KWARTALNIK NEOFILOLOGICZNY, LXV, 2/2018

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FRANZ SCHUBERT'S *DEATH AND THE MAIDEN* AND SAMUEL BECKETT'S OEUVRE

Abstract

The motif of death and the maiden, so popular in literature and painting, is referred to directly in Samuel Beckett's *All that Fall*, when Franz Schubert's piece of music, under such a title, is heard at the end of this radio drama. When discussing the vision of human existence, as consistently presented in this great Irishman's oeuvre, it is advisable to become acquainted with the basic concepts of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and also with Beckett's essay *Proust* in which he discusses human life, characterised by suffering as "the expiation for the eternal sin of having been born." This article discusses death in the Beckettland of suffering. Death hardly ever comes to young characters, the majority of Beckett's characters being either old or, at least, middle-aged, are all still longing for their end to come. Despite finding different kinds of pastimes to make their waiting less oppressive, time seems to be, as it were, at a standstill, and, to use Vladimir's words from *Waiting for Godot*, they "have time to grow old."

Keywords: Beckett, Heidegger, Proust, death

Streszczenie

Motyw śmierci i dziewczyny, popularny w literaturze i malarstwie, pojawia się w sztuce radiowej Samuela Becketta *Którzy upadają*, na końcu której słychać utwór Franza Szuberta pod takim tytułem. Kiedy przystępuje się do analizy krytycznej dotyczącej twórczości wielkiego Noblisty, warto jest zapoznać się z filozofią Heideggera oraz esejem Becketta analizującym powieść Prousta *W poszukiwaniu utraconego czasu*. W rozprawie o Proustcie dramaturg przedstawia swoją koncepcję ludzkiej egzystencji, która jest cierpieniem jako odkupieniem „za wieczny grzech narodzin." Artykuł zajmuje się przedstawieniem śmierci w twórczości Irlandczyka. W jego utworach śmierć rzadko przychodzi do postaci młodych, ale również jest długo oczekiwana przez bohaterów w wieku średnim albo nawet starszych, którzy nie mogą się jej doczekać. Mimo że stosują oni różne sposoby na skrócenie oczekiwania na kres swego życia, co wydaje się zmniejszać ich cierpienie, odnoszą wrażenie, że czas zatrzymał się, co stwierdza swoją wypowiedzią Vladimir w *Czekając na Godota*: „Mamy czas, aby się zestarzeć."

Słowa kluczowe: Schubert, Beckett, Heidegger, śmierć

ALL THAT FALL

The motif of death and the maiden, popular and diverse in different kinds of art, has a long and exciting history. Wikipedia traces it back to the medieval "Dance of Death" and enumerates a number of examples from varied media – visual art, music, drama, film, literature and television. The Internet article "Death in Art" traces its origins in the distant past of an ancient myth:

> This theme has a multi-faceted past. It is rooted in very old mythological traditions: among the ancient Greeks, the abduction of Persephone (Proserpine among the Romans) by Hades (Pluto), the god of Hell, and it is a clear pre-figuration of the clash between Eros and Thanatos. The young goddess gathered flowers in the company of carefree nymphs when she saw a pretty narcissus and plucked it. At that moment, the ground opened; Hades came out of the underworld and abducted Persephone.

Taking into account the fact that most of Samuel Beckett's works are concerned with the universal issues of human existence, it is not surprising that death is a recurrent theme in his oeuvre. The place of action for Samuel Beckett's short radio drama – *All That Fall* – is Boghill which constitutes a world of transience, deterioration and death. In a broadcast drama, existence is equivalent to being heard, the idea skilfully employed and commented upon by the playwright. The characters actually heard in the play are in most cases elderly, or quite old, and even the two young ones appear in the context of death. Numerous off-the-air individuals are dead, sterile or suffering from different illnesses. The two main protagonists' situation is no different – Mr Rooney is blind and his wife, Maddy complains of many ailments. She is a woman in her seventies, who is overweight and has different kinds of health problems, and thus, several times in the course of the play she expresses a death wish. At the same time, however, in encounters with men on her way to the station she speaks in a manner characterized by numerous sexual innuendos. Furthermore, she expresses a strong yearning for love and hopes her unloving husband will show her some feelings of warmth. Thus, she becomes a convincing illustration of George Bataille's argument: "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death" (11)[1].

In *All that Fall* the childless Mr and Mrs Rooney go on living and suffering, occasionally falling down to rise (or be raised) again. In this context, the title of the play is indicative, a point noted by Knowlson: "In spite of the apparent comic texture of the play, human misery and suffering emerge as so overwhelming that, when Psalm 145, verse 14 is quoted –'The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down'– it is greeted by the lame, seventy-year-old Maddy Rooney and her blind husband, Dan, with wild laughter at its bitter irony" (38). Zilliacus, among other critics, concedes: "The incidents in the play serve

[1] For a discussion of this aspect of the play see Uchman 2013.

as a stave for a threnody on the theme of decay and meaningless death" (32). Steward presents a different reading, arguing "The wish to fall, never to rise again, is consistently expressed throughout the play" (137); "Maddy and Dan's world is so arranged that the final fall is not an option. The Lord, if one must be posited, insists on holding them up. … there is the annoyingly stubborn presence of the continuation of meaningless life, of precisely *not* falling" (138) and "While *this* generation pants on, the hope might remain that the suffering can end through an end of regeneration" (138).

Maddy Rooney is specified in the stage directions, as a "*lady in her seventies*" (11). She mentions her "once female shape" (22) and refers to herself now by saying: "Oh I am just a hysterical old hag I know, destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and churchgoing and fat and rheumatism and childlessness" (14). Her life is intrinsically bound with suffering: "It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home, Mr Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution" (15). Wherever she is, she is reminded of her approaching death. There is so much suffering in her life that, twice in the course of the play, she expresses a death wish: "How can I go on? I can't. Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again! A great big slop thick with grit and dust and flies, they would have to scoop me up with a shovel" (14) and "What's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms" (17). Furthermore, she seems to envy the hen which has been run over by Mr Slocum's car:

> Oh, mother, you have squashed her, drive on, drive on! [*The car accelerates. Pause.*] What a death! One minute picking happy at the dung, on the road, in the sun, with now and then a dust bath, and then – bang! – all her troubles over. [*Pause.*] All the laying and hatching. [*Pause.*] Just one great squawk and then … peace. [*Pause.*] They would have slit her weasand in any case. (19)

The drama is characterised by the use of a frame as a structural element. At the beginning of the play and also at its end, on their return journey home from the station, Mr and Mrs Rooney pass a house where, an "old woman," living all alone, is playing a record to which Mrs Rooney comments: "All day the same record" and Mr Rooney specifies it is "Death and the Maiden" (37). Beckett chose Schubert's piece because it was his favourite, but also, more importantly, because he knew of no other "music so heavily imbued with such sorrow."[2] Mary Bryden discusses the chosen piece of music in the following way:

> On the face of it, there is a feasible connection to be made between the title of the song and the image of an old woman living all alone, particularly since the directions indicate that the 'music dies.' Yet even the analogic journey is interrupted by ambiguity, since the

[2] Samuel Beckett to John Montague, Maurice Sinclair, Marion Leifh and Bettina Jonic. Quoted after Bair 1980, 477.

> maiden of Schubert's song is still young when Death comes to claim her. This old woman, on the other hand, has had the leisure to play the music over and over again. She is not so much dying as reliving (and thus suspending) the experience of proximate death. (37)

The selection of a concrete piece of music may also have come from a poem written by the German poet, Matthias Claudius and translated into English by P. Jurgenson:

> *The Maiden*:
>
> Oh! leave me! Prithee, leave me! thou grisly man of bone!
> For life is sweet, is pleasant.
> Go! leave me now alone!
> Go! leave me now alone!
>
> *Death*:
>
> Give me thy hand, oh! maiden fair to see,
> For I'm a friend, hath ne'er distress'd thee.
> Take courage now, and very soon
> Within mine arms shalt softly rest thee! (Wikipedia)

Discussing the play, Paul Davies argues:

> The nature of the tragedy is that the body fears and prepares for death, the soul desires and prepares for life. This is concealed in the message of Death to the maiden, and in the mythographic message which that poem itself carries from Beckett's play over to the listener (156)

Steward argues that a new perspective on the use of this concrete music may be provided by Gregory of Nyssa, as quoted by Dollimore[3]:

> The bodily procreation of children […] is more an embarking upon death than upon life. […] Corruption has its beginning in birth and those who refrain from procreation through virginity themselves bring about a cancellation of death by preventing it from advancing further because of them. […] they keep death from going forward […] Virginity is stronger than death. […] The unceasing succession of destruction and dying […] is interrupted. Death, you see, was never able while human birth was going on in marriage. (2–3)

Unlike her daughter who died as a small child, and the little boy who was killed by the train (most probably having been pushed under it by Dan Rooney (Uchman 2013, 9–10), the aged Maddy has not yet encountered death. The use of Schubert's music is also important for another reason. While the young maiden encounters death, the woman listening to the record and Maddy alike, even though quite old and presumably longing for death, are still alive, expiating the eternal sin of having been born.

[3] Jonathan Dollimore. *Death, Desire and Loss In Western Culture*. Harmodsworth, Allen Lane, Penguin, 1998, 46.

BREATH, HEIDEGGER AND *PROUST*

This evokes Samuel Beckett's drama *Breath* as well as the philosophical concepts discussed by Martin Heidegger in his *Sein und Zeit* and the playwright's *Proust* essay. The 35-second *Breath* seems to encapsulate Beckett's vision of human existence in a nutshell. The playwright may have been influenced by the ideas of Martin Heidegger with which he became acquainted by Jean Beaufret who, in a letter to Beckett, used the expression the "diamond of pessimism" to describe the quality of the philosopher's views (Beckett, *Letters*, 75 n. 10), a phrase which Beckett considered to be "beautiful" (*Letters* 73). In an unpublished interview with Knowlson on 10 November 1989 Beckett acknowledged his indebtedness to Beaufret, who was a well known philosopher and an expert on Heidegger (Knowlson 104).

Breath, a thirty-five second piece is the world's shortest drama. Thanks to the specific and precise lightening and aural elements (an instant of recorded vagitus, the sound of inhaling and exhaling followed by another vagitus rattle), this minimalistic drama presents Beckett's vision of human lot. The blending of birth and death seems to be a recurrent theme in the playwright's oeuvre. This idea may owe something to Martin Heidegger and his *Sein und Zeit* which introduces three concepts of his philosophy: *Geworfenheit* (being thrown into existence), *Dasein* (being there) and *Sein zum Tode* (existence leading to death) (Tatarkiewicz 347–352).

The main concepts developed in the *Proust* essay are "the double-headed monster of damnation and salvation – Time" (1987, 11) and its two attributes, "Habit" and "Memory" (1987, 18). Life is a constant struggle between the dull boredom of a controlling habit and suffering, the intensity of which springs from a clear, immediate perception of things as they are. Most people, preferring boredom to suffering, a punishment for "the eternal sin of having been born" (1987, 67), take refuge in a protective, falsifying habit. The ideas are used by Beckett in his analysis of the Frenchman's novel *A la Recherche du tempts perdu*. They are also, it transpires, equally useful in analysing the oeuvre of Beckett.

WAITING FOR DEATH IN THE BECKETTLAND OF SUFFERING

Most Beckett "people," as he calls them, (Shenker 1) live their lives in an unspecified chronotopos, suffering and waiting. Not being able to stand the suffering of being, characterising their existence, they often express a death wish or even consider committing suicide. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* share the lot of many other Beckettian characters as shown in *Breath*. This motif is discernible in the speech of Pozzo, later slightly altered in the outburst of Vladimir. "POZZO: They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once

more" (1969, 89). For him, all days are identical, all lifetime seems to last merely an instant. Furthermore, measured in terms of the universe, the light of a single life is nothing as compared to the timeless night. Pozzo's last sentence is highly reminiscent of another phrasing of this idea in *Proust* ("The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm" 1987, 21). This speech is later paraphrased by Vladimir:

> Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens*.) But habit is a great deadener. … (*Pause*.) I can't go on! (*Pause*.) What have I said? (90–91)

Vladimir expresses an unwillingness or even revulsion against going on, and it is possible to interpret this sentence as a death wish. Earlier in the drama Vladimir voices his disappointment with not having committed suicide in the past: "Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first" (10). It must also be remembered that the tramps contemplate committing suicide twice in the course of the drama (17 and 93). On the first occasion, they are fascinated with the idea because hanging themselves will give them erections so dying is associated with sexuality, as the case of the death and the maiden is. In the second instance, Estragon's trousers fall down and thus the tragic attempt of ending life is intertwined with the comic visual effect, contributing to the grotesque, tragic-comic end product. It may be justifiably argued that Vladimir and Estragon are modern everymen, as they themselves argue that: "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us" (79). This idea is further strengthened when Vladimir concedes that they "have kept their appointment" and to his question "How many people can boast as much?" he gets Estragon's answer "Billions" (80). The same idea is expressed in another exchange between the two characters:

> ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.
> VLADIMIR: What other? (*Pause*.) What other?
> ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.
> VLADIMIR: (*sententious*) To every man his little cross. (*He sighs*.) Till he dies. (*Afterthought*.) And is forgotten. (62)

Earlier in the play when Vladimir accused Estragon of comparing himself to Christ, the latter answered "I always did" and added that where Christ lived "they crucified quick" (52). Belacqua in the short story "Dante and the Lobster", in the volume *More Pricks than Kicks*, watches a cook put a lobster into boiling water and says: "It's a quick death. God help us all." These words are followed by only three others assigned to none of the characters present: "It is not" (1970, 22). It is Beckett in *propria persona*, speaking without the unnecessary introduction. The meaning of this sentence is simultaneously simple and complex, as the case so often is in Beckett. No death is quick, especially if it is accompanied by so much

suffering. On the other hand, Beckett's sentence takes on a completely different connotation if we become aware of the pun it contains. Quick may also denote alive. Thus, if the second meaning is considered, the two seemingly contradictory terms, alive and dead, are joined. This might be striking at first, but it becomes even more transparent when what has been argued earlier is reflected upon. In Beckett's world life and death are not mutually exclusive. His "people" live in a state which is a combination of these two, and the only thing they can long and hope for is the final coming of "real death" which never approaches quickly.

Most of Beckett's characters are waiting for the end, for death to come. *Endgame* starts with Clov's speech: "(*fixed gaze, tonelessly*) Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (*Pause*.) Grain upon the grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap. (*Pause*.) I can't be punished any more" (12). It soon transpires, however, that it is not finished and the end is very slow in coming, this being a characteristic feature of the Beckettland of suffering. Towards the end of the drama, Hamm says: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on. …Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains … (*he hesitates*) … of that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (44–45). The heap of sand, being evocative of an hourglass, might symbolise the passage of time. It is also actually seen growing in *Happy Days*.[4] In the first act Winnie is covered up to her waist while in the second act only her head is visible. In this instance, the final disappearance of Winnie is only promised by the accumulating grains of sand yet it never actually occurs.

The impossibility of a definite ending is also the theme of *Rockaby*. It seems that Beckett used the American equivalent of the English lullaby on purpose, thus evoking the idea of falling asleep, sleep being often associated with death (as in Hamlet's "to be or not to be" monologue). This short play comprises four movements/sections, each of them beginning with the word "more" uttered by a "*prematurely old woman*" (273) seated in a rocking chair. Then a monologue of her recorded voice follows. The beginning lines of the four monologues are the same in two instances, for movements 1 and 3 being "till in the end /the day came/ in the end came/ close of a long day" (275 and 278) and for section 2 and 4 "so in the end/close of a long day" (276 and 280). On both occasions, the words "close" and "end" seem to indicate some kind of finality, solution, or terminus. Yet what precedes and follows them is another "more," another repetition, another monologue highly reminiscent of the former. The play ends with yet another plea to rock her off and for the end to come:

[4] For a discussion of the source and meaning of the millet heap see Uchman 1987, 46–47 and Uchman 2011, 108–111.

saying to herself
no
done with that
the rocker
those arms at last
saying to the rocker
rock her off
stop her eyes
fuck life
rock her off
rock her off
(*Together: echo of 'rock her off', coming to rest of rock, slow fade out.*) (282)

As the case is with so many other plays of Beckett, the end of the drama does not bring a definite conclusion. What may follow is yet another movement and yet another one until "the impossible heap" is completed. What is clear, however, is the fact that the woman is tired of life and she still hopes that one day she will be rocked off, like her mother was in the past when she died in the same rocking chair.

THE ENDLESS WAITING FOR AN END

The phrase "fuck life" is an expression of her being exhausted with suffering which constitutes an inseparable element of most of Beckett's characters' lives. Just like Vladimir, who said "I can't go on" (91), she rebels against her predicament. A similar emotion is expressed by another character of Beckett's, who utters the final words of *The Unnamable*: "I must go on, I can't go on, I will go on" (1980, 382). Again, a similar view is voiced in *Worstward Ho*: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (1996, 89). The fate of all these characters seems to be predetermined and, even though, occasionally, they rebel against "the suffering of being," they go on living, expiating "the eternal sin of having been born." Some of them resort to wishful thinking, imagining a quick death. In contrast to the idea of death and the maiden, where death comes to a young woman, Beckett's characters, old and tired of living, must endure their tragic fate, always hoping that in the end death will release them from their cruel fate and everlasting misery.

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