Estragon replies that he wasn't doing anything. But even doing nothing can be done differently, he is told. There are ways of doing nothing that invite more hostility than others. Estragon was doing nothing because what he did amounted to nothing. He has no option but to do nothing. Vladimir does nothing too. There is only nothing to do. But Vladimir is more accomplished at it, or claims to be. He is better at living in a world where all

doing amounts to nothing, where all action operates without ultimate sanction and progress is a promise without delivery. Others do nothing or do things that amount to nothing with far too much commitment. They attract the wrong kind of attention. They become responsible for their own beatings because they are the bearers of their own punishment.

12.

Estragon and Vladimir go through agony, but their suffering is without depth. Together they confront that nothing which life amounts to in the most superficial, and hence, most appropriate way. They know how to wait, knowing redemption may never arrive. The wish for redemption is suspect; it sweetens the pain of waiting. They fill time with chatter, sometimes with doing, but—unlike Pozzo—know doing to be a poor distraction. Its effects never last. They will have to find something else, another way of scratching the boil. Hope has that function. Vladimir and Estragon can hope just as they can crawl. They mistake Pozzo for Godot in the first act, and again in the second. They hear sounds approaching and think their wait is about to end. But the arrival of Godot, falsely assumed it turns out, fills them with terror too. Pozzo, not Godot, eventually appears. Both Vladimir and Estragon are relieved. They were beginning to weaken; now they are optimistic. With Pozzo there, and Lucky too, they will see the evening out. Soon they will sleep. If tomorrow arrives, the waiting will likely continue. Tomorrow arrives. Pozzo is now blind, Lucky collapses beneath his burden; both lie helpless among the scattered baggage. Vladimir and Estragon are rightly fearful of Lucky; he was vicious the day before. But they cannot resist Pozzo, not at first. His cries for help are addressed to all humankind, not to them, at least not personally. Anyone with the strength to lift Pozzo would do. But for that moment, all humankind is them, or so they decide. They will be its representatives, while they are needed. Fallen Pozzo presents an opportunity for redemption. Momentary redemption. In that moment by assisting Pozzo they might counter all its faults. Educators are prone to this redemptive hope. Collapsed in each educational moment, in every experience of futility and failure, is the strangled cry: *This will be the test of our humanity*. But Vladimir remembers just in time. Even if they help Pozzo they cannot themselves become Godot and be their final reckoning. They cannot even get closer to Godot by devoting themselves to Pozzo. They can only wait for Godot, or for night to fall. They know that nothing distinguishes them from the rest. Whether they help Pozzo

up or not—in the end they don’t—they will not use Pozzo as a redemptive balm. They know how to wait without falling for that. All this talk about helping Pozzo is an exercise in words. It is clear enough what their reason amounts to: very little at all. They perform reason, contradicting one another for instance, for the sensation it gives. Pozzo offers a distraction: an opportunity to exercise a little reason. Vladimir and Estragon use reason to warm up a bit, before dealing with Pozzo. While musing they extort Pozzo, requiring payment in exchange for help. They are clear what their assistance amounts to. It will not ennoble them. It will not give what the educator craves: *divine sanction*. Vladimir insists on making connections, on remembering what happened the day before, on establishing if this Pozzo and this Lucky are the same Pozzo and Lucky met yesterday or different. Because Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is now dumb. Though Vladimir’s insistence achieves little in terms of clarity—where to seek truth, in this context, is to generate confusion—Vladimir’s irrepressible urge to push a point to its limit forces Pozzo, in a moment of fury, to confront his pessimism. It enervates those who would rather forget, those who would prefer to bury themselves in doing, or not doing.

13.

Vladimir and Estragon make a second attempt to hang themselves but this one fails too. The cord, Estragon’s belt, is not long enough to hang both. One will need to hang from the feet of the other. They cannot both be hanged at once, and they cannot be hanged one after the other. But they try the cord nonetheless, which breaks. They promise to bring a better one tomorrow and have another go. They will fail. They will wait. But they will know, feel that they are waiting. They will not glorify the wait, or become fully distracted, or diverted from it, knowing as they do how to wait, making waiting palpable, not only for themselves but for others too. Looking to their example the educator might learn how to wait. This educator makes waiting palpable. Filling time perhaps but not for distraction. The educator waits with insistence, questioning, probing, enervating. Others begin to feel that they are waiting too.

14.

Not knowing how to wait is the everyday failure and great accomplishment of educated people. Those who wait without knowing how display a range of characteristics, each peddling a system of denial. Four characters of this type are

depicted in *Endgame*, Beckett's next play (1957). In a small room with high windows Hamm is restricted to an armchair on castors. Clov, his servant, scuttles about. Hamm's progenitors, Nagg and Nell, sit on stumps, in ashbins. The world outside is dead; all we have is claustrophobic interior. The few material goods remaining are running low. There is a loss of meaning. The tragedy of the situation is barely felt; its characters lack the resources to evaluate their predicament. At most they experience faint panic. To be properly fearful they must first mean something to themselves and the world. The contemporary educator experiences something similar. Education continues under the steam of instituted procedures that follow their own inexorable logic. With faint dread—if that—the educator feeds the emptiness of a system as productive of itself as it is dead. The educator will not give content to this feeling of emptiness, be terrorised.

15.

Clov would like to leave, but leaving would mean death. The only food is in the larder, and Hamm knows the combination. Beckett's characters are not distinct entities—this much is said—Hamm and Clov are mutually dependent. We encounter not individuals, or individual psychologies. Each character exudes traits. To the extent our time bears relation to Beckett's own, we find aspects of ourselves within them. We suspect that similar fragments constitute us. How are our eyes? Bad. How are our hearts? Bad. But we can move. Then move! Hamm sits tight, Clov moves. That is the arrangement. Both suffer in their way. Nagg wakes up, lifting the lid, gripping the rim of his bin, and demands food. Clov is ordered to give him a biscuit too hard to chew. Bottle him! Hamm orders. Sit on him! But Clov cannot sit, just as Hamm cannot stand. They are specialists, each in his way. Confined to their ashbins Nagg and Nell can barely see one another, barely touch one another, but they can reminisce. They are sentimental but strangely so. For Hamm, their son, this reminiscence amounts to so much drivel. He prefers the form of a chronicle. Each day Hamm tells a little more. Piece-by-piece he narrates his tale in fragments. Clov, for his part, does his best to create a little material order. His dream: a world where all is still, the last dust has settled, with everything in its last place. But the world has not quite ended. There is chaos still; some dust in transit, ash from the bins, perhaps even a little life. Hamm orders Clov to drop what he has accumulated and Clov does so. Remarkably unsentimental when it comes to his parents, Hamm is differently burdened. By guilt, by his recollections of those

outside, who once begged for help. The place was crawling with them. Old Mother Pegg died by his neglect. She would have died anyhow. She asked for oil for her lamp. Hagg told her to go to hell. And she died of darkness. The educator is similarly burdened by that promise, old to us now, of Enlightenment. There were such high hopes for education. It was held as the great panacea, bringing light to where there was darkness, raising up from the shadows. The guilt of a profession beholden to that promise weighs it down, even now, as ballast.

16.

Hamm does the rounds, with Clov pushing, but has his chair returned to the centre. He must be precisely located, just there, dead centre. His position at the centre means almost nothing, because it is in relation to nothing. Hamm has inspected the walls. Even the bricks are hollow. The time? Same time as usual. It is grey outside. The sun does not set. The waves are lead. Even the tides have stopped and with them history. The educator stands with Clov at the window. Or sits with Hamm listening to Clov narrate the vista. Given to sentiment, the educator's subjective sense, barely whispered but strongly felt, leaks out: *I am the last educator standing. All else falls away.*

17.

Endgame depicts the running down of a mechanism—this much is said. With Clov we confront but never quite meet its end. He stands at the door, about to depart. That final moment is held in suspense as Clov halts, facing emptiness. Here the play betrays its last and only optimism: the prospect of an end. It is more hopeful in outlook than contemporary education, an achievement of no small measure. The mechanisms of instituted education appear set to continue without end—breathless in pursuit of improvement, innovative without “making new,” performed without object—filled with ghosts of meaning from its past. Unlike Hamm and unlike Clov the educator is determined still to mean something, or do something, the two can hardly be distinguished. Propelled by a distant promise, a promise half-heard, half-remembered and completely forgotten, *I am education*, this educator declares, *education is me.*

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