

The Spatiotemporal Dimension of “after” in Samuel Beckett’s Endgame

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Abstract

In *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, Jean-Luc Nancy examines the nature of the Fukushima nuclear disaster through what he terms “the equivalence of catastrophes” involving “the complexity of interdependent systems (ecological or economic, sociopolitico-ideologic, technoscientific, cultural, logical.” In his viewpoint, “equivalence of catastrophes” is closely related to “finality itself – aiming, planning, and projecting a future in general.” He asserts that without emerging from finality itself, we cannot turn away from “the equivalence of catastrophes.” He perceives Fukushima nuclear disaster as a situation that demands us to emerge from “finality itself” and “work with other futures.” He suggests that we need to remain exposed to the “after” in “after Fukushima,” which he remarks as a rupture or suspense. An analysis of Samuel Beckett’s post-apocalyptic play, *Endgame*, aids in thinking about the notion “after.” It presents a vision of the world after a catastrophic disaster. This one-act play is set in a room with two small windows, opening up to a gray, lifeless world where everything is gone. Not only the characters on the stage but also the audience are exposed to the spatiotemporal dimension of “after.” There is no clear sign of hope in the play, but it reveals this dimension as that of reversal where we catch a glimpse of a way out of the impasse of human existence. The play calls forth our capacity to endure the fundamental indecision that lies at its core and wait for the reversal.

Keywords: Jean-Luc Nancy, Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

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Introduction

In *After Fukushima*, Nancy examines the nature of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in the era of globalization and technology through what he terms as “the regime of general equivalence” (2015, p. 5). He believes that the Fukushima nuclear disaster is “a powerfully exemplary event” (p. 30) that reveals “the regime of general equivalence.” This regime involves “[t]he complexity of interdependent systems (ecological or economic, sociopolitico-ideologic, technoscientific, cultural, logical, etc.)”; “the existing chains of constraints (electricity, gasoline, uranium, all the rare minerals, etc.)”; “and their implementation (their civilian and military, social and private uses, etc.)” (p. 5). Referring to Marx’s idea of money as a “general equivalent,” he writes, “the regime of general equivalence ... virtually absorbs, well beyond the monetary or financial sphere ... all the spheres of existence of humans, and along with them all things that exist” (p. 5). This absorption means “the connection of an equivalence and the limitless interchangeability of forces, products, agents or actors, meanings or values” in the sense that “value of any value is its equivalence” (p. 6). In other words, in this regime, all “incommensurables” and “irreducible singulars” (p. 41) are excluded.

Considering that this “regime of general equivalence” is closely related to “finality itself – aiming, planning, and projecting a future in general,” Nancy (2015) asserts that without emerging from the finality itself, we cannot turn away from “the regime of general equivalence” (pp. 36-37). He perceives Fukushima nuclear disaster as a situation that demands us to emerge from “finality itself” and “work with other futures” (p. 37).

While pondering on what it means to emerge from “finality itself” and to “work with other futures,” we must consider Nancy’s understanding of the notion “after” in “after Fukushima.”¹ According to him, “after,” as a notion, is not to be considered in terms of temporal succession of “before” and “after”; it originates from “rupture” or “suspense, even stupor” (p. 15). He writes, “It is an ‘after’ that means: Is there an after? Is there anything that follows? Are we still headed somewhere?” (p. 15). The temporality of the “after” that he thematizes here involves the rupture with “the regime of general equivalence” or that with the “finality itself.” Additionally, he suggests that it is a dimension wherein “a catastrophe of meaning” in the etymological sense of the word “catastrophe,” meaning upheaval, reversal, overturning, or collapse, takes place. Implying that the Fukushima nuclear disaster signifies “a catastrophe of meaning,” he states:

We are being exposed to a catastrophe of meaning. Let’s not hurry to hide this exposure under pink, red, or black silks. Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening [ce qui nous arrive] to us: Let us think that it is we who are arriving, or who are leaving (Nancy, 2015, p. 8).

He further writes, “It is up to us, after Fukushima, to open other paths, whether they be inside or outside this culture that is drowning itself.” (p. 40) This remark means that our remaining exposed to this temporality of “after” as a “rupture” or “suspense”

¹ Nancy relates the question of “after Fukushima” to that of “after Auschwitz” in Adorno. He writes, “‘To philosophize after Fukushima’—that is the mandate I was given for this conference. Its wording inevitably makes me think of Adorno’s: ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz’” (p. 9).

or to “a catastrophe of meaning” is decisive in “open[ing] other paths.”

The Spatiotemporal Dimension of “after” in *Endgame*

The analysis of Samuel Beckett’s post-apocalyptic play, *Endgame* (first produced in New York in 1958), aids us in thinking about the notion “after.” Not only the characters on the stage but also the audience are exposed to the spatiotemporal dimension of “after.” In this sense, we could say that this play demands us to remain exposed to this “after.”

Endgame presents a post-catastrophic space that is the last place on earth. The play is set in a shelter-like room with two small windows, opening up to a gray, lifeless world where everything is devastated after a catastrophe; it is believed that outside this room, everything is “corpsed,” and a “zero” world prevails. In this space, four moribund characters, the last human beings, are imprisoned: Hamm, a character that is visually impaired and is unable to stand; Clov, Hamm’s servant who is unable to sit; Nagg, Hamm’s father; and Nell, Hamm’s mother. Nagg and Nell’s legs are amputated, and they live in dustbins. This enclosed space of “after” is situated at the extreme limit where the world is on the verge of termination and humanity is on the verge of extinction. In the play, Hamm says, “Outside of here, it’s death” (Beckett, 2006, p. 96); Clov says, “there’s no more nature” (p. 97). Some critics relate this play to a nuclear war and regard this space as a nuclear shelter.² This space is also evocative of Noah’s ark that is mentioned in the Book of Genesis in the Bible in a flood narrative. Clov looks at the ocean outside the window through his telescope and says, “the light is sunk” and “All gone” (pp. 106-107), suggesting that everything is under water. While the flood narrative in the Book of Genesis involves the theme of re-creation, “there is an anti-creation theme in *Endgame*,” as Ackerley and Gontarski (2004, p. 176) point out. The Book of Genesis narrates that Noah, his family, and all the animals that he had carried in his ark were saved from the floods, and “all earthly life began again.” Conversely, in *Endgame*, “Hamm, as Ham, the cursed son of Noah, fears that the whole cycle of humanity might restart from the flea, and so all this suffering—his own and humanity’s—may have come to naught” (Ackerley & Gontarski, 2004, p. 176).

However, the play’s setting can be considered as the last place on earth only if we are to believe what Clov and his telescope report. There remains a possibility that the play is set in a room in an asylum where the characters are possessed by an idea that the end of world has come, like the madman whom Hamm mentions about in the middle of the play. In the play, Hamm narrates a story to Clov about a madman who lived in an asylum. According to his story, this madman “thought the end of the world had come.” When Hamm dragged him to the window and showed him what lay outside, he thought that he only saw “ashes.” He believed that “[h]e alone had been spared” (p. 113). This inserted story could be regarded as presenting a mirror image of the characters on the stage. This is a gesture that we often find in Beckett’s work. He frequently inserts words that may cancel out what has been previously presented and

² For a discussion of nuclear crisis and *Endgame*, see Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), pp. 133-138. Gibson writes, “The impact of the Cold War on Beckett produced, above all, the great play *Endgame* (*Fin de partie*). *Endgame* was composed between 1954 and 1956. The years 1953-1962 saw a major escalation of the Cold War and the beginning of nuclear crisis” (p. 133).

dismantle the certainty of what is happening; *Endgame* is no exception. The madman's story adds uncertainty to this setting.

The world of *Endgame* has a unique temporality. Many places in the play indicate that the characters live in the temporality of "after," that is, after the occurrence of a catastrophic disaster. For them, the annihilation of the external world is an undeniable fact although they do not know what has happened.³ Interestingly, this temporality of "after" is at the same time that of "before"—before the end. Hamm and Clov constantly sense an approach of the end, whose arrival is infinitely deferred. At the beginning of the play, Clov tonelessly says with a fixed gaze, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (p. 93), "echoing Christ's last words from the cross (John 19:30)" (Ackerley, 2013, p. 331). Later, Hamm also says gloomily, "It's finished, we're finished. [*Pause.*] Nearly finished. [*Pause.*] There'll be no more speech" (p. 116). When the play approaches its end, the approach of the world's end becomes imminent. Hamm seems to accept the approach of the end and says, "Then let it end! ... With a bang!" (p. 130) or "It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you anymore," and asks Clov to leave him "... a few words ... to ponder ... in [his] heart in order to 'end up with'." (p. 131)⁴

This paradoxical temporality of "after" projected in *Endgame* deviates from the chronological time, i.e., from the succession of "before" and "after" that Nancy speaks of. In this temporality, the word "yesterday" loses its meaning. For instance, we see it in the following exchange where Clov says to Hamm that he oiled the castors of Hamm's wheelchair "yesterday":

CLOV: I oiled them yesterday.

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: [*Violently.*] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent (Beckett, 2006, p. 113).

As this exchange indicates, their temporality is severed from the temporality wherein the word "yesterday" makes sense. It renders the chronological time inoperative.

This temporality in *Endgame* appears as a rupture with the idea of temporality suggesting an end. It involves the endless repetition of a futile moment. They repeat meaningless acts as Nell and Clov say, "Why this farce, day after day?" (pp. 99, 107). Further, Hamm and Clov have the following exchange:

HAMM: Do you not think this has gone on long enough?

³ This is shown in their repetition of the word, "naturally." For example, Hamm and Clov have the following exchange:

HAMM:... That old doctor, he's dead, naturally?

CLOV: He wasn't old.

HAMM: But he's dead?

CLOV: Naturally. [*Pause.*] You ask me that? (p. 104)

⁴ Clov's words also give us the image of a sudden arrival of the end. Clov says, "Good, it'll never end, I'll never go. [*Pause.*] Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand that either" (p. 132).

CLOV: Yes! [*Pause.*] What?
HAMM: This... this... thing.
CLOV: I've always thought so. [*Pause.*] You not?
HAMM: [*Gloomily.*] Then it's a day like any other day.
CLOV: As long as it lasts. [*Pause.*] All lifelong the same inanities (Beckett, 2006, p. 114).

The repetition of a futile moment is also depicted as “our goings on.” As Clov says, “I’m tired of our goings on, very tired” (p. 129); their “goings on” increasingly frustrate them. Nevertheless, at the same time, their “goings on” relieve their pain of living, like Hamm’s painkillers.⁵ When Beckett directed his own production in Berlin in 1967, he illustrated Hamm to the actor who played the character as “a king in the chess game lost from the start” and “a bad player” who makes loud senseless moves in “trying to delay the inevitable end” (Cohn, 1973, p. 152). At another occasion, on being asked what *Endgame* was about, Beckett looked distressed and said: “Well, it’s like the last game between Karpov and Korchnoi. After the third move, both knew that neither could win, but they kept on playing.” (Knowlson & Knowlson, 2006, p. 206). These words of Beckett indicate that the world of *Endgame* is characterized by futility and uselessness.

The Possibility of Reversal

To read this play in light of Nancy’s argument in *After Fukushima*, one could say that the spatiotemporal dimension of “after” in *Endgame* reveals the annihilation of meaning where all meanings grounded on “the finality” are lost, and “the collapse of future goals” (Nancy, 2015, p. 37) takes place. There are no meaningful action, things, or beings based on “the finality,” that is, “aiming, ... planning, and projecting a future in general” (Nancy, 2015, p. 37).⁶ What the characters do has nothing to do with projects or undertakings; they do not produce a work. However, precisely, at this extreme point of “the collapse of future goals” and the annihilation of meaning, we catch a glimpse of a way out of the impasse of human existence, as Nancy (2015) writes, “It is the collapse of future goals that forces us to work with other futures” (p. 37). While there is no clear sign of hope in *Endgame*, one could think that the play perhaps reveals the dimension where the reversal of meaning takes place. For example, we see it in a following exchange between Hamm and Clov:

HAMM: We’re not beginning to... to... mean something?
CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that’s a good one!
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! [... *Normal voice.*] And without going so far as that, we ourselves... [*with emotion*]... we ourselves... at certain

⁵ In *Endgame*, Hamm occasionally tells stories to Clov like a storyteller. The act of telling a story is indispensable to his survival, his “goings on.” Like his painkillers, it alleviates his pain of living in this extreme condition. Hamm says, “The end is in the beginning and yet you go on. [*Pause.*] Perhaps, I could go on with my story, end it, and begin another” (p. 126).

⁶ “The collapse of future goals” found in this play is inseparable from the idea of “unworking” (*désœuvrement*), which Nancy addresses in *The Inoperative Community*.

moments... [*Vehemently.*] To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing! (p. 108)

This exchange indicates the approach of some meaning for their being and actions. Adorno claims that this exchange shows “[t]he deadliest fear of the characters in the drama,” “the fear, disguised as humor that they might mean something” (p. 261). It is possible to read the fear of meaning that resonates with the fear of recreation, as Hamm fears that the humanity might start again from the flea. Yet, at the same time, we can find the promise of the approach of other meaning. Here, the meaning is not the meaning based on “the finality” or “future goals.” It is close to the “meaning” that Nancy discusses at the end of *After Fukushima*: “‘meaning’ as not an end to reach, but that which is possible to be close to” (2015, p. 37).

Ware (2017) calls this dimension of reversal in *Endgame* as the “dialectical space.” He explores the ethical dimensions of *Endgame* and observes that the play “opens up a dialectical space in which the future of humanity can be imagined otherwise” (Ware, 2017, p. 82). Alluding to a passage in Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Ware writes, “Only those who have been made ‘nothing’, who have suffered a ‘complete loss of humanity’, can one day become ‘everything’ and redeem themselves through a ‘total redemption of humanity’. This connection between dissolution and renewal is one that is also registered by Beckett” (p. 82).⁷ He further argues that *Endgame* describes “what Adorno calls ‘the dismantling of the subject’, humanity in its ‘death throes’,” which shows “the promise of ‘happiness’ to come,” or what Wittgenstein calls “deep disquietude,” which “constitutes the first step toward a transformed ethical and political outlook” (p. 82). According to Ware, this possibility of transformation may be “but a ‘wager’ based on an unverifiable faith in a redeemed future.” But he stresses that we can have a glimpse of that other future if we accept “the unavoidable connection between emancipation and tragedy, liberation and loss” (p. 83).

Conclusion

Nancy proposes that our remaining exposed to the “after” or to “a catastrophe of meaning” is decisive in “working with other futures” or “opening other paths.” In his argument, this “after” corresponds to “the present,” which stems from a rupture with “the regime of general equivalence.” At the end of the book, he explains that his concern is not about the decisions on not using nuclear energy any more or on using it differently but about emerging from “the endless equivalence of ends and means” (2015, p. 36). He writes, “What would be decisive, then, would be to think in the present and to think the present. No longer the end or ends to come ... but the present as the element of the near-at-hand” (p. 37). The present, for him, means “a present in which something or someone presents itself: the present of an arrival, an approach” (p. 38).⁸ In other words, according to him, what is at stake is our “capacity for meaning”;

⁷ Ware thinks that this connection is also found in Beckett’s short piece for Radio, “The Capital of the Ruins,” where Beckett mentioned a “vision of humanity in ruins” but “at the same time alluded to ‘an inkling of the terms in which our [human] condition is to be thought again’” (p. 82).

⁸ For Nancy, “the present of an arrival, an approach” essentially involves “the nonequivalence of all singularities: those of persons and moments, places, gestures of a person, those of the hours of the day or night, those of words spoken, those of clouds that pass, plants that grow with a knowing slowness” (pp. 38-39). He believes that only by our attention, respect, or esteem directed at these singularities that

it is our capacity of “thinking about ‘meaning’ as not an end to reach, but that which is possible to be close to” (p. 37).

We can argue that the “present” that opens to this other “meaning,” “that which is possible to be close to” is precisely what *Endgame* depicts, as shown in the aforementioned exchange between Hamm and Clov about meaning. The play shows us that only insofar as we remain exposed to this “present,” the spatiotemporal dimension of “after” where “the collapse of future goals” takes place, a catastrophe, in its original Greek meaning, a turning point, will arrive, enabling us to “work with other futures.” Hamm and Clov exchange an enigmatic conversation that is repeated twice in the play: To Hamm, who asks, “What’s happening, what’s happening?” Clov responds, “Something is taking its course.” (pp. 98, 107). We can interpret Clov’s line to mean that some kind of fatal power beyond humans is heading toward the end of the world. However, we could also think that this line indicates the approach of “other futures.” This exchange suggests a fundamental indecision or suspense at the core of this play. Thus, *Endgame* calls forth our capacity to endure this fundamental suspense and wait for the reversal of meaning (although it might sound paradoxical, we could say that this is a hope without hope.). To borrow Nancy’s words, it is in our capacity to “open our eyes even in darkness” (Nancy and Tonaki, 2012, p. 12).⁹

the nonequivalence is maintained (p. 39). In this sense, the present means “one that opens to this esteem of the singular” (p. 40). To see *Endgame* from this perspective, we could say that the play keeps open a space where the singular beings, gestures, and acts irreducible to the system of “general equivalence” expose themselves.

⁹ This is my translation of the original text. Beckett uses almost the same expression while speaking of the art of Bram van Velde. He writes, “on commence enfin à voir, dans le noir” (*Disjecta*, p. 126).

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