

Beckett, Bion and waiting for God

Mary Farrell

Abstract

In 1948, Samuel Beckett's famous existential theatre masterpiece, 'Waiting for Godot' was written. This paper will make links between the dialogue in the play and Beckett's analytic work with the young Wilfred Bion in the early 1930s. The paper will be illustrated by extracts from the recent film version of 'Waiting for Godot'. Reference will be made to Bion's paper 'Attacks on Linking', showing the relevance of his ideas to Beckett's life history and to a patient whose persistent rejection of interpretation has characterised our work together.

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) was a brilliant and often baffling playwright whose life mirrored his work, and was set against the backdrop of European existentialism, with its themes of alienation and the absurdity of the human condition. There have been two leading biographies: one, by Deirdre Bair with whom he resolutely refused to comply, and one by his friend James Knowlson, which was thoroughly approved by Beckett, and fittingly called 'Damned to Fame'. Beckett was indeed damned to fame. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 and his work has been discussed, explored, produced, filmed, broadcast and studied by scores of actors, directors, students and literary critics. However his extreme dislike of intrusion and social interaction is well chronicled and his house in Paris was surrounded by high walls studded with broken shards of glass.

I have been fascinated by his life and work since my teens, and read all his plays and poems as well as every article I could find. To me, his enigmatic blend of intense vulnerability and angry withdrawal encompasses so many of our difficulties in relating to each other and his most famous work, 'Waiting for Godot' (1956) says so much about the despair we can often feel when frequent disappointment is the outcome of our endeavours.

'Waiting for Godot' has become one of the most celebrated and controversial texts of the last century. Hate it or love it, one must concede that the play where, as Mercier's review in the Irish Times of 1956 said: 'nothing happens twice, once in the first act and once in the second', expresses something of the essence of our often frustrating and mystifying human experience. It was written in French in 1948. During the war, Beckett and his partner Suzanne had worked for the French Resistance (Beckett won the Croix de Guerre for his heroism) and spent many weeks of the occupation of France walking the roads and hiding at various barns and safe houses in the Midi area.

The brief summary of the play is that two homeless itinerants are waiting, on a deserted road, for someone called Godot. Godot seems to have an answer of some kind – maybe a job, maybe an entrance to a better life, maybe some interesting food to eat or a comfortable place to stay. As they wait, they meet a very bizarre couple, Pozzo and Lucky, a tyrant and his servant. Lucky is mid way between a man and a horse, treated badly by his master and yet in some way a genius who ‘thinks’ in great bursts of poetic speech. When Lucky and Pozzo depart, a boy appears who says he is from Godot. Godot, it seems, cannot come but may be there tomorrow. The next act is a repetition of the same events – in the meantime some long period of time seems to have passed:

They look at the tree.

Estragon: I see nothing

Vladimir: But yesterday it was all black and bare.

And now it's covered with leaves.

Estragon: Leaves?

Vladimir: In a single night.

Estragon: It must be Spring.

Vladimir: But in a single night!

Estragon: I tell you we weren't here yesterday. Another of your nightmares.

Vladimir: And where were we yesterday evening according to you?

Estragon: How do I know? In another compartment! There's no lack of void (Beckett, 1956, pp. 65-66).

The sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time was a familiar one for Beckett. Much has been written about his short and unfinished analysis with the young Wilfred Bion. The year was 1934. Beckett's beloved father had died suddenly in 1933 at the family home just south of Dublin, leaving Beckett at the mercy of his difficult, depressed and narcissistic mother. Beckett's mental and physical health deteriorated fast: he suffered from boils, cysts and panic attacks. Insomnia and night terrors tormented him. The only way he could sleep was if his brother Frank would get into bed with him and hold him. His mother reluctantly relinquished him to London, preferring that he sought treatment in a place where her reputation would remain unscathed. His doctor recommended the Tavistock Clinic.

Bion at the time was six years older than his 28-year-old patient. After qualifying as a doctor in 1930, with no previous training in psychotherapy, he joined the Tavistock Clinic in 1932. It is hard to know how it went for the two of them. Bion seemed very involved with his fascinating patient, and invited him to dinner, a concert and Jung's series of five lectures in London. Beckett wrote:

I used to lie down on the couch and try to go back in my past. I think it probably did help. I think it helped me to control the panic... I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out, but no-one could hear, no one was listening. I remember being in pain but being unable to do anything about it (Letter to Maurice Sinclair, 1935; cited in Bair 1978).

Beckett continued with Bion for two years – during that time he became an avid reader of Freud, Adler and Otto Rank. He made copious notes on his study and experience of psychoanalysis, referring to his ‘Peter Panitis’ and the ‘frightening severance from mother’. We can only guess that much of the content of his sessions with Bion revolved around his love-hate relationship with his powerful and autocratic mother, the intensity of his wish to separate from her and the narcissistic folie a deux that seemed to have had its genesis with her:

‘For years, I was unhappy’, he wrote in 1935, after 150 meetings with Bion, consciously and deliberately; so that I isolated myself more and more, undertook less and less, and lent myself to a crescendo of disparagement of others and myself ... the misery and solitude and apathy and the sneers were the elements of an index of superiority and guaranteed the feeling of arrogant otherness (Letter to Thomas McGreevy, 1935; cited in Bair, 1978).

Beckett was painfully aware of the frequent contempt for others that often dominated his interactions. He described his analysis as an ‘endless squabble’ and chose to end it just after Christmas 1935. His ending of the relationship with Bion was another expression of the feeling of hopelessness that anything much could come of attempting to have any meaningful interaction with another person and perhaps the extreme fear of dependency that stayed with him throughout his long life. The words that remained indelibly in his mind were the ones he heard in the lecture by Jung that he attended with Bion shortly before the analysis ended. Jung was talking about a little girl, whose dreams were full of mythological figures. Jung sensed the dreams were a premonition of her early death, and indeed, she died when she was 11. ‘She had never been born, entirely’, Jung concluded (1976). These words had a huge impact on Beckett. He felt they made sense of his whole analytic experience – what he called his womb fixation: - the desire to stay in bed and do nothing, his obsessive relationship with his mother – he had not been entirely born. He used Jung’s words later in his radio play ‘All That Fall’, where Mrs Rooney tells her husband about a lecture she has heard from ‘one of those new mind doctors’:

It was something he said and the way he said it, that have haunted me ever since ... when he had done with the little girl, he stood there motionless for some time... then he suddenly raised his head and exclaimed, as if he had had a revelation, the trouble with her was that she had never really been born! I left before the end...(Beckett, 1986, p. 195)

The resonance that this idea had with Beckett suggests to me that his life long torment from fits of depression and psychosomatic symptoms may have originated from the intense pain of his early experience of being mothered. His experience of having been neglected and suffocated, trapped in the womb and yet painfully expelled after a long and difficult labour, often dominated his thinking and these themes can be found in all his plays:

Pozzo (*suddenly furious*): Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? It's abominable! When! When! One day. Is that not enough for you, one day like any other day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer*) They give birth astride of a grave. The light gleams for an instant, then it's night once more (Beckett, 1956, p. 89).

The grim and despairing Pozzo is also controlling, powerful and obsessional: one could surmise he represented the introjected mother for Beckett. Beckett was the second child of May Beckett, a woman who had been born into a wealthy family of landowners in County Kildare. May's father had died young at the age of 54, leaving the family in financial difficulty and with considerable debt. May, at 15, was forced to go out to work and became a nurse. A stubbornly independent person, May was tall, thin and manly in her bearing, with stern eyes and a flashing temper. Her eventual marriage to the sociable and energetic Bill Beckett was her salvation in some ways, as he could make her laugh. As a successful businessman, he also restored her to the style of living she preferred. They lived in the grand old house of Cooldrinagh outside of Dublin, where Samuel was born and brought up. May was highly obsessional, needing everything to stay exactly in order, and often losing her temper with her household staff and with her children. She also suffered from periods of dreadful despair, pacing about the dark house at night like a ghost. May's behaviour, as James Knowlson writes in his biography of Beckett:

... was dominated by a rigid code of conduct and concept of decorum which promised trouble once her second son started to behave in rather wild bohemian ways of which she strongly disapproved. She used to have moods of dark depression which would last for days on end, when she was extremely difficult to deal with: strange, ill-tempered, bottled-up, tricky and difficult were all words used by those who tried to describe her personality. (Knowlson: 1996, p. 5)

The lines that perhaps characterise Beckett's relationship with his mother are to be found in his short screenplay 'Film': 'Male infant. 6 months. His mother holds him. Her severe eyes devouring him.'

The blend of dependency, love, hate, disapproval and anxious attachment described in those sparing words finds expression in the arid climate and landscape of 'Waiting for Godot'. The dialogue re-iterates the intense conflict of the wish to stay and the inability to leave. The boredom and frustrated anger is voiced by the unloved and misunderstood child who was often verbally or physically lashed by his mother.

In his paper 'Attacks on Linking', Bion (1959) talks of the 'destructive attacks that the patient makes on anything which is felt to have the function of linking one object with another.' The paper describes the ways in which patients deny and sometimes vehemently reject the therapist's interpretations. Bion suggests this is to do with the refusal of the mother to allow the mechanism of projective identification, whereby the mother serves as a repository for the infant's frighteningly powerful feelings of hate and envy. He goes on to suggest that when the mother is unable to allow this, the baby's intense feelings then become directed towards themselves, causing a hatred and lack of tolerance for all feelings, including the hatred itself.

At this point, I would like to introduce some verbatim from my work with a patient whose similar rejection of linking, fear of silence and invitations to combat have characterised our five year long encounters with each other. His transference issues, like Beckett's, revolve around the lack of attunement of his mother in his early years. Also like Beckett is his feeling, often iterated, of being trapped, feeling stuck and yet refusing any opportunity to move out of the stuckness into a more animated dialogue. Perhaps it is like the baby who needs to be born and yet is reluctant to leave the womb.

Verbatim

He's sitting waiting for me when I come back from the bathroom. He is always 5 minutes early, and always goes right into the consulting room if the door is open, rather than waiting in the waiting room. He looks amused. I have been away on holiday for the last 2 weeks, and he knows I have been to the Cook Islands.

'You're not very tanned', he says.

I always struggle not to respond to his openers, as they always seem to be an invitation to argue.

'No', I say, trying to keep my voice neutral.

'Bloody Poms', he says.

I try not to smile. He often makes me want to laugh.

'What are you looking at me like that for?' he says.

'How am I looking at you?'

'As if I'm a nut!' he says, with some intensity.

'I'm wondering if you're angry with me for going away', I say.

He snorts derisively.

His face lights up.

'Have you heard the one about the Buddhist who goes into the bar and says 'make me one with everything', he says.

He often tells me jokes.

We have been working together for five years now. I know him very well – the compulsive hand washing which was the initial complaint has got much better, though some phobic anxieties still persist.

Two Weeks Later

Today, he arrives ten minutes before the appointment. I am sitting in the waiting room (it's sunny there) drinking some water and having a swift look at the paper.

'What are you doing here?' he chides me. 'You should be in there!'

Once we are both where we should be, he tells me about his outrage that men are being forbidden to sit next to children on planes. He talks in a fairly unstructured kind of way for about 15 minutes. It seems to be about the rotten treatment that men get from the world, how if a bus plunges over a cliff, the news only talks about the women and children who died and not the men; how the men are in the firing line in wars while the women get to stay at home in safety.

I mention that he may feel angry about having been kept at home with his mum and his sister for so long as the baby boy of the family while his much older brothers and emotionally unavailable dad were out having fun.

He stares at me without responding. We are in silence for about 30 seconds. He looks belligerently at me.

'Ask me something!' he commands.

'What would you like me to ask you?'

'Something that would enlighten me! A revelation!' he crows triumphantly.

'You'd like me to take responsibility for your revelations.'

'That's what I pay you for, isn't it?'

He looks gleeful. He is trying to make me feel as ashamed as he felt when his brothers teased him for being Mummy's baby. I am considering whether to say this or not.

In 'Waiting for Godot', there is a section of dialogue between the two main characters that closely resembles the tone and atmosphere and the destruction of linking which occurs during our sessions. Estragon and Vladimir are talking about the haunting 'dead voices' that they both hear. Vladimir offers many alternative ways of comparing

and connecting with the voices, but Estragon steadfastly rejects them, preferring to stay with the one comparison he will accept:

'Like leaves ...', he insists over and over.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: They all speak together.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves (Beckett 1956).

Beckett spoke of those moments when 'the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being.' The self-defeating wish to remain static that many of our patients display is perhaps just that: the boredom of the same old rituals is preferable to the intensity of the pain that occurs when a link hits the mark. Here is verbatim from a recent session:

Today he tells me I look sick and weary and tired and he thinks I don't want to see him. I tell him I think he didn't get the right kind of love and attention from his mum and he's very disappointed about that. We are in silence for about 10 minutes and he curls into a foetal position on the sofa clutching a cushion over his face.

"I can't remember!" he yells into the cushion.

"I think you were really sad when you were little".

'I wasn't!' he's still got the cushion in front of his face. 'I didn't feel anything. I just got up and went to school and came home and went to bed and got up and went to school and came home and went to bed – I didn't have any feelings about anything!'

'I think you were a depressed little boy', I say.

He curls up even tighter. He holds the cushion tight almost like he's suffocating himself. I feel scared.

'You're making me cry!' he says.

The fear that was experienced by both of us in this session has its origin, I believe, in the seemingly uncontainable intensity experienced by the baby when the mother is unavailable to digest the indigestible and give it back to her baby in palatable form. Those 'severe eyes' devouring the baby that Beckett wrote about were the eyes of a mother who has so many unsatisfied needs herself that she is unable to respond to the needs of her child and also appears to blame her child for her distress. The result is that the child learns to turn against his own needs, suppress expression and stifle his longing for love and connection, often leading in adult life to unease, disease and profound depression.

Bion (1956) wrote:

Thanks to a denial of the main mechanism open to the infant in dealing with his too powerful emotions, the conduct of emotional life, in any case a severe problem, becomes intolerable. Feelings of hatred are therefore directed against all emotions including hate itself, and against external reality which stimulates them. It is a short step from hatred of the emotions to hatred of life itself (p. 345).

Estragon and Vladimir, the two main characters in *Waiting for Godot*, although they attempt to continue to make contact with each other, often find themselves at such an impasse of communication. They are both in pain, yet find it hard to express true feelings to each other, often seeming to prefer a banal and almost comic banter that occasionally dips into a pool of tears as they wait in their trap for the salvation that never comes. They contemplate hanging themselves from the tree.

'Let's go' – one or other of them often says.

'We can't – we're waiting for Godot' is the reply that always follows.

Many have speculated on what 'Godot' means – some have mooted that the word is a mixture of God and Eau (the French word for water) – the idea that we are all waiting for our spiritual or actual thirst to be quenched. In the therapeutic relationship, perhaps this is particularly true – to have 'the answer', to be relieved of the unbearable tension and anxiety patients often feel, to be perfectly and completely understood by the therapist, to have the attunement that a child should ideally have from its parents – would be the longed-for outcome. Maybe the therapist becomes Godot at times, and yet, like Godot, turns out to be fools' gold, when no satisfactory 'answer' or 'cure' can be provided.

Whenever the question of Godot's meaning was put to Beckett, he always gave the same reply:

'If I had known who Godot was, I would have put it in the play.'

Perhaps Godot just symbolizes the capacity to keep hoping and to keep attempting

to relate. Perhaps he symbolizes the ability to embrace the state of not knowing, of mystery and doubt that was the area of common ground between Beckett and Bion. Both of them continued to explore this area long after their relationship had ended. This is a state of mind, as David Armstrong (1992) writes in his online paper 'Names, Thoughts and Lies', where we are:

in the presence of the unthought thought, the no-thing waiting to be discovered and formulated through the elaboration and playing with preverbal and verbal images, with dreams, myths, preconceptions, Bion has referred to, using a phrase of John Keats in a letter to his two brothers, as 'negative capability': that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason (p 281).

If we are to restore any kind of hope for life in our depressed and despairing patients, we have to tolerate the pain of becoming the surrogate repository for the intense buried and often cryptic feelings our patients cannot bear. We have to survive the attacks on linking, as Estragon and Vladimir do, by simply staying there and waiting until things become clearer. I have presented you with fragments only from my work and my thoughts on *Waiting for Godot*. I would like to leave you with the ultimate in a piece of extraordinary poetry from the play – a fragment of Lucky's speech. It makes no logical sense – if we reach irritably after fact and reason to try to understand what it means, then we have lost its power - 'it means what it says' said Beckett.

Embodied in it are the images that haunt our dreams and our unconscious – the existential images of birth, death, endurance and fear. Somehow, we must tolerate the sense and non-sense of the space we occupy together in our groups and the space we live in with our clients, and like Estragon, Vladimir and Pozzo, celebrate the struggles of human kind to make itself understood.

... That man in short that man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the strides of physical culture the practice of sports such as tennis football running cycling swimming flying floating riding gliding conating camogie skating tennis of all kinds dying flying sports of all sorts autumn summer winter winter tennis of all kinds hockey of all sorts penicillin and sucedanea in a word I resume flying gliding golf over nine and eighteen holes tennis of all sorts in a word for reasons unknown in Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham namely concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown but time will tell fades away I resume Fulham Clapham in a word the dead loss per head since the death of Bishop Berkeley being to the tune of one inch four ounce per head approximately by and large more or less to the nearest decimal good measure round figures stark naked in the stockinged feet in Connemara in a word for reasons unknown no matter

what matter the facts are there and considering what is more much more grave that in the light of the labours lost of Steinweg and Peterman it appears what is more much more grave that in the light the light the light of the labours lost of Steinweg and Peterman that in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas on on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I resume the skull fading fading fading and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labours abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard (mêlée, final vociferations) tennis ... the stones ... so calm ... Cunard ... unfinished ... (Beckett:1956, p. 43).

References

- Armstrong, D. (1992). *Names, thoughts and lies: The relevance of Bion's later works for understanding experiences in groups*. *Free Associations*, 26(3), 261-282.
- Bair, D. (1978). *Samuel Beckett - A biography*. London: Picador.
- Beckett, S. (1956). *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber.
- Beckett, S. (1986). *Samuel Beckett: The complete dramatic works*. London: Faber.
- Bion, W. R. (1956). Development of schizophrenic thought. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 37, 344-346.
- Bion, W. R. (1959). Attacks on Linking. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 40 (308 - 315).
- Jung, C. G. (1976). *Analytical psychology: Its theory and practice* (The Tavistock Lectures). London: Alexshan Books.
- Knowlson, J. (1996). *Damned to fame*. London: Bloomsbury
- Mercier, V. *The Irish Times*, page 6, 1956.