« Play and Lose »: The same as the Worst in *Endgame*

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*Who is't can say 'I am at the worst?*
*I am worse than e'er I was. (...)*
*And worse I may be yet. The worst is not*
*So long as we can say 'This is the worst'.*


« Try again. Fail again. Fail better »: this is what the personless voice in Beckett’s novella *Worstward Ho* (1983) endeavours to do in order for it to reach and come to terms with the worst (Beckett 1983: 7). In *Endgame*, the characters seem to have a similar objective as to the game they have been playing: they try again, to lose again and to lose better. In a world where any initiative for achievement is a losing battle and no consolation could be offered, man is confronted with the compulsory choice of playing and losing as Ian Kott explains it in his « game theory » for both classical and post-modern drama (Kott 1978: 115). Even what Robert Heilman calls « victory in defeat » in modern drama would be too naturalistic and optimistic in this play by Beckett (Heilman: 143-147). Here the two characters vie with each other for the absurdist claim of scoring indiscriminately the worse failure (or loss) or the best failure possible (Rosset: 16). Hence, the only possibility for Beckett’s protagonists to subscribe to a dramatic system is to act knowing in advance that it entails inexorable loss. Put this way, this dramatic system could be termed tragedy, because even Greek heroes struggle in vain against necessity. The difference lies in the nature of the tragic. If Greek, or Renaissance tragedy, stages an event repeating a past situation getting worse, post-modern and Absurdist drama stage a repetition of the repetition. Clément Rosset calls the former « the tragic of repetition » and the latter, « the comic of repetition » (Rosset: 62-63). This paper reads patterns of repetition in the play otherwise than symbolising physical and mental stagnation and portending resistance to closure or « unendingness » (Iser: 112). In a first part, it attempts to examine the shape and frequency of actions in *Endgame*
and to read them as significant and purposeful within the logic of the worse and the absurd. It is, secondly, from the anthropological perspective of reciprocal violence and the scapegoating mechanism of René Girard’s theories that these actions are understood.

In his Poetics, Aristotle defines action as the soul of tragedy, evolving purposefully in a pyramidal structure, from complication, to climax, to cathartic unravelling. Action moves towards closure and this sense of an ending is of primordial importance according to Aristotle as it sustains the completion and completeness of action (ARISTOTLE: 10-24). If Endgame fails to fit in such a pattern, it is less because its structure is circular and not pyramidal than because the nature of its actions lacks the «magnitude» that Aristotle perceives as a crucial quality (ARISTOTLE: 10). In Endgame, there is no self-blinding, murder, suicide or any other complete and noble action as in classical drama. There are, however, small actions, so light, prosaic and almost leisurely that they could be termed activities. The disproportion between Hamm and Clov’s impulse to bring a hellish atmosphere to an end and the means they choose for this to happen is what generates the absurd. The protagonists are nonetheless aware that there are other and certainly more efficient ways for them to end the game. They metatheatrically reflect upon ways of performing the tragic action that would bring their game to an end. Clov comes up with the heroic, Medea-like alternative: «If I could kill him, I’d die happy» (p. 24). Hamm makes the stoic, Macbeth-like suggestion: «hit me with the axe, or with the gaff» (p. 49). He even finds inspiration for a sentimental, romantic, King Lear-like invitation: «let’s go from her, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and currents will carry us away, far away...» (p. 28). So why should Hamm and Clov prefer to play the game otherwise? It is probably because these alternatives do not hold in a play with reductio ad absurdum logic where «a little heap» is enough to become «the impossible heap» (p. 12). Consequently, there is no need for «a big heap»: dramatic progression does not follow the tragic mode, but the absurdist one. The game can end with the same actions performed on slightly different variations, just enough though to become inherently worse and worse.

Unlike the protagonists in Waiting for Godot whose waiting is «self-erasing nonactivity», Hamm and Clov are active participants in the process towards closure (CALDERWOOD: 366). They perform routines that give
the illusive impression of stasis while they build up smoothly into the
dynamic sequence that will effectuate the change, precisely from bad to
worse and to what Beckett calls in *Worstward Ho* the « unworsenable
worst » (BECKETT 1983: 33). Beckett’s drama lies not in thoughts and
ideas commented upon and responded to by words and gestures, but
precisely in these words and these gestures themselves. Clov’s staggerng or
Hamm’s attempt to move with the gaff does not impart the absurd in a
conceptual way, but is absurd in the literal, performative way. As Jonathan
Kalb puts it, « his dramas are not about experiences, they are those experiences
themselves » (KALB: 4). Because they are routines, the characters’ actions are
mainly durative and repetitive (PROST: 26-28). Durative in that they are
caught in a progressive present that seems to stretch up in some kind of
atemporality or suspended in « timelessness » (WELLWORTH: 70), (« what’s
happening » / « things are livening up » / « he’s crying » / « we’re coming »
/ « we’re getting on » / « I am freezing », etc.). Repetitive in that they
amount to a set of ritualistic movements observing mathematical accuracy
such as Clov’s goings to and fro, between kitchen, Hamm’s place,
windows and ashbins. Even intellectual activities take on the form of
action caught in duration and repetition. When Clov thinks of a solution as
to how Hamm would know he has left him, he is « having an idea » (p. 34,
emphasis added). This mental activity becoming physical action is further
emphasised by the character’s histrionic « pacing to and fro » (p. 34). It is
equivalent to Hamm’s physical activity, that of having a pee, interpreted by
Clov as intellectual illumination: « that’s the spirit » (p. 27). Besides, these
characters are « existentially active » (KUNDERT-GIBBS: 85) in that their
sense of being is tangibly measured in terms of duration and progression in
time. His breast, in which he saw a big sore, makes Hamm infer that « It
was living » (p. 26), just as much as Nagg, who « is crying », makes him
conclude « then he’s living » (p. 42, emphasis added). A vivid sore as well as
a man alive are not presented as static states but conceived of as actions
inscribed in the « physicality of time » (KUNDERT-GIBBS: 60)4: they are
« living ». The peculiarity of the -ing form, which can grammatically be
applied only to verbs of action, pins down the meta-theatricality of
*Endgame* as a play reflecting upon the very essence of tragedy in the
Aristotelian sense: imitation of an action.

It is therefore duration and iteration that give to the play the circularity
proper to Beckett’s drama and to the theatre of the Absurd at large. The
motion of the play follows the circular or spiral-like pattern in contrast with the pyramidal pattern of classical drama (FOUCRÉ: 130, OMESCO: 118). But do these aspects mean that the play resists completion? Do they necessarily impart stasis, inertia and stagnation? Do the characters simply «revolve in a diminishing spiral» as John Kundert-Gibbs asserts? (KUNDERT-GIBBS: 84). Don’t they rather, paradoxical though it may seem, evolve in a diminishing spiral?

In *Endgame*, It is from the sameness of the situation that the end slowly and perniciously builds up, or down, «grain upon grain, one by one», in Clow’s precise image (p. 12). When both Hamm and Clow acquiesce that «it’s the end of the day like any other day» (p. 17, emphasis added), Hamm pursues on an anguished tone «what’s happening? What’s happening?» (p. 17). This questioning betrays his awareness that, by virtue of its resemblance to the other days, this day is *the one day too many*; the dose infinitesimal but still too much for things to remain the same. Clow too is aware of the fact as he answers «something is taking its course» (p. 17), admitting that a Heraclitean movement is perceptible underneath a seemingly Parmenidean stasis. They beguile themselves much like Winnie, in *Happy Day*, who stubbornly repeats «no better, no worse, no change» but who then concedes to deterioration in sameness: «To have been always what I am – and so changed from what I was» (BECKETT 1966: 2, 4, 24). That the repetition and duration of the same makes the latter inevitably worsen is allegorically expressed elsewhere in the play. Nell’s description of unhappiness is quite telling in this sense:

> It’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny but we don’t laugh anymore (p. 20, emphasis added).

Similarly, Hamm visualises how the worse stems from the same when he describes his existential torment: «Something dripping in my head, ever since the fontanelles […] Splash, splash, always on the same spot» (p. 35, emphasis added). This Chinese water torture from which he has been suffering since *in utero* could be an allegory of his game with Clow, based on the «the same questions, the same answers» (p. 13), «the same inanities» (p. 33) the same farce «day after day» (p. 18). Likewise, if Clow decides to leave Hamm, it is not because he has treated him otherwise than he always
did, but precisely because he has always treated him the same way. This endgame has then been rehearsed for and prepared for through enough repetitions:

HAMM: Have you not had enough? [...] Of this... this... thing.
CLOV: I always had. (p. 13).

But the still bearable « enough » is not yet the unbearable « too much »; a situation which makes Hamm think at some point that this day may not be the day of closure:

HAMM: Do you not think this has gone long enough?
CLOV: Yes! (pause) What?
HAMM: This... this... thing.
CLOV: I’ve always thought so. (pause) you not?
HAMM: (gloomily) Then it’s a day like any other day. (p. 33)

Nevertheless, it is on this day that the gap between the « enough » and the « too much » is to be bridged. Having both had enough of what they call « this thing », Hamm and Clov are nervously on the look-out for the next move that would signal the end of the game and urge one another to, as they put it, « keep going » (respectively Hamm, p. 40 and Clov, p. 41). If each corrects his assertion that it is « finished » by specifying that it is rather « nearly finished » (respectively Clov, p. 12 and Hamm p. 35), it is because they are aware that this last step in the game is the necessary climax under the disguise of flatness that would lead to the eventual dénouement. This last moment that looks like « an uneventful event », to use Vivian Mercier’s phrase describing Waiting for Godot (MERCIER: 95), matters to Hamm and Clov as much as the end it leads to. The interim is theirs.

Waiting in this way becomes significant in that the characters are not marking time but moving beyond the edge of the « enough » through further accumulation in reduction. Within the logic of the absurd, the rhetoric of « no more » stands as the anamorphic equivalent of « too much »: « There are no more bicycle-wheels » (p. 15), « there’s no more pap » (p. 15), « there are no more sugar plums » (p. 38), « there are no more rugs » (p. 44), « there’s no more pain-killer » (p. 46), « there are no more coffins » (p. 49). Following the same logic, Hamm finds quite interchangeable the two opposite reasons for the alarm clock to be out of order: « because it’s worked too much » / « Then because it’s worked too little » (p. 34). « Lessness », to use the title of one of Beckett’s short stories
(1970), is perceived as a sign of progress in regression. The fact that they «lose [their] hair, [their] teeth! [Their] bloom! [Their] ideals! » (p. 16) is clear evidence for them that they are «living» and that nature has not forgotten them. If it had, they would not go through all these changes and would not gain, in loss, closeness to extinction. Reductio ad absurdum is again operating here; they justify the fact they are alive by the reverse justification: they are not dead. Nevertheless, they are dying.

Next to the subtractions they enumerate one by one, Hamm and Clov indulge in reciprocal torture based on the same principle of reduction. Hamm will not from Clov the combination of the larder that would finish them, and it has been long since he stopped playing the godfather with Clov whom he saves as a child from starvation. The most appropriate recipe he sadistically thinks of now is: «I’ll give you just enough to keep you from dying» (p. 14). But this new thought is a variation of former ones of the same kind. In the past, he denied Clov a bicycle-wheel (p. 15), just as he denied Mother Pegg «oil for her lamp» (p. 48), or again charity to «all those (he) might have saved» (p. 44). In return, he is denied a kiss, a touch, help to cover himself with the sheet, etc.

As Clément Rosset explains it, the philosophy of the Absurd, equivalent to that of pessimism (as first developed by Schopenhauer) and to the «logic of the worse», lies in the acknowledgement not that suffering is intolerable but that suffering is (Rosset: 20). Hence, suffering builds into a thinking system and logic upon which the paranoid, the masochist and the sadist feed. Endgame subscribes to this philosophy in that its characters measure their suffering with others’, a procedure that makes them relish withholding pleasure (sadism), relish being denied pleasure (masochism) and complain of suffering while finding intolerable that its existence should be put into question (paranoia), (Rosset: 19-23). All three conjoin in the relationship between Hamm and Clov, and between Hamm and his parents as well. All three blend in Hamm’s opening soliloquy:

Can there be misery — (he yawns) loftier than mine? No doubt. But now? (pause) My father? (pause) My...dog? (pause) Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt. (p. 12)
The most important word here is «willing». Hamm is willing to shape his understanding of the world following the principle of the worse. He can but act accordingly. Actually, he has always followed both theory and practice if one examines the chronicle of his life he delivers now and then (how he tortured the man crawling at his feet, for example, pp. 35-37). From a Girardian perspective, Hamm’s will (as much as his status as master or pseudo-king) has inexorably set the mechanism of reciprocal violence into motion. The escalation of violence has started when the subject Clov began imitating the modal Hamm by inflicting punishment in return. When he was young, Clov accepted his role as the scapegoat who would masochistically endure all kinds of torture: «they said to me, what skilled attention they get, all these dying from their wounds» (p. 51). There was then complementarity between him and the sadist master. Later, as he grew up, he became aware of Hamm’s mechanism and understood that his masochism could enfeebles his master’s sadism: «I say to myself — sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you» (p. 51). After a life-long period of close relationship, as Girard explains it in his mimetic theory the subject starts imitating his modal, and vice versa (GIRARD 1961: 115-133; 1972: 213-248). Clov has set his mind on adopting the role of the torturer, asserting that «(he) can’t be punished anymore» (p. 12) and even if he is «too old to form new habits» (p. 51), he believes that «one day, suddenly, it ends, its changes» (p. 51). Similarly, Hamm invests himself with the role of the scapegoat whose suffering is loftier than that of all those around him (p. 12). Except that there is still much of the masochist in Clov: «Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?». Hamm’s answer, «you’re not able to» (p. 32), recalls his own confession that «it’s time it ended and yet [he] hesitate[s] to...to end» (p. 12). Indeed, as Girard expounds it in his mimetic theory, the pair of rivals – as they have now become rivals for the object of desire which is power – can not conceive of themselves without their respective partner since the interplay of hatred and admiration sustains their existence (GIRARD 1961: 203-220). Hamm himself becomes desired as he blends with the object of desire he possesses and prevents Clov from getting. Reciprocally, Clov, Nell and Nagg’s rivalry is vital for Hamm as it functions like a touchstone that validates his status as modal (GIRARD 1961: 115-133; 1985: 62). This explains why, paradoxically, the higher violence escalates between them and the nearer they get to the end
of this hellish game, the more reluctant they become as to making a
decisive pace forward towards closure.

Furthermore, reciprocal violence becomes unrelenting when the
surrogate victims on whom Hamm pours out his cynical abuse are no
more efficient because no more masochistically responsive to him. His
mother dies (p. 41) and his father, though still alive, does not rise anymore
out of the dustbin when he bids him to (p. 44). As to the toy dog, it is not
finished (p. 30) and lacks its sex, the very detail that would heighten
Hamm’s sadistic pleasure in imposing on him his manly authority (p. 44).
As to Clov, he is empowered to unleash his hatred against Hamm using
these vicarious scapegoats, and any other one on which he would wreak
his vengeance, were it a flea on which he «frenziedly» shakes the
insecticide (p. 27) or a rat: «If I don’t kill that rat he’ll die» (p. 44). One of
his domestic chores consists in closing the lids on Nell and Nagg, the only
symbolic occupation that confers to him some authority. But his most
significant gesture is the one when he hits Hamm with the dog (p. 49),
most likely for the first time, considering Hamm’s appalled reaction.
Although his masochistic nature immediately gets over him as he
«imploringly» begs Hamm «let’s stop playing» (p. 49), this action
announces that the change he prophesied for himself is taking its course:
«then one day, suddenly, it ends, its changes» (p. 51). This is not in the
least an irrevocable and dignified gesture that would make him, Brutus-like,
grow in tragic stature. Nevertheless, within the context of the absurd,
where a «little heap» is enough to propel action beyond the edge of
sameness; hitting Hamm with the toy is of great portent. This action is the
worst outcome of small but steady violent ones repeated throughout the
game. Clov’s act of rebellion is prepared for by his rhetoric of denial and
bereavement, and by a few precise and new variations he wittingly weaves
within the fabric of routine such as the instant when he lets the glass slip
from his hands and remarks: «I did it on purpose» (p. 25). Likewise, his
excessive walks and exaggerated strides become now all too unbearable for
Hamm as he has replaced the slippers with the boots (p. 39). They
sadistically reinforce his mobility to further frustrate Hamm about his
immobility (EINARSSON: 114-119). Hence, if Clov’s habitual activities have
always been monotonous in appearance, consisting mainly in obeying
Hamm’s orders and looking at the wall of the kitchen to «see [his] light
dying» as he confesses (p. 17), they have been seething with violence underneath, which now surfaces.

Therefore, this last day in the game registers actions that are similar to and, yet different from, the ritualistic ones that have maintained the balance between the characters. Friction brought to the extreme in the play is the excess of violence needed for its explosion and thereby its abatement. In his anthropological studies, Girard explains that violence, because mimetic, is endemic within any community. The only efficient way to restore peace is to exert a violent act upon a sacrificial victim whose function is cathartic and propitiatory for the community especially in times of social crisis (GIRARD 1972: 27-32 et 50-51). Girard likens this surplus of violence to the homeopathic dose that cures illness with the same virus that causes it (GIRARD 1972: 430). Clov and Hamm’s reciprocal «verbal dismembering» (GIRARD 1985: 34) and aggressive moves operate as this homeopathic dose inoculated in the decaying body of their world. Except that, in this case, the law of «all against one» (GIRARD 1985: 32-34) is replaced by that of «one against one», each victimizing the other; which makes the identity of the scapegoat blurred. Besides, there is no peace to restore and no cure to bring about. The world is «corpsed» (p. 25) whether inside or outside Hamm’s place; and death is awaiting both, the one who leaves and the one who remains. Girard’s scapegoating theory functions here on the absurdist mode: not in a rising movement, whereby violence, having worsened to the extreme, is eventually canalised on and driven out thanks to the sacrificial victim, but in a narrowing spiral moving downwards from worse to the worst, with no regeneration possible.

If not obviously having the upper hand, Clov is the one that makes Hamm concede to his failure in the game. Hamm begins his day and closes it with the same phrase: «me – to play» (p. 12 et p. 51). Except that now, at the end of the day (this day and the game altogether), a change has irrevocably taken place. Hamm can but acknowledge that his situation has been considerably impaired: «play and lose and have done with losing» (p. 51). The perfective mode: «have done with losing» (emphasis added) seals Hamm’s action and its consequence: he has played and lost. He relishes announcing it, parodying the speech of the heroic scapegoats in classical drama. He says on «a chanting tone»: «You cried for night it falls; now cry in darkness» and metatheatrically comments: «nicely put that» (p. 52). Oedipus’s bloody tears are here replaced with a bathetic sniff
(p. 52). It is nonetheless possible to interpret failure in the game otherwise. Clov leaves on purpose but has also been driven to leave. This way, he could be regarded as the scapegoat expelled by Hamm whose conclusion could now read as a triumphant cry: «you remain» (p. 52). A third interpretation becomes equally valid when this moment of closure is set against the context of the Absurd. In the «game theory» he develops about classical as well as post-modern drama, Jan Kott explains that the protagonist is always compelled to play as if in a chess game, and any move he makes brings about his loss. It is tragic for the classical hero because it pits his defeat against the triumph of supernatural forces. It is absurd and grotesque for the post-modern hero because it seals his defeat with no justification or compensation (KOTT 1978: 115; 1971: 26-27). In the philosophy of the Absurd, defeat is in the same way suffering is. Hence for Hamm and Clov it is as impossible to refrain from playing and losing as it is for the player in Text Without Words to get any of the items descending from above, whether he reaches for them or renounces to make any move (BECKETT 1964: 57-60). In Endgame, both protagonists lose, because for Clov, «beyond (the walls) is the...other hell» (p. 23) and «outside of here it's death» (p. 45); as for Hamm, the contaminating effect of decomposition is unrelenting since «the whole place stinks of corpses» (p. 33). The logic of the worse in absurdist drama brings about failure either way: together they die; separated they die too.

HAMM: Gone from me you'd be dead
CLOV: And vice versa (p. 45).

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Notes:

1 It is specifically about Arthur Miller’s Crucible that Heilman speaks of « victory in defeat » or « defeat in victory ».
2 Clément Rosset explains that the « worse » of Schopenhauer’s philosophy has the same significance as « the better of possible worlds » in Leibniz’s.
3 Page references to Endgame are given between brackets with no other mention.
4 John L. Kundert-Gibbs uses this in his comment on time in Waiting for Godot
5 René Girard uses the phrase « dépeçage verbal » to describe the abuse hurled at Job by his enemies.
6 René Girard also calls it « unanimous violence » (« l’unanimité violente ») in La violence et le sacré, p. 124, p. 148-152.