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Opole

Drama and ethics

From Sophocles to Beckett

He's taught himself speech

and wind-swift thought,

trained his feelings

for communal civic life

(Sophocles, Chorus from *Antigone*)¹

The experience of theatre accompanies man from the beginning of his history till the present day. On stage, man expresses what he finds important, fortunate, hurting, unsolved and mysterious; thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, a play observed from the audience gives him a mirror-imagined distance to life, an opportunity for a deeper analysis and reflection. Theatre shows man his roles – transfers man quickly onto the stage of an internal psychodrama, allows him to identify with a role (also with an “unknown” one), with a given character and their problems. And when this “external stage” blurs in with the “internal” one, the mystical catharsis may cleanse and ennoble him. There is no theatre without values. The choice of values belongs to the essence of the drama – also in the context of ethics. From Sophocles (496 – 406 BC) to Samuel Beckett (1906 – 1989) man faces the issue of good and evil. Moral sensitivity is inherent – through its presence or absence – in any theatre and any psychodrama. The feeling of anger co-creates the theatre of Sophocles and Beckett and, at the same time, it is closely related to the axiological sensitivity of both playwrights. This mutual relationship between anger and values will decide whether anger will serve love or a nihilistic destruction. Therefore – after J. L. Moreno – every psychodrama has to be, first and foremost, an axiodrama.

1. The horizon of the stage

There is an inseparable connection between theatre and psychodrama. The things that happen on the stage of life (internal and external) become transferred onto the stage of theatre and thus offered back to the spectator, so they can ennoble the drama of their life. In the Greek culture

¹ translation by Ian Johnston, 2005

All citations of plays by Sophocles are derived from translations by Ian Johnston (*Antigone* and *Oedipus the king*) and R. C. Jebb (*Electra*)

theatre has also a religious and liturgical dimension (e.g. Epictetus of Hierapolis). A theatrical play is offered to gods, so that they return it, ennobled with divine and objective truth, to the spectator. In this way theatre is an expression of objective (infallible) divine truths and subjective (personal and susceptible to error) human matters. Not only man and his logic are invited to a theatrical play. The horizon of the stage is not limited to the endlessness of human matters.

Among the issues appearing on the stage of a drama belongs the question of values. Traditionally, the values center around beauty, good and truth. Theatre and psychotherapy are forms of care about the axiological dimension of life. There are no higher and lower or better and worse values. Eventually they exist together and interpenetrate one another. Eva Røine, during classes she conducted in Kraków, said: „Psychotherapy should be, above all, beautiful”. In the drama of beauty and ugliness, ethical issues of good and evil emerge and are eventually verified in terms of truth or falsehood. There exists no ethics without aesthetics and the philosophy of truth.

The reflection on the universe of moral choices (the inevitability of choice between good and evil) is called ethics (moral philosophy). However, there is no thought (reflection) without speech. In his drama, Sophocles inscribes a belief: “He’s taught himself speech and wind-swift thought, trained his feelings for communal civic life”. Theatre is a care for speech; on stage, one person conveys it to another person. The responsibility for speech is an ethical responsibility. For it is the place of birth and transfer of the thought (reflection), which is an ephemeral reality, like wind, and which is beyond man (“it is not known where it comes from and where it heads to”). Speech is neither an addition to acting nor its supplement, but an essential role on stage, enabling the realization of the thought, which itself may surprise the actors with its limitless horizon. Samuel Beckett, at the beginnings of his literary work, devoted much attention to the role of speech, which not only reflects reality, but also creates it. A word (a thought) somehow always becomes a flesh (a real fact). Theatre, psychodrama reveals thinking processes, dialogues (internal and external) and creates them as well. Through this, it unravels and creates reality – including ethical reality. This way a reflection is not only a passive reception of the moral universe, it is also an opportunity to create that universe – “...trained his feelings for communal civic life”(Sophocles).

Not only did Sophocles attribute such subjective and objective elusiveness to human thought; it is also present in that, what speech unravels, expresses and creates. In this way thinking of reality in the categories of objectivity and subjectivity is born. It is in human thought, where a premonition is born that there is an objective dimension of reality (as divine laws in Sophocles’ works, laws of nature and morality) – unchanging, constant and infallible (as e.g. the process of passing away and getting old), as well as a subjective dimension created by man. He, wandering through life, has to acknowledge the correctness of the objective world in order to happily reach his goal (compare: Homer’s Ulysses). There is more of objective than subjective order in the universe. However, such understanding of the universe fails with the emergence of Descartes’ philosophy. Then, a growing domination of the subjective universe begins to take place (“I...” is the first Hamm’s word in *Endgame* by Beckett). “Objective” world becomes a part of the subjective creativity of man.

The problem of ethics emerges on the horizon of this drama. It spans between objective and subjective ethics. Are there inviolable and holy ethical laws, disregarding which leads to a tragic end (Oedipus, Creon, Clytemnestra, Hamm and Clov)? Or are there only subjective laws, dependent on man in terms of their constancy and changeability (e.g. the value of honesty)? Or maybe, the place of

man on a stage of an ethical drama is between Sophocles (the drama of objectivity) and Samuel Beckett (the drama of subjectivity)?

2. Ethical clarity?

At the beginning of ethical deliberations, or even specific moral decisions, a question is hidden: what is the first source, an original inspiration to take on this issue? What does really induce man to make the effort of differentiating between good and evil? In Greek tragedy, in Sophocles' works, the inspiration seems to be the belief that there are inviolable, objective laws, with moral laws among them. Ethics stems from the acknowledgement of the eternal laws, their affirmation, and from adjustments of personal choices in accordance with those laws. Sophocles seems to represent the current of objective ethics. The inviolability of ethical laws is strengthened by the belief in their divine origins. In Antigone's mouth, the Greek playwright puts the conviction that: "I did not think \ anything which you proclaimed strong enough \ to let a mortal override the gods \ and their unwritten and unchanging laws. \ They're not just for today or yesterday, \ but exist forever, and no one knows \ where they first appeared.", "As for you, \ well, if you wish, you can show contempt \ for those laws the gods all hold in honour."

Moral laws are holy and inviolable. Institutions, which are tasked with guarding the holiness of those laws, appear on the stage of the drama. The chorus emerges from the background of human dialogues and monologues, and ascribes itself the role of the voice of people's conscience, as well as that of a guard and communicator of objective laws: "I pray fate still finds me worthy, \ demonstrating piety and reverence \ in all I say and do—in everything \ our loftiest traditions consecrate, \ those laws engendered in the heavenly skies, \ whose only father is Olympus. \ They were not born from mortal men, \ nor will they sleep and be forgotten. \ In them lives an ageless mighty god." A realistic and proper attitude of man is to be humble, whereas "Insolence gives birth to tyranny— \ that insolence which vainly crams itself \ and overflows with so much stuff \ beyond what's right or beneficial, \ that once it's climbed the highest rooftop, \ it's hurled down by force— such a quick fall \ there's no safe landing on one's feet." This is why the chorus cautions: "For I have found \ thee in no prosperous estate; and yet, for observance of nature's \ highest laws, winning the noblest renown, by thy piety towards Zeus."

Characters with special mission concerning the objective laws appear on stage. Their mission resembles that of Old Testament prophets. In Sophocles' play, blind Tiresias, led by a boy, is such a character. He is convinced that "The truth within me makes me strong.". This belief is shared by others, e.g. king Oedipus: "Teiresias, \ you who understand all things—what can be taught \ and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on \ in heaven and here on the \ earth—you know, \ although you cannot see ...".

According to Sophocles, conscience, too, is an institution responsible for the care of objective moral laws. Electra says to her sister: "For me, be it food enough that I do \ not wound mine own conscience". Undoubtedly, the one responsible for the ethical dimension is the philosopher himself – an author and play director. His plays confront the spectator with fundamental ethical issues.

Theatre, in its Greek concept, is involved in the mission of institutions – next to the chorus, soothsayers, the philosopher and conscience.

Sophocles presents the consequences of violation of objective ethics – they are equally consistent as the very rules. The results of violation of divine laws are transferred to next generations: the consequences of the bad deed of Laius, who rapes his companion, Chrysippus, are inexorably transferred onto his son, Oedipus, who kills him and lives with his own mother like with a wife. They also affect his grandsons: both Oedipus' sons die in a fratricidal fight, and his daughter, Antigone, takes her own life while defending objective laws. Violation of an objective, holy moral law disturbs the whole family system. The consequence of such a deed is so inexorable, that, as a part of the system of the objective law, seems to be a gods' punishment, a curse, a fate and a destiny. This truth is proclaimed by the chorus: "for when the gods \ shake a house to its foundations, \ then inevitable disasters strike, \ falling upon whole families". At the same time, in the mouth of a servant, the philosopher puts a belief that it is not gods and their objective laws that are the ultimate cause of the fate of man: "What we do to ourselves brings us most pain" – they are an objective consequence of violation of the inviolable laws. Is man able to break off this process of an unrelenting destruction? What would have changed, had Creon listened to Tiresias' advice? – "Consider this, my son. \ All men make mistakes—that's not uncommon. \ But when they do, they're no longer foolish \ or subject to bad luck if they try to fix \ the evil into which they've fallen, \ once they give up their intransigence." Seeing the final destruction, Creon says: "Now I'm afraid. \ Until one dies the best thing well may be \ to follow our established laws."

The belief in the existence of objective moral laws does not die with Sophocles, the current of objective ethics remains present in every period. Traces of his views can be found also in the discovery of psychodramatic roles: of an "internal Creon", who does not allow to bury, to end difficult and painful relationships with close family or friends, Oedipus and Electra complex, the complex of Clytemnestra murdering her husband, because she has not reworked her grief and anger after her daughter Iphigenia's death, as well as the inexorable mechanism of projection: Tiresias addresses king Oedipus: "You blame my temper, \ but do not see the one which lives within you. \ Instead, you are finding fault with me."

It seems, that Samuel Beckett, as opposed to Sophocles, represents the current of subjective ethics, which is a result of man's decisions, not a mirror-image of eternal laws. The world of characters of the Irish author is a reality, where "there is no nature anymore", whereas spirituality (represented by Lucky), held by a string in the body (represented by Pozzo), confesses, that god, in accordance with scientific research, is apathetic and humankind is languishing. In Sophocles' works, ethics results from the acknowledgement of the eternal laws, in Beckett's – from man's suffering, born out of an incomprehensible life. Ethics is born from the pain touching the very depth of man – from a metaphysical disagreement with the principle of existence. The Irish playwright, referring to ideas of Giambattista Vico's ideas, seems to portray the era of man, which follows the era of gods (period of philosophy and objective religion) and heroes. This era is the time of the fall of man, of reaching his own depth, which seems tragically empty. Hamm in *Endgame* admits: "the bigger a man is the fuller he is. And the emptier." The play *Waiting for Godot* begins with the word "Nothing" – "Nothing to be done." This ultimate nothingness, pathology of emptiness, permeates Beckett's whole play. Man is left with his "I" (the first word of *Endgame*) and the awareness of an unavoidable end – "Finished,

it's finished" (the first sentence by Clov in *Endgame*). What remains are only morning stimulants and evening painkillers.

What kind of ethics can be born out of pain and the pathology of nothingness? Can we talk about it when any activity is vanishing due to discouragement and apathy? Even the one, whom the characters of *Waiting for Godot* are waiting for, does nothing – "What does he do, Mr. Godot?", "He does nothing, Sir." – responds the boy. Man, at variance with himself and torn apart internally (Estragon – his biological part, Vladimir – thinking, an attempt at metaphysics, Pozzo – his body, - Lucky – his spirituality), tries in vain to get away from his own self. When suicide is not an option, man is left waiting for Somebody who will change his fate – "And if he [Godot] comes? – "We'll be saved." But the next generation (part two of *Waiting for Godot*) will not be able to stand on their own feet (all characters fall down together) and will go blind (Pozzo). Hamm from *Endgame* is not able to walk anymore and is blind (not blind from birth, though). Where, then, is the place for moral responsibility? Is it not an end to man's ethical responsibility when his opportunities to take action vanish? Maybe what is left is the responsibility for thinking and speech, which in Beckett is getting uglier and more vulgar? – "It's never the same pus from one second to the next." says Estragon, paraphrasing a sentence from the Greek philosophy, "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." concludes Pozzo. Maybe what is left is the care to maintain a dialogue between internal psychodramatic roles or the responsibility on account of the possibility of suicide? Can ethical remains be found in the care for elderly parents, who sit in separate dustbins? A morality tragically, in fact, limited – whether to give father a chocolate, change litter, give a whole biscuit or only a half?

The world of Beckett's characters is more and more asleep, and the sleep is, more and more evidently, a symbol of death (it is not known whether Hamm's mother is asleep or dead). This state of being asleep has its own history – it dates back to the previous generation. Hamm's parents spent their first moments after engagement on Lake Como (a symbol of a deep sleep, detached from reality). Hamm awakens (in afternoon) and says to Clov: "Get me ready, I'm going to bed." For Vladimir, happiness is possible only in a dream – "I was dreaming I was happy." Is the one who is asleep an ethical protagonist? – "When asleep, one is not sinning". Through the state of being asleep the characters actually detach themselves from the real world, from the Earth – "I was never there [on the Earth]." Ethical game is possible only in the story Hamm is creating the whole time – moral issues do appear there. There, the protagonist is faced by the dilemma of letting in a beggar with a child or not. But this is fiction, fancy game, in a tragic reality. "Let's stop playing!" - Clov asks beseechingly. "Never!" responds Hamm, who is left only with such play. "Put me in my coffin." (Hamm) – "There are no more coffins." In this game, it is impossible to even fulfill the moral obligation of burial (Antigone).

The characters are left with a memory of the times when they could walk, see and were given the opportunity of ethical responsibility. Clov harshly remembers: "When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no? You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness." – "I hadn't any" (Hamm). – "Yes, you had" (Clov). Hamm's parents are touched by memories too. His father says: "Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace." Maybe for Beckett the ending of the era of man (Vico) reaches a time, when "Outside of here it's death!", and inside "The whole place stinks of corpses." The possibility of taking action is coming to an end, therefore ethical responsibility

becomes a tragic fiction. What remains is pain, feeling of guilt and the embryonic position, taken by man in his deepest biological role – as if in expectation or suffering, which searches for its own beginning.

3. Ethical drama

It may seem, that the division between Sophocles (the Greek theatre and philosophy) and Beckett (the modern theatre and philosophy) is simple and unambiguous. The first one represents objective ethics, the second – subjective ethics. However, is such an understanding not too simplified? The Irish author refers to the work of Sophocles. In his first utterance, Hamm says: Can there be misery ... loftier than mine?" – a reference to king Oedipus' verse: "Alas! Alas! How miserable I am..." What is connecting those two plays and in what ways do they interpenetrate?

Maybe the radical objectivity of the Greek ethics is not always that unambiguous? Invoking objective laws, inviolable divine standards, may be an attempt to cover subjective insecurity, confusion and mistakes. It may also be a form of manipulation, so as to smuggle one's own not-reworked problems. The chorus, responsible for the objective laws, changes its stance only after Tiresias' statement and people's sympathy toward Antigone. Before that, the chorus Leader addresses Creon: "it seems to me you now control all laws concerning those who've died and us as well - the ones who are still living." Tiresias himself belongs to a group of soothsayers, who used to be accused, probably not without a reason, of manipulating "the objective truth" for financial gains. Creon admonishes Tiresias: "Do it—just don't speak to benefit yourself." Similarly, king Oedipus is not free from suspicions of Tiresias: "Creon, my old trusted family friend, has secretly conspired to overthrow me and paid off a double-dealing quack like this, a crafty bogus priest, who can only see his own advantage, who in his special art is absolutely blind." Maybe this "objective story" about fate, Oedipus' curse, was in fact fabricated in order to remove him from power?

How much suppressed aggression and unvoiced humiliation did Antigone hold inside, regarding the disgrace on her grandfather, father, fratricidal death of brothers, and how much care about the objective laws of gods, the order of which could be a compensation for the family pathology and inexplicable entanglement? How to assess morally her suicidal death? Had it not happened, the fate of many characters would have taken a different course. Was Electra's excessively strong relationship with her father not the cause behind the concentration of her life energy on solving his problems, instead of on responsibility for her own life? She herself admits: "I have no strength left; I, who am pining away \ without children,- whom no loving champion shields,- but, like some \ despised alien, I serve in the halls of my father, clad in this mean \ garb, and standing at a meagre board." At other time she confesses: "I know that my behaviour is unseemly, and becomes me ill." How can one morally assess Oedipus' mutilation, if the very chorus admonishes: "You have carried out such dreadful things how could you dare to blind yourself this way? What god drove you to it?"

Ultimately, man has to trust his own common sense, which, although dealing with divine matters, is, nonetheless, not free from the ethical burden of telling good from evil: "The most important part of true success is wisdom - not to act impiously towards the gods, for boasts of arrogant men bring on

great blows of punishment - so in old age men can discover wisdom." Tiresias himself is convinced that "how good advice is valuable—worth more than all possessions." and believes, that man, through his conversion, can change "objective" destiny and fate.

A more thorough reading of Beckett's writings may quickly raise suspicions of the similarity of his works and the radical subjectivism. The plot of *Endgame* is set after some disaster, hidden in the past, that could possibly have to do with a violation of some objective ethical laws. The consequence of that violation is, perhaps, much more consistent objectively than in Sophocles' plays. Violation of the laws in the era of gods, an attempt to save the world in the era of heroes (Giambattista Vico) leads to the hopeless "Waiting for Godot", "Last Tape" and "Endgame" in a closed shelter – actually a bunker. The consequence of that defeat, the fall of human world, is inexorable, as a stalemate in chess – man can neither die nor live. Blind Oedipus, in his mutilation, sees clearer and more; the blind ones, Pozzo and Hamm, do not see at all and do not understand.

Human tragedy is discreetly accompanied by symbols of the objective world and its order. A carefully devised objective symbolism is hidden behind the superficial chaos of the plot with its helpless characters. *Endgame* has a structure based on arithmetical principles and rules applied in musical compositions. Beckett refers to the concept of time which dates back to the Greek philosophy. A careful spectator will notice references to Greek and Roman culture. Estragon refers to the scapegoat's law. Pozzo accepts the existence of beauty and first class truth. The above mentioned Lake Como is also – and maybe above all others – the place of the plot of Alessandro Manzoni's *Engaged*, a novel based on principles of objective ethics.

Biblical symbolism, consistently accompanying the characters of Beckett's play, is surprisingly rich. Pozzo reminds, that man is created in God's image. While saying: "Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors", he refers to Ecclesiast (7, 10). In a deformed way he cites *Solomon's Parables*. The shelter of Hamm and Clov is a reference to Noah's ark. A small cloud on the horizon is either a reference to Abel's sacrifice or to Prophet Elias' story, for whom it was a harbinger of a salutary rain. When Clov looks at a wall, Hamm asks: "And what do you see on your wall? Mene, mene?"

The tragic story of Mother Pegg and the lack of oil is a reference to the parable about ten virgins (Mt 25, 1-13). Vladimir remembers the drama of two convicts crucified along with Christ. An important inspiration for Beckett, while writing *Waiting for Godot*, was a sentence by St Augustine: "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned". The old handkerchief, on which Hamm's bloody face leaves its impression, refers the spectator to the biblical veil of Veronica. Hamm awakens at 15.00 – the hour of Christ's death. The first words of *Endgame*: "Finished, it's finished,..." are a reference to the last words of crucified Christ. The etymology of character names in *Endgame* indicates a hammer, nails, pegs – a discreet reference to the crucifixion scene. A sitting boy, leaning against a rock, is a reference to the scene of Resurrection. Clov with an alarm clock in his hand reminds of the Final Judgment. Pozzo leads Lucky to the Savior fair. Between Sophocles and Beckett lies the sentence (cited above) of Hamm and Oedipus, which, in a more profound analysis, is a sentence of Christ from George Herbert's Sacrifice: "Was ever grief like mine?"

Eventually the tragic fate of the characters of the Nobel laureate is an image of hell, in which one cannot set themselves free from their own suffering, feeling of guilt, emptiness, hopelessness – a world one cannot run away, neither into life nor into death. The characters are left only with – placed

on the verge between seriousness and derision – a prayer. “Let us pray to God...”, „God have pity on me!” (Estragon). Vladimir – “Christ have mercy on us!”. When spirituality (Lucky) is not looking at the sky, Estragon is not reading the Bible (spirituality as knowledge – gnosis), but wants to be in the space where her divine-and-human story takes place – “that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.”

Therefore, it seems that Beckett's works is a complement and a continuation of Sophocles' thought. As compared to, sometimes suspiciously obvious, objective ethics (a trait of people with disorders), it shows consistently the results of a violation of the objective world (a world after its own downfall). After the era of gods (often thought of as a continuation and a projection of the subjective world), comes the era of heroes, who, in their extraordinary courage, promise the world the arrival of Godot – and along with him a salvation. The third era is the world of the man who, in his own moral decline, knows that the objective world is not his subjective product. In his honest and humble state of mind he does not want to save himself with the illusory belief that he can save himself from his downfall by a magnanimous invocation of some eternal metaphor – “all has come to an end – forever”. If tragedy turns into a drama, it is not because of the ingenious, ethical and religious, creativity of man, but because of the intervention of the objective world. The symbol of a boy links Sophocles and Beckett. A boy leads blind Tiresias, brings news from mister Godot and addresses Vladimir “Mister Albert”. Finally, a boy appears on the horizon of death (as a dove with a sign of life on Noah's ark) and sits leaning against a rock (Hamm tries to kill him). The boy – according to Antoni Libera – could be a symbol and a yearning for the fourth era, the era of Divine Providence, which would start the cycle all over again. It is an expression of a longing for the objective world, which, if it exists, will save man from the stalemate situation of *Endgame*, will cure paralyzed legs, will give back sight, the possibility of creation and ethical responsibility. Are these yearnings just another illusion, trying to bring back the “objective” and suspiciously “clear” era of gods, or are they inspired by the “first class truth” Pozzo mentions? Maybe time will tell, because – as the Greek chorus sings - “Time is god who makes rough ways smooth”.

The theatre of Sophocles and Beckett is a psychodramatic creation of its authors, who in such way manifested the drama of their internal stage in the constellation of the culture they were to live. The curtain is dropping, but the performance is not over. What happens now on the stage of the spectator's life, will be, consciously or unconsciously, inspired by this theatrical event. Identification with the observed roles will inspire their internal creator and director to stand up to a similar subject matter – also in the ethical dimension. The ethical issue – as intended by J. L. Moreno – is one of the main dimensions of the stage. Ethical values belong to axiodrama, in which psychodrama meets axiology (the study of values, norms and traditions). Moreno considered axiology the main axis of his concept of psychodrama and philosophy, because, as he said: “it is a deep need of human being, the creative submission to an invisible system of values”. Values are the eyes of anger. They facilitate the usage of the energy of aggression for an integrating, love-based creativity. The rejection of the world of values makes anger direct itself against man and his culture. Moreno recognizes God as the highest value. Nietzsche's philosophy had a significant influence on the development of J. L. Moreno's and S. Beckett's ideas. Both of them studied carefully his works, and their writings were a commentary to Nietzsche's thesis, which says, that if God is killed in the culture, then the systems of values will collapse and the world will plunge in nihilism.

The task of psychodrama – according to Moreno – is to stop the destructive process of the “valueless river”. Psychodrama, on its stage and using methods it developed, opens a space for incarnation into the axiodramatic universe of our roles – in our internal Antigone, Creon, Oedipus, Electra and Iphigenia, as well as into exceptionally rich and universal world of internal characters from Beckett’s theatre. The psychodramatic theatre – according to J. L. Moreno – is not only a subjective event – it combines objective and subjective ethics. Similarly to the Greek theatre, a psychodramatic role and play is entrusted not only to human logic. As if a mirror image, it comes back to man, permeated and transformed by the universe of objective and highest values – surprising and bewildering him with the final form of this theatrical event.