

BOOK REVIEW

All Life Long the Same Questions, the Same Answers : Reinterpreting Samuel Beckett

Chaman Ahuja

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Towards the end of *Waiting for Godot*, as the energies of Vladimir and Estragon begin to flag, they trade insults to pass the time :

VLADIMIR : Moran!

ESTRAGON : Vermin!

VLADIMIR : Abortion!

ESTRAGON : Morpion!

Till Estragon quite demolishes Vladimir with the ultimate insult:

ESTRAGON : (with finality), Critic!

In spite of Beckett's contempt for it, the critical industry on Beckett is truly of gargantuan proportions, and though Indian 'critics' were slow to climb on to the bandwagon, now they are firmly on it. The latest in the field is Professor Chaman Ahuja with his book *All Life Long the Same Questions, the Same Answers : Reinterpreting Samuel Beckett*. Professor Ahuja has set himself a monumental task for he undertakes to reinterpret not any one area of Beckett's oeuvre, but the entire gamut, including what Beckett had himself labeled as fragments or *Residua*. Even though Beckett belongs to what is known as the minimalist tradition where plays can be all of eight pages long and novells stretch to no more than 37 (set in 14 points in a 5" by 8" page), it is also true that he is a notoriously difficult writer and most of us feel privileged enough if we can master just one aspect of him. However, Professor Ahuja has found the key that will unlock all of Beckett for us and that key lies hidden —can you believe

it?—in *Waiting for Godot*! "The underlying idea of this book is that Godot theme (as I interpret it) pervades the entire range of Beckett's work—alike in poetry, fiction and drama" (p. 34). And what indeed is the "Godot them"? "*Waiting for Godot* is the dramatization of the story of evolution." Professor Ahuja is convinced that Beckett got his ideas on evolution from a little-known book by G.H. Estabrooks called *Man—The Mechanical Misfit* in which Estabrooks maintains that the human brain is a vampire, that man is not a rational but rationalizing animal, and that "civilization being an organ-grinder, far from moving up, man is skidding down the ladder of evolution" (p. 34). Professor Ahuja admits:

Of course there is no known evidence that Beckett read the book but I have a strong hunch that Godot was a typically Beckettian twist to an episode narrated by Estabrooks. A southern country preacher often used to talk of 'the people who didn't wait'. Once when a parishioner asked him what he meant, he said, 'Well, brother, it is this way. When the Lord made men, he made them from the dust of the earth. Then he stood them up in a row and said, "You all wait here till I go get you some brain." But, brother, some of them didn't wait.' Possibly while reading this, Beckett countered with a most characteristic chuckle, 'And how about those who did? They are still waiting!!' Or, maybe, he had another chuckle when he added, 'In any case, what difference did it make in the case of those who waited? What kind of brain did God bring?' Indeed that is the ironic core of Beckett's work: those who waited are no better than those who left. That is to say, there is little to choose between extinction and survival.

For many of us, indeed, Godot is the quintessential Beckett, and I remember my own shock, as late as the late 1970s, at discovering not only that Beckett wrote novels but that he considered himself primarily as novelist and a dramatist only by default! Further investigation revealed, to my

mortification, that *Godot* was not even typical Beckett. If anything, it was the exception rather than the rule in the Beckett canon. In fact even Beckett's second play, *Endgame*, is so remarkably different that it is difficult to believe sometimes that they come from the same writer. However, since *Godot* seems to be the most accessible of Beckett's plays, it is understandable that one would want to elevate it into a principle of understanding, and utilize the energy one has expended in understanding it to cover at least all the other plays, if not the fiction and poetry. The fact that there is a rare thematic unity to the works of Beckett and that he chose to excavate a rather narrow vein of human experience also encourages one to adopt this convenient methodology. However, it is not sound scholarship, and certainly Professor Ahuja does not need me to tell him that. Moreover, his understanding of *Waiting for Godot* itself seems to me flawed. It should be clear to anybody who reads the play with an open mind that the essence of *Godot* is absence, that which cannot be defined, that which does not arrive. Any attempt to identify him, therefore, with either a person or even an idea goes against the very principle of his being, or rather non-being. Professor Ahuja, however, like Beckett's earliest critics, who were obsessed with uncovering the identity of *Godot*, with defining and identifying him, maintains that *Godot* is,

something akin to God, i.e., God-like...

As the myth goes, since the very creation of the world, guilty of the Original Sin, man has been suffering incessantly in the hope of salvation which would spell escape from damnation. In the modern, secular terminology of the Darwinians, salvation and damnation mean survival and extinction, respectively. Thus may one interpret soul as an urge of the Life Force which aims at the creation of a better species until man becomes perfect, i.e., god-like or *Godot*. [p. 6]

Thus has Professor Ahuja brought in, through the backdoor, the most discredited of approaches of *Godot*, identifying him "not with

God" but with something akin to god, i.e., Superman. Instead of the creation myth he uses the new 'secular myth' of survival and extinction but in the end the logic is the same, no matter which semantic terms are used. This is the basic trouble with Professor Ahuja. What he discredits in other critics ("So fantastic has been the ingenuity of critics in inventing evernew interpretations of *Godot*. . .", p. 2), he brings in, under disguise, as a brilliant new approach a few pages down. I am afraid his '*Godot: A New Interpretation*' is nothing but old wine, without even the benefit of a new bottle. If Professor Ahuja had been less preoccupied with fitting Beckett into his scheme and more receptive to the actual play, he would have been that *Godot* is based on the simple, but not therefore easy to accept, premise that man lives his life necessarily in a state of uncertainty and our best efforts do not help us in understanding the world, and that we have us in understanding the world, and that we have no access to knowledge or reality in spite of our great need to make sense of our experiences and the world that surrounds us. In this neither our education nor status nor even our character makes any difference. Everything about ourselves and our world is provisional, and the rules we choose to live by are of our own making, arbitrary and ultimately unverifiable. In this, whether we are painfully aware of our human condition as Vladimir is, or refuse to accept, it as Estragon does, or simply delude ourselves, as Pozzo of Act I does, hardly makes a difference. It is in this sense that, perversely, we can accept Professor Ahuja's thesis that whether man waited for his brain or not matters not a whit. The basic human predicament does not change. But in the process Professor Ahuja ends up making Beckett a latter-day and inverted Shaw ("[*Godot*], I believe, is the much-awaited Superman of the vitalists" and "soul [is] an urge of the Life Force" and "soul [is] an urge of the Life Force", p. 6). This would, not doubt, have amused Beckett no end, considering that

he was quite keen to see Shaw's whole applecart well and truly upset, but in the ensuing confusion Professor Ahuja, I think misses the point about Beckett completely.

My biggest complaint against Professor Ahuja, however, is that in spite of his vast scholarship (he seems to have read just about every scrap on and about Beckett, and his Bibliography is a scholar's delight), he refuses to take Beckett seriously. When Beckett declares that if he knew who Godot was he would have said so in the play, Professor Ahuja uses that statement to discredit other critics who try to pin an identity on Godot but is not above doing the same himself within a few pages of declaring all other such approaches void. We know that Beckett was fascinated by and read a number of philosophers and thinkers but when he declares that he is no philosopher, Professor Ahuja takes him at his word for all of six pages (through pp. 29 to 34), but then ends up foisting Estabrooks on him, and then the Vitalists join in and then the Darwinists. Backdoor entry, as usual, and Professor Ahuja is back in business.

Professor Ahuja admits that he "leans heavily on symbolic and allegorical interpretations of the characters — something that Beckett would never have approved of. . ." (schematizing to the extent, in fact, of giving up equations like "superman (=Godot)", p. 6; "breath (=words)", and "boots (=feet)", p. 9), but justifies himself by maintaining that "in the arts, the artist's imagination is only half of the creative business, the other half being what is actually being received. Surely, it is safer to trust the tale than the teller" (p. 5). Let us, therefore, take him at his word and see how far he trusts the 'tale' and how far he trusts the 'teller' and how far what he 'receives' is actually supported by a close reading of the text.

Krapp's Late Tape provide a convenient example. To begin with, Professor Ahuja cannot decide whether the "three" Krapps the play reveals are the same or different. In a

three-page analysis he begins by asserting that "*Krapp's Last Tape* is Proustian in its assumption of multiple selves...[though Beckett] has gone far beyond Proust" (p. 72). Then he avers that in spite of the flux, "essentially [Krapp] has remained unchanged in many aspects" (p. 73). Finally, he asserts that the "changes are there and apparently so complete that a later generation [Krapp at 69] may refuse to recognize the earlier one [Krapp at 39]". One is not surprised at Professor Ahuja's shifting stance, since it is also Krapp's. Man's search for continuity and stability in the midst of flux is one of the basic concerns of the play, but instead of recognizing this and Beckett's essentially dualistic position, Professor Ahuja, carried away by his earnest desire to fit the play into his evolutionary pattern (remember that everything that Beckett wrote is a variation on the "Godot theme" which is that man's evolution has been imperfect), sees only that Krapp represents yet another case of man who has "changed but not changed enough", and that it is "because of this incapacity to learn enough from experience that his evolution is not linear..." (p. 73). It seems to me, however, that it is not Krapp's incapacity to learn that is the basic issue in the play but that no amount of learning will solve the intrinsic problem man faces in living in a world subject to time and change. Krapp is only too aware of man's double bind in a search for value in a world of flux. Since we identify value with continuity and stability, and both continuity and stability are the first casualties in a world dominated by time, how do we search for and maintain permanent truths in this ever-changing environment in which nothing remains the same even as nothing really ever changes? Matters are made worse by the fact that the consciousness that searches for these stable values is itself not stable, that our sense of values is itself constantly shifting. Krapp had, at one time, decided to give up everything for "the fire" in him, "the vision" that prompted him to be a writer, and yet today that fire and

vision have no meaning for him. He is haunted, instead, by the love to which he had said farewell thirty years ago. If, instead of treading this path, he had chosen the other one, of love, could he have been happier? With one part of his mind Krapp feels he could, even if not with the real Bianca or "the girl in the shabby green coat", at least with the fictional Effie Briest: "Could have been happy with her, up there in the Baltic, and the pines and the dunes." But with another part of his mind he doubts it: "Could I? ... And she?" He knows that in the end the result is always the same: uncertainty, doubt, defeat, "All that old misery". There are no certifiable truths or values in this world. Whatever values we decide to live by are of our own making and in the final analysis unverifiable. What is worse, Krapp, like most of us, no longer finds worth in the things he once found valuable and yet he cannot give up his search for stable truths. This is the dilemma not merely of Krapp but of mankind, and Krapp's "character" has nothing to do with the nature of the problem he faces.

It is true that Beckett does not glamorize his characters but to see a warm, humorous and highly sensitive Krapp merely as "a chronic lecher who cannot help peeling the banana of sex" (p. 73), a man whose "impotence" may have been caused by masturbation or could be its result (p. 75), though irrelevant to the basic

issue of the play, are deliberate misreadings which cannot be condoned. Nowhere in this play are there any suggestions of this kind, though the scatological nature of Beckett's writing does not rule them out in other works. What Professor Ahuja sees in Krapp is his own disgust at naked, unaccommodated man, not Beckett preaching to us about the "failure of man's evolutionary efforts". And finally, to make an immobile Krapp (the last sentence of the play reads: "*Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.*") seen by many as a Krapp who may be physically inert but is psychologically alert, trying to come to terms with the fundamental dualism of man's situation, into a dead Krapp ("As he lies in that position, the tape goes silent; so does Krapp's heart-beat. And as he lies dead . . .", p. 76) is to distort both the tale and the teller. Professor Ahuja not only misinterprets but also misreads, and that, I think, is a serious shortcoming, because he ends up giving us a Beckett who is neither fish nor fowl, neither Beckett nor Shaw but a creature of Professor Ahuja's own creation, one that cannot be located either in the plays or the novels or any other of his writings. Fortunately, Beckett will survive such mutilation. Will the critics?

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