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BECKETT AND THE CONTINGENCY OF OLD AGE

Elizabeth Barry

The invisibility of the ageing individual is a cultural cliché in the present day, but old age has from the outset been conspicuous by its absence in the history of thought. After the attentions of Cicero and much more briefly – and negatively – Aristotle, there is relatively little in the post-classical philosophical canon that deals directly with the subject (Cicero; Aristotle 1954, 123-5; 1934, 47). If one got to old age, evading accident and illness, one was for the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, for instance, in his essay ‘On the Length of Life,’ ‘unique and out of the normal order’ (366). Death, on the other hand, could and did happen at any time and so has tended to be the focus of study (and old age neglected) over the course of the history of philosophy.¹ Intellectually, then, as well as culturally, old age has been until recently, as May Sarton described it, “a foreign country with an unknown language” (17).

In the work of Samuel Beckett, however, ageing is anything but absent. Old age – or at least the tropes associated with it – are everywhere, and Beckett seemed to appropriate the condition as spiritually his own. He said as much, famously, to the writer Lawrence Shainberg in 1981, when he was seventy-four years old:

I always thought old age would be a writer’s best chance. Whenever I read the late work of Goethe or W. B. Yeats I had the impertinence to identify with it. Now my memory’s gone, all the old fluency’s disappeared. I don’t write a single sentence without saying to myself, ‘It’s a lie!’ So I know I was right. It’s the best chance I’ve ever had. (Shainberg, 102-3)

Beckett had been anticipating and identifying with the experience of old age for most of his life – not for the wisdom, philosophical or aesthetic maturity, or even rancorous energy that it might popularly be expected to afford, but, imaginatively at least, for a diminishing of powers that might force upon a writer the qualities he had in fact been seeking all along. He elaborated on these comments to Shainberg two years later, as Rush Rehm observes in the introduction to this volume (see Rehm, page xx):

It’s a paradox, but with old age, the more possibilities diminish, the better chance you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence [...] the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. In old age, with only a few grains of sand one has the greatest possibility. (Shainberg, 103)

This chance might relate to the process of ‘vaguening’ he looked to apply to his memories in aesthetic form (Gontarski, 76), or the ‘impotence’ he so memorably claimed as his *modus operandi* (Graver and Federman, 217); looked at another way, it could represent the use of scant means to achieve a distilled or concentrated expression of his abiding concerns.

Beckett seems to have had ageing as a preoccupation a good few decades before it could have been said to have arrived in his life. Helen Small reminds us in her masterful book on old age, *The Long Life*, that he played the hero’s ageing father, Don Diègue, in his Corneille spoof *Le Kid*, even as a student adopting the persona of the older man whose hour had come and gone (Small, 182). In his later work, however, he puts old age, or at least its associated attitudes and conditions, centre stage.

Small offers an initial caveat about her own work on ageing which acts as warning to others venturing into this territory. Every association with old age one thinks of, as she has argued, has a counter-association (Small, 2-3), an observation that firmly holds true for old age in Beckett. There incapacity is set against certain kinds of energy, indifference against often inexplicable feeling (rage or elation). Memory often fails, but material can be recalled in almost painful detail – what the psychologists call ‘redintegration,’ the release (wilful or otherwise) of a flood of memories or a very

complete memory in response to a detail or particular and very partial prompt (see, for example, Roeckelein, 64-66). The challenge, for Beckett's work as well as for cultural representations of age in general, is to understand how these apparently opposed qualities or associations might be related to each other. As philosopher Jan Baars has argued, representations of old age usually emphasize the extremes of association – either the most positive, one of which might, as Baars examines elsewhere, be wisdom (2012, 85-121), or the most negative, such as physiological and cognitive decline – without thinking about how these different dimensions interrelate (2010, 108). Beckett seemed to suggest in conversation with Shainberg – and by the example of his whole literary endeavour – that wisdom might in fact be linked with, or even attained through, the exigencies and accommodations that such apparent decline imposes.

Old age might have been suggestive for Beckett because the 'lapses' it imposes on memory and concentration recall to us what he saw as the intermittences of human identity itself: the fact that neither our consciousness nor our personality is continuous and stable. Subject A and Subject B, as Beckett puts it in his essay *Proust*, our successive selves, may have little to do with each other and we may indeed forget (for all sorts of reasons other than and including getting old) the motives for the activities and projects upon which we find ourselves engaged. In a related point, age may also be interesting because it challenges narrative unity, as Helen Small has argued (89-118): the dominant narrative conceptions of time and, in particular, time as it pertains to life span. The idea of teleological narrative – that we are working towards a purpose, that life has a rightful and proper 'span,' and that we might be seen to progress in and through life, notions that the West at least holds dear – is problematized by an indeterminate period of what can often be relatively unproductive old age, where, as Beckett put it in his novel *Molloy*, we become "a little less, in the end, the creature [we] were in the beginning, and the middle" (1990a, 30). The effect of such passages in *Molloy* and elsewhere come precisely from the fact that we expect the opposite, that there is some intangible assumption of growth in the course of a life. To be less oneself (or even less *tout court*, diminished in some physical or mental aspect) is not necessarily a bad thing for Beckett, of course, but the whole weight of his narrative experiment rests on our assumption as readers that it is.

Malone is the epitome of ageing in Beckett's work, speculating as he does about the high tally of his years and the imminence of his demise. Yet it is Molloy with whom we begin this discussion. Molloy, like his successor Malone, also seems to inhabit a state of advanced age, entailing physical frailty and impaired memory, and the novel, just as importantly, establishes certain principles that oppose narrative conceptions of time while there is still the semblance of a (conventional) narrative to kick against.

Both the character and the stymied narrative trajectories of Beckett's trilogy of novels are bound up with the compromised agency of their (apparently) ageing protagonists. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, described ageing, in Helen Small's translation, as an "act neither voluntary nor involuntary,"² and as such it is likely to be of interest to Beckett, who is fascinated in those aspects of human experience which seem to frustrate ascriptions of will, which are neither exactly voluntary nor involuntary, others including "being given birth to" (Beckett 2010, 114), dying, and more mundanely, excretion. Beckett often – both playfully and in earnest – puts speech and thought themselves into this category, his preoccupation with the birth cry, for instance, reflecting the fact that its semi-involuntary nature seems to him a good precedent and analogy for all subsequent acts of speech.

Amplifying Aristotle, Small remarks of ageing that:

[I]t is a peculiar kind of contingency – neither fully a contingency, nor quite a necessity. It is a contingency in the sense that it is not certain to be our lot: we may not live to grow old; we may choose not to grow old. But old age is also a necessity. Until or unless we die, we cannot but continue to age. (59-60)

In another less philosophical and more social context, *King Lear* is more decisive: "Age is unnecessary" (85), he laments at the end of Act II, excluded from the political sphere. But to return to Small's point: ageing reminds us of our mortality, to put this banally, but it also threatens those illusions which suggest that there is a right time to die, and that our life will be (quoting *Molloy*) "a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end" (29). This is at once because we may perceive ourselves as going on too long, beyond the appropriate end-point, and because our death, whenever it

comes, will inevitably disrupt any anticipated instantiation of the beginning-middle-and-end model: we cannot anticipate the duration or shape of these stages ahead of time. As Molloy put it: “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?” (34).

Paradoxically, then, old age is an inherently temporal concept that removes one from (human) time as traditionally conceived. Thinking about these properties of old age, it might be argued, enhances the account given by critics such as Steven Connor of the immanence that characterizes Beckett’s world (and our own). In his influential work of 1988, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, Text*, Connor reads *Molloy* in particular as offering not only withdrawal from the material world but “an ever more intense awareness of the predicament of immanence” (45). This follows from a fictional world where there is no “narrative prehistory”: which just is (44). Temporal conditions are at once vital to our sense of being and “just this, conditions, or accidents, which therefore seem arbitrary and even provisional” (45).

The condition of old age can bring to light this provisionality for two arguably opposing reasons. Firstly, and perhaps obviously, life in old age feels more provisional in an ordinary sense in being more precarious and subject to material facticity. As Frank Kermode first argued nearly fifty years ago, however, the end (generally conceived) in Beckett’s works is felt to be not imminent but immanent, a perpetual state of ending which is deprived of the promise of knowledge, realization and possible salvation that the end of life is traditionally accorded as part of a narrative arc which suggests some idea of completeness (the arc of classical tragedy, for instance, or, in a different time frame, that of eschatological theology). Kermode’s is a reading in which the ‘natural’ provisionality of old age is transformed into a condition at once timeless and provisional in Beckett’s writing.

Connor’s work, while it also emphasizes immanence in Beckett’s work, goes further than Kermode, seeing Beckett as erasing the lingering associations with eschatology that might cling to the markers of time in his writing. The second sense in which old age points up the arbitrariness of temporal measurements and markers in fact undoes the first, more common-sense idea that both life and time come to seem provisional in old age, and even Kermode’s reading of Beckett, in which ending becomes a perpetual state of being. In Connor’s reading, the provisional nature of existence for Beckett logically applies as much to beginning as to ending or to any other intervening marker of time: one’s day and time of death, being arbitrary, has no structural or epistemological relationship to the present moment.

Indeed, in Beckett’s work whether one is alive or already dead seems to be difficult to determine, and not always of enormous moment. Malone reflects on his condition in these terms:

Beyond the grave, the sensation of being beyond the grave was stronger with me six months ago. (8)

There is naturally another possibility [...] and that is that I am dead already and that all continues more or less as when I was not [...] (46)

Reading old age as a period legitimately outside time and apart from the rest of life may confer advantages, rather than simply reflecting that one is beyond the grave, shipwrecked or having missed the tide – to speak in just some of the terms that Beckett’s protagonists use of themselves in the trilogy and the *nouvelles* of the same period. One may also escape expectations of progress, purpose and acquisitiveness (whether for money or knowledge), becoming free to live in the moment. Psychological accounts of extreme old age and the period of proximate death emphasize the way in which people in these conditions often live predominantly in the present, something that can be restful, or even intense and joyful, rather than being seen as a condition where one is robbed of some specious future good.³ Rather than hoarding knowledge, it may be, as Beckett so famously puts it in *Molloy*, “to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything,” that is the time in which “peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker” (64).

Beckett’s fiction demonstrates that a conceptualization of ageing may favour narrative models other than teleological ones (and other than the dominant Aristotelian conception discussed by Suzanne Lafont in this volume, pages xx-xx [pages 1 and 3 in Lafont’s essay]), models which embrace a condition of immanence, or perhaps emphasize finitude, but a finitude as it applies to every moment of our lives. As was suggested at the beginning of this discussion, a certain attitude to time is bound up with the question of will or agency. In a kind of negative argument for Bergsonian free will, the

renunciation of will on the part of Beckett's narrators has the effect of collapsing time. The converse, then, might also be the case: to live outside of time, or at least linear narrative expectations, as one might be seen to do in old age, can offer the possibility of attaining the goal of ataraxy, cherished by Beckett's narrators, a "condition of 'calm' indifference, of scepticism become inner peace," in Michael Mooney's words (48).

Molloy's reflections on the moon, where ataraxy makes an appearance, underline this idea:

Was it not wiser to suppose either that the moon seen two nights before, far from being new as I had thought, was on the eve of being full, or else that the moon seen from Lousse's house, far from being full [...] was in fact merely entering on its first quarter, or else finally that here I had to do with two moons, as far from the new as from the full [...] It was at all event with the aid of these considerations that I grew calm again and was restored, in the face of nature's pranks, to my old ataraxy, for what it was worth. (40)

His uncertainty and inconsistency about the phases of the moon may initially be frustrating for the reader who follows the windings of this prose to no avail, learning nothing, as Molloy says, but "so much smoke and delusion." Yet, as Steven Connor implies, Molloy's own "calm indifference" to the disunity of his narrative contains a lesson for his readers: one's memories and experiences do not have to be registered in terms of a strict chronology, do not need to reach, with perfect timeliness, some sort of pinnacle of self-accomplishment, do not, indeed, need – in Hamm's words in *Endgame* – to "mount up to a life" (Beckett 1990, 126). Molloy's end – or rather his abandonment by the narrative, more accurately, at the moment when his story is put down at the end of the first part of the novel, never to be directly taken up again – preserves this ataraxic attitude in relation to space as well as time: "Molloy could stay, where he happened to be" (93).

Indifference is far from the whole story, however. Beckett gives the reader of the trilogy a sense of both the strange effects wrought on perceptions of time, and the motions of escape from it, in old age. From the outset of his narrative Malone does feel death to be near ("I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all"), but from the very start this period is uncertain, death receding when he contemplates it: "Perhaps next month. [...] Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps I shall survive Saint John the Baptist's Day [...] Indeed I would not put it past me to pant on to the Transfiguration" (3). He says later, and with less equanimity, "I shall never go back into this carcass except to find out its time" (18). In fact, the whole narrative is predicated on the uncertainty of this 'time' for him and everyone else. And it is this uncertainty, even beyond the ambivalence he feels towards his stories and the abortive task of making his inventory, which maintains Beckett's customary resistance to the idea of a *telos* or a forward-moving narrative trajectory, a model that invests in a notion of lifespan in which the period before death is either particularly rich or particularly impoverished.

Old age is very prominent in this narrative. Malone does not know how long he has been 'here' but "All I know is that I was very old already before I found myself here. I call myself an octogenarian, but I cannot prove it" (10). Even the 'acquisition' of bare years is uncertain: "Perhaps I am only a quinquagenarian, or a quadragenarian. It is ages since I counted them, my years I mean." He has learnt over long years what the "seasons can do to me" here – presumably a material lesson about bodily comfort and discomfort; on the other hand, in retrospect at least, time is perceived to have gone very quickly: "In a flicker of my lids whole days have flown." This accords with the phenomena observed by psychologists (and felt intuitively, perhaps, by most of us) that days relatively empty of activity or interaction can feel very long (and time 'slow') in living them, but then are felt to have past very quickly looking back, as there are few novel memories to recall (see, *inter alia*, James, 1: 624-627; Lemlich; Friedman). "[M]ewl, howl, gasp, rattle" (48), as Beckett puts it economically in *The Unnamable*. Arthur Schopenhauer, one of Beckett's cherished early influences, wrote memorably of this phenomenon: "Seen from the standpoint of youth, life is an infinitely long future; from the standpoint of old age, it is a very short past" (1: 424). The period of old age as a whole is felt to go quickly not because the days fly by, but because of the (supposed) paucity of new memories (Hammond, 156-94).

Kathleen Woodward, the great critic of literary old age, has developed this idea in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis, which she sees as displacing its fear of old age onto death, just as surely as it covers up its fear of death, for J. B. Pontalis, with its emphasis on sexuality (Woodward, 38). This is very suggestive in reading Beckett, who, it might be argued, reverses this process of displacement,

deferring death (life experienced as “backsliding” away from death, as Molloy puts it in relation to his failed suicide (61)) while dwelling almost lovingly on the tropes of ageing. Going further with Woodward’s argument, it would follow that Freud is displacing a fear of a *durée*, or at least the indefinite period of old age, onto an *event*, that of death. The whole method of his theory rests on event or discrete stage: the visually perceptible infantile stages, psychic scenes, traumatic events; old age, by contrast is elusive. As Woodward puts it, in old age “*nothing dramatic happens* for a long period of time” (38; italics in original). She likens it, then, to what she calls “a postmodern drama of interminable postponement, as we find it in *Waiting for Godot* and other Beckettian fictions,” rather than the Greek tragedies that were Freud’s exempla.

There is something of a feeling of limbo in the first-person narratives under discussion, but they also arguably display a richer phenomenological texture than Woodward’s description of empty fictions might imply (and that Beckett’s plays, her example, might display). The period in which Beckett’s narrators seem to exist – or subsist – has the sort of paradoxical temporality discussed above: a becalmed period where death is either out of reach or already past. This state is nonetheless vulnerable to what Malone refers at the outset as “throes,” small crises of agitation, whether emotional or physical: “Throes are the only trouble. I must be on my guard against throes” (3). Elsewhere he describes the experience of extreme old age as a groping, but of a particularly bootless kind: “Motionlessness too was a kind of groping. Yes, I have greatly groped stockstill” (51). This is a much more visceral experience than Woodward’s waiting: in the original French *Malone meurt* he is “stationné à tâtons” (82) – on tenterhooks.

Freud appeared at moments to accommodate himself to this period of waiting or, as Woodward puts it, the “infinitesimally decremental process of the subtraction of strengths, of a cumulative series of losses” (38). He writes to Lou Andreas Salomé in 1925:

I no longer want to [keep going] ardently enough. A crust of indifference is slowly creeping up around me, a fact I state without complaining. It is a natural development, a way of beginning to grow inorganic. The “detachment of old age”, I think it is called.

The “unpleasant sensations” of his ill health produce in him “this otherwise perhaps premature condition, this tendency to experience everything *sub specie aeternitatis*” (qtd. in Woodward, 45). It is interesting to note, parenthetically, that this expression of Spinoza’s is exactly that which Schopenhauer uses about the perspective of a child in his discussion of youth and age: the child sees with an aesthetic sense “things and persons, as Spinoza expresses it, from the perspective of eternity [in Schopenhauer’s original, “*sub specie aeternitatis*”]. The younger we are, the more each individual represents its entire genus” (Schopenhauer, 1: 420). Old age is in this positive respect as well as other less positive ones a form of what Beckett’s Malone (after Shakespeare) called “second childishness” (60). One can see something akin to this perspective in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir in particular seeing things very much in this way. The attitude is felt in the universal statements that he makes – absolutely literal but pitilessly absent of psychology: “We are men”; “We have time to grow old” (Beckett 1990, 76, 84). It might, then, be possible to think of Beckett as having a late style “perhaps premature[ly],” just as Freud saw this species of detachment in his own case as coming too soon.

The first person narrators are in thrall to a more uneven temporal experience, however, and rarely have the luxury (or the loss in affect) of this looking ‘at a distance.’ Psychological accounts of old age differ as to whether the perceived inactivity of old age most often provokes detachment or impotent rage;⁴ Malone seems to favour the former:

I could die to-day, if I wished, merely by making a little effort. But it is just as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things. [...] I shall be neutral and inert. No difficulty there. (3)

But his tale is not simply tepid, the dubious quality that he famously seeks in his own storytelling. Nor is it always detached. “The end of a life is always vivifying” (38), as Malone puts it. The murk that is “killing [him]” is also “nourishing” (18), old age the spur to his narrative not in the sense of a traditional *carpe diem* but because he looks at the subject itself unflinchingly, if not with relish. The Unnamable’s narrative also memorably gains new momentum as it gains as a new subject the further dilapidation of

its narrator: “And yet it appears that I have rejuvenated [...] they whip off a leg and yip off I go again, like a young one” (27).

What is left, then, for Beckett’s narrators, when so much physical and mental action is at an end, is the putatively timeless dominion of the writing self. This activity takes centre stage for these narrators: writing their lives allows them far greater power than living them. We recall the narrator of *From an Abandoned Work*, who has, he tells the reader, “nothing to add before I move on in time skipping hundreds and even thousands of days in a way I could not at the time, but had to get through somehow” (Beckett 1984, 134). It is a deliberate ploy, as Steven Connor has pointed out, not to have the narrated past join up with the narrative present in Beckett’s *Molloy*, freeing the narrator from “the dominion of his present narrating self” (56). And Beckett’s narrators are of course eloquent, even at times loquacious narrators: it is pertinent, perhaps, that psychologists report that memory for vocabulary is preserved when other kinds of cognitive reasoning begin to falter (see for example Bromley, 181-83, or Kemper 65-66).

Here too, however, there is contradiction. On the one hand, Beckett’s narratives are seemingly infected by time and the material decline of their narrators. The passage in *Molloy*, comparable to those elsewhere in the trilogy, in which he reflects upon his stiffening legs, is a masterpiece of diminishing semantic returns:

I no longer had one bad leg plus another more or less good, but now both were equally bad. And the worse, to my mind, was that which till now had been good, at least comparatively good, and whose change for the worse I had not yet got used to. So in a way, if you like, I still had one bad leg and one good, or rather less bad, with this difference however, that the less bad now was the less good of heretofore. It was therefore on the old bad leg that I often longed to lean, between one crutchstroke and the next. For while still extremely sensitive, it was less so than the other, or it was equally so, if you like, but it did not seem so, to me, because of its seniority. (78)

As his legs stiffen, his vocabulary, and the logical categories that it denotes, also become harder to deploy, more difficult to “lean” upon, and in greater danger of collapse. The expression “good leg,” starting with the modest authority bestowed by its colloquial familiarity, loses this in its subsequent revisions, the passage finally returning to the position at which it started, in which the legs are – good or bad – “equally so,” or a position still less certain: “but it did not seem so, to me.” The oft-quoted concept of a ‘syntax of weakness’⁵ is enacted in the most literal terms.

On the other hand, these narratives are in another sense beyond or outside time, challenging narrative unity with the perplexing temporal characteristics of the limbo of old age. The atrophying of both narrative structure and even syntax itself indeed forestalls the death that the end of the narrative will bring, just as Malone fears that he may have “vagitated [given the birth cry] and not be able to bloody rattle,” the term of the remaining life indeterminate but bound by the necessity to be, as Beckett writes in his eighth ‘Text for Nothing,’ “every day a little purer, a little deader” (Beckett 1984, 97). In a sardonic inversion of Epicurus, these narrators’ meaningful lives are complete not when they reach a state of unimpaired purpose and pleasure, but when they reach a position of stasis in which they can neither make progress (towards death or any other change of state) nor reflect meaningfully on their condition.

Comically bleak as this appears, what Beckett achieves in such narrative manoeuvres is to turn the contingency of life’s last phase into a potent rebuttal of the exigency of what the narrator of the 1961 *How It Is* calls “the eternal straight line effect of the pious wish not to die before my time” (39). His narrators use their writing to explore the propensity of old age to evade familiar constructions of temporality as it is found in teleological versions of narrative – and, paradoxically, to gain a measure of agency and equanimity as a result. The ageing body is, nonetheless, inscribed through the rhythms of Beckett’s prose, where it asserts its contingency and draws out the phenomenological texture and philosophical challenges of a period in which the end is near but resolutely elusive.

Notes

- ¹ Jan Baars, for instance, writes: “when only a few people in a society reach “old age” and death is a threat to all ages, death will attract more attention than aging” (2010, 105). See also Small, 1-2.
- ² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1135b1; see Small, 4. In Rackham’s edition (299-301): “there are many natural processes too that we perform or undergo knowingly, though none of them is either voluntary or involuntary; for example, growing old, and dying.”
- ³ See Coleman (160), for instance: “For some the past is genuinely over. Experiences, positive and negative, have been fully assimilated. A state of serenity and inner peace has been reached, living in the present and just ‘being’ are now the goals.” Lars Tornstam has called this, more grandly, a state of “gerotranscendence,” a shift in “metaperspective” from a materialistic view of the world to one that is more transcendent (although not necessarily religious).
- ⁴ The majority favour the former view, including Cumming and Henry in their well-known ‘disengagement’ theory, Jarvik and Cohen, and Rosen and Neugarten. Erikson (199) records anecdotal expressions of the latter, and Averill, Mirowsky and Rodin link age-related infirmity and loss of control with feelings of anger.
- ⁵ Beckett used this phrase in conversation with Lawrence Harvey, discussing the necessity of finding a form that could express “the authentic weakness of being” (Harvey, 249).

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