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AFTER CATASTROPHE: FROM BECKETT TO ŽIŽEK

Beckett's Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett's classic play *Waiting for Godot*, written in author's own account as some sort of diversion from his serious work on the trilogy of novels, takes place in an unnamed land and at an unnamed time. All the information we are given at the beginning is this: there is a tree somewhere near a country road, and it is evening (Beckett 2001, 24). Reading the text, we get a sense of a devastated, deserted, forgotten land, scarce in resources, scarce in people, scarce in everything, where a mere carrot is something of a luxury. There is no concept of time, no past, no future, only the waiting. One may wonder how comedy might even be possible in such a place. One may wonder how it is that immense hardships and lack of basic supplies are not described in genres of tragedy, sorrow or social realism—but in an almost uncanny genre of comedy, with an almost clownish sense of humor. Is this why the English version of the play comes with the label of tragicomedy—because we laugh at Vladimir and Estragon, but also feel sad about the conditions in which they live?

By examining a recent Internet phenomenon called “Latvian jokes” we can come to a better understanding of the correlation between comedy and extreme deprivation. First of all, this cluster of jokes, each following the same logic and placed within the same mythical framework, has nothing to do with Latvia, the Baltic country which constituted a part of the Soviet Union until 1991. It is completely artificial and in fact resembles the world of *Godot* with its extreme deprivation and lack of resources. It is always cold and dark in Latvia, people are always hungry, all soldiers rape women, all children cry, and a single potato is the greatest of all joys. This extremely inhospitable character of the land is somehow reflected in its language, for it is not simply broken English, it is much more, or rather, much *less*: its grammar lacks clear notions of past and future, its vocabulary consists of only a few words. There is no hope in Latvia, and there can be none. The minimal Latvian joke is probably this one:

Latvian 1: Is so cold.

Latvian 2: How cold is?

Latvian 1: Very. Also dark.

All Latvian jokes could take place in the evening on a country road while people are waiting for nothing to happen. The names of the principal characters in Beckett's play, Vladimir and Estragon, sound Eastern-European; perhaps they could be Latvians. The role of the carrot is replaced in Latvian jokes by the potato, but it is clear that its role is the same: the simplest of foods representing the sum of all human aspiration.

Latvian is rub lamp find genie. Genie say, "What is three wishes?" Latvian say, "I wish potato!" Then, POOF! Potato! Latvian so happy! "Oh! Is potato! Is potato!" say Latvian. Genie ask, "What is next wish?" Latvian is say, "I wish you go away so can enjoy potato!" POOF! So sad. Also, only lamp.

Of course, we cannot pretend that there is not a certain (American, Western-European) *Schadenfreude* at work in these kind of jokes; at least in part, these jokes seem to rely on the feeling of recipient's cultural, racial or class superiority. Indeed, Kazakhstan of the movie *Borat*, which is based precisely on the premise of an inexhaustible feeling of cultural superiority in the US, is similar to "Latvia" in many ways. However, like in *Borat*, it is also clear that the true recipient of a Latvian joke is not someone who really believes that people in a remote northern ex-Soviet state are resigned to live in such a deserted country. Even in *Borat*, the true recipient of the film is someone for whom it is clear from the very beginning that "Kazakhstan" is a completely fabricated land that simply serves as a screen for what our own (American, Western-European) culture imagines as pre-cultural, pre-historic, pre-modern, that is, for what our own culture imagines as its darkest nightmare.

Why, then, is extreme deprivation, extreme scarcity of food, culture and language, comical? How is laughter produced in a situation which, objectively, can only be a complete disaster, a catastrophe? To begin to answer these questions, let us recall that in the ancient theory of drama, the term catastrophe simply denotes the final resolution of the plot, whether it is happy or sad. Aristotle debates, for instance, whether it is more appropriate for tragedy to have the protagonist suffer a disaster or to enjoy good fortune, and argues that the happy ending is much more suitable for comedy (Aristotle 1902, 45-49; 1453a30-39). Bearing this ancient meaning of the term in mind, what we are really asking when we ask about the relationship between comedy and catastrophe is this: how is comedy possible at the end of all ends, where all action is already done, all hope is in vain and all fears are empty?

The point, of course, is that not only *Waiting for Godot*, but most of Beckett's plays take place precisely at a time that can be described as after the end. Beckett's plays can in general be said to be "catastrophic" in the precise sense of taking place at the end or even beyond end. For traditional poetics, strictly speaking, such a timeless series of events falls out of the field of dramatic as it is fit neither for tragedy nor for comedy. Indeed, Beckett has long been considered, and is still considered by some, as the master of the practice of anti-theater. The true aim of theater theory, as Martin Puchner points out, lies in adjusting our concepts of what is theatrical to include, or perhaps even to focus on what is revealed in the work of Beckett (and

many other modern playwrights); Puchner argues that what is often seen as anti-theatricality is in fact better explained as a reform of theater (Puchner 2011).

Waiting for Godot certainly takes place in a timeless bubble. While Vladimir and Estragon do speak about the past, they are completely uncertain of it, and it is impossible to determine whether the events they are referring to transpired a day or a decade ago. The same goes for their future. The arrival of Godot is not only completely uncertain, it is also quite unclear whether he is supposed to come that evening, the next, or ten years from the present. Their waiting is not so much waiting for some future arrival, but rather waiting as such, waiting that never began and will never be over, waiting in an eternal present. Many commentators have reflected upon the relationship of Didi and Gogo's position of timeless waiting to Heideggerian concept of boredom or to his existentialism of *Geworfenheit* as developed in the philosopher's famous book, *Being and Time* (for instance: Anders 1965, 144; Moran 2006, 104; Valentine 2009, 136). On some level, arguing for the play's implicit Heideggerianism seems justified inasmuch as for Heidegger, too, existence has neither a beginning point nor an ending point; one can only exist as already in the world (see especially: Heidegger 1996, 57). However, this analogy is dangerous insofar as it can lead us to the conclusion that it offers us the key to unlocking the play in its entirety. For the protagonists of the play, waiting is not only without boundaries in time, it is also without purpose, which certainly cannot be said about Heidegger's *Dasein*. In the dispositions of profound boredom and anxiety, when *Dasein* is returned to its own-most possibility—the possibility of non-existence—it is returned to its authentic existence as a possibility. In *their* waiting, Vladimir and Estragon do not face their authenticity at all; they simply are.

On this point, we should perhaps add another remark. *Waiting for Godot*, its fame and world-wide recognition notwithstanding, is probably not the most representative of Beckett's work. What is more, precisely because it appears to offer the reader so many simple keys to unlocking the play, using topics and motifs that we seemingly know a lot about—ranging from the questions of death and existence without a God to the question of suffering in the fragile, finite bodies and imperfect souls—that an inexperienced reader may explain all these elements too hastily and too spontaneously. Some Beckett scholars may therefore not even begin to analyze the work, either because it is too risky or because it is unnecessary. From the point of view of this paper, however, this wide-spread misinterpretation is reason enough to attempt an analysis.

In my view, the reason why *Waiting for Godot* can only be a comedy lies in its temporality: because it takes place “after the end,” when the disaster has already occurred, it cannot serve as a basis for the tragic heroine's desperate attempt to prevent it. As Terry Eagleton puts it: “If tragic figures meet with a fall, Beckett's figures fail to rise to a height from which a fall would be possible” (Eagleton 2003, 67). The only possible action is a non-action, a futile and meaningless action, thwarted not by the intervention of an opposing external or internal power but fruitless in itself. There is a great deal to be said in favor of declaring such a disposition tragicomic,

especially since the author did so himself in the English version of the play. I insist, however, on calling it comic, not so much because I wish to engage in a dispute over what exactly separates comedy from tragedy, but principally because I want to avoid a terrible misreading of the play that I fear is still prevalent. It seems that the label of tragicomedy allows many readers to conclude that, while the (non-)actions of the characters make us laugh, they still somehow speak the truth of some terrible, immensely sad human condition. In other words, I think it is precisely this term that makes it very easy to recognize in the play its existentialist, theological or generally “humanist” elements.

There are two kinds of commentary that fall in this trap. The first kind is extremely naive, as it takes note of Beckett’s general interest in minimalism, physical handicaps, physical and mental injury and degradation, and concludes that it must mean that “suffering and death are humanity’s lot” (Feldman 2009, 13). Or, when Estragon compares himself to Christ, “Beckett is undoubtedly drawing parallels with Christ to highlight the intensity of our suffering on earth” (White 2009, 20). These readings are naive because they simply register certain words, themes and motifs that correspond to an easily comprehensible and well-known narrative, but fail to understand their functioning in the work itself. This way of reading is of course not limited to the works of Beckett; unfortunately, it presents a troublesome predicament of the humanities which are still crumbling under the weight of their metaphysical conceptual clutter. In this regard, a considerable part of the humanities remains in a pre-Heideggerian, perhaps even pre-secular, but certainly pre-modern condition.

The second type of commentary is much more interesting, though no less mistaken. In these cases, the interpreter doesn’t simply inscribe Beckett’s work in the traditional metaphysical value system the author is clearly, already at the level of artistic practice, separating himself from. The interpreter readily acknowledges that there is a great shift in paradigm at work in Beckett’s oeuvre, and that Beckett’s protagonists are clearly nothing like the tragic heroes of Antiquity; their dramatic action consists entirely of non-activity. The argument here is that the formula of (modernist) tragedy is the very absence of (classical, heroic) tragedy. Grounding his reading of *Godot* in an interpretation of Heidegger, Günther Anders writes: “the tragedy of this kind of existence lies in the fact that it does not even have a chance of tragedy, that it must always, at the same time, in its totality be farce” (Anders 1965, 142). My thesis can be formulated as precisely the opposite of Anders’ claim: the problem is not that today, tragedy is forced into an “unnatural” cohabitation with farce, in order to be tragic at all. Quite the contrary: the problem is that today, comedy is still forced to masquerade as recognizable tragic formulae in order to be recognized as a serious genre at all. More recently, Simon Critchley expressed almost the same point as Anders, writing that “the problem with the tragic-heroic paradigm is that it is not tragic enough and that only comedy is truly tragic” (Critchley 1999, 114). The difference with Anders is perhaps only that, for Critchley, comedy is not some necessary evil that tragedy must learn to live with, but a productive and desired

form, precisely the form through which tragedy reaches its authentic voice in modernity. Critchley, too, grounds his idea of comedy in a reference to Heidegger's concept of finality and praises Beckett's laughter "which arises out of a palpable sense of inability, inauthenticity, impotence, impossibility" (114.).

Even though the second kind of commentary on *Godot*, and Beckett in general, presents a much more interesting argument, it still remains in the clutches of the "humanist" ideology of European metaphysical tradition. By interpreting (Beckett's) comedy as a contemporary form of tragedy as Critchley suggests, or else as an "ontological farce" as proposed by Anders, it effectively neutralizes, suspends its comic power and re-interprets it as tragedy, as tragedy-after-tragedy. In other words, this form of commentary still praises comedy only insofar as it is "tragic," still considers it as a serious genre only insofar as it expresses, in one way or another, "the immense human suffering on earth." By not taking the comic of comedy seriously, it overlooks its genuine metaphysical, philosophical, social and political position. In fact, it is Critchley himself who presents the formula of comedy that should be avoided at all costs: *the comedy of finitude*.

As is well known, it is the genre of tragedy that we traditionally link to the idea of human finality—to the idea of uniqueness and fragility of our existence and of the ultimate fruitlessness of action. Critchley's "comedy of finitude" is therefore quite literally intended as a way of inscribing the very essence of tragic into comedy. Against this attempt, I strongly endorse the position taken by Alenka Zupančič in her book on comedy, where she insists on the "physics of the infinite against the metaphysics of the finite" (Zupančič 2007, 42-60). With regard to Beckett's hero, Zupančič quotes Alfred Simon's formulation that "he may not be immortal, but he's indestructible [increvable]" (Zupančič 2007, 217). She applies this indestructibility, which should not be confused with the immortality of the soul, to the comic in general. To make a long story short: one should not take comedy seriously only insofar as it is essentially tragic. Rather, what one should take seriously is the very essence of the comic. The reason why *Waiting for Godot* should be read as a comedy—and not as a tragicomedy—is precisely because we should avoid the temptation of reducing its comic indestructibility to a tragic testimony of human fragility and finality.

Aaron Schuster opens his essay on the philosophy of complaint by citing the following joke:

Somewhere, back in Russia, a traveler gets on a train and sits down next to an old Jewish man. Before long, the old man starts muttering, "Oy, am I thirsty." The traveler ignores him for a while, but the old man persists: "Oy, am I thirsty. Oy, am I thirsty." Finally the traveler can stand it no longer. He gets up, walks to the car where drinks are sold, and buys a bottle of water. The old man accepts it gratefully, drinks it, and settles down. A few minutes pass. The traveler can feel the tension building up in the old man. Finally, the tension gets the best of him, and he blurts out, "Oy, was I thirsty!" (Schuster 2012, 37)

The desire of the old man seems quite minimal, but even the quenching of the thirst can't really satisfy it. There is something in his desire that persists—and perhaps we can call it the indestructibility of the comic. Do not Vladimir and Estragon belong to the same kind of comic logic of infinite complaint? Clearly, their waiting got out of control, it is running wild. There is something endless in their waiting. The assumption that most commentators make, though rarely explicitly, is that Godot will never come, or that his coming is to be expected only at the end of time. This is quite natural, because by waiting we usually mean the disposition of expecting some future event, and it is indeed clear that in the play such event will not come to pass. But perhaps in this case, this assumption is somehow wrong, or at least incomplete. Perhaps the real predicament of the protagonists is that *Godot already came*. Godot already came, but his coming was like the bottle of water for the thirsty old man, which only transformed the manifestation of his endless complaint. This is what psychoanalysis calls the persistence of the “drive” which is to be strictly distinguished from what is called “desire.” Instead of assuming the spontaneous Heideggerianism of Vladimir and Estragon and inscribing their waiting in the dimension of primordial future (for this is what Heidegger concludes in his analysis of Dasein: that the primordial temporality of our (human) existence is the future, we exist as our own coming-into existence), we should claim that the endlessness of their waiting points to its indestructibility, that its proper time has already and irrevocably passed, and that it somehow remains *after* the end, withstanding it.

Žižek's concept of catastrophe

There is an important political lesson to be drawn from the comic perversion of the everyday concept of the progression of time. First of all, the general political position of comedy is what we could call with Robert Pfaller its materialism, that is, its refusal of the alternative between noble ideas and poor applications. For comedy, it is extremely important how things appear—how ideas are applied—even to the extent that truth is merely a product of appearances. Pfaller refers to this as the principle of success (Pfaller 2005, 253). Furthermore, Zupančič essentially distinguishes between true and false comedy by detecting its political subversiveness or conservatism. Comedy is conservative if it points out that the noble power-figure is not only an ideal, but also a normal, corporeal, finite human being. It is subversive when it demonstrates that the noble power-figure is a normal human being precisely in believing it is truly a noble power-figure and acting like one. Paraphrasing Lacan, Zupančič writes: “It is not some poor chap who believes himself to be a king who is comical (this is rather pathetic), but a king who believes that he really is a king” (Zupančič 2007, 32). However, the curious post-catastrophic temporality of (some) comedies offers us a perspective on the political implications of the comic that can not be fully explained as materialism or subversiveness in the indicated sense.

In some more recent works by Slavoj Žižek we can detect a clear surge in the prominence of the concept of catastrophe, a concept that is almost absent in his earlier works but is at the same time closely related to the problematic of political comedy we are dealing with here. Whether we take *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce* (2009), or *Less Than Nothing* (2012), to name some books published in this period, the basic form of his argument remains the same. The world appears to be on the brink of ecological or social catastrophe; and the question, of course, is how to avoid or prevent it.

A critic may object even with this starting point, and claim that Žižek's estimation is weak and that there is no looming catastrophe for the humanity in the general sense; that it is all simply a matter of some isolated, unrelated "challenges" that need to be confronted and dealt with. It will have to suffice here to assert simply that Žižek does in fact deal with this possible objection and rejects it. He does so not only by pointing out the empirically quite evident capacity of humanity to annihilate itself (the bomb), and by listing other such data such as instable environment, dwindling resources, exponent population growth etc., but also, more importantly, by raising the philosophical argument that the human being cannot be thought independently from its capacity of the end. This is perhaps a trace of Heideggerianism in Žižek. But more to the point, Žižek explicitly refuses the solution of making small adaptations and improvements, of patching the most glaring holes in the (global) capitalist system. In *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce*, he describes such endeavors in the aftermath of the capitalist catastrophe as opting for a socialist future instead of a communist one (Žižek 2008, 95). Refusing corrections of the path that leads to catastrophe, what is Žižek's solution? Consistently, in each of the texts mentioned, he refers to Jean-Pierre Dupuy's "enlightened catastrophism" and proposes a paradoxical move, where the only genuine way to prevent the catastrophe is to accept its inevitability.

Dupuy [proposes] a radical solution: since one believes only when the catastrophe has really occurred (by which time it is too late to act), one must project oneself into the aftermath of the catastrophe, *confer on the catastrophe the reality of something which has already taken place*. We all know the tactical move of taking a step back in order to jump further ahead; Dupuy turns this procedure around: one has to jump ahead into the aftermath of the catastrophe in order to be able to step back from the brink. In other words, we must assume the catastrophe as our destiny. (Žižek 2012, 983-984, emphasis added)

The most important point for our discussion here is inscribed in the tentative line that I emphasized in the quotation: facing the catastrophic end, the true political move, or at least the beginning of such a move, can be described as "conferring on the catastrophe the reality of something which has already taken place." My claim is this: if one accepts Žižek's refusal of minor corrections within the political field and invests in a much more radical change, could one not say that what Žižek

proposes as the proper political move is ... a comic move? Could one not say that politics is, properly speaking, comedy?

Now, I am well aware of the dangers of such a claim. Politics, especially parliamentary and elections-related politics, politics of mass media, has in fact been called many things—farce, burlesque, circus, clown act, popularity contest and comedy—anything but serious business. And in most cases, rightly so: by performing in the many genres of instantaneous mass media like television and internet, a politician inevitably becomes at least one part entertainer; or rather, an individual who is not a good entertainer stands little chance of a long term success in official politics. But this has nothing to do with what I mean when I say that true politics is comedy. Firstly, because when I say politics, I am not referring at all to the contemporary parliamentary, entertainment-based politics. And secondly, because by comedy I do not mean something which is not serious, I do not mean something without any ethical relevance or social relevance or without ... well, political relevance.

By a political move, I mean something that precedes any parliamentary or non-parliamentary politics, something that belongs to a field prior to any form of reproduction of the political order, election-based or hereditary. By a political move, I mean the very instance of the formation of what “later” becomes a general political model for the (global) society. I put the word later in quotation marks because it is clear that such formative instance determines the entire history of that particular political model and is carried in that history. That instance is “prior” to the political model that it determines only in the logical sense, not in the temporal sense. In short, what I have in mind when I refer to politics is the very capacity to form or transform the political field. As for comedy, it should be clear that what I have in mind is what Pfaller calls the materialism of comedy and what Zupančič calls its subversiveness. It should be clear that by comedy I mean something that has a distinct political charge, something that helps to bring about the *formation* of the political field (and not to just mock it or impotently comment on it from the outside). In fact, if the lesson of Pfaller’s and Zupančič’s understanding of comedy is that true comedy is politico-formative, then perhaps all I want to claim at this point with regard to Žižek’s understanding of catastrophe is that his account of radical politics is an account of something profoundly comical. Insofar as it can be claimed that both politics and comedy belong to the curious temporality of the after-the-end, they also belong to each other.

The reader should be warned that Žižek’s precise formulation of the argument hesitates and varies. In the above passage, the entire problematic of dealing with a looming catastrophe is framed by the notion of believing: the reason why we must confer on the catastrophe the reality of something that has already taken place is because “one *believes* only when the catastrophe has really occurred” (emphasis added). This overarching theme of faith bears resemblance to and brings the discussion in the close proximity to what Alain Badiou has to say about the “event.” Indeed, Žižek sometimes refers to Dupuy and Badiou as practically saying one and the same thing: “For Badiou too, the time of the fidelity to an event is the *futur*

antérieur: overtaking oneself vis-à-vis the future, one acts now as if the future one wants to bring about were already here” (Žižek 2009, 151). Žižek points out that both Badiou and Dupuy evoke the paradoxical idea of future running ahead of itself, against the paradigm of hermeneutics which supposes the anticipation of the future in the present. However, for Žižek himself, it is not entirely clear whether the future that precedes itself, in the sense that one’s (political) action is conditioned by it, is supposed to be thought as the Event or the Catastrophe. By framing the problematic of the future-that-is-already-here with the notion of belief and therefore rephrasing, to an extent, the problematic of a looming catastrophe into the problematic of fidelity (which is fidelity to the uncertain, future rupture of continuity, called the event), it seems that Žižek pushes for the indifference between Event and Catastrophe. But is this really the only possible theoretical move? To answer the question somewhat indirectly, let me propose a provisional distinction: while the idea of existing in the extra-time, in the time *after* a terrible catastrophe has already taken place, is a comical one, this can hardly be said of the idea of the fidelity to the Badiouian event, or of the idea of the event already taking place, here and now. Fidelity to the event is not comical, while accepting the catastrophe is. Does not the “lesson of comedy,” separating between a politico-formative and a politico-conservative action, teach us that we should not underestimate the difference between Event and Catastrophe? Can a political stake that is not comical in the precise post-catastrophic sense even begin to contribute to the formation of the political field? If this is so—isn’t it quite legitimate to push Žižek’s political thesis away from the Badiouian framework towards the framework of comedy? This, in short, is what I had in mind when I emphasized in Žižek’s text the phrase that any politico-formative action must first assume that the catastrophe one is trying to prevent or avoid has already taken place.

The claim is that not only is true comedy immanently political, but also that radical politics in the formative sense must take the shape of a comical action, that is, of an action that is not proved futile in the process of its fulfillment as the result of this process, but rather perfectly futile or purposeless already in its inception. In other words, both the genuine political action and the specific type of comedy must assume that the worst already happened, that the game is already over. Regarding the suspense with which comedic plays work in general, Zupančič writes:

A prototype of comic suspense is not the question if and when the husband will discover the proverbial lover in his wife’s closet; rather, it is what will happen after he does. To be sure, comedy as a dramatic genre may well include the procedures of classic suspense, yet these are to be distinguished from comic suspense proper, which is in fact a paradoxical “suspense after the fact”: it starts only at the moment when the catastrophe (or some portion of it) has already happened. (Zupančič 2007, 93)

We should understand Žižek’s concept of the political through the lens of what Zupančič tells us about the comic suspense. It is not a question of believing, keeping faith or acting on faith—even though, of course, Žižek does not have in mind

what we traditionally and generally understand as religious faith but a variant of the Badiouian concept of fidelity. It has nothing to do with faith, hope, fear or any other concept that presupposes a duration of time in which it is possible to avert the inevitable. Rather, it is a completely free action, that is, an action free of the constraints of duration, because the worst already happened and there is nothing to fear and nothing to hope for, and to use Beckett's terms one last time, there is nothing to wait for. What remains is the pure timeless, not eternal, not immortal, but indestructible persistence. The political lesson of *Waiting for Godot* coincides perfectly with the comical lesson of formative politics: "we are the ones we have been waiting for."

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