Reading Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* as a Tale of War

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1. Contextualizing Beckett

Paying close attention to textual evidence, the present article examines Samuel Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame* from the point of view of its military content with a view to reconsidering its stage potential and, implicitly, its criticism. Is this really a play about war?

In this sense, much of the current critical consciousness – saturated with the record of Beckett's drama of language or of his demolishing "plot" and "character" – breathes fresh air thanks to such comments as the one made by Carol Gould in 2009. It is a review that brings the spectator closer to his/ her immediate fears, thus confirming the topicality of the Irish playwright's world view in *Endgame*:

> Watching this play unfold over one-hundred minutes without an interval those with leanings to the Right could easily interpret the scenario as the nuclear winter after a dirty-bomb attack by al Qaeda, Hezbollah or Hamas. Were one an Israeli, where during the years of the al-Aqsa Intifadah calendars had '9/11' on each page, one could imagine the scene as an Israeli town about to die after a biological attack from friendly Mr Assad in the North. If one is of the leanings to the Left, as was playwright Beckett, the story is one of despair in the wake of global catastrophe in the guise of fascism, global warming, genocide and world war (Gould 2009).

Over years critical voices have sometimes reasserted the connection between *Endgame* and the semantic area of bellicosity, by identifying, for instance, in the play signs of "the wholesale destruction of the Second World War" (Sydney Theatre Company 2015) or by going as far as to significantly joke about "Kuwaiting for Godot" (Murphy 2016: 338) in the Beckettian theatre as a whole. Comparably, though emphasizing the generalization tendencies in *Endgame*, and taking us through humanism, existentialism and the reductive nature of Beckettian drama, Emilie Morin cannot refrain from pointing out such a thematic preoccupation as "an unspecified catastrophe that recalls not only the First World War, but also the Second World War, the Great Irish Famine and modern atomic warfare" (Morin 2015: 69) or even "ecological disaster" (*ibidem*: 62). Yet such illustrative speculations about the specific *chronotope* of the dramatic text – to use Bakhtin's famous term –

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have not always succeeded in securely pinning it on exact, historically identifiable events. The schematization of *dramatis personae*, the simplicity of the dialogue, the generally human purport of the characters' concerns and reactions, the detachment due to the half-tragic, half-comic atmosphere contribute all to the planetary, ahistorical adequacy of the dramatic message.

At some point in the play, Nell and Nagg, Hamm's infirm parents living in two ashbins briefly recall the moment "[w]hen we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks" (Beckett 1972: 19), offering no other comment than a specification on the location of the unhappy event:

> Nell: It was in *the Ardennes.*
> (They laugh less heartily.)
> Nagg*:* On the road to *Sedan.* (They laugh still less heartily.) (my italics – C.A.) (Beckett 1972: 19).

For a story situated in a – so obviously constructed – no-time, no-space setting, it becomes suspect to introduce such precise details. The evoked locations are consistently infused with historical significances, reminding us of an important section of the planetary battle scene in both World Wars. What a contemporary commentator might hurriedly overlook can still stand for a highly significant literary message. Rereading the whole play in a more restrictive key – as a war writing – can provide a useful reconsideration of all the universal aspects tackled by critical discourse.

If, in the tradition initiated by Martin Esslin (1961), quite a number of Beckettian critics tend to generalize the message of *Endgame* by extending its significances to compositional techniques or philosophical pessimisms, in this paper we are trying to particularize the area of exegetical interest by focusing on "war", namely on the basic meaning of the concept: that of a physical, historically institutionalized confrontation. Within the framework of close reading, our analysis identifies a parallelism of voices: the essential "war" discourse doubling the surface message formulated in the more playful terms of a caricatured "home".

2. A Tale of War Meant for the Stage

Beckett's direct contact with war apparently reaches its acme when the young Irishman participates devotedly in the French Resistance movement during World War II, between 1940 and 1944. Still, the author's perspective on a fallen humanity is the result of a cosmopolitan wandering through the effects of various, universally condemnable forms of human violence. Dealing with the force of Beckett's commitment to the French liberation cause, Lois Gordon offers a cursory yet comprehensive view of the playwright's experience of variegated facets of man-induced sufferance:

> From his earliest youth (the civil war in Ireland, the Foxrock hospitals for World War I veterans, the Dublin street beggars and homes for the insane), to his early manhood (the racial riots in Belfast), through the "bad years" in England, and in his most recent travels in Germany, he had seen humanity in economic, physical, mental, and spiritual distress. Until his death, he was pained at the slightest

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> manifestation of human suffering, and he was never free from the memory of those who perished during the war (Gordon 1996: 141).

Also, a more directly perceivable aspect of armed conflicts might have been provided to the Beckettian spirit by the experiences in Saint Lô, the hypothetical source of inspiration for his "later writings, most notably *Endgame*" (S.E. Gontarski qtd. in O'Brien 1986: 386). Beckett's roles of a translator, driver and storekeeper at a hospital (re)founded by the Irish Red Cross in a devastated 1945 France could indeed have offered material for the volatile facet of pain in *Endgame*.

At the same time, the words "Ardennes" and "Sedan", the closest to geographical reality, can be generative of a reading key to the obscurity of a text that often loses itself in the diversity of its interpretations. Suggestively calling forth the French segment of the writer's biography, the invoked localities are laden with history.

Part of the Battle of the Frontiers, the military confrontation in the Ardennes in August 1914 marks France's unsuccessful attempt to support its invasion of Lorraine. In World War II the same famous geographical region is even more historically resonant: the Ardennes stood for one of the war locations in the Battle of France (1940), and, more importantly, for the Nazi Germany's failure in the Battle of the Bulge (1944–1945) to neutralize the increasingly threatening Western Front. Entailing either the victory of the assailer or that of the attacked, the military disputes in the Ardennes area can provide – in a more detached, both historical and philosophical perspective – the postulate of recurrent violence and sufferance, the symbol and the interrogation of generally bellicose tendencies in humans, the revelation of more or less elaborate absurdities haunting man's consciousness.

Moreover, in *Endgame* the evocation of Sedan (Beckett 1972: 19) – owing its fame to the battle fought in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war or to the French-German military clash in May 1940 – can sustain even more evidently the figural representation of history as a form of travel through unhappy recurrences. "Sedan" can offer, in a way similar to "the Ardennes", a dramatic representation of profound historical pessimism.

Additionally, one should not neglect the occurrence – later in the play, in connection with a mysterious starving man – of another toponym: "I inquired about the situation at Kov, beyond the gulf. Not a sinner. …" (*ibidem*: 36). The closest phonic resemblance we can think of is to the Ukrainian city of Kharkov. The locality is easily associable with World War II as it represented, as we remember, the site for four famous battles between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Army, and had connections with the Jewish persecution and the Katyn massacre.

Though the use of geographical names can be a departing point, Beckett's specific conciseness is, rather, generative of ambiguity and multiplicity. Thus one can extend the series of spatial and temporal suppositions. If Valerie Topsfield relies, more securely, on the playwright's own localization of *Endgame* in an early manuscript – "dans la Picardie […] détruite progressivement dans l'automne de 1914, le printemps de 1918, et l'automne suivant, dans des circonstances mystérieuses" (Beckett qtd. in Topsfield 1988: 112) –, Jacques Guicharnaud characterizes the setting of the play "as a symbol of the world after the H-bomb" (Guicharnaud 1961: 189), thus voicing a common interpretation of *Endgame* as a

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postnuclear catastrophe**.** In reading the "war" substratum of the play, Picardy can indeed provide substantial evidence, considering its sad historical renown due especially to its battlefields in the Great War of 1914–1918. Simultaneously, the obsession with disease and dismemberment, the display of the gradual destruction of the human body, the symbolic attack of fleas or rats as insidious but persistent factors of degradation recompose all, in a more poignant manner, the remnants of a nuclear attack, the fight with irradiation, the double death of mind and flesh.

Apart from the precise coordinates offered by "the Ardennes" and "Sedan", military conflict can be considered an integral part of the text mainly thanks to the rich body imagery. The physical evidence for a previous bellicose episode can be provided by Hamm's "blood-stained handkerchief" (Beckett 1972: 12), by Nagg and Nell's lack of "shanks" (*ibidem*: 19), by their son's own "armchair on castors" (*ibidem*: 12), all in all, by the repeated allusions to body fragmentation, illness and death.

The syntagm "[t]hose forests" (*ibidem*: 12) appearing in Hamm's first speech may be a hint at the tree-covered Ardennes region, and, in this way, yet another (dissimulated) form of introducing the basic subject matter of the play. A "whistle hanging from his [Hamm's] neck" (*ibidem*: 12), and Clov's decision to "wait for him to whistle me" (*ibidem*: 12) may represent the elements establishing, from the very beginning, a subjection relation between a soldier and his superior, between a trainer and his trainee. Thus the suggestion of a military barracks has already been outlined. A sentence like "Outside of here it's death" (*ibidem*: 15) can make the setting even more significant: the personages are in a military establishment, in an obscure hiding place, or, more precisely, even in a trench. Although the characters' movements are not compatible with the narrowness of such a place, Hamm's remark that "here we're down in a hole" (*ibidem*: 30) may indeed be indicative of a typically military excavation (if not of death itself).

Moreover, the glass used by Clov for looking "at the earth" (*ibidem*: 24) could have been better termed "the spyglass", thus making the suggestion of military equipment complete. In this sense, Hamm's obsession with the horizon – yet another of Beckett's "disturbing and fascinating tropes of visuality" (Lawrence 2018: 2) immediately decodable as the symbol of hope – can be traced back to a rather banal military practice: troops' scrutinizing manoeuvres.

Still, let us remember that the setting is also broadly established in the familiar atmosphere of a household. We learn of the existence of a kitchen, and, also, of the daily routine of meals and sleeping hours. The supposedly cosy framework is apparently subverted by various representations of fight, death and decay. Immaterial details perfectly integrate themselves into the "war" sphere:

> Clov: I must have put on *my boots.*
> Hamm: Your slippers were hurting you? (my italics – C.A.) (Beckett 1972: 39).

We have here the replacement of a peaceful, civil existence with the brutal war insignia. Jokingly, the dialogue epitomizes the drama of recruitment, the enforced abandonment of a secure environment. Hamm's bitter irony may represent a fictional facet of what Beckett called, in an article written in 1946 for radio correspondence, "that smile at the human condition" (Beckett qtd. in O'Brien 1986: 335). If the inhabitants of Saint-Lô – to which the journalistic report referred –

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demonstrated the heroism of their facts in fighting ruins and despair, the Beckettian heroes display the courage of their rhetoric. In the play as a whole one identifies a subtle kind of laughter – the record of an impossible escape from man's bloody tendencies. Nell's conclusion that "[n]othing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett 1972: 20) renders, in fact, a self-derisive attitude and, as Martin Esslin suggests, against a Nietzschean background, the "heroic courage in the face of impossible odds" (Esslin 1986: 20).

Front life permanently impinges upon the intimate background of "at home". By means of a subtle homophony game, the text of the play becomes the repository of the characters' hidden war memories. The "powder" (Beckett 1972: 27) used for killing the flea can also belong to the implicit discourse of war. The tragic facet of violence is downgraded by its being repeatedly projected upon the more familiar territory of chores:

> Hamm: A rat! Are there still rats?
> Clov: In the kitchen there's one.
> Hamm: And you haven't *exterminated* him? (my italics – C.A.) (Beckett 1972: 37).

Even the description of a dilapidated lighthouse appears resonant with army language: we are told that "[t]here was a bit left" (Beckett 1972: 25), namely "[t]he base" (*ibidem*: 25). What obviously designates an essential part of a building, the base, can also indicate – according to the Beckettian propensity for language games – a direction centre for military personnel. Along similar lines, Clov is trying "to create a little *order*" (my italics – C. A.; *ibidem*: 39), echoing one of the main daily tasks of a military professional. Also, the alarm is equally evocative of the army context, but it is, in its turn, dissimulated against a domestic background as a linguistic disguise: the compound noun "the alarm-clock" (*ibidem*: 34).

Intimations of a concentration camp or of a hospital as the actual place are equally present in the play. Subject to physical degradation and starvation, Nagg and Nell are "bottled" (*ibidem*: 22) in their ashbins. Possibly two guardian-figures, Hamm and Clov control them by raising and closing the lids. Their failed attempt to touch each other may evoke a war idyll enacted from behind a barbed wire fence. Moreover, Hamm reportedly leads his daily existence among his wheelchair, the catheter and the painkillers. The impression of wounded bodies, created by the characters' obvious infirmities, but also sustained by Nagg's referring to a "hollow" (*ibidem*: 20) in his body, is continued transparently in Hamm's narrative delirium: "Last night I saw inside my breast. There was a big sore" (*ibidem*: 26). If extended to the head, injuries can provide even more productive representational material from a director's point of view. In this sense, reviewing some stagings of the play, Deirdre Bair interestingly mentions, among others, "an approximation of the interior of a human skull" (Bair 1980: 468). The characters' sometimes incoherent speeches, the linguistic games, the general impression of dislocation (present in the bodies, but also in the described seascape) create all the image of the confusion caused by "a cerebral haemorrhage" (Dutton 1986: 81). The impression of mental (and physical) agony is rendered surrealistically by a confused Hamm in all his obscure speeches – the obvious effect of "something dripping in my head" (Beckett 1972: 19). Besides, Hamm's demand for Clov to "Look at the earth" using "the glass" (*ibidem*: 24)

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contributes to the impression of the characters' imponderability: they seem to have risen above the planet, in an after-death space, or they are still in a no-man's-land, on the intermediary territory between life and death.

Judging by the scenic and textual evidence, the subject of *Endgame* could mostly be centred on the postwar reception of conflict. The paraphrase "My kingdom for a nightman!" (*ibidem*: 22) recomposes the battle atmosphere by its very contamination with the Shakespearean context, and alludes, in this way, to the last stage of hostilities. Also, supposedly at the end of the war – any war –, it marks the bitter conclusion on the futility and abjectness of such human enterprises.

The aftermath of war is best represented by the number of dead people. In this sense, the play is an indirect mode of writing an obituary. Death is a prominent leitmotif of the play, sounding, apparently, the most explicit in Hamm's realization that "The whole place stinks of corpses" (*ibidem*: 33), and in Clov's conclusion that "There are no more coffins" (*ibid.*: 49). The "war" subtext helps us get a better insight into the concept of violent death. By his playing upon the double meaning of "naturally", Becket indirectly formulates an indictment of war:

> Hamm: […] *That old doctor, he's dead, naturally.*
> Clov: He wasn't old.
> Hamm: But he's dead?
> Clov: *Naturally.* (my italics – C. A.) (Beckett 1972: 23).

The doctor's youth is a subtle hint at a subversion of the normal life course. What could have been a "natural" death is now "naturally" – that is "implacably" – motivated by violence as a sine qua non of armed conflicts. Clov's report on Mother Pegg's disappearance casts a doubt upon the nature of her death: she allegedly passed away because of "darkness" (Beckett 1972: 48) – yet another metaphor for violent destruction. Hamm's conclusive remark – "But *naturally* she's extinguished!" (my italics – C. A.; *ibidem*: 31) – seems to better solve the mystery by the simple usage of an adverb whose meaning is, like in the doctor's case, "without a doubt", not "in a natural way".

The war survivors' supreme aspiration has apparently remained natural extinction, the opposite of a cruel ending induced by weapons. The idea is more explicitly reinforced in one of Hamm's (war?) recollections in the form of a valuable piece of advice addressed to a hypothetical war witness: "Here if you were careful, you might die a nice *natural* death in peace and comfort" (my italics – C. A.; *ibidem*: 37).

If our above comments on the polysemy of words and their adequacy in a "war" context may seem unsubstantiated, they are nevertheless inspired (and sustained) by Hamm's use of more developed statements – whole sentences that achieve an evocation of war by their surprising convergence towards a specific imagery. The character's main speeches are made up of rather disparate ideas among which one detects, like flashes of what psychoanalysts would call repressed memories, the voices of a past experience at the front.

In this sense, the ambiguous story about a man asking for food and protection is suggestive of the search undertaken by the army on what used to be a battlefield. It hints at one's surprise in encountering survivors, and at the famine with which

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they may be confronted. In the middle of an account of past events one comes across a key-statement – "Come on now, what is the object of this invasion?" (*ibidem*: 36) – that brings us *in medias res*, and suggestively crayons the basic message of the text. The question is rhetorical; in concise terms, it can voice the condemnation of armed conflicts:

> Hamm: [...] *The man came crawling towards me, on his belly.* Pale, wonderfully pale and thin, he seemed on the point of – (Pause. Normal tone) No, I've done that bit. [...] No, no, don't look at me, don't look at me. He dropped his eyes and mumbled something, apologies I presume. (Pause.) I'm a busy man, you know, the final touches, before the festivities, you know what it is. (Pause. Forcibly.) *Come on now, what is the object of this invasion?* (Pause.) It was a glorious bright day, I remember, fifty by the heliometer, but already *the sun was sinking down into the...down among the dead.* (Normal tone.) Nicely put, that. […] (my italics – C.A.) (Beckett 1972: 35–36).

From a strictly semantic point of view, the "object" of war may simply point to – as suggested above by our identifying a series of concrete signs of the military experience – an authorial perspective: the concern with describing a given historical event. "Object" understood as subject matter is completed here by its instrumental significance: to a considerable extent, this is a story with and about objects. They are endowed with a vigorous signifying role: such elements as the whistle, the telescope, the alarm clock, or even the characters themselves display a metonymical relationship with armed hostilities. The entire drama can, in fact, be viewed as a metonymy of war. At the same time, according to *Macmillan English Dictionary*, "object" also means "something you plan to achieve" (Rundell 2002: 973), such a sense making the message of *Endgame* – the pointlessness of "war" – more obvious and more imperious. The domestic content proposed, by and large, by the décor – and dealing apparently with communication and/or philosophical issues – turns out to be paralleled by a powerful militant content: "war" has no object; it is a futile piece of reality.

The polysemy of "object" reminds us of Beckett's propensity for the linguistic game, for sending a multiplicity of messages by the derision of language and, generally, of any other communication means. The "war" context makes no exception. In this sense, confirming "the Ardennes" and "Sedan" as possible hints at World War I, Richard Dutton interestingly combines a linguistic perspective with a historical one, emphasizing the chronicled aspect of the play. It is worth considering the critic's attempt to integrate the Beckettian text into a "war" context by means of a keen remark on the dramatist's use of the linguistic repertoire:

> The latter phrase ["Something dripping in my head ever since fontanelles." (Beckett 1972: 35)] is an extremely odd one. The fontanelle is the soft, uncovered spot on a newborn baby's head, before the plates of the skull have joined together. So Hamm seems to be saying 'ever since birth'. But why be so circuitous about it, and why use the plural? It may be that Beckett is playing on the sound and shape of a relatively unfamiliar word and so conjuring with the more familiar sound and shape of 'Dardanelles' – the scene of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in the First World War. The phrase 'ever since the Dardanelles', in the context of a head-wound, would be much more conventional English than 'ever since the fontanelles', and perhaps the net

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> effect of this aural pun is a running together of birth and battle which would be quite appropriate in this play (Dutton 1986: 84).

Returning from Beckett-the-writer to Beckett-the-man, one realizes again that the dramatist's private background provides sufficient evidence for his real-life contact with war either as a process or as a tragic effect. Moreover, historical events that did not necessarily belong to the author's contemporaneity or to his adult life – see the battle of Gallipoli (1915) – could not have been ignored by the scholarly spirit of a former academic. History in its entirety must have been taken into account in Beckett's rendering the *éternel retour* of human violence. In a different connection, one should additionally remark that the political framework of interpretation seems to remain constant with Beckett: one can listen, for instance, to James McNaughton whose comparable view in 2018 describes *Endgame* as an attempt "to ask seriously whether Stalin and Hitler's starvation policies are an outgrowth of European colonialism" (McNaughton 2018: 23).

On the other hand, holding language in derision is part of a larger context of skepticism integrated – in the first decades of the twentieth century – within the awareness of new (historical, social, cultural, religious, ethic, aesthetic) relativisms. Nietzsche's and Darwin's annihilated God, Einstein's theory of relativity, Saussure's linguistic arbitrariness, but also the incipient dissolution of the British Empire, or the new sympathies with Marxism or Fascism are only a few disparate, yet significant elements that contributed to the loss of the old landmarks at the beginning of chronologically accredited modernism. Among such factors, World War I "produced a deep mistrust of optimistic secular or teleological understandings of history and […] showed conclusively the failures of nineteenth-century rationalism" (Childs 2000: 20). Undoubtedly, World War II has caused similar effects. This new state of mind, materialized as new epistemological and ontological doubts, is fully illustrated by Beckett's characters: in an extended perspective, their obsession seems to be with a generalized concept of "invasion" – of humans, of time, of ideas, of words – that makes them universally "[s]uspicious of all authority" (Worton 1994: 85).

3. Conclusions

The hidden "war" message of the play requires thorough exploration as a prerequisite to the critical discourse on the heavier, philosophically grounded problematics of man's condition, and on aesthetic desiderata. Even if a complete biographical decryption of *Endgame*, or an exact localization of the evoked events is not possible, one can still conclude that the military content of the play is sustainable on account of the richness of specific symbols and the pervasiveness of battlefield language. The characters' speeches reveal surprising intersections between civil discourse and soldierly jargon. There are two voices parallel to each other: one recording front incidents, and another dealing with domestic misery, with the torments of the people's everydayness.

In a 1957 letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett informs us of his decision "to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind", and to see the play in the light of "the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue" (Beckett qtd. in Cooke 1985:

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20). The dramatist's retraction stands for a theatrical act in itself: by adopting a "no man's land" of reference points, he obtains the opposite effect of a multiplicity of interpretations – the textual capacity to generate permanently renewed meanings, and a maximum of pliability on the reader's/spectator's expectations. Yet narrowing the critical perspective can prove fruitful, too. The underlying narrative pattern – the *objectless* character of armed conflicts as the simplest and, possibly, the most stable of all the interpretations of the play – can ensure the transition to universal *objects* of interest identifiable in the text: time, space, life, death, body, mind, power, solitude, language, teleology. It could also be seen as an efficient way of dealing with specifically modernist (and/or incipiently postmodernist) forms of discoursing. Through the agency of the battlefield, the passage to "the paralysis of human aspiration" (Baldick 2004: 1), a basic feature of the theatre of the absurd, is guaranteed and made easier for the spectator's understanding.

Universal, timeless, eternally human, Beckett's theatrical world seems to need a return to the topicality of the warfare representations of the 1950s simply for the sake of defining a new critical canon in the twenty-first century.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the "tale of war" substratum of Samuel Beckett's 1957 play entitled *Endgame*. Containing hypothetical allusions to World War I or II, the drama requires a particularization of the critical perspective in the context of a Beckettian exegesis tempted to prevalently deal with generally human issues or theatre aesthetics. Our (subjective) close reading – doubled by a (more objective) stylistic awareness – reveals that the "war" discourse parallels (and sustains) the complementary discourse concerned with the failure of interpersonal skills, the collapse of "plot" and "character" or the limitations of the linguistic code.

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