

Samuel Beckett and the Weight of Compassion

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There are many facets to Samuel Beckett's writing—humor, despair, love, poignancy, suffering—but for me there is one dominant characteristic—*compassion*, compassion for the human condition of existence. What I propose is to illustrate the influence of this pervading quality and in so doing show that this tenderness was present from the moment Beckett first took pen to paper. It is this compassion, tempered, as it so often is, with humor, that makes the suffering Beckett felt for fellow man bearable for the reader. In making this observation we should spare a thought for the pain Beckett had to endure to portray so vividly the state of the world and man's, at times, heroic ability to contend.

Beckett's confinement to Ireland occurred during a period of his life when influences are formative and lasting; a period when the culture, mannerisms and eccentricities of one's society are not only fundamental to the development of personality, but may provide also the raw material of creativity should a sensitive talent be among its youth. To feel compassion, as Beckett did so forcefully, for fellow-man is one thing, to express it another. At least two moments on Beckett's path to realization can be highlighted here, each of which illuminate in differing ways the magnitude of the task he was to impose upon himself. The first in terms of chronology (though not publication) is recounted in *Krapp's Last Tape* where the location is readily identifiable in the early draft of the play as the large granite pier at Dun Laoghaire:¹

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . . (*hesitates*) . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—(*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller,

clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—(*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire . . .²

Beckett once told me that the “revelation” had, in reality, occurred on the much less pretentious pier at Greystones, near where his mother had a summer house in the thirties and forties.

The second moment of realization arose out of his wartime experiences in France, among which the period spent in Saint-Lô with the Irish Red Cross Hospital was to leave lasting impressions. Beckett served as storekeeper and translator to the complex of huts established by the Irish Red Cross in this Normandy town, which had been annihilated by an allied bomb blitz in June 1944. Here Beckett, and his Irish medical compatriots, saw and shared the suffering of a devastated community. Beckett often discussed Saint-Lô with me, curious as to the fate of those doctors and nurses with whom he had served, and many of whom became colleagues of mine in later years. From these discussions I came to realize how deeply he had been affected by his experiences there. I never sought, and none can ever know (perhaps not even Sam himself) the abstract influences of Saint-Lô in his writing. There are, however, two works that arise directly from Saint-Lô—a poem simply entitled “Saint-Lô” and a prose piece, which was written for Radio Eireann; whether or not it was ever broadcast is not known. The pervading sense of compassion, not only for the impoverished people of Saint-Lô, but also for his compatriots, for their naiveté, their difficulty in grappling with the immense tragedy of war, is evident from the following extract:

On what a year ago was a grass slope, lying in the angle that the Vire and Bayeux roads make as they unite at the entrance of the town, opposite what remains of the second most important stud-farm in France, a general hospital now stands. It is the Hospital of the Irish Red Cross in Saint-Lô, as the Laudiniens themselves say, the Irish Hospital . . .

And yet the whole enterprise turned from the beginning on the establishing of a relation in the light of which the therapeutic relation faded to the merest of pretexts. What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, nor the unregarding munificence of the French Ministry of Reconstruction . . . , but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them and, who knows, by them in us (for they are an imaginative people), of that smile at the human condition as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Burroughes

and Welcome, the smile deriding, among other things, the having and not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health. . . . I suspect that our pains were those inherent in the simple and necessary and yet so unattainable proposition that their way of being we, was not our way and that our way of being they, was not their way. It is only fair to say that many of us had never been abroad before.

. . . I think that to the end of its hospital days it will be called the Irish Hospital, and after that the huts, when they have been turned into dwellings, the Irish huts. I mention this possibility, in the hope that it will give general satisfaction. And having done so I may perhaps venture to mention another, more remote but perhaps of greater import in certain quarters, I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realising that they got at least as good they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France.³

In the poem "Saint Lô" Beckett weaves a complex statement on the survival of humanity in the depths of ruin and despair. The river Vire, winding its way through the ruined city, links the past, the destruction of the present, and the inevitable rebirth witnessed by Beckett, with the future havoc that all-forgetting humanity will just as inevitably inflict upon itself again.

Vire will wind in other shadows
unborn through the bright ways tremble
and the old mind ghost-forsaken
sink into its havoc⁴

That moment on the jetty at Greystones may have fired Beckett's literary vision, but the fulfillment of its arduous demands had to be defined, clarified, and then gathered into a true *vade mecum*, to drive him unerringly and relentlessly towards the achievement of what then seemed the unattainable. This, Beckett did in the remarkable "Tailpiece" to *Watt*:

who may tell the tale
of the old man?
weigh absence in a scale?
mete want with a span?
the sum assess
of the world's woes?
nothingness
in words enclose?⁵

That Beckett should have postulated so demanding an avocatory vision was astounding; that he had the courage and discipline to fulfill it in every detail is testimony to the magnificence of his achievement. Once the course was charted, the process of drawing on the past began and what treasures Beckett's prodigious memory was to provide for his writing! Back, back to childhood (and at times beyond), to the mosaic of compassion woven from the developmental threads of the people who occupied a growing child's world, tiny when viewed from afar, a metropolis when seen from within.

The coincidence of Beckett's arrival on Good Friday, April 13th, 1906 with the remembrance of an auspicious departure could, if taken at face value, be dismissed lightly, or even misinterpreted as an example of Beckettian humour, but no, its profundity is deliberate and those who ignore, or demean this, fail to appreciate the morality that is central to all Beckett's work. I have written somewhere that Beckett's writing is for me more beautiful, more edifying, than the Bible. This is not to demean one of the greatest works we own, but rather to make the point that time changes our perception of great works and with this our ability to be moved and influenced by them. In likening Beckett's work to the Bible, I do so only to state its profound morality and not to impart an unwelcome religiosity on Beckett—Sam was a non-believer, who saw all too clearly the pain inflicted by the intolerance of religion on mankind—his was a message of tolerance.

You were born on an Easter Friday after long labour. Yes I remember. The sun had not long sunk behind the larches. Yes I remember.⁶

Or if only, You first saw the light and cried at the close of the day when in darkness Christ at the ninth hour cried and died.⁷

Beckett's childhood was a happy one and he cherished its memories which recur in his work, often with greater force and poignancy in his later writing. Foxrock was then a rural, untroubled hamlet. "In such surroundings," he wrote, "slipped away my last moments of peace and happiness."⁸ The smallest incidents, the most insignificant characters were given heroic proportions:

The crocuses and the larch turning green every year a week before the others and the pastures red with uneaten sheep's placentas and the long summer days and the new-mown hay and the wood-pigeon in the morning and the cuckoo in the afternoon and the corncrake in the

evening and the wasps in the jam and the smell of the gorse and the look of the gorse and the apples falling and the children walking in the dead leaves and the larch turning brown a week before the others and the chestnuts falling and the howling winds and the sea breaking over the pier and the first fires and the hooves on the road and the consumptive postman whistling *The Roses Are Blooming in Picardy* and the standard oil-lamp and of course the snow and to be sure the sleet and bless your heart the slush and every fourth year the February debacle and the endless April showers and the crocuses and then the whole bloody business starting all over again.⁹

Such, in fact, was the pastoral tranquility of Foxrock, nestling at the foothills of the Dublin mountains, that on certain spring evenings it became “a matter of some difficulty to keep God out of one’s meditations.”¹⁰ But this peaceful harmony between land, sky, and youth was shattered betimes by the suffering that lurked at every corner if one chose to see it. One growing boy saw clearly and was moved by the tragic figures around him; he observed them carefully in their decrepitude and later restored their dignity:

In the ditch on the far side of the road a strange equipage was installed: an old high-wheeled cart, hung with rags. Belacqua looked around for something in the nature of a team, the crazy yoke could scarcely have fallen from the sky, but nothing in the least resembling a draught-beast was to be seen, not even a cow. Squatting under the cart a complete down-and-out was very busy with something or other. The sun beamed down on this as though it were a new-born lamb. Belacqua took in the whole outfit at a glance and felt, the wretched bourgeois, a paroxysm of shame for his capon belly.¹¹

The down-and-out in many guises is recognized as central to the Beckettian theme. Tramps and dishevelled figures illustrate theater programmes, books by, and books about Beckett; yet such images are but a shallow representation, a one dimensional view, of the whole. Deprived of the words that express Beckett’s compassion, such pictures cannot impart the sense of dignity with which Beckett has endowed his tragic creations. A picture, however, tender and evocative, cannot convey the poignancy of Beckett’s childhood beggar woman:

An old beggar woman is fumbling at a big garden gate. Half blind. You know the place well. Stone deaf and not in her right mind the woman of the house is a crony of your mother. She was sure she could fly once in the air. So one day she launched herself from a first floor window. On the

way home from kindergarten on your tiny cycle you see the poor old beggar woman trying to get in. You dismount and open the gate for her. She blesses you. What were her words? God reward you little master. Some such words. God save you little master.¹²

When Beckett left the childhood environs of Foxrock to become a student, and later a lecturer, at Trinity College, the characters surrounding him changed but the compassionate eyes continued to observe the tragic vignettes of city life that would later influence much of his writing. During this period Beckett lived in a garret on the upper floor of No. 6 Clare Street, where the family business, Beckett & Medcalf, was situated. From here he was within easy reach of humanity, an abundance of which was to be had in Dublin's many public houses. He chose his observational post carefully:

Here he was known, in the sense that his grotesque exterior had long ceased to alienate the curates and make them giggle, and to the extent that he was served with his drink without having to call for it. This did not always seem a privilege. He was tolerated, what was more, and let alone by the rough but kindly habitués of the house, recruited for the most part from among dockers, railwaymen and vague jokers on the dole. Here also art and love, scrabbling in dispute or staggering home, were barred, or, perhaps better, unknown. The aesthetes and the impotent were far away.¹³

In such pleasant surroundings, the proximity of suffering humanity coping, often majestically, with the cruelty of life, became tolerable and provided, moreover, an almost theatrical illusion temporarily blunting the pain of realization:

Sitting in this crapulent den, drinking his drink, he gradually ceased to see its furnishings with pleasure, the bottles, representing centuries of loving research, the stools, the counter, the powerful screws, the shining phalanx of the pulls of the beer-engines, all cunningly devised and elaborated to further the relations between purveyor and consumer in this domain. The bottles drawn and emptied in a twinkling, the casks responding to the slightest pressure on their joysticks, the weary proletarians at rest on arse and elbow, the cash-register that never complains, the graceful curates flying from customer to customer, all this made up a spectacle in which Belacqua was used to take delight and chose to see a pleasant instance of machinery decently subservient to appetite. A great major symphony of supply and demand, effect and cause, fulcrum on the middle C of the counter and waxing, as it proceeded, in the charming harmonies of blasphemy and broken glass and all the aliquots

of fatigue and ebriety. So that he would say that the only place where he could come to anchor and be happy was a low public-house and that all the wearisome tactic of gress and dud Beethoven would be done away with if only he could spend his life in such a place.¹⁴

But such reveries were short, necessarily so in the haunts frequented by Beckett, the student. Both inside and out, the pain of poverty abounded; the beggar woman again, this time selling the impossible, seduces Belacqua with the rhythm of her language:

“Seats in heaven” she said in a white voice “tuppence apiece, four fer a tanner.”

“No” said Belacqua. It was the first syllable to come to his lips. It had not been his intention to deny her.

“The best of seats” she said “again I’m sold out. Tuppence apiece the best of seats, four fer a tanner” . . .

“Have you got them on you?” he mumbled.

“Heaven goes round” she said, whirling her arm, “and round and round and round and round.”

“Yes” said Belacqua “round and round.”

“Rowan” she said, dropping the d’s and getting more of a spin into the slogan, “rowan an’ rowan an’ rowan.”¹⁵

On 31st March, 1926, a house named *La Mancha*, in County Dublin, was found in flames, and six bodies were removed from the blaze: two brothers, two sisters and their two servants. Only the gardener, Henry McCabe, who raised the alarm, survived. A number of inconsistencies in McCabe’s account of the event led to his arrest, trial, and conviction for arson and the murder of six people. In passing the death sentence, the judge urged McCabe to spend his remaining days preparing to meet his Maker.¹⁶ McCabe’s fate burned on in Beckett’s mind, eventually finding expression—a plea for mercy—not acquittal—in *More Pricks than Kicks*:

Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgement. He thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God on Nineveh. And poor McCabe, he would get it in the neck at dawn. What was he doing now, how was he feeling? He would relish one more meal, one more night.¹⁷

On long straight Pearse Street that permitted “a simple cantilena” of the mind, many adventures ordained by the Bovril sign dancing “through its seven phases” were enacted, few more poignant than that of two beggar girls on an evening of human vicissitude in Dublin:

It was a most pleasant street, despite its name, to be abroad in, full as it always was with shabby substance and honest-to-God coming and going. All day the roadway was a tumult of buses, red and blue and silver. By one of these a little girl was run down, just as Belacqua drew near to the railway viaduct. She had been to the Hibernian Dairies for milk and bread and then she had plunged out into the roadway, she was in such a childish fever to get back in record time with her treasure to the tenement in Mark Street where she lived. The good milk was all over the road and the loaf, which had sustained no injury, was sitting up against the kerb, for all the world as though a pair of hands had taken it up and set it down there. The queue standing for the Palace Cinema was torn between conflicting desires: to keep their places and to see the excitement. They craned their necks and called out to know the worst, but they stood firm. Only one girl, debauched in appearance and swathed in a black blanket, fell out near the sting of the queue and secured the loaf. With the loaf under her blanket she sidled unchallenged down Mark Street and turned into Mark Lane. When she got back to the queue her place had been taken of course. But her sally had not cost her more than a couple of yards.¹⁸

The deranged in society, whether they be poor, deformed, or mentally ill, are special to Beckett. As with the poor, he treats the insane with humor, sympathy and admiration, never with disrespect. In madness, the insane sometimes achieve the perfect escape from a chaotic society; no mean feat in Beckett's view. Moreover, absorbed in their worlds, the mentally disturbed are protected from the contamination of society and retain an integrity not to be found in the sane. Asylums are sanctuaries, where the dualities that compose the Beckettian personality are permitted expression and dialogue free of the interference that would necessarily stifle their existence in so-called normal society. Deranged man, for such are those in mental institutions said to be, is given a dignity generally denied him even by the most sympathetic of observers simply because the condition is not *felt*. Though the House of Saint John of God and Portrane Lunatic Asylum feature in Beckett's early writing, and his compassion for the condition of the inmates is expressed in "Fingal" and *Malone Dies*, it is in the Magdalen Mental Mercy Seat, stinking of "per-aldehyde and truant sphincters," that Beckett creates his "bower of bliss":

The pads surpassed by far all he had ever been able to imagine in the way of indoor bowers of bliss. The three dimensions, slightly concave, were so exquisitely proportioned that the absence of the fourth was scarcely felt. The tender luminous oyster-grey of the pneumatic upholstery,

cushioning every square inch of ceiling, walls, floor and door, lent colour to the truth, that one was a prisoner of air. The temperature was such that only total nudity could do it justice. No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum. The compartment was windowless, like a monad, except for the shuttered judas in the door, at which a sane eye appeared, or was employed to appear, at frequent and regular intervals throughout the twenty-four hours. Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more creditable representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world.¹⁹

In the pursuit of the quality of compassion, so closely allied to love, one is drawn to Beckett's relationship with his parents. Take the father first, ostensibly shining through history (in the portrayals of those who knew him not) as a simple man, but in his son's writing he rises to a higher plane, if we choose to see it, a plane on which he provides the support so craved for and so much needed by his son in childhood and adolescence:

Yes, this evening it has to be as in the story my father used to read to me, evening after evening, when I was small, and he had all his health, to calm me, evening after evening, year after year it seems to me this evening, which I don't remember much about, except that it was the adventures of one Joe Broom, or Breen, the son of a lighthouse-keeper, a strong muscular lad of fifteen, those were the words, who swam for miles in the night, a knife between his teeth, after a shark, I forget why, out of sheer heroism. He might have simply told me the story, he knew it by heart, so did I, but that wouldn't have calmed me, he had to read it to me, evening after evening, or pretend to read it to me, turning the pages and explaining the pictures that were of me already, evening after evening the same pictures till I dozed off on his shoulder. If he had skipped a single word I would have hit him, with my little fist, in his big belly bursting out of the old cardigan and unbuttoned trousers that rested him from his office canonicals.²⁰

However Beckett's relationship with his mother may be misinterpreted by those who fail to appreciate the mores of the Irish family during the first fifty years of this century, the fact is that Beckett bore deep love for his mother albeit, perhaps, with less intensity, than for his father. Ireland is a land where the spoken word has many meanings and affection often masquerades under the guise of derision. So, in this regard, a plea for "no symbols where none intended." May Beckett's

death, in a nursing home overlooking the Grand Canal in Dublin, caused her son intense distress, expressed in one of Beckett's most powerful pieces of writing, one which captures not only the profound sense of loss, and relief that his mother's suffering is over, but also the inevitability of death and the timelessness of age, the inexorable cycle of death and birth and life, the whole business of existence:

—bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone. (*Pause*) Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs . . .

—the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (*Pause.*) Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog's moments.²¹

My discipline demands compassion and feeling, or such at least would be the public's perception of the "medicine man," as Lenny Bernstein affectionately liked to call us doctors. Paradoxically, the practice of medicine makes the exclusion of sentiment a prerequisite for the survival of self, and the process, begun in early studentship, soon becomes so integral a part of the scientific persona that the dissipated gems of idealism, among which, of course, may be found compassion, become unrecognizable. The years of training, so carefully constructed by our institutions, initially blunt and finally pervert the purity of avocation and the sensibility of youth, essences to be found in most medical students but so few doctors. It is chastening, but not necessarily a balm to existence, to have this protective wall around one annihilated. I can do no better, in closing with a great sense of sadness that the Sam I once knew is no more, than quote what I wrote with a much lighter heart for a *festschrift* for his eightieth birthday in 1986:

The occasion is too great, my ability to express too feeble, other than to gasp in gratitude, to acknowledge the greatness of his sum, to admit that I for one will never be as before. Whether for worse or better I know not. But changed as no other ever could. Possessing now an understanding of and feeling for fellow-man as no other could inculcate in a long apprenticeship designed to do just that. The problem now is feeling too much. Not being able to go on but having to do so, as only Sam knows

how. Man unadorned: ugly, decrepit, depraved, laughing, despairing, majestic in his nothingness, not always without hope. A life spent with humanity in the doldrums but only seen from afar. Now terrifyingly close. Can't endure the pain once not felt, necessarily so. What now? Still gratitude for the profundity of realisation. Might not have come from any other. Might never have come. What then?²²

NOTES

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1. E. O'Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland*. Dublin: Black Cat Press and Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 83.
2. S. Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber & Faber, 1986, p. 220.
3. E. O'Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland*. Dublin: Black Cat Press and Faber and Faber, 1986, pp. 333-337.
4. S. Beckett, "Saint-Lô." *Irish Times*, June 24, 1946.
5. S. Beckett, *Watt*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1972, p. 274.
6. S. Beckett, *Company*. London: John Calder, 1980, p. 47.
7. S. Beckett, *ibid.*, p. 77.
8. S. Beckett *Molloy*. In *The Trilogy. Molloy. Malone Dies. The Unnamable*. London: John Calder, 1976, p. 93.
9. S. Beckett *Watt*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1972, pp. 45-46.
10. S. Beckett *More Pricks than Kicks*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1970, p. 109.
11. S. Beckett, *ibid.*, p. 111.
12. S. Beckett, *Company*. London: John Calder, 1980, pp. 21-22
13. S. Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1970, pp. 43-44.
14. S. Beckett, *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.
15. S. Beckett, *ibid.*, pp. 47-48.
16. E. O'Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland*. Dublin: Black Cat Press and Faber and Faber, 1986, pp. 133-136.
17. S. Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1970, p. 20.

18. S. Beckett, *ibid.*, p. 43.
19. S. Beckett, *Murphy*. London: John Calder, 1963, p. 125.
20. S. Beckett, *The Calmative*. In *Four Novellas*. London: John Calder, 1967, pp. 54–55.
21. S. Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape." *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 60.
22. E. O'Brien, in: *As no other dare fail: For Samuel Beckett on his 80th Birthday by his friends and admirers*. Ed. J. Calder. London: John Calder, New York: Riverrun Press, 1986, p. 99.