

EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS OF ANOUILH'S BECKETT

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IN this paper I propose to examine the relation between King Henry and Beckett in their attempt and failure to establish encounter and in their process of self-discovery, culminating in the absurd choice of the king to kill Beckett and in Beckett's decision to accept to be killed.

THE FAILURE OF ENCOUNTER

Henry and Beckett never understand each other because they never encounter each other as persons, as Beckett confesses in I 1 which is really an epilogue to the play:

KING: Don't you think we'd have done better to understand each other?

BECKETT: Understand each other? It wasn't possible.

They do not understand each other because they have no common point of interest. Their only meeting point would have been a sense of honor, but they understand honor differently:

For the King *honor of the realm* was sacred; that honor for Beckett was a mark of shame — his parents had to agree to 'collaborate' to keep their lands (I 2 p. 4); but that is barely honor, as the king hints: 'And honor was reconciled with collaboration, too?' (I 2 p. 5). For Beckett honor was 'the honor of God' (I 1 p. 1). They could not understand each other, because they would not listen to each other (cf. I 3 p. 10), even though they treat each other as friends. However, Beckett shows deference to the king — he rubs him down after he washes —

KING: You're a nobleman, why do you play at being my valet? (I 2 p. 3), and Beckett does it as a matter of course.

BECKETT: I am your servant, my prince, that's all. Helping you to govern or helping you to get warm again is part of the same thing to me. I like helping you. (ib p. 4)

Even so, Beckett speaks with a touch of scorn, for though he would like to treat Henry as a friend, he can't, because, as Gwendolen says, 'You belong to a conquered race, too.' (I 6 p. 24).

And it is precisely because he is a member of the conquered race that he has been deprived of the possibility of ever experiencing honor for the realm: 'There is a gap in me where honor ought to be,' as he explains to Gwendolen. (I 6 p. 24)

So Beckett clings to the honor of God to redeem his life, but Henry never understands the deeper allegiance of his Chancellor. 'I shall never know what you're thinking,' he tells him. (I 6 p. 25).

So between the two men there is no bond, save that of King and subject, but Beckett as a subject knows that he has no honor to cling to, for Henry is not 'my true prince. . . . How tenderly I would love you, then, my prince, in an ordered world.' He would have given his loyalty: 'Each of us bound in reality to the other.' His loyalty would not have been that of a subject to his king, but that of a friend to another, of a person to another, accepting one another as they were — 'head, heart and limbs, with no further questions to ask of oneself, ever.' (I 6 p. 26). But he is a 'Saxon dog' even though he is priveleged and the King calls him 'son' (I 5 p. 14).

So he knows that his honor is fake:

BECKETT: But I cheated my way in. An alien, a bastard, and stole my place among the conquerors. . . . So long as Beckett is obliged to improvise his honor, he will serve you.

But he knows, though he tries to hide the fact from himself, he has to live with his shame, the shame he felt since he was young (cf II 1 pp. 33-34); yet he convinces himself as he is confronted by the young monk — his own ghost, when young, as though Fate was playing a timely trick on him (II 1 p. 34) 'Shame is a stale vintage.' He tells the young monk: 'Your father and your grandfather drank it to the dregs. The cup is empty now.' He knows he is thinking of his own father and grandfather and he is just as ashamed of them as the young monk. But what can he do. 'Did you imagine you could liberate your race single-handed?'

Perhaps the burden of shame is too great for any one man; if he could share it with the young monk, it would be lighter for both. 'If I took over half of it, would its weight be less heavy?' (III 2 p. 47). Perhaps, but now the burden weighs on the shoulders of the Archbishop. He needs to share, but he can't, for Beckett accepts only one type of honor — the honor of God 'And if one day, he meets it face to face . . .' (I 6 p. 26) then anything may happen. Meanwhile Beckett must search for his honor, for at this stage he does not know where it lies: 'But where is Beckett's honor?' He must search, but the search is within himself, as the Archbishop of Canterbury suggests: 'He is as it were detached, as if seeking his real self.' (I 3 p. 11).

It will not be easy for Beckett however to go through this existential self-understanding, for he is still somehow living outside experience: he

likes to label things rather than understand them, and to explain or justify their function. The king rebukes him, when he calls Gwendolen his mistress: 'Why do you put labels on to everything to justify your feelings?'

BECKETT: 'Because without labels, the world would have no shape, my prince.'

Beckett must give shape to the world if he is to understand what he is doing. 'It's essential, my prince, otherwise we can't know what we're doing.' (I 5 p. 12-13). Yet he is searching for true knowledge – not the vain speculation of the 'learned clerics debating the sex of angels' nor indulging himself in 'an unimaginable capacity for absorbing food' like the Norman nobles (I 6 p. 19), for the clerics (are as far from the true knowledge of things as these mindless brutes, the nobles). But how can he understand unless he experiences? He doubts Gwendolen's explanation 'I am my Lord's captive and I belong to him, body and soul. God has willed it so, since he gave the Normans victory over my people....' (I 6 p. 19).

It's a theory: 'This belief will do as well as any, my kitten. ... but ... I have a feeling that God's system is a little muddled.' He must experience, but so far only the encounter with beauty does not draw him away from God. 'Beauty is the one thing which doesn't shake one's faith in God' (I 6 p. 19).

SELF-DISCOVERY

He is just as enigmatic to himself as he is to the barons, who in the words of the fourth baron are waiting 'Till he show himself. ... For him to show himself. For him to break cover.' They know that one day Beckett will be confronted by a crisis, and in that crisis he will have to show his true identity: 'The day he does, we'll know who he is.' And so will Beckett, for then he will be confronted with an existential encounter – with himself, with his king and with his God.

The barons bait him, but he does not swallow the bait: 'If he is a loyal subject, he should have at heart the honor of a soldier. A soldier's honor, ... is to win victories.' Beckett explains. He is not worried, even if he has to go out of his way to make the French collaborate, much as he hates collaboration (II 1 p. 29). So proudly he states: 'I am the French people's dearest friend.'

But the Barons take him up on that: they will put him to the test: 'What about England's honor, ...'

But he sees the hook under the bait: England's honor ... in the final reckoning, has always been to succeed.' (II 1 p.29). Still he has not yet come to terms with his divided allegiance. For the moment he can show his loyalty to the king by saving his life (II 1 p.27), and winning French cities for him – not dead, but live cities.

Yet the test will come when he discovers that he is confronted by the honor of God – and find that he was wrong when he said to the king: 'You know one can always come to some arrangement with God, on this earth.' (II 1 p.32).

So he will fight the king's battle; he will advise him patiently (II, 2); the king will reluctantly obey (II, 3) because he knows that his Chancellor is the better man: 'With my big fist and your big brain we'll do some good work, you and I.' (II.1 p.32). Yet they don't understand each other. In fact, when the Archbishop is dead, and the king thinks Beckett is his man, then he only thinks that 'This is the time to score a point.' He is stunned by his own brain-wave: 'An extraordinary idea is creeping into my mind, Beckett. A master-stroke. (II 3 p.38-39). I suddenly feel extremely intelligent. ... I am subtle, ... I am profound. So profound it's making my head spin.' (II 3 p.38-39). It's almost pathetic. Henry does not understand Beckett. So he will exercise his royal veto to make sure that 'the Primate is my man' – and he will appoint 'Someone who doesn't know what dizziness means' so he would not 'grow dizzy with power.' 'someone who isn't even afraid of God.' (II 3 p.39). The king does not understand Beckett. And Beckett thinks that the king is joking. 'You really fooled me for a second' (II 3 p.39). Perhaps Beckett doesn't understand the king either. When he realizes how serious it is, then he wants the king not to do it. 'It frightens me.'

This was the moment when the king and Beckett could have had their moment of encounter, but the king is set on playing his game against the Pope, 'Beckett, this is an order.' And Beckett who could have kept his loyalty for Henry by renouncing the Primate and perhaps losing his head – renounces this encounter for ever. 'If I become Archbishop, I can no longer be your friend' (II 3 p.40). The king does not listen 'This is madness, my Lord ... I could not serve both God and you.' Henry does not understand. He does not realize that Beckett is loyal to him because he is his lord, and that he will be loyal to the Pope and to God, if he is made Archbishop. 'You've never disappointed me, Thomas. And you are the only man I trust' (II 3 p.40).

Beckett is beginning to find where his honor lies – perhaps with a touch of vanity. He gave away all his wealth, and wearing a plain dress-

ing gown he picks up the crucifix: 'Lord, are you sure You are not tempting me? It all seems far too easy' (II 4 p.42).

Even when he hears that Beckett has given away all his wealth and had invited forty beggars to dinner, and later as Archbishop sends him a letter instead of obeying the king's summons, Henry still defends him against the royal 'females': 'You'd like to see him dead, wouldn't you, you females, — because he loves me?' (III.1 p.44).

Only when Beckett returns the royal Seal does he begin to understand that Beckett is interested in God's honor. 'You think you have God's Honor to defend now.' Henry is hurt, because 'Only I loved you and you didn't love me — that's the difference.' Yet Beckett states: 'We loved each other' (cf IV 1. p. 59). Now he begins to understand 'I shall learn to be alone' (III 1 p.45). From this moment onwards both have lost the chance of an encounter: the king accuses and summons Beckett before his Council (III 2 p.47) to retaliate the Archbishop's excommunications, but 'The kingdom of God must be defended like any other Kingdom' (III 2 p.48). Beckett begins to see where his honor lies: 'You passed the burden on to me and now I have to carry it, and nothing will ever make me set it down again' (III 2 p.48). So he ignores the summons, and the Bishops prepare to assemble to vote him to prison (III 3 p.49). Yet Henry acknowledges his worth: 'And Beckett was my friend, red-blooded — generous and full of strength. O my Thomas!' And in this moment of self-pity, he acknowledges against his previous denial that Beckett loved him: '... no one on this earth has ever loved me except Beckett.' Even now the opportunity for encounter has not disappeared, though it is weak. The queen, talking like a mother to her son, is practical enough to suggest the only humane line of action. 'Well, call him back. Absolve him, since he loves you. But do something' (III 3 p.50). But he does nothing: he is content to wallow in self-pity. 'I'm learning to be alone, again' (III 3 p.50). He has reason to be alone: 'The only intelligent man in my kingdom is against me' (III 3 p.50). So once more he misses his chance, and Louis and the sea manage between them to keep them apart playing the game of honor (III 4.p.52).

As Beckett, accused of fraud, perjury and treason towards Henry, asks asylum to the king of France, but he makes it clear 'I cannot buy this protection with any act hostile to my country,' (III 3 p.54) still aware of his allegiance to Henry, yet still searching for his honor of God.

So while the Pope is worried whether he should forfeit his honor and accept the money from the king, and receive Beckett to balance his dishonor with an honorable act, the Archbishop is waiting in the antechamber

planning to save the Honor of God of which he considers himself the champion because he feels he has usurped the title of Primate (III 5 p. 56). Instead Pope and cardinals scheme to outwit him, and hit the king in the bargain. So Beckett becomes a pawn in the game between the Pope and the king (III 5 p. 56).

But Beckett realizes that the honor of God is not in the convent cell; he realizes that 'I am certain now that you meant to tempt me with this hair-shirt, object of so much vapid self-congratulation; ... and the conveniences of prayer.' His place is in the cathedral: 'I shall go back to my place so that I may do what I believe is my life's work' (III 6 p. 58).

Beckett is aware now that he is staking his life for God's honor. The king is after his life. 'I think he cannot forgive me for preferring God to him' (IV 1 p. 59). But even his decision to be true to himself and his God, is misunderstood as 'a taste for martyrdom' (IV ip. 59).

But he insists: 'The honor of God and common sense ... dictate that I should go and have myself killed - if killed I must be - among my flock in my own cathedral. That is my place' (IV 1 p. 59). Perhaps Henry would then have encountered Beckett, as Louis almost did - 'What a pity it is to be a king, sometimes, when one has the surprise of meeting a man' (IV 1 p. 59). Even Thomas would perhaps have encountered Henry, for he still thought of him: '... Ever since we stopped seeing each other, I have never ceased to talk to him.'

In the plain lashed by the wind Beckett and Henry meet, but the king prefers to talk about trivial things (IV 2 p. 61) and once more they put off the encounter: 'If we start straightaway we're sure to quarrel' (IV 2 p. 61). Beckett leads the conversation to serious matters; the king insists: 'Let's not start yet, I tell you. Talk about something else' (IV 2 p. 61), but moved by Beckett's loyalty, as he tells him 'You have remained my prince,' he cries 'Then why are you doing me harm?' And now it is Beckett who cannot encounter the king. And the conversation moves on and off touching almost on moments of authentic encounter, as Beckett says: 'I do so wish I could help you' Henry retorts 'Then what are you waiting for? You can see I'm dying for it.'

This is the moment when the conflict between the honor of God and the honor of the realm takes its fullest expression in Beckett's mind. 'I'm waiting for the honor of God and the honor of the king to become one.' The moment comes and goes. 'You'll wait a long time, then.' Beckett answers, 'Yes, I'm afraid I will.' (IV 2 p. 62). Now they are both aware that they have missed meeting each other as two persons.

All this scene is a series of attempts to bring about the encounter

which they both dreaded, so in their pride they push each other away. The King almost irritated says: 'If we've nothing more to say to each other, we might as well go and get warm.'

But Beckett tries again, feebly: 'We have everything to say to each other, my prince. The opportunity may not occur again.' Henry is ready to forget, but 'you must make the first move, I'm prepared to forget a lot of things, but not the fact that I am King.' Beckett knows that, if the king must steer the ship against the wind, then Beckett must 'direct the wind for God.' So they cannot encounter each other as friends, even if once they were friends. 'The tasks have been shared out, once and for all. The pity of it is that it should have been between us two, my prince – who were friends' (IV 2 p.62).

There is no way out: the king will not weaken, nor will he be conquered by force. Beckett's job is to resist. 'It is not for me to win you around. I have only to say no to you.'

THE ABSURD CHOICE

At this stage, the action reaches an impasse – not only no encounter is possible, but neither Henry's nor Beckett's decision can be justified any longer. They cannot be founded on logic. Beckett explains: 'We must only do – absurdly – what we have been given to do – right to the end.' Henry protests: Beckett had lived intensely – never absurdly. 'That word isn't like you.' This new streak cannot be explained as a revolt, but as a trust: He had been a man without honor because he was a man without a purpose; but when Henry chose him, God chose him too. 'I was a man without honor. And suddenly I found it – one I never imagined would ever become mine: – the honor of God.' Yet he could hardly understand this honor was so vulnerable: 'a frail, incomprehensible honor, vulnerable as a boy-king fleeing from danger' (IV 2 p.63). The king does not understand the language of the absurd: he wants to talk about practical issues. But Beckett is only interested in defending this honor: 'I have to defend this child, who was given, naked, into my care' (IV 2 p.63). So his honor may become more manifest to himself.

The king will let him come back to England. Beckett was ready to deliver himself to the king; so as they part from each other, these two strong men are alone. The king still wants to find out if Beckett ever loved him; and Beckett doesn't even know for sure. 'In so far as I was capable of love, yes, my prince, I did.' But was he capable of love? Perhaps now he loved God. Or 'Did you start to love God?' the king asks. No, Beckett is only capable of submitting to the honor of God. 'I started to love the honor of God.'

For Beckett to love the honor of God is to be a man of integrity — to begin to understand what he should do not to betray himself by making his life non-authentic. He must be faithful to his work, so if he loves the honor of God, he should learn to love the work that this honor demands of him.

Perhaps he will find himself if he learns to love: like the dirty peasant who in his 'night of love ... was a king, and shed his fear' (I 5 p. 16). Beckett confesses he has still to learn to love. 'I don't like being loved.' (I 6 p. 19). He loves only one thing — not the people for whom he works, but the work he does because he has to do it. 'There's one thing I do love, ... and that I'm sure of. Doing what I have to do and doing it well.' Perhaps that's a kind of self-love, even though Beckett calls it aesthetics (II 1 p. 30). Beckett and Henry separate: Henry can't bear to come near him, not even to look at him, and has his revenge by planning to make the Bishop of York consecrate his son king instead of Thomas; his defeat makes him vent his anger against his son and the elder and the younger queens (IV 3 p. 66-67). He becomes vulgar to stifle his rancour (ib. p. 68). Yet in his anger he is eager to hear news of Beckett and learn he has landed in England, but as he hears of the welcome the Saxon population gave him escorting him back to Canterbury: 'A miserable wretch who ate my bread! A fellow I raised up from nothing. A Saxon! A man I loved. Yes, I loved him. And I believe I still do!'

And in his humiliation that this man should oppose him he demands the one thing that cannot be justified: he demands his murder. Had he decided to have him accused, indicated condemned and executed, even in a mock trial, he would have saved appearances to make his action not right, but at least rational. When Henry cries for a murderer to get rid of him, the absurd takes over: 'Will no one rid me of him? ... A priest who jeers at me and does me injury. Are there none but cowards like myself around me?' (IV 3 p. 69). Yet he loves this man. Beckett is ready to die: he will defend the honor of God with his life. But was it necessary? Beckett perhaps has a moment of doubt, and he prays: 'Lord, do not, in this interval of waiting, let one last doubt enter my soul.' But he knows that this action, even as martyrdom, is absurd: he calls it 'The supreme folly. This is its hour' (IV 3 p. 71).

Beckett is ready but he is shaken, even crushed by this act which he cannot justify. 'How difficult you make it all' he prays. 'And how heavy your Honor is to bear.' So Beckett dies, and 'the honor of God has been washed clean.'

So was it worth dying for the honor of God? Yes, Henry explains — 'Eng-

land will owe her ultimate victory over chaos to him.' His loyalty to the honor of God was his way of finding his integrity, and integrity is what gives value to man's resistance to any form of tyranny or oppression, whether such resistance is justified or not, provided we do not set out to defend the honor of God as Henry proposes to do because 'The Honor of God . . . is a very good thing, and taken all in all, one gains by having it on one's side' (IV 4 p.73).

To defend the honor of God – or of man – for that matter is important because through that loyalty man is loyal to himself and to other men, even if such a resistance cannot be justified as expedient or practical or wise.

So even if Beckett and Henry never have a genuine encounter and they are led to resist one another, their action is absurd but not valueless, for even if Henry uses Beckett's murder and his canonization for his own political security, he cannot destroy the fact that Beckett chooses to die to protect his integrity which he sees rooted in his loyalty to God rather than in his service to the king. And if we are faced with a choice, we may not justify our choice, but we may have to choose to protect our integrity as we understand it.

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