

“HE HALTS AT WATER’S EDGE” : LIFE, MOTION, AND IMMOBILITY IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S *EMBERS*

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Abstract: This paper considers the relation between motion and vitality in Samuel Beckett’s radio play *Embers*. The play, in which a largely motionless man contemplates his life, and engages in dialogues with a woman who may or may not be entirely in his head, has consistently been regarded as being primarily enacted within the head of Henry, the central figure. Yet this paper deduces that Henry’s late approach to the sea indicates a significant element of potential suicide in the sea, which is preceded by Henry’s father’s apparent suicide in the same sea beside which Henry sits.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Embers*, motion, immobility, suicide.

Samuel Beckett might reasonably be considered a dramatist whose primary dynamic characteristic is restricted motion and obstructed mobility. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are physically capable of leaving, but do not; in *Endgame*, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell seem effectively entombed in whatever cave or bunker it is that they occupy; in *Happy Days*, Winnie is partially—and then almost completely—buried in sand; in *Play*, the three characters are trapped in jars; in *Not I*, the mouth cannot move from or even resist the interrogative light. Even in his radio work, motion and mobility are notable: *All That Fall*, Beckett’s first radio play, depicts a walking journey followed by the mystery of what happened on a train journey. This paper seeks to investigate what relation motion and immobility may have in relation to Beckett’s second radio play, *Embers*.

Embers contains a significant uncertainty: does it have any existence independent of Henry’s mind? It is a vexatious question to resolve, yet this ambiguity does not diminish one’s pleasure in listening to the play, nor does it substantially influence the aesthetic experience it provides. Whether or not one regards Henry as having some communication with other voices, or instead believes that all of the sounds and voices he hears are purely self-generated hallucinations, the auditor of *Embers* is immersed in Henry’s mind, where the play develops. We experience what Henry experiences. Although Ronald

Hayman probably goes too far in asserting that “*Embers* is the play in which Beckett most clearly marks down the central character as mad,” (Hayman 1973: 81) it may be that he is as helpless to control what happens as the auditors are.

This paper is interested in the concept of motion and stasis as enacted in *Embers*. The play is relatively simple in real or implied physical action: an old man, Henry, walks along the strand, then sits down and thinks. In his thoughts he retells himself what seems to be a remembered, fragmentary, creative story about two men named Bolton and Holloway, and then he communicates with the voice of his former wife, Ada, and they discuss their daughter Addie. Thus, even the most literal interpretation of *Embers* would involve little physical action: a man sits at the seashore, and ponders. As such, it is another of Beckett’s dramas in which physical action is determinedly subordinate to an apparent mental polyphony.

Although one must always be mindful of Beckett’s unambiguous statement in *Watt*, “no symbols where none intended,” (Beckett 1970: 254) it is also appropriate to note that this affirms that some symbols are intended. Thus, this paper interprets the drama of *Embers* as enacting, or at least implying, that the shore represents life and the sea represents death, and that Henry’s deliberations by the sea may be understood as his contemplations of whether or not to end his life by drowning himself. This is proposed not to diminish the play by crude simplification and reduction to a suicide drama, but merely to call attention to the uncommonly recurrent applicability of this approach. In a work that Anthony Cronin described as “a hauntingly beautiful but obscure work whose narrative development is difficult enough to follow on the page,” (Cronin 1997: 446) the interpretation proposed has at least the merit of consistency with the text, as well as coherence with the general structure of the work itself. The implications of Henry’s motions are therefore significant, as they suggest whether or not he is moving towards life, or towards death.

It is perhaps worthwhile acknowledging, at the outset, that certain rather dark elements of the play will be emphasized to support the reading just proposed by this paper: that Henry’s few motions give us an indication of whether or not he intends to drown himself. Those elements that will be emphasized are the association of the land with the living and death with the sea; the frequency of suicide or assisted suicide in the play; and the incessant need for Henry to divert himself from thinking about death in water, and its proximate availability to him. These elements are useful for this paper, but the paper also

endorses Barry McGovern's observation that "*Embers* is a very funny play, like all Beckett's work. But the humour is very black and very sardonic [...] the darkness of the piece can only register if the humour leavens it" (McGovern 2009: 137).

The play begins with the sound of the sea; although "scarcely audible," the sea is heard before Henry enters. This may suggest that the sea has an existence independent of Henry. But soon he arrives, as announced by his bootfalls on the beach shingles. He orders himself "On!" only then to issue the orders "Stop!" and "Down!" thus bringing himself from walking to a halt, to a seated position, and effectively ending the physical motion of the play—with the exception of two brief walks he takes closer to the play's conclusion. What is of importance is that he begins the play moving along or toward the sea, and then halts himself; almost all of the later action of the play will transpire beside the waters.

His ruminations begin with the apparently insignificant question, "Who is beside me now?", which he answers for his auditors (unless specifically noted, the dramatic pauses are omitted in this paper, to assure the narrative clarity of the quotations): "An old man, blind and foolish. My father, back from the dead, to be with me. As if he hadn't died. No, simply back from the dead to be with me, in this strange place" (Beckett 1984: 93). Thus from the very beginning of the play, *Embers* establishes the idea that Henry is in a place of transition from life to death and back again, in what he describes as a "strange place." He expresses no surprise that his dead father can come back and be present.

As he sits he again notes the association of the sea with questions of life and death. He addresses his father:

You would never live this side of the bay, you wanted the sun on the water for that evening bathe you took once too often. But when I got your money I moved across, as perhaps you may know. We never found your body, you know, that held up probate an unconscionable time, they said there was nothing to prove you hadn't run away from us all and alive and well under a false name in the Argentine for example, that grieved mother greatly. (Beckett 1984: 93-94)

Here again, life is associated with the land, the sea with death, and we hear here the first suggestion that his father died in the water ("that evening bathe you took once too often"). That the division between life and death is uncertain and indefinite is suggested by the

fact that the father's death in water was seen as possibly the escape to a new life, which delayed the decision of the probate courts; it is also worth remembering that Henry is affirming this story to his dead father, talking to his shade as though it were beside him (as it may be, unspeaking). Throughout the play, this early association of land with life, the sea with death, and the strand as the intermediate contact area—the “strange place”—will be iterated.

Henry's reflections on the sea also sound somewhat analogous to the constant awareness one has of death, sometimes almost suppressed or forgotten, whilst at other times undeniably present. He remarks of the sea, “Today it's calm, but I often hear it above in the house and walking the roads and start talking, oh just loud enough to drown it, nobody notices” (Beckett 1984: 94). This leads to the intriguing suggestion that all of Henry's conversation—whether it is his monologue or his later discussion with Ada—is an attempt to drown out the noise of the sea, which is itself associated with death. Beckett pertinently uses the word “drown” to describe the intention of his talking, thus verbally suggesting an association between the sea, death in the sea, and the ongoing narration we as auditors hear from Henry. The suggestion will be taken up again that one passes time in life by inventing stories, which is a frequent occupation for passing time in Beckett's world.

One of the stories that he tells himself, and which he seems to have difficulty recalling, is the tale of Bolton and Holloway. This intriguing story involves Bolton, on a bitter winter night, awaiting the visit of Holloway, who seems to be some form of medical man. When Holloway arrives he finds the hangings drawn and the fire out; this, intriguingly, is what one would find in a house that had just experienced a death, a tradition of closing the home also featured in *Krapp's Last Tape*, “I was there when the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs [...] I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last” (Beckett 1984: 60). Here, however, the death may be in the future. It seems that Bolton may be hoping for Holloway to give him some manner of merciful overdose; Clas Zilliacus suggests that “Bolton's object, it seems to me, is euthanasia.” (Zilliacus 1976: 86) The story would thus apparently be about a man, in “great trouble,” awaiting the delivery of his means of death, but who needs the assistance of a friend to obtain the deliverance for which he pleads. This may be analogous with Henry's situation. Henry too seems to be awaiting the transition into death, as his conversations seem exclusively to be with the dead. Like Bolton, he waits for the visitor to come (in Bolton's case, Holloway; in Henry's case, his father), but

Henry is the one who must make the connection. As Ada later observes, when Henry states that he wanted to be with his father, there is “no difficulty about that.” Here the clear reference is to suicide, as a means of reconnecting with the father. This echoes the apparent plea for help committing suicide that Bolton seems to be making to Holloway, and it foreshadows the revelation that Henry’s sister—of whom we hear nothing else in the play except this fact—“said she would throw herself off the cliff” (Beckett 1984: 102). Suicide is evidently a common thought or action in Henry’s family.

However, one interprets the Bolton and Holloway story, it clearly serves two functions for Henry: 1) it helps him to drown out the sound of the sea, and 2) it serves to pass the time, distracting him from other ruminations. As he later remarks to Ada, “every syllable is a second gained.” Gained against what, one might ask. Here the obvious answer is likely the correct one, that it is time gained before death. This would contextualize Henry’s talking and story-telling as perhaps the hesitation of the tempted suicide. And this concept of time and how to employ it recurs throughout *Embers*. The sound of the sea itself suggests one of humanity’s oldest markers of time, the moon and lunar cycles, tides and months. Addie’s music lesson is punctuated by the music master “beating time lightly with [a] ruler,” (Beckett 1984: 99) which is itself a tool of measurement and regulation. (I am unconvinced by James Jesson’s suggestion that this should be extended so that ‘the tapping and pounding sounds of Addie’s lessons strengthens the erotic hints in the music master’s phallic cylindrical ruler.’ [Jesson 2009: 54]) Henry thinks of horses and, rather oddly, of mammoths as being trainable to mark time: “Train it to mark time! Shoe it with steel and tie it up in the yard, have it stamp all day! A ten ton mammoth back from the dead, shoe it with steel and have it tramp the world down!” (Beckett 1984: 93) We note here that again in *Embers* death and life are permeable conditions, and that the dead can come back, whether they are human dead or mammoth dead. The idea of a horse marking time apparently stays with Henry, as he later asks Ada, “Could a horse be trained to stand still and mark time with its four legs?” (Beckett 1984: 97) This notion of passing time by standing still is important to this reading of *Embers*: if Henry is, as this paper proposes, considering walking into the sea to die, then every second he sits or stands still is indeed a second gained, and every story he tells himself is time gained.

This conception also helps to explain the extraordinary number of pauses in the play. Clas Zilliacus has observed that “More than two

hundred pauses are called for in the text of *Embers*" (Zilliacus 1976: 89). Beckett's pauses and silences are integral to his work, and can have differing causes and effects from play to play; but it is not unreasonable to ask whether or not they have a specific function unique to each play in which they appear. In *Embers*, it might be asserted, the frequent pauses enact—on an extremely regular basis—the sense of Henry speaking into a void, or trying to summon companionship from an empty beyond. Each time there is a pause, the lack of response by which he is greeted has two dramatic effects: first, the lack of reply by another character/voice emphasizes his loneliness and isolation. It is almost always Henry who has to break his own pauses, or to answer his own remarks, an observation particularly true if one regards Ada as having no independent identity from his thoughts. Secondly, Beckett's text states clearly that the pauses are not to be silent, but are instead filled with the sound of the sea: "Sea," states the text direction as soon as Henry sits down, "still faint, audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated" (Beckett 1984: 93). Thus the pauses both emphasize Henry's hopeless desire to be answered, and also demonstrate the hopelessness of his attempt to drown out the sound of the sea. In other words, every moment not filled with speech is a moment when the sea can be heard, reminding him of his father's death, and perhaps luring him to his own.

This then raises the question of Henry's most interactive voice, memory, or invention: Ada. Whether or not Ada is present to Henry in any sense other than his invention has remained a subject of scholarly debate. Ruby Cohn reasonably suggests that the lack of actual sound may suggest an ethereality for Ada, as Henry seems to be the only person who actually makes sounds on the earth: "Henry alone has footsteps that we can hear over the radio. His silent father is signaled by no sound; the voices of his wife and daughter are preceded by no footsteps; Bolton and Holloway, the characters in Henry's story, are possibly his creations" (Cohn 1973: 173). Ada, it seems certain, is dead. As this paper has suggested, if the land represents life and the sea death, her inability to make a sound on the shingle ("No sound as she sits") emphasizes the fact that she is dead, as the living Henry makes sound when he sits down ("Slither of shingle as he sits"). As a thematic echo of this, he later also knocks two stones together, then throws them. When the first hits, he says of the sound, "That's life!," then of the second, when it falls, he says, "Not this [...] sucking!" Although it is uncertain what this "sucking" is supposed to be, it may be suggested that Henry is emphasizing the solidity of life on the earth with the drawing, or sucking, of the body into the sea that would be caused by

an ebb tide. (The play was, in the early draft version, titled 'Ebb'). Ada responds to this strange assertion by asking an existential question: "And why life? Why life, Henry? Is there anyone about?" (Beckett 1984: 101) These are, among other things, questions that one might suppose someone actively contemplating suicide might ask: is there someone about to save me or, conversely, to impede my desire to die? Henry's response, "Not a living soul," reinforces his isolation, as well as implying that Ada, who is said to be beside him, is not alive.

As noted previously, several rather darker elements of *Embers* are here emphasized largely to validate the consideration of Henry's movements proposed by this paper. Those elements are: the association of the land with the living and death with the sea; the frequency of suicide or assisted suicide in the play; and the incessant need for Henry to divert himself from thinking about death in water, and perhaps of its immediate availability to him. These have been noted to draw attention to the context in which Henry makes clear physical motion. For most of the play, he sits on the strand and does not apparently move; there are, at least, no sound cues indicating movement, or a shifting of weight. Yet there are two times when he approaches the shore, and they form the core of this argument. It is to these two moments that we now turn our attention.

Henry's first motion after sitting down on the shingles of the sea comes during his conversation with Ada. The moment is immediately after the "evocation" of Addie learning to ride horses, in which her speed increases from "walking" to "galloping," giving the impression of a loss of control. Ada then asks him, "Why do you get up?," to which Henry replies, "I thought I might try and get as far as the water's edge. (Pause. With a sigh.) And back." If this paper is right in suggesting that the temptation of drowning himself motivates much of Henry's thinking, his attempt here to walk to the water's edge has a certain thematic resonance, as it suggests that he is tempted to try to build a momentum that might carry him into the sea. Yet he almost immediately recognizes that he will not drown himself, and so "with a sigh" he acknowledges that he will also return: "And back." Ada's remarks are almost encouraging, as though trying to spur him past the hesitation before drowning himself, or at least encouraging him to reach the water: "Well, why don't you? Don't stand there thinking about it. Don't stand there staring" (Beckett 1984: 99). When he gets to the water he stops and recollects ("twenty years earlier") what seems to be a moment of sexual contact between the two of them, which also roils the sea. This stops him, and he returns up the strand, to join Ada again.

This moment is significant because it shows us the closest Henry gets to the water until the conclusion of the play. When he first orders himself to stomp or stagger into audibility, at the beginning of the play, his proximity to the sea is only implied. The sea is noted as being “a little louder” as he moves “on,” and we may certainly assume that the shingles on which he sits constitute the scattered rocks on the strand. He therefore spends the majority of the play near the water, but how close is unclear. Yet in this moment, perhaps with Addie’s accelerating horse giving him the hope or idea of reckless momentum, he rises and moves directly to what Beckett terms “water’s edge.” Although he then returns to the shingles where Ada is, he will return at the end of the play, again, to the “water’s edge.”

Between those two approaches to the edge of the sea, however, Henry has several conversations with Ada. She intriguingly suggests that he should “see a doctor about your talking,” “see Holloway, he’s alive still,” and “see Holloway” (Beckett 1984: 100-101). These tantalizing references suggest that Holloway may in some sense be a real person, although the audience knows—does Ada?—that Holloway may be the agent of euthanasia or a pitying overdose. Yet Henry does not pursue this possibility, perhaps because she has urged him to “see” a doctor, or “see Holloway,” in a purely auditory play. Yet then, as the conversation develops, he asks Ada whether or not she ever met his father and, as she tells him, he begins to become more desperate, repeatedly asking her to keep speaking, and noting his own inability to do so: “I can’t do it anymore! I can’t do it anymore now!” (Beckett 1984: 103)

Ada’s talk, after Henry has returned from the edge of the water, is about whether or not she met his father, and she affirms that she did in fact see him at a distance, staring at the sea. Ronald Hayman believes this to be a crucial passage for the play, both in terms of the revelation it offers, as well as the suggestion that Ada’s voice is not purely an invention of Henry’s mind.

This is crucial. She did meet his father, on the day that the old man was drowned, and from her description of the events of that day it becomes obvious to Henry that the drowning was suicide...if my reading is correct, the enlightenment that Ada brings to Henry couldn’t possibly come from a voice already present inside his head [...] At the end of the play, Henry is left alone, looking out to sea just as his father was, the day he drowned, and perhaps Henry too is thinking of the same escape. (Hayman 1973: 86-87)

This paper concurs with Hayman's general description of the significance of this passage. It seems highly credible that this revelation does indicate suicide, and this interpretation would also explain why she insists that nothing was particularly memorable about him that day:

Yes, you know what I mean, there are attitudes remain in one's mind for reasons that are clear, the carriage of a head for example, bowed when one would have thought it should be lifted, and vice versa, or a hand suspended in mid air, as if unowned. That kind of thing. But with your father sitting on the rock that day nothing of the kind, no detail you could put your finger on and say, How very peculiar! No, I could never make it out. Perhaps, as i said, just the great stillness of the whole body, as if all the breath had left it. (Beckett 1984: 103)

This has the sound of someone attempting to recall whether or not a suicide gave any indication that would seem "very peculiar" of his or her emotional state, such as a "head bowed when one would have thought it should be lifted." And her description of him as looking "as if all the breath had left" his body is a clear association of this last sighting of Henry's father with the expiration of death. This finally also leads Henry to imagine that Ada doubled back to the site where she saw Henry's father:

Suddenly feels uneasy and gets down again, conductor: "Changed your mind, Miss?," goes back up path, no sign of you. Very unhappy and uneasy, hangs round a bit, not a soul about, cold wind coming in off sea, goes back down path and takes tram home. (Beckett 1984: 103)

This description of the area where Henry's father has apparently just drowned himself—"not a soul about," except for Ada—reminds us that Henry is now in the same position, with only Ada's spirit or voice, and "not a living soul" around.

This then leads us into the last moments of the play. This paper disagrees with Hayman's description that "At the end of the play, Henry is left alone, looking out to sea just as his father was, the day he drowned, and perhaps Henry too is thinking of the same escape" (Hayman 1973: 87). The disagreement lies only in the physical position of Henry; he is not sitting, "just as his father was"; he is standing, and

has walked, again, to the “water’s edge.” It is a peculiar textual direction: “He halts at water’s edge” (Beckett 1984: 104). How is one to replicate that with a sound effect? All that Beckett suggests is the previously encountered, “Sea a little louder.” Yet this direction is consequential if it is intended to assist the actor, or the reader, to know how to interpret this last motion of the play.

This paper contends that Henry’s walk to the edge of the sea suggests his commitment to trying to drown himself. By approaching the water this final time he does what his father had done, in similar circumstances. His previous approach to the water was accomplished without any commands, and only the urging of Ada’s voice (“Why don’t you? Don’t stand there thinking about it. Don’t stand there staring.”). Now, Henry urges his feet “on” to the “water’s edge,” and he—for the first time in the play—explicitly contemplates the future. He foresees an appointment with a plumber, to deal with “the waste,” then “Saturday... nothing. Sunday... Sunday... nothing all day. Nothing, all day nothing. All day all night nothing. Not a sound” (Beckett 1984: 104). This may be interpreted as reflecting his lack of social connections, yet it also seems plausible that he is considering a future after he is dead; the phrase “All day all night nothing. Not a sound,” is a restatement of Ada’s assurance that under the sea “all is as quiet as the grave. Not a sound. All day, all night, not a sound” (Beckett 1984: 101).

Of course, there is one sound left in the play: “Sea.” This is, as this paper has suggested, not simply a contextual sound, but it is plausibly the sound most associated in Henry’s mind with death. It is also apparently a sound that he has been trying to overcome with the talking that has now stopped. Given that his last spoken words are those of the promise of the silence of a watery grave, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Henry may be on the verge of finally ending his life. Beckett is, of course, too skilled an artist to end this powerful radio drama with the ludicrous splashing sounds of Henry entering the water. Rather, Beckett leaves Henry—perhaps like Vladimir and Estragon—resolved to go and on the verge of action, but unmoving. All later movement is outside the scope of the work as presented.

It must be noted again in conclusion that this interpretation is not intended to diminish a skilfully crafted radio play into a relatively simplistic suicide narrative. Rather, this paper hopes to indicate the significance of several brief movements, almost unnoticeable, in a drama that is almost entirely conducted in one stationary place. It is an element of the play almost unstudied, yet as this paper asserts, acutely

related to an interpretation of the drama. By noting that Henry does not merely finish the play staring at the sea, but in fact has walked to its verge, and murmurs to himself Ada's promise of the silence of death, indicates that this drama may not be a recurrent story but, in fact, may be the final repetition of a long process of staving off suicide. Henry is left, in the end, with only the sound of the sea, and as Ruby Cohn summarizes it, "the silence of nonbeing finally drowns all being." (Cohn 1973: 176)

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"ON OSTAJE NA IVICI VODE": ŽIVOT, POKRET I MOBILNOST U UGARCIMA SEMJUJELA BEKETA

U ovome radu razmatra se odnos između pokreta i vitalnosti u radio drami *Ugarci* Semjela Beketa. Ovoj drami, u kojoj najvećim dijelom nepokretan čovjek razmišlja o svom životu i uključuje se u dijaloge sa ženskom osobom koja može a i ne mora sasvim da bude u prozvod mašte, uglavnom se pristupalo kao drami koja se najvećim dijelom odigrava u glavi Henrija, koji je središnja figura. Međutim, u ovom radu izvodi se zaključak da Henrijev pristup moru sugerše značajan element mogućeg samoubistva u moru, a kojem prethodi

sugerisano samoubistvo Henrijevog oca u istom moru kraj kojeg Henri sjedi.

Ključne riječi: Semjuel Beket, *Ugarci* pokret, nepokretnost, samoubistvo.