THE SPECTACLE OF FAILURE: READING BECKETT'S *ENDGAME* PHILOSOPHICALLY

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The borderline between philosophy and literature is highly contested. Still, if literary theorists and philosophers agree on the occasional work's ability to transcend border norms altogether, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* is a piece of dramatic writing that amply deserves the distinction. My article attempts a symptomatic comparison between the existential condition of *Endgame*'s characters, on the one hand, and the philosophical predicament, on the other. The importance of failure – both as an obstacle and as a catalyst for regeneration – provides a useful framework for this cross-disciplinary comparison. I draw inspiration from Stanley Cavell's reading of *Endgame*, but I take Cavell's analysis a step further. In 'Ending the Waiting Game' Cavell finds satisfaction in discovering what Beckett's play can say about a specific school of philosophy – logical positivism. I treat this discovery as an invitation to consider the possibility of a broader conclusion. There is much in *Endgame*, in Cavell's other writings, in the works of his and Beckett's commentators and in Wittgenstein's legacy that points to the existence and acceptance of philosophical infirmity. I see the recognition of this infirmity as a necessary step towards a better understanding of the play but also as a contribution to our general sense of the productive continuities between philosophy and literature.

I

Philosophy has a peculiar relationship with failure. In his 'Ending the Waiting Game' Stanley Cavell notes that an unhappy family 'gets in its own way in its own way'. This is a direct reference to the family circle, and circus, of Beckett's *Endgame*, but also an echo of the famous first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.[1] Even though Cavell's essay does not explore the connection explicitly, the notion of getting in one's own way in one's own way is also applicable to philosophy. This notion is my point of departure in tracing some fruitful analogies between the existential quagmire Beckett's characters find themselves in on the one hand and the philosophical predicament on the other. Adorno formulates this parallel in his observation that 'the misery of participants in the

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[1]   There are two places in Beckett's play where the characters broach the topic of family misery and the claim to uniqueness thereof. The first is when Nell says, 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness', and the other is when Hamm confesses that he and Clov had had great fun only to follow up with the words 'and then we got into the way of it'. See Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 101, 123.

Endgame is the misery of philosophy'.[2] While this statement confirms my application of Cavell's notion, it also raises some important questions. Can literature share and elucidate philosophy's failures? If so, under what conditions? And, in the spirit of the last sentence of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, at what cost to philosophy?[3]

To say that philosophy is a failure would be self-defeating on two counts. Firstly, if true, the statement will undermine its own import. Secondly, in order to be true, the statement needs to rest on *some* philosophical assumption of what constitutes a philosophical success. But, of course, if such an assumption were intelligible to anyone, then they could claim their understanding of it as a philosophical success. Yet failure is a frequent charge in and against philosophy. At its most common, this charge is levelled at a rival view that we believe we have the means to refute. A classic example of this is Kant's proverbial 'awakening' on account of what he saw as Hume's philosophical shortcomings. If one zooms out, failure can be seen as the reason why entire bodies of work or schools of thought have been rendered historically obsolete. Cartesian dualism and most of its tributaries are good candidates for both categories. And, finally, at its most general, the charge of failure might be made about philosophy as such – a seemingly paradoxical move that turns out to be at least partly defensible.

Alain Badiou reframes the problem by proposing to regard failure as something we should hope to attain through philosophical means rather than something we ought to avoid. When he claims that 'the essence of saying is ill saying', he acknowledges a limitation not only of language but also of philosophy.[4] His solution is to push forth, past any prescription of intelligibility. 'Since well saying is impossible,' Badiou contends, 'the only hope lies in betrayal: to attain a failure so complete it would elicit a total abandonment of the prescription itself, a relinquishment of saying and of language.' Badiou identifies this hope with the 'mystical temptation' to remain silent that Wittgenstein succumbs to at the end of the *Tractatus*.[5] But what is significant here is that with both philosophers what is billed as the failure of philosophy is actually also considered a sign of its persistent health. Badiou sees failure as 'the norm of saying' and not its eradication. Wittgenstein regards the 'bewitchment' of language, and the obstacles it creates, as an essential, and galvanizing, condition for doing

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2   Theodor W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique*, no. 26 (1982): 130.
3   Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 496.
4   Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, trans. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 90.
5   Ibid., 91.

philosophy.[6] For both thinkers, it is only the attainment of total failure, and not the many failures of philosophical language which lead up to it, that is liable to render us utterly speechless.

This framework – proposed by Badiou in his study of Beckett – bears significant similarities to Cavell's own treatment of Beckett's *Endgame*. Like Badiou, Cavell harbours the programmatic assumption that the borderline between literature and philosophy is fruitfully porous. Another similarity is the example of Wittgenstein, whose work both Badiou and Cavell consider emblematic of philosophy's courtship with strife and failure. And, thirdly, both Badiou and Cavell use a particular school of philosophy – logical positivism – to illustrate the dynamics of philosophical success and failure which Beckett teases out by literary means.[7]

In what follows I explore the philosophical implications of Beckett's *Endgame* through Cavell's lens. I start Section II with a brief survey of the critical context that locates *Endgame* on the philosophical register. I subsequently identify and expound on three dimensions of the play which are of particular philosophical interest – its systematic subversion of meaning, its obsession with confirmation, and its preoccupation with compulsive behaviour. In Section III, I show how relevant these dimensions are to philosophy and to the philosophical predicament. I start the section with an overview of Cavell's reading of Beckett, its putative origins, and its reception. Wittgenstein's work, in particular, is brought to bear on the questions this rich encounter raises. I then draw parallels between Beckett's fictional world and the world of philosophy as conveyed by Cavell and Wittgenstein. In Section IV, I attend to Cavell's reading of *Endgame* as an enactment, and inadvertent critique, of logical positivism. The section ends with some considerations of how the critique of logical positivism fits in the broader picture of philosophy which I reconstruct. My conclusion recapitulates key intuitions about the relationship between philosophy and literature which this reconstruction relies on.

Since it seems to tread the fine line between reconstruction and construct, my essay warrants a disclaimer. While I adhere close to the Beckett and Cavell texts, the philosophical and literary connections I draw are sometimes more

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[6]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 40.

[7]   In his discussion of 'ill saying', Badiou makes the following observation: 'Were we dealing with an empiricist doctrine of language according to which language sticks to things with various degrees of adherence, this would arouse no interest. Moreover, the text itself would turn out to be impossible.' Badiou, *On Beckett*, 90. The 'empiricist doctrine' he refers to is consistent with the logical positivist's dream of linguistic clarity as identified by Cavell. Both Badiou and Cavell regard this dream as unattainable, which is what makes logical positivism a token example of philosophical failure.

broadly associative. I see this as a necessity when trying not only to take one's sources at their word, but also to trace the implications of what they say beyond the page. An example of this is my treatment of *Endgame* in Section II. The three dimensions of Beckett's play which shoulder this treatment are obviously not announced by Beckett himself – they are my original contribution to the recognition and articulation of *Endgame*'s constitutive framework. The alignment of this framework with Cavell's thinking in Section III is, likewise, not explicitly offered by Cavell. Instead, it is an encounter I stage between *Endgame*'s philosophical import and the broader implications of Cavell's reading of it. I thus see the conclusions my study urges – about failure, philosophical and otherwise – as already implicitly present in Beckett, Cavell, and the interpretative networks they inhabit. While I agree with these conclusions, they should not be considered mine alone. Instead, I hope they will be seen as the product of intertextual exegesis and summation – my effort at orienting myself, and hopefully others, in the rich discourse that bears indirect witness to them.

In the spirit of Badiou and Cavell, my article explores, and hopefully embodies, the dialogical relationship between the literary and the philosophical. In Cavell I see an example of philosophical rigour which is not strictly beholden to narrowly philosophical interest and to philosophical language. His work shows how philosophically productive it can be to engage different disciplinary discourses – literary, scientific, sociological, and so forth.[8] Philosophy stands no risk of finding its demise in literature or elsewhere. The pain and strife of crossing over into another field, and dragging the borderlines along, are more likely to energize philosophy than harm it. The negotiation of these disciplinary transgressions is also, as Badiou acknowledges, a way of courting new brands of failure. This might make philosophy a more dangerous enterprise but it is also likely to make it more intriguing. After all, Tolstoy's sentence about unhappy families is a reminder that pain, strife, and failure form the sine qua non of spectacle.

II

Endgame is a puzzle of narrative reverse-engineering. While the action sputters along in what durationally appears to be forward motion, the characters

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[8]   In his 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', Cavell points out that the literary bent of the *Philosophical Investigations* is philosophically expedient to the extent to which it enables Wittgenstein to operate beyond 'existing terms of criticism'. See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70.

obsessively retrace past events, recent and distant. The fact that only one of the characters is ambulatory, while the other three are not, adds to the impression of contested motion. This impression is only heightened by the additional circumstance that the main character, Hamm, is blind and wheelchair-bound. The play goes on, but somehow refuses to unfold. No major events, except for the negligible, and neglected, demise of Nell – Hamm's mother – transpire. For the better part of the play Hamm and his servant/lover/son Clov rehearse variations on conversations and actions whose structure seems relegated to, and actively beckoning from, the trash heap of the past. For the audience, this renders the question of 'what happened' as pertinent as the one of 'what is happening'. Apart from creating a sense of mystery, this also suggests what Leslie Hill has called a 'purgatorial cycle'.[9] For Hill, this condition is typical of modern literature. And, indeed, it is tempting to contextualize Beckett as a true modern – an embattled ethicist whose disjointed invective is the only adequate response to a time out of joint. The *New York Times* critic who reviewed the first American performance of *Endgame* called it 'a portrait of desolation, lovelessness, boredom, ruthlessness, sorrow, nothingness'.[10] The question is how such an unyielding dramatic beast became irresistible bait for philosophical interpretation.

As Dermot Moran notes, 'Beckett's writings contain a kind of arbitrary collection or *bricolage* of philosophical ideas'.[11] But Beckett's works engage philosophy not only at the level of content: when Moran acknowledges Beckett's devotion to using 'the least number of words and those showing their inadequacy', he discerns a philosophical method as well.[12] Finally, Beckett's own suggestion, in a letter to a friend, that 'the true power of art is to show up the failure of language' is strikingly reminiscent of the concerns of what Richard Rorty has called 'the linguistic turn' in philosophy.[13]

Endgame confirms these observations convincingly. The play is a masterpiece of economy – a feat of linguistic, narrative, physical, and emotional parsimony. Its sentences are short, even stunted. The story is inconsequential and elliptical. The characters' bodily dispositions are tightly choreographed. Laughter, both on and off stage, is replaced by what the playwright's stage directions identify as 'brief laughs'. The overall impression is of a mysterious mismatch between what

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9   Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.
10   Brooks Atkinson, 'Beckett's Endgame', *New York Times*, 29 January 1958.
11   Dermot Moran, 'Beckett and Philosophy', in *Samuel Beckett: One Hundred Years*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: New Island Press, 2006), 93.
12   Ibid., 95.
13   Ibid., 102.

the play says and what it means.[14] This automatically qualifies it for philosophical scrutiny – a well-articulated, highly formalized dramatization of the structure of meaning like *Endgame* would seem to demand a philosophical understanding of itself and its audience.

The classic French children's book *Le Petit Nicolas* includes a scene where a physical education instructor introduces himself to a group of children with the salutation 'My name is Hector Duval. And yours?', to which one of the children – little Fabrice – answers, 'Ours isn't.' In the exchange, the instructor's words constitute a social prompt, whereas Fabrice's answer is a deliberate departure from the conventions that render that prompt meaningful. But this is not to say that it is unimaginable that conditions could exist under which Fabrice's words would constitute a 'straight answer'. In fact, our ability to imagine such a situation and our awareness of how far it would be from the ordinary is the reason Fabrice's subversion of meaning is of the kind that even children can laugh about. In the children's book the instructor's words present a pivot that secures conventional meaning. Fabrice's departure, in turn, harmonizes with the initial prompt. We laugh with the children because we are equally empowered by our awareness of the nature of the misunderstanding, its intentional character, and the extent of its impact. The brief laughs in *Endgame*, on the other hand, seem to be provoked by something somewhat different.[15]

Beckett's characters inhabit a space that is organized according to three peculiar principles. The first one is the systematic subversion of meaning, which places all characters at the constant peril of reciprocating and perpetuating each other's misunderstanding. We often witness a bilateral suspension of locution whereby neither of the interlocutors is tethered to the conditions that would make their statements meaningful. In other words, unlike the humorous episode in *Le Petit Nicolas*, the jokes of *Endgame* do not have a 'straight man'. The classic pleasure of understanding what two characters are saying or doing to each other better than they themselves do – a function of theatre that simultaneously establishes the fourth wall and helps pierce it – is here rationed out very conservatively. Beckett's intention to deny us this pleasure is palpable in one of

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[14] Badiou formulates this mismatch in the following way: 'Beginning with the play *Endgame*, Beckett dissociates what-comes-to-pass from any allegiance – even an invented one – to meanings.' Badiou, *On Beckett*, 20.

[15] Laughter here is not only highly regulated, but also intentionally paired with discomfort. Moran finds confirmation of this in Nell's pronouncement that 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness'. See Moran, 'Beckett and Philosophy', 103. This is yet another formulation of Tolstoy's famous sentence about unhappy families and it is also fully consistent with Cavell's notion of getting in one's own way in one's own way. Instead of being refreshingly revelatory, the occasional glimmers of understanding that *Endgame* affords its audiences are saddled with the guilt of dark enjoyment.

Hamm's short monologues: '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.'[16] This makes for a pronounced claustrophobic effect.

The characters are all suffering various modes of confinement, but the audience is granted its own unique mode too. Normally, a theatre audience is engaged in the narrative not only by being given an opportunity to *follow* the action but also by being allowed or encouraged to *anticipate* what would happen next. It is important to notice here that both following and anticipating require a rulebook, but only the latter cannot get by without one. Hugh Kenner's allusion to chess – briefly mentioned by Cavell in a footnote – can be somewhat helpful here.[17] Beckett's play is distinguished by a brand of rule-governed claustrophobia typical of chess and characterized by a strict causality, a finite number of moves, and a probabilistic approach. All of these enable, in fact require, prediction and anticipation. The atmosphere of *Endgame*, however, is akin to that of watching a chess game without having any idea of the rules. There seems to be an inscrutable causality to the characters' words and actions, there are a set of repetitive actions and locutions which seem to be integral to the play's inner logic, and there is the constant tease of probability in Clov's possible reactions to Hamm's incessant and repetitive prompts. Amidst this confusion, Beckett's consolation for us is that the rules of engagement are likely to *emerge* from the experience of it ('wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough'). But this means, at best, that we would begin to be able to reliably anticipate characters' words and actions only long after much of the play has unfolded. It is thus that the characters' entrapment becomes our own. When Clov asks 'What is there to keep me here?' and Hamm answers 'The dialogue', this is as much a glimpse into Clov and Hamm's predicament as it is of its relevance to us.[18]

The second principle of Beckett's play is that of constant obsessive confirmation. This is a manifestation of what Andrew Gibson has identified as Beckett's 'resistance of *doxa*'.[19] And while this resistance runs the risk of failure at every turn, Gibson contends that 'tentatively, contradictorily, fitfully, and by a variety of different means, Beckett edges towards a faith in possibility'. There is, indeed, a tentativeness and repetitiveness to everything that happens in *Endgame*, as if the very possibility of impacting the world were being tested.

16   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 108.
17   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 115.
18   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 120–21.
19   Andrew Gibson, 'Badiou, Beckett and Contemporary Criticism', in Badiou, *On Beckett*, 136.

This also manifests itself in the surveillance to which the characters subject their shared psychological and physical terrain. In Hamm we get a prime literary example of studied blindness – a case of pushing the limits of sensory deprivation to a place of hyper-awareness: 'HAMM: Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. (*Pause.*) Do you know what's happened? (*Pause.*) Clov!'[20] This is simultaneously a display of strength and insecurity. Hamm's strength derives from his uncanny sense of his own limitations, but he is insecure because he cannot be as certain about the limitations of others. Why else would Hamm constantly inquire about Clov's health, feelings, and comfort level? Conventionally, these questions would indicate emotional investment or self-interest. In *Endgame*, however, fellow feeling and egoism are rendered indiscernible. Both Clov and Hamm know that one of them begins where the other one ends but they do not know exactly where that is. When Hamm asks 'Why do you stay with me?', Clov asks back 'Why do you keep me?' The resolution comes in the next two sentences pronounced in succession by Hamm and Clov: 'There's no one else', 'There's nowhere else.'[21] This sequence establishes a bizarre equivalence between personal identity and spatial location. Beckett's characters are, literally, not *who* they are but *where* they are. And this location is the object of Hamm and Clov's perpetual search of each other.[22]

The third principle of *Endgame* is the element of compulsion in all proceedings. One explicit marker of this is the characters' frequent articulation of their own stage directions. Hamm's first line is 'Me to play'. This sets the tone for a peculiar mode of speaking. These three words are simultaneously an acknowledgement of Hamm's environment, a jerking of oneself into action, and an admission of a specific existential state. The second aspect – the verbal articulation of summoning oneself to act – is especially interesting. It is a display of deliberateness that is encountered in various contexts. In children, for example, giving oneself verbal directions seems to accompany actions as a reminder of what is being done and why, but also as a recognition of the ways language applies to action. In the elderly, it is mostly a function of failing short-term memory – repeating to oneself what one has just done, is now doing, and is about to do serves as a tool of cognitive positioning. While it is tempting to look for

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20   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 128.
21   Ibid., 95.
22   In his discussions of *Endgame*, Adorno captures this predicament in the following way:
      'But once the subject is no longer unquestionably identical with itself, no longer
      a self-contained complex of meaning, its boundary with what is outside it becomes
      blurred, and the situations of inwardness become those of *physis*, of physical reality.'
      Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New
      York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 252.

applications of self-directing speech which are completely positive in character, it is hard to deny that in most cases such speech assumes a compensatory role. In children, it replaces the narrative mode of speaking with a voiceover mode that is better suited to the immediacy of action. In the elderly, it monitors the passage of time as a substitute for increasingly infirm memory.

While in the above examples a specific need is served by the practice of giving oneself verbal directions, in Beckett's characters it appears to be a matter of inner compulsion. Clov's articulations of what he is doing could reasonably be read as attempts to accommodate Hamm's disability. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that Clov does not care to provide a truthful picture of the proceedings to Hamm. Furthermore, there are instances when Clov's use of verbal self-direction is ostensibly not meant to deliver information to Hamm at all. A good example of the latter is the line 'This is what we call making an exit', which Clov pronounces in the process of his hesitant exit.[23] It is a note to self that does not reach its destination. The only import of a line like this is the perpetuation of the general dramatic cycle.[24]

By using this peculiar mode of speaking the characters of *Endgame* demonstrate that futility is not only the fuel but also the goal of compulsive behaviour. This reading comports with Bruno Clément's contention that the 'voice of failure' readers hear in Beckett is anything but destructive. It is in fact the sound of a text that 'deprecates itself, corrects itself, and thereby constitutes itself, surreptitiously, in critical discourse'.[25] Clément's observations about Beckett's 'frighteningly precise' stage directions are also revealing. While these directions seem to be a means of securing authorial control – a way, as Clement puts it, to 'mark out the ground' – they also sanction a constant and compulsive re-negotiation of its parameters.[26] Why else would Beckett grant his characters the freedom to self-direct?

<center>III</center>

A thorough account of 'Ending the Waiting Game' would include many aspects of Cavell's study that I cannot broach. For example, his inimitable feats of literary association – between *Endgame* and the biblical story of the Flood,

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[23] Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 132.

[24] This mode of dramatic perpetuation is confirmed by Gibson, who observes: 'Repetition does not necessarily have a stymying effect on Beckett's world. It is not an index of an essential paralysis.' Gibson, 'Badiou, Beckett', 127.

[25] Bruno Clément, 'What the Philosophers Do with Samuel Beckett', trans. Anthony Uhlmann, in *Beckett after Beckett*, ed. S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 119–20.

[26] Ibid., 129.

between Beckett and Chekhov, between Hamm and Hamlet, and so forth – are so rich that they deserve to be investigated all on their own. For my purposes, the two convictions Cavell starts with, and the threads of consistent interest they weave through the text, provide sufficient initial guidance. They also serve as an underlining reminder that, however many literary and filmic sources Cavell consults, mining *Endgame* for philosophical insight is an important part of his intention. The first conviction is that 'the ground of the play's quality is the *ordinariness* of its events'.[27] The second is that the language Beckett has discovered has a quality of '*hidden literality*'.[28] Both the ordinariness of the proceedings and the literality of the play's language are 'hidden' behind their aggressive obviousness – everything the characters do is intelligible and everything they say is said in the clearest possible manner. But it is precisely this amplification of unambiguous physicality and verbal clarity that Beckett's audiences are prone to find incomprehensible. Moran's claim that Beckett's characters display 'a dry, analytic manner which makes their calm rationality all the more absurd and disconnected' confirms Cavell's convictions, at least as far as the verbal aspect is concerned.[29] The first philosophical lesson of *Endgame* Cavell draws is, thus, that there is such a thing as excessive clarity.

Excessive complexity, on the other hand, is not only acceptable, but on the evidence of Cavell's essay it is also often unavoidable. It is because of its complexity, I think, that 'Ending the Waiting Game' has garnered some negative criticism. It has, for example, been accused of practising the opposite of what it preaches on account of Cavell's plunge into interpretations of the kind his own analysis disqualifies.[30] The essay has been seen by some as an empty gesture in favour of Cavell's beloved ordinary language philosophy.[31] It has also, conversely, garnered admiration for various reasons – from its sensitivity to the timbre of Beckett's work to the gateway it provides to Wittgenstein's notion of sublimity.[32]

I believe that it is precisely Cavell's connection with Wittgenstein, and the inspiration thereof, that provides the key to Cavell's interpretation of Beckett.

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[27] Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 117.

[28] Ibid., 119.

[29] Moran, 'Beckett and Philosophy', 97.

[30] Jay M. Bernstein, 'Philosophy's Refuge: Adorno in Beckett', in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 177–91.

[31] Benjamin H. Ogden, 'What Philosophy Can't Say about Literature: Stanley Cavell and *Endgame*', *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (2009): 126–38.

[32] For most references to commentators on Cavell's essay, I am indebted to David Rudrum's 'From the Sublime to the Ordinary: Stanley Cavell's Beckett', *Textual Practice* 23 (2009): 543–58. In this essay, Rudrum quite convincingly accomplishes his goal of 'teasing out some of the implications of Cavell's position'.

In a more recent volume, Cavell describes Wittgenstein's picture of human existence as a 'continuous compromise with restlessness, disorientation, phantasms of loneliness and devastation, dotted with assertions of emptiness that defeat sociability as they seek it'.[33] This could very well be a description of the world of *Endgame*, but the dire picture is also emphatically consistent with Cavell's understanding of the philosophical predicament. In his famous essay 'The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', Cavell makes two statements that close the allegorical loop – from the human condition as described by Wittgenstein to the condition of Beckett's characters to the philosopher's infirmity. The first statement is that 'human self-destructiveness is at war with itself in philosophy'.[34] There is here still a glimmer of hope for anyone willing to wager that philosophy has the resources to win such an uneven contest. All such hope, however, is tempered by Cavell's second statement, which is a reminder that each 'human creature' that finds itself in the grip of philosophy 'remains tormented'.[35]

'The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself' is also where Cavell charts out the conditions under which philosophy and art cross and share paths.[36] His suggestion that Wittgenstein's later work has a literary dimension that is *philosophically* integral, and philosophically *therapeutic*, has inspired many subsequent Cavell and Wittgenstein scholars.[37] But even among those who take the crossing and sharing of paths for granted, the negotiation of the relationship between literature and philosophy can lead to idiosyncratic conclusions. For example, in *Literature and Philosophy*, Richard Kuhns contends that 'works of literary art may on occasion be understood as realizing possibilities of experience, explanatory accounts of which are offered by philosophy'.[38] This claim contains an echo of Cavell's belief that 'art begins where explanations leave off, or before they start'.[39] But for Cavell the concession that literature is not explanatory in

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[33]   Stanley Cavell, 'Responses', in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 161.
[34]   Stanley Cavell, 'The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26.
[35]   Ibid.
[36]   Ibid., 25.
[37]   The entire collection *The Literary Wittgenstein* is under the spell of Cavell's seminal essay, but the contributions by Timothy Gould ('Restlessness and the Achievement of Peace: Writing and Method in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*', 75–91) and David Schalkwyk ('Wittgenstein's "Imperfect Garden": The Ladders and Labyrinths of Philosophy as *Dichtung*', 55–74) have the most to say about philosophical strife and failure, and the role of the literary in elucidating them. See Gibson and Huemer, *Literary Wittgenstein*.
[38]   Richard Kuhns, *Literature and Philosophy: Structures of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1971), 59.
[39]   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 143.

character does not imply that it is not a legitimate medium for philosophical insight. While Kuhns's statement allows for a common ground for literature and philosophy, the overlap is only there in terms of subject – possibilities of experience – and a hypothetical subject at that. What I think Cavell urges is a much more radical overlap – a space where literature, Beckett's drama in particular, uses what seem like non-philosophical tools to do philosophy.[40]

If we return now to the three dimensions that frame my discussion of *Endgame*, it becomes clear how much Beckett has accomplished philosophically. The apprehension of confinement is one that is often associated with Wittgenstein – he registers philosophy's entrapment in its obsession with the limits of thought, its weariness of the vagaries of language, and its stubborn quest for the place where 'giving grounds comes to an end'.[41] It is startling how much of Wittgenstein sneaks into *Endgame*, and unintentionally at that. Schopenhauer's classic observation about our perceiving our field of vision as the limit of our world is one that Wittgenstein readily adopts in the *Tractatus*. In *Endgame*, this same principle emerges out of Hamm's suggestion that a turn around the room in his wheelchair is all it takes go 'right round the world'.[42] Cavell takes stock of this mode of entrapment when he describes Hamm's relationship to Clov as one in which 'both partners wish nothing more than to end it, but in which each is incapable of taking final steps because its end presents itself as the end of the world'.[43]

Another sign of entrapment – *Endgame*'s denial of anticipatory clarity as I have discussed it above – is also consistent with Wittgenstein. In § 188 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein analyses the connection between meaning to do something and doing it, and concludes that engaging in the former is a way of tracing one's future steps. The paragraph in question ends with the observation that 'only meaning can anticipate reality'.[44] The next few sections are devoted to a discussion of the dependence of anticipatory meanings on order and, more precisely, formulas. As I have sought to show above, it is

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[40]   For a recent discussion of the relationship between philosophy and literature, and a defence of the significant overlaps thereof, see Bence Nanay, 'Philosophy versus Literature? Against the Discontinuity Thesis', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 349–60. For a paradigmatic version of the case against the acceptance of literature as a vehicle of conceptual, and thus philosophical, knowledge, see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[41]   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe and Denis Paul (New York: Harper, 1972), 24, 27, 28, 74.

[42]   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 104.

[43]   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 118.

[44]   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 64.

precisely because of the lack of intelligible and overarching order that the meanings of what Beckett's characters say fail to set up any foreseeable future. His jealous protection of *Endgame*'s rulebook is what allows Beckett to develop a narrative where nothing changes yet nothing is ever the same. Cavell articulates this stagnation, and the Wittgensteinian implication of anticipation, in the following way: 'The life of waiting for life to come is all the life ever to come.'[45] Cavell soon follows up with the suggestion that all it takes to break out of this vicious cycle is to stop waiting. This, of course, would constitute a break with the apparent rules that govern the world of the play, but they cannot be broken as long as they remain inscrutable for everyone following the action in real time – characters and audience members alike.

The extent to which the characters are entrapped within an order they cannot discern is evident in Clov's daydreaming of a life that suspiciously resembles his own: 'I love order. It is my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.'[46] As to the audience, I agree with Cavell's contention that no one – on stage or off – is granted the privilege of global understanding: 'It is a matter of our feeling that no one in the place, on the stage or in the house, knows better than anyone else what is happening, no one has a better right to speak than anyone else.'[47] Cavell recognizes a demand, on Beckett's part, for actors to say words as if they did not expect to say them. But according to Cavell, Beckett also 'has nothing more to *tell* the audience than his characters' words convey'.[48] To reduce a theatrical play to a text – to, so to speak, hold drama to its word – constitutes a move from the performative to the philosophical. We watch the play as if we were reading it, a live audience locked inside its own thoughts.

The studied blindness I have discussed above with reference to Beckett's play is also an object of interest for Wittgenstein. The obsessive search for confirmation of states of affairs is something that the world of *Endgame* shares with the world of philosophy. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein says that giving grounds, or providing confirmation, comes to an end not when one begins to *see* with certainty but when one begins *acting* with it.[49] As Wittgenstein observes on numerous occasions in *On Certainty*, action and more specifically the actions associated with a particular form of life are the ultimate epistemological expedient in the process of giving grounds. This emphasis on action is picked up in Cavell's analysis of

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45   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 121.
46   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 120.
47   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 158.
48   Ibid., 160.
49   Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 28.

Endgame where he acknowledges that in order for Beckett's characters to die at their own hands – a line of action Hamm and Clov seem to be seriously contemplating – they have to first take their lives into their own hands.[50] Action and human agency are for the most part replaced by auto-surveillance – Beckett's characters are brilliant at attending to their own experiences, but not at having them.[51] Analogically, they are better equipped to wait for the end of the world than to bring it about.

The third dimension of *Endgame* which reveals analogies between the world of the play and that of philosophy has to do with compulsive behaviour. And, indeed, the philosopher's search for her two Holy Grails – intelligibility and presuppositionlessness – is as restless as it is often futile. Getting in one's own way, as Austin noticed in his 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', is often a matter of honest error.[52] Doing it *repeatedly*, however, as unhappy families and philosophers are prone to do, suggests two things – firstly, the inconclusive character of many of philosophy's findings and, secondly, the interminable desire to continue searching for new ones. Wittgenstein claims that philosophy leaves things as they are. There can be nothing more maddening and also more comforting – maddening because of the energy expended on what is often a fruitless quest and comforting because of the gradual realization that the fruit is the quest itself. Cavell's contention that 'philosophy is what thought does to itself' should be understood in the context of a long philosophical tradition of compulsive aspirations and palliative accomplishments – a cyclical history of painful strain and temporary relief.[53]

In philosophy, it is again Wittgenstein who carries the diagnostic, and therapeutic, torch.[54] In § 61 of *On Certainty* Wittgenstein tells the story of sitting in a garden and listening to another philosopher pointing at a tree and repeatedly saying, 'I know that that's a tree.' When a stranger passes by, Wittgenstein feels compelled to explain his companion's behaviour: 'This fellow isn't insane. We're only doing philosophy.'[55] This quick sketch intimates two things – firstly, that philosophy is prone to retrace its own steps obsessively and, secondly, that from

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[50] Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 133.
[51] For a lucid presentation on the differences between attending to one's experience and having one, see Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine', in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 42–45.
[52] J. L. Austin, 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966): 427–40.
[53] Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 126.
[54] Hymers summarizes the Wittgensteinian diagnostic as follows: 'That weakness of the will that characterizes philosophical puzzlement involves a kind of compulsive behavior on our part, which stands in need of therapy.' Michael Hymers, *Wittgenstein and the Practice of Philosophy* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010), 88.
[55] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 10.

the perspective of non-philosophers this constitutes unhealthy behaviour. In another passage from the same book Wittgenstein compares himself to 'an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys'.[56] This behaviour is conducive to verbal self-direction – the old lady is likely to engage in a stream of spoken reminders that accompany the search for the respective objects but do not make it any more effective. As I have shown above, this is the kind of search Hamm and Clov are engaged in, except they are cursed with excellent memories and nothing specific to search for.

The problem with philosophy is, one suspects, even more serious than these sketches betray. In his essay on *Endgame* Cavell quotes the following passage from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: 'The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of sound human understanding.'[57] To this Cavell quickly adds, 'as though there were no other philosophical path to sanity, save through madness'.[58] The following diagnosis, offered by John Wisdom, a pupil of Wittgenstein's and a pioneer of the psychoanalytic reading of philosophy, applies as directly to Beckett's characters as it does to the philosophical predicament:

> The neurotic may discuss his problems – he may indeed – but he never means business; the discussion is not a means to action, to something other than itself; on the contrary, after a while we get the impression that in spite of his evident unhappiness and desire to come from hesitation to decision he also desires the discussion never to end and dreads its ending. Have you not quite often had this impression with philosophers?[59]

If Wisdom is right, philosophy is inherently self-defeating, but its ability to accommodate defeat is also an essential aspect of its longevity. This, of course, is also the conclusion Badiou advocates in his discussion of failure.

Even if it is not life-affirming in a straightforward way, philosophical neurosis still seems to be resolutely incompatible with death – the aversion to endings Wisdom attributes to philosophers implies an apprehension of mortality too. A similar incompatibility applies to *Endgame*'s characters. Concerning death, the pragmatic options are clear: one either takes one's own life or lets it run its course. An entry from 1 October 1917 in Wittgenstein's early *Notebooks*, identifies suicide as the 'elementary sin', because 'if anything is not allowed then suicide

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56   Ibid., 70.
57   Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 126–27.
58   Ibid., 127.
59   John Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 172.

is not allowed'.[60] To take one's own life – that is, to exercise one's agency for the purpose of losing it – seems to dissolve both ethics and logic. The second option – to let life run its course – stands up to scrutiny on both dramatic and philosophical grounds. Socrates' last words, asking Crito to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius, are often read as implying that life itself is an ailment.[61] On the evidence of repeated allusions in the play, Beckett also seems to see life as an ailment.[62] Yet neither Socrates nor Beckett would endorse suicide as a cure. For Socrates, suicide violates the imperatives of faith and ethics. For Beckett, it undermines the very logic of drama – an endgame always unfolds as the deferral of an ending.

<div align="center">IV</div>

We have every reason to believe that Beckett did not mean *Endgame* as a philosophical allegory,[63] yet it succeeds spectacularly at being one.[64] As I have tried to show, the ways in which Beckett's characters get in their own way in their own way bear uncanny resemblances with the ways philosophers do the same. When Gibson claims that recent philosophical readings have started to focus on Beckett's 'diagnostic attitude,' he credits not only Beckett's diagnostic prowess, but also those commentators sensitive enough to acknowledge it.[65] Even though Cavell does not adopt this diagnostic attitude explicitly, he deserves credit for informing and enabling diagnostic readings like the present one. But, while falling short of the general analogy I advocate, Cavell does make an undisputable contribution to the conversation by acknowledging *Endgame*'s profound relevance to one specific school of philosophy – logical positivism. When Benjamin Ogden criticizes Cavell for attempting to subject *Endgame* to the purposes of his beloved ordinary language philosophy, he misses Cavell's point altogether. It is true that ordinary language philosophy is largely a reaction to the failures of logical positivism and it is also true that Cavell's critique of

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[60] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 91.

[61] For a comprehensive account of this view and its various alternatives, see Colin Wells, 'The Mystery of Socrates' Last Words', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 16 (2008): 137–48.

[62] While this intimation occurs more than once in the play, it is captured for the first time in Hamm's words 'you're on earth, there's no cure for that'. See Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 118.

[63] In her superb *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, Perloff provides sufficient evidence of Beckett's disavowal of any connection between his writing and the philosophy of his day. See Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 115–44.

[64] Clément takes this even further when he posits that Beckett not only partakes in philosophical discourse, but also earns the position of 'critical authority'. See Clément, 'What the Philosophers Do', 121.

[65] Gibson, 'Badiou, Beckett', 121.

the latter is a part of his reading of Beckett's play. But there is something that complicates the simple conjecture of Cavell playing favourites. It is the fact that throughout his essay Cavell remains as uncharitable in the conclusions he draws with reference to ordinary language philosophy as he does in those that concern logical positivism.[66]

While Badiou and Adorno have both gestured at the diagnostic connection between Beckett's characters and logical positivism, Cavell takes the analogy the furthest.[67] What, according to Cavell, Beckett teaches us about logical positivism is that its hopes for an ideal language, for an immutable logical system underwriting all our words and actions, and for a strict method of verification are empty ones.[68] The way this is accomplished is by the dramatic enactment of these various positivist ideals. An ideal language, purportedly, would be one where, as Cavell puts it, the form of a statement would *look* like what it means.[69] The characters Beckett creates inhabit this ideal, literally, to a fault. Their speech is so clear that it registers as a contortion. But, even more significantly, the impression of grammatical contortion perfectly mirrors that of the physical contortion of their beings. Language and action are literalized to the point of irredeemable oddness. Literature here becomes an enactment of philosophy – the incarnation, in word, diction and gesture, of a positivist system too reductive for philosophy to accommodate by itself.

The immutable order, in turn, is also ever-present, but, as I have shown, remains jealously guarded by Beckett. Even the early Wittgenstein – whose philosophy is consistent with the spirit of logical positivism and is partly responsible for its birth – realizes that the logical latticework of our world is largely inscrutable and consequently ineffable. Some of the failures of logical positivism itself, as we now know, owe a lot to its problematic relationship with this framing paradox.[70] It is

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[66] The category of the ordinary is one whose application to Beckett's play Ogden misunderstands. For a clearer take on Cavell's application of this category, and a sensible critique of Ogden's position, see Rudrum, 'From the Sublime to the Ordinary'.

[67] Adorno's single reference to the positivists, and an allusion to the futility of their enterprise, occurs in the following statement about Beckett's characters: 'Short of breath until they almost fall silent, they no longer manage the synthesis of linguistic phrases; they stammer in protocol sentences that might stem from positivists or Expressionists.' Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 137. For Badiou's reference to the logical positivists' approach to philosophy, see Badiou, *On Beckett*, 90.

[68] Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 120–23.

[69] Ibid., 123.

[70] Carnap's reliance on logic as 'the method of doing philosophy', for example, runs into various difficulties with subsequent generations of philosophers, sympathizers and enemies alike. For more on Carnap's view and its critics, see James Conant, 'The Emergence of the Concept of the Analytic Tradition as a Form of Philosophical Self-Consciousness', in *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide: Pluralist Philosophy in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Jeffrey A. Bell, Andrew Cutrofello, and Paul M. Livingston (New York: Routledge, 2016), 18–58.

when philosophy attempts to articulate the logical latticework of the world, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, that it leaves things as they are. It is when Beckett's characters attempt to articulate the underlying structure of their predicament that they apprehend the extent of their entrapment. The third dream of positivism – that of strict verification – is also put into practice by Beckett. It remains unclear if his characters' blindness is caused by their obsessive pursuit of confirmations or vice versa. Both Cavell and Wittgenstein admit of no difference to philosophy between the two possible alternatives. Beckett does not seem compelled to take sides either: 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm in my right mind. Then it passes over and I'm as lucid as before. […] Sometimes I wonder if I'm in my right senses. Then it passes off and I'm as intelligent as ever.'[71] This is not simply a report on *Endgame*'s accommodation of blindness; it is also a reminder to philosophers that two of their most fundamental motivations – the pursuit of clarity and the cultivation of wonder – pull ever so insistently in divergent directions.

Most of my article can be regarded as a preliminary gesture in addressing the complexity of the questions I have raised. But at least the observations I have made make it easier to answer the three questions I started out with. On the question of allowing literature to share philosophy's failures and to elucidate them, Beckett's *Endgame*, and Cavell's reading of it, make a very strong case for an affirmative answer. My answer to the second question, about the conditions for a successful literary intervention in philosophy, is that any type of exposition or narrative which affords us profound insight into 'what thought does to itself' can be regarded as a contribution to philosophy. The last, and at this juncture easiest, question concerns the cost at which such disciplinary transgressions occur. The price philosophy pays for reading literature philosophically is the concession that philosophical answers are not always the product of strictly philosophical inquiry. The consolation is that getting in one's own way in somebody else's way might just present a rare chance for breaking new ground.

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[71]   Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 128.

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