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Dialectics of Closure and Opening in Samuel Beckett's Fin de Partie

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Author
Schwab, GM

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In his critique of discursive totalization, Jacques Derrida has defined the concept of "closure" with respect to two poles: finitude and play. His exposition of Lévi-Strauss points up two possibilities for "conceiving the limit of totalization": against the "classical" insight into the limitation of a finite discourse, which strives in vain to master an infinite richness, Derrida sets the "modern" understanding which no longer anchors the impossibility of totalization in the concept of finitude, but rather in that of play. Within language's field of play totalization would be meaningless since the closure of a finite whole that lacks either a center or an origin allows for infinite substitutions.

Applied to another context, this analysis can be taken to interpret the inner dynamic of Samuel Beckett's Endgame. Conversely, however, it is also possible to develop a reading of Endgame which challenges Derrida's theory of closure from a new perspective. Closure is in two ways central in Endgame: as an interpretive gesture, it forms both an implicit theme and a nucleus for the strategies guiding aesthetic response.

Endgame is commonly ascribed to the theater of the absurd. This categorization has tended to determine the nature of interpretation by suggesting an understanding of the play as a symbolic representation of
an absurd world. Thus we have been brought to see its characters as reduced subjects living in an alienated world of decay and awaiting death or an apocalypse with sick bodies and black humor. As a consequence, both the particularity and the peculiarity of the aesthetic presentation disappear from view and, accordingly, the crucial aesthetic experience as well: interpretation functions as closure. The “absurd” becomes an ethnocentric category of remainders capable of accounting for everything which eludes either the familiar or the already understood.

What is it, then, in *Endgame* which seems so absurd? First impressions actually generate the suggestive fascination of an alien or exotic world. In a gloomy room, suffused with grey light, we meet the two main characters: Hamm in his wheelchair and Clov acting out a strange pantomime by trying to climb a ladder in order to look out the window. But why are the windows in this barren room so high? Did a taller race of men live here once? Or have the characters been shrinking? A picture also hangs in the room, but it is turned towards the wall. Does it symbolize the “world upside-down?” In front we see two dustbins in which Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell, vegetate. Is this more than a wicked metaphor for the generation gap?

The characters’ most striking attribute is their advanced state of bodily deteriorization. Clov is the only one who is still able to move, albeit with stiff knees. Nagg and Nell lost their legs in the famous bicycle accident in the Ardennes. Hamm is lame, blind, and bleeding, needs tranquilizers, and suffers from a chronic cough. All this is so highly suggestive of symbolic meaning that one can hardly evade the atmosphere of finality, decay, and apocalypse. The characters themselves suggest that they might be the last survivors of a great disaster, and the lifelessness of the world outside supports this view. Nothing seems more evident than to see this scene as anticipating the advancing decay of our culture or an imminent global catastrophe.

Yet these interpretive closures lead us directly into the communicative dilemma in which *Endgame* quite openly and intentionally wants us to be. Those who limit themselves to such a reading miss the peculiar quality of the play which presents aesthetic strategies aimed at forestalling that gesture of closure which would construe the play as the symbolic representation of a deteriorating world. Whereas Samuel Beckett’s own verdict, “Beware of symbols!” is more than just a rhetorical warning against interpretive closures, the play’s very atmosphere, its sensual imagery, and its mutilated plot lend themselves to such symbolic interpretations. What we find, in fact, is that the very invitation to “misreadings” is one of the main communicative strategies. One
cannot but be affected by the play's suggestive symbolism, especially when responding spontaneously. This conflict is crucial in the aesthetic response to Beckett's *Endgame*. We *ought* not to see any symbols, but find it impossible to see *none*. This communicative dilemma is responsible for the fact that the central [aesthetic] experience of the play is not anchored in referential meaning, but in the strategies guiding aesthetic response.

This displacement becomes most evident when one tries to hold on to one's notions of "identity." An audience whose expectations are still geared to characters having a circumscribed identity will be bitterly disappointed. The main characters, Hamm and Clov, don't seem to commit themselves to any psychic continuity as a basis for identity. To be sure, they display forms of behavior and speech which resemble certain manifestations of an inner life. However, as soon as one attempts to assemble these manifestations into some coherent notion of personality, the characters shift to a different level of self-presentation.

If nothing else, it is at least possible to grasp the basic lines of kinship and relation: Hamm and Clov live their relationship on the model of master and slave. Nagg and Nell are Hamm's parents, and there are vague hints that Hamm might have adopted Clov as his son. But thinking in these terms becomes unreliable as soon as one realizes that not only acting out but also playing with these roles proves to be Hamm and Clov's favorite preoccupation, if not obsession. In these games they relegate even the few palpable traits of identity to an iridescent half-light. The very notion of identity is revealed as a socially induced closure. In Hamm and Clov's playing with such roles the closure inherent in representations of identity is opened through never ending and continually variable substitutions. If *Endgame* brings to light the limits of totalization, then it collapses the "classical" relation to finitude with the modern one to "play."4 This collapse is possible because the characters' discourse lacks a center which would be able to check and ground the play of substitutions5 and thus to facilitate the representation of a centered subjectivity.

Doesn't Hamm himself, with his allusion to Zeno's heap of grain, play ironically with the viewer's search for an identity in the characters?6 Hamm's ironic self-parody, his waiting for a heap to materialize

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4. Of course, only in the sense of Derrida's critique of the closure characteristic of totalizing discourses.
5. Derrida, loc. cit.
6. "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of ... [he hesitates] ... that Old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life." S. Beckett, *Endgame, followed by Act Without Words* [New York: Grove Press, 1958], 70.
out of the accumulation of discrete moments, a new quality that one might call life, resembles the spectator who attempts to compile an "identity" for the characters out of ever new sequential repetitions and recursive speech. The audience might well take Hamm's grain paradigm as a hint that neither the identity of the characters nor the meaning of the play can be discovered by assembling fragments of identity or meaning. Perhaps, then, the audience could give up its search for neatly circumscribed wholes and instead, try to illuminate the iridescent plasticity of characters and play. This would also mean abandoning an interpretative gesture of closure in order to become involved in a decentering language-game of endless substitutions, that is, a game in which fragmented units of speech appear to be randomly substituted for each other. The play's language-game with the audience is reflected and mediated by the equally unfamiliar language-game of the characters. The latter contradicts not only all the expectations of dramatic dialogue, but also the very conditions for the functioning of dialogue. Neither is the dialogue situated in any intelligible context, nor does it derive from any representative function of speech or even a minimal amount of coherence. Moreover, it is full of contingencies, and these would be a stumbling block for any successful communication—at least according to systems theory.

Considering these disturbing qualities, one may be struck nonetheless by the easy flow of the dialogue. Most striking is the constant introduction of new topics, accompanied by the recurrence of nearly identical sequences of dialogue, though sometimes with the roles of the speakers reversed. The characters seem to be involved in a language-game, in which speech units can be moved around like chess pieces. There are not only identical but also unexpectedly abrupt moves in a game which functions according to rules unknown to the audience. An endless substitution of basic existential or anthropological problems seems to control the subject of conversation. The game, as it progresses with its preordained repetition of speech units, allows these themes to circle back on themselves. The content freezes into paradigmatic formulas belonging to an empty speech which the characters toss to and fro between them like a ball. One might think of it as a private use of language, which no longer requires one to mean what one says, but which gives one the freedom to play with the familiarity of old and empty rules. Or, from the perspective of the Derridean theory of closure: Hamm and Clov play with the superabundance of floating signifiers over and above all their possible signifieds in order to thematize the character of this surplus itself.
Yet this language game is also an end-game which focuses on ending and non-ending. Clov knows how to gain the advantage by threatening to violate the rules and terminate what is in principle an endless game. Or does even the threat of breaking the rules belong to the game? The nature of playing this game makes it impossible to identify the characters with their speech. By alternately exchanging slightly varied sequences of stereotyped dialogue in this game of substitution, the characters undermine any conceivable self-differentiation through their speech. So, for example, Clov's question, "Why this farce, day after day?" has already been asked before by Nell; Hamm's "Don't we laugh?" will in turn be taken up later by Clov. Such a play with the substitution and repetition of speech units undercuts any notion of speech as reliable self-presentation.

To aggravate matters, the characters continually vacillate between different levels of play. Thus the boundaries between the "endgame" and the "games within the endgame" remain fluid. Moreover, Hamm caricatures our expectation that dramatic characters display some presentation of self. He parodies this function of self-presentation and self-ironically unmasks the seduction of the other through self-stylization. By playfully enclosing himself in the role of a narcissistic artist, he discloses self-presentation as a mock fight for recognition. His dependence on Clov as spectator caricatures, in addition, self-presentation as a way of performing for the internalized Other. Such a self-presentation can only portray a fictional self. One need only think of the scenes in which Hamm repeatedly urges Clov to ask him for his story, whereupon Clov immediately stages himself as a character who complies with this request.

How can a spectator react to these language games if they are not played by conventional rules and defy all our interpretive closures? As the characters refuse self-presentation and even caricature the latent function of self-presentation inherent in our speech, we become unsure of our relation to them. Where are the characters in their own speech? They don't seem to share our norms of communication. Their dialogue lacks representative qualities and hardly makes "sense" to us. Whatever has the appearance of identity, representation, or meaning is counteracted or contradicted in the course of the play. The pervasive structure of negation and contradiction frustrates all partial investments of meaning and thereby fundamentally impedes every gesture of interpretation which strives for closure.

Hamm and Clov present their dialogue as an imaginary game, replete with suggestive symbolism, yet without pretensions to any latent meaning. Thus they hedge themselves against any interpretation bent on deciphering a truth or centering the decentered play. This strategy lures the audience into a type of double bind: highly connotative “symbols” suggest a latent dimension and invite ever newer constructions of meaning—apparently only to dismantle them as soon as they tend to stabilize. Each invitation to closure is followed by new openings which prove that closure to be reductive. It seems as if Endgame doesn’t allow for the construction of latent meaning or as if the invitations to closure are intentionally set up as traps. The dilemma becomes inescapable: in order to “understand” the characters, the audience must construe the symbolic meaning which the characters seem to suggest but, in fact, later reject. Should the audience do so, it is sanctioned, for the characters deride this meaning as a conventional projection of preconceived ideas:

Hamm: Clov?
Clov: (impatiently): What is it?
Hamm: We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?
Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that’s a good one!
Hamm: I wonder. [Pause]. Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. [Voice of rational being.] Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they’re at! (Clov starts, drops the telescope and begins to scratch his belly with both hands.)

The dynamic outlined here between a continual invitation to closure and renewed opening can be seen as one of the play’s central strategic devices. It is anchored not only in what the characters say but also in the structure of the play and the dramatic language. The very act of symbolic interpretation, then, is being rejected as an unacceptable closure of the play’s open structure.

At first glance we seem to be offered a play decidedly rich in con-

8. Cf. Derrida, op. cit., 427 [264]: “The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin. . .”
notation. Literary criticism has worked out allusions to literary and cultural history which are sufficiently broad in scope: Hamm as Hamlet, as “ham” actor; his sheet as Christ’s sudarium or a stage curtain, and so forth. Nevertheless, such connotations cannot be woven into the pattern of a coherent structure. The continual fluctuation between offers of connotation and their withdrawal prevents closure.

And yet, understanding that not even specific offers of connotation refer to a hidden meaning already presupposes an involvement in the play. Where closure is continually forestalled and connotations fail to provide meaning, the audience will be excluded from its familiar relation to language.

The different strategies enticing the audience into closures which are subsequently rejected and reopened by the play lead to one significant effect: they challenge language’s “structure of double meaning.” Endgame plays with the “superabundance of signifier, in relation to the signified” in order, finally, to exaggerate altogether the line between signer and signified. This structure of double meaning is, of course, fundamental to language in general. Its effect is revealed as soon as a manifest meaning explicitly refers to a latent one. Yet, if a play such as Endgame no longer carries an evident manifest meaning, then we automatically suspect a latent one. While this suspicion can be said to characterize our reaction to poetic language in general, the challenge of Endgame consists in undermining this conventional receptive disposition. The failure of our efforts to “make sense” out of what we see by interpreting symbolically is—from this point of view—the basic initial aesthetic experience of the play. Thus both symbolic closure and its failure are the results of textual strategies.

If we accept this, then the significance of the play can be found neither in the manifest nor in the latent dimension of dramatic speech. What I mean here is that significance is produced by dramatic speech but can no longer be bound to its meaning. It even tends towards an asemantic quality. Only when we forego our “need for semantic succour” in our construction of meaning can we grasp what the play is trying to convey and thus avoid projecting preconceived conventional

12. Lévi-Strauss quoted by Derrida, op. cit., 424 [261].
"meanings" and closures. Due to this shift in the reception process the main aesthetic potential of Endgame lies rather in the effect of that process than the substance of its imaginary stage world. The corresponding aesthetic strategy which consists in the rejection of the structure of double meaning, and the denial of closure produces very complex effects. It not only challenges the familiar relation between manifest and latent meaning, but also unsettles the audience’s habits and conventions of communication. In the reception process we have to follow the play’s strategy to let us shift between invitations to closure and required reopenings. Thus we may experience the extent to which our need for meaning induces us to close the gaps of the play by projecting our imaginations into them. This offers us some insight into our need for projective closures, as well as into the defensive qualities of our own communicative behavior.

One main consequence of those strategies guiding audience response is that in the process of reception they shift our attention from the subjectivity of the fictional characters to our own subjectivity. What we then experience is our own decenteredness. Since the structure of double meaning is the linguistic basis of decentered subjectivity, it is entirely appropriate that the play challenge this structure. The double meaning structure, i.e., a form of expression that can simultaneously show and hide meaning, gives us a chance not only to express, but also to react to, decentered subjectivity. Equally appropriate is the peculiar presentation of characters in Endgame. Decentered subjectivity is not conveyed by presenting “decentered characters,” but by challenging all familiar notions of subjectivity. To effect this challenge one cannot present so-called “realistic” characters, but only highly stylized ones. Hamm and Clov are condensed and overdetermined characters. Similar to the figures who people our dreams, they have absorbed meanings, signs, and properties from other characters as well as pure psychological or aesthetic functions. This complex and allusive overdetermination has occasioned numerous speculative interpretations.

Hamm and Clov have been seen as mythical characters in a mythical place or set within the tradition of the cosmological dialogue of the gods. They have been likened to Chronos and Mercury, to the sons of Noah after the flood, to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and also to Gloucester and Edgar in King Lear. Others have explicated the numerous echoes of other Beckett characters, Pozzo and Lucky in particular, as well as the Unnamable. On the other hand, Endgame has also been interpreted as an aesthetic differentiation of what is otherwise conceived of as a unity. Here the characters appear as components of a unified self or their room
as a human brain whose various functions are divided up among the characters.

What is common to all of these interpretations is the desire to reduce the condensed form of the characters to a latent meaning. The symbolic connotations are, of course, the indisputable guides for a spontaneous response to the play. They ground the strategy of invitation to closure. The continual openings, however, prove those symbols to be irreducible. They resist any reduction to a latent meaning. Peter Brook characterizes Beckett’s peculiar way of using symbols: “A true symbol is like Beckett’s Endgame. The entire work is one symbol enclosing numerous others, though none of them are of the type which stand for something else; we get no further when we ask what they are supposed to mean, since here a symbol has become an object.”

The condensation of characters constitutes still another device used to affect the audience’s subjectivity. Condensations are gestalt formations unconsciously produced and invested with meaning. By appealing to our unconscious, then, the condensed characters of Endgame allow a different function of the communicative strategy to come into play: the transgression of the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious. But in order to make the audience transgress these boundaries Endgame must pursue a double strategy. It takes into account decenteredness by appealing on different levels and by different means to both conscious and unconscious domains of response. Those aspects of the play which allow for immediate access are also those which invite interpretive closures. The central devices here are condensation and diffusion of meaning, both of which produce highly ambivalent appeals. Conscious annoyances are often counterbalanced by unconscious fascination. The latter becomes evident if we consider that the dissolution of the conventional symbolic functioning of language, which renders the process of understanding so difficult, also allows for effects which are normally absent or remain unconscious. Thus the strongest appeal and the most far-reaching effect of Endgame issue from what cannot be integrated into the symbolic order or cannot be centered: for example, speech acts violating the symbolic order of language, dramatic elements which cannot be integrated into the plot, behaviors which cannot be centered in the characters. In turn, this

15. P. Brook, “Mit Beckett leben,” in: Materialien zu Becketts “Endspiel” (Frankfurt: Deutsche Erstansg, 1968), 32. The quotation has been translated from the original, which was in German.

16. The complexity of this double strategy has to be somewhat simplified here. For a more detailed analysis see G. Schwab, op. cit., 105–25.
decentering affects the audience. The relative security of our status as audience allows us to be drawn into the game Beckett's characters are playing. But in so doing, we become temporarily infected by their decentered condition. Hamm and Clov play their identity games above all with the audience's identity, making it experience both its own decenteredness and its need for centering interpretations and closures.

The strongest impulse for the reflective side of the aesthetic experience of Endgame comes from the strategy of continual opening by means of rejection and frustration. However fascinating these openings may unconsciously be, they must nonetheless be coped with consciously, for they are responsible for the continual failure of our attempts at interpretation. The history of Beckett criticism proves how difficult such an experience is even in terms of aesthetics. Thus it could also be viewed as the history of a collective defense against this failure, which in turn has given rise to a Beckett industry virtually addicted to symbolic interpretation.

Coping positively rather than negatively with the continual rejection of interpretations and the opening up of closure leads the audience to reflect upon the character of such interpretive acts themselves. For as long as the audience does not bale out of the communicative situation which arises in the immediate experience of the text and its dialectic of closing and opening or attraction and frustration, it remains trapped in an aesthetic double bind. There are, however, a number of clues in the play indicating that the way to get out of the trap is by shifting to a metalevel and reflecting on one's own interpretive acts. This strategy involves implicit references to the audience's situation—references which, like the above quoted passage, explicitly deal with projection and closure. The aesthetic devices are thus targeted to a self-reflection which is both a mastery of the frustrated spontaneous response as well as an insight into one's own acts in interpretation. In addition to the emotive and unconscious effects on the audience, self-reflection, then, can also be considered one of the basic elements in the overall response to Endgame.

I would now like to summarize some of the main points concerning the strategies guiding aesthetic response. As we have seen, the dynamic between closures and openings in Endgame entangles the audience both in the game the characters are playing and in a network made up of its own projections of meaning. This dynamic, however, is only one of the disillusioning strategies, which aim at a type of meta-understanding or, better yet, metaexperience of one's own communicative acts. The effect is to make the audience conscious of how it projects meaning. This
allows it to experience its projections as an attempt to close and center something inherently open and decentered. We might also call this effort a defense against the experience of otherness. At the same time the dis-illusioning strategies aim at altering our need for centering and closing open structures.

The subtlest and most far-reaching of these strategies is the "withdrawal of double meaning," i.e., the play's insistence on rejecting latent meaning, which interestingly enough itself operates as a double strategy. The separation of conscious from unconscious appeals accounts for the fact that the spectators themselves are decentered subjects. The importance of this double strategy lies in allowing them to transgress the border between consciousness and the unconscious. As our decentered subjectivity depends on polarizing these domains, transgressing the boundaries between them also affects our decentered condition. Seen in this way, *Fin de partie*—the *Endgame*—becomes a game involving the limits of our own subjectivity. In the reception process, the conventions characterizing our subjectivity are temporarily suspended. It is little wonder that so many react to the play as if a taboo were being violated.

Ambivalence, then, is also an important aspect of the aesthetic experience of *Endgame*. Transgressing the line between consciousness and the unconscious is always fraught with ambivalence. It releases anxieties of disintegration, emptiness, or inundation by the unconscious. Simultaneously, however, it can become a source of delight. We derive pleasure from our positive investment in that original, undifferentiated mode of being which has been forced by the reality principle to survive in the reserves set aside for alternative states of consciousness.

This transgressive quality of *Endgame* is perhaps best documented by the isolated laughter so typical during the performance of Beckett's plays. I see this laughter as an expression of unconscious understanding or reaction. The spectator signals by his laughter that the strangeness of *Endgame* is not so foreign to him after all. This laughter arises spontaneously at the threshold of an unconscious understanding of something which our consciousness does not allow to be understood. However impenetrable or uninterpretable the dramatic action may seem, the laughter indicates that there is indeed a hidden understanding beyond consciousness. This laughter itself subverts the boundaries of our subjectivity in a specific way, since it involves, like laughter in general, a temporary abandoning of our ego-limits. And this is, of course, precisely one of the effects which *Endgame* had set as its goal.
The seemingly insignificant spontaneous laughter physically anticipates a type of transgression which has become one of the hallmarks of aesthetic response to contemporary art. The conscious experience of a shift in, or an expansion of, the limits of our subjectivity is more painful and has provoked extremely defensive responses towards modern art. _Endgame_ makes us aware that not only the open rejection of a work of art but also its “centering” by interpretive closures can be such a defense. In order to be able to derive benefit from the play’s potential transgressions, we must learn to renounce interpretive closures. _Endgame_ challenges them in three ways: it rejects them, it activates our unconscious desire for dissolutions, and it counterbalances its own transgressive tendencies by making us shift to a metalevel. Thus it aims at expanding the boundaries of our consciousness in two directions: towards the unconscious and towards self-reflection. Simultaneously, however, our need for closure emerges, in the aesthetic experience of _Endgame_, as a function of our need for meaning. One historical function of Beckett’s strategy guiding aesthetic response resides in the objective not simply to supplant this need with another, but instead to work on it and, in so doing, to activate our latent desire for openings. By its dialectical rendering of closure, _Endgame_ marks a historically significant threshold beyond which we experience an important change in our dispositions and in the nature of our aesthetic response. Hence, this is really the main reason _Endgame_ has become so successful as an “endgame” which plays with the limits of our subjectivity.

Translated by D. L. Selden